



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

January 30, 2023

Case No. FL-2022-00062

Mr. Gary Ruskin
U.S. Right to Know
4096 Piedmont Avenue, #963
Oakland, CA 94611

Dear Mr. Ruskin:

As we noted in our letter dated December 19, 2022, we are processing your request for material under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552. The Department of State has identified an additional six responsive records subject to the FOIA. Upon review, we have determined that two records may be released in full and four records may be released in part.

An enclosure explains the FOIA exemptions and other grounds for withholding material. Where we have made redactions, the applicable FOIA exemptions are marked on each record. All non-exempt material that is reasonably segregable from the exempt material has been released and is enclosed.

We will keep you informed as your case progresses. If you have any questions, your attorney may contact Assistant United States Attorney, Stephanie Johnson, at stephanie.johnson5@usdoj.gov or (202) 252-7874. Please refer to the case number, FL-2022-00062, and the civil action number, 22-cv-01130, in all correspondence about this case.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Diamonece Hickson", with a large, stylized initial "D" and "H".

Diamonece Hickson
Chief, Litigation and Appeals Branch
Office of Information Programs and Services

Enclosures: As stated.

The Freedom of Information Act (5 USC 552)

FOIA Exemptions

- (b)(1) Information specifically authorized by an executive order to be kept secret in the interest of national defense or foreign policy. Executive Order 13526 includes the following classification categories:
- 1.4(a) Military plans, systems, or operations
 - 1.4(b) Foreign government information
 - 1.4(c) Intelligence activities, sources or methods, or cryptology
 - 1.4(d) Foreign relations or foreign activities of the US, including confidential sources
 - 1.4(e) Scientific, technological, or economic matters relating to national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
 - 1.4(f) U.S. Government programs for safeguarding nuclear materials or facilities
 - 1.4(g) Vulnerabilities or capabilities of systems, installations, infrastructures, projects, plans, or protection services relating to US national security, including defense against transnational terrorism
 - 1.4(h) Weapons of mass destruction
- (b)(2) Related solely to the internal personnel rules and practices of an agency
- (b)(3) Specifically exempted from disclosure by statute (other than 5 USC 552), for example:
- | | |
|----------------|---|
| ARMSEXP | Arms Export Control Act, 50a USC 2411(c) |
| CIA PERS/ORG | Central Intelligence Agency Act of 1949, 50 USC 403(g) |
| EXPORT CONTROL | Export Administration Act of 1979, 50 USC App. Sec. 2411(c) |
| FS ACT | Foreign Service Act of 1980, 22 USC 4004 |
| INA | Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 USC 1202(f), Sec. 222(f) |
| IRAN | Iran Claims Settlement Act, Public Law 99-99, Sec. 505 |
- (b)(4) Trade secrets and confidential commercial or financial information
- (b)(5) Interagency or intra-agency communications forming part of the deliberative process, attorney-client privilege, or attorney work product
- (b)(6) Personal privacy information
- (b)(7) Law enforcement information whose disclosure would:
- (A) interfere with enforcement proceedings
 - (B) deprive a person of a fair trial
 - (C) constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy
 - (D) disclose confidential sources
 - (E) disclose investigation techniques
 - (F) endanger life or physical safety of an individual
- (b)(8) Prepared by or for a government agency regulating or supervising financial institutions
- (b)(9) Geological and geophysical information and data, including maps, concerning wells

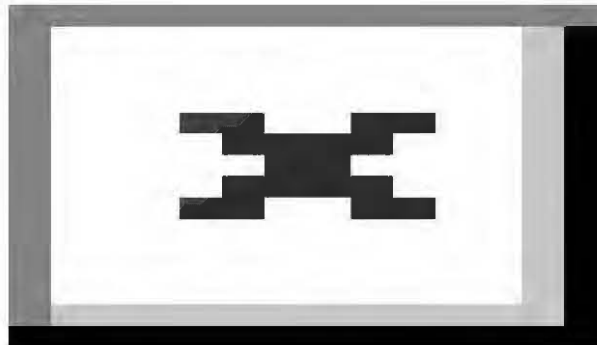
Other Grounds for Withholding

- NR Material not responsive to a FOIA request excised with the agreement of the requester

From: "Stilwell, David R" (b)(6)
To: Feith, David (b)(6)
CC: Keshap, Atul (b)(6)
Subject: RE: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis
Date: Mon, 4 Jan 2021 20:22:42 +0000

He's not a scientist, but a novelist (and investigative reporter).

Recent Tweet:



From: Feith, David (b)(6)
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 3:14 PM
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)
Subject: FW: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

Pass to (b)(6) before 4pm call?

From: Feith, David (b)(6)
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 2:20 PM
To: EAP-FO-Principals-DL <EAP-FO-Principals-DL@state.gov>; DL NSC Asia (DL.Asia@whmo.mil) <DL.Asia@whmo.mil>; MPottinger (b)(6) Ruggiero, Anthony J. (b)(6)
(b)(6)
Subject: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

This looks awfully interesting. The story the New Yorker wouldn't tell...

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/coronavirus-lab-escape-theory.html>

Feb 4, 2021, 6:00 A.M.

The Lab-Leak Hypothesis

The Lab Leak Hypothesis

For decades, scientists have been hot-wiring viruses in hopes of preventing a pandemic, not causing one. But what if ...?

By Nicholson Baker

I.

Flask Monsters

What happened was fairly simple, I've come to believe. It was an accident. A virus spent some time in a laboratory, and eventually it got out. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, began its existence inside a bat, then it learned how to infect people in a claustrophobic mine shaft, and then it was made more infectious in one or more laboratories, perhaps as part of a scientist's well-intentioned but risky effort to create a broad-spectrum vaccine. SARS-2 was not designed as a biological weapon. But it was, I think, designed. Many thoughtful people dismiss this notion, and they may be right. They sincerely believe that the coronavirus arose naturally, "zoonotically," from animals, without having been previously studied, or hybridized, or sluiced through cell cultures, or otherwise worked on by trained professionals. They hold that a bat, carrying a coronavirus, infected some other creature, perhaps a pangolin, and that the pangolin may have already been sick with a different coronavirus disease, and out of the conjunction and commingling of those two diseases within the pangolin, a new disease, highly infectious to humans, evolved. Or they hypothesize that two coronaviruses recombined in a bat, and this new virus spread to other bats, and then the bats infected a

person directly — in a rural setting, perhaps — and that this person caused a simmering undetected outbreak of respiratory disease, which over a period of months or years evolved to become virulent and highly transmissible but was not noticed until it appeared in Wuhan.

There is no direct evidence for these zoonotic possibilities, just as there is no direct evidence for an experimental mishap — no written confession, no incriminating notebook, no official accident report. Certainty craves detail, and detail requires an investigation. It has been a full year, 80 million people have been infected, and, surprisingly, no public investigation has taken place. We still know very little about the origins of this disease.

Nevertheless, I think it's worth offering some historical context for our yearlong medical nightmare. We need to hear from the people who for years have contended that certain types of virus experimentation might lead to a disastrous pandemic like this one. And we need to stop hunting for new exotic diseases in the wild, shipping them back to laboratories, and hot-wiring their genomes to prove how dangerous to human life they might become.

Over the past few decades, scientists have developed ingenious methods of evolutionary acceleration and recombination, and they've learned how to trick viruses, coronaviruses in particular, those spiky hairballs of protein we now know so well, into moving quickly from one species of animal to another or from one type of cell culture to another. They've made machines that mix and mingle the viral code for bat diseases with the code for human diseases — diseases like SARS, severe acute respiratory syndrome, for example, which arose in China in 2003, and MERS, Middle East respiratory syndrome, which broke out a decade later and has to do with bats and camels. Some of the experiments — “gain of function” experiments — aimed to create new, more virulent, or more infectious strains of diseases in an effort to predict and therefore defend against threats that might conceivably arise in nature. The term *gain of function* is itself a euphemism; the Obama White House more accurately described this work as “experiments that may be reasonably anticipated to confer attributes to influenza, MERS, or SARS viruses such that the virus would have enhanced pathogenicity and/or transmissibility in mammals via the respiratory route.” The virologists who carried out these experiments have accomplished amazing feats of genetic transmutation, no question, and there have been very few publicized accidents over the years. But there have been some.

And we were warned, repeatedly. The intentional creation of new microbes that combine virulence with heightened transmissibility “poses extraordinary

risks to the public,” wrote infectious-disease experts Marc Lipsitch and Thomas Inglesby in 2014. “A rigorous and transparent risk-assessment process for this work has not yet been established.” That’s still true today. In 2012, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Lynn Klotz warned that there was an 80 percent chance, given how many laboratories were then handling virulent viro-varietals, that a leak of a potential pandemic pathogen would occur sometime in the next 12 years.

A lab accident — a dropped flask, a needle prick, a mouse bite, an illegibly labeled bottle — is apolitical. Proposing that something unfortunate happened during a scientific experiment in Wuhan — where COVID-19 was first diagnosed and where there are three high-security virology labs, one of which held in its freezers the most comprehensive inventory of sampled bat viruses in the world — isn’t a conspiracy theory. It’s just a theory. It merits attention, I believe, alongside other reasoned attempts to explain the source of our current catastrophe.

II.

“A Reasonable Chance”

From early 2020, the world was brooding over the origins of COVID-19. People were reading research papers, talking about what kinds of live animals were or were not sold at the Wuhan seafood market — wondering where the new virus had come from.

Meanwhile, things got strange all over the world. The Chinese government shut down transportation and built hospitals at high speed. There were video clips of people who’d suddenly dropped unconscious in the street. A doctor on YouTube told us how we were supposed to scrub down our produce when we got back from the supermarket. A scientist named Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology published a paper saying that the novel coronavirus was 96 percent identical to a bat virus, RaTG13, found in Yunnan province in southern China. On March 13, I wrote in my journal that there seemed to be something oddly artificial about the disease: “It’s too airborne — too catching — it’s something that has been selected for infectivity. That’s what I suspect. No way to know so no reason to waste time thinking about it.”

This was just a note to self — at the time, I hadn’t interviewed scientists about SARS-2 or read their research papers. But I did know something about pathogens and laboratory accidents; I published a book last year, *Baseless*,

that talks about some of them. The book is named after a Pentagon program, Project Baseless, whose goal, as of 1951, was to achieve “an Air Force–wide combat capability in biological and chemical warfare at the earliest possible date.”

A vast treasure was spent by the U.S. on the amplification and aerial delivery of diseases — some well known, others obscure and stealthy. America’s biological-weapons program in the ’50s had A1-priority status, as high as nuclear weapons. In preparation for a total war with a numerically superior communist foe, scientists bred germs to be resistant to antibiotics and other drug therapies, and they infected lab animals with them, using a technique called “serial passaging,” in order to make the germs more virulent and more catching.

And along the way, there were laboratory accidents. By 1960, hundreds of American scientists and technicians had been hospitalized, victims of the diseases they were trying to weaponize. Charles Armstrong, of the National Institutes of Health, one of the consulting founders of the American germ-warfare program, investigated Q fever three times, and all three times, scientists and staffers got sick. In the anthrax pilot plant at Camp Detrick, Maryland, in 1951, a microbiologist, attempting to perfect the “foaming process” of high-volume production, developed a fever and died. In 1964, veterinary worker Albert Nickel fell ill after being bitten by a lab animal. His wife wasn’t told that he had Machupo virus, or Bolivian hemorrhagic fever. “I watched him die through a little window to his quarantine room at the Detrick infirmary,” she said.

In 1977, a worldwide epidemic of influenza A began in Russia and China; it was eventually traced to a sample of an American strain of flu preserved in a laboratory freezer since 1950. In 1978, a hybrid strain of smallpox killed a medical photographer at a lab in Birmingham, England; in 2007, live foot-and-mouth disease leaked from a faulty drainpipe at the Institute for Animal Health in Surrey. In the U.S., “more than 1,100 laboratory incidents involving bacteria, viruses and toxins that pose significant or bioterror risks to people and agriculture were reported to federal regulators during 2008 through 2012,” reported *USA Today* in an exposé published in 2014.

In 2015, the Department of Defense discovered that workers at a germ-warfare testing center in Utah had mistakenly sent close to 200 shipments of live anthrax to laboratories throughout the United States and also to Australia, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and several other countries over the past 12 years. In 2019, laboratories at Fort Detrick — where “defensive” research involves the creation of potential pathogens to defend against — were shut

down for several months by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for “breaches of containment.” They reopened in December 2019.

High-containment laboratories have a whispered history of near misses. Scientists are people, and people have clumsy moments and poke themselves and get bitten by the enraged animals they are trying to nasally inoculate. Machines can create invisible aerosols, and cell solutions can become contaminated. Waste systems don’t always work properly. Things can go wrong in a hundred different ways.

Hold that human fallibility in your mind. And then consider the cautious words of Alina Chan, a scientist who works at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. “There is a reasonable chance that what we are dealing with is the result of a lab accident,” Chan told me in July of last year. There was also, she added, a reasonable chance that the disease had evolved naturally — both were scientific possibilities. “I don’t know if we will ever find a smoking gun, especially if it was a lab accident. The stakes are so high now. It would be terrifying to be blamed for millions of cases of COVID-19 and possibly up to a million deaths by year end, if the pandemic continues to grow out of control. The Chinese government has also restricted their own scholars and scientists from looking into the origins of SARS-CoV-2. At this rate, the origin of SARS-CoV-2 may just be buried by the passage of time.”

I asked Jonathan A. King, a molecular biologist and biosafety advocate from MIT, whether he’d thought *lab accident* when he first heard about the epidemic. “Absolutely, absolutely,” King answered. Other scientists he knew were concerned as well. But scientists, he said, in general were cautious about speaking out. There were “very intense, very subtle pressures” on them not to push on issues of laboratory biohazards. Collecting lots of bat viruses, and passaging those viruses repeatedly through cell cultures, and making bat-human viral hybrids, King believes, “generates new threats and desperately needs to be reined in.”

“All possibilities should be on the table, including a lab leak,” a scientist from the NIH, Philip Murphy — chief of the Laboratory of Molecular Immunology — wrote me recently. Nikolai Petrovsky, a professor of endocrinology at Flinders University College of Medicine in Adelaide, Australia, said in an email, “There are indeed many unexplained features of this virus that are hard if not impossible to explain based on a completely natural origin.” Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University, wrote that he’d been concerned for some years about the Wuhan laboratory and about the work being done there to create “chimeric” (i.e., hybrid) SARS-related bat

coronaviruses “with enhanced human infectivity.” Ebright said, “In this context, the news of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan ***screamed*** lab release.”

III.

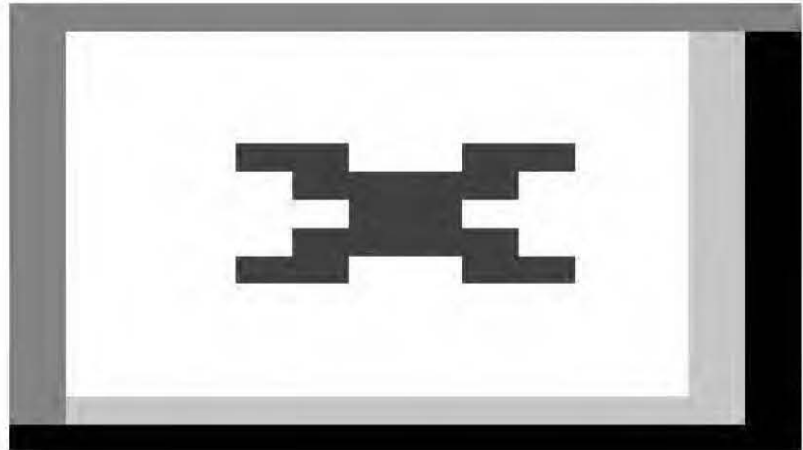
“No Credible Evidence”

The new disease, as soon as it appeared, was intercepted — stolen and politicized by people with ulterior motives. The basic and extremely interesting scientific question of what happened was sucked up into an ideological sharknado.

Some Americans boycotted Chinese restaurants; others bullied and harassed Asian Americans. Steve Bannon, broadcasting from his living room, in a YouTube series called *War Room*, said that the Chinese Communist Party had made a biological weapon and intentionally released it. He called it the “CCP virus.” And his billionaire friend and backer, Miles Guo, a devoted Trump supporter, told a right-wing website that the communists’ goal was to “use the virus to infect selective people in Hong Kong, so that the Chinese Communist Party could use it as an excuse to impose martial law there and ultimately crush the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. But it backfired terribly.”

In *The Lancet*, in February, a powerful counterstatement appeared, signed by 27 scientists. “We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin,” the statement said. “Scientists from multiple countries have published and analyzed genomes of the causative agent, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), and they overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife, as have so many other emerging pathogens.”

The behind-the-scenes organizer of this *Lancet* statement, Peter Daszak, is a zoologist and bat-virus sample collector and the head of a New York nonprofit called EcoHealth Alliance — a group that (as veteran science journalist Fred Guterl explained later in *Newsweek*) has channeled money from the National Institutes of Health to Shi Zhengli’s laboratory in Wuhan, allowing the lab to carry on recombinant research into diseases of bats and humans. “We have a choice whether to stand up and support colleagues who are being attacked and threatened daily by conspiracy theorists or to just turn a blind eye,” Daszak said in February in *Science* magazine.



How Did It Get Out? 1. The Tongguan Mine Shaft in Mojiang, Yunnan, where, in 2013, fragments of RaTG13, the closest known relative of SARSCoV-2, were recovered and transported to the Wuhan Institute of Virology; **2. The Wuhan Institute of Virology**, where Shi Zhengli's team brought the RaTG13 sample, sequenced its genome, then took it out of the freezer several times in recent years; **3. The Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention**, which first reported signs of the novel coronavirus in hospital patients; **4. The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market**, an early suspected origin of the pandemic, where the first major outbreak occurred. Illustration: Map by Jason Lee

Vincent Racaniello, a professor at Columbia and a co-host of a podcast called *This Week in Virology*, said on February 9 that the idea of an accident in Wuhan was “complete bunk.” The coronavirus was 96 percent similar to a bat virus found in 2013, Racaniello said. “It’s not a man-made virus. It wasn’t released from a lab.”

Racaniello’s dismissal was seconded by a group of scientists from Ohio State, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of North Carolina, who put out a paper in *Emerging Microbes and Infections* to quiet the “speculations, rumors, and conspiracy theories that SARS-CoV-2 is of laboratory origin.” There was “currently no credible evidence” that SARS-2 leaked from a lab, these scientists said, using a somewhat different argument from Racaniello’s. “Some people have alleged that the human SARS-CoV-2 was leaked directly from a laboratory in Wuhan where a bat CoV (RaTG13) was recently

reported,” they said. But RaTG13 could not be the source because it differed from the human SARS-2 virus by more than a thousand nucleotides. One of the paper’s authors, Susan Weiss, told the Raleigh *News & Observer*, “The conspiracy theory is ridiculous.”

The most influential natural-origin paper, “The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2,” by a group of biologists that included Kristian Andersen of Scripps Research, appeared online in a preliminary version in mid-February.

“We do not believe any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible,” the scientists said. Why? Because molecular-modeling software predicted that if you wanted to optimize an existing bat virus so that it would replicate well in human cells, you would arrange things a different way than how the SARS-2 virus actually does it — even though the SARS-2 virus does an extraordinarily good job of replicating in human cells. The laboratory-based scenario was implausible, the paper said, because, although it was true that the virus could conceivably have developed its unusual genetic features in a laboratory, a stronger and “more parsimonious” explanation was that the features came about through some kind of natural mutation or recombination. “What we think,” explained one of the authors, Robert F. Garry of Tulane University, on YouTube, “is that this virus is a recombinant. It probably came from a bat virus, plus perhaps one of these viruses from the pangolin.” Journalists, for the most part, echoed the authoritative pronouncements of Daszak, Racaniello, Weiss, Andersen, and other prominent natural-originists. “The balance of the scientific evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the new coronavirus emerged from nature — be it the Wuhan market or somewhere else,” said the Washington *Post*’s “Fact Checker” column. “Dr. Fauci Again Dismisses Wuhan Lab As Source of Coronavirus,” said *CBS News*, posting a video interview of Anthony Fauci by *National Geographic*. “If you look at the evolution of the virus in bats, and what’s out there now,” Fauci said, “it’s very, very strongly leaning toward ‘This could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated’ — the way the mutations have naturally evolved.”

Everyone took sides; everyone thought of the new disease as one more episode in an ongoing partisan struggle. Think of Mike Pompeo, that landmass of Cold War truculence; think of Donald Trump himself. They stood at their microphones saying, in a winking, I-know-something-you-don’t-know sort of way, that this disease escaped from a Chinese laboratory. Whatever they were saying must be wrong. It became impermissible, almost taboo, to admit that, of course, SARS-2 could have come from a lab accident. “The administration’s claim that the virus spread from a Wuhan lab has made the notion politically

toxic, even among scientists who say it could have happened,” wrote science journalist Mara Hvistendahl in the Intercept.

IV.

“Is It a Complete Coincidence?”

Even so, in January and February of 2020, there were thoughtful people who were speaking up, formulating their perplexities.

One person was Sam Hussein, who works for Consortium News. He went to a CDC press conference at the National Press Club on February 11, 2020. By then, 42,000 people had gotten sick in China and more than a thousand had died. But there were only 13 confirmed cases in the U.S. Halfway through the Q&A period, Hussein went to the microphone and asked the CDC’s representative, Anne Schuchat, where the virus had come from. His head was spinning, he told me later.

“Obviously the main concern is how to stop the virus,” Hussein said; nonetheless, he wanted to know more about its source. “Is it the CDC’s contention,” he asked, “that there’s absolutely no relation to the BSL-4 lab in Wuhan? It’s my understanding that this is the only place in China with a BSL-4 lab. We in the United States have, I think, two dozen or so, and there have been problems and incidents.” (A BSL-4 laboratory is a maximum-security biosafety-level-four facility, used to house research on the most dangerous known pathogens. *New York* has confirmed there are at least 11 BSL-4 facilities currently operating in the U.S.) Hussein hastened to say that he wasn’t implying that what happened in Wuhan was in any way intentional. “I’m just asking, Is it a complete coincidence that this outbreak happened in the one city in China with a BSL-4 lab?”

Schuchat thanked Hussein for his questions and comments. Everything she’d seen was quite consistent with a natural, zoonotic origin for the disease, she said.

That same month, a group of French scientists from Aix-Marseille University posted a paper describing their investigation of a small insertion in the genome of the new SARS-2 virus. The virus’s spike protein contained a sequence of amino acids that formed what Etienne Decroly and colleagues called a “peculiar furin-like cleavage site” — a chemically sensitive region on the lobster claw of the spike protein that would react in the presence of an enzyme called furin, which is a type of protein found everywhere within the

human body, but especially in the lungs. When the spike senses human furin, it shudders, chemically speaking, and the enzyme opens the protein, commencing the tiny morbid ballet whereby the virus burns a hole in a host cell's outer membrane and finds its way inside.

The code for this particular molecular feature — not found in SARS or any SARS-like bat viruses, but present in a slightly different form in the more lethal MERS virus — is easy to remember because it's a roar: "R-R-A-R." The letter code stands for amino acids: arginine, arginine, alanine, and arginine. Its presence, so Decroly and his colleagues observed, may heighten the "pathogenicity" — that is, the god-awfulness — of a disease.

Botao Xiao, a professor at the South China University of Technology, posted a short paper on a preprint server titled "The Possible Origins of 2019-nCoV Coronavirus." Two laboratories, the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention (WHCDC) and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, were not far from the seafood market, which was where the disease was said to have originated, Xiao wrote — in fact, the WHCDC was only a few hundred yards away from the market — whereas the horseshoe bats that hosted the disease were hundreds of miles to the south. (No bats were sold in the market, he pointed out.) It was unlikely, he wrote, that a bat would have flown to a densely populated metropolitan area of 15 million people. "The killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan," Xiao believed. He urged the relocation of "biohazardous laboratories" away from densely populated places. His article disappeared from the server.

And late in the month, a professor at National Taiwan University, Fang Chitai, gave a lecture on the coronavirus in which he described the anomalous R-R-A-R furin cleavage site. The virus was "unlikely to have four amino acids added all at once," Fang said — natural mutations were smaller and more haphazard, he argued. "From an academic point of view, it is indeed possible that the amino acids were added to COVID-19 in the lab by humans." When the *Taiwan News* published an article about Fang's talk, Fang disavowed his own comments, and the video copy of the talk disappeared from the website of the Taiwan Public Health Association. "It has been taken down for a certain reason," the association explained. "Thank you for your understanding."

“A Serious Shortage of Appropriately Trained Technicians”

In the spring, I did some reading on coronavirus history. Beginning in the 1970s, dogs, cows, and pigs were diagnosed with coronavirus infections; dog shows were canceled in 1978 after 25 collies died in Louisville, Kentucky. New varieties of coronaviruses didn't start killing humans, though, until 2003 — that's when restaurant chefs, food handlers, and people who lived near a live-animal market got sick in Guangzhou, in southern China, where the shredded meat of a short-legged raccoonlike creature, the palm civet, was served in a regional dish called “dragon-tiger-phoenix soup.” The new disease, SARS, spread alarmingly in hospitals, and it reached 30 countries and territories. More than 800 people died; the civet-borne virus was eventually traced to horseshoe bats.

Later, smaller outbreaks of SARS in Taiwan, Singapore, and China's National Institute of Virology in Beijing were all caused by laboratory accidents. Of the Beijing Virology Institute, the World Health Organization's safety investigators wrote, in May 2004, that they had “serious concerns about biosafety procedures.” By one account, a SARS storage room in the Beijing lab was so crowded that the refrigerator holding live virus was moved out to the hallway. “Scientists still do not fully understand exactly where or how SARS emerged 18 months ago,” wrote *Washington Post* reporter David Brown in June 2004. “But it is clear now that the most threatening source of the deadly virus today may be places they know intimately — their own laboratories.”

I'm just asking, Is it a complete coincidence that this outbreak happened in the one city in China with a BSL-4 lab?

MERS arose in 2012, possibly spread by camels that had contracted the disease from bats or bat guano, then passed it to human drinkers of raw camel milk and butchers of camel meat. It was an acute sickness, with a high fatality rate, mostly confined to Saudi Arabia. Like SARS, MERS ebbed quickly — it all but disappeared outside the Middle East, except for an outbreak in 2015 at the Samsung Medical Center in South Korea, where a single case of MERS led to more than 180 infections, many involving hospital workers.

In January 2015, the brand-new BSL-4 lab in Wuhan, built by a French contractor, celebrated its opening, but full safety certification came slowly. According to State Department cables from 2018 leaked to the *Washington Post*, the new BSL-4 lab had some start-up problems, including “a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory.” The staff had gotten some training at a BSL-4 lab in Galveston, Texas, but they were doing potentially dangerous work with SARS-like viruses, the memo said, and they needed more help from the U.S.

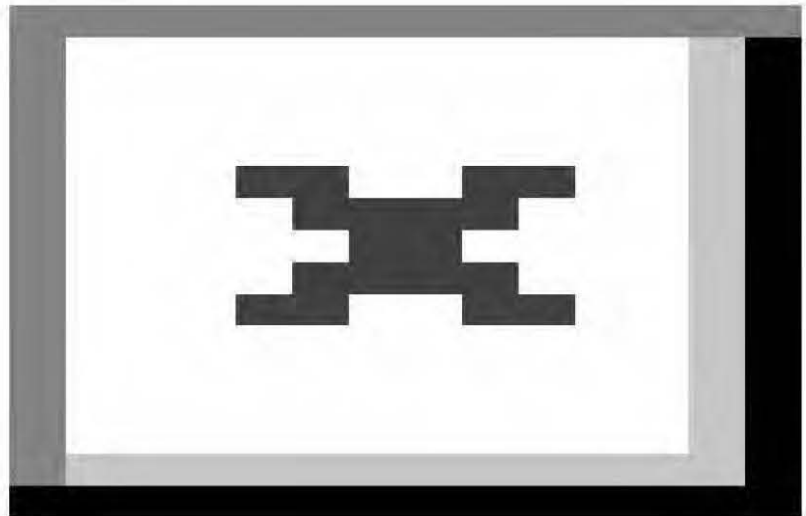
In November or December of 2019, the novel coronavirus began to spread. Chinese scientists initially named it “Wuhan seafood market pneumonia virus,” but soon that idea went away. The market, closed and decontaminated by Chinese officials on January 1, 2020, was an amplifying hub, not the source of the outbreak, according to several studies by Chinese scientists. Forty-five percent of the earliest SARS-2 patients had no link with the market.

VI.

Emergence

Now let’s take a step back. AIDS, fatal and terrifying and politically charged, brought on a new era in government-guided vaccine research, under the guidance of Anthony Fauci. A virologist at Rockefeller University, Stephen S. Morse, began giving talks on “emerging viruses” — other plagues that might be in the process of coming out of nature’s woodwork. In 1992, Richard Preston wrote a horrific account of one emergent virus, Ebola, in *The New Yorker*, which became a best-selling book in 1994; Laurie Garrett’s *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* appeared that same year and was also a best seller. The idea seemed to be everywhere: We were on the verge of a wave of zoonotic, emergent plagues.

This new, useful term, *emerging*, began to glow in the research papers of some coronavirologists, who were out of the spotlight, working on common colds and livestock diseases. The term was useful because it was fluid. An emerging disease could be real and terrifying, as AIDS was — something that had just arrived on the medical scene and was confounding our efforts to combat it — or it could be a disease that hadn’t arrived, and might never arrive, but could be shown in a laboratory to be waiting in the wings, just a few mutations away from a human epidemic. It was real and unreal at the same time — a quality that was helpful when applying for research grants.



Where Did It Come From? This chart measures the genetic similarity of known viruses to the novel coronavirus (which appears in yellow). By far the closest is the bat virus RaTG13, which appears in blue, and which was recovered in 2013 and brought to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The first SARS, marked in red, is a much more distant relative. Graphic: Zhou, P., Yang, XL., Wang, XG. et al. A pneumonia outbreak associated with a new coronavirus of probable bat origin. *Nature* 579, 270–273 (2020)

Take, for instance, this paper from 1995: “High Recombination and Mutation Rates in Mouse Hepatitis Viruses Suggest That Coronaviruses May Be Potentially Important Emerging Viruses.” It was written by Dr. Ralph Baric and his bench scientist, Boyd Yount, at the University of North Carolina. Baric, a gravelly voiced former swim champion, described in this early paper how his lab was able to train a coronavirus, MHV, which causes hepatitis in mice, to jump species, so that it could reliably infect BHK (baby-hamster kidney) cell cultures. They did it using serial passaging: repeatedly dosing a mixed solution of mouse cells and hamster cells with mouse-hepatitis virus, while each time decreasing the number of mouse cells and upping the concentration of hamster cells. At first, predictably, the mouse-hepatitis virus couldn’t do much with the hamster cells, which were left almost free of infection, floating in

their world of fetal-calf serum. But by the end of the experiment, after dozens of passages through cell cultures, the virus had mutated: It had mastered the trick of parasitizing an unfamiliar rodent. A scourge of mice was transformed into a scourge of hamsters. And there was more: "It is clear that MHV can rapidly alter its species specificity and infect rats and primates," Baric said. "The resulting virus variants are associated with demyelinating diseases in these alternative species." (A demyelinating disease is a disease that damages nerve sheaths.) With steady prodding from laboratory science, along with some rhetorical exaggeration, a lowly mouse ailment was morphed into an emergent threat that might potentially cause nerve damage in primates. That is, nerve damage in us.

A few years later, in a further round of "interspecies transfer" experimentation, Baric's scientists introduced their mouse coronavirus into flasks that held a suspension of African-green-monkey cells, human cells, and pig-testicle cells. Then, in 2002, they announced something even more impressive: They'd found a way to create a full-length infectious clone of the entire mouse-hepatitis genome. Their "infectious construct" replicated itself just like the real thing, they wrote.

Not only that, but they'd figured out how to perform their assembly seamlessly, without any signs of human handiwork. Nobody would know if the virus had been fabricated in a laboratory or grown in nature. Baric called this the "no-see'm method," and he asserted that it had "broad and largely unappreciated molecular biology applications." The method was named, he wrote, after a "very small biting insect that is occasionally found on North Carolina beaches."

In 2006, Baric, Yount, and two other scientists were granted a patent for their invisible method of fabricating a full-length infectious clone using the seamless, no-see'm method. But this time, it wasn't a clone of the mouse-hepatitis virus — it was a clone of the entire deadly human SARS virus, the one that had emerged from Chinese bats, via civets, in 2002. The Baric Lab came to be known by some scientists as "the Wild Wild West." In 2007, Baric said that we had entered "the golden age of coronavirus genetics."

"I would be afraid to look in their freezers," one virologist told me.

Baric and Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the two top experts on the genetic interplay between bat and human coronaviruses, began collaborating in 2015.

VII.

“I Had Not Slept a Wink”

Early in the pandemic, *Scientific American* profiled Shi Zhengli, known in China as the “bat woman.” Shi trapped hundreds of bats in nets at the mouths of caves in southern China, sampled their saliva and their blood, swabbed their anuses, and gathered up their fecal pellets. Several times, she visited and sampled bats in a mine in Mojiang, in southern China, where, in 2012, six men set to work shoveling bat guano were sickened by a severe lung disease, three of them fatally. Shi’s team took the samples back to Wuhan and analyzed whatever fragments of bat virus she could find. In some cases, when she found a sequence that seemed particularly significant, she experimented with it in order to understand how it might potentially infect humans. Some of her work was funded by the National Institutes of Health and some of it by the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency of the Department of Defense via Peter Daszak’s EcoHealth Alliance.

As Shi explained to *Scientific American*, late in December 2019, she heard from the director of the Wuhan Institute that there was an outbreak of a new disease in the city. Medical samples taken from hospital patients arrived at her lab for analysis. Shi determined that the new virus was related to SARS but even more closely related to a bat disease that her own team had found on a virus-hunting trip: the now-famous RaTG13. Shi was surprised that the outbreak was local, she said: “I had never expected this kind of thing to happen in Wuhan, in central China.” The bat hiding places that she’d been visiting were, after all, as far away as Orlando, Florida, is from New York City. Could this new virus, she wondered, have come from her own laboratory? She checked her records and found no exact matches. “That really took a load off my mind,” she said. “I had not slept a wink for days.”

If one of the first thoughts that goes through the head of a lab director at the Wuhan Institute of Virology is that the new coronavirus could have come from her lab, then we are obliged to entertain the scientific possibility that it could indeed have come from her lab. Right then, there should have been a comprehensive, pockets-inside-out, fully public investigation of the Virology Institute, along with the other important virus labs in Wuhan, including the one close by the seafood market, headquarters of the Wuhan CDC. There should have been interviews with scientists, interviews with biosafety teams, close parsings of laboratory notebooks, freezer and plumbing and decontamination systems checks — everything. It didn’t happen. The Wuhan

Institute of Virology closed down its databases of viral genomes, and the Chinese Ministry of Education sent out a directive: "Any paper that traces the origin of the virus must be strictly and tightly managed."

Shi made some WeChat posts early in 2020. "The novel 2019 coronavirus is nature punishing the human race for keeping uncivilized living habits," she wrote. "I, Shi Zhengli, swear on my life that it has nothing to do with our laboratory." She advised those who believed rumors, and gave credence to unreliable scientific papers, to "shut their stinking mouths."

VIII.

“ ‘Bug to Drug’ in 24 Hours”

It wasn't only AIDS that changed the way the NIH funded research. The War on Terror also influenced which diseases got the most attention. In the late '90s, under Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush, biodefense specialists became interested — again — in anthrax. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency built a small anthrax factory in Nevada, using simulants, to demonstrate how easy it would be for a terrorist to build a small anthrax factory. And in the first year of the Bush presidency, the Defense Intelligence Agency wrote up plans to create a vaccine-resistant form of anthrax using state-of-the-art gene-splicery. A front-page article describing these initiatives, "U.S. Germ Warfare Research Pushes Treaty Limits," appeared in the *New York Times* on September 4, 2001, one week before 9/11. "Pentagon Says Projects Are Defense, Is Pressing Ahead," was the subtitle.

After the 9/11 attacks, and the mysterious anthrax mailings that began a week later (which said, "TAKE PENACILIN [*sic*] NOW / DEATH TO AMERICA / DEATH TO ISRAEL / ALLAH IS GREAT"), the desire for biopreparedness became all consuming. Now there were emerging biothreats from humans as well as from the evolving natural world. Fauci's anti-terror budget went from \$53 million in 2001 to \$1.7 billion in 2003. Setting aside his work toward an AIDS vaccine, which was taking longer than he'd foreseen, Fauci said he would be going all out to defend against a suite of known Cold War agents, all of which had been bred and perfected in American weapons programs many years before — brucellosis, anthrax, tularemia, and plague, for instance. "We are making this the highest priority," Fauci said. "We are really marshaling all available resources."

I would be afraid to look in their freezers.

Vaccine development had to progress much faster, Fauci believed; he wanted to set up “vaccine systems” and “vaccine platforms,” which could be quickly tailored to defend against a particular emergent strain some terrorist with an advanced biochemistry degree might have thrown together in a laboratory. “Our goal within the next 20 years is ‘bug to drug’ in 24 hours,” Fauci said. “This would specifically meet the challenge of genetically engineered bioagents.” The first Project BioShield contract Fauci awarded was to VaxGen, a California pharmaceutical company, for \$878 million worth of shots of anthrax vaccine.

By 2005, so much money was going toward biothreat reduction and preparedness that more than 750 scientists sent a protest letter to the NIH. Their claim was that grants to study canonical biowar diseases — anthrax, plague, brucellosis, and tularemia, all exceptionally rare in the U.S. — had increased by a factor of 15 since 2001, whereas funds for the study of widespread “normal” diseases, of high public-health importance, had decreased.

Fauci was firm in his reply: “The United States through its leaders made the decision that this money was going to be spent on biodefense,” he said. “We disagree with the notion that biodefense concerns are of ‘low public-health significance.’”

In 2010, by one count, there were 249 BSL-3 laboratories and seven BSL-4 laboratories in the U.S., and more than 11,000 scientists and staffers were authorized to handle the ultralethal germs on the government’s select pathogen list. And yet the sole bioterrorist in living memory who actually killed American citizens, according to the FBI — the man who sent the anthrax letters — turned out to be one of the government’s own researchers. Bruce Ivins, an eccentric, suicidal laboratory scientist from Ohio who worked in vaccine development at Fort Detrick, allegedly wanted to boost the fear level so as to persuade the government to buy more of the patented, genetically engineered anthrax VaxGen vaccine, of which he was a co-inventor. (See David Willman’s fascinating biography of Ivins, *Mirage Man*.) Fauci’s staff at NIH funded Ivins’s vaccine laboratory and gave \$100 million to VaxGen to accelerate vaccine production. (The NIH’s \$878 million contract with VaxGen, however, was quietly canceled in 2006; Ivins, who was never charged, killed himself in 2008.)

“The whole incident amounted to a snake eating its own tail,” wrote Wendy Orent in an August 2008 piece titled “Our Own Worst Bioenemy” in the Los Angeles *Times*. “No ingenious biowarrior from Al Qaeda sent the lethal

envelopes through the U.S. postal system. An American scientist did." What confirmed Ivins's guilt, according to the FBI, was that there was a genetic match between the anthrax used in the killings and the strain held at Fort Detrick.

IX.

"Weapons of Mass Disruption"

After SARS appeared in 2003, Ralph Baric's laboratory moved up the NIH funding ladder. SARS was a "dual use" organism — a security threat and a zoonotic threat at the same time. In 2006, Baric wrote a long, fairly creepy paper on the threat of "weaponizable" viruses. Synthetic biology had made possible new kinds of viral "weapons of mass disruption," he wrote, involving, for example, "rapid production of numerous candidate bioweapons that can be simultaneously released," a scattershot terror tactic Baric called the "'survival of the fittest' approach."

Baric hoped to find a SARS vaccine, but he couldn't; he kept looking for it, year after year, supported by the NIH, long after the disease itself had been contained. It wasn't really gone, Baric believed. Like other epidemics that pop up and then disappear, as he told a university audience some years later, "they don't go extinct. They are waiting to return." What do you do if you run a well-funded laboratory, an NIH "center of excellence," and your emergent virus is no longer actually making people sick? You start squeezing it and twisting it into different shapes. Making it stand on its hind legs and quack like a duck, or a bat. Or breathe like a person.

Baric's safety record is good — although there was a minor mouse-bite incident in 2016, uncovered by ProPublica — and his motives are beyond reproach: "Safe, universal, vaccine platforms are needed that can be tailored to new pathogens as they emerge, quickly tested for safety, and then strategically used to control new disease outbreaks in human populations," he wrote in a paper on public health. But the pioneering work he did over the past 15 years — generating tiny eager single-stranded flask monsters and pitting them against human cells, or bat cells, or gene-spliced somewhat-human cells, or monkey cells, or humanized mice — was not without risk, and it may have led others astray.

In 2006, for instance, Baric and his colleagues, hoping to come up with a "vaccine strategy" for SARS, produced noninfectious virus replicon particles (or VRPs) using the Venezuelan-equine-encephalitis virus (another American

germ-warfare agent), which they fitted with various SARS spike proteins. Then, wearing Tyvek suits and two pairs of gloves each, and working in a biological safety cabinet in a BSL-3-certified laboratory, they cloned and grew recombinant versions of the original SARS virus in an incubator in a medium that held African-green-monkey cells. When they had grown enough virus, the scientists swapped out one kind of spike protein for a carefully chosen mutant, and they challenged their prototype vaccine with it in mice.

The scientists also tried their infectious SARS clones in something called an air-liquid interface, using a relatively new type of cell culture developed by Raymond Pickles of the University of North Carolina's Cystic Fibrosis Center. Pickles had perfected a method of emulating the traits of human airway tissue by cultivating cells taken from lung-disease patients — nurturing the culture over four to six weeks in such a way that the cells differentiated and developed a crop of tiny moving hairs, or cilia, on top and goblet cells within that produced real human mucus. In fact, before infecting these HAE (human airway epithelial) cells with a virus, the lab worker must sometimes rinse off some of the accumulated mucus, as if helping the lab-grown tissue to clear its throat. So Baric was exposing and adapting his engineered viruses to an extraordinarily true-to-life environment — the juicy, sticky, hairy inner surface of our breathing apparatus.

SARS-2 seems almost perfectly calibrated to grab and ransack our breathing cells and choke the life out of them. “By the time SARS-CoV-2 was first detected in late 2019, it was already pre-adapted to human transmission,” Alina Chan and her co-authors have written, whereas SARS, when it first appeared in 2003, underwent “numerous adaptive mutations” before settling down. Perhaps viral nature hit a bull’s-eye of airborne infectivity, with almost no mutational drift, no period of accommodation and adjustment, or perhaps some lab worker somewhere, inspired by Baric’s work with human airway tissue, took a spike protein that was specially groomed to colonize and thrive deep in the ciliated, mucosal tunnels of our inner core and cloned it onto some existing viral bat backbone. It could have happened in Wuhan, but — because anyone can now “print out” a fully infectious clone of any sequenced disease — it could also have happened at Fort Detrick, or in Texas, or in Italy, or in Rotterdam, or in Wisconsin, or in some other citadel of coronaviral inquiry. No conspiracy — just scientific ambition, and the urge to take exciting risks and make new things, and the fear of terrorism, and the fear of getting sick. Plus a whole lot of government money.

“Risky Areas for Spillover”

Project Bioshield began to fade by the end of the Bush administration, although the expensive high-containment laboratories, controversial preservers and incubators of past and future epidemics, remain. By 2010, some BioShield projects had dissolved into Obama’s Predict program, which paid for laboratories and staff in 60 “risky areas for spillover” around the world. Jonna Mazet, a veterinary scientist from the University of California, Davis, was in charge of Predict, which was a component of USAID’s “Emerging Pandemic Threats” program. Her far-flung teams collected samples from 164,000 animals and humans and claimed to have found “almost 1,200 potentially zoonotic viruses, among them 160 novel coronaviruses, including multiple SARS- and MERS-like coronaviruses.” The fruits of Predict’s exotic harvest were studied and circulated in laboratories worldwide, and their genetic sequences became part of GenBank, the NIH’s genome database, where any curious RNA wrangler anywhere could quickly synthesize snippets of code and test out a new disease on human cells.

Baric, Jonna Mazet, and Peter Daszak of EcoHealth worked together for years — and Daszak also routed Predict money to Shi Zhengli’s bat-surveillance team in Wuhan through his nonprofit, mingling it with NIH money and money from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency. In 2013, Mazet announced that Shi Zhengli’s virus hunters, with Predict’s support, had, for the first time, isolated and cultured a live SARS-like virus from bats and demonstrated that this virus could bind to the human ACE2, or “angiotensin-converting enzyme 2,” receptor, which Baric’s laboratory had determined to be the sine qua non of human infectivity. “This work shows that these viruses can directly infect humans and validates our assumption that we should be searching for viruses of pandemic potential before they spill over to people,” Mazet said.

Daszak, for his part, seems to have viewed his bat quests as part of an epic, quasi-religious death match. In a paper from 2008, Daszak and a co-author described Bruegel’s painting *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* and compared it to the contemporary human biological condition. The fallen angels could be seen as pathogenic organisms that had descended “through an evolutionary (not spiritual) pathway that takes them to a netherworld where they can feed only on our genes, our cells, our flesh,” Daszak wrote. “Will we succumb to the multitudinous horde? Are we to be cast downward into chthonic chaos represented here by the heaped up gibbering phantasmagory against which we rail and struggle?”

XI.

“Lab-Made?”

There are, in fact, some helpful points of agreement between zoonoticists — those who believe in a natural origin of the SARS-2 virus — and those who believe that it probably came from a laboratory. Both sides agree, when pressed, that a lab origin can’t be conclusively ruled out and a natural origin can’t be ruled out either — because nature, after all, is capable of improbable, teleological-seeming achievements. Both sides also agree, for the most part, that the spillover event that began the human outbreak probably happened only once, or a few times, quite recently, and not many times over a longer period. They agree that bat virus RaTG13 (named for the *Rinolophus affinis* bat, from Tongguan, in 2013) is the closest match to the human virus that has yet been found, and that although the two viruses are very similar, the spike protein of the bat virus lacks the features the human spike protein possesses that enable it to work efficiently with human tissue.

Zoonoticists hold that SARS-2’s crucial features — the furin cleavage site and the ACE2 receptor — are the result of a recombinant event involving a bat coronavirus (perhaps RaTG13 or a virus closely related to it) and another, unknown virus. Early on, researchers proposed that it could be a snake sold at the seafood market — a Chinese cobra or a banded krait —but no: Snakes don’t typically carry coronaviruses. Then there was a thought that the disease came from sick smuggled pangolins, because there existed a certain pangolin coronavirus that was, inexplicably, almost identical in its spike protein to the human coronavirus — but then, no: There turned out to be questions about the reliability of the genetic information in that diseased-pangolin data set, on top of which there were no pangolins for sale at the Wuhan market. Then a group from China’s government veterinary laboratory at Harbin tried infecting beagles, pigs, chickens, ducks, ferrets, and cats with SARS-2 to see if they could be carriers. (Cats and ferrets got sick; pigs, ducks, and most dogs did not.)

In September, some scientists at the University of Michigan, led by Yang Zhang, reported that they had created a “computational pipeline” to screen nearly a hundred possible intermediate hosts, including the Sumatran orangutan, the Western gorilla, the Olive baboon, the crab-eating macaque, and the bonobo. All these primates were “permissive” to the SARS-2 coronavirus and should undergo “further experimental investigation,” the scientists proposed.

Despite this wide-ranging effort, there is at the moment no animal host that zoonoticists can point to as the missing link. There's also no single, agreed-upon hypothesis to explain how the disease may have traveled from the bat reservoirs of Yunnan all the way to Wuhan, seven hours by train, without leaving any sick people behind and without infecting anyone along the way.

The zoonoticists say that we shouldn't find it troubling that virologists have been inserting and deleting furin cleavage sites and ACE2-receptor-binding domains in experimental viral spike proteins for years: The fact that virologists have been doing these things in laboratories, in advance of the pandemic, is to be taken as a sign of their prescience, not of their folly. But I keep returning to the basic, puzzling fact: This patchwork pathogen, which allegedly has evolved without human meddling, first came to notice in the only city in the world with a laboratory that was paid for years by the U.S. government to perform experiments on certain obscure and heretofore unpublicized strains of bat viruses — which bat viruses then turned out to be, out of all the organisms on the planet, the ones that are most closely related to the disease. What are the odds?

In July, I discovered a number of volunteer analysts who were doing a new kind of forensic, samizdat science, hunched over the letter code of the SARS-2 genome like scholars deciphering the cuneiform impressions in Linear B tablets. There were the anonymous authors of Project Evidence, on GitHub, who “disavow all racism and violent attacks, including those which are aimed at Asian or Chinese people,” and there was Yuri Deigin, a biotech entrepreneur from Canada, who wrote a massive, lucid paper on Medium, “Lab-Made?,” which illumined the mysteries of the spike protein. Jonathan Latham of the Bioscience Resource Project, with his co-author Allison Wilson, wrote two important papers: one a calm, unsparing overview of laboratory accidents and rash research and the other a close look at the small outbreak of an unexplained viral pneumonia in a bat-infested copper mine in 2012. I corresponded with Alina Chan (now the subject of a nicely turned piece in *Boston* magazine by Rowan Jacobsen) and with the pseudonymous Billy Bostickson, a tireless researcher whose Twitter photo is a cartoon of an injured experimental monkey, and Monali Rahalkar, of the Agharkar Research Institute in Pune, India, who wrote a paper with her husband, Rahul Bahulikar, that also sheds light on the story of the bat-guano-shoveling men whose virus was remarkably like SARS-2, except that it was not nearly as catching. I talked to Rossana Segreto, a molecular biologist at the University of Innsbruck, whose paper, “Is Considering a Genetic-Manipulation Origin for SARS-CoV-2 a Conspiracy Theory That Must Be Censored?,” co-authored with Yuri Deigin, was finally published in November under a milder title; it argued

that SARS-2's most notable features, the furin site and the human ACE2-binding domain, were unlikely to have arisen simultaneously and "might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site directed mutagenesis." Segreto is also the person who first established that a bat-virus fragment named BtCoV/4991, identified in 2013, was 100 percent identical to the closest known cousin to SARS-CoV-2, the bat virus RaTG13, thereby proving that the virus closest to the SARS-2-pandemic virus was linked back not to a bat cave but to a mine shaft, and that this same virus had been stored and worked on in the Wuhan Institute for years. This made possible the first big investigative piece on SARS-2's origins, in the *Times* of London, in July: "Nobody can deny the bravery of scientists who risked their lives harvesting the highly infectious virus," the *Times* authors write. "But did their courageous detective work lead inadvertently to a global disaster?"

XII.

"A New, Non-Natural Risk"

In 2011, a tall, confident Dutch scientist, Ron Fouchier, using grant money from Fauci's group at NIH, created a mutant form of highly pathogenic avian influenza, H5N1, and passaged it ten times through ferrets in order to prove that he could "force" (his word) this potentially fatal disease to infect mammals, including humans, "via aerosols or respiratory droplets." Fouchier said his findings indicated that these avian influenza viruses, thus forced, "pose a risk of becoming pandemic in humans."

This experiment was too much for some scientists: Why, out of a desire to prove that something extremely infectious could happen, would you make it happen? And why would the U.S. government feel compelled to pay for it to happen? Late in 2011, Marc Lipsitch of the Harvard School of Public Health got together with several other dismayed onlookers to ring the gong for caution. On January 8, 2012, the *New York Times* published a scorcher of an editorial, "An Engineered Doomsday." "We cannot say there would be no benefits at all from studying the virus," the *Times* said. "But the consequences, should the virus escape, are too devastating to risk."

These gain-of-function experiments were an important part of the NIH's approach to vaccine development, and Anthony Fauci was reluctant to stop funding them. He and Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, along with Gary Nabel, NIAID director of vaccine research, published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* in which they contended that the ferret flu experiments, and others like them, were "a risk worth taking."

“Important information and insights can come from generating a potentially dangerous virus in the laboratory,” they wrote; the work can “help delineate the principles of virus transmission between species.” The work was safe because the viruses were stored in a high-security lab, they believed, and the work was necessary because nature was always coming up with new threats. “Nature is the worst bioterrorist,” Fauci told a reporter. “We know that through history.”

Soon afterward, there followed some distressing screwups in secure federal laboratories involving live anthrax, live smallpox, and live avian influenza. These got attention in the science press. Then Lipsitch’s activists (calling themselves the Cambridge Working Group) sent around a strong statement on the perils of research with “Potential Pandemic Pathogens,” signed by more than a hundred scientists. The work might “trigger outbreaks that would be difficult or impossible to control,” the signers said. Fauci reconsidered, and the White House in 2014 announced that there would be a “pause” in the funding of new influenza, SARS, and MERS gain-of-function research.

Baric, in North Carolina, was not happy. He had a number of gain-of-function experiments with pathogenic viruses in progress. “It took me ten seconds to realize that most of them were going to be affected,” he told NPR. Baric and a former colleague from Vanderbilt University wrote a long letter to an NIH review board expressing their “profound concerns.” “This decision will significantly inhibit our capacity to respond quickly and effectively to future outbreaks of SARS-like or MERS-like coronaviruses, which continue to circulate in bat populations and camels,” they wrote. The funding ban was itself dangerous, they argued. “Emerging coronaviruses in nature do not observe a mandated pause.”

Hoping to smooth over controversy by showing due diligence, the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, founded in the BioShield era under President Bush, paid a consulting firm, Gryphon Scientific, to write a report on gain-of-function research, which by now was simply referred to as GoF. In chapter six of this thousand-page dissertation, published in April 2016, the consultants take up the question of coronaviruses. “Increasing the transmissibility of the coronaviruses could significantly increase the chance of a global pandemic due to a laboratory accident,” they wrote.

The Cambridge Working Group continued to write letters of protest and plead for restraint and sanity. Steven Salzberg, a professor of biomedical engineering at Johns Hopkins, said, “We have enough problems simply keeping up with the current flu outbreaks — and now with Ebola — without

scientists creating incredibly deadly new viruses that might accidentally escape their labs.” David Relman of Stanford Medical School said, “It is unethical to place so many members of the public at risk and then consult only scientists — or, even worse, just a small subset of scientists — and exclude others from the decision-making and oversight process.” Richard Ebright wrote that creating and evaluating new threats very seldom increases security: “Doing so in biology — where the number of potential threats is nearly infinite, and where the asymmetry between the ease of creating threats and the difficulty of addressing threats is nearly absolute — is especially counterproductive.” Lynn Klotz wrote, “Awful as a pandemic brought on by the escape of a variant H5N1 virus might be, it is SARS that now presents the greatest risk. The worry is less about recurrence of a natural SARS outbreak than of yet another escape from a laboratory researching it to help protect against a natural outbreak.” Marc Lipsitch argued that gain-of-function experiments can mislead, “resulting in worse not better decisions,” and that the entire gain-of-function debate as overseen by the NIH was heavily weighted in favor of scientific insiders and “distinctly unwelcoming of public participation.”

Nariyoshi Shinomiya, a professor of physiology and nano-medicine at the National Defense Medical College in Japan, offered this warning: “Similar to nuclear or chemical weapons there is no going back once we get a thing in our hands.”

But in the end, Baric was allowed to proceed with his experiments, and the research papers that resulted, showered with money, became a sort of *Anarchist’s Cookbook* for the rest of the scientific world. In November 2015, Baric and colleagues published a collaboration paper with Shi Zhengli titled “A SARS-like Cluster of Circulating Bat Coronaviruses Shows Potential for Human Emergence.” Into a human SARS virus that they had adapted so that it would work in mice, Baric and Shi et al. inserted the spike protein of a bat virus, SHC014, discovered by Shi in southern China. They dabbed the mice nasally with virus and waited, looking for signs of sickness: “hunching, ruffled fur.” They also infected human airway cells with the mouse-adapted bat-spike-in-a-human-virus backbone. In both mice and human airway cells, the chimeric virus caused a “robust infection.”

This proved, Baric and Shi believed, that you did not need civets or other intermediate hosts in order for bats to cause an epidemic in humans and that therefore all the SARS-like viruses circulating in bat populations “may pose a future threat.” Peter Daszak, who had used Predict funds to pay Shi for her work on the paper, was impressed by this conclusion; the findings, he said,

“move this virus from a candidate emerging pathogen to a clear and present danger.”

Richard Ebright was trenchantly unenthusiastic. “The only impact of this work,” he said, “is the creation, in a lab, of a new, non-natural risk.”

Early in 2016, Baric and Shi again collaborated. Shi sent Baric a fresh bat virus spike protein, and Baric inserted it into the backbone of a human SARS virus and then used that infectious clone to attack human airway cells. “The virus readily and efficiently replicated in cultured human airway tissues, suggesting an ability to potentially jump directly to humans,” reported the UNC’s website. This time, they also used the bat-human hybrid virus to infect transgenic humanized mice that grew human ACE2 protein. The mice, young and old, lost weight and died, proving, again, that this particular bat virus was potentially “poised to emerge in human populations.” It was “an ongoing threat,” Baric wrote. But was it? Civets and camels that are exposed to a lot of bat-guano dust may be an ongoing threat and a manageable one. But the bats themselves just want to hang in their caves and not be bothered by frowning sightseers in spacesuits who want to poke Q-tips in their bottoms. This 2016 “poised for human emergence” paper was supported by eight different NIH grants. In 2015, Baric’s lab received \$8.3 million from the NIH; in 2016, it received \$10.5 million.

Gain-of-function research came roaring back under Trump and Fauci. “The National Institutes of Health will again fund research that makes viruses more dangerous,” said an article in *Nature* in December 2017. Carrie Wolinetz of the NIH’s office of science policy defended the decision. “These experiments will help us get ahead of viruses that are already out there and pose a real and present danger to human health,” she told *The Lancet*. The NIH, Wolinetz said, was committed to a leadership role with gain-of-function research internationally. “If we are pursuing this research in an active way, we will be much better positioned to develop protection and countermeasures should something bad happen in another country.”

A reporter asked Marc Lipsitch what he thought of the resumption of NIH funding. Gain-of-function experiments “have done almost nothing to improve our preparedness for pandemics,” he said, “yet they risked creating an accidental pandemic.”

XIII.

“Proximity Is a Problem”

In April, four months into the coronavirus emergency, a deputy director at the NIH wrote an email to EcoHealth Alliance. “You are instructed to cease providing any funds to Wuhan Institute of Virology,” it said. In response, Daszak and the chief scientific officer of New England Biolabs (a company that sells seamless gene-splicing products to laboratories, among other things) got 77 Nobel Prize winners to sign a statement saying that the cancellation deprived the “nation and the world of highly regarded science that could help control one of the greatest health crises in modern history and those that may arise in the future.” Later, as a condition of further funding, the NIH wrote to say it wanted Daszak to arrange an outside inspection of the Wuhan lab and to procure from Wuhan’s scientists a sample of whatever they’d used to sequence the SARS-2 virus. Daszak was outraged (“I am not trained as a private detective”), and again he fought back. He was reluctant to give up his own secrets, too. “Conspiracy-theory outlets and politically motivated organizations have made Freedom of Information Act requests on our grants and all of our letters and emails to the NIH,” he told *Nature*. “We don’t think it’s fair that we should have to reveal everything we do.”

But Daszak has survived — even prospered. Recently, *The Lancet* made him the lead investigator in its inquiry into the origins of the pandemic, and the World Health Organization named him to its ten-person origins investigation. (“We’re still close enough to the origin to really find out more details about where it has come from,” Daszak told *Nature*.)

The NIH has also set up an ambitious new international program, called CREID, which stands for Centers for Research in Emerging Infectious Diseases, and it has put Daszak’s EcoHealth in charge of trapping animals and looking for obscure bat viruses in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Baric is one of Daszak’s partners in CREID. The virus hunting and collecting, which Richard Ebright likens to “looking for a gas leak with a lighted match,” will continue and widen with U.S. funding. “We’re going to work in remote parts of Malaysia and Thailand to get to the front line of where the next pandemic is going to start,” Daszak told NPR.

In May, an interviewer from the People’s Pharmacy website asked Baric if he had any thoughts on whether the coronavirus began with a natural bat-to-human transfer. “Or was there something a little bit more, perhaps, insidious involved?”

“Well, of course the answers to those questions are in China,” Baric replied. “Exactly how they work in that facility is something that would be very difficult for a Westerner to know,” he said. “The main problems that the Institute of Virology has is that the outbreak occurred in close proximity to that Institute. That Institute has in essence the best collection of virologists in the world that have gone out and sought out, and isolated, and sampled bat species throughout Southeast Asia. So they have a very large collection of viruses in their laboratory. And so it’s — you know — proximity is a problem. It’s a problem.”

Over the course of the fall, and especially after the election muffled Donald Trump’s influence over the country’s public-health apparatus, that proximity problem — and the uncomfortable questions of origins it raised — began to grow somewhat more discussable. The BBC, *Le Monde*, and Italy’s RAI have all recently taken seriously the scientific possibility of a lab leak. In late October, the World Health Organization convened the first meeting of its second inquiry into the origins of the disease. The WHO’s effort is perhaps the world’s best chance to satisfy its curiosity about goings-on at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and at the Wuhan CDC’s virus lab near the Wuhan seafood market. But, as the *New York Times* has reported, the WHO’s information gathering has been hindered by Chinese secretiveness since February, when an initial investigative team sent to Beijing was told its members’ access to scientists would be restricted and that it couldn’t visit the seafood market, then considered a hub of the pandemic.

When a BBC video team tried to inspect the Yunnan mine shaft, they found the road to the mine blocked by a strategically parked truck that had “broken down” shortly before they arrived. Reporter John Sudworth asked Daszak, one of the ten members of the second WHO investigative team, whether he would push for access to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. “That’s not my job to do that,” Daszak replied.

In November, David Relman, the Stanford microbiologist, one of the most thoughtful of the voices warning against gain-of-function research, published a paper in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on the urgent need to unravel the origins of COVID-19. “If SARS-CoV-2 escaped from a lab to cause the pandemic,” he wrote, “it will become critical to understand the chain of events and prevent this from happening again.” Conflicts of interest by researchers and administrators will need to be addressed, Relman wrote; to reach the truth, the investigation must be transparent, international, and, as much as possible, unpolitical. “A more complete understanding of the

origins of COVID-19 clearly serves the interests of every person in every country on this planet.”

“The world is sitting on a precedent-setting decision right now,” wrote Alina Chan on December 8. “It is unclear if SARS2 is 100 percent natural or emerged due to lab/research activities. If we walk away from this, demonstrating that we cannot effectively investigate its origins, it will pave the way for future COVIDS.”

Just before this issue of *New York* went to press, I reached Ralph Baric by phone and asked him where he now believed SARS-2 came from. (Anthony Fauci, Shi Zhengli, and Peter Daszak didn’t respond to emails, and Kristian Andersen said he was busy with other things.) Baric said he still thought the virus came from bats in southern China, perhaps directly, or possibly via an intermediate host, although the smuggled pangolins, in his view, were a red herring. The disease evolved in humans over time without being noticed, he suspected, becoming gradually more infectious, and eventually a person carried it to Wuhan “and the pandemic took off.” Then he said, “Can you rule out a laboratory escape? The answer in this case is probably not.”

XIV.

Transmission

So how did we actually get this disease?

Here’s what I think happened. In April 2012, in a copper mine in Mojiang, China, three men were given an awful job — they were told to shovel bat guano out of a mine shaft. They went to work and shoveled guano for seven hours a day in the confined, insufficiently ventilated space of the mine shaft, and by the end of the week, they were sick with a viral pneumonia of unknown etiology. Three more, younger shovelers were hired to replace the ones who were out sick.

The viral load in their lungs was so huge, because of all the guano dust, that their lungs became a kind of accelerated laboratory passaging experiment, as Jonathan Latham and Allison Wilson have written, forcing the virus to switch its allegiance from bats to humans. SARS experts were consulted, and the disease was judged to be SARS-like but not SARS. It was something new. (Shi Zhengli told *Scientific American* that the guano shovelers had died of a fungal disease, but, as Monali Rahalkar pointed out, they were treated with antivirals,

and their symptoms were consistent with viral pneumonia with attendant secondary fungal infections.)

Although it was a severe disease, and in the end three of the shovelers died, there was no resultant epidemic. It was actually a case of industrial overexposure to an infectious substance — what we might call a massive OSHA violation. The bat disease that the men encountered wasn't necessarily all that dangerous except in an environment of immunosuppressive overload.

Peter Daszak and Shi Zhengli were interested, of course, because this unidentified coronavirus disease involved bats and people. Of the fragmentary bits of virus Shi retrieved from the mine shaft, one was SARS-like, and Shi sequenced it and called it BtCoV/4991 and published a paper about it. Several times — in 2016 and 2018 and 2019 — this most interesting sample, a portion of what we now know as RaTG13, was taken out of the freezers in Shi's lab and worked on in undisclosed ways. (Peter Daszak claims that these samples have disintegrated and can't be validated or studied.) Samples of the nameless human disease also traveled back to the Wuhan Institute of Virology — few specifics about these valuable specimens have been released by Chinese sources, however.

This is the period in the story that demands a very close investigation, when chimeric assemblages may have been created and serially passaged, using BtCoV/4991, a.k.a. RaTG13, and other bat viruses, perhaps along with forms of the human virus. It's when Shi and Baric both published papers that were about what happened when you hot-swapped mutant spike proteins between bat viruses and human viruses.

The link, via the renamed sample BtCoV/4991, to the copper mine is of exceptional importance because of the one huge difference between the unnamed guano shovelers' virus and the SARS-2 virus that is now ravaging, for example, California: transmissibility. Airborne human-to-human transmissibility — the kind of thing that gain-of-functioneers like Ron Fouchier and Ralph Baric were aiming at, in order to demonstrate what Baric called "lurking threats" — is COVID-19's crucial distinguishing feature. If six men had gotten extremely sick with COVID-19 back in 2012 in southern China, doctors and nurses in the hospital where they lay dying would likely have gotten sick as well. There might have been hundreds or thousands of cases. Instead, only the shovelers themselves, who had breathed a heavy concentration of guano dust for days, got it.

The existence of bat virus RaTG13 is therefore not necessarily evidence of a natural bat origin. In fact, it seems to me to imply the opposite: New functional components may have been overlaid onto or inserted into the RaTG13 genome, new Tinkertoy intermolecular manipulations, especially to its spike protein, which have the effect of making it unprecedentedly infectious in human airways.

This is where the uniquely peculiar furin insert and/or the human-tuned ACE2-receptor-binding domain may come in — although it's also possible that either of these elements could have evolved as part of some multistep zoonotic process. But in the climate of gonzo laboratory experimentation, at a time when all sorts of tweaked variants and amped-up substitutions were being tested on cell cultures and in the lungs of humanized mice and other experimental animals, isn't it possible that somebody in Wuhan took the virus that had been isolated from human samples, or the RaTG13 bat virus sequence, or both (or other viruses from that same mine shaft that Shi Zhengli has recently mentioned in passing), and used them to create a challenge disease for vaccine research — a chopped-and-channeled version of RaTG13 or the miners' virus that included elements that would make it thrive and even rampage in people? And then what if, during an experiment one afternoon, this new, virulent, human-infecting, furin-ready virus got out?

For more than 15 years, coronavirologists strove to prove that the threat of SARS was ever present and must be defended against, and they proved it by showing how they could doctor the viruses they stored in order to force them to jump species and go directly from bats to humans. More and more bat viruses came in from the field teams, and they were sequenced and synthesized and "rewired," to use a term that Baric likes. In this international potluck supper of genetic cookery, hundreds of new variant diseases were invented and stored. And then one day, perhaps, somebody messed up. It's at least a reasonable, "parsimonious" explanation of what might have happened.

This may be the great scientific meta-experiment of the 21st century. Could a world full of scientists do all kinds of reckless recombinant things with viral diseases for many years and successfully avoid a serious outbreak? The hypothesis was that, yes, it was doable. The risk was worth taking. There would be no pandemic.

I hope the vaccine works.

**This article appears in the January 4, 2021, issue of New York Magazine*

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David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

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	(c)

(b)(6)

Sender:

Recipient:

(b)(6)

EL 3062 00062 A 00000564926 34
"This patchwork pathogen, which allegedly has evolved without human meddling, first came to notice in the only city in the world with a laboratory that was paid for years by the U.S. government to perform experiments on certain obscure and heretofore unpublicized strains of bat viruses — which bat viruses then turned out to be, out of all the organisms on the planet, the ones that are most closely related to the disease. What are the odds?"

Nicholson Baker

NEW YORK

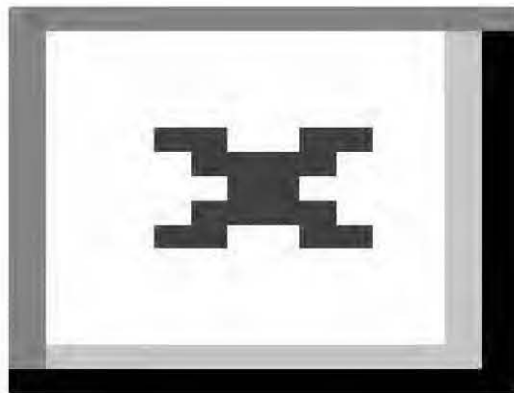
From: "Stilwell, David R" (b)(6)
To: Park, Christopher J (T) (b)(6)
CC: Feith, David (b)(6)
Ford, Christopher A (b)(6)
Subject: RE: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis
Date: Wed, 6 Jan 2021 01:31:25 +0000

(b)(5)

Alina Chan offers some useful insights on the sensitivities in an article from Sep '20.

Best

Dave



From: Park, Christopher J (T) <(b)(6)>
Sent: Tuesday, January 5, 2021 9:33 AM
To: Feith, David <(b)(6)>; Ford, Christopher A <(b)(6)>
Cc: Stilwell, David R <(b)(6)>
Subject: RE: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

It's a good read, though Angela Rasmussen (Georgetown virologist) shredded it rather savagely yesterday and thinks he misunderstands a lot of the science he's trying to describe.

At the end of the day, there's no question but that it's possible all of this was the result of a lab accident. The challenge after that is to assess the relative probability of such an event as opposed to natural emergence, factoring in the available evidence, and to figure out whether it's actually possible to know for certain – pinning down outbreak origins is historically a pretty iffy business.

From: Feith, David <(b)(6)>
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 2:22 PM
To: Ford, Christopher A <(b)(6)>; Park, Christopher J (T) <(b)(6)>
Cc: Stilwell, David R <(b)(6)>
Subject: FW: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

From: Feith, David <(b)(6)>
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 2:20 PM
To: EAP-FO-Principals-DL <EAP-FO-Principals-DL@state.gov>; DL NSC Asia (DL.Asia@whmo.mil) <DL.Asia@whmo.mil>; (b)(6) <(b)(6)> EOP/NSC
(b)(6) <(b)(6)@nsc.eop.gov>
Subject: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

This looks awfully interesting. The story the New Yorker wouldn't tell...

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/coronavirus-lab-escape-theory.html>

Jan 4, 2021, 6:00 AM The Lab-Leak Hypothesis

The Lab Leak Hypothesis

For decades, scientists have been hot-wiring viruses in hopes of

preventing a pandemic, not causing one. But what if ...?

By Nicholson Baker

I.

Flask Monsters

What happened was fairly simple, I've come to believe. It was an accident. A virus spent some time in a laboratory, and eventually it got out. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, began its existence inside a bat, then it learned how to infect people in a claustrophobic mine shaft, and then it was made more infectious in one or more laboratories, perhaps as part of a scientist's well-intentioned but risky effort to create a broad-spectrum vaccine. SARS-2 was not designed as a biological weapon. But it was, I think, designed. Many thoughtful people dismiss this notion, and they may be right. They sincerely believe that the coronavirus arose naturally, "zoonotically," from animals, without having been previously studied, or hybridized, or sluiced through cell cultures, or otherwise worked on by trained professionals. They hold that a bat, carrying a coronavirus, infected some other creature, perhaps a pangolin, and that the pangolin may have already been sick with a different coronavirus disease, and out of the conjunction and commingling of those two diseases within the pangolin, a new disease, highly infectious to humans, evolved. Or they hypothesize that two coronaviruses recombined in a bat, and this new virus spread to other bats, and then the bats infected a person directly — in a rural setting, perhaps — and that this person caused a simmering undetected outbreak of respiratory disease, which over a period of months or years evolved to become virulent and highly transmissible but was not noticed until it appeared in Wuhan.

There is no direct evidence for these zoonotic possibilities, just as there is no direct evidence for an experimental mishap — no written confession, no incriminating notebook, no official accident report. Certainty craves detail, and detail requires an investigation. It has been a full year, 80 million people have been infected, and, surprisingly, no public investigation has taken place. We still know very little about the origins of this disease.

Nevertheless, I think it's worth offering some historical context for our yearlong medical nightmare. We need to hear from the people who for years have contended that certain types of virus experimentation might lead to a disastrous pandemic like this one. And we need to stop hunting for new exotic diseases in the wild, shipping them back to laboratories, and hot-wiring their genomes to prove how dangerous to human life they might become.

Over the past few decades, scientists have developed ingenious methods of evolutionary acceleration and recombination, and they've learned how to trick viruses, coronaviruses in particular, those spiky hairballs of protein we now know so well, into moving quickly from one species of animal to another or from one type of cell culture to another. They've made machines that mix and mingle the viral code for bat diseases with the code for human diseases — diseases like SARS, severe acute respiratory syndrome, for example, which arose in China in 2003, and MERS, Middle East respiratory syndrome, which broke out a decade later and has to do with bats and camels. Some of the experiments — “gain of function” experiments — aimed to create new, more virulent, or more infectious strains of diseases in an effort to predict and therefore defend against threats that might conceivably arise in nature. The term *gain of function* is itself a euphemism; the Obama White House more accurately described this work as “experiments that may be reasonably anticipated to confer attributes to influenza, MERS, or SARS viruses such that the virus would have enhanced pathogenicity and/or transmissibility in mammals via the respiratory route.” The virologists who carried out these experiments have accomplished amazing feats of genetic transmutation, no question, and there have been very few publicized accidents over the years. But there have been some.

And we were warned, repeatedly. The intentional creation of new microbes that combine virulence with heightened transmissibility “poses extraordinary risks to the public,” wrote infectious-disease experts Marc Lipsitch and Thomas Inglesby in 2014. “A rigorous and transparent risk-assessment process for this work has not yet been established.” That's still true today. In 2012, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Lynn Klotz warned that there was an 80 percent chance, given how many laboratories were then handling virulent viro-varietals, that a leak of a potential pandemic pathogen would occur sometime in the next 12 years.

A lab accident — a dropped flask, a needle prick, a mouse bite, an illegibly labeled bottle — is apolitical. Proposing that something unfortunate happened during a scientific experiment in Wuhan — where COVID-19 was first diagnosed and where there are three high-security virology labs, one of which

held in its freezers the most comprehensive inventory of sampled bat viruses in the world — isn't a conspiracy theory. It's just a theory. It merits attention, I believe, alongside other reasoned attempts to explain the source of our current catastrophe.

II.

“A Reasonable Chance”

From early 2020, the world was brooding over the origins of COVID-19. People were reading research papers, talking about what kinds of live animals were or were not sold at the Wuhan seafood market — wondering where the new virus had come from.

Meanwhile, things got strange all over the world. The Chinese government shut down transportation and built hospitals at high speed. There were video clips of people who'd suddenly dropped unconscious in the street. A doctor on YouTube told us how we were supposed to scrub down our produce when we got back from the supermarket. A scientist named Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology published a paper saying that the novel coronavirus was 96 percent identical to a bat virus, RaTG13, found in Yunnan province in southern China. On March 13, I wrote in my journal that there seemed to be something oddly artificial about the disease: “It's too airborne — too catching — it's something that has been selected for infectivity. That's what I suspect. No way to know so no reason to waste time thinking about it.”

This was just a note to self — at the time, I hadn't interviewed scientists about SARS-2 or read their research papers. But I did know something about pathogens and laboratory accidents; I published a book last year, *Baseless*, that talks about some of them. The book is named after a Pentagon program, Project Baseless, whose goal, as of 1951, was to achieve “an Air Force-wide combat capability in biological and chemical warfare at the earliest possible date.”

A vast treasure was spent by the U.S. on the amplification and aerial delivery of diseases — some well known, others obscure and stealthy. America's biological-weapons program in the '50s had A1-priority status, as high as nuclear weapons. In preparation for a total war with a numerically superior communist foe, scientists bred germs to be resistant to antibiotics and other drug therapies, and they infected lab animals with them, using a technique

called “serial passaging,” in order to make the germs more virulent and more catching.

And along the way, there were laboratory accidents. By 1960, hundreds of American scientists and technicians had been hospitalized, victims of the diseases they were trying to weaponize. Charles Armstrong, of the National Institutes of Health, one of the consulting founders of the American germ-warfare program, investigated Q fever three times, and all three times, scientists and staffers got sick. In the anthrax pilot plant at Camp Detrick, Maryland, in 1951, a microbiologist, attempting to perfect the “foaming process” of high-volume production, developed a fever and died. In 1964, veterinary worker Albert Nickel fell ill after being bitten by a lab animal. His wife wasn’t told that he had Machupo virus, or Bolivian hemorrhagic fever. “I watched him die through a little window to his quarantine room at the Detrick infirmary,” she said.

In 1977, a worldwide epidemic of influenza A began in Russia and China; it was eventually traced to a sample of an American strain of flu preserved in a laboratory freezer since 1950. In 1978, a hybrid strain of smallpox killed a medical photographer at a lab in Birmingham, England; in 2007, live foot-and-mouth disease leaked from a faulty drainpipe at the Institute for Animal Health in Surrey. In the U.S., “more than 1,100 laboratory incidents involving bacteria, viruses and toxins that pose significant or bioterror risks to people and agriculture were reported to federal regulators during 2008 through 2012,” reported *USA Today* in an exposé published in 2014.

In 2015, the Department of Defense discovered that workers at a germ-warfare testing center in Utah had mistakenly sent close to 200 shipments of live anthrax to laboratories throughout the United States and also to Australia, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and several other countries over the past 12 years. In 2019, laboratories at Fort Detrick — where “defensive” research involves the creation of potential pathogens to defend against — were shut down for several months by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for “breaches of containment.” They reopened in December 2019.

High-containment laboratories have a whispered history of near misses. Scientists are people, and people have clumsy moments and poke themselves and get bitten by the enraged animals they are trying to nasally inoculate. Machines can create invisible aerosols, and cell solutions can become contaminated. Waste systems don’t always work properly. Things can go wrong in a hundred different ways.

Hold that human fallibility in your mind. And then consider the cautious words of Alina Chan, a scientist who works at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. “There is a reasonable chance that what we are dealing with is the result of a lab accident,” Chan told me in July of last year. There was also, she added, a reasonable chance that the disease had evolved naturally — both were scientific possibilities. “I don’t know if we will ever find a smoking gun, especially if it was a lab accident. The stakes are so high now. It would be terrifying to be blamed for millions of cases of COVID-19 and possibly up to a million deaths by year end, if the pandemic continues to grow out of control. The Chinese government has also restricted their own scholars and scientists from looking into the origins of SARS-CoV-2. At this rate, the origin of SARS-CoV-2 may just be buried by the passage of time.”

I asked Jonathan A. King, a molecular biologist and biosafety advocate from MIT, whether he’d thought *lab accident* when he first heard about the epidemic. “Absolutely, absolutely,” King answered. Other scientists he knew were concerned as well. But scientists, he said, in general were cautious about speaking out. There were “very intense, very subtle pressures” on them not to push on issues of laboratory biohazards. Collecting lots of bat viruses, and passaging those viruses repeatedly through cell cultures, and making bat-human viral hybrids, King believes, “generates new threats and desperately needs to be reined in.”

“All possibilities should be on the table, including a lab leak,” a scientist from the NIH, Philip Murphy — chief of the Laboratory of Molecular Immunology — wrote me recently. Nikolai Petrovsky, a professor of endocrinology at Flinders University College of Medicine in Adelaide, Australia, said in an email, “There are indeed many unexplained features of this virus that are hard if not impossible to explain based on a completely natural origin.” Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University, wrote that he’d been concerned for some years about the Wuhan laboratory and about the work being done there to create “chimeric” (i.e., hybrid) SARS-related bat coronaviruses “with enhanced human infectivity.” Ebright said, “In this context, the news of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan ***screamed*** lab release.”

III.

“No Credible Evidence”

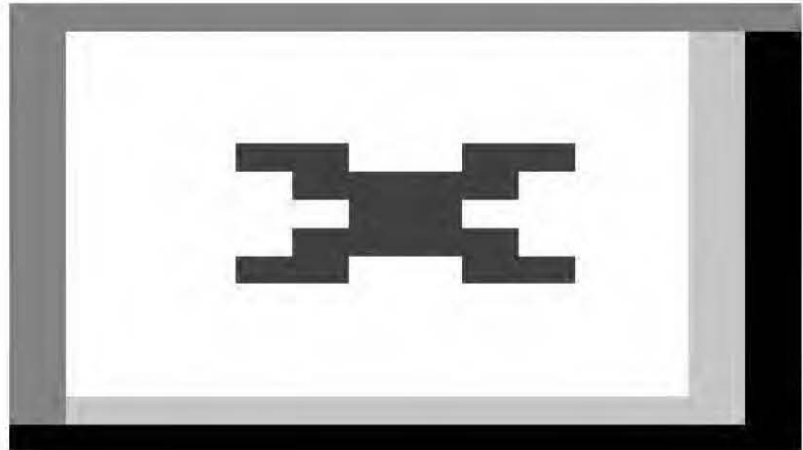
The new disease, as soon as it appeared, was intercepted — stolen and politicized by people with ulterior motives. The basic and extremely

interesting scientific question of what happened was sucked up into an ideological sharknado.

Some Americans boycotted Chinese restaurants; others bullied and harassed Asian Americans. Steve Bannon, broadcasting from his living room, in a YouTube series called *War Room*, said that the Chinese Communist Party had made a biological weapon and intentionally released it. He called it the “CCP virus.” And his billionaire friend and backer, Miles Guo, a devoted Trump supporter, told a right-wing website that the communists’ goal was to “use the virus to infect selective people in Hong Kong, so that the Chinese Communist Party could use it as an excuse to impose martial law there and ultimately crush the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. But it backfired terribly.”

In *The Lancet*, in February, a powerful counterstatement appeared, signed by 27 scientists. “We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin,” the statement said. “Scientists from multiple countries have published and analyzed genomes of the causative agent, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), and they overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife, as have so many other emerging pathogens.”

The behind-the-scenes organizer of this *Lancet* statement, Peter Daszak, is a zoologist and bat-virus sample collector and the head of a New York nonprofit called EcoHealth Alliance — a group that (as veteran science journalist Fred Guterl explained later in *Newsweek*) has channeled money from the National Institutes of Health to Shi Zhengli’s laboratory in Wuhan, allowing the lab to carry on recombinant research into diseases of bats and humans. “We have a choice whether to stand up and support colleagues who are being attacked and threatened daily by conspiracy theorists or to just turn a blind eye,” Daszak said in February in *Science* magazine.



How Did It Get Out? 1. The Tongguan Mine Shaft in Mojiang, Yunnan, where, in 2013, fragments of RaTG13, the closest known relative of SARSCoV-2, were recovered and transported to the Wuhan Institute of Virology; **2. The Wuhan Institute of Virology**, where Shi Zhengli's team brought the RaTG13 sample, sequenced its genome, then took it out of the freezer several times in recent years; **3. The Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention**, which first reported signs of the novel coronavirus in hospital patients; **4. The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market**, an early suspected origin of the pandemic, where the first major outbreak occurred. Illustration: Map by Jason Lee

Vincent Racaniello, a professor at Columbia and a co-host of a podcast called *This Week in Virology*, said on February 9 that the idea of an accident in Wuhan was “complete bunk.” The coronavirus was 96 percent similar to a bat virus found in 2013, Racaniello said. “It’s not a man-made virus. It wasn’t released from a lab.”

Racaniello’s dismissal was seconded by a group of scientists from Ohio State, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of North Carolina, who put out a paper in *Emerging Microbes and Infections* to quiet the “speculations, rumors, and conspiracy theories that SARS-CoV-2 is of laboratory origin.” There was “currently no credible evidence” that SARS-2 leaked from a lab, these scientists said, using a somewhat different argument from Racaniello’s. “Some people have alleged that the human SARS-CoV-2 was leaked directly from a laboratory in Wuhan where a bat CoV (RaTG13) was recently

reported,” they said. But RaTG13 could not be the source because it differed from the human SARS-2 virus by more than a thousand nucleotides. One of the paper’s authors, Susan Weiss, told the Raleigh *News & Observer*, “The conspiracy theory is ridiculous.”

The most influential natural-origin paper, “The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2,” by a group of biologists that included Kristian Andersen of Scripps Research, appeared online in a preliminary version in mid-February.

“We do not believe any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible,” the scientists said. Why? Because molecular-modeling software predicted that if you wanted to optimize an existing bat virus so that it would replicate well in human cells, you would arrange things a different way than how the SARS-2 virus actually does it — even though the SARS-2 virus does an extraordinarily good job of replicating in human cells. The laboratory-based scenario was implausible, the paper said, because, although it was true that the virus could conceivably have developed its unusual genetic features in a laboratory, a stronger and “more parsimonious” explanation was that the features came about through some kind of natural mutation or recombination. “What we think,” explained one of the authors, Robert F. Garry of Tulane University, on YouTube, “is that this virus is a recombinant. It probably came from a bat virus, plus perhaps one of these viruses from the pangolin.” Journalists, for the most part, echoed the authoritative pronouncements of Daszak, Racaniello, Weiss, Andersen, and other prominent natural-originists. “The balance of the scientific evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the new coronavirus emerged from nature — be it the Wuhan market or somewhere else,” said the Washington *Post*’s “Fact Checker” column. “Dr. Fauci Again Dismisses Wuhan Lab As Source of Coronavirus,” said *CBS News*, posting a video interview of Anthony Fauci by *National Geographic*. “If you look at the evolution of the virus in bats, and what’s out there now,” Fauci said, “it’s very, very strongly leaning toward ‘This could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated’ — the way the mutations have naturally evolved.”

Everyone took sides; everyone thought of the new disease as one more episode in an ongoing partisan struggle. Think of Mike Pompeo, that landmass of Cold War truculence; think of Donald Trump himself. They stood at their microphones saying, in a winking, I-know-something-you-don’t-know sort of way, that this disease escaped from a Chinese laboratory. Whatever they were saying must be wrong. It became impermissible, almost taboo, to admit that, of course, SARS-2 could have come from a lab accident. “The administration’s claim that the virus spread from a Wuhan lab has made the notion politically

toxic, even among scientists who say it could have happened,” wrote science journalist Mara Hvistendahl in the Intercept.

IV.

“Is It a Complete Coincidence?”

Even so, in January and February of 2020, there were thoughtful people who were speaking up, formulating their perplexities.

One person was Sam Hussein, who works for Consortium News. He went to a CDC press conference at the National Press Club on February 11, 2020. By then, 42,000 people had gotten sick in China and more than a thousand had died. But there were only 13 confirmed cases in the U.S. Halfway through the Q&A period, Hussein went to the microphone and asked the CDC’s representative, Anne Schuchat, where the virus had come from. His head was spinning, he told me later.

“Obviously the main concern is how to stop the virus,” Hussein said; nonetheless, he wanted to know more about its source. “Is it the CDC’s contention,” he asked, “that there’s absolutely no relation to the BSL-4 lab in Wuhan? It’s my understanding that this is the only place in China with a BSL-4 lab. We in the United States have, I think, two dozen or so, and there have been problems and incidents.” (A BSL-4 laboratory is a maximum-security biosafety-level-four facility, used to house research on the most dangerous known pathogens. *New York* has confirmed there are at least 11 BSL-4 facilities currently operating in the U.S.) Hussein hastened to say that he wasn’t implying that what happened in Wuhan was in any way intentional. “I’m just asking, Is it a complete coincidence that this outbreak happened in the one city in China with a BSL-4 lab?”

Schuchat thanked Hussein for his questions and comments. Everything she’d seen was quite consistent with a natural, zoonotic origin for the disease, she said.

That same month, a group of French scientists from Aix-Marseille University posted a paper describing their investigation of a small insertion in the genome of the new SARS-2 virus. The virus’s spike protein contained a sequence of amino acids that formed what Etienne Decroly and colleagues called a “peculiar furin-like cleavage site” — a chemically sensitive region on the lobster claw of the spike protein that would react in the presence of an enzyme called furin, which is a type of protein found everywhere within the

human body, but especially in the lungs. When the spike senses human furin, it shudders, chemically speaking, and the enzyme opens the protein, commencing the tiny morbid ballet whereby the virus burns a hole in a host cell's outer membrane and finds its way inside.

The code for this particular molecular feature — not found in SARS or any SARS-like bat viruses, but present in a slightly different form in the more lethal MERS virus — is easy to remember because it's a roar: "R-R-A-R." The letter code stands for amino acids: arginine, arginine, alanine, and arginine. Its presence, so Decroly and his colleagues observed, may heighten the "pathogenicity" — that is, the god-awfulness — of a disease.

Botao Xiao, a professor at the South China University of Technology, posted a short paper on a preprint server titled "The Possible Origins of 2019-nCoV Coronavirus." Two laboratories, the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention (WHCDC) and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, were not far from the seafood market, which was where the disease was said to have originated, Xiao wrote — in fact, the WHCDC was only a few hundred yards away from the market — whereas the horseshoe bats that hosted the disease were hundreds of miles to the south. (No bats were sold in the market, he pointed out.) It was unlikely, he wrote, that a bat would have flown to a densely populated metropolitan area of 15 million people. "The killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan," Xiao believed. He urged the relocation of "biohazardous laboratories" away from densely populated places. His article disappeared from the server.

And late in the month, a professor at National Taiwan University, Fang Chitai, gave a lecture on the coronavirus in which he described the anomalous R-R-A-R furin cleavage site. The virus was "unlikely to have four amino acids added all at once," Fang said — natural mutations were smaller and more haphazard, he argued. "From an academic point of view, it is indeed possible that the amino acids were added to COVID-19 in the lab by humans." When the *Taiwan News* published an article about Fang's talk, Fang disavowed his own comments, and the video copy of the talk disappeared from the website of the Taiwan Public Health Association. "It has been taken down for a certain reason," the association explained. "Thank you for your understanding."

“A Serious Shortage of Appropriately Trained Technicians”

In the spring, I did some reading on coronavirus history. Beginning in the 1970s, dogs, cows, and pigs were diagnosed with coronavirus infections; dog shows were canceled in 1978 after 25 collies died in Louisville, Kentucky. New varieties of coronaviruses didn't start killing humans, though, until 2003 — that's when restaurant chefs, food handlers, and people who lived near a live-animal market got sick in Guangzhou, in southern China, where the shredded meat of a short-legged raccoonlike creature, the palm civet, was served in a regional dish called “dragon-tiger-phoenix soup.” The new disease, SARS, spread alarmingly in hospitals, and it reached 30 countries and territories. More than 800 people died; the civet-borne virus was eventually traced to horseshoe bats.

Later, smaller outbreaks of SARS in Taiwan, Singapore, and China's National Institute of Virology in Beijing were all caused by laboratory accidents. Of the Beijing Virology Institute, the World Health Organization's safety investigators wrote, in May 2004, that they had “serious concerns about biosafety procedures.” By one account, a SARS storage room in the Beijing lab was so crowded that the refrigerator holding live virus was moved out to the hallway. “Scientists still do not fully understand exactly where or how SARS emerged 18 months ago,” wrote *Washington Post* reporter David Brown in June 2004. “But it is clear now that the most threatening source of the deadly virus today may be places they know intimately — their own laboratories.”

I'm just asking, Is it a complete coincidence that this outbreak happened in the one city in China with a BSL-4 lab?

MERS arose in 2012, possibly spread by camels that had contracted the disease from bats or bat guano, then passed it to human drinkers of raw camel milk and butchers of camel meat. It was an acute sickness, with a high fatality rate, mostly confined to Saudi Arabia. Like SARS, MERS ebbed quickly — it all but disappeared outside the Middle East, except for an outbreak in 2015 at the Samsung Medical Center in South Korea, where a single case of MERS led to more than 180 infections, many involving hospital workers.

In January 2015, the brand-new BSL-4 lab in Wuhan, built by a French contractor, celebrated its opening, but full safety certification came slowly. According to State Department cables from 2018 leaked to the *Washington Post*, the new BSL-4 lab had some start-up problems, including “a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory.” The staff had gotten some training at a BSL-4 lab in Galveston, Texas, but they were doing potentially dangerous work with SARS-like viruses, the memo said, and they needed more help from the U.S.

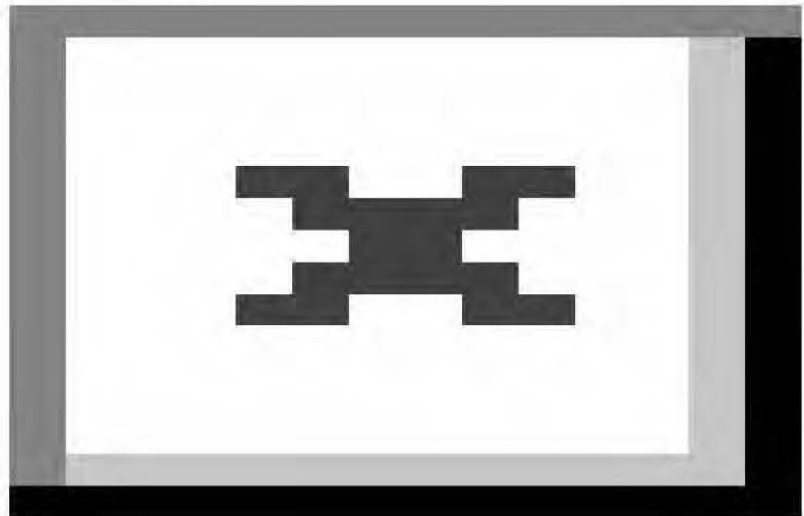
In November or December of 2019, the novel coronavirus began to spread. Chinese scientists initially named it “Wuhan seafood market pneumonia virus,” but soon that idea went away. The market, closed and decontaminated by Chinese officials on January 1, 2020, was an amplifying hub, not the source of the outbreak, according to several studies by Chinese scientists. Forty-five percent of the earliest SARS-2 patients had no link with the market.

VI.

Emergence

Now let’s take a step back. AIDS, fatal and terrifying and politically charged, brought on a new era in government-guided vaccine research, under the guidance of Anthony Fauci. A virologist at Rockefeller University, Stephen S. Morse, began giving talks on “emerging viruses” — other plagues that might be in the process of coming out of nature’s woodwork. In 1992, Richard Preston wrote a horrific account of one emergent virus, Ebola, in *The New Yorker*, which became a best-selling book in 1994; Laurie Garrett’s *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* appeared that same year and was also a best seller. The idea seemed to be everywhere: We were on the verge of a wave of zoonotic, emergent plagues.

This new, useful term, *emerging*, began to glow in the research papers of some coronavirologists, who were out of the spotlight, working on common colds and livestock diseases. The term was useful because it was fluid. An emerging disease could be real and terrifying, as AIDS was — something that had just arrived on the medical scene and was confounding our efforts to combat it — or it could be a disease that hadn’t arrived, and might never arrive, but could be shown in a laboratory to be waiting in the wings, just a few mutations away from a human epidemic. It was real and unreal at the same time — a quality that was helpful when applying for research grants.



Where Did It Come From? This chart measures the genetic similarity of known viruses to the novel coronavirus (which appears in yellow). By far the closest is the bat virus RaTG13, which appears in blue, and which was recovered in 2013 and brought to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The first SARS, marked in red, is a much more distant relative. Graphic: Zhou, P., Yang, XL., Wang, XG. et al. A pneumonia outbreak associated with a new coronavirus of probable bat origin. *Nature* 579, 270–273 (2020)

Take, for instance, this paper from 1995: “High Recombination and Mutation Rates in Mouse Hepatitis Viruses Suggest That Coronaviruses May Be Potentially Important Emerging Viruses.” It was written by Dr. Ralph Baric and his bench scientist, Boyd Yount, at the University of North Carolina. Baric, a gravelly voiced former swim champion, described in this early paper how his lab was able to train a coronavirus, MHV, which causes hepatitis in mice, to jump species, so that it could reliably infect BHK (baby-hamster kidney) cell cultures. They did it using serial passaging: repeatedly dosing a mixed solution of mouse cells and hamster cells with mouse-hepatitis virus, while each time decreasing the number of mouse cells and upping the concentration of hamster cells. At first, predictably, the mouse-hepatitis virus couldn’t do much with the hamster cells, which were left almost free of infection, floating in

their world of fetal-calf serum. But by the end of the experiment, after dozens of passages through cell cultures, the virus had mutated: It had mastered the trick of parasitizing an unfamiliar rodent. A scourge of mice was transformed into a scourge of hamsters. And there was more: "It is clear that MHV can rapidly alter its species specificity and infect rats and primates," Baric said. "The resulting virus variants are associated with demyelinating diseases in these alternative species." (A demyelinating disease is a disease that damages nerve sheaths.) With steady prodding from laboratory science, along with some rhetorical exaggeration, a lowly mouse ailment was morphed into an emergent threat that might potentially cause nerve damage in primates. That is, nerve damage in us.

A few years later, in a further round of "interspecies transfer" experimentation, Baric's scientists introduced their mouse coronavirus into flasks that held a suspension of African-green-monkey cells, human cells, and pig-testicle cells. Then, in 2002, they announced something even more impressive: They'd found a way to create a full-length infectious clone of the entire mouse-hepatitis genome. Their "infectious construct" replicated itself just like the real thing, they wrote.

Not only that, but they'd figured out how to perform their assembly seamlessly, without any signs of human handiwork. Nobody would know if the virus had been fabricated in a laboratory or grown in nature. Baric called this the "no-see'm method," and he asserted that it had "broad and largely unappreciated molecular biology applications." The method was named, he wrote, after a "very small biting insect that is occasionally found on North Carolina beaches."

In 2006, Baric, Yount, and two other scientists were granted a patent for their invisible method of fabricating a full-length infectious clone using the seamless, no-see'm method. But this time, it wasn't a clone of the mouse-hepatitis virus — it was a clone of the entire deadly human SARS virus, the one that had emerged from Chinese bats, via civets, in 2002. The Baric Lab came to be known by some scientists as "the Wild Wild West." In 2007, Baric said that we had entered "the golden age of coronavirus genetics."

"I would be afraid to look in their freezers," one virologist told me.

Baric and Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the two top experts on the genetic interplay between bat and human coronaviruses, began collaborating in 2015.

VII.

“I Had Not Slept a Wink”

Early in the pandemic, *Scientific American* profiled Shi Zhengli, known in China as the “bat woman.” Shi trapped hundreds of bats in nets at the mouths of caves in southern China, sampled their saliva and their blood, swabbed their anuses, and gathered up their fecal pellets. Several times, she visited and sampled bats in a mine in Mojiang, in southern China, where, in 2012, six men set to work shoveling bat guano were sickened by a severe lung disease, three of them fatally. Shi’s team took the samples back to Wuhan and analyzed whatever fragments of bat virus she could find. In some cases, when she found a sequence that seemed particularly significant, she experimented with it in order to understand how it might potentially infect humans. Some of her work was funded by the National Institutes of Health and some of it by the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency of the Department of Defense via Peter Daszak’s EcoHealth Alliance.

As Shi explained to *Scientific American*, late in December 2019, she heard from the director of the Wuhan Institute that there was an outbreak of a new disease in the city. Medical samples taken from hospital patients arrived at her lab for analysis. Shi determined that the new virus was related to SARS but even more closely related to a bat disease that her own team had found on a virus-hunting trip: the now-famous RaTG13. Shi was surprised that the outbreak was local, she said: “I had never expected this kind of thing to happen in Wuhan, in central China.” The bat hiding places that she’d been visiting were, after all, as far away as Orlando, Florida, is from New York City. Could this new virus, she wondered, have come from her own laboratory? She checked her records and found no exact matches. “That really took a load off my mind,” she said. “I had not slept a wink for days.”

If one of the first thoughts that goes through the head of a lab director at the Wuhan Institute of Virology is that the new coronavirus could have come from her lab, then we are obliged to entertain the scientific possibility that it could indeed have come from her lab. Right then, there should have been a comprehensive, pockets-inside-out, fully public investigation of the Virology Institute, along with the other important virus labs in Wuhan, including the one close by the seafood market, headquarters of the Wuhan CDC. There should have been interviews with scientists, interviews with biosafety teams, close parsings of laboratory notebooks, freezer and plumbing and decontamination systems checks — everything. It didn’t happen. The Wuhan

Institute of Virology closed down its databases of viral genomes, and the Chinese Ministry of Education sent out a directive: "Any paper that traces the origin of the virus must be strictly and tightly managed."

Shi made some WeChat posts early in 2020. "The novel 2019 coronavirus is nature punishing the human race for keeping uncivilized living habits," she wrote. "I, Shi Zhengli, swear on my life that it has nothing to do with our laboratory." She advised those who believed rumors, and gave credence to unreliable scientific papers, to "shut their stinking mouths."

VIII.

"‘Bug to Drug’ in 24 Hours"

It wasn't only AIDS that changed the way the NIH funded research. The War on Terror also influenced which diseases got the most attention. In the late '90s, under Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush, biodefense specialists became interested — again — in anthrax. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency built a small anthrax factory in Nevada, using simulants, to demonstrate how easy it would be for a terrorist to build a small anthrax factory. And in the first year of the Bush presidency, the Defense Intelligence Agency wrote up plans to create a vaccine-resistant form of anthrax using state-of-the-art gene-splicery. A front-page article describing these initiatives, "U.S. Germ Warfare Research Pushes Treaty Limits," appeared in the *New York Times* on September 4, 2001, one week before 9/11. "Pentagon Says Projects Are Defense, Is Pressing Ahead," was the subtitle.

After the 9/11 attacks, and the mysterious anthrax mailings that began a week later (which said, "TAKE PENACILIN [*sic*] NOW / DEATH TO AMERICA / DEATH TO ISRAEL / ALLAH IS GREAT"), the desire for biopreparedness became all consuming. Now there were emerging biothreats from humans as well as from the evolving natural world. Fauci's anti-terror budget went from \$53 million in 2001 to \$1.7 billion in 2003. Setting aside his work toward an AIDS vaccine, which was taking longer than he'd foreseen, Fauci said he would be going all out to defend against a suite of known Cold War agents, all of which had been bred and perfected in American weapons programs many years before — brucellosis, anthrax, tularemia, and plague, for instance. "We are making this the highest priority," Fauci said. "We are really marshaling all available resources."

I would be afraid to look in their freezers.

Vaccine development had to progress much faster, Fauci believed; he wanted to set up “vaccine systems” and “vaccine platforms,” which could be quickly tailored to defend against a particular emergent strain some terrorist with an advanced biochemistry degree might have thrown together in a laboratory. “Our goal within the next 20 years is ‘bug to drug’ in 24 hours,” Fauci said. “This would specifically meet the challenge of genetically engineered bioagents.” The first Project BioShield contract Fauci awarded was to VaxGen, a California pharmaceutical company, for \$878 million worth of shots of anthrax vaccine.

By 2005, so much money was going toward biothreat reduction and preparedness that more than 750 scientists sent a protest letter to the NIH. Their claim was that grants to study canonical biowar diseases — anthrax, plague, brucellosis, and tularemia, all exceptionally rare in the U.S. — had increased by a factor of 15 since 2001, whereas funds for the study of widespread “normal” diseases, of high public-health importance, had decreased.

Fauci was firm in his reply: “The United States through its leaders made the decision that this money was going to be spent on biodefense,” he said. “We disagree with the notion that biodefense concerns are of ‘low public-health significance.’”

In 2010, by one count, there were 249 BSL-3 laboratories and seven BSL-4 laboratories in the U.S., and more than 11,000 scientists and staffers were authorized to handle the ultralethal germs on the government’s select pathogen list. And yet the sole bioterrorist in living memory who actually killed American citizens, according to the FBI — the man who sent the anthrax letters — turned out to be one of the government’s own researchers. Bruce Ivins, an eccentric, suicidal laboratory scientist from Ohio who worked in vaccine development at Fort Detrick, allegedly wanted to boost the fear level so as to persuade the government to buy more of the patented, genetically engineered anthrax VaxGen vaccine, of which he was a co-inventor. (See David Willman’s fascinating biography of Ivins, *Mirage Man*.) Fauci’s staff at NIH funded Ivins’s vaccine laboratory and gave \$100 million to VaxGen to accelerate vaccine production. (The NIH’s \$878 million contract with VaxGen, however, was quietly canceled in 2006; Ivins, who was never charged, killed himself in 2008.)

“The whole incident amounted to a snake eating its own tail,” wrote Wendy Orent in an August 2008 piece titled “Our Own Worst Bioenemy” in the Los Angeles *Times*. “No ingenious biowarrior from Al Qaeda sent the lethal

envelopes through the U.S. postal system. An American scientist did." What confirmed Ivins's guilt, according to the FBI, was that there was a genetic match between the anthrax used in the killings and the strain held at Fort Detrick.

IX.

"Weapons of Mass Disruption"

After SARS appeared in 2003, Ralph Baric's laboratory moved up the NIH funding ladder. SARS was a "dual use" organism — a security threat and a zoonotic threat at the same time. In 2006, Baric wrote a long, fairly creepy paper on the threat of "weaponizable" viruses. Synthetic biology had made possible new kinds of viral "weapons of mass disruption," he wrote, involving, for example, "rapid production of numerous candidate bioweapons that can be simultaneously released," a scattershot terror tactic Baric called the "'survival of the fittest' approach."

Baric hoped to find a SARS vaccine, but he couldn't; he kept looking for it, year after year, supported by the NIH, long after the disease itself had been contained. It wasn't really gone, Baric believed. Like other epidemics that pop up and then disappear, as he told a university audience some years later, "they don't go extinct. They are waiting to return." What do you do if you run a well-funded laboratory, an NIH "center of excellence," and your emergent virus is no longer actually making people sick? You start squeezing it and twisting it into different shapes. Making it stand on its hind legs and quack like a duck, or a bat. Or breathe like a person.

Baric's safety record is good — although there was a minor mouse-bite incident in 2016, uncovered by ProPublica — and his motives are beyond reproach: "Safe, universal, vaccine platforms are needed that can be tailored to new pathogens as they emerge, quickly tested for safety, and then strategically used to control new disease outbreaks in human populations," he wrote in a paper on public health. But the pioneering work he did over the past 15 years — generating tiny eager single-stranded flask monsters and pitting them against human cells, or bat cells, or gene-spliced somewhat-human cells, or monkey cells, or humanized mice — was not without risk, and it may have led others astray.

In 2006, for instance, Baric and his colleagues, hoping to come up with a "vaccine strategy" for SARS, produced noninfectious virus replicon particles (or VRPs) using the Venezuelan-equine-encephalitis virus (another American

germ-warfare agent), which they fitted with various SARS spike proteins. Then, wearing Tyvek suits and two pairs of gloves each, and working in a biological safety cabinet in a BSL-3-certified laboratory, they cloned and grew recombinant versions of the original SARS virus in an incubator in a medium that held African-green-monkey cells. When they had grown enough virus, the scientists swapped out one kind of spike protein for a carefully chosen mutant, and they challenged their prototype vaccine with it in mice.

The scientists also tried their infectious SARS clones in something called an air-liquid interface, using a relatively new type of cell culture developed by Raymond Pickles of the University of North Carolina's Cystic Fibrosis Center. Pickles had perfected a method of emulating the traits of human airway tissue by cultivating cells taken from lung-disease patients — nurturing the culture over four to six weeks in such a way that the cells differentiated and developed a crop of tiny moving hairs, or cilia, on top and goblet cells within that produced real human mucus. In fact, before infecting these HAE (human airway epithelial) cells with a virus, the lab worker must sometimes rinse off some of the accumulated mucus, as if helping the lab-grown tissue to clear its throat. So Baric was exposing and adapting his engineered viruses to an extraordinarily true-to-life environment — the juicy, sticky, hairy inner surface of our breathing apparatus.

SARS-2 seems almost perfectly calibrated to grab and ransack our breathing cells and choke the life out of them. “By the time SARS-CoV-2 was first detected in late 2019, it was already pre-adapted to human transmission,” Alina Chan and her co-authors have written, whereas SARS, when it first appeared in 2003, underwent “numerous adaptive mutations” before settling down. Perhaps viral nature hit a bull’s-eye of airborne infectivity, with almost no mutational drift, no period of accommodation and adjustment, or perhaps some lab worker somewhere, inspired by Baric’s work with human airway tissue, took a spike protein that was specially groomed to colonize and thrive deep in the ciliated, mucosal tunnels of our inner core and cloned it onto some existing viral bat backbone. It could have happened in Wuhan, but — because anyone can now “print out” a fully infectious clone of any sequenced disease — it could also have happened at Fort Detrick, or in Texas, or in Italy, or in Rotterdam, or in Wisconsin, or in some other citadel of coronaviral inquiry. No conspiracy — just scientific ambition, and the urge to take exciting risks and make new things, and the fear of terrorism, and the fear of getting sick. Plus a whole lot of government money.

“Risky Areas for Spillover”

Project Bioshield began to fade by the end of the Bush administration, although the expensive high-containment laboratories, controversial preservers and incubators of past and future epidemics, remain. By 2010, some BioShield projects had dissolved into Obama’s Predict program, which paid for laboratories and staff in 60 “risky areas for spillover” around the world. Jonna Mazet, a veterinary scientist from the University of California, Davis, was in charge of Predict, which was a component of USAID’s “Emerging Pandemic Threats” program. Her far-flung teams collected samples from 164,000 animals and humans and claimed to have found “almost 1,200 potentially zoonotic viruses, among them 160 novel coronaviruses, including multiple SARS- and MERS-like coronaviruses.” The fruits of Predict’s exotic harvest were studied and circulated in laboratories worldwide, and their genetic sequences became part of GenBank, the NIH’s genome database, where any curious RNA wrangler anywhere could quickly synthesize snippets of code and test out a new disease on human cells.

Baric, Jonna Mazet, and Peter Daszak of EcoHealth worked together for years — and Daszak also routed Predict money to Shi Zhengli’s bat-surveillance team in Wuhan through his nonprofit, mingling it with NIH money and money from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency. In 2013, Mazet announced that Shi Zhengli’s virus hunters, with Predict’s support, had, for the first time, isolated and cultured a live SARS-like virus from bats and demonstrated that this virus could bind to the human ACE2, or “angiotensin-converting enzyme 2,” receptor, which Baric’s laboratory had determined to be the sine qua non of human infectivity. “This work shows that these viruses can directly infect humans and validates our assumption that we should be searching for viruses of pandemic potential before they spill over to people,” Mazet said.

Daszak, for his part, seems to have viewed his bat quests as part of an epic, quasi-religious death match. In a paper from 2008, Daszak and a co-author described Bruegel’s painting *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* and compared it to the contemporary human biological condition. The fallen angels could be seen as pathogenic organisms that had descended “through an evolutionary (not spiritual) pathway that takes them to a netherworld where they can feed only on our genes, our cells, our flesh,” Daszak wrote. “Will we succumb to the multitudinous horde? Are we to be cast downward into chthonic chaos represented here by the heaped up gibbering phantasmagory against which we rail and struggle?”

XI.

“Lab-Made?”

There are, in fact, some helpful points of agreement between zoonoticists — those who believe in a natural origin of the SARS-2 virus — and those who believe that it probably came from a laboratory. Both sides agree, when pressed, that a lab origin can’t be conclusively ruled out and a natural origin can’t be ruled out either — because nature, after all, is capable of improbable, teleological-seeming achievements. Both sides also agree, for the most part, that the spillover event that began the human outbreak probably happened only once, or a few times, quite recently, and not many times over a longer period. They agree that bat virus RaTG13 (named for the *Rinolophus affinis* bat, from Tongguan, in 2013) is the closest match to the human virus that has yet been found, and that although the two viruses are very similar, the spike protein of the bat virus lacks the features the human spike protein possesses that enable it to work efficiently with human tissue.

Zoonoticists hold that SARS-2’s crucial features — the furin cleavage site and the ACE2 receptor — are the result of a recombinant event involving a bat coronavirus (perhaps RaTG13 or a virus closely related to it) and another, unknown virus. Early on, researchers proposed that it could be a snake sold at the seafood market — a Chinese cobra or a banded krait —but no: Snakes don’t typically carry coronaviruses. Then there was a thought that the disease came from sick smuggled pangolins, because there existed a certain pangolin coronavirus that was, inexplicably, almost identical in its spike protein to the human coronavirus — but then, no: There turned out to be questions about the reliability of the genetic information in that diseased-pangolin data set, on top of which there were no pangolins for sale at the Wuhan market. Then a group from China’s government veterinary laboratory at Harbin tried infecting beagles, pigs, chickens, ducks, ferrets, and cats with SARS-2 to see if they could be carriers. (Cats and ferrets got sick; pigs, ducks, and most dogs did not.)

In September, some scientists at the University of Michigan, led by Yang Zhang, reported that they had created a “computational pipeline” to screen nearly a hundred possible intermediate hosts, including the Sumatran orangutan, the Western gorilla, the Olive baboon, the crab-eating macaque, and the bonobo. All these primates were “permissive” to the SARS-2 coronavirus and should undergo “further experimental investigation,” the scientists proposed.

Despite this wide-ranging effort, there is at the moment no animal host that zoonoticists can point to as the missing link. There's also no single, agreed-upon hypothesis to explain how the disease may have traveled from the bat reservoirs of Yunnan all the way to Wuhan, seven hours by train, without leaving any sick people behind and without infecting anyone along the way.

The zoonoticists say that we shouldn't find it troubling that virologists have been inserting and deleting furin cleavage sites and ACE2-receptor-binding domains in experimental viral spike proteins for years: The fact that virologists have been doing these things in laboratories, in advance of the pandemic, is to be taken as a sign of their prescience, not of their folly. But I keep returning to the basic, puzzling fact: This patchwork pathogen, which allegedly has evolved without human meddling, first came to notice in the only city in the world with a laboratory that was paid for years by the U.S. government to perform experiments on certain obscure and heretofore unpublicized strains of bat viruses — which bat viruses then turned out to be, out of all the organisms on the planet, the ones that are most closely related to the disease. What are the odds?

In July, I discovered a number of volunteer analysts who were doing a new kind of forensic, samizdat science, hunched over the letter code of the SARS-2 genome like scholars deciphering the cuneiform impressions in Linear B tablets. There were the anonymous authors of Project Evidence, on GitHub, who “disavow all racism and violent attacks, including those which are aimed at Asian or Chinese people,” and there was Yuri Deigin, a biotech entrepreneur from Canada, who wrote a massive, lucid paper on Medium, “Lab-Made?,” which illumined the mysteries of the spike protein. Jonathan Latham of the Bioscience Resource Project, with his co-author Allison Wilson, wrote two important papers: one a calm, unsparing overview of laboratory accidents and rash research and the other a close look at the small outbreak of an unexplained viral pneumonia in a bat-infested copper mine in 2012. I corresponded with Alina Chan (now the subject of a nicely turned piece in *Boston* magazine by Rowan Jacobsen) and with the pseudonymous Billy Bostickson, a tireless researcher whose Twitter photo is a cartoon of an injured experimental monkey, and Monali Rahalkar, of the Agharkar Research Institute in Pune, India, who wrote a paper with her husband, Rahul Bahulikar, that also sheds light on the story of the bat-guano-shoveling men whose virus was remarkably like SARS-2, except that it was not nearly as catching. I talked to Rossana Segreto, a molecular biologist at the University of Innsbruck, whose paper, “Is Considering a Genetic-Manipulation Origin for SARS-CoV-2 a Conspiracy Theory That Must Be Censored?,” co-authored with Yuri Deigin, was finally published in November under a milder title; it argued

that SARS-2's most notable features, the furin site and the human ACE2-binding domain, were unlikely to have arisen simultaneously and "might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site directed mutagenesis." Segreto is also the person who first established that a bat-virus fragment named BtCoV/4991, identified in 2013, was 100 percent identical to the closest known cousin to SARS-CoV-2, the bat virus RaTG13, thereby proving that the virus closest to the SARS-2-pandemic virus was linked back not to a bat cave but to a mine shaft, and that this same virus had been stored and worked on in the Wuhan Institute for years. This made possible the first big investigative piece on SARS-2's origins, in the *Times* of London, in July: "Nobody can deny the bravery of scientists who risked their lives harvesting the highly infectious virus," the *Times* authors write. "But did their courageous detective work lead inadvertently to a global disaster?"

XII.

"A New, Non-Natural Risk"

In 2011, a tall, confident Dutch scientist, Ron Fouchier, using grant money from Fauci's group at NIH, created a mutant form of highly pathogenic avian influenza, H5N1, and passaged it ten times through ferrets in order to prove that he could "force" (his word) this potentially fatal disease to infect mammals, including humans, "via aerosols or respiratory droplets." Fouchier said his findings indicated that these avian influenza viruses, thus forced, "pose a risk of becoming pandemic in humans."

This experiment was too much for some scientists: Why, out of a desire to prove that something extremely infectious could happen, would you make it happen? And why would the U.S. government feel compelled to pay for it to happen? Late in 2011, Marc Lipsitch of the Harvard School of Public Health got together with several other dismayed onlookers to ring the gong for caution. On January 8, 2012, the *New York Times* published a scorcher of an editorial, "An Engineered Doomsday." "We cannot say there would be no benefits at all from studying the virus," the *Times* said. "But the consequences, should the virus escape, are too devastating to risk."

These gain-of-function experiments were an important part of the NIH's approach to vaccine development, and Anthony Fauci was reluctant to stop funding them. He and Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, along with Gary Nabel, NIAID director of vaccine research, published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* in which they contended that the ferret flu experiments, and others like them, were "a risk worth taking."

“Important information and insights can come from generating a potentially dangerous virus in the laboratory,” they wrote; the work can “help delineate the principles of virus transmission between species.” The work was safe because the viruses were stored in a high-security lab, they believed, and the work was necessary because nature was always coming up with new threats. “Nature is the worst bioterrorist,” Fauci told a reporter. “We know that through history.”

Soon afterward, there followed some distressing screwups in secure federal laboratories involving live anthrax, live smallpox, and live avian influenza. These got attention in the science press. Then Lipsitch’s activists (calling themselves the Cambridge Working Group) sent around a strong statement on the perils of research with “Potential Pandemic Pathogens,” signed by more than a hundred scientists. The work might “trigger outbreaks that would be difficult or impossible to control,” the signers said. Fauci reconsidered, and the White House in 2014 announced that there would be a “pause” in the funding of new influenza, SARS, and MERS gain-of-function research.

Baric, in North Carolina, was not happy. He had a number of gain-of-function experiments with pathogenic viruses in progress. “It took me ten seconds to realize that most of them were going to be affected,” he told NPR. Baric and a former colleague from Vanderbilt University wrote a long letter to an NIH review board expressing their “profound concerns.” “This decision will significantly inhibit our capacity to respond quickly and effectively to future outbreaks of SARS-like or MERS-like coronaviruses, which continue to circulate in bat populations and camels,” they wrote. The funding ban was itself dangerous, they argued. “Emerging coronaviruses in nature do not observe a mandated pause.”

Hoping to smooth over controversy by showing due diligence, the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, founded in the BioShield era under President Bush, paid a consulting firm, Gryphon Scientific, to write a report on gain-of-function research, which by now was simply referred to as GoF. In chapter six of this thousand-page dissertation, published in April 2016, the consultants take up the question of coronaviruses. “Increasing the transmissibility of the coronaviruses could significantly increase the chance of a global pandemic due to a laboratory accident,” they wrote.

The Cambridge Working Group continued to write letters of protest and plead for restraint and sanity. Steven Salzberg, a professor of biomedical engineering at Johns Hopkins, said, “We have enough problems simply keeping up with the current flu outbreaks — and now with Ebola — without

scientists creating incredibly deadly new viruses that might accidentally escape their labs.” David Relman of Stanford Medical School said, “It is unethical to place so many members of the public at risk and then consult only scientists — or, even worse, just a small subset of scientists — and exclude others from the decision-making and oversight process.” Richard Ebright wrote that creating and evaluating new threats very seldom increases security: “Doing so in biology — where the number of potential threats is nearly infinite, and where the asymmetry between the ease of creating threats and the difficulty of addressing threats is nearly absolute — is especially counterproductive.” Lynn Klotz wrote, “Awful as a pandemic brought on by the escape of a variant H5N1 virus might be, it is SARS that now presents the greatest risk. The worry is less about recurrence of a natural SARS outbreak than of yet another escape from a laboratory researching it to help protect against a natural outbreak.” Marc Lipsitch argued that gain-of-function experiments can mislead, “resulting in worse not better decisions,” and that the entire gain-of-function debate as overseen by the NIH was heavily weighted in favor of scientific insiders and “distinctly unwelcoming of public participation.”

Nariyoshi Shinomiya, a professor of physiology and nano-medicine at the National Defense Medical College in Japan, offered this warning: “Similar to nuclear or chemical weapons there is no going back once we get a thing in our hands.”

But in the end, Baric was allowed to proceed with his experiments, and the research papers that resulted, showered with money, became a sort of *Anarchist’s Cookbook* for the rest of the scientific world. In November 2015, Baric and colleagues published a collaboration paper with Shi Zhengli titled “A SARS-like Cluster of Circulating Bat Coronaviruses Shows Potential for Human Emergence.” Into a human SARS virus that they had adapted so that it would work in mice, Baric and Shi et al. inserted the spike protein of a bat virus, SHC014, discovered by Shi in southern China. They dabbed the mice nasally with virus and waited, looking for signs of sickness: “hunching, ruffled fur.” They also infected human airway cells with the mouse-adapted bat-spike-in-a-human-virus backbone. In both mice and human airway cells, the chimeric virus caused a “robust infection.”

This proved, Baric and Shi believed, that you did not need civets or other intermediate hosts in order for bats to cause an epidemic in humans and that therefore all the SARS-like viruses circulating in bat populations “may pose a future threat.” Peter Daszak, who had used Predict funds to pay Shi for her work on the paper, was impressed by this conclusion; the findings, he said,

“move this virus from a candidate emerging pathogen to a clear and present danger.”

Richard Ebright was trenchantly unenthusiastic. “The only impact of this work,” he said, “is the creation, in a lab, of a new, non-natural risk.”

Early in 2016, Baric and Shi again collaborated. Shi sent Baric a fresh bat virus spike protein, and Baric inserted it into the backbone of a human SARS virus and then used that infectious clone to attack human airway cells. “The virus readily and efficiently replicated in cultured human airway tissues, suggesting an ability to potentially jump directly to humans,” reported the UNC’s website. This time, they also used the bat-human hybrid virus to infect transgenic humanized mice that grew human ACE2 protein. The mice, young and old, lost weight and died, proving, again, that this particular bat virus was potentially “poised to emerge in human populations.” It was “an ongoing threat,” Baric wrote. But was it? Civets and camels that are exposed to a lot of bat-guano dust may be an ongoing threat and a manageable one. But the bats themselves just want to hang in their caves and not be bothered by frowning sightseers in spacesuits who want to poke Q-tips in their bottoms. This 2016 “poised for human emergence” paper was supported by eight different NIH grants. In 2015, Baric’s lab received \$8.3 million from the NIH; in 2016, it received \$10.5 million.

Gain-of-function research came roaring back under Trump and Fauci. “The National Institutes of Health will again fund research that makes viruses more dangerous,” said an article in *Nature* in December 2017. Carrie Wolinetz of the NIH’s office of science policy defended the decision. “These experiments will help us get ahead of viruses that are already out there and pose a real and present danger to human health,” she told *The Lancet*. The NIH, Wolinetz said, was committed to a leadership role with gain-of-function research internationally. “If we are pursuing this research in an active way, we will be much better positioned to develop protection and countermeasures should something bad happen in another country.”

A reporter asked Marc Lipsitch what he thought of the resumption of NIH funding. Gain-of-function experiments “have done almost nothing to improve our preparedness for pandemics,” he said, “yet they risked creating an accidental pandemic.”

XIII.

“Proximity Is a Problem”

In April, four months into the coronavirus emergency, a deputy director at the NIH wrote an email to EcoHealth Alliance. “You are instructed to cease providing any funds to Wuhan Institute of Virology,” it said. In response, Daszak and the chief scientific officer of New England Biolabs (a company that sells seamless gene-splicing products to laboratories, among other things) got 77 Nobel Prize winners to sign a statement saying that the cancellation deprived the “nation and the world of highly regarded science that could help control one of the greatest health crises in modern history and those that may arise in the future.” Later, as a condition of further funding, the NIH wrote to say it wanted Daszak to arrange an outside inspection of the Wuhan lab and to procure from Wuhan’s scientists a sample of whatever they’d used to sequence the SARS-2 virus. Daszak was outraged (“I am not trained as a private detective”), and again he fought back. He was reluctant to give up his own secrets, too. “Conspiracy-theory outlets and politically motivated organizations have made Freedom of Information Act requests on our grants and all of our letters and emails to the NIH,” he told *Nature*. “We don’t think it’s fair that we should have to reveal everything we do.”

But Daszak has survived — even prospered. Recently, *The Lancet* made him the lead investigator in its inquiry into the origins of the pandemic, and the World Health Organization named him to its ten-person origins investigation. (“We’re still close enough to the origin to really find out more details about where it has come from,” Daszak told *Nature*.)

The NIH has also set up an ambitious new international program, called CREID, which stands for Centers for Research in Emerging Infectious Diseases, and it has put Daszak’s EcoHealth in charge of trapping animals and looking for obscure bat viruses in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Baric is one of Daszak’s partners in CREID. The virus hunting and collecting, which Richard Ebright likens to “looking for a gas leak with a lighted match,” will continue and widen with U.S. funding. “We’re going to work in remote parts of Malaysia and Thailand to get to the front line of where the next pandemic is going to start,” Daszak told NPR.

In May, an interviewer from the People’s Pharmacy website asked Baric if he had any thoughts on whether the coronavirus began with a natural bat-to-human transfer. “Or was there something a little bit more, perhaps, insidious involved?”

“Well, of course the answers to those questions are in China,” Baric replied. “Exactly how they work in that facility is something that would be very difficult for a Westerner to know,” he said. “The main problems that the Institute of Virology has is that the outbreak occurred in close proximity to that Institute. That Institute has in essence the best collection of virologists in the world that have gone out and sought out, and isolated, and sampled bat species throughout Southeast Asia. So they have a very large collection of viruses in their laboratory. And so it’s — you know — proximity is a problem. It’s a problem.”

Over the course of the fall, and especially after the election muffled Donald Trump’s influence over the country’s public-health apparatus, that proximity problem — and the uncomfortable questions of origins it raised — began to grow somewhat more discussable. The BBC, *Le Monde*, and Italy’s RAI have all recently taken seriously the scientific possibility of a lab leak. In late October, the World Health Organization convened the first meeting of its second inquiry into the origins of the disease. The WHO’s effort is perhaps the world’s best chance to satisfy its curiosity about goings-on at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and at the Wuhan CDC’s virus lab near the Wuhan seafood market. But, as the *New York Times* has reported, the WHO’s information gathering has been hindered by Chinese secretiveness since February, when an initial investigative team sent to Beijing was told its members’ access to scientists would be restricted and that it couldn’t visit the seafood market, then considered a hub of the pandemic.

When a BBC video team tried to inspect the Yunnan mine shaft, they found the road to the mine blocked by a strategically parked truck that had “broken down” shortly before they arrived. Reporter John Sudworth asked Daszak, one of the ten members of the second WHO investigative team, whether he would push for access to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. “That’s not my job to do that,” Daszak replied.

In November, David Relman, the Stanford microbiologist, one of the most thoughtful of the voices warning against gain-of-function research, published a paper in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on the urgent need to unravel the origins of COVID-19. “If SARS-CoV-2 escaped from a lab to cause the pandemic,” he wrote, “it will become critical to understand the chain of events and prevent this from happening again.” Conflicts of interest by researchers and administrators will need to be addressed, Relman wrote; to reach the truth, the investigation must be transparent, international, and, as much as possible, unpolitical. “A more complete understanding of the

origins of COVID-19 clearly serves the interests of every person in every country on this planet.”

“The world is sitting on a precedent-setting decision right now,” wrote Alina Chan on December 8. “It is unclear if SARS2 is 100 percent natural or emerged due to lab/research activities. If we walk away from this, demonstrating that we cannot effectively investigate its origins, it will pave the way for future COVIDS.”

Just before this issue of *New York* went to press, I reached Ralph Baric by phone and asked him where he now believed SARS-2 came from. (Anthony Fauci, Shi Zhengli, and Peter Daszak didn’t respond to emails, and Kristian Andersen said he was busy with other things.) Baric said he still thought the virus came from bats in southern China, perhaps directly, or possibly via an intermediate host, although the smuggled pangolins, in his view, were a red herring. The disease evolved in humans over time without being noticed, he suspected, becoming gradually more infectious, and eventually a person carried it to Wuhan “and the pandemic took off.” Then he said, “Can you rule out a laboratory escape? The answer in this case is probably not.”

XIV.

Transmission

So how did we actually get this disease?

Here’s what I think happened. In April 2012, in a copper mine in Mojiang, China, three men were given an awful job — they were told to shovel bat guano out of a mine shaft. They went to work and shoveled guano for seven hours a day in the confined, insufficiently ventilated space of the mine shaft, and by the end of the week, they were sick with a viral pneumonia of unknown etiology. Three more, younger shovelers were hired to replace the ones who were out sick.

The viral load in their lungs was so huge, because of all the guano dust, that their lungs became a kind of accelerated laboratory passaging experiment, as Jonathan Latham and Allison Wilson have written, forcing the virus to switch its allegiance from bats to humans. SARS experts were consulted, and the disease was judged to be SARS-like but not SARS. It was something new. (Shi Zhengli told *Scientific American* that the guano shovelers had died of a fungal disease, but, as Monali Rahalkar pointed out, they were treated with antivirals,

and their symptoms were consistent with viral pneumonia with attendant secondary fungal infections.)

Although it was a severe disease, and in the end three of the shovelers died, there was no resultant epidemic. It was actually a case of industrial overexposure to an infectious substance — what we might call a massive OSHA violation. The bat disease that the men encountered wasn't necessarily all that dangerous except in an environment of immunosuppressive overload.

Peter Daszak and Shi Zhengli were interested, of course, because this unidentified coronavirus disease involved bats and people. Of the fragmentary bits of virus Shi retrieved from the mine shaft, one was SARS-like, and Shi sequenced it and called it BtCoV/4991 and published a paper about it. Several times — in 2016 and 2018 and 2019 — this most interesting sample, a portion of what we now know as RaTG13, was taken out of the freezers in Shi's lab and worked on in undisclosed ways. (Peter Daszak claims that these samples have disintegrated and can't be validated or studied.) Samples of the nameless human disease also traveled back to the Wuhan Institute of Virology — few specifics about these valuable specimens have been released by Chinese sources, however.

This is the period in the story that demands a very close investigation, when chimeric assemblages may have been created and serially passaged, using BtCoV/4991, a.k.a. RaTG13, and other bat viruses, perhaps along with forms of the human virus. It's when Shi and Baric both published papers that were about what happened when you hot-swapped mutant spike proteins between bat viruses and human viruses.

The link, via the renamed sample BtCoV/4991, to the copper mine is of exceptional importance because of the one huge difference between the unnamed guano shovelers' virus and the SARS-2 virus that is now ravaging, for example, California: transmissibility. Airborne human-to-human transmissibility — the kind of thing that gain-of-functioneers like Ron Fouchier and Ralph Baric were aiming at, in order to demonstrate what Baric called "lurking threats" — is COVID-19's crucial distinguishing feature. If six men had gotten extremely sick with COVID-19 back in 2012 in southern China, doctors and nurses in the hospital where they lay dying would likely have gotten sick as well. There might have been hundreds or thousands of cases. Instead, only the shovelers themselves, who had breathed a heavy concentration of guano dust for days, got it.

The existence of bat virus RaTG13 is therefore not necessarily evidence of a natural bat origin. In fact, it seems to me to imply the opposite: New functional components may have been overlaid onto or inserted into the RaTG13 genome, new Tinkertoy intermolecular manipulations, especially to its spike protein, which have the effect of making it unprecedentedly infectious in human airways.

This is where the uniquely peculiar furin insert and/or the human-tuned ACE2-receptor-binding domain may come in — although it's also possible that either of these elements could have evolved as part of some multistep zoonotic process. But in the climate of gonzo laboratory experimentation, at a time when all sorts of tweaked variants and amped-up substitutions were being tested on cell cultures and in the lungs of humanized mice and other experimental animals, isn't it possible that somebody in Wuhan took the virus that had been isolated from human samples, or the RaTG13 bat virus sequence, or both (or other viruses from that same mine shaft that Shi Zhengli has recently mentioned in passing), and used them to create a challenge disease for vaccine research — a chopped-and-channeled version of RaTG13 or the miners' virus that included elements that would make it thrive and even rampage in people? And then what if, during an experiment one afternoon, this new, virulent, human-infecting, furin-ready virus got out?

For more than 15 years, coronavirologists strove to prove that the threat of SARS was ever present and must be defended against, and they proved it by showing how they could doctor the viruses they stored in order to force them to jump species and go directly from bats to humans. More and more bat viruses came in from the field teams, and they were sequenced and synthesized and "rewired," to use a term that Baric likes. In this international potluck supper of genetic cookery, hundreds of new variant diseases were invented and stored. And then one day, perhaps, somebody messed up. It's at least a reasonable, "parsimonious" explanation of what might have happened.

This may be the great scientific meta-experiment of the 21st century. Could a world full of scientists do all kinds of reckless recombinant things with viral diseases for many years and successfully avoid a serious outbreak? The hypothesis was that, yes, it was doable. The risk was worth taking. There would be no pandemic.

I hope the vaccine works.

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David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

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Sender:

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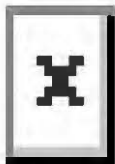
From: "Asher, David" (b)(6)
Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)
Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)
To: Pease, Michael (b)(6)
DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)
Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)
Gross, Laura J (b)(6)
CC: (b)(6)
Subject: Re: Mike's summary of post cables
Date: Tue, 15 Dec 2020 02:22:28 +0000

These cables meticulously document a situation that was already out of control in January. I'm reading February now (b)(5)

(b)(5)

See below.

<https://www.nap.edu/read/24890/chapter/2#7>



Summary | Biodefense in the Age of Synthetic Biology - The National Academies Press

Visit [NAP.edu/10766](https://www.nap.edu/10766) to get more information about this book, to buy it in print, or to download it as a free PDF. Scientific advances over the past several decades have accelerated the ability to engineer existing organisms and to potentially create novel ones not found in nature. Synthetic biology

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Scientific advances over the past several decades have accelerated the ability to engineer existing organisms and to potentially create novel ones not found in nature. Synthetic biology, which collectively refers to concepts, approaches, and tools that enable the modification or creation of biological organisms, is being pursued overwhelmingly for beneficial purposes ranging from reducing the

burden of disease to improving agricultural yields to remediating pollution. Although the contributions synthetic biology can make in these and other areas hold great promise, it is also possible to imagine malicious uses that could threaten U.S. citizens and military personnel. Making informed decisions about how to address such concerns requires a realistic assessment of the capabilities that could be misused. To that end, the U.S. Department of Defense, working with other agencies involved in biodefense, asked the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to develop a framework to guide an assessment of the security concerns related to advances in synthetic biology, to assess the levels of concern warranted for such advances, and to identify options that could help mitigate those concerns. An excerpted version of the study charge highlights the key tasks undertaken (see [Chapter 1, Box 1-2](#) for the more detailed statement of task):

To assist the U.S. Department of Defense's Chemical and Biological Defense Program (CBDP), the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine will appoint an ad hoc committee to address the changing nature of the biodefense threat in the age of synthetic biology. Specifically, the focus of the study will be the manipulation of biological functions, systems, or microorganisms resulting in the production of disease-causing agents or toxins. . . . Initially, the committee will develop a strategic framework to guide an assessment of the potential security vulnerabilities related to advances in biology and biotechnology, with a particular emphasis on synthetic biology.

The framework will focus on how to address the following three questions: What are the possible security concerns with regard to synthetic biology that are on the horizon? What are the time frames of development of these concerns? What are our options for mitigating these potential concerns? . . .

. . . [T]he committee will use the outlined strategic framework to generate an assessment of potential vulnerabilities posed by synthetic biology. Inputs to this assessment may include information about the current threat, current program priorities and research, and an evaluation of the current landscape of science and technology. Conclusions and recommendations will include a list and description of potential vulnerabilities posed by synthetic biology.

An initial framework for assessing concerns was published in an interim report (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2017a). This, the study's final report, builds on and supersedes that report. This report

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explores and envisions potential misuses of synthetic biology, including concepts that are regularly discussed in open meetings. The potential misuses as they are discussed in the report are neither comprehensive nor enabling in the level of information and detail provided; they are included to illustrate the expanding mission of biodefense in the age of synthetic biology.

OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATION

Biotechnology in the age of synthetic biology expands the landscape of potential defense concerns. The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and its partnering agencies should continue to pursue ongoing strategies for chemical and biological defense; these strategies remain relevant in the age of synthetic biology. DoD and its partners also need to have approaches to account for the broader capabilities enabled by synthetic biology, now and into the future.

The nation's experience preparing for naturally occurring diseases provides a strong foundation for developing strategies to prevent and respond to emerging biologically enabled threats, particularly those based on naturally occurring pathogens. But synthetic biology approaches also have the potential to be used in ways that could change the presentation of an attack, for example, by modifying the properties of existing microorganisms, using microorganisms to produce chemicals, or employing novel or unexpected strategies to cause harm. It is valuable for the U.S. government to pay close attention to rapidly advancing fields such as synthetic biology, just as it did to advances in chemistry and physics during the Cold War era. However, approaches modeled after those taken to counter Cold War threats are not sufficient to address biological and biologically enabled chemical weapons in the age of synthetic biology. The partners involved in the U.S. biodefense enterprise will need expanded strategies and approaches to account for the new capabilities enabled by advances in this field.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING CONCERN CONTRIBUTES TO PLANNING

Recommendation

The Department of Defense and its interagency partners should use a framework in assessing synthetic biology capabilities and their implications.

- a. **A framework is a valuable tool for parsing the changing biotechnology landscape.**
- b. **Using a framework facilitates the identification of bottlenecks and barriers, as well as efforts to monitor advances in technology and knowledge that change what is possible.**
- c. **A framework provides a mechanism for incorporating the necessary technical expertise into the assessment.** A framework enables the participation of technical experts in synthetic biology and biotechnology

along with experts in complementary areas (e.g., intelligence and public health).

The framework developed in the report identifies the features of a synthetic biology-enabled capability that would increase or decrease the level of concern about a given capability being used for harm. As summarized in [Figure S-1](#), this framework identifies factors to determine the relative levels of concern posed by advances in biotechnology. In addition to supporting the analysis conducted in this study, the framework is intended to aid others in their consideration of current and future synthetic biology capabilities. Specifically, the framework is designed to support uses including analyzing existing biotechnologies to evaluate the levels of concern warranted at present; understanding how various technologies or capabilities compare to, interact with, or complement each other; identifying key bottlenecks and barriers that, if removed, could lead to a change in the level of concern about a capability; evaluating the implications of new experimental results or new technologies; and horizon-scanning to predict or prepare for potential future areas of concern. Use of a framework for assessing the implications of

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FIGURE S-1 Framework for assessing concern. The framework consists of four factors, along with descriptive elements within each factor. The factors are Usability of the Technology, Usability as a Weapon, Requirements of Actors, and Potential for Mitigation. These factors delineate the information used to assess the level of concern for particular synthetic biology-enabled capabilities.

synthetic biology capabilities thus contributes to biodefense planning and facilitates consideration of expert opinions about specific synthetic biology-enabled capabilities or combinations of capabilities.

SYNTHETIC BIOLOGY EXPANDS WHAT IS POSSIBLE

Synthetic biology expands what is possible in creating new weapons. It also expands the range of actors who could undertake such efforts and decreases the time required. Based on this study's analysis of the potential ways in which synthetic biology approaches and tools may be misused to cause harm, the following specific observations were made:

- a. **Of the potential capabilities assessed, three currently warrant the most concern: (1) re-creating known pathogenic viruses, (2) making existing bacteria more dangerous, and (3) making harmful biochemicals via in situ synthesis.** The first two capabilities are of high concern due to usability of the

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- technology. The third capability, which involves using microbes to produce harmful biochemicals in humans, is of high concern because its novelty challenges potential mitigation options.
- b. **With regard to *pathogens*, synthetic biology is expected to (1) expand the range of what could be produced, including making bacteria and viruses more harmful; (2) decrease the amount of time required to engineer such organisms; and (3) expand the range of actors who could undertake such efforts.** The creation and manipulation of pathogens is facilitated by increasingly accessible technologies and starting materials, including DNA sequences in public databases. A wide range of pathogen characteristics could be explored as part of such efforts.
 - c. **With regard to *chemicals, biochemicals, and toxins*, synthetic biology blurs the line between chemical and biological weapons.** High-potency molecules that can be produced through simple genetic pathways are of greatest concern, because they could conceivably be developed with modest resources and organizational footprint.
 - d. **It may be possible to use synthetic biology to *modulate human physiology in novel ways*.** These ways include physiological changes that differ from the typical effects of known pathogens and chemical agents. Synthetic biology expands the landscape by potentially allowing the delivery of biochemicals by a biological agent and by potentially allowing the engineering of the microbiome or immune system. Although unlikely today, these types of manipulations may become more feasible as knowledge of complex systems, such as the immune system and microbiome, grows.
 - e. **Some malicious applications of synthetic biology may not seem plausible now but could become achievable if certain barriers are overcome.** These barriers include knowledge barriers, as is the case for building a novel pathogen, or technological barriers, as in engineering

complex biosynthetic pathways into bacteria or re-creating known bacterial pathogens. It is important to continue to monitor advances in biotechnology that may lower these barriers.

Synthetic biology concepts, approaches, and tools do not, in and of themselves, pose inherent harm. Rather, concerns derive from the specific applications or capabilities that synthetic biology might enable. The framework developed in the report was applied to assess the relative levels of concern posed by a set of synthetic biology capabilities. This assessment was undertaken in several steps. First, the framework was used to qualitatively analyze each of the identified capabilities individually. This analysis included considerations related to the state of the art of the technologies involved, the feasibility of using the capability to produce an effective weapon, the characteristics and resources an actor would likely require to carry out an attack, and information on proactive and reactive measures that might be taken to help mitigate the effects of misusing the capability. Then, an overall level of concern was determined for each capability relative to the other capabilities considered and an assessment of the landscape of capabilities and concerns presented. The results of this assessment are summarized in [Figure S-2](#).

Capabilities currently warranting the highest relative level of concern include re-creating known pathogenic viruses, making biochemical compounds via in situ synthesis, and the use of synthetic biology to make existing bacteria more dangerous. These capabilities are based on technologies and knowledge that are readily available to a wide array of actors. Capabilities posing a moderate-to-high relative level of concern include manufacturing chemicals or biochemicals by exploiting natural metabolic pathways and the use of synthetic biology to make existing viruses more dangerous. These capabilities are also supported by available technologies and knowledge but involve more constraints and would likely be limited by factors related to both biology and skill. Capabilities posing a moderate relative level of concern include manufacturing chemicals or biochemicals by creating novel metabolic pathways, efforts to modify the human microbiome to cause harm, efforts to modify the human immune system, and efforts to modify the human genome. Although conceivable, these

capabilities are more futuristic and likely limited by available knowledge and technology. Capabilities warranting a lower relative level of concern include re-creating known pathogenic bacteria and creating new pathogens; these capabilities involve major design and implementation challenges. The use of human gene drives warrants a minimal level of concern because it would be impractical to rely on generations of sexual reproduction to spread a harmful trait through a human population.

The application of the report's framework in this analysis reflects a snapshot in time, given understanding of current technologies and capabilities. As the field continues to evolve, some bottlenecks will likely widen and

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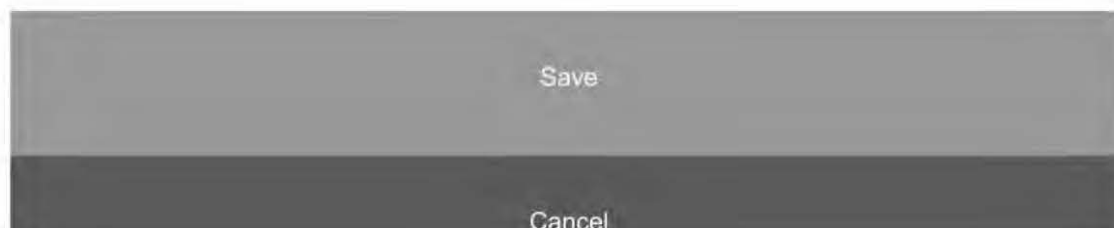



FIGURE S-2 Relative ranking of concerns related to the synthetic biology-enabled capabilities analyzed. At present, capabilities toward the top warrant a relatively higher level of concern while capabilities toward the bottom warrant a relatively lower level of concern.

some barriers will be overcome. Table S-1 identifies a number of technical developments that may contribute to overcoming such bottlenecks and barriers

to increase the feasibility or impact of a potential attack and the level of biodefense concern warranted for a capability. It is impossible to predict precisely when these developments might occur; those time lines are influenced by the drivers of commercial development and academic research, as well as by converging or synergistic technologies that may come from outside the field of synthetic biology. It will be important to continue to monitor advances in synthetic biology and biotechnology that may affect these bottlenecks and barriers.

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TABLE S-1 Bottlenecks and Barriers That Currently Constrain the Capabilities Considered and Developments That Could Reduce These Constraints

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
Re-creating known pathogenic viruses	Bootling	Demonstrations of bootling viruses with synthesized genomes
Re-creating known pathogenic bacteria	DNA synthesis and assembly	Improvements in synthesis and assembly technology for handling larger DNA constructs
	Bootling	Demonstrations of bootling bacteria with synthesized

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
Making existing viruses more dangerous	Constraints on viral genome organization	genomes Increased knowledge of viral genome organization and/or demonstration of combinatorial approaches capable of facilitating larger-scale modifications to viral genome
	Engineering complex viral traits	Increased knowledge of determinants of complex viral traits, as well as how to engineer pathways to produce them
Making existing bacteria more dangerous	Engineering complex bacterial traits	Advances in combinatorial approaches and/or increased knowledge of determinants of complex bacterial traits, as well as how to engineer pathways to produce them
	Limited knowledge regarding minimal requirements for viability (in both viruses and bacteria)	Increased knowledge of requirements for viability in viruses or bacteria
Creating new pathogens	Constraints on viral genome organization	Increased knowledge of viral genome organization and/or demonstration of combinatorial approaches capable of facilitating larger-scale modifications to viral genome
	Tolerability of toxins to the host organism synthesizing the toxin	Pathway elucidation, improvements in circuit design, and improvements in host ("chassis") engineering to make toxins tolerable to the host organism synthesizing the
Manufacturing chemicals or biochemicals by exploiting natural metabolic pathways		

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
Manufacturing chemicals or biochemicals by creating novel metabolic pathways	Pathway not known	toxin Pathway elucidation and/or demonstrations of combinatorial approaches
	Challenges to large-scale production	Improvements in intracellular and industrial productivity
	Tolerability of toxins to the host organism synthesizing the toxin	Pathway elucidation and/or improvements in circuit design and/or improvements in host ("chassis") engineering to make toxins tolerable to the host organism synthesizing the toxin
	Engineering enzyme activity	Increased knowledge of how to modify enzymatic functions to make specific products
	Limited knowledge of requirements for designing novel pathways	Improvements in directed evolution and/or increased knowledge of how to build pathways from disparate organisms
	Challenges to large-scale production	Improvements in intracellular and industrial productivity
Making biochemicals via in situ synthesis	Limited understanding of microbiome	Improvements in knowledge related to microbiome colonization of host, in situ horizontal transfer of genetic elements, and other relationships between microbiome organisms and host processes
Modifying the human microbiome	Limited understanding of microbiome	Improvements in knowledge related to microbiome colonization of

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
		host, in situ horizontal transfer of genetic elements, and other relationships between microbiome organisms and host processes

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Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
Modifying the human immune system	Engineering of delivery system	Increased knowledge related to the potential for viruses or microbes to deliver immunomodulatory factors
	Limited understanding of complex immune processes	Knowledge related to how to manipulate the immune system, including how to cause autoimmunity and predictability across a population
Modifying the human genome	Means to engineer horizontal transfer	Increased knowledge of techniques to effectively alter the human genome through horizontal transfer of genetic information
	Lack of knowledge about regulation of human gene expression	Increased knowledge related to regulation of human gene expression

NOTE: Shading indicates developments thought to be propelled by commercial drivers. Some approaches, such as combinatorial approaches and directed evolution, may allow bottlenecks and barriers to be widened or overcome with less explicit knowledge or tools.

A RANGE OF STRATEGIES IS NEEDED TO PREPARE AND RESPOND

Recommendations

Many of the traditional approaches to biological and chemical defense preparedness will be relevant to synthetic biology, but synthetic biology will also present new challenges. The Department of Defense (DoD) and partner agencies will need approaches to biological and chemical weapons defense that meet these new challenges.

- a. The DoD and its partners in the chemical and biological defense enterprise should continue exploring strategies that are applicable to a wide range of chemical and biodefense threats.** Nimble biological and chemical defense strategies are needed because of rapid rates of technological change, as well as strategies adaptable to a wide range of threats because of uncertainty about which approaches an adversary might pursue.
- b. The potential unpredictability related to how a synthetic biology-enabled weapon could manifest creates an added challenge to monitoring and detection. The DoD and its partners should evaluate the national military and civilian infrastructure that informs population-based surveillance, identification, and notification of both natural and purposeful health threats.** An evaluation should consider whether and how the public health infrastructure needs to be strengthened to adequately recognize a synthetic biology-enabled attack. Ongoing evaluation will support responsive and adaptive management as technology advances.
- c. The U.S. government, in conjunction with the scientific community, should consider strategies that manage emerging risk better than current agent-based lists and access control approaches.** Strategies

based on lists, such as the Federal Select Agent Program Select Agents and Toxins list, will be insufficient for managing risks arising from the application of synthetic biology. While measures to control access to physical materials such as synthetic nucleic acids and microbial strains have merits, such approaches will not be effective in mitigating all types of synthetic biology-enabled attacks.

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Exploration Areas

It has been stated by both scientific and political leaders that the 21st century is the century of the life sciences. But as with previous expansions in technological capabilities, biotechnology in the age of synthetic biology presents a "dual-use dilemma" that scientific knowledge, materials, and techniques required for beneficial research or development could be misused to cause harm. Although current approaches to defense and public health preparedness remain valuable, there are also clear limitations to current approaches such as pathogen list-based screening tools.

To comprehensively assess the preparedness and response capabilities of existing military and civilian defense and public health enterprises or to determine how to address gaps lies outside the scope of this study;

however, **exploration of the following areas is suggested to address some of the challenges posed by synthetic biology:**

- a. **Developing capabilities to detect unusual ways in which a synthetic biology-enabled weapon may manifest.** For consequence management, expanding the development of epidemiological methods (e.g., surveillance and data collection) would strengthen the ability to detect unusual symptoms or aberrant patterns of disease. Enhancing epidemiological methods will have an additional benefit of strengthening the ability to respond to natural disease outbreaks.
- b. **Harnessing computational approaches for mitigation.** The role of computational approaches for prevention, detection, control, and attribution will become more important with the increasing reliance of synthetic biology on computational design and computational infrastructure.
- c. **Leveraging synthetic biology to advance detection, therapeutics, vaccines, and other medical countermeasures.** Taking advantage of beneficial applications of synthetic biology for countermeasure research and development is expected to prove valuable, along with corresponding efforts to facilitate the entire development process, including regulatory considerations.

Although addressing the potential concerns posed by synthetic biology in the age of biotechnology will remain a challenge for scientists and for the nation's defense, there is reason for optimism that, with continued monitoring of biotechnology capabilities and strategic biodefense investments, the United States can foster fruitful scientific and technological advances while minimizing the likelihood that these same advances will be used for harm.

From: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)

Sent: Monday, December 14, 2020 11:47 AM

To: Asher, David (b)(6); Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6); Jih, Rongsong

(b)(6); Pease, Michael (b)(6); DiNanno, Thomas G

(b)(6) Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6) Gross, Laura J
(b)(6)
Cc: (b)(6)
Subject: RE: Mike's summary of post cables

Good Morning,

This may be OBE'd by Mike's work, but I captured a goodly number of cables from Embassy Beijing related to this effort. Some of the earlier cables from January and February may be particularly helpful.

Neil



Neil Couch
Acting Director, Office of Verification, Planning, and Outreach
Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance
U.S. Department of State
(b)(6)

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

From: Asher, David (b)(6)
Sent: Sunday, December 13, 2020 6:30 PM
To: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6) Jih, Rongsong (b)(6) Pease, Michael
(b)(6) DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6) Paulopol, Andreea I
(b)(6) Gross, Laura J (b)(6)
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)
Subject: Re: Mike's summary of post cables

Many of you may have read this article but it remains important as reminder of several inconvenient facts. (b)(5)

(b)(5)

(b)(5)

where did it come from—how, who, and why? The VCAWG should be a straight forward evidence based discussion, not supposition, imposition, or borderline superstition level theories.

<https://www.bostonmagazine.com/news/2020/09/09/alina-chan-broad-institute-coronavirus/>

RESEARCH

Could COVID-19 Have Escaped from a Lab?

The world's preeminent scientists say a theory from the Broad Institute's Alina Chan is too wild to be believed. But when the theory is about the possibility of COVID being man-made, is this science or censorship?

by ROWAN JACOBSEN 9/9/2020, 9:29 a.m.

- 

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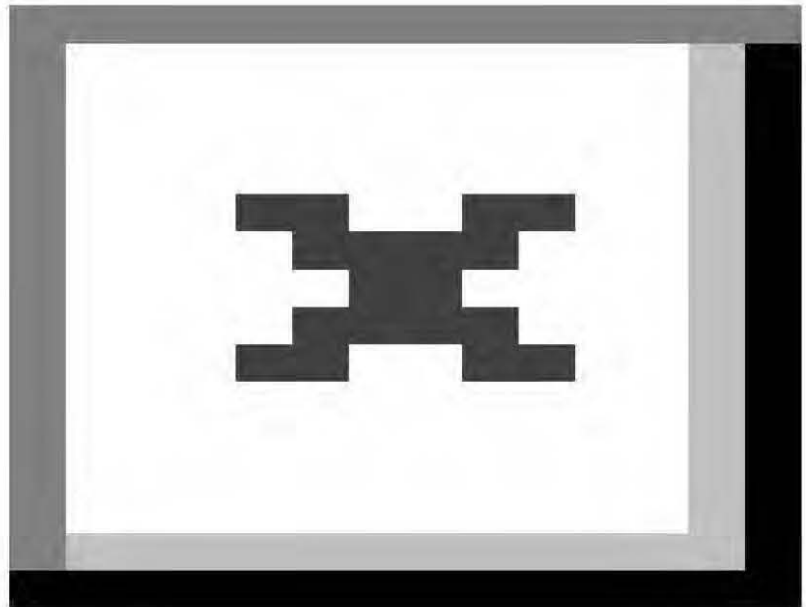


Illustration by Benjamin Purvis

In January, as she watched the news about a novel virus spreading out of control in China,

Alina Chan braced for a shutdown. The molecular biologist at the Broad Institute of Harvard and MIT started stockpiling medicine and supplies. By the time March rolled around and a quarantine seemed imminent, she'd bought hundreds of dollars' worth of fillets from her favorite fishmonger in Cambridge and packed them into her freezer. Then she began to ramp down her projects in the lab, isolating her experimental cells from their cultures and freezing them in small tubes.

As prepared as she was for the shutdown, though, she found herself unprepared for the frustration of being frozen out of work. She paced the walls of her tiny apartment feeling bored and useless. Chan has been a puzzle demon since childhood, which was precisely what she loved about her work—the chance to solve fiendishly difficult problems about how viruses operate and how, through gene therapy, they could be repurposed to help cure devastating genetic diseases. Staring out her window at the eerily quiet streets of her Inman Square neighborhood, she groaned at the thought that it could be months before she was at it again. Her mind wandered back to 2003, when she was a teenager growing up in Singapore and the first SARS virus, a close relative of this coronavirus, appeared in Asia. It hadn't been anything like this. That one had been relatively easy to corral. *How had this virus come out of nowhere and shut down the planet? Why was it so different?* she asked herself.

ADVERTISING

Then it hit her: The world's greatest puzzle was staring her in the face. Stuck at home, all she had to work with was her brain and her laptop. Maybe they were enough. Chan fired up the kettle for the first of what would become hundreds of cups of tea, stacked four boxes on her kitchen counter to raise her laptop to the proper height, pulled back her long dark hair, and began reading all of the scientific literature she could find on the coronavirus.

It wasn't long before she came across an article about the remarkable stability of the virus, whose genome had barely changed from the earliest human cases, despite trillions of replications. This perplexed Chan. Like many emerging infectious diseases, COVID-19 was thought to be zoonotic—it originated in animals, then somehow found its way into people. At the time, the Chinese government and most scientists insisted the jump had happened at Wuhan's seafood market, but that didn't make sense to Chan. If the virus had leapt from animals to humans in the market, it should have immediately started evolving to life inside its new human hosts. But it hadn't.

On a hunch, she decided to look at the literature on the 2003 SARS virus, which had jumped from civets to people. *Bingo*. A few papers mentioned its rapid evolution in its first months of existence. Chan felt the familiar surge of puzzle endorphins. The new virus really wasn't behaving like it should. Chan knew that delving further into this puzzle would require some deep genetic analysis, and she knew just the person for the task. She opened Google Chat and fired off a message to Shing Hei Zhan. He was an old friend from her days at the University of British Columbia and, more important, he was a computational god.

"Do you want to partner on a very unusual paper?" she wrote.

Sure, he replied.

One thing Chan noticed about the original SARS was that the virus in the first human cases was subtly different—a few dozen letters of genetic code—from the one in the civets. That meant it had immediately morphed. She asked Zhan to pull up the genomes for the coronaviruses that had been found on surfaces in the Wuhan seafood market. Were they at all different from the earliest documented cases in humans?

Zhan ran the analysis. Nope, they were 100 percent the same. Definitely from humans, not animals. The seafood-market theory, which Chinese health officials and the World Health Organization espoused in the early days of the pandemic, was wrong. Chan's puzzle detectors pulsed again. "Shing," she messaged Zhan, "this paper is going to be insane."

In the coming weeks, as the spring sun chased shadows across her kitchen floor, Chan stood at her counter and pounded out her paper, barely pausing to eat or sleep. It was clear that the first SARS evolved rapidly during its first three months of existence, constantly fine-tuning its ability

to infect humans, and settling down only during the later stages of the epidemic. In contrast, the new virus looked a lot more like late-stage SARS. "It's almost as if we're missing the early phase," Chan marveled to Zhan. Or, as she put it in their paper, as if "it was already well adapted for human transmission."

That was a profoundly provocative line. Chan was implying that the virus was already familiar with human physiology when it had its coming-out party in Wuhan in late 2019. If so, there were three possible explanations.

Perhaps it was just staggeringly bad luck: The mutations had all occurred in an earlier host species, and just happened to be the perfect genetic arrangement for an invasion of humanity. But that made no sense. Those mutations would have been disadvantageous in the old host. Maybe the virus had been circulating undetected in humans for months, working out the kinks, and nobody had noticed. Also unlikely. China's health officials would not have missed it, and even if they had, they'd be able to go back now through stored samples to find the trail of earlier versions. And they weren't coming up with anything.

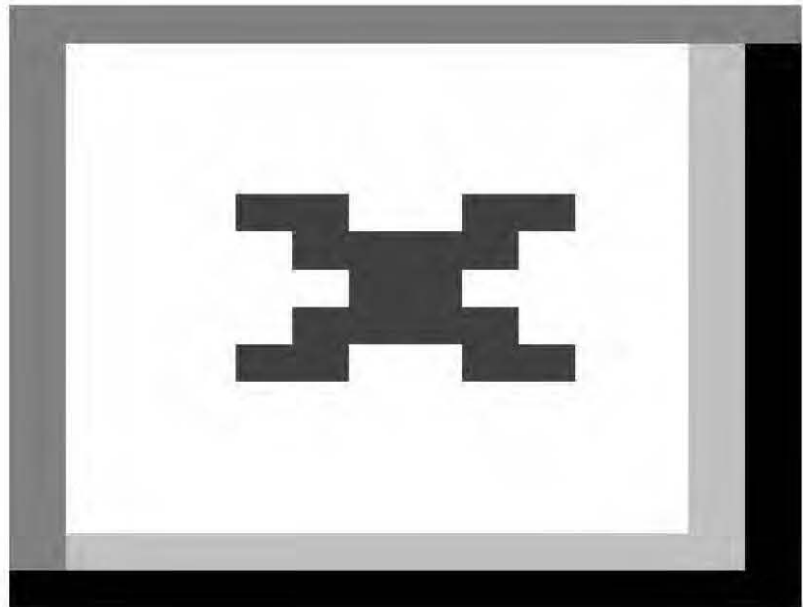
That left a third possibility: The missing phase had happened in a lab, where the virus had been trained on human cells. Chan knew this was the third rail of potential explanations. At the time, conspiracy theorists were spinning bioweapon fantasies, and Chan was loath to give them any ammunition. But she also didn't want to play politics by withholding her findings. Chan is in her early thirties, still at the start of her career, and an absolute idealist about the purity of the scientific process. Facts were facts.

Or at least they used to be. Since the start of the pandemic, the Trump administration has been criticized for playing fast and loose with facts—denying, exaggerating, or spinning them to suit the president's political needs. As a result, many scientists have learned to censor themselves for fear that their words will be misrepresented. Still, Chan thought, if she were to sit on scientific research just to avoid providing ammunition to conspiracy theorists or Trump, would she be any better than them?

Chan knew she had to move forward and make her findings public. In the final draft of her paper, she torpedoed the seafood-market theory, then laid out a case that the virus seemed curiously well adapted to humans. She mentioned all three possible explanations, carefully wording the third to emphasize that if the novel coronavirus did come from a lab, it would have been the result of an accident in the course of legitimate research.

On May 2, Chan uploaded the paper to a site where as-yet-unpublished biology papers known as "preprints" are shared for open peer review. She tweeted out the news and waited. On May 16, the *Daily Mail*, a British tabloid, picked up her research. The very next day, *Newsweek* ran a story with the headline "Scientists Shouldn't Rule Out Lab as Source of Coronavirus, New Study Says."

And that, Chan says, is when "shit exploded everywhere."



Alina Chan, a molecular biologist at the Broad Institute, says we can't rule out the possibility that the novel coronavirus originated in a lab—even though she knows it's a politically radioactive thing to say. / Photo by Mona Miri

Chan had come to my attention a week before the *Newsweek* story was published through her smart and straightforward tweets, which I found refreshing at a time when most scientists were avoiding any serious discussion about the possibility that COVID-19 had escaped from a biolab. I'd written a lot about genetic engineering and so-called gain-of-function research—the fascinating, if scary, line of science in which scientists alter viruses to make them more transmissible or lethal as a way of assessing how close those viruses are to causing pandemics. I also knew that deadly pathogens escape from biolabs with surprising frequency. Most of these accidents end up being harmless, but many researchers have been infected, and people have died as a result.

For years, concerned scientists have warned that this type of pathogen research was going to trigger a pandemic. Foremost among them was Harvard epidemiologist Marc Lipsitch, who founded the Cambridge Working Group in 2014 to lobby against these experiments. In a series

of policy papers, op-eds, and scientific forums, he pointed out that accidents involving deadly pathogens occurred more than twice a week in U.S. labs, and estimated that just 10 labs performing gain-of-function research over a 10-year period would run a nearly 20 percent risk of an accidental release. In 2018, he argued that such a release could “lead to global spread of a virulent virus, a biosafety incident on a scale never before seen.”

Thanks in part to the Cambridge Working Group, the federal government briefly instituted a moratorium on such research. By 2017, however, the ban was lifted and U.S. labs were at it again. Today, in the United States and across the globe, there are dozens of labs conducting experiments on a daily basis with the deadliest known pathogens. One of them is the Wuhan Institute of Virology. For more than a decade, its scientists have been discovering coronaviruses in bats in southern China and bringing them back to their lab in Wuhan. There, they mix genes from different strains of these novel viruses to test their infectivity in human cells and lab animals.

When word spread in January that a novel coronavirus had caused an outbreak in Wuhan—which is a thousand miles from where the bats that carry this lineage of viruses are naturally found—many experts were quietly alarmed. There was no proof that the lab was the source of the virus, but the pieces fit.

Despite the evidence, the scientific community quickly dismissed the idea. Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, which has funded the work of the Wuhan Institute of Virology and other labs searching for new viruses, called the notion “preposterous,” and many other experts echoed that sentiment.

That wasn’t necessarily what every scientist thought in private, though. “They can’t speak directly,” one scientist told me confidentially, referring to the virology community’s fear of having their comments sensationalized in today’s politically charged environment. “Many virologists don’t want to be hated by everyone in the field.”

There are other potential reasons for the pushback. There’s long been a sense that if the public and politicians really knew about the dangerous pathogen research being conducted in many laboratories, they’d be outraged. Denying the possibility of a catastrophic incident like this, then, could be seen as a form of career preservation. “For the substantial subset of virologists who perform gain-of-function research,” Richard Ebright, a Rutgers microbiologist and another founding member of the Cambridge Working Group, told me, “avoiding restrictions on research funding, avoiding implementation of appropriate biosafety standards, and avoiding implementation of appropriate research oversight are powerful motivators.” Antonio Regalado, biomedicine editor of *MIT Technology Review*, put it more bluntly. If it turned out COVID-19 came from a lab, he tweeted, “it would shatter the scientific edifice top to bottom.”

That’s a pretty good incentive to simply dismiss the whole hypothesis, but it quickly amounted to a global gaslighting of the media—and, by proxy, the public. An unhealthy absolutism set in: Either you insisted that any questions about lab involvement were absurd, or you were a tool of the Trump administration and its desperation to blame China for the virus. I was used to social media pundits ignoring inconvenient or politically toxic facts, but I’d never expected to see that from some of our best scientists.

Which is why Chan stood out on Twitter, daring to speak truth to power. “It is very difficult to do research when one hypothesis has been negatively cast as a conspiracy theory,” she wrote. Then she offered some earnest advice to researchers, suggesting that most viral research should be done with neutered viruses that have had their replicating machinery removed in advance, so that even if they escaped confinement, they would be incapable of making copies of themselves.

"When these precautions are not followed, risk of lab escape is exponentially higher," she explained, adding, "I hope the pandemic motivates local ethics and biosafety committees to think carefully about how they can reduce risk." She elaborated on this in another tweet several days later: "I'd also—personally—prefer if high biosafety level labs were not located in the most populous cities on earth."

How Safe Are Boston's Biolabs?

As one of the world centers of biotech, the Hub is peppered with academic and corporate labs doing research on pathogens. Foremost among them is Boston University's National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL), the only lab in the city designated as BSL-4 (the highest level of biosafety and the same level as the Wuhan Institute of Virology). It is one of just a dozen or so in the United States equipped to work with live versions of the world's most dangerous viruses, including Ebola and Marburg. Researchers there began doing so in 2018 after a decade of controversy: Many locals objected to the risks of siting such a facility in the center of a major metropolitan area.

The good news? Before opening, NEIDL undertook one of the most thorough risk assessments in history, learning from the mistakes of other facilities. Even Lynn Klotz, a senior science fellow at the Washington, DC-based Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, who advised local groups that opposed NEIDL, told the medical website Contagion that the lab likely has the best possible security protocols and measures in place. But the reality, Klotz added, is that most lab accidents are caused by human error, and there is only so much that can be done through good design and protocols to proactively prevent such mistakes. (Or to guard against an intentional release by a disgruntled researcher, as allegedly happened in the anthrax attacks of 2001.)

Rutgers molecular biologist Richard Ebright, a longtime critic of potentially dangerous pathogen research, says the risks introduced by NEIDL are not low enough and "definitely not" worth the negligible benefits.

Still, risk is relative. Klotz has estimated the chance of a pathogen escape from a BSL-4 lab at 0.3 percent per year, and NEIDL is probably significantly safer than the typical BSL-4 lab. And if catching a deadly pathogen is your fear, well, currently you run a good risk of finding one in your own neighborhood. Until that gets cleared up, the city's biolabs are probably among the safer spaces in town.

Chan had started using her Twitter account this intensely only a few days earlier, as a form of outreach for her paper. The social platform has become the way many scientists find out about one another's work, and studies have shown that attention on Twitter translates to increased citations for a paper in scientific literature. But it's a famously raw forum. Many scientists are not prepared for the digital storms that roil the Twittersverse, and they don't handle it well. Chan dreaded it at first, but quickly took to Twitter like a digital native. "Having Twitter elevates your work," she says. "And I think it's really fun to talk to nonscientists about that work."

After reading her tweets, I reviewed her preprint, which I found mind-blowing, and wrote her to say so. She thanked me and joked that she worried it might be "career suicide."

It wasn't long before it began to look like she might be right.

Speaking her mind, it turns out—even in the face of censure—was nothing new for Chan, who is Canadian but was raised in Singapore, one of the more repressive regimes on earth. Her parents, both computer science professionals, encouraged free thinking and earnest inquiry in their daughter, but the local school system did not. Instead, it was a pressure-cooker of a system that rewarded students for falling in line, and moved quickly to silence rebels.

That was a bad fit for Chan. "You have to bow to teachers," she says. "Sometimes teachers from other classes would show up and ask me to bow to them. And I would say, 'No, you're not my teacher.' Back then they believed in corporal punishment. A teacher could just take a big stick and beat you in front of the class. I got whacked so many times."

Still, Chan rebelled in small ways, skipping school and hanging out at the arcade. She also lost interest in her studies. "I just really didn't like school. And I didn't like all the extracurriculars they pack you with in Singapore," she says. That changed when a teacher recruited her for math Olympiads, in which teams of students compete to solve devilishly hard arithmetic puzzles. "I really loved it," she says. "You just sit in a room and think about problems."

Chan might well have pursued a career in math, but then she came up against teams from China in Olympiad competitions. "They would just wipe everyone else off the board," she says. "They were machines. They'd been trained in math since they could walk. They'd hit the buzzer before you could even comprehend the question. I thought, *I'm not going to survive in this field.*"

Chan decided to pursue biology instead, studying at the University of British Columbia. "I liked viruses from the time I was a teen," she says. "I remember the first time I learned about HIV. I thought it was a puzzle and a challenge." That instinct took her to Harvard Medical School as a postdoc, where the puzzle became how to build virus-like biomolecules to accomplish tasks inside cells, and then to Ben Deverman's lab at the Broad Institute. "When I see an interesting question, I want to spend 100 percent of my time working on it," she says. "I get really fixated on answering scientific questions."

Deverman, for his part, says he wasn't actively looking to expand his team when Chan came along, but when "opportunities to hire extraordinary people fall in my lap," he takes them. "Alina brings a ton of value to the lab," he explains, adding that she has an ability to pivot between different topics and cut to the chase. Nowhere was that more on display than with her coronavirus work, which Deverman was able to closely observe. In fact, Chan ran so many ideas past him that he eventually became a coauthor. "She is insightful, determined, and has the rare ability to explain complex scientific findings to other scientists and to the public," he says. Those skills would prove highly useful when word got out about her coronavirus paper.

If Chan had spent a lifetime learning how to pursue scientific questions, she spent most of the shutdown learning what happens when the answers you come up with are politically radioactive. After the *Newsweek* story ran, conservative-leaning publications seized on her paper as conclusive evidence that the virus had come from a lab. "Everyone focused on the one line," Chan laments. "The tabloids just zoomed in on it." Meanwhile, conspiracists took it as hard evidence of their wild theories that there had been an intentional leak.

Chan spent several exhausting days putting out online fires with the many people who had misconstrued her findings. "I was so naive," she tells me with a quick, self-deprecating laugh. "I just thought, *Shouldn't the world be thinking about this fairly?* I really have to kick myself now." Even more troubling, though, were the reactions from other scientists. As soon as her paper got picked up by the media, luminaries in the field sought to censure her. Jonathan Eisen, a well-known professor at UC Davis, criticized the study in *Newsweek* and on his influential Twitter account, writing, "Personally, I do not find the analysis in this new paper remotely convincing." In a long thread, he argued that comparing the new virus to SARS was not enough to show that it was preadapted to humans. He wanted to see comparisons to the initial leap of other viruses from animals to humans.

Moments later, Daszak piled on. The NIH had recently cut its grant to his organization, EcoHealth Alliance, after the Trump administration learned that some of it had gone to fund the Wuhan Institute of Virology's work. Daszak was working hard to get it restored and trying to stamp out any suggestion of a lab connection. He didn't hold back on Chan. "This is sloppy research," he tweeted, calling it "a poorly designed phylogenetic study with too many inferences and not enough data, riding on a wave of conspiracy to drive a higher impact." Peppering his tweets with exclamation points, he attacked the wording of the paper, arguing that one experiment it cited was impossible, and told Chan she didn't understand her own data.

Afterward, a Daszak supporter followed up his thread with a GIF of a mike drop.

It was an old and familiar dynamic: threatened silverback male attempts to bully a junior female member of the tribe. As a postdoc, Chan was in a vulnerable position. The world of science is

still a bit medieval in its power structure, with a handful of institutions and individuals deciding who gets published, who gets positions, who gets grants. There's little room for rebels.

What happened next was neither old nor familiar: Chan didn't back down. "Sorry to disrupt mike drop," she tweeted, providing a link to a paper in the prestigious journal *Nature* that "does that exact experiment you thought was impossible." Politely but firmly, she justified each point Daszak had attacked, showing him his mistakes. In the end, Daszak was reduced to arguing that she had used the word "isolate" incorrectly. In a coup de grâce, Chan pointed out that actually the word had come from online data provided by GenBank, the NIH's genetic sequence database. She offered to change it to whatever made sense. At that point, Daszak stopped replying. He insists, however, that Chan is overinterpreting her findings.

With Eisen, Chan readily agreed to test her hypothesis by finding other examples of viruses infecting new hosts. Within days, a perfect opportunity came along when news broke that the coronavirus had jumped from humans to minks at European fur farms. Sure enough, the mink version began to rapidly mutate. "You actually see the rapid evolution happening," Chan said. "Just in the first few weeks, the changes are quite drastic."

Chan also pointed out to Eisen that the whole goal of a website such as bioRxiv (pronounced "bioarchive")—where she posted the paper—is to elicit feedback that will make papers better before publication. Good point, he replied. Eventually he conceded that there was "a lot of interesting analysis in the paper" and agreed to work with Chan on the next draft.

The Twitter duels with her powerful colleagues didn't rattle Chan. "I thought Jonathan was very reasonable," she says. "I really appreciated his expertise, even if he disagreed with me. I like that kind of feedback. It helped to make our paper better."

With Daszak, Chan is more circumspect. "Some people have trouble keeping their emotions in check," she says. "Whenever I saw his comments, I'd just think, *Is there something I can learn here? Is there something he's right about that I should be fixing?*" Ultimately, she decided, there was not.

By late May, both journalists and armchair detectives interested in the mystery of the coronavirus were discovering Chan as a kind of Holmes to our Watson. She crunched information at twice our speed, zeroing in on small details we'd overlooked, and became a go-to for anyone looking for spin-free explications of the latest science on COVID-19. It was thrilling to see her reasoning in real time, a reminder of why I've always loved science, with its pursuit of patterns that sometimes leads to exciting revelations. The website CNET featured her in a story about "a league of scientists-turned-detectives" who were using genetic sequencing technologies to uncover COVID-19's origins. After it came out, Chan added "scientist-turned-detective" to her Twitter bio.

She's lived up to her new nom de tweet. As the search for the source of the virus continued, several scientific teams published papers identifying a closely related coronavirus in pangolins—anteater-like animals that are heavily trafficked in Asia for their meat and scales. The number of different studies made it seem as though this virus was ubiquitous in pangolins. Many scientists eagerly embraced the notion that the animals might have been the intermediate hosts that had passed the novel coronavirus to humans. It fit their preexisting theories about wet markets, and it would have meant no lab had been involved.

As Chan read the pangolin papers, she grew suspicious. The first one was by a team that had analyzed a group of the animals intercepted by anti-smuggling authorities in southern China. They found the closely related virus in a few of them, and published the genomes for that virus. Some of the other papers, though, were strangely ambiguous about where their data was coming

from, or how their genomes had been constructed. Had they really taken samples from actual pangolins?

Once again, Chan messaged Shing Hei Zhan. "Shing, something's weird here," she wrote. Zhan pulled up the raw data from the papers and compared the genomes they had published. Individual copies of a virus coming from different animals should have small differences, just as individuals of a species have genetic differences. Yet the genomes in all of the pangolin papers were perfect matches—the authors were all simply using the first group's data set. Far from being ubiquitous, the virus had been found only in a few pangolins who were held together, and it was unclear where they had caught it. The animals might have even caught it from their own smuggler. Remarkably, one group of authors in *Nature* even appeared to use the same genetic sequences from the other paper as if it were confirmation of their own discovery. "These sequences appear to be from the same virus (Pangolin-CoV) that we identified in the present study."

Chan called them out on Twitter: "Of course it's the same Pangolin-CoV, you used the same dataset!" For context, she later added, "Imagine if clinical trials were playing fast and loose with their patient data; renaming patients, throwing them into different datasets without clarification, possibly even describing the same patient multiple times across different studies unintentionally."

She and Zhan posted a new preprint on bioRxiv dismantling the pangolin papers. Confirmation came in June when the results of a study of hundreds of pangolins in the wildlife trade were announced: Not a single pangolin had any sign of a coronavirus. Chan took a victory lap on Twitter: "Supports our hypothesis all this time." The pangolin theory collapsed.

Chan then turned her Holmesian powers on bigger game: Daszak and the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Daszak had been pleading his case everywhere from *60 Minutes* to the *New York Times* and has been successful in rallying sympathy to his cause, even getting 77 Nobel laureates to sign a letter calling for the NIH to restore EcoHealth Alliance's funding.

In several long and detailed "tweetorials," Chan began to cast a cloud of suspicion on the WIV's work. She pointed out that scientists there had discovered a virus that is more than 96 percent identical to the COVID-19 coronavirus in 2013 in a mineshaft soon after three miners working there had died from a COVID-like illness. The WIV didn't share these findings until 2020, even though the goal of such work, Chan pointed out, was supposedly to identify viruses with the potential to cause human illnesses and warn the world about them.

Even though that virus had killed three miners, Daszak said it wasn't considered a priority to study at the time. "We were looking for SARS-related virus, and this one was 20 percent different. We thought it was interesting, but not high risk. So we didn't do anything about it and put it in the freezer," he told a reporter from *Wired*. It was only in 2020, he maintained, that they started looking into it once they realized its similarity to COVID-19. But Chan pointed to an online database showing that the WIV had been genetically sequencing the mine virus in 2017 and 2018, analyzing it in a way they had done in the past with other viruses in preparation for running experiments with them. Diplomatic yet deadpan, she wrote, "I think Daszak was misinformed."

For good measure, almost in passing, Chan pointed out a detail no one else had noticed: COVID-19 contains an uncommon genetic sequence that has been used by genetic engineers in the past to insert genes into coronaviruses without leaving a trace, and it falls at the exact point that would allow experimenters to swap out different genetic parts to change the infectivity. That same sequence can occur naturally in a coronavirus, so this was not irrefutable proof of an unnatural origin, Chan explained, "only an observation." Still, it was enough for one Twitter user to muse,

"If capital punishment were as painful as what Alina Chan is doing to Daszak/WIV regarding their story, it would be illegal."

Daszak says that indeed he had been misinformed and was unaware that that virus found in the mine shaft had been sequenced before 2020. He also says that a great lab, with great scientists, is now being picked apart to search for suspicious behavior to support a preconceived theory. "If you believe, deep down, something fishy went on, then what you do is you go through all the evidence and you try to look for things that support that belief," he says, adding, "That is not how you find the truth."

Many of the points in Chan's tweetorials had also been made by others, but she was the first reputable scientist to put it all together. That same week, London's *Sunday Times* and the BBC ran stories following the same trail of breadcrumbs that Chan had laid out to suggest that there had been a coverup at the WIV. The story soon circulated around the world. In the meantime, the WIV has steadfastly denied any viral leak. Lab director Yanyi Wang went on Chinese television and described such charges as "pure fabrication," and went on to explain that the bat coronavirus from 2013 was so different than COVID that it could not have evolved into it this quickly and that the lab only sequenced it and didn't obtain a live virus from it.

To this day, there is no definitive evidence as to whether the virus occurred naturally or had its origins in a lab, but the hypothesis that the Wuhan facility was the source is increasingly mainstream and the science behind it can no longer be ignored. And Chan is largely to thank for that.

In late spring, Chan walked through the tall glass doors of the Broad Institute for the first time in months. As she made her way across the gleaming marble foyer, her sneaker squeaks echoed in the silence. It was like the zombie apocalypse version of the Broad; all the bright lights but none of the people. It felt all the weirder that she was wearing her gym clothes to work.

A few days earlier, the Broad had begun letting researchers back into their labs to restart their projects. All computer work still needed to be done remotely, but bench scientists such as Chan could pop in just long enough to move along their cell cultures, provided they got tested for the virus every four days.

In her lab, Chan donned her white lab coat and took inventory, throwing out months of expired reagents and ordering new materials. Then she rescued a few samples from the freezer, took her seat at one of the tissue-culture hoods—stainless steel, air-controlled cabinets in which cell engineers do their work—and began reviving some of her old experiments.

She had mixed emotions about being back. It felt good to free her gene-therapy projects from their stasis, and she was even more excited about the new project she and Deverman were working on: an online tool that allows vaccine developers to track changes in the virus's genome by time, location, and other characteristics. "It came out of my personal frustration at not being able to get answers fast," she says.

On the other hand, she missed being all-consuming by her detective work. "I wanted to stop after the pangolin preprint," she says, "but this mystery keeps drawing me back in." So while she waits for her cell cultures to grow, she's been sleuthing on the side—only this time she has more company: Increasingly, scientists have been quietly contacting her to share their own theories and papers about COVID-19's origins, forming something of a growing underground resistance. "There's a lot of curiosity," she says. "People are starting to think more deeply about it." And they have to, she says, if we are going to prevent future outbreaks: "It's really important to find out where this came from so it doesn't happen again."

That is what keeps Chan up at night—the possibility of new outbreaks in humans from the same source. If the virus emerged naturally from a bat cave, there could well be other strains in existence ready to spill over. If they are closely related, whatever vaccines we develop might work on them, too. But that might not be the case with manipulated viruses from a laboratory. “Someone could have been sampling viruses from different caves for a decade and just playing mix-and-match in the lab, and those viruses could be so different from one another that none of our vaccines will work on them,” she says. Either way, “We need to find where this came from, and close it down.”

Whatever important information she finds, we can be sure Chan will share it with the world. Far from being shaken by the controversy her paper stirred, she is more committed than ever to holding a line that could all too easily be overrun. “Scientists shouldn’t be censoring themselves,” she says. “We’re obliged to put all the data out there. We shouldn’t be deciding that it’s better if the public doesn’t know about this or that. If we start doing that, we lose credibility, and eventually we lose the public’s trust. And that’s not good for science.” In fact, it would cause an epidemic of doubt, and that wouldn’t be good for any of us.

From: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)
Sent: Sunday, December 13, 2020 2:42 PM
To: Jih, Rongsong (b)(6); Pease, Michael (b)(6); DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6); Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6); Asher, David (b)(6); Gross, Laura J (b)(6)
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)
Subject: Re: Mike's summary of post cables

Great (b)(5)

(b)(5)

Jeff Gibbs

Senior Adviser AVC

SSD/AVC

c: (b)(6)

From: Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)
Sent: Saturday, December 12, 2020 12:43 PM
To: Pease, Michael (b)(6); DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6); Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6); Asher, David (b)(6); Gross, Laura J (b)(6)
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6); Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6); Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)
Subject: Mike's summary of post cables

Thanks, Mike.

Inclined to think we can cite some of these in the CR as sources of concerns...

(BTW, Bullets 1, 4, and 5 (especially 5) have been widely reported on Taiwan TV.)

From: Pease, Michael (b)(6)
Sent: Saturday, December 12, 2020 11:46 AM
To: DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6); Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6); Asher, David (b)(6); Gross, Laura J (b)(6)
Cc: Couch, Johnny N (b)(6); Jih, Rongsong (b)(6); (b)(6)
(b)(6); Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)
Subject: Re: response from CDC/NIH

I have found over 90 Embassy Beijing cables dealing with COVID-19 from 7 Jan to present. As luck would have it, we had consulate personnel on the scene in Wuhan. I have harvested about half of the cables -- I am almost up to March. So far, these cables document:

- Gross corruption and ineptitude by the local government officials (some of whom were later fired). Arguably, these officials enabled COVID-19 to go from outbreak to epidemic to pandemic.
 - Frequent requests from USG via multiple channels to try to assist, scientifically collaborate, and more importantly, attempt to obtain critical data on the epidemiological and medical aspects of the outbreak as it was spreading throughout China and to other countries.
 - Private PPE and other donations from the US.
 - Consistent stonewalling by the PRC as the epidemic grows into a global pandemic.
 - The WHO publicly saying what the PRC wanted, and privately/unofficially/candidly complaining about the utter lack of transparency and cooperation.
- Note: On multiple occasions WHO leaders publicly praised the PRC leadership for adhering to international health standards and aggressively attacking the virus.

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

(b)(6)

(b)(6)



From: "Park, Christopher J (T)" (b)(6)
To: Feith, David (b)(6)
Ford, Christopher A (b)(6)
CC: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)
Subject: RE: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis
Date: Tue, 5 Jan 2021 14:33:17 +0000

It's a good read, though Angela Rasmussen (Georgetown virologist) shredded it rather savagely yesterday and thinks he misunderstands a lot of the science he's trying to describe.

(b)(5)

From: Feith, David (b)(6)
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 2:22 PM
To: Ford, Christopher A (b)(6); Park, Christopher J (T) (b)(6)
Cc: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)
Subject: FW: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

From: Feith, David (b)(6)
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 2:20 PM
To: EAP-FO-Principals-DL <EAP-FO-Principals-DL@state.gov>; DL NSC Asia (DL.Asia@whmo.mil) <DL.Asia@whmo.mil>; MPottinger (b)(6); Ruggiero, Anthony J (b)(6)
(b)(6)
Subject: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

This looks awfully interesting. The story the New Yorker wouldn't tell...

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/coronavirus-lab-escape-theory.html>

Jan 4, 2021, 6:00 A.M.

The Lab-Leak Hypothesis

The Lab Leak Hypothesis

For decades, scientists have been hot-wiring viruses in hopes of preventing a pandemic, not causing one. But what if ...?

By Nicholson Baker

I.

Flask Monsters

What happened was fairly simple, I've come to believe. It was an accident. A virus spent some time in a laboratory, and eventually it got out. SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, began its existence inside a bat, then it learned how to infect people in a claustrophobic mine shaft, and then it was made more infectious in one or more laboratories, perhaps as part of a scientist's well-intentioned but risky effort to create a broad-spectrum vaccine. SARS-2 was not designed as a biological weapon. But it was, I think, designed. Many thoughtful people dismiss this notion, and they may be right. They sincerely believe that the coronavirus arose naturally, "zoonotically," from animals, without having been previously studied, or hybridized, or sluiced through cell cultures, or otherwise worked on by trained professionals. They hold that a bat, carrying a coronavirus, infected some other creature, perhaps a pangolin, and that the pangolin may have already been sick with a different coronavirus disease, and out of the conjunction and commingling of those two diseases within the pangolin, a new disease, highly infectious to humans, evolved. Or they hypothesize that two coronaviruses recombined in a bat, and this new virus spread to other bats, and then the bats infected a person directly — in a rural setting, perhaps — and that this person caused a simmering undetected outbreak of respiratory disease, which over a period of months or years evolved to become virulent and highly transmissible but was not noticed until it appeared in Wuhan.

There is no direct evidence for these zoonotic possibilities, just as there is no direct evidence for an experimental mishap — no written confession, no incriminating notebook, no official accident report. Certainty craves detail, and detail requires an investigation. It has been a full year, 80 million people

have been infected, and, surprisingly, no public investigation has taken place. We still know very little about the origins of this disease.

Nevertheless, I think it's worth offering some historical context for our yearlong medical nightmare. We need to hear from the people who for years have contended that certain types of virus experimentation might lead to a disastrous pandemic like this one. And we need to stop hunting for new exotic diseases in the wild, shipping them back to laboratories, and hot-wiring their genomes to prove how dangerous to human life they might become.

Over the past few decades, scientists have developed ingenious methods of evolutionary acceleration and recombination, and they've learned how to trick viruses, coronaviruses in particular, those spiky hairballs of protein we now know so well, into moving quickly from one species of animal to another or from one type of cell culture to another. They've made machines that mix and mingle the viral code for bat diseases with the code for human diseases — diseases like SARS, severe acute respiratory syndrome, for example, which arose in China in 2003, and MERS, Middle East respiratory syndrome, which broke out a decade later and has to do with bats and camels. Some of the experiments — “gain of function” experiments — aimed to create new, more virulent, or more infectious strains of diseases in an effort to predict and therefore defend against threats that might conceivably arise in nature. The term *gain of function* is itself a euphemism; the Obama White House more accurately described this work as “experiments that may be reasonably anticipated to confer attributes to influenza, MERS, or SARS viruses such that the virus would have enhanced pathogenicity and/or transmissibility in mammals via the respiratory route.” The virologists who carried out these experiments have accomplished amazing feats of genetic transmutation, no question, and there have been very few publicized accidents over the years. But there have been some.

And we were warned, repeatedly. The intentional creation of new microbes that combine virulence with heightened transmissibility “poses extraordinary risks to the public,” wrote infectious-disease experts Marc Lipsitch and Thomas Inglesby in 2014. “A rigorous and transparent risk-assessment process for this work has not yet been established.” That's still true today. In 2012, in *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Lynn Klotz warned that there was an 80 percent chance, given how many laboratories were then handling virulent viro-varietals, that a leak of a potential pandemic pathogen would occur sometime in the next 12 years.

A lab accident — a dropped flask, a needle prick, a mouse bite, an illegibly labeled bottle — is apolitical. Proposing that something unfortunate happened during a scientific experiment in Wuhan — where COVID-19 was first diagnosed and where there are three high-security virology labs, one of which held in its freezers the most comprehensive inventory of sampled bat viruses in the world — isn't a conspiracy theory. It's just a theory. It merits attention, I believe, alongside other reasoned attempts to explain the source of our current catastrophe.

II.

“A Reasonable Chance”

From early 2020, the world was brooding over the origins of COVID-19. People were reading research papers, talking about what kinds of live animals were or were not sold at the Wuhan seafood market — wondering where the new virus had come from.

Meanwhile, things got strange all over the world. The Chinese government shut down transportation and built hospitals at high speed. There were video clips of people who'd suddenly dropped unconscious in the street. A doctor on YouTube told us how we were supposed to scrub down our produce when we got back from the supermarket. A scientist named Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology published a paper saying that the novel coronavirus was 96 percent identical to a bat virus, RaTG13, found in Yunnan province in southern China. On March 13, I wrote in my journal that there seemed to be something oddly artificial about the disease: “It's too airborne — too catching — it's something that has been selected for infectivity. That's what I suspect. No way to know so no reason to waste time thinking about it.”

This was just a note to self — at the time, I hadn't interviewed scientists about SARS-2 or read their research papers. But I did know something about pathogens and laboratory accidents; I published a book last year, *Baseless*, that talks about some of them. The book is named after a Pentagon program, Project Baseless, whose goal, as of 1951, was to achieve “an Air Force-wide combat capability in biological and chemical warfare at the earliest possible date.”

A vast treasure was spent by the U.S. on the amplification and aerial delivery of diseases — some well known, others obscure and stealthy. America's biological-weapons program in the '50s had A1-priority status, as high as

nuclear weapons. In preparation for a total war with a numerically superior communist foe, scientists bred germs to be resistant to antibiotics and other drug therapies, and they infected lab animals with them, using a technique called “serial passaging,” in order to make the germs more virulent and more catching.

And along the way, there were laboratory accidents. By 1960, hundreds of American scientists and technicians had been hospitalized, victims of the diseases they were trying to weaponize. Charles Armstrong, of the National Institutes of Health, one of the consulting founders of the American germ-warfare program, investigated Q fever three times, and all three times, scientists and staffers got sick. In the anthrax pilot plant at Camp Detrick, Maryland, in 1951, a microbiologist, attempting to perfect the “foaming process” of high-volume production, developed a fever and died. In 1964, veterinary worker Albert Nickel fell ill after being bitten by a lab animal. His wife wasn’t told that he had Machupo virus, or Bolivian hemorrhagic fever. “I watched him die through a little window to his quarantine room at the Detrick infirmary,” she said.

In 1977, a worldwide epidemic of influenza A began in Russia and China; it was eventually traced to a sample of an American strain of flu preserved in a laboratory freezer since 1950. In 1978, a hybrid strain of smallpox killed a medical photographer at a lab in Birmingham, England; in 2007, live foot-and-mouth disease leaked from a faulty drainpipe at the Institute for Animal Health in Surrey. In the U.S., “more than 1,100 laboratory incidents involving bacteria, viruses and toxins that pose significant or bioterror risks to people and agriculture were reported to federal regulators during 2008 through 2012,” reported *USA Today* in an exposé published in 2014.

In 2015, the Department of Defense discovered that workers at a germ-warfare testing center in Utah had mistakenly sent close to 200 shipments of live anthrax to laboratories throughout the United States and also to Australia, Germany, Japan, South Korea, and several other countries over the past 12 years. In 2019, laboratories at Fort Detrick — where “defensive” research involves the creation of potential pathogens to defend against — were shut down for several months by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for “breaches of containment.” They reopened in December 2019.

High-containment laboratories have a whispered history of near misses. Scientists are people, and people have clumsy moments and poke themselves and get bitten by the enraged animals they are trying to nasally inoculate. Machines can create invisible aerosols, and cell solutions can become

contaminated. Waste systems don't always work properly. Things can go wrong in a hundred different ways.

Hold that human fallibility in your mind. And then consider the cautious words of Alina Chan, a scientist who works at the Broad Institute of MIT and Harvard. "There is a reasonable chance that what we are dealing with is the result of a lab accident," Chan told me in July of last year. There was also, she added, a reasonable chance that the disease had evolved naturally — both were scientific possibilities. "I don't know if we will ever find a smoking gun, especially if it was a lab accident. The stakes are so high now. It would be terrifying to be blamed for millions of cases of COVID-19 and possibly up to a million deaths by year end, if the pandemic continues to grow out of control. The Chinese government has also restricted their own scholars and scientists from looking into the origins of SARS-CoV-2. At this rate, the origin of SARS-CoV-2 may just be buried by the passage of time."

I asked Jonathan A. King, a molecular biologist and biosafety advocate from MIT, whether he'd thought *lab accident* when he first heard about the epidemic. "Absolutely, absolutely," King answered. Other scientists he knew were concerned as well. But scientists, he said, in general were cautious about speaking out. There were "very intense, very subtle pressures" on them not to push on issues of laboratory biohazards. Collecting lots of bat viruses, and passaging those viruses repeatedly through cell cultures, and making bat-human viral hybrids, King believes, "generates new threats and desperately needs to be reined in."

"All possibilities should be on the table, including a lab leak," a scientist from the NIH, Philip Murphy — chief of the Laboratory of Molecular Immunology — wrote me recently. Nikolai Petrovsky, a professor of endocrinology at Flinders University College of Medicine in Adelaide, Australia, said in an email, "There are indeed many unexplained features of this virus that are hard if not impossible to explain based on a completely natural origin." Richard Ebright, a molecular biologist at Rutgers University, wrote that he'd been concerned for some years about the Wuhan laboratory and about the work being done there to create "chimeric" (i.e., hybrid) SARS-related bat coronaviruses "with enhanced human infectivity." Ebright said, "In this context, the news of a novel coronavirus in Wuhan ***screamed*** lab release."

III.

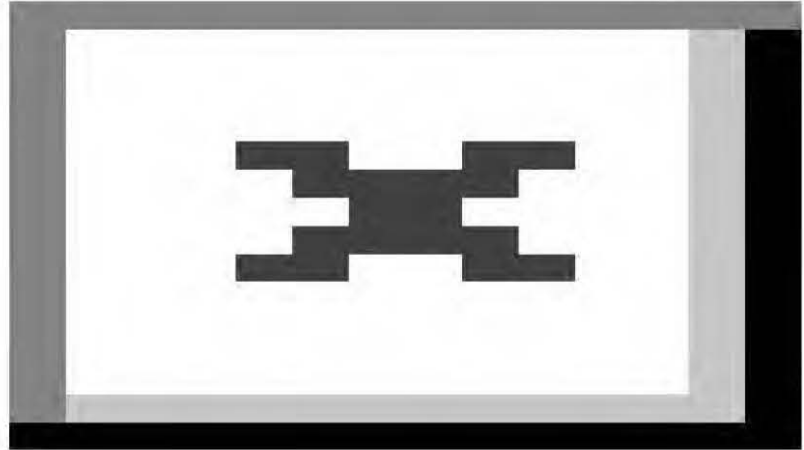
“No Credible Evidence”

The new disease, as soon as it appeared, was intercepted — stolen and politicized by people with ulterior motives. The basic and extremely interesting scientific question of what happened was sucked up into an ideological sharknado.

Some Americans boycotted Chinese restaurants; others bullied and harassed Asian Americans. Steve Bannon, broadcasting from his living room, in a YouTube series called *War Room*, said that the Chinese Communist Party had made a biological weapon and intentionally released it. He called it the “CCP virus.” And his billionaire friend and backer, Miles Guo, a devoted Trump supporter, told a right-wing website that the communists’ goal was to “use the virus to infect selective people in Hong Kong, so that the Chinese Communist Party could use it as an excuse to impose martial law there and ultimately crush the Hong Kong pro-democracy movement. But it backfired terribly.”

In *The Lancet*, in February, a powerful counterstatement appeared, signed by 27 scientists. “We stand together to strongly condemn conspiracy theories suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin,” the statement said. “Scientists from multiple countries have published and analyzed genomes of the causative agent, severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), and they overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife, as have so many other emerging pathogens.”

The behind-the-scenes organizer of this *Lancet* statement, Peter Daszak, is a zoologist and bat-virus sample collector and the head of a New York nonprofit called EcoHealth Alliance — a group that (as veteran science journalist Fred Guttl explained later in *Newsweek*) has channeled money from the National Institutes of Health to Shi Zhengli’s laboratory in Wuhan, allowing the lab to carry on recombinant research into diseases of bats and humans. “We have a choice whether to stand up and support colleagues who are being attacked and threatened daily by conspiracy theorists or to just turn a blind eye,” Daszak said in February in *Science* magazine.



How Did It Get Out? 1. The Tongguan Mine Shaft in Mojiang, Yunnan, where, in 2013, fragments of RaTG13, the closest known relative of SARSCoV-2, were recovered and transported to the Wuhan Institute of Virology; **2. The Wuhan Institute of Virology**, where Shi Zhengli's team brought the RaTG13 sample, sequenced its genome, then took it out of the freezer several times in recent years; **3. The Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention**, which first reported signs of the novel coronavirus in hospital patients; **4. The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market**, an early suspected origin of the pandemic, where the first major outbreak occurred. Illustration: Map by Jason Lee

Vincent Racaniello, a professor at Columbia and a co-host of a podcast called *This Week in Virology*, said on February 9 that the idea of an accident in Wuhan was “complete bunk.” The coronavirus was 96 percent similar to a bat virus found in 2013, Racaniello said. “It’s not a man-made virus. It wasn’t released from a lab.”

Racaniello’s dismissal was seconded by a group of scientists from Ohio State, the University of Pennsylvania, and the University of North Carolina, who put out a paper in *Emerging Microbes and Infections* to quiet the “speculations, rumors, and conspiracy theories that SARS-CoV-2 is of laboratory origin.” There was “currently no credible evidence” that SARS-2 leaked from a lab, these scientists said, using a somewhat different argument from Racaniello’s. “Some people have alleged that the human SARS-CoV-2 was leaked directly from a laboratory in Wuhan where a bat CoV (RaTG13) was recently

reported,” they said. But RaTG13 could not be the source because it differed from the human SARS-2 virus by more than a thousand nucleotides. One of the paper’s authors, Susan Weiss, told the Raleigh *News & Observer*, “The conspiracy theory is ridiculous.”

The most influential natural-origin paper, “The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2,” by a group of biologists that included Kristian Andersen of Scripps Research, appeared online in a preliminary version in mid-February.

“We do not believe any type of laboratory-based scenario is plausible,” the scientists said. Why? Because molecular-modeling software predicted that if you wanted to optimize an existing bat virus so that it would replicate well in human cells, you would arrange things a different way than how the SARS-2 virus actually does it — even though the SARS-2 virus does an extraordinarily good job of replicating in human cells. The laboratory-based scenario was implausible, the paper said, because, although it was true that the virus could conceivably have developed its unusual genetic features in a laboratory, a stronger and “more parsimonious” explanation was that the features came about through some kind of natural mutation or recombination. “What we think,” explained one of the authors, Robert F. Garry of Tulane University, on YouTube, “is that this virus is a recombinant. It probably came from a bat virus, plus perhaps one of these viruses from the pangolin.” Journalists, for the most part, echoed the authoritative pronouncements of Daszak, Racaniello, Weiss, Andersen, and other prominent natural-originists. “The balance of the scientific evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the new coronavirus emerged from nature — be it the Wuhan market or somewhere else,” said the Washington *Post*’s “Fact Checker” column. “Dr. Fauci Again Dismisses Wuhan Lab As Source of Coronavirus,” said *CBS News*, posting a video interview of Anthony Fauci by *National Geographic*. “If you look at the evolution of the virus in bats, and what’s out there now,” Fauci said, “it’s very, very strongly leaning toward ‘This could not have been artificially or deliberately manipulated’ — the way the mutations have naturally evolved.”

Everyone took sides; everyone thought of the new disease as one more episode in an ongoing partisan struggle. Think of Mike Pompeo, that landmass of Cold War truculence; think of Donald Trump himself. They stood at their microphones saying, in a winking, I-know-something-you-don’t-know sort of way, that this disease escaped from a Chinese laboratory. Whatever they were saying must be wrong. It became impermissible, almost taboo, to admit that, of course, SARS-2 could have come from a lab accident. “The administration’s claim that the virus spread from a Wuhan lab has made the notion politically

toxic, even among scientists who say it could have happened,” wrote science journalist Mara Hvistendahl in the Intercept.

IV.

“Is It a Complete Coincidence?”

Even so, in January and February of 2020, there were thoughtful people who were speaking up, formulating their perplexities.

One person was Sam Hussein, who works for Consortium News. He went to a CDC press conference at the National Press Club on February 11, 2020. By then, 42,000 people had gotten sick in China and more than a thousand had died. But there were only 13 confirmed cases in the U.S. Halfway through the Q&A period, Hussein went to the microphone and asked the CDC’s representative, Anne Schuchat, where the virus had come from. His head was spinning, he told me later.

“Obviously the main concern is how to stop the virus,” Hussein said; nonetheless, he wanted to know more about its source. “Is it the CDC’s contention,” he asked, “that there’s absolutely no relation to the BSL-4 lab in Wuhan? It’s my understanding that this is the only place in China with a BSL-4 lab. We in the United States have, I think, two dozen or so, and there have been problems and incidents.” (A BSL-4 laboratory is a maximum-security biosafety-level-four facility, used to house research on the most dangerous known pathogens. *New York* has confirmed there are at least 11 BSL-4 facilities currently operating in the U.S.) Hussein hastened to say that he wasn’t implying that what happened in Wuhan was in any way intentional. “I’m just asking, Is it a complete coincidence that this outbreak happened in the one city in China with a BSL-4 lab?”

Schuchat thanked Hussein for his questions and comments. Everything she’d seen was quite consistent with a natural, zoonotic origin for the disease, she said.

That same month, a group of French scientists from Aix-Marseille University posted a paper describing their investigation of a small insertion in the genome of the new SARS-2 virus. The virus’s spike protein contained a sequence of amino acids that formed what Etienne Decroly and colleagues called a “peculiar furin-like cleavage site” — a chemically sensitive region on the lobster claw of the spike protein that would react in the presence of an enzyme called furin, which is a type of protein found everywhere within the

human body, but especially in the lungs. When the spike senses human furin, it shudders, chemically speaking, and the enzyme opens the protein, commencing the tiny morbid ballet whereby the virus burns a hole in a host cell's outer membrane and finds its way inside.

The code for this particular molecular feature — not found in SARS or any SARS-like bat viruses, but present in a slightly different form in the more lethal MERS virus — is easy to remember because it's a roar: "R-R-A-R." The letter code stands for amino acids: arginine, arginine, alanine, and arginine. Its presence, so Decroly and his colleagues observed, may heighten the "pathogenicity" — that is, the god-awfulness — of a disease.

Botao Xiao, a professor at the South China University of Technology, posted a short paper on a preprint server titled "The Possible Origins of 2019-nCoV Coronavirus." Two laboratories, the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention (WHCDC) and the Wuhan Institute of Virology, were not far from the seafood market, which was where the disease was said to have originated, Xiao wrote — in fact, the WHCDC was only a few hundred yards away from the market — whereas the horseshoe bats that hosted the disease were hundreds of miles to the south. (No bats were sold in the market, he pointed out.) It was unlikely, he wrote, that a bat would have flown to a densely populated metropolitan area of 15 million people. "The killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan," Xiao believed. He urged the relocation of "biohazardous laboratories" away from densely populated places. His article disappeared from the server.

And late in the month, a professor at National Taiwan University, Fang Chitai, gave a lecture on the coronavirus in which he described the anomalous R-R-A-R furin cleavage site. The virus was "unlikely to have four amino acids added all at once," Fang said — natural mutations were smaller and more haphazard, he argued. "From an academic point of view, it is indeed possible that the amino acids were added to COVID-19 in the lab by humans." When the *Taiwan News* published an article about Fang's talk, Fang disavowed his own comments, and the video copy of the talk disappeared from the website of the Taiwan Public Health Association. "It has been taken down for a certain reason," the association explained. "Thank you for your understanding."

“A Serious Shortage of Appropriately Trained Technicians”

In the spring, I did some reading on coronavirus history. Beginning in the 1970s, dogs, cows, and pigs were diagnosed with coronavirus infections; dog shows were canceled in 1978 after 25 collies died in Louisville, Kentucky. New varieties of coronaviruses didn't start killing humans, though, until 2003 — that's when restaurant chefs, food handlers, and people who lived near a live-animal market got sick in Guangzhou, in southern China, where the shredded meat of a short-legged raccoonlike creature, the palm civet, was served in a regional dish called “dragon-tiger-phoenix soup.” The new disease, SARS, spread alarmingly in hospitals, and it reached 30 countries and territories. More than 800 people died; the civet-borne virus was eventually traced to horseshoe bats.

Later, smaller outbreaks of SARS in Taiwan, Singapore, and China's National Institute of Virology in Beijing were all caused by laboratory accidents. Of the Beijing Virology Institute, the World Health Organization's safety investigators wrote, in May 2004, that they had “serious concerns about biosafety procedures.” By one account, a SARS storage room in the Beijing lab was so crowded that the refrigerator holding live virus was moved out to the hallway. “Scientists still do not fully understand exactly where or how SARS emerged 18 months ago,” wrote *Washington Post* reporter David Brown in June 2004. “But it is clear now that the most threatening source of the deadly virus today may be places they know intimately — their own laboratories.”

I'm just asking, Is it a complete coincidence that this outbreak happened in the one city in China with a BSL-4 lab?

MERS arose in 2012, possibly spread by camels that had contracted the disease from bats or bat guano, then passed it to human drinkers of raw camel milk and butchers of camel meat. It was an acute sickness, with a high fatality rate, mostly confined to Saudi Arabia. Like SARS, MERS ebbed quickly — it all but disappeared outside the Middle East, except for an outbreak in 2015 at the Samsung Medical Center in South Korea, where a single case of MERS led to more than 180 infections, many involving hospital workers.

In January 2015, the brand-new BSL-4 lab in Wuhan, built by a French contractor, celebrated its opening, but full safety certification came slowly. According to State Department cables from 2018 leaked to the *Washington Post*, the new BSL-4 lab had some start-up problems, including “a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory.” The staff had gotten some training at a BSL-4 lab in Galveston, Texas, but they were doing potentially dangerous work with SARS-like viruses, the memo said, and they needed more help from the U.S.

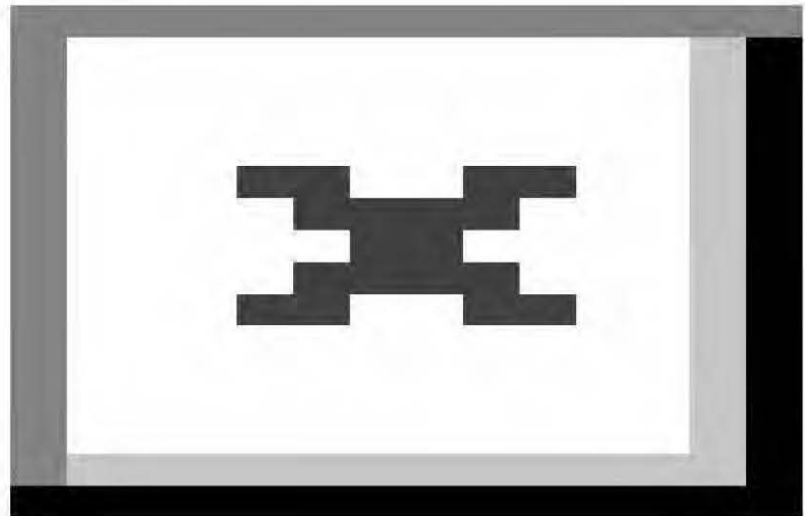
In November or December of 2019, the novel coronavirus began to spread. Chinese scientists initially named it “Wuhan seafood market pneumonia virus,” but soon that idea went away. The market, closed and decontaminated by Chinese officials on January 1, 2020, was an amplifying hub, not the source of the outbreak, according to several studies by Chinese scientists. Forty-five percent of the earliest SARS-2 patients had no link with the market.

VI.

Emergence

Now let’s take a step back. AIDS, fatal and terrifying and politically charged, brought on a new era in government-guided vaccine research, under the guidance of Anthony Fauci. A virologist at Rockefeller University, Stephen S. Morse, began giving talks on “emerging viruses” — other plagues that might be in the process of coming out of nature’s woodwork. In 1992, Richard Preston wrote a horrific account of one emergent virus, Ebola, in *The New Yorker*, which became a best-selling book in 1994; Laurie Garrett’s *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* appeared that same year and was also a best seller. The idea seemed to be everywhere: We were on the verge of a wave of zoonotic, emergent plagues.

This new, useful term, *emerging*, began to glow in the research papers of some coronavirologists, who were out of the spotlight, working on common colds and livestock diseases. The term was useful because it was fluid. An emerging disease could be real and terrifying, as AIDS was — something that had just arrived on the medical scene and was confounding our efforts to combat it — or it could be a disease that hadn’t arrived, and might never arrive, but could be shown in a laboratory to be waiting in the wings, just a few mutations away from a human epidemic. It was real and unreal at the same time — a quality that was helpful when applying for research grants.



Where Did It Come From? This chart measures the genetic similarity of known viruses to the novel coronavirus (which appears in yellow). By far the closest is the bat virus RaTG13, which appears in blue, and which was recovered in 2013 and brought to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The first SARS, marked in red, is a much more distant relative. Graphic: Zhou, P., Yang, XL., Wang, XG. et al. A pneumonia outbreak associated with a new coronavirus of probable bat origin. *Nature* 579, 270–273 (2020)

Take, for instance, this paper from 1995: “High Recombination and Mutation Rates in Mouse Hepatitis Viruses Suggest That Coronaviruses May Be Potentially Important Emerging Viruses.” It was written by Dr. Ralph Baric and his bench scientist, Boyd Yount, at the University of North Carolina. Baric, a gravelly voiced former swim champion, described in this early paper how his lab was able to train a coronavirus, MHV, which causes hepatitis in mice, to jump species, so that it could reliably infect BHK (baby-hamster kidney) cell cultures. They did it using serial passaging: repeatedly dosing a mixed solution of mouse cells and hamster cells with mouse-hepatitis virus, while each time decreasing the number of mouse cells and upping the concentration of hamster cells. At first, predictably, the mouse-hepatitis virus couldn’t do much with the hamster cells, which were left almost free of infection, floating in

their world of fetal-calf serum. But by the end of the experiment, after dozens of passages through cell cultures, the virus had mutated: It had mastered the trick of parasitizing an unfamiliar rodent. A scourge of mice was transformed into a scourge of hamsters. And there was more: "It is clear that MHV can rapidly alter its species specificity and infect rats and primates," Baric said. "The resulting virus variants are associated with demyelinating diseases in these alternative species." (A demyelinating disease is a disease that damages nerve sheaths.) With steady prodding from laboratory science, along with some rhetorical exaggeration, a lowly mouse ailment was morphed into an emergent threat that might potentially cause nerve damage in primates. That is, nerve damage in us.

A few years later, in a further round of "interspecies transfer" experimentation, Baric's scientists introduced their mouse coronavirus into flasks that held a suspension of African-green-monkey cells, human cells, and pig-testicle cells. Then, in 2002, they announced something even more impressive: They'd found a way to create a full-length infectious clone of the entire mouse-hepatitis genome. Their "infectious construct" replicated itself just like the real thing, they wrote.

Not only that, but they'd figured out how to perform their assembly seamlessly, without any signs of human handiwork. Nobody would know if the virus had been fabricated in a laboratory or grown in nature. Baric called this the "no-see'm method," and he asserted that it had "broad and largely unappreciated molecular biology applications." The method was named, he wrote, after a "very small biting insect that is occasionally found on North Carolina beaches."

In 2006, Baric, Yount, and two other scientists were granted a patent for their invisible method of fabricating a full-length infectious clone using the seamless, no-see'm method. But this time, it wasn't a clone of the mouse-hepatitis virus — it was a clone of the entire deadly human SARS virus, the one that had emerged from Chinese bats, via civets, in 2002. The Baric Lab came to be known by some scientists as "the Wild Wild West." In 2007, Baric said that we had entered "the golden age of coronavirus genetics."

"I would be afraid to look in their freezers," one virologist told me.

Baric and Shi Zhengli of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the two top experts on the genetic interplay between bat and human coronaviruses, began collaborating in 2015.

VII.

“I Had Not Slept a Wink”

Early in the pandemic, *Scientific American* profiled Shi Zhengli, known in China as the “bat woman.” Shi trapped hundreds of bats in nets at the mouths of caves in southern China, sampled their saliva and their blood, swabbed their anuses, and gathered up their fecal pellets. Several times, she visited and sampled bats in a mine in Mojiang, in southern China, where, in 2012, six men set to work shoveling bat guano were sickened by a severe lung disease, three of them fatally. Shi’s team took the samples back to Wuhan and analyzed whatever fragments of bat virus she could find. In some cases, when she found a sequence that seemed particularly significant, she experimented with it in order to understand how it might potentially infect humans. Some of her work was funded by the National Institutes of Health and some of it by the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency of the Department of Defense via Peter Daszak’s EcoHealth Alliance.

As Shi explained to *Scientific American*, late in December 2019, she heard from the director of the Wuhan Institute that there was an outbreak of a new disease in the city. Medical samples taken from hospital patients arrived at her lab for analysis. Shi determined that the new virus was related to SARS but even more closely related to a bat disease that her own team had found on a virus-hunting trip: the now-famous RaTG13. Shi was surprised that the outbreak was local, she said: “I had never expected this kind of thing to happen in Wuhan, in central China.” The bat hiding places that she’d been visiting were, after all, as far away as Orlando, Florida, is from New York City. Could this new virus, she wondered, have come from her own laboratory? She checked her records and found no exact matches. “That really took a load off my mind,” she said. “I had not slept a wink for days.”

If one of the first thoughts that goes through the head of a lab director at the Wuhan Institute of Virology is that the new coronavirus could have come from her lab, then we are obliged to entertain the scientific possibility that it could indeed have come from her lab. Right then, there should have been a comprehensive, pockets-inside-out, fully public investigation of the Virology Institute, along with the other important virus labs in Wuhan, including the one close by the seafood market, headquarters of the Wuhan CDC. There should have been interviews with scientists, interviews with biosafety teams, close parsings of laboratory notebooks, freezer and plumbing and decontamination systems checks — everything. It didn’t happen. The Wuhan

Institute of Virology closed down its databases of viral genomes, and the Chinese Ministry of Education sent out a directive: "Any paper that traces the origin of the virus must be strictly and tightly managed."

Shi made some WeChat posts early in 2020. "The novel 2019 coronavirus is nature punishing the human race for keeping uncivilized living habits," she wrote. "I, Shi Zhengli, swear on my life that it has nothing to do with our laboratory." She advised those who believed rumors, and gave credence to unreliable scientific papers, to "shut their stinking mouths."

VIII.

“ ‘Bug to Drug’ in 24 Hours”

It wasn't only AIDS that changed the way the NIH funded research. The War on Terror also influenced which diseases got the most attention. In the late '90s, under Bill Clinton and then George W. Bush, biodefense specialists became interested — again — in anthrax. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency built a small anthrax factory in Nevada, using simulants, to demonstrate how easy it would be for a terrorist to build a small anthrax factory. And in the first year of the Bush presidency, the Defense Intelligence Agency wrote up plans to create a vaccine-resistant form of anthrax using state-of-the-art gene-splicery. A front-page article describing these initiatives, "U.S. Germ Warfare Research Pushes Treaty Limits," appeared in the *New York Times* on September 4, 2001, one week before 9/11. "Pentagon Says Projects Are Defense, Is Pressing Ahead," was the subtitle.

After the 9/11 attacks, and the mysterious anthrax mailings that began a week later (which said, "TAKE PENACILIN [*sic*] NOW / DEATH TO AMERICA / DEATH TO ISRAEL / ALLAH IS GREAT"), the desire for biopreparedness became all consuming. Now there were emerging biothreats from humans as well as from the evolving natural world. Fauci's anti-terror budget went from \$53 million in 2001 to \$1.7 billion in 2003. Setting aside his work toward an AIDS vaccine, which was taking longer than he'd foreseen, Fauci said he would be going all out to defend against a suite of known Cold War agents, all of which had been bred and perfected in American weapons programs many years before — brucellosis, anthrax, tularemia, and plague, for instance. "We are making this the highest priority," Fauci said. "We are really marshaling all available resources."

I would be afraid to look in their freezers.

Vaccine development had to progress much faster, Fauci believed; he wanted to set up “vaccine systems” and “vaccine platforms,” which could be quickly tailored to defend against a particular emergent strain some terrorist with an advanced biochemistry degree might have thrown together in a laboratory. “Our goal within the next 20 years is ‘bug to drug’ in 24 hours,” Fauci said. “This would specifically meet the challenge of genetically engineered bioagents.” The first Project BioShield contract Fauci awarded was to VaxGen, a California pharmaceutical company, for \$878 million worth of shots of anthrax vaccine.

By 2005, so much money was going toward bioterror reduction and preparedness that more than 750 scientists sent a protest letter to the NIH. Their claim was that grants to study canonical bioterror diseases — anthrax, plague, brucellosis, and tularemia, all exceptionally rare in the U.S. — had increased by a factor of 15 since 2001, whereas funds for the study of widespread “normal” diseases, of high public-health importance, had decreased.

Fauci was firm in his reply: “The United States through its leaders made the decision that this money was going to be spent on biodefense,” he said. “We disagree with the notion that biodefense concerns are of ‘low public-health significance.’”

In 2010, by one count, there were 249 BSL-3 laboratories and seven BSL-4 laboratories in the U.S., and more than 11,000 scientists and staffers were authorized to handle the ultra-lethal germs on the government’s select pathogen list. And yet the sole bioterrorist in living memory who actually killed American citizens, according to the FBI — the man who sent the anthrax letters — turned out to be one of the government’s own researchers. Bruce Ivins, an eccentric, suicidal laboratory scientist from Ohio who worked in vaccine development at Fort Detrick, allegedly wanted to boost the fear level so as to persuade the government to buy more of the patented, genetically engineered anthrax VaxGen vaccine, of which he was a co-inventor. (See David Willman’s fascinating biography of Ivins, *Mirage Man*.) Fauci’s staff at NIH funded Ivins’s vaccine laboratory and gave \$100 million to VaxGen to accelerate vaccine production. (The NIH’s \$878 million contract with VaxGen, however, was quietly canceled in 2006; Ivins, who was never charged, killed himself in 2008.)

“The whole incident amounted to a snake eating its own tail,” wrote Wendy Orent in an August 2008 piece titled “Our Own Worst Bioenemy” in the *Los Angeles Times*. “No ingenious biowarrior from Al Qaeda sent the lethal

envelopes through the U.S. postal system. An American scientist did." What confirmed Ivins's guilt, according to the FBI, was that there was a genetic match between the anthrax used in the killings and the strain held at Fort Detrick.

IX.

"Weapons of Mass Disruption"

After SARS appeared in 2003, Ralph Baric's laboratory moved up the NIH funding ladder. SARS was a "dual use" organism — a security threat and a zoonotic threat at the same time. In 2006, Baric wrote a long, fairly creepy paper on the threat of "weaponizable" viruses. Synthetic biology had made possible new kinds of viral "weapons of mass disruption," he wrote, involving, for example, "rapid production of numerous candidate bioweapons that can be simultaneously released," a scattershot terror tactic Baric called the "'survival of the fittest' approach."

Baric hoped to find a SARS vaccine, but he couldn't; he kept looking for it, year after year, supported by the NIH, long after the disease itself had been contained. It wasn't really gone, Baric believed. Like other epidemics that pop up and then disappear, as he told a university audience some years later, "they don't go extinct. They are waiting to return." What do you do if you run a well-funded laboratory, an NIH "center of excellence," and your emergent virus is no longer actually making people sick? You start squeezing it and twisting it into different shapes. Making it stand on its hind legs and quack like a duck, or a bat. Or breathe like a person.

Baric's safety record is good — although there was a minor mouse-bite incident in 2016, uncovered by ProPublica — and his motives are beyond reproach: "Safe, universal, vaccine platforms are needed that can be tailored to new pathogens as they emerge, quickly tested for safety, and then strategically used to control new disease outbreaks in human populations," he wrote in a paper on public health. But the pioneering work he did over the past 15 years — generating tiny eager single-stranded flask monsters and pitting them against human cells, or bat cells, or gene-spliced somewhat-human cells, or monkey cells, or humanized mice — was not without risk, and it may have led others astray.

In 2006, for instance, Baric and his colleagues, hoping to come up with a "vaccine strategy" for SARS, produced noninfectious virus replicon particles (or VRPs) using the Venezuelan-equine-encephalitis virus (another American

germ-warfare agent), which they fitted with various SARS spike proteins. Then, wearing Tyvek suits and two pairs of gloves each, and working in a biological safety cabinet in a BSL-3-certified laboratory, they cloned and grew recombinant versions of the original SARS virus in an incubator in a medium that held African-green-monkey cells. When they had grown enough virus, the scientists swapped out one kind of spike protein for a carefully chosen mutant, and they challenged their prototype vaccine with it in mice.

The scientists also tried their infectious SARS clones in something called an air-liquid interface, using a relatively new type of cell culture developed by Raymond Pickles of the University of North Carolina's Cystic Fibrosis Center. Pickles had perfected a method of emulating the traits of human airway tissue by cultivating cells taken from lung-disease patients — nurturing the culture over four to six weeks in such a way that the cells differentiated and developed a crop of tiny moving hairs, or cilia, on top and goblet cells within that produced real human mucus. In fact, before infecting these HAE (human airway epithelial) cells with a virus, the lab worker must sometimes rinse off some of the accumulated mucus, as if helping the lab-grown tissue to clear its throat. So Baric was exposing and adapting his engineered viruses to an extraordinarily true-to-life environment — the juicy, sticky, hairy inner surface of our breathing apparatus.

SARS-2 seems almost perfectly calibrated to grab and ransack our breathing cells and choke the life out of them. “By the time SARS-CoV-2 was first detected in late 2019, it was already pre-adapted to human transmission,” Alina Chan and her co-authors have written, whereas SARS, when it first appeared in 2003, underwent “numerous adaptive mutations” before settling down. Perhaps viral nature hit a bull’s-eye of airborne infectivity, with almost no mutational drift, no period of accommodation and adjustment, or perhaps some lab worker somewhere, inspired by Baric’s work with human airway tissue, took a spike protein that was specially groomed to colonize and thrive deep in the ciliated, mucosal tunnels of our inner core and cloned it onto some existing viral bat backbone. It could have happened in Wuhan, but — because anyone can now “print out” a fully infectious clone of any sequenced disease — it could also have happened at Fort Detrick, or in Texas, or in Italy, or in Rotterdam, or in Wisconsin, or in some other citadel of coronaviral inquiry. No conspiracy — just scientific ambition, and the urge to take exciting risks and make new things, and the fear of terrorism, and the fear of getting sick. Plus a whole lot of government money.

“Risky Areas for Spillover”

Project Bioshield began to fade by the end of the Bush administration, although the expensive high-containment laboratories, controversial preservers and incubators of past and future epidemics, remain. By 2010, some BioShield projects had dissolved into Obama’s Predict program, which paid for laboratories and staff in 60 “risky areas for spillover” around the world. Jonna Mazet, a veterinary scientist from the University of California, Davis, was in charge of Predict, which was a component of USAID’s “Emerging Pandemic Threats” program. Her far-flung teams collected samples from 164,000 animals and humans and claimed to have found “almost 1,200 potentially zoonotic viruses, among them 160 novel coronaviruses, including multiple SARS- and MERS-like coronaviruses.” The fruits of Predict’s exotic harvest were studied and circulated in laboratories worldwide, and their genetic sequences became part of GenBank, the NIH’s genome database, where any curious RNA wrangler anywhere could quickly synthesize snippets of code and test out a new disease on human cells.

Baric, Jonna Mazet, and Peter Daszak of EcoHealth worked together for years — and Daszak also routed Predict money to Shi Zhengli’s bat-surveillance team in Wuhan through his nonprofit, mingling it with NIH money and money from the U.S. Defense Threat Reduction Agency. In 2013, Mazet announced that Shi Zhengli’s virus hunters, with Predict’s support, had, for the first time, isolated and cultured a live SARS-like virus from bats and demonstrated that this virus could bind to the human ACE2, or “angiotensin-converting enzyme 2,” receptor, which Baric’s laboratory had determined to be the sine qua non of human infectivity. “This work shows that these viruses can directly infect humans and validates our assumption that we should be searching for viruses of pandemic potential before they spill over to people,” Mazet said.

Daszak, for his part, seems to have viewed his bat quests as part of an epic, quasi-religious death match. In a paper from 2008, Daszak and a co-author described Bruegel’s painting *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* and compared it to the contemporary human biological condition. The fallen angels could be seen as pathogenic organisms that had descended “through an evolutionary (not spiritual) pathway that takes them to a netherworld where they can feed only on our genes, our cells, our flesh,” Daszak wrote. “Will we succumb to the multitudinous horde? Are we to be cast downward into chthonic chaos represented here by the heaped up gibbering phantasmagory against which we rail and struggle?”

XI.

“Lab-Made?”

There are, in fact, some helpful points of agreement between zoonoticists — those who believe in a natural origin of the SARS-2 virus — and those who believe that it probably came from a laboratory. Both sides agree, when pressed, that a lab origin can’t be conclusively ruled out and a natural origin can’t be ruled out either — because nature, after all, is capable of improbable, teleological-seeming achievements. Both sides also agree, for the most part, that the spillover event that began the human outbreak probably happened only once, or a few times, quite recently, and not many times over a longer period. They agree that bat virus RaTG13 (named for the *Rinolophus affinis* bat, from Tongguan, in 2013) is the closest match to the human virus that has yet been found, and that although the two viruses are very similar, the spike protein of the bat virus lacks the features the human spike protein possesses that enable it to work efficiently with human tissue.

Zoonoticists hold that SARS-2’s crucial features — the furin cleavage site and the ACE2 receptor — are the result of a recombinant event involving a bat coronavirus (perhaps RaTG13 or a virus closely related to it) and another, unknown virus. Early on, researchers proposed that it could be a snake sold at the seafood market — a Chinese cobra or a banded krait —but no: Snakes don’t typically carry coronaviruses. Then there was a thought that the disease came from sick smuggled pangolins, because there existed a certain pangolin coronavirus that was, inexplicably, almost identical in its spike protein to the human coronavirus — but then, no: There turned out to be questions about the reliability of the genetic information in that diseased-pangolin data set, on top of which there were no pangolins for sale at the Wuhan market. Then a group from China’s government veterinary laboratory at Harbin tried infecting beagles, pigs, chickens, ducks, ferrets, and cats with SARS-2 to see if they could be carriers. (Cats and ferrets got sick; pigs, ducks, and most dogs did not.)

In September, some scientists at the University of Michigan, led by Yang Zhang, reported that they had created a “computational pipeline” to screen nearly a hundred possible intermediate hosts, including the Sumatran orangutan, the Western gorilla, the Olive baboon, the crab-eating macaque, and the bonobo. All these primates were “permissive” to the SARS-2 coronavirus and should undergo “further experimental investigation,” the scientists proposed.

Despite this wide-ranging effort, there is at the moment no animal host that zoonoticists can point to as the missing link. There's also no single, agreed-upon hypothesis to explain how the disease may have traveled from the bat reservoirs of Yunnan all the way to Wuhan, seven hours by train, without leaving any sick people behind and without infecting anyone along the way.

The zoonoticists say that we shouldn't find it troubling that virologists have been inserting and deleting furin cleavage sites and ACE2-receptor-binding domains in experimental viral spike proteins for years: The fact that virologists have been doing these things in laboratories, in advance of the pandemic, is to be taken as a sign of their prescience, not of their folly. But I keep returning to the basic, puzzling fact: This patchwork pathogen, which allegedly has evolved without human meddling, first came to notice in the only city in the world with a laboratory that was paid for years by the U.S. government to perform experiments on certain obscure and heretofore unpublicized strains of bat viruses — which bat viruses then turned out to be, out of all the organisms on the planet, the ones that are most closely related to the disease. What are the odds?

In July, I discovered a number of volunteer analysts who were doing a new kind of forensic, samizdat science, hunched over the letter code of the SARS-2 genome like scholars deciphering the cuneiform impressions in Linear B tablets. There were the anonymous authors of Project Evidence, on GitHub, who “disavow all racism and violent attacks, including those which are aimed at Asian or Chinese people,” and there was Yuri Deigin, a biotech entrepreneur from Canada, who wrote a massive, lucid paper on Medium, “Lab-Made?,” which illumined the mysteries of the spike protein. Jonathan Latham of the Bioscience Resource Project, with his co-author Allison Wilson, wrote two important papers: one a calm, unsparing overview of laboratory accidents and rash research and the other a close look at the small outbreak of an unexplained viral pneumonia in a bat-infested copper mine in 2012. I corresponded with Alina Chan (now the subject of a nicely turned piece in *Boston* magazine by Rowan Jacobsen) and with the pseudonymous Billy Bostickson, a tireless researcher whose Twitter photo is a cartoon of an injured experimental monkey, and Monali Rahalkar, of the Agharkar Research Institute in Pune, India, who wrote a paper with her husband, Rahul Bahulikar, that also sheds light on the story of the bat-guano-shoveling men whose virus was remarkably like SARS-2, except that it was not nearly as catching. I talked to Rossana Segreto, a molecular biologist at the University of Innsbruck, whose paper, “Is Considering a Genetic-Manipulation Origin for SARS-CoV-2 a Conspiracy Theory That Must Be Censored?,” co-authored with Yuri Deigin, was finally published in November under a milder title; it argued

that SARS-2's most notable features, the furin site and the human ACE2-binding domain, were unlikely to have arisen simultaneously and "might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site directed mutagenesis." Segreto is also the person who first established that a bat-virus fragment named BtCoV/4991, identified in 2013, was 100 percent identical to the closest known cousin to SARS-CoV-2, the bat virus RaTG13, thereby proving that the virus closest to the SARS-2-pandemic virus was linked back not to a bat cave but to a mine shaft, and that this same virus had been stored and worked on in the Wuhan Institute for years. This made possible the first big investigative piece on SARS-2's origins, in the *Times* of London, in July: "Nobody can deny the bravery of scientists who risked their lives harvesting the highly infectious virus," the *Times* authors write. "But did their courageous detective work lead inadvertently to a global disaster?"

XII.

"A New, Non-Natural Risk"

In 2011, a tall, confident Dutch scientist, Ron Fouchier, using grant money from Fauci's group at NIH, created a mutant form of highly pathogenic avian influenza, H5N1, and passaged it ten times through ferrets in order to prove that he could "force" (his word) this potentially fatal disease to infect mammals, including humans, "via aerosols or respiratory droplets." Fouchier said his findings indicated that these avian influenza viruses, thus forced, "pose a risk of becoming pandemic in humans."

This experiment was too much for some scientists: Why, out of a desire to prove that something extremely infectious could happen, would you make it happen? And why would the U.S. government feel compelled to pay for it to happen? Late in 2011, Marc Lipsitch of the Harvard School of Public Health got together with several other dismayed onlookers to ring the gong for caution. On January 8, 2012, the *New York Times* published a scorcher of an editorial, "An Engineered Doomsday." "We cannot say there would be no benefits at all from studying the virus," the *Times* said. "But the consequences, should the virus escape, are too devastating to risk."

These gain-of-function experiments were an important part of the NIH's approach to vaccine development, and Anthony Fauci was reluctant to stop funding them. He and Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, along with Gary Nabel, NIAID director of vaccine research, published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* in which they contended that the ferret flu experiments, and others like them, were "a risk worth taking."

“Important information and insights can come from generating a potentially dangerous virus in the laboratory,” they wrote; the work can “help delineate the principles of virus transmission between species.” The work was safe because the viruses were stored in a high-security lab, they believed, and the work was necessary because nature was always coming up with new threats. “Nature is the worst bioterrorist,” Fauci told a reporter. “We know that through history.”

Soon afterward, there followed some distressing screwups in secure federal laboratories involving live anthrax, live smallpox, and live avian influenza. These got attention in the science press. Then Lipsitch’s activists (calling themselves the Cambridge Working Group) sent around a strong statement on the perils of research with “Potential Pandemic Pathogens,” signed by more than a hundred scientists. The work might “trigger outbreaks that would be difficult or impossible to control,” the signers said. Fauci reconsidered, and the White House in 2014 announced that there would be a “pause” in the funding of new influenza, SARS, and MERS gain-of-function research.

Baric, in North Carolina, was not happy. He had a number of gain-of-function experiments with pathogenic viruses in progress. “It took me ten seconds to realize that most of them were going to be affected,” he told NPR. Baric and a former colleague from Vanderbilt University wrote a long letter to an NIH review board expressing their “profound concerns.” “This decision will significantly inhibit our capacity to respond quickly and effectively to future outbreaks of SARS-like or MERS-like coronaviruses, which continue to circulate in bat populations and camels,” they wrote. The funding ban was itself dangerous, they argued. “Emerging coronaviruses in nature do not observe a mandated pause.”

Hoping to smooth over controversy by showing due diligence, the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity, founded in the BioShield era under President Bush, paid a consulting firm, Gryphon Scientific, to write a report on gain-of-function research, which by now was simply referred to as GoF. In chapter six of this thousand-page dissertation, published in April 2016, the consultants take up the question of coronaviruses. “Increasing the transmissibility of the coronaviruses could significantly increase the chance of a global pandemic due to a laboratory accident,” they wrote.

The Cambridge Working Group continued to write letters of protest and plead for restraint and sanity. Steven Salzberg, a professor of biomedical engineering at Johns Hopkins, said, “We have enough problems simply keeping up with the current flu outbreaks — and now with Ebola — without

scientists creating incredibly deadly new viruses that might accidentally escape their labs.” David Relman of Stanford Medical School said, “It is unethical to place so many members of the public at risk and then consult only scientists — or, even worse, just a small subset of scientists — and exclude others from the decision-making and oversight process.” Richard Ebright wrote that creating and evaluating new threats very seldom increases security: “Doing so in biology — where the number of potential threats is nearly infinite, and where the asymmetry between the ease of creating threats and the difficulty of addressing threats is nearly absolute — is especially counterproductive.” Lynn Klotz wrote, “Awful as a pandemic brought on by the escape of a variant H5N1 virus might be, it is SARS that now presents the greatest risk. The worry is less about recurrence of a natural SARS outbreak than of yet another escape from a laboratory researching it to help protect against a natural outbreak.” Marc Lipsitch argued that gain-of-function experiments can mislead, “resulting in worse not better decisions,” and that the entire gain-of-function debate as overseen by the NIH was heavily weighted in favor of scientific insiders and “distinctly unwelcoming of public participation.”

Nariyoshi Shinomiya, a professor of physiology and nano-medicine at the National Defense Medical College in Japan, offered this warning: “Similar to nuclear or chemical weapons there is no going back once we get a thing in our hands.”

But in the end, Baric was allowed to proceed with his experiments, and the research papers that resulted, showered with money, became a sort of *Anarchist’s Cookbook* for the rest of the scientific world. In November 2015, Baric and colleagues published a collaboration paper with Shi Zhengli titled “A SARS-like Cluster of Circulating Bat Coronaviruses Shows Potential for Human Emergence.” Into a human SARS virus that they had adapted so that it would work in mice, Baric and Shi et al. inserted the spike protein of a bat virus, SHC014, discovered by Shi in southern China. They dabbed the mice nasally with virus and waited, looking for signs of sickness: “hunching, ruffled fur.” They also infected human airway cells with the mouse-adapted bat-spike-in-a-human-virus backbone. In both mice and human airway cells, the chimeric virus caused a “robust infection.”

This proved, Baric and Shi believed, that you did not need civets or other intermediate hosts in order for bats to cause an epidemic in humans and that therefore all the SARS-like viruses circulating in bat populations “may pose a future threat.” Peter Daszak, who had used Predict funds to pay Shi for her work on the paper, was impressed by this conclusion; the findings, he said,

“move this virus from a candidate emerging pathogen to a clear and present danger.”

Richard Ebright was trenchantly unenthusiastic. “The only impact of this work,” he said, “is the creation, in a lab, of a new, non-natural risk.”

Early in 2016, Baric and Shi again collaborated. Shi sent Baric a fresh bat virus spike protein, and Baric inserted it into the backbone of a human SARS virus and then used that infectious clone to attack human airway cells. “The virus readily and efficiently replicated in cultured human airway tissues, suggesting an ability to potentially jump directly to humans,” reported the UNC’s website. This time, they also used the bat-human hybrid virus to infect transgenic humanized mice that grew human ACE2 protein. The mice, young and old, lost weight and died, proving, again, that this particular bat virus was potentially “poised to emerge in human populations.” It was “an ongoing threat,” Baric wrote. But was it? Civets and camels that are exposed to a lot of bat-guano dust may be an ongoing threat and a manageable one. But the bats themselves just want to hang in their caves and not be bothered by frowning sightseers in spacesuits who want to poke Q-tips in their bottoms. This 2016 “poised for human emergence” paper was supported by eight different NIH grants. In 2015, Baric’s lab received \$8.3 million from the NIH; in 2016, it received \$10.5 million.

Gain-of-function research came roaring back under Trump and Fauci. “The National Institutes of Health will again fund research that makes viruses more dangerous,” said an article in *Nature* in December 2017. Carrie Wolinetz of the NIH’s office of science policy defended the decision. “These experiments will help us get ahead of viruses that are already out there and pose a real and present danger to human health,” she told *The Lancet*. The NIH, Wolinetz said, was committed to a leadership role with gain-of-function research internationally. “If we are pursuing this research in an active way, we will be much better positioned to develop protection and countermeasures should something bad happen in another country.”

A reporter asked Marc Lipsitch what he thought of the resumption of NIH funding. Gain-of-function experiments “have done almost nothing to improve our preparedness for pandemics,” he said, “yet they risked creating an accidental pandemic.”

XIII.

“Proximity Is a Problem”

In April, four months into the coronavirus emergency, a deputy director at the NIH wrote an email to EcoHealth Alliance. “You are instructed to cease providing any funds to Wuhan Institute of Virology,” it said. In response, Daszak and the chief scientific officer of New England Biolabs (a company that sells seamless gene-splicing products to laboratories, among other things) got 77 Nobel Prize winners to sign a statement saying that the cancellation deprived the “nation and the world of highly regarded science that could help control one of the greatest health crises in modern history and those that may arise in the future.” Later, as a condition of further funding, the NIH wrote to say it wanted Daszak to arrange an outside inspection of the Wuhan lab and to procure from Wuhan’s scientists a sample of whatever they’d used to sequence the SARS-2 virus. Daszak was outraged (“I am not trained as a private detective”), and again he fought back. He was reluctant to give up his own secrets, too. “Conspiracy-theory outlets and politically motivated organizations have made Freedom of Information Act requests on our grants and all of our letters and emails to the NIH,” he told *Nature*. “We don’t think it’s fair that we should have to reveal everything we do.”

But Daszak has survived — even prospered. Recently, *The Lancet* made him the lead investigator in its inquiry into the origins of the pandemic, and the World Health Organization named him to its ten-person origins investigation. (“We’re still close enough to the origin to really find out more details about where it has come from,” Daszak told *Nature*.)

The NIH has also set up an ambitious new international program, called CREID, which stands for Centers for Research in Emerging Infectious Diseases, and it has put Daszak’s EcoHealth in charge of trapping animals and looking for obscure bat viruses in Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Baric is one of Daszak’s partners in CREID. The virus hunting and collecting, which Richard Ebright likens to “looking for a gas leak with a lighted match,” will continue and widen with U.S. funding. “We’re going to work in remote parts of Malaysia and Thailand to get to the front line of where the next pandemic is going to start,” Daszak told NPR.

In May, an interviewer from the People’s Pharmacy website asked Baric if he had any thoughts on whether the coronavirus began with a natural bat-to-human transfer. “Or was there something a little bit more, perhaps, insidious involved?”

“Well, of course the answers to those questions are in China,” Baric replied. “Exactly how they work in that facility is something that would be very difficult for a Westerner to know,” he said. “The main problems that the Institute of Virology has is that the outbreak occurred in close proximity to that Institute. That Institute has in essence the best collection of virologists in the world that have gone out and sought out, and isolated, and sampled bat species throughout Southeast Asia. So they have a very large collection of viruses in their laboratory. And so it’s — you know — proximity is a problem. It’s a problem.”

Over the course of the fall, and especially after the election muffled Donald Trump’s influence over the country’s public-health apparatus, that proximity problem — and the uncomfortable questions of origins it raised — began to grow somewhat more discussable. The BBC, *Le Monde*, and Italy’s RAI have all recently taken seriously the scientific possibility of a lab leak. In late October, the World Health Organization convened the first meeting of its second inquiry into the origins of the disease. The WHO’s effort is perhaps the world’s best chance to satisfy its curiosity about goings-on at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and at the Wuhan CDC’s virus lab near the Wuhan seafood market. But, as the *New York Times* has reported, the WHO’s information gathering has been hindered by Chinese secretiveness since February, when an initial investigative team sent to Beijing was told its members’ access to scientists would be restricted and that it couldn’t visit the seafood market, then considered a hub of the pandemic.

When a BBC video team tried to inspect the Yunnan mine shaft, they found the road to the mine blocked by a strategically parked truck that had “broken down” shortly before they arrived. Reporter John Sudworth asked Daszak, one of the ten members of the second WHO investigative team, whether he would push for access to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. “That’s not my job to do that,” Daszak replied.

In November, David Relman, the Stanford microbiologist, one of the most thoughtful of the voices warning against gain-of-function research, published a paper in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* on the urgent need to unravel the origins of COVID-19. “If SARS-CoV-2 escaped from a lab to cause the pandemic,” he wrote, “it will become critical to understand the chain of events and prevent this from happening again.” Conflicts of interest by researchers and administrators will need to be addressed, Relman wrote; to reach the truth, the investigation must be transparent, international, and, as much as possible, unpolitical. “A more complete understanding of the

origins of COVID-19 clearly serves the interests of every person in every country on this planet.”

“The world is sitting on a precedent-setting decision right now,” wrote Alina Chan on December 8. “It is unclear if SARS2 is 100 percent natural or emerged due to lab/research activities. If we walk away from this, demonstrating that we cannot effectively investigate its origins, it will pave the way for future COVIDS.”

Just before this issue of *New York* went to press, I reached Ralph Baric by phone and asked him where he now believed SARS-2 came from. (Anthony Fauci, Shi Zhengli, and Peter Daszak didn’t respond to emails, and Kristian Andersen said he was busy with other things.) Baric said he still thought the virus came from bats in southern China, perhaps directly, or possibly via an intermediate host, although the smuggled pangolins, in his view, were a red herring. The disease evolved in humans over time without being noticed, he suspected, becoming gradually more infectious, and eventually a person carried it to Wuhan “and the pandemic took off.” Then he said, “Can you rule out a laboratory escape? The answer in this case is probably not.”

XIV.

Transmission

So how did we actually get this disease?

Here’s what I think happened. In April 2012, in a copper mine in Mojiang, China, three men were given an awful job — they were told to shovel bat guano out of a mine shaft. They went to work and shoveled guano for seven hours a day in the confined, insufficiently ventilated space of the mine shaft, and by the end of the week, they were sick with a viral pneumonia of unknown etiology. Three more, younger shovelers were hired to replace the ones who were out sick.

The viral load in their lungs was so huge, because of all the guano dust, that their lungs became a kind of accelerated laboratory passaging experiment, as Jonathan Latham and Allison Wilson have written, forcing the virus to switch its allegiance from bats to humans. SARS experts were consulted, and the disease was judged to be SARS-like but not SARS. It was something new. (Shi Zhengli told *Scientific American* that the guano shovelers had died of a fungal disease, but, as Monali Rahalkar pointed out, they were treated with antivirals,

and their symptoms were consistent with viral pneumonia with attendant secondary fungal infections.)

Although it was a severe disease, and in the end three of the shovelers died, there was no resultant epidemic. It was actually a case of industrial overexposure to an infectious substance — what we might call a massive OSHA violation. The bat disease that the men encountered wasn't necessarily all that dangerous except in an environment of immunosuppressive overload.

Peter Daszak and Shi Zhengli were interested, of course, because this unidentified coronavirus disease involved bats and people. Of the fragmentary bits of virus Shi retrieved from the mine shaft, one was SARS-like, and Shi sequenced it and called it BtCoV/4991 and published a paper about it. Several times — in 2016 and 2018 and 2019 — this most interesting sample, a portion of what we now know as RaTG13, was taken out of the freezers in Shi's lab and worked on in undisclosed ways. (Peter Daszak claims that these samples have disintegrated and can't be validated or studied.) Samples of the nameless human disease also traveled back to the Wuhan Institute of Virology — few specifics about these valuable specimens have been released by Chinese sources, however.

This is the period in the story that demands a very close investigation, when chimeric assemblages may have been created and serially passaged, using BtCoV/4991, a.k.a. RaTG13, and other bat viruses, perhaps along with forms of the human virus. It's when Shi and Baric both published papers that were about what happened when you hot-swapped mutant spike proteins between bat viruses and human viruses.

The link, via the renamed sample BtCoV/4991, to the copper mine is of exceptional importance because of the one huge difference between the unnamed guano shovelers' virus and the SARS-2 virus that is now ravaging, for example, California: transmissibility. Airborne human-to-human transmissibility — the kind of thing that gain-of-functioneers like Ron Fouchier and Ralph Baric were aiming at, in order to demonstrate what Baric called "lurking threats" — is COVID-19's crucial distinguishing feature. If six men had gotten extremely sick with COVID-19 back in 2012 in southern China, doctors and nurses in the hospital where they lay dying would likely have gotten sick as well. There might have been hundreds or thousands of cases. Instead, only the shovelers themselves, who had breathed a heavy concentration of guano dust for days, got it.

The existence of bat virus RaTG13 is therefore not necessarily evidence of a natural bat origin. In fact, it seems to me to imply the opposite: New functional components may have been overlaid onto or inserted into the RaTG13 genome, new Tinkertoy intermolecular manipulations, especially to its spike protein, which have the effect of making it unprecedentedly infectious in human airways.

This is where the uniquely peculiar furin insert and/or the human-tuned ACE2-receptor-binding domain may come in — although it's also possible that either of these elements could have evolved as part of some multistep zoonotic process. But in the climate of gonzo laboratory experimentation, at a time when all sorts of tweaked variants and amped-up substitutions were being tested on cell cultures and in the lungs of humanized mice and other experimental animals, isn't it possible that somebody in Wuhan took the virus that had been isolated from human samples, or the RaTG13 bat virus sequence, or both (or other viruses from that same mine shaft that Shi Zhengli has recently mentioned in passing), and used them to create a challenge disease for vaccine research — a chopped-and-channeled version of RaTG13 or the miners' virus that included elements that would make it thrive and even rampage in people? And then what if, during an experiment one afternoon, this new, virulent, human-infecting, furin-ready virus got out?

For more than 15 years, coronavirologists strove to prove that the threat of SARS was ever present and must be defended against, and they proved it by showing how they could doctor the viruses they stored in order to force them to jump species and go directly from bats to humans. More and more bat viruses came in from the field teams, and they were sequenced and synthesized and "rewired," to use a term that Baric likes. In this international potluck supper of genetic cookery, hundreds of new variant diseases were invented and stored. And then one day, perhaps, somebody messed up. It's at least a reasonable, "parsimonious" explanation of what might have happened.

This may be the great scientific meta-experiment of the 21st century. Could a world full of scientists do all kinds of reckless recombinant things with viral diseases for many years and successfully avoid a serious outbreak? The hypothesis was that, yes, it was doable. The risk was worth taking. There would be no pandemic.

I hope the vaccine works.

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David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State

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To: noreply@techmis.com <noreply@techmis.com>
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Secretary of State

Pompeo warns of consequences if any Americans wrongfully detained overseas die from coronavirus (Washington Times)

[Washington Times](#) [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Andrew Blake, Neutral]

Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo issued a warning Wednesday to countries where U.S. citizens are being wrongfully imprisoned during the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic.

"If you are wrongfully detaining Americans during this time, and they become infected and die of coronavirus, we will hold your government strictly responsible," said Mr. Pompeo.

"All wrongfully detained Americans should be released immediately," President Trump's top diplomat stressed during a press conference held at State Department headquarters.

It is not clear how many Americans are imprisoned abroad, and the State Department did not immediately respond to an inquiry about the number of Americans it considers to be wrongfully detained in other countries.

The State Department previously singled out several Americans detained overseas while raising concerns about the coronavirus ravaging prisons around the world, however.

Mr. Pompeo issued a statement last month urging Venezuela to release five U.S. citizens and one U.S. resident jailed in Caracas – Citgo executives dubbed the "Citgo 6" – saying they each have weakened immune systems and face a grave health risk if they contract COVID-19, the infectious respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

More recently, the U.S. envoy to Russia raised concerns this week about the health and safety amid the pandemic of Paul Whelan, a former Marine jailed in Moscow for more than 15 months on accusations of conducting espionage. In a statement Tuesday, Amb. John Sullivan said the U.S. attempted to deliver masks, gloves and sanitizers to protect Mr.

Whelan in prison from COVID-19 but were ultimately denied.

Worldwide, more than 3 million people have contracted COVID-19 since the coronavirus was discovered in late December, according to Johns Hopkins University. More than 225,000 people have died from the disease and over 950,000 have recovered, according to the university.

COVID-19 is highly contagious in addition to being potentially deadly, making people confined to cramped and unsanitary facilities like prisons at a disadvantage due to their inability to maintain social distancing practices meant to prevent the disease from spreading. Several prisons in the U.S. and abroad have accordingly released inmates rather than risk having them contract, spread and succumb to COVID-19 in their custody.

U.S. Borders to Remain Shut to Foreign Travelers as States Reopen (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 4:25 PM, Jessica Donati, Neutral]

The Trump administration has no immediate plans to reopen the country's borders after imposing a ban on foreign travelers from the European Union and the U.K. last month to slow the spread of the coronavirus, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

Mr. Pompeo told reporters Wednesday that the State Department was working with countries on plans to resume international travel, but declined to say whether borders would reopen before the summer.

"We hope we can get those back open as each country is ready to do that," Mr. Pompeo said, "and as we're confident that people who travel in from those countries won't create tremendous increased risks to the United States."

The administration's approach to travel restrictions signaled a somewhat more cautious position on U.S. borders than to reopening parts of the economy, as the Trump administration has come under pressure to balance demands to reopen business against warnings about restarting the economy too soon and risking a second wave of infections.

The U.S. has over 1 million confirmed coronavirus cases, accounting for just over a third of world-wide infections, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. More than 58,000 Americans have died, more than the combined death toll in Italy and Spain, the two worst affected countries after the U.S.

On March 11, President Trump announced a ban on travel to the U.S. for most foreign travelers who have been in Europe's 26-country Schengen Area during a two-week period before their arrival. He banned travel from the United Kingdom later that week.

The U.S. also has taken steps to slow travel over its land borders. It reached agreements with Canada and Mexico to shut down their borders to nonessential travel last month to curb the spread of the virus, with exceptions to allow trade and commerce to continue.

The Trump administration restricted travel to and from China in January, and has taken a series of actions to curb legal immigration to the U.S. as part of the effort to combat the

virus.

The State Department last month suspended routine visa processing in most countries, and has declined to say when it might resume. Senior officials have said the department will look at each individual country's response to the outbreak before making a decision.

"It's really too early yet to say how we are going to go about fully re-establishing routine visa operations around the world," Ian Brownlee, the principal deputy assistant secretary for consular affairs, told reporters this week.

Illegal immigration has slowed to a trickle at its southern border, where the U.S. has stopped processing asylum requests made after March 20.

Last week, the administration also suspended green cards for prospective immigrants abroad for the next 60 days.

Pompeo urges end to overflight rights for Iran airline flying to Venezuela (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:51 PM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday called on countries to deny overflight rights to Mahan Air, an Iranian airline under U.S. sanctions, which he said recently delivered cargoes of "unknown support" to the Venezuelan government.

The United States maintains punishing sanctions on Iran aimed at containing its regional power in the Middle East and has hit Venezuela with similarly tough measures in an effort to force socialist President Nicolas Maduro from power.

Speaking at a State Department news conference, Pompeo said aircraft of privately owned Mahan Air, Iran's largest airline, in recent days delivered supplies to Maduro's government.

"Over the last few days, multiple aircraft belonging to Mahan Air have transferred unknown support to the Maduro regime," Pompeo said. "This is the same terrorist airline that Iran used to move weapons and fighters around the Middle East."

The flights "must stop," Pompeo continued, adding that countries should deny Mahan Air overflight rights "just as many have already denied landing rights to this sanctioned airline."

The Trump administration has waged a campaign of sanctions and diplomatic measures against Venezuela in an effort to oust Maduro, whose 2018 re-election was considered a sham by most Western countries.

The United States and dozens of other governments recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as interim president in January of last year. But Maduro – who derides Guaido as a U.S. puppet – remains in power, backed by Venezuela's military as well as Russia, China and Cuba. Some U.S. officials have said this has been a growing source of frustration for President Donald Trump.

Last week, a Venezuelan official said the country received materials via Iranian aircraft to help it start the catalytic cracking unit at the Cardon refinery, which is necessary to produce

gasoline.

Planes flying from Tehran landed at the Las Piedras airport in western Venezuela, where Cardon is located, on April 21 and 22, according to data on flight-tracking service FlightRadar24 reviewed by Reuters. The planes were operated by Mahan Air.

Both oil-producing countries are OPEC members.

Washington in December and January sanctioned Mahan Air for alleged roles in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and transporting arms and fighters to Syria as part of Iran's backing of Damascus in that country's civil war.

Those sanctions expanded on 2011 counterterrorism sanctions imposed on Mahan Air over its support for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

[Iran] U.S. will not let Iran buy arms when U.N. embargo ends: Pompeo (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:51 PM, Humeysa Pamuk and Arshad Mohammed, Neutral]

The United States will not allow Iran to purchase conventional arms after a U.N. prohibition on this expires in October, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters at a news briefing. "We will work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales and then in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

The United States in 2018 withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal that sought to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. As part of that deal, a U.N. arms embargo on Iran expires in October.

A U.S.-drafted resolution to extend the embargo has been given to Britain, France and Germany, all parties to the nuclear deal, a U.S. official confirmed, but U.N. diplomats said it has not been shared with the remaining 11 U.N. Security Council members, including Russia and China. Russia and China, which hold vetoes on the council and are parties to the nuclear deal, are believed to be eager to sell armaments to Iran.

"The failures of the Iran nuclear deal are legion. One of them is now upon us ... where China, Russia, and other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapon systems to the Iranians in October, Pompeo said.

"We are urging our E3 partners to take action. This is within their capacity to do," he added, referring to Britain, France and Germany, each of which has the ability to force the "snapback" of all U.N. sanctions on Iran – including the conventional arms embargo – lifted under the nuclear deal.

Several European diplomats said since Washington has pulled out of the nuclear deal, it may not be able to spark a sanctions snapback, but Pompeo on Wednesday pushed back on that argument.

"The U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 is very clear. We don't have to declare ourselves as a participant ... It's there in the language ... It's unambiguous and the rights that accrue to participants in the UN Security Council resolution are fully available to all those participants," he said.

Some U.N. diplomats said that while legal opinions on whether the United States could do this were split, ultimately it would be up to council members to decide whether to accept a U.S. complaint of "significant non-performance" by Iran.

[Iran] Pompeo prepared to kill the Iran nuclear deal to block arms sales to Tehran (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/29/2020 3:56 PM, Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is preparing to force the renewal of all international sanctions on Iran in order to bar the regime from purchasing conventional weapons this fall.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters Wednesday. "We are going to make sure that, come October of this year, the Iranians aren't able to buy conventional weapons that they would be given, what President Obama and Vice President Biden delivered to the world in that terrible deal."

Pompeo is trying to extend the embargo on conventional weapons sales to Tehran, a restriction that is scheduled to expire in October, according to the terms of the United Nations Security Council resolution that ratified the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The potential danger of such weapons sales could attract European support for Pompeo's initiative, but that partnership is complicated by lingering anger over the U.S. withdrawal from the accord.

"It's now just several months out where China, Russia, other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year," Pompeo said. "I think the world realizes that's a mistake."

The options for how to extend the arms embargo are limited, given that Russia or China could veto a new resolution banning such sales. Their expected recalcitrance leaves one alternative, according to Iran hawks: an allegation that Iran has violated the nuclear deal, culminating in the snapback of all international sanctions in place before the implementation of the 2015 deal.

"We're urging our E3 partners to take action, which is within their capacity to do," Pompeo said, referring to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. "We'll work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales. And then, in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

"You cannot cherry-pick a resolution saying you implement only parts of it but you won't do it for the rest," a Western diplomat involved in the allied deliberations told Agence France-Presse.

Iran hawks think that legal argument doesn't hold any water. "Someone suggested this is fancy lawyering," Pompeo said. "It's just reading."

The snapback process, this argument emphasizes, is governed by a U.N. Security Council resolution, not by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the 2015 deal is known.

That means that the total demise of the 2015 agreement could be just a few months away. "The only other option is a new arms embargo resolution, which Russia and China would veto, and then, we'll lose," a congressional Republican aide who follows Iran issues told the Washington Examiner.

[Iran] Pompeo Vows to Stop U.N. From Lifting Iranian Arms Embargo (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [4/29/2020 4:15 PM, Adam Kredo, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said the Trump administration will not permit the United Nations to lift a ban on Iran's purchase of advanced military technology later this year.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters at the State Department.

Pompeo said the United States is laying the groundwork to stop U.N. member nations—primarily Russia and China—from lifting an international arms embargo on Iran that is set to expire under the terms of the landmark nuclear deal.

While President Donald Trump removed the United States from the nuclear accord, the administration maintains that it still has sufficient leverage at the U.N. to stop the arms embargo from lifting. If these efforts fail, the Trump administration could petition the U.N. Security Council for what is known as snapback, the reimposition of all global sanctions on Iran that were lifted as part of the nuclear deal signed during the Obama administration.

"The failures of the Iran nuclear deal are legion. One of them is now upon us," Pompeo said. "It's now just several months out where China, Russia, other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year. This isn't far off. This isn't some fantasy by conservatives. This is a reality."

Pompeo said it is clear Iran will immediately move to purchase a range of advanced military equipment once the embargo is lifted. Russia and China, which have sold Iran military equipment in the past, have the most to gain if the embargo is removed, he said.

"Does anybody think that the nation that today is conducting terror campaigns by Lebanese Hezbollah or Iraqi Shia movements or firing military missiles into the air ought to be permitted to purchase conventional weapons systems in just a few months?" Pompeo asked. "I think the world realizes that's a mistake."

U.S. officials are currently working to convince their European counterparts the arms embargo remains critical to stopping Iran's terrorism enterprise.

"We're urging our E3 partners (France, Germany, and Italy) to take action, which is within their capacity to do," Pompeo said. "We'll go—we'll work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales. And then in the event we can't get anyone else

to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

While some nations have argued the United States has no right to sway the arms embargo debate since it abandoned the nuclear accord, Pompeo made clear the State Department rejects this view.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which codified the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—including the restrictions on the arms embargo and its subsequent expiration date—does not bar the United States from taking action.

"We don't have to declare ourselves a participant," Pompeo said.

"It's unambiguous and the rights that accrue to participants in the U.N. Security Council resolution are fully available to all those participants," he said. "We're going to—we are going to make sure that come October of this year, the Iranians aren't able to buy conventional weapons that they would be given what President Obama and Vice President Biden delivered to the world in that terrible deal."

[Iraq] Pompeo says Iraqi leaders must drop sectarian quota system to help form new government (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:42 AM, Humeysa Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

Iraqi leaders must put aside a sectarian quota system and make compromises to help the formation of a government and help the bilateral relationship between Washington and Baghdad, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, Iraq's president named intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi as prime minister-designate, the third person tapped to lead Iraq in just 10 weeks as it struggles to replace a government that fell last year after months of deadly protests.

[China] Pompeo Says China Responsible for Outbreak, Must Detail Origin (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 12:29 PM, Josh Wingrove, Neutral]

China poses a threat to the world by hiding information about the origin of the coronavirus that it allowed to spread to other countries, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

President Donald Trump's top diplomat, speaking in a television interview Wednesday, ratcheted up the accusations between the U.S. and China over the virus. White House adviser Jared Kushner, who is Trump's son-in-law, also said Wednesday that the president has ordered an investigation into the origins of the virus and will hold those responsible accountable for its spread.

"The Chinese Communist Party now has a responsibility to tell the world how this pandemic got out of China and all across the world, causing such global economic devastation," Pompeo told Fox News on Wednesday morning, during an interview where he repeatedly criticized China's government. "America needs to hold them accountable."

Trump again criticized the World Health Organization during a White House meeting with Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards. The president has sought to cut off U.S. funding for

the UN agency, accusing it of taking Chinese claims about the virus at "face value."

"They misled us," he said. "They're literally a pipe organ for China."

He said that nothing positive is happening in China and that the country shouldn't have allowed international air travel during its coronavirus outbreak.

The comments came after China Central Television's top evening news program on Wednesday questioned the transparency and accuracy of U.S. data on Covid-19 infections. In recent days, the state television program said Pompeo is "turning himself into the common enemy of mankind" and that he "has exceeded the bottom line of being human."

China knows that the virus outbreak originated in that country, Pompeo said, and is using "classic communist disinformation" to shift the focus from that, Pompeo said.

"I've been heartened to see Australia, other countries joining us, demanding an investigation, because while we know this started in Wuhan, China, we don't yet know from where it started," Pompeo said. "And in spite of our best efforts to get experts on the ground, they continue to try and hide and obfuscate."

Kushner, speaking in a separate Fox News interview on Wednesday morning, said Trump had asked his administration to investigate the origin of the virus.

"He has asked the team to look into, very carefully, what happened, how this got here, and to make sure that he will take whatever actions that are necessary to make sure the people who caused the problems are held accountable for it," Kushner said.

[China] U.S. believes many Chinese labs doing contagious pathogen work under unknown security – Pompeo (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:44 AM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said the United States believes there are many laboratories in China working on contagious pathogens, but does not know if the facilities have adequate security to prevent future pandemics.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think, on contagious pathogens inside of China today," Pompeo told a State Department news conference. "And we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this (coronavirus pandemic) from happening again. Remember this isn't the first time that we've had a virus come out of China."

[China] Pompeo renews calls for China to provide U.S. access to Wuhan labs (The Hill)

The Hill [4/29/2020 1:53 PM, Laura Kelly, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday renewed calls for the U.S. to have access to Chinese virology labs in Wuhan, part of the Trump administration's effort to investigate the origins of the coronavirus.

The U.S. and China are in a war of words over the outbreak of COVID-19, which was first

detected in Wuhan, with Washington calling for probes into Beijing's role in the outbreak and accusing the Chinese Communist Party of covering up the virus threat early on.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the [Wuhan Institute of Virology]," Pompeo said in a briefing with reporters at the State Department. "We don't know precisely where this virus originated from."

The World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have said the first cases of the coronavirus were first detected in people associated with an animal market in the city of Wuhan, China, saying the virus likely originated in bats.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology is situated near the market where the virus outbreak was first detected.

Researchers have said the strain of the virus in COVID-19 makes it unlikely that it is manmade.

Pompeo also called on China to be transparent about its safety regulations and precautions at such institutions.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think continue on contagious pathogens inside of China today," he said. "And we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this from happening again."

Pompeo said having access to the labs was akin to conducting oversight of nuclear facilities.

Sens. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) and Ed Markey (D-Mass.) on Tuesday requested the State Department provide information about its response to diplomatic cables reportedly sent in 2018 that raised the alarm over safety hazards at the lab. The senators said U.S. diplomats warned that the lab had "severe safety and management weaknesses."

President Trump on April 15 said the U.S. had launched "serious investigations" into China's role in the spread of the coronavirus.

"We are not happy with China," he said during a press briefing. "We believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

The U.S. in January first called for China to allow CDC experts to examine and investigate the origins of the virus.

In February, representatives from the CDC and the National Institutes of Health joined a WHO-sponsored delegation to China to evaluate the Chinese response to the coronavirus outbreak. The Wuhan Institute of Virology was not listed on the itinerary.

[China] Pompeo pushes China to provide access to Wuhan labs over coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:09 AM, Humeyra Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, Neutral]
U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday again pushed China to provide the world access to its virology labs in Wuhan, saying the world needed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic originated and Beijing had an obligation to be transparent.

Ties between the United States and China have significantly deteriorated since the eruption of the coronavirus outbreak, which has now killed more than 200,000 people around the world, including more than 58,000 in the United States, after originating in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Washington and Beijing have been trading insults and accusations over the handling of the pandemic, with Pompeo last week saying United States "strongly believed" China failed to report the outbreak in a timely manner and then covered up how dangerous the respiratory illness caused by the virus was.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the WIV (Wuhan Institute of Virology) there. We don't know precisely where this virus originated from," Pompeo told a news conference at the State Department, and added that U.S. concerns over the safety of Chinese labs persisted.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think, on contagious pathogens inside of China today and we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this from happening again," Pompeo said.

"The Chinese Communist Party tells us they want to be our partners ... There is a continuing obligation on the part of reliable partners to share this information," he added.

President Donald Trump said on April 15 his government was investigating whether the coronavirus outbreak originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, where the virus emerged. Those claims have no basis in fact, the head of the lab told Reuters on Tuesday.

Pompeo was asked in a Fox News interview about a letter sent to him on Tuesday from Democratic Senators Chris Murphy and Ed Markey seeking information about his department's response to reported warnings about safety at WIV and recommending increased U.S. engagement and technical assistance.

A Washington Post opinion column this month said the U.S. State Department in 2018 warned in diplomatic cables about safety and management weaknesses at a Wuhan laboratory.

"We'll do our best to respond to those two senators," he said.

"The United States for a long time, and continuing today, tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens," Pompeo said.

"We do this, not only in China, but we try to bring our expertise from our National Institutes of Health, from our CDC to precisely prevent something like this."

Reuters reported in March that ahead of the coronavirus outbreak the Trump administration

cut staff by more than two-thirds at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention office in China, as part of a larger rollback of U.S.-funded health and science experts on the ground there.

In their letter, the senators asked why, in the context of alarming reports about WIV, "were key CDC staff positions, including the resident CDC advisor position in Beijing, eliminated in 2018 and 2019?"

Most scientists now say the new coronavirus originated in wildlife, with bats and pangolins identified as possible host species.

Yuan Zhiming, a director at the Wuhan Institute of Virology has rejected theories that the lab had accidentally released a coronavirus it had harvested from bats for research purposes.

[China] Pompeo hits back after China claims U.S. is lying about COVID-19: 'Classic communist disinformation' (FOX News)

FOX News [4/29/2020 12:30 AM, Talia Kaplan, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reacted to China's foreign ministry claiming that America is "lying through their teeth" about the coronavirus pandemic, calling it "classic communist disinformation."

Pompeo made the comment on "Fox & Friends" on Wednesday referring to the statement from China foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

"We advise American politicians to reflect on their own problems and try their best to control the [coronavirus] epidemic as soon as possible instead of continuing to play tricks to deflect blame," Shuang said on Tuesday.

"They [Chinese officials] know that this happened in their country," Pompeo said. "This is classic communist disinformation. This is what communists do."

China's foreign ministry also accused the United States of "lying through their teeth" and suggested the country mind its own business as the war of words between the world's two biggest economic powers escalated.

"This very much is our own business," Pompeo said in response.

He added, "What the Chinese communist party did here in not preventing the spread of this around the world, they're responsible for it. America needs to hold them accountable."

Shuang's comments came on the heels of President Trump suggesting in a press conference on Monday that the U.S. would be seeking "substantial" compensation for China's handling of the global pandemic.

"We are not happy with China," Trump said. "We are not happy with that whole situation because we believe it could have been stopped at the source. It could have been stopped quickly and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

He added that the United States is considering several options to "hold them accountable."

On Wednesday, Pompeo noted that China kicked journalists out and suppressed information from doctors about the dangers of the virus.

"Those are the kind of things that communist institutions do," he continued. "We all know them from the soviet days. We know the kinds of things that communist parties do to try and manage information inside of their own country and around the world and so we see these efforts."

Multiple sources told Fox News earlier this month that there is increasing confidence that the COVID-19 outbreak likely originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology laboratory. An investigation into the matter is continuing.

On Wednesday Pompeo pointed out that "the United States for a long time and continuing today tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens."

"We do this not only in China, but we try to bring our expertise from our national institutes of health, from our CDC to precisely prevent something like this," he continued, referring to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has claimed more than 218,000 lives globally, according to Johns Hopkins.

Pompeo said the reason the U.S. spend American taxpayer dollars on efforts to monitor countries conducting research on highly contagious pathogens "is to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard."

The Wuhan Institute of Virology lab was reportedly the subject of multiple urgent warnings inside the U.S. State Department two years ago.

U.S. Embassy officials warned in January 2018 about inadequate safety at that lab and passed on information about scientists conducting risky research on coronavirus from bats. The Washington Post reported two weeks ago.

On Wednesday, Pompeo also brought up Australia, which has been on the receiving end of Beijing's ire as well.

China's ambassador to Australia warned on Monday that the government's call for an independent international inquiry into the origins of the pandemic could lead to a Chinese boycott of Australian products, The Australian Financial Review reported. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne hit back, dismissing China's attempt at "economic coercion."

"I have been heartened to see Australia, other countries joining us, demanding an investigation because while we know this started in Wuhan, China, we don't yet know from where it started and in spite of our best efforts to get experts on the ground, they continue to try and hide," Pompeo said, adding that what China is doing is "wrong."

[China] Sec. Pompeo: U.S. needs to hold China's Communist Party accountable to prevent pandemic happening in future (Yahoo News/FOX News)

Yahoo News/FOX News [4/29/2020 9:12 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discusses how the U.S. and other countries can join together to hold the China's Communist Party accountable for the coronavirus crisis.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Mike Pompeo Accuses China of Posing a Worldwide Threat for Hiding Origin of the Coronavirus (Yahoo News/Time Magazine)

Yahoo News/Time Magazine [4/29/2020 4:11 PM, Staff, Neutral]

China poses a threat to the world by hiding information about the origin of the coronavirus that it allowed to spread to other countries, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Mike Pompeo Defends U.S. Funding For Wuhan Virology Lab (The National Interest)

The National Interest [4/29/2020 4:15 PM, Matthew Petti, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo defended U.S. funding for the Wuhan Institute of Virology as a program "to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard" in a Fox and Friends interview on Wednesday.

U.S. officials have suggested that the 2019 novel coronavirus was initially released in an accident at the Wuhan laboratory. The institution's coronavirus research had been supported by U.S. grants, attracting the ire of Republican politicians who blame the laboratory for the pandemic.

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) attacked U.S. funding for the laboratory last week, telling Fox News host Tucker Carlson that "at best, Americans are funding people who are lying to us and at worst, we're funding people who we knew had problems handling pathogens, who then birthed a monster virus onto the world."

Democratic lawmakers have also called for confronting the Chinese government over a lack of transparency related to the coronavirus pandemic, although none have endorsed the laboratory-origin theory.

Pompeo, however, defended the research program against members of his own party.

"We spend American taxpayer dollars ... to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard," he said. "We try to bring our expertise from our National Institutes of Health [NIH], from our [Centers for Disease Control], to precisely prevent something like this."

Recently-leaked State Department cables from 2018 show that U.S. officials had been concerned with safety issues at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Pompeo then addressed a Tuesday report in the New York Post pointing the finger at NIH infectious disease chief Dr. Anthony Fauci for \$7.4 million in U.S. government grants to the now-controversial coronavirus research.

"I don't know the details of the NIH grants," Pompeo told Fox News. "Look, the United States, for a long time and continuing today, tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens."

The Trump administration cut off one of the NIH grants for coronavirus research in China on Monday, stating that the NIH "does not believe that the current project outcomes align with the program goals and agency priorities."

The research involved both collecting bat coronaviruses from the wild and running "gain-of-function" experiments aimed at determining whether the viruses could jump between species.

The NIH has defended its research as necessary for public health.

"Most emerging human viruses come from wildlife, and these represent a significant threat to public health and biosecurity in the US and globally, as demonstrated by the SARS epidemic of 2002-03, and the current COVID-19 pandemic," the organization told Newsweek.

Fox News reported earlier in April that some U.S. officials believe that the novel coronavirus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology and escaped in a laboratory accident.

U.S. officials have publicly dismissed this theory.

"It should be no surprise to you that we have taken a keen interest in that and we've had a lot of intelligence take a hard look at that," Gen. Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on April 14. "I would just say at this point, it's inconclusive, although the weight of evidence seems to indicate natural [origin], but we don't know for certain."

Pompeo, however, has leaned into allegations, demanding increased transparency from China.

"We all need to get to the bottom of what actually happened here, not only for the current instant but to make sure something like this doesn't happen again," he said on Wednesday. "There are still many labs operating inside of China today, and the world needs to know that we're not going to see a repeat of this in the days and weeks and months ahead."

[North Korea] Pompeo says no sight of North Korea's Kim, real risk of famine in country (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:52 AM, David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

The United States has caught no sight of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and is watching reports about his health, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday, adding there was a real risk of famine in the country amid the coronavirus outbreak.

North Korean media has not reported on Kim's whereabouts since he presided over a meeting on April 11, provoking speculation about his health and raising concerns about instability in the nuclear-armed country that could affect other North Asian countries and the United States.

"We haven't seen him. We don't have any information to report today, we're watching it closely," Pompeo told Fox News after being asked about conflicting reports about Kim's health.

Pompeo said the United States was also monitoring the situation more broadly in North Korea, which borders China, given the risk presented by the coronavirus.

"There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea too," he added. "We're watching each of those things closely, as they have a real impact on our mission set, which to ultimately denuclearize North Korea."

Pompeo told a later State Department news conference the United States would continue to focus on North Korean denuclearization, "no matter what transpires there."

President Donald Trump met Kim three times in 2018 and 2019 in an attempt to persuade him to give up a nuclear weapons program that threatens the United States. While talks have stalled, Trump has continued to hail Kim as a friend.

Pompeo did not elaborate on the risk of famine in North Korea, but a North Korean economic delegation was due in Beijing this week to discuss food supplies and trade issues as the coronavirus outbreak has severely disrupted the country's food supply, two people with direct knowledge of the situation told Reuters.

Impoverished and isolated North Korea is prone to food shortages. As many as 1.1 million people died during the famines of the 1990s, according to South Korean estimates.

Officials in South Korea and the United States have said Kim may be staying at a coastal resort to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, and have expressed skepticism about media reports he had some kind of serious illness.

They caution, however, that Kim's health and location are closely guarded secrets and reliable information is difficult to obtain in North Korea.

[North Korea] Pompeo says 'still hopeful' for a North Korea deal (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 11:34 AM, Staff, Neutral]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday he remained hopeful for a nuclear agreement with North Korea, despite speculation about leader Kim Jong Un's health and a standstill in talks.

Pompeo, whose diplomacy paved the way for a breakthrough 2018 summit in Singapore between Kim and President Donald Trump, said for the second time in as many weeks that a leadership change in North Korea would not change US policy.

"Regardless of what transpires inside of North Korea with respect to their leadership, our mission remains the same – to deliver on that commitment that Chairman Kim made with President Trump back in Singapore, and that's the ... verified denuclearization of North Korea," Pompeo told reporters.

"We are still hopeful that we'll find a path to negotiate that solution to get the outcome that is good for the American people, good for the North Korean people and for the whole world," he said.

Speaking earlier Wednesday to Fox News, Pompeo voiced concern that North Korea could be hit either by the coronavirus pandemic or widespread hunger.

"There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea," he said.

The totalitarian state, which prides itself on self-reliance, was ravaged in the 1990s by a famine estimated to have killed at least hundreds of thousands of people.

Pompeo, who traveled four times to Pyongyang in 2018, declined to speculate on Kim's health and said that he had met much of the North Korean leadership including Kim's sister Kim Yo Jong – seen as a key player in the event of succession.

A top official in South Korea, which has been seeking reconciliation with its totalitarian neighbor, has said that Kim is "alive and well."

Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, reported that Kim underwent a cardiovascular procedure triggered by heavy smoking, obesity and fatigue.

Trump last week denied a report on Kim's health by CNN, his frequent nemesis, and on Monday said without further explanation that he had a "very good idea" about the North Korean leader's condition.

Trump, who has boasted that he prevented war with North Korea, met Kim twice more after Singapore but talks have been off for most of the past year.

North Korea is demanding an end to US sanctions and has shown anger by lobbing a series of projectiles into the sea.

Trump's aides, notably Pompeo, argue that North Korea must give up its nuclear arsenal before it reaps any rewards.

[North Korea] Mike Pompeo: U.S. mission won't change if Kim Jong-un replaced (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 11:33 AM, Guy Taylor, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the U.S. policy of seeking total and "verified denuclearization" of North Korea won't change if the isolated nation's young dictator, Kim Jong-un, is replaced by a new leader anytime soon.

Mr. Pompeo made the assertion at a press conference Wednesday as rumors that Mr. Kim's may be gravely ill continued to swirl following his disappearance from public view for the past several weeks.

While South Korean officials claim the rumors are inaccurate, saying Mr. Kim is likely keeping a low profile to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, U.S. officials have remained noncommittal in their comments on his status.

President Trump suggested Monday there may be classified intelligence on Mr. Kim.

"I do have a very good idea, but I can't talk about it now," the president told reporters when asked what he knows of Mr. Kim's health.

"I do know how he's doing, relatively speaking," Mr. Trump said. "We will see. You will probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future."

Mr. Pompeo suggested Wednesday that U.S. officials may be in the dark on Mr. Kim's status.

"We haven't seen him," the secretary of state told Fox News on Wednesday morning according to Reuters. "We don't have any information to report today. We're watching it closely."

"I don't have anything to add to the status of Chairman Kim," Mr. Pompeo said later during a press briefing at State Department headquarters.

He went on to suggest that U.S. officials would continue to pursue diplomacy and negotiations with whatever North Korean officials take control in Pyongyang should Mr. Kim no longer be the country's leader.

"We did have a chance to interact with a number of North Koreans on our various trips, the ones that I took," said Mr. Pompeo, who traveled personally to Pyongyang during the early years of the Trump administration to pursue talks with the Kim regime.

He added that Mr. Trump also met several North Korean officials during his summits with Mr. Kim, first in Singapore in 2018 and then in Hanoi in 2019.

"We've had a chance to meet Chairman Kim's sister and some of the other leaders there as well," Mr. Pompeo said, referring to Kim Yo-jong, the younger sister of Mr. Kim who is rumored to be in position to take over as leader should the North Korean dictator die.

"Our mission is the same, regardless of what transpires inside of North Korea with respect to their leadership," Mr. Pompeo said. "Our mission ... is to deliver on the agreement that Chairman Kim made with President Trump back in Singapore and that's the fully denuclearized, verified denuclearization of North Korea."

"We are still hopeful that we'll find a path to negotiate that solution to get the outcome that is good for the American people, good for the North Korean people and the whole world," the secretary of state said. "Our mission simply won't change, no matter what should transpire there."

[India] Mike Pompeo Praises India for Lifting Export Restrictions on Critical Medical Supplies (Yahoo News/News18)

Yahoo News/News18 [4/29/2020 1:37 PM, Staff, Neutral]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday praised India for lifting export bans on critical medical supplies including pharmaceuticals used to treat COVID-19 patients, saying it was an example of working together with partner countries to tackle the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

"We're working with our friends in Australia, India and Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam to share information and best practices as we begin to move the global economy forward," Pompeo told reporters at a news conference here.

"Our conversation certainly involved global supply chains, keeping them running smoothly, getting our economies back to full strength and thinking about how we restructure the supply change chains to prevent something like this from ever happening again," he said.

The coronavirus has infected more than three million people and claimed over 211,000 lives worldwide.

"One example of our work together is with India. It's lifted export bans on critical medical supplies including pharmaceuticals used to treat some COVID-19 patients," Pompeo said.

Over the last few weeks, he has spoken over phone – at least four times – with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar. Readout of the calls indicated that ensuring global supply chain figured prominently in their conversations.

Pompeo said that the US government has provided more than USD 32 million in funding to support the COVID-19 response in Pacific island countries.

"We're working with the Burmese government, the United Nations, NGOs, and others to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Burma, including among vulnerable populations," he said.

Referring to a recent report, Pompeo said that Americans have devoted nearly USD 6.5 billion in government and non-government contributions to help countries fight COVID-19.

"This is by far the largest country total in the world and more than 12 times that of China's combined contributions," he said.

Department of State News**Congressional Religious Freedom Report: Lift Syria Sanctions on Kurds (The National Interest)**

The National Interest [4/29/2020 12:30 AM, Matthew Petti, Neutral]

A religious freedom watchdog appointed by Congress suggested on Tuesday that the United States should provide a "potential sanctions exemption" to the Kurdish-led autonomous entity in Northeast Syria.

The U.S. government has imposed harsh economic sanctions aimed at punishing Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad for human rights abuses. But critics have accused the sanctions of affecting areas outside of Assad's control, including the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) controlled by U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led forces.

The criticism gained steam on Tuesday, when the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released its annual report on religious freedom around the world.

The report recommends "examining" targeted sanctions relief as part of a program to "[e]xpand U.S. engagement with and assistance to the AANES."

This appears to be the first time a U.S. government body has acknowledged a problem with the sanctions on Syria, which are backed by even harsh congressional critics of other sanctions campaigns.

The report praised the AANES as "a crucial center of positive religious freedom conditions in Syria" and "the area that has shown the most potential for expanded religious freedom over the last two years," which was put "at serious risk" during a Turkish invasion of Syria in October 2019.

Turkish forces and Turkish-backed militias streamed across the border after President Donald Trump gave Turkey a green light to attack the AANES, which had been under U.S. protection.

State Department officials downplayed allegations of Turkish war crimes before Congress and delayed a statement condemning the Turkish-backed militias for executing Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf.

The latest USCIRF report asked the Trump administration to "[e]xert significant pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria" and prevent further Turkish attacks or human rights abuses, in addition to considering sanctions relief.

It also asked Congress to pass legislation threatening Turkish officials with sanctions for persecuting U.S. citizens and "press" the Trump administration "determine" whether Saudi officials could be subject to sanctions under U.S. human rights law.

Northeast Syria is the only case where the USCIRF report suggested lifting sanctions. The USCIRF recommended imposing sanctions on officials responsible for religious persecution in Myanmar, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Cuba, Iraq, and Nicaragua.

Congress created the USCIRF as part of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which requires the U.S. government to monitor religious persecution around the world. Presidents are mandated to take actions ranging from diplomatic protests to economic sanctions against "Countries of Special Concern."

But the State Department can issue waivers shielding Countries of Special Concern from penalties if it is in the "national interest" of the United States.

The Department of State renewed waivers in December protecting Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

U.S. Panel Lists India Among Nations With Waning Religious Freedom (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:46 AM, Archana Chaudhary, 6400K, Neutral]

A U.S. government commission has recommended adding India to a list of countries with a worrying record on religious freedom for minorities. India has rejected the report's observations.

India has been listed, along with China, North Korea, Pakistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, among 14 nations "of particular concern" by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its annual report released on Tuesday.

The country took a "sharp downward turn in 2019" as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims," the commission said.

The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission.

Three members of the commission dissented with the decision to add India to the list. India's foreign ministry in a statement rejected the commission's report and called its comments "biased and tendentious."

"We regard it as an organization of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," India's foreign ministry said.

In its report, the USCIRF listed policies, including a new religion-based law that fast tracks Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which has led to nationwide protests. The law "is meant to provide protection for listed non-Muslim religious communities – but not for Muslims – against exclusion from a nationwide National Register of Citizens and the resulting detention, deportation, and potential statelessness," it said.

The panel proposed a range of measures against Indian officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, including targeted sanctions, banning their entry into U.S. and freezing their assets. These are unlikely to be followed as the comments aren't binding on the Trump administration, Michael Kugelman, deputy director and senior associate for South Asia at the Washington-based Wilson Center, said in a tweet.

U.S. panel on religious freedom urges targeted sanctions on India (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:38 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, 5304K, Neutral]

A U.S. government commission has criticised India for failing to protect religious minorities and called for sanctions on government officials responsible for violating religious freedoms enshrined in its constitution.

The Indian government rejected the annual report from the U.S. Commission on

International Religious Freedom saying it had distorted reality to new levels.

Since it was re-elected to power last year, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has introduced policies hurtful to the country's 172 million Muslims and allowed a campaign of hate and violence against them, the commission said in its report released late on Tuesday.

It criticised a new citizenship law that parliament enacted last year laying out a path for citizenship for six religious groups from neighbouring countries excluding Muslims.

"The national and various state governments also allowed nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities to continue with impunity, and engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence against them," the commission said.

The commission is a bipartisan U.S. government advisory body that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. But these are not binding.

India should be designated a "country of particular concern," the worst category in its survey, because of the sharp downturn in religious freedom in 2019, the commission said.

Myanmar, China, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Russia and Vietnam are among the 14 countries in that category.

The commission also urged the U.S. government to "impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/ or barring their entry into the United States."

It did not identify any agencies or officials it deemed responsible.

The Indian foreign ministry dismissed the findings of the commission saying it had crossed a new threshold.

"Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new. But on this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new levels," ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said.

He said some of the members of the commission had dissented from its conclusions. Two of them wrote in their dissenting notes that India, the world's largest democracy, could not be put in the same group as China and North Korea run by authoritarian regimes.

"It has not been able to carry its own commissioners in its endeavour. We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," Srivastava said.

India rejects scathing U.S. religious freedom report as 'biased' (Yahoo News/BBC)
Yahoo News/BBC [4/29/2020 2:23 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

India has rejected the findings of a US religious freedom panel which has named it a "country of particular concern," since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)

was re-elected.

The annual report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) places India alongside Pakistan, China and North Korea.

Delhi said the report was "biased" and a "new level of misrepresentation."

This is the first time India has been placed in this category since 2004.

In its key findings, the USCIRF report says that following the massive victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP in 2019, "the national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims."

It also made special mention to India's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), adding that "Home Minister Amit Shah referred to migrants as "termites" to be eradicated."

Nadine Maenza, the Vice Chair for the religious freedom watchdog said that the CAA "potentially exposes millions of Muslims to detention, deportation, and statelessness when the government completes its planned nationwide National Register of Citizens."

"We reject the observations on India in the USCIRF annual report. Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new," said external affairs ministry spokesperson Anurag Srivastava. "On this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new levels. We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly."

The religious freedom panel had even recommended "targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious rights."

Two of the nine member panel expressed dissent over the panel's recommendation. Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee said "India does not belong to the same category as authoritarian regimes like China and North Korea. India is the largest democratic nation in the world, where the CAA has been challenged openly by the opposition Congress Party and law makers, civil society, and various groups."

The Indian American Muslim Council, an advocacy group welcomed the report. In a statement, it said, "As a part of the Indian diaspora that only wishes well for the country of our birth, we view international criticism of India's religious freedom record as distressing but painfully necessary, given the escalating level of persecution of minorities."

It further said that in March, "along with its partners, International Christian Concern (ICC) and Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR), it had written to USCIRF urging it to bring India into its list of the worst offenders of religious freedom violations in the world."

Saudi cabinet calls on Yemen's southern separatists to rescind emergency (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 12:45 AM, Nayera Abdallah and Omar Fahmy, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's cabinet has urged Yemen's main separatist group, which has declared self-rule in the south, to abide by an agreement to end a previous standoff with the Saudi-

backed government.

The declaration by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) on Sunday, which included emergency rule in southern regions, threatens to renew conflict with the government.

They are both part of a military alliance formed by Saudi Arabia to battle Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement, which ousted the internationally recognised government from power in the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014.

"Any step that is contrary to the Riyadh agreement should be cancelled," the Saudi cabinet said in a statement issued late on Tuesday, referring to a power-sharing deal agreed in November.

The virtual cabinet meeting was chaired by King Salman. State news agency SPA posted images of the monarch and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, taking part at separate locations.

The Saudi-led coalition on Monday described the STC's announcement of emergency rule in the south, including the interim seat of government Aden, as an "escalatory action" at a time when all parties should focus on confronting the novel coronavirus.

The cabinet also lauded the coalition for extending by one month a nationwide ceasefire due to the coronavirus, which Riyadh said would also help alleviate the suffering of Yemenis during the holy month of Ramadan, which began on Friday, and support U.N. peace efforts.

The United States welcomed the coalition ceasefire announcement, Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV reported on Wednesday, citing U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker.

Yemen has been mired in conflict since the coalition intervened in March 2015 against the Houthis, who control Sanaa and most big urban centres. They have not accepted the truce.

The war has killed more than 100,000 people and pushed millions to the verge of famine.

China embassy accuses Australia of 'petty tricks' in coronavirus dispute (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 4:45 AM, Kirsty Needham, 5304K, Neutral]

China accused Australia of "petty tricks" on Wednesday in an intensifying dispute over Canberra's push for an international inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak that could affect diplomatic and economic ties between the countries.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his proposed inquiry into how the coronavirus developed and spread would not be targeted at China but was needed given COVID-19 had killed more than 200,000 people and shut down much of the global economy.

"Now, it would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again," he said.

Australian government ministers have repeatedly said China, the country's largest trade partner, was threatening "economic coercion" after its ambassador, Cheng Jingye, said this week that Chinese consumers could boycott Australian products and universities because of the calls for the inquiry. The head of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) called Cheng to express concern. The Chinese embassy then released a statement detailing what it said was discussed on the call, prompting another rebuke from DFAT.

On Wednesday, the Chinese embassy returned fire, saying on its website that details of the call had first been "obviously leaked by some Australian officials" and it needed to set the record straight.

"The Embassy of China doesn't play petty tricks, this is not our tradition. But if others do, we have to reciprocate," an embassy spokesman said in the statement.

Chinese state media has fiercely rounded on Morrison, with Australian studies scholar Chen Hong writing in the Global Times tabloid on Wednesday that Australia was "spearheading" a "malicious campaign to frame and incriminate China."

And Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the paper which is affiliated to the Beijing-controlled People's Daily newspaper, said on Chinese social media that Australia was always making trouble.

"It is a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes. Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off," Hu wrote.

New Zealand, which also has China as its largest trading partner, on Wednesday sided with neighbouring Australia in supporting an inquiry into the pandemic.

"It's very hard to conceive of there not being a desire by every country in world, including the country of origin, for an investigation to find out how this happened," Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters said.

Australia's call for an inquiry has so far only received lukewarm support more widely, with France and the United Kingdom saying it was not the right time to focus on an inquiry.

U.S. President Donald Trump has said China could have stopped the coronavirus before it swept the globe and that his administration was conducting "serious investigations" into what happened.

China bristles at Australia's call for investigation into coronavirus origin (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [4/29/2020 1:37 AM, Paul Karp and Helen Davidson, 3975K, Neutral]

The Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, has defied China and defended the "entirely reasonable and sensible" call for an investigation into the origins of coronavirus, as the international political fallout over the pandemic deepened.

China has been pushing back against criticism from other governments about how it handled the outbreak of Covid-19, which is believed to have started in Wuhan and which has now infected 3 million people worldwide and killed 200,000.

Donald Trump's accusation at the weekend that Beijing could have done more to prevent the deadly spread of the disease was met with fierce criticism from China's state media.

While Australia has eschewed the more strident approach of the US, which has stopped funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO), it has urged its allies to back an overhaul of the WHO and suggested recruiting independent investigators akin to "weapons inspectors" to determine the source of major disease outbreaks.

On Wednesday Morrison said his government "will of course continue to pursue what is a very reasonable and sensible course of action."

"This is a virus that has taken more than 200,000 lives across the world," he told reporters in Canberra. It has shut down the global economy. The implications and impacts of this are extraordinary.

"Now, it would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again."

Australia's stance has angered Beijing, which has denied wrongdoing during the pandemic. In recent days Chinese state media has run numerous inflammatory statements including that Australia was "gum stuck to the bottom of China's shoe," doing the work of the US but without holding any influence, and risking longterm damage to its bilateral relationship and trading partnership with China.

On Tuesday, the Chinese embassy released details of a call from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Dfat), and in a further move to embarrass the Morrison government, claimed the Dfat secretary had said it was "not the time to commence the review now and Australia has no details of the proposal."

The move came after warnings by China's ambassador to Australia, Jingye Cheng, on Monday over consumer boycotts, described by an Australian minister as "threats of economic coercion."

A Tuesday night editorial in the Global Times accused Australia of "panda bashing" and victim blaming, and Morrison of "adventurism" which could damage the bilateral relationship "beyond repair."

"The Morrison government's adventurism to fiddle with this mutually beneficial comprehensive strategic partnership is in defiance of rational thought and common sense," it said.

"Canberra is treading on a hazardous path that has no prospect for a U-turn during the Covid-19 pandemic, and likely for a long time afterward."

But on Wednesday Morrison insisted the investigation "is not targeted" and refused to buy in to the war of words with China, saying the response was "a matter for them."

"Australia will do what is in our interest, in the global interest, and we will of course continue to support moves to ensure there is a proper independent assessment of what has occurred here."

Morrison said Australia's relationship with China was "mutually beneficial" and noted its trade with China consisted mainly of export of resources. "I see no reason why that would alter in the future."

In other coronavirus developments around the world:

The number of US cases passed one million as Donald Trump predicted a "great" economic rebound in the fall and claimed the country would soon be performing 5m coronavirus diagnostic tests a day.

Brazil's total number of confirmed deaths overtook the WHO's figure for China as cases accelerate in Latin America's biggest country. The number of deaths in Brazil has now passed 5,000.

China's consultative parliament is set to hold its annual meeting on 22 May, the official Xinhua news agency reported on Wednesday, more than two months later than originally planned.

Nearly 70 residents infected with coronavirus died at a Massachusetts home for ageing veterans, as state and federal officials try to figure out what went wrong in the deadliest known outbreak at a long-term care facility in the US.

China reported zero new deaths as of the end of 28 April. There were 26 new asymptomatic cases, down from 40 the day before, but 21 new imported cases, compared to three a day earlier, and 22 cases in the mainland.

The Academy Awards will for the first time allow films that debuted on a streaming service without a theatrical run to be eligible for nominations, a break with tradition in direct response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia defends call for an inquiry into COVID-19 origins (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:06 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Australia's calls for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 is "reasonable" and not targeted at any specific country, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

UK envoy in Washington backs probe into origins of pandemic, WHO reforms (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain's ambassador to the United States on Wednesday backed calls for an investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus and the response of the World Health Organization,

but said the first priority should be containing the outbreak.

The comments came after Britain's foreign affairs parliamentary committee asked the government whether it plans to use international bodies to hold China to account over the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cross-party body asked for the government's strategy in dealing with China, taking into account Beijing's role in giving early information on the pandemic, its role within medical and industrial supply chains and the reliance of the UK and its partners on the country.

The committee asked if the government planned to make representations at international gatherings such as the World Health Organization, Group of Seven (G7) advanced economies or Group of 20 (G20) major economies to "hold China accountable for its attempts to mislead the international community in order to control the narrative around COVID-19."

Asked about the issue during an online event with The Washington Post newspaper, British Ambassador Karen Pierce said an investigation was certainly needed into how the virus emerged and the health risks associated with wet markets in China, which have spawned at least three virus outbreaks since 2000.

The British government also favored a review of the WHO's handling of the outbreak and reforms of the organization, she said. "We need to learn after all these crises, just as we did after Ebola in 2014. We need to learn how we can always do things better," she said.

However, she underscored that it was crucial now to focus on bolstering international cooperation to respond to the pandemic.

"We would see these sorts of reviews and reforms and investigations as something to come later," she said.

The U.S. government has repeatedly criticized China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, which began late last year in the Chinese city of Wuhan and has grown into a global pandemic. The outbreak has killed nearly 217,000 people globally, including more than 27,000 in Britain and over 58,000 in the United States, according to a Reuters tally.

U.S. President Donald Trump has suspended U.S. funding of the WHO, accusing the U.N. agency of promoting China's "disinformation" about the outbreak. WHO officials have denied this and China has said it has been transparent and open.

U.S. Puts Amazon Foreign Websites on List of Platforms Blamed for Facilitating Piracy (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:27 PM, William Mauldin, Neutral]

The Trump administration hit Amazon.com Inc. over intellectual-property rights Wednesday, putting five of the online retailer's foreign platforms on a list of "notorious markets" believed to facilitate sales of counterfeit and pirated goods.

The U.S. trade representative's office listed Amazon's web domains in Canada, France,

Germany, India, and the U.K. among the accused platforms that allow for piracy. The action doesn't target Amazon's U.S. platform.

In a statement, an Amazon spokeswoman called the action a "purely political act." Amazon founder and Chief Executive Jeff Bezos has been a frequent target of President Trump.

"Amazon makes significant investments in proactive technologies and processes to detect and stop bad actors and potentially counterfeit products from being sold in our stores," the spokeswoman said. "In 2019 alone, we invested over \$500 million and have more than 8,000 employees protecting our store from fraud and abuse."

The Wall Street Journal previously reported that the trade representative was considering taking the action. The notorious-markets list has been used to encourage foreign companies and countries to crack down on piracy and counterfeiting, so the targeting of foreign platforms of a prominent U.S. company is a milestone.

The trade office said it took the action in response to complaints from U.S. apparel makers that Amazon isn't taking sufficient steps to block the sale of counterfeits on the five foreign platforms.

On a call with reporters, a senior U.S. trade official said companies have complained that seller information on the platforms is misleading, making it hard to determine who is selling the good, and that the process for removing listings can be "lengthy and burdensome."

The American Apparel and Footwear Association had formally requested that the U.S. add the Amazon sales platforms in those five countries to the list. The association said its members flagged those sites as the biggest source of problems among Amazon's platforms, with thousands of counterfeit items and listings.

In the trade office's report Wednesday, U.S. officials said that companies complained that the seller information displayed by Amazon on the foreign sites is often misleading, making it "difficult for consumers and right holders alike to determine who is selling the goods and that anyone can become a seller on Amazon with too much ease because Amazon does not sufficiently vet sellers on its platforms.

Amazon's counterfeit-removal processes "can be lengthy and burdensome, even for right holders that enroll in Amazon's brand protection programs," according to the report.

Putting Amazon on the list highlights the tensions between the administration and Mr. Bezos.

President Trump blames Mr. Bezos for unfavorable coverage in the Washington Post, which Mr. Bezos bought in 2013 for \$250 million. The Post says its editorial decisions are independent.

Besides Amazon, the annual notorious-markets list once again included the Taobao.com website owned by Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.

"Taobao remains one of the largest sources of counterfeit sales in China," the report said.

While the report noted improved response times and policies, it said the site is still known for the number of counterfeits "offered for sale on Taobao and the lack of transparency regarding filters and other proactive anticounterfeiting measures."

An Alibaba spokesman said the company "will continue to expand and enhance its robust enforcement programs, engage in meaningful dialogue and promote advanced collaboration."

Social-media platforms that allow users to buy and sell goods also are drawing scrutiny in Washington. "Right holders have expressed increasing concerns with a growing trend of counterfeit products being offered for sale on e-commerce features related to large platforms, such as WeChat, " Tencent Holdings Ltd.'s giant social-media platform in China, according to the report.

More broadly, the Trump administration has sought to boost intellectual-property protection for drugmakers, Hollywood, the music industry and consumer-products firms in trade agreements, including a recent "phase one" trade pact with China.

In recent years, lobbyists and lawmakers have wrangled over how to address the degree of liability that online platforms should face for identifying and removing pirated electronic content or goods. Consumer watchdogs warn that officials can go too far in guaranteeing companies' rights and that some firms, including big drugmakers, may benefit too much from long-term patent and market protections.

Besides the notorious-markets list, the trade representative's office on Wednesday also released its new list of countries that don't take sufficient steps to protect intellectual-property rights. The "priority watch list" includes Algeria, Argentina, Chile, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine and Venezuela.

China recently submitted a road map for addressing intellectual-property rights as a part of the "phase one" trade agreement, and the U.S. trade official said Wednesday that Washington is reviewing the blueprint and continuing to work with Beijing on the issue.

Exclusive: Amazon turns to Chinese firm on U.S. blacklist to meet thermal camera needs (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:00 PM, Krystal Hu and Jeffrey Dastin, Neutral]

Amazon.com Inc (AMZN.O) has bought cameras to take temperatures of workers during the coronavirus pandemic from a firm the United States blacklisted over allegations it helped China detain and monitor the Uighurs and other Muslim minorities, three people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

China's Zhejiang Dahua Technology Co Ltd (002236.SZ) shipped 1,500 cameras to Amazon this month in a deal valued close to \$10 million, one of the people said. At least 500 systems from Dahua – the blacklisted firm – are for Amazon's use in the United States, another person said.

The Amazon procurement, which has not been previously reported, is legal because the rules control U.S. government contract awards and exports to blacklisted firms, but they do

not stop sales to the private sector.

However, the United States "considers that transactions of any nature with listed entities carry a 'red flag' and recommends that U.S. companies proceed with caution," according to the Bureau of Industry and Security's [here website](#). Dahua has disputed the designation, and Beijing has denied mistreatment of the minority groups.

The deal comes as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned of a shortage of temperature-reading devices and said it wouldn't halt certain pandemic uses of thermal cameras that lack the agency's regulatory approval. Top U.S.-based maker FLIR Systems Inc (FLIR.O) has faced an up to weeks-long order backlog, forcing it to prioritize products for hospitals and other critical facilities.

Amazon declined to confirm its purchase from Dahua, but said its hardware complied with national, state and local law, and its temperature checks were to "support the health and safety of our employees, who continue to provide a critical service in our communities."

The company added it was implementing thermal imagers from "multiple" manufacturers, which it declined to name. These vendors include Infrared Cameras Inc, which Reuters previously reported, and FLIR, according to employees at Amazon-owned Whole Foods who saw the deployment. FLIR declined to comment on its customers.

"It's troubling to learn that well-known American companies are continuing to turn a blind eye to companies that are fueling the Chinese Communist Party's brutal treatment of so many of their own people," said the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul, in reaction to the news.

Dahua, one of the biggest surveillance camera manufacturers globally, said it does not discuss customer engagements and it adheres to applicable laws. Dahua is committed "to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19" through technology that detects "abnormal elevated skin temperature — with high accuracy," it said in a statement.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, which maintains the blacklist, declined comment. The FDA said it would use discretion when enforcing regulations during the public health crisis as long as thermal systems lacking compliance posed no "undue risk" and secondary evaluations confirmed fevers.

Dahua's thermal cameras have been used in hospitals, airports, train stations, government offices and factories during the pandemic. International Business Machines Corp (IBM.N) placed an order for 100 units, and the automaker Chrysler placed an order for 10, one of the sources said. In addition to selling thermal technology, Dahua makes white-label security cameras resold under dozens of other brands such as Honeywell, according to research and reporting firm IPVM.

Honeywell said some but not all its cameras are manufactured by Dahua, and it holds products to its cybersecurity and compliance standards. IBM and Chrysler's parent Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV (FCHA.MI) did not comment.

The Trump Administration added Dahua and seven other tech firms last year to the blacklist

for acting against U.S. foreign policy interests, saying they were "implicated" in "China's campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, and high-technology surveillance against Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other members of Muslim minority groups."

More than one million people have been sent to camps in the Xinjiang region as part of China's campaign to root out terrorism, the United Nations has estimated.

Dahua has said the U.S. decision lacked "any factual basis." Beijing has urged the United States to remove the companies from the list.

A provision of U.S. law, which is scheduled to take effect in August, will also bar the federal government from starting or renewing contracts with a company using "any equipment, system, or service" from firms including Dahua "as a substantial or essential component of any system."

Amazon's cloud unit is a major contractor with the U.S. intelligence community, and it has been battling Microsoft Corp (MSFT.O) for an up to \$10 billion deal with the Pentagon.

Top industry associations have asked Congress for a year-long delay because they say the law would reduce supplies to the government dramatically, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that policies clarifying the implementation of the law were forthcoming.

FACE DETECTION & PRIVACY

The coronavirus has infected staff from dozens of Amazon warehouses, ignited small protests over allegedly unsafe conditions and prompted unions to demand site closures. Temperature checks help Amazon stay operational, and the cameras – a faster, socially distant alternative to forehead thermometers – can speed up lines to enter its buildings. Amazon said the type of temperature reader it uses varies by building.

To see if someone has a fever, Dahua's camera compares a person's radiation to a separate infrared calibration device. It uses face detection technology to track subjects walking by and make sure it is looking for heat in the right place.

An additional recording device keeps snapshots of faces the camera has spotted and their temperatures, according to a demonstration of the technology in San Francisco. Optional facial recognition software can fetch images of the same subject across time to determine, for instance, who a virus patient may have been near in a line for temperature checks.

Amazon said it is not using facial recognition on any of its thermal cameras. Civil liberties groups have warned the software could strip people of privacy and lead to arbitrary apprehensions if relied on by police. U.S. authorities have also worried that equipment makers like Dahua could hide a technical "back door" to Chinese government agents seeking intelligence.

In response to questions about the thermal systems, Amazon said in a statement, "None of this equipment has network connectivity, and no personal identifiable information will be visible, collected, or stored."

Dahua made the decision to market its technology in the United States before the FDA issued the guidance on thermal cameras in the pandemic. Its supply is attracting many U.S. customers not deterred by the blacklist, according to Evan Steiner, who sells surveillance equipment from a range of manufacturers in California through his firm EnterActive Networks LLC.

"You're seeing a lot of companies doing everything that they possibly can preemptively to prepare for their workforce coming back," he said.

Developing Countries Draw Down Reserves to Shield Currencies (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:27 AM, Caitlin Ostroff and Avantika Chilkoti, Neutral] Emerging-market countries last month depleted their foreign-exchange reserves at the fastest pace since the global financial crisis to contain a plunge in their currencies, leaving some nations vulnerable to further shocks.

Twelve of the largest developing countries, including Brazil and Russia, reduced their combined reserves by at least \$143.5 billion in March in the biggest drawdown since October 2008, according to data from research firm Arkera. That has left Turkey with its lowest foreign-exchange balance since November 2006. For Egypt, March marked the biggest monthly drain on its reserves on record.

Those countries dipped into their coffers to combat a precipitous slide in their currencies after the coronavirus pandemic brought the global economy to a jarring near-halt in March. Financial markets grew turbulent, with investors pulling funds out of risky assets such as emerging markets' stocks and bonds while scrambling for dollars.

The depletion in reserves is likely to leave countries like Turkey, Egypt and South Africa especially exposed to further market shocks, investors said. Some countries may struggle with debt owed to foreign investors, or paying for imports of oil, food and medicines priced in U.S. dollars. The continued strength of the American currency, widely held by governments, will also make replenishing those reserves in coming months a challenge.

"The experience from '08 was that the winners are those that let their currencies go," said Timothy Ash, senior sovereign strategist covering emerging markets at BlueBay Asset Management. "They have wasted reserves, they should have just let the currency go wherever."

In Turkey, which endured a currency crisis in 2018, authorities drew down almost \$19.2 billion from foreign-exchange reserves in March as the Turkish lira's decline against the dollar accelerated. Its already diminished reserves dropped to about \$56 billion, according to Refinitiv. That helped limit the decline in the lira to 15% this year.

The central bank's net reserves, a figure that deducts funds borrowed from the domestic banks, are below zero, estimated Brad Setser, a senior fellow at New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

Turkey has \$12.5 billion of U.S.-dollar-denominated debt coming due through the end of 2021, according to Dealogic. The nation's banking sector, which had almost \$79 billion of short-term debt due by February 2021, may not be able to make payment if the lira falls further, said Per Hammarlund, chief emerging-market strategist at SEB Markets.

Turkey's central bank declined to comment on the drop in reserves, but said it has worked to provide banks with greater liquidity and credit.

Egypt's foreign-currency reserves fell by about \$5.4 billion last month—the biggest monthly drop on record—leaving the country with about \$36.4 billion, according to Refinitiv. Its currency has gained about 2% this year.

While the Egyptian pound is no longer pegged to the dollar, authorities aim to keep the currency from depreciating too much to control the cost of imported wheat and grains, and keep inflation in check. But a sharp decline in tourism in recent weeks is also eroding the country's foreign-exchange income and has fueled speculation about its ability to make debt payments.

Such concerns drove the yield on Egypt's dollar-denominated 10-year bond maturing Wednesday to 31% on April 24, from 4% at the beginning of March. The yield eased back down to under 6% this week after the International Monetary Fund said on Sunday that Egypt has asked for financial assistance. Egypt's central bank didn't respond to requests for comment.

The muted moves in the Turkish and Egyptian currencies suggest large-scale intervention by the central banks to stem their decline, according to analysts at the Institute of International Finance who weighed the fall in local currencies against changes in foreign-exchange reserves.

Mexico's peso, in contrast, has fallen 22% this year as the nation held off on intervening in currency markets.

"The Mexican peso got clobbered, but in many regards they're doing what you have to do: stand back, let the currency get clobbered and pick up the pieces after," said Robin Brooks, chief economist at the IIF.

Saudi Arabia used up \$27 billion from its reserves in March—the largest drop going back two decades—to maintain the riyal's value against the dollar as oil prices slid. That has left it with about \$479 billion.

Meanwhile, Brazil and Russia, which also have sizable reserves even after the recent drain on their coffers, have let their currencies absorb more of the hit from the economic meltdown. That has left the Russian ruble down 16% this year, and the Brazilian real down 27%.

"The ones that have drawn down their reserves, they have bet this will be relatively short lived," said Mr. Hammarlund.

Nations Must Promote 'Green Recovery' From Virus, IMF Chief Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:15 AM, Ana Monteiro, Neutral]

With the world economy reeling from the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, nations must do all they can to promote a recovery that also fights against the climate-change crisis, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.

"Taking measures now to fight the climate crisis is not just a 'nice-to-have,' it is a 'must-have' if we are to leave a better world for our children," she said in prepared remarks to be delivered at the Petersburg Climate Dialogue Wednesday.

The IMF's fiscal affairs department recommends nations mandate commitments to reduce carbon emissions when they provide financial lifelines to companies that are carbon-intensive, adding that record-low oil prices make this an opportune time to phase out subsidies.

State guarantees can be used to mobilize private finance for green investment, the lender said. It must be mandatory for financial firms to better disclose climate risks in their lending portfolios, and the industry must find better ways of pricing in this risk, it said.

The IMF also recommends a substantially higher carbon price to encourage climate-smart investment and accelerate the shift to cleaner fuels.

"The current global carbon price is only \$2 per ton, way below the levels needed to keep global warming under 2 degrees Celsius (35.6 degrees Fahrenheit), which we estimate to be \$75 per ton," Georgieva said. For the transition to be fair and growth-friendly, carbon-tax revenues can be used to provide upfront assistance to poorer households, lower burdensome taxes, and support investments in health, education, and infrastructure, she said.

[Iraq] Iraq Seeks More Aid From the U.S. to Manage Coronavirus Fallout (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 4:07 PM, Glen Carey, Neutral]

Iraq is seeking financial assistance from the U.S. to help the country combat the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic and plummeting oil revenue, the country's health minister-designate said.

"We have been promised by the United States government as part of this strategy between Iraq and United States to help us financially," Jaafar Allawi said on Wednesday during an online policy forum organized by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I think there is a team negotiating now, or in the process of negotiation, to get Iraq some support, financial support, from America."

The U.S. has proposed a strategic dialogue in June that aims for the two governments to work together amid the pandemic and decreased oil revenue. Announcing the talks during a briefing on April 7, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo warned that the Covid-19 outbreak and "plummeting oil revenues" threaten an economic collapse in Iraq.

The virus outbreak hit OPEC's second-biggest producer as Iraq's government was trying to end months of damaging political deadlock that coincided with a slump in oil prices. Iraq's

intelligence chief Mustafa Al-Kadhimi was picked to form a government after previous attempts failed.

The latest crisis in Iraq began when anti-government protests erupted in October as people lost patience with years of rampant corruption and poor services, forcing the prime minister to resign the following month. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have also led to armed conflict in Iraq, threatening the country's tenuous stability.

"The challenges facing the Iraqi state have become more acute since the beginning of 2020 and represent real risks to the stability of the state," Ayham Kamel, head of Middle East and North Africa at the Eurasia Group consultancy, wrote in a note on Wednesday. "A shrinking revenue pie due to low oil prices will prove to be the most destabilizing factor over the next 12-18 months. Irrespective of who is leading the government, a large drop in revenues combined with rampant corruption is bound to create problems."

Al-Kadhimi is "well positioned to win confidence from the key political and sectarian blocks in parliament, and therefore succeed in forming a relatively reformist government," Kamel wrote. "However, this is far from a slam dunk as the list of obstacles and complications in Iraq's political system are endless."

Iraqi authorities have reported 2,003 cases of the coronavirus so far and imposed curfew measures in mid-March to try and control the outbreak. Kuwait has contributed a "large amount of money," and the Chinese government has provided Iraq with equipment to help combat the outbreak, Allawi said during the forum.

[Lebanon] Key U.S. official urges Lebanon to prove commitment to reforms: Al-Arabiya (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:18 AM, Maher Chmaytelli, 5304K, Neutral]

The U.S. State Department's top diplomat for the Middle East has urged crisis-hit Lebanon to prove its commitment to reform in order to secure international assistance, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV channel said on Wednesday.

Lebanon is grappling with renewed protests following a collapse in its currency, soaring inflation and spiralling unemployment, but its dire financial straits have only been worsened by a shutdown to rein in the coronavirus pandemic.

The growing unrest threatens to tip Lebanon into more serious conflict, even as Beirut looks to pass an economic rescue plan and enter talks with foreign creditors after defaulting on hefty debt obligations last month.

An accumulation of bad financial decisions, inaction and entrenched corruption and cronyism, were the cause of Lebanon's crisis, Al Arabiya quoted David Schenker, the U.S. assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, as saying.

"For Lebanon to be in a position to receive assistance from international financial institutions it must prove that it is ready to make difficult choices and decisions to show it is 100% committed to reform," it quoted him saying in an interview.

Its subsidiary channel, Al Hadath, also interviewed Schenker, who specified reforms to the power sector, customs, telecommunications and tax collection.

Lebanon's government, formed in January with the support of the powerful Iranian-backed movement Hezbollah, has struggled to make economic reforms demanded by foreign donors. The United States has classified Hezbollah as a terrorist group.

The U.S. official also welcomed a ceasefire announcement by the Saudi-led coalition that has been battling the Iran-aligned Houthi movement in Yemen for five years. The truce was prompted by the pandemic and as a measure to support U.N. peace efforts.

[Lebanon] As Lebanon's Crisis Deepens, Politicians Trade Blame (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:11 PM, Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, Neutral]

Lebanese politicians who have led their country into financial disaster are squabbling over who is to blame, stirring up old rivalries that may spell even deeper trouble ahead.

Lebanon faces its gravest threat since the 1975-90 civil war as its currency sinks, inflation spirals and protesters return to the streets, angered by an economic crisis made worse by a coronavirus shutdown.

Unrest this week in Sidon and Tripoli, where banks were torched and a demonstrator killed, is seen as a sign of what's to come as poverty and unemployment soar. Prices of consumer goods have shot up 50% since October.

The government is trying to finalise a rescue plan, perhaps as soon Thursday. Many hope this will be taken straight to the IMF, widely seen as Lebanon's only source of vital financial aid, albeit with tough conditions attached.

The plan must address huge gaps in the national finances including a projected \$83 billion hole in the banking sector - an amount that will soon be equal to twice the size of the rapidly shrinking economy. How to divide the losses is one of the biggest problems ahead.

But while the government is backed by the pro-Iranian Shi'ite group Hezbollah and its Maronite Christian ally President Michel Aoun, it is opposed by important players in Lebanon's sectarian politics: Sunni politician Saad al-Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Aoun's Maronite rival Samir Geagea.

Once leaders of an alliance against Hezbollah and Syria, these three have grown increasingly critical of Prime Minister Hassan Diab, a little-known academic made premier by Hezbollah and its allies using their parliamentary majority.

Nabih Berri, the Shi'ite parliament speaker and Hezbollah ally, appears to be taking a position in the middle.

The old political fault line has emerged in a row over the role of central bank governor Riad Salameh, steward of the banking system since 1993 and architect of the fixed exchange rate that has crumbled since mass protests against political corruption and incompetence began last October.

Diab has rebuked Salameh over the currency crisis and a lack of transparency at the central bank. Hezbollah has also been critical, its deputy leader saying Salameh was in part responsible for the pound's collapse.

Heavily armed and listed as a terrorist group by Washington, Hezbollah has its own axe to grind with Salameh: his application of U.S. sanctions that have shut the group and its followers out of the banking system.

Salameh has hit back, blaming successive governments' failure to reform and vowing to defend the central bank's independence.

Hariri, a traditional ally of Gulf Arab and Western states, has defended Salameh while accusing Diab of trying to destroy Lebanon's free market economy and ignoring state corruption.

Jumblatt has meanwhile painted Diab as a nonentity doing the bidding of Hezbollah and Aoun. While Salameh had made mistakes, he was not to blame for \$50-\$60 billion of waste in the state-run electricity company, the responsibility of an energy ministry run for years by the party Aoun founded, Jumblatt said.

Lebanon's leaders, all of whom are accused of complicity in the corruption that has led to the crisis, are trying to deflect accountability.

"This bickering will only lead to more suffering and deeper economic problems. If the exchange rate reaches extremely high levels, I don't see how the state can continue to function," said Mohanad Hage Ali, a fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The pound has more than halved in value since October.

A draft government reform plan set out the scale of the problem earlier this month, including the \$83 billion hole in the banking sector and \$40 billion of losses at the central bank.

The draft drew criticism from Hariri, Jumblatt and others, particularly because it called for an "exceptional contribution" from the banks' large depositors.

The banking association also weighed in, telling the government to "keep your hands off" the banks and accusing it of squandering the money lent to it, endangering deposits.

"Without a fair distribution of losses, the chances of coming up with a solution that would receive international support look slim," said Khalil Gebara, senior policy fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. "In a country that is so sectarian, finding solutions ... is looking very difficult."

Governments that aided Lebanon in the past are insisting Lebanon enact a reform plan before getting help this time.

"For Lebanon to be in a position to receive assistance from international financial institutions it must prove that it is ready to make difficult choices and decisions to show it is 100%

committed to reform," David Schenker, U.S. assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, told Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV on Wednesday.

Nasser Saidi, a former vice governor at the central bank, says Lebanon needs a \$25-\$30 billion IMF package over three to five years. Lebanon must admit it needs the IMF and start negotiations as quickly as possible, he said.

Farouk Soussa, senior economist at Goldman Sachs, said the draft plan leaked this month was "technically extremely capable and thorough but politically naive".

"The space between where the technocrats are and where the political forces – in terms of what is an acceptable recovery plan – is quite wide," he said.

"It would have been very difficult under normal circumstances but in the context of COVID it only complicates the economic situation in Lebanon exponentially."

[Lebanon] Lebanon cities erupt against collapse in currency (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:27 AM, Libby Hogan, 5304K, Neutral]

Protests against growing economic hardship erupted in Tripoli and spread to other Lebanese cities on Tuesday, with banks set ablaze and violence boiling over into a second night. One demonstrator was killed in riots overnight Monday, according to security and medical sources, as a collapse in the currency, soaring inflation and spiraling unemployment convulse Lebanon, a country in deep financial crisis since October. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Russia] Russia slams U.S. arguments for low-yield nukes (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:17 PM, Vladimir Isachenkov, Neutral]

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday rejected U.S. arguments for fielding low-yield nuclear warheads, warning that an attempt to use such weapons against Russia would trigger an all-out nuclear retaliation.

The U.S. State Department argued in a paper released last week that fitting the low-yield nuclear warheads to submarine-launched ballistic missiles would help counter potential new threats from Russia and China. It charged that Moscow in particular was pondering the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons as a way of coercion in a limited conflict — an assertion that Russia has repeatedly denied.

The State Department noted that the new supplemental warhead "reduces the risk of nuclear war by reinforcing extended deterrence and assurance."

The Russian Foreign Ministry sees it otherwise.

The ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, commented on the State Department's paper at a briefing on Wednesday, emphasizing that the U.S. shouldn't view its new low-yield warheads as a flexible tool that could help avert an all-out nuclear conflict with Russia.

"Any attack involving a U.S. submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), regardless of its weapon specifications, would be perceived as a nuclear aggression," Zakharova said.

"Those who like to theorize about the flexibility of American nuclear potential must understand that in line with the Russian military doctrine such actions are seen as warranting retaliatory use of nuclear weapons by Russia."

Zakharova cast the U.S. deployment of low-yield warheads as a destabilizing move that would result in "lowering the nuclear threshold."

U.S.-Russian differences on nuclear arms issues come as relations between Moscow and Washington are at post-Cold War lows over the Ukrainian crisis and the accusations of Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 presidential election.

Last year, both Moscow and Washington withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

The only U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control agreement still standing is the New START treaty, which was signed in 2010 by U.S. President Barack Obama and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The pact limits each country to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers and envisages sweeping on-site inspections to verify the compliance.

Russia has offered to extend the New START that expires in February 2021, while the Trump administration has pushed for a new arms control pact that would also include China. Moscow has described that idea as unfeasible, pointing at Beijing's refusal to negotiate any deal that would reduce its much smaller nuclear arsenal.

In a statement Wednesday marking the 10th anniversary of signing the New START, the Russian Foreign Ministry hailed the treaty as an instrument that helps ensure predictability in the nuclear sphere and reaffirmed Moscow's offer to extend it without any preconditions.

[Turkey] Erdogan Reaches Out to Trump in Letter Accompanying Medical Aid (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 3:22 AM, Cagan Koc, 6400K, Neutral]

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continued his charm offensive on U.S. President Donald Trump, with a letter praising his coronavirus measures and calling for stronger collaboration between the NATO allies.

The letter accompanied Turkey's shipment of a military cargo plane carrying medical supplies to the U.S. to boost its fight against the pandemic, in a gesture of solidarity after years of fractious relations. The donation ordered by Erdogan included 500,000 surgical masks, 40,000 protective overalls, disinfectants, goggles and face shields.

"I am following with appreciation your determined struggle to control the pandemic in the U.S., and I am very pleased to observe that, thanks to your measures, America has taken the first steps towards normalization by achieving a downward trend in the number of new cases," Erdogan said in the letter, according to a statement by the presidency in Ankara.

Erdogan told Trump that Turkey will continue to be a "reliable and strong partner of the U.S." to meet basic needs during the outbreak and normalization process thereafter. He

underlined the importance of collaboration between the two countries on measures to restore order, saying he looks forward "to exchanging ideas and suggestions on this issue at the earliest convenience."

The U.S. and Turkey have been at odds over a series of flashpoints, most recently Turkey's purchase last year of a Russian missile-defense system that the U.S. says could help Moscow gather critical intelligence on NATO systems. Erdogan's personal relationship with Trump has remained publicly warm despite the disputes, even as Washington threatened Turkey with sanctions if it deployed the S-400 missile batteries.

Turkey has "slowed down" the planned April activation of the missiles, top defense industry official Ismail Demir told state-run TRT television on Tuesday.

Erdogan said he hopes the U.S. Congress and media also understand the strategic importance of the relationship between the two countries and "act in a way that our common fight against our common problems necessitates."

[Turkey] Turkey vows solidarity with U.S. in fighting virus outbreak (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:59 AM, Staff, 2194K, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has promised to stand in solidarity with the United States in its struggle against the coronavirus pandemic and as it recovers from the outbreak.

In a letter sent to President Donald Trump, Erdogan also said he was following "with appreciation" the American leader's efforts to control the outbreak.

The letter was sent Tuesday along with a plane load of personal protective equipment that Turkey donated to the U.S. It was made public on Wednesday.

Erdogan wrote: "I am very pleased to observe that, thanks to your measures, America has taken the first steps towards normalization by achieving a downward trend in the number of new cases."

"You can be sure, as a reliable and strong partner of the U.S., we will continue to demonstrate solidarity in every way possible," Erdogan wrote.

Turkey sent 500,000 surgical masks, 4,000 overalls, 2,000 liters (528 gallons) of disinfectant, 1,500 goggles, 400 N-95 masks and 500 face shields. Turkey has sent similar medical equipment aid to a total of 55 countries — including Britain, Italy and Spain.

Erdogan and Trump have maintained a close personal relationship despite a series of differences between Ankara and Washington, including policy on Syria and Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400 Russian missile defense system that the U.S. says poses a threat to its F-35 stealth fighter jets and to NATO.

The U.S. removed Turkey from the fighter jet program and has threatened sanctions if the Russian system is deployed.

[Turkey] Turkey donates protective gear to U.S., asks for improved solidarity in return (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 9:38 AM, Lauren Meier, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has issued a new letter to President Trump calling for increased solidarity between the two countries after years of a strained relationship.

Along with the letter, released Wednesday, Mr. Erdogan sent a host of medical supplies to the U.S. to aid its fight against the coronavirus outbreak including surgical masks, disinfectant, N-95 masks, and face shields.

The U.S. has been the hardest hit country by COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus, and has infected more than 1 million and killed over 58,000 across the country.

"I hope that this humble assistance will assist your fight against this pandemic and contribute to the speedy recuperation of your citizens who contracted this virus," Mr. Erdogan wrote.

"I hope that in the upcoming period, with the spirit of solidarity we have displayed during the pandemic, Congress and the U.S. media will better understand the strategic importance of our relations," he said.

U.S.-Turkey relations have been tense in recent years over disputes regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally's military involvement in Syria and its purchase of a Russian missile defense system, which prompted the Pentagon to halt Turkey's involvement in the F-35 program and threaten sanctions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took to Twitter to express gratitude for Turkey's donation.

"During times of crisis, @NATO Allies must stand together," he said.

"We thank Turkey for their generous donation of medical supplies and protective equipment to help us fight #COVID19 in our hardest hit areas. Americans are grateful for your friendship, partnership and support."

Turkey has reported 114,653 confirmed cases of COVID-19, marking the highest of any Middle Eastern country, 2,992 deaths and 38,809 recoveries, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker.

[China] Ortagus: Our countries have to solve this pandemic together (Yahoo News/FOX News Videos)

Yahoo News/FOX News Videos [4/29/2020 5:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus speaks out on the lack of transparency from China over the coronavirus outbreak. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Trump administration asks intelligence agencies to find out whether China, WHO hid info on coronavirus pandemic (NBC News)

NBC News [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, 7718K, Neutral]

The White House has ordered intelligence agencies to comb through communications intercepts, human source reporting, satellite imagery and other data to establish whether China and the World Health Organization initially hid what they knew about the emerging coronavirus pandemic, current and former U.S. officials familiar with the matter told NBC News.

A specific "tasking" seeking information about the outbreak's early days was sent last week to the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which includes the National Center for Medical Intelligence, an official directly familiar with the matter said. The CIA has received similar instructions, according to current and former officials familiar with the matter.

President Donald Trump appeared to refer to the request at his news conference Monday. "We're doing very serious investigations," Trump said. "We are not happy with that whole situation, because we believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

As part of the tasking, intelligence agencies were asked to determine what the WHO knew about two research labs studying coronaviruses in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus was first observed. NBC News has previously reported that the spy agencies have been investigating the possibility that the virus escaped accidentally from one of the labs, although many experts believe that is unlikely.

The move coincides with a public effort by the White House, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump's political allies to focus attention on China's inability to contain the virus shortly after it emerged. As NBC News previously reported, U.S. intelligence officials have said China initially failed to disclose the seriousness of the outbreak, robbing the rest of the world of information that might have led to earlier containment efforts.

"As the president has said, the United States is thoroughly investigating this matter," White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said. "Understanding the origins of the virus is important to help the world respond to this pandemic but also to inform rapid-response efforts to future infectious disease outbreaks."

The CIA declined to comment. An official from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said, "We are not aware of any such tasking from the White House."

Trump has shifted from initially praising China's handling of the outbreak to sharply criticizing it as the threat the pandemic poses to the U.S. economy and his re-election prospects has crystallized. Blaming China for America's economic struggles has proven effective for Trump with his political base, and his allies believe it's a message that could resonate in November with voters in the Midwest.

"The president is now running against China as much as anyone," said a person close to the president.

The Trump administration has also accused the WHO of erring in January when it reported

no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Trump, alleging that China exercised undue influence over the agency, has suspended U.S. funding of the WHO.

Initially, the WHO used conservative language. In a statement about the disease on Jan. 14 — regarding the first case outside China, in Thailand — the WHO said, "There is no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission."

The agency soon stopped saying that, and by mid-January it was clear that the virus was spreading well beyond China.

Critics see the White House focus on China and the WHO as an effort to distract attention from the open question of what warnings Trump got in January and February from his own health and intelligence advisers during a time when he was downplaying the severity of the virus.

The Washington Post reported Monday that the intelligence reporting and analysis about the pandemic appeared in the president's daily intelligence brief more than a dozen times, although the newspaper did not specifically describe what information was passed along.

An administration official confirmed to NBC News that the President's Daily Brief, or PDB, included more than a dozen mentions in January and February of U.S. intelligence about the coronavirus in China, as well as Beijing's attempts to cover it up and suppress information about it.

The official played down the significance of the intelligence, saying there was not much more detail in the briefings than what was in the public domain. The official also said the briefings did not include any warning about how widespread and deadly the virus has now become around the globe.

An ODNI official told NBC News that "details in the Washington Post story are not true," but declined to say what specifically is disputed, citing the highly classified nature of the PDB.

Asked Tuesday to clarify what intelligence officials were telling him in January and February, the president said, "I would have to check."

"I want to look to the exact dates of warnings," he said.

NBC News has reported that U.S. intelligence agencies saw early warning signs of a health crisis in Wuhan as far back as November and that the National Center for Medical Intelligence predicted that the coronavirus would cause a global pandemic in February, well before the WHO declared one.

The House and Senate intelligence committees have requested access to all intelligence products produced about the pandemic and are closely examining what has already been turned over to them, officials from both committees have told NBC News.

The committees typically are not granted access to the PDB, the officials said. The congressionally sponsored commission that investigated the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, was allowed to review presidential briefs and determined that President George W.

Bush was warned in the summer of 2001 that Osama bin Laden was "determined to strike" inside the United States.

[China] Senior Chinese official challenges Trump over coronavirus response, says U.S. wasted weeks (NBC News)

NBC News [4/29/2020 7:12 AM, Janis Mackey Frayer and Adela Suliman, 7718K, Negative]

A senior Chinese government official challenged President Donald Trump's handling of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States, accusing him of wasting weeks after the threat posed by the virus first became apparent.

In a wide-ranging interview with NBC News conducted in Mandarin on Tuesday, the official, Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, also hit back at the politicization of the virus.

Le, a rising star within the country's political establishment, rejected claims that China had covered up the initial outbreak or that it should be held financially liable for COVID-19. Instead, he termed the virus a "natural disaster" and called for greater cooperation and an end to accusations.

"On Jan. 23 when Wuhan went under lockdown, the United States reported only one confirmed case, but on March 13 when President Trump announced a national emergency, the United States reported over 1,600 confirmed cases," Le said, referring to the city in China's Hubei province where the virus is believed to have emerged.

"In this interval of 50 days, what was the U.S. government doing? Where have those 50 days gone?" said Le, who was born on China's industrial east coast and began his diplomatic career in what was then the Soviet Union, and is fluent in Russian.

The White House, the Department of State and the National Security Council did not respond to requests for comment on the interview. On Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted that the Chinese Communist Party needed to be "transparent."

"The world seeks answers to COVID19 and its origins ... China has a responsibility to cooperate," he wrote, referring to the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Pompeo has previously stated that Beijing will "pay a price" for its actions, while often adding he didn't yet know what form that would take.

On Tuesday, the number of cases of the coronavirus in the U.S. passed 1 million, a milestone that Trump said was due to "much better" testing than other countries.

The U.S. has recorded more than 58,000 deaths so far, due to COVID-19, according to an NBC News tally.

China has been hounded by questions over missteps in its initial response to contain the virus. So far, more than 200,000 people globally have died from COVID-19, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Trump has heaped criticism on Beijing since the outbreak of the pandemic, at times questioning the accuracy of its official death toll and saying he was looking into speculation

that the infection originated in a Wuhan laboratory — a possibility that Chinese officials have repeatedly rejected.

"Do you really believe those numbers in this vast country called China. ... Does anybody really believe that?" Trump said at a White House news briefing April 15. "Some countries are in big, big trouble and they're not reporting the facts — and that's up to them," he added.

Trump also shocked the international community when he pledged to stop funding the global public health body, the World Health Organization, accusing it of being too close to Beijing and mishandling the outbreak.

The White House has since ordered intelligence agencies to comb through communications intercepts and satellite imagery to establish whether China and the WHO initially hid what they knew about the emerging coronavirus pandemic, current and former U.S. officials familiar with the matter told NBC News this week.

As part of this, intelligence agencies were asked to determine what the WHO knew about two research labs studying coronaviruses in Hubei province. NBC News has previously reported that the spy agencies have been investigating the possibility that the virus escaped accidentally from one of the labs, although many experts believe that is unlikely.

After years of on-and-off trade talks, the coronavirus pandemic is the latest issue to create an impasse between the world's two largest economies.

When Chinese medical professionals first reported cases of the virus in Wuhan late in 2019, reports were suppressed. Some, including Dr. Li Wenliang — who later died from the virus — were reprimanded for spreading what officials claimed was false information when the medical staff warned of the danger posed by the newly discovered disease, causing an outcry on Chinese social media.

Le stood by the country's official data and said China's response had been "fast" compared to other countries.

"I want to say China has not covered anything up. We did not cause any delay," he said.

Trump and senior U.S. officials have previously emphasized the Chinese origins of the disease, infuriating Beijing by referring to it as the "Wuhan" or "China virus."

Le, 57, offered his "heartfelt sympathy" to Americans fighting the crisis. Widely considered a likely candidate to be China's next foreign minister, he lived in New York when he was deployed to the United Nations in the late 1990s.

He urged greater cooperation between the two countries, stating that "the true enemy of the United States is the COVID-19 virus," not China.

"I think it's really important for the U.S. government to find the right focus, the real enemy," said Le, a senior member of China's Communist Party who has been the second-ranking official at the Foreign Affairs Ministry under Foreign Minister Wang Yi since 2018.

Earlier this month, both the Republican and the Democratic parties released TV ad campaigns accusing the other of mishandling the Chinese political relationship.

Le said it was "short-sighted" and "irresponsible" to seek electoral gain as a result of the crisis. He added that the Chinese public was "angry" and "entitled to express their outrage" at the U.S. politicization of the pandemic.

"Unfortunately, some political figures are politicizing this COVID-19. They're using this virus to stigmatize China. This is not something we are willing to see," he said.

In Missouri last week, while anti-lockdown protesters demonstrated, state Attorney General Eric Schmitt filed a lawsuit against the Chinese government. The first of its kind to seek damages, the suit accused China of lying about the virus and causing financial damage to the state.

Le said any claims asking China to make reparations were "preposterous" and presented an "out-and-out political farce."

"There is no international law that supports blaming a country for simply being the first to report a disease," Le said.

But he said he wouldn't object to some scientific investigation that kept away from "conspiracy theories."

"We do not oppose normal communication and mutual learning between scientists," he said. "What we do oppose is arbitrary investigations based on the presumption of China's guilt. That is something we firmly oppose."

[North Korea] Satellite images of luxury boats further suggest North Korea's Kim at favoured villa: experts (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:02 AM, Josh Smith, 5304K, Neutral]

Satellite imagery showing recent movements of luxury boats often used by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his entourage near Wonsan provide further indications he has been at the coastal resort, according to experts who monitor the reclusive regime.

Speculation about Kim's health and location erupted after his unprecedented absence from April 15 celebrations to mark the birthday of his late grandfather and North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung.

On Tuesday, North Korea-monitoring website NK PRO reported commercial satellite imagery showed boats often used by Kim had made movements in patterns that suggested he or his entourage may be in the Wonsan area.

That followed a report last week by a U.S.-based North Korea monitoring project, 38 North, which reported satellite images showed what was believed to be Kim's personal train was parked at a station reserved for his use at the villa in Wonsan.

Officials in South Korea and the United States say it is plausible Kim may be staying there, possibly to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, and have expressed scepticism of media reports he had some kind of serious illness.

They caution, however, that Kim's health and location are closely guarded secrets and reliable information is difficult to obtain in North Korea.

The last time official media in North Korea reported on Kim's whereabouts was when he presided over a meeting on April 11, but there have been near-daily reports of him sending letters and diplomatic messages.

Kim's seaside compound in Wonsan, on the country's east coast, is dotted with guest villas and serviced by a private beach, basketball court, and private train station, according to experts and satellite imagery. An airstrip was bulldozed last year to build a horse riding track, while a boathouse nearby shelters Kim's Princess 95 luxury yacht, valued at around \$7 million in 2013.

"It's one of his favourite houses," said Michael Madden, a North Korea leadership expert at the U.S.-based Stimson Center, who has compared Kim's affinity for Wonsan to U.S. President Donald Trump's favoured resort, Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

Madden said Kim is believed to have about 13 significant compounds around the country, though he appears to only regularly use about half of them.

"All of them are set up to serve as the leader's headquarters, so they are all equipped for him to run the country," he said.

Wonsan is one of the larger and better appointed compounds, but it also has a useful location that allows Kim to easily travel to other areas along the coast, or return quickly to Pyongyang in his private train or along a special highway designated for use only by the Kim family or top officials, Madden said.

FAVOURED SPOT

Wonsan also holds symbolic power for the Kim dynasty: It was there Kim Il Sung, who helped found North Korea at the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, first landed with Soviet troops to take over the country.

Wonsan is believed by some experts to be Kim Jong Un's birthplace, partly because he spent his early years at the family's palace there, although official history has never confirmed where he was born.

The Japanese chef Kenji Fujimoto, who worked for the Kims and visited Wonsan, recounted in his memoirs how a young Kim Jong Un described rollerblading, playing basketball, riding jet skis and playing in the pool at the compound.

Later, photos showed Kim sipping drinks there with American basketball player Dennis Rodman when the star visited North Korea in 2013.

The Wonsan area has also become emblematic of Kim's strategy for survival based on a combination of economic development, tourism, and nuclear weapons. He is rebuilding the city of 360,000 people and wants to turn it into a billion-dollar tourist hotspot.

In recent months, the project has been repeatedly delayed, undermined in part by international sanctions imposed over the North's nuclear and missile programmes, which have restricted its ability to seek foreign investment.

Wonsan has also been the scene of some of Kim's renewed military drills and missile tests, which he resumed amid increasing frustration with a lack of progress in denuclearisation talks with the United States and South Korea.

[Afghanistan] Afghan officials: Suicide bomber kills 3 civilians in Kabul (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:58 AM, Rahim Faiez, 2194K, Negative]

A suicide bomber on Wednesday targeted a base belonging to Afghan special forces on the southern outskirts of the capital, Kabul, killing at least three civilians and wounding 15, officials said.

The government blamed the Taliban for the attack, which took place a day after the country's defense minister and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan visited the facility.

The bombing happened outside the base for army commandos as civilian contractors working in the facility waited outside to get into the base, said a military official, speaking on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to talk to the media about the attack.

Tareq Arian, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, said the site of the bombing was in the Chahar Asyab district and blamed the Taliban for the attack, calling it a crime against humanity.

"The target was likely the base itself, but the bomber failed to reach his target and instead killed innocent civilians," Arian said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, but both the Taliban and the Islamic State group are active in Kabul and its surroundings and have repeatedly struck military and civilian targets.

On Tuesday, the Afghan defense minister, Gen. Assadullah Khalid, and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, U.S. Gen. Scott Miller, visited the base, known as Army Commando Corps, praising achievements of the Afghan commandos and their dedication in defending the country.

Also Wednesday, a sticky bomb attached to vehicle detonated elsewhere in Kabul, wounding three civilians, according to Firdaus Faramarz, spokesman for the Kabul police chief. No one claimed responsibility for that attack.

The Taliban have continued to attack security outposts, even as the U.S. and NATO proceed with a full troop withdrawal that is set to be completed next year under a deal

signed at the end of February between the U.S. peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban.

On Sunday, Khalilzad called on the country's feuding political leaders to set their differences aside to combat the coronavirus pandemic and advance the stalled peace agreement signed with the Taliban.

He said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah, who each declared himself the victor in September's election, should "put the interest of the country ahead of their own" during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began last week.

He urged the government and the Taliban to carry out a prisoner exchange that was part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. The agreement had called for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 government personnel held by the insurgents.

To date, Ghani has released 550 detainees based on age, vulnerability to the virus and time served behind bars. The Taliban have not said if those released are among the prisoners referred to in the agreement. For their part, the Taliban have freed 60 prisoners.

In a statement Wednesday, the Taliban expressed concern that coronavirus could spread unchecked in Afghan government prisons, and urged international right organizations to act swiftly to save lives.

"If the novel coronavirus were to enter these prisons, it could prove catastrophic," the statement said.

The insurgents also delivered a veiled threat, saying they would exact revenge "upon the cold-hearted enemy" if Taliban prisoners lose their lives to the virus.

Afghanistan has reported 1,939 cases and 58 deaths from the coronavirus.

[Afghanistan] Bombing near Afghan capital kills three amid unabated violence (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:38 AM, Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Abdul Matin Sahak, 5304K, Negative] A suicide bombing near Kabul, the Afghan capital, killed three people and wounded 15 on Wednesday, the interior ministry said, as violence in the war-torn nation threatens a fragile peace process.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the blast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, amid the coronavirus pandemic and United States-led efforts for peace talks between the Taliban militia and the Afghan government.

"A suicide bomber detonated his explosives among civilians," interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said in a statement, adding that the blast happened in the Char Asiab district of Kabul province, about 11 km (7 miles) from the capital.

Hopes for an end to Afghanistan's decades of war were raised in late February when the Taliban Islamist militants and the United States struck a deal for the withdrawal of U.S.-led

foreign forces in exchange for Taliban security guarantees.

In the run-up to the pact, there was a one-week reduction in violence, but attacks and bombings have continued since, with the Taliban having rejected calls for a ceasefire.

The United Nations has expressed alarm at the number of civilians killed in March and the U.S. commander in Afghanistan this month travelled to Doha to meet Taliban leaders and warn them the violence must be reduced.

On Wednesday, another blast in Kabul wounded three civilians who were taken to hospital, police said.

Nine people were killed and seven hurt in a Taliban attack on security checkpoints controlled by pro-government militia in northern Samangan province on Tuesday, a provincial police spokesman said, with an unknown number of Taliban casualties.

The Taliban did not respond to a request for comment on the attack in Samangan and a spokesman said he was looking into the blast in Kabul.

Editorials and Op-eds

America First meets global pandemic, testing Trump worldview (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:20 PM, Michael Tackett and Jonathan Lemire, Neutral]

When terrorists struck the United States on Sept. 11, Nicholas Burns was the U.S. ambassador to NATO, and one memory still stands out: how swiftly America's allies invoked Article Five of the organization's charter, that an attack on one member was an attack on all.

It was a kinship among nations nurtured over decades and a muscular display of collective defense that has defined much of the post World War II era. It is also a worldview that Burns finds starkly at odds with President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy as NATO's members and other countries suffer from the deadly weight of the coronavirus pandemic.

America First has been a ready applause line for Trump, but now it is also a philosophy being put to a life-or-death test, with much of the world still looking to the U.S. for leadership and assistance.

Burns, a Harvard professor and a former top U.S. diplomat who served Republican and Democratic presidents, said it was "entirely reasonable and rational" to focus inward "in the first weeks of the crisis in March. The president's job is to protect the people of the United States ... Having said that, I think it is abundantly clear that we cannot succeed in fighting the pandemic and confront the global economic collapse if we are not cooperating globally."

"The America First attitude is a very fixed set of beliefs about the world and our role in it," said Burns, who is also an informal adviser to former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee. "He thinks that alliances and partnerships weaken us and slow us down. He's not an isolationist. He's a unilateralist. That has not

worked well the last three years."

Trump's guiding foreign policy mixed with his "I alone can fix it" ethos has made him an unpredictable partner for America's allies, who continue to struggle with how to manage the president and fortify strategic ties with the United States.

During the pandemic, Trump has been accused by allies like Germany and Canada of disrupting shipments of medical supplies, saying that the U.S. needed them first. But he has also offered to provide ventilators to other nations, both among allies and foes.

"President Trump has done a masterful job in the face of an unprecedented crises – safeguarding the health and well-being of the American people by ensuring our citizens have what they need first – then providing assistance to allies through an historic coordination of international efforts," Hogan Gidley, the deputy White House press secretary, said in a statement.

For much of his presidency, though, Trump has been alliance averse. He has withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal and Paris climate treaty while threatening to do the same for NATO. And he has rattled some of the United States' longest allies with aggressive rhetoric on trade deals and military alliances alike.

He has favored authoritarian leaders like President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China and Kim Jong Un of North Korea over those like German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Now China has also moved to fill a gap in humanitarian aid in the form of supplies. Trump has become more bellicose toward China, saying that the country withheld critical information about the coronavirus outbreak and would pay an unspecified later price for it.

"This pandemic crisis shows the inherent limits to the 'America First' foreign policy," said Richard Haass, another top diplomat in both Bush administrations and president of the Council on Foreign Relations. "Sovereignty is not a guarantee of security. Borders aren't impermeable; oceans aren't moats. We were vulnerable to an infection that began in Wuhan, and it proves that globalization is a reality rather than a choice."

Had Trump truly implemented America First, he said, the nation would have been better prepared. "A true American First national security policy would have had in place more testing, ventilators, PPE. It would have been more self-reliant. This moment shows that America First is more of a slogan than a reality."

But Steve Bannon, a former senior adviser to Trump, said that America First does not mean America alone. "It means prioritizing national interest and that strong allies matters. You don't turn your back on them. America doesn't need to abandon a leadership position. It needs to be a global leader, the global leader. But you prioritize what you need."

Bannon said the crisis also underscored the lack of U.S. capacity to manufacture medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, businesses that have located primarily in China and India because of lower production costs. "This pandemic underscores that public health is a national security issue," he said, adding, "A new nationalism is going to be coming out of

this: a stronger America, a more focused America."

The notion of America First flourished during World War I and was promoted by Republicans and Democrats alike until World War II. After World War II, when the U.S. emerged as a superpower, the country took on an expansionist view of how spreading American ideals and building alliances could ensure peace and the U.S. standing in the world.

The grandest show of influence was the Marshall Plan, when the U.S. spent about \$800 billion in today's dollars to rebuild Western Europe after World War II, an investment that built alliances that endure today, even though some of them have grown fragile in the Trump era.

"Broadly, the president has failed his Harry Truman moment," said Benn Steil, the author of the award-winning book "The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War." "He had the best opportunity he would ever have to show the world he could rally his nation and its allies around a pandemic response that would highlight the best features of democracy and capitalism – as the Marshall Plan did."

Instead, Steil said, he is "hearing shock and disappointment" from colleagues abroad. "They have never seen a United States so dysfunctional that it cannot even protect its own citizens, let alone mitigate suffering abroad and rally cooperation among allies."

On Coronavirus, National Security Threats, O'Brien Picks His Spots (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 8:00 AM, Michael C. Bender and Gordon Lubold, Neutral]
When President Trump was initially hesitant about curbing travel from China in January, his national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, described in stark terms the impending coronavirus threat.

"This will be the largest national security crisis of your presidency," Mr. O'Brien told the president, according to people familiar with the discussion.

Mr. Trump authorized the restrictions.

While Mr. O'Brien viewed the novel coronavirus as an imminent danger, he largely removed himself from the spotlight on the administration's response, instead picking moments to assert himself behind the scenes. He rarely attends coronavirus task force meetings, ceding those duties to his chief deputy, and has appeared just once, on March 19, at the president's evening news conferences on the topic.

After seven months on the job, Mr. O'Brien has settled into the role of facilitator. He is quicker than either of his predecessors, John Bolton or H.R. McMaster, to defer to the president's judgment.

Mr. O'Brien arrives at the office by 9 a.m. most mornings, often fielding phone calls from the president much earlier, and is comfortable in the Washington social scene. He travels with Mr. Trump to Mar-a-Lago, and sits at the middle of the table in the White House Situation

Room. But he has told colleagues that he is more comfortable in the background, viewing himself as a "quiet professional," in the words of one associate, and sees himself as a senior aide, not a principal.

Publicly, the president has praised him for helping bring home some 75,000 Americans from foreign soil as coronavirus-related travel restrictions went into place. Mr. O'Brien, an attorney who has advised Republican presidential candidates including two of Mr. Trump's competitors in 2016, touts his decision to cut the size of the National Security Council to 110 from 180, describing the move as one aimed at deflating a bloated bureaucracy, according to aides. He has since restored about a dozen of those positions to help respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Privately, Mr. O'Brien advocated bringing Dr. Deborah Birx into the White House to help coordinate the administration's response to the virus. He unsuccessfully lobbied his counterpart in Europe to institute similar travel restrictions on China, according to people familiar with the discussions.

Mr. O'Brien played a key role in scotching the president's meeting in February with the Austrian chancellor after his team told him there was a case of coronavirus inside the country's foreign ministry, White House officials said. Austrians disputed the claim but agreed to postpone the meeting, a senior Austrian official said.

In March, Mr. O'Brien signed off on a meeting with Brazilian leaders during the president's Florida vacation. Two days after those meetings, one of the South American officials who met with Mr. Trump tested positive for the disease.

Away from the cameras, the typically soft-spoken and measured Mr. O'Brien has flashed a temper. He slammed the table during one meeting in February, interrupting Vice President Mike Pence to make a point to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who was hesitant to take actions that could undermine the economy, according to a person familiar with the meeting.

As the pandemic unfolded earlier this year, Mr. O'Brien told senior White House officials to consider Matthew Pottinger, his chief deputy, as the voice of the National Security Council on coronavirus matters, aides said. The decision was viewed inside the NSC as a way of freeing Mr. O'Brien to deal with other national security issues, a spokesman said.

Mr. Pottinger, a former Wall Street Journal reporter and Marine, raised early concerns inside the White House about the virus. But an approach colleagues described as aggressive complicated the knotty internal politics at the White House as the administration was struggling to find its footing in dealing with the pandemic.

Some senior officials said they became concerned when Mr. Pottinger wore a mask to the White House complex while the administration was asking Americans to leave the supply of masks for medical professionals. Mick Mulvaney, who was acting chief of staff until March, criticized Mr. Pottinger's approach to senior staff, officials said.

At Mr. Pottinger's urging, the National Security Council, the White House's primary arm for coordinating the federal government's response to national security issues, had called the

first administration-wide coronavirus meeting in the Situation Room on Jan. 27. But when the White House formally created its task force a few days later, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar was put in charge.

A month later, Mr. Azar was replaced by Vice President Pence. The NSC's role has diminished as the administration's focus shifted to disaster response.

Mr. O'Brien's low-key approach has distinguished him from his predecessors in the Trump administration.

Mr. Bolton's aggressive policy activism frustrated Mr. Trump, and he eventually resigned over the president's interest in meeting with leaders of Iran and the Taliban. Mr. McMaster, who was an active-duty Army lieutenant general when he served as national security adviser, had a professorial style that wore on Mr. Trump. Mike Flynn, who was a retired Army lieutenant general when he served, was removed after more than a month in the job for lying to Vice President Mike Pence.

Mr. O'Brien was viewed by some to be an unlikely pick to join Mr. Trump in the White House. He was an adviser to Mitt Romney, a fellow Mormon, for his 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. He backed Scott Walker's Republican bid in 2016. When the former Wisconsin governor dropped out, he advised Sen. Ted Cruz's campaign.

Mr. O'Brien was privately wary of Mr. Trump, according to friends and former colleagues, and publicly described Mr. Trump's view on the defense budget as "troubling" and his approach to national security giving anxiety to "peace through strength" Republicans.

He took a more optimistic view once Mr. Trump won the party's nomination, saying the real-estate magnate and reality TV star could grow into the job.

Mr. O'Brien first attracted Mr. Trump's attention as the administration's special envoy for hostage affairs at the State Department, said friends and associates. Under Mr. O'Brien, more than 40 Americans were released from various countries.

In the White House, Mr. O'Brien has focused the National Security Council more on China, officials said. He has written that the president's focus on competition with China has been the administration's most important foreign policy development.

While his two predecessors were known for their experience on Middle East policy, Mr. O'Brien, officials said, is more closely aligned with Peter Navarro, the president's trade adviser who wrote the book, "Death by China."

Messrs. Navarro and O'Brien struck up a correspondence when both were living in California, the former as a university professor and the latter as a law firm partner, after Mr. Navarro read an article and deemed Mr. O'Brien's views on China sufficiently tough.

"For the first time we have a national security adviser whose strategic views and hard-nosed analytics are in line with the president's," Mr. Navarro said in an interview.

Mr. O'Brien has internal critics who believe he isn't strong enough on other issues, such as

the Middle East and Afghanistan. Many Pentagon leaders urge a robust American military presence to counter Iran, for example. Mr. O'Brien, believing the focus should be on countering China, has labored to advise the president on finding the right balance. But ultimately it is the president's decision, aides say.

"What he doesn't try to do is teach the president that his world view is wrong," said one U.S. official. "It's different from advising versus fundamentally trying to change his view."

We've Lost Time in the Race for a Covid-19 Cure (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:00 AM, Lionel Laurent, 6400K, Neutral]

It's been three months since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern on its way to becoming a full-blown pandemic.

Despite much hype around several existing drugs, we still haven't found a proven, evidence-based treatment for Covid-19. The stakes are clearly high, with a vaccine at least a year away, if at all, and countries around the world facing a potential second wave of infections as they start to lift draconian lockdown measures. A conclusive finding that one of the already-available medicines can reduce the viral load or severity of symptoms in infected patients would be a "game changer," as French state medical adviser Jean-Francois Delfraissy said on local radio on Monday.

For now, we're still waiting for convincing evidence of whether potentially promising drugs actually work. A European trial of four treatments, dubbed "Discovery," began in March; it was due to give early results in the first week of April. That date was pushed back to this week after a slow start getting off the ground. In that time, tens of thousands of people have died.

It's tempting to imagine the blame for lost time lies with bureaucratic red tape and squabbling scientists who prefer idle box-ticking to daring experiments with drugs on the pandemic's front lines. That's the narrative favored by supporters of Didier Raoult, the flamboyant French doctor who first flagged anti-malaria drug chloroquine as a promising treatment in February. While the scientific establishment waits for conclusive trial results, self-declared "maverick" Raoult has been using hydroxychloroquine (a less toxic derivative of chloroquine) on patients. U.S. President Donald Trump's endorsement of the drug, and his pressure on regulators to fast track it, have made it a household name.

But, if anything, it's the mavericks not the bureaucrats who have slowed things down.

Recent trials of hydroxychloroquine, for example, have been criticized for cutting a lot of corners without showing clinically significant effects. Raoult's test in Marseilles used a small sample size of 42 patients, their enrollment wasn't randomized and one patient who died was excluded from the results. Subsequent trials elsewhere were also found to be of limited quality. A review by Birmingham University's Robin Ferner and Oxford University's Jeffrey Aronson found that most hadn't been blinded, meaning those involved knew which treatment was being administered to whom. Other drawbacks included inconsistent treatment procedures, such as the addition of the antibiotic azithromycin, which when combined with hydroxychloroquine can cause dangerous heart problems. Of the 142

hydroxychloroquine trials registered as of April 14, only about 35% were designed to be blinded, the review found.

Sacrificing standards for speed hasn't just resulted in a lack of evidence; it has hampered and delayed follow-up studies. When the "Discovery" mega-study began enrolling patients in March, it immediately hit a big hurdle — patients swayed by headlines only wanted to be treated with hydroxychloroquine. In the U.S., one patient who was offered the chance to trial Gilead Sciences Inc.'s remdesivir asked for "Trump's drug" instead. The hype around potential treatments has also spurred countries to hoard drugs, hurting their availability.

Doctors are understandably in an ethical bind in this pandemic. The urge to "try everything" is strong when patients and their families are visibly suffering. Yet speed has to be balanced against other trade-offs like patient safety, too. And the grim truth is that a double-blind, randomized trial of several drugs could have been conducted by now. This week, the Paris region's hospital association announced that a randomized 129-patient trial of tocilizumab (marketed by Roche Holding AG as Actemra) launched just a month ago has already shown "significant" improvement for Covid-19 sufferers — though the results aren't yet peer reviewed.

There are other ways to accelerate research in a pandemic. One option is the use of adaptive platform trials, in which several treatments are monitored at the same time so that resources can be shifted toward those that are the most effective, as my colleague Max Nisen has written. Artificial intelligence can also help. The University of Pittsburgh is using machine learning to power its own adaptive trial of potential Covid-19 treatments across 40 hospitals. Even before testing, researchers are being called upon to use computational methods to screen existing treatments quickly, as in one initiative by a European moon-shot foundation called JEDI.

And if there is conclusive evidence that a cheap generic drug like hydroxychloroquine works, then the pharmaceutical supply chain may find new ways to meet a rise in demand. French firm Rondol Industrie is testing the ability of drug-blending machines to make more efficient doses of hydroxychloroquine that would improve absorption into the human body. The benefits of a lower dose for the same treatment result could include fewer side effects and lower production costs. It would also make it possible to treat more patients with the same quantity of active pharmaceutical ingredient.

Without that evidence, though, we will only be wasting time. Clinical trials are logistically and financially costly, but they're invaluable. A new pledge by world leaders such as France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Angela Merkel to raise \$8 billion for the development and accessibility of possible treatments for Covid-19 will help. This is a race without an obvious shortcut.

Antibody tests show we're nowhere near herd immunity (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 10:26 AM, Natalie E. Dean and Caitlin Rivers, Neutral]

A wave of preliminary results of antibody tests is adding to our understanding of how the novel coronavirus is moving through the American population. But there are reasons to be cautious about interpreting the findings.

In contrast with tests for active infection, these tests detect antibodies the body creates after someone has been infected with the virus. So they should identify people who got sick and recovered from the disease covid-19, or who carried the virus but had no symptoms.

In recent weeks, in separate studies, researchers have announced that roughly 2.5 to 4 percent of residents in Santa Clara County, Calif.; 3 to 6 percent of people in Los Angeles County; 6 percent in Miami-Dade County; and 14 percent across New York state have been infected at some point by the coronavirus. That last study estimated that as many as 1 in 5 residents of New York City had been infected.

Unfortunately, these new antibody tests can have high error rates, and in the studies involving Los Angeles County, Miami-Dade County and New York, the full scientific reports are not yet available for scientists to review. The Santa Clara County study also came under criticism from other scholars for its methodology and statistical analysis.

What can we learn from these studies? First, they reveal that even in the hardest-hit communities, most people are still at risk of being infected by the virus. We are a long, long way from developing "herd immunity" — meaning that so many are immune that there are not enough susceptible people left for the virus to circulate. This would require at least 60 percent of the population to be infected. With low levels of immunity in the population, if we lift restrictions on movement and "reopen" the economy without proper precautions, the coronavirus outbreak could again take off.

Even more worrisome are some of the other conclusions that people are drawing from the results. Last month, two Stanford Medicine professors who contributed to the Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties studies, Eran Bendavid and Jay Bhattacharya, wrote an opinion article in the Wall Street Journal titled "Is the Coronavirus as Deadly as They Say?" They argued that previous overestimates of the death rate for coronavirus infection — now "corrected" by the antibody studies — meant that massive shutdowns and stay-in place orders were likely excessive.

It was already widely known, however, that we often only identify the most severe covid-19 cases, through testing swab samples. Early (rough) estimates are that a quarter or even as many as half of infections have no symptoms at all; those would be totally missed as well. The current official tally in Santa Clara County is 100 deaths and 2,084 confirmed cases, which would crudely suggest that 4.7 percent of cases are fatal. Naturally, antibody tests can help us pin down the true death rate following infection by allowing us to include everyone, even infections with no symptoms, in the denominator. Based on the Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties studies' results, only 0.1 to 0.2 percent of infections are fatal.

It's unclear that this estimate will hold up to further scrutiny. Notably, if the fatality rate were truly only 0.1 percent, that implies that all 8 million people in New York City have already been infected — which seems unlikely. That supposition is also contradicted by the New York antibody test results, which suggest that fatality rates there are closer to 0.5 or 1 percent. But even if the California numbers are accurate, they in no way warrant a conclusion that shutdowns were an overreaction.

Anti-vaxxers will fight the eventual coronavirus vaccine. Here's how to stop them.

If we know anything about this virus, it is that it spreads easily. Unlike influenza, there is virtually no population-level immunity, meaning many more people can be infected, millions in the United States alone. We also know that it overwhelms health-care systems. In New York City, there have been more than 40,000 hospitalizations and nearly 17,000 deaths — and that follows the Italian catastrophe, in which some hospitals, including in the Lombardy region, were reportedly forced to triage care, choosing who would receive scarce ventilators.

With the potential for huge numbers of people to be infected, taking comfort in a lower death rate would be the wrong way to think about the results — and easing up efforts to blunt this deadly public health threat would be a serious mistake. We know firsthand that covid-19 can quickly spiral out of control in cities and entire regions of countries, with devastating consequences. Preventing the disasters we've seen in Wuhan, New York City and Lombardy must remain our first priority. Antibody studies alone cannot tell us if we are ready to reopen the economy. That will instead depend on our preparedness to test, trace and isolate infected people so that we don't end up back where we started.

The next pandemic could be even worse (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 6:31 AM, Jamie Metzl, Andrew Hessel and Hansa Bhargava, 12317K, Neutral]

This is war.

A world war.

Not against a country or regime, but a virus – an enemy invader that is as alien to most people as it is invisible, and completely unaffected by humanity's borders, politics or morality.

After dangerously slow starts first in China, Europe and the United States, the world is now mobilizing to face the Covid-19 pandemic in an all-hands-on-deck moment. This counterattack is already showing preliminary results, but much of our effort will be for naught if we fully demobilize once this battle is won.

There's a reason why militaries don't demobilize after each war. To face ongoing threats, our militaries maintain ongoing capabilities. Even though we've faced terrible pandemics before, we're now suffering unnecessarily because we've not applied their lessons to our ongoing war with deadly pathogens.

If any military had failed as spectacularly as the world's governments have in preparing for and preventing this crisis, their leaders would have been summarily fired. The commanders who replaced them would then be judged by their ability to do everything possible to prevent the next crisis.

As the levers of state power and public health around the world now shift into gear, we can expect better results over the coming months, potentially including ongoing development of one or more Covid-19 vaccines and therapeutic strategies for critical care.

But even once we have a vaccine, we can't allow a full demobilization because as bad as

this virus is, future pandemics could be even worse.

The novel coronavirus hits the rare sweet spot for infectious diseases. It causes illness but many people have mild symptoms or are asymptomatic, facilitating spread. It wasn't so deadly that it immobilized its new hosts immediately or, as would be the case with Ebola, provoked an immediate quarantine of affected areas. It succeeded in part because the true threat wasn't immediately recognized.

The world of biology is dynamic by definition, so there has always been the chance that deadly viruses like this would jump from animals to humans. It's always been a question of when, not if. Through our destruction of natural habitats, population growth, international travel, industrial scale animal husbandry and other actions, however, our species has massively exacerbated this threat.

But naturally occurring viruses might pale in comparison to the viruses that could potentially be created by the powerful new tools of synthetic biology – agents precision-engineered to cause harm.

A recent piece in the journal Nature Medicine assessing the likely origins of the novel coronavirus concluded that, whatever the origins of the outbreak itself, SARS-CoV-2 is most likely naturally occurring because of the relatively inefficient way it hijacks human cells. In other words, if a malicious genetic engineer was intentionally manipulating a virus to be deadly and contagious, they could potentially do a much better job.

In 2017, University of Alberta in Canada synthesized an extinct horsepox virus, a cousin of smallpox, for around \$100,000.

This science has advanced so rapidly and the cost has come down so precipitously that the same feat could today be achieved for just a few thousand dollars. Unlike nuclear weapons, the development of which need the type of massive infrastructure usually reserved for nation states, developing a synthetic pathogen is now within the capacity of many groups or even individuals distributed across the globe. The next pandemic may not be an accident of nature.

But if we think about our struggle against any and all infectious agents as a battlefield, which we should, then we should learn from our most effective militaries about how best to prepare for what may be heading our way.

Here's the plan:

1. Maintain essential capabilities: The soldiers in our fight against deadly pathogens are our public health officials, doctors, government planners and data modelers. To build the standing capabilities we'll need for this fight, we must invest the necessary time and money to prepare for rare but inevitable events. With disease outbreaks, you pay a bit now for readiness or you pay a lot later for response, only with more human suffering added to the price tag. Once we have these personnel in place, we must plan and train like our lives depend on it. They do.

2. Develop global and local surveillance networks: Militaries invest massive resources in

monitoring their enemy's every action through satellite networks, spies and data analytics. To be ready for the next pandemic, we must develop new sensor systems that can identify new infectious agents in real time and use advanced data analytics to identify worrisome patterns of diseases well before a major outbreak emerges.

3. Build and maintain a network of alliances: Few militaries can succeed alone, and no country can protect itself from a deadly pathogen on its own. Pandemic preparedness must become a core and ongoing component of international cooperation. The World Health Organization can play the central role in this process, but only if it has the resources, staff and mandate to succeed. We must make that happen.

4. Build emergency response capacity: Militaries have expeditionary forces to take the battle to the enemy wherever a threat originates. We need the same capabilities for pandemics. The moment a tripwire is triggered indicating a potential pathogenic outbreak, trained emergency response teams, both national and international, must be ready to mobilize and equipped with tools and authority to respond.

5. Forward-deployed personnel and weaponry: Transporting personnel and equipment to faraway locations is expensive and slow, which is why leading militaries deploy people and equipment near the theaters where they will most likely be needed. The organization of the US Strategic National Stockpile may need a review to put more medical equipment closer to the front lines in major urban centers. In recent years, the US government pulled back some of the personnel on the ground in foreign countries working in disease prevention. As we are now seeing, if we don't fight the skirmish of a pathogenic agent at its source, we can end up fighting a major war everywhere else.

6. Invest in the defensive weapons of the future: Militaries are always building the next generation of weapons and working to counter the enemy's latest innovations. We now need to step up our efforts to create vaccine platforms that can rapidly counter novel threats as well as universal vaccines designed to target entire classes of viruses. Here, the growing power of synthetic biology to quickly design, build and deploy countermeasures in near-real time can be a powerful force for good.

There is little doubt that we were not ready for the terrible and largely preventable crisis we now face. Our poorly planned, underresourced and haphazard global response has led to over 200,000 deaths, massively disrupted our lives and caused trillions of dollars in economic fallout.

Shame on us if we are caught unprepared the next time.

A Scramble for Virus Apps That Do No Harm (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 10:32 AM, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Natasha Singer and Aaron Krolak, 40577K, Neutral]

Faced with a growing coronavirus threat, the governor of North Dakota last month posed a question to a friend from his private-sector days. The friend, a software engineer, had once created a location-tracking app for football fans at North Dakota State University who liked to meet up when traveling to big games.

"Can you track people for Covid?" asked the governor, Douglas Burgum. Within days, the engineer, Tim Brookins, had reworked the football app to do just that, he recalled in an interview. The app is now being used in North and South Dakota as part of statewide efforts to ramp up contact tracing for people infected with the coronavirus.

The new app is part of a worldwide scramble to deploy smartphone tools to rein in the pandemic. If the virus's path can be tracked, even predicted, the hope is that more people will be able to resume at least part of their normal routines — and fewer will need to confine themselves at home.

At their core, the apps are intended to gather information about the movements of people who have tested positive for the virus, alert others who might have crossed their paths, and in some cases make sure infected people stay quarantined. They use smartphone technologies, such as GPS and Bluetooth, to collect and share the data, which make them agile and easy to use but also provide an enticing target for hackers or government surveillance.

Several dozen countries, states, universities and companies are racing to develop and begin using the digital tools, which public health experts said could improve person-to-person contact tracing but are not a panacea. The mad dash has left some places with a confusing mishmash of options, and has some computer security researchers worried about vulnerabilities in hastily written software.

There is no evidence that the apps will be effective without widespread testing for the virus and without enormous numbers of voluntary participants, which could be hampered by years of privacy scandals involving both governments and companies.

Aware of the problems, Apple and Google announced this month they were creating software that public health authorities could use to make apps. The tool will allow different apps to work together and has the support of many privacy experts. But several technology law scholars expressed concern that even well-intentioned digital surveillance tools could become problematic and are difficult to withdraw.

"We've already learned what moving fast and breaking things can do to society," said Woodrow Hartzog, a professor of law and computer science at Northeastern University, referring to the negative consequences of a tech mind-set that values speed and disruption above all else.

Only 25,000 people in North Dakota, about 3 percent of the population, have downloaded the state's app, which before last week was available only for iPhones. Last month, Singapore introduced a voluntary contact-tracing app, but only about 1.1 million people — 20 percent of the population — have downloaded it. Norway's app has caught on more quickly, with nearly 30 percent of residents signing up for it since it was released about a week and a half ago.

Still, a recent study by epidemiologists at Oxford University estimated that 60 percent of the population in a given area would need to use an automated app that traces contacts and notifies users of exposure, combined with other tactics such as broader testing and the quarantining of the most vulnerable people, for the app to contain the virus.

While some compliance is better than none, the researchers found, low rates of adoption in many areas suggest voluntary programs may not provide a breakthrough.

"With 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent uptake of the app, you get a progressive reduction in the size of the epidemic," said Christophe Fraser, an expert in infectious disease dynamics and control at the Big Data Institute at Oxford, who has advised Britain's National Health Service on an app it is developing.

Despite the uncertainty, some health experts say the virus spreads so quickly and stealthily that there is an urgent need for new mechanisms to combat it. Even with partial participation, for example, the apps can allow traditional contact tracing to focus on people without phones, who are often poorer, older and more vulnerable. Only about half of Americans age 65 or over have a smartphone.

"Automated contact tracing is a big idea, an ambitious idea," said Dr. Louise Ivers, the executive director of the Center for Global Health at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, who has been working with a team at M.I.T. to develop contact-tracing technology. "But it's important to be ambitious right now."

On the Trail of the Pandemic

The proliferation of coronavirus apps has trailed the spread of the pandemic around the globe. Often, the differences among apps are technical ones but can create vast differences in their security, privacy and effectiveness.

In February, China began requiring residents in more than 200 cities to download a health code app that automatically dictates whether people must quarantine. Location data is sent to the government from the phones, but it is unclear how the quarantine decisions are made.

By contrast, Singapore's app uses Bluetooth rather than location data to identify nearby phones, and the information is stored on the phones unless a person tests positive for the virus and agrees to share the data with contact tracers, who can then notify others who may have been exposed.

In Norway, the app sends data from the phone's GPS and Bluetooth to central servers that can be accessed by government health authorities. A new law mandates that the information be used only for the pandemic, and that it be deleted every 30 days.

Tora Sanden Doskeland, a graduate student in Norway, said she had downloaded the app despite her concerns about governments and corporations that collect data on people.

"I'm not an expert in this disease or technology or law, but I trust people who are, and I believe the government is relying on them when it tells us to make this choice," she said. "There are pros and cons, but we need to do something together."

North Dakota's app, Care19, uses Wi-Fi, cell towers and GPS to gauge people's locations, usually within about 175 feet, making it much less accurate than Bluetooth-based apps. This means it is now useful only to help patients tell contact tracers where they were while

they were contagious.

An analysis by The New York Times confirmed that the app sends people's location data to a private server hosted on Microsoft's cloud platform. Mr. Brookins, the developer, said only he and one other person have access to the server, and health officials can get the data only of people who test positive for the coronavirus and then agree to share it.

India, which, like the United States, is relying on a combination of state and federal efforts to tackle the pandemic, is a case study in the rush for new technologies.

A quarantine app in the Indian state of Maharashtra, which includes the country's most populous city, Mumbai, uses GPS data collected from people's smartphones to create a virtual perimeter around their homes. If users move beyond their permitted radius, the app notifies local authorities.

Another app, called Quarantine Watch, in the state of Karnataka, also records the locations of certain people under quarantine and requires them to take selfies to prove they are staying home.

In an effort to coordinate public health surveillance, the central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced its own contact-tracing app in early April. The app, called Aarogya Setu — or health care bridge — uses smartphone location data and Bluetooth to log people's travel routes and the other phones they encounter. With urging from Mr. Modi, more than 77 million people, about 5.6 percent of the population, have downloaded it so far. Local authorities are now promoting the Modi government's app along with their own.

An expert advising the Modi government on its app said it had already helped public health monitors pinpoint hot spots for the virus and speed their door-to-door visits to certain neighborhoods to alert residents, many of whom did not own smartphones.

But civil liberties groups have warned that the rush to adopt virus-tracking technologies may entrench new forms of government surveillance and social control even if the apps do not prove effective in fighting the coronavirus.

"They just pilot it out, see how it works and, as the debate is taking place, they scale the project — and once it's scaled, then it becomes a lot harder to roll back," said Sidharth Deb, the policy and parliamentary counsel for the Internet Freedom Foundation, a digital rights group in New Delhi.

An analysis by The Times found that the Quarantine Watch app, which is available on Google Android, lacked common security measures, and that the Android version of the Aarogya Setu app leaked a user's latitude and longitude to a YouTube server.

Google, which owns YouTube, said that the Aarogya Setu app appeared to have sent the location data inadvertently and that YouTube would delete it. The app developers said on Sunday they had fixed the problem. An official in Karnataka said that the app used essential security measures and that the issues identified by The Times had been resolved.

Preventing Surveillance

The wide range of efforts, and their varying quality, have led to calls for industry standards related to privacy and other matters.

Whether to send data to central health authorities is the biggest sticking point.

Technologists who focus on privacy say the best way to prevent governments from using data to surveil people is to never let them have it in the first place.

"You can look at what happened after 9/11," said James Larus, the dean of the School of Computer and Communications Science at EPFL, a science-focused university in Switzerland. "There were all these consequences for privacy made possible by a crisis."

But centralized collection of the data may be essential for effective contact tracing, others argue.

"Having location history helps you better identify where infections might be, helps you identify the hot spots," said Lalitesh Katragadda, the founder of Indihood, a group developing technologies for underserved populations, and an adviser on the Indian government's app.

Some officials in Europe have said they also want information about nearby phones to be shared with public health officers, so they can then contact those people personally.

The Apple and Google program, which draws on ideas from Singapore and from academics, aims to answer the question in favor of privacy experts. The app software will keep track of nearby phones using secret codes, but the data will stay on users' phones. When people test positive for the coronavirus, they can allow their own codes to be put on a list. The phones of all other users will regularly check that list and provide an alert if there is a risk of infection.

So far, the companies have refused to change their system to allow governments to collect data about people's contacts, and it is unclear whether the gathering of more general location data will be possible. On Friday, the companies changed the name of their system — to "exposure notification" from "contact tracing" — to underline its focus on directly alerting people.

Another point of contention surrounds how virus symptoms are reported. Should people voluntarily self-report, or should health workers do so after confirming a diagnosis?

And some significant technological questions need to be worked out, including making sure that the Bluetooth detection accounts for when people are separated by walls and that the apps do not drain batteries or interfere with headphones. Engineers working on programs at M.I.T. and Stanford said they thought the problems were surmountable.

A key to making the apps successful, proponents said, is persuading people that the apps will help keep them safe and allow them to emerge from lockdowns.

"When you hear people saying there will never be takeup of the app," said Dr. Fraser, the Oxford epidemiologist, "they are talking like we are not in the world we are currently in."

Coronavirus Complicates the Expat Adventure (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 9:17 AM, Kathryn Dill, Neutral]

Abe Chuang, an American working in Japan, is riding out the coronavirus pandemic far from his native Los Angeles with no regrets about his expatriate experience.

"The U.S. is always going to be home, but I honestly could not have picked a better place to be locked down," said Mr. Chuang, who likens the atmosphere these days near his central Tokyo apartment to a quiet Sunday.

For generations, adventurous Americans have moved internationally to see the world, polish language skills, find or follow romance and chase career opportunities. According to estimates by the U.S. State Department, roughly 9 million Americans currently live overseas. For some expatriates, the pandemic has emphasized the miles between their address and wherever they call home, particularly as restrictions on nonessential travel have tightened around the world.

Even among Americans with established lives abroad, the crisis has emphasized the distance between family members. Beth Darvell has lived in Hong Kong since she was 19, when her family relocated there from Jacksonville, Fla. She was charmed by the city, which she said is both lively and relaxed.

Her parents have since moved to Honolulu, but Ms. Darvell, now 29, said Asia feels like home. Before the pandemic, she and her husband, a British expat, had been pondering a move to the U.S. to be closer to her parents but shelved the idea once travel was restricted.

"It's changed a lot of my perspective on whether I want to be this far away from people that I love," she said, adding they are now talking about whether to relocate closer to one set of their parents once the crisis is over.

The pandemic is unlikely to prompt many expats to move back to the U.S., but it may change the way those planning moves evaluate potential destinations, said Betsy Burlingame, founder of Expat Exchange, a social network for people moving and living abroad.

"They may look at health care in the countries that they are thinking of moving to a little more, especially younger people who often go abroad and don't really think that much about the health-care systems in the countries they'll be moving to," she said.

Mr. Chuang, who moved to Tokyo in 2019 following nearly five years in New York City, has government-provided health insurance in Japan. As the pandemic intensified, his mother called and asked if he wanted to come home, but he feared putting his elderly grandmother, who lives in the same house, at risk if he returned to California. Mr. Chuang, a 38-year-old copywriter from Los Angeles, opted to stay in Japan, where he works at an advertising agency.

"My mom and I, after we talked it through, she said, 'You know what? Stay there. It would probably be worse if you came home,'" Mr. Chuang said.

A number of expatriates expressed concern for their American families and friends and said

they feel safer abroad, citing swift government responses to the crisis, community-minded cultures and subsidized or free health insurance.

Heather Stone, who grew up in New Jersey, lives with her two children in Tel Aviv. Ms. Stone, 56, has lived in Israel since 1990, and said that over the past 30 years her family in the U.S. has often worried about her safety. Now she is the one who fears for them.

"I think it's the first time that I've really felt that the country that I'm living in has been better prepared for a crisis," she said, "and that the people that I'm living among are better prepared for a crisis than the people that I grew up with."

Jennifer Ortiz also worries about family back in the U.S. Ms. Ortiz, 28, lives in Lisbon with her husband, who is Portuguese. As coronavirus swept Europe and intensified in Santa Barbara, Calif., where her parents live, she spent a lot of time on the phone trying to persuade them to stop going to the gym and instead shelter in place. She considered joining them, concerned by the prospect of one parent getting sick and the other having to carry that burden alone. So far, she has stayed put and checks on them by phone.

Returning home to Sarasota, Fla., wasn't an option for Grant Golub, a first-year student working on his doctorate at the London School of Economics. His father is a general surgeon on the front lines of the coronavirus fight, and he didn't want to risk getting his dad sick, or vice versa. He also said he wouldn't have been productive in the U.S.—at least not without lugging a stack of heavy books he had checked out from British libraries for his examination of American foreign policy during World War II.

Mr. Golub, 24, said his British acquaintances were slower than others to take the threat seriously. "There is a cultural norm in Britain to not try to fret about things," he said, "to not panic when it's not normal."

Being far from home during a lockdown can cause its own stresses, as some expatriates are discovering. Over the past two months, social interactions around the world largely have moved online, which can be tough on those in unfamiliar places. Caroline Kosse and James Schumacher, both 31, had been living in Amsterdam for 12 months when the coronavirus struck.

"They say you don't really know a place until a year," said Mr. Schumacher, a freelance art director. "We hit our year and got locked inside."

The couple, who are both from Louisville, Ky., had to cancel a long-planned summer trip to see relatives, attend weddings and meet their newborn niece. They have a standing Friday night videoconference call with other Americans living in Amsterdam, but face-to-face meetings with local friends aren't easy, they said. A socially distanced bike ride with another couple was lovely, but difficult.

"We didn't get off our bikes," Mr. Schumacher said. "Then we stood on a canal 10 feet away from each other."

Merkel's revived hold on power forces Trump to work with a leader he dislikes to confront China (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Joel Gehrke, 727K, Neutral]

President Trump will unexpectedly be forced to work with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with whom he has been at loggerheads in the past, to confront poised threats from China amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump has flogged Merkel's policies throughout his campaign and presidency. Meantime, Merkel had been in a weakened state, expected to leave office next year. Yet the woman deemed the most powerful leader in Europe, prior to the backlash against her embrace of Syrian refugees in 2015, has recovered some of her old strength due to German approval of her response to the pandemic.

"She's gotten a second lease on life," the German Marshall Fund's Sudha David-Wilp, a Berlin-based expert in transatlantic foreign policy issues, told the Washington Examiner. "She was basically considered a lame duck a couple months ago."

In short, the shock of the coronavirus pandemic might make Trump and Merkel into a geopolitical odd couple over the next year, if not longer.

Merkel's popularity has surged at a delicate time in the domestic German political scene. Her chosen successor, Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, was forced in February to abandon her hope to take over as chancellor after failing to consolidate control of their Christian Democrat Union party.

"If CDU remains very strong, and her personal leadership, it will raise questions of whether she would possibly seek a fifth term because of the extraordinary nature of the crisis," Center for Strategic and International Studies analyst Heather Conley, who directs the Europe program, told the Washington Examiner.

Both Conley and David-Wilp agree that it is unlikely for Merkel to extend her political career; she has a reputation for refusing to make such dramatic shifts after making a major decision. Still, it's undeniable that she lacks an heir at a time when "the crisis is fueling Germans' comfort level with the stability that Angela Merkel has provided for the last 15 years," as Conley put it.

Nevertheless, the German assessment of China's ambitions has moved toward Trump's, offering him an opportunity if the rancor can be held in check.

"The German position on China, as well as the European position, has been changing and leaning towards the direction of the U.S.," said Conley. "So, the U.S. has an opportunity, with skillful leadership, to help move that relationship where we want it to be and have a much more allied, joined approach towards China."

"Merkel is going to have to get tougher now on China, and there will be greater scope for U.S.-German cooperation in confronting Beijing over the course of the next year," the Heritage Foundation's Nile Gardiner told the Washington Examiner. "The damage that has been inflicted by the pandemic is being heavily blamed, in Europe, on China — as it is in the United States. And Merkel will have to reflect that in her administration's policies."

Merkel famously had a close bond with then-President Barack Obama, in part due to their agreement on the refugee policies that Trump denounced during his rise to the White House. Trump, by contrast, has treated Germany as a diplomatic foil since taking office. Merkel has exchanged compliments with Trump in public, but she hasn't succeeded in hiding that she finds it "sobering and a bit depressing" to watch him clash with other allies — a view that German citizens share, according to public polling.

"The general mood in Germany regarding this president in the United States is really very bad," the European official noted. "I hope that this style of Merkel will help to keep this relationship from falling down further, but it's very difficult to say how it will evolve, actually."

Their own domestic politics makes it harder for German officials to partner with the Trump administration, but the emerging anger at China could create more space for such traditional cooperation.

"The tide was turning against China already, and I think that Merkel will adopt a harder and harsher line towards Beijing," Gardiner said. "It's important because Germany often sets the lead in the European Union."

Oil's Collapse Is a Geopolitical Reset In Disguise (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Meghan L. O'Sullivan, 6400K, Neutral]

The world is on the cusp of a geopolitical reset. The global pandemic could well undermine international institutions, reinforce nationalism and spur de-globalization. But far-sighted leadership could also rekindle cooperation, glimmers of which appeared in the G-20's offer of debt relief for some of the world's poorest countries, a joint plea from more than 200 former national leaders for a more coordinated pandemic response and an unprecedented multinational pact to arrest the crash in oil markets.

The remarkable effort to address the turmoil in the oil markets will be critical to oil's eventual balance — although the past two weeks have shown that its promised production cuts were too slow and insufficient in the face of oil demand's plunge. The challenges and opportunities that the collapse in the oil market is pushing to the fore are perhaps just the first taste of Covid-19 induced geopolitical crises that world leaders and policy makers will need to grapple with in the coming months and years.

As history has shown, a big change in energy markets often precipitates a big change in geopolitics. For instance, the shift from coal to oil catapulted Middle Eastern countries to strategic significance. And the recent technology-driven boom in shale oil elevated the United States to net oil exporter status, changing its outlook on the importance of oil in global affairs. We now face a disruption of such proportions that it, too, will reorder some power relationships.

Right now, the focus in Washington is on how to save the U.S. oil industry, much of which is under enormous pressure given the drop in prices. While this is understandable and necessary, Washington needs to make room on its list of priorities for a number of strategic shifts that the crisis has created. For starters, policy makers should consider four challenges and opportunities that are already manifest.

Prepare for more fragile, or even failed, states and the risks that can accompany them.

For dozens of oil producers, the plunge in oil prices is devastating. No major oil producer can balance its budget at prices below \$40; according to the International Monetary Fund, with the exception of Qatar, every country in the Middle East requires at least \$60, with Algeria at \$157 and Iran at a whopping \$390. The average Brent price of oil over the past month has been a hair above \$20.

Of course, fiscal break-even prices are only one factor when gauging which oil producers are the most vulnerable to deep economic dislocation and its accompanying social and political turmoil. Those with (comparatively) more diversified economies — such as the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and Russia — are obviously better off. Countries with fixed exchange rates — like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia — are at a particular disadvantage, as they need to use their precious foreign exchange reserves to prop up their currencies. Some countries have the capacity to cut expenditures, and others to borrow. And some have legitimate political institutions to manage the inevitable hardships as subsidies are slashed, jobs are lost and capital spending is curtailed.

But many do not. And, unlike the last price plunge in 2016, this shock does not come after a period of stable, high oil prices, which allowed some countries to bolster their finances. Instead, oil prices have been middling, as America's surging shale oil production and OPEC+ production cuts kept them roughly in the \$50-\$70 range, below many oil exporters' fiscal break-even levels.

Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Nigeria, Ecuador, Angola, Suriname — not to mention two countries already on the brink, Iran and Venezuela — are particularly vulnerable. They may not all fail in the sense of state collapse, but many could cease to meet their public sector payrolls, never mind expenditures related to health care, education and other services, including security.

The mere prospect of many countries unable to fund their security budgets should sound alarm bells in the United States and beyond. It adds urgency to a question that national security professionals, foreign policy makers and politicians have grappled with since 9/11: How to keep ungoverned territories from becoming safe havens for terrorist groups or drug cartels looking to target the West or undermine its security in other ways. Of particular concern to U.S. policy makers should be Iraq, Nigeria and Mexico. Each faces its own looming crisis, with potentially profound implications for U.S. interests.

In Iraq, a caretaker government confronts deep fiscal travails: Its oil revenues — which make up 90% of budgetary income — plunged by 46% for March, even before the full impact of the coronavirus on oil was apparent. This fiscal collapse has dire implications for the country's struggle to stave off ISIS, for Iraq's ability to stand up to interference by its neighbors and for its efforts to meet the demands of its young and restive population.

Nigeria's economy is likewise beleaguered, having just begun to climb out of a recession before the imposition of strict pandemic containment measures. Signs of social discontent are on the rise, and President Muhammadu Buhari — a former military man — could resort to the army to maintain law and order. That would undermine the legitimacy and

effectiveness of Nigeria's battle against an Islamist insurgency in the northeast of the country, with ripple effects throughout an already vulnerable region.

With its diversified economy, a hedge on its oil for 2020 and relatively developed institutions, Mexico is much better positioned to manage the turmoil in energy markets. But President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's apparent unwillingness to grasp the severity of the pandemic should be cause for concern. Even as other countries deliver eye-popping relief to the newly unemployed, Lopez Obrador has barely budged from earlier pledges of austerity or moved to revisit other elements of his economic plans. The federal government is struggling to wrest control of parts of the country from drug cartels, and to meet U.S. demands to contain Central American migrants heading north. Should Mexico be forced to cut back spending on security forces as seems highly likely, both those problems could metastasize.

How might the United States and its partners prepare for more turmoil in these countries, and in ungoverned territories, particularly in the Sahel or the Middle East where extremist groups already have footholds? One answer is obviously the need to maintain and increase aid and humanitarian assistance to the many countries that will face existential crises, either from the oil plunge, the coronavirus, or both. Another answer, strangely enough, can be found in Syria. Far from being the "forever war" that President Donald Trump called it, the small, behind-the-scenes contingent of U.S. troops supporting a much larger group of indigenous forces against extremist fighters is the sort of arrangement that the United States — ideally with others — should replicate in countries that ask for help. Faced with the demands and fears of their own citizens, politicians in North America, Europe and elsewhere may struggle to justify security and other support for countries whose institutions wobble or collapse under the combined weight of low oil prices and the coronavirus. But being prepared to build more limited military partnerships — and, importantly, to explain to their citizens why such arrangements aren't "forever wars" — will be part of managing the foreign policy fallout of this moment.

Double-down on contingency planning and red-teaming for Iran and Venezuela.

Both Iran and Venezuela were careening before the coronavirus materialized. Under severe U.S. sanctions, oil exports — a lifeline for both countries — had been dramatically curtailed before the pandemic and the oil price collapse. The impact of cratering oil prices will therefore be far less than in the past, but each will still suffer as foreign exchange dwindles further, constraining imports even more.

Many in the Trump administration may hope that this confluence of historical factors leads to the downfall of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the Islamic revolution in Iran. Yet is the United States prepared if either scenario unfolds?

The fall of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro may lead not to the transitional government many have hoped for, but to complete state collapse and an epic humanitarian and security disaster. Alternatively, if the country is hit hard by Covid-19, pressures for political accommodation between Venezuela's opposition and the government could extend Maduro's tenure. Iran's government is much more entrenched, and it is hard for outsiders to accurately assess what's happening there right now. If the regime is under unprecedented pressure, the most likely outcome is not for a democratic alternative to emerge, but for the

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to assume more power, heightening U.S.-Iran tensions and the potential for hot conflict.

Now would be a good time for the U.S. not only to step up its contingency planning for such outcomes, but also to consider whether changes to American policy toward either country would better advance its interests and mitigate human suffering. In particular, the United States should reconsider its earlier decision not to establish some version of an Oil for Food program for Venezuela. Such a program could save Venezuelan lives, stem the tide of refugees that risks destabilizing the whole region and bolster the political opposition; in the face of a global pandemic, these benefits should now outweigh any concerns policy makers may have had about prolonging the life of the Maduro regime.

Defuse a looming U.S. crisis with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and other OPEC+ members had multiple motives for agreeing on April 12 to curb oil production. In Saudi Arabia's case, however, among those reasons was a sharp increase in hostility from members of the U.S. Congress who in the past appeared to appreciate the multifaceted relationship between Riyadh and Washington. Once willing to speak in favor of the U.S.-Saudi partnership, these members suddenly revealed that they were willing to upend economic, military, and diplomatic ties if Saudi Arabia did not curb its production to arrest the free fall of oil prices (and protect the American oil industry).

Such threats no doubt gave President Trump leverage when pressuring Saudi leaders to agree to a deep cut. But they also exposed the fragility in the bilateral relationship. If oil prices continue to fall, members of Congress may well try to punish Riyadh for a situation largely not of its own making. It would be a painful pressure point on the kingdom at a time when neither the United States nor the region can afford any greater destabilization. To avert that possibility, the administration should work closely with key members of Congress. It should not cede management of the bilateral relationship to the legislative branch.

Expand contacts over managing the oil market into more lasting areas of détente.

Recent efforts to pull the global oil market back from the brink exposed some new common interests and triggered intense contacts between leaders. Might this prompt greater cooperation in otherwise fraught relationships? As President Trump's about-face on the value of OPEC demonstrates, now is a time for rethinking old orthodoxies and finding new ways to approach problems.

Despite Trump's insistence that the United States needs and wants a better relationship with Russia, this dysfunctional dyad so far has been impervious to recalibration. Moscow and Washington are unlikely to come to any meaningful détente, given President Putin's need to demonize the United States and the certainty that Russia is in for hard economic times. Putin has repeatedly tried to compensate for economic bad news by asserting Russia more aggressively on the world stage. He could well do the same again.

Yet a small opening exists to professionalize a segment of bilateral U.S.-Russia ties. Russia has long been interested in pulling the United States into coordinating the global oil market. Although the United States does not need to join OPEC+ and its pledges to mandate production cuts, having regular exchanges about global energy trends could create a niche

for constructive discussions between Russian and U.S. officials. It is not crazy to think that a dialogue around common energy interests could evolve into a more meaningful conversation about how to deal with Venezuela's collapse, for instance.

Similarly, although China was not a central player in trying to stem the oil market collapse, the United States and others should bring Chinese officials into regular consultations on the topic. As the world's largest oil importer and its sixth largest producer, China's interests are mixed. But as the world's second largest economy, China may have its own tools to influence global supply and demand. Energy (and climate) are areas in which the United States and China have common interests, and where they have had productive exchanges, even during periods of tension. Again, it is not crazy to think that such dialogues, if intensified, could be a net positive in a critical but rapidly deteriorating bilateral relationship.

Finally, by giving Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Russia a face-saving way to paper over Mexico's partial compliance with the April 12 production cut agreement, Trump should have secured some goodwill with Mexico's president. That could come in handy as both countries, with their intertwined economies, cooperate to smooth the transition to normalcy, whenever that comes.

Foreign policy makers and leading thinkers do need to consider how the global order will change in response to the coronavirus. As John Ikenberry pointed out elsewhere, history suggests that initial moves toward isolation could be followed by global efforts to re-create needed institutions. But a U.S. failure to address the more immediate challenges stemming from the Covid-19 oil market collapse will not bode well for any larger effort to remake the world order.

[France] Pandemic Shakes France's Faith in a Cornerstone: Strong Central Government (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 6:51 AM, Norimitsu Onishi and Constant Méheut, 40577K, Negative]

A couple of baguettes tucked under her arm, Maha Rambousek fiddled with a face mask that kept sliding off her nose. After a local decree made masks mandatory in public, she had quickly stitched it together, but was left confused when the policy was overturned two days later by the central government.

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right," Ms. Rambousek said. "And I can't turn to anybody for certainties."

The measure in Sceaux, a well-to-do suburb just south of Paris, was one of an increasing number of exceptional local challenges to the government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, which has shaken confidence in a cornerstone of French society: the primal authority of the centralized state.

The city of Perpignan lodged contagious patients in a hotel after the central government told people to self-isolate at home. Officials in the city of Marseille carried out widespread testing of both the sick and healthy even as the government ordered that only the seriously ill be tested. The city of Paris tightened a national lockdown by banning daytime jogging.

While France's vaunted health care system has staved off disaster, France has suffered the world's fourth-biggest death toll — now at 23,660 official deaths, behind the United States, Italy and Spain — a consequence, critics say, of the central government's failure to anticipate the onslaught of the contagion.

That failure and a critical shortage of masks and testing kits — also resulting from gaps in state policies — led to the virus's rapid early spread, prompting France to impose one of the world's strictest nationwide lockdowns, now in its seventh week.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a tentative plan on Monday to gradually reopen the country starting on May 11. Schools and businesses would start reopening, though not restaurants or cafes. He urged companies to keep their employees working at home. And he promised that masks and testing would be made sufficiently available.

But it was not clear that those steps would halt what polls show is declining confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic.

"Trust in the state has been eroding for some time, since the state is no longer able to respond to the need for security," said Phillipe Laurent, the mayor of Sceaux and the secretary general of the Association of Mayors of France.

About a dozen complaints have been lodged by individuals and medical organizations with the French Court of Justice, a special court that hears accusations of government mismanagement. Several officials have been accused of willfully failing to take appropriate measures to combat the virus, endangering people's lives.

The government's failure to stem the initial outbreak undermined the important social contract between the state and the people, said Pierre Vermeren, a historian.

"We have some of the highest taxes and biggest public spending in the world, and the French people accept that because, implicitly, their protection was guaranteed by the state," said Mr. Vermeren, who teaches at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Critics blame France's poor showing, at least in part, on the excessive centralization of the French state, embodied by a president, Emmanuel Macron, who has spoken of his belief in the "top-down" exercise of power and has employed martial language in describing the fight against the virus.

Like many leaders, Mr. Macron initially derived a boost from the crisis, but that has begun to fade. Nearly 60 percent of respondents described him as a "bad president" in one recent poll, while another poll showed confidence in the government's management of the crisis declining steadily to 39 percent from 55 percent in the past month.

In keeping with his reputation for aloofness and heavy-handedness, Mr. Macron initially angered many French by harshly blaming them for not respecting social distancing measures during the same weekend last month that he allowed local elections to be held — a decision widely condemned since then.

He is also held responsible for the government's flip-flopping messages on masks, which

many French now perceive as a deception to cover up a blunder by the state, which allowed its stockpiles to decline.

Still, there is no doubt that the French state has been better equipped than most on many levels.

France's traditionally strong health care system has succeeded in treating the sick and avoiding the kind of triage seen in Italy. The government mobilized high-speed trains to transfer hundreds of patients to relieve overwhelmed regional hospitals. It spent tens of billions of euros to support businesses and workers, softening the crippling effects of the lockdown.

But challenges, like that from Sceaux, population 20,000, to the authority of the state have been met with a stiff rebuke, regardless of the shifting understanding of the virus.

France's interior minister quickly condemned Sceaux's mask ordinance as a threat to "fundamental freedoms," and the Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, overturned it. The city of Nice, which was about to make masks mandatory, backed down.

Critics say the French state's shutting down of any challenges was a sign of weakness by a government left in a defensive crouch after it failed to quickly grasp the threat.

Even after the coronavirus had raged through Asian nations, Mr. Macron and his wife, Brigitte, made a point on March 6 of attending the theater to encourage people to keep going out despite the pandemic. Eleven days later, when Mr. Macron imposed the nationwide lockdown, the virus was out of control in France, too.

In a recent interview with *Le Point*, Mr. Macron acknowledged that France became aware of the pandemic in China at the beginning of January. By Jan. 24, the first cases of Covid-19 were recorded in France.

In Asia, countries close to the epicenter of the pandemic in China, like Taiwan and South Korea, reacted quickly with contact tracing and testing, limiting official deaths to six and 246, respectively.

Despite the extra time afforded by geography, France's enduring vision of itself as a "great power" prevented it from seeking pointers in Asian nations' nimble response, said Jean-Jacques Roche, a specialist on French foreign policy at the University Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas.

"France can't compare itself to South Korea or Taiwan, it can only compare itself to another great power," Mr. Roche said. "To compare itself to countries that are not great powers is in some ways unbearable."

In a written reply, Mr. Philippe's office said that the "French state was on alert very early on," adding that hospitals and health associations were warned of the pandemic by mid-January.

The collective failure by some of the West's leading nations to respond quickly and effectively to the virus has left experts elsewhere in the world bewildered.

"Contact tracing and isolation are the basics of a response to any epidemic," said Dr. Mosoka Fallah, a Liberian epidemiologist who is managing the response to the coronavirus in his country and led contact tracing efforts there during the 2014 Ebola outbreak. "I'm really surprised that they didn't do that."

But France was — it has become clearer over the weeks — desperately short of both masks and test kits. In late February, France had the capacity to carry out only 3,000 tests a week. Even today, the weekly number of tests in France, 175,000, is a fraction of the 840,000 tests carried out weekly in Germany.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, the French authorities tracked and tested the infected in two small clusters. But they quickly ran out of capacity when a major outbreak occurred in mid-February following a large gathering at an evangelical church in the Grand Est in eastern France, the second-most affected region after Paris.

After the gathering, the church's congregation of 2,000 worshipers spread the virus across the country before the authorities realized the scale of the contamination, said Jean Rottner, the president of the Grand Est region and an emergency physician. By then, he said, "it was pointless" to try to track the people who had attended the gathering.

But in South Korea, where the first major outbreak also originated in a church, health officials did just that — quickly imposing emergency measures and retracing worshipers' movements. Those efforts stemmed the contamination.

The French government, having failed at that, imposed some of the world's tightest lockdown restrictions, confining 67 million to their homes and deploying security forces to keep people off the streets.

"It's not only medieval, but we've never experienced this in our history," said Mr. Vermeren, the historian, adding that past pandemics had put French cities under quarantine, but never confined an entire population to their homes.

As infections and deaths rose exponentially after the start of the lockdown — forcing Mr. Macron to extend it to two months — several regions in France ordered millions of masks, mainly from China. By that time, though, they were engaging in a worldwide competition for supplies that at times pitted them against their own government.

As France prepares to open up starting on May 11, some regions, feeling bitten, are hedging their bets.

Mr. Rottner, the president of the Grand Est, said that he was already ordering millions of test kits. He said he didn't want to "make the same mistake again."

[China] White House aides torn over trade hawk's proposal as President Trump weighs action on China (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 7:49 AM, Jeff Stein, Robert Costa and Josh Dawsey, 18460K, Neutral]

A debate over an executive order to boost American production of medical supplies has gripped the White House, as President Trump weighs how to confront China over the coronavirus outbreak without exacerbating the economic crisis sparked by the pandemic.

Trump has grouched about China during several recent Oval Office meetings and expressed interest in an executive order crafted by White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, the president's leading China hawk and a divisive figure within the administration. The executive order would over time require the federal government to buy medical supplies and pharmaceuticals manufactured in the United States, aiming to reduce dependency on imports and increase domestic production.

But Trump has stopped short of signing the measure. Several of Trump's confidants, including Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, have voiced reservations about embracing's Navarro strategy, according to three officials familiar with the deliberations.

The unresolved debate underscores the tensions inside the West Wing as Trump publicly expresses the desire to exact compensation from China over the coronavirus, but is warned privately against jeopardizing the chances of a U.S. economic recovery or access to medical supplies from abroad, all as he turns toward his reelection campaign.

Navarro's draft, which has circulated among senior officials for several weeks, would require the federal government to only purchase essential medical equipment and pharmaceuticals manufactured in America. Navarro has argued it would make the United States less dependent on foreign nations for critical medical supplies. The order gives firms substantial time to figure out the new requirements, reducing the shock it could have on prices and production, two former officials familiar with its contents said.

Although it has the support of some officials at the State Department and the National Security Council, Mnuchin and several business leaders close to Trump are averse to making a major push on supply chains at a fragile moment for the economy, they said. And Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner, shares Mnuchin's caution about Navarro's push to do this executive order at this time, two officials said, and has been focused on responding to the pandemic.

Some White House aides privately insist the order could still be approved, but others say it could be stuck in the Office of Legal Counsel under review for weeks to come since it lacks sufficient support within Trump's inner circle. Still, the lag on Trump's signature has frustrated some of Navarro's allies inside and outside the administration.

Officials interviewed for this story spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak frankly about sensitive internal deliberations.

The internal struggle over Navarro's proposal highlights a long-standing White House rift over China that has gained new dimension and significance as the president considers his response to Beijing's handling of the coronavirus.

For decades, Trump has assailed his predecessors for being weak in confronting Beijing,

arguing the Chinese have for decades exploited clueless American politicians to ravage the U.S. economy. In White House coronavirus news conferences, he has repeatedly returned to the trade deal with China reached by his administration last year.

"In the history of any country, nobody has been ripped off like the United States by China — and many other countries. And we stop it," Trump said at a White House press briefing last week. "Nobody has been tougher before the deal ever, on China, than Trump."

But confronted with a deadly global pandemic that originated in China and devastated the U.S. economy, Trump has appeared at times ambivalent in his response. The president initially praised Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's handling of the outbreak, saying Xi is doing "a very good job with a very, very tough situation." When the virus spread to the United States, Trump resisted major swipes at Xi and instead targeted his fury at the World Health Organization. Senior aides say this a way for Trump to vent and reassure his base that he is battling an organization with ties to China, even if he's not battling China and Xi daily.

Trump has sometimes stuck to a "wait-and-see" approach, suggesting China may not bear responsibility for the outbreak and ensuing damage.

"If it was a mistake, a mistake is a mistake," Trump said last week of China and the coronavirus. "But if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences."

At other times, Trump has struck a more aggressive tone. On Monday, the president strongly suggested the United States would seek hundreds of billions of dollars in damages from China because of the virus.

"We haven't determined the final amount yet. It's very substantial," Trump said. "This is worldwide damage."

Inside the administration, some officials are wary of an aggressive confrontation with Beijing. In private discussions, Mnuchin, Kushner and their allies have warned that Trump could jeopardize critical protective gear for American medical workers if the White House ramps up its attacks on Xi or accedes to Navarro's demands for remaking the U.S. supply chain. They have also urged Trump to wait to act until further investigations of China's role are concluded, officials said.

"Nobody except Peter wants to slam China over and over again, because we're going to need what China is making, whether it's equipment or a vaccine down the road, you never know," one White House official said.

Navarro, 70, has for decades blamed China for many of America's most serious social and economic problems and feels vindicated by the outbreak, according to three people he has spoken to in recent weeks. Navarro warned in private memos in January about the danger posed by the coronavirus, and circulated to White House advisers an "official coronavirus response plan," which included PowerPoint slides and other written materials about the potential impact of the virus, one person familiar with the documents said.

Navarro has accused China of creating the virus and using the deadly outbreak to

"profiteer" off the world's pain. Chinese officials have adamantly denied this. Regardless, Navarro has asserted Beijing created the virus in a government laboratory, then "knowingly hid" proof of its spread. He, and others pushing this theory, have not produced any evidence to back up their claim. Allying China committed "four kills" in its handling of the virus, Navarro has said the Chinese bought the world's supply of personal protective gear, then deliberately sold those goods back to the world at inflated prices.

"The Chinese effectively declared war. They spawned that virus," Navarro said on Fox News on Saturday.

In an interview, Navarro said the proposed executive order was not aimed at China or any other specific country but instead intended to secure the United States' ability to produce critical medicines, supplies, and equipment. Navarro said he and other administration officials are focused on the current crisis of rapidly mobilizing and repurposing industrial capacity to meet U.S. demand.

More than 75 other nations have imposed export restrictions on crucial medical supplies, which Navarro said demonstrates "how countries realistically act in their own self-interest to the exclusion of others when globalist push comes to nationalist shove."

"This is a defensive measure for the American people not aimed at any other country," Navarro said. "Onshoring America's public health industrial base is both a national imperative and the logical conclusion to draw from a pandemic that has exposed the weak underbelly of globalized supply chains and the risks of not domestically producing your essential medicines and medical countermeasures."

Navarro has in recent days circulated Pew polling data showing a sharp turn in public sentiment against China. Bipartisan proposals have emerged in the Senate to require onshoring of U.S. pharmaceutical supplies. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) has introduced legislation requiring firms to return production to the United States, while numerous Republican senators, including White House ally Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), have argued that China "needs to pay" for the pandemic and face sanctions for its role in the virus.

Leading Democrats such as Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) have also called for Trump to act more aggressively toward China. Former vice president Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, recently released an ad attacking Trump for not being sufficiently tough on China.

"Everybody I talk to in the Senate is thinking about how Communist China has treated America as an adversary. Even the globalists, even those who say we need a free economy — they look at it now and say, 'The coronavirus is the tipping point that pushed it over the edge,'" Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) said. "Peter has been clear in his belief that China is an adversary and not to be trusted, and the coronavirus has shown he's been right."

Navarro may prove too personally polarizing within the White House to push Trump toward confrontation. Navarro's memos on coronavirus, for example, were disregarded by other administration officials. Administration communications officials worry about Navarro on TV and have sought in the past to keep him off the air. "Peter sends a lot of memos," one

official said.

Navarro has repeatedly clashed with top administration officials, recently questioning the medical judgment of Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's leading infectious-disease expert.

Former White House economic adviser Gary Cohn tried sidelining Navarro by assigning him to an office that "amounted to a broom closet," one former senior administration official said.

Some international trade experts warn Navarro's demands could have devastating consequences for Americans on the front-lines of responding to the pandemic, arguing that foreign countries could devastate U.S. access to supplies through retaliation. Earlier this month, the Trump administration faced an international backlash when it tried to impose additional controls on exports of American-made PPE. Canada, for instance, manufactures a specialized tree pulp the United States imports for production of its masks. The administration later added significant exemptions to its proposed restrictions.

"You're exposing yourself to retaliation," said Chad Bown, a trade expert at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, who is critical of Navarro. "You're making yourself vulnerable to being cut off from supplies from other countries. It's a huge benefit to have access to international markets to have a diverse source in a time of need."

But others say the United States must try to force production back to domestic soil. "The notion that an angry Chinese government would limit medicine and PPE imports on which we are incredibly reliant in retaliation for the U.S. enacting policies to incentivize more domestic manufacturing of such supplies precisely spotlights why it's critical to expand domestic capacity," said Lori Wallach, a trade expert at Public Citizen, a left-leaning organization.

Bob Bland, founder of Masks for America, which has secured hundreds of thousands of masks for nurses across the country, said the United States' dependence on China for personal protective gear has dramatically undercut its ability to protect its front-line medical personnel.

"Countries all over the world are realizing we don't have the ability to make any of this locally, but local production is the only way to scale up quickly enough and avoid price gouging," Bland said. "The answer to that has to be regional production for PPE. It would give us a fighting chance against pandemics like this in the future."

[China] Seeking Real Voices in China, Despite Censorship and Fear (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 2:10 AM, Raymond Zhong, 40577K, Negative]

In retrospect, one of the bigger regrets I have about my time in China is that I never took up smoking.

I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. Nothing helps you talk to strangers in China like a cigarette. Whenever I wanted to find out what was going on inside a big company, I would look for someone outside an office or factory having a nicotine break. A shared smoke is a way to freeze time. And for a foreign reporter in a place where people aren't always eager

to speak to foreign reporters, even a little extra time can make the difference between a good interview and no interview at all.

Access to regular people in China might be the part of foreign correspondents' jobs there that the Chinese authorities find hardest to control, though they certainly try. With a dose of charm and persistence from a reporter, people do open up, despite the country's rigid curbs on speech and thought.

Last month, though, the Chinese government cut off that access for me and almost all of the other Americans working for The Times, The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post, ordering us out of the country as part of the intensifying standoff between the Trump administration and Beijing.

I spent much of my two years in China covering that standoff, and from the great heights at which we journalists often write about such matters — through politicians' statements and government policies, through trade data and corporate decisions — it could seem as if titanic forces in both nations were drawing them inexorably toward conflict.

But the situation usually looked different when speaking to ordinary people in China. Like people everywhere, they tend to be less dogmatic and more curious about the world than their leaders. Seen through their eyes, the wider costs of the hostility came into focus, as did the degree to which it was driven by anxieties that felt distant to the communities most directly affected by it.

Last year, for instance, I went to the southern city of Zhuhai to visit a plant run by the American manufacturer Flex. The Trump administration was clamping down on one of Flex's customers, the Chinese tech giant Huawei, and the company was letting workers in Zhuhai go.

In the baking August heat, I met Zhan Yuanxian, 38, who had just turned in his employee ID. He said it was hard to be mad at Flex or the United States for what happened. Over the years, the company's presence had transformed a once-rough part of the city, bringing in shops, restaurants and housing.

Another employee, Gong Yian, said working at Flex was good but had been even better before, when the company flew in foreigners to run the plant. Lately, more bosses were Chinese, he said, and they ruled with an iron fist.

In the beginning, "if we weren't working, we'd feel bad," Mr. Gong said. "As more Chinese came in, it became management by oppression."

The next day, in the nearby city of Dongguan, I met Bruce Xu, whose company made cowboy boots for the American market. He was dreading the next wave of tariffs. But he was equally concerned for his American customers, whom he visited regularly.

I asked him what he thought of the United States.

"America is better than China," he said. It's cleaner, and the people are better mannered. In the United States, "you can't even smoke," he said. "No matter which floor you live on, you

have to run downstairs and go outside to smoke."

Using a handful of interviews to find the true pulse of a nation of 1.4 billion might seem foolhardy. But it beats the alternatives — like scanning social media, for instance. Recently, as the Chinese government beefs up its online propaganda, censorship and disinformation efforts, it is becoming nearly impossible to tell, through the digital veil, what people in China actually think.

When social media mobs attacked the N.B.A. last year for an executive's tweet supporting the Hong Kong protests, how much did that tell us about nationalist sentiment in China, and how much did it merely reflect the efficacy of Beijing's paid internet trolls? If someone got angry after reading a state propaganda outlet, did that person's outrage count as manufactured or genuine? What did it even mean to be genuinely offended? All the layers of unreality could be suffocating.

Even face to face with people in China, it could be tough to have real conversations, and not just because of my distaste for nicotine. People ended interviews when they started to seem hazardous — too personal, too political. This is how the authoritarian system keeps a lid on criticism: It gives everyone reason to think that personal matters are political, that they can get in trouble just for talking about their own lives and opinions.

Often enough, though, I found people in China who were relieved that someone was finally listening.

Hog farmers pleading for aid from the local government after their herds were devastated by an incurable plague. Truckers whose incomes had been gutted by new, Uber-like apps that brought Silicon Valley efficiency to their happily inefficient industry. Recyclers driven underground by a clumsy antipollution crackdown. Coders fed up with the tech industry's callousness toward its workers.

I'm leaving China more convinced than ever of how much ordinary people can teach us about a place — which might be one reason the government was so eager for us to leave.

One of the last conversations I had in the country was with two cops in Beijing. They were helping me obtain a temporary visa so I could stay a little longer and pack up everything I owned.

Officer Shao and his partner were relaxed and friendly, seemingly unbothered by my pariah status. As we waited for my visa, they asked me about The Times. If the paper isn't controlled by the government, then who ensures that what you write is accurate? If it's all up to your editors, then who appoints your editors?

We talked about the fear and xenophobia that the coronavirus had brought out in both China and the United States. They said they had even heard that Americans were stockpiling guns, though they weren't sure if the news was fake. I was sorry to inform them that it was not.

Were those two officers the voice of real China? Maybe not. But they gave me a glimpse of

life in the country at that moment, and they put familiar things in a new light. As far as I'm concerned, that was plenty.

[China] To Confront China After Coronavirus, We Must See the Bigger Picture (Yahoo News/The National Review)

Yahoo News/The National Review [4/29/2020 6:30 AM, Lewis Libby, 12818K, Negative]

In a popular movie two decades ago, hard-eyed criminals released into Sydney a woman infected with a virus, knowing that unsuspecting Australians would catch the highly contagious disease and, traveling on, unwittingly spread death across a hundred homelands. This past winter, the hard-eyed leaders of China did worse. They allowed not one, but thousands of infected to leave China and enter an unsuspecting world, a world lulled by Beijing. The crucial question is: Why?

"China caused an enormous amount of pain [and] loss of life ... by not sharing the information they had," Secretary of State Pompeo said on April 23. America is angry, he added, and while much remains to be known, China "will pay a price."

No subpoenas, no oversight committees, no tell-all books will expose President Xi's calculations as the novel coronavirus spread inside China. The unelected of Beijing guard well their secret debates. The CCP knows the virtues of opacity, of letting uncertainty, complacency, and wishful thinking paralyze the West. Exploiting these has been its way.

In 2018, a major Trump-administration speech called CCP misdeeds to task. Some, including, notably, Japan's prime minister, applauded. But many nations looked toward their feet, too reluctant, too sophisticated, perhaps too intimidated to bestir. Staggering COVID-19 losses may yet remind the world of the dangers of drift as great powers go astray.

Today's American, European, Japanese, and Asian policymakers, like those of centuries past, bear the burdens of judgment. Uncertainty has ever been the statesman's curse. America's famed diplomat, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, has written, "Nations learn only by experience, they 'know' only when it is too late to act. But statesmen must act as if their intuition were already experience ..."

A reassessment of Xi and the CCP looms. From their actions and practices, from assessments of their motives and apparent long-term aims, today's statesmen, like their forebears, must judge future risks and craft the surest course ahead. These are early days, but the picture of Beijing presented so far is troubling.

Even before the virus spread in Wuhan, Xi brooded over a worrying hand. The CCP could not intimidate prolonged protests on the streets of freedom-loving Hong Kong. And the Party's oppression there, in determined violation of treaty commitments, spurred voters in Taiwan to rebuff Beijing's hopes for a more amenable regime in Taipei. The world was finally awakening to Xi's increasingly autocratic surveillance state, his harsh repression of Uighur Muslims, and his predatory Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's economy, essential to Xi's hold on power, had stumbled, in part because of the Trump administration's move to counter China's unfair, neo-mercantilist practices and to condemn their grim geopolitical implications. Worse yet, America's markets hummed, raising reelection hopes within the Trump administration, which had also surpassed modern predecessors in

challenging China. Rumors of Party dissatisfaction with Xi seeped out.

COVID-19's outbreak in Wuhan further darkened Xi's prospects. As long as the virus raged primarily inside China — derailing only her economy, stigmatizing only her government — his troubles would soar. All the while, the world predictably would have leapt ahead, taking Chinese customers, stealing China's long-sought glory.

The disease's spread to Berlin and Paris, New York and Tokyo, improved Xi's prospects, at least in the near term. Pandemic diverted foreign eyes from Hong Kong's and the Uighurs' plight. Desperate needs rendered disease-weakened nations more susceptible to China's goods and BRI's short-term appeal. Asian states, wary of Beijing, had new cause to doubt the commitment of a pandemic-preoccupied Washington, while a weakened economy and vastly increased debts would likely constrain future U.S. defense spending, essential to Asian security. An unpredictable element had entered into America's 2020 election.

As events unfolded, might Xi have recognized that COVID-19's leap into the wider world promised such political and geopolitical gains? Some say a desire to protect itself first fed a CCP cover-up, as if putting this before the health of innocents were not bad enough. But were CCP leaders blind, as days passed, to other benefits? It is the Chinese way, the noted French Sinologist François Jullien has written, to exploit the potential inherent in unfolding situations. CCP leaders still study China's legendary strategist, Sun Tzu, who advised centuries ago that if, "in the midst of difficulties, we are always ready to seize an advantage, we may extricate ourselves from misfortune."

As the CCP realized the imminent disaster COVID-19 posed inside China, Xi suppressed the world's appreciation of its dangers. By sometime in December, Chinese authorities had learned that a novel, highly infectious coronavirus similar to deadly SARS was on the loose. Yet for weeks PRC authorities, including China's National Health Commission, suppressed inquiries and, directly or through the WHO, misled the world about the risks. When Chinese authorities finally acknowledged human-to-human transmission, the CCP took steps to isolate Wuhan from other parts of China, but continued to permit international travel. After the U.S. on January 31, and later Australia, restricted travelers from China, Beijing's spokesmen, artful and indignant, rose to denounce such acts as ill-founded and ill-intentioned.

For days, even weeks, after the CCP first knew of the danger, Chinese authorities and customs officers let tens of thousands of travelers, infected among them, leave China and enter an unwary world. In late January, China extended Lunar New Year celebrations, inviting greater international travel. PRC border guards stamped more exit papers. When America restricted such travelers, Beijing allowed more to leave for less cautious lands.

Then, as pandemic gripped the world, the CCP brazenly blamed America for COVID-19. Xi once more preened over his authoritarian "China model's" efficiencies, now cauterizing troubles he denies having caused. In Europe, Beijing postured as a savior offering needed medical supplies — albeit that its sales favored states where it sought geopolitical gains, often bore high prices, included defective products that could undermine defenses, and drew on CCP surpluses bolstered by January purchases of world supplies at pre-pandemic prices. In Southeast Asia, Beijing proved "relentless in exploiting the pandemic," a respected, former high-level Filipino bemoans, as it pushed its "illegal and expansive"

territorial claims. Inside China, the Party seized the moment to round up leaders of Hong Kong's democracy movement and reassert unilateral efforts to curtail the city's special, self-governing status.

Even after the virus began to spread inside China, events might have taken a different course. Many had once hoped for better from CCP leaders. Dreams of a mellowing CCP had floated widely among academics and policy elites, perhaps buoyed by the way such illusions avoided, rather than imposed, hard choices. Some yet hold to such views. The benign CCP of their reveries would have alerted others promptly as the novel virus's dangers became known, shared information, welcomed foreign scientists, ceased reckless practices, and guarded against the pandemic's spread.

Indeed, under different leadership, China could have followed such a path. Traditions of humane governance, venerable and Confucian, are not alien to that land. China's ancient text, the Tao-te Ching, favors just such a response:

"A great nation is like a man:

When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.

Having realized, he admits it.

Having admitted it, he corrects it.

He considers those who point out his faults

As his most benevolent teachers."

The learned will debate how much such leadership would have eased the wider world's suffering. Metrics and estimates will vary, but the consensus will be clear enough: The harm would have decreased manyfold.

Such openness and grace have not been Xi's way. As he built up islets in the South China Sea, he promised never to militarize them, then dishonored his promise, disregarded international rulings, and dispatched ships in packs to intimidate neighboring states and expand Beijing's writ. Pledging to protect intellectual property, he enabled ongoing theft and coercion, ineluctably undermining industries of the advanced democracies, and then pressed forward on China's newly gained advantages. His BRI professes to aid, then exploits poor countries' weaknesses. Citing the betterment of all in the cause of greater China, he has imprisoned Uighurs, undermined Tibetan culture, and threatened the peaceful regional order that had enabled China's rise. He violates treaty commitments to curb Hong Kong's freedoms. Behind an anti-corruption façade, his prosecutors ruined scores of his rivals, as he consolidated and extended his personal powers. These wrongs he continues still. Xi's are not the ways of grace and remorse.

An angry narrative drives this man. Under his hand, the CCP highlights Chinese suffering and humiliation roughly a century ago under Western and Japanese imperialists, while eliding the democratic world's helping hand and Japan's benign democracy over four generations since. He slides past the Chinese millions massacred in the intervening

decades by the CCP and Mao — China's legendary leader who spread cruelty and death as he judged useful. In imitation of Mao, Xi has issued his own "little red book" of wisdom. Mao's iconic image looms over Tiananmen still. Coveting Mao's autocratic power, Xi strove and won it; now he dare not let it go.

The bitter recall of ancient Chinese glories; resentment of past humiliations; insecurity bred by corruption and illegitimacy; disdain, even hatred of America's easy ways — these are the pathogens coursing through Xi's circle. A fever for Chinese primacy burns among them. For a time, they might pander to a Western-inspired, rules-based order, a liberal conceit; but this is not their dream. A historic economic rise, technological mastery, a rapidly expanding navy, all causes to be proud of, have freed them to be brazen. Xi now bares the teeth Deng Xiaoping's smile hid. From South China Sea islets to the New Silk Road's arid ends, the CCP, ruthless and defiant, pounds the stakes it holds to advance its aims. For Xi's CCP, it is the fate of small states to bend to the strong.

Rules should soon be theirs to set, the CCP believes, and not without some reason. Before Trump, a subtle and experienced Chinese diplomat confessed, CCP leaders marveled at America's ineffectual response. In the South and East China Seas, on India's long border, Beijing's hostile and determined quest had followed Lenin's line: "Probe with bayonets, if you find mush, you push; if you find steel, you withdraw." It is to our shame, Trump observed on China's unfair trade practices, that Beijing had not been held to account by prior administrations. Unanswered, history has shown, the ambitious calculate and, at times, miscalculate.

In past American forbearance, CCP leaders have seen a once great power on the wane. In foreign capitals they confided, inside China they proclaimed: It will soon be America's turn to bend. They claim their own version of the right side of history.

The keys to victory, Sun Tzu counseled, lie in knowing your enemy and deceiving them. The cunning men of Beijing have taken heed. They have an instinct for a divided, self-doubting, and weary West. Cloaking their aggressions in ambiguity, they weigh the likely costs against desired gains.

Straining to contain COVID-19, President Trump and Secretary Pompeo rightly extend a hand to international, including Chinese, cooperation. But in post-pandemic days to come, the democracies must carefully take the measure of the CCP and hold it to account, crafting strategies for what it is, not what they wish it to be. That is leadership's task.

The late, great professor Fouad Ajami warned, "Men love the troubles they know" — too ready to slip into a comfortable neglect, too reluctant to face strategic change. Some cite an arc of history, he lamented, to hide behind, hoping it might bear the burdens they would rather shun.

With all doubts resolved in their favor, the untouchable leaders of the CCP have much for which to answer. Perhaps in reality, even more.

In a time of death, Ajami cautioned: "There is no fated happiness or civility in any land." As a great river may abruptly rise or fall, "Those gauges on the banks will have to be read and watched with care."

[China] The GOP's No. 1 coronavirus China hawk (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 4:30 AM, Burgess Everett, 4207K, Neutral]

Investment banker Warren Stephens was on the phone with Sen. Tom Cotton in January, when the Arkansas Republican gave an abrupt goodbye.

"I gotta go. I've got a meeting at the White House. This virus deal in China, we're behind the curve on this thing," Stephens recounted Cotton telling him. "I said: 'Whoa whoa whoa, what do you mean?' 'Cause you know at that time, it was nowhere."

Since January, the first-term senator has warned that China was covering up the lethality of the disease and doing little to stop what became a global pandemic — taking his coronavirus concerns to President Donald Trump and the Department of Health and Human Services. He says Washington must "exact a very steep price" from China in the months to come.

So, as the rest of the Republican Party now races to condemn China as the disease's greatest villain, Cotton finds himself with a three-month head start.

And with a series of ambitious Republican senators and governors beginning to maneuver to succeed Trump in 2024, Cotton is front and center in the debate over the GOP's future. His emergence as the party's fiercest China hawk could position him well regardless of Trump's fate in November.

And as usual, the sharp-edged Cotton is taking it to the max.

"Their criminal negligence allowed what could have been a health outbreak in Wuhan to become a devastating global pandemic," Cotton said in a telephone interview. "Their malign, deliberate actions to send the virus around the world by allowing international travel to continue in December and January represents just how little regard for human life they have."

Cotton wants American citizens to be able to sue Chinese officials for the economic and public health fallout from the pandemic and move production of key medical supplies to the United States from China. He says he will seek to attach that legislation to upcoming must-pass coronavirus bills, which could have the Senate debating China's culpability in a matter of weeks.

And he's stepping up his rhetoric too, asserting that "senior leaders in Beijing made a deliberate and calculated decision" to keep air travel flowing out of China. The Chinese government, he said, "did not want to see a relative diminution of their power as against the rest of the world, especially against the United States."

It's vintage Cotton: Take a hard-line position early and go for the jugular in an uncompromising manner.

The senator is also playing a notable role in Congress' coronavirus rescue efforts, serving as a vocal advocate of direct payments to Americans in previous discussions, though he now advocates a go-slow approach to the next big tranche of aid.

Regardless, the 42-year-old Arkansan has long been a young man in a hurry.

After attending Harvard and taking classes from then-law professor Elizabeth Warren, Cotton joined the Army. After he returned from service in the Middle East, Stephens recalls Cotton telling him he was going to run for the House. Stephens tried to dissuade him, arguing he was not well-known enough in the state GOP, but Cotton plunged in anyway: "My advice to him was to not do it."

Cotton won, and just two years later, defeated a longtime Democratic incumbent to join the Senate. Now as his first term winds down, he finds himself firmly in the national mix with other high-profile Republicans vying to take the White House in 2024 or beyond.

"He's certainly never said that to me," said Stephens, who runs a private equity firm based in Arkansas, of whether Cotton is plotting to be president. "But, you know, he'd be a really good one."

Cotton himself spurns talk of higher office. He says his focus is on restarting the economy, winning reelection in a race in which he has no Democratic opponent and bringing China to heel.

But targeting China is an increasingly popular position in the Republican Party, so much so that Senate Republican strategists distributed a memo advising GOP candidates to concentrate their fire on China in the battle for the Senate. Even some Democratic senators are also asking tough questions.

Cotton drew several critical headlines in February for suggesting that the virus could have come from research labs in Wuhan. Some reporting has bolstered Cotton's statements, but there is no consensus in either the medical or political world on the matter.

Many lawmakers in both parties are careful about how closely to link Chinese labs with the virus.

"I think it is possible," said Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.). "I for one don't know where it came from, but we certainly should find out."

Cotton is as certain as ever.

"The presence of two different virology labs in Wuhan forces any reasonable and responsible leader to at least ask the question if the virus could have emerged in those labs," Cotton said in the interview. "It's not conclusive and it rarely is in the world of intelligence, but all of the evidence we have at this point points to those labs."

Cotton spoke to Trump in January and lobbied him to ban flights to China. Now Trump cites the travel ban multiple times a day when defending his national leadership. Cotton also urged Americans to leave China and in early February warned coronavirus would likely become a pandemic, more than a month before the World Health Organization made it official.

Some critics say he could have done more.

"If you were so clever and saw that China was lying, then why did the president believe them?" said former Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), who served with Cotton for four years.

"You can't have it both ways. You can't say 'I saw it coming.' If you saw it coming, what did you do to stop it?" she said. "It just drives me frickin' crazy. What I'm saying is, did you write a note to yourself in your basement? Who cares if you were right. What did you do about it?"

Cotton is one of the sharpest-edged combatants in the Capitol. He led a successful effort to tank an immigration compromise Heitkamp crafted in 2018 and organized a Republican letter to Iran undermining President Barack Obama's nuclear agreement. He helped sink then-Speaker Paul Ryan's "border adjustment tax" idea and nearly stopped a popular criminal justice reform bill from becoming law.

Yet on China issues, he's been relatively bipartisan — working closely with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) on curbing Chinese influence abroad. Schumer sometimes refers to him as "Mr. ZTE," a reference to Cotton's efforts to bar the Chinese telecom company from the United States.

The Chinese Embassy did not respond to a request for comment, but it's clear the Chinese government is keenly observing the flurry of GOP rhetoric targeting its role in the spread of the disease.

"It's just all too obvious why some political forces in the U.S. have been obsessively attacking China using the pandemic as a weapon," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang on Monday. "We firmly oppose the attempts of some people in the U.S. to grab more votes and undermine China's interests by smearing China."

But even Republicans with wildly different dispositions than Cotton praise his early warnings on China.

"Sen. Cotton is absolutely right to point the finger at China and to make sure the world knows from where this virus came and why we collectively had a delayed response to it," said Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah), the party's 2012 nominee. "You have to tip your cap to Sen. Cotton."

**[North Korea] Where's North Korea's Kim? Let's see what the satellites say.
(Washington Post)**

Washington Post [4/29/2020 1:17 PM, Simon Denyer, Neutral]

In the spycraft arts of trying to peer into the world's most secretive regime, commercial satellite images have become an indispensable power.

It is the North Korean version of Kremlinology adapted for the modern age — with images taken from orbit a key part of trying to monitor Pyongyang's missiles, nuclear sites and more. Now, the views from commercial satellites offer potential clues as the world tries to figure out Kim Jong Un's whereabouts.

New satellite images of luxury boats owned by the North Korean leader have been spotted at his villa in the coastal resort of Wonsan, providing more evidence that Kim is probably holed up by the beach, according to NK Pro, a specialist news and analysis service based in Seoul.

The revelation comes days after satellite photos also showed what is probably Kim's personal train parked at a railway platform reserved for his use near the villa in Wonsan, according to researchers at 38 North, a website affiliated with the Stimson Center.

As rumors swirl about Kim's health, they provide some of the best evidence yet that reports of Kim's demise might be premature. But they certainly do not show whether he is fit and well.

North Korea watchers still pore over the phrasing of state media reports and the placement of officials at important events for clues about what is in Kim's mind, for hints of ideological debates and power struggles, for clues about who is up and who is down among his entourage — and sometimes even for signs of who might have been executed or imprisoned.

The satellite image scrutiny usually goes for bigger targets such as military activity. But the current analysis into Kim's personal world reinforces how much North Korea remains a puzzle to the world despite Kim's groundbreaking outreach to South Korea and the United States, including two summits with President Trump.

But the experts at NK Pro, 38 North and other specialist groups now have access to regular eyes in the sky from commercial services Planet and Maxar, as well as less frequent historical images from Google Earth.

Images come in every day and are scoured for clues about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs: a trailer being parked here, steam coming from a facility there, scaffolding or a platform being put up somewhere else.

But they are also being used to look for planes, motorcades, trains and boats.

It's like a giant game of "Where's Waldo?" — with an entire country to scour and just a few clues.

"In a country like North Korea, there's no noise when it comes to luxury facilities," said Colin Zwirko at NK Pro. "It's only Kim family facilities. There's no other people that could be just freely enjoying boat parties or having mansions in remote places."

When reports emerged that Kim might have had a cardiovascular operation at a hospital near Mount Myohyang on April 12, experts looked for confirmation from the skies.

Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, reportedly died at a mansion on the top of the mountain in 1994, although that mansion was demolished in 2012. There are still some villas in the area, but no obvious signs in satellite photos of unusual activity, said Zwirko.

There was also talk that Kim might have attended a missile test near Wonsan on April 14.

The complex at Wonsan on North Korea's east coast has a private beach, guest villas, a horse racing track and a basketball court, and it is believed to be one of Kim's favorite places to stay.

First, 38 North spotted that Kim's train had arrived at Wonsan sometime between April 15 and April 21. It was still present April 23, "when it appeared to be repositioned for departure," 38 North reported.

On Tuesday, Zwirko announced that he had spotted an approximately 60-meter (200-foot) leisure boat positioned for use in the villa's private harbor, as well as two other large leisure boats used by Kim in the area. The main boat was seen in a photograph when basketball star Dennis Rodman visited Kim and went to Wonsan in 2013, and it is believed to have a pool on board under a roof.

But Zwirko also did what he called a baseline survey, cross-checking years of satellite imagery against state media reports and NK Pro's own database.

He has spotted Kim's train at Wonsan on eight occasions since 2013. On seven, he was able to confirm that Kim was staying at Wonsan or attending an event in the area.

Similarly, he has listed 23 occasions since 2013 when the boats were taken out of storage and placed ready for use. On 14 of those occasions, he was able to confirm that Kim had been in the area.

In other words, he said, the boat appears to be brought out of storage for Kim to use. Along with the train, the images indicate that the leader is likely to be staying at Wonsan, an assessment backed by senior South Korean officials with access to intelligence reports.

That does not mean that Kim is in perfect health, although a flurry of official letters in his name suggests to many observers that he is at least alive and conscious.

The alternative, of course, is that North Korea is playing an elaborate trick to buy time — issuing statements, moving boats and trains around — to fool the outside world.

"What I can conclude from my research is that there has been a high correlation of these boat activities in Wonsan when Kim is around," said Zwirko. "And I would expect this to be no different, unless the theory of purposefully moving boats around to trick us is true. I have confidence that the pattern should hold — the boat movement activities indicate a high chance he's in the area."

Chad O'Carroll, who founded NK Pro, said commercial satellite images are really helping with investigations of contemporary issues in North Korea in ways that simply were not possible when Kim's father and predecessor, Kim Jong Il, died in 2011.

"What people have been able to do recently with the train out at Wonsan and now the boats, it's really impressive and probably worries the North Koreans somewhat because this technology is only going to keep improving," he said. "And by another 10 years from now, just imagine what we'll be able to see — it should be pretty mind-blowing."

[North Korea] Amid health worries, Kim Jong Un's role looms large (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 2:01 AM, Foster Klug, 2194K, Neutral]

New rumors about Kim Jong Un pour in daily. The North Korean leader is dead. Or he's very ill. Or maybe he's just recuperating in his luxury compound.

As speculation about his health builds, an underlying question looms for professional spies, outside policymakers, academics and curious news-consumers alike.

What do we really know about the man who leads North Korea?

The answer is crucial because Kim's intentions, and the as-yet-unknown state of his health, play an outsized role in the workings of Northeast Asia, an uneasy collection of wary neighbors at the best of times and home to two of the three biggest economies in the world and a huge buildup of American military machinery and manpower.

Sandwiched amid goliaths, North Korea is a small, impoverished, extraordinarily proud nation that through sheer force of will — and a relentless cult of personality built around a single family — has been at the center of a half-century security headache for its neighbors.

No matter how successful China, South Korea and Japan become — and their collective transformation from war, poverty and domestic infighting into political and economic might has been spectacular — North Korea, and its single-minded pursuit of nuclear-tipped missiles meant to protect the Kim family, has made it impossible to ignore, holding the region and Washington hostage to its narrow ambitions.

THE DISAPPEARANCE

There's not much to go on here despite the building media coverage.

Some unconfirmed, lightly or unsourced news reports say that he is in fragile condition or even a vegetative state following heart surgery.

The South Korean government, however, maintains that Kim still appears to be in power and that there have been no signs that something big has happened in the North.

What's uncontested is that Kim hasn't appeared in public since an April 11 meeting focused on the coronavirus. This sort of vanishing act has happened before, but what has set rumors ablaze now is that for the first time as leader he missed the most important holiday of the North Korean year, the April 15 celebration of his grandfather's birth.

There have been no photographs and no video of the leader in nearly three weeks, only state media reports of him sending written greetings to world leaders or citizens of merit.

THE MAN

Those looking to understand Kim face a problem. Much of what the outside world sees is filtered through relentless North Korean propaganda meant to build him into an infallible

paragon of leadership.

Add to that vaguely sourced or misleading outside media reports and the extreme difficulty of cracking the North's ultra-secrecy surrounding anything to do with the leader, and the picture that emerges of Kim is often more mosaic than profile.

In South Korea, he is seen as both demon and statesman. He has repeatedly threatened to burn Seoul to the ground. He has also rolled out the red carpet for a visit to Pyongyang by South Korea's president and sent his own sister south for the 2018 Olympics.

In the West, portrayals of Kim often run to caricature. His broken friendship with Dennis Rodman, the former basketball star he reportedly idolized as a schoolboy; the rumors about his extreme love of cheese and his allegedly creative ways of disposing of officials who displease him.

Then there's the stunning series of summits over the last two years with the leaders of Russia, China, the United States and South Korea.

Kim was likely born in 1984 and attended boarding school for several years in Switzerland. Early on, some observers argued that his time in the West would lead him to eventually embrace Chinese-style reforms.

That has not happened so far, though he has taken a markedly different approach to leadership than his publicity-shy father, Kim Jong Il, who died in 2011.

Outside governments and experts initially questioned the ability of a man then in his 20s to lead, but Kim Jong Un quickly consolidated power. He ordered the 2013 execution of his uncle and mentor, Jang Song Thaek, who was accused of treason. Kim is also suspected of ordering the assassination of his estranged half brother, and potential rival, at a Malaysian airport in 2017.

Kim has shown a growing confidence on the world stage, most clearly with the high-stakes diplomacy that followed a run of nuclear and missile tests in 2017 that had many fearing war.

The sight of a North Korean leader meeting with his South Korean and U.S. rivals was extraordinary, though it's not yet clear whether the diplomacy will settle an uneasy region.

Kim entered 2020 vowing to bolster his nuclear deterrent in the face of "gangster-like" U.S. sanctions, and he supervised a series of weapons launches and military drills in March.

Much of what happens now will depend on Kim's health.

North Korea, despite its poverty, has long commanded world attention because of its sustained, belligerent pursuit of what it calls self-defensive measures in the face of U.S. hostility — and what critics call an illegal accumulation of nuclear bombs.

There's debate about whether North Korea ever intended to give up its nukes during the summits with Washington and Seoul. But the diplomacy seems inconceivable without Kim.

That raises fears, at a time of massive political instability, to a return to threats and increasingly powerful weapons tests meant to perfect the nuclear weapons seen as the only real guarantee of the Kim family's power.

[North Korea] Trump Isn't Ready for Kim Jong Un's Death (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 4:28 AM, Jung H. Pak, 4207K, Neutral]

The internet is ablaze with rumors, chatter and circular reporting about North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's whereabouts. U.S. and regional media have variously reported that Kim is recovering from heart surgery, in "grave danger," "in a vegetative state" or even dead, setting off a torrent of speculation about who might succeed him and the implications for regime stability. President Donald Trump did little to shed light on the rumors, stating first, "I've had a very good relationship with him. I can only say this, I wish him well," and later adding, "I do know how he's doing, relatively speaking ... You will probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future." Trump also boasted, "If somebody else were in this position, we would've been right now at war with North Korea."

Trump has often bragged about his approach to North Korea, touting his relationship with Kim in and of itself as progress toward bilateral ties and denuclearization. But Kim's absence is now showing us just how fragile Trump's approach really is.

Trump's strategy toward North Korea has consisted of sidestepping established diplomatic processes and reducing U.S. ties with North Korea to a single, superficial leader-to-leader channel. Trump's direct outreach didn't lead to any diplomatic breakthroughs: It simply gave Kim legitimacy as he continued to build up his nuclear arsenal. It also allowed Kim to shun Trump's State Department officials at all other levels, shutting down working-level talks and limiting Washington's ability to glean insights into the country. Now, with North Korea potentially facing an uncertain future, the Trump administration is ill-equipped to handle it.

Kim's absence triggers visions of massive regional disruption with catastrophic consequences. North Korea has possibly dozens of nuclear weapons, a substantial cache of biological and chemical weapons, a diverse array of ballistic missiles and a million-person military. State propaganda has made it clear that Kim alone controls these levers of military power. A power struggle in North Korea as a result of Kim's death or incapacity could lead officials to jockey for control of the regime's nuclear weapons, either to use them or sell them for cash. Such a development might invite U.S., Chinese and South Korean military intervention, setting the stage for confrontation and miscalculation that could spiral into a larger conflict.

Nuclear war or "loose nukes" isn't the only prospect worrying Washington, Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo. Internal collapse in North Korea could spark armed clashes among competing factions for control and trigger massive refugee flows, taxing the region's ability to respond.

The current pandemic would only amplify a humanitarian disaster in North Korea. Of its total population of 25 million people, North Korea has 10 million citizens who are malnourished and 8 million who lack access to clean water, making them more vulnerable to the coronavirus and other diseases. Internal instability could also unravel the state's strict measures to contain the coronavirus. Last week, the state ramped up its anti-coronavirus

campaign, including reinforcing existing border lockdowns and the inspection and quarantining of imported goods—an acknowledgement of the ongoing necessity of pandemic vigilance, even though Pyongyang still insists that it has zero infections. A few days earlier, the regime reportedly announced restrictions on some imports to “prevent the spread of the virus,” alarming North Koreans whose survival depends on smuggling and trading goods from China. Pyongyang residents this week are reportedly panic-buying, according to NK News, mirroring similar behavior around the world as a result of the uncertainty about the pandemic and availability of daily necessities. Adding to the North’s woes, one of China’s biggest cities in its northeast, close to North Korea, is tackling an outbreak of coronavirus.

The Trump administration is not ready to handle a post-Kim North Korea beset with problems. Trump’s unilateral decision in 2018 to engage directly with Kim, as well as the latter’s sidelining or purging of his negotiators since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, shriveled bilateral diplomacy between the two countries down to shallow letters between Trump and Kim. Trump has little to show for his efforts: Kim has only built a more dangerous and powerful nuclear arsenal while providing hollow assurances that he would “work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,” a pledge falling far short of previous agreements, like the Joint Statement of 2005 in which North Korea “committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.”

In the meantime, Trump’s desire for a grand deal with Kim undermined his own diplomats who have struggled to gain traction with their North Korean counterparts on even defining what “denuclearization” means. It’s hard to say how much success U.S. diplomats would have had in establishing substantive and sustained contacts had Trump not pursued his one-on-one détente, but Trump’s actions certainly didn’t help. Trump flattered Kim, postponed military exercises with South Korea, and blocked large-scale sanctions on North Korea, even as Kim continued with his missile tests and human rights violations—giving Kim little reason to invest in working-level talks with the U.S. Thus, U.S. diplomats never had a chance to establish contacts that might have proved critical now, as North Korea potentially heads toward chaos.

Trump’s gutting of the national security bureaucracy hasn’t helped. The current acting director of National Intelligence—a position that requires leading the intelligence community, a sprawling organization with 17 entities—is a political loyalist with no security or intelligence experience. Key positions on Asia and North Korea policy remain vacant or in limbo. These are the people who would ordinarily be able to help with information collection and analysis, diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and military planning in the event of Kim’s death.

Further, dealing successfully with North Korea will require China’s help. And yet Trump has been waging a war of words with the Chinese government over who’s more at fault in the coronavirus pandemic. There are plenty of reasons to be critical of Beijing’s suppression of information to hide the scale of the health crisis, but Trump might want to look more to the future: If Kim’s absence leads to a destabilizing power struggle or even internal collapse, China’s early cooperation will be necessary to stem a potential humanitarian crisis, secure North Korea’s nuclear weapons and avoid conditions that might spark armed conflict among the U.S., China and South Korea as the three sides move to protect their interests.

Trump has also reportedly scuttled a potential deal with South Korea on burden-sharing,

undermining U.S.-South Korea military readiness and the decades-old alliance, even as he requested Covid-19 testing kits from Seoul. A long-time critic of alliances, Trump for nearly a year has ignored North Korean missile tests that threaten South Korea, calling them "very standard." The perceived erosion of U.S. commitment to alliances increases the potential for North Korean adventurism and reduces the ability of the U.S. to exert influence in the region.

Trump has spent two years boasting that he has North Korea policy under control because of his personal rapport with Kim. And yet, he has been unable to use that relationship to push denuclearization or improve bilateral ties. All he's done is made the United States ill-prepared for a North Korea without Kim.

[North Korea] Who Would Succeed Kim Jong Un in North Korea? Look to Mount Paektu (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:52 PM, Timothy W. Martin and Dasl Yoon, Neutral]

For seven decades, North Korea's ruling Kim family maintained its grip on power with a simple conceit: nobody but the Supreme Leader could rule the country.

And that leader, they insisted, needed to be a Kim, a way to keep control within the family and guarantee fealty in a nation that's endured famines, economic hardship and widespread human rights abuse. Only those from the "Mount Paektu bloodline," or those with a direct lineage to the country's founder Kim Il Sung, are deemed legitimate successors.

But that design now may be a vulnerability. The conspicuous absence of North Korea's third-generation leader, Kim Jong Un, has ignited fresh debate over a question that's all but unmentionable inside the country: Who could replace him?

Mr. Kim, 36 years old, doesn't appear to have launched any formal grooming for his successor before his unexplained absence, close Pyongyang watchers say, though many believe some form of contingency planning exists.

His health status has come into question after he skipped an April 15 ceremony and hasn't reappeared publicly since. A flurry of media reports have since suggested the North Korean leader could be alive, comatose or dead.

South Korea's government, which closely monitors the North, claims to know his current whereabouts without elaborating and has repeatedly asserted he is alive. President Trump said this week he had a "very good idea" of Mr. Kim's health status and that people would hear about it "in the not-too-distant future."

There is little doubt the next leader up would be a Kim family member, though the options look limited.

The oldest of Kim Jong Un's three children is a son born in 2010, according to Seoul's spy agency. Mr. Kim's older brother is assumed to have long ago given up any political aspirations. His great uncle, a younger sibling of Kim Il Sung, is around 100. Mr. Kim's aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, only recently reappeared in public after her once-powerful husband, Jang Song Thaek, was executed for allegedly trying to overthrow the government.

That leaves Mr. Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, 32, a confidante who was recently reinstated to the country's Politburo, the top decision-making body. She has been her brother's mouthpiece of late, issuing two statements in March aimed at the U.S. and South Korea. She has attended three inter-Korean meetings, both U.S.-North Korea summits with Mr. Trump and the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

Ms. Kim's increasingly central role in domestic North Korean politics makes her a likely "official Mount Paektu bloodline successor," according to a report published Wednesday by a South Korea government-affiliated think tank.

Whether tradition-bound North Korea is ready for a female leader is the wrong question to be asking given the Kim family's entrenchment and Kim Yo Jong's credentials, said Soo Kim, a North Korean expert at Rand Corp., a policy think tank, and a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst.

"The bloodline is going to trump everything else," she said.

The "Mount Paektu bloodline" is a reference to Korea's tallest and most sacred mountain, where Kim Il Sung based his guerrilla forces battling the Japanese and where his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, was allegedly born, according to North Korean history. Historians suspect his birth place was Russia.

Though his father spent more than a decade being prepped for power, Kim Jong Un's grooming unfolded in just over a year after Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in 2008. After that, Kim Jong Un accompanied his father to inspection sites and quickly assumed leadership roles in the military and the ruling Workers' Party, becoming the equivalent of a four-star general.

"We learned Kim Jong Il would groom a successor in 2009. At the time, we couldn't even nail down how to spell Kim Jong Un's name," said Cho Sung-ryul, a researcher at the South Korean government-funded Institute for National Security Strategy.

Even after assuming power, a new Kim leader wouldn't be able to rest solely on the family name, Pyongyang watchers say. Mr. Kim exiled, jailed or executed hundreds of other senior officials—including his uncle, Mr. Jang. In 2017, his half brother Kim Jong Nam was assassinated in Malaysia, an attack that South Korean officials have blamed on North Korea, which it denies.

It's uncertain if a new Kim leader, now or in the future, would have the smarts, power and skills of the predecessors, posing a challenge to a country that's long revolved around a singular, dynastic leader, said Kongdan Oh, a Washington-based North Korea expert who has written several books on the Kim regime.

"Kim's death, if it happened now or soon, would be the beginning of a chaotic and painful process of transformation for North Korea," Ms. Oh said.

Other North Korean experts have presumed Kim Yo Jong may be pegged as a potential successor. Ms. Kim has been seen playing a supportive role, often taking notes by her

brother's side or handing him a pen. An iconic image before last year's nuclear summit in Hanoi was her trailing Kim Jong Un with an ashtray.

Domestically she is considered a powerful political figure as the second North Korean woman to become a member of the Politburo. Since 2014, she has served as deputy director of the North's propaganda and agitation department—the same role her father held before becoming the North Korean leader.

Some security analysts say Ms. Kim could take charge in Mr. Kim's temporary absence but she is too inexperienced to govern the state. But the same concerns arose about Mr. Kim in 2011 when he suddenly succeeded his father before he ultimately consolidated power.

Mr. Kim's prolonged absence, or passing, would bring significant security implications due to the North's nuclear weapons program and the possibility for domestic instability, said Lee Seong-hyon, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the Sejong Institute in Seoul.

"The death of a nuclear-state leader is a risk to the entire world," Mr. Lee said.

[Taiwan] Taiwan Emerging From Pandemic With a Stronger Hand Against China (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 8:46 AM, Iain Marlow, Neutral]

Few governments around the world are likely to emerge from the pandemic with a stronger standing than before. Taiwan is one of them – and that's not good for China.

Taiwan was forced to contain the outbreak without official help from the World Health Organization and other international bodies, thanks to China's longstanding push to isolate the democratically ruled island that it claims as its territory. For weeks, leaders in Taipei struggled to evacuate residents from the virus epicenter in Wuhan, as Beijing rejected basic conditions such as having Taiwanese medical personnel aboard the aircraft.

Around the same time, the People's Republic of China flew bombers and fighter jets around the island, prompting President Tsai Ing-Wen to scramble warplanes.

Despite those hurdles, Taiwan has led the world in its fight against the virus, with only about 400 infections and six deaths for a population of 23 million. By comparison, New York state – with slightly fewer people – had almost 300,000 cases and more than 22,000 deaths.

Taiwan's success against Covid-19 has shown that democracies could fight the virus without resorting to authoritarian measures, serving as a key rebuttal against Chinese propaganda showcasing the strength of its system against the West. Taipei's openness also contrasted sharply with the lack of transparency about the initial outbreak and subsequent diplomatic pressure from the Beijing, generating goodwill that could pay dividends in the future.

"I can't think of another issue with such global resonance that has broken so favorably for Taiwan, and so negatively for the PRC, since perhaps the Tiananmen Square massacre," said Kharis Templeman, an adviser to the Project on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

While the overall geopolitical dynamics were unlikely to change much given China's growing economic clout, Taiwan's "international stature has done well out of this crisis," Templeman said. "Taiwan has been dealing with Chinese opacity and propaganda campaigns for decades. So there's definitely some rise in sympathy for Taiwan."

A call this week between Taiwan's health minister and the Trump administration's top health official served to reinforce the island's importance to the global community, while also signaling that it could become a point of tension between the U.S. and China. Support for Taipei has surged in Washington after President Donald Trump held an unprecedented 2016 phone call with Tsai, launched a bruising trade war against Xi Jinping's government and sold Taiwan long-coveted F-16 fighter jets.

China's foreign ministry objected to the latest phone call, demanding that the U.S. "immediately correct its mistake, stop manipulating the Taiwan issue by taking advantage of the pandemic, and stop official contacts with Taiwan." The ministry urged "the U.S. side to adhere to one-China principle," referring to Washington's long-held position that the PRC is China's sole legal government.

Last year, Xi reaffirmed Beijing's desire to govern Taiwan under the same "one country, two systems" framework as the former British colony of Hong Kong. That position is deeply unpopular in Taiwan, which re-elected Tsai in a landslide in January. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party views Taiwan as a sovereign, independent nation.

For the moment, Taiwan is basking in the glow of international praise. It's won plaudits for not only stemming infections, but also pledges to ship millions of surgical masks to Europe, the U.S. and its few remaining diplomatic allies around the world that China hasn't picked off. Taipei has also held virtual seminars with countries such as India and the Philippines, according to Wang Ting-yu, a lawmaker in Tsai's party and member of Taiwan's foreign affairs and national defense committee.

"This year will be the closest moment for Taiwan to participate in international organizations," Wang said. "Not only have we shown our capability to stop the virus from spreading, we're also using democracy to stop it from spreading -- we're communicating with our people and the government and the people are on the same side fighting the virus. This message can provide a reference for the world."

Taiwan's successful virus approach – led by a National Health Command Center set up following the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, outbreak in 2003 – combined proactive testing, big data and new technologies. That included early screening of flights, the rapid identification and containment of potential cases, integrating its national health insurance and immigration databases, and ensuring quarantine compliance via mobile phone tracking. The government quickly took more than 120 separate public health measures.

In some ways, Taiwan's adversity also helped underwrite its response. Taipei has little room for error because it can't seek help from multilateral agencies and Beijing would pounce on any missteps, said Rupert Hammond-Chambers, a managing director at the consultancy Bower Group Asia.

"Today, Taiwan's standing is at a historic high," said Hammond-Chambers, who is also president of the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council. Still, he added, over the longer term "the stark reality of the PRC's financial muscle and heavy-handed political strategies will mitigate much of the positive equity Taiwan has built amongst nations."

The pandemic served as an ideal springboard for Taiwan's long-standing campaign for diplomatic inclusion. A high-profile exchange between a journalist and WHO official Bruce Aylward, who repeatedly tried to avoid mentioning Taiwan, "did a great job of highlighting the silliness of excluding what is effectively a nation of 23 million people from important international bodies," said Graeme Smith, a fellow at the Australian National University who researches China's influence across Asia.

China's veto power in many international bodies is likely to continue to keep Taiwan on the outside looking in, said Shelley Rigger, a political science professor at Davidson College and author of "Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse." Still, she said, the favorable attention Taiwan was earning would still have an impact.

"It does matter, because if things get ugly, Taiwan will benefit from a positive image and high profile," Rigger said. "And if opportunities to loosen Beijing's stranglehold on its international space do appear, Taiwan needs for people around the world to respond quickly to take advantage of them."

[Afghanistan] One thing quarantine reminds me of: My deployment to Afghanistan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Jackie Munn, 18460K, Neutral]

It's a beautiful April day. My 5-year-old son is weeding one of our garden beds while I cut into a bag of soil conditioner. We work silently in tandem, watching as people walk their dogs and children pedal past on bikes. With so many of our neighbors practicing social distancing to try to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, the outside world feels more alive than usual, reminding me what spring looked like before the Internet and social media. When you're not going to the office, no wonder people are relishing the ability to change their scenery, welcoming the reprieve of being outdoors instead of taking fresh air for granted.

My son pulls a stubborn weed and smiles as he stumbles backward. I'm grateful for our little vegetable garden and the time we're able to spend together on it. We planted one last year, but growing our own food this year, in the middle of a pandemic, seems more important. In a few weeks, we'll be able to harvest what we sowed, hopefully reducing the need for grocery shopping a little.

Lost in thought, I use my gloved fingers to poke holes into the soil, preparing it for seeds. I stop when I feel dirt collecting underneath my right index fingernail. Looking down at my gloves, an old pair of Army-issued tactical shooting gloves, I notice a small hole in the trigger finger. The material looks worn down, even beneath a new layer of dirt. The gloves remind me of wintertime shooting drills at Fort Bragg, N.C., and carrying around a rifle and body armor for 10 months in Paktia, Afghanistan. If I close my eyes, I can still feel the way the simulated leather creaks when it's gripping the handles of my M4 rifle. I realize using

combat gloves to garden is bizarre, but I enjoy the idea of repurposing them: Instead of handling bullets and smelling like gunpowder, they now smell like mulch and drive tools into the earth.

And the gloves underscore a sentiment I'd been noticing: The past several weeks of social distancing remind me a lot of my deployment to Afghanistan.

Back in 2012, I lived on a small combat outpost, the size of two football fields, that housed fewer than 150 people. I was one of four women, and if not for my female teammate, I would have felt horribly isolated. There was no grocery store, shopping mall, barber shop or amenities to occupy our time. Every day we worked out — either running multiple figure-eights across the rocky post or visiting the small plywood shed that housed the bare essentials for a gym: a squat rack, dumbbells, barbells, benches and a power cage. We ate two meals a day in a trailer converted into a kitchen before or after missions. We tried to keep regular hours when not on missions, waking up the same time each morning and going to bed around the same. We Skyped with loved ones back home and wrote emails, doing our best to keep in touch with our communities and the daily comings and goings of our families and friends. Deployments felt especially miserable because everyone back home was living a normal life. Instead of FOMO, "fear of missing out," many deployed soldiers experienced SFMO, "sadness from missing out." We missed birthdays, graduations, weddings, school plays, vacations and funerals. We were unable to say goodbye when loved ones back home died, and we were often unable to say our final goodbyes when friends died in combat. Being deployed is like putting your life on pause — going to a dangerous and uncertain place to spend months doing the exact same thing, with the exact same people, while eating the exact same food.

Being isolated at home during this pandemic is inconvenient, but at least everyone is suffering similar hardships together. My husband and I are able to spend quality time with my son, something my husband always missed when he deployed after I got out of the service — even though managing distance learning at home requires a hefty amount of patience, determination and grace. I am also, for the first time in our professional careers, able to spend more time with my husband. Instead of rushing around to and from work, from school, from gymnastics or swimming, we're able to live a much slower lifestyle. We play more board games, build puzzles, cook together and spend more time asking each other questions and telling one another stories. We've seen family on FaceTime more often in the past few weeks than we have in the past three months.

I know my family is lucky. Unlike many Americans, my husband and I are still earning paychecks, our son's teachers are still engaged in his daily learning activities, we have adequate supplies of essentials, we are in good health, and we don't have to worry about the mortgage or putting food on the table. But we're not without stress.

While I'm not on the front lines in an ER or an ICU, I do work in a public health department that cares for low-income and usually uninsured maternity patients in our outpatient clinic. We also manage the county's investigation for positive covid-19 cases, managing outbreaks, keeping track of those with symptoms, notifying their close contacts and contacting health care facilities with exposures to positive cases. The tension circulating throughout the clinic and department is palpable: Everyone's hands are chapped, and many look nervous behind their masks. As coronavirus cases and deaths rise, staff members

whisper to each other in between patients. One clinic nurse tells me her concerns about the potential for unwittingly exposing her immunocompromised husband, while another worries about her own health as an asthmatic. Before the governor of Virginia issued his stay-at-home order, nurses assigned to track covid-19 cases initially vented about positive cases not adequately isolating, or expressed frustration over close contacts who had symptoms but continued to go to work or out and about in the community.

Now that everyone is ordered to stay home, county residents with positive tests and active symptoms are monitored daily from afar. Staff listen quietly as residents detail their temperature and symptoms; many sound miserable, with audible coughs and voices that shake. It's like you can almost feel their feverish chills. Others sound healthy and normal, eagerly awaiting their isolation period to end. An Indian immigrant in his 30s who works in the food industry asked me why this happened to him. He was young and healthy, he washed his hands all the time, he tried to practice social distancing. Why him? He was just unlucky — simple as that.

It was a familiar feeling of random unfairness: Some soldiers are wounded and make it home, others don't.

At one point, one of my colleagues mentioned that she felt like the world had turned into a war zone. Some days, it certainly reminds me of the monotony and apprehension I felt in Afghanistan. For 10 months, we treated everything as a potential threat. I knew that small-arms fire, mortars or improvised explosive devices could kill me at any moment, and many times, we had no idea who the bad guys were or who was trying to harm us. It could be a farmer, a teacher or a local soldier working with us during the day, only to plot against us at night. Our team was hypervigilant pulling security on dirt roads in Afghanistan, and I notice the same creeping feelings as I go for walks around my neighborhood and local parks. I also feel it when I'm with patients, since some of them may be spreading the coronavirus without any symptoms. I have no idea whether the patients I'm seeing are infected, so I just assume that they are. It's safer to be vigilant.

But this type of vigilance can be exhausting, and it can be detrimental for those constantly on guard while working on the front lines. This type of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional fatigue can be found in every war ever fought. I worry what this pandemic will do to the mental health of health-care workers, essential employees and those without support systems. Undoubtedly, there will be those who will walk away unscathed, but there is also a decent probability that several will be casualties of this fight.

As the sun begins to set, my son walks over, handing me a packet of seeds to plant. They'll need nurturing and protection over the next several weeks to survive. We'll have to be patient, doing our best to tend to our garden, waiting patiently to see if our hard work pays off. Health-care providers across the globe will have to be like diligent gardeners or combat veterans, hoping that their efforts will yield positive results and watching out for themselves and their comrades. Similarly, we all will need to be vigilant, ready and willing to do our part, sowing the seeds for a better tomorrow.

Coronavirus News

As Coronavirus Deaths Spike in Brazil, Bolsonaro Says, 'So What?': Live Updates (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Fighting fears and travel bans, countries and businesses are trying to rescue summer vacation. In Bangkok, a high-end restaurant has transformed into an aid operation.

Faith in the central government fractures over France's coronavirus response

A couple of baguettes tucked under her arm, Maha Rambousek fiddled with a face mask that kept sliding off her nose. After a local decree made masks mandatory in public, she had quickly stitched it together, but was left confused when the policy was overturned two days later by the central government.

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right," Ms. Rambousek said. "And I can't turn to anybody for certainties."

The measure in Sceaux, a well-to-do suburb just south of Paris, was one of an increasing number of exceptional, local challenges to the government's handling of the outbreak, which has shaken confidence in a cornerstone of French society: the primal authority of the centralized state.

The city of Perpignan lodged contagious patients in a hotel after the central government told people to self-isolate at home. Officials in the city of Marseille carried out widespread testing of both the sick and healthy even as the government ordered that only the seriously ill be tested.

While France's vaunted health care system has staved off disaster, France has suffered the world's fourth-biggest death toll — now at 23,293 official deaths, behind the United States, Italy and Spain — a consequence, critics say, of the central government's failure to anticipate the onslaught of the contagion.

That failure and a critical shortage of masks and testing kits — also resulting from gaps in state policies — led to the virus's rapid early spread, prompting France to impose one of the world's strictest nationwide lockdowns, now in its seventh week.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a tentative plan on Monday to gradually reopen the country starting on May 11. Schools and businesses would start reopening, though not restaurants or cafes. He urged companies to keep their employees working at home. And he promised that masks and testing would be made sufficiently available.

But it was not clear that those steps would halt what polls show is declining confidence in the government's handling of the epidemic.

Live updates: Trump to hold virtual town hall at Lincoln Memorial on Sunday; possible health advances help lift stocks (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 4:34 PM, Kim Bellware, Mark Berman, Miriam Berger, Siobhan O'Grady, Felicia Sonmez, Meryl Kornfield, Candace Buckner, Michael Brice-Saddler and Colby Itkowitz, Neutral]

President Trump will participate in a Fox News virtual town hall Sunday evening shot live from the Lincoln Memorial. The event will include a sit-down interview with Fox anchors followed by a round of audience-submitted questions related to the reopening of the economy. The president also suggested Wednesday that he does not plan to extend federal social-distancing guidelines amid the coronavirus pandemic, noting that the country's governors will make decisions on what guidelines work best given the conditions in their states.

Meanwhile, small but significant health advances against the coronavirus sent the Dow Jones industrial average up 532 points, about 2.2 percent, to 24,634, all but ignoring sobering data that shows a U.S. economy far from being awakened from its self-induced coma. Stocks are on pace for one of their best months in decades as the nation ramps up its coronavirus tests and states take steps to awaken their economies from the weeks-long lockdown.

Here are some significant developments:

- Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said a second wave of infections is "inevitable" in the United States, which has recorded more than 1 million confirmed cases — nearly one-third of the global total.

- As antsy Americans show growing signs of "quarantine fatigue" and officials face pressure to ease restrictions, factories, malls and state governments in many parts of the country are taking steps toward reopening.

- 'Frostbite' toes and 'second-week crashes' are among the curious and sometimes dangerous phenomena among some covid-19 patients that have caught the interest of medical experts in recent weeks.

- The U.S. economy shrank by 4.8 percent from January through March as it saw the worst slowdown in growth since the Great R

- Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe warned that holding the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 will be "impossible" if the pandemic is not contained.

- Signaling confidence that it has contained the virus, China scheduled its big legislative meetings for late May. The "Two Sessions" meetings had been postponed at the height of the outbreak.

UN warns coronavirus fallout will lead to the next pandemic – global starvation (FOX News)

FOX News [4/29/2020 2:00 PM, Hollie McKay, Negative]

The next global pandemic may very well be a hunger pandemic as a result of the fallout from coronavirus.

While the World Health Organization warns that stringent guidelines need to stay in place to combat the spread of COVID-19, fellow United Nations agency World Food Program (WFP) believes that it will lead to an uptick in global poverty and starvation, and the response to

the virus itself may end up killing more people by the end of 2020.

Last week, WFP's executive director David Beasley cautioned the UN Security Council that the risk of large-scale famine in much of the developing world was now "of biblical proportions" as a result of the global pandemic.

"While dealing with a COVID-19 pandemic, we are also on the brink of a hunger pandemic," Beasley told the council. "There is also a real danger that more people could potentially die from the economic impact of COVID-19 than from the virus itself."

Even before the outbreak, 2020 was on track to be the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II due to the ongoing wars in places like Yemen, Syria and South Sudan, compounded with natural disasters and desert locust swarms across Africa.

That grim reality has been exacerbated by efforts to curb the coronavirus, which has led to cratering economies, mass job losses and crashing oil prices.

"We can confidently state that levels have risen. Quarantine regulations, shipping challenges, and overall supply chain issues are compounding and adding to previously existing starvation conditions," Ian Bradbury, CEO of the Canada-based humanitarian organization 1st NAEF, told Fox News.

"We can expect more global deaths due to secondary impacts of COVID-19 than the virus itself — the World Food Program currently estimates that 265 million will be on the brink of starvation by the end of the year."

At the beginning of 2020, some 130 million were already facing dire levels of hunger. That figure could now more than double the number of people facing acute hunger to 265 million by the end of this year.

As it already stands, 820 million people globally are considered undernourished, according to UN statistics, with 22 percent of children younger than 5 classified as "stunted" as a consequence of malnutrition.

Almost 700 million people, roughly 9 percent of the planet's population, are "severely food insecure" and nearly two billion — one in four — are assessed as "moderately or severely food insecure."

That statistic is expected to rise as the planting, harvesting and transporting of food items has been dwindling, and the almost 400 million children who rely on schools for meals can no longer attend. Experts have cautioned that while rashes of hunger have long been experienced in different pockets of the globe, never before has it been experienced on such a global scale.

"My father was killed in the war, and my brother and I work to care for our family. The [impact] that this sickness has created on us means that everything has become more expensive, and so the money we make is not enough to meet our monthly needs," Suleiman Hussein Suleiman, a 22-year-old logistics worker from Hemo village in Syria, decried.

"We lived in hardship before, and now it is even harder. It is hard for us to find food every day. If things go on like this, the people will erupt like a volcano — they will say, 'Better that we go back to work and die of coronavirus than that our children starve to death!'"

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, barely recovered from years of fighting ISIS, many are expressing the renewed challenges of struggling to find work and the loss of dignity that comes with that.

"The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact [on us] as it has on many countries around the world. We announced strict measures from the very start of the pandemic and put in place a series of regulations that helped contain the number of our cases and avoid overwhelming our health system," said Jutiar Adil, a spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). "Financially, we're feeling the pinch."

And in the already famished and crumbling Venezuela, which has been embattled with closures and stay-at-home orders, locals are further feeling the pangs of daily life.

"Besides hunger, as there is no food, nor gasoline which truly complicates life, tension and even paranoia has become an everyday issue for me and others I talk to, friends and other people. The quarantine is taking a big toll in my life besides everything else I have been dealing with," said Aidiana Martinez, a 41-year-old living in the capital, Caracas. "[The food shortages] are getting so bad that it is hard to explain."

Maria Teresa Herrera, a 39-year-old administrator in Caracas, concurred that everyday decisions are a weighing up of life and death.

"I live in constant fear, thinking if I get contagious, I will pass it to my daughter, but if I don't go to work, my daughter will starve. This is terrifying," she continued. "It is complicated to find food, first because of the new schedule for stores ... and also the total lack of gasoline, affecting even the transportation chain of the limited food that is distributed. I am terrified this pandemic can go on for way more time, then we will die from starvation and COVID."

Lilia Martinez, a 45-year-old banker in Caracas' Baruta Municipality, stressed that "poverty had reached inhuman levels before this crisis, and now there is no immediate or near future light of recovery."

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan many contend that life has become untenable.

"It has been three months now that I haven't gotten any salary from office, and I am hardly surviving, and it is getting more difficult to come over home expenses. My brother's business is also going below zero because of the lockdown," said Zaki Nadry, a 27-year-old Kabul-based government official. "Poverty has become worse as you see more beggars in the streets. Daily laborers are suffering because of no daily projects, which have made them turn to beggars as well."

In many countries, especially those in Africa that have largely avoided a direct hit from the virus, the tight restrictions have induced a sense of sheer frustration. While the likes of Zimbabwe have only documented 32 confirmed coronavirus cases and four deaths, the fear

of overwhelming the already fragile health care system has meant a continued government-mandated lockdown — and subsequently, thousands going to bed hungry.

In Kenya earlier this month, dozens were injured and two people died in a stampede in a rush to obtain food handouts. In Colombia, those starving are tying red clothing items outside their homes to signal their empty stomachs.

Dominique Burgeon, director of Emergency and Resilience Division of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has also issued warnings urging governments to do everything possible to keep trade avenues and supply chains functioning, underscoring that "now more than ever, we need international cooperation and supply arrangements to preserve the fluidity of global food markets."

Food security experts are also lamenting that funding from donor nations, organizations and individuals is fast drying up due to economic assault that the novel pathogen has cast on much of the world, meaning that the monies necessary to deliver humanitarian relief in some of the hardest-hit areas may all but fall apart.

The WFP estimates that they require an immediate injection of \$350 million to keep operations afloat, bemoaning that only about a quarter of the sum been met.

"We have to keep our food security programs running, not only because of increased needs from COVID-19 but also because war and violence continue and the needs that existed before all of this are still there," noted Elizabeth Shaw, a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). "In East Africa, it is now the most important planting season. We have to get the seeds and farming tools out to people now, or they won't have things to eat come July or August."

Nonetheless, the widespread lockdowns and travel prohibitions also present unprecedented logistical hurdles for many charities and nongovernmental organizations that are no longer able to reach the hungry and those most in need, especially in far-flung places.

It is anticipated that the impact will not only be felt everywhere from Africa and Asia to the Middle East and Central America, but will deeply scar Americans struggling to make primary ends meet.

"From East to West and everywhere in between, coronavirus has left its mark on our global society, and food insecurity is a real issue here at home. Millions of hard-working Americans live paycheck to paycheck and rely on every dollar to keep their families fed and lives afloat," added New York-based Assemblyman Mike LiPetri.

"When you take away their income and don't provide real economic relief, the situation goes from manageable to dire real fast."

Don't forget the homeless once coronavirus crisis ends, U.N. expert urges (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 1:04 PM, Zoe Tabary, Neutral]

Life-saving measures to house the most vulnerable amid coronavirus lockdowns risk falling by the wayside after the pandemic, a United Nations expert has warned, calling for stronger

action to eradicate housing insecurity.

Governments around the world have been racing to house the estimated 1.8 billion people who are homeless or live in inadequate housing and are uniquely at risk of being infected and infecting others during the pandemic.

But many of those efforts are emergency measures rather than "the structural change we actually need" to guarantee affordable and secure housing for all, said Leilani Farha, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing.

"Housing has become both central and invisible in the pandemic," Farha told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Governments are telling people to stay home, wash your hands and physical distance," said Farha, whose six-year tenure as U.N. Special Rapporteur comes to an end on Thursday.

"But that mantra was ordered without any consideration being given to the fact that millions of people worldwide can't do those three things."

More than 3.1 million people have been infected by the novel coronavirus across the world and about 220,000 have died, according to a global tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Health experts say the homeless are more likely to contract illnesses such as the coronavirus, in part because of weakened immune systems due to additional stress, and lack of nutrition and sleep.

Those living in cramped housing are also at heightened risk, with a surge of coronavirus cases in foreign-worker dormitories across Singapore and in the slums of India drawing attention to the squalid housing conditions of migrant labourers.

Farha said she had seen encouraging innovations worldwide to house the vulnerable, such as the Northern Irish city of Belfast ending rough sleeping by housing homeless people in hotels.

"We're seeing governments stepping in – like providing water and sanitation in Nairobi slums – in ways that hadn't been done previously," she said.

Authorities in India and South Africa have set up impromptu shelters and camps, sometimes using stadiums and soccer fields, while U.S. and British cities have taken steps to prevent homelessness with eviction bans and rent freezes.

But housing efforts risk losing steam once countries start lifting lockdown measures and focus on averting an economic recession, Farha warned.

"We talk about rent referral but what about rent forgiveness? People will come out of the pandemic burdened with debt and unable to pay rent for months longer," she said, adding there was an economic case for tackling homelessness.

"Homelessness has a huge economic cost as it creates a burden on healthcare systems," Farha said. "A stable, housing-secure society is good for the economy."

Farha, who will remain in her native Canada as head of The Shift, a new initiative to secure the right to housing, said she would continue visiting cities around the world to expose housing and human rights issues.

She will be replaced as U.N. Special Rapporteur by Indian academic Balakrishnan Rajagopal, an urban planning expert who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

President Trump hails U.S. coronavirus testing as infections cross a million (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 2:34 AM, Kanishka Singh, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States has reported more than a million coronavirus infections only because of its testing, President Donald Trump said on Wednesday, hailing the effort as being "much better than any other country in the world."

The Twitter comments came amid warnings from state public health officials that shortages of trained workers and materials have limited testing capacity.

"The only reason the U.S. has reported one million cases of coronavirus is that our testing is sooo much better than any other country in the world," Trump said on Twitter.

"Other countries are way behind us in testing, and therefore show far fewer cases."

A Reuters tally shows the United States has by far the world's largest number of confirmed cases at more than a million, with total deaths topping 58,000 by late Tuesday.

Cases exceeded 3.1 million worldwide, with more than 216,000 deaths, Reuters calculations show.

The rise pressures efforts to boost testing capacity and health officials flagged the challenge of getting tests to those who need them most.

"One of the problems has been is the tests getting to the people who need them," U.S. infectious diseases expert and health official Anthony Fauci told CNN in an interview on Tuesday.

Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said every American in need of a virus test should be able to get one by the end of May or the beginning of June.

"Everyone who needs a test, according to the way we're approaching the identification, isolation, contact tracing – keeping the country safe and healthy, hopefully, we should see that as we get toward the end of May, the beginning of June," Fauci said.

The virus has taken an unprecedented toll of the U.S. economy, with a likely contraction in the first quarter at its sharpest pace since the Great Recession, as stringent measures to slow the virus spread almost shut down the nation, ending the longest expansion in its

history.

The number of Americans seeking jobless benefits over the past five weeks has soared to 26.5 million, or nearly one in six U.S. workers, and the Trump administration has forecast an April unemployment rate exceeding 16%.

What You Need to Know About the Covid-19 Antibody Test (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Tim Herrera, 40577K, Neutral]

As states across the country weigh options for reopening after weeks of stay-at-home orders, antibody tests have emerged as a potential pathway on how — and when — to do it.

But there are many caveats, as a recent study found that many of the antibody tests available currently provided inaccurate results.

Antibody tests look for signs in the blood that a person has been exposed to the novel coronavirus. Knowing who has been exposed, along with how many people have been, may help to better understand the spread of the virus. This is especially important as studies continue to show that significant percentages of all coronavirus carriers — in some studies, up to half — show no symptoms at all.

The Food and Drug Administration in the United States said this month that “the question of when we can return to work and resume our normal activities is one of the most critical issues facing our nation. Antibody tests — also known as serological tests — may have the potential to play a role in this complex calculation.”

But should you get one? Can you get one? What do they actually tell us? Here’s everything you need to know.

What is an antibody test, and how does it work?

When your body is exposed to a foreign pathogen, like a virus that causes illness, your body’s response is to produce antibodies that live in the blood and tissue. These are proteins that bind to and destroy the virus, preventing it from making copies of itself and further spreading the infection.

The antibody test, also called a serology test, looks at whether your body has developed those antibodies; the presence of them most likely means you were exposed to Covid-19, the illness caused by the virus. Some tests, like the one used by the Mount Sinai Health System in New York, can measure the level of antibodies in your system — your titer.

But in general, most of the tests being made available across the country detect only whether the antibodies are present, said Dr. Jeffrey Jhang, medical director of clinical laboratories and transfusion services for the Mount Sinai Health System. A direct-to-consumer test announced on Tuesday from Quest Diagnostics — more on that below — measures only presence or absence.

Antibodies can take generally anywhere from about a week to 14 days to develop, Dr. Jhang said, and the levels of antibodies vary based on time since exposure and a person’s

immune system. This means that a lack of antibodies does not necessarily mean you were not exposed to the virus.

The test is similar to other blood tests you may have had before: A sample of blood is taken from the patient and is then analyzed to determine the presence of antibodies. Most tests will generally return results within a few days, but that may vary, as some tests can return results in a few hours.

If I have antibodies, I'm immune, right?

Not necessarily.

The antibody test does not test for immunity to Covid-19. There is no test yet that can tell if you are immune. It is simply too early to know if the presence of antibodies confers immunity, as this is a new virus, meaning we've never seen it before.

But experts generally agree that, based on experiences with other viruses, including SARS, the presence of antibodies most likely does confer some level of protection, though we don't know to what extent or for how long.

"The difficult thing is we do not have clinical evidence yet of whether the presence of antibodies actually prevents the individual from getting the disease again," Dr. Jhang said, adding, "I think most people believe that the presence of antibodies in most cases would confer some protection given our experience with other viruses."

"But we really have to wait to see some evidence of that before we can be confident in being able to say that these antibodies can be protective," he said.

If I get an antibody test, can it tell if I have the virus?

An antibody test is not the same thing as a diagnostic test for Covid-19, and it will not diagnose whether you currently have it.

Remember that antibodies take time to develop, so a lack of antibodies may just mean your body hasn't had enough time to develop them postinfection.

Do I still need to practice social distancing if I have antibodies?

Yes. If you test positive for antibodies, it is important that you continue to practice social distancing and proper general hygiene, as we still don't know if antibodies confer immunity. Wear a mask, wash your hands regularly, socially distance yourself and clean your home often.

Why does this matter?

As we just learned, knowing your antibody level will help you determine whether you've been exposed to the coronavirus. This does not mean you're immune, and you should still practice all of the safety precautions you have been. But it does mean you may be eligible to donate convalescent plasma, which can potentially help patients still suffering from

Covid-19 by allowing them to “borrow” your antibodies to accelerate their recovery time.

Widespread antibody testing may also give us a clearer picture of the scope of the disease. Results from a random testing of 3,000 people in New York City recently suggested that as many as one in five residents — or about 2.7 million people — might have encountered the disease without realizing it. When describing the results, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said that because the rate of infection might be far higher than initially thought, the death rate of the virus might be far lower than we thought.

Once the medical community determines whether antibodies confer immunity — which experts say will take at least six months or so to determine — we’ll have a better sense of who may be less at risk emerging from lockdown.

“Once we understand that the antibodies are protective, then the testing means something,” Dr. Jhang said, as it may help “figure out who can go back to work and be protected and not spread the disease, or when kids can go back to school, teachers going in to teach.”

Are the tests accurate?

A study of 14 available antibody tests published last week found that only three delivered consistently reliable results. The study, which has yet to be peer-reviewed, found that only one test never returned a false positive, which is when the test incorrectly confirms the presence of coronavirus antibodies in people who didn’t have them. The other two tests with consistently reliable results returned false positives about 1 percent of the time.

Further, these three tests confirmed the presence of antibodies in infected people only 90 percent of the time.

Part of the reason for the inaccuracies, Dr. Jhang said, may be what’s called cross-reactivity: This is when a test misidentifies antibodies for a different, but similar, coronavirus.

Florian Krammer of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York told The New York Times that false positives weren’t necessarily an issue when determining how widespread the disease is, as a given test’s false-positive rate can be accounted for in estimates. They do, however, matter greatly on an individual level.

“You don’t want anybody back to work who has a false positive — that’s the last thing you want to do,” Dr. Krammer said.

And the World Health Organization, citing ideas for an “immunity passport” or “risk-free certificate” from some countries, last week advised against relying on the tests for policy decisions.

Should I get a test?

If you think you currently have Covid-19, or have experienced in the last few days symptoms like coughing, fever, loss of taste or smell, or difficulty breathing, you should not get a test. Again, the antibody test is not the same as a diagnostic test for Covid-19.

The test is generally intended for people who either have had a positive test for Covid-19 and have recovered; or who think they were exposed to Covid-19 and no longer have symptoms.

Quest Diagnostics, which on Tuesday announced it is selling a direct-to-consumer antibody test — meaning you don't need to first see a physician to take it — offered these guidelines for people interested in an antibody test:

- Have had a positive test for Covid-19 and it has been at least seven days and you want to know if you have detectable levels of immunoglobulin G, or IgG, antibodies.

- Have not experienced a fever or felt feverish in the last three days.

- Have not experienced new or worsening symptoms of Covid-19 in the past 10 days: loss of smell or taste, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, feeling weak or lethargic, lightheadedness or dizziness, vomiting or diarrhea, slurred speech and/or seizures.

Where can I get a test?

While getting a test to diagnose Covid-19 is still somewhat difficult, antibody testing seems to be rolling out a little more smoothly. Many organizations nationwide are beginning to offer the test, perhaps most notably Quest, which is offering the test without a physician's referral at the 2,200 patient service centers it operates around the country, the company said.

LabCorp, a competitor of Quest, announced on Monday that, with a physician's referral, patients could get an antibody test at any of its more than 2,000 patient service centers, as well as its 100 locations in Walgreens.

In New York City, the walk-in clinic CityMD said in an email to patients that, as of Tuesday, it would also offer antibody testing that would "indicate with high accuracy if you had the virus in the past whether or not you experienced symptoms."

CityMD advises that people "wait two to four weeks after the end of symptoms to get the antibody test." For more information about getting tested through CityMD, [click here](#).

Last, you can just ask your doctor about antibody testing, as doctors can refer patients to many locations running the test nationwide. Most insurance providers should cover the test, but check with yours to be sure.

Gilead Drug Helped Advanced Covid-19 Patients Recover Faster, U.S. Study Finds (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 3:51 PM, Joseph Walker, Neutral]

A closely-watched drug from Gilead Sciences Inc. GILD 5.67% helped hospitalized Covid-19 patients recover faster, U.S. government researchers said, results that might be enough to lead to its authorization for emergency use.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said Wednesday that advanced Covid-19 patients taking remdesivir in the institute's study had a speedier recovery than

patients taking placebo.

The reported benefit was moderate, however, with remdesivir patients recovering four days faster. All told, it took the patients 11 days to recover.

Also on Wednesday, a separate study in China posted negative results for the drug. The researchers urged more testing, however, because their trial was stopped early due to problems recruiting subjects as the pandemic slowed there.

Researchers run drug trials to establish whether a drug works safely. The varying outcomes for remdesivir point to the challenges scientists face finding definitive proof while racing to come up with a treatment in the middle of a pandemic.

The NIAID-funded study could carry more weight for U.S. health regulators weighing whether to approve wider use of remdesivir, however, since the study was carried out by government researchers and was fully enrolled.

NIAID Director Anthony Fauci said at the White House the results appeared to open the door to drug treatment of Covid-19, though he indicated drugmakers would probably need to build upon the findings to improve the benefit. "This will be the standard of care," he said.

"The FDA, literally as we speak, is working with Gilead to figure out mechanisms to make this easily available to those who need it with regard to getting to the market," Dr. Fauci said. "The FDA is very well aware that this is something that is important so I'm sure they'll move very expeditiously."

The U.S. study compared recovery times for 1,063 hospitalized patients taking either remdesivir or placebo.

NIAID said in a news release that patients taking remdesivir recovered in 11 days, compared with 15 days for patients taking placebo, a 31% improvement that was statistically significant.

A lower proportion of remdesivir patients died than in the placebo, but the difference wasn't statistically significant, though the NIAID said the data suggested a survival benefit. In the remdesivir group, 8% of patients died, compared with 11.6% of patients in the placebo arm.

The data are based on an interim analysis, and more detailed data will be released in the future, the agency said.

The separate study in China showed that remdesivir didn't have a statistically significant benefit over placebo, researchers said.

The median time to clinical improvement in patients taking remdesivir was 21 days, compared with 23 days for patients taking placebo in the China study, but the difference wasn't statistically significant, according to a paper published in the *Lancet*, a medical journal.

The rate of death was similar in both groups, with 14% of the patients taking remdesivir

dying compared with 13% of patients in the placebo group. The difference wasn't statistically significant.

Bin Cao, a physician who led the Chinese study, said in an interview that he thinks remdesivir did perform somewhat better than placebo in the study, but that the difference was small.

He also said remdesivir may have a role to play in treating Covid-19, but that further studies would have to be done to determine how early in the disease to treat patients and if it should be combined with other drugs.

Dr. Cao noted that patients in the Chinese study were extremely sick and weren't treated with remdesivir until a median of 10 days after their symptoms appeared. Patients may be too sick at that stage for a single antiviral drug to clear the virus, he said.

He also noted that the remdesivir group had a higher proportion of patients with pre-existing conditions like diabetes and hypertension, which may have also influenced the results.

Some experts said the Chinese study data were inconclusive because the trial was stopped early due to a lack of patients. Researchers intended to enroll 453 patients, but had only 237 patients enrolled when the study was stopped.

"The study has not shown a statistically significant finding that confirms a remdesivir treatment benefit of at least the minimally clinically important difference, nor has it ruled such a benefit out," wrote John David Norrie of the Usher Institute's Edinburgh Clinical Trials Unit, in a commentary accompanying the Lancet paper.

Gilead's remdesivir, an antiviral drug administered intravenously and previously tested in Ebola, is among the most closely watched experimental treatments for Covid-19, and is being studied in multiple clinical trials around the world. If approved by regulators, the drug would be the first proven to be effective against Covid-19.

The drug is unlikely to prove a panacea against the new coronavirus, and it won't prevent healthy people from being infected as a vaccine would, doctors and analysts say. Doctors have been looking for evidence from testing whether it reduces the risk of death in patients with Covid-19.

Also on Wednesday, Gilead said a separate study it funded showed that Covid-19 patients taking remdesivir for five days had similar results as patients taking a 10-day course of the drug. The study didn't compare the drug with a control group of patients not taking the drug, making the results difficult to interpret.

The results, while positive, far from definitively demonstrate that remdesivir safely fights Covid-19. The purpose of the study was to compare the two dosing timeframes, and see whether a five-day treatment course achieved similar results as a 10-day course. A shorter course would mean more patients could get the drug.

"The study demonstrates the potential for some patients to be treated with a 5-day regimen, which could significantly expand the number of patients who could be treated with our

current supply of remdesivir," Chief Medical Officer Merdad Parsey said.

The company said it is conducting the study at 180 sites, including in countries with high levels of Covid-19 infection such as China, the U.S. and Italy. The study's initial phase involved 397 patients, and the company will enroll another 5,600 patients, Gilead said.

Gilead expects data at the end of May from another study assessing the two dosing durations of remdesivir in patients with moderate Covid-19 compared with patients receiving standard treatment.

Remdesivir hasn't been approved anywhere and has yet to be deemed safe or effective for Covid-19 treatment.

Not just hospitals: U.N. uncovers surprise tools needed to beat coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 10:09 AM, Nellie Peyton, Neutral]

How countries cope with the new coronavirus depends on more than hospital beds and income levels, the United Nations said on Wednesday, highlighting forgotten factors like internet access and reliance on tourism.

The U.N. Development Programme's (UNDP) analysis of countries' vulnerability to pandemics produced some surprising results, said its chief statistician Milorad Kovacevic.

Small island developing states, such as Jamaica and Haiti, are among the most at risk economically due to their reliance on remittances, tourism and aid, UNDP found, despite the fact they have recorded only a handful of deaths from coronavirus.

"This may ruin the development achievements that some of these countries had over the last 30 years," Kovacevic said.

The global economy is collapsing at a pace not seen since World War Two, with many countries under lockdowns to curb the spread of an outbreak which has infected some 3 million people.

As governments and central banks scramble to provide unprecedented support to combat recession and unemployment, there are concerns over developing countries' limited firepower to fund health and economic rescue efforts.

This does not mean that the poorest countries will suffer most. More important than income level are health and education systems, inequality and social services, according to UNDP.

Inequality in developed countries is often associated with weaker social cohesion and lower trust in government, which could make it harder to beat the disease, said Kovacevic, while more than 40% of the world's people have no social safety net.

One of the most important factors that may be overlooked is connectivity, since internet access determines whether people can continue their education and jobs at home, Kovacevic said.

"The digital divide has become more significant than ever at this moment," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Some 6.5 billion people – 86% of the global population – do not have access to reliable broadband internet, UNDP said.

Croatia also emerged as another unexpected result. While it is well-prepared based on health and development measures, 20% of its gross domestic product (GDP) comes from tourism, which means it could be hard hit by travel bans and lockdowns.

Experts have warned that the 2030 deadline to meet the U.N.'s development goals is at risk as economies suffer in the fight against the virus, public financing dries up and international cooperation wanes.

Prepare for less privacy (Axios)

Axios [4/29/2020 5:40 AM, Jennifer A. Kingson, 526K, Neutral]

Whether in the workplace or the mall, people can expect that an opened-up world will involve more intrusive security measures and surveillance.

Why it matters: All the new coronavirus protocols that companies are considering for their workers and customers — from contact tracing and temperature-taking to heat mapping and "immunity passports" — have privacy and civil liberties implications.

Where it stands: While there's evidence that people are less concerned with privacy than before the pandemic hit — and more concerned with health — they still may not be ready for a world where their blood is tested for antibodies before boarding an airplane, as Dubai-based Emirates airlines has started doing.

The CEO of Delta, Ed Bastian, said the airline is considering "immunity passports" that would be required for boarding.

Other options could have a far broader reach.

Employers are entitled to mandate that workers get their temperature taken at the workplace (per a coronavirus-specific EEOC decision), report any symptoms to their boss, and get a COVID-19 vaccine if one is developed, per the WSJ.

Apple and Google are collaborating on an app-based system for contact tracing that "uses Bluetooth to determine if users have recently been in close proximity to someone with the coronavirus," Axios' Ina Fried reports.

While the tech giants envision an opt-in system, that would limit its utility, since it might not attract a critical mass of people.

Where it's going: Companies are going to be collecting a lot more information about people — through contactless payment systems, which will be in growing use as people avoid face-to-face transactions, and through the various technologies in development that will track people's virus exposure.

But the security of that information will be vulnerable to hacking or misuse, as well as public skepticism.

"For people to adopt a technology, it's very important to get privacy right," Omer Tene of the International Association of Privacy Professionals tells Axios. "If there's the fear that it's creepy or spying on them — or even draining their battery — people won't opt in to it."

And in the same way that closed-circuit cameras stationed around London in advance of the Olympics became permanent fixtures, some surveillance measures to combat COVID-19 could turn out to be anything but temporary.

"Civil liberties rarely roll backwards," Cillian Kieran, CEO of the data privacy management company Ethyca, tells Axios.

The intrigue: Companies are still contemplating what measures they'll put in place for workers and customers once they reopen — and few have stated their plans openly yet. But many options under discussion would bump up against a hodgepodge of existing rules, like the medical privacy law HIPAA and the California Consumer Privacy Act.

Contact tracing services rely on databases like the ones that the CCPA allows people to remove themselves from, for example.

But erring too far on the side of privacy could expose companies to liability lawsuits from people who say they contracted COVID-19 on the job or in a store or restaurant.

For companies, "privacy is essential to getting the adoption and cooperation you need," Jules Polonetsky, CEO of the Future of Privacy Forum, tells Axios.

"For any of these measures to succeed, employers need to figure how to ensure that employees don't feel penalized by cooperating or reporting."

People need to feel like companies are doing things in the least intrusive way, being transparent in what's being collected and how it's used and making sure that data isn't held indefinitely, Sean Joyce, PwC's cybersecurity and privacy leader, tells Axios.

"Are you doing things to respect the privacy of each individual?" he says, "So it's not like there's a line of 20 people and you're saying, 'Hey, Sean — you registered 102 degrees, step out of line.'"

Be smart: Going forward, "we're going to be forced to be more biosecure, because my infection could infect an entire village," James Canton, CEO of the Institute for Global Future, tells Axios.

People might exchange biosecurity information routinely — or even wear or carry a physical token signaling they're immune, he predicts.

"It sounds Orwellian to some, or draconian to others, but it'll protect lives."

Navy Secretary Orders Deeper Inquiry Into Virus-Stricken Ship (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 4:11 PM, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, Neutral]

The acting secretary of the Navy on Wednesday ordered a wider investigation into events aboard the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, shelving for now a recommendation by the Navy's top admiral to restore Capt. Brett E. Crozier to command the virus-stricken warship.

"I have unanswered questions that the preliminary inquiry has identified and that can only be answered by a deeper review," the acting secretary, James E. McPherson, said in a statement.

Mr. McPherson said he was directing the chief of naval operations, Adm. Michael M. Gilday, to investigate, expanding a preliminary review that the Navy completed and presented to Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper last week.

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak aboard U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt," Mr. McPherson said.

His announcement came just days after Admiral Gilday recommended giving Captain Crozier his job back. But Mr. Esper, who initially said he would leave the process largely with the military chain of command, declined to endorse the findings last week, saying that he wanted to review the Navy's investigation into the matter first.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had also told associates that he favored a wider inquiry into the Roosevelt matter.

The decision essentially kicks down the road any action on Admiral Gilday's recommendation that Captain Crozier be reinstated, and was seen by some people within the Defense Department as reflecting concern among both civilian and military officials at the Pentagon over getting on the wrong side of President Trump. Captain Crozier was fired in part because of fears that Mr. Trump wanted him gone, and not knowing how the president feels about reinstating the captain has cast a shadow over the actions since.

"More and more, this looks like the military leadership and civilian leadership having very divergent goals," said Jon Soltz, an Iraq war veteran who is the chairman of VoteVets.org. "The military seems to not be interested in punishing a captain for taking desperate action to save the lives of his crew members."

But the Defense Department's civilian leadership, he said, "seems more interested in protecting the Trump administration's image, even if that means hanging commanders out to dry."

Reinstating Captain Crozier could be a remarkable reversal to a story that has seized the attention of the Navy, the military and even a nation struggling with the coronavirus. Instead, it is unclear who will be at the helm of the nuclear-powered carrier as its 4,800-member crew prepares to leave its weekslong quarantine in Guam to resume operations in the western Pacific.

Mr. McPherson's two-paragraph statement made no mention of Captain Crozier's fate. A spokeswoman for Mr. McPherson said that Capt. Carlos Sardiello, a former commanding officer of the Roosevelt who was summoned back after Captain Crozier was dismissed, would remain in charge for now.

Navy officials said the broader investigation would be conducted by an admiral outside the Pacific region and would most likely take about 30 days.

Senior lawmakers reacted with some skepticism to the Navy's latest decision.

"It's perfectly legitimate to extend the investigation about everything that happened with the Roosevelt," Representative Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat who heads the House Armed Services Committee, told reporters on a conference call.

But, Mr. Smith added, "I personally think that Captain Crozier should be reinstated."

Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the senior Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement, "This investigation should be thorough and expeditious." He added, "The removal of Captain Crozier was highly unorthodox and the recommendations of the military leadership on his reinstatement should be heavily weighed."

From the moment his letter pleading for assistance from top Navy officials became public, Captain Crozier has assumed the role of an unlikely hero, willing to sacrifice a three-decade career for the sake of his sailors.

After Captain Crozier was fired by the acting Navy secretary at the time, his personal setback took on momentum as a larger cause. Videos of hundreds of sailors cheering their skipper as he walked off the ship's gangway went viral on social media.

An ill-fated trip to the carrier afterward by the acting secretary, Thomas B. Modly, backfired when he criticized the crew for supporting its deposed captain. Mr. Modly resigned.

General Milley had agreed with Admiral Gilday, the Navy's top officer, in advising that Captain Crozier not be removed until an investigation into the events aboard the Roosevelt was complete. But Mr. Modly waved off those warnings, fearing that Mr. Trump wanted Captain Crozier fired, according to his acquaintances, and dismissed the skipper.

Mr. Trump's position appeared to ease, however, given the support for Captain Crozier in the Navy and among the general public. The president has not made clear where he stands on Captain Crozier's reinstatement, leading some Pentagon officials to conclude that Mr. Esper's hesitation in accepting the Navy's recommendations would allow time to account for the views of the president.

The announcement on Wednesday comes as the crew of the Roosevelt begins its long-scheduled turnover: swapping out those sailors who remained behind to clean the ship with healthy crew members who were isolated on Guam for the past several weeks.

In the coming days, the Roosevelt will start a series of sea trials, requalifying flight crews and pilots, before carrying on with its deployment in the western Pacific.

This week, the Kidd, the second deployed American warship stricken with the virus, returned to port in San Diego with at least 64 members of its crew testing positive for the illness, according to a Navy news release. The Kidd, a destroyer, was previously operating in the eastern Pacific and the Caribbean as part of a counternarcotics operation.

Navy opening full investigation of coronavirus outbreak on USS Theodore Roosevelt (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 11:21 AM, Dan Lamothe, Neutral]

The U.S. Navy will open a full investigation of the coronavirus outbreak aboard an aircraft carrier, acting Navy secretary James McPherson said Wednesday, days after the service's top officer recommended the reinstatement of a captain who raised concerns about the handling of the issue.

McPherson said Wednesday that after carefully reviewing a preliminary inquiry into what happened, he has "unanswered questions" that "can only be answered by a deeper review."

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions, and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt," McPherson said in a statement.

The statement did detail McPherson's questions, and Navy officials did not offer clarification Wednesday morning. It was not immediately clear who will lead the investigation for Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations.

The outbreak on the ship in the Pacific had resulted in 940 confirmed coronavirus cases and 29 recovered cases so far among a crew of more than 4,800, the Navy said. The virus began spreading after a port visit to Vietnam in early March, although Navy officials have said the outbreak could have originated with a resupply flight to the carrier.

As the outbreak spread among the crew, Navy Capt. Brett Crozier, the commanding officer, sent an email to three admirals with a memo attached raising concerns as the ship arrived in Guam for quarantining, testing and cleaning.

"I fully realize that I bear responsibility for not demanding more decisive action the moment we pulled in, but at this point my only priority is the continued well-being of the crew and embarked staff," Crozier wrote in the March 30 email, later obtained by The Washington Post. "I believe if there is ever a time to ask for help it is now regardless of the impact on my career."

The memo attached to the email leaked to the media and was initially published in the San Francisco Chronicle a day later. Crozier wrote in it that "decisive action is required."

"We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die," Crozier wrote. "If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset — our sailors."

Acting Navy secretary Thomas Modly removed Crozier from his job April 2, saying the

captain had not safeguarded his message to senior Navy officials and had shown poor judgment. Modly resigned on April 7 after traveling from Washington to Guam and delivering a speech over the Theodore Roosevelt's loudspeaker in which he insulted Crozier and lectured the crew for supporting him.

Gilday recommended Crozier be reinstated last week, following the preliminary inquiry. But McPherson and Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper sought more information before making a decision.

President Trump initially criticized Crozier for sending the memo and email to Navy officials but softened his tone when videos emerged showing the ship's crew cheering Crozier off the ship after he was relieved of command. Trump said that he did not "want to destroy somebody for having a bad day," and that he might intervene in the case.

Navy Will Reopen Investigation of USS Roosevelt Coronavirus Outbreak (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:18 PM, Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, Neutral]

The U.S. Navy will open a second investigation into the coronavirus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, a top official said Wednesday, delaying action on a recommendation that the aircraft carrier's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, be reinstated to duty.

Capt. Crozier was removed from his post April 2 after writing and distributing a memo demanding a more aggressive Navy response to the coronavirus outbreak. Following a first investigation, the Navy recommended last week that Capt. Crozier be reinstated.

But the acting Navy secretary, James E. McPherson, asked the U.S. chief naval officer, Adm. Mike Gilday, for a broader probe of the outbreak, citing unanswered questions left by the earlier inquiry, which he called a preliminary investigation. Mr. McPherson announced the follow-on probe in a statement Wednesday.

The decision extends a tumultuous period following an upheaval over the military's response to the virus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt. Nearly 1,000 sailors eventually were infected, with one death.

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt," Mr. McPherson said of the new probe.

Adm. Gilday met last week with Mr. McPherson, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the initial probe and the recommendation that Capt. Crozier be reinstated. Mr. Esper last week asked for more time to consider the recommendation.

The Navy opened the first investigation on April 1, the week after the first coronavirus cases began appearing on the Theodore Roosevelt and days after the ship was diverted to port in Guam.

Capt. Crozier on March 30 wrote and distributed a memo pleading for a faster and more thorough response to the outbreak. At the time, about 70 crew members had tested positive for the coronavirus.

On April 2, Capt. Crozier was relieved of command by the acting Navy secretary at the time, Thomas Modly, who said he lost confidence in the naval commander.

Mr. Modly, in turn, resigned the following week after an uproar over disparaging remarks he made about Capt. Crozier over the aircraft carrier's public address system. Mr. McPherson was named the new acting secretary.

When Capt. Crozier left the vessel following his removal, he was cheered by throngs of sailors in a salute that was captured on video and circulated world-wide on social media.

The saga over the outbreak has divided the Navy as it battles coronavirus outbreaks among crew members among other ships as well.

Chief Petty Officer Charles Robert Thacker Jr., 41 years old, of Fort Smith, Ark., died April 13 at Naval Hospital Guam, the Navy said in a statement.

Trade

[China] Trump Administration Remains Hopeful on China Trade Pact Despite Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 4:32 PM, William Mauldin, Neutral]

A senior U.S. trade official expressed confidence Wednesday that Beijing will meet its obligations under the trade deal with Washington, despite fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and doubts by experts about China's ability to meet purchase targets.

"There have been certain challenges presented by the coronavirus, but overall the experience that we've had is that the Chinese are very, very committed to implementing their commitments," the senior official said during a briefing with reporters.

Many others question whether China, with its economy hit hard by the pandemic, is able to meet the trade deal's mandate that it increase purchases of U.S. goods and services by \$200 billion over 2017 levels.

"Looking at the supply-and-demand trends, and looking at how ambitious those targets were to begin with, in my view it's inconceivable that we're going to hit those targets this year," said Wendy Cutler, a former senior U.S. trade official and current vice president at the Asia Society Policy Institute.

The American Petroleum Institute, the trade group for the oil-and-gas industry, last week sent a letter to U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer and other senior officials reminding them of China's commitment to purchase \$18.5 billion in additional U.S. energy products this year—and suggesting that China might even increase that commitment.

"Further examination of this Agreement may present opportunities to address our domestic oversupply and at the same time, further advance U.S. international objectives," API President Mike Sommers said in the letter.

Still, even large quantities of oil won't yield the same revenue as previously given the major drop in energy prices and so may not help satisfy the dollar requirement for purchases.

"You can cover this up a bit because of the virus, but pretty soon we're going to see all of this exposed, and we're going to be able to judge whether China begins to make the purchases they promised," said Michael Wessel, a member of the congressionally mandated U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. The China deal, signed in January, has a clause that allows Beijing to consult with Washington on the purchase agreements in case of a sudden economic setback.

The limited trade agreement, which consists mostly of concessions made by Beijing, is the main tangible result of President Trump's 2016 campaign promise to raise pressure on the world's second-biggest economy to balance trade and respect global rules of commerce.

With the U.S. economy also faltering, Mr. Trump is relying on the first phase of the China pact and an amended version of the North American trade rules with Canada and Mexico as his main economic achievements as he seeks reelection this fall.

China's required purchases include not only U.S. agricultural exports but American energy products, transportation equipment and other goods. The exact product breakdown is classified.

U.S. officials say they expect China to follow through on its commitments. "There have been some issues related to purchases and we really have been talking extensively to the Chinese to stay on track to make the purchases and meet the purchase commitments," the senior trade official said.

Some progress has been made. This month China belatedly published a required "action plan" for improving intellectual-property protection in the country, a key issue that kicked off the trade spat in 2017, according to a report by the Xinhua state news agency. The road map was supposed to be published within 30 business days of the agreement's effective date in mid-February.

The senior U.S. trade official said Washington is reviewing the intellectual-property plan and will stay in touch on intellectual-property measures as China rolls them out.

"They took some action on intellectual property that seemed to be in the spirit of the agreement," said Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa), chairman of the Finance Committee, in a call with reporters on Tuesday.

Despite the hopeful signs on trade, U.S.-Chinese ties have deteriorated in recent weeks, notably with finger-pointing over the coronavirus epidemic.

"Relations between the U.S. and China politically are at a low point with concerns over China's withholding of information about the virus," said Kelly Ann Shaw, a former economic and security official in the Trump White House and current partner at law firm Hogan Lovells.

Even so, she said, that "based on my experience negotiating with them that China will comply where it is physically possible to do so."

[China] China committed to Phase 1 trade deal despite pandemic – U.S. official (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

China remains "very, very committed" to meeting its commitments under a Phase 1 trade deal with the United States, despite the unprecedented economic and health impacts of the new coronavirus pandemic, a senior U.S. trade official said on Wednesday.

The official told reporters that U.S. officials were talking regularly, and often daily, about implementation of the trade deal and to make sure that China fulfilled its extensive agreements to buy U.S. goods and services.

The U.S. Trade Representative's office kept China on its priority watch list for concerns about intellectual property protections and enforcement, and was watching closely to see if it implemented changes agreed as part of the trade agreement, the official said.

Near East & North Africa

Saudi TV Series Sparks Rare Ramadan Debate on Ties With Israel (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 8:59 AM, Vivian Nereim, 6400K, Neutral]

A Saudi television series in which the taboo topic of ties with Israel became a plot line has spurred speculation it's a prelude to a real-life push for a rethink toward a country long viewed as a public enemy in the Arab world.

The show, called "Exit 7," is a comedic special for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, exploring rapid changes in Saudi Arabia through a bumbling father figure who's trying to adapt. In the controversial episode earlier this week, he discovers his son has befriended an Israeli through an online game. The revelation divides the family: shocking the father, infuriating his daughter and leading his father-in-law to declare "so what?"

"Israel is there whether you like it or not," says the unperturbed elder, played by Saudi actor Rashid Al Shamrani. He later says he'd happily do business with Israelis and argues that Palestinians are the real enemy for "insulting" Saudi Arabia "day and night."

The fact that the episode was aired by MBC – a private broadcaster majority-owned by the Saudi government – led some Saudis to predict that officials want to pave the way for closer relations with Israel. Gulf Arab states and Israel don't have diplomatic relations, but there have been closer informal contacts in recent years which officials say stem from shared concerns over Iran.

'Not My Issue'

"The notion of a real Saudi-Israeli normalization is still far-fetched," said Abdulaziz Alghashian, a lecturer of international relations at the U.K.'s University of Essex. But the TV show did at least start to normalize discourse about normalization, he said, and it could be "a way of gradually introducing the Saudi public to very early stages of sporadic Saudi-Israeli cooperation."

Across the Gulf, the idea of treating Israel as just another country is deeply contentious. Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki Al Faisal recently appeared on Saudi television to declare "the Zionist lobby" was among the kingdom's biggest enemies in the U.S.

Yet there's also been a nationalistic reaction against long-established support for Palestinians and their demands for the return of land occupied by Israel, partly due to perceived Palestinian criticism of Saudi Arabia. Most recently a political cartoon by a Palestinian in Sweden that appeared to mock the damage of falling oil prices on the kingdom stirred anger. Saudi Twitter users have shared a "Palestine is not my issue" hashtag.

To some extent, it's a generational shift. Supporting the Palestinians remains a key element of state rhetoric. But some Saudis closer in age to 34-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman argue it's time to focus on their own country, not pan-Arab dilemmas that absorbed years of attention with little result.

Kuwait Row

"Exit 7" underscores how complex Saudi discourse on the topic is, Alghashian said. While the sister character declares a crusade against "the Zionist danger," a delivery man she asks about the topic replies that he wants nothing to do with politics and is more concerned about finding a job.

It's one of several Ramadan series to court controversy on the issue this year. Another MBC show called Umm Haroun, set in 1940s Kuwait, depicts a multi-religious village with Jewish residents and stars Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al-Fahad as a Jewish midwife. In a statement, MBC said the drama showcases "a Middle East where acceptance of one another was the norm." But it set off a backlash in Kuwait, with Al-Fahad criticized by some for taking on the role.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Ramadan series "The End" took the opposite tack: Set in the year 2120 in a dystopian post-Israel Jerusalem, it predicts the destruction of the Jewish state and imagines a future without it.

"Inside every Arab, there's the idea of liberating any occupied Arab territory," show writer Amr Sami Atef said in an interview with Saudi television channel Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath.

Israel's foreign ministry condemned the drama, which stood in stark contrast to the cooperation between governments in Egypt and Israel, which established full diplomatic ties in 1980, especially over security.

[Israel] Israel deems women's ritual baths essential, leaving some conflicted over virus risk (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Ruth Eglash, 18460K, Neutral]

As covid-19 spread rapidly in the first weeks of March, Esther grew nervous. It was nearly time for her monthly visit to the ritual bath that many observant Jewish women use to purify themselves after every menstrual cycle, and she worried she might catch the virus at the very place meant for physical and spiritual cleansing.

"I have a disability and many underlying health issues," said Esther, 43, an ultra-Orthodox mother of seven. "Deciding whether or not to go was very, very stressful."

Even as Israel closed down its public sphere to stem the spread of the coronavirus, the government deemed that some 700 of these ritual baths, or mikvahs, were essential and permitted them to remain open along with supermarkets and pharmacies. When most of the country was completely locked down for the Passover holiday, the women's mikvahs were not.

Without a dip in a mikvah, observant women are forbidden to have any physical contact with their husbands, leaving these wives with a dilemma: go to the mikvah and resume intimate relations or stay clear of the ritual bath to avoid any chance of infection.

"I deliberated for a long time about whether I should even go. I thought about waiting until after this crisis was over," said Esther, a Jerusalem resident who spoke on condition that her full name be withheld so she could discuss an intimate matter. "But the truth is, I am a woman and my husband a man; we need to be together. Without the mikvah we would not be able to be intimate, and that would make this difficult time even more stressful and lonely."

She decided to go, but took precautions she hoped would keep her safe. She arrived early, when the water was still fresh. She sprayed disinfectant on every surface before touching it. She spent as little time there as possible.

According to Jewish law, women are required to visit the mikvah, a small pool containing water mainly from a natural source, on the conclusion of a 12-to-14-day period that begins with the onset of menstruation. Until a full-body immersion is carried out, any form of physical contact between a husband and wife is prohibited. For observant Jews, ignoring this commandment is as unthinkable as eating pork or driving on the Sabbath.

Dvora Eiferman, the official at the Ministry of Religious Services overseeing public mikvahs, said that even when emergency measures were imposed in mid-March, shuttering stores, restaurants, gyms and ritual baths for men, and later when synagogues and other religious spaces were closed down, it was clear the women's mikvahs would remain open.

"We are talking about the most important ritual, a basic need, and there was no choice but to keep them open," she said.

In the United States, many Jewish communities have also tried to keep their mikvahs open, although as the coronavirus crisis has deepened, particularly in the New York area where the Jewish population has been especially hard hit, the ritual baths have been shuttered

along with other religious institutions.

The Israeli government, in keeping mikvahs open, issued new safety guidelines. These require women to register in advance, allowing the mikvah attendant to track those entering and have time to clean the bath between appointments. The chlorine levels in the baths must be measured after every two or three immersions. While women would previously shower on site in private bathrooms before entering the mikvah, such preparations are no longer permitted on the premises.

So far, there are no reported cases of women who have become infected at a mikvah in Israel, according to Mitchell Schwaber, director of the National Center for Infection Control.

But there have been scares, and many women remain fearful about going, though they feel there is no choice.

In Efrat, a Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank where one of the first Israeli outbreaks of coronavirus occurred, a woman visited the mikvah without realizing she was infected. When that was discovered, the bathhouse, one of two in the town, was ordered closed. Every woman who had been there that day was ordered into a 14-day quarantine. The mikvah was reopened a week later after a thorough cleaning.

"It is a little uncomfortable doing this when the [attendant] is guiding you from a distance, wearing a face mask," said Hindy Ginsberg, 36, who lives in Efrat. "But I am grateful the option is still there."

Ginsberg, who is a consulting expert on Jewish purity laws, stressed the importance of the mikvah for Jewish married life. "Even if you take sex out of the equation, we would still not be able to hold hands, and that would just be too difficult with everything that is going on," she said.

For many observant Jewish women, mikvah visits have long been meant to be discreet, carried out in the evening without any notice to family members. Under the new guidelines, women must use a newly created app to register their appointments. Names and contact details must be logged in case of another scare.

"My local women's WhatsApp group was joking about what excuses we could give our children or the police about where we are going when everyone is meant to be staying home," Ginsberg said. "I had to pretend I was going to the supermarket."

Not everyone agrees that the baths need to remain open in the midst of a pandemic. Rabbi Haim Amsalem, a former parliament member from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, has urged that health and safety should always come first.

"The question was posed to me by communities in Europe and the U.S., where mikvahs have been closed for months and where there are strict directives not to leave the house at all," said Amsalem. "My approach is that Torah commandments are not supposed to be a punishment. We have to find a way to live with these rules but not put ourselves in danger."

He determined that women can fulfill Jewish law with an immersion in a large bath, a hot tub

or a private swimming pool.

For Esther, returning to the mikvah during the coronavirus outbreak no longer seems like an option. She said she was so unsettled by her last visit there that she convinced her doctor to prescribe contraceptive pills to stave off her next menstrual cycle.

"I'll take it for a month or two and by then I hope this situation will be better," she said.

[Libya] Libya's Hifter declares cease-fire in Tripoli fighting (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:29 PM, Samy Magdy, Neutral]

Eastern Libyan forces laying siege to the country's capital of Tripoli said Wednesday they have agreed on a humanitarian pause in fighting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Ahmed al-Mosmari, a spokesman for the forces of military commander Khalifa Hifter, said at a news conference that they have stopped all military operations across Libya in response to international appeals for a humanitarian truce so authorities could focus on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

The recent round of fighting in war-torn Libya began last April when Hifter's forces launched an offensive trying to take Tripoli, clashing with an array of militias loosely allied with the U.N.-supported but weak government in the capital.

There was no immediate comment from the Tripoli-based administration, known as the Government of National Accord.

Violence has escalated in recent weeks, with the two warring sides accusing each other of shelling civilian neighborhoods. The U.N. has said the violence and worsening humanitarian crisis in Libya could amount to war crimes.

Stephanie Williams, acting U.N. envoy in Libya, on Tuesday called for a humanitarian truce during Ramadan that could pave the way for a permanent cease-fire.

The cease-fire announcement came after Hifter, in an attempted show of strength, declared on Monday that a 2015 U.N.-brokered political deal to unite the oil-rich country was "a thing of the past."

Al-Mosmari, the spokesman, said Wednesday that Hifter's self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces would announce constitutional declaration including a "road map" that would lead the country to elections.

The Tripoli-based government had said it wasn't surprised by Hifter's announcement and urged Libyans to join "a comprehensive dialogue and continue on the democratic path to reach a comprehensive and permanent solution based on ballot boxes."

While the 2015 agreement has failed to bring unity or stability to the divided country, Hifter's announcement threatened to further complicate U.N. efforts to broker a political settlement to the civil war.

The clashes in Libyan have complicated efforts to fight the coronavirus outbreak. Libya has confirmed more than 60 cases, including two deaths, most of them the country's west.

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011, when a civil war toppled long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who was later killed. The chaos has worsened in the recent round of fighting as foreign backers increasingly intervened despite pledges to the contrary at a high-profile peace summit in Berlin earlier this year.

[Saudi Arabia] Saudi foreign reserves fall at fastest for two decades (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:58 AM, Marwa Rashad and Davide Barbuscia, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's central bank foreign reserves fell in March at their fastest rate in at least 20 years and to their lowest since 2011, while the kingdom slipped into a \$9 billion budget deficit in the first quarter as oil revenues collapsed.

The world's largest oil exporter is suffering from historic price lows, while at the same time measures to fight the new coronavirus are likely to curb the pace and scale of economic reforms launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority said late on Tuesday its net foreign assets, which include securities such as U.S Treasuries and foreign deposits, fell in March to \$464 billion, their lowest in 19 years.

The nearly \$27 billion decline – the biggest monthly drop in at least two decades – signals the kingdom's urgent need to tap into reserves to offset economic damage from oil prices and a severe coronavirus-driven slowdown of non-oil sectors.

"We believe that the magnitude of the drop ... reflected both higher government funding to cover the budget deficit and the support packages announced in March to help counterbalance the impact of COVID-19," said Monica Malik, chief economist at Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB).

Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan said last week the kingdom would limit its draw down to a maximum of \$32 billion from reserves this year to fill a widening deficit which it plans to cover instead by increasing borrowing to nearly \$60 billion.

Early on Wednesday the finance ministry reported a first quarter budget deficit of \$9 billion, mostly because of a drop in oil revenues that reversed a first quarter surplus of around \$7.4 billion in 2019.

Oil revenues in the first three months of the year posted a 24% annual decline to \$34 billion and pushed total revenues down 22% year on year.

Saudi Arabia, which had registered more than 20,000 coronavirus cases as of Tuesday with 152 deaths, had originally projected a \$50 billion deficit this year, or 6.4% of gross domestic product (GDP), widening from around \$35 billion last year.

Jadaan has said the deficit could now widen to up to 9% of GDP this year, but some

analysts have predicted 22% with oil prices at \$30 a barrel.

International oil prices LCOc1 have shed around two thirds value since the start of this year and are trading around \$21.

"If Finance Minister al-Jadaan's plans are for merely \$32 billion of reserves drawdown then, following a \$27 billion reduction in March alone, that means almost all the remainder will be covered by new sovereign debt issuance, assuming there are no further privatisations, because of market conditions," said Hasnain Malik, head of equity strategy at Tellimer.

Saudi Arabia and other large producers recently agreed to cut output by almost 10 million barrels per day (bpd), in May-June, in an attempt to balance the market, but demand kept falling nonetheless due to the global slowdown.

Jadaan said last week he expects the pandemic to cause a slump in activity in the non-oil private sector too this year and that the government could take more actions on top of \$32 billion in emergency stimulus measures announced last month.

Private sector loan growth, however, was solid in March, central bank data showed, "potentially reflecting the higher borrowing requirements of corporates with COVID-19 impacting cash flows," said ADCB's Malik.

Non-oil revenues in the first quarter fell 17% compared to the same period one year earlier, with revenues from taxes on goods and services plunging, in a sign of overall slowdown.

Saudi Arabia has already cut its 2020 budget by nearly 5% and further spending curbs are likely.

In Q1, however, capex spending declined only 4%, the finance ministry said.

Riyadh last month raised its debt ceiling to 50% of GDP from 30%. It has already borrowed \$12 billion in international bonds this year.

[Tunisia] Tunisia announces lockdown easing, timeline for students (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 3:39 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Tunisian officials on Wednesday announced a partial easing of lockdown measures in place to curb the spread of novel coronavirus, although schools will largely remain closed until September.

Education Minister Mohamed Hamdi, Health Minister Abdellatif Mekki and other officials told a joint news conference that work was expected to resume with reduced staffing in some sectors from Monday.

A broader relaxation is planned for June 14 but will depend on how the health situation develops, officials said, warning of the risk of a second wave of infection.

People aged over 65 and those suffering from chronic illnesses were among those not

covered by Wednesday's easing of restrictions.

Students in their final year of high school are set to restart classes on May 28 and sit their end-of-year exams in July, the education minister said.

Other students will return to school for the new academic year in September.

Schools in Tunisia have been closed since mid-March.

Medicine and pharmacy students will return to university on May 11, with other departments opening later, said Higher Education Minister Slim Choura.

Tunisia has officially declared 975 cases of novel coronavirus including 40 deaths, and has put strict social distancing measures in place, including a night-time curfew.

Tunisia's Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh had said earlier this month that lockdown measures would be progressively eased after May 3.

[Yemen] Yemen records multiple coronavirus cases for first time; U.N. fears more (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:24 PM, Mohammed Mukhashaf and Mohammed Ghobari, Neutral] Yemeni authorities reported multiple coronavirus infections for the first time on Wednesday after the United Nations said it feared the disease could be spreading undetected in a country where millions face famine and lack medical care.

The five new COVID-19 cases were detected in Aden, a southern port which is interim headquarters of a government ousted from the capital Sanaa more than five years ago by the Iran-aligned Houthi group in a war that has created the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Previously Yemen had detected only a single case.

International health officials have long warned that Yemen's population could be extremely vulnerable to an outbreak, which would be difficult to detect in a country where health infrastructure has been degraded by poverty and war.

An emergency committee for coronavirus maintained by the Aden-based government said in a tweet that it would release more details about the five new cases.

Authorities told Reuters they have been unable to track down "patient zero" for Yemen's infections, an important step in tracing people potentially exposed to infection and containing an outbreak.

On Tuesday the United Nations said there was a "very real probability" the virus was circulating within communities.

Health workers say the virus could spread rapidly in a country where 24 million people – 80% of the population – rely on aid, and 10 million are at risk of famine.

Yemen's only previous laboratory-confirmed case was detected on April 10 in the southern port of Ash Shihr. The 60-year-old port official has since recovered and tested negative for the virus, the committee said on Monday.

Two sources familiar with the matter have told Reuters there has been at least one confirmed case in the capital Sanaa, which is controlled by the Houthis.

But the Houthi Health Ministry denied this and said all suspected cases had tested negative for COVID-19.

On Wednesday the Aden-based government's emergency coronavirus committee said it had concerns that Sanaa authorities were not admitting to a coronavirus outbreak there.

Responding to the newly confirmed cases, authorities in Aden announced a three-day, 24-hour curfew starting at midnight.

The announcement came from the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group that declared self-rule on Sunday in southern Yemeni governorates including Aden.

Mosques were also closed until further notice in Aden, and shopping centres and restaurants for two weeks. Markets selling qat, the mildly stimulant green leaf chewed daily by many Yemenis, will continue to be closed across all southern governorates and its sale banned in and around towns.

Wholesalers will be asked to store a certain amount of reserve goods, before certain amounts are allowed for export, the STC statement said.

Europe and Eurasia

[Albania] Albanian economy to shrink by 5% due to virus, quake – World Bank (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:09 PM, Benet Koleka, Neutral]

Albania's economy, hit by an earthquake that left 17,000 homeless last year and coronavirus-containment measures, could shrink by as much as 5% in 2020, even if most economic activities restart in early summer, the World Bank said.

In its semi-annual report on the Western Balkans released on Wednesday, the bank described the double hit to Albania as "destructive," noting the new coronavirus had frozen large parts of the economy.

The bank said dependence on tourism, close ties with hard-hit Italy across the Adriatic Sea and limited fiscal options made Albania especially vulnerable right now.

"Even according to the baseline scenario, which assumes most economic activities could re-start by the beginning of summer, the annual gross domestic product is expected to shrink by 5% in the year 2020," the World Bank said.

However, the bank said its forecast had an unusually high degree of uncertainty. The downside scenario, which assumed economic activity would start later in the summer, saw the economy shrink by 6.9%.

The recession and measures to prop up the economy would widen the budget deficit to 5.4% of gross domestic product in 2020 and increase public debt to 75.8% of GDP, it added.

Albania's last assessment at the end of March saw economic growth slowing to 2% from 4.1%, the budget deficit rising to 3.9% from 2.2% and public debt rising four percentage points to 68.8% of gross domestic product.

Once the crisis was over, "the normalisation of economic activity and the reconstruction to soothe the consequences of the quake are expected to back rapid growth, but structural reforms are needed in the medium term," the bank added.

[Austria] Austrian president's office briefly cleared after bomb threat (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:17 AM, Francois Murphy, Neutral]

Part of the former imperial palace in central Vienna housing Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen's office was evacuated on Wednesday after a bomb threat and the president was taken to safety, but police soon gave the all-clear.

A police spokesman said the threat was made by email against the Hofburg, a sprawling palace complex that includes reception rooms, the headquarters of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and temporarily the debating chamber of Austria's lower house of parliament.

Police sealed off the area around Van der Bellen's office, including a square that separates it from the office of the head of Austria's government, conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

"The search was negative. All closures can be lifted!" the Vienna police said on Twitter on Wednesday evening.

Van der Bellen, a former leader of the left-wing Greens whose role is largely ceremonial, had been evacuated, a spokesman for his office confirmed, though he added that he did not know details of the threat or its target.

It remains unclear who made the threat or why.

The part of the complex temporarily occupied by parliament while its main building nearby is being renovated was not evacuated, a parliament spokesman said. That area is at the opposite end of the palace.

[Bosnia] Bosnia Reports Sharp Rise in Coronavirus Cases After Relaxing Lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:19 AM, Staff, Negative]

Bosnia reported on Wednesday its sharpest daily rise in new coronavirus infections this

month after its two autonomous regions had gradually begun to ease lockdowns.

There were 93 new infections and two deaths in the previous 24 hours, compared with 20 new infections a day earlier and 49 the day before that, officials said.

The total number of infected people rose to 1,677 with 65 deaths, while 29,130 have been tested.

Both the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb Republic imposed lockdowns last month after the outbreak of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus. Their measures included barring people aged over 65 and children up to 18 from leaving home at all.

The Serb Republic, which started on Monday to let senior citizens leave home for three hours each workday and some businesses to reopen, reported 59 new cases. Its officials urged citizens to continue to avoid gatherings and to wear masks at all times.

"The percentage of positive cases in relation to those tested is revealing a lowering of individual discipline in obeying the prescribed measures," Serb Republic Health Minister Alen Seranic said, adding that 8% of those tested in the past 24 hours were found to be positive, up from 5% previously.

"The whole community is behaving in a more relaxed manner than before, when we had a different number of cases from now," said Seranic, who is a trained epidemiologist.

In the northern town of Banja Luka, which has recorded the highest number of coronavirus cases in Bosnia, Pedja Kovacevic, head of the intensive care department at the main hospital, said health workers had been able to cope with the pandemic so far.

"What is terrifying is that we have the largest number of sick and hospitalised patients in the hospital in the ninth week, and I call on the public and every citizen to think twice (before leaving home)," Kovacevic said.

The Bosniak-Croat Federation lifted its night curfew last Friday and abolished a measure of obligatory quarantine. It also allowed senior citizens and children to leave home every second day for several hours.

These measures will be reinstated during the three-day Labour Day holidays, officials said, adding that people there too were behaving in a more relaxed manner.

"We are aware that we'll see new peaks and trends of the disease, but we have to go back to normal life," said Goran Cerkez, the federation assistant health minister.

"We shall see how that proceeds, and whether we have to reinstate restrictions will depend on the citizens."

Bosnia's economy has been hit hard by the lockdowns and the closure of many businesses. The International Monetary Fund has forecast growth to shrink 5% this year.

[France] Labs see bottlenecks in France's plan to scale-up COVID-19 testing (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:26 AM, Matthias Blamont, Neutral]

The leaders of two federations representing thousands of private laboratories across France cast doubt on the country's ability to more than double coronavirus testing before the country begins unwinding its lockdown on May 11.

The industry officials cited two looming bottlenecks: a potential shortage of workers able to conduct tests and the availability of government-approved reagents, with countries around the world racing to get hold of testing kits.

Mass testing is critical to France's ability to emerge safely from a now six-week old lockdown.

France will switch to an aggressive doctrine on COVID-19 testing from May 11, aiming for 700,000 nasal swab tests per week, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe on Tuesday said.

This means France must nearly triple its current capacity in just a fortnight.

"I'm not sure this goal of 700,000 is reasonable," Francois Blanchecotte, head of the Syndicat des Biologistes federation representing some 4,000 labs, told Reuters. "One limitation will be the number of people able to do testing on such a scale."

France is not alone in scrambling to test more widely. Britain was on track to meet a target of 100,000 tests per day by Thursday, its health minister said this week, although recent data shows about 43,000 daily tests being completed.

Swab tests involve collecting a sample from either a person's nasal passage or throat. A reagent is then added to determine whether there is an infection.

France has authorised about 40 reagents for use in COVID-19 testing, manufactured by large pharmaceutical groups like Switzerland's Roche and the United States' Abbott Laboratories, as well as small and mid-sized companies.

Lionel Barrand, who leads the Syndicat National des Jeunes Biologistes Medicaux federation, cautioned this number might be inadequate and that laboratories were already having difficulties sourcing reagents in France and from abroad.

China, where the global pandemic originated, is an important source market of reagents.

"Will there be enough reagents? We're still seeing tensions on supply at a national level," Barrand said.

France had the logistics to scale up testing, he said. "But that will work only if we have enough reagents and swabs."

A health ministry spokeswoman said France had taken steps with international suppliers to secure supplies of reagents. Meanwhile the French health industry regulator had approved a new locally made cotton swab to ease pressure on swab imports.

Countries around the world hope blood tests meant to show whether people exposed to the disease have developed antibodies thought to offer some immunity will also guide efforts to restart their economies.

But serological testing has so far proved unreliable and questions persist over the human body's immunity memory after coronavirus infection.

That places more pressure on nasal swab testing. Barrand said clarity was needed on which symptoms — which include headaches, fever, dry coughs and a loss of taste — necessitated testing.

"If every person presenting with a small symptom turns up, the system will collapse," he said.

[Germany] Germany to extend travel warning for tourist trips abroad to mid-June – report (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:48 AM, Michelle Martin, 5304K, Neutral]

The German cabinet will on Wednesday extend a travel warning for all tourism trips abroad until at least June 14, magazine Der Spiegel reported, saying that a Foreign Ministry document to that effect had been agreed with other ministries.

[Germany] Germany hopes there will be coordinated EU decision on foreign travel – minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The German government warned foreign travel would not be risk-free even if travel restrictions were lifted, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Wednesday, adding that Germany hopes to discuss a coordinated solution with its European Union partners.

Maas told reporters that the government would revisit on a weekly basis the question of whether travel restrictions could be lifted, but advised against leisure travel even if they were, adding that there could be no guarantee that travel warnings would not be reintroduced at short notice.

Although a Europe-wide solution would be desirable, he could not rule out that there would be differences in travel regimes between the EU's member states, he added.

[Germany] Prosecutors charge neo-Nazi with German politician's murder (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 8:48 AM, Staff, Negative]

German prosecutors have charged a far-right extremist with the killing of a regional politician from Chancellor Angela Merkel's party and in a near-fatal attack on an Iraqi asylum-seeker a few years before.

Federal prosecutors said Wednesday that Stephan Ernst, who has previous convictions for a string violent anti-migrant crimes, is accused of murder, attempted murder, serious bodily harm and firearms offenses.

A second man, identified only as Markus H., was charged with accessory to murder and breaking firearms laws for allegedly helping Ernst improve his marksmanship while suspecting that he was considering a politically motivated attack, the prosecutors said.

Walter Luebcke, who led the regional administration in Germany's the central region of Kassel, was shot on his porch on June 1, 2019, and died later that night.

Prosecutors said in a statement that Ernst and Markus H. had visited an October 2015 town hall event where Luebcke defended the German government's decision to allow hundreds of thousands of refugees into the country.

Angered by sexual assaults in Cologne months later and an Islamist truck attack in Nice, France, in July 2016, Ernst allegedly decided to kill Luebcke to "send a publicly noticeable signal against the current state order, which he rejected," according to prosecutors.

Around the same time, Ernst allegedly attacked the Iraqi asylum-seeker from behind with a knife, injuring the victim's spine and severing two nerves.

Prosecutors said the attack was rooted in Ernst's "right-wing extremist hatred of refugees."

After his arrest in June, authorities said they found numerous illegal firearms that Ernst had stored in various locations, including three revolvers, two pistols, two rifles and a submachine gun, as well as 1,400 bullets.

[Holy See] Knights of Malta Grand Master who healed rift with Vatican dies (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 3:14 AM, Philip Pullella, 5304K, Neutral]

Giacomo Dalla Torre, the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta who steered the global Catholic chivalric order and charity to reconciliation with the Vatican after a period of conflict, died on Wednesday.

The Knights said Dalla Torre, 75, had been ill for several months.

He was elected interim leader in 2017 following the abrupt resignation of Matthew Festing, whose final months of governance were marred by a dispute with the Vatican over the running of the group.

The group's Grand Masters usually rule for life and Festing, a Briton, was the first in several centuries to step down.

The conflict laid bare tensions between a reformist Pope, Francis, and his conservative critics, led by American Cardinal Raymond Burke, the Knights' chaplain.

After the Burke faction lost an internal power struggle, Dalla Torre reconciled the group with the Vatican and began a process of reform.

Dalla Torre was the 80th grand master of the group, whose formal name is Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta.

It was founded in Jerusalem nearly 1,000 years ago to provide medical aid for pilgrims in the Holy Land.

It now has a multi-million dollar budget, 13,500 members, 80,000 volunteers and 42,000 medical staff running refugee camps, drug treatment centres, disaster relief programs and clinics around the world.

Since the upheavals that led to Festing's resignation, the order - which is a sovereign entity and has bilateral diplomatic relations with 110 states - has been working on a new constitution.

Reformers, backed by the Vatican, want to revamp its constitution to make its government more transparent and better able to respond to the massive growth it has seen in recent years.

They also want to make it possible for commoners to reach top positions. Under the current monarchical hierarchy, the top Knights are required to have noble lineage. The late Grand Master had the rank of prince and his full name was Giacomo Dalla Torre del Tempio di Sanguinetto.

Under normal conditions, senior members be required to gather in Rome in three months to elect a new grand master but the period likely will be extended because of the coronavirus pandemic, a source in the order said.

[Kosovo] UK climate activists stranded in historic town in Kosovo (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:51 AM, Visar Kryeziu, 2194K, Neutral]

British climate activists Rosie Watson and Mike Elm were on an international bicycle and running tour to promote their green campaign when they got stuck in Kosovo because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Watson, 25, from Loweswater in northwestern England, and Elm, 32, from Edinburgh, Scotland, have been stranded in Prizren, a town in Kosovo, 85 kilometers (50 miles) southwest of the capital, Pristina.

Since mid-March, Kosovo has been in a lockdown with all of its land and air border crossings shut. The virus has killed at least 22 people in the Balkan nation, which has more than 790 confirmed cases.

The couple decided against getting on an evacuation flight organized by the British government, saying they are against plane travel and they want to continue their journey once it's possible to do so. Their trip is low-budget and they have had free accommodation since the start.

They are enjoying the historic, cobblestone streets of Prizren, a town along the Bistrica River and the Sharri Mountains that was founded in the second century A.D. and has a medieval castle. They have also been sampling fli, a local butter pie, and been reassured by a traditional welcome from residents.

In Prizren, they have focused on writing about their trip. Watson has a blog as does Elm.

Watson started her "The New Story Run" in August last year from the United Kingdom, planning a two-year tour on foot to Mongolia "to tell stories of people finding a better and more equal and healthy way of living for us and the planets and tackling the climate crisis." After running 3,570 kilometers (2,220 miles), or 17 kilometers (around 10 miles) per day, she has a lot to write about.

Inspired by her efforts, Elm joined her in November aiming to cycle a total of 12,000 kilometers (7,450 miles), or 50 kilometers (30 miles) a day. Before getting stuck, they took different routes, but they met up time and again along the way.

Elm met people in Prizren trying "to improve this beautiful city by bringing more trees and green space." Previously, he was in Zlarin, which aims at becoming Croatia's first single-use plastic free island. In neighboring Albania, Watson met with a community battling against hydroelectric operations that he says are endangering nearby Valbona National Park.

"A better world for our children needs a better world for us right now," Elm said.

The pandemic will urge people to "see some of the benefits of having less cars in the city and the cleaner air, the nicer sound, the quieter environment," he added.

When borders reopen, their plan is to continue their journey through Bulgaria, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and finally Mongolia.

"This virus has shown that we, and governments, have the ability to transform society and whole countries very fast — something which we need to do to avoid the impacts of the climate crisis," Watson said.

[Poland] Poland to reopen hotels and shopping malls on May 4 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:49 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Polish hotels and shopping malls will reopen on May 4 and pre-schools will have the option to open on May 6, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Wednesday, part of efforts to ease restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

Poland, the largest economy in the European Union's eastern wing, started relaxing some of its curbs on public life earlier in April, alongside other countries keen to prop up industry damaged by the pandemic.

Morawiecki also reaffirmed the government's plan to hold a presidential election as scheduled on May 10, or with a delay of a couple of weeks at most, despite calls from opposition parties and others for a much longer delay.

Further steps to unfreeze the economy, including a reopening of restaurants, will be announced at a later date, Morawiecki said. Poles are still required to wear masks in public and schools will remain closed until May 24.

The government has also not given any indication when it might re-open the country's borders.

Poland, which has a population of 38 million, had reported 12,415 cases of the new coronavirus and 606 deaths as of Wednesday.

On the plans for the presidential election, Morawiecki urged the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament, to speed up its discussions on a legislative proposal to allow postal voting instead of polling booths.

Morawiecki's nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) says it would be safe to hold a postal vote at this time, but a final decision on whether election rules are changed to allow it rests with the legislature.

Although PiS and its allies have a majority in the lower house Sejm, the opposition controls the Senate.

The election has become a highly divisive issue in Poland, with the opposition and human rights groups accusing PiS of putting political gain ahead of public health in its insistence the vote takes place on time.

Opinion polls show the incumbent Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, is likely to win the vote.

[Poland] EU opens new legal case against Poland over muzzling judges (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 6:52 AM, Gabriela Baczynska, 5304K, Neutral]

The European Union's executive on Wednesday started a new legal case against the nationalist Polish government over what it said was the muzzling of judges in the bloc's largest ex-communist country.

The EU has long accused the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party of undermining Polish democracy by increasing direct state control over the courts, media and civic society, a charge the party rejects.

The European Commission said it was giving Poland two months to address its concerns about a law introduced earlier this year that would allow to punish judges who criticise the government's reforms of the judicial system.

"There are clear risks that the provisions regarding the disciplinary regime against judges can be used for political control of the content of judicial decisions," said Vera Jourova, the Czech member of the executive Commission who is responsible for upholding the EU's democratic values.

"This is a European issue because Polish courts apply European law. Judges from other countries must trust that Polish judges act independently. This mutual trust is the foundation of our single market," she told a news conference.

Should Warsaw refuse to budge, the Commission would sue it in the European Court of Justice, which could eventually lead to hefty fines as well as a court order telling the Polish

government to change tack.

The case is one of multiple battles being waged between the EU and Poland over upholding the rule of law.

The Commission has also recently criticised Warsaw's decision to press ahead with a presidential election next month despite concerns over public health due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The PiS-led government is considering holding the election by postal ballot, saying this would ensure public safety, but opposition parties and pro-democracy groups say such a vote, held at such short notice, could not be fair or transparent.

"We cannot compromise or put in lockdown our fundamental rights and values," Jourova said on Wednesday. "The virus must not kill democracy."

Opposition parties and rights groups have urged a lengthy delay to the presidential election. If held on schedule, on May 10, opinion polls suggest incumbent Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, will win re-election.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki reaffirmed on Wednesday the government's plan to hold the election on time, or with a small delay of a couple of weeks at most.

[Russia] Russia's coronavirus case tally nears the 100,000 milestone (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:33 AM, Gleb Stolyarov and Maria Kiselyova, 5304K, Negative]

Russia's nationwide tally of confirmed coronavirus cases neared the 100,000 mark on Wednesday after 5,841 new cases of the virus were registered overnight along with a record daily rise in the death toll.

Russia, the world's largest country by territory, has been on lockdown since President Vladimir Putin announced the closure of most public spaces in late March.

It this week overtook China and Iran in the number of confirmed cases. The figures mean Russia now ranks eighth worldwide for the number of confirmed cases, though it has so far recorded far fewer deaths than many of the most hard-hit countries.

The nationwide case tally now stands at 99,399, the country's coronavirus crisis response centre said on Wednesday. It said 108 people diagnosed with the novel coronavirus had died in the last 24 hours, a record daily rise. That means the official overall death toll now stands at 972 people.

Authorities began recording a sharp rise in cases this month.

Russia is now in its fifth week of a lockdown that, together with the collapse of oil prices, has put the economy on course for a 4-6% contraction, according to the central bank.

Putin, addressing the nation on television on Tuesday, said the lockdown measures would have to be rolled over for another two weeks. He warned the outbreak's peak was still

ahead.

"The situation is still very difficult," said Putin. "We are facing a new and perhaps the most intense stage in countering the epidemic."

[Russia] Russia sees tentative signs of fuel demand recovery in Europe: minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:04 AM, Vladimir Soldatkin and Darya Korsunskaya, 5304K, Neutral]
Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak on Wednesday said the country is seeing tentative signs of recovery in fuel demand on the European market.

Speaking at an online meeting chaired by President Vladimir Putin, Novak added that Russia's oil output is expected to drop by 10% this year.

Putin said that Russia should continue cooperating with its partners to balance global oil markets.

[Russia] Russia flies nuclear-capable bombers over Baltic Sea in training exercise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:32 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia has flown two nuclear-capable Tu-160 strategic bombers over the neutral waters of the Baltic Sea, the Russian Ministry of Defence said on Wednesday, a move that prompted Finland, Denmark, Poland and Sweden to scramble jets to escort them.

The ministry said the flight was routine in nature and strictly adhered to international airspace regulations.

Russia carries out similar training flights over the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific oceans, as well as over the Black and Baltic Seas on a regular basis, a policy some NATO members regard as unhelpful sabre-rattling.

The two Tupolev T-160 aircraft, which can carry up to 12 short-range nuclear missiles, were in the air for eight hours, the Russian Defence Ministry said.

"At specific stages of the route, the aircraft were escorted by the Finnish Air Force's F-18s, Royal Danish and Polish Air Force F-16s, as well as by the Swedish Air Force's Saab JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets," it said.

Russia made a similar statement on Tuesday, saying two Russian Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bombers had flown a routine four-hour flight over the neutral waters of the Barents and Norwegian seas, prompting Norway to scramble its jets to escort them.

Also on Tuesday, it said advanced jets belonging to its Baltic Fleet had rehearsed striking naval targets in the Baltic Sea.

[Russia] Russia's Aging Infrastructure Threatens Oil Output Pact (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 11:14 AM, Georgi Kantchev, Neutral]

Russia's adherence to a hard-fought oil production deal with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. could be imperiled by its aging industrial infrastructure and the unique challenges of winding down a broad network of wells across its vast landmass.

Moscow, Riyadh and Washington agreed in early April to lead a multinational coalition that aims to cut 13% of global oil production through the end of June. The curbs are meant to address a sharp drop in demand caused by global travel restrictions and business shutdowns to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The demand erosion, along with a Saudi-Russian price war and an unprecedented shortage of oil storage space, have contributed to a 63% decline in the global benchmark oil price, since the start of the year.

As part of the pact, set to begin on Friday, Russia has committed to its biggest reduction ever, a cut of 2 million barrels a day, or around a fifth of its current production.

But Russia's oil infrastructure isn't geared to quick and deep production cuts, analysts say. The country faces considerable obstacles, from the frigid Siberian climate where pipelines can burst without oil in them, to low-yielding Soviet-era fields that are expensive to maintain and restart.

Russia has some 200,000 active wells—more than most other oil-producing countries—each with unique characteristics and geology. Most of its wells are old and require costly, labor-intensive techniques—such as water or gas injection and hydraulic fracturing—to get the oil out of the ground. Around 90% of Russia's crude is produced that way, according to Darya Kozlova, head of regulatory affairs at energy advisory Vygon Consulting.

Wells in Saudi Arabia have more underground pressure and higher yields. Shale producers in the U.S. have also been nimble in reacting to price fluctuations.

"Production cuts of such magnitude have never been done in Russia so we are venturing into the unknown," said Vladimir Milov, a former deputy energy minister and now an opposition politician. "There are just too many technical challenges to achieve these cuts."

Many producers are finding it hard to come up with the necessary volumes to cut, said Mikhail Krutikhin, a partner in the independent RusEnergy consulting agency who has advised oil companies on the cuts in recent weeks.

"They just don't know how to do it," he said. "It's a completely new paradigm."

Major Russian oil companies are lobbying the energy ministry for exemptions from the cuts, according to people familiar with the matter.

The ministry didn't respond to a request for comment.

The cuts will be distributed proportionally among all companies and Russia will fully comply with the deal, Energy Minister Alexander Novak said Wednesday in an interview with Russian newswire, Interfax.

Russia has a checkered history of sticking to supply agreements and its production has typically been steady in recent years, despite commitments to reduce it. In January last year, Russia had complied with only 18% of its pledge at the time to join OPEC in collective cuts, according to the International Energy Agency.

"Companies will try to cheat again and inflate their numbers," Mr. Krutikhin said.

To achieve a national 20% output reduction, Russian producers plan to abandon some of their least effective wells and postpone new drilling. But those decisions will need time for analysis and testing, experts say.

Tatneft, one of Russia's largest producers, will shut around 40% of its wells, starting with the least efficient sites, the company said Tuesday.

Some producers fear shutting wells because, in many cases, restarts require new pumps and other equipment, as well as repairs to burst or clogged pipes. The average cost of suspending a well in Western Siberia, home to most of Russia's production, is about \$5,000 a well, according to Ms. Kozlova. Reopening costs about \$16,000.

Many wells that are shut will likely be abandoned for good, analysts say. For firms like Capital Oil, a small producer in the southeastern Saratov region, Russia's cuts present an existential crisis.

The company has fully suspended production, but restarting might be financially impossible. Capital Oil is close to bankruptcy and has no money to pay salaries, said its co-owner Khamzat Askhabov.

"Production is becoming unprofitable," he said. "If low oil prices persist for six months, we expect massive bankruptcies of companies" like ours.

According to Russia's Association of Independent Oil and Gas Producers, all but four of Russia's 132 independent companies—representing around 4% of Russia's oil production—could go bankrupt.

"The Russian oil industry is at risk of falling asleep like the beautiful princess in the fairy tale, but then not waking up the way we know her," Mr. Milov said.

[Serbia] Serbs bang pots to protest govt and strict coronavirus measures (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 3:07 PM, Aleksandar Vasovic, Neutral]

For two nights, a cacophony of tin pans, drums, whistles, and horns has reverberated through much of Serbia as citizens, stuck at home under curfew, vent their anger at the government and its tough containment measures to curb the new coronavirus.

Serbia, which has reported 8,497 confirmed cases and 173 deaths from COVID-19, introduced stringent measures last month, including a state of emergency, closure of borders, daily curfew from 1600 GMT, and total lockdowns all weekend, including all four days of the Easter holiday.

The government has started to lift restrictions as the rate of infections slows, but said that a lockdown during the Labour Day holiday on May 1, an important celebration in Serbia, should remain in place.

The banging is due to continue on Wednesday evening, and recalls similar popular protests from 1996 to 1997 when Serbians rebelled against election fraud and the former strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

At the balcony of his apartment in Belgrade's Vracar neighbourhood, Dragan Djilas, the head of the opposition Alliance for Serbia, and a former leader of the student protests of the 1990s, used a wooden spoon to bang a pot.

"This energy (from the 1990s) has re-emerged as the people cannot endure any longer ... these lockdowns, these 80-hour incarcerations," Djilas told Reuters.

The protests also express many people's discontent with the policies of President Aleksandar Vucic, a former nationalist firebrand and former information minister under Milosevic who later adopted pro-European values, and with his Serbian Progressive Party.

Many in Serbia accuse Vucic and the ruling coalition of autocracy, oppression against political opponents, stifling of media freedoms, corruption, cronyism, and ties with organised crime. Both Vucic, in power since 2012, and his allies deny such accusations.

Most of Serbia's opposition parties, which are frequently divided and bickering, have boycotted parliament. They have said they will not take part in elections initially set for April and postponed until later in the year.

Bojan Klacar, the executive director of the Belgrade-based pollster CESID said the protest could damage the Serbian president and his allies, but added that a divided opposition was unable to tap into its energy. He added that heavy-handed handling of the crisis did not dent popularity of Vucic among his supporters.

From his window in a concrete, Communist-era building in the Novi Beograd neighbourhood, Dobrica Veselinovic, a prominent activist of the Ne Davimo Beograd (Do Not Drown Belgrade) rights group, played Bella Ciao, a song of Italian antifascist fighters during the World War II.

He also projected a banner reading "noise against dictatorship" and "raise your voice every evening from 2005" (1805 GMT) onto the wall of a nearby building.

"The most important thing is that people (who disagree with the government) realize that they are not alone ... We invited people to raise their voice against what is happening in society," Veselinovic said.

[Slovenia] Slovenia to ease coronavirus restrictions, gradually reopen schools (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Marja Novak, Neutral]

Slovenia will from Thursday lift a restriction imposed at the end of March that prohibited citizens from travelling outside their local municipalities, Prime Minister Janez Jansa said on Wednesday.

Education Minister Simona Kustec told national TV Slovenia later on Wednesday that schools and kindergartens, which have been closed since the middle of March, would gradually start reopening from May 18. She did not give details.

Slovenia, which has 2 million residents and borders Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, has so far confirmed 1,418 coronavirus cases and 89 deaths.

Jansa thanked citizens for following restrictions imposed from the middle of March to curb the pandemic and said in a speech sent to the media: "Thanks to you, Slovenia is the most successful (in curbing the coronavirus) among all neighbours of the focal country Italy."

He added that Slovenia was also among countries that had suffered less economic and social damage than most because of the government's quick response, which included financial help of about 3 billion euros or some 6% of gross domestic product to companies and citizens hurt by the outbreak.

Jansa said more restrictions would be lifted on Monday, but gave no details. The government said earlier that hairdressers and beauty parlours, as well as outdoor bars and restaurants and a number of shops, would be able to open from Monday. Libraries and museums are also expected to open on Monday.

He said, however, that large public events, including large sports gatherings, in Slovenia and the rest of Europe would "most probably" only be possible after a vaccination or medication for the coronavirus is discovered and widely used. He also called on citizens to remain disciplined in the coming weeks to prevent the spread of the virus.

On Monday, several hundred people protested in various Slovenian cities against Jansa's centre-right government and its coronavirus restrictions.

Slovenia closed all schools, bars, restaurants, hotels, cultural and sports centres, and shops, apart from food and drug stores, and suspended public transport in the middle of March. It has prohibited any socialising in public spaces and introduced an obligatory quarantine for most people entering the country.

The first restrictions were lifted last week when car service centres and shops that sell cars, bicycles, furniture and construction material were allowed to open. Residents are obliged, however, to wear face masks in all indoor public spaces.

The Bank of Slovenia said last month the country's GDP could fall by 6% to 16% this year due to the coronavirus, while the government expects a budget deficit of 8.1% of GDP this year after a surplus of 0.5% in 2019. Slovenia's export-oriented economy expanded by 2.4% last year.

[Spain] Spain readies to ease lockdown, warns will need discipline (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:00 PM, Clara-Laeila Laudette and Into Landauro, Neutral]

Spain's lockdown is making progress against the new coronavirus but a gradual easing from next week will require even more discipline, officials said on Wednesday, after the country recorded 325 deaths from the infection overnight.

The lockdown, one of the toughest in Europe, has halted public life since March 14 and nearly paralysed the economy.

In Madrid, workers were painting "keep your distance" signs on to zebra crossings in the capital in preparation for restrictions to be gradually removed.

The country's overall death toll from the virus rose by 453 to 24,275, the health ministry said, adding that the additional cases were from the previous days in the region of Galicia.

The number of diagnosed cases rose by 2,144 from Tuesday to 212,917, the world's second-highest tally after the United States, the ministry said.

"The evolution we are seeing is still very favourable and is in line with what we expected," health emergency coordinator Fernando Simon told a news briefing on Wednesday.

He said the so-called 'R' rate – the average number of infections that one person with the virus causes – stood at below 1, signalling a downward trend, in almost all areas of the country.

The daily number of deaths has decreased sharply from the high of 950 seen in early April.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced late on Tuesday a four-phase plan to lift the lockdown that would culminate in a return to normality by the end of June.

FOREIGN TOURISM

But Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska told a news conference on Wednesday "the period of easing measures would take more discipline than lockdown" itself.

Implementation will vary from province to province depending on factors such as how the rate of infection evolves, the number of intensive care beds available locally and compliance with distancing rules. These targets are yet to be announced.

Health Minister Salvador Illa said the rules on visiting friends and family would be provided in the coming days.

The Hotel Business Association of Madrid on Wednesday expressed its "serious concern" over the plan, as well as its "disbelief" that the government was contemplating reopening hotels "when the arrival of clients is impossible" because of closed borders and suspended flights.

The government's plan does not specify when Spain will be able to reopen its tourism industry, which is worth 12% of Gross Domestic Product.

"Foreign tourism is the hardest part to manage. We look at what has happened to those ahead of us (in Asia); when they started cross-border mobility there were outbreaks of imported cases," said a government official who declined to be named.

"We also want to take the decision at (European) Community level, especially in view of the Schengen area," he added.

Data released on Wednesday showed Spanish retail sales fell 14.1% in March from a year earlier on a calendar-adjusted basis, after rising 1.8% in February.

Most stores closed during the second half of last month as part of the lockdown and have remained shut in April.

[Sweden] Swedish leader defends coronavirus approach, shrugs off far-right embrace (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 2:30 PM, Ryan Heath, Neutral]

Sweden's foreign minister says there's been a "misunderstanding" in the United States about her country's Covid-19 policies — which have been distinctly more liberal than the strict lockdowns instituted across much of the rest of Europe and North America.

Ann Linde told POLITICO that Sweden is not a libertarian nirvana: the government has moved to limit online gambling in recent days, is closing restaurants that break social distancing rules, and has forbidden family visits to nursing homes.

But, added Linde, "this is a marathon not a sprint" and policy "needs to be on a level that's acceptable to the people."

Sweden's public health agency believes "It's good for people to be outdoors, to have walks" she said. "If you're locked inside there's risk of depression, domestic violence, alcohol abuse" Linde continued, echoing a point President Donald Trump has often made.

Sweden's relatively lax approach to controlling the coronavirus pandemic — keeping restaurants, other businesses and most schools open — has made the country a symbol for far-right activists in the United States and Europe as they push to ease domestic restrictions in their own countries.

But Linde brushed off that support in remarks to POLITICO Wednesday, her first public comments in Washington since the coronavirus crisis began shuttering the globe last month.

Linde said she clarified the country's approach during a virtual meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well.

The endorsement of far-right groups, "doesn't mean much", she said, because Sweden is managing the pandemic "according to our tradition" and won't change strategy because of outside voices.

And she noted that inside Sweden, it's not just the far-right Sweden Democrats who are supporting the government's approach: all eight parties represented in the Swedish Parliament are in agreement.

Linde believes Sweden can afford to have looser rules because the government enjoys "high levels of trust."

"Government advice is not some tip that you follow if you want, it's seen as something that you should follow," she explained. By way of example, Linde pointed out that although internal travel in Sweden is not banned, there was a 96 percent decrease in travel to the popular vacation island of Gotland over the Easter weekend holiday.

Critics of Sweden's approach, however, note that the country has a much higher Covid-19 death rate than its Scandinavian neighbors, including 11 times the number of deaths as neighboring Norway, with only twice the population. Linde, however, told POLITICO, "It's not much use comparing" the two countries, because so many factors determine how a virus spreads, and different countries use different measures for classifying Covid-19 deaths.

Linde did express concern for Sweden's failure to keep the coronavirus out of nursing homes, one of the few settings where the country has implemented strict social distancing rules, including forbidding family visits. "There are far too many deaths in the nursing homes," Linde conceded. "We don't know why."

The Swedish government recently set a \$500-a-week limit for individuals playing online casino and slot machines. And Linde highlighted five restaurants that were also closed this week for breaking social distancing rules.

"We are totally prepared to go in with harder measures if (the rules) are not followed," Linde said, adding that the government has the legal power to immediately close schools if pandemic circumstances change.

With roughly half of Sweden's GDP dependent on exports, the government there is working feverishly to hold off the push for more tariffs, and to eliminate them on medical goods. "Global value chains are not working the way they have to work. It's definitely a bad situation for Sweden," Linde said.

In her meeting with Pompeo, Linde raised concerns about the state of global trade links. She acknowledged, however, that the United States and Sweden "have different views" on the importance of multilateral trading systems.

Linde was critical of the initial policy response of EU countries to the merging pandemic.

"It was bad at the beginning, better now," Linde said, citing an end to medical export restrictions and sales taxes on medical products. While willing to contribute to some joint recovery efforts, Sweden, which sits outside the Euro single currency, opposes European Union governments issuing joint bonds to pay for the added costs.

Given its low government debt and the headroom for its own large stimulus package Linde

said Sweden prefers to safeguard its own financial stability.

Sweden is following the European Union in keeping its borders closed to non-EU residents, which Linde said it will maintain until the EU collectively decides to re-open. And Linde said her government will "support the United Nations in every way."

"We have always been big fans of multilateralism," she added.

[Turkey] Turkey's coronavirus death toll rises by 89 to 3,081 – health minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:29 PM, Staff, Negative]

The number of people who have died from COVID-19 in Turkey has risen by 89 in the last 24 hours to 3,081, Health Ministry data showed on Wednesday, continuing a downward trend.

The total number of cases rose by 2,936 to 117,589, the data showed, the highest total outside Western Europe or the United States.

A total of 44,022 people have so far recovered from the new coronavirus, which causes the respiratory disease COVID-19. The number of tests carried out in the past 24 hours was 43,498, higher than in previous days.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said earlier that the number of cases in the country has peaked and was starting to decline, adding that he did not expect a second wave if measures against the outbreak were followed.

[Turkey] Epidemic's Hidden Victims, Syrian Workers Left Penniless in Turkey (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:39 AM, Dominic Evans and Umit Bektas, Negative]

When the clothing factory where Syrian refugee Mohammed Eid had worked since arriving in Istanbul closed because of the coronavirus lockdown, his manager had a bleak message for laid-off staff: you're on your own.

Like millions across Turkey, Eid lost his wage packet overnight. But unlike Turkish workers idled by the enforced shutdown, he found no safety net to help him and his family through the sudden crisis.

With a wife, three-year-old daughter and second child due any day, Eid has no income to pay bills or the rent on his basement apartment in the working class district of Esenyurt, where many Syrian refugees live.

"When the factory closed, the boss told us 'This break is at your expense, not mine'," Eid said in the small home he found after arriving from Jordan in December. "I have to sort out my costs of living, eating. He gave me nothing."

While Turkish workers laid off since March are entitled to 1,200 lira (\$170) a month from the state, that benefit does not extend to hundreds of thousands of Syrians, most of whom work in the informal economy, many as day labourers.

Clothing retailers and shopping malls have closed across the country and many of their suppliers have shut down too as Ankara attempts to contain an outbreak that has killed close to 3,000.

The government aims to begin reviving the economy in late May, a senior official said this week, and Eid said he expected to hear from his own employer at around that time. Until then he and others wait in limbo, fearing eviction and worrying how to feed their families.

"We don't know how many Syrians could have been laid off. We're talking about somewhere between 700,000 to 800,000 potential informal Syrian workers in the labour market," said Omar Kadkoy a policy analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) in Ankara.

NO SUPPORT

Turkey hosts 3.6 million Syrians, the world's largest refugee population, who have fled the nine-year conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of people in their country. Most live in Istanbul or near Turkey's southern border with Syria, only a small minority in refugee camps.

They mostly work in clothing companies, manufacturing, construction or the hospitality sector.

A Labour Ministry spokeswoman said only Turkish workers could benefit from the government's coronavirus aid package, and that Syrians were already supported by United Nations and European Union aid projects.

However, an EU-funded scheme which distributes monthly cash payments via Turkey's Red Crescent to refugees is limited to families with three or more children, or those without working-age men, Syrians say.

"We have not received any support from ... anywhere," said Suhaib al-Bakr, a 33-year father of two from Syria's northeastern province of Hasaka.

Bakr, a veterinarian in his own country, worked for the past four years as an assistant at tailoring companies in Istanbul, taking daily work where it was available for about \$13 a day.

He hasn't worked for six weeks. His landlord agreed to cancel his rent payment last month, but is expecting the next instalment. If he could, Bakr says he would even return to the ruins of his own country to escape the uncertainty.

"The situation is bad there, worse than here. But my mother and father are there. We can go and live with them," he said. "But the way is closed. What can I do?"

[United Kingdom] UK now has world's third-highest virus-related death toll (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 2:40 PM, Pan Pylas, Neutral]

The U.K. has the third-highest coronavirus death toll in the world after the British

government published new figures Wednesday that include deaths outside of hospitals.

After factoring in deaths in all settings such as care homes, the number of people in Britain who have died after testing positive for the virus has now hit 26,097, way ahead of the 21,678 announced on Tuesday. Until now, hospital deaths have been reported daily, while deaths in nursing homes and other settings were reported separately on a weekly basis.

Under the new measurement, the U.K. has leapfrogged Spain and France in Europe, with only Italy ahead. The U.S. has the world's highest death toll.

The upward revision prompted renewed criticism of the government's approach throughout the crisis. The new leader of the main opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer, said the scale of deaths in the U.K. is "truly dreadful" and has accused the Conservative government of being too slow in putting the country into lockdown, in testing people for the virus and in getting critical protective gear for medical workers.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab sought to ease any worries, saying the additional deaths were a cumulative total going back to March 2.

"They don't represent a sudden surge in the number of deaths," he said at the government's daily press briefing.

In spite of that, it is becoming increasingly clear that the U.K. could end up with the second-highest coronavirus death toll in the world, partly because Italy is considered to be around a couple of weeks ahead in the epidemic.

There is also an acknowledgement that the new figures underestimate the total death toll in care homes as they only include those who have tested positive for the coronavirus. Also, the death certificates of those dying in care homes can take a couple of weeks to be issued.

Professor Yvonne Doyle, medical director at Public Health England, said the new figures, which her organization helped to compile, provide "a comprehensive picture, and this is most important for control."

In spite of the grim death news, the trends in most of the virus-related numbers are heading in the right direction. The number of people being hospitalized with the coronavirus has been falling for the best part of three weeks, particularly in London, which was the epicenter of the outbreak in the country. Also the number of coronavirus-related deaths are falling when measured on a seven-day rolling basis.

Doyle said she could not yet say whether deaths in care homes were falling but that "we should know that soon because the hospital curve has declined."

Raab said it was too soon for the government to make an assessment as to whether its five tests on easing the lockdown restrictions have been met. Among those tests are a "sustained and consistent fall" in daily coronavirus-related daily deaths, and reliable data showing that the rate of inflection has moderated to manageable levels.

"We are coming through the peak but we are not there yet, which is why we are keeping our

focus on the social distancing measures," he said.

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, or SAGE, is due to deliver its latest advice to ministers in the next few days but all the signs are that the government will extend most of the lockdown restrictions from May 7.

Earlier this week on his return to work after recovering from COVID-19, Prime Minister Boris Johnson, said the country was at "the moment of maximum risk." Johnson missed Prime Minister's Questions earlier Wednesday because his partner gave birth to a baby boy.

[United Kingdom] UK death toll 27,241, opposition Labour leader Starmer says (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:12 AM, Guy Faulconbridge and Elizabeth Piper, 5304K, Neutral] The United Kingdom's COVID-19 death toll is probably higher than 27,241, making it one of the worst-hit countries in Europe, opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said on Wednesday as he questioned the government's response to the outbreak.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government is facing growing criticism for its response to the outbreak as the death toll continues to rise.

While the government's chief scientific adviser said last month that keeping the death toll below 20,000 would be a "good outcome," the hospital toll passed that milestone last week.

Broader data published on Tuesday showed fatalities topped 24,000 nine days ago, but Starmer said his calculations showed 27,241 had died.

"We are possibly on track to have one of the worst death rates in Europe," Starmer told parliament. "Far from success, these latest figures are truly dreadful."

Starmer appears to have added the latest hospital death toll of 21,698 to the most recent English care home death toll of 4,343 and the non-hospital COVID-19 death tolls in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

If his calculations are accurate, the United Kingdom would have the second or third worst official death toll in the world after the United States and possibly Italy.

The United States has a death toll of 58,605, Italy 27,359, Spain 23,822 and France 23,660, according to a Reuters tally.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, standing in for the prime minister during questions in parliament, said it was "far too early" to make international comparisons.

"If they are to be done, they should be done on a per capita basis," he said.

Other countries measure death numbers in different ways, he added.

'TOO SLOW'

Starmer, after speaking to Johnson, said in a letter to the prime minister that mistakes had been made in the government's response – including being too slow to impose a lockdown – and called for Johnson to publish an exit strategy.

"We were too slow to enter the lockdown, too slow to increase the uptake of testing and too slow to get personal protective equipment to frontline NHS and care staff," Starmer said in the letter.

"We have already seen the consequences of poor planning and preparation. This cannot happen again."

Johnson initially resisted introducing the lockdown but changed course when projections showed a quarter of a million people could die.

Since the lockdown started on March 23, his government has faced criticism from opposition parties and some doctors for initially delaying measures, for limited testing capabilities, and for a lack of protective equipment for health workers.

Government, party and scientific advisers are divided over how and when Britain should start returning to work, even in limited form. The government is next due to review social distancing measures on May 7.

[United Kingdom] Britain's coronavirus testing capacity over 73,000 a day – Raab (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:21 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain now has capacity to conduct more than 73,000 tests for the coronavirus per day, foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Wednesday.

The government set itself a target to conduct 100,000 tests per day by the end of April. Raab said the actual daily number of test carried out was 52,429.

East Asia and Pacific

China, South Korea Move to Revive Business Travel Between Them (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 9:51 AM, Chun Han Wong, Neutral]

South Korea says it has agreed with China to start facilitating some business travel between the two Asian neighbors, in Beijing's first formal bilateral program to ease border controls and help revive economic activity stalled by the coronavirus pandemic.

Under a "fast-track" immigration arrangement starting May 1, South Korean business personnel can travel to seven provinces and three major cities in China—Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing—after passing through health-screening and quarantine procedures, the South Korean Foreign Ministry said Wednesday.

Chinese business travelers can also visit South Korea by going through a similar health-screening process, the ministry said. It said the two governments would continue discussing

ways to improve and expand the program.

China's Foreign Ministry didn't immediately respond to an emailed request for comment sent after business hours.

The arrangement is the first so-called fast-track, or "green lane," immigration program that China has launched since Chinese officials began approaching a number of countries over recent weeks to discuss the possibility of allowing some cross-border business travel to resume.

China's travel curbs are among the strictest world-wide, imposed to halt the reintroduction of the coronavirus into the country where the pandemic first erupted. Since late March, China has suspended entry for nearly all foreigners and slashed the volume of international passenger flights to and from the country.

As China signaled initial success in containing its domestic coronavirus contagion, its officials have proposed efforts to facilitate essential travel with foreign counterparts from more than a dozen countries across the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere, The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month.

On Tuesday, senior Chinese diplomats discussed proposals for "fast-track" travel arrangements in phone calls with counterparts from Austria, Germany and Singapore, according to China's Foreign Ministry. Talks are already under way between China and Singapore on a "green lane" program facilitating essential business travel.

To visit China under the new program, prospective South Korean travelers must have an invitation from a China-based company, monitor their own health for two weeks, and undergo coronavirus testing up to 72 hours before departure, according to the South Korean Foreign Ministry. Those who test negative will receive government health certification allowing them to proceed with their trips.

After arriving in China, travelers will be quarantined for one to two days at a government-designated facility and must pass another coronavirus test before they can continue their journey, the ministry statement said.

The arrangement allows South Korean business travelers to visit the Chinese provinces of Anhui, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Shandong and Sichuan. The Chinese capital of Beijing, which currently imposes a 21-day quarantine on international travelers arriving in the city, isn't included in the program.

Chinese business travelers must also test negative for the coronavirus up to 72 hours before departing for South Korea, according to the South Korean statement. These travelers must again test negative for the pathogen after arriving in South Korea, before they can conduct economic activities under "surveillance procedures," the statement said, without elaborating.

Some Chinese local governments to allow fast-track entry of Koreans (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Ten Chinese local governments have agreed to allow a fast-track entry of businessmen from South Korea under which they are exempt from strict coronavirus quarantine measures, South Korean authorities said on Tuesday.

China has blocked entry for nearly all foreigners in an effort to curb risks of coronavirus infections posed by travellers from overseas. China's foreign ministry said last week it was in talks with some countries to establish fast-track procedures to allow travel by business and technical personnel to ensure the smooth operation of global supply chains.

A person in Korea has to get tested for coronavirus within 72 hours before departure, and again get tested in China during a couple of days of quarantine period.

Starting May 1, the rules will apply to employees of Korean companies or Chinese firms that have operations in China and want to visit 10 areas, including Shanghai, Chongqing and Tianjin.

South Korea is the first country wto have received fast-track status from China, its biggest trading partner, the South Koreab foreign ministry said in a statement.

fast-track status will ensure that essential economic activity is guaranteed while honouring quarantine principles to prevent the spread of Covid-19, the ministry said.

Both New Zealand and Australia Contained Coronavirus, but One Is Set to Pay a Heavier Price (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Rachel Pannett and Stephen Wright, Neutral]

New Zealand imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, aiming to stamp out the new coronavirus. Australia took a different approach, adopting social-distancing restrictions but keeping more of its economy open, in an effort to suppress the pathogen.

Both strategies appear to have delivered similar health outcomes: New infections have dropped markedly—to just a couple a day on average in New Zealand and around 10 a day in Australia. But the economic and social costs look likely to be significantly bigger in New Zealand, providing a cautionary example of the potential trade-offs as countries weigh imposing and lifting restrictions.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern warned New Zealanders in late March that tens of thousands might die without dramatic measures. At the time, there were roughly 100 confirmed infections and no deaths in the remote island nation.

The new rules closed nearly all businesses, aside from grocery stores and pharmacies, and restricted people from interacting with others outside their household, even to attend funerals. The lockdown was ranked among the most severe globally by Oxford University's stringency index of government responses.

"We will never know what would actually have happened without our Level 4 restrictions and we can look overseas and see that this devastating scenario has played out in many other countries," Ms. Ardern said Monday, as she declared victory over the virus.

Australia, in comparison, put in place strict social-distancing measures—limiting social gatherings to just two people—but kept many businesses open, including mining, construction and restaurants for takeout.

On Tuesday, New Zealand began to loosen the restrictions on some areas of the economy, including allowing service businesses to take orders online and construction and forestry companies to operate. Prohibitions against some leisure activities, such as surfing and hunting on private land, were also lifted.

New Zealand's strategy has been controversial. Simon Thornley, a lecturer in epidemiology at the University of Auckland, has said striving for elimination is bound to fail and would generate worse economic and health outcomes than the virus itself. He is part of a group of six academics, calling themselves Plan B, who lobbied to loosen the restrictions.

"The biggest risk of this will be chronic unhappiness within citizens" as people deal with the consequences of the long lockdown, including rising joblessness, said Peter Gluckman, who previously served as New Zealand's chief science adviser. "Lots of small businesses have been disrupted and may not recover."

Governments around the world are balancing the relaxation of restrictions to ease economic pain against the risks of fueling fresh coronavirus outbreaks. A paper published in the journal *Science* on April 14 said one-time lockdowns likely won't be enough and that physical-distancing measures may need to be in place intermittently until 2022.

New Zealand's known and probable infections are stabilizing at around 1,500. Australia, with its larger population of roughly 25 million versus about 5 million in New Zealand, has around 6,700 cases. That puts both of them closer to countries such as South Korea and Taiwan, where a combination of social distancing with aggressive testing and widespread mask usage has contained local outbreaks.

New Zealand and Australia were quick to close their borders to China, taking advantage of their remote island geographies. And both rolled out generous government stimulus packages to offset the impact on key industries including tourism, foreign education and retail: the equivalent of 6% of GDP in New Zealand and about 16% in Australia, among the biggest responses globally.

Their differing growth trajectories now, however, reflect the severity of New Zealand's lockdown. Economists expect New Zealand's economy to contract by more than 20% in the three months through June, compared with the quarter immediately prior, whereas Australia's economy is expected to shrink some 13% over the same period.

"This reflects the fact that our lockdown is very strict. We also see quite a protracted recovery here," said Elizabeth Kendall, an economist with Australia & New Zealand Banking Group Ltd. in New Zealand.

ANZ expects New Zealand's economy to be 10.4% smaller at the end of 2020 than it was at the start of the calendar year. For Australia, the contraction is forecast at 4.7%.

New Zealand's jobless rate may rise to 13.5% from 4% at the end of last year, according to government forecasts. Australia's central bank has forecast the country's unemployment rate will roughly double to 10% by June.

In Australia, bars and restaurants were allowed to offer takeout services, to help avoid mass layoffs of hospitality workers. Key industries such as mining and construction were able to keep their operations running even as other businesses were shut down.

In one such example, BHP Group Ltd., the world's largest listed miner, relocated some tugboat pilots and their families from their homes in the island state of Tasmania to Western Australia as the closure of state borders threatened to disrupt the use of fly-in, fly-out workers, in which companies fly workers in to remote regions rather than relocating them there permanently.

Paul Bloxham, chief economist at HSBC in Sydney, said the silver lining for New Zealand might be a sharper, V-shaped recovery—as often occurs after a hurricane or an earthquake, aided by rebuilding efforts—whereas Australia is more likely looking at a U-shaped recovery with a prolonged bottom.

"When things open again, people will want to do all the things they haven't been able to do for a while. And that supports the idea of a bounceback," said Mr. Bloxham.

Yvette Edwards, a florist in the New Zealand capital, Wellington, said her business has seen exceptionally high demand since reopening; they delivered about 70 flower arrangements on Tuesday, the first day of reduced restrictions. About 90% of those were people buying for themselves, likely celebrating the end of the lockdown, she said.

She said it was strange not to have people coming into the store, but seeing her two employees after four weeks of lockdown was poignant.

"One of the most amazing things when we arrived in the morning was just seeing each other's faces again. We literally spent five minutes staring at each other," she said. "It was the most surreal feeling. We all just stood there laughing."

[Australia] Australia marks 250th anniversary of Cook landing in muted fashion (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 3:12 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

The 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook's contentious landing in Australia went largely unmarked Wednesday as the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of long-planned commemorative events.

On April 29, 1770, Captain Cook sailed the Endeavour into Botany Bay – called Kamay in the local indigenous language – an event that is increasingly being seen through the eyes of the Aboriginal Australians who were on the shore.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the anniversary represented "a merging of histories," calling Cook an "extraordinary individual."

"The day Cook and the local indigenous community at Kamay first made contact 250 years ago changed the course of our land forever," he said.

"It's a point in time from which we embarked on a shared journey which is realized in the way we live today."

Australia's government was forced to cancel events marking 250 years since Cook's landing due to the COVID-19 outbreak, including the planned Aus\$6.5 million (\$4.3 million) circumnavigation of Australia by a replica of the Endeavour.

The first contact between the British navigator and Aboriginals foreshadowed the colonization of the continent and centuries of dispossession for indigenous Australians.

During his voyage, Cook declared Australia "Terra Nullius" – or legally unoccupied land – and claimed it as British territory despite Aboriginal history stretching back more than 60,000 years.

The British later established a penal colony in New South Wales in 1788.

Gujaga Foundation chair Ray Ingrey said the indigenous Dharawal people had been working with Australia's National Museum for 18 months to showcase their ancestors' recollections of encountering Cook.

"Australian society has matured quite a lot over last 50 years since the last anniversary came around, the 200th anniversary," he told AFP.

"A lot of the messages being received by the National Museum was the broader community saying 'We've heard about Cook's side of story, or the story from the ship, and we want to hear more about the story from the shore'."

An online exhibition features the "largely missing" stories passed down through generations of indigenous Australians of those encounters with Cook and his crew.

"As the longboats started to row towards the shore, my ancestors realized that they weren't Aboriginal people at all, they were in fact alien people because they looked so different to ourselves. We actually thought they was ghosts," elder Shayne Williams said in a video released by the museum.

The warriors on the shore started yelling and gesturing for them to leave, before beginning to throw rocks and then throwing spears, which landed at the crew's feet.

"If our people wanted to spear one of those sailors they could have easily done that. But it was just warning shots," Williams said.

"So what Cook and his crew did, they returned fire with their muskets. Actually hit one of the warriors in the legs."

Ingrey said the anniversary was a "significant event for all Australians" but the indigenous side of the story had long been overlooked or misrepresented.

"It was the first act of violence towards our people by the British, however it is our shared history and we have shared present, so it's only common sense that we have a shared future," he told AFP.

"Both stories need to be respected and that's all that we would hope for, that we have the opportunity to tell our story the way that we want to tell it and be respected to do that.

"We can only then move forward as a nation when both histories are acknowledged and accepted."

[China] China Sets Date for Congress, Signaling Coronavirus Is Under Control (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 9:28 AM, Keith Bradsher, 40577K, Neutral]

China delivered its strongest statement of confidence yet that it has tamed the country's coronavirus epidemic, announcing on Wednesday it would hold a much-delayed top political gathering late next month and ease quarantine restrictions in the capital.

The most important event on China's political calendar, the annual session of the National People's Congress will provide the Communist Party with a platform intended to inspire national pride and reassert its primacy. The gathering of top officials from across China will also allow the party to demonstrate unity at a time when many in North America, Europe, Africa and Australia are highly critical of China's initial efforts to conceal the severity of the outbreak.

"The narrative is that the Chinese way of doing things, the China model, is better than other countries in controlling the virus," said Willy Lam, a specialist in Beijing politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "This is a symbolic event, showing China has won the war."

The congress is largely ceremonial, with delegates gathering every year to rubber-stamp major decisions. But the decision in February to delay this year's session came as a shock to many in China, and sent a global signal of the seriousness of the epidemic. Even during the SARS outbreak in 2003, the annual legislative session went ahead as scheduled.

But the outbreak in China has subsided in recent weeks, with most cases coming from travelers returning from abroad. On Wednesday, only one case of local transmission was reported.

The announcement that the congress was scheduled for May 22 suggests that officials feel assured that the gathering can be held without placing the central leadership and delegates at risk.

The government did not say how this year's meeting would be conducted. But in past years, it has drawn nearly 3,000 delegates from every province, including officials, party members, army generals in olive green and a smattering of representatives of ethnic minorities in traditional dress. They have assembled in tight rows on the main floor of the cavernous Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square to attend carefully scripted meetings.

The congress will portray Xi Jinping, China's top leader, as firmly in charge, said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a political scientist at Hong Kong Baptist University. Mr. Xi mostly disappeared from public view during the worst days of the outbreak in Wuhan, where the virus first emerged.

By holding the session, "he wants to show again he's very much in the saddle," Mr. Cabestan said.

In another sign that the government wants to project confidence in its strategy to tame the virus, the authorities in Beijing said on Wednesday that most domestic travelers arriving in the city would no longer be required to spend two weeks in quarantine. Quarantines will now be limited to people coming from overseas or from areas in China with recent cases, such as Hubei Province and its capital, Wuhan.

But the situation in China remains far from normal. The country has almost completely closed its borders and halted nearly all international flights in recent weeks, preventing many of its own citizens from coming home. China has urged foreign governments not to transfer diplomats to Beijing.

China has already acknowledged that the epidemic has set off the country's worst slowdown in nearly half a century, with the economy shrinking 6.8 percent in the first three months of the year compared with a year ago. The figure highlights the impact of China's drastic efforts to stamp out the coronavirus, which included a lockdown that expanded to cover half the population and the temporary closure of factories and offices across the country.

Mr. Xi struck a cautious but optimistic tone on Tuesday about the country's resolve to restore normal business activity in the world's second-largest economy.

"Thanks to our strenuous efforts, we have emerged from the most challenging time," Mr. Xi told the president of Nepal in a phone conversation, according to the Foreign Ministry. "Yet we remain soberly aware of the situation."

"We have every confidence that China's economic fundamentals underpinning long-term growth remain solid," he was described as saying.

China is practically alone among major countries in not having begun an extensive government spending program as an economic stimulus in response to the pandemic, even as the entire economy has slowed sharply and appears to suffer from continued weakness in consumer spending. One popular theory for why China has not yet acted is that it may be waiting for the congress to approve a comprehensive spending plan.

"This is a very important legal issue: Any important stimulus needs to be sealed by the congress," said Yu Yongding, a senior economist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The standing committee of the congress, which announced the opening date, did not say how long the session would last. Recent annual sessions have lasted about two weeks.

Health concerns might yet shorten this year's event.

The meetings are usually staid affairs in which the premier delivers an annual work report that in past years has provided a target for the Chinese economy's full-year growth. Economists expect that the economic growth target for this year is likely to be considerably below the usual 6 percent or so, if one is set at all.

This year's agenda is also likely to be focused on helping the country weather the impact of a possibly lengthy global recession triggered by the pandemic.

One key sign of how the government plans to address the downturn will be seen in the annual government budget, which may include economic stimulus measures.

Also on the agenda is a plan to overhaul China's laws for the handling of public health emergencies, including statutes on wildlife trade — which has drawn criticism for its links to disease outbreaks — and biosecurity.

The epidemic not only set back the country's economic activity, but also placed in jeopardy Mr. Xi's pledge to eradicate rural poverty this year. The government will most likely use the legislative session to reaffirm its commitment to this goal, on which Mr. Xi has staked his legacy.

[China] In a sign the virus is largely contained, China schedules big political meetings for late May (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 7:36 AM, Anna Fifield, Neutral]

China signaled its confidence that its novel coronavirus epidemic has finally been brought under control, scheduling for next month its highest-profile annual legislative meetings, which had been postponed at the height of the outbreak.

Known as the "Two Sessions," the meetings are always a piece of important political theater for China's ruling Communist Party, a venue for the leaders to trumpet their achievements of the past year and lay out their plans and targets for the year ahead.

But that will be particularly tricky this year, with China still emerging from a coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan at the end of last year, killing 4,643 people and sickening almost 85,000 in the country.

"A big part of these meetings is to be an accountability mechanism," said Ryan Manuel, managing director of Official China, a consultancy specializing in China's domestic political environment.

He predicted a lot of pushback this year if the party's leaders try to set overly ambitious growth targets or move aggressively to centralize power. "That will result in a lot of squealing," Manuel said.

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a mostly ceremonial advisory body, is to start meeting on May 21, and the National People's Congress, the rubber-stamp parliament, will convene the following day, China's official Xinhua News Agency announced

Wednesday. The NPC usually sits for at least 10 days, but no end date was reported.

The meetings had been scheduled to begin on March 5 but were postponed because of the coronavirus outbreak. Ironically, it was because Wuhan was holding its municipal meeting, a precursor to the national congress, in mid-January that authorities decided against alerting the public to a potential outbreak and risk upsetting the political calendar.

"The COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control situation in China is improving steadily, and the normal economic and social life is gradually resuming," the NPC Standing Committee said in a statement cited by Xinhua.

The meeting would "unite the thoughts" of the deputies on China's challenges and consider the "progress" of its poverty eradication program, Tam Yiu-chung, a Hong Kong representative on the Standing Committee, quoted Li Zhanshu, the committee chairman, as saying.

The annual meetings bring more than 5,000 delegates from all over the country to Beijing and to the main event: a huge NPC meeting in the majestic Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square. There, the delegates listen as President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang review the past year and lay out the government's targets for the year ahead.

The NPC has made "special arrangements" to protect the deputies against the coronavirus this time around, Tam told reporters, according to the South China Morning Post.

Chinese citizens abroad seek refuge from the coronavirus pandemic — at home

It wasn't clear whether that meant the meetings would use video conferencing rather than going ahead in person, as usual. The Standing Committee meeting held this week was a mixture of the two, with Beijing members attending in person and those outside the capital joining remotely.

The Global Times, a nationalist newspaper linked to the Communist Party, suggested last week that the Two Sessions meetings might be held in a similar way, noting that it has "become a trend to have video conferences."

While most of China is returning to life as normal — some areas faster than others — the capital, Beijing, continues to be under tight restrictions ahead of the politically significant meetings.

All people arriving in Beijing must undergo a quarantine period of as long as 21 days, and the national borders remain closed to foreign citizens.

Even after declaring victory over the virus, which began at the end of last year in the central province of Hubei, China has experienced secondary waves of infection as its citizens have returned from countries hit by the epidemic, especially from Iran, Italy and, most recently, Russia.

But now, with hospitals and quarantine centers set up on the northern border with Russia, authorities appear confident that they can manage the contagion.

[China] China to hold annual parliament meeting after two-month delay in signal that coronavirus is under control (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 2:43 AM, Nectar Gan, 12317K, Neutral]

China announced Wednesday it will hold the country's biggest annual political meeting in May following a two-month delay, the strongest signal yet from the Chinese government that it considers the novel coronavirus outbreak to be under control.

The annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's top legislative body, is usually held in early March. This year, it was postponed for the first time in decades due to the coronavirus outbreak.

On Wednesday, the NPC Standing Committee announced the parliamentary session will kick off on May 22, citing the "continuously improving situation of epidemic prevention and control on Covid-19" and a "gradual return to normal of economic and social life" in China, according to state news agency Xinhua.

The announcement is a symbolic display of confidence by Beijing that it has successfully contained the coronavirus, which was first reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December last year. It has since spread worldwide, infecting more than 3.1 million people and killing at least 216,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The highly choreographed meeting of the rubber-stamp parliament will see nearly 3,000 delegates from around the country gathered in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, unveiling the country's key economic targets, approving budgets, and passing legislation in sessions that last for about 10 days.

Allowing thousands of people to travel to the Chinese capital and sit side by side for days in an indoor setting would have been unthinkable two months ago, when much of the country was under varying types of restrictive lockdown measures intended to stop the fast-spreading virus.

But the country has turned a corner in recent weeks, with the number of newly reported infections slowing to a trickle. Lockdowns have also been lifted across China, including the original epicenter of Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province. People have returned to work, and some provinces have allowed final year high school students to return to classrooms in advance of university entrance examinations.

Beneath the surface, however, fears about a potential second wave of infections remain high. China last month banned the entry of most foreign nationals, following outbreaks around the world and a surge in imported cases. As of Wednesday, a total of 1,660 imported cases have been reported, mostly Chinese nationals returning from overseas. In many cities, all overseas arrivals are required to go into mandatory quarantine for at least two weeks.

Concerns have been particularly heightened over the recent spike in imported and locally transmitted infections near the Chinese-Russian border in northeastern Heilongjiang province. According to provincial health authorities, 386 Covid-19 cases have entered China through the Heilongjiang, and 556 local cases have been reported.

Chinese citizens have rushed to return home as the outbreak worsens in Russia, which has now recorded 93,000 confirmed cases – nearly 10,000 more than reported in China, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Earlier this month, the city of Suifenhe, which lies right by the Russian border, announced a city-wide lockdown, confining all residents to their homes and allowing only one person per household to go out for grocery shopping every three days. It also opened a makeshift hospital to treat coronavirus patients, converted from an office building.

Last week, the provincial capital of Harbin, a city of more than 10 million people, banned public gatherings, and residents would only be allowed to socialize with people in their respective households.

Locally transmitted cases have also been reported in recent weeks in Guangdong province, in the country's south.

At this year's belated NPC meetings, much attention will be placed on the central government's work report, to be delivered to delegates by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. The report will reveal the country's key economic targets and map out major policies for the coming year.

The Chinese economy has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, after its growth had already slumped to a near three-decade low last year following the US-China trade war.

In the first quarter of 2020, the world's second largest economy shrank 6.8% compared to a year earlier, according to government statistics. It was the first time China has reported an economic contraction since 1976, when Communist Party leader Mao Zedong's death ended a decade of social and economic tumult. The economy shrunk 1.6% that year.

The NPC's annual plenary session has kicked-off every year on March 5 since the date was first formalized in 1995. It went ahead as scheduled in 2003 amid the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, which originated in China and hit the country hard. SARS eventually spread across the world to infect more than 8,000 people, killing at least 774.

[China] China to roll out economic measures to support virus-hit Hubei (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 8:51 AM, Colin Qian and Ryan Woo, 5304K, Neutral]

China will roll out a basket of measures including tax, credit and foreign trade policies to support economic development in central Hubei province, the ruling Communist Party's politburo said on Wednesday, state television reported.

Hubei, the epicentre of the new coronavirus outbreak in the country, should speed up development in auto-making, 5G and artificial intelligence areas, it said.

Wuhan, capital of Hubei and the city hit hardest by the epidemic in China, reported on Wednesday a 40.5% slump in its gross domestic product in the first quarter compared with a year earlier.

Like the rest of the province, Wuhan's manufacturing sector led the decline in output, paralysed by a lockdown that was only lifted on April 8.

No new confirmed cases have been reported in Wuhan and Hubei since early April.

Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, has reported more than 3,800 fatalities from the coronavirus outbreak.

[China] How foreigners, especially black people, became unwelcome in parts of China amid COVID crisis (ABC News)

ABC News [4/29/2020 5:11 AM, Alice Chambers and Guy Davies, 3795K, Negative]

For Andrew, a black American living in China and teaching English for the past two years, life had been pretty good.

"As a black foreigner, because China was closed for so long, there is a novelty about seeing foreigners," he said. "It's part of life that you just get used to here, and it's never been malicious."

But about two weeks ago, that all changed, he said.

As COVID-19 cases originating in China appeared to decrease, and cases that the government said were brought into the country from abroad increased, being foreign in China, and especially being black, meant feeling unwelcome in certain places.

"In the past couple of weeks, things have changed drastically," Andrew, who has been teaching in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, told ABC News. He asked that ABC use only his first name, as he and his employer are wary of the risk of retaliation from Chinese authorities.

American authorities appear to be well-aware of the issue. In an April 13 health alert, the U.S. Consulate General warned about discrimination against African Americans in Guangzhou. "As part of this campaign, police ordered bars and restaurants not to serve clients who appear to be of African origin. Moreover, local officials launched a round of mandatory tests for COVID-19, followed by mandatory self-quarantine, for anyone with 'African contacts,' regardless of recent travel history or previous quarantine completion. African-Americans have also reported that some businesses and hotels refuse to do business with them," the bulletin read.

The consulate general said it "advises African-Americans or those who believe Chinese officials may suspect them of having contact with nationals of African countries to avoid the Guangzhou metropolitan area until further notice."

"At a moment when the international community urgently needs to work together to fight the pandemic, the US side is making unwarranted allegations in an attempt to sow discords and stoke troubles," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said on April 13. "This is neither moral nor responsible. We suggest that the US had better focus on domestic efforts to contain the spread of the virus. Attempts to use the pandemic to drive a wedge between China and Africa are bound to fail."

Lijian also said that "new measures" were adopted in Guangzhou to address "the concerns of some African citizens."

ABC News reached out and placed an official request to comment with the information department of the Foreign Ministry as well as the one in Guangzhou but has not heard back at time of publication.

By mid-March, Chinese propaganda had shifted, from praising the country's quick action dealing with the virus, to worrying about its reintroduction from abroad. It was around this time that Keenan Chen, a researcher and reporter with First Draft, an organization that tracks misinformation online, told ABC News he began to see unconfirmed speculation that community transmission in China was not as serious as cases coming in from the outside.

"China is very concerned about a second wave coming from abroad," Evanna Hu, a partner and an expert on China at Omelas, a Washington-based firm that tracks online extremism and information manipulation, told ABC News.

Despite many of the new imported cases in China coming from Chinese students returning from studying overseas, state and social media more often than not simply say the new cases are brought into the country coupled with images of the coronavirus ravaging the United States and Europe, leaving the impression that foreigners were the ones infected.

A reported attack and a swift crackdown

Guangzhou has one of the largest African populations in China (400,000-500,000 by some estimates) and reports in early April showed discrimination against those residents, some of whom were left homeless or subject to arbitrary COVID-19 testing after authorities said that five Nigerians had tested positive for the virus. Significantly, the People's Government of Guangzhou Province announced that a Nigerian man at a COVID ward had attacked and wounded a female nurse while allegedly attempting to flee, Chen told ABC, adding that this news circulated widely on social media. ABC News could not independently verify if the original report was true.

Andrew said a taxi driver drive off when he saw him, and has also had issues with the authorities when riding on the metro.

For no apparent reason, Andrew said he was asked by local police to produce his passport as he was trying to get the metro. When he asked why, he was told there was a new rule in place, and was given no explanation. Eventually he ceded to their demands: "I realized I was standing there, frustrating a group of people who did not create this rule," he said. Now he mostly stays at home.

"The narrative that I have seen about foreigners is that foreigners are spreading the virus because they're irresponsible," Andrew told ABC News. "So if you have a population doing their very best to take care of themselves and they're told that some are not, that explains why it happens so quickly."

Matt Slack, a white man from New Jersey who has run a chain of pizza restaurants in

Guangzhou for the past four years, said the change in the disposition towards foreigners "was like a light switch."

"I'm privileged to say that that I've gone 36 years of my life without experiencing racism," he told ABC News. Now, he's been refused entrance to restaurants, other people won't get in the elevator with him. "People won't sit beside you in the subway," he said.

Chen said that the Chinese people know the information they get online is unreliable. In the past 10 years the censorship machine has become so sophisticated that it's hard to access the internet seen by the outside world.

"There's absolutely tons of racism and xenophobia online," he said. "[But] racist content and xenophobic content is rarely censored online, unlike comments against the government."

Anti-black racism

Slack said he recalls how, on April 6, his businesses were visited by the local city management. He said he was never given an official note, but his store managers reported to him that they were given a blue sign that they were instructed to show to customers. It was written in English and said that their pizza restaurants were only offering take-away. The message was meant for foreigners, Slack said his manager reported to him, "especially [for] black people."

Slack also said he was not allowed to eat in a restaurant in a different neighborhood one day recently, even though he saw Chinese people eating there. Andrew said his foreign friends don't want to dine out because of concerns they'd be denied.

Both expats painted a picture of a shifting information landscape in which it's difficult to determine where directives are coming from. Andrew said his fear is that "they could show up at your door and tell you you're under quarantine." "And we don't know who 'they' is. It's inconsistent," he added.

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in China in December, controlling the epidemic block by block has fallen on the most grass-roots level of the Chinese civil-service: the neighborhood committee. Under immense pressure to deliver results to their supervisors, some overeager neighborhood controllers have resorted to sometimes sweepingly extreme measures like welding families inside their home in Jiangsu Province back in early February. Provincial officials later found out and forbade the practice. What is happening in certain areas of Guangzhou may be part of the same phenomenon of overzealous low-level leaders taking matters into their own hands.

"The signs that I've seen are not on letterheads," said Hu. "Which the reason why I think it might be very low level CCP officials, but it probably wasn't sanctioned from the top."

International backlash

Last week, the authorities in Guangzhou published a multi-lingual statement, addressed to everyone in the province, to say that the government has "zero tolerance over discriminatory language or acts."

But reports of racism have drawn international condemnation from senior politicians in both Africa and the United States.

Some of this appears to have stemmed from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) putting forth "many contradictory stories" about the origins of coronavirus, including alleging that the U.S. Army and Italy were the true sources, and not Wuhan, where the outbreak is believed to have begun, according to Dr. Matthew Kroenig, associate professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University,

"There is longstanding and well-documented racism, especially against black people, in China," he said. "The state has seized on this sentiment in recent days to find a scapegoat."

Some of the apparent increase in racism will likely have a political rationale, he said.

"Most CCP actions are driven by its two foremost goals of domestic stability and increased international leadership," Kroenig continued. "Similarly, China's disinformation campaign is driven by a desire to deflect blame, so the regime can appear competent both at home and abroad."

However, this has become an economic and foreign policy problem for China, as the country's economic interests in Africa means they have been keen to play down accusations of racism, according to Hu. "The Chinese propaganda machine has gone into overdrive since April 12th to dispel rumors of Africans being targeted," she said. "The Chinese Communist Party is trying their hardest right now to dispel those rumors, which I've never seen before as part of their foreign policy."

Hope for the future

Slack has refused to follow the local authority's direction not to allow foreigners into his restaurants and doesn't know if his business will survive.

His restaurants normally employ about 45 people, around 20 of whom are currently working given the COVID-19 restrictions still in place.

Slack says there are a hundred ways to shut a business down in China, but that he can't keep quiet right now. "We just won't operate anywhere in which our business is encouraged to discriminate even if we get shut down for it," he wrote in a public LinkedIn post.

In an email sent on April 24 and reviewed by ABC News, the U.S. embassy in Beijing assured American citizens stated that: "In response to reports of discrimination against foreign citizens the Chinese government has reiterated that all public health measures, including mandatory testing and quarantine policies, apply equally to both Chinese citizens and foreigners." The embassy has urged US citizens to report cases of discrimination to the police and, after reporting, asked them to inform the nearest American Citizens Services Unit of the incident.

Andrew, however, is more hopeful for his future. He has the support of his employer and a wide circle of friends and acquaintances both foreign and Chinese. He says he has been

touched by shows of solidarity – local Chinese volunteers have stepped up to support Africans evicted from their homes. On the other hand, he wouldn't recommend foreigners to move to China right now.

"I don't think that this is a permanent thing," he said. "I don't think it reflects on the people of China. I think it reflects on the fear that people are living in, and the desire that anyone has to explain away this situation that is fraught for literally everyone."

[Hong Kong] As virus infections dwindle, Hong Kong protests gain steam (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:58 AM, Zen Soo, Neutral]

Demonstrators chanted pro-democracy slogans in a luxury mall in Hong Kong on Wednesday, the latest in a string of small but determined protests as the city's coronavirus outbreak slows.

More than 100 protesters gathered at lunchtime in the Landmark Atrium mall in Central, a prestigious business and retail district, despite social distancing rules that prohibit public gatherings of more than four.

They sang a protest anthem, "Glory to Hong Kong," and held up signs reading "Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now" and "Hong Kong Independence." One protester hung a banner cursing Hong Kong police and their families.

"The protests had calmed down previously because of the coronavirus, but now we must step up and let the world know that we have not given up," said Mich Chan, who works in the legal industry. "We're still fighting for what we fought for last year."

Holding up a sign calling for the movement's five demands to be met, Chan said she was not worried about possible transmission of the virus during the protests because the people of Hong Kong are "disciplined and know how to protect themselves" by wearing masks.

Police entered the mall about half an hour after the protest began, urging people to leave and warning those assembled that they were violating social distancing rules and participating in an unlawful assembly. The police detained several protesters but later let them go, with no arrests made.

The protest followed similar ones in malls on Sunday and Tuesday in which police dispersed the crowds. They are a continuation of a movement that began last June to protest an extradition bill that would have allowed detainees in Hong Kong to be transferred to mainland China. Although the bill was later withdrawn, the demonstrations continued, with protesters demanding full democracy and an independent inquiry into police behavior.

Organizers are planning further protests in May, with an eye to a major march on July 1, the day when Britain returned Hong Kong to China in 1997. Activists expect protesters to return to the streets again, as the city's daily virus cases have dwindled to single digits for over two weeks.

Adrian Wong, who works in banking, said he came out to protest despite worries about the coronavirus.

"I am concerned about the virus but I think I still have to come out, so that Hong Kong's people won't forget what happened in the last year," Wong said. "The violence of the Hong Kong police force is destroying Hong Kong, and the five demands have not been met yet."

The protests this month are also fueled by the perception that mainland China is interfering in Hong Kong's affairs, after Beijing's liaison office accused pan-democrat lawmakers of damaging public interest by filibustering and delaying the election of a chairman of the Legislative Council House Committee.

Protesters also criticized the arrests of 15 pro-democracy activists and lawmakers earlier this month on charges of unauthorized assembly during several large-scale demonstrations last year.

"Whether people protest depends on the government's actions. If the Beijing liaison office continues to criticize lawmakers, disqualify them or even put pressure on people, then people will be angry and come out to protest more eagerly," activist Ventus Lau said.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong court rejects appeal by protest leader Edward Leung (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:04 AM, Jessie Pang, 5304K, Neutral]

A Hong Kong court on Wednesday rejected an appeal by pro-democracy activist Edward Leung against a six-year jail term for his part in demonstrations in the Chinese-ruled city in 2016 that turned violent.

Leung, 28, one of the leaders of a movement advocating independence from China, was jailed for rioting and was handed the harshest sentence to a pro-democracy leader since Britain returned Hong Kong to Beijing in 1997.

The appeal court judges said in their judgement the law must ensure that public order and peace are preserved and not threatened by the use of violence.

"If public order is not preserved, the freedom and rights of citizens will be lost," they said.

In his appeal, Leung's lawyer argued his sentence was disproportionate to his offence, citing other, more violent protesters receiving lighter sentences.

The ruling comes as the financial hub is gearing up for demonstrations over the next few months after a relative lull this year as the new coronavirus and social distancing restrictions aimed at curbing its spread saw many protesters stay indoors.

Authorities have repeatedly said the city is facing the risk of "home-grown terrorism" after several police reports of explosive materials being found.

More than 7,800 protesters have been arrested since opposition to a now-withdrawn extradition bill escalated in June last year, with 564 of those charged with rioting, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Although Leung was jailed before the demonstrations erupted last year, many regard him as a "spiritual leader" of the movement.

One of his old slogans — "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" — is one of the most popular chants of the new generation of protesters.

[Japan] Japan's Abe says impossible to hold Olympics unless pandemic contained (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:12 AM, Leika Kihara, Neutral]

It will be impossible to host the Tokyo Olympic Games next year unless the coronavirus pandemic is contained, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Wednesday.

"The Olympic Games must be held in a way that shows the world has won its battle against the coronavirus pandemic," Abe told parliament.

"Otherwise, it will be hard to hold the Games."

He was replying to a query from an opposition lawmaker whether Tokyo could host the Games next year, after this year's delay caused by the pandemic.

[Japan] Japan firms back same-sex partnership certificate campaign in gay rights push (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:08 AM, Beh Lih Yi, Neutral]

A Japanese charity has won the backing of businesses from banks to insurers for a new scheme offering digital partnership certificates that allow same-sex couples to tap into the same staff benefits as heterosexual ones.

The Famiee Project said it wanted to spur change by tapping into growing business support for LGBT+ rights in socially conservative Japan and aims to sign up 100 businesses by the time it launches the scheme in July.

Gay marriage is illegal in Japan and although about two dozen cities, towns and wards issue same-sex partnership certificates, they lack legal standing and prejudice persists.

"If we have a big network of corporations that support us, we can persuade the government to change the law," said Famiee Project founder Koki Uchiyama.

"That kind of movement is already happening in Japan," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Tokyo, referring to the growing business support for LGBT+ rights.

The scheme has so far been endorsed by 17 companies including banking firm Mizuho Financial Group, insurer Sompo Japan and Hotto Link, a public-listed data firm where Uchiyama is the chief executive.

Some of the 17 firms have already recognised certificates issued by local authorities, but these documents can only be used in the area they are issued.

Famiee Project said its digital certificates will use blockchain technology and QR codes for record and verification, making it easier for nationwide use.

The project aims to get 100 companies on board by July to provide same-sex couples with benefits such as marriage or parental leave.

It also wants the firms to accept the certificates for services such as opening joint bank account or naming insurance beneficiaries.

The Justice Ministry and Welfare Ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Japan's laws on LGBT+ issues are relatively liberal compared with many Asian countries, with same-sex relations legal since 1880, but being openly gay remains largely taboo.

About a third of Japanese companies have measures in place to support gay couples, but discrimination is still common, according to Nijiirō Diversity, which campaigns for LGBT+ rights in the workplace.

"This certificate alone is not effective. The government should give more support to companies working towards measures on LGBT+ rights," said the group founder Maki Muraki.

Activist Ai Nakajima said she hoped the scheme would spur government into action.

"Companies are changing, but the government is not changing. So tax benefits or health insurance benefits are still not possible," said Nakajima, who was among 13 same-sex couples to sue the government over the right to gay marriage last year.

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party has said that same-sex marriage was "incompatible" with the constitution, although public polls showing growing acceptance in recent years.

[Malaysia] After virus outbreak tied to religious event, Malaysia puts the brakes on Ramadan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 9:07 AM, Emily Ding, Neutral]

Over several days in late February, at least 12,500 Muslims convened at the Jamek Mosque on Kuala Lumpur's outskirts to pray, eat and listen to sermons in an annual act to renew their faith.

On the eve of the gathering in the suburb of Sri Petaling — organized by Jemaah Tabligh Malaysia, the local chapter of a religious pilgrimage movement founded in India about a century ago — the World Health Organization had not yet declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic, and Malaysia had 22 reported cases. Initially, the event came and went as it had in years before.

The first sign of trouble came March 9, when a participant from Brunei was reported to be infected. A few days later, a Malaysian participant tested positive. By March 17, cases linked to the religious celebration had become Malaysia's largest cluster and now account

for 37 percent of its total of almost 6,000 cases. Some of the 1,500 foreign attendees carried the virus home to Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

With the holy month of Ramadan underway, this year's religious festivities are unlike any in memory. It's a time when Muslims usually come together to break their dawn-to-sunset fast with family and friends, and for nightly prayers at mosques. But such activities now pose a risk of coronavirus transmission.

Two weeks after the Kuala Lumpur event, about 9,000 Muslims gathered in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, as part of another tabligh chapter — until authorities shut it down. Attendees spread the virus to neighboring countries, including Malaysia and Thailand.

"Ramadan is a very high-risk event," said Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist at the University of Indonesia. "The infections from the tabligh gathering in South Sulawesi spread to many different islands. Then you have all these small clusters around the country that can become a big fire engulfing the whole country."

Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority nation, recently banned people from traveling back to their hometowns in an exodus that traditionally happens at the end of Ramadan for the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Yet it has not imposed a national lockdown, and social distancing measures vary among provinces.

"It's going to be very difficult to keep the people from going to the mosque every night," or dropping by a relative's house to break fast together, Riono said. Indonesia has more than 9,000 coronavirus cases and 700 deaths.

In Malaysia, the government has extended restrictions on movement until at least May 12 — midway through Ramadan. The country has closed its borders, banned events and gatherings, shut schools and houses of worship, and allowed only essential businesses to operate. Most people can travel only for necessities — exceptions require police approval — within six miles of their home, with one person allowed in each car.

"We have leaders who decided to be brave and initiated the lockdown relatively early in comparison with other countries, once we knew we had made a mistake," said Nirmala Bhoo Pathy, an epidemiologist at the University of Malaya. The Health Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Malaysia's Islamic affairs minister, Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri, has advised Muslims to order food and have it delivered to friends and relatives instead of visiting them at home. Officials have also halted the food bazaars that normally pop up across the country and have established a fund for mosques and prayer houses to distribute food to the needy.

"We should welcome Ramadan with the new normal," Zulkifli said on the eve of the holy month.

As the world battles the pandemic, the Kuala Lumpur mosque gathering highlights how a localized hot spot can quickly become a wider outbreak.

Attendees have reportedly said that precautions against the coronavirus were not observed,

and that people prayed closely together and shared food.

By late March, the mosque cluster had spread to five generations as family members infected neighbors, their neighbors infected their friends, and so on. Participants in the gathering also had visited Islamic schools, contributing to new subclusters of infections among students and teachers.

In early April, Malaysian officials said about 3,000 tabligh participants had yet to be screened — in part because some had gone abroad. One of the organizers, Abdullah Cheong, publicly disputed this figure, citing discrepancies in earlier estimates. Cheong declined to comment further about the gathering when contacted by The Washington Post.

Khairi Akbar, a 41-year-old Malaysian who took part in the gathering, learned in March that he was an asymptomatic carrier of the virus. After being admitted to the hospital for 18 days and self-quarantined for another 14, he was looking forward to spending Ramadan at home with his wife and children — although he worries about his mother, who lives alone in another state.

"We believe that Allah is the doer of all things, so even if the current situation means that we cannot perform our normal prayers in the mosque, there must be something that he wants us to learn," he said. "I believe we can achieve the same purpose of Ramadan staying in our homes, but I definitely miss breaking fast together at the mosque and doing prayers at night."

To deter people from contravening stay-home orders, Defense Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said police would increase roadblocks around the country. Eleven temporary prisons have been set up to house violators, he said. Since March 18, more than 19,000 have been arrested. Some have since been released, others fined or imprisoned.

The clampdown appears to be having an effect. In recent days, Malaysia has registered daily cases of the coronavirus in the double digits — down from a high of more than 200 in early April. Malaysia's director general of health, Noor Hisham Abdullah, recently said the country is in "the recovery phase."

"But it's not impossible to have an exponential surge if we let our guard down," he added.

Rahmah Ghazali, a 36-year-old freelance journalist who is normally based in Britain, said her family could still mark Ramadan together but that they have had to modify their plans. She has been living with her husband and two sisters in her parents' house in Kajang, near Kuala Lumpur, with her parents' domestic helper and their seven grandchildren.

"We're cooking more than ever," she said. "We don't go out and don't really order deliveries because it can get expensive, and currently neither I nor my husband are working. We won't be spending like in previous years."

[Myanmar] UN human rights expert accuse Myanmar army of fresh abuses (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 9:25 AM, Staff, 2194K, Negative]

The U.N.'s human rights expert on Myanmar has called for a new investigation into

allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity during recent fighting in the Southeast Asian country as she approaches the end of her appointment.

Yanghee Lee, whose formal title is special rapporteur, accused Myanmar's military of "inflicting immense suffering" on ethnic minorities in Rakhine and Chin states, where the government is battling the Arakan Army, a well-armed and well-trained guerrilla force representing the Buddhist Rakhine minority.

"While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine state, targeting the civilian population," Lee said in a statement issued Wednesday in Geneva.

She accused the military of "systematically violating the most fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and human rights," and said its conduct toward civilians "may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."

Lee, a South Korean whose term ends this month, has been a sharp critic of Myanmar's military since her appointment in 2014, focusing especially on human rights abuses against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine state.

In August 2017, the military – known as the Tatmadaw – launched what it called a clearance campaign in northern Rakhine state in response to attacks by a Rohingya insurgent group. The campaign forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Security forces were accused of mass rapes and killings and burning thousands of homes.

The International Court of Justice in the Netherlands agreed last year to rule on charges of genocide lodged against Myanmar. U.N. agencies and human rights organizations have extensively documented atrocities. Myanmar's government says it acted justifiably and denies any major abuses.

Lee linked the current situation in Rakhine and Chin to the government's actions against the Rohingya, for which no senior officers have faced justice and token punishments were given to a handful of low-ranking security personnel.

"Having faced no accountability, the Tatmadaw continues to operate with impunity. For decades, its tactics have intentionally maximized civilian suffering; we all know what they did to the Rohingya in 2017," Lee said. "They are now targeting all civilians in the conflict area, with people from Rakhine, Rohingya, Mro, Dagnet and Chin communities being killed in recent months. Their alleged crimes must be investigated in accordance with international standards, with perpetrators being held accountable."

The Arakan Army, which says it is seeking self-determination, has engaged in increasingly fierce combat with government forces since late 2018.

Lee said government air and artillery strikes in recent weeks have killed and injured scores of adults and children.

"More than 157,000 people have been displaced, and hundreds including women and

children killed and wounded since the conflict started," she said.

Lee was also critical of the Arakan Army, which she said "has also conducted its hostilities in a manner that has had negative impacts on civilians, including kidnapping local officials and parliamentarians."

She added that the guerrilla force had declared a unilateral cease-fire, citing the need to combat the spread of COVID-19.

"The focus of all authorities, including security forces, should be on dealing with the COVID-19 crisis," Lee said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar military may be committing new war crimes, says departing rights envoy (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:45 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The departing U.N. human rights envoy for Myanmar said its military is engaged in activities against rebels that may amount to "war crimes and crimes against humanity" in Rakhine and Chin states, and that she was "enraged" and "saddened" by the situation in the country after six years in the role.

The South Korean special rapporteur said the basis for her conclusion about possible war crimes was that the armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, have ramped up attacks against civilians in recent weeks with air and artillery strikes.

Two military spokesmen did not answer phone calls seeking comment. A government spokesman also did not answer phone calls seeking comment. The army has denied targeting civilians and has declared the insurgent group it is fighting, the Arakan Army, a terrorist organisation.

"While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine State, targeting the civilian population," Yanghee Lee said on Wednesday in her final statement as rights envoy, calling for an investigation into the accusations "in accordance with international standards."

Government troops and fighters from the Arakan Army, which wants greater autonomy for Myanmar's western region and recruits largely from the region's Buddhist majority, have been fighting for more than a year, but clashes have intensified recently.

Dozens of people have been killed and tens of thousands displaced.

The government has repeatedly refused requests by Lee to enter Myanmar. She has previously accused the army of genocide and other war crimes against the Rohingya Muslim minority in Rakhine in 2017, when some 700,000 fled an army crackdown.

The army and government have consistently rejected such accusations and said the military was responding to attacks by Rohingya Muslim insurgents.

Lee told Reuters by phone from South Korea that the democratic opening that brought

Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to power in 2016, ending half a century of military rule, had failed to bring the hoped-for expansion of rights and freedoms.

She criticized what she described as the "systemic failure" of the international community, including the United Nations, to stop grave human rights violations.

"We repeat the phrase, 'Never again'. It goes on and on," she said.

Lee has been a divisive figure inside Myanmar. Her defense of the Rohingya made her a popular target of Buddhist nationalists. The last time she was allowed to visit the country was in 2017, shortly after the expulsion of tens of thousands of Rohingya during a military campaign.

[Papua New Guinea] Zijin warns Papua New Guinea of China anger over end of gold mine lease (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:52 AM, Tom Westbrook and Tom Daly, 5304K, Neutral]

China's Zijin Mining has warned Papua New Guinea that its failure to renew the lease of a gold mine it jointly owns with Barrick Gold Corp there could damage bilateral relations.

Papua New Guinea on Friday said it would not renew a 20-year mining lease at its Porgera gold mine, citing environmental damage and social unrest even as gold prices have soared to more than seven-year highs.

Barrick (Niugini) Limited (BNL), the local venture in which both miners have a 47.5% stake, suspended operations on Saturday, saying the government had not given it formal notification that it would not renew the lease, or any details of a planned transition.

Zijin, which is a state-controlled company, said that Papua New Guinea needed to conduct negotiations to extend the mining lease in good faith, and that a failure to resolve the issue could impair relations between the two countries.

"As a Chinese enterprise, Zijin would like to contribute to the existing good economic, trade, cultural and inter-governmental relations between China and PNG," Chen Jinghe, chairman of Zijin's board said in a letter addressed to Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape.

"However, if Zijin's investment in Porgera mine is not properly protected by the PNG government, I am afraid there will be significant negative impact on the bilateral relations between China and PNG," he said in the letter, dated Monday, seen by Reuters. Chen's office confirmed the letter had been sent.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't immediately respond to a faxed request for comment. China's embassy in Port Moresby did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment. The office of Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister did not respond to a request for comment.

China has steadily increased its influence and spending in the Pacific in recent years, and is Papua New Guinea's biggest creditor, budget figures show.

The BNL joint venture had run into opposition from local landowners and residents. Critics say the Porgera mine has polluted the water and created other environmental and social problems, with minimal economic benefits for locals.

Marape warned Barrick in a social media post on Monday that the government would take control of the mine if it closed during the transition period.

Both miners have said they would pursue all legal means to protect their interests and recover damages.

Zijin also said that it understood the need for greater benefits distribution among governments, landowners and stakeholders.

But if the special mining lease extension is not granted, the mine will be forced to close, the company said.

That would also result in "the removal of the installations and facilities in the mine ... (which) would render the mine's operation impossible for years," the company added.

[Singapore] Singapore warns against spreading fake news about foreign workers living in dorms (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [4/29/2020 6:43 AM, Gurdip Singh, 3975K, Neutral]

Singapore on Wednesday warned against spreading fake news and videos about migrants workers, saying this could disturb the law and order situation in dormitories where a large number of foreign workers, including Indian nationals, have been tested positive for COVID-19.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam warned that such videos can lead to serious law and order incidents. He said the authorities are watching individuals who spread the videos "very carefully."

Warning those spreading fake news maliciously, he said, they will be charged if a crime was committed.

The Indian-origin minister's warning came as hundreds of thousands of foreign workers have been barred from leaving their cramped dormitories to curb the spread of COVID-19, as they make up a majority of Singapore's new cases each day, according to a Channel News Asia report on Wednesday.

So far, a total of 12,183 of the 323,000 migrant workers living in dormitories — about 3.77 per cent — have tested positive, putting the spotlight on their living conditions.

The total number of coronavirus cases in the city-state on Wednesday rose to 15,641 with a vast majority of them being migrant workers.

Shanmugam said a number of fake and "very malicious" videos were circulating on social media, with one suggesting that a Bangladeshi worker in Singapore committed suicide

because of a lack of money and work.

Another video purportedly showed two men of South Asian origin fighting in a dorm in Singapore, when in fact the incident took place in Dubai, Shanmugam pointed out.

"It's to create panic, unhappiness, anger and hopefully violence," the minister told reporters via video conference.

Shanmugam said the videos also serve to make Singaporeans believe that foreign workers here were being treated badly, despite authorities ensuring they continued to get paid, three meals a day and "first-class medical treatment."

The minister acknowledged that while it was impossible that every worker would be satisfied with the quality of the free meals, a "majority of them" said the quality of the food they received was good, the report said.

"But even now, people are deliberately circulating old photographs of food packets; sometimes food being thrown away from some places, not necessarily Singapore, and saying, 'you see, these workers are being ill-treated'," he was quoted as saying.

"And (this is) also encouraging them to come out and complain, even when there's nothing to complain about." Shanmugam said the authorities were watching the people who spread these videos and photos "very closely" and added "where it's clearly criminal, we will charge (in court)."

However, he declined to give details on how many people were being investigated for circulating such posts, only adding that they comprised both locals and foreigners.

Shanmugam reiterated that such posts could lead to 'serious' law and order situations, including a "riot-like situation."

"You can see that when people are together and they are not going out to work, a small spark can create a serious incident," he said, referring to the 2013 Little India riots involving some 300 South Asian workers including those from India.

"We need to be very careful. We are taking care of them (the foreign workers), but at the same time they can be stoked into anger, creating law and order incidents through the use of falsehoods," the minister said.

[South Korea] Fire at Construction Site Kills 38 in South Korea (New York Times)
New York Times [4/29/2020 8:52 AM, Choe Sang-Hun, 40577K, Negative]

A blaze at a construction site southeast of Seoul killed 38 people on Wednesday in one of the deadliest fires to hit South Korea in recent years, police officers and local news reports said.

With emergency workers still looking for one other person who may remain trapped inside a building filled with toxic smoke, they have so far found 38 bodies, Seo Seung-hyeon, a local fire department chief, said during a news briefing. Ten others were injured, including eight

who were in serious condition, he said.

When the fire broke out, 78 workers were believed to be working in the four-story warehouse under construction in Icheon, 50 miles southeast of Seoul, the Fire Department said.

The blaze was the third devastating workplace fire to hit South Korea in recent years, and came as President Moon Jae-in has struggled to make good on his promise to put an end to the man-made disasters that have convulsed the country since a 2014 ferry sinking killed more than 300 people.

The Fire Department said it was investigating the cause of the blaze. But Mr. Seo said that investigators suspected that it was caused by an explosion in an underground level, where some workers used urethane, a combustible chemical used for insulation work.

Dozens of fire engines were sent to control the flames. Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun urged his government to dedicate every available resource to rescue the workers believed to be trapped in the warehouse.

The fire was extinguished in three hours, but firefighters searching for the missing workers were hampered by toxic gas in the warehouse.

Photos and TV reports showed orange-red flames and black clouds of smoke engulfing the warehouse and responders bringing out bodies from the building on stretchers to ambulances outside.

The Yonhap news agency quoted a survivor as saying that the smoke filled the building so quickly that he could barely find his way out.

South Korea, which has had strong economic growth in recent decades, has been prone to major disasters despite its leaders' repeated promises to make the country safer.

In 2014, an overloaded ferry capsized, killing more than 300 people, most of them high school students. In 2018, a fire at a hospital that doubled as a nursing home killed 47 people.

The blaze came two years after a hospital fire in the southern city of Miryang killed 41 people in a building that lacked sprinklers. That disaster occurred a month after another fire killed 29 people at a fitness center.

Mr. Moon took power in May 2017, replacing his predecessor, Park Geun-hye, who was impeached and jailed on corruption charges following weeks of huge anti-government protests. South Koreans grew cold toward Ms. Park after she was accused of mishandling the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster.

Keenly aware of that recent history, Mr. Moon repeatedly promised South Koreans that they would "never have to shed tears because of safety issues." He also vowed to "end governmental incompetence and irresponsibility" in making South Korea safer.

But after the Miryang fire, Mr. Moon said he felt "crushed" that his promise went unfulfilled.

In recent weeks, Mr. Moon's government has won global plaudits for its successful efforts to contain the coronavirus epidemic. His party won a landslide in the April 15 parliamentary elections largely seen as a midterm referendum on Mr. Moon's performance as president.

[Thailand] Migrants jobless and trapped under Thai coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:08 AM, Nanchanok Wongsamuth, Negative]

Htoo Gay War quit her job as a domestic worker in January because her employer refused to allow her to take one day off each week – just before Thailand reported its first case of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Three months later, the pregnant 30-year-old from Myanmar has been unable to find a new job as Thailand has declared a state of emergency, shutting malls, schools and bars to curb the spread of the virus, which has infected some 3,000 people.

"I want to go home to be with my parents, because at least they can take care of me while I'm out of work and don't have any money," she said from the central province of Pathum Thani.

"But I can't go back now that the borders are closed," she said, adding that her family are scraping by on her husband's salary of 8,000 baht (\$247) per month.

Thailand has about 2.8 million registered migrant workers mainly from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, government figures show. But the United Nations estimates that 2 million more work informally across the country.

At least half a million migrant workers in Thailand have been left unemployed as a result of the coronavirus crisis, estimates the Migrant Working Group (MWG), a network of non-governmental organisations promoting migrant rights.

"These workers will find it difficult to seek new jobs as many venues are still closed, and they also can't go back home and have very little access to government aid," said Adisorn Kerdmongkol, a coordinator at MWG.

Suchat Pornchaiwiseskul, director-general of the Department of Employment, said its policy was to help unemployed migrants find new jobs within 30 days.

"Thailand's labour law protects both Thai and foreign workers," Suchat said.

Thailand has introduced a raft of measures to help workers affected by the coronavirus, including financial aid for informal Thai workers and for Thai and foreign workers registered under the social security system.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation spoke to seven migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar who said they did not receive government assistance because they were not formally registered.

One female worker who earned 120 baht a day at a beauty salon before it closed, said she owed money to a grocery store because she could not afford to pay for basic goods.

"I've been looking for a new job, but no one has been willing to accept me," said the worker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because Thai law does not allow migrants to work in beauty salons.

About 60,000 migrant workers scrambled to leave Thailand in March before the land border was closed, as the shutting of businesses left them without an income.

Most migrant workers are not members of Thailand's social security scheme, said Jarrett Basedow, regional director of Issara Institute, a labour rights and anti-trafficking group.

"We have not yet talked to a migrant worker who has accessed this assistance," he said, adding that many work illegally, have not received a social security card or their employers have not paid the necessary contributions.

Unemployed people must contribute to social security for at least six months before they can receive benefits.

Basedow said many employers were laying off workers, often with no legal severance pay, by pressuring workers to sign resignation letters or not renewing their contracts.

"Many of these workers are worried about meeting their needs until they are able to return home, as they have no employment and high debt," he said.

Pasuta Chuenkhachorn, a lawyer with the Human Rights and Development Foundation, which provides legal aid to migrant workers and trafficking victims, said the government's financial aid measures discriminated against migrants.

"In times of crisis like this, the Thai government only takes care of Thai people," she said.

One glass factory worker from Myanmar said he and dozens of other workers were laid off on March 1, as orders had fallen.

He was unable to look for a new job because his passport and work permit were still with the agency that recruited him.

"There's no point in staying here anymore," he said by phone from Thailand's central Samut Prakan province.

"Once the borders are open, I'll go home. It's hard to find work here and I don't have my personal documents."

South and Central Asia

[Bangladesh] 'A life too often lived underwater': How tidal flooding is wreaking havoc in Bangladesh (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Kenneth Dickerman and Jashim Salam, Neutral]
Climate change is affecting everyone everywhere in myriad ways. I recently wrote about how rising sea levels are affecting Miami. Rising sea levels are a problem around the world. Photographer Jashim Salam has been documenting how this has been affecting him, his family and his neighbors in the southeastern Bangladeshi city of Chittagong.

Salam notes Chittagong often is regarded as the commercial and industrial capital of Bangladesh. As such, it is densely populated, with people from all over the country heading there for work. Salam estimates the population of Chittagong at 6.5 million. Those people are living with the effects of climate change, particularly with regard to rising sea levels.

Salam, his family and his neighbors are badly affected by tidal surges. He told *In Sight* his home, in the Chaktai area of Chittagong, gets flooded every year from June to October, sometimes as much as twice a day, because of the rising tidal waters from the Karnaphuli River.

Salam says this flooding makes life difficult. It affects everyone's daily routine. "People have to save their belongings from tidal floods and also throw out water from their homes every time it's flooded," he says. "The main business areas of Chaktai and Khatungonj also are affected by the tidal floodwater." Because of the flooding, business is halted and products become waterlogged.

Residents are trying to find ways to cope. They've raised their ground-level floors and built barriers and walls to keep the water at bay. Still, the water finds a way in. This is all compounded by the annual monsoon season. "This is a recent phenomenon, one many blame on climate change and rising seas coupled with the annual monsoon season," Salam says. "Residents have had to adapt and adjust to the enormous hardships of a life too often lived underwater."

Salam's photos drive home the difficulties people face because of the recurrent tidal flooding. The rising water spares no thing and no one. We see people standing in water driven up to and past their calves, detritus floating through the murky waters and what were once keepsakes streaked, faded and waterlogged. As Salam told *In Sight*, "I am portraying a city that I am deeply connected with — and the suffering experienced by its inhabitants."

[Editorial note: consult source link for photographs]

[India] India has 1,000 coronavirus deaths but expert says no exponential rise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 9:11 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, Neutral]

India has recorded its 1,000th novel coronavirus death, but the head of a government think-tank said on Wednesday that its 1.3 billion people, strained from weeks of lockdown, were not experiencing the feared exponential surge in infections.

India has now reported 31,331 cases, including 1,007 deaths, according to figures from the Health Ministry. Neighbouring Pakistan has 15,282 confirmed cases amid concerns about worshippers gathering at mosques during the current holy month of Ramadan.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi must decide soon whether to extend the world's biggest lockdown, now 40 days old, beyond May 3.

Health officials say the shutdown has prevented an explosive surge of infections that would have crippled India's modest health care system.

"Our analysis finds that the rate of growth in positive cases and fatalities has been consistently lower – linear but non-exponential," said Amitabh Kant, chief executive of the government thinktank Niti Aayog.

Aayog urged a phased exit from the shutdown, but the government has a difficult decision ahead.

The big cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad – which are also India's economic growth engines – top the list of cases and there are no signs of the pandemic abating there, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said.

"When I see Delhi's COVID-19 map, I see only red and orange colours which is extremely worrying."

Red zones indicate infection hotspots, orange denotes some infection, while green indicates an area with no infections.

Wednesday's daily increase in cases, 1,897, was the highest in weeks.

Still, the scale of the outbreak is dwarfed by the United States or large western European countries.

In Afghanistan, 46 people tested positive in Kabul prisons, said Farhad Bayani, a spokesman for the prison administration, even as the Afghan government frees thousands of prisoners to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Some of them include Taliban fighters, freed as part of a prisoner swap with the insurgent group under a U.S.-brokered peace process.

Here are official government figures on the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia:

India has reported 31,331 cases, including 1,007 deaths

Pakistan has reported 15,282 cases, including 335 deaths

Afghanistan has reported 1,939 cases, including 61 deaths

Sri Lanka has reported 622 cases, including seven deaths

Bangladesh has reported 7,103 cases, including 163 deaths

Maldives has reported 200 cases and no deaths

Nepal has reported 57 cases and no deaths

Bhutan has reported seven cases and no deaths

[India] Asia Today: Indian businesses urge easing of virus lockdown (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:45 AM, Staff, Neutral]

With Chinese industries ramping up production, competing Indian businesses are urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to loosen India's 5-week-old coronavirus lockdown when it comes up for review on Sunday.

Gurcharan Das, former head of Procter & Gamble in India, said Wednesday that key industries such as pharmaceuticals, information technology and automobiles, which employ millions of people, can resume manufacturing at half or even one-third of their capacities in areas unaffected by the coronavirus. He said the manufacturers should ensure that safeguards are in place for their workers, including safe distancing and the wearing of masks.

If India is unable to bring its economy back on the track, it could lose 30-40 million jobs by the end of this year, leading to a devastating economic crisis, said Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, executive chairwoman of Biocon, a biopharmaceutical company.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said 300 of India's 720 districts are unaffected by the coronavirus. Another 300 have had very few cases, while 120 have hotspots. New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Indore and Ahmedabad are among the main troubled areas. India has so far confirmed more than 30,000 cases and 1,007 deaths.

India earlier this month changed rules to block Chinese foreign direct investment into the country through automatic routes. Chinese goods such as cars, cellphones, toys and furniture flood Indian markets. India also is getting ventilators, testing kits and other medical equipment from China.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a three-week lockdown on March 25 and later extended it until May 3, when he is scheduled to address the nation on its future.

In other developments in the Asia-Pacific region:

— **INDIA SHELVES HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE PLANS:** Public health officials in India have shelved plans to administer the untested anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, or HCQ, to thousands in Mumbai's crowded slums as a way of preventing infections in healthy people. Health officials in Mumbai said the plan to conduct tests was still in the cards but had not yet been approved by the Indian government. For now, they will follow federal guidelines that say the drug can only be used for high-risk groups including health care workers taking care of COVID-19 patients, contacts of confirmed patients and those in quarantine centers. Experts say there is little evidence to show that HCQ can help treat COVID-19 infections. The drug had been widely touted by President Donald Trump.

— **BANGKOK SET TO EASE RESTRICTIONS:** Officials in Thailand's capital say they're preparing to ease restrictions that were imposed to fight the coronavirus. The Bangkok

Metropolitan Administration said Wednesday that plans call for the reopening of restaurants, markets, exercise venues, parks, hairdressers and barbers, clinics and nursing homes, animal hospitals and pet salons, and golf courses and driving ranges. Restaurants will have to keep their seats at least 1.5 meters (5 feet) apart and practice a wide range of sanitary measures. Thailand has confirmed 2,947 cases, including 54 deaths.

— **CONCERNS OVER MALAYSIA LOCKDOWN PENALTIES:** Malaysian lawyers and an international rights group have voiced concern over what they say is excessive sentencing of violators of the country's coronavirus lockdown. Malaysia, which has confirmed 5,851 cases and 100 deaths from COVID-19, has arrested more than 21,000 people since a partial lockdown began March 8. Violators face a fine or a jail term of up to six months. The Bar Council, which represents some 15,000 lawyers, urged courts to temper justice with compassion because the offenses don't involve violent crime. Human Rights Watch said Malaysia should stop jailing violators because it's counterproductive to reducing the virus spread.

— **HOLIDAY WORRIES IN SOUTH KOREA:** South Korean officials have issued public pleas for vigilance to maintain hard-won gains against the coronavirus as the nation enters its longest holiday since infections surged in February. Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip said Wednesday that 180,000 people are expected to visit the resort island of Jeju during a six-day break from Thursday to Tuesday, despite the island government pleading travelers not to come. Kim urged travelers to wear masks, not to share food and stay at home if they have fever or respiratory symptoms. South Korea has confirmed 10,761 cases, including 246 deaths.

— **TOKYO SITUATION STILL SERIOUS:** Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike on Wednesday called for an extension of Japan's nationwide "state of emergency," which requests people to stay home and social distance. She noted that reported daily cases of COVID-19 in Tokyo have topped 100 people recently. The state of emergency lasts through May 6, which marks the end of the Golden Week holidays that began this week. The government has asked people not to travel during the holidays. There is no lockdown in Japan, and some businesses and restaurants remain open.

— **CHINA CONGRESS SET:** China has decided to hold the annual meeting of its ceremonial parliament late next month after postponing it for weeks because of the coronavirus outbreak. The official Xinhua News Agency said Wednesday that the National People's Congress would open in Beijing on May 22, according to a decision made by its standing committee, which handles most legislative affairs outside the annual two-week session of the full body. The convening of the full session, which would encompass about 3,000 members, indicates China's growing confidence that it has largely overcome the pandemic that was first detected in the country late last year.

— **AUSTRALIAN MINING MAGNATE URGES INQUIRY DELAY:** An Australian mining magnate and partner in the government's pandemic response says a global inquiry into the coronavirus should be delayed until after the U.S. presidential election. Andrew Forrest, who became a billionaire exporting iron ore to China as founder of Fortescue Metals Group, said such an inquiry made "common sense," but should be held after the November election so "there's not going to be a political dog in this fight." Australia's calls for an independent

inquiry are damaging bilateral relations with China, which accused Australia of parroting the United States.

[India] Navy, Air Force to Lead Biggest Evacuation Plan Ever to Bring Back Indians Stranded in Gulf Nations (Yahoo News/News18)

Yahoo News/News18 [4/29/2020 2:11 AM, Staff, 3975K, Neutral]

The Navy is in the advanced stages of preparing at least three of its ships to The Navy is in the advanced stages of preparing at least three of its ships to evacuate thousands of stranded Indians, particularly migrant labourers, from the Gulf countries.

INS Jalashwa, Navy's second-biggest amphibious transport dock which can carry dozens of tanks, is among the three ships modified to accommodate as many passengers as possible, while following strict social distancing norms. Each ship will have a quarantine facility and medical teams to monitor the health of those onboard.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain are home to 70% Indians living abroad. Embassies in these six countries are in the process of putting together details of those who need to be evacuated in a phased manner. According to sources, the government of India has decided to give priority to migrant labourers whose work permits have either expired or are about to expire as they might be running out of resources after month-long lockdowns.

"With thousands of Indians in Middle East wanting to come back, this could be the biggest evacuation ever by India. Navy ships will have to make multiple trips as one ship would be able to accommodate about 500 people at a time. Social distancing norms are sacrosanct," said a source close to developments.

"We don't want a situation like in the US and French Navy where the virus spread like wildfire. We will have to ensure that everyone who comes on board is Covid-negative and is in a position to undertake sea journey," he added.

Men will be in the upper decks and open spaces, while women, children and elderly will be given accommodation in the lower deck. "We are modifying the ships a bit to make space for people to stay at a safe distance from each other. Then extra food and medicines have to be stocked. After all, you don't want to be sailing for a week without adequate arrangements," a Navy officer told News18.

"All I can say is that we are ready. The full scope of the evacuation and the assets being used will become clear only after it's cleared at the highest level in the government," another Navy officer said. These large amphibious ships are being kept ready in Kochi, Vizag and Karwar.

Air Force and national carrier Air India are also working on Middle East evacuation plan. Put together, this is likely to become biggest evacuation exercise every by India, with one estimate projecting movement of over a lakh Indians from Middle East to India. Keeping these people in quarantine for two weeks post their return and ensuring safe movement into community is going to be another challenge. While states like Kerala have been making preparations for mass arrivals, Centre has asked all states to be prepared.

The Air Force is likely to use 11 C-17 Globemasters that can carry 100 passengers at a time and reach Middle East in less than four hours. Air India is likely to operate special flights as well.

Many Gulf countries have said they face a challenge with migrant workers. Some, including the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, have locked down areas with a large population of low-wage workers from South Asia.

Over eight million Indians live in the Gulf and only those with family emergencies and whose work permits have expired are likely to be evacuated in phase-I.

In an interview on Monday, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said the state is prepared to rehabilitate Gulf returnees. He had also written a letter to the Prime Minister's Office asking the Centre to expedite the process of evacuation.

Earlier in the month, based on a petition moved by the Kerala Muslim Cultural Society, the Kerala High Court had sought the Centre to file a report on evacuating the stranded Indians in the UAE.

Similarly, MK Raghavan, Kozhikode MP, has also approached the Supreme Court seeking its intervention in bringing back the jobless people, pregnant women and those on visiting visas due to cancellation of flights and struck in the Gulf nations.

Since the outbreak, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have reported 17,522 and 10,349 positive coronavirus cases respectively. According to a report, the majority of Indians who tested positive for coronavirus infection abroad are located in the Gulf countries.

[Kyrgyzstan] Kyrgyzstan in talks to restructure \$1.8 billion in debt to China (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:17 AM, Olga Dzyubenko, 5304K, Neutral]

Kyrgyzstan is in talks with the Export-Import Bank of China to restructure its debt, Deputy Prime Minister Erkin Asrandiyev said on Wednesday.

The Central Asian nation, which owes the Eximbank \$1.8 billion, said last month it would seek debt relief due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on its economy.

[Pakistan] Pakistan Prepares to Ease Coronavirus Curbs With Infections Below Projections (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:25 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Pakistan is preparing to loosen coronavirus lockdown restrictions as the number of infections and deaths are well below previous projections, officials said on Wednesday.

The South Asian nation, which has registered more than 15,000 cases of COVID-19 including 335 deaths, has already granted exemptions to dozens of sectors to open up over the last few days.

"The mortality numbers are nowhere near the same as we see in other countries," Planning Minister Asad Umar, who oversees the response to the virus, told journalists.

He said infections and deaths in Pakistan were lower 30-35% lower than projections and, if things remained this way, the country could open up further in coming days.

Experts say Pakistan's low numbers are due to limited testing. Currently Pakistan, a country of more than 207 million people, conducts about 8,000 tests a day.

On Tuesday, the country registered 800 positive cases and 26 deaths – the highest number of deaths in a single day. Experts and officials say infections will peak in mid-May.

Umar said that despite the rising numbers, the disease was under control, but the economic cost had been "tremendous" as revenues and exports had been hit during a month-long lockdown.

The IMF has projected that Pakistan's economy will contract 1.5% this financial year.

Pakistan a few days ago launched a new "Test, Trace and Quarantine" system, which officials say will allow it to steadily open up commercial and industrial activities over the next few weeks without risking further infections.

Officials at the briefing did admit there remained areas of concern – particularly the high incidence of infections in health workers. Zafar Mirza, the top health official, said at least 480 health workers, including doctors, had been infected.

He added that because of the lockdown and the focus on the coronavirus, a number of other health programmes, such as an anti-polio campaign, had been affected.

Pakistan has also removed restrictions on congregations at mosques for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, leading doctors to raise the alarm on the risk of mass infections.

But Mirza said safety procedures for mosque gatherings had been worked out between the government and clerics.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Bolivia] Bolivia extends coronavirus lockdown until May 10 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:07 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Bolivia will extend its lockdown against the COVID-19 pandemic until May 10, the government announced on Wednesday, while planning to relax stay-at-home rules in parts of the country little affected by the illness starting May 11.

President Jeanine Anez, in a televised message to the nation, said Bolivia will move to a "dynamic" or "less rigid" quarantine on May 11, allowing some people to return to work.

Policy going forward will hinge on the country's success at containing the pandemic, which has killed 55 Bolivians so far with a total 1,053 cases confirmed.

"Opening the quarantine a little or closing it completely will depend on how the pandemic is

being controlled in each region," she said. "The Ministry of Health will evaluate every seven days how the pandemic evolves in each region. On that basis, decisions will be taken to relax or harden the quarantine."

[Brazil] Brazil leaves its many poor hanging amid coronavirus surge (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:20 PM, Mauricio Savarese and Diarlei Rodrigues, Negative]

Work had already dried up for Ivanilson Gervásio when the coronavirus first emerged in Brazil in late February. As cases now surge amid a simultaneous implosion of Latin America's largest economy, hope of finding a job is gone, forcing Gervásio to line up for hours outside a state-owned bank for a \$110 monthly government handout.

His goal was to buy beef to feed his 6-year-old daughter, who hasn't had it for a month.

Multitudes of destitute Brazilians like Gervásio face bureaucratic delays in getting assistance, amid fraud and a disjointed emergency response by federal officials. Authorities even launched a cell phone app for the payouts, although many people have only rudimentary mobile devices.

So Gervásio, like many Brazilians, had to leave home amid a lockdown aimed at halting the spread of the virus and go to a Caixa Economica Federal bank.

As crowds swarmed the bank's branches across the country, President Jair Bolsonaro was hit with increasing criticism for a slow response in helping the poorest during the crisis.

He already had been slammed by the left and the right for downplaying the health risk and for delaying a rescue of the economy.

The coronavirus has killed over 5,000 people in Brazil, the most in Latin America, but even local policymakers admit the toll is much higher. They expect the deaths to peak sometime in May.

Big lines emerged across the country on Monday after the emergency aid announced at the start of April was finally freed up. The aid package will help as many as 24 million citizens working in the informal economy without any benefits, representing more than 10 percent of the population.

Gervásio, wearing an improvised black and yellow mask, was typical of the would-be recipients: He doesn't have a bank account and barely understands the aid distribution app. Unemployed for six years and getting by on odd jobs, he had to use a friend's phone to register for the benefit.

"There's no food at home," said Gervásio, tears welling as he described depending on neighbors for food. "We are not afraid of the coronavirus, but starvation is cruel."

In the same line was manicurist Maiara Sales, 31, who left her disabled 5-year-old son at home to go to the bank to report that someone had stolen her identity and her first \$110 payment.

"I can't even remove the email that was registered as mine," she said, adding that many in her neighborhood are hungry. "I see people crying, people who need to eat. The government needs to be more organized. Either they have the money to pay us or they don't."

Bolsonaro argues that workers in Brazil's informal economy are suffering because of the stay-at-home recommendations he opposes that were put in place by governors and mayors. He insists that most Brazilians should be allowed to go back to work, with exceptions for at-risk groups like the elderly or those with underlying health problems.

But the governors counter that Bolsonaro has not released enough federal funds for them to fight the pandemic. Most of the country's states and cities were already strapped for cash before the crisis, they say.

Even the wealthy governor of Sao Paulo state, João Doria, who made a fortune in marketing, backs stronger state intervention.

"By saving lives, we will be able to save the economy," Doria said last month.

Doria, one of Bolsonaro's strongest critics, said his own decision to shut down the state of Sao Paulo — Brazil's most populous — generated intense opposition from his private sector friends, including one who called him "upset, enraged."

"I told him that at the end of this pandemic, I will have helped save his life, his family," Doria said. "And that is because we are taking the right measures."

Sao Paulo received about \$20 billion in emergency federal funds at the start of April but nothing since then, Doria said.

Brazil's Senate is expected to vote next week on a package of nearly \$17 billion for states and cities to compensate for economic losses. Although the lower house of Congress approved it, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes has said handing out the emergency aid would be like doling out a blank check.

Guedes, a free market champion, had rallied much of the business community behind Bolsonaro's victorious 2018 presidential campaign with promises to privatize many state-owned companies, cut government spending and open up largely closed sectors of the economy to more foreign investment.

Despite Guedes' aversion to giving out federal funding, Bolsonaro's administration has acknowledged a need for financial relief.

Caixa slashed interest rates on overdrafts and credit card installment payments, and the government allowed all citizens to withdraw the equivalent of one month's minimum wage — about \$195 — from state-run retirement accounts required for all working Brazilians. The federal government is also sending doctors to some coronavirus hot spots, like the Amazon city Manaus, where coffins have piled up in common graves.

The market-friendly reforms that Bolsonaro and Guedes want to push through is the

opposite of what the government should focus on for the foreseeable future, said Monica de Bolle, a Brazilian senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

De Bolle said she expects Brazil's economy to contract 9% this year, more than it did in the country's 2015-16 recession, and that unemployment will rise above 20%.

Bolsonaro's economic team was still focusing on economic reforms in March as coronavirus cases rose, instead of getting resources to those who most needed them, she told an online panel Tuesday sponsored by the Washington-based Wilson Center.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime crisis we've never seen before in Brazil," she said.

Bolsonaro also has been consumed this week with a political crisis that erupted after the exit of his justice minister, Sergio Moro.

Asked about the death toll in Brazil this week surpassing that of China, Bolsonaro responded: "So what?"

He added: "I am sorry. What do you want me to do?"

[Brazil] Brazil Top Court Suspends Nomination of Federal Police Chief (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:24 PM, Mario Sergio Lima, Neutral]

A Brazilian Supreme Court justice suspended the nomination of Alexandre Ramagem as the new chief of the country's federal police in a fresh blow to President Jair Bolsonaro.

Ramagem, who is close to the Bolsonaro family, was set to take office on Wednesday afternoon. Bolsonaro fired the previous police chief last week, prompting his justice minister to resign in protest.

In his decision, Justice Alexandre de Moraes determined that there was sufficient concern of "irreparable damage" in allowing Ramagem to take the post. "The federal police is not an intelligence agency of the Presidency," he wrote.

Moraes referenced an earlier ruling of the court determining that former Justice Minister Sergio Moro's accusations against Bolsonaro merit a formal probe. Moro had made his claims during his exit speech Friday, when he said Bolsonaro was replacing the police chief without cause and . The federal police is carrying out a number of investigations that could potentially implicate the president's family.

While the attorney general's office initially said it would challenge the ruling, Bolsonaro later withdrew Ramagem's nomination in a decree published at the official gazette.

The court's decision is a further setback for Bolsonaro, who's now struggling with a political crisis just as the number of coronavirus-related deaths climb to more than 5,000 in the country. The resignation of his popular justice minister, considered by many Brazilians as a hero for taking down a network of corrupt politicians and business leaders, has split his support base.

[Brazil] Brazil's Bolsonaro withdraws name of family friend as top cop (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:45 PM, Ricardo Brito and Lisandra Paraguassu, Neutral]

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on Wednesday withdrew the name of a family friend he had picked to run the federal police, after a Supreme Court justice blocked an appointment that opponents said would allow him inappropriate influence over law enforcement.

His decision to drop Alexandre Ramagem, who was director of the Brazilian intelligence agency Abin, was published in the government's official gazette.

The suspension of the appointment by Justice Alexandre de Moraes earlier on Wednesday came after the top court authorized an investigation into allegations by Bolsonaro's former justice minister that the president had abused his power by swapping the police chief.

Moraes wrote that he granted the injunction, which can still be appealed, because there were relevant signs that Ramagem, who was set to take office on Wednesday afternoon, could be compromised by his close relationship with Bolsonaro's family.

Ramagem, who joined the federal police in 2005 and has run the intelligence agency since July, had the fewest years of service of any officer tapped to lead the force.

He took charge of Bolsonaro's security in 2018 after the soon-to-be president was stabbed on the campaign trail and grew close to the president's sons, who have been accused of taking part in embezzlement and misinformation schemes, which they deny.

Bolsonaro's shakeup of the federal police has spurred a political crisis in Brazil, distracting from the battle against an accelerating coronavirus outbreak in the country, whose official death toll climbed past 5,000 on Tuesday, passing that of China.

[Canada] Canada's coronavirus outbreak slows as cases top 50,000, but long fight looms (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:39 AM, Allison Martell and Moira Warburton, Neutral]

Canadian hospitals had beds to spare as the country hit 50,373 confirmed coronavirus cases on Wednesday, and several provinces were relaxing public health measures, but health experts were already worrying about a future wave of infections.

While it is too soon to say whether Canada's epidemic has peaked, it has slowed, thanks to swift workplace closures and other physical distancing measures: New cases doubled every three days early in the epidemic, and now double every 16 days, the government said on Tuesday. Since the first death on March 9, the virus has killed 2,904 in total. In the United States, an average of 2,000 died each day in April, a Reuters tally found.

"I really thought we were on track for something similar to what we were watching unfold in Italy and subsequently in New York (a month ago)," said epidemiologist Ashleigh Tuite of the University of Toronto. "I think big picture, across the country, we've done OK."

Hospitals fared well although the virus flared in long-term care homes and several prisons. Like the United States and European countries, Canada has struggled to contain the outbreak among seniors, and approximately 79% of deaths are linked to long-term care and

seniors' homes.

In British Columbia, where cases spiked early on, partly due to its proximity to the first U.S. epicenter of Washington state, the number of coronavirus patients in hospital is falling. The province had a total of 94 COVID-19 patients in hospital on Tuesday, including 37 in intensive care, down from a peak of 149 on April 4, according to provincial data compiled by Reuters.

In Ontario and Quebec, the number in ICU has plateaued.

Non-ICU hospitalizations are still climbing in Ontario and Quebec, a consequence of transfers from overwhelmed long-term care homes, officials said. Ontario had 742 non-ICU patients as of Wednesday, up 17% from a week earlier, according to a Reuters tally. In hard-hit Quebec, the figure rose 38% on Tuesday from a week earlier, to 1,408 as more seniors were shifted to hospitals.

But the data suggests that the vast majority of Canadians have not been ill. Some may not know anyone who has been ill. And as the weeks stretch on, officials have started to acknowledge that people are getting impatient.

"The measures we've taken so far are working. In fact, in many parts of the country, the curve has flattened, but we're not out of the woods yet," said Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday. "We're in the middle of the most serious public health emergency Canada has ever seen and if we lift measures too quickly, we might lose the progress we've made."

The problem with successfully controlling the first wave of an epidemic is that it can set up a large second wave, said Gerald Evans, a Queen's University researcher and medical director of infection control at Kingston Health Sciences Centre, a hospital. Few have been exposed, so many are still susceptible to the virus.

"We've been able to provide care for people without overwhelming the system. The drawback is, we have to be prepared for that to happen again during a second wave," he said.

Jason Kindrachuk, a virologist at the University of Manitoba, is worried about the possibility of a second wave that could overlap with flu season, especially given how few people seem to have been exposed the first time around.

"We are doing well, but we certainly are nowhere near the end yet," he said. "This is a long game."

[Canada] Canada says its coronavirus death rate continues to spike despite a slower growth rate (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 2:44 AM, Paula Newton and Madeline Holcombe, 12317K, Neutral]

Canada has a higher coronavirus death rate than previously predicted, even though the country has a growth rates slower than most countries – including the United States – according to a new snapshot and updated modeling Tuesday.

The epidemic growth rate was doubling every three days, but now has slowed to doubling every 16, Canadian public health officials say. But Canada is now reporting nearly 3,000 coronavirus deaths, much higher than originally predicted.

"We are seeing the tragic paradox of the epidemic playing out," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, during a presentation of the new modeling Tuesday.

"As the epidemic comes under control, and the growth of cases slows, the severe outcomes and deaths continue to accrue, as Covid-19 takes a heavy toll among highly susceptible populations," said Dr. Tam.

Less than two weeks ago, Canadian officials had predicted a case fatality rate of about 2.2%. It now stands at 5.5% with hundreds more deaths possible in the next week alone. However, health experts have cautioned that fatality rates may be lower than reported because they do not always count asymptomatic or mild cases.

Canada is currently dealing with hundreds of outbreaks in long-term care homes throughout the country, and hundreds of those elderly and vulnerable residents have died. Government statistics released Tuesday show that 79% of deaths across the country are related to outbreaks in care centers.

"Outbreaks in long-term care and seniors' homes are driving epidemic growth in Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia and are responsible for the majority of all deaths in Canada," said Dr. Tam.

In response to the outbreaks and requests from provinces, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced last week that thousands of soldiers would be deployed to long term care homes to support seniors.

"This is not a long-term solution. In Canada we shouldn't have soldiers taking care of seniors," Trudeau said during his daily press conference in Ottawa Thursday.

The virus is clearly slowing down in Canada with a marked improvement in transmission rates. Earlier in the pandemic, each infected person was likely to infect 2.19 people, now that rate of transmission has slowed to only one.

Some regions are issuing guidelines and dates for reopening, like Quebec where elementary schools will open in phases beginning in May. Trudeau said he is collaborating with provincial leaders, but that there must be enough personal protective equipment throughout the country before it is safe for businesses and workplaces to reopen.

While Canada was flattening the curve, Trudeau said distancing measures and some closures would remain in place for some time.

"We're in the middle of the most serious public health emergency Canada has ever seen and if we lift measures too quickly, we might lose the progress we've made," said Trudeau during a press conference in Ottawa Tuesday.

[Cuba] Pandemic crisis squeezes Cuba's fragile private businesses (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:10 PM, Andrea Rodriguez, Neutral]

Until a few weeks ago, Julio Álvarez was the image of a successful Cuban entrepreneur. He had a dozen cars — classic Chevrolets and Fords that arrived before the 1959 revolution — conveying photo-snapping foreign tourists along Havana's seafront Malecon for \$30 an hour.

Now the new coronavirus has hit and the cars are parked, the tourists quarantined in their home countries and the drivers shut up in their own homes.

The pandemic that has frozen businesses around the world has been tough as well on the fragile private sector that has been permitted to blossom at times through the cracks of Cuba's socialist economy.

A record 600,000 people had taken out licenses to operate permitted forms of private businesses in Cuba under limited economic reforms launched by then-President Raul Castro in 2010. Many catered heavily to foreign tourists.

Then first three cases of the pandemic hit Cuba on March 11. Thirteen days later, authorities suspended classes, shut airports and told foreign tourists to stay in their hotels pending a trip off the island. Car rental services and recreational activities were closed.

Since then, at least 139,000 private businesses have temporarily handed back their licenses — permits which otherwise require them to pay monthly fees.

"We are at an impasse," said Álvarez, co-owner of Nostalgicar, a family business launched nine years ago. "We have 19 workers contracted. We can't maintain them. They earned their money and are living on their savings."

It's become common to find "closed" signs on private cafes, bars, restaurants and lodging houses, to say nothing of the paralyzed taxi and car services like Nostalgicar that accounted for some 50,000 of those private business licenses.

Legal entrepreneurs, who first emerged in the tough days of the 1990s following the collapse of Cuba's aid and trade with the Soviet Union, have had to struggle with occasional waves of disapproval from the state, which has imposed strict limits on the size and types of activities allowed, as well as the impact of U.S. sanctions that have aimed to squeeze off the flow of tourists.

"The private sector, especially the most attractive businesses ... entered this already suffering a contraction due to the hardening of the (U.S.) embargo policy toward Cuba, which included the closure of cruise ships," said Omar Everleny Pérez, a local economist. "After the cancellation of (U.S. airline) flights to the provinces, there were limits on people who came."

Although 70% of Cubans work for the state, more than half a million had taken advantage of the 2010 opening to open businesses ranging from small repair and sewing shops to gourmet restaurants.

Many of private workers saw a sharp increase in their incomes. Alvarez said his mechanics earn about 2,000 Cuban pesos (\$80) a month, 10 times what they'd make in a state repair shop.

The pandemic, which has infected at least 1,400 people and claimed more than 50 lives in Cuba, hit at a time when the economy already was sluggish. The Trump administration has tightened the U.S. embargo and Venezuela, which had been a key supporter of the island, itself has plunged into crisis.

Cuba's government reported gross domestic product grew by just 0.5% last year, and long lines had once again become common for some types of foods because the government found it hard to raise hard currency. The U.N.'s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean last week estimated that Cuba's economy would contract by 3.7% this year. Pérez said the drop could be as sharp as 5%.

Cuba's also hurt by an expected drop in remittances sent back by Cubans and Cuban-Americans in the United States and elsewhere. That money often provides key capital for the small private businesses.

Economist Emilio Morales of the Miami-based Havana Consulting Group estimates Cuban citizens received some \$3.6 billion in remittances in 2018, in addition to an estimated \$3 billion in goods brought to the island by visiting emigrants.

Some entrepreneurs are trying to adjust rather than throw in the towel. Restaurants are offering home delivery, beauty salons are trying to offer tips on social media and clothing stores are offering online sales. Álvarez said he was thinking of offering his workshop to repair the cars of others.

A few entrepreneurs said they think the crisis may eventually encourage the government to allow a greater expansion of private business, though still within a socialist system.

"I am optimistic," said Gregory Biniowsky, a Canadian living in Cuba and cofounder of the now-shuttered Nazdarovie restaurant. "Though we are going to recover slowly," he added.

"This crisis could shake the state and decisionmakers to be more open and to make changes within Cuba that help entrepreneurs, such as permitting us to import raw materials ... They can't permit themselves the luxury that the non-state sector collapses."

[Cuba] Magnitude 4.5 quake strikes near Guantanamo province, Cuba – EMSC (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

An earthquake of magnitude 4.5 has struck 41 kilometres (25 miles) southeast of Baracoa town in the province of Guantanamo, Cuba, the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) said on Wednesday.

The quake was at a depth of 8 km, EMSC said. It was revised from its initial measurement of magnitude 6.6 and depth of 2 km.

There were no immediate reports of damage from the temblor, which comes months after a major earthquake struck south of Cuba, sending shockwaves across the region.

Baracoa is a popular tourist destination in Cuba.

[Mexico] U.S. Factories Low on Inventory Show Reliance on Mexico's Restart (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Jenny Leonard, Neutral]

The past four weeks have been a real test for North American supply chains. Even as some U.S. states gradually begin to reopening their economies, some American manufacturers — especially small- and medium-sized ones — are finding themselves reliant on how and when Mexico will decide to lift its restrictions.

Mexico's stringent shelter-in-place order shut down of almost all manufacturing in the country. For U.S. companies like Bradford White, whose water heaters have been deployed in New York's Javits Center-turned hospital in the state's fight against the coronavirus outbreak, the shortage of inputs from Mexico could soon mean significant production interruptions.

The problem for businesses on both sides of the border is that the U.S. and Mexico don't agree on how to define an "essential" business or service. While the U.S. government deems entire supply chains essential, Mexico does not.

With inventory running low and no relief in sight, the squeeze is giving U.S. companies a stark reminder of their reliance on Mexican inputs and suppliers.

"With Mexico not allowing production, that's a bit of a problem for us right now," Scott Wine, the CEO of Polaris, in an interview Tuesday. The Minnesota-based recreational-vehicle maker relies on Mexico for parts such as engines, which it produces at a Monterrey plant located about 100 miles from the U.S. border.

Officials from both countries have been in touch but so far haven't found a solution.

Mexican ambassador to the U.S., Martha Barcena, said Tuesday that Mexico is not reluctant to coordinate with the U.S. on the matter.

"We have to acknowledge that the evolution of the pandemic has been different in the two countries," Barcena said on Twitter. "There is total awareness of the importance of preserving the value chains."

The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Christopher Landau, also weighed in over social media, offering the help of an embassy commercial attaché who will reach out to Bradford White.

Still, a lingering conflict could result in companies reconsidering their dependence on Mexican supplies, said Kevin Messner, senior vice president of policy and government relations at the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers.

"Businesses want stability and they want certainty, more than ever," he said.

[Mexico] Drugs, oil ... women? Mexican cartels turn to human trafficking (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:39 PM, Christine Murray, Neutral]

Organized crime is mutating in Mexico as gangs who steal oil and sell drugs try a lucrative new line of work trafficking people, according to a top official fighting money laundering.

Santiago Nieto, head of Mexico's financial intelligence unit (UIF), said his team had discovered that some of the country's most notorious cartels had branched out into sex trafficking, especially ones whose core business faced disruption.

"A lot of criminal groups are mutating," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at the unmarked office building that houses the UIF, responsible for unearthing illicit funds.

"When one possibility ends ... they start to link up with other kinds of criminal activities," Nieto said in an interview conducted at distance in his office.

Mexico is an origin, transit and destination country for human trafficking, a global business estimated to be worth \$150 billion a year.

Yet relative to the drugs trade, little is known about the shadowy groups in Mexico that deal in people.

High-profile cases often involve smaller, family-based U.S.-Mexico networks rather than the big cartels that grab headlines.

The Guanajuato-based Santa Rosa de Lima gang dedicated to tapping oil pipelines later turned to extortion and got involved in a table dancing bar staffed by trafficked women, Nieto said.

He said the Mexico City Tepito Union drug gang had similarly branched out to guard women forced into commercial sex.

Nieto traced the web of criminal activities across a meter-wide sheet of paper with a complex diagram linking bank transfers, trips and shell companies that supported the rackets.

Human trafficking may be the third-largest illicit activity in Mexico, after drugs and guns, he estimated.

To help combat what is a fast-growing crime, Nieto said U.S., Canadian and Mexican financial intelligence teams had planned joint meetings, but the pandemic had put that on hold.

While it is often confused with consensual smuggling, trafficking victims are coerced or deceived into exploitation.

There have been isolated reports of drug cartels forcing men and women to cultivate or pack drugs and work as lookouts or hit men. But anti-trafficking justice efforts in Mexico have focused on sexual exploitation and been patchy.

More than half the state-level cases opened in 2019 were in just three of the nation's 32 states: Chihuahua, Mexico City and the state of Mexico.

The UIF has collaborated mostly with the latter two states, Nieto said, and presented four cases to the attorney general's office, responsible for federal prosecutions.

A fifth would be presented imminently, he added, related to an investigation into members of the Light of the World Church, whose head Naason Joaquin Garcia faced U.S. charges of rape and trafficking that were thrown out this month.

Nieto said progress on prosecuting federal cases was slow.

"We haven't seen that they've advanced much," he said. "It has to change for the good of the country, we need a more proactive attorney general's office."

Mexico's attorney general's office did not respond to a request for comment. The Light of the World church did not reply to a request for comment.

In March, the church's lawyers had said that legal issues with the UIF were being resolved in their favor in court.

Garcia had always denied the U.S. charges.

High volumes of cash and difficulty in securing arrest warrants made trafficking cases tricky, Nieto said, voicing hope that current cases go to trial so he could move on to new ones.

"The judges and public prosecutors have to realize how bad this issue is, trafficking at the end of the day is about ... human life," he said.

[Nicaragua] Nicaragua government failing to protect indigenous (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 10:22 AM, Christopher Sherman, Neutral]

Nicaragua's government has not only failed to enforce laws that protect its indigenous peoples and their communal lands, but is actively promoting illegal land grabs and granting concessions to mining and timber companies, according to a report released Wednesday.

Since 2015, more than 40 members of these communities along Nicaragua's northern Caribbean coast have been killed and many more wounded and kidnapped, according to The Oakland Institute, a California-based think tank. The complaints in many ways echo recent reports of U.N. and regional rights agencies.

Residents say non-indigenous settlers known as "colonos" have been responsible for the killings, but in many cases police do not even come to investigate.

The violence has increased in recent years, obscured first by the government's crackdown on protests that began in April 2018 and more recently by the world's attention being diverted by the coronavirus pandemic. So far this year, eight people have been killed in these communities, said Anuradha Mittal, the institute's executive director and author of the report. Four of those deaths came in late March.

"Violence is escalating when the world is focused on Covid," Mittal said "The people are like, 'forget about dying from Covid, we are dying from land invasions.'"

A request for comment from the Nicaraguan government on the contents of the report was not answered.

The spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned attacks that occurred in late January when dozens of settlers attacked the Mayangna community inside the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve.

"Most of the violence has been carried out by settlers as they seek to force indigenous people from their ancestral homes and use their lands for illegal logging and cattle farming," the U.N. agency's spokeswoman Marta Hurtado said in early February.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned that attack and said the government failed to protect the indigenous peoples and their territory. It noted such attacks had been occurring for years and called on Nicaragua's government to adopt policies "to protect the rights of indigenous peoples to life, integrity and territory."

On paper, Nicaragua appears to be one of the better countries in terms of protecting its indigenous people and their land. A pair of laws were lauded internationally for guaranteeing these communities' rights to their land and their right to manage it. One law includes a provision calling for the clearing of indigenous territories of settlers and outside corporations who are there without legal title.

But "the government has failed to enforce these laws, and instead colludes with business interests and plays an active role in the colonization of the protected lands by outsiders," the institute said. "A constant stream of settlers, central government interventions, forestry and extractive industries, threaten their lands, economic well being, and political autonomy."

The communities have had success in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, but the government has not backed up those decisions from the regional court.

The situation is further complicated by the personal business interests of the family of President Daniel Ortega. The report outlines the family's ties to one of the most active timber companies working in protected areas.

The government has also promoted international mining opportunities that have advanced with government backing despite local resistance.

"The forest cover in Nicaragua has dropped from 76 percent in 1969 to 25 percent today," the report said.

Ortega's 2018 repression of street protests caused more than 328 deaths, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. More recently, the government has faced international criticism for not implementing social distancing measures and even promoting mass gatherings despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nicaragua's indigenous communities have turned to international courts, because they found no redress in Nicaragua's justice system, Mittal said.

"It becomes a responsibility of the international community to hold individual governments accountable," she said. "And that is what the intent of the report is, to drag this dracula out into the sunlight and let international attention be poured over it."

[Venezuela] Venezuela Asks Bank of England to Sell Its Gold to U.N. for Coronavirus Relief – Sources (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:34 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Venezuela is asking the Bank of England to sell part of the South American nation's gold reserves held in its coffers and send the proceeds to the United Nations to help with the country's coronavirus-fighting efforts, according to two sources with knowledge of the situation.

Venezuela for decades stored gold that makes up part of its central bank reserves in the vaults of foreign financial institutions including the Bank of England, which provides gold custodian services to many developing countries.

But the Bank of England has since 2018 refused to transfer the 31 tonnes of gold to the government of President Nicolas Maduro, whom Great Britain has refused to recognize as the country's legitimate leader after his disputed 2018 re-election.

The effort signals that Maduro is desperately seeking financial resources around the world as the country's economy struggles under low oil prices, crippling U.S. sanctions and a paralyzing coronavirus quarantine.

Consulted about the issue, the United Nations Development Programme said it "has been approached recently to explore mechanisms to use existing resources held by the Central Bank of Venezuela in financial institutions outside the country to fund the ongoing efforts to address the ... the COVID-19 pandemic."

It was not immediately evident how much gold Venezuela was asking the Bank of England to sell. At current market prices, Venezuelan gold on deposit at the Bank of England would be worth around \$1.7 billion.

Venezuela's information ministry and central bank did not respond to requests for comment.

The Bank of England said it does not comment on individual customer relationships.

Former U.N. aid chief Jan Egeland on Tuesday called for sanctions on Venezuela and other countries to be lifted and urged the release of Venezuelan funds in banks in Britain, the United States and Portugal.

Venezuela has lived a six-year economic crisis driven by an collapsing socialist system and a decaying oil industry, driving a mass migration of nearly 5 million people and fueling hyperinflation that has left many unable to obtain basic food.

Recent tightening of U.S. sanctions meant to oust Maduro have strangled fuel imports, prompting Venezuelans to wait for hours in fuel stations queues or turn to the pricey black market.

Venezuela as of Tuesday had reported only 329 coronavirus cases and 10 deaths.

But critics have questioned the figures, and the United Nations has described the country as one of the most vulnerable due to lack of running water in many areas and a decayed public health system.

Maduro's government has for years raised cash by exporting gold, both from artisanal mines in the southern Amazon jungle and from gold reserves held by the central bank.

The central bank has continued to remove gold from its coffers in the last month with the hopes of exporting it, according to three sources, one of whom said eight tonnes have been removed since quarantine started in mid-March.

Central bank data shows that total monetary reserves fell more than \$500 million between April 14 and 24.

Employees who work in the wing of central bank where the gold vaults are located have been arriving to work despite the quarantine, according to three sources familiar with the matter.

It was not immediately evident how many gold sale operations had been carried out or where the gold was sold.

Part of the proceeds were used to acquire supplies to refine the country's crude, a source added, in response to the near collapse of the country's 1.3 million barrel-per-day refining circuit.

Six tons of gold had already been withdrawn from the central bank between the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 and sold to acquire euros in cash, which the institution channeled through local banks and the government used to pay suppliers.

Following the latest withdrawal, the central bank would still have more than 80 tonnes of gold in its vaults, according to sources, compared with 129 tonnes at the start of 2019.

[Venezuela] Venezuelan migrants block Bogota road, demand ability to travel home (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:41 PM, Oliver Griffin, Neutral]

A large crowd of Venezuelan migrants held up traffic on a Bogota highway on Wednesday, demanding to be allowed to leave Colombia and return to Venezuela.

Altogether, some 500 migrants arrived near the toll booths that mark the northern border of Bogota on Tuesday afternoon.

Some of these migrants said Colombian authorities were preventing the group of about 12

buses in which they were traveling from making their way to the border.

Colombia's migration agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but police at the site said Venezuela limits the number of migrants who can return each day. Venezuela has said the number of those returning is limited to 600, to allow for testing and organizing the necessary quarantines.

The mass movement of thousands of Venezuelans back to their economically devastated country has been triggered by a coronavirus lockdown in Colombia, which has made it impossible for them to earn a living.

Now in its sixth week, the suspension of Colombian businesses has decimated the informal economy in which many of these Venezuelan migrants work, plunging them deeper into poverty and triggering a reversal in migration flows.

Colombia is the top destination for Venezuelans who have fled their country's crisis, and some 1.8 million migrants have arrived here in recent years.

Now, a reverse migration has begun. Around 12,000 Venezuelans have returned to their home country as of Monday, according to Colombia's government.

"There are children here and we have no food to give them, we have no water, no resources, nor anywhere to stay. We are living on the street," said Jesus Bolivar, 34, a Venezuelan doctor who has been in Colombia for over a year.

Weary from travel, the returning migrants – including the elderly, diabetes patients and pregnant women – said Colombia's migration agency would not allow the buses to leave until Friday.

"We're in a bad way," said Dubraska Dubian, 26, who was trying to get back to Venezuela with her husband and their three young daughters.

"How are we going to manage here until Friday? We can't even wash our hands. We're sleeping in the buses, we don't have food," Dubian added. "They have to let us leave."

At least 300 migrants were unable to cross the border in the city of Cucuta over the weekend.

"What we want is to travel, to go back to our country," Bolivar said.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Locusts, Pandemics, Floods: East Africa Can't Catch a Break (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 2:00 AM, Bobby Ghosh, 6400K, Negative]

How much more calamity can East Africa take? Already struggling with the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and a Biblical scourge of locusts, the region is now being lashed by exceptionally heavy rainfall, with floods that threaten life and livelihood from Ethiopia to Tanzania, and all parts in between.

For the continent's most economically vibrant region, the trifecta of tribulations may well add up to a fourth: food scarcity. This ghost from East Africa's past could hardly have picked a worse moment to return. The world is distracted by the pandemic, and traditional sources of succor—the U.S. and Europe—face their own economic distress. China, the region's economic partner of choice in recent years, has not yet demonstrated the ability (or indeed the desire) to fill the vacuum.

Even before the floods, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was warning of "an unprecedented threat to food security" in East Africa. Blame the emergence of huge new locust swarms. The Climate Prediction and Application Center in Nairobi says locusts are "invading the Eastern Africa region in exceptionally large swarms like never seen before."

The swarms are a product of climate change: Unusually wet weather over the past 18 months created perfect breeding conditions. The war in Yemen may also have played a role, by constraining the ability of local authorities to control the first swarms before they crossed over into the Horn of Africa.

The voraciousness of the locusts has hit East African farmers hardest. According to Gro Intelligence, a privately funded commodity data and analysis service, the insects have damaged more than 25 million hectares of farmland in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Worse is to come. The current wet conditions may swell new swarms in the summer, just as harvest season begins.

Fighting locust swarms requires pesticides, and an army of people to spray them. But the coronavirus pandemic is hampering the effort. It is delaying the delivery of pesticides and equipment, and jacking up shipping costs. Governments need to protect their populations from the virus, and travel restrictions designed to impede its spread are constraining efforts against the swarms.

But the danger to food security is so great, countries may feel they do not have the luxury of choosing between scourges. Uganda, for instance, is asking its farmers to go ahead with crop planting, even though it is struggling to get them face masks — and despite the risk that locusts will ruin much of the harvest anyway.

The FAO is calling for \$153 million to assist East African countries, along with Sudan and Yemen, in fighting the swarms; so far, more than two-thirds of that sum has been pledged or received. But combating the food shortages, now exacerbated by the floods, will require much larger sums. And still more will be needed to put East African economies, until recently the envy of the continent, on life-support as the world recovers from the pandemic.

Where will the money come from? East African countries will compete with their African neighbors — and the wider developing world — for emergency funds from multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and eventually for bigger bailouts.

There will also be competition among African nations for the rescheduling, or outright

forgiveness, of payments owed to China, the continent's largest creditor. Beijing has agreed to join other G-20 members in a \$20 billion debt moratorium for some poor nations, but is not committing itself to more. Some African governments say China is demanding strategic state assets in return for easing or erasing debt. Other lenders worry that any consideration they give African debtors will, in effect, benefit Chinese lenders.

Neither man nor nature, it seems, is inclined to give East Africa a break.

China silent amid global calls to give Africa debt relief (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 1:18 AM, Rodney Muhumuza, 2194K, Neutral]

African leaders are asking what China can do for them as the coronavirus pandemic threatens to destroy economies and wipe out some 20 million jobs across a continent where Beijing is both the top trading partner and top lender.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have announced immediate relief measures, including freeing up billions in debt payments and expectations for help from China are high across resource-rich Africa, but Beijing has remained silent.

China holds about a third of Africa's sovereign debt. Demand for Chinese-backed capital to build everything from highways to hydroelectric dams has left countries heavily indebted, leading to concerns about a debt trap and even loss of sovereignty.

Many of those countries, including oil exporters such as Angola, spend a substantial chunk of their budgets servicing debt while health and education suffer.

Any respite would be welcome for a country like Uganda, whose finance minister says "shocking deficits" in the past year have forced authorities to borrow to keep the government running. Uganda's national debt stood at over \$10 billion in 2018, nearly a third owed to China, according to official figures.

"We have strong bilateral relations with China, but they haven't come to us saying anything," the minister, Matia Kasaija, told The Associated Press.

China has been noncommittal beyond its support, as a member of the G-20 group of wealthy nations, for a moratorium that frees up to \$20 billion in debt payments through 2020 for low-income countries.

Some analysts predict that actual debt forgiveness looks unlikely and that China, despite its enormous influence in Africa, will avoid unilateral measures despite global pressure.

Ghana's finance minister has said he expects more from Beijing.

"My feeling is that China has to come on stronger," said Ken Ofori-Atta, speaking to the Washington-based Center for Global Development. "I think our Africa debt to China is over \$145 billion, about \$8 billion in payments required this year ... So that needs to be looked at. It's just an apocalyptic moment."

Asked whether China would offer debt relief to Africa, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman

Zhao Lijian on April 7 said he believed "China will resolve these countries' difficulties via consultation through diplomatic channels."

In a statement emailed to the AP, the foreign ministry said China had "overcome difficulties" in helping Africa with shipments of medical supplies to help fight the pandemic. "China will continue to provide assistance to Africa within its capabilities and in accordance with the development of the epidemic and Africa's needs," it said.

China's footprint on the continent has been expanding as some African leaders, favoring the perceived lack of political strings that come with Chinese capital, have turned to Beijing while other funders hesitate over corruption and other concerns.

In turn, China has been keen to exploit Africa's vast natural resources in countries such as war-ravaged South Sudan, where Chinese firms dominate the oil sector.

Angola had received up to \$42.8 billion in Chinese loans by 2017 and repays its debt partly by channeling more of its crude to China. This means Angola, Africa's second largest oil producer, is left with less oil to put on the market.

The Chinese government, banks and contractors extended \$143 billion in loans to African governments and companies from 2000 to 2017, according to the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University.

But Beijing's commercial focus on the region is one reason some analysts believe debt forgiveness or cash donations are out of the question. Countries seeking China's help to keep projects running likely will end up becoming more indebted, said Nathan Hayes, Africa analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"Many debt-financed projects will come under enormous strain this year as revenues dry up, and many will need to be refinanced and renegotiated. Many of these will be financed by China, giving the country opportunity to renegotiate terms," he said. "Debt-for-equity swaps may ultimately be a more sustainable deal for African countries, depending on the terms, and they may have little choice."

In a notable example, state-owned China Merchants Group bought back half of a port in Sri Lanka in 2017 after the Sri Lankans fell behind in repaying \$1.5 billion in loans from Beijing.

Even debt forgiveness can be an investment for China, which waived Ethiopia's outstanding interest on debts through 2018 at a conference on Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative to support infrastructure construction across many regions. That came just as the Chinese utility State Grid was buying a \$1.8 billion stake in Ethiopia's national power company.

Negotiating with individual African governments gives Beijing leeway to assert its interests with "a much smaller partner, rather than dealing with a whole continent, with greater economic and political weight," according to Hayes.

Africa's finance ministers have called for a \$100 billion stimulus package, of which \$44 billion would come from a freeze on servicing debt. They say an additional \$50 billion may be needed in 2021.

The EU has responded by planning a pledging conference in May. The IMF has cancelled six months' worth of debt payments — \$500 million — for 25 countries, 19 of them in Africa.

The coronavirus has infected relatively few people on the continent of 1.3 billion people. But with known cases nearing 35,000, lockdown measures could bring economic ruin and perhaps the continent's first recession in 25 years.

French President Emmanuel Macron says helping Africa, including with debt cancellations, is a moral duty. He has urged China to help.

Some say China's hand could be forced into rare acts of charity.

"China can respond by repurposing its debt ... as a tool to keep its African partners," said Angelo Izama, an analyst with the Uganda-based group Leo Africa Institute. "If there is a continental movement for debt relief, it would have no choice."

Africa Braces for a Record Wave of Locusts (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:22 AM, Nicholas Bariyo and Joe Parkinson, Neutral]

First came the floods. The waters swamped bean and corn fields and created a breeding ground for a swarm of desert locusts the size of Manhattan that fanned out and destroyed a swath of farmland across eight East African nations as large as Oklahoma earlier this year.

Now their offspring are threatening a historic infestation—a second wave of locusts, 20 times as large as the first, that the U.N. warns could chew their way through 2 million square miles of pastureland, farms and gardens, around half the size of Western Europe.

The swarms, which would be by far the largest on record, are expected to descend as the new coronavirus accelerates across East Africa, raising the prospect of a double-shock to some of the world's poorest and most heavily-indebted economies.

Aid agencies warn that, together, they could lead to a collapse in agricultural production and mass food shortages.

While confirmed cases of Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, are just over 30,000, with some 1,423 deaths, the World Health Organization this week warned that the infection curve on the continent is lagging behind Asia, Europe and the U.S. Some 300,000 Africans could die in the "best-case scenario," it said.

The timing could scarcely be worse. The next wave of locusts is due to coincide with planting season in East Africa. Experts including the African Development Bank are calling the new swarm "Locust-19," worried that it will have a similar economic impact as Covid-19. The World Food Program, a U.N. agency, says the impact could push 130 million people to the "brink of starvation" by the end of the year.

Farmers are still battling to contain the first generation that ate up crops across the Horn of Africa. Heavier-than-expected rains since March and coronavirus-related supply disruptions have hampered efforts to spray them with pesticides and created more of the wet, marshy

habitats in which they like to breed.

"We have killed millions and millions of locusts, but they keep returning," said General Sam Kavuma, the commander of Uganda's 2,000-strong military unit fighting to halt the invading bugs. "We have never seen anything like this."

Compounding the problem, Gen. Kavuma's unit also spends much of its time on the lookout for people violating stay-at-home orders as Ugandan authorities attempt to halt the spread of the transmission of the coronavirus. Uganda's lockdown is one of the world's strictest. During the previous infestation, farmers banged drums, whistled and threw stones to protect their crops. But in recent days they have been forced to watch in frustration as the insects devoured their farms and gardens, trapped inside by fear of the virus and the security forces enforcing the lockdown.

Meanwhile, the insects can travel around 90 miles each day and consume their own body weight in cassava, corn and other crops. The World Bank has warned the locusts could cause more than \$8.5 billion in damage this year, more than triple the losses witnessed during the last major infestation in 2005.

That leaves farmers wrestling with the dilemma of whether to protect their crops as best they can, or follow the curfew orders now in place across much of the region.

"These are tough odds," said Lane Bunkers, country representative for Catholic Relief Services in Kenya. "The focus appears to be more on coronavirus pandemic but hunger could kill more people."

There is some expertise on the ground. The scale of the previous infestation brought agricultural specialists to the region who remain in place, despite coronavirus-related travel restrictions.

But the spread of the coronavirus means there is more competition for financing and resources. Commodity exports have ground to a near halt thanks to a slump in demand in China and elsewhere, sending currencies tumbling. Shipping costs have tripled in recent weeks.

That means some countries can't afford to properly tackle the locust infestation. In Sudan, the government says it is treating only 30% of the affected 2.5 million acres. Somalia only has enough pesticides to treat 20% of threatened farmlands, according to the U.N. In Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous nation, the locusts are moving too fast for the authorities to keep up—they already have destroyed half a million acres of farmlands.

There are also political and security factors at play. Insurgencies in Yemen and Somalia have hindered access to breeding grounds, allowing locusts to multiply into vast colonies since last summer, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. In Somalia, which hasn't had a stable government since 1991, locust control teams have had to negotiate with al-Shabaab militants for access to spray breeding grounds there.

In Uganda, Gen. Kavuma, who once led operations against the Lord's Resistance Army in the Central African Republic, now commands squads of soldiers who spread out across

cassava fields toting spray pumps to douse fast-moving insects with pesticides. Some troops torched locust-infested bushes while school children have been mobilized to chase the insects from fields and gardens.

As recently as last month, mature locusts, bright yellow in color, were still forcing herders to flee the area. Now farmers have spotted the arrival of their offspring, pinkish in color and known as hoppers, looking for sprouting vegetation.

Hoppers are more destructive because they are at a stage where they feed heavily, said Keith Cressman, a locust forecasting expert at the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Association. A square-kilometer-sized swarm, just over a third of a square mile, can consume as much food as 35,000 people.

Experts say it is crucial to attack the second swarm before it lays eggs again and a third wave—which could be yet bigger, perhaps 20 times bigger—could arrive in June, the peak harvest season.

"The swarms can strip a community's entire agriculture production for a season bare in a matter of hours," said Kirk Prichard, Humanitarian director at Concern Worldwide, a humanitarian agency working in the region.

[Côte d'Ivoire] Ivory Coast Withdraws From African Human Rights Court (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 11:01 AM, Leanne de Bassompierre and Baudelaire Mieu, Neutral]
Ivory Coast withdrew from the African Human Rights and Peoples Court, a week after the tribunal ordered the West African nation to suspend an arrest warrant against presidential hopeful Guillaume Soro, who on Tuesday was sentenced to 20 years in jail.

The decision to pull out was taken at a weekly cabinet meeting, government spokesman Sidi Toure told reporters on Wednesday in the commercial capital, Abidjan.

"We respect our international commitments, but we also appreciate our sovereignty," he said.

Soro, a former speaker of parliament and rebel leader, was sentenced in absentia by an Abidjan court after a one-day trial. He was convicted on charges of money laundering and embezzlement, ruling him out of presidential elections scheduled to take place in October.

[Ethiopia] City demolitions expose Ethiopian families to coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 8:23 AM, Nita Bhalla and Emeline Wuilbercq, 5304K, Negative]
Scores of Ethiopian families are at risk of contracting the new coronavirus after authorities demolished their makeshift houses and left them homeless, human rights groups said on Wednesday.

Authorities in the capital began destroying the informal settlements near Bole International Airport in February.

They say the settlement in Addis Ababa, home to more than 1,000 people, is illegal. Residents — mostly casual labourers who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 restrictions

— say they bought the land in 2007 and have the documents to prove it.

"Having a home is critical to protecting oneself from COVID-19, stopping its spread and recovering from it," said Deprose Muchena, Amnesty International's Director for East and Southern Africa.

"The authorities must ensure that no one is put in a position of increased vulnerability to COVID-19 including by rendering them homeless."

Around the world, homeless communities and residents in slums and informal settlements are particularly at risk of the virus, as limited access to water and overcrowding turn hand-washing and social distancing into a luxury.

Muchena said parents and young children were now sleeping rough, in the cold and rain, with no place to go and at heightened risk of catching and spreading the deadly virus.

The East African nation declared a state of emergency to help curb the virus on April 8. Home to some 110 million people, Ethiopia has recorded 130 cases and three deaths.

LAND GRAB IN A CRISIS

City authorities say some Ethiopians are now abusing the global crisis to seize land that is not theirs.

Addis Ababa Mayor Takele Uma Banti told the Thomson Reuters Foundation the forced evictions aimed to stop people migrating to the capital and grabbing land from farmers and government.

He said people had used the pandemic to build houses while authorities' attention was set on enforcing social distancing.

"Demolition will continue because these buildings are informal, it is a source of land grabbing," Takele said, noting that similar demolitions were happening across Addis Ababa.

In Ethiopia, all land is owned by the state.

While buying and selling it is illegal, long-term leases can be bought from the government.

But homeowners and land law experts say there is a bustling underground market run by developers, brokers and local officials, who often turn a blind eye to illegal activity.

Amnesty International said satellite imagery verified claims made by the evicted communities, showing about 40 structures had been damaged or destroyed since April 6.

Families were not given any notice, said the group, nor had authorities consulted residents in line with international laws.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission called for a moratorium on forced evictions of informal settlements until the pandemic was under control and the state of emergency lifted.

"Forced eviction of families during #COVID19 poses (a) great risk for vulnerable people including women and children," Daniel Bekele, EHRC's chief commissioner, said in a statement.

[Kenya] Kenya Cuts Interest Rate to Nine-Year Low to Boost Economy (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 10:40 AM, David Herbling, Neutral]

Kenya's central bank cut its benchmark interest rate for the fourth time in a row at a special meeting of the monetary policy committee to try cushion the economy from the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

The MPC reduced the rate to 7% from 7.25%, Governor Patrick Njoroge said in an emailed statement Wednesday from the capital, Nairobi. That brings the total easing since November to 200 basis points, with the rate now the lowest since September 2011. The median estimate of five economists in a Bloomberg survey was for a 50 basis-point cut.

Key Insights

The central bank cut its 2020 growth forecast for East Africa's largest economy to 2.3%. Expansion at 5.4% in 2019 missed government estimates. The World Bank said output could shrink 1% if the disruptions caused by the pandemic last for about three months.

The policy actions taken in March, when the MPC cut interest rates and lowered its cash-reserve ratio to free up liquidity, "are having the intended impact on the economy, and are still being transmitted," Njoroge said.

The virus has disrupted agriculture and tourism, which are Kenya's biggest foreign-exchange earners after remittances. The latest information shows that orders have started to return, reflecting the impact of mitigation measures put in place by the government targeted at maintaining cargo flights, the lifting of lockdown measures and easing of supply restrictions in some of the key destination markets, the central bank said.

Kenya is negotiating with the International Monetary Fund for a precautionary facility to cushion the economy against the Covid-19 shock. It also expects relief from special drawing rights of 75 billion shillings (\$700 million) by mid-May, Treasury Secretary Ukur Yatani said on Tuesday.

The MPC will meet again in a month and "stands ready to take additional measures as necessary," Njoroge said.

[Kenya] One of the World's Largest Refugee Camps Is Placed on Lockdown (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:44 AM, Pauline Bax, 6400K, Negative]

Kenya put one of the world's largest refugee camps under lockdown, even as humanitarian agencies warned there's no infrastructure in place to deal with a potential outbreak of the coronavirus.

All movement in and out of Dadaab, home to more than 220,000 people living in rickety,

makeshift housing, as well as the smaller Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya, will be prohibited as of Wednesday, according to Kenya's Interior Ministry. The measure is an extension of a 21-day partial lockdown across the country that was imposed last week.

With only one dedicated Covid-19 health facility at Dadaab, "a possible outbreak of the coronavirus would be a disaster," Philippa Crosland-Taylor, country director at aid organization CARE, said in a statement. The camp "has no health infrastructure in place that could deal with an outbreak," she said.

Dadaab, situated near the Somali border, opened almost three decades ago and is home to mostly ethnic Somalis who crossed into Kenya to flee civil war, drought and famine. While the Kenyan government has often threatened to close the camps, it's never done so. Most facilities in the settlements are operated by international humanitarian organizations.

[Niger] UN: New Polio Outbreak in Niger After Vaccination Suspended (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 7:31 AM, Maria Cheng, Negative]

The World Health Organization says Niger has been struck by a new outbreak of polio, following the suspension of immunization activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.N. health agency reported that two children were infected by the highly infectious, water-borne disease and that one was paralyzed. The outbreak was sparked by a mutated virus that originated in the vaccine and was not connected to a previous polio epidemic Niger stopped last year, WHO said, in a statement last week.

"The poliovirus will inevitably continue to circulate and may paralyze more children as no high-quality immunization campaigns can be conducted in a timely manner," said Pascal Mkanda, WHO's coordinator of polio eradication in Africa.

In rare cases, the live virus in oral polio vaccine can evolve into a form capable of igniting new outbreaks among non-immunized children; stopping the epidemic requires more targeted vaccination.

Earlier this month, WHO and partners announced they were forced to halt all polio vaccination activities until at least June 1, acknowledging the decision would inevitably result in more children being paralyzed.

The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says there have been 33,500 cases and 1,469 deaths as of Tuesday, but experts suspect the real numbers are far higher due to lack of testing and poor surveillance.

Eradicating polio requires more than 90% of children being immunized, typically in mass campaigns involving millions of health workers that would break social distancing guidelines needed to stop the spread of the new coronavirus.

Across Africa, 14 other countries are struggling to contain their polio epidemics, which have also been caused by a rare mutation of the virus in the oral vaccine. Health officials had initially aimed to wipe out polio by 2000, but that deadline has been pushed back and missed repeatedly.

[South Africa] South Africa Covid-19 Cases Rise by Record for 24-Hour Period (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 3:26 PM, Janice Kew and Ana Monteiro, Negative]

The number of coronavirus cases in South Africa surged by a record for a 24-hour period as testing increased.

The nation has 5,350 confirmed cases as of Wednesday, 354 more than yesterday, the Health Ministry said in an emailed statement. A further 10 Covid-19 related deaths were recorded, bringing the total number of deceased to 103, it said. The ministry said 11,630 tests were conducted in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 197,127.

[South Africa] South Africa's HIV failures cost more than 300,000 lives. Now this painful past is helping in Covid-19 fight. (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 5:41 AM, David McKenzie and Brent Swails, 12317K, Neutral]

When President Donald Trump mused recently about injecting household disinfectants as treatment for Covid-19 in the White House briefing room, South Africans were reminded of their own dark past.

Two decades ago, the country's health minister announced that beetroot or garlic could treat HIV/AIDS.

South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki at the time falsely believed that HIV treatments could be poisonous, so he kept proven, lifesaving antiretrovirals (ARVs) from those in need.

In all, South Africa's official AIDS denials and misinformation cost the lives of more than 300,000 people, according to several studies.

"We can't have a large number of people dying," Dr. Yogan Pillay, a senior official at the Department of Health, said. "We came from a period where we had large numbers of South Africans dying from HIV. We can't repeat that now and we shouldn't."

An ambitious initiative

It is the memory of that past failure, South African health officials say, that is driving their fight against this new virus and it is the considerable resources they have since built up against HIV, that could provide their best weapon in fighting Covid-19.

After years of dithering under Mbeki, the South African government drastically changed course against HIV because of civil society lawsuits and a change in leadership.

They put millions of people on ARVs and recruited an army of community health workers to inform the public of the dangers of AIDS and the importance of testing.

They were able to mount this fight, in large part, because of an ambitious initiative launched by another US Republican president.

Former President George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), announced in 2003, is arguably the single most successful international US

public health response.

More than 14 million people are on ARVs because of PEPFAR. When it began, fewer than 50,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa could access the life-sustaining drugs.

"Quite frankly, without the PEPFAR investment in South Africa, we wouldn't have more than a million people on treatment, a significant reduction in the number of deaths from HIV and TB, or the significant increase in our life expectancy," Dr. Pillay said.

Pillay said that there are currently roughly eight million HIV positive people in South Africa, with more than two million infected people not on antiretrovirals.

A sweeping lockdown

Those numbers mean that South Africa has the world's largest HIV burden, which helped to convince South African scientists and officials to recommend a sweeping lockdown as Covid-19 struck the country.

Countries around the world are under lockdown, but South Africa's is one of the strictest and it was instituted before a single confirmed Covid-19 death and in a country already in an economic recession.

"This was a very tough decision for the government to take," Dr. Pillay said, "but they took it because they didn't want to repeat the mistakes of ... our early response to HIV."

In a middle-income country with the world's greatest levels of inequality, South Africa has managed to drastically flatten its infection curve early while much richer countries like the UK and the United States have struggled to do so.

South Africa has distinct disadvantages to those wealthy nations. Millions live in townships and informal settlements across the country where the lockdowns make sense in principle, but not really in practice.

Townships like Thokoza, in the southeast of Johannesburg, are a nightmare scenario for combating a respiratory disease.

But here, too, the country's experience with HIV is helping its battle.

Around 35,000 government and PEPFAR supported health workers are now actively screening for the disease in communities they already work, conducting routine health checks, according to Pillay.

They have already screened nearly six million people for Covid-19, according to the latest figures from the country's Department of Health.

Community health worker Anito Pato said that the trust she has built up with the community allows her to address fear of the new virus right away. She goes door-to-door in Thokoza to check for symptoms of Covid-19 and refer the sick for testing.

"They didn't know much about Covid-19 and they think it is affecting the rich people, not them," Pato said. "We try to explain to them why we are screening and what corona is."

A man in a blue work shirt called Pato over during her visit. He wanted a test. Pato explained that there aren't enough tests right now and that he should go to the clinic or the mobile testing center they have set up if he gets the symptoms.

"AIDS is better because we have got treatment," the man, Salvin Tawananda, told CNN, "But corona, people are just scared."

The government and US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are closely monitoring efforts in Thokoza and other townships, where social distancing is all but impossible, and failure could be disastrous.

"It is very hard for people here to adhere to those lockdown rules and that is even more reason why we should be out there looking for the disease before it takes over these communities," said Dr. Meredith McMorow, a CDC official based in South Africa.

"South Africa was certainly the hardest hit by HIV and it concerns us that it will be the hardest hit by Covid-19 as well that is why we are doing everything we can to get ready right now."

Covid-19's effect on HIV patients

McMorow's concern comes from not yet knowing Covid-19's effects on HIV positive people.

To date, studies in China and elsewhere are inconclusive, but Megan Doherty, the head of the WHO's global HIV program, said it pays to be extremely cautious with any emerging disease.

"Because this is an unprecedented pandemic, we just don't know how it reacts in all situations," she said. "We just don't know enough about the interactions between HIV and Covid-19 and how patients with both infections will do."

ARVs are being tested as possible therapeutics for COVID-19 in clinical trials.

Dr. Larry Corey, now president and director emeritus of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, helped develop the first effective ARV treatment.

He said he is skeptical that ARVs designed for HIV will become a broad-based treatment for Covid-19.

"The best ARVs that are discovered are highly specific to each virus," he said.

Corey, who now leads the global HIV-vaccine trial network, said regardless of the results of ARV trials in Covid-19 treatment, South Africa is well placed to play a critical part in the next phase of this pandemic, because of its HIV infrastructure and experience with HIV vaccine trials.

"I feel proud of my communities," said Pato, as she moved down a narrow path leading to another section of corrugated iron shacks. "I feel like I am a bullet to shoot this disease. It must not control us. We must control this corona."

[South Africa] Virus lockdown worsens suffering for Johannesburg beggars (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:07 AM, Bram Janssen, 2194K, Negative]

Inock Mukanhairi shows the small amount of food that he has for himself, his wife, Angeline, and five children — barely enough to make it through another week of South Africa's strict coronavirus lockdown.

The 58-year-old and his wife are both blind. Normally, they would be begging at traffic lights on Johannesburg's streets, relying on handouts from motorists, pedestrians and shop owners.

But the lockdown, now in its fifth week, has changed that.

Police are preventing them from leaving their dilapidated building to beg on the empty streets and barren sidewalks.

The building houses about two dozen blind or otherwise disabled foreigners who rely on handouts to make enough for food and rent. With their children, they make up about 70 people. Many have entered South Africa illegally from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi.

"I really understand that the coronavirus is killing a lot of people. But at the same time, I'm locked inside my room," said Mukanhairi. "So death is death, due to corona or due to hunger."

South Africa has the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Africa, with more than 4,360, including 86 deaths.

The country's far-reaching restrictions have been in effect since March 27 and residents must stay home, except for visits to grocery stores, pharmacies and health facilities. The lockdown will be eased starting May 1, but this is unlikely to help the beggars, because people will still be required to stay home.

Families of six to eight people are crammed into small rooms where they cook, eat and sleep. Under such conditions, social distancing is not possible. The building has a few taps for water, so regular hand-washing is also difficult.

The elderly and blind often just sit on their beds as their children play in the dimly lit and narrow hallways, where loose electric cords dangle from the ceiling.

Without any donations, they say they are uncertain about where they will get their next meals.

Last week, South Africa announced an increase in social grants for the poor, elderly and disabled, but these immigrants are not eligible for that aid.

At the start of the lockdown, authorities swept the homeless from the streets and took them to a housing facility where food is provided. The beggars say they fled to their own building at the time to avoid being rounded up.

They are not alone in being uncertain about how getting adequate food. The U.N. World Food Program said this month that the number of people around the world with acute hunger could almost double this year because of the pandemic. At least 265 million people could face food insecurity by the end of this year, a jump of 130 million.

Rosewite Prikise, 41, lives with her four children in one of the small rooms, where all share a bed.

"We have one week's worth of food left," she said. "So we cannot survive, especially us who are blind. We cannot go outside and our situation is not right."

[South Africa] Fears rise for illegal South African miners hiding underground in virus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:48 AM, Kim Harrisberg, Neutral]

At least 100 illegal gold miners in South Africa are hiding underground, too scared to surface with police on patrol to enforce the coronavirus lockdown, according to industry sources.

Many illegal miners, known as zama-zamas – a Zulu expression for "taking a chance" – were underground in abandoned or disused mines in Gauteng province when the lockdown began on March 27.

Lawyers, activists and illegal miners told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that zama-zamas had little choice but to continue working, worried about being arrested if they surfaced and knowing there was no other work.

"They are struggling to get to the surface (to buy food) as police are blocking the entrances and they fear arrest," said Johannesburg gold miner Zach, whose name was changed to protect his identity.

"At least 100 (zama-zamas) that I know of are trying to earn some money during the lockdown," said Zach, 29, adding he had been arrested many times since turning to mining six years ago.

Illegal gold mining has plagued South Africa's mining companies for decades, robbing the industry and state coffers of billions of rand through smalltime pilfering as well as networks run by organised crime.

The Minerals Council South Africa estimates seven tonnes of gold – from total national production of about 135 tonnes – is lost each year to illegal mining, which is driven by the joblessness and economic hardship that prevail across the country.

Thousands of zama-zamas are thought to be operating at any one time, many of them

undocumented immigrants from neighbouring countries who provided migrant labour for South Africa's mines in the past but were then laid off.

Zama-zamas are now a permanent fixture of the shanties that ring Johannesburg and its satellite towns along the gold reef, and are blamed for outbreaks of violence, including underground shoot-outs between rival gangs.

Once the largest gold producer, South Africa now ranks about eighth globally with mining accounting for roughly 7% of GDP.

The sector braced for a heavy hit when the government last month ordered most underground mines and furnaces to be put into care and maintenance due to the coronavirus.

But after a lobbying campaign by miners, it said it would allow mines to operate at up to half capacity during the lockdown, recognising the chance of instability if deep-level mines closed for a long period.

Informal mining has continued nevertheless as it remains largely unrecognised by the government – just like many zama-zamas, who are unable to seek financial assistance, legal experts said.

Edwin Makwati, a lawyer from the Legal Resources Centre in Johannesburg said that "artisanal miners depend on mining to feed their families but they are categorised as criminals."

"Now they have to face the decision: do they die of hunger or risk arrest for violating the COVID-19 regulations?" he said in a phone interview.

Yvette, 32, a zama-zama from Soweto township whose name has also been changed, also believed there were still "at least 100 zama-zamas underground" in Gauteng province alone, sifting for gold in tunnels no longer maintained and at risk of collapse.

"There are (abandoned) shafts throughout the country where there could be more," she said.

A 2015 report by South Africa's Human Rights Commission identified 221 open holes and disused shafts alone in Gauteng, which is the most populous of the country's nine provinces.

Some had been covered by the government, but zama-zamas would likely find other entrances into the mines, some of which run up to four km (2.5 miles) deep, the report said.

Police spokesman Brigadier Vish Naidoo acknowledged it was likely that some zama-zamas were underground, adding that "they stay underground for months, even before lockdown."

"A crime is a crime. There are no good zama-zamas," he said in a phone interview.

A spokesman for the South African Department of Mineral Resources and Energy said the ministry only kept records of mine workers from legal operations.

"Illegal mining ... is fueled by highly organized dangerous, well-financed and complex local and international crime syndicates," he added in emailed comments.

Charmane Russell, spokeswoman for the Minerals Council South Africa, said that "illegal miners are not screened or protected in any way ... and the gathering of people clearly does not comply with social distancing requirements."

Scores of zama-zamas die each year in the labyrinth of tunnels that stretch beneath the streets of Johannesburg and beyond, although police and the government admit they have no idea of the precise toll.

But Sindile, a female zama-zama from Soweto township who helps process gold above ground, said the money that could be earned made it worth the risk for many.

Artisanal mining can fetch Zach and Sindile up to 5,000 rand (\$270) a month – more than the national minimum wage of roughly 3,600 rand (\$195).

"You know hunger?" said Sindile, a single mother of three, who also asked not to be identified. "It is not your friend. This is why we take chances."

The zama-zamas said that the lockdown and increased police presence have added additional challenges to their already dangerous work.

Reported cases of the coronavirus were close to 5,000 in South Africa and about 93 deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

"But we are more afraid of the police than the virus," said Yvette.

David Van Wyk, lead researcher at Bench Marks Foundation, a church-linked group that monitors corporate responsibility, said it was working on setting up co-operatives with informal miners.

"The coronavirus pandemic is going to bring a lot more unemployment," said Van Wyk, who predicted more South Africans desperate for work would take up illegal mining.

"We may even see informal mines collapse. This is a scary time for zama-zamas, especially those currently underground."

[Sudan] Sudan postpones key economic meeting due to coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:04 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Sudan has postponed a key economic conference meant to formulate subsidy reforms demanded by foreign donors until after the coronavirus pandemic, the state news agency SUNA reported on Wednesday.

The conference had been scheduled for June 2, with preparatory meetings in May. A new date will be set after Sudan's epidemic has been overcome, SUNA quoted the conference's preparatory committee as saying.

Sudan's struggling economy has not revived with the overthrow of long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir a year ago.

The transitional government has been trying to overcome shortages of imported – and heavily subsidised – fuel and flour. Inflation is running at more than 80%, according to official statistics.

Potential foreign donors are pressing for subsidy reforms and greater economic transparency.

But the government, in an awkward power-sharing arrangement with the military, is divided on how to tackle the issue and had postponed any action until after the economic conference, which was originally scheduled for March.

Sudan is also lobbying to be removed from a list of countries that the United States considers sponsors of terrorism, a designation that complicates efforts to negotiate a deal for its foreign debt, unblock international funding and connect to international banking systems.

On Tuesday, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet warned that Sudan, which has suffered from internal conflict and international isolation for decades, could experience "untold suffering" and a "humanitarian disaster" unless donors acted fast, with the threat from COVID-19 looming.

"We run the risk of a country which held such promise relapsing back into political instability and potential conflict," she said in a statement, noting that Sudan was not eligible to access a \$50 billion trust fund set up by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to help countries fight the coronavirus.

Sudan said on Wednesday it had recorded 57 new cases of the coronavirus, bringing the total to 375, and three new deaths, for a total of 28.

[Sudan] Sudan's Bashir Seeks Jail Move as Aide Gets Virus, Lawyer Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 9:34 AM, Mohammed Alamin, Neutral]

Ousted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir is asking to be moved from prison after one of his former enforcers detained in the same facility was infected with the coronavirus, his lawyer said.

Ahmed Haroun, an ex-Interior Ministry official who became leader of Bashir's political party in the final days of his rule, has been transferred to the hospital in Khartoum's Kober prison after testing positive for Covid-19, although his condition isn't currently serious, according to the head of Bashir's defense team, Mohamed al-Hassan al-Amin.

Bashir, who's 76 and being held in the same jail, is also in danger from the virus and his legal representatives are appealing for his detention to be turned into a form of house arrest, al-Amin said by phone.

Haroun was sharing a cell with other former top officials from Bashir's government, he said. Health Minister Akram Ali Altoum declined to comment on al-Amin's claims.

Bashir, who was overthrown by the army a year ago amid mass protests against his three-decade rule, was jailed in December after being found guilty of illicitly possessing millions of dollars in foreign currencies. Both he and Haroun have been indicted by the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes against humanity committed in the western region of Darfur.

The North African country, which has reported 318 cases of the virus and 25 deaths, has been ravaged by years of economic mismanagement and international sanctions. Medical officials have warned of severe shortages of protective gear and equipment.

[Uganda] Uganda restricts truckers on busy trade route to curb coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 4:57 AM, Elias Biryabarema, Neutral]

Uganda has stepped up restrictions on trucks passing through its territory — limiting them to one driver and banning them from stopping over in hotels — in a bid to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

The landlocked country sits on some of east Africa's busiest road cargo routes that funnel goods from ports in Kenya and Tanzania further inland to Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Drivers have already been complaining about long queues building up on the Uganda-Kenya border as officials from both countries carry out health checks, according to reports on NTV and other local media.

"One driver is enough," Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said as he announced the new restrictions late on Tuesday. Trucks were previously allowed three crew.

"He (the driver) must not stay in hotels, he must not stay in lodges. He must not stay in homes, he should park his vehicle in designated places ... to rest a bit and continue," Museveni added.

Uganda had registered 79 COVID-19 cases as of Tuesday, at least 16 of them truckers arriving from Kenya and Tanzania, according to health ministry figures.

Infection and fatality figures reported across Africa are still relatively low compared with the United States, parts of Asia and Europe.

But there are fears the infection could spread fast, particularly in areas with poor sanitation facilities, and overwhelm already stretched health services.

Uganda has banned public gatherings, closed schools, barred most vehicles from the roads and ordered all but essential businesses to shut down.

The lockdown, among the toughest imposed in Africa, is currently due to end on May 5. Museveni said on Tuesday restrictions may ease after that.

Museveni also criticised the country's lawmakers for allocating themselves a one-off payment of 20 million shillings (\$5,267.32) each in a supplementary budget meant to fund the fight against the coronavirus.

"It would be morally reprehensible for members of parliament to give themselves money for personal use when the country is in such a crisis," he said. He ordered them to repay the cash.

Network TV News Coverage

Australia's Call for Investigation Draws Chinese Anger (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:17 AM, Staff]

When President Donald Trump openly and repeatedly accuses China of failing to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic and talks about an investigation, Beijing has been silent. When the Australian government calls for an independent international investigation, the response from China was swift and severe. China's ambassador in Canberra warned of a backlash by Chinese consumers over the push for an inquiry, including boycotting Australian goods. With China being Australia's biggest market, any type of boycott would be devastating to the economy already severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Ryan Patel, a senior fellow at the Drucker School of Management in California, says that with "\$190 billion in two-way trade with China" and 65% of Australia's trading partnerships in Asia, "they are going to need other countries to step in here" and back up Australia's request for an inquiry. Patel adds that China's strong response to Australia "sends a message to the rest of southeast Asia" since Australia is a part of a trade pact with them.

France, Spain Announce Plans to Lift Restrictions (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:12 AM, Scott McLean and Melissa Bell]

After six weeks of lockdown, Spain's prime minister has announced a four-phase plan to ease coronavirus restrictions with the goal of returning to "normalcy" by the end of June. Phase one will allow some stores to reopen, while restaurant terraces and churches can open at 30% capacity. There will be special times set for senior citizens to go out. Schools will not reopen until September; by then, the country should be on to phase two, when outdoor shows might be allowed with some restrictions. In the final phase, masks will be encouraged and social distancing will still be mandatory. Free movement will not be allowed throughout the country until all regions are on the final phase. None of the phases have set dates, but each phase will last a minimum of two weeks. In the meantime, France hopes to begin lifting its partial lockdowns starting May 11, when shops, businesses, and some schools will reopen. France's prime minister has been outlining what the lifting of France's partial lockdown will look like after six weeks of restrictions. Starting May 11, children will be allowed to go back to school on a voluntary basis, although that will be staggered according to their ages as they gradually reopen. Retailers will also reopen with restrictions on the

number of people allowed inside shops at any given time. One major concern as people are allowed to go back to work and school is public transit being overwhelmed, which will be limited to those who really need it to take at peak hours. The staggered lifting of restrictions will continue into June, followed by a preliminary period to make sure that a second wave of the virus is avoided.

U.S. Accuses China, 32 Other Countries of Intellectual Property Theft (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [4/29/2020 11:02 AM, Staff]

The U.S. Trade Office reported on Wednesday that China and 32 other countries have been accused of intellectual property theft by the United States.

Zoom Users Targeted by Overseas Spies? (ABC World News Now)

(B) ABC World News Now [4/29/2020 2:37 AM, Pierre Thomas, 584K]

A new government warning says that Zoom, a video call service used by millions of Americans as schools and places of business are moving to remote meetings, could be the target of spies overseas. According to a new Department of Homeland Security report, Zoom, which is now seeing 300 million daily participants, could be used to eavesdrop on meetings and be an opening for espionage. The DHS report warns, "Any organization currently using — or considering using — Zoom should evaluate the risk of its use." According to the intelligence analysis, China is of particular concern of spying since some of Zoom's development is done there. "China's access to Zoom servers makes Beijing uniquely positioned to target U.S. public and private sector users," according to the government bulletin. This report comes a month after the FBI warned that hackers are able to interrupt Zoom calls with obscene messages. Since then, Zoom has upped security and added password protection to calls. The company disagrees with the intelligence analysis released, calling it "heavily misinformed," adding that workers in China lack "the power or access to make substantive changes to our platform or the means to access any meeting content."

[Lebanon] Lebanon's Economic Protests Turn Violent (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:33 AM, Arwa Damon]

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Lebanon was already seeing widespread unrest in response to high prices and unemployment. Now, after two months of a lockdown, demonstrators are back on the streets protesting the rising poverty and soaring food prices. Protests broke out across the country, but were primarily focused in the northern city of Tripoli, where buildings were set on fire and banks were attacked. Protests first broke out because of the economic situation in October of 2019. One protestor described the most recent demonstrations as the "fiercest" since the protests began. The coronavirus epidemic has exacerbated the existing economic problem, and now the Ministry of Social Affairs says that 75% of the Lebanese population is in need of aid. Banks have been imposing discretionary capital controls on people, meaning that citizens have not had their money released for months. In January and February, the Lebanese prime minister announced that \$5.7 billion was transferred out of cash-strapped Lebanon, confirming fears that average citizens would hurt financially while the elite would be able to access their funds.

{End of Report}

Sender: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>

Recipient: noreply@techmis.com <noreply@techmis.com>



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Secretary of State

Pompeo warns of consequences if any Americans wrongfully detained overseas die from coronavirus (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Andrew Blake, Neutral]

Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo issued a warning Wednesday to countries where U.S. citizens are being wrongfully imprisoned during the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic.

"If you are wrongfully detaining Americans during this time, and they become infected and die of coronavirus, we will hold your government strictly responsible," said Mr. Pompeo.

"All wrongfully detained Americans should be released immediately," President Trump's top diplomat stressed during a press conference held at State Department headquarters.

It is not clear how many Americans are imprisoned abroad, and the State Department did not immediately respond to an inquiry about the number of Americans it considers to be wrongfully detained in other countries.

The State Department previously singled out several Americans detained overseas while raising concerns about the coronavirus ravaging prisons around the world, however.

Mr. Pompeo issued a statement last month urging Venezuela to release five U.S. citizens and one U.S. resident jailed in Caracas – Citgo executives dubbed the “Citgo 6” – saying they each have weakened immune systems and face a grave health risk if they contract COVID-19, the infectious respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

More recently, the U.S. envoy to Russia raised concerns this week about the health and safety amid the pandemic of Paul Whelan, a former Marine jailed in Moscow for more than 15 months on accusations of conducting espionage. In a statement Tuesday, Amb. John Sullivan said the U.S. attempted to deliver masks, gloves and sanitizers to protect Mr. Whelan in prison from COVID-19 but were ultimately denied.

Worldwide, more than 3 million people have contracted COVID-19 since the coronavirus was discovered in late December, according to Johns Hopkins University. More than 225,000 people have died from the disease and over 950,000 have recovered, according to the university.

COVID-19 is highly contagious in addition to being potentially deadly, making people confined to cramped and unsanitary facilities like prisons at a disadvantage due to their inability to maintain social distancing practices meant to prevent the disease from spreading. Several prisons in the U.S. and abroad have accordingly released inmates rather than risk having them contract, spread and succumb to COVID-19 in their custody.

U.S. Borders to Remain Shut to Foreign Travelers as States Reopen (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 4:25 PM, Jessica Donati, Neutral]

The Trump administration has no immediate plans to reopen the country's borders after imposing a ban on foreign travelers from the European Union and the U.K. last month to slow the spread of the coronavirus, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

Mr. Pompeo told reporters Wednesday that the State Department was working with countries on plans to resume international travel, but declined to say whether borders would reopen before the summer.

“We hope we can get those back open as each country is ready to do that,” Mr. Pompeo said, “and as we’re confident that people who travel in from those countries won’t create tremendous increased risks to the United States.”

The administration’s approach to travel restrictions signaled a somewhat more cautious position on U.S. borders than to reopening parts of the economy, as the Trump administration has come under pressure to balance demands to reopen business against warnings about restarting the economy too soon and risking a second wave of infections.

The U.S. has over 1 million confirmed coronavirus cases, accounting for just over a third of world-wide infections, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. More than 58,000 Americans have died, more than the combined death toll in Italy and Spain, the two worst affected countries after the U.S.

On March 11, President Trump announced a ban on travel to the U.S. for most foreign travelers who have been in Europe's 26-country Schengen Area during a two-week period before their arrival. He banned travel from the United Kingdom later that week.

The U.S. also has taken steps to slow travel over its land borders. It reached agreements with Canada and Mexico to shut down their borders to nonessential travel last month to curb the spread of the virus, with exceptions to allow trade and commerce to continue.

The Trump administration restricted travel to and from China in January, and has taken a series of actions to curb legal immigration to the U.S. as part of the effort to combat the virus.

The State Department last month suspended routine visa processing in most countries, and has declined to say when it might resume. Senior officials have said the department will look at each individual country's response to the outbreak before making a decision.

"It's really too early yet to say how we are going to go about fully re-establishing routine visa operations around the world," Ian Brownlee, the principal deputy assistant secretary for consular affairs, told reporters this week.

Illegal immigration has slowed to a trickle at its southern border, where the U.S. has stopped processing asylum requests made after March 20.

Last week, the administration also suspended green cards for prospective immigrants abroad for the next 60 days.

Pompeo urges end to overflight rights for Iran airline flying to Venezuela (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:51 PM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday called on countries to deny overflight rights to Mahan Air, an Iranian airline under U.S. sanctions, which he said recently delivered cargoes of "unknown support" to the Venezuelan government.

The United States maintains punishing sanctions on Iran aimed at containing its regional power in the Middle East and has hit Venezuela with similarly tough measures in an effort to force socialist President Nicolas Maduro from power.

Speaking at a State Department news conference, Pompeo said aircraft of privately owned Mahan Air, Iran's largest airline, in recent days delivered supplies to Maduro's government.

"Over the last few days, multiple aircraft belonging to Mahan Air have transferred unknown support to the Maduro regime," Pompeo said. "This is the same terrorist airline that Iran used to move weapons and fighters around the Middle East."

The flights "must stop," Pompeo continued, adding that countries should deny Mahan Air overflight rights "just as many have already denied landing rights to this sanctioned airline."

The Trump administration has waged a campaign of sanctions and diplomatic measures against Venezuela in an effort to oust Maduro, whose 2018 re-election was considered a sham by most Western countries.

The United States and dozens of other governments recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as interim president in January of last year. But Maduro – who derides Guaido as a U.S. puppet – remains in power, backed by Venezuela's military as well as Russia, China and Cuba. Some U.S. officials have said this has been a growing source of frustration for President Donald Trump.

Last week, a Venezuelan official said the country received materials via Iranian aircraft to help it start the catalytic cracking unit at the Cardon refinery, which is necessary to produce gasoline.

Planes flying from Tehran landed at the Las Piedras airport in western Venezuela, where Cardon is located, on April 21 and 22, according to data on flight-tracking service FlightRadar24 reviewed by Reuters. The planes were operated by Mahan Air.

Both oil-producing countries are OPEC members.

Washington in December and January sanctioned Mahan Air for alleged roles in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and transporting arms and fighters to Syria as part of Iran's backing of Damascus in that country's civil war.

Those sanctions expanded on 2011 counterterrorism sanctions imposed on Mahan Air over its support for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

[Iran] U.S. will not let Iran buy arms when U.N. embargo ends: Pompeo (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:51 PM, Humeyra Pamuk and Arshad Mohammed, Neutral]

The United States will not allow Iran to purchase conventional arms after a U.N. prohibition on this expires in October, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters at a news briefing. "We will work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales and then in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

The United States in 2018 withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal that sought to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. As part of that deal, a U.N. arms embargo on Iran expires in October.

A U.S.-drafted resolution to extend the embargo has been given to Britain, France and Germany, all parties to the nuclear deal, a U.S. official confirmed, but U.N. diplomats said it has not been shared with the remaining 11 U.N. Security Council members, including Russia and China. Russia and China, which hold vetoes on the council and are parties to the nuclear deal, are believed to be eager to sell armaments to Iran.

"The failures of the Iran nuclear deal are legion. One of them is now upon us ... where China, Russia, and other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapon systems to the Iranians in October, Pompeo said.

"We are urging our E3 partners to take action. This is within their capacity to do," he added, referring to Britain, France and Germany, each of which has the ability to force the "snapback" of all U.N. sanctions on Iran – including the conventional arms embargo – lifted

under the nuclear deal.

Several European diplomats said since Washington has pulled out of the nuclear deal, it may not be able to spark a sanctions snapback, but Pompeo on Wednesday pushed back on that argument.

"The U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 is very clear. We don't have to declare ourselves as a participant ... It's there in the language ... It's unambiguous and the rights that accrue to participants in the UN Security Council resolution are fully available to all those participants," he said.

Some U.N. diplomats said that while legal opinions on whether the United States could do this were split, ultimately it would be up to council members to decide whether to accept a U.S. complaint of "significant non-performance" by Iran.

[Iran] Pompeo prepared to kill the Iran nuclear deal to block arms sales to Tehran (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/29/2020 3:56 PM, Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is preparing to force the renewal of all international sanctions on Iran in order to bar the regime from purchasing conventional weapons this fall.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters Wednesday. "We are going to make sure that, come October of this year, the Iranians aren't able to buy conventional weapons that they would be given, what President Obama and Vice President Biden delivered to the world in that terrible deal."

Pompeo is trying to extend the embargo on conventional weapons sales to Tehran, a restriction that is scheduled to expire in October, according to the terms of the United Nations Security Council resolution that ratified the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The potential danger of such weapons sales could attract European support for Pompeo's initiative, but that partnership is complicated by lingering anger over the U.S. withdrawal from the accord.

"It's now just several months out where China, Russia, other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year," Pompeo said. "I think the world realizes that's a mistake."

The options for how to extend the arms embargo are limited, given that Russia or China could veto a new resolution banning such sales. Their expected recalcitrance leaves one alternative, according to Iran hawks: an allegation that Iran has violated the nuclear deal, culminating in the snapback of all international sanctions in place before the implementation of the 2015 deal.

"We're urging our E3 partners to take action, which is within their capacity to do," Pompeo said, referring to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. "We'll work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales. And then, in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

"You cannot cherry-pick a resolution saying you implement only parts of it but you won't do it for the rest," a Western diplomat involved in the allied deliberations told Agence France-

Presse.

Iran hawks think that legal argument doesn't hold any water. "Someone suggested this is fancy lawyering," Pompeo said. "It's just reading."

The snapback process, this argument emphasizes, is governed by a U.N. Security Council resolution, not by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the 2015 deal is known.

That means that the total demise of the 2015 agreement could be just a few months away. "The only other option is a new arms embargo resolution, which Russia and China would veto, and then, we'll lose," a congressional Republican aide who follows Iran issues told the Washington Examiner.

[Iran] Pompeo Vows to Stop U.N. From Lifting Iranian Arms Embargo (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [4/29/2020 4:15 PM, Adam Kredo, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said the Trump administration will not permit the United Nations to lift a ban on Iran's purchase of advanced military technology later this year.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters at the State Department.

Pompeo said the United States is laying the groundwork to stop U.N. member nations—primarily Russia and China—from lifting an international arms embargo on Iran that is set to expire under the terms of the landmark nuclear deal.

While President Donald Trump removed the United States from the nuclear accord, the administration maintains that it still has sufficient leverage at the U.N. to stop the arms embargo from lifting. If these efforts fail, the Trump administration could petition the U.N. Security Council for what is known as snapback, the reimposition of all global sanctions on Iran that were lifted as part of the nuclear deal signed during the Obama administration.

"The failures of the Iran nuclear deal are legion. One of them is now upon us," Pompeo said. "It's now just several months out where China, Russia, other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year. This isn't far off. This isn't some fantasy by conservatives. This is a reality."

Pompeo said it is clear Iran will immediately move to purchase a range of advanced military equipment once the embargo is lifted. Russia and China, which have sold Iran military equipment in the past, have the most to gain if the embargo is removed, he said.

"Does anybody think that the nation that today is conducting terror campaigns by Lebanese Hezbollah or Iraqi Shia movements or firing military missiles into the air ought to be permitted to purchase conventional weapons systems in just a few months?" Pompeo asked. "I think the world realizes that's a mistake."

U.S. officials are currently working to convince their European counterparts the arms embargo remains critical to stopping Iran's terrorism enterprise.

"We're urging our E3 partners (France, Germany, and Italy) to take action, which is within

their capacity to do," Pompeo said. "We'll go—we'll work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales. And then in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

While some nations have argued the United States has no right to sway the arms embargo debate since it abandoned the nuclear accord, Pompeo made clear the State Department rejects this view.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which codified the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—including the restrictions on the arms embargo and its subsequent expiration date—does not bar the United States from taking action.

"We don't have to declare ourselves a participant," Pompeo said.

"It's unambiguous and the rights that accrue to participants in the U.N. Security Council resolution are fully available to all those participants," he said. "We're going to—we are going to make sure that come October of this year, the Iranians aren't able to buy conventional weapons that they would be given what President Obama and Vice President Biden delivered to the world in that terrible deal."

[Iraq] Pompeo says Iraqi leaders must drop sectarian quota system to help form new government (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:42 AM, Humeysa Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

Iraqi leaders must put aside a sectarian quota system and make compromises to help the formation of a government and help the bilateral relationship between Washington and Baghdad, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, Iraq's president named intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi as prime minister-designate, the third person tapped to lead Iraq in just 10 weeks as it struggles to replace a government that fell last year after months of deadly protests.

[China] Pompeo Says China Responsible for Outbreak, Must Detail Origin (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 12:29 PM, Josh Wingrove, Neutral]

China poses a threat to the world by hiding information about the origin of the coronavirus that it allowed to spread to other countries, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

President Donald Trump's top diplomat, speaking in a television interview Wednesday, ratcheted up the accusations between the U.S. and China over the virus. White House adviser Jared Kushner, who is Trump's son-in-law, also said Wednesday that the president has ordered an investigation into the origins of the virus and will hold those responsible accountable for its spread.

"The Chinese Communist Party now has a responsibility to tell the world how this pandemic got out of China and all across the world, causing such global economic devastation," Pompeo told Fox News on Wednesday morning, during an interview where he repeatedly criticized China's government. "America needs to hold them accountable."

Trump again criticized the World Health Organization during a White House meeting with

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards. The president has sought to cut off U.S. funding for the UN agency, accusing it of taking Chinese claims about the virus at "face value."

"They misled us," he said. "They're literally a pipe organ for China."

He said that nothing positive is happening in China and that the country shouldn't have allowed international air travel during its coronavirus outbreak.

The comments came after China Central Television's top evening news program on Wednesday questioned the transparency and accuracy of U.S. data on Covid-19 infections. In recent days, the state television program said Pompeo is "turning himself into the common enemy of mankind" and that he "has exceeded the bottom line of being human."

China knows that the virus outbreak originated in that country, Pompeo said, and is using "classic communist disinformation" to shift the focus from that, Pompeo said.

"I've been heartened to see Australia, other countries joining us, demanding an investigation, because while we know this started in Wuhan, China, we don't yet know from where it started," Pompeo said. "And in spite of our best efforts to get experts on the ground, they continue to try and hide and obfuscate."

Kushner, speaking in a separate Fox News interview on Wednesday morning, said Trump had asked his administration to investigate the origin of the virus.

"He has asked the team to look into, very carefully, what happened, how this got here, and to make sure that he will take whatever actions that are necessary to make sure the people who caused the problems are held accountable for it," Kushner said.

[China] U.S. believes many Chinese labs doing contagious pathogen work under unknown security – Pompeo (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:44 AM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said the United States believes there are many laboratories in China working on contagious pathogens, but does not know if the facilities have adequate security to prevent future pandemics.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think, on contagious pathogens inside of China today," Pompeo told a State Department news conference. "And we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this (coronavirus pandemic) from happening again. Remember this isn't the first time that we've had a virus come out of China."

[China] Pompeo renews calls for China to provide U.S. access to Wuhan labs (The Hill)

The Hill [4/29/2020 1:53 PM, Laura Kelly, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday renewed calls for the U.S. to have access to Chinese virology labs in Wuhan, part of the Trump administration's effort to investigate the origins of the coronavirus.

The U.S. and China are in a war of words over the outbreak of COVID-19, which was first

detected in Wuhan, with Washington calling for probes into Beijing's role in the outbreak and accusing the Chinese Communist Party of covering up the virus threat early on.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the [Wuhan Institute of Virology]," Pompeo said in a briefing with reporters at the State Department. "We don't know precisely where this virus originated from."

The World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have said the first cases of the coronavirus were first detected in people associated with an animal market in the city of Wuhan, China, saying the virus likely originated in bats.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology is situated near the market where the virus outbreak was first detected.

Researchers have said the strain of the virus in COVID-19 makes it unlikely that it is manmade.

Pompeo also called on China to be transparent about its safety regulations and precautions at such institutions.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think continue on contagious pathogens inside of China today," he said. "And we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this from happening again."

Pompeo said having access to the labs was akin to conducting oversight of nuclear facilities.

Sens. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) and Ed Markey (D-Mass.) on Tuesday requested the State Department provide information about its response to diplomatic cables reportedly sent in 2018 that raised the alarm over safety hazards at the lab. The senators said U.S. diplomats warned that the lab had "severe safety and management weaknesses."

President Trump on April 15 said the U.S. had launched "serious investigations" into China's role in the spread of the coronavirus.

"We are not happy with China," he said during a press briefing. "We believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

The U.S. in January first called for China to allow CDC experts to examine and investigate the origins of the virus.

In February, representatives from the CDC and the National Institutes of Health joined a WHO-sponsored delegation to China to evaluate the Chinese response to the coronavirus outbreak. The Wuhan Institute of Virology was not listed on the itinerary.

[China] Pompeo pushes China to provide access to Wuhan labs over coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:09 AM, Humeyra Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday again pushed China to provide the

world access to its virology labs in Wuhan, saying the world needed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic originated and Beijing had an obligation to be transparent.

Ties between the United States and China have significantly deteriorated since the eruption of the coronavirus outbreak, which has now killed more than 200,000 people around the world, including more than 58,000 in the United States, after originating in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Washington and Beijing have been trading insults and accusations over the handling of the pandemic, with Pompeo last week saying United States "strongly believed" China failed to report the outbreak in a timely manner and then covered up how dangerous the respiratory illness caused by the virus was.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the WIV (Wuhan Institute of Virology) there. We don't know precisely where this virus originated from," Pompeo told a news conference at the State Department, and added that U.S. concerns over the safety of Chinese labs persisted.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think, on contagious pathogens inside of China today and we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this from happening again," Pompeo said.

"The Chinese Communist Party tells us they want to be our partners ... There is a continuing obligation on the part of reliable partners to share this information," he added.

President Donald Trump said on April 15 his government was investigating whether the coronavirus outbreak originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, where the virus emerged. Those claims have no basis in fact, the head of the lab told Reuters on Tuesday.

Pompeo was asked in a Fox News interview about a letter sent to him on Tuesday from Democratic Senators Chris Murphy and Ed Markey seeking information about his department's response to reported warnings about safety at WIV and recommending increased U.S. engagement and technical assistance.

A Washington Post opinion column this month said the U.S. State Department in 2018 warned in diplomatic cables about safety and management weaknesses at a Wuhan laboratory.

"We'll do our best to respond to those two senators," he said.

"The United States for a long time, and continuing today, tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens," Pompeo said.

"We do this, not only in China, but we try to bring our expertise from our National Institutes of Health, from our CDC to precisely prevent something like this."

Reuters reported in March that ahead of the coronavirus outbreak the Trump administration cut staff by more than two-thirds at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention office in China, as part of a larger rollback of U.S.-funded health and science experts on the ground there.

In their letter, the senators asked why, in the context of alarming reports about WIV, "were key CDC staff positions, including the resident CDC advisor position in Beijing, eliminated in 2018 and 2019?"

Most scientists now say the new coronavirus originated in wildlife, with bats and pangolins identified as possible host species.

Yuan Zhiming, a director at the Wuhan Institute of Virology has rejected theories that the lab had accidentally released a coronavirus it had harvested from bats for research purposes.

[China] Pompeo hits back after China claims U.S. is lying about COVID-19: 'Classic communist disinformation' (FOX News)

FOX News [4/29/2020 12:30 AM, Talia Kaplan, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reacted to China's foreign ministry claiming that America is "lying through their teeth" about the coronavirus pandemic, calling it "classic communist disinformation."

Pompeo made the comment on "Fox & Friends" on Wednesday referring to the statement from China foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

"We advise American politicians to reflect on their own problems and try their best to control the [coronavirus] epidemic as soon as possible instead of continuing to play tricks to deflect blame," Shuang said on Tuesday.

"They [Chinese officials] know that this happened in their country," Pompeo said. "This is classic communist disinformation. This is what communists do."

China's foreign ministry also accused the United States of "lying through their teeth" and suggested the country mind its own business as the war of words between the world's two biggest economic powers escalated.

"This very much is our own business," Pompeo said in response.

He added, "What the Chinese communist party did here in not preventing the spread of this around the world, they're responsible for it. America needs to hold them accountable."

Shuang's comments came on the heels of President Trump suggesting in a press conference on Monday that the U.S. would be seeking "substantial" compensation for China's handling of the global pandemic.

"We are not happy with China," Trump said. "We are not happy with that whole situation because we believe it could have been stopped at the source. It could have been stopped quickly and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

He added that the United States is considering several options to "hold them accountable."

On Wednesday, Pompeo noted that China kicked journalists out and suppressed information from doctors about the dangers of the virus.

"Those are the kind of things that communist institutions do," he continued. "We all know them from the soviet days. We know the kinds of things that communist parties do to try and manage information inside of their own country and around the world and so we see these efforts."

Multiple sources told Fox News earlier this month that there is increasing confidence that the COVID-19 outbreak likely originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology laboratory. An investigation into the matter is continuing.

On Wednesday Pompeo pointed out that "the United States for a long time and continuing today tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens."

"We do this not only in China, but we try to bring our expertise from our national institutes of health, from our CDC to precisely prevent something like this," he continued, referring to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has claimed more than 218,000 lives globally, according to Johns Hopkins.

Pompeo said the reason the U.S. spend American taxpayer dollars on efforts to monitor countries conducting research on highly contagious pathogens "is to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard."

The Wuhan Institute of Virology lab was reportedly the subject of multiple urgent warnings inside the U.S. State Department two years ago.

U.S. Embassy officials warned in January 2018 about inadequate safety at that lab and passed on information about scientists conducting risky research on coronavirus from bats, The Washington Post reported two weeks ago.

On Wednesday, Pompeo also brought up Australia, which has been on the receiving end of Beijing's ire as well.

China's ambassador to Australia warned on Monday that the government's call for an independent international inquiry into the origins of the pandemic could lead to a Chinese boycott of Australian products, The Australian Financial Review reported. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne hit back, dismissing China's attempt at "economic coercion."

"I have been heartened to see Australia, other countries joining us, demanding an investigation because while we know this started in Wuhan, China, we don't yet know from where it started and in spite of our best efforts to get experts on the ground, they continue to try and hide," Pompeo said, adding that what China is doing is "wrong."

[China] Sec. Pompeo: U.S. needs to hold China's Communist Party accountable to prevent pandemic happening in future (Yahoo News/FOX News)

Yahoo News/FOX News [4/29/2020 9:12 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discusses how the U.S. and other countries can join together to hold the China's Communist Party accountable for the coronavirus crisis.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Mike Pompeo Accuses China of Posing a Worldwide Threat for Hiding Origin of the Coronavirus (Yahoo News/Time Magazine)

Yahoo News/Time Magazine [4/29/2020 4:11 PM, Staff, Neutral]

China poses a threat to the world by hiding information about the origin of the coronavirus that it allowed to spread to other countries, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Mike Pompeo Defends U.S. Funding For Wuhan Virology Lab (The National Interest)

The National Interest [4/29/2020 4:15 PM, Matthew Petti, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo defended U.S. funding for the Wuhan Institute of Virology as a program "to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard" in a Fox and Friends interview on Wednesday.

U.S. officials have suggested that the 2019 novel coronavirus was initially released in an accident at the Wuhan laboratory. The institution's coronavirus research had been supported by U.S. grants, attracting the ire of Republican politicians who blame the laboratory for the pandemic.

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) attacked U.S. funding for the laboratory last week, telling Fox News host Tucker Carlson that "at best, Americans are funding people who are lying to us and at worst, we're funding people who we knew had problems handling pathogens, who then birthed a monster virus onto the world."

Democratic lawmakers have also called for confronting the Chinese government over a lack of transparency related to the coronavirus pandemic, although none have endorsed the laboratory-origin theory.

Pompeo, however, defended the research program against members of his own party.

"We spend American taxpayer dollars ... to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard," he said. "We try to bring our expertise from our National Institutes of Health [NIH], from our [Centers for Disease Control], to precisely prevent something like this."

Recently-leaked State Department cables from 2018 show that U.S. officials had been concerned with safety issues at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Pompeo then addressed a Tuesday report in the New York Post pointing the finger at NIH infectious disease chief Dr. Anthony Fauci for \$7.4 million in U.S. government grants to the now-controversial coronavirus research.

"I don't know the details of the NIH grants," Pompeo told Fox News. "Look, the United States, for a long time and continuing today, tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens."

The Trump administration cut off one of the NIH grants for coronavirus research in China on Monday, stating that the NIH "does not believe that the current project outcomes align with the program goals and agency priorities."

The research involved both collecting bat coronaviruses from the wild and running "gain-of-

function" experiments aimed at determining whether the viruses could jump between species.

The NIH has defended its research as necessary for public health.

"Most emerging human viruses come from wildlife, and these represent a significant threat to public health and biosecurity in the US and globally, as demonstrated by the SARS epidemic of 2002-03, and the current COVID-19 pandemic," the organization told Newsweek.

Fox News reported earlier in April that some U.S. officials believe that the novel coronavirus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology and escaped in a laboratory accident.

U.S. officials have publicly dismissed this theory.

"It should be no surprise to you that we have taken a keen interest in that and we've had a lot of intelligence take a hard look at that," Gen. Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on April 14. "I would just say at this point, it's inconclusive, although the weight of evidence seems to indicate natural [origin], but we don't know for certain."

Pompeo, however, has leaned into allegations, demanding increased transparency from China.

"We all need to get to the bottom of what actually happened here, not only for the current instant but to make sure something like this doesn't happen again," he said on Wednesday. "There are still many labs operating inside of China today, and the world needs to know that we're not going to see a repeat of this in the days and weeks and months ahead."

[North Korea] Pompeo says no sight of North Korea's Kim, real risk of famine in country (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:52 AM, David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

The United States has caught no sight of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and is watching reports about his health, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday, adding there was a real risk of famine in the country amid the coronavirus outbreak.

North Korean media has not reported on Kim's whereabouts since he presided over a meeting on April 11, provoking speculation about his health and raising concerns about instability in the nuclear-armed country that could affect other North Asian countries and the United States.

"We haven't seen him. We don't have any information to report today, we're watching it closely," Pompeo told Fox News after being asked about conflicting reports about Kim's health.

Pompeo said the United States was also monitoring the situation more broadly in North Korea, which borders China, given the risk presented by the coronavirus.

"There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea too," he added. "We're watching each of those things closely, as they have a real impact on our mission set, which to ultimately denuclearize North Korea."

Pompeo told a later State Department news conference the United States would continue to focus on North Korean denuclearization, "no matter what transpires there."

President Donald Trump met Kim three times in 2018 and 2019 in an attempt to persuade him to give up a nuclear weapons program that threatens the United States. While talks have stalled, Trump has continued to hail Kim as a friend.

Pompeo did not elaborate on the risk of famine in North Korea, but a North Korean economic delegation was due in Beijing this week to discuss food supplies and trade issues as the coronavirus outbreak has severely disrupted the country's food supply, two people with direct knowledge of the situation told Reuters.

Impoverished and isolated North Korea is prone to food shortages. As many as 1.1 million people died during the famines of the 1990s, according to South Korean estimates.

Officials in South Korea and the United States have said Kim may be staying at a coastal resort to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, and have expressed skepticism about media reports he had some kind of serious illness.

They caution, however, that Kim's health and location are closely guarded secrets and reliable information is difficult to obtain in North Korea.

[North Korea] Pompeo says 'still hopeful' for a North Korea deal (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 11:34 AM, Staff, Neutral]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday he remained hopeful for a nuclear agreement with North Korea, despite speculation about leader Kim Jong Un's health and a standstill in talks.

Pompeo, whose diplomacy paved the way for a breakthrough 2018 summit in Singapore between Kim and President Donald Trump, said for the second time in as many weeks that a leadership change in North Korea would not change US policy.

"Regardless of what transpires inside of North Korea with respect to their leadership, our mission remains the same – to deliver on that commitment that Chairman Kim made with President Trump back in Singapore, and that's the ... verified denuclearization of North Korea," Pompeo told reporters.

"We are still hopeful that we'll find a path to negotiate that solution to get the outcome that is good for the American people, good for the North Korean people and for the whole world," he said.

Speaking earlier Wednesday to Fox News, Pompeo voiced concern that North Korea could be hit either by the coronavirus pandemic or widespread hunger.

"There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea," he said.

The totalitarian state, which prides itself on self-reliance, was ravaged in the 1990s by a famine estimated to have killed at least hundreds of thousands of people.

Pompeo, who traveled four times to Pyongyang in 2018, declined to speculate on Kim's health and said that he had met much of the North Korean leadership including Kim's sister Kim Yo Jong – seen as a key player in the event of succession.

A top official in South Korea, which has been seeking reconciliation with its totalitarian neighbor, has said that Kim is "alive and well."

Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, reported that Kim underwent a cardiovascular procedure triggered by heavy smoking, obesity and fatigue.

Trump last week denied a report on Kim's health by CNN, his frequent nemesis, and on Monday said without further explanation that he had a "very good idea" about the North Korean leader's condition.

Trump, who has boasted that he prevented war with North Korea, met Kim twice more after Singapore but talks have been off for most of the past year.

North Korea is demanding an end to US sanctions and has shown anger by lobbing a series of projectiles into the sea.

Trump's aides, notably Pompeo, argue that North Korea must give up its nuclear arsenal before it reaps any rewards.

[North Korea] Mike Pompeo: U.S. mission won't change if Kim Jong-un replaced (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 11:33 AM, Guy Taylor, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the U.S. policy of seeking total and "verified denuclearization" of North Korea won't change if the isolated nation's young dictator, Kim Jong-un, is replaced by a new leader anytime soon.

Mr. Pompeo made the assertion at a press conference Wednesday as rumors that Mr. Kim's may be gravely ill continued to swirl following his disappearance from public view for the past several weeks.

While South Korean officials claim the rumors are inaccurate, saying Mr. Kim is likely keeping a low profile to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, U.S. officials have remained noncommittal in their comments on his status.

President Trump suggested Monday there may be classified intelligence on Mr. Kim.

"I do have a very good idea, but I can't talk about it now," the president told reporters when asked what he knows of Mr. Kim's health.

"I do know how he's doing, relatively speaking," Mr. Trump said. "We will see. You will probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future."

Mr. Pompeo suggested Wednesday that U.S. officials may be in the dark on Mr. Kim's status.

"We haven't seen him," the secretary of state told Fox News on Wednesday morning according to Reuters. "We don't have any information to report today. We're watching it closely."

"I don't have anything to add to the status of Chairman Kim," Mr. Pompeo said later during a press briefing at State Department headquarters.

He went on to suggest that U.S. officials would continue to pursue diplomacy and negotiations with whatever North Korean officials take control in Pyongyang should Mr. Kim no longer be the country's leader.

"We did have a chance to interact with a number of North Koreans on our various trips, the ones that I took," said Mr. Pompeo, who traveled personally to Pyongyang during the early years of the Trump administration to pursue talks with the Kim regime.

He added that Mr. Trump also met several North Korean officials during his summits with Mr. Kim, first in Singapore in 2018 and then in Hanoi in 2019.

"We've had a chance to meet Chairman Kim's sister and some of the other leaders there as well," Mr. Pompeo said, referring to Kim Yo-jong, the younger sister of Mr. Kim who is rumored to be in position to take over as leader should the North Korean dictator die.

"Our mission is the same, regardless of what transpires inside of North Korea with respect to their leadership," Mr. Pompeo said. "Our mission ... is to deliver on the agreement that Chairman Kim made with President Trump back in Singapore and that's the fully denuclearized, verified denuclearization of North Korea."

"We are still hopeful that we'll find a path to negotiate that solution to get the outcome that is good for the American people, good for the North Korean people and the whole world," the secretary of state said. "Our mission simply won't change, no matter what should transpire there."

[India] Mike Pompeo Praises India for Lifting Export Restrictions on Critical Medical Supplies (Yahoo News/News18)

Yahoo News/News18 [4/29/2020 1:37 PM, Staff, Neutral]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday praised India for lifting export bans on critical medical supplies including pharmaceuticals used to treat COVID-19 patients, saying it was an example of working together with partner countries to tackle the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

"We're working with our friends in Australia, India and Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam to share information and best practices as we begin to move the global economy forward," Pompeo told reporters at a news conference here.

"Our conversation certainly involved global supply chains, keeping them running smoothly, getting our economies back to full strength and thinking about how we restructure the supply change chains to prevent something like this from ever happening again," he said.

The coronavirus has infected more than three million people and claimed over 211,000 lives worldwide.

"One example of our work together is with India. It's lifted export bans on critical medical supplies including pharmaceuticals used to treat some COVID-19 patients," Pompeo said.

Over the last few weeks, he has spoken over phone – at least four times – with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar. Readout of the calls indicated that ensuring global supply chain figured prominently in their conversations.

Pompeo said that the US government has provided more than USD 32 million in funding to support the COVID-19 response in Pacific island countries.

"We're working with the Burmese government, the United Nations, NGOs, and others to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Burma, including among vulnerable populations," he said.

Referring to a recent report, Pompeo said that Americans have devoted nearly USD 6.5 billion in government and non-government contributions to help countries fight COVID-19.

"This is by far the largest country total in the world and more than 12 times that of China's combined contributions," he said.

Department of State News

Congressional Religious Freedom Report: Lift Syria Sanctions on Kurds (The National Interest)

The National Interest [4/29/2020 12:30 AM, Matthew Petti, Neutral]

A religious freedom watchdog appointed by Congress suggested on Tuesday that the United States should provide a "potential sanctions exemption" to the Kurdish-led autonomous entity in Northeast Syria.

The U.S. government has imposed harsh economic sanctions aimed at punishing Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad for human rights abuses. But critics have accused the sanctions of affecting areas outside of Assad's control, including the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) controlled by U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led forces.

The criticism gained steam on Tuesday, when the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released its annual report on religious freedom around the world.

The report recommends "examining" targeted sanctions relief as part of a program to "[e]xpand U.S. engagement with and assistance to the AANES."

This appears to be the first time a U.S. government body has acknowledged a problem with the sanctions on Syria, which are backed by even harsh congressional critics of other sanctions campaigns.

The report praised the AANES as "a crucial center of positive religious freedom conditions in Syria" and "the area that has shown the most potential for expanded religious freedom over the last two years," which was put "at serious risk" during a Turkish invasion of Syria in

October 2019.

Turkish forces and Turkish-backed militias streamed across the border after President Donald Trump gave Turkey a green light to attack the AANES, which had been under U.S. protection.

State Department officials downplayed allegations of Turkish war crimes before Congress and delayed a statement condemning the Turkish-backed militias for executing Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf.

The latest USCIRF report asked the Trump administration to "[e]xert significant pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria" and prevent further Turkish attacks or human rights abuses, in addition to considering sanctions relief.

It also asked Congress to pass legislation threatening Turkish officials with sanctions for persecuting U.S. citizens and "press" the Trump administration "determine" whether Saudi officials could be subject to sanctions under U.S. human rights law.

Northeast Syria is the only case where the USCIRF report suggested lifting sanctions. The USCIRF recommended imposing sanctions on officials responsible for religious persecution in Myanmar, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Cuba, Iraq, and Nicaragua.

Congress created the USCIRF as part of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which requires the U.S. government to monitor religious persecution around the world. Presidents are mandated to take actions ranging from diplomatic protests to economic sanctions against "Countries of Special Concern."

But the State Department can issue waivers shielding Countries of Special Concern from penalties if it is in the "national interest" of the United States.

The Department of State renewed waivers in December protecting Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

U.S. Panel Lists India Among Nations With Waning Religious Freedom (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:46 AM, Archana Chaudhary, 6400K, Neutral]

A U.S. government commission has recommended adding India to a list of countries with a worrying record on religious freedom for minorities. India has rejected the report's observations.

India has been listed, along with China, North Korea, Pakistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, among 14 nations "of particular concern" by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its annual report released on Tuesday.

The country took a "sharp downward turn in 2019" as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims," the commission said.

The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission.

Three members of the commission dissented with the decision to add India to the list. India's foreign ministry in a statement rejected the commission's report and called its comments "biased and tendentious."

"We regard it as an organization of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," India's foreign ministry said.

In its report, the USCIRF listed policies, including a new religion-based law that fast tracks Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which has led to nationwide protests. The law "is meant to provide protection for listed non-Muslim religious communities – but not for Muslims – against exclusion from a nationwide National Register of Citizens and the resulting detention, deportation, and potential statelessness," it said.

The panel proposed a range of measures against Indian officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, including targeted sanctions, banning their entry into U.S. and freezing their assets. These are unlikely to be followed as the comments aren't binding on the Trump administration, Michael Kugelman, deputy director and senior associate for South Asia at the Washington-based Wilson Center, said in a tweet.

U.S. panel on religious freedom urges targeted sanctions on India (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:38 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, 5304K, Neutral]

A U.S. government commission has criticised India for failing to protect religious minorities and called for sanctions on government officials responsible for violating religious freedoms enshrined in its constitution.

The Indian government rejected the annual report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom saying it had distorted reality to new levels.

Since it was re-elected to power last year, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has introduced policies hurtful to the country's 172 million Muslims and allowed a campaign of hate and violence against them, the commission said in its report released late on Tuesday.

It criticised a new citizenship law that parliament enacted last year laying out a path for citizenship for six religious groups from neighbouring countries excluding Muslims.

"The national and various state governments also allowed nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities to continue with impunity, and engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence against them," the commission said.

The commission is a bipartisan U.S. government advisory body that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. But these are not binding.

India should be designated a "country of particular concern," the worst category in its survey, because of the sharp downturn in religious freedom in 2019, the commission said.

Myanmar, China, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Russia and Vietnam are among the 14 countries in that category.

The commission also urged the U.S. government to "impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/ or barring their entry into the United States."

It did not identify any agencies or officials it deemed responsible.

The Indian foreign ministry dismissed the findings of the commission saying it had crossed a new threshold.

"Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new. But on this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new levels," ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said.

He said some of the members of the commission had dissented from its conclusions. Two of them wrote in their dissenting notes that India, the world's largest democracy, could not be put in the same group as China and North Korea run by authoritarian regimes.

"It has not been able to carry its own commissioners in its endeavour. We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," Srivastava said.

India rejects scathing U.S. religious freedom report as 'biased' (Yahoo News/BBC)
Yahoo News/BBC [4/29/2020 2:23 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

India has rejected the findings of a US religious freedom panel which has named it a "country of particular concern," since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was re-elected.

The annual report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) places India alongside Pakistan, China and North Korea.

Delhi said the report was "biased" and a "new level of misrepresentation."

This is the first time India has been placed in this category since 2004.

In its key findings, the USCIRF report says that following the massive victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP in 2019, "the national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims."

It also made special mention to India's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), adding that "Home Minister Amit Shah referred to migrants as "termites" to be eradicated."

Nadine Maenza, the Vice Chair for the religious freedom watchdog said that the CAA "potentially exposes millions of Muslims to detention, deportation, and statelessness when the government completes its planned nationwide National Register of Citizens."

"We reject the observations on India in the USCIRF annual report. Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new," said external affairs ministry spokesperson Anurag Srivastava. "On this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new

levels. We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly."

The religious freedom panel had even recommended "targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious rights."

Two of the nine member panel expressed dissent over the panel's recommendation. Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee said "India does not belong to the same category as authoritarian regimes like China and North Korea. India is the largest democratic nation in the world, where the CAA has been challenged openly by the opposition Congress Party and law makers, civil society, and various groups."

The Indian American Muslim Council, an advocacy group welcomed the report. In a statement, it said, "As a part of the Indian diaspora that only wishes well for the country of our birth, we view international criticism of India's religious freedom record as distressing but painfully necessary, given the escalating level of persecution of minorities."

It further said that in March, "along with its partners, International Christian Concern (ICC) and Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR), it had written to USCIRF urging it to bring India into its list of the worst offenders of religious freedom violations in the world."

Saudi cabinet calls on Yemen's southern separatists to rescind emergency (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 12:45 AM, Nayera Abdallah and Omar Fahmy, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's cabinet has urged Yemen's main separatist group, which has declared self-rule in the south, to abide by an agreement to end a previous standoff with the Saudi-backed government.

The declaration by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) on Sunday, which included emergency rule in southern regions, threatens to renew conflict with the government.

They are both part of a military alliance formed by Saudi Arabia to battle Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement, which ousted the internationally recognised government from power in the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014.

"Any step that is contrary to the Riyadh agreement should be cancelled," the Saudi cabinet said in a statement issued late on Tuesday, referring to a power-sharing deal agreed in November.

The virtual cabinet meeting was chaired by King Salman. State news agency SPA posted images of the monarch and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, taking part at separate locations.

The Saudi-led coalition on Monday described the STC's announcement of emergency rule in the south, including the interim seat of government Aden, as an "escalatory action" at a time when all parties should focus on confronting the novel coronavirus.

The cabinet also lauded the coalition for extending by one month a nationwide ceasefire due to the coronavirus, which Riyadh said would also help alleviate the suffering of Yemenis during the holy month of Ramadan, which began on Friday, and support U.N. peace efforts.

The United States welcomed the coalition ceasefire announcement, Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV reported on Wednesday, citing U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker.

Yemen has been mired in conflict since the coalition intervened in March 2015 against the Houthis, who control Sanaa and most big urban centres. They have not accepted the truce.

The war has killed more than 100,000 people and pushed millions to the verge of famine.

China embassy accuses Australia of 'petty tricks' in coronavirus dispute (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 4:45 AM, Kirsty Needham, 5304K, Neutral]

China accused Australia of "petty tricks" on Wednesday in an intensifying dispute over Canberra's push for an international inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak that could affect diplomatic and economic ties between the countries.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his proposed inquiry into how the coronavirus developed and spread would not be targeted at China but was needed given COVID-19 had killed more than 200,000 people and shut down much of the global economy.

"Now, it would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again," he said.

Australian government ministers have repeatedly said China, the country's largest trade partner, was threatening "economic coercion" after its ambassador, Cheng Jingye, said this week that Chinese consumers could boycott Australian products and universities because of the calls for the inquiry. The head of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) called Cheng to express concern. The Chinese embassy then released a statement detailing what it said was discussed on the call, prompting another rebuke from DFAT.

On Wednesday, the Chinese embassy returned fire, saying on its website that details of the call had first been "obviously leaked by some Australian officials" and it needed to set the record straight.

"The Embassy of China doesn't play petty tricks, this is not our tradition. But if others do, we have to reciprocate," an embassy spokesman said in the statement.

Chinese state media has fiercely rounded on Morrison, with Australian studies scholar Chen Hong writing in the Global Times tabloid on Wednesday that Australia was "spearheading" a "malicious campaign to frame and incriminate China."

And Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the paper which is affiliated to the Beijing-controlled People's Daily newspaper, said on Chinese social media that Australia was always making trouble.

"It is a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes. Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off," Hu wrote.

New Zealand, which also has China as its largest trading partner, on Wednesday sided with neighbouring Australia in supporting an inquiry into the pandemic.

"It's very hard to conceive of there not being a desire by every country in world, including the country of origin, for an investigation to find out how this happened," Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters said.

Australia's call for an inquiry has so far only received lukewarm support more widely, with France and the United Kingdom saying it was not the right time to focus on an inquiry.

U.S. President Donald Trump has said China could have stopped the coronavirus before it swept the globe and that his administration was conducting "serious investigations" into what happened.

China bristles at Australia's call for investigation into coronavirus origin (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [4/29/2020 1:37 AM, Paul Karp and Helen Davidson, 3975K, Neutral]

The Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, has defied China and defended the "entirely reasonable and sensible" call for an investigation into the origins of coronavirus, as the international political fallout over the pandemic deepened.

China has been pushing back against criticism from other governments about how it handled the outbreak of Covid-19, which is believed to have started in Wuhan and which has now infected 3 million people worldwide and killed 200,000.

Donald Trump's accusation at the weekend that Beijing could have done more to prevent the deadly spread of the disease was met with fierce criticism from China's state media.

While Australia has eschewed the more strident approach of the US, which has stopped funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO), it has urged its allies to back an overhaul of the WHO and suggested recruiting independent investigators akin to "weapons inspectors" to determine the source of major disease outbreaks.

On Wednesday Morrison said his government "will of course continue to pursue what is a very reasonable and sensible course of action."

"This is a virus that has taken more than 200,000 lives across the world," he told reporters in Canberra. It has shut down the global economy. The implications and impacts of this are extraordinary.

"Now, it would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again."

Australia's stance has angered Beijing, which has denied wrongdoing during the pandemic. In recent days Chinese state media has run numerous inflammatory statements including that Australia was "gum stuck to the bottom of China's shoe," doing the work of the US but without holding any influence, and risking longterm damage to its bilateral relationship and trading partnership with China.

On Tuesday, the Chinese embassy released details of a call from Australia's Department of

Foreign Affairs and Trade (Dfat), and in a further move to embarrass the Morrison government, claimed the Dfat secretary had said it was "not the time to commence the review now and Australia has no details of the proposal."

The move came after warnings by China's ambassador to Australia, Jingye Cheng, on Monday over consumer boycotts, described by an Australian minister as "threats of economic coercion."

A Tuesday night editorial in the Global Times accused Australia of "panda bashing" and victim blaming, and Morrison of "adventurism" which could damage the bilateral relationship "beyond repair."

"The Morrison government's adventurism to fiddle with this mutually beneficial comprehensive strategic partnership is in defiance of rational thought and common sense," it said.

"Canberra is treading on a hazardous path that has no prospect for a U-turn during the Covid-19 pandemic, and likely for a long time afterward."

But on Wednesday Morrison insisted the investigation "is not targeted" and refused to buy in to the war of words with China, saying the response was "a matter for them."

"Australia will do what is in our interest, in the global interest, and we will of course continue to support moves to ensure there is a proper independent assessment of what has occurred here."

Morrison said Australia's relationship with China was "mutually beneficial" and noted its trade with China consisted mainly of export of resources. "I see no reason why that would alter in the future."

In other coronavirus developments around the world:

The number of US cases passed one million as Donald Trump predicted a "great" economic rebound in the fall and claimed the country would soon be performing 5m coronavirus diagnostic tests a day.

Brazil's total number of confirmed deaths overtook the WHO's figure for China as cases accelerate in Latin America's biggest country. The number of deaths in Brazil has now passed 5,000.

China's consultative parliament is set to hold its annual meeting on 22 May, the official Xinhua news agency reported on Wednesday, more than two months later than originally planned.

Nearly 70 residents infected with coronavirus died at a Massachusetts home for ageing veterans, as state and federal officials try to figure out what went wrong in the deadliest known outbreak at a long-term care facility in the US.

China reported zero new deaths as of the end of 28 April. There were 26 new asymptomatic cases, down from 40 the day before, but 21 new imported cases, compared to three a day

earlier, and 22 cases in the mainland.

The Academy Awards will for the first time allow films that debuted on a streaming service without a theatrical run to be eligible for nominations, a break with tradition in direct response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia defends call for an inquiry into COVID-19 origins (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:06 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Australia's calls for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 is "reasonable" and not targeted at any specific country, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

UK envoy in Washington backs probe into origins of pandemic, WHO reforms (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain's ambassador to the United States on Wednesday backed calls for an investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus and the response of the World Health Organization, but said the first priority should be containing the outbreak.

The comments came after Britain's foreign affairs parliamentary committee asked the government whether it plans to use international bodies to hold China to account over the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cross-party body asked for the government's strategy in dealing with China, taking into account Beijing's role in giving early information on the pandemic, its role within medical and industrial supply chains and the reliance of the UK and its partners on the country.

The committee asked if the government planned to make representations at international gatherings such as the World Health Organization, Group of Seven (G7) advanced economies or Group of 20 (G20) major economies to "hold China accountable for its attempts to mislead the international community in order to control the narrative around COVID-19."

Asked about the issue during an online event with The Washington Post newspaper, British Ambassador Karen Pierce said an investigation was certainly needed into how the virus emerged and the health risks associated with wet markets in China, which have spawned at least three virus outbreaks since 2000.

The British government also favored a review of the WHO's handling of the outbreak and reforms of the organization, she said. "We need to learn after all these crises, just as we did after Ebola in 2014. We need to learn how we can always do things better," she said.

However, she underscored that it was crucial now to focus on bolstering international cooperation to respond to the pandemic.

"We would see these sorts of reviews and reforms and investigations as something to come later," she said.

The U.S. government has repeatedly criticized China's handling of the coronavirus

outbreak, which began late last year in the Chinese city of Wuhan and has grown into a global pandemic. The outbreak has killed nearly 217,000 people globally, including more than 27,000 in Britain and over 58,000 in the United States, according to a Reuters tally.

U.S. President Donald Trump has suspended U.S. funding of the WHO, accusing the U.N. agency of promoting China's "disinformation" about the outbreak. WHO officials have denied this and China has said it has been transparent and open.

U.S. Puts Amazon Foreign Websites on List of Platforms Blamed for Facilitating Piracy (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:27 PM, William Mauldin, Neutral]

The Trump administration hit Amazon.com Inc. over intellectual-property rights Wednesday, putting five of the online retailer's foreign platforms on a list of "notorious markets" believed to facilitate sales of counterfeit and pirated goods.

The U.S. trade representative's office listed Amazon's web domains in Canada, France, Germany, India, and the U.K. among the accused platforms that allow for piracy. The action doesn't target Amazon's U.S. platform.

In a statement, an Amazon spokeswoman called the action a "purely political act." Amazon founder and Chief Executive Jeff Bezos has been a frequent target of President Trump.

"Amazon makes significant investments in proactive technologies and processes to detect and stop bad actors and potentially counterfeit products from being sold in our stores," the spokeswoman said. "In 2019 alone, we invested over \$500 million and have more than 8,000 employees protecting our store from fraud and abuse."

The Wall Street Journal previously reported that the trade representative was considering taking the action. The notorious-markets list has been used to encourage foreign companies and countries to crack down on piracy and counterfeiting, so the targeting of foreign platforms of a prominent U.S. company is a milestone.

The trade office said it took the action in response to complaints from U.S. apparel makers that Amazon isn't taking sufficient steps to block the sale of counterfeits on the five foreign platforms.

On a call with reporters, a senior U.S. trade official said companies have complained that seller information on the platforms is misleading, making it hard to determine who is selling the good, and that the process for removing listings can be "lengthy and burdensome."

The American Apparel and Footwear Association had formally requested that the U.S. add the Amazon sales platforms in those five countries to the list. The association said its members flagged those sites as the biggest source of problems among Amazon's platforms, with thousands of counterfeit items and listings.

In the trade office's report Wednesday, U.S. officials said that companies complained that the seller information displayed by Amazon on the foreign sites is often misleading, making it "difficult for consumers and right holders alike to determine who is selling the goods and that anyone can become a seller on Amazon with too much ease because Amazon does not sufficiently vet sellers on its platforms."

Amazon's counterfeit-removal processes "can be lengthy and burdensome, even for right holders that enroll in Amazon's brand protection programs," according to the report.

Putting Amazon on the list highlights the tensions between the administration and Mr. Bezos.

President Trump blames Mr. Bezos for unfavorable coverage in the Washington Post, which Mr. Bezos bought in 2013 for \$250 million. The Post says its editorial decisions are independent.

Besides Amazon, the annual notorious-markets list once again included the Taobao.com website owned by Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.

"Taobao remains one of the largest sources of counterfeit sales in China," the report said. While the report noted improved response times and policies, it said the site is still known for the number of counterfeits "offered for sale on Taobao and the lack of transparency regarding filters and other proactive anticounterfeiting measures."

An Alibaba spokesman said the company "will continue to expand and enhance its robust enforcement programs, engage in meaningful dialogue and promote advanced collaboration."

Social-media platforms that allow users to buy and sell goods also are drawing scrutiny in Washington. "Right holders have expressed increasing concerns with a growing trend of counterfeit products being offered for sale on e-commerce features related to large platforms, such as WeChat, " Tencent Holdings Ltd.'s giant social-media platform in China, according to the report.

More broadly, the Trump administration has sought to boost intellectual-property protection for drugmakers, Hollywood, the music industry and consumer-products firms in trade agreements, including a recent "phase one" trade pact with China.

In recent years, lobbyists and lawmakers have wrangled over how to address the degree of liability that online platforms should face for identifying and removing pirated electronic content or goods. Consumer watchdogs warn that officials can go too far in guaranteeing companies' rights and that some firms, including big drugmakers, may benefit too much from long-term patent and market protections.

Besides the notorious-markets list, the trade representative's office on Wednesday also released its new list of countries that don't take sufficient steps to protect intellectual-property rights. The "priority watch list" includes Algeria, Argentina, Chile, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine and Venezuela.

China recently submitted a road map for addressing intellectual-property rights as a part of the "phase one" trade agreement, and the U.S. trade official said Wednesday that Washington is reviewing the blueprint and continuing to work with Beijing on the issue.

Exclusive: Amazon turns to Chinese firm on U.S. blacklist to meet thermal camera needs (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:00 PM, Krystal Hu and Jeffrey Dastin, Neutral]

Amazon.com Inc (AMZN.O) has bought cameras to take temperatures of workers during the coronavirus pandemic from a firm the United States blacklisted over allegations it helped China detain and monitor the Uighurs and other Muslim minorities, three people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

China's Zhejiang Dahua Technology Co Ltd (002236.SZ) shipped 1,500 cameras to Amazon this month in a deal valued close to \$10 million, one of the people said. At least 500 systems from Dahua – the blacklisted firm – are for Amazon's use in the United States, another person said.

The Amazon procurement, which has not been previously reported, is legal because the rules control U.S. government contract awards and exports to blacklisted firms, but they do not stop sales to the private sector.

However, the United States "considers that transactions of any nature with listed entities carry a 'red flag' and recommends that U.S. companies proceed with caution," according to the Bureau of Industry and Security's [here website](#). Dahua has disputed the designation, and Beijing has denied mistreatment of the minority groups.

The deal comes as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned of a shortage of temperature-reading devices and said it wouldn't halt certain pandemic uses of thermal cameras that lack the agency's regulatory approval. Top U.S.-based maker FLIR Systems Inc (FLIR.O) has faced an up to weeks-long order backlog, forcing it to prioritize products for hospitals and other critical facilities.

Amazon declined to confirm its purchase from Dahua, but said its hardware complied with national, state and local law, and its temperature checks were to "support the health and safety of our employees, who continue to provide a critical service in our communities."

The company added it was implementing thermal imagers from "multiple" manufacturers, which it declined to name. These vendors include Infrared Cameras Inc, which Reuters previously reported, and FLIR, according to employees at Amazon-owned Whole Foods who saw the deployment. FLIR declined to comment on its customers.

"It's troubling to learn that well-known American companies are continuing to turn a blind eye to companies that are fueling the Chinese Communist Party's brutal treatment of so many of their own people," said the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul, in reaction to the news.

Dahua, one of the biggest surveillance camera manufacturers globally, said it does not discuss customer engagements and it adheres to applicable laws. Dahua is committed "to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19" through technology that detects "abnormal elevated skin temperature — with high accuracy," it said in a statement.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, which maintains the blacklist, declined comment. The FDA said it would use discretion when enforcing regulations during the public health crisis as long as thermal systems lacking compliance posed no "undue risk" and secondary evaluations confirmed fevers.

Dahua's thermal cameras have been used in hospitals, airports, train stations, government offices and factories during the pandemic. International Business Machines Corp (IBM.N) placed an order for 100 units, and the automaker Chrysler placed an order for 10, one of the sources said. In addition to selling thermal technology, Dahua makes white-label security cameras resold under dozens of other brands such as Honeywell, according to research and reporting firm IPVM.

Honeywell said some but not all its cameras are manufactured by Dahua, and it holds products to its cybersecurity and compliance standards. IBM and Chrysler's parent Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV (FCHA.MI) did not comment.

The Trump Administration added Dahua and seven other tech firms last year to the blacklist for acting against U.S. foreign policy interests, saying they were "implicated" in "China's campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, and high-technology surveillance against Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other members of Muslim minority groups."

More than one million people have been sent to camps in the Xinjiang region as part of China's campaign to root out terrorism, the United Nations has estimated.

Dahua has said the U.S. decision lacked "any factual basis." Beijing has urged the United States to remove the companies from the list.

A provision of U.S. law, which is scheduled to take effect in August, will also bar the federal government from starting or renewing contracts with a company using "any equipment, system, or service" from firms including Dahua "as a substantial or essential component of any system."

Amazon's cloud unit is a major contractor with the U.S. intelligence community, and it has been battling Microsoft Corp (MSFT.O) for an up to \$10 billion deal with the Pentagon.

Top industry associations have asked Congress for a year-long delay because they say the law would reduce supplies to the government dramatically, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that policies clarifying the implementation of the law were forthcoming.

FACE DETECTION & PRIVACY

The coronavirus has infected staff from dozens of Amazon warehouses, ignited small protests over allegedly unsafe conditions and prompted unions to demand site closures. Temperature checks help Amazon stay operational, and the cameras – a faster, socially distant alternative to forehead thermometers – can speed up lines to enter its buildings. Amazon said the type of temperature reader it uses varies by building.

To see if someone has a fever, Dahua's camera compares a person's radiation to a separate infrared calibration device. It uses face detection technology to track subjects walking by and make sure it is looking for heat in the right place.

An additional recording device keeps snapshots of faces the camera has spotted and their temperatures, according to a demonstration of the technology in San Francisco. Optional facial recognition software can fetch images of the same subject across time to determine,

for instance, who a virus patient may have been near in a line for temperature checks.

Amazon said it is not using facial recognition on any of its thermal cameras. Civil liberties groups have warned the software could strip people of privacy and lead to arbitrary apprehensions if relied on by police. U.S. authorities have also worried that equipment makers like Dahua could hide a technical "back door" to Chinese government agents seeking intelligence.

In response to questions about the thermal systems, Amazon said in a statement, "None of this equipment has network connectivity, and no personal identifiable information will be visible, collected, or stored."

Dahua made the decision to market its technology in the United States before the FDA issued the guidance on thermal cameras in the pandemic. Its supply is attracting many U.S. customers not deterred by the blacklist, according to Evan Steiner, who sells surveillance equipment from a range of manufacturers in California through his firm EnterActive Networks LLC.

"You're seeing a lot of companies doing everything that they possibly can preemptively to prepare for their workforce coming back," he said.

Developing Countries Draw Down Reserves to Shield Currencies (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:27 AM, Caitlin Ostroff and Avantika Chilkoti, Neutral]

Emerging-market countries last month depleted their foreign-exchange reserves at the fastest pace since the global financial crisis to contain a plunge in their currencies, leaving some nations vulnerable to further shocks.

Twelve of the largest developing countries, including Brazil and Russia, reduced their combined reserves by at least \$143.5 billion in March in the biggest drawdown since October 2008, according to data from research firm Arkera. That has left Turkey with its lowest foreign-exchange balance since November 2006. For Egypt, March marked the biggest monthly drain on its reserves on record.

Those countries dipped into their coffers to combat a precipitous slide in their currencies after the coronavirus pandemic brought the global economy to a jarring near-halt in March. Financial markets grew turbulent, with investors pulling funds out of risky assets such as emerging markets' stocks and bonds while scrambling for dollars.

The depletion in reserves is likely to leave countries like Turkey, Egypt and South Africa especially exposed to further market shocks, investors said. Some countries may struggle with debt owed to foreign investors, or paying for imports of oil, food and medicines priced in U.S. dollars. The continued strength of the American currency, widely held by governments, will also make replenishing those reserves in coming months a challenge.

"The experience from '08 was that the winners are those that let their currencies go," said Timothy Ash, senior sovereign strategist covering emerging markets at BlueBay Asset Management. "They have wasted reserves, they should have just let the currency go wherever."

In Turkey, which endured a currency crisis in 2018, authorities drew down almost \$19.2 billion from foreign-exchange reserves in March as the Turkish lira's decline against the dollar accelerated. Its already diminished reserves dropped to about \$56 billion, according to Refinitiv. That helped limit the decline in the lira to 15% this year.

The central bank's net reserves, a figure that deducts funds borrowed from the domestic banks, are below zero, estimated Brad Setser, a senior fellow at New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

Turkey has \$12.5 billion of U.S.-dollar-denominated debt coming due through the end of 2021, according to Dealogic. The nation's banking sector, which had almost \$79 billion of short-term debt due by February 2021, may not be able to make payment if the lira falls further, said Per Hammarlund, chief emerging-market strategist at SEB Markets.

Turkey's central bank declined to comment on the drop in reserves, but said it has worked to provide banks with greater liquidity and credit.

Egypt's foreign-currency reserves fell by about \$5.4 billion last month—the biggest monthly drop on record—leaving the country with about \$36.4 billion, according to Refinitiv. Its currency has gained about 2% this year.

While the Egyptian pound is no longer pegged to the dollar, authorities aim to keep the currency from depreciating too much to control the cost of imported wheat and grains, and keep inflation in check. But a sharp decline in tourism in recent weeks is also eroding the country's foreign-exchange income and has fueled speculation about its ability to make debt payments.

Such concerns drove the yield on Egypt's dollar-denominated 10-year bond maturing Wednesday to 31% on April 24, from 4% at the beginning of March. The yield eased back down to under 6% this week after the International Monetary Fund said on Sunday that Egypt has asked for financial assistance. Egypt's central bank didn't respond to requests for comment.

The muted moves in the Turkish and Egyptian currencies suggest large-scale intervention by the central banks to stem their decline, according to analysts at the Institute of International Finance who weighed the fall in local currencies against changes in foreign-exchange reserves.

Mexico's peso, in contrast, has fallen 22% this year as the nation held off on intervening in currency markets.

"The Mexican peso got clobbered, but in many regards they're doing what you have to do: stand back, let the currency get clobbered and pick up the pieces after," said Robin Brooks, chief economist at the IIF.

Saudi Arabia used up \$27 billion from its reserves in March—the largest drop going back two decades—to maintain the riyal's value against the dollar as oil prices slid. That has left it with about \$479 billion.

Meanwhile, Brazil and Russia, which also have sizable reserves even after the recent drain

on their coffers, have let their currencies absorb more of the hit from the economic meltdown. That has left the Russian ruble down 16% this year, and the Brazilian real down 27%.

"The ones that have drawn down their reserves, they have bet this will be relatively short lived," said Mr. Hammarlund.

Nations Must Promote 'Green Recovery' From Virus, IMF Chief Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:15 AM, Ana Monteiro, Neutral]

With the world economy reeling from the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, nations must do all they can to promote a recovery that also fights against the climate-change crisis, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.

"Taking measures now to fight the climate crisis is not just a 'nice-to-have,' it is a 'must-have' if we are to leave a better world for our children," she said in prepared remarks to be delivered at the Petersberg Climate Dialogue Wednesday.

The IMF's fiscal affairs department recommends nations mandate commitments to reduce carbon emissions when they provide financial lifelines to companies that are carbon-intensive, adding that record-low oil prices make this an opportune time to phase out subsidies.

State guarantees can be used to mobilize private finance for green investment, the lender said. It must be mandatory for financial firms to better disclose climate risks in their lending portfolios, and the industry must find better ways of pricing in this risk, it said.

The IMF also recommends a substantially higher carbon price to encourage climate-smart investment and accelerate the shift to cleaner fuels.

"The current global carbon price is only \$2 per ton, way below the levels needed to keep global warming under 2 degrees Celsius (35.6 degrees Fahrenheit), which we estimate to be \$75 per ton," Georgieva said. For the transition to be fair and growth-friendly, carbon-tax revenues can be used to provide upfront assistance to poorer households, lower burdensome taxes, and support investments in health, education, and infrastructure, she said.

[Iraq] Iraq Seeks More Aid From the U.S. to Manage Coronavirus Fallout (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 4:07 PM, Glen Carey, Neutral]

Iraq is seeking financial assistance from the U.S. to help the country combat the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic and plummeting oil revenue, the country's health minister-designate said.

"We have been promised by the United States government as part of this strategy between Iraq and United States to help us financially," Jaafar Allawi said on Wednesday during an online policy forum organized by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I think there is a team negotiating now, or in the process of negotiation, to get Iraq some support, financial support, from America."

The U.S. has proposed a strategic dialogue in June that aims for the two governments to

work together amid the pandemic and decreased oil revenue. Announcing the talks during a briefing on April 7, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo warned that the Covid-19 outbreak and "plummeting oil revenues" threaten an economic collapse in Iraq.

The virus outbreak hit OPEC's second-biggest producer as Iraq's government was trying to end months of damaging political deadlock that coincided with a slump in oil prices. Iraq's intelligence chief Mustafa Al-Kadhimi was picked to form a government after previous attempts failed.

The latest crisis in Iraq began when anti-government protests erupted in October as people lost patience with years of rampant corruption and poor services, forcing the prime minister to resign the following month. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have also led to armed conflict in Iraq, threatening the country's tenuous stability.

"The challenges facing the Iraqi state have become more acute since the beginning of 2020 and represent real risks to the stability of the state," Ayham Kamel, head of Middle East and North Africa at the Eurasia Group consultancy, wrote in a note on Wednesday. "A shrinking revenue pie due to low oil prices will prove to be the most destabilizing factor over the next 12-18 months. Irrespective of who is leading the government, a large drop in revenues combined with rampant corruption is bound to create problems."

Al-Kadhimi is "well positioned to win confidence from the key political and sectarian blocks in parliament, and therefore succeed in forming a relatively reformist government," Kamel wrote. "However, this is far from a slam dunk as the list of obstacles and complications in Iraq's political system are endless."

Iraqi authorities have reported 2,003 cases of the coronavirus so far and imposed curfew measures in mid-March to try and control the outbreak. Kuwait has contributed a "large amount of money," and the Chinese government has provided Iraq with equipment to help combat the outbreak, Allawi said during the forum.

[Lebanon] Key U.S. official urges Lebanon to prove commitment to reforms: Al-Arabiya (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:18 AM, Maher Chmaytelli, 5304K, Neutral]

The U.S. State Department's top diplomat for the Middle East has urged crisis-hit Lebanon to prove its commitment to reform in order to secure international assistance, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV channel said on Wednesday.

Lebanon is grappling with renewed protests following a collapse in its currency, soaring inflation and spiralling unemployment, but its dire financial straits have only been worsened by a shutdown to rein in the coronavirus pandemic.

The growing unrest threatens to tip Lebanon into more serious conflict, even as Beirut looks to pass an economic rescue plan and enter talks with foreign creditors after defaulting on hefty debt obligations last month.

An accumulation of bad financial decisions, inaction and entrenched corruption and cronyism, were the cause of Lebanon's crisis, Al Arabiya quoted David Schenker, the U.S. assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, as saying.

"For Lebanon to be in a position to receive assistance from international financial institutions it must prove that it is ready to make difficult choices and decisions to show it is 100% committed to reform," it quoted him saying in an interview.

Its subsidiary channel, Al Hadath, also interviewed Schenker, who specified reforms to the power sector, customs, telecommunications and tax collection.

Lebanon's government, formed in January with the support of the powerful Iranian-backed movement Hezbollah, has struggled to make economic reforms demanded by foreign donors. The United States has classified Hezbollah as a terrorist group.

The U.S. official also welcomed a ceasefire announcement by the Saudi-led coalition that has been battling the Iran-aligned Houthi movement in Yemen for five years. The truce was prompted by the pandemic and as a measure to support U.N. peace efforts.

[Lebanon] As Lebanon's Crisis Deepens, Politicians Trade Blame (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:11 PM, Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, Neutral]

Lebanese politicians who have led their country into financial disaster are squabbling over who is to blame, stirring up old rivalries that may spell even deeper trouble ahead.

Lebanon faces its gravest threat since the 1975-90 civil war as its currency sinks, inflation spirals and protesters return to the streets, angered by an economic crisis made worse by a coronavirus shutdown.

Unrest this week in Sidon and Tripoli, where banks were torched and a demonstrator killed, is seen as a sign of what's to come as poverty and unemployment soar. Prices of consumer goods have shot up 50% since October.

The government is trying to finalise a rescue plan, perhaps as soon Thursday. Many hope this will be taken straight to the IMF, widely seen as Lebanon's only source of vital financial aid, albeit with tough conditions attached.

The plan must address huge gaps in the national finances including a projected \$83 billion hole in the banking sector - an amount that will soon be equal to twice the size of the rapidly shrinking economy. How to divide the losses is one of the biggest problems ahead.

But while the government is backed by the pro-Iranian Shi'ite group Hezbollah and its Maronite Christian ally President Michel Aoun, it is opposed by important players in Lebanon's sectarian politics: Sunni politician Saad al-Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Aoun's Maronite rival Samir Geagea.

Once leaders of an alliance against Hezbollah and Syria, these three have grown increasingly critical of Prime Minister Hassan Diab, a little-known academic made premier by Hezbollah and its allies using their parliamentary majority.

Nabih Berri, the Shi'ite parliament speaker and Hezbollah ally, appears to be taking a position in the middle.

The old political fault line has emerged in a row over the role of central bank governor Riad Salameh, steward of the banking system since 1993 and architect of the fixed exchange

rate that has crumbled since mass protests against political corruption and incompetence began last October.

Diab has rebuked Salameh over the currency crisis and a lack of transparency at the central bank. Hezbollah has also been critical, its deputy leader saying Salameh was in part responsible for the pound's collapse.

Heavily armed and listed as a terrorist group by Washington, Hezbollah has its own axe to grind with Salameh: his application of U.S. sanctions that have shut the group and its followers out of the banking system.

Salameh has hit back, blaming successive governments' failure to reform and vowing to defend the central bank's independence.

Hariri, a traditional ally of Gulf Arab and Western states, has defended Salameh while accusing Diab of trying to destroy Lebanon's free market economy and ignoring state corruption.

Jumblatt has meanwhile painted Diab as a nonentity doing the bidding of Hezbollah and Aoun. While Salameh had made mistakes, he was not to blame for \$50-\$60 billion of waste in the state-run electricity company, the responsibility of an energy ministry run for years by the party Aoun founded, Jumblatt said.

Lebanon's leaders, all of whom are accused of complicity in the corruption that has led to the crisis, are trying to deflect accountability.

"This bickering will only lead to more suffering and deeper economic problems. If the exchange rate reaches extremely high levels, I don't see how the state can continue to function," said Mohanad Hage Ali, a fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The pound has more than halved in value since October.

A draft government reform plan set out the scale of the problem earlier this month, including the \$83 billion hole in the banking sector and \$40 billion of losses at the central bank.

The draft drew criticism from Hariri, Jumblatt and others, particularly because it called for an "exceptional contribution" from the banks' large depositors.

The banking association also weighed in, telling the government to "keep your hands off" the banks and accusing it of squandering the money lent to it, endangering deposits.

"Without a fair distribution of losses, the chances of coming up with a solution that would receive international support look slim," said Khalil Gebara, senior policy fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. "In a country that is so sectarian, finding solutions ... is looking very difficult."

Governments that aided Lebanon in the past are insisting Lebanon enact a reform plan before getting help this time.

"For Lebanon to be in a position to receive assistance from international financial institutions

it must prove that it is ready to make difficult choices and decisions to show it is 100% committed to reform," David Schenker, U.S. assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, told Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV on Wednesday.

Nasser Saidi, a former vice governor at the central bank, says Lebanon needs a \$25-\$30 billion IMF package over three to five years. Lebanon must admit it needs the IMF and start negotiations as quickly as possible, he said.

Farouk Soussa, senior economist at Goldman Sachs, said the draft plan leaked this month was "technically extremely capable and thorough but politically naive".

"The space between where the technocrats are and where the political forces – in terms of what is an acceptable recovery plan – is quite wide," he said.

"It would have been very difficult under normal circumstances but in the context of COVID it only complicates the economic situation in Lebanon exponentially."

[Lebanon] Lebanon cities erupt against collapse in currency (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:27 AM, Libby Hogan, 5304K, Neutral]

Protests against growing economic hardship erupted in Tripoli and spread to other Lebanese cities on Tuesday, with banks set ablaze and violence boiling over into a second night. One demonstrator was killed in riots overnight Monday, according to security and medical sources, as a collapse in the currency, soaring inflation and spiraling unemployment convulse Lebanon, a country in deep financial crisis since October. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Russia] Russia slams U.S. arguments for low-yield nukes (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:17 PM, Vladimir Isachenkov, Neutral]

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday rejected U.S. arguments for fielding low-yield nuclear warheads, warning that an attempt to use such weapons against Russia would trigger an all-out nuclear retaliation.

The U.S. State Department argued in a paper released last week that fitting the low-yield nuclear warheads to submarine-launched ballistic missiles would help counter potential new threats from Russia and China. It charged that Moscow in particular was pondering the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons as a way of coercion in a limited conflict — an assertion that Russia has repeatedly denied.

The State Department noted that the new supplemental warhead "reduces the risk of nuclear war by reinforcing extended deterrence and assurance."

The Russian Foreign Ministry sees it otherwise.

The ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, commented on the State Department's paper at a briefing on Wednesday, emphasizing that the U.S. shouldn't view its new low-yield warheads as a flexible tool that could help avert an all-out nuclear conflict with Russia.

"Any attack involving a U.S. submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), regardless of its weapon specifications, would be perceived as a nuclear aggression," Zakharova said.

"Those who like to theorize about the flexibility of American nuclear potential must understand that in line with the Russian military doctrine such actions are seen as warranting retaliatory use of nuclear weapons by Russia."

Zakharova cast the U.S. deployment of low-yield warheads as a destabilizing move that would result in "lowering the nuclear threshold."

U.S.-Russian differences on nuclear arms issues come as relations between Moscow and Washington are at post-Cold War lows over the Ukrainian crisis and the accusations of Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 presidential election.

Last year, both Moscow and Washington withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

The only U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control agreement still standing is the New START treaty, which was signed in 2010 by U.S. President Barack Obama and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The pact limits each country to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers and envisages sweeping on-site inspections to verify the compliance.

Russia has offered to extend the New START that expires in February 2021, while the Trump administration has pushed for a new arms control pact that would also include China. Moscow has described that idea as unfeasible, pointing at Beijing's refusal to negotiate any deal that would reduce its much smaller nuclear arsenal.

In a statement Wednesday marking the 10th anniversary of signing the New START, the Russian Foreign Ministry hailed the treaty as an instrument that helps ensure predictability in the nuclear sphere and reaffirmed Moscow's offer to extend it without any preconditions.

[Turkey] Erdogan Reaches Out to Trump in Letter Accompanying Medical Aid (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 3:22 AM, Cagan Koc, 6400K, Neutral]

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continued his charm offensive on U.S. President Donald Trump, with a letter praising his coronavirus measures and calling for stronger collaboration between the NATO allies.

The letter accompanied Turkey's shipment of a military cargo plane carrying medical supplies to the U.S. to boost its fight against the pandemic, in a gesture of solidarity after years of fractious relations. The donation ordered by Erdogan included 500,000 surgical masks, 40,000 protective overalls, disinfectants, goggles and face shields.

"I am following with appreciation your determined struggle to control the pandemic in the U.S., and I am very pleased to observe that, thanks to your measures, America has taken the first steps towards normalization by achieving a downward trend in the number of new cases," Erdogan said in the letter, according to a statement by the presidency in Ankara.

Erdogan told Trump that Turkey will continue to be a "reliable and strong partner of the U.S." to meet basic needs during the outbreak and normalization process thereafter. He underlined the importance of collaboration between the two countries on measures to restore order, saying he looks forward "to exchanging ideas and suggestions on this issue

at the earliest convenience."

The U.S. and Turkey have been at odds over a series of flashpoints, most recently Turkey's purchase last year of a Russian missile-defense system that the U.S. says could help Moscow gather critical intelligence on NATO systems. Erdogan's personal relationship with Trump has remained publicly warm despite the disputes, even as Washington threatened Turkey with sanctions if it deployed the S-400 missile batteries.

Turkey has "slowed down" the planned April activation of the missiles, top defense industry official Ismail Demir told state-run TRT television on Tuesday.

Erdogan said he hopes the U.S. Congress and media also understand the strategic importance of the relationship between the two countries and "act in a way that our common fight against our common problems necessitates."

[Turkey] Turkey vows solidarity with U.S. in fighting virus outbreak (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:59 AM, Staff, 2194K, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has promised to stand in solidarity with the United States in its struggle against the coronavirus pandemic and as it recovers from the outbreak.

In a letter sent to President Donald Trump, Erdogan also said he was following "with appreciation" the American leader's efforts to control the outbreak.

The letter was sent Tuesday along with a plane load of personal protective equipment that Turkey donated to the U.S. It was made public on Wednesday.

Erdogan wrote: "I am very pleased to observe that, thanks to your measures, America has taken the first steps towards normalization by achieving a downward trend in the number of new cases."

"You can be sure, as a reliable and strong partner of the U.S., we will continue to demonstrate solidarity in every way possible," Erdogan wrote.

Turkey sent 500,000 surgical masks, 4,000 overalls, 2,000 liters (528 gallons) of disinfectant, 1,500 goggles, 400 N-95 masks and 500 face shields. Turkey has sent similar medical equipment aid to a total of 55 countries — including Britain, Italy and Spain.

Erdogan and Trump have maintained a close personal relationship despite a series of differences between Ankara and Washington, including policy on Syria and Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400 Russian missile defense system that the U.S. says poses a threat to its F-35 stealth fighter jets and to NATO.

The U.S. removed Turkey from the fighter jet program and has threatened sanctions if the Russian system is deployed.

[Turkey] Turkey donates protective gear to U.S., asks for improved solidarity in return (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 9:38 AM, Lauren Meier, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has issued a new letter to President Trump calling for increased solidarity between the two countries after years of a strained relationship.

Along with the letter, released Wednesday, Mr. Erdogan sent a host of medical supplies to the U.S. to aid its fight against the coronavirus outbreak including surgical masks, disinfectant, N-95 masks, and face shields.

The U.S. has been the hardest hit country by COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus, and has infected more than 1 million and killed over 58,000 across the country.

"I hope that this humble assistance will assist your fight against this pandemic and contribute to the speedy recuperation of your citizens who contracted this virus," Mr. Erdogan wrote.

"I hope that in the upcoming period, with the spirit of solidarity we have displayed during the pandemic, Congress and the U.S. media will better understand the strategic importance of our relations," he said.

U.S.-Turkey relations have been tense in recent years over disputes regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally's military involvement in Syria and its purchase of a Russian missile defense system, which prompted the Pentagon to halt Turkey's involvement in the F-35 program and threaten sanctions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took to Twitter to express gratitude for Turkey's donation.

"During times of crisis, @NATO Allies must stand together," he said.

"We thank Turkey for their generous donation of medical supplies and protective equipment to help us fight #COVID19 in our hardest hit areas. Americans are grateful for your friendship, partnership and support."

Turkey has reported 114,653 confirmed cases of COVID-19, marking the highest of any Middle Eastern country, 2,992 deaths and 38,809 recoveries, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker.

[China] Ortagus: Our countries have to solve this pandemic together (Yahoo News/FOX News Videos)

Yahoo News/FOX News Videos [4/29/2020 5:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus speaks out on the lack of transparency from China over the coronavirus outbreak. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Trump administration asks intelligence agencies to find out whether China, WHO hid info on coronavirus pandemic (NBC News)

NBC News [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, 7718K, Neutral]

The White House has ordered intelligence agencies to comb through communications intercepts, human source reporting, satellite imagery and other data to establish whether

China and the World Health Organization initially hid what they knew about the emerging coronavirus pandemic, current and former U.S. officials familiar with the matter told NBC News.

A specific "tasking" seeking information about the outbreak's early days was sent last week to the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which includes the National Center for Medical Intelligence, an official directly familiar with the matter said. The CIA has received similar instructions, according to current and former officials familiar with the matter.

President Donald Trump appeared to refer to the request at his news conference Monday. "We're doing very serious investigations," Trump said. "We are not happy with that whole situation, because we believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

As part of the tasking, intelligence agencies were asked to determine what the WHO knew about two research labs studying coronaviruses in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus was first observed. NBC News has previously reported that the spy agencies have been investigating the possibility that the virus escaped accidentally from one of the labs, although many experts believe that is unlikely.

The move coincides with a public effort by the White House, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump's political allies to focus attention on China's inability to contain the virus shortly after it emerged. As NBC News previously reported, U.S. intelligence officials have said China initially failed to disclose the seriousness of the outbreak, robbing the rest of the world of information that might have led to earlier containment efforts.

"As the president has said, the United States is thoroughly investigating this matter," White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said. "Understanding the origins of the virus is important to help the world respond to this pandemic but also to inform rapid-response efforts to future infectious disease outbreaks."

The CIA declined to comment. An official from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said, "We are not aware of any such tasking from the White House."

Trump has shifted from initially praising China's handling of the outbreak to sharply criticizing it as the threat the pandemic poses to the U.S. economy and his re-election prospects has crystallized. Blaming China for America's economic struggles has proven effective for Trump with his political base, and his allies believe it's a message that could resonate in November with voters in the Midwest.

"The president is now running against China as much as anyone," said a person close to the president.

The Trump administration has also accused the WHO of erring in January when it reported no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Trump, alleging that China exercised undue influence over the agency, has suspended U.S. funding of the WHO.

Initially, the WHO used conservative language. In a statement about the disease on Jan. 14 — regarding the first case outside China, in Thailand — the WHO said, "There is no clear

evidence of human-to-human transmission."

The agency soon stopped saying that, and by mid-January it was clear that the virus was spreading well beyond China.

Critics see the White House focus on China and the WHO as an effort to distract attention from the open question of what warnings Trump got in January and February from his own health and intelligence advisers during a time when he was downplaying the severity of the virus.

The Washington Post reported Monday that the intelligence reporting and analysis about the pandemic appeared in the president's daily intelligence brief more than a dozen times, although the newspaper did not specifically describe what information was passed along.

An administration official confirmed to NBC News that the President's Daily Brief, or PDB, included more than a dozen mentions in January and February of U.S. intelligence about the coronavirus in China, as well as Beijing's attempts to cover it up and suppress information about it.

The official played down the significance of the intelligence, saying there was not much more detail in the briefings than what was in the public domain. The official also said the briefings did not include any warning about how widespread and deadly the virus has now become around the globe.

An ODNI official told NBC News that "details in the Washington Post story are not true," but declined to say what specifically is disputed, citing the highly classified nature of the PDB.

Asked Tuesday to clarify what intelligence officials were telling him in January and February, the president said, "I would have to check."

"I want to look to the exact dates of warnings," he said.

NBC News has reported that U.S. intelligence agencies saw early warning signs of a health crisis in Wuhan as far back as November and that the National Center for Medical Intelligence predicted that the coronavirus would cause a global pandemic in February, well before the WHO declared one.

The House and Senate intelligence committees have requested access to all intelligence products produced about the pandemic and are closely examining what has already been turned over to them, officials from both committees have told NBC News.

The committees typically are not granted access to the PDB, the officials said. The congressionally sponsored commission that investigated the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, was allowed to review presidential briefs and determined that President George W. Bush was warned in the summer of 2001 that Osama bin Laden was "determined to strike" inside the United States.

[China] Senior Chinese official challenges Trump over coronavirus response, says U.S. wasted weeks (NBC News)

NBC News [4/29/2020 7:12 AM, Janis Mackey Frayer and Adela Suliman, 7718K, Negative] A senior Chinese government official challenged President Donald Trump's handling of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States, accusing him of wasting weeks after the threat posed by the virus first became apparent.

In a wide-ranging interview with NBC News conducted in Mandarin on Tuesday, the official, Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, also hit back at the politicization of the virus.

Le, a rising star within the country's political establishment, rejected claims that China had covered up the initial outbreak or that it should be held financially liable for COVID-19. Instead, he termed the virus a "natural disaster" and called for greater cooperation and an end to accusations.

"On Jan. 23 when Wuhan went under lockdown, the United States reported only one confirmed case, but on March 13 when President Trump announced a national emergency, the United States reported over 1,600 confirmed cases," Le said, referring to the city in China's Hubei province where the virus is believed to have emerged.

"In this interval of 50 days, what was the U.S. government doing? Where have those 50 days gone?" said Le, who was born on China's industrial east coast and began his diplomatic career in what was then the Soviet Union, and is fluent in Russian.

The White House, the Department of State and the National Security Council did not respond to requests for comment on the interview. On Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted that the Chinese Communist Party needed to be "transparent."

"The world seeks answers to COVID19 and its origins ... China has a responsibility to cooperate," he wrote, referring to the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Pompeo has previously stated that Beijing will "pay a price" for its actions, while often adding he didn't yet know what form that would take.

On Tuesday, the number of cases of the coronavirus in the U.S. passed 1 million, a milestone that Trump said was due to "much better" testing than other countries.

The U.S. has recorded more than 58,000 deaths so far, due to COVID-19, according to an NBC News tally.

China has been hounded by questions over missteps in its initial response to contain the virus. So far, more than 200,000 people globally have died from COVID-19, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Trump has heaped criticism on Beijing since the outbreak of the pandemic, at times questioning the accuracy of its official death toll and saying he was looking into speculation that the infection originated in a Wuhan laboratory — a possibility that Chinese officials have repeatedly rejected.

"Do you really believe those numbers in this vast country called China. ... Does anybody really believe that?" Trump said at a White House news briefing April 15. "Some countries are in big, big trouble and they're not reporting the facts — and that's up to them," he added.

Trump also shocked the international community when he pledged to stop funding the global public health body, the World Health Organization, accusing it of being too close to Beijing and mishandling the outbreak.

The White House has since ordered intelligence agencies to comb through communications intercepts and satellite imagery to establish whether China and the WHO initially hid what they knew about the emerging coronavirus pandemic, current and former U.S. officials familiar with the matter told NBC News this week.

As part of this, intelligence agencies were asked to determine what the WHO knew about two research labs studying coronaviruses in Hubei province. NBC News has previously reported that the spy agencies have been investigating the possibility that the virus escaped accidentally from one of the labs, although many experts believe that is unlikely.

After years of on-and-off trade talks, the coronavirus pandemic is the latest issue to create an impasse between the world's two largest economies.

When Chinese medical professionals first reported cases of the virus in Wuhan late in 2019, reports were suppressed. Some, including Dr. Li Wenliang — who later died from the virus — were reprimanded for spreading what officials claimed was false information when the medical staff warned of the danger posed by the newly discovered disease, causing an outcry on Chinese social media.

Le stood by the country's official data and said China's response had been "fast" compared to other countries.

"I want to say China has not covered anything up. We did not cause any delay," he said.

Trump and senior U.S. officials have previously emphasized the Chinese origins of the disease, infuriating Beijing by referring to it as the "Wuhan" or "China virus."

Le, 57, offered his "heartfelt sympathy" to Americans fighting the crisis. Widely considered a likely candidate to be China's next foreign minister, he lived in New York when he was deployed to the United Nations in the late 1990s.

He urged greater cooperation between the two countries, stating that "the true enemy of the United States is the COVID-19 virus," not China.

"I think it's really important for the U.S. government to find the right focus, the real enemy," said Le, a senior member of China's Communist Party who has been the second-ranking official at the Foreign Affairs Ministry under Foreign Minister Wang Yi since 2018.

Earlier this month, both the Republican and the Democratic parties released TV ad campaigns accusing the other of mishandling the Chinese political relationship.

Le said it was "short-sighted" and "irresponsible" to seek electoral gain as a result of the crisis. He added that the Chinese public was "angry" and "entitled to express their outrage" at the U.S. politicization of the pandemic.

"Unfortunately, some political figures are politicizing this COVID-19. They're using this virus to stigmatize China. This is not something we are willing to see," he said.

In Missouri last week, while anti-lockdown protesters demonstrated, state Attorney General Eric Schmitt filed a lawsuit against the Chinese government. The first of its kind to seek damages, the suit accused China of lying about the virus and causing financial damage to the state.

Le said any claims asking China to make reparations were "preposterous" and presented an "out-and-out political farce."

"There is no international law that supports blaming a country for simply being the first to report a disease," Le said.

But he said he wouldn't object to some scientific investigation that kept away from "conspiracy theories."

"We do not oppose normal communication and mutual learning between scientists," he said. "What we do oppose is arbitrary investigations based on the presumption of China's guilt. That is something we firmly oppose."

[North Korea] Satellite images of luxury boats further suggest North Korea's Kim at favoured villa: experts (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:02 AM, Josh Smith, 5304K, Neutral]

Satellite imagery showing recent movements of luxury boats often used by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his entourage near Wonsan provide further indications he has been at the coastal resort, according to experts who monitor the reclusive regime.

Speculation about Kim's health and location erupted after his unprecedented absence from April 15 celebrations to mark the birthday of his late grandfather and North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung.

On Tuesday, North Korea-monitoring website NK PRO reported commercial satellite imagery showed boats often used by Kim had made movements in patterns that suggested he or his entourage may be in the Wonsan area.

That followed a report last week by a U.S.-based North Korea monitoring project, 38 North, which reported satellite images showed what was believed to be Kim's personal train was parked at a station reserved for his use at the villa in Wonsan.

Officials in South Korea and the United States say it is plausible Kim may be staying there, possibly to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, and have expressed scepticism of media reports he had some kind of serious illness.

They caution, however, that Kim's health and location are closely guarded secrets and reliable information is difficult to obtain in North Korea.

The last time official media in North Korea reported on Kim's whereabouts was when he presided over a meeting on April 11, but there have been near-daily reports of him sending letters and diplomatic messages.

Kim's seaside compound in Wonsan, on the country's east coast, is dotted with guest villas and serviced by a private beach, basketball court, and private train station, according to experts and satellite imagery. An airstrip was bulldozed last year to build a horse riding track, while a boathouse nearby shelters Kim's Princess 95 luxury yacht, valued at around \$7 million in 2013.

"It's one of his favourite houses," said Michael Madden, a North Korea leadership expert at the U.S.-based Stimson Center, who has compared Kim's affinity for Wonsan to U.S. President Donald Trump's favoured resort, Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

Madden said Kim is believed to have about 13 significant compounds around the country, though he appears to only regularly use about half of them.

"All of them are set up to serve as the leader's headquarters, so they are all equipped for him to run the country," he said.

Wonsan is one of the larger and better appointed compounds, but it also has a useful location that allows Kim to easily travel to other areas along the coast, or return quickly to Pyongyang in his private train or along a special highway designated for use only by the Kim family or top officials, Madden said.

FAVOURED SPOT

Wonsan also holds symbolic power for the Kim dynasty: It was there Kim Il Sung, who helped found North Korea at the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, first landed with Soviet troops to take over the country.

Wonsan is believed by some experts to be Kim Jong Un's birthplace, partly because he spent his early years at the family's palace there, although official history has never confirmed where he was born.

The Japanese chef Kenji Fujimoto, who worked for the Kims and visited Wonsan, recounted in his memoirs how a young Kim Jong Un described rollerblading, playing basketball, riding jet skis and playing in the pool at the compound.

Later, photos showed Kim sipping drinks there with American basketball player Dennis Rodman when the star visited North Korea in 2013.

The Wonsan area has also become emblematic of Kim's strategy for survival based on a combination of economic development, tourism, and nuclear weapons. He is rebuilding the city of 360,000 people and wants to turn it into a billion-dollar tourist hotspot.

In recent months, the project has been repeatedly delayed, undermined in part by international sanctions imposed over the North's nuclear and missile programmes, which have restricted its ability to seek foreign investment.

Wonsan has also been the scene of some of Kim's renewed military drills and missile tests, which he resumed amid increasing frustration with a lack of progress in denuclearisation talks with the United States and South Korea.

[Afghanistan] Afghan officials: Suicide bomber kills 3 civilians in Kabul (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:58 AM, Rahim Faiez, 2194K, Negative]

A suicide bomber on Wednesday targeted a base belonging to Afghan special forces on the southern outskirts of the capital, Kabul, killing at least three civilians and wounding 15, officials said.

The government blamed the Taliban for the attack, which took place a day after the country's defense minister and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan visited the facility.

The bombing happened outside the base for army commandos as civilian contractors working in the facility waited outside to get into the base, said a military official, speaking on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to talk to the media about the attack.

Tareq Arian, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, said the site of the bombing was in the Chahar Asyab district and blamed the Taliban for the attack, calling it a crime against humanity.

"The target was likely the base itself, but the bomber failed to reach his target and instead killed innocent civilians," Arian said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, but both the Taliban and the Islamic State group are active in Kabul and its surroundings and have repeatedly struck military and civilian targets.

On Tuesday, the Afghan defense minister, Gen. Assadullah Khalid, and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, U.S. Gen. Scott Miller, visited the base, known as Army Commando Corps, praising achievements of the Afghan commandos and their dedication in defending the country.

Also Wednesday, a sticky bomb attached to vehicle detonated elsewhere in Kabul, wounding three civilians, according to Firdaus Faramarz, spokesman for the Kabul police chief. No one claimed responsibility for that attack.

The Taliban have continued to attack security outposts, even as the U.S. and NATO proceed with a full troop withdrawal that is set to be completed next year under a deal signed at the end of February between the U.S. peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban.

On Sunday, Khalilzad called on the country's feuding political leaders to set their differences aside to combat the coronavirus pandemic and advance the stalled peace agreement signed with the Taliban.

He said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah, who each declared himself the victor in September's election, should "put the interest of the country ahead of their own" during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began last week.

He urged the government and the Taliban to carry out a prisoner exchange that was part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. The agreement had called for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 government personnel held by the insurgents.

To date, Ghani has released 550 detainees based on age, vulnerability to the virus and time served behind bars. The Taliban have not said if those released are among the prisoners referred to in the agreement. For their part, the Taliban have freed 60 prisoners.

In a statement Wednesday, the Taliban expressed concern that coronavirus could spread unchecked in Afghan government prisons, and urged international right organizations to act swiftly to save lives.

"If the novel coronavirus were to enter these prisons, it could prove catastrophic," the statement said.

The insurgents also delivered a veiled threat, saying they would exact revenge "upon the cold-hearted enemy" if Taliban prisoners lose their lives to the virus.

Afghanistan has reported 1,939 cases and 58 deaths from the coronavirus.

[Afghanistan] Bombing near Afghan capital kills three amid unabated violence (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:38 AM, Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Abdul Matin Sahak, 5304K, Negative] A suicide bombing near Kabul, the Afghan capital, killed three people and wounded 15 on Wednesday, the interior ministry said, as violence in the war-torn nation threatens a fragile peace process.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the blast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, amid the coronavirus pandemic and United States-led efforts for peace talks between the Taliban militia and the Afghan government.

"A suicide bomber detonated his explosives among civilians," interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said in a statement, adding that the blast happened in the Char Asiab district of Kabul province, about 11 km (7 miles) from the capital.

Hopes for an end to Afghanistan's decades of war were raised in late February when the Taliban Islamist militants and the United States struck a deal for the withdrawal of U.S.-led foreign forces in exchange for Taliban security guarantees.

In the run-up to the pact, there was a one-week reduction in violence, but attacks and bombings have continued since, with the Taliban having rejected calls for a ceasefire.

The United Nations has expressed alarm at the number of civilians killed in March and the U.S. commander in Afghanistan this month travelled to Doha to meet Taliban leaders and warn them the violence must be reduced.

On Wednesday, another blast in Kabul wounded three civilians who were taken to hospital, police said.

Nine people were killed and seven hurt in a Taliban attack on security checkpoints controlled by pro-government militia in northern Semangan province on Tuesday, a provincial police spokesman said, with an unknown number of Taliban casualties.

The Taliban did not respond to a request for comment on the attack in Samangan and a spokesman said he was looking into the blast in Kabul.

Editorials and Op-eds

America First meets global pandemic, testing Trump worldview (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:20 PM, Michael Tackett and Jonathan Lemire, Neutral]

When terrorists struck the United States on Sept. 11, Nicholas Burns was the U.S. ambassador to NATO, and one memory still stands out: how swiftly America's allies invoked Article Five of the organization's charter, that an attack on one member was an attack on all.

It was a kinship among nations nurtured over decades and a muscular display of collective defense that has defined much of the post World War II era. It is also a worldview that Burns finds starkly at odds with President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy as NATO's members and other countries suffer from the deadly weight of the coronavirus pandemic.

America First has been a ready applause line for Trump, but now it is also a philosophy being put to a life-or-death test, with much of the world still looking to the U.S. for leadership and assistance.

Burns, a Harvard professor and a former top U.S. diplomat who served Republican and Democratic presidents, said it was "entirely reasonable and rational" to focus inward "in the first weeks of the crisis in March. The president's job is to protect the people of the United States ... Having said that, I think it is abundantly clear that we cannot succeed in fighting the pandemic and confront the global economic collapse if we are not cooperating globally."

"The America First attitude is a very fixed set of beliefs about the world and our role in it," said Burns, who is also an informal adviser to former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee. "He thinks that alliances and partnerships weaken us and slow us down. He's not an isolationist. He's a unilateralist. That has not worked well the last three years."

Trump's guiding foreign policy mixed with his "I alone can fix it" ethos has made him an unpredictable partner for America's allies, who continue to struggle with how to manage the president and fortify strategic ties with the United States.

During the pandemic, Trump has been accused by allies like Germany and Canada of disrupting shipments of medical supplies, saying that the U.S. needed them first. But he has also offered to provide ventilators to other nations, both among allies and foes.

"President Trump has done a masterful job in the face of an unprecedented crises – safeguarding the health and well-being of the American people by ensuring our citizens have what they need first – then providing assistance to allies through an historic coordination of international efforts," Hogan Gidley, the deputy White House press secretary, said in a statement.

For much of his presidency, though, Trump has been alliance averse. He has withdrawn

from the Iran nuclear deal and Paris climate treaty while threatening to do the same for NATO. And he has rattled some of the United States' longest allies with aggressive rhetoric on trade deals and military alliances alike.

He has favored authoritarian leaders like President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China and Kim Jong Un of North Korea over those like German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Now China has also moved to fill a gap in humanitarian aid in the form of supplies. Trump has become more bellicose toward China, saying that the country withheld critical information about the coronavirus outbreak and would pay an unspecified later price for it.

"This pandemic crisis shows the inherent limits to the 'America First' foreign policy," said Richard Haass, another top diplomat in both Bush administrations and president of the Council on Foreign Relations. "Sovereignty is not a guarantee of security. Borders aren't impermeable; oceans aren't moats. We were vulnerable to an infection that began in Wuhan, and it proves that globalization is a reality rather than a choice."

Had Trump truly implemented America First, he said, the nation would have been better prepared. "A true American First national security policy would have had in place more testing, ventilators, PPE. It would have been more self-reliant. This moment shows that America First is more of a slogan than a reality."

But Steve Bannon, a former senior adviser to Trump, said that America First does not mean America alone. "It means prioritizing national interest and that strong allies matters. You don't turn your back on them. America doesn't need to abandon a leadership position. It needs to be a global leader, the global leader. But you prioritize what you need."

Bannon said the crisis also underscored the lack of U.S. capacity to manufacture medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, businesses that have located primarily in China and India because of lower production costs. "This pandemic underscores that public health is a national security issue," he said, adding, "A new nationalism is going to be coming out of this: a stronger America, a more focused America."

The notion of America First flourished during World War I and was promoted by Republicans and Democrats alike until World War II. After World War II, when the U.S. emerged as a superpower, the country took on an expansionist view of how spreading American ideals and building alliances could ensure peace and the U.S. standing in the world.

The grandest show of influence was the Marshall Plan, when the U.S. spent about \$800 billion in today's dollars to rebuild Western Europe after World War II, an investment that built alliances that endure today, even though some of them have grown fragile in the Trump era.

"Broadly, the president has failed his Harry Truman moment," said Benn Steil, the author of the award-winning book "The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War." "He had the best opportunity he would ever have to show the world he could rally his nation and its allies around a pandemic response that would highlight the best features of democracy and capitalism – as the Marshall Plan did."

Instead, Steil said, he is "hearing shock and disappointment" from colleagues abroad. "They have never seen a United States so dysfunctional that it cannot even protect its own citizens, let alone mitigate suffering abroad and rally cooperation among allies."

On Coronavirus, National Security Threats, O'Brien Picks His Spots (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 8:00 AM, Michael C. Bender and Gordon Lubold, Neutral]
When President Trump was initially hesitant about curbing travel from China in January, his national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, described in stark terms the impending coronavirus threat.

"This will be the largest national security crisis of your presidency," Mr. O'Brien told the president, according to people familiar with the discussion.

Mr. Trump authorized the restrictions.

While Mr. O'Brien viewed the novel coronavirus as an imminent danger, he largely removed himself from the spotlight on the administration's response, instead picking moments to assert himself behind the scenes. He rarely attends coronavirus task force meetings, ceding those duties to his chief deputy, and has appeared just once, on March 19, at the president's evening news conferences on the topic.

After seven months on the job, Mr. O'Brien has settled into the role of facilitator. He is quicker than either of his predecessors, John Bolton or H.R. McMaster, to defer to the president's judgment.

Mr. O'Brien arrives at the office by 9 a.m. most mornings, often fielding phone calls from the president much earlier, and is comfortable in the Washington social scene. He travels with Mr. Trump to Mar-a-Lago, and sits at the middle of the table in the White House Situation Room. But he has told colleagues that he is more comfortable in the background, viewing himself as a "quiet professional," in the words of one associate, and sees himself as a senior aide, not a principal.

Publicly, the president has praised him for helping bring home some 75,000 Americans from foreign soil as coronavirus-related travel restrictions went into place. Mr. O'Brien, an attorney who has advised Republican presidential candidates including two of Mr. Trump's competitors in 2016, touts his decision to cut the size of the National Security Council to 110 from 180, describing the move as one aimed at deflating a bloated bureaucracy, according to aides. He has since restored about a dozen of those positions to help respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Privately, Mr. O'Brien advocated bringing Dr. Deborah Birx into the White House to help coordinate the administration's response to the virus. He unsuccessfully lobbied his counterpart in Europe to institute similar travel restrictions on China, according to people familiar with the discussions.

Mr. O'Brien played a key role in scotching the president's meeting in February with the Austrian chancellor after his team told him there was a case of coronavirus inside the country's foreign ministry, White House officials said. Austrians disputed the claim but

agreed to postpone the meeting, a senior Austrian official said.

In March, Mr. O'Brien signed off on a meeting with Brazilian leaders during the president's Florida vacation. Two days after those meetings, one of the South American officials who met with Mr. Trump tested positive for the disease.

Away from the cameras, the typically soft-spoken and measured Mr. O'Brien has flashed a temper. He slammed the table during one meeting in February, interrupting Vice President Mike Pence to make a point to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who was hesitant to take actions that could undermine the economy, according to a person familiar with the meeting.

As the pandemic unfolded earlier this year, Mr. O'Brien told senior White House officials to consider Matthew Pottinger, his chief deputy, as the voice of the National Security Council on coronavirus matters, aides said. The decision was viewed inside the NSC as a way of freeing Mr. O'Brien to deal with other national security issues, a spokesman said.

Mr. Pottinger, a former Wall Street Journal reporter and Marine, raised early concerns inside the White House about the virus. But an approach colleagues described as aggressive complicated the knotty internal politics at the White House as the administration was struggling to find its footing in dealing with the pandemic.

Some senior officials said they became concerned when Mr. Pottinger wore a mask to the White House complex while the administration was asking Americans to leave the supply of masks for medical professionals. Mick Mulvaney, who was acting chief of staff until March, criticized Mr. Pottinger's approach to senior staff, officials said.

At Mr. Pottinger's urging, the National Security Council, the White House's primary arm for coordinating the federal government's response to national security issues, had called the first administration-wide coronavirus meeting in the Situation Room on Jan. 27. But when the White House formally created its task force a few days later, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar was put in charge.

A month later, Mr. Azar was replaced by Vice President Pence. The NSC's role has diminished as the administration's focus shifted to disaster response.

Mr. O'Brien's low-key approach has distinguished him from his predecessors in the Trump administration.

Mr. Bolton's aggressive policy activism frustrated Mr. Trump, and he eventually resigned over the president's interest in meeting with leaders of Iran and the Taliban. Mr. McMaster, who was an active-duty Army lieutenant general when he served as national security adviser, had a professorial style that wore on Mr. Trump. Mike Flynn, who was a retired Army lieutenant general when he served, was removed after more than a month in the job for lying to Vice President Mike Pence.

Mr. O'Brien was viewed by some to be an unlikely pick to join Mr. Trump in the White House. He was an adviser to Mitt Romney, a fellow Mormon, for his 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. He backed Scott Walker's Republican bid in 2016. When the former Wisconsin governor dropped out, he advised Sen. Ted Cruz's campaign.

Mr. O'Brien was privately wary of Mr. Trump, according to friends and former colleagues, and publicly described Mr. Trump's view on the defense budget as "troubling" and his approach to national security giving anxiety to "peace through strength" Republicans.

He took a more optimistic view once Mr. Trump won the party's nomination, saying the real-estate magnate and reality TV star could grow into the job.

Mr. O'Brien first attracted Mr. Trump's attention as the administration's special envoy for hostage affairs at the State Department, said friends and associates. Under Mr. O'Brien, more than 40 Americans were released from various countries.

In the White House, Mr. O'Brien has focused the National Security Council more on China, officials said. He has written that the president's focus on competition with China has been the administration's most important foreign policy development.

While his two predecessors were known for their experience on Middle East policy, Mr. O'Brien, officials said, is more closely aligned with Peter Navarro, the president's trade adviser who wrote the book, "Death by China."

Messrs. Navarro and O'Brien struck up a correspondence when both were living in California, the former as a university professor and the latter as a law firm partner, after Mr. Navarro read an article and deemed Mr. O'Brien's views on China sufficiently tough.

"For the first time we have a national security adviser whose strategic views and hard-nosed analytics are in line with the president's," Mr. Navarro said in an interview.

Mr. O'Brien has internal critics who believe he isn't strong enough on other issues, such as the Middle East and Afghanistan. Many Pentagon leaders urge a robust American military presence to counter Iran, for example. Mr. O'Brien, believing the focus should be on countering China, has labored to advise the president on finding the right balance. But ultimately it is the president's decision, aides say.

"What he doesn't try to do is teach the president that his world view is wrong," said one U.S. official. "It's different from advising versus fundamentally trying to change his view."

We've Lost Time in the Race for a Covid-19 Cure (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:00 AM, Lionel Laurent, 6400K, Neutral]

It's been three months since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern on its way to becoming a full-blown pandemic.

Despite much hype around several existing drugs, we still haven't found a proven, evidence-based treatment for Covid-19. The stakes are clearly high, with a vaccine at least a year away, if at all, and countries around the world facing a potential second wave of infections as they start to lift draconian lockdown measures. A conclusive finding that one of the already-available medicines can reduce the viral load or severity of symptoms in infected patients would be a "game changer," as French state medical adviser Jean-Francois Delfraissy said on local radio on Monday.

For now, we're still waiting for convincing evidence of whether potentially promising drugs actually work. A European trial of four treatments, dubbed "Discovery," began in March; it was due to give early results in the first week of April. That date was pushed back to this week after a slow start getting off the ground. In that time, tens of thousands of people have died.

It's tempting to imagine the blame for lost time lies with bureaucratic red tape and squabbling scientists who prefer idle box-ticking to daring experiments with drugs on the pandemic's front lines. That's the narrative favored by supporters of Didier Raoult, the flamboyant French doctor who first flagged anti-malaria drug chloroquine as a promising treatment in February. While the scientific establishment waits for conclusive trial results, self-declared "maverick" Raoult has been using hydroxychloroquine (a less toxic derivative of chloroquine) on patients. U.S. President Donald Trump's endorsement of the drug, and his pressure on regulators to fast track it, have made it a household name.

But, if anything, it's the mavericks not the bureaucrats who have slowed things down.

Recent trials of hydroxychloroquine, for example, have been criticized for cutting a lot of corners without showing clinically significant effects. Raoult's test in Marseilles used a small sample size of 42 patients, their enrollment wasn't randomized and one patient who died was excluded from the results. Subsequent trials elsewhere were also found to be of limited quality. A review by Birmingham University's Robin Ferner and Oxford University's Jeffrey Aronson found that most hadn't been blinded, meaning those involved knew which treatment was being administered to whom. Other drawbacks included inconsistent treatment procedures, such as the addition of the antibiotic azithromycin, which when combined with hydroxychloroquine can cause dangerous heart problems. Of the 142 hydroxychloroquine trials registered as of April 14, only about 35% were designed to be blinded, the review found.

Sacrificing standards for speed hasn't just resulted in a lack of evidence; it has hampered and delayed follow-up studies. When the "Discovery" mega-study began enrolling patients in March, it immediately hit a big hurdle — patients swayed by headlines only wanted to be treated with hydroxychloroquine. In the U.S., one patient who was offered the chance to trial Gilead Sciences Inc.'s remdesivir asked for "Trump's drug" instead. The hype around potential treatments has also spurred countries to hoard drugs, hurting their availability.

Doctors are understandably in an ethical bind in this pandemic. The urge to "try everything" is strong when patients and their families are visibly suffering. Yet speed has to be balanced against other trade-offs like patient safety, too. And the grim truth is that a double-blind, randomized trial of several drugs could have been conducted by now. This week, the Paris region's hospital association announced that a randomized 129-patient trial of tocilizumab (marketed by Roche Holding AG as Actemra) launched just a month ago has already shown "significant" improvement for Covid-19 sufferers — though the results aren't yet peer reviewed.

There are other ways to accelerate research in a pandemic. One option is the use of adaptive platform trials, in which several treatments are monitored at the same time so that resources can be shifted toward those that are the most effective, as my colleague Max Nisen has written. Artificial intelligence can also help. The University of Pittsburgh is using machine learning to power its own adaptive trial of potential Covid-19 treatments across 40

hospitals. Even before testing, researchers are being called upon to use computational methods to screen existing treatments quickly, as in one initiative by a European moon-shot foundation called JEDI.

And if there is conclusive evidence that a cheap generic drug like hydroxychloroquine works, then the pharmaceutical supply chain may find new ways to meet a rise in demand. French firm Rondol Industrie is testing the ability of drug-blending machines to make more efficient doses of hydroxychloroquine that would improve absorption into the human body. The benefits of a lower dose for the same treatment result could include fewer side effects and lower production costs. It would also make it possible to treat more patients with the same quantity of active pharmaceutical ingredient.

Without that evidence, though, we will only be wasting time. Clinical trials are logistically and financially costly, but they're invaluable. A new pledge by world leaders such as France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Angela Merkel to raise \$8 billion for the development and accessibility of possible treatments for Covid-19 will help. This is a race without an obvious shortcut.

Antibody tests show we're nowhere near herd immunity (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 10:26 AM, Natalie E. Dean and Caitlin Rivers, Neutral]

A wave of preliminary results of antibody tests is adding to our understanding of how the novel coronavirus is moving through the American population. But there are reasons to be cautious about interpreting the findings.

In contrast with tests for active infection, these tests detect antibodies the body creates after someone has been infected with the virus. So they should identify people who got sick and recovered from the disease covid-19, or who carried the virus but had no symptoms.

In recent weeks, in separate studies, researchers have announced that roughly 2.5 to 4 percent of residents in Santa Clara County, Calif.; 3 to 6 percent of people in Los Angeles County; 6 percent in Miami-Dade County; and 14 percent across New York state have been infected at some point by the coronavirus. That last study estimated that as many as 1 in 5 residents of New York City had been infected.

Unfortunately, these new antibody tests can have high error rates, and in the studies involving Los Angeles County, Miami-Dade County and New York, the full scientific reports are not yet available for scientists to review. The Santa Clara County study also came under criticism from other scholars for its methodology and statistical analysis.

What can we learn from these studies? First, they reveal that even in the hardest-hit communities, most people are still at risk of being infected by the virus. We are a long, long way from developing "herd immunity" — meaning that so many are immune that there are not enough susceptible people left for the virus to circulate. This would require at least 60 percent of the population to be infected. With low levels of immunity in the population, if we lift restrictions on movement and "reopen" the economy without proper precautions, the coronavirus outbreak could again take off.

Even more worrisome are some of the other conclusions that people are drawing from the results. Last month, two Stanford Medicine professors who contributed to the Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties studies, Eran Bendavid and Jay Bhattacharya, wrote an opinion

article in the Wall Street Journal titled "Is the Coronavirus as Deadly as They Say?" They argued that previous overestimates of the death rate for coronavirus infection — now "corrected" by the antibody studies — meant that massive shutdowns and stay-in place orders were likely excessive.

It was already widely known, however, that we often only identify the most severe covid-19 cases, through testing swab samples. Early (rough) estimates are that a quarter or even as many as half of infections have no symptoms at all; those would be totally missed as well. The current official tally in Santa Clara County is 100 deaths and 2,084 confirmed cases, which would crudely suggest that 4.7 percent of cases are fatal. Naturally, antibody tests can help us pin down the true death rate following infection by allowing us to include everyone, even infections with no symptoms, in the denominator. Based on the Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties studies' results, only 0.1 to 0.2 percent of infections are fatal.

It's unclear that this estimate will hold up to further scrutiny. Notably, if the fatality rate were truly only 0.1 percent, that implies that all 8 million people in New York City have already been infected — which seems unlikely. That supposition is also contradicted by the New York antibody test results, which suggest that fatality rates there are closer to 0.5 or 1 percent. But even if the California numbers are accurate, they in no way warrant a conclusion that shutdowns were an overreaction.

Anti-vaxxers will fight the eventual coronavirus vaccine. Here's how to stop them.

If we know anything about this virus, it is that it spreads easily. Unlike influenza, there is virtually no population-level immunity, meaning many more people can be infected, millions in the United States alone. We also know that it overwhelms health-care systems. In New York City, there have been more than 40,000 hospitalizations and nearly 17,000 deaths — and that follows the Italian catastrophe, in which some hospitals, including in the Lombardy region, were reportedly forced to triage care, choosing who would receive scarce ventilators.

With the potential for huge numbers of people to be infected, taking comfort in a lower death rate would be the wrong way to think about the results — and easing up efforts to blunt this deadly public health threat would be a serious mistake. We know firsthand that covid-19 can quickly spiral out of control in cities and entire regions of countries, with devastating consequences. Preventing the disasters we've seen in Wuhan, New York City and Lombardy must remain our first priority. Antibody studies alone cannot tell us if we are ready to reopen the economy. That will instead depend on our preparedness to test, trace and isolate infected people so that we don't end up back where we started.

The next pandemic could be even worse (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 6:31 AM, Jamie Metz, Andrew Hessel and Hansa Bhargava, 12317K, Neutral]

This is war.

A world war.

Not against a country or regime, but a virus — an enemy invader that is as alien to most people as it is invisible, and completely unaffected by humanity's borders, politics or morality.

After dangerously slow starts first in China, Europe and the United States, the world is now mobilizing to face the Covid-19 pandemic in an all-hands-on-deck moment. This counterattack is already showing preliminary results, but much of our effort will be for naught if we fully demobilize once this battle is won.

There's a reason why militaries don't demobilize after each war. To face ongoing threats, our militaries maintain ongoing capabilities. Even though we've faced terrible pandemics before, we're now suffering unnecessarily because we've not applied their lessons to our ongoing war with deadly pathogens.

If any military had failed as spectacularly as the world's governments have in preparing for and preventing this crisis, their leaders would have been summarily fired. The commanders who replaced them would then be judged by their ability to do everything possible to prevent the next crisis.

As the levers of state power and public health around the world now shift into gear, we can expect better results over the coming months, potentially including ongoing development of one or more Covid-19 vaccines and therapeutic strategies for critical care.

But even once we have a vaccine, we can't allow a full demobilization because as bad as this virus is, future pandemics could be even worse.

The novel coronavirus hits the rare sweet spot for infectious diseases. It causes illness but many people have mild symptoms or are asymptomatic, facilitating spread. It wasn't so deadly that it immobilized its new hosts immediately or, as would be the case with Ebola, provoked an immediate quarantine of affected areas. It succeeded in part because the true threat wasn't immediately recognized.

The world of biology is dynamic by definition, so there has always been the chance that deadly viruses like this would jump from animals to humans. It's always been a question of when, not if. Through our destruction of natural habitats, population growth, international travel, industrial scale animal husbandry and other actions, however, our species has massively exacerbated this threat.

But naturally occurring viruses might pale in comparison to the viruses that could potentially be created by the powerful new tools of synthetic biology – agents precision-engineered to cause harm.

A recent piece in the journal Nature Medicine assessing the likely origins of the novel coronavirus concluded that, whatever the origins of the outbreak itself, SARS-CoV-2 is most likely naturally occurring because of the relatively inefficient way it hijacks human cells. In other words, if a malicious genetic engineer was intentionally manipulating a virus to be deadly and contagious, they could potentially do a much better job.

In 2017, University of Alberta in Canada synthesized an extinct horsepox virus, a cousin of smallpox, for around \$100,000.

This science has advanced so rapidly and the cost has come down so precipitously that the same feat could today be achieved for just a few thousand dollars. Unlike nuclear weapons,

the development of which need the type of massive infrastructure usually reserved for nation states, developing a synthetic pathogen is now within the capacity of many groups or even individuals distributed across the globe. The next pandemic may not be an accident of nature.

But if we think about our struggle against any and all infectious agents as a battlefield, which we should, then we should learn from our most effective militaries about how best to prepare for what may be heading our way.

Here's the plan:

1. **Maintain essential capabilities:** The soldiers in our fight against deadly pathogens are our public health officials, doctors, government planners and data modelers. To build the standing capabilities we'll need for this fight, we must invest the necessary time and money to prepare for rare but inevitable events. With disease outbreaks, you pay a bit now for readiness or you pay a lot later for response, only with more human suffering added to the price tag. Once we have these personnel in place, we must plan and train like our lives depend on it. They do.

2. **Develop global and local surveillance networks:** Militaries invest massive resources in monitoring their enemy's every action through satellite networks, spies and data analytics. To be ready for the next pandemic, we must develop new sensor systems that can identify new infectious agents in real time and use advanced data analytics to identify worrisome patterns of diseases well before a major outbreak emerges.

3. **Build and maintain a network of alliances:** Few militaries can succeed alone, and no country can protect itself from a deadly pathogen on its own. Pandemic preparedness must become a core and ongoing component of international cooperation. The World Health Organization can play the central role in this process, but only if it has the resources, staff and mandate to succeed. We must make that happen.

4. **Build emergency response capacity:** Militaries have expeditionary forces to take the battle to the enemy wherever a threat originates. We need the same capabilities for pandemics. The moment a tripwire is triggered indicating a potential pathogenic outbreak, trained emergency response teams, both national and international, must be ready to mobilize and equipped with tools and authority to respond.

5. **Forward-deployed personnel and weaponry:** Transporting personnel and equipment to faraway locations is expensive and slow, which is why leading militaries deploy people and equipment near the theaters where they will most likely be needed. The organization of the US Strategic National Stockpile may need a review to put more medical equipment closer to the front lines in major urban centers. In recent years, the US government pulled back some of the personnel on the ground in foreign countries working in disease prevention. As we are now seeing, if we don't fight the skirmish of a pathogenic agent at its source, we can end up fighting a major war everywhere else.

6. **Invest in the defensive weapons of the future:** Militaries are always building the next generation of weapons and working to counter the enemy's latest innovations. We now need to step up our efforts to create vaccine platforms that can rapidly counter novel threats as well as universal vaccines designed to target entire classes of viruses. Here, the growing

power of synthetic biology to quickly design, build and deploy countermeasures in near-real time can be a powerful force for good.

There is little doubt that we were not ready for the terrible and largely preventable crisis we now face. Our poorly planned, underresourced and haphazard global response has led to over 200,000 deaths, massively disrupted our lives and caused trillions of dollars in economic fallout.

Shame on us if we are caught unprepared the next time.

A Scramble for Virus Apps That Do No Harm (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 10:32 AM, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Natasha Singer and Aaron Krolak, 40577K, Neutral]

Faced with a growing coronavirus threat, the governor of North Dakota last month posed a question to a friend from his private-sector days. The friend, a software engineer, had once created a location-tracking app for football fans at North Dakota State University who liked to meet up when traveling to big games.

"Can you track people for Covid?" asked the governor, Douglas Burgum. Within days, the engineer, Tim Brookins, had reworked the football app to do just that, he recalled in an interview. The app is now being used in North and South Dakota as part of statewide efforts to ramp up contact tracing for people infected with the coronavirus.

The new app is part of a worldwide scramble to deploy smartphone tools to rein in the pandemic. If the virus's path can be tracked, even predicted, the hope is that more people will be able to resume at least part of their normal routines — and fewer will need to confine themselves at home.

At their core, the apps are intended to gather information about the movements of people who have tested positive for the virus, alert others who might have crossed their paths, and in some cases make sure infected people stay quarantined. They use smartphone technologies, such as GPS and Bluetooth, to collect and share the data, which make them agile and easy to use but also provide an enticing target for hackers or government surveillance.

Several dozen countries, states, universities and companies are racing to develop and begin using the digital tools, which public health experts said could improve person-to-person contact tracing but are not a panacea. The mad dash has left some places with a confusing mishmash of options, and has some computer security researchers worried about vulnerabilities in hastily written software.

There is no evidence that the apps will be effective without widespread testing for the virus and without enormous numbers of voluntary participants, which could be hampered by years of privacy scandals involving both governments and companies.

Aware of the problems, Apple and Google announced this month they were creating software that public health authorities could use to make apps. The tool will allow different apps to work together and has the support of many privacy experts. But several technology law scholars expressed concern that even well-intentioned digital surveillance tools could become problematic and are difficult to withdraw.

"We've already learned what moving fast and breaking things can do to society," said Woodrow Hartzog, a professor of law and computer science at Northeastern University, referring to the negative consequences of a tech mind-set that values speed and disruption above all else.

Only 25,000 people in North Dakota, about 3 percent of the population, have downloaded the state's app, which before last week was available only for iPhones. Last month, Singapore introduced a voluntary contact-tracing app, but only about 1.1 million people — 20 percent of the population — have downloaded it. Norway's app has caught on more quickly, with nearly 30 percent of residents signing up for it since it was released about a week and a half ago.

Still, a recent study by epidemiologists at Oxford University estimated that 60 percent of the population in a given area would need to use an automated app that traces contacts and notifies users of exposure, combined with other tactics such as broader testing and the quarantining of the most vulnerable people, for the app to contain the virus.

While some compliance is better than none, the researchers found, low rates of adoption in many areas suggest voluntary programs may not provide a breakthrough.

"With 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent uptake of the app, you get a progressive reduction in the size of the epidemic," said Christophe Fraser, an expert in infectious disease dynamics and control at the Big Data Institute at Oxford, who has advised Britain's National Health Service on an app it is developing.

Despite the uncertainty, some health experts say the virus spreads so quickly and stealthily that there is an urgent need for new mechanisms to combat it. Even with partial participation, for example, the apps can allow traditional contact tracing to focus on people without phones, who are often poorer, older and more vulnerable. Only about half of Americans age 65 or over have a smartphone.

"Automated contact tracing is a big idea, an ambitious idea," said Dr. Louise Ivers, the executive director of the Center for Global Health at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, who has been working with a team at M.I.T. to develop contact-tracing technology.

"But it's important to be ambitious right now."

On the Trail of the Pandemic

The proliferation of coronavirus apps has trailed the spread of the pandemic around the globe. Often, the differences among apps are technical ones but can create vast differences in their security, privacy and effectiveness.

In February, China began requiring residents in more than 200 cities to download a health code app that automatically dictates whether people must quarantine. Location data is sent to the government from the phones, but it is unclear how the quarantine decisions are made.

By contrast, Singapore's app uses Bluetooth rather than location data to identify nearby phones, and the information is stored on the phones unless a person tests positive for the virus and agrees to share the data with contact tracers, who can then notify others who may

have been exposed.

In Norway, the app sends data from the phone's GPS and Bluetooth to central servers that can be accessed by government health authorities. A new law mandates that the information be used only for the pandemic, and that it be deleted every 30 days.

Tora Sanden Dorskeland, a graduate student in Norway, said she had downloaded the app despite her concerns about governments and corporations that collect data on people.

"I'm not an expert in this disease or technology or law, but I trust people who are, and I believe the government is relying on them when it tells us to make this choice," she said. "There are pros and cons, but we need to do something together."

North Dakota's app, Care19, uses Wi-Fi, cell towers and GPS to gauge people's locations, usually within about 175 feet, making it much less accurate than Bluetooth-based apps. This means it is now useful only to help patients tell contact tracers where they were while they were contagious.

An analysis by The New York Times confirmed that the app sends people's location data to a private server hosted on Microsoft's cloud platform. Mr. Brookins, the developer, said only he and one other person have access to the server, and health officials can get the data only of people who test positive for the coronavirus and then agree to share it.

India, which, like the United States, is relying on a combination of state and federal efforts to tackle the pandemic, is a case study in the rush for new technologies.

A quarantine app in the Indian state of Maharashtra, which includes the country's most populous city, Mumbai, uses GPS data collected from people's smartphones to create a virtual perimeter around their homes. If users move beyond their permitted radius, the app notifies local authorities.

Another app, called Quarantine Watch, in the state of Karnataka, also records the locations of certain people under quarantine and requires them to take selfies to prove they are staying home.

In an effort to coordinate public health surveillance, the central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced its own contact-tracing app in early April. The app, called Aarogya Setu — or health care bridge — uses smartphone location data and Bluetooth to log people's travel routes and the other phones they encounter. With urging from Mr. Modi, more than 77 million people, about 5.6 percent of the population, have downloaded it so far. Local authorities are now promoting the Modi government's app along with their own.

An expert advising the Modi government on its app said it had already helped public health monitors pinpoint hot spots for the virus and speed their door-to-door visits to certain neighborhoods to alert residents, many of whom did not own smartphones.

But civil liberties groups have warned that the rush to adopt virus-tracking technologies may entrench new forms of government surveillance and social control even if the apps do not prove effective in fighting the coronavirus.

"They just pilot it out, see how it works and, as the debate is taking place, they scale the project — and once it's scaled, then it becomes a lot harder to roll back," said Sidharth Deb, the policy and parliamentary counsel for the Internet Freedom Foundation, a digital rights group in New Delhi.

An analysis by The Times found that the Quarantine Watch app, which is available on Google Android, lacked common security measures, and that the Android version of the Aarogya Setu app leaked a user's latitude and longitude to a YouTube server.

Google, which owns YouTube, said that the Aarogya Setu app appeared to have sent the location data inadvertently and that YouTube would delete it. The app developers said on Sunday they had fixed the problem. An official in Karnataka said that the app used essential security measures and that the issues identified by The Times had been resolved.

Preventing Surveillance

The wide range of efforts, and their varying quality, have led to calls for industry standards related to privacy and other matters.

Whether to send data to central health authorities is the biggest sticking point.

Technologists who focus on privacy say the best way to prevent governments from using data to surveil people is to never let them have it in the first place.

"You can look at what happened after 9/11," said James Larus, the dean of the School of Computer and Communications Science at EPFL, a science-focused university in Switzerland. "There were all these consequences for privacy made possible by a crisis."

But centralized collection of the data may be essential for effective contact tracing, others argue.

"Having location history helps you better identify where infections might be, helps you identify the hot spots," said Lalitesh Katragadda, the founder of Indihood, a group developing technologies for underserved populations, and an adviser on the Indian government's app.

Some officials in Europe have said they also want information about nearby phones to be shared with public health officers, so they can then contact those people personally.

The Apple and Google program, which draws on ideas from Singapore and from academics, aims to answer the question in favor of privacy experts. The app software will keep track of nearby phones using secret codes, but the data will stay on users' phones. When people test positive for the coronavirus, they can allow their own codes to be put on a list. The phones of all other users will regularly check that list and provide an alert if there is a risk of infection.

So far, the companies have refused to change their system to allow governments to collect data about people's contacts, and it is unclear whether the gathering of more general location data will be possible. On Friday, the companies changed the name of their system — to "exposure notification" from "contact tracing" — to underline its focus on directly alerting people.

Another point of contention surrounds how virus symptoms are reported. Should people voluntarily self-report, or should health workers do so after confirming a diagnosis?

And some significant technological questions need to be worked out, including making sure that the Bluetooth detection accounts for when people are separated by walls and that the apps do not drain batteries or interfere with headphones. Engineers working on programs at M.I.T. and Stanford said they thought the problems were surmountable.

A key to making the apps successful, proponents said, is persuading people that the apps will help keep them safe and allow them to emerge from lockdowns.

"When you hear people saying there will never be takeup of the app," said Dr. Fraser, the Oxford epidemiologist, "they are talking like we are not in the world we are currently in."

Coronavirus Complicates the Expat Adventure (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 9:17 AM, Kathryn Dill, Neutral]

Abe Chuang, an American working in Japan, is riding out the coronavirus pandemic far from his native Los Angeles with no regrets about his expatriate experience.

"The U.S. is always going to be home, but I honestly could not have picked a better place to be locked down," said Mr. Chuang, who likens the atmosphere these days near his central Tokyo apartment to a quiet Sunday.

For generations, adventurous Americans have moved internationally to see the world, polish language skills, find or follow romance and chase career opportunities. According to estimates by the U.S. State Department, roughly 9 million Americans currently live overseas. For some expatriates, the pandemic has emphasized the miles between their address and wherever they call home, particularly as restrictions on nonessential travel have tightened around the world.

Even among Americans with established lives abroad, the crisis has emphasized the distance between family members. Beth Darvell has lived in Hong Kong since she was 19, when her family relocated there from Jacksonville, Fla. She was charmed by the city, which she said is both lively and relaxed.

Her parents have since moved to Honolulu, but Ms. Darvell, now 29, said Asia feels like home. Before the pandemic, she and her husband, a British expat, had been pondering a move to the U.S. to be closer to her parents but shelved the idea once travel was restricted.

"It's changed a lot of my perspective on whether I want to be this far away from people that I love," she said, adding they are now talking about whether to relocate closer to one set of their parents once the crisis is over.

The pandemic is unlikely to prompt many expats to move back to the U.S., but it may change the way those planning moves evaluate potential destinations, said Betsy Burlingame, founder of Expat Exchange, a social network for people moving and living abroad.

"They may look at health care in the countries that they are thinking of moving to a little

more, especially younger people who often go abroad and don't really think that much about the health-care systems in the countries they'll be moving to," she said.

Mr. Chuang, who moved to Tokyo in 2019 following nearly five years in New York City, has government-provided health insurance in Japan. As the pandemic intensified, his mother called and asked if he wanted to come home, but he feared putting his elderly grandmother, who lives in the same house, at risk if he returned to California. Mr. Chuang, a 38-year-old copywriter from Los Angeles, opted to stay in Japan, where he works at an advertising agency.

"My mom and I, after we talked it through, she said, 'You know what? Stay there. It would probably be worse if you came home,'" Mr. Chuang said.

A number of expatriates expressed concern for their American families and friends and said they feel safer abroad, citing swift government responses to the crisis, community-minded cultures and subsidized or free health insurance.

Heather Stone, who grew up in New Jersey, lives with her two children in Tel Aviv. Ms. Stone, 56, has lived in Israel since 1990, and said that over the past 30 years her family in the U.S. has often worried about her safety. Now she is the one who fears for them.

"I think it's the first time that I've really felt that the country that I'm living in has been better prepared for a crisis," she said, "and that the people that I'm living among are better prepared for a crisis than the people that I grew up with."

Jennifer Ortiz also worries about family back in the U.S. Ms. Ortiz, 28, lives in Lisbon with her husband, who is Portuguese. As coronavirus swept Europe and intensified in Santa Barbara, Calif., where her parents live, she spent a lot of time on the phone trying to persuade them to stop going to the gym and instead shelter in place. She considered joining them, concerned by the prospect of one parent getting sick and the other having to carry that burden alone. So far, she has stayed put and checks on them by phone.

Returning home to Sarasota, Fla., wasn't an option for Grant Golub, a first-year student working on his doctorate at the London School of Economics. His father is a general surgeon on the front lines of the coronavirus fight, and he didn't want to risk getting his dad sick, or vice versa. He also said he wouldn't have been productive in the U.S.—at least not without lugging a stack of heavy books he had checked out from British libraries for his examination of American foreign policy during World War II.

Mr. Golub, 24, said his British acquaintances were slower than others to take the threat seriously. "There is a cultural norm in Britain to not try to fret about things," he said, "to not panic when it's not normal."

Being far from home during a lockdown can cause its own stresses, as some expatriates are discovering. Over the past two months, social interactions around the world largely have moved online, which can be tough on those in unfamiliar places. Caroline Kosse and James Schumacher, both 31, had been living in Amsterdam for 12 months when the coronavirus struck.

"They say you don't really know a place until a year," said Mr. Schumacher, a freelance art

director. "We hit our year and got locked inside."

The couple, who are both from Louisville, Ky., had to cancel a long-planned summer trip to see relatives, attend weddings and meet their newborn niece. They have a standing Friday night videoconference call with other Americans living in Amsterdam, but face-to-face meetings with local friends aren't easy, they said. A socially distanced bike ride with another couple was lovely, but difficult.

"We didn't get off our bikes," Mr. Schumacher said. "Then we stood on a canal 10 feet away from each other."

Merkel's revived hold on power forces Trump to work with a leader he dislikes to confront China (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Joel Gehrke, 727K, Neutral]

President Trump will unexpectedly be forced to work with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with whom he has been at loggerheads in the past, to confront poised threats from China amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump has flogged Merkel's policies throughout his campaign and presidency. Meantime, Merkel had been in a weakened state, expected to leave office next year. Yet the woman deemed the most powerful leader in Europe, prior to the backlash against her embrace of Syrian refugees in 2015, has recovered some of her old strength due to German approval of her response to the pandemic.

"She's gotten a second lease on life," the German Marshall Fund's Sudha David-Wilp, a Berlin-based expert in transatlantic foreign policy issues, told the Washington Examiner. "She was basically considered a lame duck a couple months ago."

In short, the shock of the coronavirus pandemic might make Trump and Merkel into a geopolitical odd couple over the next year, if not longer.

Merkel's popularity has surged at a delicate time in the domestic German political scene. Her chosen successor, Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, was forced in February to abandon her hope to take over as chancellor after failing to consolidate control of their Christian Democrat Union party.

"If CDU remains very strong, and her personal leadership, it will raise questions of whether she would possibly seek a fifth term because of the extraordinary nature of the crisis," Center for Strategic and International Studies analyst Heather Conley, who directs the Europe program, told the Washington Examiner.

Both Conley and David-Wilp agree that it is unlikely for Merkel to extend her political career; she has a reputation for refusing to make such dramatic shifts after making a major decision. Still, it's undeniable that she lacks an heir at a time when "the crisis is fueling Germans' comfort level with the stability that Angela Merkel has provided for the last 15 years," as Conley put it.

Nevertheless, the German assessment of China's ambitions has moved toward Trump's, offering him an opportunity if the rancor can be held in check.

"The German position on China, as well as the European position, has been changing and leaning towards the direction of the U.S.," said Conley. "So, the U.S. has an opportunity, with skillful leadership, to help move that relationship where we want it to be and have a much more allied, joined approach towards China."

"Merkel is going to have to get tougher now on China, and there will be greater scope for U.S.-German cooperation in confronting Beijing over the course of the next year," the Heritage Foundation's Nile Gardiner told the Washington Examiner. "The damage that has been inflicted by the pandemic is being heavily blamed, in Europe, on China — as it is in the United States. And Merkel will have to reflect that in her administration's policies."

Merkel famously had a close bond with then-President Barack Obama, in part due to their agreement on the refugee policies that Trump denounced during his rise to the White House. Trump, by contrast, has treated Germany as a diplomatic foil since taking office. Merkel has exchanged compliments with Trump in public, but she hasn't succeeded in hiding that she finds it "sobering and a bit depressing" to watch him clash with other allies — a view that German citizens share, according to public polling.

"The general mood in Germany regarding this president in the United States is really very bad," the European official noted. "I hope that this style of Merkel will help to keep this relationship from falling down further, but it's very difficult to say how it will evolve, actually."

Their own domestic politics makes it harder for German officials to partner with the Trump administration, but the emerging anger at China could create more space for such traditional cooperation.

"The tide was turning against China already, and I think that Merkel will adopt a harder and harsher line towards Beijing," Gardiner said. "It's important because Germany often sets the lead in the European Union."

Oil's Collapse Is a Geopolitical Reset In Disguise (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Meghan L. O'Sullivan, 6400K, Neutral]

The world is on the cusp of a geopolitical reset. The global pandemic could well undermine international institutions, reinforce nationalism and spur de-globalization. But far-sighted leadership could also rekindle cooperation, glimmers of which appeared in the G-20's offer of debt relief for some of the world's poorest countries, a joint plea from more than 200 former national leaders for a more coordinated pandemic response and an unprecedented multinational pact to arrest the crash in oil markets.

The remarkable effort to address the turmoil in the oil markets will be critical to oil's eventual balance — although the past two weeks have shown that its promised production cuts were too slow and insufficient in the face of oil demand's plunge. The challenges and opportunities that the collapse in the oil market is pushing to the fore are perhaps just the first taste of Covid-19 induced geopolitical crises that world leaders and policy makers will need to grapple with in the coming months and years.

As history has shown, a big change in energy markets often precipitates a big change in geopolitics. For instance, the shift from coal to oil catapulted Middle Eastern countries to strategic significance. And the recent technology-driven boom in shale oil elevated the United States to net oil exporter status, changing its outlook on the importance of oil in

global affairs. We now face a disruption of such proportions that it, too, will reorder some power relationships.

Right now, the focus in Washington is on how to save the U.S. oil industry, much of which is under enormous pressure given the drop in prices. While this is understandable and necessary, Washington needs to make room on its list of priorities for a number of strategic shifts that the crisis has created. For starters, policy makers should consider four challenges and opportunities that are already manifest.

Prepare for more fragile, or even failed, states and the risks that can accompany them.

For dozens of oil producers, the plunge in oil prices is devastating. No major oil producer can balance its budget at prices below \$40; according to the International Monetary Fund, with the exception of Qatar, every country in the Middle East requires at least \$60, with Algeria at \$157 and Iran at a whopping \$390. The average Brent price of oil over the past month has been a hair above \$20.

Of course, fiscal break-even prices are only one factor when gauging which oil producers are the most vulnerable to deep economic dislocation and its accompanying social and political turmoil. Those with (comparatively) more diversified economies — such as the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and Russia — are obviously better off. Countries with fixed exchange rates — like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia — are at a particular disadvantage, as they need to use their precious foreign exchange reserves to prop up their currencies. Some countries have the capacity to cut expenditures, and others to borrow. And some have legitimate political institutions to manage the inevitable hardships as subsidies are slashed, jobs are lost and capital spending is curtailed.

But many do not. And, unlike the last price plunge in 2016, this shock does not come after a period of stable, high oil prices, which allowed some countries to bolster their finances. Instead, oil prices have been middling, as America's surging shale oil production and OPEC+ production cuts kept them roughly in the \$50-\$70 range, below many oil exporters' fiscal break-even levels.

Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Nigeria, Ecuador, Angola, Suriname — not to mention two countries already on the brink, Iran and Venezuela — are particularly vulnerable. They may not all fail in the sense of state collapse, but many could cease to meet their public sector payrolls, never mind expenditures related to health care, education and other services, including security.

The mere prospect of many countries unable to fund their security budgets should sound alarm bells in the United States and beyond. It adds urgency to a question that national security professionals, foreign policy makers and politicians have grappled with since 9/11: How to keep ungoverned territories from becoming safe havens for terrorist groups or drug cartels looking to target the West or undermine its security in other ways. Of particular concern to U.S. policy makers should be Iraq, Nigeria and Mexico. Each faces its own looming crisis, with potentially profound implications for U.S. interests.

In Iraq, a caretaker government confronts deep fiscal travails: Its oil revenues — which make up 90% of budgetary income — plunged by 46% for March, even before the full impact of the coronavirus on oil was apparent. This fiscal collapse has dire implications for

the country's struggle to stave off ISIS, for Iraq's ability to stand up to interference by its neighbors and for its efforts to meet the demands of its young and restive population.

Nigeria's economy is likewise beleaguered, having just begun to climb out of a recession before the imposition of strict pandemic containment measures. Signs of social discontent are on the rise, and President Muhammadu Buhari — a former military man — could resort to the army to maintain law and order. That would undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of Nigeria's battle against an Islamist insurgency in the northeast of the country, with ripple effects throughout an already vulnerable region.

With its diversified economy, a hedge on its oil for 2020 and relatively developed institutions, Mexico is much better positioned to manage the turmoil in energy markets. But President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's apparent unwillingness to grasp the severity of the pandemic should be cause for concern. Even as other countries deliver eye-popping relief to the newly unemployed, Lopez Obrador has barely budged from earlier pledges of austerity or moved to revisit other elements of his economic plans. The federal government is struggling to wrest control of parts of the country from drug cartels, and to meet U.S. demands to contain Central American migrants heading north. Should Mexico be forced to cut back spending on security forces as seems highly likely, both those problems could metastasize.

How might the United States and its partners prepare for more turmoil in these countries, and in ungoverned territories, particularly in the Sahel or the Middle East where extremist groups already have footholds? One answer is obviously the need to maintain and increase aid and humanitarian assistance to the many countries that will face existential crises, either from the oil plunge, the coronavirus, or both. Another answer, strangely enough, can be found in Syria. Far from being the "forever war" that President Donald Trump called it, the small, behind-the-scenes contingent of U.S. troops supporting a much larger group of indigenous forces against extremist fighters is the sort of arrangement that the United States — ideally with others — should replicate in countries that ask for help. Faced with the demands and fears of their own citizens, politicians in North America, Europe and elsewhere may struggle to justify security and other support for countries whose institutions wobble or collapse under the combined weight of low oil prices and the coronavirus. But being prepared to build more limited military partnerships — and, importantly, to explain to their citizens why such arrangements aren't "forever wars" — will be part of managing the foreign policy fallout of this moment.

Double-down on contingency planning and red-teaming for Iran and Venezuela.

Both Iran and Venezuela were careening before the coronavirus materialized. Under severe U.S. sanctions, oil exports — a lifeline for both countries — had been dramatically curtailed before the pandemic and the oil price collapse. The impact of cratering oil prices will therefore be far less than in the past, but each will still suffer as foreign exchange dwindles further, constraining imports even more.

Many in the Trump administration may hope that this confluence of historical factors leads to the downfall of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the Islamic revolution in Iran. Yet is the United States prepared if either scenario unfolds?

The fall of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro may lead not to the transitional government many

have hoped for, but to complete state collapse and an epic humanitarian and security disaster. Alternatively, if the country is hit hard by Covid-19, pressures for political accommodation between Venezuela's opposition and the government could extend Maduro's tenure. Iran's government is much more entrenched, and it is hard for outsiders to accurately assess what's happening there right now. If the regime is under unprecedented pressure, the most likely outcome is not for a democratic alternative to emerge, but for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to assume more power, heightening U.S.-Iran tensions and the potential for hot conflict.

Now would be a good time for the U.S. not only to step up its contingency planning for such outcomes, but also to consider whether changes to American policy toward either country would better advance its interests and mitigate human suffering. In particular, the United States should reconsider its earlier decision not to establish some version of an Oil for Food program for Venezuela. Such a program could save Venezuelan lives, stem the tide of refugees that risks destabilizing the whole region and bolster the political opposition; in the face of a global pandemic, these benefits should now outweigh any concerns policy makers may have had about prolonging the life of the Maduro regime.

Defuse a looming U.S. crisis with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and other OPEC+ members had multiple motives for agreeing on April 12 to curb oil production. In Saudi Arabia's case, however, among those reasons was a sharp increase in hostility from members of the U.S. Congress who in the past appeared to appreciate the multifaceted relationship between Riyadh and Washington. Once willing to speak in favor of the U.S.-Saudi partnership, these members suddenly revealed that they were willing to upend economic, military, and diplomatic ties if Saudi Arabia did not curb its production to arrest the free fall of oil prices (and protect the American oil industry).

Such threats no doubt gave President Trump leverage when pressuring Saudi leaders to agree to a deep cut. But they also exposed the fragility in the bilateral relationship. If oil prices continue to fall, members of Congress may well try to punish Riyadh for a situation largely not of its own making. It would be a painful pressure point on the kingdom at a time when neither the United States nor the region can afford any greater destabilization. To avert that possibility, the administration should work closely with key members of Congress. It should not cede management of the bilateral relationship to the legislative branch.

Expand contacts over managing the oil market into more lasting areas of détente.

Recent efforts to pull the global oil market back from the brink exposed some new common interests and triggered intense contacts between leaders. Might this prompt greater cooperation in otherwise fraught relationships? As President Trump's about-face on the value of OPEC demonstrates, now is a time for rethinking old orthodoxies and finding new ways to approach problems.

Despite Trump's insistence that the United States needs and wants a better relationship with Russia, this dysfunctional dyad so far has been impervious to recalibration. Moscow and Washington are unlikely to come to any meaningful détente, given President Putin's need to demonize the United States and the certainty that Russia is in for hard economic times. Putin has repeatedly tried to compensate for economic bad news by asserting Russia more aggressively on the world stage. He could well do the same again.

Yet a small opening exists to professionalize a segment of bilateral U.S.-Russia ties. Russia has long been interested in pulling the United States into coordinating the global oil market. Although the United States does not need to join OPEC+ and its pledges to mandate production cuts, having regular exchanges about global energy trends could create a niche for constructive discussions between Russian and U.S. officials. It is not crazy to think that a dialogue around common energy interests could evolve into a more meaningful conversation about how to deal with Venezuela's collapse, for instance.

Similarly, although China was not a central player in trying to stem the oil market collapse, the United States and others should bring Chinese officials into regular consultations on the topic. As the world's largest oil importer and its sixth largest producer, China's interests are mixed. But as the world's second largest economy, China may have its own tools to influence global supply and demand. Energy (and climate) are areas in which the United States and China have common interests, and where they have had productive exchanges, even during periods of tension. Again, it is not crazy to think that such dialogues, if intensified, could be a net positive in a critical but rapidly deteriorating bilateral relationship.

Finally, by giving Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Russia a face-saving way to paper over Mexico's partial compliance with the April 12 production cut agreement, Trump should have secured some goodwill with Mexico's president. That could come in handy as both countries, with their intertwined economies, cooperate to smooth the transition to normalcy, whenever that comes.

Foreign policy makers and leading thinkers do need to consider how the global order will change in response to the coronavirus. As John Ikenberry pointed out elsewhere, history suggests that initial moves toward isolation could be followed by global efforts to re-create needed institutions. But a U.S. failure to address the more immediate challenges stemming from the Covid-19 oil market collapse will not bode well for any larger effort to remake the world order.

[France] Pandemic Shakes France's Faith in a Cornerstone: Strong Central Government (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 6:51 AM, Norimitsu Onishi and Constant Méheut, 40577K, Negative]

A couple of baguettes tucked under her arm, Maha Rambousek fiddled with a face mask that kept sliding off her nose. After a local decree made masks mandatory in public, she had quickly stitched it together, but was left confused when the policy was overturned two days later by the central government.

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right," Ms. Rambousek said. "And I can't turn to anybody for certainties."

The measure in Sceaux, a well-to-do suburb just south of Paris, was one of an increasing number of exceptional local challenges to the government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, which has shaken confidence in a cornerstone of French society: the primal authority of the centralized state.

The city of Perpignan lodged contagious patients in a hotel after the central government told people to self-isolate at home. Officials in the city of Marseille carried out widespread testing

of both the sick and healthy even as the government ordered that only the seriously ill be tested. The city of Paris tightened a national lockdown by banning daytime jogging.

While France's vaunted health care system has staved off disaster, France has suffered the world's fourth-biggest death toll — now at 23,660 official deaths, behind the United States, Italy and Spain — a consequence, critics say, of the central government's failure to anticipate the onslaught of the contagion.

That failure and a critical shortage of masks and testing kits — also resulting from gaps in state policies — led to the virus's rapid early spread, prompting France to impose one of the world's strictest nationwide lockdowns, now in its seventh week.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a tentative plan on Monday to gradually reopen the country starting on May 11. Schools and businesses would start reopening, though not restaurants or cafes. He urged companies to keep their employees working at home. And he promised that masks and testing would be made sufficiently available.

But it was not clear that those steps would halt what polls show is declining confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic.

"Trust in the state has been eroding for some time, since the state is no longer able to respond to the need for security," said Phillipe Laurent, the mayor of Sceaux and the secretary general of the Association of Mayors of France.

About a dozen complaints have been lodged by individuals and medical organizations with the French Court of Justice, a special court that hears accusations of government mismanagement. Several officials have been accused of willfully failing to take appropriate measures to combat the virus, endangering people's lives.

The government's failure to stem the initial outbreak undermined the important social contract between the state and the people, said Pierre Vermeren, a historian.

"We have some of the highest taxes and biggest public spending in the world, and the French people accept that because, implicitly, their protection was guaranteed by the state," said Mr. Vermeren, who teaches at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Critics blame France's poor showing, at least in part, on the excessive centralization of the French state, embodied by a president, Emmanuel Macron, who has spoken of his belief in the "top-down" exercise of power and has employed martial language in describing the fight against the virus.

Like many leaders, Mr. Macron initially derived a boost from the crisis, but that has begun to fade. Nearly 60 percent of respondents described him as a "bad president" in one recent poll, while another poll showed confidence in the government's management of the crisis declining steadily to 39 percent from 55 percent in the past month.

In keeping with his reputation for aloofness and heavy-handedness, Mr. Macron initially angered many French by harshly blaming them for not respecting social distancing measures during the same weekend last month that he allowed local elections to be held — a decision widely condemned since then.

He is also held responsible for the government's flip-flopping messages on masks, which many French now perceive as a deception to cover up a blunder by the state, which allowed its stockpiles to decline.

Still, there is no doubt that the French state has been better equipped than most on many levels.

France's traditionally strong health care system has succeeded in treating the sick and avoiding the kind of triage seen in Italy. The government mobilized high-speed trains to transfer hundreds of patients to relieve overwhelmed regional hospitals. It spent tens of billions of euros to support businesses and workers, softening the crippling effects of the lockdown.

But challenges, like that from Sceaux, population 20,000, to the authority of the state have been met with a stiff rebuke, regardless of the shifting understanding of the virus.

France's interior minister quickly condemned Sceaux's mask ordinance as a threat to "fundamental freedoms," and the Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, overturned it. The city of Nice, which was about to make masks mandatory, backed down.

Critics say the French state's shutting down of any challenges was a sign of weakness by a government left in a defensive crouch after it failed to quickly grasp the threat.

Even after the coronavirus had raged through Asian nations, Mr. Macron and his wife, Brigitte, made a point on March 6 of attending the theater to encourage people to keep going out despite the pandemic. Eleven days later, when Mr. Macron imposed the nationwide lockdown, the virus was out of control in France, too.

In a recent interview with Le Point, Mr. Macron acknowledged that France became aware of the pandemic in China at the beginning of January. By Jan. 24, the first cases of Covid-19 were recorded in France.

In Asia, countries close to the epicenter of the pandemic in China, like Taiwan and South Korea, reacted quickly with contact tracing and testing, limiting official deaths to six and 246, respectively.

Despite the extra time afforded by geography, France's enduring vision of itself as a "great power" prevented it from seeking pointers in Asian nations' nimble response, said Jean-Jacques Roche, a specialist on French foreign policy at the University Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas.

"France can't compare itself to South Korea or Taiwan, it can only compare itself to another great power," Mr. Roche said. "To compare itself to countries that are not great powers is in some ways unbearable."

In a written reply, Mr. Philippe's office said that the "French state was on alert very early on," adding that hospitals and health associations were warned of the pandemic by mid-January.

The collective failure by some of the West's leading nations to respond quickly and effectively to the virus has left experts elsewhere in the world bewildered.

"Contact tracing and isolation are the basics of a response to any epidemic," said Dr. Mosoka Fallah, a Liberian epidemiologist who is managing the response to the coronavirus in his country and led contact tracing efforts there during the 2014 Ebola outbreak. "I'm really surprised that they didn't do that."

But France was — it has become clearer over the weeks — desperately short of both masks and test kits. In late February, France had the capacity to carry out only 3,000 tests a week. Even today, the weekly number of tests in France, 175,000, is a fraction of the 840,000 tests carried out weekly in Germany.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, the French authorities tracked and tested the infected in two small clusters. But they quickly ran out of capacity when a major outbreak occurred in mid-February following a large gathering at an evangelical church in the Grand Est in eastern France, the second-most affected region after Paris.

After the gathering, the church's congregation of 2,000 worshipers spread the virus across the country before the authorities realized the scale of the contamination, said Jean Rottner, the president of the Grand Est region and an emergency physician. By then, he said, "it was pointless" to try to track the people who had attended the gathering.

But in South Korea, where the first major outbreak also originated in a church, health officials did just that — quickly imposing emergency measures and retracing worshipers' movements. Those efforts stemmed the contamination.

The French government, having failed at that, imposed some of the world's tightest lockdown restrictions, confining 67 million to their homes and deploying security forces to keep people off the streets.

"It's not only medieval, but we've never experienced this in our history," said Mr. Vermeren, the historian, adding that past pandemics had put French cities under quarantine, but never confined an entire population to their homes.

As infections and deaths rose exponentially after the start of the lockdown — forcing Mr. Macron to extend it to two months — several regions in France ordered millions of masks, mainly from China. By that time, though, they were engaging in a worldwide competition for supplies that at times pitted them against their own government.

As France prepares to open up starting on May 11, some regions, feeling bitten, are hedging their bets.

Mr. Rottner, the president of the Grand Est, said that he was already ordering millions of test kits. He said he didn't want to "make the same mistake again."

[China] White House aides torn over trade hawk's proposal as President Trump weighs action on China (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 7:49 AM, Jeff Stein, Robert Costa and Josh Dawsey, 18460K, Neutral]

A debate over an executive order to boost American production of medical supplies has gripped the White House, as President Trump weighs how to confront China over the coronavirus outbreak without exacerbating the economic crisis sparked by the pandemic.

Trump has groused about China during several recent Oval Office meetings and expressed interest in an executive order crafted by White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, the president's leading China hawk and a divisive figure within the administration. The executive order would over time require the federal government to buy medical supplies and pharmaceuticals manufactured in the United States, aiming to reduce dependency on imports and increase domestic production.

But Trump has stopped short of signing the measure. Several of Trump's confidants, including Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, have voiced reservations about embracing's Navarro strategy, according to three officials familiar with the deliberations.

The unresolved debate underscores the tensions inside the West Wing as Trump publicly expresses the desire to exact compensation from China over the coronavirus, but is warned privately against jeopardizing the chances of a U.S. economic recovery or access to medical supplies from abroad, all as he turns toward his reelection campaign.

Navarro's draft, which has circulated among senior officials for several weeks, would require the federal government to only purchase essential medical equipment and pharmaceuticals manufactured in America. Navarro has argued it would make the United States less dependent on foreign nations for critical medical supplies. The order gives firms substantial time to figure out the new requirements, reducing the shock it could have on prices and production, two former officials familiar with its contents said.

Although it has the support of some officials at the State Department and the National Security Council, Mnuchin and several business leaders close to Trump are averse to making a major push on supply chains at a fragile moment for the economy, they said. And Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner, shares Mnuchin's caution about Navarro's push to do this executive order at this time, two officials said, and has been focused on responding to the pandemic.

Some White House aides privately insist the order could still be approved, but others say it could be stuck in the Office of Legal Counsel under review for weeks to come since it lacks sufficient support within Trump's inner circle. Still, the lag on Trump's signature has frustrated some of Navarro's allies inside and outside the administration.

Officials interviewed for this story spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak frankly about sensitive internal deliberations.

The internal struggle over Navarro's proposal highlights a long-standing White House rift over China that has gained new dimension and significance as the president considers his response to Beijing's handling of the coronavirus.

For decades, Trump has assailed his predecessors for being weak in confronting Beijing, arguing the Chinese have for decades exploited clueless American politicians to ravage the

U.S. economy. In White House coronavirus news conferences, he has repeatedly returned to the trade deal with China reached by his administration last year.

"In the history of any country, nobody has been ripped off like the United States by China — and many other countries. And we stop it," Trump said at a White House press briefing last week. "Nobody has been tougher before the deal ever, on China, than Trump."

But confronted with a deadly global pandemic that originated in China and devastated the U.S. economy, Trump has appeared at times ambivalent in his response. The president initially praised Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's handling of the outbreak, saying Xi is doing "a very good job with a very, very tough situation." When the virus spread to the United States, Trump resisted major swipes at Xi and instead targeted his fury at the World Health Organization. Senior aides say this a way for Trump to vent and reassure his base that he is battling an organization with ties to China, even if he's not battling China and Xi daily.

Trump has sometimes stuck to a "wait-and-see" approach, suggesting China may not bear responsibility for the outbreak and ensuing damage.

"If it was a mistake, a mistake is a mistake," Trump said last week of China and the coronavirus. "But if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences."

At other times, Trump has struck a more aggressive tone. On Monday, the president strongly suggested the United States would seek hundreds of billions of dollars in damages from China because of the virus.

"We haven't determined the final amount yet. It's very substantial," Trump said. "This is worldwide damage."

Inside the administration, some officials are wary of an aggressive confrontation with Beijing. In private discussions, Mnuchin, Kushner and their allies have warned that Trump could jeopardize critical protective gear for American medical workers if the White House ramps up its attacks on Xi or accedes to Navarro's demands for remaking the U.S. supply chain. They have also urged Trump to wait to act until further investigations of China's role are concluded, officials said.

"Nobody except Peter wants to slam China over and over again, because we're going to need what China is making, whether it's equipment or a vaccine down the road, you never know," one White House official said.

Navarro, 70, has for decades blamed China for many of America's most serious social and economic problems and feels vindicated by the outbreak, according to three people he has spoken to in recent weeks. Navarro warned in private memos in January about the danger posed by the coronavirus, and circulated to White House advisers an "official coronavirus response plan," which included PowerPoint slides and other written materials about the potential impact of the virus, one person familiar with the documents said.

Navarro has accused China of creating the virus and using the deadly outbreak to "profiteer" off the world's pain. Chinese officials have adamantly denied this. Regardless, Navarro has asserted Beijing created the virus in a government laboratory, then "knowingly

hid" proof of its spread. He, and others pushing this theory, have not produced any evidence to back up their claim. Alleging China committed "four kills" in its handling of the virus, Navarro has said the Chinese bought the world's supply of personal protective gear, then deliberately sold those goods back to the world at inflated prices.

"The Chinese effectively declared war. They spawned that virus," Navarro said on Fox News on Saturday.

In an interview, Navarro said the proposed executive order was not aimed at China or any other specific country but instead intended to secure the United States' ability to produce critical medicines, supplies, and equipment. Navarro said he and other administration officials are focused on the current crisis of rapidly mobilizing and repurposing industrial capacity to meet U.S. demand.

More than 75 other nations have imposed export restrictions on crucial medical supplies, which Navarro said demonstrates "how countries realistically act in their own self-interest to the exclusion of others when globalist push comes to nationalist shove."

"This is a defensive measure for the American people not aimed at any other country," Navarro said. "Onshoring America's public health industrial base is both a national imperative and the logical conclusion to draw from a pandemic that has exposed the weak underbelly of globalized supply chains and the risks of not domestically producing your essential medicines and medical countermeasures."

Navarro has in recent days circulated Pew polling data showing a sharp turn in public sentiment against China. Bipartisan proposals have emerged in the Senate to require onshoring of U.S. pharmaceutical supplies. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) has introduced legislation requiring firms to return production to the United States, while numerous Republican senators, including White House ally Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), have argued that China "needs to pay" for the pandemic and face sanctions for its role in the virus.

Leading Democrats such as Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) have also called for Trump to act more aggressively toward China. Former vice president Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, recently released an ad attacking Trump for not being sufficiently tough on China.

"Everybody I talk to in the Senate is thinking about how Communist China has treated America as an adversary. Even the globalists, even those who say we need a free economy — they look at it now and say, 'The coronavirus is the tipping point that pushed it over the edge,'" Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) said. "Peter has been clear in his belief that China is an adversary and not to be trusted, and the coronavirus has shown he's been right."

Navarro may prove too personally polarizing within the White House to push Trump toward confrontation. Navarro's memos on coronavirus, for example, were disregarded by other administration officials. Administration communications officials worry about Navarro on TV and have sought in the past to keep him off the air. "Peter sends a lot of memos," one official said.

Navarro has repeatedly clashed with top administration officials, recently questioning the

medical judgment of Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's leading infectious-disease expert.

Former White House economic adviser Gary Cohn tried sidelining Navarro by assigning him to an office that "amounted to a broom closet," one former senior administration official said.

Some international trade experts warn Navarro's demands could have devastating consequences for Americans on the front-lines of responding to the pandemic, arguing that foreign countries could devastate U.S. access to supplies through retaliation. Earlier this month, the Trump administration faced an international backlash when it tried to impose additional controls on exports of American-made PPE. Canada, for instance, manufactures a specialized tree pulp the United States imports for production of its masks. The administration later added significant exemptions to its proposed restrictions.

"You're exposing yourself to retaliation," said Chad Bown, a trade expert at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, who is critical of Navarro. "You're making yourself vulnerable to being cut off from supplies from other countries. It's a huge benefit to have access to international markets to have a diverse source in a time of need."

But others say the United States must try to force production back to domestic soil. "The notion that an angry Chinese government would limit medicine and PPE imports on which we are incredibly reliant in retaliation for the U.S. enacting policies to incentivize more domestic manufacturing of such supplies precisely spotlights why it's critical to expand domestic capacity," said Lori Wallach, a trade expert at Public Citizen, a left-leaning organization.

Bob Bland, founder of Masks for America, which has secured hundreds of thousands of masks for nurses across the country, said the United States' dependence on China for personal protective gear has dramatically undercut its ability to protect its front-line medical personnel.

"Countries all over the world are realizing we don't have the ability to make any of this locally, but local production is the only way to scale up quickly enough and avoid price gouging," Bland said. "The answer to that has to be regional production for PPE. It would give us a fighting chance against pandemics like this in the future."

[China] Seeking Real Voices in China, Despite Censorship and Fear (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 2:10 AM, Raymond Zhong, 40577K, Negative]

In retrospect, one of the bigger regrets I have about my time in China is that I never took up smoking.

I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. Nothing helps you talk to strangers in China like a cigarette. Whenever I wanted to find out what was going on inside a big company, I would look for someone outside an office or factory having a nicotine break. A shared smoke is a way to freeze time. And for a foreign reporter in a place where people aren't always eager to speak to foreign reporters, even a little extra time can make the difference between a good interview and no interview at all.

Access to regular people in China might be the part of foreign correspondents' jobs there that the Chinese authorities find hardest to control, though they certainly try. With a dose of

charm and persistence from a reporter, people do open up, despite the country's rigid curbs on speech and thought.

Last month, though, the Chinese government cut off that access for me and almost all of the other Americans working for The Times, The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post, ordering us out of the country as part of the intensifying standoff between the Trump administration and Beijing.

I spent much of my two years in China covering that standoff, and from the great heights at which we journalists often write about such matters — through politicians' statements and government policies, through trade data and corporate decisions — it could seem as if titanic forces in both nations were drawing them inexorably toward conflict.

But the situation usually looked different when speaking to ordinary people in China. Like people everywhere, they tend to be less dogmatic and more curious about the world than their leaders. Seen through their eyes, the wider costs of the hostility came into focus, as did the degree to which it was driven by anxieties that felt distant to the communities most directly affected by it.

Last year, for instance, I went to the southern city of Zhuhai to visit a plant run by the American manufacturer Flex. The Trump administration was clamping down on one of Flex's customers, the Chinese tech giant Huawei, and the company was letting workers in Zhuhai go.

In the baking August heat, I met Zhan Yuanxian, 38, who had just turned in his employee ID. He said it was hard to be mad at Flex or the United States for what happened. Over the years, the company's presence had transformed a once-rough part of the city, bringing in shops, restaurants and housing.

Another employee, Gong Yian, said working at Flex was good but had been even better before, when the company flew in foreigners to run the plant. Lately, more bosses were Chinese, he said, and they ruled with an iron fist.

In the beginning, "if we weren't working, we'd feel bad," Mr. Gong said. "As more Chinese came in, it became management by oppression."

The next day, in the nearby city of Dongguan, I met Bruce Xu, whose company made cowboy boots for the American market. He was dreading the next wave of tariffs. But he was equally concerned for his American customers, whom he visited regularly.

I asked him what he thought of the United States.

"America is better than China," he said. It's cleaner, and the people are better mannered. In the United States, "you can't even smoke," he said. "No matter which floor you live on, you have to run downstairs and go outside to smoke."

Using a handful of interviews to find the true pulse of a nation of 1.4 billion might seem foolhardy. But it beats the alternatives — like scanning social media, for instance. Recently, as the Chinese government beefs up its online propaganda, censorship and disinformation efforts, it is becoming nearly impossible to tell, through the digital veil, what people in China

actually think.

When social media mobs attacked the N.B.A. last year for an executive's tweet supporting the Hong Kong protests, how much did that tell us about nationalist sentiment in China, and how much did it merely reflect the efficacy of Beijing's paid internet trolls? If someone got angry after reading a state propaganda outlet, did that person's outrage count as manufactured or genuine? What did it even mean to be genuinely offended? All the layers of unreality could be suffocating.

Even face to face with people in China, it could be tough to have real conversations, and not just because of my distaste for nicotine. People ended interviews when they started to seem hazardous — too personal, too political. This is how the authoritarian system keeps a lid on criticism: It gives everyone reason to think that personal matters are political, that they can get in trouble just for talking about their own lives and opinions.

Often enough, though, I found people in China who were relieved that someone was finally listening.

Hog farmers pleading for aid from the local government after their herds were devastated by an incurable plague. Truckers whose incomes had been gutted by new, Uber-like apps that brought Silicon Valley efficiency to their happily inefficient industry. Recyclers driven underground by a clumsy antipollution crackdown. Coders fed up with the tech industry's callousness toward its workers.

I'm leaving China more convinced than ever of how much ordinary people can teach us about a place — which might be one reason the government was so eager for us to leave.

One of the last conversations I had in the country was with two cops in Beijing. They were helping me obtain a temporary visa so I could stay a little longer and pack up everything I owned.

Officer Shao and his partner were relaxed and friendly, seemingly unbothered by my pariah status. As we waited for my visa, they asked me about The Times. If the paper isn't controlled by the government, then who ensures that what you write is accurate? If it's all up to your editors, then who appoints your editors?

We talked about the fear and xenophobia that the coronavirus had brought out in both China and the United States. They said they had even heard that Americans were stockpiling guns, though they weren't sure if the news was fake. I was sorry to inform them that it was not.

Were those two officers the voice of real China? Maybe not. But they gave me a glimpse of life in the country at that moment, and they put familiar things in a new light. As far as I'm concerned, that was plenty.

[China] To Confront China After Coronavirus, We Must See the Bigger Picture (Yahoo News/The National Review)

Yahoo News/The National Review [4/29/2020 6:30 AM, Lewis Libby, 12818K, Negative]

In a popular movie two decades ago, hard-eyed criminals released into Sydney a woman infected with a virus, knowing that unsuspecting Australians would catch the highly

contagious disease and, traveling on, unwittingly spread death across a hundred homelands. This past winter, the hard-eyed leaders of China did worse. They allowed not one, but thousands of infected to leave China and enter an unsuspecting world, a world lulled by Beijing. The crucial question is: Why?

"China caused an enormous amount of pain [and] loss of life ... by not sharing the information they had," Secretary of State Pompeo said on April 23. America is angry, he added, and while much remains to be known, China "will pay a price."

No subpoenas, no oversight committees, no tell-all books will expose President Xi's calculations as the novel coronavirus spread inside China. The unelected of Beijing guard well their secret debates. The CCP knows the virtues of opacity, of letting uncertainty, complacency, and wishful thinking paralyze the West. Exploiting these has been its way.

In 2018, a major Trump-administration speech called CCP misdeeds to task. Some, including, notably, Japan's prime minister, applauded. But many nations looked toward their feet, too reluctant, too sophisticated, perhaps too intimidated to bestir. Staggering COVID-19 losses may yet remind the world of the dangers of drift as great powers go astray.

Today's American, European, Japanese, and Asian policymakers, like those of centuries past, bear the burdens of judgment. Uncertainty has ever been the statesman's curse. America's famed diplomat, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, has written, "Nations learn only by experience, they 'know' only when it is too late to act. But statesmen must act as if their intuition were already experience ..."

A reassessment of Xi and the CCP looms. From their actions and practices, from assessments of their motives and apparent long-term aims, today's statesmen, like their forebears, must judge future risks and craft the surest course ahead. These are early days, but the picture of Beijing presented so far is troubling.

Even before the virus spread in Wuhan, Xi brooded over a worrying hand. The CCP could not intimidate prolonged protests on the streets of freedom-loving Hong Kong. And the Party's oppression there, in determined violation of treaty commitments, spurred voters in Taiwan to rebuff Beijing's hopes for a more amenable regime in Taipei. The world was finally awakening to Xi's increasingly autocratic surveillance state, his harsh repression of Uighur Muslims, and his predatory Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's economy, essential to Xi's hold on power, had stumbled, in part because of the Trump administration's move to counter China's unfair, neo-mercantilist practices and to condemn their grim geopolitical implications. Worse yet, America's markets hummed, raising reelection hopes within the Trump administration, which had also surpassed modern predecessors in challenging China. Rumors of Party dissatisfaction with Xi seeped out.

COVID-19's outbreak in Wuhan further darkened Xi's prospects. As long as the virus raged primarily inside China — derailing only her economy, stigmatizing only her government — his troubles would soar. All the while, the world predictably would have leapt ahead, taking Chinese customers, stealing China's long-sought glory.

The disease's spread to Berlin and Paris, New York and Tokyo, improved Xi's prospects, at least in the near term. Pandemic diverted foreign eyes from Hong Kong's and the Uighurs' plight. Desperate needs rendered disease-weakened nations more susceptible to China's

goods and BRI's short-term appeal. Asian states, wary of Beijing, had new cause to doubt the commitment of a pandemic-preoccupied Washington, while a weakened economy and vastly increased debts would likely constrain future U.S. defense spending, essential to Asian security. An unpredictable element had entered into America's 2020 election.

As events unfolded, might Xi have recognized that COVID-19's leap into the wider world promised such political and geopolitical gains? Some say a desire to protect itself first fed a CCP cover-up, as if putting this before the health of innocents were not bad enough. But were CCP leaders blind, as days passed, to other benefits? It is the Chinese way, the noted French Sinologist François Jullien has written, to exploit the potential inherent in unfolding situations. CCP leaders still study China's legendary strategist, Sun Tzu, who advised centuries ago that if, "in the midst of difficulties, we are always ready to seize an advantage, we may extricate ourselves from misfortune."

As the CCP realized the imminent disaster COVID-19 posed inside China, Xi suppressed the world's appreciation of its dangers. By sometime in December, Chinese authorities had learned that a novel, highly infectious coronavirus similar to deadly SARS was on the loose. Yet for weeks PRC authorities, including China's National Health Commission, suppressed inquiries and, directly or through the WHO, misled the world about the risks. When Chinese authorities finally acknowledged human-to-human transmission, the CCP took steps to isolate Wuhan from other parts of China, but continued to permit international travel. After the U.S. on January 31, and later Australia, restricted travelers from China, Beijing's spokesmen, artful and indignant, rose to denounce such acts as ill-founded and ill-intentioned.

For days, even weeks, after the CCP first knew of the danger, Chinese authorities and customs officers let tens of thousands of travelers, infected among them, leave China and enter an unwary world. In late January, China extended Lunar New Year celebrations, inviting greater international travel. PRC border guards stamped more exit papers. When America restricted such travelers, Beijing allowed more to leave for less cautious lands.

Then, as pandemic gripped the world, the CCP brazenly blamed America for COVID-19. Xi once more preened over his authoritarian "China model's" efficiencies, now cauterizing troubles he denies having caused. In Europe, Beijing postured as a savior offering needed medical supplies — albeit that its sales favored states where it sought geopolitical gains, often bore high prices, included defective products that could undermine defenses, and drew on CCP surpluses bolstered by January purchases of world supplies at pre-pandemic prices. In Southeast Asia, Beijing proved "relentless in exploiting the pandemic," a respected, former high-level Filipino bemoans, as it pushed its "illegal and expansive" territorial claims. Inside China, the Party seized the moment to round up leaders of Hong Kong's democracy movement and reassert unilateral efforts to curtail the city's special, self-governing status.

Even after the virus began to spread inside China, events might have taken a different course. Many had once hoped for better from CCP leaders. Dreams of a mellowing CCP had floated widely among academics and policy elites, perhaps buoyed by the way such illusions avoided, rather than imposed, hard choices. Some yet hold to such views. The benign CCP of their reveries would have alerted others promptly as the novel virus's dangers became known, shared information, welcomed foreign scientists, ceased reckless practices, and guarded against the pandemic's spread.

Indeed, under different leadership, China could have followed such a path. Traditions of humane governance, venerable and Confucian, are not alien to that land. China's ancient text, the Tao-te Ching, favors just such a response:

"A great nation is like a man:

When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.

Having realized, he admits it.

Having admitted it, he corrects it.

He considers those who point out his faults

As his most benevolent teachers."

The learned will debate how much such leadership would have eased the wider world's suffering. Metrics and estimates will vary, but the consensus will be clear enough: The harm would have decreased manyfold.

Such openness and grace have not been Xi's way. As he built up islets in the South China Sea, he promised never to militarize them, then dishonored his promise, disregarded international rulings, and dispatched ships in packs to intimidate neighboring states and expand Beijing's writ. Pledging to protect intellectual property, he enabled ongoing theft and coercion, ineluctably undermining industries of the advanced democracies, and then pressed forward on China's newly gained advantages. His BRI professes to aid, then exploits poor countries' weaknesses. Citing the betterment of all in the cause of greater China, he has imprisoned Uighurs, undermined Tibetan culture, and threatened the peaceful regional order that had enabled China's rise. He violates treaty commitments to curb Hong Kong's freedoms. Behind an anti-corruption façade, his prosecutors ruined scores of his rivals, as he consolidated and extended his personal powers. These wrongs he continues still. Xi's are not the ways of grace and remorse.

An angry narrative drives this man. Under his hand, the CCP highlights Chinese suffering and humiliation roughly a century ago under Western and Japanese imperialists, while eliding the democratic world's helping hand and Japan's benign democracy over four generations since. He slides past the Chinese millions massacred in the intervening decades by the CCP and Mao — China's legendary leader who spread cruelty and death as he judged useful. In imitation of Mao, Xi has issued his own "little red book" of wisdom. Mao's iconic image looms over Tiananmen still. Coveting Mao's autocratic power, Xi strove and won it; now he dare not let it go.

The bitter recall of ancient Chinese glories; resentment of past humiliations; insecurity bred by corruption and illegitimacy; disdain, even hatred of America's easy ways — these are the pathogens coursing through Xi's circle. A fever for Chinese primacy burns among them. For a time, they might pander to a Western-inspired, rules-based order, a liberal conceit; but this is not their dream. A historic economic rise, technological mastery, a rapidly expanding navy, all causes to be proud of, have freed them to be brazen. Xi now bares the teeth Deng Xiaoping's smile hid. From South China Sea islets to the New Silk Road's arid ends, the

CCP, ruthless and defiant, pounds the stakes it holds to advance its aims. For Xi's CCP, it is the fate of small states to bend to the strong.

Rules should soon be theirs to set, the CCP believes, and not without some reason. Before Trump, a subtle and experienced Chinese diplomat confessed, CCP leaders marveled at America's ineffectual response. In the South and East China Seas, on India's long border, Beijing's hostile and determined quest had followed Lenin's line: "Probe with bayonets, if you find mush, you push; if you find steel, you withdraw." It is to our shame, Trump observed on China's unfair trade practices, that Beijing had not been held to account by prior administrations. Unanswered, history has shown, the ambitious calculate and, at times, miscalculate.

In past American forbearance, CCP leaders have seen a once great power on the wane. In foreign capitals they confided, inside China they proclaimed: It will soon be America's turn to bend. They claim their own version of the right side of history.

The keys to victory, Sun Tzu counseled, lie in knowing your enemy and deceiving them. The cunning men of Beijing have taken heed. They have an instinct for a divided, self-doubting, and weary West. Cloaking their aggressions in ambiguity, they weigh the likely costs against desired gains.

Straining to contain COVID-19, President Trump and Secretary Pompeo rightly extend a hand to international, including Chinese, cooperation. But in post-pandemic days to come, the democracies must carefully take the measure of the CCP and hold it to account, crafting strategies for what it is, not what they wish it to be. That is leadership's task.

The late, great professor Fouad Ajami warned, "Men love the troubles they know" — too ready to slip into a comfortable neglect, too reluctant to face strategic change. Some cite an arc of history, he lamented, to hide behind, hoping it might bear the burdens they would rather shun.

With all doubts resolved in their favor, the untouchable leaders of the CCP have much for which to answer. Perhaps in reality, even more.

In a time of death, Ajami cautioned: "There is no fated happiness or civility in any land." As a great river may abruptly rise or fall, "Those gauges on the banks will have to be read and watched with care."

[China] The GOP's No. 1 coronavirus China hawk (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 4:30 AM, Burgess Everett, 4207K, Neutral]

Investment banker Warren Stephens was on the phone with Sen. Tom Cotton in January, when the Arkansas Republican gave an abrupt goodbye.

"I gotta go. I've got a meeting at the White House. This virus deal in China, we're behind the curve on this thing," Stephens recounted Cotton telling him. "I said: 'Whoa whoa whoa, what do you mean?' 'Cause you know at that time, it was nowhere."

Since January, the first-term senator has warned that China was covering up the lethality of the disease and doing little to stop what became a global pandemic — taking his coronavirus concerns to President Donald Trump and the Department of Health and Human

Services. He says Washington must "exact a very steep price" from China in the months to come.

So, as the rest of the Republican Party now races to condemn China as the disease's greatest villain, Cotton finds himself with a three-month head start.

And with a series of ambitious Republican senators and governors beginning to maneuver to succeed Trump in 2024, Cotton is front and center in the debate over the GOP's future. His emergence as the party's fiercest China hawk could position him well regardless of Trump's fate in November.

And as usual, the sharp-edged Cotton is taking it to the max.

"Their criminal negligence allowed what could have been a health outbreak in Wuhan to become a devastating global pandemic," Cotton said in a telephone interview. "Their malign, deliberate actions to send the virus around the world by allowing international travel to continue in December and January represents just how little regard for human life they have."

Cotton wants American citizens to be able to sue Chinese officials for the economic and public health fallout from the pandemic and move production of key medical supplies to the United States from China. He says he will seek to attach that legislation to upcoming must-pass coronavirus bills, which could have the Senate debating China's culpability in a matter of weeks.

And he's stepping up his rhetoric too, asserting that "senior leaders in Beijing made a deliberate and calculated decision" to keep air travel flowing out of China. The Chinese government, he said, "did not want to see a relative diminution of their power as against the rest of the world, especially against the United States."

It's vintage Cotton: Take a hard-line position early and go for the jugular in an uncompromising manner.

The senator is also playing a notable role in Congress' coronavirus rescue efforts, serving as a vocal advocate of direct payments to Americans in previous discussions, though he now advocates a go-slow approach to the next big tranche of aid.

Regardless, the 42-year-old Arkansan has long been a young man in a hurry.

After attending Harvard and taking classes from then-law professor Elizabeth Warren, Cotton joined the Army. After he returned from service in the Middle East, Stephens recalls Cotton telling him he was going to run for the House. Stephens tried to dissuade him, arguing he was not well-known enough in the state GOP, but Cotton plunged in anyway: "My advice to him was to not do it."

Cotton won, and just two years later, defeated a longtime Democratic incumbent to join the Senate. Now as his first term winds down, he finds himself firmly in the national mix with other high-profile Republicans vying to take the White House in 2024 or beyond.

"He's certainly never said that to me," said Stephens, who runs a private equity firm based

in Arkansas, of whether Cotton is plotting to be president. "But, you know, he'd be a really good one."

Cotton himself spurns talk of higher office. He says his focus is on restarting the economy, winning reelection in a race in which he has no Democratic opponent and bringing China to heel.

But targeting China is an increasingly popular position in the Republican Party, so much so that Senate Republican strategists distributed a memo advising GOP candidates to concentrate their fire on China in the battle for the Senate. Even some Democratic senators are also asking tough questions.

Cotton drew several critical headlines in February for suggesting that the virus could have come from research labs in Wuhan. Some reporting has bolstered Cotton's statements, but there is no consensus in either the medical or political world on the matter.

Many lawmakers in both parties are careful about how closely to link Chinese labs with the virus.

"I think it is possible," said Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.). "I for one don't know where it came from, but we certainly should find out."

Cotton is as certain as ever.

"The presence of two different virology labs in Wuhan forces any reasonable and responsible leader to at least ask the question if the virus could have emerged in those labs," Cotton said in the interview. "It's not conclusive and it rarely is in the world of intelligence, but all of the evidence we have at this point points to those labs."

Cotton spoke to Trump in January and lobbied him to ban flights to China. Now Trump cites the travel ban multiple times a day when defending his national leadership. Cotton also urged Americans to leave China and in early February warned coronavirus would likely become a pandemic, more than a month before the World Health Organization made it official.

Some critics say he could have done more.

"If you were so clever and saw that China was lying, then why did the president believe them?" said former Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), who served with Cotton for four years.

"You can't have it both ways. You can't say 'I saw it coming.' If you saw it coming, what did you do to stop it?" she said. "It just drives me frickin' crazy. What I'm saying is, did you write a note to yourself in your basement? Who cares if you were right. What did you do about it?"

Cotton is one of the sharpest-edged combatants in the Capitol. He led a successful effort to tank an immigration compromise Heitkamp crafted in 2018 and organized a Republican letter to Iran undermining President Barack Obama's nuclear agreement. He helped sink then-Speaker Paul Ryan's "border adjustment tax" idea and nearly stopped a popular criminal justice reform bill from becoming law.

Yet on China issues, he's been relatively bipartisan — working closely with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) on curbing Chinese influence abroad. Schumer sometimes refers to him as "Mr. ZTE," a reference to Cotton's efforts to bar the Chinese telecom company from the United States.

The Chinese Embassy did not respond to a request for comment, but it's clear the Chinese government is keenly observing the flurry of GOP rhetoric targeting its role in the spread of the disease.

"It's just all too obvious why some political forces in the U.S. have been obsessively attacking China using the pandemic as a weapon," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang on Monday. "We firmly oppose the attempts of some people in the U.S. to grab more votes and undermine China's interests by smearing China."

But even Republicans with wildly different dispositions than Cotton praise his early warnings on China.

"Sen. Cotton is absolutely right to point the finger at China and to make sure the world knows from where this virus came and why we collectively had a delayed response to it," said Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah), the party's 2012 nominee. "You have to tip your cap to Sen. Cotton."

**[North Korea] Where's North Korea's Kim? Let's see what the satellites say.
(Washington Post)**

Washington Post [4/29/2020 1:17 PM, Simon Denyer, Neutral]

In the spycraft arts of trying to peer into the world's most secretive regime, commercial satellite images have become an indispensable power.

It is the North Korean version of Kremlinology adapted for the modern age — with images taken from orbit a key part of trying to monitor Pyongyang's missiles, nuclear sites and more. Now, the views from commercial satellites offer potential clues as the world tries to figure out Kim Jong Un's whereabouts.

New satellite images of luxury boats owned by the North Korean leader have been spotted at his villa in the coastal resort of Wonsan, providing more evidence that Kim is probably holed up by the beach, according to NK Pro, a specialist news and analysis service based in Seoul.

The revelation comes days after satellite photos also showed what is probably Kim's personal train parked at a railway platform reserved for his use near the villa in Wonsan, according to researchers at 38 North, a website affiliated with the Stimson Center.

As rumors swirl about Kim's health, they provide some of the best evidence yet that reports of Kim's demise might be premature. But they certainly do not show whether he is fit and well.

North Korea watchers still pore over the phrasing of state media reports and the placement of officials at important events for clues about what is in Kim's mind, for hints of ideological debates and power struggles, for clues about who is up and who is down among his

entourage — and sometimes even for signs of who might have been executed or imprisoned.

The satellite image scrutiny usually goes for bigger targets such as military activity. But the current analysis into Kim's personal world reinforces how much North Korea remains a puzzle to the world despite Kim's groundbreaking outreach to South Korea and the United States, including two summits with President Trump.

But the experts at NK Pro, 38 North and other specialist groups now have access to regular eyes in the sky from commercial services Planet and Maxar, as well as less frequent historical images from Google Earth.

Images come in every day and are scoured for clues about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs: a trailer being parked here, steam coming from a facility there, scaffolding or a platform being put up somewhere else.

But they are also being used to look for planes, motorcades, trains and boats.

It's like a giant game of "Where's Waldo?" — with an entire country to scour and just a few clues.

"In a country like North Korea, there's no noise when it comes to luxury facilities," said Colin Zwirko at NK Pro. "It's only Kim family facilities. There's no other people that could be just freely enjoying boat parties or having mansions in remote places."

When reports emerged that Kim might have had a cardiovascular operation at a hospital near Mount Myohyang on April 12, experts looked for confirmation from the skies.

Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, reportedly died at a mansion on the top of the mountain in 1994, although that mansion was demolished in 2012. There are still some villas in the area, but no obvious signs in satellite photos of unusual activity, said Zwirko.

There was also talk that Kim might have attended a missile test near Wonsan on April 14. The complex at Wonsan on North Korea's east coast has a private beach, guest villas, a horse racing track and a basketball court, and it is believed to be one of Kim's favorite places to stay.

First, 38 North spotted that Kim's train had arrived at Wonsan sometime between April 15 and April 21. It was still present April 23, "when it appeared to be repositioned for departure," 38 North reported.

On Tuesday, Zwirko announced that he had spotted an approximately 60-meter (200-foot) leisure boat positioned for use in the villa's private harbor, as well as two other large leisure boats used by Kim in the area. The main boat was seen in a photograph when basketball star Dennis Rodman visited Kim and went to Wonsan in 2013, and it is believed to have a pool on board under a roof.

But Zwirko also did what he called a baseline survey, cross-checking years of satellite imagery against state media reports and NK Pro's own database.

He has spotted Kim's train at Wonsan on eight occasions since 2013. On seven, he was able to confirm that Kim was staying at Wonsan or attending an event in the area.

Similarly, he has listed 23 occasions since 2013 when the boats were taken out of storage and placed ready for use. On 14 of those occasions, he was able to confirm that Kim had been in the area.

In other words, he said, the boat appears to be brought out of storage for Kim to use. Along with the train, the images indicate that the leader is likely to be staying at Wonsan, an assessment backed by senior South Korean officials with access to intelligence reports.

That does not mean that Kim is in perfect health, although a flurry of official letters in his name suggests to many observers that he is at least alive and conscious.

The alternative, of course, is that North Korea is playing an elaborate trick to buy time — issuing statements, moving boats and trains around — to fool the outside world.

"What I can conclude from my research is that there has been a high correlation of these boat activities in Wonsan when Kim is around," said Zwirko. "And I would expect this to be no different, unless the theory of purposefully moving boats around to trick us is true. I have confidence that the pattern should hold — the boat movement activities indicate a high chance he's in the area."

Chad O'Carroll, who founded NK Pro, said commercial satellite images are really helping with investigations of contemporary issues in North Korea in ways that simply were not possible when Kim's father and predecessor, Kim Jong Il, died in 2011.

"What people have been able to do recently with the train out at Wonsan and now the boats, it's really impressive and probably worries the North Koreans somewhat because this technology is only going to keep improving," he said. "And by another 10 years from now, just imagine what we'll be able to see — it should be pretty mind-blowing."

[North Korea] Amid health worries, Kim Jong Un's role looms large (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 2:01 AM, Foster Klug, 2194K, Neutral]

New rumors about Kim Jong Un pour in daily. The North Korean leader is dead. Or he's very ill. Or maybe he's just recuperating in his luxury compound.

As speculation about his health builds, an underlying question looms for professional spies, outside policymakers, academics and curious news-consumers alike.

What do we really know about the man who leads North Korea?

The answer is crucial because Kim's intentions, and the as-yet-unknown state of his health, play an outsized role in the workings of Northeast Asia, an uneasy collection of wary neighbors at the best of times and home to two of the three biggest economies in the world and a huge buildup of American military machinery and manpower.

Sandwiched amid goliaths, North Korea is a small, impoverished, extraordinarily proud nation that through sheer force of will — and a relentless cult of personality built around a single family — has been at the center of a half-century security headache for its neighbors.

No matter how successful China, South Korea and Japan become — and their collective transformation from war, poverty and domestic infighting into political and economic might has been spectacular — North Korea, and its single-minded pursuit of nuclear-tipped missiles meant to protect the Kim family, has made it impossible to ignore, holding the region and Washington hostage to its narrow ambitions.

THE DISAPPEARANCE

There's not much to go on here despite the building media coverage.

Some unconfirmed, lightly or unsourced news reports say that he is in fragile condition or even a vegetative state following heart surgery.

The South Korean government, however, maintains that Kim still appears to be in power and that there have been no signs that something big has happened in the North.

What's uncontested is that Kim hasn't appeared in public since an April 11 meeting focused on the coronavirus. This sort of vanishing act has happened before, but what has set rumors ablaze now is that for the first time as leader he missed the most important holiday of the North Korean year, the April 15 celebration of his grandfather's birth.

There have been no photographs and no video of the leader in nearly three weeks, only state media reports of him sending written greetings to world leaders or citizens of merit.

THE MAN

Those looking to understand Kim face a problem. Much of what the outside world sees is filtered through relentless North Korean propaganda meant to build him into an infallible paragon of leadership.

Add to that vaguely sourced or misleading outside media reports and the extreme difficulty of cracking the North's ultra-secrecy surrounding anything to do with the leader, and the picture that emerges of Kim is often more mosaic than profile.

In South Korea, he is seen as both demon and statesman. He has repeatedly threatened to burn Seoul to the ground. He has also rolled out the red carpet for a visit to Pyongyang by South Korea's president and sent his own sister south for the 2018 Olympics.

In the West, portrayals of Kim often run to caricature. His broken friendship with Dennis Rodman, the former basketball star he reportedly idolized as a schoolboy; the rumors about his extreme love of cheese and his allegedly creative ways of disposing of officials who displease him.

Then there's the stunning series of summits over the last two years with the leaders of Russia, China, the United States and South Korea.

Kim was likely born in 1984 and attended boarding school for several years in Switzerland.

Early on, some observers argued that his time in the West would lead him to eventually embrace Chinese-style reforms.

That has not happened so far, though he has taken a markedly different approach to leadership than his publicity-shy father, Kim Jong Il, who died in 2011.

Outside governments and experts initially questioned the ability of a man then in his 20s to lead, but Kim Jong Un quickly consolidated power. He ordered the 2013 execution of his uncle and mentor, Jang Song Thaek, who was accused of treason. Kim is also suspected of ordering the assassination of his estranged half brother, and potential rival, at a Malaysian airport in 2017.

Kim has shown a growing confidence on the world stage, most clearly with the high-stakes diplomacy that followed a run of nuclear and missile tests in 2017 that had many fearing war.

The sight of a North Korean leader meeting with his South Korean and U.S. rivals was extraordinary, though it's not yet clear whether the diplomacy will settle an uneasy region.

Kim entered 2020 vowing to bolster his nuclear deterrent in the face of "gangster-like" U.S. sanctions, and he supervised a series of weapons launches and military drills in March.

Much of what happens now will depend on Kim's health.

North Korea, despite its poverty, has long commanded world attention because of its sustained, belligerent pursuit of what it calls self-defensive measures in the face of U.S. hostility — and what critics call an illegal accumulation of nuclear bombs.

There's debate about whether North Korea ever intended to give up its nukes during the summits with Washington and Seoul. But the diplomacy seems inconceivable without Kim.

That raises fears, at a time of massive political instability, to a return to threats and increasingly powerful weapons tests meant to perfect the nuclear weapons seen as the only real guarantee of the Kim family's power.

[North Korea] Trump Isn't Ready for Kim Jong Un's Death (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 4:28 AM, Jung H. Pak, 4207K, Neutral]

The internet is ablaze with rumors, chatter and circular reporting about North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's whereabouts. U.S. and regional media have variously reported that Kim is recovering from heart surgery, in "grave danger," "in a vegetative state" or even dead, setting off a torrent of speculation about who might succeed him and the implications for regime stability. President Donald Trump did little to shed light on the rumors, stating first, "I've had a very good relationship with him. I can only say this, I wish him well," and later adding, "I do know how he's doing, relatively speaking ... You will probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future." Trump also boasted, "If somebody else were in this position, we would've been right now at war with North Korea."

Trump has often bragged about his approach to North Korea, touting his relationship with Kim in and of itself as progress toward bilateral ties and denuclearization. But Kim's absence is now showing us just how fragile Trump's approach really is.

Trump's strategy toward North Korea has consisted of sidestepping established diplomatic processes and reducing U.S. ties with North Korea to a single, superficial leader-to-leader channel. Trump's direct outreach didn't lead to any diplomatic breakthroughs: It simply gave Kim legitimacy as he continued to build up his nuclear arsenal. It also allowed Kim to shun Trump's State Department officials at all other levels, shutting down working-level talks and limiting Washington's ability to glean insights into the country. Now, with North Korea potentially facing an uncertain future, the Trump administration is ill-equipped to handle it.

Kim's absence triggers visions of massive regional disruption with catastrophic consequences. North Korea has possibly dozens of nuclear weapons, a substantial cache of biological and chemical weapons, a diverse array of ballistic missiles and a million-person military. State propaganda has made it clear that Kim alone controls these levers of military power. A power struggle in North Korea as a result of Kim's death or incapacity could lead officials to jockey for control of the regime's nuclear weapons, either to use them or sell them for cash. Such a development might invite U.S., Chinese and South Korean military intervention, setting the stage for confrontation and miscalculation that could spiral into a larger conflict.

Nuclear war or "loose nukes" isn't the only prospect worrying Washington, Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo. Internal collapse in North Korea could spark armed clashes among competing factions for control and trigger massive refugee flows, taxing the region's ability to respond.

The current pandemic would only amplify a humanitarian disaster in North Korea. Of its total population of 25 million people, North Korea has 10 million citizens who are malnourished and 8 million who lack access to clean water, making them more vulnerable to the coronavirus and other diseases. Internal instability could also unravel the state's strict measures to contain the coronavirus. Last week, the state ramped up its anti-coronavirus campaign, including reinforcing existing border lockdowns and the inspection and quarantining of imported goods—an acknowledgement of the ongoing necessity of pandemic vigilance, even though Pyongyang still insists that it has zero infections. A few days earlier, the regime reportedly announced restrictions on some imports to "prevent the spread of the virus," alarming North Koreans whose survival depends on smuggling and trading goods from China. Pyongyang residents this week are reportedly panic-buying, according to NK News, mirroring similar behavior around the world as a result of the uncertainty about the pandemic and availability of daily necessities. Adding to the North's woes, one of China's biggest cities in its northeast, close to North Korea, is tackling an outbreak of coronavirus.

The Trump administration is not ready to handle a post-Kim North Korea beset with problems. Trump's unilateral decision in 2018 to engage directly with Kim, as well as the latter's sidelining or purging of his negotiators since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, shriveled bilateral diplomacy between the two countries down to shallow letters between Trump and Kim. Trump has little to show for his efforts: Kim has only built a more dangerous and powerful nuclear arsenal while providing hollow assurances that he would "work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," a pledge falling far short of previous agreements, like the Joint Statement of 2005 in which North Korea "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs."

In the meantime, Trump's desire for a grand deal with Kim undermined his own diplomats

who have struggled to gain traction with their North Korean counterparts on even defining what "denuclearization" means. It's hard to say how much success U.S. diplomats would have had in establishing substantive and sustained contacts had Trump not pursued his one-on-one détente, but Trump's actions certainly didn't help. Trump flattered Kim, postponed military exercises with South Korea, and blocked large-scale sanctions on North Korea, even as Kim continued with his missile tests and human rights violations—giving Kim little reason to invest in working-level talks with the U.S. Thus, U.S. diplomats never had a chance to establish contacts that might have proved critical now, as North Korea potentially heads toward chaos.

Trump's gutting of the national security bureaucracy hasn't helped. The current acting director of National Intelligence—a position that requires leading the intelligence community, a sprawling organization with 17 entities—is a political loyalist with no security or intelligence experience. Key positions on Asia and North Korea policy remain vacant or in limbo. These are the people who would ordinarily be able to help with information collection and analysis, diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and military planning in the event of Kim's death.

Further, dealing successfully with North Korea will require China's help. And yet Trump has been waging a war of words with the Chinese government over who's more at fault in the coronavirus pandemic. There are plenty of reasons to be critical of Beijing's suppression of information to hide the scale of the health crisis, but Trump might want to look more to the future: If Kim's absence leads to a destabilizing power struggle or even internal collapse, China's early cooperation will be necessary to stem a potential humanitarian crisis, secure North Korea's nuclear weapons and avoid conditions that might spark armed conflict among the U.S., China and South Korea as the three sides move to protect their interests.

Trump has also reportedly scuttled a potential deal with South Korea on burden-sharing, undermining U.S.-South Korea military readiness and the decades-old alliance, even as he requested Covid-19 testing kits from Seoul. A long-time critic of alliances, Trump for nearly a year has ignored North Korean missile tests that threaten South Korea, calling them "very standard." The perceived erosion of U.S. commitment to alliances increases the potential for North Korean adventurism and reduces the ability of the U.S. to exert influence in the region.

Trump has spent two years boasting that he has North Korea policy under control because of his personal rapport with Kim. And yet, he has been unable to use that relationship to push denuclearization or improve bilateral ties. All he's done is made the United States ill-prepared for a North Korea without Kim.

[North Korea] Who Would Succeed Kim Jong Un in North Korea? Look to Mount Paektu (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:52 PM, Timothy W. Martin and Dasl Yoon, Neutral]

For seven decades, North Korea's ruling Kim family maintained its grip on power with a simple conceit: nobody but the Supreme Leader could rule the country.

And that leader, they insisted, needed to be a Kim, a way to keep control within the family and guarantee fealty in a nation that's endured famines, economic hardship and widespread human rights abuse. Only those from the "Mount Paektu bloodline," or those with a direct lineage to the country's founder Kim Il Sung, are deemed legitimate successors.

But that design now may be a vulnerability. The conspicuous absence of North Korea's third-generation leader, Kim Jong Un, has ignited fresh debate over a question that's all but unmentionable inside the country: Who could replace him?

Mr. Kim, 36 years old, doesn't appear to have launched any formal grooming for his successor before his unexplained absence, close Pyongyang watchers say, though many believe some form of contingency planning exists.

His health status has come into question after he skipped an April 15 ceremony and hasn't reappeared publicly since. A flurry of media reports have since suggested the North Korean leader could be alive, comatose or dead.

South Korea's government, which closely monitors the North, claims to know his current whereabouts without elaborating and has repeatedly asserted he is alive. President Trump said this week he had a "very good idea" of Mr. Kim's health status and that people would hear about it "in the not-too-distant future."

There is little doubt the next leader up would be a Kim family member, though the options look limited.

The oldest of Kim Jong Un's three children is a son born in 2010, according to Seoul's spy agency. Mr. Kim's older brother is assumed to have long ago given up any political aspirations. His great uncle, a younger sibling of Kim Il Sung, is around 100. Mr. Kim's aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, only recently reappeared in public after her once-powerful husband, Jang Song Thaek, was executed for allegedly trying to overthrow the government.

That leaves Mr. Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, 32, a confidante who was recently reinstated to the country's Politburo, the top decision-making body. She has been her brother's mouthpiece of late, issuing two statements in March aimed at the U.S. and South Korea. She has attended three inter-Korean meetings, both U.S.-North Korea summits with Mr. Trump and the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

Ms. Kim's increasingly central role in domestic North Korean politics makes her a likely "official Mount Paektu bloodline successor," according to a report published Wednesday by a South Korea government-affiliated think tank.

Whether tradition-bound North Korea is ready for a female leader is the wrong question to be asking given the Kim family's entrenchment and Kim Yo Jong's credentials, said Soo Kim, a North Korean expert at Rand Corp., a policy think tank, and a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst.

"The bloodline is going to trump everything else," she said.

The "Mount Paektu bloodline" is a reference to Korea's tallest and most sacred mountain, where Kim Il Sung based his guerrilla forces battling the Japanese and where his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, was allegedly born, according to North Korean history. Historians suspect his birth place was Russia.

Though his father spent more than a decade being prepped for power, Kim Jong Un's grooming unfolded in just over a year after Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in 2008. After that,

Kim Jong Un accompanied his father to inspection sites and quickly assumed leadership roles in the military and the ruling Workers' Party, becoming the equivalent of a four-star general.

"We learned Kim Jong Il would groom a successor in 2009. At the time, we couldn't even nail down how to spell Kim Jong Un's name," said Cho Sung-ryul, a researcher at the South Korean government-funded Institute for National Security Strategy.

Even after assuming power, a new Kim leader wouldn't be able to rest solely on the family name, Pyongyang watchers say. Mr. Kim exiled, jailed or executed hundreds of other senior officials—including his uncle, Mr. Jang. In 2017, his half brother Kim Jong Nam was assassinated in Malaysia, an attack that South Korean officials have blamed on North Korea, which it denies.

It's uncertain if a new Kim leader, now or in the future, would have the smarts, power and skills of the predecessors, posing a challenge to a country that's long revolved around a singular, dynastic leader, said Kongdan Oh, a Washington-based North Korea expert who has written several books on the Kim regime.

"Kim's death, if it happened now or soon, would be the beginning of a chaotic and painful process of transformation for North Korea," Ms. Oh said.

Other North Korean experts have presumed Kim Yo Jong may be pegged as a potential successor. Ms. Kim has been seen playing a supportive role, often taking notes by her brother's side or handing him a pen. An iconic image before last year's nuclear summit in Hanoi was her trailing Kim Jong Un with an ashtray.

Domestically she is considered a powerful political figure as the second North Korean woman to become a member of the Politburo. Since 2014, she has served as deputy director of the North's propaganda and agitation department—the same role her father held before becoming the North Korean leader.

Some security analysts say Ms. Kim could take charge in Mr. Kim's temporary absence but she is too inexperienced to govern the state. But the same concerns arose about Mr. Kim in 2011 when he suddenly succeeded his father before he ultimately consolidated power.

Mr. Kim's prolonged absence, or passing, would bring significant security implications due to the North's nuclear weapons program and the possibility for domestic instability, said Lee Seong-hyon, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the Sejong Institute in Seoul.

"The death of a nuclear-state leader is a risk to the entire world," Mr. Lee said.

[Taiwan] Taiwan Emerging From Pandemic With a Stronger Hand Against China (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 8:46 AM, Iain Marlow, Neutral]

Few governments around the world are likely to emerge from the pandemic with a stronger standing than before. Taiwan is one of them – and that's not good for China.

Taiwan was forced to contain the outbreak without official help from the World Health Organization and other international bodies, thanks to China's longstanding push to isolate

the democratically ruled island that it claims as its territory. For weeks, leaders in Taipei struggled to evacuate residents from the virus epicenter in Wuhan, as Beijing rejected basic conditions such as having Taiwanese medical personnel aboard the aircraft.

Around the same time, the People's Republic of China flew bombers and fighter jets around the island, prompting President Tsai Ing-Wen to scramble warplanes.

Despite those hurdles, Taiwan has led the world in its fight against the virus, with only about 400 infections and six deaths for a population of 23 million. By comparison, New York state – with slightly fewer people – had almost 300,000 cases and more than 22,000 deaths.

Taiwan's success against Covid-19 has shown that democracies could fight the virus without resorting to authoritarian measures, serving as a key rebuttal against Chinese propaganda showcasing the strength of its system against the West. Taipei's openness also contrasted sharply with the lack of transparency about the initial outbreak and subsequent diplomatic pressure from the Beijing, generating goodwill that could pay dividends in the future.

"I can't think of another issue with such global resonance that has broken so favorably for Taiwan, and so negatively for the PRC, since perhaps the Tiananmen Square massacre," said Kharis Templeman, an adviser to the Project on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

While the overall geopolitical dynamics were unlikely to change much given China's growing economic clout, Taiwan's "international stature has done well out of this crisis," Templeman said. "Taiwan has been dealing with Chinese opacity and propaganda campaigns for decades. So there's definitely some rise in sympathy for Taiwan."

A call this week between Taiwan's health minister and the Trump administration's top health official served to reinforce the island's importance to the global community, while also signaling that it could become a point of tension between the U.S. and China. Support for Taipei has surged in Washington after President Donald Trump held an unprecedented 2016 phone call with Tsai, launched a bruising trade war against Xi Jinping's government and sold Taiwan long-coveted F-16 fighter jets.

China's foreign ministry objected to the latest phone call, demanding that the U.S. "immediately correct its mistake, stop manipulating the Taiwan issue by taking advantage of the pandemic, and stop official contacts with Taiwan." The ministry urged "the U.S. side to adhere to one-China principle," referring to Washington's long-held position that the PRC is China's sole legal government.

Last year, Xi reaffirmed Beijing's desire to govern Taiwan under the same "one country, two systems" framework as the former British colony of Hong Kong. That position is deeply unpopular in Taiwan, which re-elected Tsai in a landslide in January. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party views Taiwan as a sovereign, independent nation.

For the moment, Taiwan is basking in the glow of international praise. It's won plaudits for not only stemming infections, but also pledges to ship millions of surgical masks to Europe, the U.S. and its few remaining diplomatic allies around the world that China hasn't picked off. Taipei has also held virtual seminars with countries such as India and the Philippines,

according to Wang Ting-yu, a lawmaker in Tsai's party and member of Taiwan's foreign affairs and national defense committee.

"This year will be the closest moment for Taiwan to participate in international organizations," Wang said. "Not only have we shown our capability to stop the virus from spreading, we're also using democracy to stop it from spreading -- we're communicating with our people and the government and the people are on the same side fighting the virus. This message can provide a reference for the world."

Taiwan's successful virus approach – led by a National Health Command Center set up following the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, outbreak in 2003 – combined proactive testing, big data and new technologies. That included early screening of flights, the rapid identification and containment of potential cases, integrating its national health insurance and immigration databases, and ensuring quarantine compliance via mobile phone tracking. The government quickly took more than 120 separate public health measures.

In some ways, Taiwan's adversity also helped underwrite its response. Taipei has little room for error because it can't seek help from multilateral agencies and Beijing would pounce on any missteps, said Rupert Hammond-Chambers, a managing director at the consultancy Bower Group Asia.

"Today, Taiwan's standing is at a historic high," said Hammond-Chambers, who is also president of the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council. Still, he added, over the longer term "the stark reality of the PRC's financial muscle and heavy-handed political strategies will mitigate much of the positive equity Taiwan has built amongst nations."

The pandemic served as an ideal springboard for Taiwan's long-standing campaign for diplomatic inclusion. A high-profile exchange between a journalist and WHO official Bruce Aylward, who repeatedly tried to avoid mentioning Taiwan, "did a great job of highlighting the silliness of excluding what is effectively a nation of 23 million people from important international bodies," said Graeme Smith, a fellow at the Australian National University who researches China's influence across Asia.

China's veto power in many international bodies is likely to continue to keep Taiwan on the outside looking in, said Shelley Rigger, a political science professor at Davidson College and author of "Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse." Still, she said, the favorable attention Taiwan was earning would still have an impact.

"It does matter, because if things get ugly, Taiwan will benefit from a positive image and high profile," Rigger said. "And if opportunities to loosen Beijing's stranglehold on its international space do appear, Taiwan needs for people around the world to respond quickly to take advantage of them."

[Afghanistan] One thing quarantine reminds me of: My deployment to Afghanistan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Jackie Munn, 18460K, Neutral]

It's a beautiful April day. My 5-year-old son is weeding one of our garden beds while I cut into a bag of soil conditioner. We work silently in tandem, watching as people walk their dogs and children pedal past on bikes. With so many of our neighbors practicing social

distancing to try to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, the outside world feels more alive than usual, reminding me what spring looked like before the Internet and social media. When you're not going to the office, no wonder people are relishing the ability to change their scenery, welcoming the reprieve of being outdoors instead of taking fresh air for granted.

My son pulls a stubborn weed and smiles as he stumbles backward. I'm grateful for our little vegetable garden and the time we're able to spend together on it. We planted one last year, but growing our own food this year, in the middle of a pandemic, seems more important. In a few weeks, we'll be able to harvest what we sowed, hopefully reducing the need for grocery shopping a little.

Lost in thought, I use my gloved fingers to poke holes into the soil, preparing it for seeds. I stop when I feel dirt collecting underneath my right index fingernail. Looking down at my gloves, an old pair of Army-issued tactical shooting gloves, I notice a small hole in the trigger finger. The material looks worn down, even beneath a new layer of dirt. The gloves remind me of wintertime shooting drills at Fort Bragg, N.C., and carrying around a rifle and body armor for 10 months in Paktia, Afghanistan. If I close my eyes, I can still feel the way the simulated leather creaks when it's gripping the handles of my M4 rifle. I realize using combat gloves to garden is bizarre, but I enjoy the idea of repurposing them: Instead of handling bullets and smelling like gunpowder, they now smell like mulch and drive tools into the earth.

And the gloves underscore a sentiment I'd been noticing: The past several weeks of social distancing remind me a lot of my deployment to Afghanistan.

Back in 2012, I lived on a small combat outpost, the size of two football fields, that housed fewer than 150 people. I was one of four women, and if not for my female teammate, I would have felt horribly isolated. There was no grocery store, shopping mall, barber shop or amenities to occupy our time. Every day we worked out — either running multiple figure-eights across the rocky post or visiting the small plywood shed that housed the bare essentials for a gym: a squat rack, dumbbells, barbells, benches and a power cage. We ate two meals a day in a trailer converted into a kitchen before or after missions. We tried to keep regular hours when not on missions, waking up the same time each morning and going to bed around the same. We Skyped with loved ones back home and wrote emails, doing our best to keep in touch with our communities and the daily comings and goings of our families and friends. Deployments felt especially miserable because everyone back home was living a normal life. Instead of FOMO, "fear of missing out," many deployed soldiers experienced SFMO, "sadness from missing out." We missed birthdays, graduations, weddings, school plays, vacations and funerals. We were unable to say goodbye when loved ones back home died, and we were often unable to say our final goodbyes when friends died in combat. Being deployed is like putting your life on pause — going to a dangerous and uncertain place to spend months doing the exact same thing, with the exact same people, while eating the exact same food.

Being isolated at home during this pandemic is inconvenient, but at least everyone is suffering similar hardships together. My husband and I are able to spend quality time with my son, something my husband always missed when he deployed after I got out of the service — even though managing distance learning at home requires a hefty amount of patience, determination and grace. I am also, for the first time in our professional careers,

able to spend more time with my husband. Instead of rushing around to and from work, from school, from gymnastics or swimming, we're able to live a much slower lifestyle. We play more board games, build puzzles, cook together and spend more time asking each other questions and telling one another stories. We've seen family on FaceTime more often in the past few weeks than we have in the past three months.

I know my family is lucky. Unlike many Americans, my husband and I are still earning paychecks, our son's teachers are still engaged in his daily learning activities, we have adequate supplies of essentials, we are in good health, and we don't have to worry about the mortgage or putting food on the table. But we're not without stress.

While I'm not on the front lines in an ER or an ICU, I do work in a public health department that cares for low-income and usually uninsured maternity patients in our outpatient clinic. We also manage the county's investigation for positive covid-19 cases, managing outbreaks, keeping track of those with symptoms, notifying their close contacts and contacting health care facilities with exposures to positive cases. The tension circulating throughout the clinic and department is palpable: Everyone's hands are chapped, and many look nervous behind their masks. As coronavirus cases and deaths rise, staff members whisper to each other in between patients. One clinic nurse tells me her concerns about the potential for unwittingly exposing her immunocompromised husband, while another worries about her own health as an asthmatic. Before the governor of Virginia issued his stay-at-home order, nurses assigned to track covid-19 cases initially vented about positive cases not adequately isolating, or expressed frustration over close contacts who had symptoms but continued to go to work or out and about in the community.

Now that everyone is ordered to stay home, county residents with positive tests and active symptoms are monitored daily from afar. Staff listen quietly as residents detail their temperature and symptoms; many sound miserable, with audible coughs and voices that shake. It's like you can almost feel their feverish chills. Other's sound healthy and normal, eagerly awaiting their isolation period to end. An Indian immigrant in his 30s who works in the food industry asked me why this happened to him. He was young and healthy, he washed his hands all the time, he tried to practice social distancing. Why him? He was just unlucky — simple as that.

It was a familiar feeling of random unfairness: Some soldiers are wounded and make it home, others don't.

At one point, one of my colleagues mentioned that she felt like the world had turned into a war zone. Some days, it certainly reminds me of the monotony and apprehension I felt in Afghanistan. For 10 months, we treated everything as a potential threat. I knew that small-arms fire, mortars or improvised explosive devices could kill me at any moment, and many times, we had no idea who the bad guys were or who was trying to harm us. It could be a farmer, a teacher or a local soldier working with us during the day, only to plot against us at night. Our team was hypervigilant pulling security on dirt roads in Afghanistan, and I notice the same creeping feelings as I go for walks around my neighborhood and local parks. I also feel it when I'm with patients, since some of them may be spreading the coronavirus without any symptoms. I have no idea whether the patients I'm seeing are infected, so I just assume that they are. It's safer to be vigilant.

But this type of vigilance can be exhausting, and it can be detrimental for those constantly

on guard while working on the front lines. This type of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional fatigue can be found in every war ever fought. I worry what this pandemic will do to the mental health of health-care workers, essential employees and those without support systems. Undoubtedly, there will be those who will walk away unscathed, but there is also a decent probability that several will be casualties of this fight.

As the sun begins to set, my son walks over, handing me a packet of seeds to plant. They'll need nurturing and protection over the next several weeks to survive. We'll have to be patient, doing our best to tend to our garden, waiting patiently to see if our hard work pays off. Health-care providers across the globe will have to be like diligent gardeners or combat veterans, hoping that their efforts will yield positive results and watching out for themselves and their comrades. Similarly, we all will need to be vigilant, ready and willing to do our part, sowing the seeds for a better tomorrow.

Coronavirus News

As Coronavirus Deaths Spike in Brazil, Bolsonaro Says, 'So What?': Live Updates (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Fighting fears and travel bans, countries and businesses are trying to rescue summer vacation. In Bangkok, a high-end restaurant has transformed into an aid operation.

Faith in the central government fractures over France's coronavirus response

A couple of baguettes tucked under her arm, Maha Rambousek fiddled with a face mask that kept sliding off her nose. After a local decree made masks mandatory in public, she had quickly stitched it together, but was left confused when the policy was overturned two days later by the central government.

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right," Ms. Rambousek said. "And I can't turn to anybody for certainties."

The measure in Sceaux, a well-to-do suburb just south of Paris, was one of an increasing number of exceptional, local challenges to the government's handling of the outbreak, which has shaken confidence in a cornerstone of French society: the primal authority of the centralized state.

The city of Perpignan lodged contagious patients in a hotel after the central government told people to self-isolate at home. Officials in the city of Marseille carried out widespread testing of both the sick and healthy even as the government ordered that only the seriously ill be tested.

While France's vaunted health care system has staved off disaster, France has suffered the world's fourth-biggest death toll — now at 23,293 official deaths, behind the United States, Italy and Spain — a consequence, critics say, of the central government's failure to anticipate the onslaught of the contagion.

That failure and a critical shortage of masks and testing kits — also resulting from gaps in state policies — led to the virus's rapid early spread, prompting France to impose one of the

word's strictest nationwide lockdowns, now in its seventh week.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a tentative plan on Monday to gradually reopen the country starting on May 11. Schools and businesses would start reopening, though not restaurants or cafes. He urged companies to keep their employees working at home. And he promised that masks and testing would be made sufficiently available.

But it was not clear that those steps would halt what polls show is declining confidence in the government's handling of the epidemic.

Live updates: Trump to hold virtual town hall at Lincoln Memorial on Sunday; possible health advances help lift stocks (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 4:34 PM, Kim Bellware, Mark Berman, Miriam Berger, Siobhan O'Grady, Felicia Sonmez, Meryl Kornfield, Candace Buckner, Michael Brice-Saddler and Colby Itkowitz, Neutral]

President Trump will participate in a Fox News virtual town hall Sunday evening shot live from the Lincoln Memorial. The event will include a sit-down interview with Fox anchors followed by a round of audience-submitted questions related to the reopening of the economy. The president also suggested Wednesday that he does not plan to extend federal social-distancing guidelines amid the coronavirus pandemic, noting that the country's governors will make decisions on what guidelines work best given the conditions in their states.

Meanwhile, small but significant health advances against the coronavirus sent the Dow Jones industrial average up 532 points, about 2.2 percent, to 24,634, all but ignoring sobering data that shows a U.S. economy far from being awakened from its self-induced coma. Stocks are on pace for one of their best months in decades as the nation ramps up its coronavirus tests and states take steps to awaken their economies from the weeks-long lockdown.

Here are some significant developments:

-Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said a second wave of infections is "inevitable" in the United States, which has recorded more than 1 million confirmed cases — nearly one-third of the global total.

-As antsy Americans show growing signs of "quarantine fatigue" and officials face pressure to ease restrictions, factories, malls and state governments in many parts of the country are taking steps toward reopening.

-'Frostbite' toes and 'second-week crashes' are among the curious and sometimes dangerous phenomena among some covid-19 patients that have caught the interest of medical experts in recent weeks.

-The U.S. economy shrank by 4.8 percent from January through March as it saw the worst slowdown in growth since the Great R

-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe warned that holding the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 will be "impossible" if the pandemic is not contained.

-Signaling confidence that it has contained the virus, China scheduled its big legislative meetings for late May. The "Two Sessions" meetings had been postponed at the height of the outbreak.

UN warns coronavirus fallout will lead to the next pandemic – global starvation (FOX News)

FOX News [4/29/2020 2:00 PM, Hollie McKay, Negative]

The next global pandemic may very well be a hunger pandemic as a result of the fallout from coronavirus.

While the World Health Organization warns that stringent guidelines need to stay in place to combat the spread of COVID-19, fellow United Nations agency World Food Program (WFP) believes that it will lead to an uptick in global poverty and starvation, and the response to the virus itself may end up killing more people by the end of 2020.

Last week, WFP's executive director David Beasley cautioned the UN Security Council that the risk of large-scale famine in much of the developing world was now "of biblical proportions" as a result of the global pandemic.

"While dealing with a COVID-19 pandemic, we are also on the brink of a hunger pandemic," Beasley told the council. "There is also a real danger that more people could potentially die from the economic impact of COVID-19 than from the virus itself."

Even before the outbreak, 2020 was on track to be the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II due to the ongoing wars in places like Yemen, Syria and South Sudan, compounded with natural disasters and desert locust swarms across Africa.

That grim reality has been exacerbated by efforts to curb the coronavirus, which has led to cratering economies, mass job losses and crashing oil prices.

"We can confidently state that levels have risen. Quarantine regulations, shipping challenges, and overall supply chain issues are compounding and adding to previously existing starvation conditions," Ian Bradbury, CEO of the Canada-based humanitarian organization 1st NAEF, told Fox News.

"We can expect more global deaths due to secondary impacts of COVID-19 than the virus itself — the World Food Program currently estimates that 265 million will be on the brink of starvation by the end of the year."

At the beginning of 2020, some 130 million were already facing dire levels of hunger. That figure could now more than double the number of people facing acute hunger to 265 million by the end of this year.

As it already stands, 820 million people globally are considered undernourished, according to UN statistics, with 22 percent of children younger than 5 classified as "stunted" as a consequence of malnutrition.

Almost 700 million people, roughly 9 percent of the planet's population, are "severely food insecure" and nearly two billion — one in four — are assessed as "moderately or severely food insecure."

That statistic is expected to rise as the planting, harvesting and transporting of food items has been dwindling, and the almost 400 million children who rely on schools for meals can no longer attend. Experts have cautioned that while rashes of hunger have long been experienced in different pockets of the globe, never before has it been experienced on such a global scale.

"My father was killed in the war, and my brother and I work to care for our family. The [impact] that this sickness has created on us means that everything has become more expensive, and so the money we make is not enough to meet our monthly needs," Suleiman Hussein Suleiman, a 22-year-old logistics worker from Hemo village in Syria, decried.

"We lived in hardship before, and now it is even harder. It is hard for us to find food every day. If things go on like this, the people will erupt like a volcano — they will say, 'Better that we go back to work and die of coronavirus than that our children starve to death!'"

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, barely recovered from years of fighting ISIS, many are expressing the renewed challenges of struggling to find work and the loss of dignity that comes with that.

"The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact [on us] as it has on many countries around the world. We announced strict measures from the very start of the pandemic and put in place a series of regulations that helped contain the number of our cases and avoid overwhelming our health system," said Jutiar Adil, a spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). "Financially, we're feeling the pinch."

And in the already famished and crumbling Venezuela, which has been embattled with closures and stay-at-home orders, locals are further feeling the pangs of daily life.

"Besides hunger, as there is no food, nor gasoline which truly complicates life, tension and even paranoia has become an everyday issue for me and others I talk to, friends and other people. The quarantine is taking a big toll in my life besides everything else I have been dealing with," said Aidiana Martinez, a 41-year-old living in the capital, Caracas. "[The food shortages] are getting so bad that it is hard to explain."

Maria Teresa Herrera, a 39-year-old administrator in Caracas, concurred that everyday decisions are a weighing up of life and death.

"I live in constant fear, thinking if I get contagious, I will pass it to my daughter, but if I don't go to work, my daughter will starve. This is terrifying," she continued. "It is complicated to find food, first because of the new schedule for stores ... and also the total lack of gasoline, affecting even the transportation chain of the limited food that is distributed. I am terrified this pandemic can go on for way more time, then we will die from starvation and COVID."

Lilia Martinez, a 45-year-old banker in Caracas' Baruta Municipality, stressed that "poverty had reached inhuman levels before this crisis, and now there is no immediate or near future light of recovery."

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan many contend that life has become untenable.

"It has been three months now that I haven't gotten any salary from office, and I am hardly surviving, and it is getting more difficult to come over home expenses. My brother's business is also going below zero because of the lockdown," said Zaki Nadry, a 27-year-old Kabul-based government official. "Poverty has become worse as you see more beggars in the streets. Daily laborers are suffering because of no daily projects, which have made them turn to beggars as well."

In many countries, especially those in Africa that have largely avoided a direct hit from the virus, the tight restrictions have induced a sense of sheer frustration. While the likes of Zimbabwe have only documented 32 confirmed coronavirus cases and four deaths, the fear of overwhelming the already fragile health care system has meant a continued government-mandated lockdown — and subsequently, thousands going to bed hungry.

In Kenya earlier this month, dozens were injured and two people died in a stampede in a rush to obtain food handouts. In Colombia, those starving are tying red clothing items outside their homes to signal their empty stomachs.

Dominique Burgeon, director of Emergency and Resilience Division of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has also issued warnings urging governments to do everything possible to keep trade avenues and supply chains functioning, underscoring that "now more than ever, we need international cooperation and supply arrangements to preserve the fluidity of global food markets."

Food security experts are also lamenting that funding from donor nations, organizations and individuals is fast drying up due to economic assault that the novel pathogen has cast on much of the world, meaning that the monies necessary to deliver humanitarian relief in some of the hardest-hit areas may all but fall apart.

The WFP estimates that they require an immediate injection of \$350 million to keep operations afloat, bemoaning that only about a quarter of the sum been met.

"We have to keep our food security programs running, not only because of increased needs from COVID-19 but also because war and violence continue and the needs that existed before all of this are still there," noted Elizabeth Shaw, a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). "In East Africa, it is now the most important planting season. We have to get the seeds and farming tools out to people now, or they won't have things to eat come July or August."

Nonetheless, the widespread lockdowns and travel prohibitions also present unprecedented logistical hurdles for many charities and nongovernmental organizations that are no longer able to reach the hungry and those most in need, especially in far-flung places.

It is anticipated that the impact will not only be felt everywhere from Africa and Asia to the Middle East and Central America, but will deeply scar Americans struggling to make primary ends meet.

"From East to West and everywhere in between, coronavirus has left its mark on our global society, and food insecurity is a real issue here at home. Millions of hard-working Americans live paycheck to paycheck and rely on every dollar to keep their families fed and lives

afloat," added New York-based Assemblyman Mike LiPetri.

"When you take away their income and don't provide real economic relief, the situation goes from manageable to dire real fast."

Don't forget the homeless once coronavirus crisis ends, U.N. expert urges (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:04 PM, Zoe Tabary, Neutral]

Life-saving measures to house the most vulnerable amid coronavirus lockdowns risk falling by the wayside after the pandemic, a United Nations expert has warned, calling for stronger action to eradicate housing insecurity.

Governments around the world have been racing to house the estimated 1.8 billion people who are homeless or live in inadequate housing and are uniquely at risk of being infected and infecting others during the pandemic.

But many of those efforts are emergency measures rather than "the structural change we actually need" to guarantee affordable and secure housing for all, said Leilani Farha, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing.

"Housing has become both central and invisible in the pandemic," Farha told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Governments are telling people to stay home, wash your hands and physical distance," said Farha, whose six-year tenure as U.N. Special Rapporteur comes to an end on Thursday.

"But that mantra was ordered without any consideration being given to the fact that millions of people worldwide can't do those three things."

More than 3.1 million people have been infected by the novel coronavirus across the world and about 220,000 have died, according to a global tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Health experts say the homeless are more likely to contract illnesses such as the coronavirus, in part because of weakened immune systems due to additional stress, and lack of nutrition and sleep.

Those living in cramped housing are also at heightened risk, with a surge of coronavirus cases in foreign-worker dormitories across Singapore and in the slums of India drawing attention to the squalid housing conditions of migrant labourers.

Farha said she had seen encouraging innovations worldwide to house the vulnerable, such as the Northern Irish city of Belfast ending rough sleeping by housing homeless people in hotels.

"We're seeing governments stepping in – like providing water and sanitation in Nairobi slums – in ways that hadn't been done previously," she said.

Authorities in India and South Africa have set up impromptu shelters and camps, sometimes using stadiums and soccer fields, while U.S. and British cities have taken steps to prevent homelessness with eviction bans and rent freezes.

But housing efforts risk losing steam once countries start lifting lockdown measures and focus on averting an economic recession, Farha warned.

"We talk about rent referral but what about rent forgiveness? People will come out of the pandemic burdened with debt and unable to pay rent for months longer," she said, adding there was an economic case for tackling homelessness.

"Homelessness has a huge economic cost as it creates a burden on healthcare systems," Farha said. "A stable, housing-secure society is good for the economy."

Farha, who will remain in her native Canada as head of The Shift, a new initiative to secure the right to housing, said she would continue visiting cities around the world to expose housing and human rights issues.

She will be replaced as U.N. Special Rapporteur by Indian academic Balakrishnan Rajagopal, an urban planning expert who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

President Trump hails U.S. coronavirus testing as infections cross a million (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 2:34 AM, Kanishka Singh, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States has reported more than a million coronavirus infections only because of its testing, President Donald Trump said on Wednesday, hailing the effort as being "much better than any other country in the world."

The Twitter comments came amid warnings from state public health officials that shortages of trained workers and materials have limited testing capacity.

"The only reason the U.S. has reported one million cases of coronavirus is that our testing is sooo much better than any other country in the world," Trump said on Twitter.

"Other countries are way behind us in testing, and therefore show far fewer cases."

A Reuters tally shows the United States has by far the world's largest number of confirmed cases at more than a million, with total deaths topping 58,000 by late Tuesday.

Cases exceeded 3.1 million worldwide, with more than 216,000 deaths, Reuters calculations show.

The rise pressures efforts to boost testing capacity and health officials flagged the challenge of getting tests to those who need them most.

"One of the problems has been is the tests getting to the people who need them," U.S. infectious diseases expert and health official Anthony Fauci told CNN in an interview on Tuesday.

Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said every American in need of a virus test should be able to get one by the end of May or the beginning of June.

"Everyone who needs a test, according to the way we're approaching the identification,

isolation, contact tracing — keeping the country safe and healthy, hopefully, we should see that as we get toward the end of May, the beginning of June,” Fauci said.

The virus has taken an unprecedented toll of the U.S. economy, with a likely contraction in the first quarter at its sharpest pace since the Great Recession, as stringent measures to slow the virus spread almost shut down the nation, ending the longest expansion in its history.

The number of Americans seeking jobless benefits over the past five weeks has soared to 26.5 million, or nearly one in six U.S. workers, and the Trump administration has forecast an April unemployment rate exceeding 16%.

What You Need to Know About the Covid-19 Antibody Test (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Tim Herrera, 40577K, Neutral]

As states across the country weigh options for reopening after weeks of stay-at-home orders, antibody tests have emerged as a potential pathway on how — and when — to do it.

But there are many caveats, as a recent study found that many of the antibody tests available currently provided inaccurate results.

Antibody tests look for signs in the blood that a person has been exposed to the novel coronavirus. Knowing who has been exposed, along with how many people have been, may help to better understand the spread of the virus. This is especially important as studies continue to show that significant percentages of all coronavirus carriers — in some studies, up to half — show no symptoms at all.

The Food and Drug Administration in the United States said this month that “the question of when we can return to work and resume our normal activities is one of the most critical issues facing our nation. Antibody tests — also known as serological tests — may have the potential to play a role in this complex calculation.”

But should you get one? Can you get one? What do they actually tell us? Here’s everything you need to know.

What is an antibody test, and how does it work?

When your body is exposed to a foreign pathogen, like a virus that causes illness, your body’s response is to produce antibodies that live in the blood and tissue. These are proteins that bind to and destroy the virus, preventing it from making copies of itself and further spreading the infection.

The antibody test, also called a serology test, looks at whether your body has developed those antibodies; the presence of them most likely means you were exposed to Covid-19, the illness caused by the virus. Some tests, like the one used by the Mount Sinai Health System in New York, can measure the level of antibodies in your system — your titer.

But in general, most of the tests being made available across the country detect only whether the antibodies are present, said Dr. Jeffrey Jhang, medical director of clinical laboratories and transfusion services for the Mount Sinai Health System. A direct-to-consumer test announced on Tuesday from Quest Diagnostics — more on that below —

measures only presence or absence.

Antibodies can take generally anywhere from about a week to 14 days to develop, Dr. Jhang said, and the levels of antibodies vary based on time since exposure and a person's immune system. This means that a lack of antibodies does not necessarily mean you were not exposed to the virus.

The test is similar to other blood tests you may have had before: A sample of blood is taken from the patient and is then analyzed to determine the presence of antibodies. Most tests will generally return results within a few days, but that may vary, as some tests can return results in a few hours.

If I have antibodies, I'm immune, right?

Not necessarily.

The antibody test does not test for immunity to Covid-19. There is no test yet that can tell if you are immune. It is simply too early to know if the presence of antibodies confers immunity, as this is a new virus, meaning we've never seen it before.

But experts generally agree that, based on experiences with other viruses, including SARS, the presence of antibodies most likely does confer some level of protection, though we don't know to what extent or for how long.

"The difficult thing is we do not have clinical evidence yet of whether the presence of antibodies actually prevents the individual from getting the disease again," Dr. Jhang said, adding, "I think most people believe that the presence of antibodies in most cases would confer some protection given our experience with other viruses."

"But we really have to wait to see some evidence of that before we can be confident in being able to say that these antibodies can be protective," he said.

If I get an antibody test, can it tell if I have the virus?

An antibody test is not the same thing as a diagnostic test for Covid-19, and it will not diagnose whether you currently have it.

Remember that antibodies take time to develop, so a lack of antibodies may just mean your body hasn't had enough time to develop them postinfection.

Do I still need to practice social distancing if I have antibodies?

Yes. If you test positive for antibodies, it is important that you continue to practice social distancing and proper general hygiene, as we still don't know if antibodies confer immunity. Wear a mask, wash your hands regularly, socially distance yourself and clean your home often.

Why does this matter?

As we just learned, knowing your antibody level will help you determine whether you've

been exposed to the coronavirus. This does not mean you're immune, and you should still practice all of the safety precautions you have been. But it does mean you may be eligible to donate convalescent plasma, which can potentially help patients still suffering from Covid-19 by allowing them to "borrow" your antibodies to accelerate their recovery time.

Widespread antibody testing may also give us a clearer picture of the scope of the disease. Results from a random testing of 3,000 people in New York City recently suggested that as many as one in five residents — or about 2.7 million people — might have encountered the disease without realizing it. When describing the results, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said that because the rate of infection might be far higher than initially thought, the death rate of the virus might be far lower than we thought.

Once the medical community determines whether antibodies confer immunity — which experts say will take at least six months or so to determine — we'll have a better sense of who may be less at risk emerging from lockdown.

"Once we understand that the antibodies are protective, then the testing means something," Dr. Jhang said, as it may help "figure out who can go back to work and be protected and not spread the disease, or when kids can go back to school, teachers going in to teach."

Are the tests accurate?

A study of 14 available antibody tests published last week found that only three delivered consistently reliable results. The study, which has yet to be peer-reviewed, found that only one test never returned a false positive, which is when the test incorrectly confirms the presence of coronavirus antibodies in people who didn't have them. The other two tests with consistently reliable results returned false positives about 1 percent of the time.

Further, these three tests confirmed the presence of antibodies in infected people only 90 percent of the time.

Part of the reason for the inaccuracies, Dr. Jhang said, may be what's called cross-reactivity: This is when a test misidentifies antibodies for a different, but similar, coronavirus.

Florian Krammer of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York told The New York Times that false positives weren't necessarily an issue when determining how widespread the disease is, as a given test's false-positive rate can be accounted for in estimates. They do, however, matter greatly on an individual level.

"You don't want anybody back to work who has a false positive — that's the last thing you want to do," Dr. Krammer said.

And the World Health Organization, citing ideas for an "immunity passport" or "risk-free certificate" from some countries, last week advised against relying on the tests for policy decisions.

Should I get a test?

If you think you currently have Covid-19, or have experienced in the last few days symptoms like coughing, fever, loss of taste or smell, or difficulty breathing, you should not

get a test. Again, the antibody test is not the same as a diagnostic test for Covid-19.

The test is generally intended for people who either have had a positive test for Covid-19 and have recovered; or who think they were exposed to Covid-19 and no longer have symptoms.

Quest Diagnostics, which on Tuesday announced it is selling a direct-to-consumer antibody test — meaning you don't need to first see a physician to take it — offered these guidelines for people interested in an antibody test:

- Have had a positive test for Covid-19 and it has been at least seven days and you want to know if you have detectable levels of immunoglobulin G, or IgG, antibodies.

- Have not experienced a fever or felt feverish in the last three days.

- Have not experienced new or worsening symptoms of Covid-19 in the past 10 days: loss of smell or taste, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, feeling weak or lethargic, lightheadedness or dizziness, vomiting or diarrhea, slurred speech and/or seizures.

Where can I get a test?

While getting a test to diagnose Covid-19 is still somewhat difficult, antibody testing seems to be rolling out a little more smoothly. Many organizations nationwide are beginning to offer the test, perhaps most notably Quest, which is offering the test without a physician's referral at the 2,200 patient service centers it operates around the country, the company said.

LabCorp, a competitor of Quest, announced on Monday that, with a physician's referral, patients could get an antibody test at any of its more than 2,000 patient service centers, as well as its 100 locations in Walgreens.

In New York City, the walk-in clinic CityMD said in an email to patients that, as of Tuesday, it would also offer antibody testing that would "indicate with high accuracy if you had the virus in the past whether or not you experienced symptoms."

CityMD advises that people "wait two to four weeks after the end of symptoms to get the antibody test." For more information about getting tested through CityMD, [click here](#).

Last, you can just ask your doctor about antibody testing, as doctors can refer patients to many locations running the test nationwide. Most insurance providers should cover the test, but check with yours to be sure.

Gilead Drug Helped Advanced Covid-19 Patients Recover Faster, U.S. Study Finds (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 3:51 PM, Joseph Walker, Neutral]

A closely-watched drug from Gilead Sciences Inc. GILD 5.67% helped hospitalized Covid-19 patients recover faster, U.S. government researchers said, results that might be enough to lead to its authorization for emergency use.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said Wednesday that advanced Covid-19 patients taking remdesivir in the institute's study had a speedier recovery than

patients taking placebo.

The reported benefit was moderate, however, with remdesivir patients recovering four days faster. All told, it took the patients 11 days to recover.

Also on Wednesday, a separate study in China posted negative results for the drug. The researchers urged more testing, however, because their trial was stopped early due to problems recruiting subjects as the pandemic slowed there.

Researchers run drug trials to establish whether a drug works safely. The varying outcomes for remdesivir point to the challenges scientists face finding definitive proof while racing to come up with a treatment in the middle of a pandemic.

The NIAID-funded study could carry more weight for U.S. health regulators weighing whether to approve wider use of remdesivir, however, since the study was carried out by government researchers and was fully enrolled.

NIAID Director Anthony Fauci said at the White House the results appeared to open the door to drug treatment of Covid-19, though he indicated drugmakers would probably need to build upon the findings to improve the benefit. "This will be the standard of care," he said.

"The FDA, literally as we speak, is working with Gilead to figure out mechanisms to make this easily available to those who need it with regard to getting to the market," Dr. Fauci said. "The FDA is very well aware that this is something that is important so I'm sure they'll move very expeditiously."

The U.S. study compared recovery times for 1,063 hospitalized patients taking either remdesivir or placebo.

NIAID said in a news release that patients taking remdesivir recovered in 11 days, compared with 15 days for patients taking placebo, a 31% improvement that was statistically significant.

A lower proportion of remdesivir patients died than in the placebo, but the difference wasn't statistically significant, though the NIAID said the data suggested a survival benefit. In the remdesivir group, 8% of patients died, compared with 11.6% of patients in the placebo arm.

The data are based on an interim analysis, and more detailed data will be released in the future, the agency said.

The separate study in China showed that remdesivir didn't have a statistically significant benefit over placebo, researchers said.

The median time to clinical improvement in patients taking remdesivir was 21 days, compared with 23 days for patients taking placebo in the China study, but the difference wasn't statistically significant, according to a paper published in the Lancet, a medical journal.

The rate of death was similar in both groups, with 14% of the patients taking remdesivir dying compared with 13% of patients in the placebo group. The difference wasn't

statistically significant.

Bin Cao, a physician who led the Chinese study, said in an interview that he thinks remdesivir did perform somewhat better than placebo in the study, but that the difference was small.

He also said remdesivir may have a role to play in treating Covid-19, but that further studies would have to be done to determine how early in the disease to treat patients and if it should be combined with other drugs.

Dr. Cao noted that patients in the Chinese study were extremely sick and weren't treated with remdesivir until a median of 10 days after their symptoms appeared. Patients may be too sick at that stage for a single antiviral drug to clear the virus, he said.

He also noted that the remdesivir group had a higher proportion of patients with pre-existing conditions like diabetes and hypertension, which may have also influenced the results.

Some experts said the Chinese study data were inconclusive because the trial was stopped early due to a lack of patients. Researchers intended to enroll 453 patients, but had only 237 patients enrolled when the study was stopped.

"The study has not shown a statistically significant finding that confirms a remdesivir treatment benefit of at least the minimally clinically important difference, nor has it ruled such a benefit out," wrote John David Norrie of the Usher Institute's Edinburgh Clinical Trials Unit, in a commentary accompanying the Lancet paper.

Gilead's remdesivir, an antiviral drug administered intravenously and previously tested in Ebola, is among the most closely watched experimental treatments for Covid-19, and is being studied in multiple clinical trials around the world. If approved by regulators, the drug would be the first proven to be effective against Covid-19.

The drug is unlikely to prove a panacea against the new coronavirus, and it won't prevent healthy people from being infected as a vaccine would, doctors and analysts say. Doctors have been looking for evidence from testing whether it reduces the risk of death in patients with Covid-19.

Also on Wednesday, Gilead said a separate study it funded showed that Covid-19 patients taking remdesivir for five days had similar results as patients taking a 10-day course of the drug. The study didn't compare the drug with a control group of patients not taking the drug, making the results difficult to interpret.

The results, while positive, far from definitively demonstrate that remdesivir safely fights Covid-19. The purpose of the study was to compare the two dosing timeframes, and see whether a five-day treatment course achieved similar results as a 10-day course. A shorter course would mean more patients could get the drug.

"The study demonstrates the potential for some patients to be treated with a 5-day regimen, which could significantly expand the number of patients who could be treated with our current supply of remdesivir," Chief Medical Officer Merdad Parsey said.

The company said it is conducting the study at 180 sites, including in countries with high levels of Covid-19 infection such as China, the U.S. and Italy. The study's initial phase involved 397 patients, and the company will enroll another 5,600 patients, Gilead said.

Gilead expects data at the end of May from another study assessing the two dosing durations of remdesivir in patients with moderate Covid-19 compared with patients receiving standard treatment.

Remdesivir hasn't been approved anywhere and has yet to be deemed safe or effective for Covid-19 treatment.

Not just hospitals: U.N. uncovers surprise tools needed to beat coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:09 AM, Nellie Peyton, Neutral]

How countries cope with the new coronavirus depends on more than hospital beds and income levels, the United Nations said on Wednesday, highlighting forgotten factors like internet access and reliance on tourism.

The U.N. Development Programme's (UNDP) analysis of countries' vulnerability to pandemics produced some surprising results, said its chief statistician Milorad Kovacevic.

Small island developing states, such as Jamaica and Haiti, are among the most at risk economically due to their reliance on remittances, tourism and aid, UNDP found, despite the fact they have recorded only a handful of deaths from coronavirus.

"This may ruin the development achievements that some of these countries had over the last 30 years," Kovacevic said.

The global economy is collapsing at a pace not seen since World War Two, with many countries under lockdowns to curb the spread of an outbreak which has infected some 3 million people.

As governments and central banks scramble to provide unprecedented support to combat recession and unemployment, there are concerns over developing countries' limited firepower to fund health and economic rescue efforts.

This does not mean that the poorest countries will suffer most. More important than income level are health and education systems, inequality and social services, according to UNDP.

Inequality in developed countries is often associated with weaker social cohesion and lower trust in government, which could make it harder to beat the disease, said Kovacevic, while more than 40% of the world's people have no social safety net.

One of the most important factors that may be overlooked is connectivity, since internet access determines whether people can continue their education and jobs at home, Kovacevic said.

"The digital divide has become more significant than ever at this moment," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Some 6.5 billion people – 86% of the global population – do not have access to reliable

broadband internet, UNDP said.

Croatia also emerged as another unexpected result. While it is well-prepared based on health and development measures, 20% of its gross domestic product (GDP) comes from tourism, which means it could be hard hit by travel bans and lockdowns.

Experts have warned that the 2030 deadline to meet the U.N.'s development goals is at risk as economies suffer in the fight against the virus, public financing dries up and international cooperation wanes.

Prepare for less privacy (Axios)

Axios [4/29/2020 5:40 AM, Jennifer A. Kingson, 526K, Neutral]

Whether in the workplace or the mall, people can expect that an opened-up world will involve more intrusive security measures and surveillance.

Why it matters: All the new coronavirus protocols that companies are considering for their workers and customers — from contact tracing and temperature-taking to heat mapping and "immunity passports" — have privacy and civil liberties implications.

Where it stands: While there's evidence that people are less concerned with privacy than before the pandemic hit — and more concerned with health — they still may not be ready for a world where their blood is tested for antibodies before boarding an airplane, as Dubai-based Emirates airlines has started doing.

The CEO of Delta, Ed Bastian, said the airline is considering "immunity passports" that would be required for boarding.

Other options could have a far broader reach.

Employers are entitled to mandate that workers get their temperature taken at the workplace (per a coronavirus-specific EEOC decision), report any symptoms to their boss, and get a COVID-19 vaccine if one is developed, per the WSJ.

Apple and Google are collaborating on an app-based system for contact tracing that "uses Bluetooth to determine if users have recently been in close proximity to someone with the coronavirus," Axios' Ina Fried reports.

While the tech giants envision an opt-in system, that would limit its utility, since it might not attract a critical mass of people.

Where it's going: Companies are going to be collecting a lot more information about people — through contactless payment systems, which will be in growing use as people avoid face-to-face transactions, and through the various technologies in development that will track people's virus exposure.

But the security of that information will be vulnerable to hacking or misuse, as well as public skepticism.

"For people to adopt a technology, it's very important to get privacy right," Omer Tene of the

International Association of Privacy Professionals tells Axios. 'If there's the fear that it's creepy or spying on them — or even draining their battery — people won't opt in to it.'

And in the same way that closed-circuit cameras stationed around London in advance of the Olympics became permanent fixtures, some surveillance measures to combat COVID-19 could turn out to be anything but temporary.

"Civil liberties rarely roll backwards," Cillian Kieran, CEO of the data privacy management company Ethyca, tells Axios.

The intrigue: Companies are still contemplating what measures they'll put in place for workers and customers once they reopen — and few have stated their plans openly yet. But many options under discussion would bump up against a hodgepodge of existing rules, like the medical privacy law HIPAA and the California Consumer Privacy Act.

Contact tracing services rely on databases like the ones that the CCPA allows people to remove themselves from, for example.

But erring too far on the side of privacy could expose companies to liability lawsuits from people who say they contracted COVID-19 on the job or in a store or restaurant.

For companies, "privacy is essential to getting the adoption and cooperation you need," Jules Polonetsky, CEO of the Future of Privacy Forum, tells Axios.

"For any of these measures to succeed, employers need to figure how to ensure that employees don't feel penalized by cooperating or reporting."

People need to feel like companies are doing things in the least intrusive way, being transparent in what's being collected and how it's used and making sure that data isn't held indefinitely, Sean Joyce, PwC's cybersecurity and privacy leader, tells Axios.

"Are you doing things to respect the privacy of each individual?" he says, "So it's not like there's a line or 20 people and you're saying, 'Hey, Sean — you registered 102 degrees, step out of line.'"

Be smart: Going forward, "we're going to be forced to be more biosecure, because my infection could infect an entire village," James Canton, CEO of the Institute for Global Future, tells Axios.

People might exchange biosecurity information routinely — or even wear or carry a physical token signaling they're immune, he predicts.

"It sounds Orwellian to some, or draconian to others, but it'll protect lives."

Navy Secretary Orders Deeper Inquiry Into Virus-Stricken Ship (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 4:11 PM, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, Neutral]

The acting secretary of the Navy on Wednesday ordered a wider investigation into events aboard the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, shelving for now a recommendation by the Navy's top admiral to restore Capt. Brett E. Crozier to command the virus-stricken warship.

"I have unanswered questions that the preliminary inquiry has identified and that can only be answered by a deeper review," the acting secretary, James E. McPherson, said in a statement.

Mr. McPherson said he was directing the chief of naval operations, Adm. Michael M. Gilday, to investigate, expanding a preliminary review that the Navy completed and presented to Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper last week.

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak aboard U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt," Mr. McPherson said.

His announcement came just days after Admiral Gilday recommended giving Captain Crozier his job back. But Mr. Esper, who initially said he would leave the process largely with the military chain of command, declined to endorse the findings last week, saying that he wanted to review the Navy's investigation into the matter first.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had also told associates that he favored a wider inquiry into the Roosevelt matter.

The decision essentially kicks down the road any action on Admiral Gilday's recommendation that Captain Crozier be reinstated, and was seen by some people within the Defense Department as reflecting concern among both civilian and military officials at the Pentagon over getting on the wrong side of President Trump. Captain Crozier was fired in part because of fears that Mr. Trump wanted him gone, and not knowing how the president feels about reinstating the captain has cast a shadow over the actions since.

"More and more, this looks like the military leadership and civilian leadership having very divergent goals," said Jon Soltz, an Iraq war veteran who is the chairman of VoteVets.org. "The military seems to not be interested in punishing a captain for taking desperate action to save the lives of his crew members."

But the Defense Department's civilian leadership, he said, "seems more interested in protecting the Trump administration's image, even if that means hanging commanders out to dry."

Reinstating Captain Crozier could be a remarkable reversal to a story that has seized the attention of the Navy, the military and even a nation struggling with the coronavirus. Instead, it is unclear who will be at the helm of the nuclear-powered carrier as its 4,800-member crew prepares to leave its weekslong quarantine in Guam to resume operations in the western Pacific.

Mr. McPherson's two-paragraph statement made no mention of Captain Crozier's fate. A spokeswoman for Mr. McPherson said that Capt. Carlos Sardiello, a former commanding officer of the Roosevelt who was summoned back after Captain Crozier was dismissed, would remain in charge for now.

Navy officials said the broader investigation would be conducted by an admiral outside the Pacific region and would most likely take about 30 days.

Senior lawmakers reacted with some skepticism to the Navy's latest decision.

"It's perfectly legitimate to extend the investigation about everything that happened with the Roosevelt," Representative Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat who heads the House Armed Services Committee, told reporters on a conference call.

But, Mr. Smith added, "I personally think that Captain Crozier should be reinstated."

Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the senior Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement, "This investigation should be thorough and expeditious." He added, "The removal of Captain Crozier was highly unorthodox and the recommendations of the military leadership on his reinstatement should be heavily weighed."

From the moment his letter pleading for assistance from top Navy officials became public, Captain Crozier has assumed the role of an unlikely hero, willing to sacrifice a three-decade career for the sake of his sailors.

After Captain Crozier was fired by the acting Navy secretary at the time, his personal setback took on momentum as a larger cause. Videos of hundreds of sailors cheering their skipper as he walked off the ship's gangway went viral on social media.

An ill-fated trip to the carrier afterward by the acting secretary, Thomas B. Modly, backfired when he criticized the crew for supporting its deposed captain. Mr. Modly resigned.

General Milley had agreed with Admiral Gilday, the Navy's top officer, in advising that Captain Crozier not be removed until an investigation into the events aboard the Roosevelt was complete. But Mr. Modly waved off those warnings, fearing that Mr. Trump wanted Captain Crozier fired, according to his acquaintances, and dismissed the skipper.

Mr. Trump's position appeared to ease, however, given the support for Captain Crozier in the Navy and among the general public. The president has not made clear where he stands on Captain Crozier's reinstatement, leading some Pentagon officials to conclude that Mr. Esper's hesitation in accepting the Navy's recommendations would allow time to account for the views of the president.

The announcement on Wednesday comes as the crew of the Roosevelt begins its long-scheduled turnover: swapping out those sailors who remained behind to clean the ship with healthy crew members who were isolated on Guam for the past several weeks.

In the coming days, the Roosevelt will start a series of sea trials, requalifying flight crews and pilots, before carrying on with its deployment in the western Pacific.

This week, the Kidd, the second deployed American warship stricken with the virus, returned to port in San Diego with at least 64 members of its crew testing positive for the illness, according to a Navy news release. The Kidd, a destroyer, was previously operating in the eastern Pacific and the Caribbean as part of a counternarcotics operation.

Navy opening full investigation of coronavirus outbreak on USS Theodore Roosevelt (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 11:21 AM, Dan Lamothe, Neutral]

The U.S. Navy will open a full investigation of the coronavirus outbreak aboard an aircraft carrier, acting Navy secretary James McPherson said Wednesday, days after the service's top officer recommended the reinstatement of a captain who raised concerns about the handling of the issue.

McPherson said Wednesday that after carefully reviewing a preliminary inquiry into what happened, he has "unanswered questions" that "can only be answered by a deeper review."

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions, and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt," McPherson said in a statement.

The statement did detail McPherson's questions, and Navy officials did not offer clarification Wednesday morning. It was not immediately clear who will lead the investigation for Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations.

The outbreak on the ship in the Pacific had resulted in 940 confirmed coronavirus cases and 29 recovered cases so far among a crew of more than 4,800, the Navy said. The virus began spreading after a port visit to Vietnam in early March, although Navy officials have said the outbreak could have originated with a resupply flight to the carrier.

As the outbreak spread among the crew, Navy Capt. Brett Crozier, the commanding officer, sent an email to three admirals with a memo attached raising concerns as the ship arrived in Guam for quarantining, testing and cleaning.

"I fully realize that I bear responsibility for not demanding more decisive action the moment we pulled in, but at this point my only priority is the continued well-being of the crew and embarked staff," Crozier wrote in the March 30 email, later obtained by The Washington Post. "I believe if there is ever a time to ask for help it is now regardless of the impact on my career."

The memo attached to the email leaked to the media and was initially published in the San Francisco Chronicle a day later. Crozier wrote in it that "decisive action is required."

"We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die," Crozier wrote. "If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset — our sailors."

Acting Navy secretary Thomas Modly removed Crozier from his job April 2, saying the captain had not safeguarded his message to senior Navy officials and had shown poor judgment. Modly resigned on April 7 after traveling from Washington to Guam and delivering a speech over the Theodore Roosevelt's loudspeaker in which he insulted Crozier and lectured the crew for supporting him.

Gilday recommended Crozier be reinstated last week, following the preliminary inquiry. But McPherson and Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper sought more information before making a decision.

President Trump initially criticized Crozier for sending the memo and email to Navy officials

but softened his tone when videos emerged showing the ship's crew cheering Crozier off the ship after he was relieved of command. Trump said that he did not "want to destroy somebody for having a bad day," and that he might intervene in the case.

Navy Will Reopen Investigation of USS Roosevelt Coronavirus Outbreak (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:18 PM, Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, Neutral] The U.S. Navy will open a second investigation into the coronavirus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, a top official said Wednesday, delaying action on a recommendation that the aircraft carrier's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, be reinstated to duty.

Capt. Crozier was removed from his post April 2 after writing and distributing a memo demanding a more aggressive Navy response to the coronavirus outbreak. Following a first investigation, the Navy recommended last week that Capt. Crozier be reinstated.

But the acting Navy secretary, James E. McPherson, asked the U.S. chief naval officer, Adm. Mike Gilday, for a broader probe of the outbreak, citing unanswered questions left by the earlier inquiry, which he called a preliminary investigation. Mr. McPherson announced the follow-on probe in a statement Wednesday.

The decision extends a tumultuous period following an upheaval over the military's response to the virus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt. Nearly 1,000 sailors eventually were infected, with one death.

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt," Mr. McPherson said of the new probe.

Adm. Gilday met last week with Mr. McPherson, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the initial probe and the recommendation that Capt. Crozier be reinstated. Mr. Esper last week asked for more time to consider the recommendation.

The Navy opened the first investigation on April 1, the week after the first coronavirus cases began appearing on the Theodore Roosevelt and days after the ship was diverted to port in Guam.

Capt. Crozier on March 30 wrote and distributed a memo pleading for a faster and more thorough response to the outbreak. At the time, about 70 crew members had tested positive for the coronavirus.

On April 2, Capt. Crozier was relieved of command by the acting Navy secretary at the time, Thomas Modly, who said he lost confidence in the naval commander.

Mr. Modly, in turn, resigned the following week after an uproar over disparaging remarks he made about Capt. Crozier over the aircraft carrier's public address system. Mr. McPherson was named the new acting secretary.

When Capt. Crozier left the vessel following his removal, he was cheered by throngs of sailors in a salute that was captured on video and circulated world-wide on social media.

The saga over the outbreak has divided the Navy as it battles coronavirus outbreaks among crew members among other ships as well.

Chief Petty Officer Charles Robert Thacker Jr., 41 years old, of Fort Smith, Ark., died April 13 at Naval Hospital Guam, the Navy said in a statement.

Trade

[China] Trump Administration Remains Hopeful on China Trade Pact Despite Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 4:32 PM, William Mauldin, Neutral]

A senior U.S. trade official expressed confidence Wednesday that Beijing will meet its obligations under the trade deal with Washington, despite fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and doubts by experts about China's ability to meet purchase targets.

"There have been certain challenges presented by the coronavirus, but overall the experience that we've had is that the Chinese are very, very committed to implementing their commitments," the senior official said during a briefing with reporters.

Many others question whether China, with its economy hit hard by the pandemic, is able to meet the trade deal's mandate that it increase purchases of U.S. goods and services by \$200 billion over 2017 levels.

"Looking at the supply-and-demand trends, and looking at how ambitious those targets were to begin with, in my view it's inconceivable that we're going to hit those targets this year," said Wendy Cutler, a former senior U.S. trade official and current vice president at the Asia Society Policy Institute.

The American Petroleum Institute, the trade group for the oil-and-gas industry, last week sent a letter to U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer and other senior officials reminding them of China's commitment to purchase \$18.5 billion in additional U.S. energy products this year—and suggesting that China might even increase that commitment.

"Further examination of this Agreement may present opportunities to address our domestic oversupply and at the same time, further advance U.S. international objectives," API President Mike Sommers said in the letter.

Still, even large quantities of oil won't yield the same revenue as previously given the major drop in energy prices and so may not help satisfy the dollar requirement for purchases.

"You can cover this up a bit because of the virus, but pretty soon we're going to see all of this exposed, and we're going to be able to judge whether China begins to make the purchases they promised," said Michael Wessel, a member of the congressionally mandated U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a

request for comment. The China deal, signed in January, has a clause that allows Beijing to consult with Washington on the purchase agreements in case of a sudden economic setback.

The limited trade agreement, which consists mostly of concessions made by Beijing, is the main tangible result of President Trump's 2016 campaign promise to raise pressure on the world's second-biggest economy to balance trade and respect global rules of commerce.

With the U.S. economy also faltering, Mr. Trump is relying on the first phase of the China pact and an amended version of the North American trade rules with Canada and Mexico as his main economic achievements as he seeks reelection this fall.

China's required purchases include not only U.S. agricultural exports but American energy products, transportation equipment and other goods. The exact product breakdown is classified.

U.S. officials say they expect China to follow through on its commitments. "There have been some issues related to purchases and we really have been talking extensively to the Chinese to stay on track to make the purchases and meet the purchase commitments," the senior trade official said.

Some progress has been made. This month China belatedly published a required "action plan" for improving intellectual-property protection in the country, a key issue that kicked off the trade spat in 2017, according to a report by the Xinhua state news agency. The road map was supposed to be published within 30 business days of the agreement's effective date in mid-February.

The senior U.S. trade official said Washington is reviewing the intellectual-property plan and will stay in touch on intellectual-property measures as China rolls them out.

"They took some action on intellectual property that seemed to be in the spirit of the agreement," said Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa), chairman of the Finance Committee, in a call with reporters on Tuesday.

Despite the hopeful signs on trade, U.S.-Chinese ties have deteriorated in recent weeks, notably with finger-pointing over the coronavirus epidemic.

"Relations between the U.S. and China politically are at a low point with concerns over China's withholding of information about the virus," said Kelly Ann Shaw, a former economic and security official in the Trump White House and current partner at law firm Hogan Lovells.

Even so, she said, that "based on my experience negotiating with them that China will comply where it is physically possible to do so."

[China] China committed to Phase 1 trade deal despite pandemic – U.S. official (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

China remains "very, very committed" to meeting its commitments under a Phase 1 trade deal with the United States, despite the unprecedented economic and health impacts of the

new coronavirus pandemic, a senior U.S. trade official said on Wednesday.

The official told reporters that U.S. officials were talking regularly, and often daily, about implementation of the trade deal and to make sure that China fulfilled its extensive agreements to buy U.S. goods and services.

The U.S. Trade Representative's office kept China on its priority watch list for concerns about intellectual property protections and enforcement, and was watching closely to see if it implemented changes agreed as part of the trade agreement, the official said.

Near East & North Africa

Saudi TV Series Sparks Rare Ramadan Debate on Ties With Israel (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 8:59 AM, Vivian Nereim, 6400K, Neutral]

A Saudi television series in which the taboo topic of ties with Israel became a plot line has spurred speculation it's a prelude to a real-life push for a rethink toward a country long viewed as a public enemy in the Arab world.

The show, called "Exit 7," is a comedic special for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, exploring rapid changes in Saudi Arabia through a bumbling father figure who's trying to adapt. In the controversial episode earlier this week, he discovers his son has befriended an Israeli through an online game. The revelation divides the family: shocking the father, infuriating his daughter and leading his father-in-law to declare "so what?"

"Israel is there whether you like it or not," says the unperturbed elder, played by Saudi actor Rashid Al Shamrani. He later says he'd happily do business with Israelis and argues that Palestinians are the real enemy for "insulting" Saudi Arabia "day and night."

The fact that the episode was aired by MBC – a private broadcaster majority-owned by the Saudi government – led some Saudis to predict that officials want to pave the way for closer relations with Israel. Gulf Arab states and Israel don't have diplomatic relations, but there have been closer informal contacts in recent years which officials say stem from shared concerns over Iran.

'Not My Issue'

"The notion of a real Saudi-Israeli normalization is still far-fetched," said Abdulaziz Alghashian, a lecturer of international relations at the U.K.'s University of Essex. But the TV show did at least start to normalize discourse about normalization, he said, and it could be "a way of gradually introducing the Saudi public to very early stages of sporadic Saudi-Israeli cooperation."

Across the Gulf, the idea of treating Israel as just another country is deeply contentious. Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki Al Faisal recently appeared on Saudi television to declare "the Zionist lobby" was among the kingdom's biggest enemies in the U.S.

Yet there's also been a nationalistic reaction against long-established support for Palestinians and their demands for the return of land occupied by Israel, partly due to perceived Palestinian criticism of Saudi Arabia. Most recently a political cartoon by a

Palestinian in Sweden that appeared to mock the damage of falling oil prices on the kingdom stirred anger. Saudi Twitter users have shared a "Palestine is not my issue" hashtag.

To some extent, it's a generational shift. Supporting the Palestinians remains a key element of state rhetoric. But some Saudis closer in age to 34-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman argue it's time to focus on their own country, not pan-Arab dilemmas that absorbed years of attention with little result.

Kuwait Row

"Exit 7" underscores how complex Saudi discourse on the topic is, Alghashian said. While the sister character declares a crusade against "the Zionist danger," a delivery man she asks about the topic replies that he wants nothing to do with politics and is more concerned about finding a job.

It's one of several Ramadan series to court controversy on the issue this year. Another MBC show called Umm Haroun, set in 1940s Kuwait, depicts a multi-religious village with Jewish residents and stars Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al-Fahad as a Jewish midwife. In a statement, MBC said the drama showcases "a Middle East where acceptance of one another was the norm." But it set off a backlash in Kuwait, with Al-Fahad criticized by some for taking on the role.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Ramadan series "The End" took the opposite tack: Set in the year 2120 in a dystopian post-Israel Jerusalem, it predicts the destruction of the Jewish state and imagines a future without it.

"Inside every Arab, there's the idea of liberating any occupied Arab territory," show writer Amr Sami Atef said in an interview with Saudi television channel Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath.

Israel's foreign ministry condemned the drama, which stood in stark contrast to the cooperation between governments in Egypt and Israel, which established full diplomatic ties in 1980, especially over security.

[Israel] Israel deems women's ritual baths essential, leaving some conflicted over virus risk (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Ruth Eglash, 18460K, Neutral]

As covid-19 spread rapidly in the first weeks of March, Esther grew nervous. It was nearly time for her monthly visit to the ritual bath that many observant Jewish women use to purify themselves after every menstrual cycle, and she worried she might catch the virus at the very place meant for physical and spiritual cleansing.

"I have a disability and many underlying health issues," said Esther, 43, an ultra-Orthodox mother of seven. "Deciding whether or not to go was very, very stressful."

Even as Israel closed down its public sphere to stem the spread of the coronavirus, the government deemed that some 700 of these ritual baths, or mikvahs, were essential and permitted them to remain open along with supermarkets and pharmacies. When most of the country was completely locked down for the Passover holiday, the women's mikvahs were not.

Without a dip in a mikvah, observant women are forbidden to have any physical contact with their husbands, leaving these wives with a dilemma: go to the mikvah and resume intimate relations or stay clear of the ritual bath to avoid any chance of infection.

"I deliberated for a long time about whether I should even go. I thought about waiting until after this crisis was over," said Esther, a Jerusalem resident who spoke on condition that her full name be withheld so she could discuss an intimate matter. "But the truth is, I am a woman and my husband a man; we need to be together. Without the mikvah we would not be able to be intimate, and that would make this difficult time even more stressful and lonely."

She decided to go, but took precautions she hoped would keep her safe. She arrived early, when the water was still fresh. She sprayed disinfectant on every surface before touching it. She spent as little time there as possible.

According to Jewish law, women are required to visit the mikvah, a small pool containing water mainly from a natural source, on the conclusion of a 12-to-14-day period that begins with the onset of menstruation. Until a full-body immersion is carried out, any form of physical contact between a husband and wife is prohibited. For observant Jews, ignoring this commandment is as unthinkable as eating pork or driving on the Sabbath.

Dvora Eiferman, the official at the Ministry of Religious Services overseeing public mikvahs, said that even when emergency measures were imposed in mid-March, shuttering stores, restaurants, gyms and ritual baths for men, and later when synagogues and other religious spaces were closed down, it was clear the women's mikvahs would remain open.

"We are talking about the most important ritual, a basic need, and there was no choice but to keep them open," she said.

In the United States, many Jewish communities have also tried to keep their mikvahs open, although as the coronavirus crisis has deepened, particularly in the New York area where the Jewish population has been especially hard hit, the ritual baths have been shuttered along with other religious institutions.

The Israeli government, in keeping mikvahs open, issued new safety guidelines. These require women to register in advance, allowing the mikvah attendant to track those entering and have time to clean the bath between appointments. The chlorine levels in the baths must be measured after every two or three immersions. While women would previously shower on site in private bathrooms before entering the mikvah, such preparations are no longer permitted on the premises.

So far, there are no reported cases of women who have become infected at a mikvah in Israel, according to Mitchell Schwaber, director of the National Center for Infection Control.

But there have been scares, and many women remain fearful about going, though they feel there is no choice.

In Efrat, a Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank where one of the first Israeli outbreaks of coronavirus occurred, a woman visited the mikvah without realizing she was

infected. When that was discovered, the bathhouse, one of two in the town, was ordered closed. Every woman who had been there that day was ordered into a 14-day quarantine. The mikvah was reopened a week later after a thorough cleaning.

"It is a little uncomfortable doing this when the [attendant] is guiding you from a distance, wearing a face mask," said Hindy Ginsberg, 36, who lives in Efrat. "But I am grateful the option is still there."

Ginsberg, who is a consulting expert on Jewish purity laws, stressed the importance of the mikvah for Jewish married life. "Even if you take sex out of the equation, we would still not be able to hold hands, and that would just be too difficult with everything that is going on," she said.

For many observant Jewish women, mikvah visits have long been meant to be discreet, carried out in the evening without any notice to family members. Under the new guidelines, women must use a newly created app to register their appointments. Names and contact details must be logged in case of another scare.

"My local women's WhatsApp group was joking about what excuses we could give our children or the police about where we are going when everyone is meant to be staying home," Ginsberg said. "I had to pretend I was going to the supermarket."

Not everyone agrees that the baths need to remain open in the midst of a pandemic. Rabbi Haim Amsalem, a former parliament member from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, has urged that health and safety should always come first.

"The question was posed to me by communities in Europe and the U.S., where mikvahs have been closed for months and where there are strict directives not to leave the house at all," said Amsalem. "My approach is that Torah commandments are not supposed to be a punishment. We have to find a way to live with these rules but not put ourselves in danger."

He determined that women can fulfill Jewish law with an immersion in a large bath, a hot tub or a private swimming pool.

For Esther, returning to the mikvah during the coronavirus outbreak no longer seems like an option. She said she was so unsettled by her last visit there that she convinced her doctor to prescribe contraceptive pills to stave off her next menstrual cycle.

"I'll take it for a month or two and by then I hope this situation will be better," she said.

[Libya] Libya's Hifter declares cease-fire in Tripoli fighting (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:29 PM, Samy Magdy, Neutral]

Eastern Libyan forces laying siege to the country's capital of Tripoli said Wednesday they have agreed on a humanitarian pause in fighting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Ahmed al-Mosmari, a spokesman for the forces of military commander Khalifa Hifter, said at a news conference that they have stopped all military operations across Libya in response to international appeals for a humanitarian truce so authorities could focus on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

The recent round of fighting in war-torn Libya began last April when Hifter's forces launched an offensive trying to take Tripoli, clashing with an array of militias loosely allied with the U.N.-supported but weak government in the capital.

There was no immediate comment from the Tripoli-based administration, known as the Government of National Accord.

Violence has escalated in recent weeks, with the two warring sides accusing each other of shelling civilian neighborhoods. The U.N. has said the violence and worsening humanitarian crisis in Libya could amount to war crimes.

Stephanie Williams, acting U.N. envoy in Libya, on Tuesday called for a humanitarian truce during Ramadan that could pave the way for a permanent cease-fire.

The cease-fire announcement came after Hifter, in an attempted show of strength, declared on Monday that a 2015 U.N.-brokered political deal to unite the oil-rich country was "a thing of the past."

Al-Mosmari, the spokesman, said Wednesday that Hifter's self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces would announce constitutional declaration including a "road map" that would lead the country to elections.

The Tripoli-based government had said it wasn't surprised by Hifter's announcement and urged Libyans to join "a comprehensive dialogue and continue on the democratic path to reach a comprehensive and permanent solution based on ballot boxes."

While the 2015 agreement has failed to bring unity or stability to the divided country, Hifter's announcement threatened to further complicate U.N. efforts to broker a political settlement to the civil war.

The clashes in Libyan have complicated efforts to fight the coronavirus outbreak. Libya has confirmed more than 60 cases, including two deaths, most of them the country's west.

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011, when a civil war toppled long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who was later killed. The chaos has worsened in the recent round of fighting as foreign backers increasingly intervened despite pledges to the contrary at a high-profile peace summit in Berlin earlier this year.

[Saudi Arabia] Saudi foreign reserves fall at fastest for two decades (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:58 AM, Marwa Rashad and Davide Barbuscia, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's central bank foreign reserves fell in March at their fastest rate in at least 20 years and to their lowest since 2011, while the kingdom slipped into a \$9 billion budget deficit in the first quarter as oil revenues collapsed.

The world's largest oil exporter is suffering from historic price lows, while at the same time measures to fight the new coronavirus are likely to curb the pace and scale of economic reforms launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority said late on Tuesday its net foreign assets, which

include securities such as U.S Treasuries and foreign deposits, fell in March to \$464 billion, their lowest in 19 years.

The nearly \$27 billion decline – the biggest monthly drop in at least two decades – signals the kingdom's urgent need to tap into reserves to offset economic damage from oil prices and a severe coronavirus-driven slowdown of non-oil sectors.

"We believe that the magnitude of the drop ... reflected both higher government funding to cover the budget deficit and the support packages announced in March to help counterbalance the impact of COVID-19," said Monica Malik, chief economist at Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB).

Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan said last week the kingdom would limit its draw down to a maximum of \$32 billion from reserves this year to fill a widening deficit which it plans to cover instead by increasing borrowing to nearly \$60 billion.

Early on Wednesday the finance ministry reported a first quarter budget deficit of \$9 billion, mostly because of a drop in oil revenues that reversed a first quarter surplus of around \$7.4 billion in 2019.

Oil revenues in the first three months of the year posted a 24% annual decline to \$34 billion and pushed total revenues down 22% year on year.

Saudi Arabia, which had registered more than 20,000 coronavirus cases as of Tuesday with 152 deaths, had originally projected a \$50 billion deficit this year, or 6.4% of gross domestic product (GDP), widening from around \$35 billion last year.

Jadaan has said the deficit could now widen to up to 9% of GDP this year, but some analysts have predicted 22% with oil prices at \$30 a barrel.

International oil prices LCOc1 have shed around two thirds value since the start of this year and are trading around \$21.

"If Finance Minister al-Jadaan's plans are for merely \$32 billion of reserves drawdown then, following a \$27 billion reduction in March alone, that means almost all the remainder will be covered by new sovereign debt issuance, assuming there are no further privatisations, because of market conditions," said Hasnain Malik, head of equity strategy at Tellimer.

Saudi Arabia and other large producers recently agreed to cut output by almost 10 million barrels per day (bpd), in May-June, in an attempt to balance the market, but demand kept falling nonetheless due to the global slowdown.

Jadaan said last week he expects the pandemic to cause a slump in activity in the non-oil private sector too this year and that the government could take more actions on top of \$32 billion in emergency stimulus measures announced last month.

Private sector loan growth, however, was solid in March, central bank data showed, "potentially reflecting the higher borrowing requirements of corporates with COVID-19 impacting cash flows," said ADCB's Malik.

Non-oil revenues in the first quarter fell 17% compared to the same period one year earlier, with revenues from taxes on goods and services plunging, in a sign of overall slowdown.

Saudi Arabia has already cut its 2020 budget by nearly 5% and further spending curbs are likely.

In Q1, however, capex spending declined only 4%, the finance ministry said.

Riyadh last month raised its debt ceiling to 50% of GDP from 30%. It has already borrowed \$12 billion in international bonds this year.

[Tunisia] Tunisia announces lockdown easing, timeline for students (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 3:39 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Tunisian officials on Wednesday announced a partial easing of lockdown measures in place to curb the spread of novel coronavirus, although schools will largely remain closed until September.

Education Minister Mohamed Hamdi, Health Minister Abdellatif Mekki and other officials told a joint news conference that work was expected to resume with reduced staffing in some sectors from Monday.

A broader relaxation is planned for June 14 but will depend on how the health situation develops, officials said, warning of the risk of a second wave of infection.

People aged over 65 and those suffering from chronic illnesses were among those not covered by Wednesday's easing of restrictions.

Students in their final year of high school are set to restart classes on May 28 and sit their end-of-year exams in July, the education minister said.

Other students will return to school for the new academic year in September.

Schools in Tunisia have been closed since mid-March.

Medicine and pharmacy students will return to university on May 11, with other departments opening later, said Higher Education Minister Slim Choura.

Tunisia has officially declared 975 cases of novel coronavirus including 40 deaths, and has put strict social distancing measures in place, including a night-time curfew.

Tunisia's Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh had said earlier this month that lockdown measures would be progressively eased after May 3.

[Yemen] Yemen records multiple coronavirus cases for first time; U.N. fears more (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:24 PM, Mohammed Mukhashaf and Mohammed Ghobari, Neutral]

Yemeni authorities reported multiple coronavirus infections for the first time on Wednesday after the United Nations said it feared the disease could be spreading undetected in a

country where millions face famine and lack medical care.

The five new COVID-19 cases were detected in Aden, a southern port which is interim headquarters of a government ousted from the capital Sanaa more than five years ago by the Iran-aligned Houthi group in a war that has created the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Previously Yemen had detected only a single case.

International health officials have long warned that Yemen's population could be extremely vulnerable to an outbreak, which would be difficult to detect in a country where health infrastructure has been degraded by poverty and war.

An emergency committee for coronavirus maintained by the Aden-based government said in a tweet that it would release more details about the five new cases.

Authorities told Reuters they have been unable to track down "patient zero" for Yemen's infections, an important step in tracing people potentially exposed to infection and containing an outbreak.

On Tuesday the United Nations said there was a "very real probability" the virus was circulating within communities.

Health workers say the virus could spread rapidly in a country where 24 million people – 80% of the population – rely on aid, and 10 million are at risk of famine.

Yemen's only previous laboratory-confirmed case was detected on April 10 in the southern port of Ash Shihr. The 60-year-old port official has since recovered and tested negative for the virus, the committee said on Monday.

Two sources familiar with the matter have told Reuters there has been at least one confirmed case in the capital Sanaa, which is controlled by the Houthis.

But the Houthi Health Ministry denied this and said all suspected cases had tested negative for COVID-19.

On Wednesday the Aden-based government's emergency coronavirus committee said it had concerns that Sanaa authorities were not admitting to a coronavirus outbreak there.

Responding to the newly confirmed cases, authorities in Aden announced a three-day, 24-hour curfew starting at midnight.

The announcement came from the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group that declared self-rule on Sunday in southern Yemeni governorates including Aden.

Mosques were also closed until further notice in Aden, and shopping centres and restaurants for two weeks. Markets selling qat, the mildly stimulant green leaf chewed daily by many Yemenis, will continue to be closed across all southern governorates and its sale banned in and around towns.

Wholesalers will be asked to store a certain amount of reserve goods, before certain amounts are allowed for export, the STC statement said.

Europe and Eurasia

[Albania] Albanian economy to shrink by 5% due to virus, quake – World Bank (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:09 PM, Benet Koleka, Neutral]

Albania's economy, hit by an earthquake that left 17,000 homeless last year and coronavirus-containment measures, could shrink by as much as 5% in 2020, even if most economic activities restart in early summer, the World Bank said.

In its semi-annual report on the Western Balkans released on Wednesday, the bank described the double hit to Albania as "destructive," noting the new coronavirus had frozen large parts of the economy.

The bank said dependence on tourism, close ties with hard-hit Italy across the Adriatic Sea and limited fiscal options made Albania especially vulnerable right now.

"Even according to the baseline scenario, which assumes most economic activities could re-start by the beginning of summer, the annual gross domestic product is expected to shrink by 5% in the year 2020," the World Bank said.

However, the bank said its forecast had an unusually high degree of uncertainty. The downside scenario, which assumed economic activity would start later in the summer, saw the economy shrink by 6.9%.

The recession and measures to prop up the economy would widen the budget deficit to 5.4% of gross domestic product in 2020 and increase public debt to 75.8% of GDP, it added.

Albania's last assessment at the end of March saw economic growth slowing to 2% from 4.1%, the budget deficit rising to 3.9% from 2.2% and public debt rising four percentage points to 68.8% of gross domestic product.

Once the crisis was over, "the normalisation of economic activity and the reconstruction to soothe the consequences of the quake are expected to back rapid growth, but structural reforms are needed in the medium term," the bank added.

[Austria] Austrian president's office briefly cleared after bomb threat (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:17 AM, Francois Murphy, Neutral]

Part of the former imperial palace in central Vienna housing Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen's office was evacuated on Wednesday after a bomb threat and the president was taken to safety, but police soon gave the all-clear.

A police spokesman said the threat was made by email against the Hofburg, a sprawling palace complex that includes reception rooms, the headquarters of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and temporarily the debating chamber of Austria's lower house of parliament.

Police sealed off the area around Van der Bellen's office, including a square that separates it from the office of the head of Austria's government, conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

"The search was negative. All closures can be lifted!" the Vienna police said on Twitter on Wednesday evening.

Van der Bellen, a former leader of the left-wing Greens whose role is largely ceremonial, had been evacuated, a spokesman for his office confirmed, though he added that he did not know details of the threat or its target.

It remains unclear who made the threat or why.

The part of the complex temporarily occupied by parliament while its main building nearby is being renovated was not evacuated, a parliament spokesman said. That area is at the opposite end of the palace.

[Bosnia] Bosnia Reports Sharp Rise in Coronavirus Cases After Relaxing Lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:19 AM, Staff, Negative]

Bosnia reported on Wednesday its sharpest daily rise in new coronavirus infections this month after its two autonomous regions had gradually begun to ease lockdowns.

There were 93 new infections and two deaths in the previous 24 hours, compared with 20 new infections a day earlier and 49 the day before that, officials said.

The total number of infected people rose to 1,677 with 65 deaths, while 29,130 have been tested.

Both the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb Republic imposed lockdowns last month after the outbreak of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus. Their measures included barring people aged over 65 and children up to 18 from leaving home at all.

The Serb Republic, which started on Monday to let senior citizens leave home for three hours each workday and some businesses to reopen, reported 59 new cases. Its officials urged citizens to continue to avoid gatherings and to wear masks at all times.

"The percentage of positive cases in relation to those tested is revealing a lowering of individual discipline in obeying the prescribed measures," Serb Republic Health Minister Alen Seranic said, adding that 8% of those tested in the past 24 hours were found to be positive, up from 5% previously.

"The whole community is behaving in a more relaxed manner than before, when we had a different number of cases from now," said Seranic, who is a trained epidemiologist.

In the northern town of Banja Luka, which has recorded the highest number of coronavirus cases in Bosnia, Pedja Kovacevic, head of the intensive care department at the main hospital, said health workers had been able to cope with the pandemic so far.

"What is terrifying is that we have the largest number of sick and hospitalised patients in the hospital in the ninth week, and I call on the public and every citizen to think twice (before leaving home)," Kovacevic said.

The Bosniak-Croat Federation lifted its night curfew last Friday and abolished a measure of obligatory quarantine. It also allowed senior citizens and children to leave home every second day for several hours.

These measures will be reinstated during the three-day Labour Day holidays, officials said, adding that people there too were behaving in a more relaxed manner.

"We are aware that we'll see new peaks and trends of the disease, but we have to go back to normal life," said Goran Cerkez, the federation assistant health minister.

"We shall see how that proceeds, and whether we have to reinstate restrictions will depend on the citizens."

Bosnia's economy has been hit hard by the lockdowns and the closure of many businesses. The International Monetary Fund has forecast growth to shrink 5% this year.

[France] Labs see bottlenecks in France's plan to scale-up COVID-19 testing (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:26 AM, Matthias Blamont, Neutral]

The leaders of two federations representing thousands of private laboratories across France cast doubt on the country's ability to more than double coronavirus testing before the country begins unwinding its lockdown on May 11.

The industry officials cited two looming bottlenecks: a potential shortage of workers able to conduct tests and the availability of government-approved reagents, with countries around the world racing to get hold of testing kits.

Mass testing is critical to France's ability to emerge safely from a now six-week old lockdown.

France will switch to an aggressive doctrine on COVID-19 testing from May 11, aiming for 700,000 nasal swab tests per week, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe on Tuesday said.

This means France must nearly triple its current capacity in just a fortnight.

"I'm not sure this goal of 700,000 is reasonable," Francois Blanchecotte, head of the Syndicat des Biologistes federation representing some 4,000 labs, told Reuters. "One limitation will be the number of people able to do testing on such a scale."

France is not alone in scrambling to test more widely. Britain was on track to meet a target of 100,000 tests per day by Thursday, its health minister said this week, although recent data shows about 43,000 daily tests being completed.

Swab tests involve collecting a sample from either a person's nasal passage or throat. A reagent is then added to determine whether there is an infection.

France has authorised about 40 reagents for use in COVID-19 testing, manufactured by large pharmaceutical groups like Switzerland's Roche and the United States' Abbott Laboratories, as well as small and mid-sized companies.

Lionel Barrand, who leads the Syndicat National des Jeunes Biologistes Medicaux federation, cautioned this number might be inadequate and that laboratories were already having difficulties sourcing reagents in France and from abroad.

China, where the global pandemic originated, is an important source market of reagents.

"Will there be enough reagents? We're still seeing tensions on supply at a national level," Barrand said.

France had the logistics to scale up testing, he said. "But that will work only if we have enough reagents and swabs."

A health ministry spokeswoman said France had taken steps with international suppliers to secure supplies of reagents. Meanwhile the French health industry regulator had approved a new locally made cotton swab to ease pressure on swab imports.

Countries around the world hope blood tests meant to show whether people exposed to the disease have developed antibodies thought to offer some immunity will also guide efforts to restart their economies.

But serological testing has so far proved unreliable and questions persist over the human body's immunity memory after coronavirus infection.

That places more pressure on nasal swab testing. Barrand said clarity was needed on which symptoms — which include headaches, fever, dry coughs and a loss of taste — necessitated testing.

"If every person presenting with a small symptom turns up, the system will collapse," he said.

[Germany] Germany to extend travel warning for tourist trips abroad to mid-June – report (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:48 AM, Michelle Martin, 5304K, Neutral]

The German cabinet will on Wednesday extend a travel warning for all tourism trips abroad until at least June 14, magazine Der Spiegel reported, saying that a Foreign Ministry document to that effect had been agreed with other ministries.

[Germany] Germany hopes there will be coordinated EU decision on foreign travel – minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The German government warned foreign travel would not be risk-free even if travel restrictions were lifted, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Wednesday, adding that Germany hopes to discuss a coordinated solution with its European Union partners.

Maas told reporters that the government would revisit on a weekly basis the question of whether travel restrictions could be lifted, but advised against leisure travel even if they were, adding that there could be no guarantee that travel warnings would not be reintroduced at short notice.

Although a Europe-wide solution would be desirable, he could not rule out that there would be differences in travel regimes between the EU's member states, he added.

[Germany] Prosecutors charge neo-Nazi with German politician's murder (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 8:48 AM, Staff, Negative]

German prosecutors have charged a far-right extremist with the killing of a regional politician from Chancellor Angela Merkel's party and in a near-fatal attack on an Iraqi asylum-seeker a few years before.

Federal prosecutors said Wednesday that Stephan Ernst, who has previous convictions for a string violent anti-migrant crimes, is accused of murder, attempted murder, serious bodily harm and firearms offenses.

A second man, identified only as Markus H., was charged with accessory to murder and breaking firearms laws for allegedly helping Ernst improve his marksmanship while suspecting that he was considering a politically motivated attack, the prosecutors said.

Walter Luebcke, who led the regional administration in Germany's the central region of Kassel, was shot on his porch on June 1, 2019, and died later that night.

Prosecutors said in a statement that Ernst and Markus H. had visited an October 2015 town hall event where Luebcke defended the German government's decision to allow hundreds of thousands of refugees into the country.

Angered by sexual assaults in Cologne months later and an Islamist truck attack in Nice, France, in July 2016, Ernst allegedly decided to kill Luebcke to "send a publicly noticeable signal against the current state order, which he rejected," according to prosecutors.

Around the same time, Ernst allegedly attacked the Iraqi asylum-seeker from behind with a knife, injuring the victim's spine and severing two nerves.

Prosecutors said the attack was rooted in Ernst's "right-wing extremist hatred of refugees."

After his arrest in June, authorities said they found numerous illegal firearms that Ernst had stored in various locations, including three revolvers, two pistols, two rifles and a submachine gun, as well as 1,400 bullets.

[Holy See] Knights of Malta Grand Master who healed rift with Vatican dies (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:14 AM, Philip Pullella, 5304K, Neutral]

Giacomo Dalla Torre, the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta who steered the global Catholic chivalric order and charity to reconciliation with the Vatican after a period of conflict, died on Wednesday.

The Knights said Dalla Torre, 75, had been ill for several months.

He was elected interim leader in 2017 following the abrupt resignation of Matthew Festing, whose final months of governance were marred by a dispute with the Vatican over the running of the group.

The group's Grand Masters usually rule for life and Festing, a Briton, was the first in several centuries to step down.

The conflict laid bare tensions between a reformist Pope, Francis, and his conservative critics, led by American Cardinal Raymond Burke, the Knights' chaplain.

After the Burke faction lost an internal power struggle, Dalla Torre reconciled the group with the Vatican and began a process of reform.

Dalla Torre was the 80th grand master of the group, whose formal name is Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta.

It was founded in Jerusalem nearly 1,000 years ago to provide medical aid for pilgrims in the Holy Land.

It now has a multi-million dollar budget, 13,500 members, 80,000 volunteers and 42,000 medical staff running refugee camps, drug treatment centres, disaster relief programs and clinics around the world.

Since the upheavals that led to Festing's resignation, the order - which is a sovereign entity and has bilateral diplomatic relations with 110 states - has been working on a new constitution.

Reformers, backed by the Vatican, want to revamp its constitution to make its government more transparent and better able to respond to the massive growth it has seen in recent years.

They also want to make it possible for commoners to reach top positions. Under the current monarchical hierarchy, the top Knights are required to have noble lineage. The late Grand Master had the rank of prince and his full name was Giacomo Dalla Torre del Tempio di Sanguinetto.

Under normal conditions, senior members be required to gather in Rome in three months to elect a new grand master but the period likely will be extended because of the coronavirus pandemic, a source in the order said.

[Kosovo] UK climate activists stranded in historic town in Kosovo (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:51 AM, Visar Kryeziu, 2194K, Neutral]

British climate activists Rosie Watson and Mike Elm were on an international bicycle and running tour to promote their green campaign when they got stuck in Kosovo because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Watson, 25, from Loweswater in northwestern England, and Elm, 32, from Edinburgh, Scotland, have been stranded in Prizren, a town in Kosovo, 85 kilometers (50 miles) southwest of the capital, Pristina.

Since mid-March, Kosovo has been in a lockdown with all of its land and air border crossings shut. The virus has killed at least 22 people in the Balkan nation, which has more than 790 confirmed cases.

The couple decided against getting on an evacuation flight organized by the British government, saying they are against plane travel and they want to continue their journey once it's possible to do so. Their trip is low-budget and they have had free accommodation since the start.

They are enjoying the historic, cobblestone streets of Prizren, a town along the Bistrica River and the Sharri Mountains that was founded in the second century A.D. and has a medieval castle. They have also been sampling fli, a local butter pie, and been reassured by a traditional welcome from residents.

In Prizren, they have focused on writing about their trip. Watson has a blog as does Elm.

Watson started her "The New Story Run" in August last year from the United Kingdom, planning a two-year tour on foot to Mongolia "to tell stories of people finding a better and more equal and healthy way of living for us and the planets and tackling the climate crisis." After running 3,570 kilometers (2,220 miles), or 17 kilometers (around 10 miles) per day, she has a lot to write about.

Inspired by her efforts, Elm joined her in November aiming to cycle a total of 12,000 kilometers (7,450 miles), or 50 kilometers (30 miles) a day. Before getting stuck, they took different routes, but they met up time and again along the way.

Elm met people in Prizren trying "to improve this beautiful city by bringing more trees and green space." Previously, he was in Zlarin, which aims at becoming Croatia's first single-use plastic free island. In neighboring Albania, Watson met with a community battling against hydroelectric operations that he says are endangering nearby Valbona National Park.

"A better world for our children needs a better world for us right now," Elm said.

The pandemic will urge people to "see some of the benefits of having less cars in the city and the cleaner air, the nicer sound, the quieter environment," he added.

When borders reopen, their plan is to continue their journey through Bulgaria, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and finally Mongolia.

"This virus has shown that we, and governments, have the ability to transform society and whole countries very fast — something which we need to do to avoid the impacts of the climate crisis," Watson said.

[Poland] Poland to reopen hotels and shopping malls on May 4 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:49 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Polish hotels and shopping malls will reopen on May 4 and pre-schools will have the option to open on May 6, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Wednesday, part of efforts to ease restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

Poland, the largest economy in the European Union's eastern wing, started relaxing some of its curbs on public life earlier in April, alongside other countries keen to prop up industry damaged by the pandemic.

Morawiecki also reaffirmed the government's plan to hold a presidential election as scheduled on May 10, or with a delay of a couple of weeks at most, despite calls from opposition parties and others for a much longer delay.

Further steps to unfreeze the economy, including a reopening of restaurants, will be announced at a later date, Morawiecki said. Poles are still required to wear masks in public and schools will remain closed until May 24.

The government has also not given any indication when it might re-open the country's borders.

Poland, which has a population of 38 million, had reported 12,415 cases of the new coronavirus and 606 deaths as of Wednesday.

On the plans for the presidential election, Morawiecki urged the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament, to speed up its discussions on a legislative proposal to allow postal voting instead of polling booths.

Morawiecki's nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) says it would be safe to hold a postal vote at this time, but a final decision on whether election rules are changed to allow it rests with the legislature.

Although PiS and its allies have a majority in the lower house Sejm, the opposition controls the Senate.

The election has become a highly divisive issue in Poland, with the opposition and human rights groups accusing PiS of putting political gain ahead of public health in its insistence the vote takes place on time.

Opinion polls show the incumbent Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, is likely to win the vote.

[Poland] EU opens new legal case against Poland over muzzling judges (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 6:52 AM, Gabriela Baczynska, 5304K, Neutral]

The European Union's executive on Wednesday started a new legal case against the nationalist Polish government over what it said was the muzzling of judges in the bloc's largest ex-communist country.

The EU has long accused the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party of undermining Polish democracy by increasing direct state control over the courts, media and civic society, a charge the party rejects.

The European Commission said it was giving Poland two months to address its concerns about a law introduced earlier this year that would allow to punish judges who criticise the government's reforms of the judicial system.

"There are clear risks that the provisions regarding the disciplinary regime against judges can be used for political control of the content of judicial decisions," said Vera Jourova, the Czech member of the executive Commission who is responsible for upholding the EU's democratic values.

"This is a European issue because Polish courts apply European law. Judges from other countries must trust that Polish judges act independently. This mutual trust is the foundation of our single market," she told a news conference.

Should Warsaw refuse to budge, the Commission would sue it in the European Court of Justice, which could eventually lead to hefty fines as well as a court order telling the Polish government to change tack.

The case is one of multiple battles being waged between the EU and Poland over upholding the rule of law.

The Commission has also recently criticised Warsaw's decision to press ahead with a presidential election next month despite concerns over public health due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The PiS-led government is considering holding the election by postal ballot, saying this would ensure public safety, but opposition parties and pro-democracy groups say such a vote, held at such short notice, could not be fair or transparent.

"We cannot compromise or put in lockdown our fundamental rights and values," Jourova said on Wednesday. "The virus must not kill democracy."

Opposition parties and rights groups have urged a lengthy delay to the presidential election. If held on schedule, on May 10, opinion polls suggest incumbent Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, will win re-election.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki reaffirmed on Wednesday the government's plan to hold the election on time, or with a small delay of a couple of weeks at most.

[Russia] Russia's coronavirus case tally nears the 100,000 milestone (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 5:33 AM, Gleb Stolyarov and Maria Kiselyova, 5304K, Negative]
Russia's nationwide tally of confirmed coronavirus cases neared the 100,000 mark on Wednesday after 5,841 new cases of the virus were registered overnight along with a record daily rise in the death toll.

Russia, the world's largest country by territory, has been on lockdown since President Vladimir Putin announced the closure of most public spaces in late March.

It this week overtook China and Iran in the number of confirmed cases. The figures mean Russia now ranks eighth worldwide for the number of confirmed cases, though it has so far recorded far fewer deaths than many of the most hard-hit countries.

The nationwide case tally now stands at 99,399, the country's coronavirus crisis response centre said on Wednesday. It said 108 people diagnosed with the novel coronavirus had died in the last 24 hours, a record daily rise. That means the official overall death toll now

stands at 972 people.

Authorities began recording a sharp rise in cases this month.

Russia is now in its fifth week of a lockdown that, together with the collapse of oil prices, has put the economy on course for a 4-6% contraction, according to the central bank.

Putin, addressing the nation on television on Tuesday, said the lockdown measures would have to be rolled over for another two weeks. He warned the outbreak's peak was still ahead.

"The situation is still very difficult," said Putin. "We are facing a new and perhaps the most intense stage in countering the epidemic."

[Russia] Russia sees tentative signs of fuel demand recovery in Europe: minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:04 AM, Vladimir Soldatkin and Darya Korsunskaya, 5304K, Neutral] Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak on Wednesday said the country is seeing tentative signs of recovery in fuel demand on the European market.

Speaking at an online meeting chaired by President Vladimir Putin, Novak added that Russia's oil output is expected to drop by 10% this year.

Putin said that Russia should continue cooperating with its partners to balance global oil markets.

[Russia] Russia flies nuclear-capable bombers over Baltic Sea in training exercise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:32 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia has flown two nuclear-capable Tu-160 strategic bombers over the neutral waters of the Baltic Sea, the Russian Ministry of Defence said on Wednesday, a move that prompted Finland, Denmark, Poland and Sweden to scramble jets to escort them.

The ministry said the flight was routine in nature and strictly adhered to international airspace regulations.

Russia carries out similar training flights over the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific oceans, as well as over the Black and Baltic Seas on a regular basis, a policy some NATO members regard as unhelpful sabre-rattling.

The two Tupolev T-160 aircraft, which can carry up to 12 short-range nuclear missiles, were in the air for eight hours, the Russian Defence Ministry said.

"At specific stages of the route, the aircraft were escorted by the Finnish Air Force's F-18s, Royal Danish and Polish Air Force F-16s, as well as by the Swedish Air Force's Saab JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets," it said.

Russia made a similar statement on Tuesday, saying two Russian Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bombers had flown a routine four-hour flight over the neutral waters of the Barents

and Norwegian seas, prompting Norway to scramble its jets to escort them.

Also on Tuesday, it said advanced jets belonging to its Baltic Fleet had rehearsed striking naval targets in the Baltic Sea.

[Russia] Russia's Aging Infrastructure Threatens Oil Output Pact (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 11:14 AM, Georgi Kantchev, Neutral]

Russia's adherence to a hard-fought oil production deal with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. could be imperiled by its aging industrial infrastructure and the unique challenges of winding down a broad network of wells across its vast landmass.

Moscow, Riyadh and Washington agreed in early April to lead a multinational coalition that aims to cut 13% of global oil production through the end of June. The curbs are meant to address a sharp drop in demand caused by global travel restrictions and business shutdowns to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The demand erosion, along with a Saudi-Russian price war and an unprecedented shortage of oil storage space, have contributed to a 63% decline in the global benchmark oil price, since the start of the year.

As part of the pact, set to begin on Friday, Russia has committed to its biggest reduction ever, a cut of 2 million barrels a day, or around a fifth of its current production.

But Russia's oil infrastructure isn't geared to quick and deep production cuts, analysts say. The country faces considerable obstacles, from the frigid Siberian climate where pipelines can burst without oil in them, to low-yielding Soviet-era fields that are expensive to maintain and restart.

Russia has some 200,000 active wells—more than most other oil-producing countries—each with unique characteristics and geology. Most of its wells are old and require costly, labor-intensive techniques—such as water or gas injection and hydraulic fracturing—to get the oil out of the ground. Around 90% of Russia's crude is produced that way, according to Darya Kozlova, head of regulatory affairs at energy advisory Vygon Consulting.

Wells in Saudi Arabia have more underground pressure and higher yields. Shale producers in the U.S. have also been nimble in reacting to price fluctuations.

"Production cuts of such magnitude have never been done in Russia so we are venturing into the unknown," said Vladimir Milov, a former deputy energy minister and now an opposition politician. "There are just too many technical challenges to achieve these cuts."

Many producers are finding it hard to come up with the necessary volumes to cut, said Mikhail Krutikhin, a partner in the independent RusEnergy consulting agency who has advised oil companies on the cuts in recent weeks.

"They just don't know how to do it," he said. "It's a completely new paradigm."

Major Russian oil companies are lobbying the energy ministry for exemptions from the cuts, according to people familiar with the matter.

The ministry didn't respond to a request for comment.

The cuts will be distributed proportionally among all companies and Russia will fully comply with the deal, Energy Minister Alexander Novak said Wednesday in an interview with Russian newswire, Interfax.

Russia has a checkered history of sticking to supply agreements and its production has typically been steady in recent years, despite commitments to reduce it. In January last year, Russia had complied with only 18% of its pledge at the time to join OPEC in collective cuts, according to the International Energy Agency.

"Companies will try to cheat again and inflate their numbers," Mr. Krutikhin said.

To achieve a national 20% output reduction, Russian producers plan to abandon some of their least effective wells and postpone new drilling. But those decisions will need time for analysis and testing, experts say.

Tatneft, one of Russia's largest producers, will shut around 40% of its wells, starting with the least efficient sites, the company said Tuesday.

Some producers fear shutting wells because, in many cases, restarts require new pumps and other equipment, as well as repairs to burst or clogged pipes. The average cost of suspending a well in Western Siberia, home to most of Russia's production, is about \$5,000 a well, according to Ms. Kozlova. Reopening costs about \$16,000.

Many wells that are shut will likely be abandoned for good, analysts say. For firms like Capital Oil, a small producer in the southeastern Saratov region, Russia's cuts present an existential crisis.

The company has fully suspended production, but restarting might be financially impossible. Capital Oil is close to bankruptcy and has no money to pay salaries, said its co-owner Khamzat Askhabov.

"Production is becoming unprofitable," he said. "If low oil prices persist for six months, we expect massive bankruptcies of companies" like ours.

According to Russia's Association of Independent Oil and Gas Producers, all but four of Russia's 132 independent companies—representing around 4% of Russia's oil production—could go bankrupt.

"The Russian oil industry is at risk of falling asleep like the beautiful princess in the fairy tale, but then not waking up the way we know her," Mr. Milov said.

[Serbia] Serbs bang pots to protest govt and strict coronavirus measures (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 3:07 PM, Aleksandar Vasovic, Neutral]

For two nights, a cacophony of tin pans, drums, whistles, and horns has reverberated through much of Serbia as citizens, stuck at home under curfew, vent their anger at the government and its tough containment measures to curb the new coronavirus.

Serbia, which has reported 8,497 confirmed cases and 173 deaths from COVID-19, introduced stringent measures last month, including a state of emergency, closure of borders, daily curfew from 1600 GMT, and total lockdowns all weekend, including all four days of the Easter holiday.

The government has started to lift restrictions as the rate of infections slows, but said that a lockdown during the Labour Day holiday on May 1, an important celebration in Serbia, should remain in place.

The banging is due to continue on Wednesday evening, and recalls similar popular protests from 1996 to 1997 when Serbians rebelled against election fraud and the former strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

At the balcony of his apartment in Belgrade's Vracar neighbourhood, Dragan Djilas, the head of the opposition Alliance for Serbia, and a former leader of the student protests of the 1990s, used a wooden spoon to bang a pot.

"This energy (from the 1990s) has re-emerged as the people cannot endure any longer ... these lockdowns, these 80-hour incarcerations," Djilas told Reuters.

The protests also express many people's discontent with the policies of President Aleksandar Vucic, a former nationalist firebrand and former information minister under Milosevic who later adopted pro-European values, and with his Serbian Progressive Party.

Many in Serbia accuse Vucic and the ruling coalition of autocracy, oppression against political opponents, stifling of media freedoms, corruption, cronyism, and ties with organised crime. Both Vucic, in power since 2012, and his allies deny such accusations.

Most of Serbia's opposition parties, which are frequently divided and bickering, have boycotted parliament. They have said they will not take part in elections initially set for April and postponed until later in the year.

Bojan Klacar, the executive director of the Belgrade-based pollster CESID said the protest could damage the Serbian president and his allies, but added that a divided opposition was unable to tap into its energy. He added that heavy-handed handling of the crisis did not dent popularity of Vucic among his supporters.

From his window in a concrete, Communist-era building in the Novi Beograd neighbourhood, Dobrica Veselinovic, a prominent activist of the Ne Davimo Beograd (Do Not Drown Belgrade) rights group, played Bella Ciao, a song of Italian antifascist fighters during the World War II.

He also projected a banner reading "noise against dictatorship" and "raise your voice every evening from 2005" (1805 GMT) onto the wall of a nearby building.

"The most important thing is that people (who disagree with the government) realize that they are not alone ... We invited people to raise their voice against what is happening in society," Veselinovic said.

[Slovenia] Slovenia to ease coronavirus restrictions, gradually reopen schools (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Marja Novak, Neutral]

Slovenia will from Thursday lift a restriction imposed at the end of March that prohibited citizens from travelling outside their local municipalities, Prime Minister Janez Jansa said on Wednesday.

Education Minister Simona Kustec told national TV Slovenia later on Wednesday that schools and kindergartens, which have been closed since the middle of March, would gradually start reopening from May 18. She did not give details.

Slovenia, which has 2 million residents and borders Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, has so far confirmed 1,418 coronavirus cases and 89 deaths.

Jansa thanked citizens for following restrictions imposed from the middle of March to curb the pandemic and said in a speech sent to the media: "Thanks to you, Slovenia is the most successful (in curbing the coronavirus) among all neighbours of the focal country Italy."

He added that Slovenia was also among countries that had suffered less economic and social damage than most because of the government's quick response, which included financial help of about 3 billion euros or some 6% of gross domestic product to companies and citizens hurt by the outbreak.

Jansa said more restrictions would be lifted on Monday, but gave no details. The government said earlier that hairdressers and beauty parlours, as well as outdoor bars and restaurants and a number of shops, would be able to open from Monday. Libraries and museums are also expected to open on Monday.

He said, however, that large public events, including large sports gatherings, in Slovenia and the rest of Europe would "most probably" only be possible after a vaccination or medication for the coronavirus is discovered and widely used. He also called on citizens to remain disciplined in the coming weeks to prevent the spread of the virus.

On Monday, several hundred people protested in various Slovenian cities against Jansa's centre-right government and its coronavirus restrictions.

Slovenia closed all schools, bars, restaurants, hotels, cultural and sports centres, and shops, apart from food and drug stores, and suspended public transport in the middle of March. It has prohibited any socialising in public spaces and introduced an obligatory quarantine for most people entering the country.

The first restrictions were lifted last week when car service centres and shops that sell cars, bicycles, furniture and construction material were allowed to open. Residents are obliged, however, to wear face masks in all indoor public spaces.

The Bank of Slovenia said last month the country's GDP could fall by 6% to 16% this year due to the coronavirus, while the government expects a budget deficit of 8.1% of GDP this year after a surplus of 0.5% in 2019. Slovenia's export-oriented economy expanded by 2.4% last year.

[Spain] Spain readies to ease lockdown, warns will need discipline (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:00 PM, Clara-Laeila Laudette and Into Landauro, Neutral]

Spain's lockdown is making progress against the new coronavirus but a gradual easing from next week will require even more discipline, officials said on Wednesday, after the country recorded 325 deaths from the infection overnight.

The lockdown, one of the toughest in Europe, has halted public life since March 14 and nearly paralysed the economy.

In Madrid, workers were painting "keep your distance" signs on to zebra crossings in the capital in preparation for restrictions to be gradually removed.

The country's overall death toll from the virus rose by 453 to 24,275, the health ministry said, adding that the additional cases were from the previous days in the region of Galicia.

The number of diagnosed cases rose by 2,144 from Tuesday to 212,917, the world's second-highest tally after the United States, the ministry said.

"The evolution we are seeing is still very favourable and is in line with what we expected," health emergency coordinator Fernando Simon told a news briefing on Wednesday.

He said the so-called 'R' rate – the average number of infections that one person with the virus causes – stood at below 1, signalling a downward trend, in almost all areas of the country.

The daily number of deaths has decreased sharply from the high of 950 seen in early April.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced late on Tuesday a four-phase plan to lift the lockdown that would culminate in a return to normality by the end of June.

FOREIGN TOURISM

But Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska told a news conference on Wednesday "the period of easing measures would take more discipline than lockdown" itself.

Implementation will vary from province to province depending on factors such as how the rate of infection evolves, the number of intensive care beds available locally and compliance with distancing rules. These targets are yet to be announced.

Health Minister Salvador Illa said the rules on visiting friends and family would be provided in the coming days.

The Hotel Business Association of Madrid on Wednesday expressed its "serious concern" over the plan, as well as its "disbelief" that the government was contemplating reopening hotels "when the arrival of clients is impossible" because of closed borders and suspended flights.

The government's plan does not specify when Spain will be able to reopen its tourism industry, which is worth 12% of Gross Domestic Product.

"Foreign tourism is the hardest part to manage. We look at what has happened to those ahead of us (in Asia); when they started cross-border mobility there were outbreaks of imported cases," said a government official who declined to be named.

"We also want to take the decision at (European) Community level, especially in view of the Schengen area," he added.

Data released on Wednesday showed Spanish retail sales fell 14.1% in March from a year earlier on a calendar-adjusted basis, after rising 1.8% in February.

Most stores closed during the second half of last month as part of the lockdown and have remained shut in April.

[Sweden] Swedish leader defends coronavirus approach, shrugs off far-right embrace (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 2:30 PM, Ryan Heath, Neutral]

Sweden's foreign minister says there's been a "misunderstanding" in the United States about her country's Covid-19 policies — which have been distinctly more liberal than the strict lockdowns instituted across much of the rest of Europe and North America.

Ann Linde told POLITICO that Sweden is not a libertarian nirvana: the government has moved to limit online gambling in recent days, is closing restaurants that break social distancing rules, and has forbidden family visits to nursing homes.

But, added Linde, "this is a marathon not a sprint" and policy "needs to be on a level that's acceptable to the people."

Sweden's public health agency believes "It's good for people to be outdoors, to have walks" she said. "If you're locked inside there's risk of depression, domestic violence, alcohol abuse" Linde continued, echoing a point President Donald Trump has often made.

Sweden's relatively lax approach to controlling the coronavirus pandemic — keeping restaurants, other businesses and most schools open — has made the country a symbol for far-right activists in the United States and Europe as they push to ease domestic restrictions in their own countries.

But Linde brushed off that support in remarks to POLITICO Wednesday, her first public comments in Washington since the coronavirus crisis began shuttering the globe last month.

Linde said she clarified the country's approach during a virtual meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well.

The endorsement of far-right groups, "doesn't mean much", she said, because Sweden is managing the pandemic "according to our tradition" and won't change strategy because of outside voices.

And she noted that inside Sweden, it's not just the far-right Sweden Democrats who are supporting the government's approach: all eight parties represented in the Swedish Parliament are in agreement.

Linde believes Sweden can afford to have looser rules because the government enjoys "high levels of trust."

"Government advice is not some tip that you follow if you want, it's seen as something that you should follow," she explained. By way of example, Linde pointed out that although internal travel in Sweden is not banned, there was a 96 percent decrease in travel to the popular vacation island of Gotland over the Easter weekend holiday.

Critics of Sweden's approach, however, note that the country has a much higher Covid-19 death rate than its Scandinavian neighbors, including 11 times the number of deaths as neighboring Norway, with only twice the population. Linde, however, told POLITICO, "It's not much use comparing" the two countries, because so many factors determine how a virus spreads, and different countries use different measures for classifying Covid-19 deaths.

Linde did express concern for Sweden's failure to keep the coronavirus out of nursing homes, one of the few settings where the country has implemented strict social distancing rules, including forbidding family visits. "There are far too many deaths in the nursing homes," Linde conceded. "We don't know why."

The Swedish government recently set a \$500-a-week limit for individuals playing online casino and slot machines. And Linde highlighted five restaurants that were also closed this week for breaking social distancing rules.

"We are totally prepared to go in with harder measures if (the rules) are not followed," Linde said, adding that the government has the legal power to immediately close schools if pandemic circumstances change.

With roughly half of Sweden's GDP dependent on exports, the government there is working feverishly to hold off the push for more tariffs, and to eliminate them on medical goods. "Global value chains are not working the way they have to work. It's definitely a bad situation for Sweden," Linde said.

In her meeting with Pompeo, Linde raised concerns about the state of global trade links. She acknowledged, however, that the United States and Sweden "have different views" on the importance of multilateral trading systems.

Linde was critical of the initial policy response of EU countries to the merging pandemic.

"It was bad at the beginning, better now," Linde said, citing an end to medical export restrictions and sales taxes on medical products. While willing to contribute to some joint recovery efforts, Sweden, which sits outside the Euro single currency, opposes European Union governments issuing joint bonds to pay for the added costs.

Given its low government debt and the headroom for its own large stimulus package Linde said Sweden prefers to safeguard its own financial stability.

Sweden is following the European Union in keeping its borders closed to non-EU residents, which Linde said it will maintain until the EU collectively decides to re-open. And Linde said

her government will "support the United Nations in every way."

"We have always been big fans of multilateralism," she added.

[Turkey] Turkey's coronavirus death toll rises by 89 to 3,081 – health minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:29 PM, Staff, Negative]

The number of people who have died from COVID-19 in Turkey has risen by 89 in the last 24 hours to 3,081, Health Ministry data showed on Wednesday, continuing a downward trend.

The total number of cases rose by 2,936 to 117,589, the data showed, the highest total outside Western Europe or the United States.

A total of 44,022 people have so far recovered from the new coronavirus, which causes the respiratory disease COVID-19. The number of tests carried out in the past 24 hours was 43,498, higher than in previous days.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said earlier that the number of cases in the country has peaked and was starting to decline, adding that he did not expect a second wave if measures against the outbreak were followed.

[Turkey] Epidemic's Hidden Victims, Syrian Workers Left Penniless in Turkey (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:39 AM, Dominic Evans and Umit Bektas, Negative]

When the clothing factory where Syrian refugee Mohammed Eid had worked since arriving in Istanbul closed because of the coronavirus lockdown, his manager had a bleak message for laid-off staff: you're on your own.

Like millions across Turkey, Eid lost his wage packet overnight. But unlike Turkish workers idled by the enforced shutdown, he found no safety net to help him and his family through the sudden crisis.

With a wife, three-year-old daughter and second child due any day, Eid has no income to pay bills or the rent on his basement apartment in the working class district of Esenyurt, where many Syrian refugees live.

"When the factory closed, the boss told us 'This break is at your expense, not mine'," Eid said in the small home he found after arriving from Jordan in December. "I have to sort out my costs of living, eating. He gave me nothing."

While Turkish workers laid off since March are entitled to 1,200 lira (\$170) a month from the state, that benefit does not extend to hundreds of thousands of Syrians, most of whom work in the informal economy, many as day labourers.

Clothing retailers and shopping malls have closed across the country and many of their suppliers have shut down too as Ankara attempts to contain an outbreak that has killed close to 3,000.

The government aims to begin reviving the economy in late May, a senior official said this week, and Eid said he expected to hear from his own employer at around that time. Until then he and others wait in limbo, fearing eviction and worrying how to feed their families.

"We don't know how many Syrians could have been laid off. We're talking about somewhere between 700,000 to 800,000 potential informal Syrian workers in the labour market," said Omar Kadkoy a policy analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) in Ankara.

NO SUPPORT

Turkey hosts 3.6 million Syrians, the world's largest refugee population, who have fled the nine-year conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of people in their country. Most live in Istanbul or near Turkey's southern border with Syria, only a small minority in refugee camps.

They mostly work in clothing companies, manufacturing, construction or the hospitality sector.

A Labour Ministry spokeswoman said only Turkish workers could benefit from the government's coronavirus aid package, and that Syrians were already supported by United Nations and European Union aid projects.

However, an EU-funded scheme which distributes monthly cash payments via Turkey's Red Crescent to refugees is limited to families with three or more children, or those without working-age men, Syrians say.

"We have not received any support from ... anywhere," said Suhaib al-Bakr, a 33-year father of two from Syria's northeastern province of Hasaka.

Bakr, a veterinarian in his own country, worked for the past four years as an assistant at tailoring companies in Istanbul, taking daily work where it was available for about \$13 a day.

He hasn't worked for six weeks. His landlord agreed to cancel his rent payment last month, but is expecting the next instalment. If he could, Bakr says he would even return to the ruins of his own country to escape the uncertainty.

"The situation is bad there, worse than here. But my mother and father are there. We can go and live with them," he said. "But the way is closed. What can I do?"

[United Kingdom] UK now has world's third-highest virus-related death toll (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 2:40 PM, Pan Pylas, Neutral]

The U.K. has the third-highest coronavirus death toll in the world after the British government published new figures Wednesday that include deaths outside of hospitals.

After factoring in deaths in all settings such as care homes, the number of people in Britain who have died after testing positive for the virus has now hit 26,097, way ahead of the 21,678 announced on Tuesday. Until now, hospital deaths have been reported daily, while deaths in nursing homes and other settings were reported separately on a weekly basis.

Under the new measurement, the U.K. has leapfrogged Spain and France in Europe, with only Italy ahead. The U.S. has the world's highest death toll.

The upward revision prompted renewed criticism of the government's approach throughout the crisis. The new leader of the main opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer, said the scale of deaths in the U.K. is "truly dreadful" and has accused the Conservative government of being too slow in putting the country into lockdown, in testing people for the virus and in getting critical protective gear for medical workers.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab sought to ease any worries, saying the additional deaths were a cumulative total going back to March 2.

"They don't represent a sudden surge in the number of deaths," he said at the government's daily press briefing.

In spite of that, it is becoming increasingly clear that the U.K. could end up with the second-highest coronavirus death toll in the world, partly because Italy is considered to be around a couple of weeks ahead in the epidemic.

There is also an acknowledgement that the new figures underestimate the total death toll in care homes as they only include those who have tested positive for the coronavirus. Also, the death certificates of those dying in care homes can take a couple of weeks to be issued.

Professor Yvonne Doyle, medical director at Public Health England, said the new figures, which her organization helped to compile, provide "a comprehensive picture, and this is most important for control."

In spite of the grim death news, the trends in most of the virus-related numbers are heading in the right direction. The number of people being hospitalized with the coronavirus has been falling for the best part of three weeks, particularly in London, which was the epicenter of the outbreak in the country. Also the number of coronavirus-related deaths are falling when measured on a seven-day rolling basis.

Doyle said she could not yet say whether deaths in care homes were falling but that "we should know that soon because the hospital curve has declined."

Raab said it was too soon for the government to make an assessment as to whether its five tests on easing the lockdown restrictions have been met. Among those tests are a "sustained and consistent fall" in daily coronavirus-related daily deaths, and reliable data showing that the rate of inflection has moderated to manageable levels.

"We are coming through the peak but we are not there yet, which is why we are keeping our focus on the social distancing measures," he said.

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, or SAGE, is due to deliver its latest advice to ministers in the next few days but all the signs are that the government will extend most of the lockdown restrictions from May 7.

Earlier this week on his return to work after recovering from COVID-19, Prime Minister Boris

Johnson, said the country was at "the moment of maximum risk." Johnson missed Prime Minister's Questions earlier Wednesday because his partner gave birth to a baby boy.

[United Kingdom] UK death toll 27,241, opposition Labour leader Starmer says (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:12 AM, Guy Faulconbridge and Elizabeth Piper, 5304K, Neutral] The United Kingdom's COVID-19 death toll is probably higher than 27,241, making it one of the worst-hit countries in Europe, opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said on Wednesday as he questioned the government's response to the outbreak.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government is facing growing criticism for its response to the outbreak as the death toll continues to rise.

While the government's chief scientific adviser said last month that keeping the death toll below 20,000 would be a "good outcome," the hospital toll passed that milestone last week.

Broader data published on Tuesday showed fatalities topped 24,000 nine days ago, but Starmer said his calculations showed 27,241 had died.

"We are possibly on track to have one of the worst death rates in Europe," Starmer told parliament. "Far from success, these latest figures are truly dreadful."

Starmer appears to have added the latest hospital death toll of 21,698 to the most recent English care home death toll of 4,343 and the non-hospital COVID-19 death tolls in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

If his calculations are accurate, the United Kingdom would have the second or third worst official death toll in the world after the United States and possibly Italy.

The United States has a death toll of 58,605, Italy 27,359, Spain 23,822 and France 23,660, according to a Reuters tally.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, standing in for the prime minister during questions in parliament, said it was "far too early" to make international comparisons.

"If they are to be done, they should be done on a per capita basis," he said.

Other countries measure death numbers in different ways, he added.

'TOO SLOW'

Starmer, after speaking to Johnson, said in a letter to the prime minister that mistakes had been made in the government's response – including being too slow to impose a lockdown – and called for Johnson to publish an exit strategy.

"We were too slow to enter the lockdown, too slow to increase the uptake of testing and too slow to get personal protective equipment to frontline NHS and care staff," Starmer said in the letter.

"We have already seen the consequences of poor planning and preparation. This cannot

happen again.”

Johnson initially resisted introducing the lockdown but changed course when projections showed a quarter of a million people could die.

Since the lockdown started on March 23, his government has faced criticism from opposition parties and some doctors for initially delaying measures, for limited testing capabilities, and for a lack of protective equipment for health workers.

Government, party and scientific advisers are divided over how and when Britain should start returning to work, even in limited form. The government is next due to review social distancing measures on May 7.

[United Kingdom] Britain's coronavirus testing capacity over 73,000 a day – Raab (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:21 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain now has capacity to conduct more than 73,000 tests for the coronavirus per day, foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Wednesday.

The government set itself a target to conduct 100,000 tests per day by the end of April. Raab said the actual daily number of test carried out was 52,429.

East Asia and Pacific

China, South Korea Move to Revive Business Travel Between Them (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 9:51 AM, Chun Han Wong, Neutral]

South Korea says it has agreed with China to start facilitating some business travel between the two Asian neighbors, in Beijing's first formal bilateral program to ease border controls and help revive economic activity stalled by the coronavirus pandemic.

Under a “fast-track” immigration arrangement starting May 1, South Korean business personnel can travel to seven provinces and three major cities in China—Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing—after passing through health-screening and quarantine procedures, the South Korean Foreign Ministry said Wednesday.

Chinese business travelers can also visit South Korea by going through a similar health-screening process, the ministry said. It said the two governments would continue discussing ways to improve and expand the program.

China's Foreign Ministry didn't immediately respond to an emailed request for comment sent after business hours.

The arrangement is the first so-called fast-track, or “green lane,” immigration program that China has launched since Chinese officials began approaching a number of countries over recent weeks to discuss the possibility of allowing some cross-border business travel to resume.

China's travel curbs are among the strictest world-wide, imposed to halt the reintroduction

of the coronavirus into the country where the pandemic first erupted. Since late March, China has suspended entry for nearly all foreigners and slashed the volume of international passenger flights to and from the country.

As China signaled initial success in containing its domestic coronavirus contagion, its officials have proposed efforts to facilitate essential travel with foreign counterparts from more than a dozen countries across the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere, The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month.

On Tuesday, senior Chinese diplomats discussed proposals for "fast-track" travel arrangements in phone calls with counterparts from Austria, Germany and Singapore, according to China's Foreign Ministry. Talks are already under way between China and Singapore on a "green lane" program facilitating essential business travel.

To visit China under the new program, prospective South Korean travelers must have an invitation from a China-based company, monitor their own health for two weeks, and undergo coronavirus testing up to 72 hours before departure, according to the South Korean Foreign Ministry. Those who test negative will receive government health certification allowing them to proceed with their trips.

After arriving in China, travelers will be quarantined for one to two days at a government-designated facility and must pass another coronavirus test before they can continue their journey, the ministry statement said.

The arrangement allows South Korean business travelers to visit the Chinese provinces of Anhui, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Shandong and Sichuan. The Chinese capital of Beijing, which currently imposes a 21-day quarantine on international travelers arriving in the city, isn't included in the program.

Chinese business travelers must also test negative for the coronavirus up to 72 hours before departing for South Korea, according to the South Korean statement. These travelers must again test negative for the pathogen after arriving in South Korea, before they can conduct economic activities under "surveillance procedures," the statement said, without elaborating.

Some Chinese local governments to allow fast-track entry of Koreans (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Ten Chinese local governments have agreed to allow a fast-track entry of businessmen from South Korea under which they are exempt from strict coronavirus quarantine measures, South Korean authorities said on Tuesday.

China has blocked entry for nearly all foreigners in an effort to curb risks of coronavirus infections posed by travellers from overseas. China's foreign ministry said last week it was in talks with some countries to establish fast-track procedures to allow travel by business and technical personnel to ensure the smooth operation of global supply chains.

A person in Korea has to get tested for coronavirus within 72 hours before departure, and again get tested in China during a couple of days of quarantine period.

Starting May 1, the rules will apply to employees of Korean companies or Chinese firms that

have operations in China and want to visit 10 areas, including Shanghai, Chongqing and Tianjin.

South Korea is the first country who have received fast-track status from China, its biggest trading partner, the South Koreab foreign ministry said in a statement.

fast-track status will ensure that essential economic activity is guaranteed while honouring quarantine principles to prevent the spread of Covid-19, the ministry said.

Both New Zealand and Australia Contained Coronavirus, but One Is Set to Pay a Heavier Price (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Rachel Pannett and Stephen Wright, Neutral]

New Zealand imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, aiming to stamp out the new coronavirus. Australia took a different approach, adopting social-distancing restrictions but keeping more of its economy open, in an effort to suppress the pathogen.

Both strategies appear to have delivered similar health outcomes: New infections have dropped markedly—to just a couple a day on average in New Zealand and around 10 a day in Australia. But the economic and social costs look likely to be significantly bigger in New Zealand, providing a cautionary example of the potential trade-offs as countries weigh imposing and lifting restrictions.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern warned New Zealanders in late March that tens of thousands might die without dramatic measures. At the time, there were roughly 100 confirmed infections and no deaths in the remote island nation.

The new rules closed nearly all businesses, aside from grocery stores and pharmacies, and restricted people from interacting with others outside their household, even to attend funerals. The lockdown was ranked among the most severe globally by Oxford University's stringency index of government responses.

"We will never know what would actually have happened without our Level 4 restrictions and we can look overseas and see that this devastating scenario has played out in many other countries," Ms. Ardern said Monday, as she declared victory over the virus.

Australia, in comparison, put in place strict social-distancing measures—limiting social gatherings to just two people—but kept many businesses open, including mining, construction and restaurants for takeout.

On Tuesday, New Zealand began to loosen the restrictions on some areas of the economy, including allowing service businesses to take orders online and construction and forestry companies to operate. Prohibitions against some leisure activities, such as surfing and hunting on private land, were also lifted.

New Zealand's strategy has been controversial. Simon Thornley, a lecturer in epidemiology at the University of Auckland, has said striving for elimination is bound to fail and would generate worse economic and health outcomes than the virus itself. He is part of a group of six academics, calling themselves Plan B, who lobbied to loosen the restrictions.

"The biggest risk of this will be chronic unhappiness within citizens" as people deal with the

consequences of the long lockdown, including rising joblessness, said Peter Gluckman, who previously served as New Zealand's chief science adviser. "Lots of small businesses have been disrupted and may not recover."

Governments around the world are balancing the relaxation of restrictions to ease economic pain against the risks of fueling fresh coronavirus outbreaks. A paper published in the journal *Science* on April 14 said one-time lockdowns likely won't be enough and that physical-distancing measures may need to be in place intermittently until 2022.

New Zealand's known and probable infections are stabilizing at around 1,500. Australia, with its larger population of roughly 25 million versus about 5 million in New Zealand, has around 6,700 cases. That puts both of them closer to countries such as South Korea and Taiwan, where a combination of social distancing with aggressive testing and widespread mask usage has contained local outbreaks.

New Zealand and Australia were quick to close their borders to China, taking advantage of their remote island geographies. And both rolled out generous government stimulus packages to offset the impact on key industries including tourism, foreign education and retail: the equivalent of 6% of GDP in New Zealand and about 16% in Australia, among the biggest responses globally.

Their differing growth trajectories now, however, reflect the severity of New Zealand's lockdown. Economists expect New Zealand's economy to contract by more than 20% in the three months through June, compared with the quarter immediately prior, whereas Australia's economy is expected to shrink some 13% over the same period.

"This reflects the fact that our lockdown is very strict. We also see quite a protracted recovery here," said Elizabeth Kendall, an economist with Australia & New Zealand Banking Group Ltd. in New Zealand.

ANZ expects New Zealand's economy to be 10.4% smaller at the end of 2020 than it was at the start of the calendar year. For Australia, the contraction is forecast at 4.7%.

New Zealand's jobless rate may rise to 13.5% from 4% at the end of last year, according to government forecasts. Australia's central bank has forecast the country's unemployment rate will roughly double to 10% by June.

In Australia, bars and restaurants were allowed to offer takeout services, to help avoid mass layoffs of hospitality workers. Key industries such as mining and construction were able to keep their operations running even as other businesses were shut down.

In one such example, BHP Group Ltd., the world's largest listed miner, relocated some tugboat pilots and their families from their homes in the island state of Tasmania to Western Australia as the closure of state borders threatened to disrupt the use of fly-in, fly-out workers, in which companies fly workers in to remote regions rather than relocating them there permanently.

Paul Bloxham, chief economist at HSBC in Sydney, said the silver lining for New Zealand might be a sharper, V-shaped recovery—as often occurs after a hurricane or an earthquake, aided by rebuilding efforts—whereas Australia is more likely looking at a U-

shaped recovery with a prolonged bottom.

"When things open again, people will want to do all the things they haven't been able to do for a while. And that supports the idea of a bounceback," said Mr. Bloxham.

Yvette Edwards, a florist in the New Zealand capital, Wellington, said her business has seen exceptionally high demand since reopening; they delivered about 70 flower arrangements on Tuesday, the first day of reduced restrictions. About 90% of those were people buying for themselves, likely celebrating the end of the lockdown, she said.

She said it was strange not to have people coming into the store, but seeing her two employees after four weeks of lockdown was poignant.

"One of the most amazing things when we arrived in the morning was just seeing each other's faces again. We literally spent five minutes staring at each other," she said. "It was the most surreal feeling. We all just stood there laughing."

[Australia] Australia marks 250th anniversary of Cook landing in muted fashion (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 3:12 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

The 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook's contentious landing in Australia went largely unmarked Wednesday as the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of long-planned commemorative events.

On April 29, 1770, Captain Cook sailed the Endeavour into Botany Bay – called Kamay in the local indigenous language – an event that is increasingly being seen through the eyes of the Aboriginal Australians who were on the shore.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the anniversary represented "a merging of histories," calling Cook an "extraordinary individual."

"The day Cook and the local indigenous community at Kamay first made contact 250 years ago changed the course of our land forever," he said.

"It's a point in time from which we embarked on a shared journey which is realized in the way we live today."

Australia's government was forced to cancel events marking 250 years since Cook's landing due to the COVID-19 outbreak, including the planned Aus\$6.5 million (\$4.3 million) circumnavigation of Australia by a replica of the Endeavour.

The first contact between the British navigator and Aboriginals foreshadowed the colonization of the continent and centuries of dispossession for indigenous Australians.

During his voyage, Cook declared Australia "Terra Nullius" – or legally unoccupied land – and claimed it as British territory despite Aboriginal history stretching back more than 60,000 years.

The British later established a penal colony in New South Wales in 1788.

Gujaga Foundation chair Ray Ingrey said the indigenous Dharawal people had been working with Australia's National Museum for 18 months to showcase their ancestors' recollections of encountering Cook.

"Australian society has matured quite a lot over last 50 years since the last anniversary came around, the 200th anniversary," he told AFP.

"A lot of the messages being received by the National Museum was the broader community saying 'We've heard about Cook's side of story, or the story from the ship, and we want to hear more about the story from the shore'."

An online exhibition features the "largely missing" stories passed down through generations of indigenous Australians of those encounters with Cook and his crew.

"As the longboats started to row towards the shore, my ancestors realized that they weren't Aboriginal people at all, they were in fact alien people because they looked so different to ourselves. We actually thought they was ghosts," elder Shayne Williams said in a video released by the museum.

The warriors on the shore started yelling and gesturing for them to leave, before beginning to throw rocks and then throwing spears, which landed at the crew's feet.

"If our people wanted to spear one of those sailors they could have easily done that. But it was just warning shots," Williams said.

"So what Cook and his crew did, they returned fire with their muskets. Actually hit one of the warriors in the legs."

Ingrey said the anniversary was a "significant event for all Australians" but the indigenous side of the story had long been overlooked or misrepresented.

"It was the first act of violence towards our people by the British, however it is our shared history and we have shared present, so it's only common sense that we have a shared future," he told AFP.

"Both stories need to be respected and that's all that we would hope for, that we have the opportunity to tell our story the way that we want to tell it and be respected to do that.

"We can only then move forward as a nation when both histories are acknowledged and accepted."

[China] China Sets Date for Congress, Signaling Coronavirus Is Under Control (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 9:28 AM, Keith Bradsher, 40577K, Neutral]

China delivered its strongest statement of confidence yet that it has tamed the country's coronavirus epidemic, announcing on Wednesday it would hold a much-delayed top political gathering late next month and ease quarantine restrictions in the capital.

The most important event on China's political calendar, the annual session of the National People's Congress will provide the Communist Party with a platform intended to inspire

national pride and reassert its primacy. The gathering of top officials from across China will also allow the party to demonstrate unity at a time when many in North America, Europe, Africa and Australia are highly critical of China's initial efforts to conceal the severity of the outbreak.

"The narrative is that the Chinese way of doing things, the China model, is better than other countries in controlling the virus," said Willy Lam, a specialist in Beijing politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "This is a symbolic event, showing China has won the war."

The congress is largely ceremonial, with delegates gathering every year to rubber-stamp major decisions. But the decision in February to delay this year's session came as a shock to many in China, and sent a global signal of the seriousness of the epidemic. Even during the SARS outbreak in 2003, the annual legislative session went ahead as scheduled.

But the outbreak in China has subsided in recent weeks, with most cases coming from travelers returning from abroad. On Wednesday, only one case of local transmission was reported.

The announcement that the congress was scheduled for May 22 suggests that officials feel assured that the gathering can be held without placing the central leadership and delegates at risk.

The government did not say how this year's meeting would be conducted. But in past years, it has drawn nearly 3,000 delegates from every province, including officials, party members, army generals in olive green and a smattering of representatives of ethnic minorities in traditional dress. They have assembled in tight rows on the main floor of the cavernous Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square to attend carefully scripted meetings.

The congress will portray Xi Jinping, China's top leader, as firmly in charge, said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a political scientist at Hong Kong Baptist University. Mr. Xi mostly disappeared from public view during the worst days of the outbreak in Wuhan, where the virus first emerged.

By holding the session, "he wants to show again he's very much in the saddle," Mr. Cabestan said.

In another sign that the government wants to project confidence in its strategy to tame the virus, the authorities in Beijing said on Wednesday that most domestic travelers arriving in the city would no longer be required to spend two weeks in quarantine. Quarantines will now be limited to people coming from overseas or from areas in China with recent cases, such as Hubei Province and its capital, Wuhan.

But the situation in China remains far from normal. The country has almost completely closed its borders and halted nearly all international flights in recent weeks, preventing many of its own citizens from coming home. China has urged foreign governments not to transfer diplomats to Beijing.

China has already acknowledged that the epidemic has set off the country's worst slowdown in nearly half a century, with the economy shrinking 6.8 percent in the first three

months of the year compared with a year ago. The figure highlights the impact of China's drastic efforts to stamp out the coronavirus, which included a lockdown that expanded to cover half the population and the temporary closure of factories and offices across the country.

Mr. Xi struck a cautious but optimistic tone on Tuesday about the country's resolve to restore normal business activity in the world's second-largest economy.

"Thanks to our strenuous efforts, we have emerged from the most challenging time," Mr. Xi told the president of Nepal in a phone conversation, according to the Foreign Ministry. "Yet we remain soberly aware of the situation."

"We have every confidence that China's economic fundamentals underpinning long-term growth remain solid," he was described as saying.

China is practically alone among major countries in not having begun an extensive government spending program as an economic stimulus in response to the pandemic, even as the entire economy has slowed sharply and appears to suffer from continued weakness in consumer spending. One popular theory for why China has not yet acted is that it may be waiting for the congress to approve a comprehensive spending plan.

"This is a very important legal issue: Any important stimulus needs to be sealed by the congress," said Yu Yongding, a senior economist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The standing committee of the congress, which announced the opening date, did not say how long the session would last. Recent annual sessions have lasted about two weeks. Health concerns might yet shorten this year's event.

The meetings are usually staid affairs in which the premier delivers an annual work report that in past years has provided a target for the Chinese economy's full-year growth. Economists expect that the economic growth target for this year is likely to be considerably below the usual 6 percent or so, if one is set at all.

This year's agenda is also likely to be focused on helping the country weather the impact of a possibly lengthy global recession triggered by the pandemic.

One key sign of how the government plans to address the downturn will be seen in the annual government budget, which may include economic stimulus measures.

Also on the agenda is a plan to overhaul China's laws for the handling of public health emergencies, including statutes on wildlife trade — which has drawn criticism for its links to disease outbreaks — and biosecurity.

The epidemic not only set back the country's economic activity, but also placed in jeopardy Mr. Xi's pledge to eradicate rural poverty this year. The government will most likely use the legislative session to reaffirm its commitment to this goal, on which Mr. Xi has staked his legacy.

[China] In a sign the virus is largely contained, China schedules big political meetings for late May (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 7:36 AM, Anna Fifield, Neutral]

China signaled its confidence that its novel coronavirus epidemic has finally been brought under control, scheduling for next month its highest-profile annual legislative meetings, which had been postponed at the height of the outbreak.

Known as the "Two Sessions," the meetings are always a piece of important political theater for China's ruling Communist Party, a venue for the leaders to trumpet their achievements of the past year and lay out their plans and targets for the year ahead.

But that will be particularly tricky this year, with China still emerging from a coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan at the end of last year, killing 4,643 people and sickening almost 85,000 in the country.

"A big part of these meetings is to be an accountability mechanism," said Ryan Manuel, managing director of Official China, a consultancy specializing in China's domestic political environment.

He predicted a lot of pushback this year if the party's leaders try to set overly ambitious growth targets or move aggressively to centralize power. "That will result in a lot of squealing," Manuel said.

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a mostly ceremonial advisory body, is to start meeting on May 21, and the National People's Congress, the rubber-stamp parliament, will convene the following day, China's official Xinhua News Agency announced Wednesday. The NPC usually sits for at least 10 days, but no end date was reported.

The meetings had been scheduled to begin on March 5 but were postponed because of the coronavirus outbreak. Ironically, it was because Wuhan was holding its municipal meeting, a precursor to the national congress, in mid-January that authorities decided against alerting the public to a potential outbreak and risk upsetting the political calendar.

"The COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control situation in China is improving steadily, and the normal economic and social life is gradually resuming," the NPC Standing Committee said in a statement cited by Xinhua.

The meeting would "unite the thoughts" of the deputies on China's challenges and consider the "progress" of its poverty eradication program, Tam Yiu-chung, a Hong Kong representative on the Standing Committee, quoted Li Zhanshu, the committee chairman, as saying.

The annual meetings bring more than 5,000 delegates from all over the country to Beijing and to the main event: a huge NPC meeting in the majestic Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square. There, the delegates listen as President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang review the past year and lay out the government's targets for the year ahead.

The NPC has made "special arrangements" to protect the deputies against the coronavirus this time around, Tam told reporters, according to the South China Morning Post.

Chinese citizens abroad seek refuge from the coronavirus pandemic — at home

It wasn't clear whether that meant the meetings would use video conferencing rather than going ahead in person, as usual. The Standing Committee meeting held this week was a mixture of the two, with Beijing members attending in person and those outside the capital joining remotely.

The Global Times, a nationalist newspaper linked to the Communist Party, suggested last week that the Two Sessions meetings might be held in a similar way, noting that it has "become a trend to have video conferences."

While most of China is returning to life as normal — some areas faster than others — the capital, Beijing, continues to be under tight restrictions ahead of the politically significant meetings.

All people arriving in Beijing must undergo a quarantine period of as long as 21 days, and the national borders remain closed to foreign citizens.

Even after declaring victory over the virus, which began at the end of last year in the central province of Hubei, China has experienced secondary waves of infection as its citizens have returned from countries hit by the epidemic, especially from Iran, Italy and, most recently, Russia.

But now, with hospitals and quarantine centers set up on the northern border with Russia, authorities appear confident that they can manage the contagion.

[China] China to hold annual parliament meeting after two-month delay in signal that coronavirus is under control (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 2:43 AM, Nectar Gan, 12317K, Neutral]

China announced Wednesday it will hold the country's biggest annual political meeting in May following a two-month delay, the strongest signal yet from the Chinese government that it considers the novel coronavirus outbreak to be under control.

The annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's top legislative body, is usually held in early March. This year, it was postponed for the first time in decades due to the coronavirus outbreak.

On Wednesday, the NPC Standing Committee announced the parliamentary session will kick off on May 22, citing the "continuously improving situation of epidemic prevention and control on Covid-19" and a "gradual return to normal of economic and social life" in China, according to state news agency Xinhua.

The announcement is a symbolic display of confidence by Beijing that it has successfully contained the coronavirus, which was first reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December last year. It has since spread worldwide, infecting more than 3.1 million people and killing at least 216,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The highly choreographed meeting of the rubber-stamp parliament will see nearly 3,000 delegates from around the country gathered in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, unveiling the country's key economic targets, approving budgets, and passing legislation in

sessions that last for about 10 days.

Allowing thousands of people to travel to the Chinese capital and sit side by side for days in an indoor setting would have been unthinkable two months ago, when much of the country was under varying types of restrictive lockdown measures intended to stop the fast-spreading virus.

But the country has turned a corner in recent weeks, with the number of newly reported infections slowing to a trickle. Lockdowns have also been lifted across China, including the original epicenter of Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province. People have returned to work, and some provinces have allowed final year high school students to return to classrooms in advance of university entrance examinations.

Beneath the surface, however, fears about a potential second wave of infections remain high. China last month banned the entry of most foreign nationals, following outbreaks around the world and a surge in imported cases. As of Wednesday, a total of 1,660 imported cases have been reported, mostly Chinese nationals returning from overseas. In many cities, all overseas arrivals are required to go into mandatory quarantine for at least two weeks.

Concerns have been particularly heightened over the recent spike in imported and locally transmitted infections near the Chinese-Russian border in northeastern Heilongjiang province. According to provincial health authorities, 386 Covid-19 cases have entered China through the Heilongjiang, and 556 local cases have been reported.

Chinese citizens have rushed to return home as the outbreak worsens in Russia, which has now recorded 93,000 confirmed cases – nearly 10,000 more than reported in China, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Earlier this month, the city of Suifenhe, which lies right by the Russian border, announced a city-wide lockdown, confining all residents to their homes and allowing only one person per household to go out for grocery shopping every three days. It also opened a makeshift hospital to treat coronavirus patients, converted from an office building.

Last week, the provincial capital of Harbin, a city of more than 10 million people, banned public gatherings, and residents would only be allowed to socialize with people in their respective households.

Locally transmitted cases have also been reported in recent weeks in Guangdong province, in the country's south.

At this year's belated NPC meetings, much attention will be placed on the central government's work report, to be delivered to delegates by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. The report will reveal the country's key economic targets and map out major policies for the coming year.

The Chinese economy has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, after its growth had already slumped to a near three-decade low last year following the US-China trade war.

In the first quarter of 2020, the world's second largest economy shrank 6.8% compared to a

year earlier, according to government statistics. It was the first time China has reported an economic contraction since 1976, when Communist Party leader Mao Zedong's death ended a decade of social and economic tumult. The economy shrunk 1.6% that year.

The NPC's annual plenary session has kicked-off every year on March 5 since the date was first formalized in 1995. It went ahead as scheduled in 2003 amid the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, which originated in China and hit the country hard. SARS eventually spread across the world to infect more than 8,000 people, killing at least 774.

[China] China to roll out economic measures to support virus-hit Hubei (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 8:51 AM, Colin Qian and Ryan Woo, 5304K, Neutral]

China will roll out a basket of measures including tax, credit and foreign trade policies to support economic development in central Hubei province, the ruling Communist Party's politburo said on Wednesday, state television reported.

Hubei, the epicentre of the new coronavirus outbreak in the country, should speed up development in auto-making, 5G and artificial intelligence areas, it said.

Wuhan, capital of Hubei and the city hit hardest by the epidemic in China, reported on Wednesday a 40.5% slump in its gross domestic product in the first quarter compared with a year earlier.

Like the rest of the province, Wuhan's manufacturing sector led the decline in output, paralysed by a lockdown that was only lifted on April 8.

No new confirmed cases have been reported in Wuhan and Hubei since early April.

Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, has reported more than 3,800 fatalities from the coronavirus outbreak.

[China] How foreigners, especially black people, became unwelcome in parts of China amid COVID crisis (ABC News)

ABC News [4/29/2020 5:11 AM, Alice Chambers and Guy Davies, 3795K, Negative]

For Andrew, a black American living in China and teaching English for the past two years, life had been pretty good.

"As a black foreigner, because China was closed for so long, there is a novelty about seeing foreigners," he said. "It's part of life that you just get used to here, and it's never been malicious."

But about two weeks ago, that all changed, he said.

As COVID-19 cases originating in China appeared to decrease, and cases that the government said were brought into the country from abroad increased, being foreign in China, and especially being black, meant feeling unwelcome in certain places.

"In the past couple of weeks, things have changed drastically," Andrew, who has been teaching in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, told ABC News. He asked that ABC use

only his first name, as he and his employer are wary of the risk of retaliation from Chinese authorities.

American authorities appear to be well-aware of the issue. In an April 13 health alert, the U.S. Consulate General warned about discrimination against African Americans in Guangzhou. "As part of this campaign, police ordered bars and restaurants not to serve clients who appear to be of African origin. Moreover, local officials launched a round of mandatory tests for COVID-19, followed by mandatory self-quarantine, for anyone with 'African contacts,' regardless of recent travel history or previous quarantine completion. African-Americans have also reported that some businesses and hotels refuse to do business with them," the bulletin read.

The consulate general said it "advises African-Americans or those who believe Chinese officials may suspect them of having contact with nationals of African countries to avoid the Guangzhou metropolitan area until further notice."

"At a moment when the international community urgently needs to work together to fight the pandemic, the US side is making unwarranted allegations in an attempt to sow discords and stoke troubles," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said on April 13. "This is neither moral nor responsible. We suggest that the US had better focus on domestic efforts to contain the spread of the virus. Attempts to use the pandemic to drive a wedge between China and Africa are bound to fail."

Lijian also said that "new measures" were adopted in Guangzhou to address "the concerns of some African citizens."

ABC News reached out and placed an official request to comment with the information department of the Foreign Ministry as well as the one in Guangzhou but has not heard back at time of publication.

By mid-March, Chinese propaganda had shifted, from praising the country's quick action dealing with the virus, to worrying about its reintroduction from abroad. It was around this time that Keenan Chen, a researcher and reporter with First Draft, an organization that tracks misinformation online, told ABC News he began to see unconfirmed speculation that community transmission in China was not as serious as cases coming in from the outside.

"China is very concerned about a second wave coming from abroad," Evanna Hu, a partner and an expert on China at Omelas, a Washington-based firm that tracks online extremism and information manipulation, told ABC News.

Despite many of the new imported cases in China coming from Chinese students returning from studying overseas, state and social media more often than not simply say the new cases are brought into the country coupled with images of the coronavirus ravaging the United States and Europe, leaving the impression that foreigners were the ones infected.

A reported attack and a swift crackdown

Guangzhou has one of the largest African populations in China (400,000-500,000 by some estimates) and reports in early April showed discrimination against those residents, some of whom were left homeless or subject to arbitrary COVID-19 testing after authorities said that

five Nigerians had tested positive for the virus. Significantly, the People's Government of Guangzhou Province announced that a Nigerian man at a COVID ward had attacked and wounded a female nurse while allegedly attempting to flee, Chen told ABC, adding that this news circulated widely on social media. ABC News could not independently verify if the original report was true.

Andrew said a taxi driver drive off when he saw him, and has also had issues with the authorities when riding on the metro.

For no apparent reason, Andrew said he was asked by local police to produce his passport as he was trying to get the metro. When he asked why, he was told there was a new rule in place, and was given no explanation. Eventually he ceded to their demands: "I realized I was standing there, frustrating a group of people who did not create this rule," he said. Now he mostly stays at home.

"The narrative that I have seen about foreigners is that foreigners are spreading the virus because they're irresponsible," Andrew told ABC News. "So if you have a population doing their very best to take care of themselves and they're told that some are not, that explains why it happens so quickly."

Matt Slack, a white man from New Jersey who has run a chain of pizza restaurants in Guangzhou for the past four years, said the change in the disposition towards foreigners "was like a light switch."

"I'm privileged to say that that I've gone 36 years of my life without experiencing racism," he told ABC News. Now, he's been refused entrance to restaurants, other people won't get in the elevator with him. "People won't sit beside you in the subway," he said.

Chen said that the Chinese people know the information they get online is unreliable. In the past 10 years the censorship machine has become so sophisticated that it's hard to access the internet seen by the outside world.

"There's absolutely tons of racism and xenophobia online," he said. "[But] racist content and xenophobic content is rarely censored online, unlike comments against the government."

Anti-black racism

Slack said he recalls how, on April 6, his businesses were visited by the local city management. He said he was never given an official note, but his store managers reported to him that they were given a blue sign that they were instructed to show to customers. It was written in English and said that their pizza restaurants were only offering take-away. The message was meant for foreigners, Slack said his manager reported to him, "especially [for] black people."

Slack also said he was not allowed to eat in a restaurant in a different neighborhood one day recently, even though he saw Chinese people eating there. Andrew said his foreign friends don't want to dine out because of concerns they'd be denied.

Both expats painted a picture of a shifting information landscape in which it's difficult to determine where directives are coming from. Andrew said his fear is that "they could show

up at your door and tell you you're under quarantine." "And we don't know who 'they' is. It's inconsistent," he added.

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in China in December, controlling the epidemic block by block has fallen on the most grass-roots level of the Chinese civil-service: the neighborhood committee. Under immense pressure to deliver results to their supervisors, some overeager neighborhood controllers have resorted to sometimes sweepingly extreme measures like welding families inside their home in Jiangsu Province back in early February. Provincial officials later found out and forbade the practice. What is happening in certain areas of Guangzhou may be part of the same phenomenon of overzealous low-level leaders taking matters into their own hands.

"The signs that I've seen are not on letterheads," said Hu. "Which the reason why I think it might be very low level CCP officials, but it probably wasn't sanctioned from the top."

International backlash

Last week, the authorities in Guangzhou published a multi-lingual statement, addressed to everyone in the province, to say that the government has "zero tolerance over discriminatory language or acts."

But reports of racism have drawn international condemnation from senior politicians in both Africa and the United States.

Some of this appears to have stemmed from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) putting forth "many contradictory stories" about the origins of coronavirus, including alleging that the U.S. Army and Italy were the true sources, and not Wuhan, where the outbreak is believed to have begun, according to Dr. Matthew Kroenig, associate professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University,

"There is longstanding and well-documented racism, especially against black people, in China," he said. "The state has seized on this sentiment in recent days to find a scapegoat."

Some of the apparent increase in racism will likely have a political rationale, he said.

"Most CCP actions are driven by its two foremost goals of domestic stability and increased international leadership," Kroenig continued. "Similarly, China's disinformation campaign is driven by a desire to deflect blame, so the regime can appear competent both at home and abroad."

However, this has become an economic and foreign policy problem for China, as the country's economic interests in Africa means they have been keen to play down accusations of racism, according to Hu. "The Chinese propaganda machine has gone into overdrive since April 12th to dispel rumors of Africans being targeted," she said. "The Chinese Communist Party is trying their hardest right now to dispel those rumors, which I've never seen before as part of their foreign policy."

Hope for the future

Slack has refused to follow the local authority's direction not to allow foreigners into his

restaurants and doesn't know if his business will survive.

His restaurants normally employ about 45 people, around 20 of whom are currently working given the COVID-19 restrictions still in place.

Slack says there are a hundred ways to shut a business down in China, but that he can't keep quiet right now. "We just won't operate anywhere in which our business is encouraged to discriminate even if we get shut down for it," he wrote in a public LinkedIn post.

In an email sent on April 24 and reviewed by ABC News, the U.S. embassy in Beijing assured American citizens stated that: "In response to reports of discrimination against foreign citizens the Chinese government has reiterated that all public health measures, including mandatory testing and quarantine policies, apply equally to both Chinese citizens and foreigners." The embassy has urged US citizens to report cases of discrimination to the police and, after reporting, asked them to inform the nearest American Citizens Services Unit of the incident.

Andrew, however, is more hopeful for his future. He has the support of his employer and a wide circle of friends and acquaintances both foreign and Chinese. He says he has been touched by shows of solidarity – local Chinese volunteers have stepped up to support Africans evicted from their homes. On the other hand, he wouldn't recommend foreigners to move to China right now.

"I don't think that this is a permanent thing," he said. "I don't think it reflects on the people of China. I think it reflects on the fear that people are living in, and the desire that anyone has to explain away this situation that is fraught for literally everyone."

[Hong Kong] As virus infections dwindle, Hong Kong protests gain steam (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:58 AM, Zen Soo, Neutral]

Demonstrators chanted pro-democracy slogans in a luxury mall in Hong Kong on Wednesday, the latest in a string of small but determined protests as the city's coronavirus outbreak slows.

More than 100 protesters gathered at lunchtime in the Landmark Atrium mall in Central, a prestigious business and retail district, despite social distancing rules that prohibit public gatherings of more than four.

They sang a protest anthem, "Glory to Hong Kong," and held up signs reading "Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now" and "Hong Kong Independence." One protester hung a banner cursing Hong Kong police and their families.

"The protests had calmed down previously because of the coronavirus, but now we must step up and let the world know that we have not given up," said Mich Chan, who works in the legal industry. "We're still fighting for what we fought for last year."

Holding up a sign calling for the movement's five demands to be met, Chan said she was not worried about possible transmission of the virus during the protests because the people of Hong Kong are "disciplined and know how to protect themselves" by wearing masks.

Police entered the mall about half an hour after the protest began, urging people to leave

and warning those assembled that they were violating social distancing rules and participating in an unlawful assembly. The police detained several protesters but later let them go, with no arrests made.

The protest followed similar ones in malls on Sunday and Tuesday in which police dispersed the crowds. They are a continuation of a movement that began last June to protest an extradition bill that would have allowed detainees in Hong Kong to be transferred to mainland China. Although the bill was later withdrawn, the demonstrations continued, with protesters demanding full democracy and an independent inquiry into police behavior.

Organizers are planning further protests in May, with an eye to a major march on July 1, the day when Britain returned Hong Kong to China in 1997. Activists expect protesters to return to the streets again, as the city's daily virus cases have dwindled to single digits for over two weeks.

Adrian Wong, who works in banking, said he came out to protest despite worries about the coronavirus.

"I am concerned about the virus but I think I still have to come out, so that Hong Kong's people won't forget what happened in the last year," Wong said. "The violence of the Hong Kong police force is destroying Hong Kong, and the five demands have not been met yet."

The protests this month are also fueled by the perception that mainland China is interfering in Hong Kong's affairs, after Beijing's liaison office accused pan-democrat lawmakers of damaging public interest by filibustering and delaying the election of a chairman of the Legislative Council House Committee.

Protesters also criticized the arrests of 15 pro-democracy activists and lawmakers earlier this month on charges of unauthorized assembly during several large-scale demonstrations last year.

"Whether people protest depends on the government's actions. If the Beijing liaison office continues to criticize lawmakers, disqualify them or even put pressure on people, then people will be angry and come out to protest more eagerly," activist Ventus Lau said.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong court rejects appeal by protest leader Edward Leung (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:04 AM, Jessie Pang, 5304K, Neutral]

A Hong Kong court on Wednesday rejected an appeal by pro-democracy activist Edward Leung against a six-year jail term for his part in demonstrations in the Chinese-ruled city in 2016 that turned violent.

Leung, 28, one of the leaders of a movement advocating independence from China, was jailed for rioting and was handed the harshest sentence to a pro-democracy leader since Britain returned Hong Kong to Beijing in 1997.

The appeal court judges said in their judgement the law must ensure that public order and peace are preserved and not threatened by the use of violence.

"If public order is not preserved, the freedom and rights of citizens will be lost," they said.

In his appeal, Leung's lawyer argued his sentence was disproportionate to his offence, citing other, more violent protesters receiving lighter sentences.

The ruling comes as the financial hub is gearing up for demonstrations over the next few months after a relative lull this year as the new coronavirus and social distancing restrictions aimed at curbing its spread saw many protesters stay indoors.

Authorities have repeatedly said the city is facing the risk of "home-grown terrorism" after several police reports of explosive materials being found.

More than 7,800 protesters have been arrested since opposition to a now-withdrawn extradition bill escalated in June last year, with 564 of those charged with rioting, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Although Leung was jailed before the demonstrations erupted last year, many regard him as a "spiritual leader" of the movement.

One of his old slogans — "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" — is one of the most popular chants of the new generation of protesters.

[Japan] Japan's Abe says impossible to hold Olympics unless pandemic contained (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:12 AM, Leika Kihara, Neutral]

It will be impossible to host the Tokyo Olympic Games next year unless the coronavirus pandemic is contained, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Wednesday.

"The Olympic Games must be held in a way that shows the world has won its battle against the coronavirus pandemic," Abe told parliament.

"Otherwise, it will be hard to hold the Games."

He was replying to a query from an opposition lawmaker whether Tokyo could host the Games next year, after this year's delay caused by the pandemic.

[Japan] Japan firms back same-sex partnership certificate campaign in gay rights push (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:08 AM, Beh Lih Yi, Neutral]

A Japanese charity has won the backing of businesses from banks to insurers for a new scheme offering digital partnership certificates that allow same-sex couples to tap into the same staff benefits as heterosexual ones.

The Famiee Project said it wanted to spur change by tapping into growing business support for LGBT+ rights in socially conservative Japan and aims to sign up 100 businesses by the time it launches the scheme in July.

Gay marriage is illegal in Japan and although about two dozen cities, towns and wards issue same-sex partnership certificates, they lack legal standing and prejudice persists.

"If we have a big network of corporations that support us, we can persuade the government to change the law," said Famiee Project founder Koki Uchiyama.

"That kind of movement is already happening in Japan," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Tokyo, referring to the growing business support for LGBT+ rights.

The scheme has so far been endorsed by 17 companies including banking firm Mizuho Financial Group, insurer Sampo Japan and Hotto Link, a public-listed data firm where Uchiyama is the chief executive.

Some of the 17 firms have already recognised certificates issued by local authorities, but these documents can only be used in the area they are issued.

Famiee Project said its digital certificates will use blockchain technology and QR codes for record and verification, making it easier for nationwide use.

The project aims to get 100 companies on board by July to provide same-sex couples with benefits such as marriage or parental leave.

It also wants the firms to accept the certificates for services such as opening joint bank account or naming insurance beneficiaries.

The Justice Ministry and Welfare Ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Japan's laws on LGBT+ issues are relatively liberal compared with many Asian countries, with same-sex relations legal since 1880, but being openly gay remains largely taboo.

About a third of Japanese companies have measures in place to support gay couples, but discrimination is still common, according to Nijiro Diversity, which campaigns for LGBT+ rights in the workplace.

"This certificate alone is not effective. The government should give more support to companies working towards measures on LGBT+ rights," said the group founder Maki Muraki.

Activist Ai Nakajima said she hoped the scheme would spur government into action.

"Companies are changing, but the government is not changing. So tax benefits or health insurance benefits are still not possible," said Nakajima, who was among 13 same-sex couples to sue the government over the right to gay marriage last year.

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party has said that same-sex marriage was "incompatible" with the constitution, although public polls showing growing acceptance in recent years.

[Malaysia] After virus outbreak tied to religious event, Malaysia puts the brakes on Ramadan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 9:07 AM, Emily Ding, Neutral]

Over several days in late February, at least 12,500 Muslims convened at the Jamek

Mosque on Kuala Lumpur's outskirts to pray, eat and listen to sermons in an annual act to renew their faith.

On the eve of the gathering in the suburb of Sri Petaling — organized by Jemaah Tabligh Malaysia, the local chapter of a religious pilgrimage movement founded in India about a century ago — the World Health Organization had not yet declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic, and Malaysia had 22 reported cases. Initially, the event came and went as it had in years before.

The first sign of trouble came March 9, when a participant from Brunei was reported to be infected. A few days later, a Malaysian participant tested positive. By March 17, cases linked to the religious celebration had become Malaysia's largest cluster and now account for 37 percent of its total of almost 6,000 cases. Some of the 1,500 foreign attendees carried the virus home to Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

With the holy month of Ramadan underway, this year's religious festivities are unlike any in memory. It's a time when Muslims usually come together to break their dawn-to-sunset fast with family and friends, and for nightly prayers at mosques. But such activities now pose a risk of coronavirus transmission.

Two weeks after the Kuala Lumpur event, about 9,000 Muslims gathered in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, as part of another tabligh chapter — until authorities shut it down. Attendees spread the virus to neighboring countries, including Malaysia and Thailand.

"Ramadan is a very high-risk event," said Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist at the University of Indonesia. "The infections from the tabligh gathering in South Sulawesi spread to many different islands. Then you have all these small clusters around the country that can become a big fire engulfing the whole country."

Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority nation, recently banned people from traveling back to their hometowns in an exodus that traditionally happens at the end of Ramadan for the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Yet it has not imposed a national lockdown, and social distancing measures vary among provinces.

"It's going to be very difficult to keep the people from going to the mosque every night," or dropping by a relative's house to break fast together, Riono said. Indonesia has more than 9,000 coronavirus cases and 700 deaths.

In Malaysia, the government has extended restrictions on movement until at least May 12 — midway through Ramadan. The country has closed its borders, banned events and gatherings, shut schools and houses of worship, and allowed only essential businesses to operate. Most people can travel only for necessities — exceptions require police approval — within six miles of their home, with one person allowed in each car.

"We have leaders who decided to be brave and initiated the lockdown relatively early in comparison with other countries, once we knew we had made a mistake," said Nirmala Bhoo Pathy, an epidemiologist at the University of Malaya. The Health Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Malaysia's Islamic affairs minister, Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri, has advised Muslims to order

food and have it delivered to friends and relatives instead of visiting them at home. Officials have also halted the food bazaars that normally pop up across the country and have established a fund for mosques and prayer houses to distribute food to the needy.

"We should welcome Ramadan with the new normal," Zulkifli said on the eve of the holy month.

As the world battles the pandemic, the Kuala Lumpur mosque gathering highlights how a localized hot spot can quickly become a wider outbreak.

Attendees have reportedly said that precautions against the coronavirus were not observed, and that people prayed closely together and shared food.

By late March, the mosque cluster had spread to five generations as family members infected neighbors, their neighbors infected their friends, and so on. Participants in the gathering also had visited Islamic schools, contributing to new subclusters of infections among students and teachers.

In early April, Malaysian officials said about 3,000 tabligh participants had yet to be screened — in part because some had gone abroad. One of the organizers, Abdullah Cheong, publicly disputed this figure, citing discrepancies in earlier estimates. Cheong declined to comment further about the gathering when contacted by The Washington Post.

Khairi Akbar, a 41-year-old Malaysian who took part in the gathering, learned in March that he was an asymptomatic carrier of the virus. After being admitted to the hospital for 18 days and self-quarantined for another 14, he was looking forward to spending Ramadan at home with his wife and children — although he worries about his mother, who lives alone in another state.

"We believe that Allah is the doer of all things, so even if the current situation means that we cannot perform our normal prayers in the mosque, there must be something that he wants us to learn," he said. "I believe we can achieve the same purpose of Ramadan staying in our homes, but I definitely miss breaking fast together at the mosque and doing prayers at night."

To deter people from contravening stay-home orders, Defense Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said police would increase roadblocks around the country. Eleven temporary prisons have been set up to house violators, he said. Since March 18, more than 19,000 have been arrested. Some have since been released, others fined or imprisoned.

The clampdown appears to be having an effect. In recent days, Malaysia has registered daily cases of the coronavirus in the double digits — down from a high of more than 200 in early April. Malaysia's director general of health, Noor Hisham Abdullah, recently said the country is in "the recovery phase."

"But it's not impossible to have an exponential surge if we let our guard down," he added.

Rahmah Ghazali, a 36-year-old freelance journalist who is normally based in Britain, said her family could still mark Ramadan together but that they have had to modify their plans. She has been living with her husband and two sisters in her parents' house in Kajang, near

Kuala Lumpur, with her parents' domestic helper and their seven grandchildren.

"We're cooking more than ever," she said. "We don't go out and don't really order deliveries because it can get expensive, and currently neither I nor my husband are working. We won't be spending like in previous years."

[Myanmar] UN human rights expert accuse Myanmar army of fresh abuses (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 9:25 AM, Staff, 2194K, Negative]

The U.N.'s human rights expert on Myanmar has called for a new investigation into allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity during recent fighting in the Southeast Asian country as she approaches the end of her appointment.

Yanghee Lee, whose formal title is special rapporteur, accused Myanmar's military of "inflicting immense suffering" on ethnic minorities in Rakhine and Chin states, where the government is battling the Arakan Army, a well-armed and well-trained guerrilla force representing the Buddhist Rakhine minority.

"While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine state, targeting the civilian population," Lee said in a statement issued Wednesday in Geneva.

She accused the military of "systematically violating the most fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and human rights," and said its conduct toward civilians "may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."

Lee, a South Korean whose term ends this month, has been a sharp critic of Myanmar's military since her appointment in 2014, focusing especially on human rights abuses against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine state.

In August 2017, the military – known as the Tatmadaw – launched what it called a clearance campaign in northern Rakhine state in response to attacks by a Rohingya insurgent group. The campaign forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Security forces were accused of mass rapes and killings and burning thousands of homes.

The International Court of Justice in the Netherlands agreed last year to rule on charges of genocide lodged against Myanmar. U.N. agencies and human rights organizations have extensively documented atrocities. Myanmar's government says it acted justifiably and denies any major abuses.

Lee linked the current situation in Rakhine and Chin to the government's actions against the Rohingya, for which no senior officers have faced justice and token punishments were given to a handful of low-ranking security personnel.

"Having faced no accountability, the Tatmadaw continues to operate with impunity. For decades, its tactics have intentionally maximized civilian suffering; we all know what they did to the Rohingya in 2017," Lee said. "They are now targeting all civilians in the conflict area, with people from Rakhine, Rohingya, Mro, Dagnet and Chin communities being killed in recent months. Their alleged crimes must be investigated in accordance with international standards, with perpetrators being held accountable."

The Arakan Army, which says it is seeking self-determination, has engaged in increasingly fierce combat with government forces since late 2018.

Lee said government air and artillery strikes in recent weeks have killed and injured scores of adults and children.

"More than 157,000 people have been displaced, and hundreds including women and children killed and wounded since the conflict started," she said.

Lee was also critical of the Arakan Army, which she said "has also conducted its hostilities in a manner that has had negative impacts on civilians, including kidnapping local officials and parliamentarians."

She added that the guerrilla force had declared a unilateral cease-fire, citing the need to combat the spread of COVID-19.

"The focus of all authorities, including security forces, should be on dealing with the COVID-19 crisis," Lee said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar military may be committing new war crimes, says departing rights envoy (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:45 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The departing U.N. human rights envoy for Myanmar said its military is engaged in activities against rebels that may amount to "war crimes and crimes against humanity" in Rakhine and Chin states, and that she was "enraged" and "saddened" by the situation in the country after six years in the role.

The South Korean special rapporteur said the basis for her conclusion about possible war crimes was that the armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, have ramped up attacks against civilians in recent weeks with air and artillery strikes.

Two military spokesmen did not answer phone calls seeking comment. A government spokesman also did not answer phone calls seeking comment. The army has denied targeting civilians and has declared the insurgent group it is fighting, the Arakan Army, a terrorist organisation.

"While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine State, targeting the civilian population," Yanghee Lee said on Wednesday in her final statement as rights envoy, calling for an investigation into the accusations "in accordance with international standards."

Government troops and fighters from the Arakan Army, which wants greater autonomy for Myanmar's western region and recruits largely from the region's Buddhist majority, have been fighting for more than a year, but clashes have intensified recently.

Dozens of people have been killed and tens of thousands displaced.

The government has repeatedly refused requests by Lee to enter Myanmar. She has previously accused the army of genocide and other war crimes against the Rohingya

Muslim minority in Rakhine in 2017, when some 700,000 fled an army crackdown.

The army and government have consistently rejected such accusations and said the military was responding to attacks by Rohingya Muslim insurgents.

Lee told Reuters by phone from South Korea that the democratic opening that brought Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to power in 2016, ending half a century of military rule, had failed to bring the hoped-for expansion of rights and freedoms.

She criticized what she described as the "systemic failure" of the international community, including the United Nations, to stop grave human rights violations.

"We repeat the phrase, 'Never again'. It goes on and on," she said.

Lee has been a divisive figure inside Myanmar. Her defense of the Rohingya made her a popular target of Buddhist nationalists. The last time she was allowed to visit the country was in 2017, shortly after the expulsion of tens of thousands of Rohingya during a military campaign.

[Papua New Guinea] Zijin warns Papua New Guinea of China anger over end of gold mine lease (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:52 AM, Tom Westbrook and Tom Daly, 5304K, Neutral]

China's Zijin Mining has warned Papua New Guinea that its failure to renew the lease of a gold mine it jointly owns with Barrick Gold Corp there could damage bilateral relations.

Papua New Guinea on Friday said it would not renew a 20-year mining lease at its Porgera gold mine, citing environmental damage and social unrest even as gold prices have soared to more than seven-year highs.

Barrick (Niugini) Limited (BNL), the local venture in which both miners have a 47.5% stake, suspended operations on Saturday, saying the government had not given it formal notification that it would not renew the lease, or any details of a planned transition.

Zijin, which is a state-controlled company, said that Papua New Guinea needed to conduct negotiations to extend the mining lease in good faith, and that a failure to resolve the issue could impair relations between the two countries.

"As a Chinese enterprise, Zijin would like to contribute to the existing good economic, trade, cultural and inter-governmental relations between China and PNG," Chen Jinghe, chairman of Zijin's board said in a letter addressed to Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape.

"However, if Zijin's investment in Porgera mine is not properly protected by the PNG government, I am afraid there will be significant negative impact on the bilateral relations between China and PNG," he said in the letter, dated Monday, seen by Reuters. Chen's office confirmed the letter had been sent.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't immediately respond to a faxed request for comment. China's embassy in Port Moresby did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment. The office of Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister did not respond to a

request for comment.

China has steadily increased its influence and spending in the Pacific in recent years, and is Papua New Guinea's biggest creditor, budget figures show.

The BNL joint venture had run into opposition from local landowners and residents. Critics say the Porgera mine has polluted the water and created other environmental and social problems, with minimal economic benefits for locals.

Marape warned Barrick in a social media post on Monday that the government would take control of the mine if it closed during the transition period.

Both miners have said they would pursue all legal means to protect their interests and recover damages.

Zijin also said that it understood the need for greater benefits distribution among governments, landowners and stakeholders.

But if the special mining lease extension is not granted, the mine will be forced to close, the company said.

That would also result in "the removal of the installations and facilities in the mine ... (which) would render the mine's operation impossible for years," the company added.

[Singapore] Singapore warns against spreading fake news about foreign workers living in dorms (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [4/29/2020 6:43 AM, Gurdip Singh, 3975K, Neutral]

Singapore on Wednesday warned against spreading fake news and videos about migrants workers, saying this could disturb the law and order situation in dormitories where a large number of foreign workers, including Indian nationals, have been tested positive for COVID-19.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam warned that such videos can lead to serious law and order incidents. He said the authorities are watching individuals who spread the videos "very carefully."

Warning those spreading fake news maliciously, he said, they will be charged if a crime was committed.

The Indian-origin minister's warning came as hundreds of thousands of foreign workers have been barred from leaving their cramped dormitories to curb the spread of COVID-19, as they make up a majority of Singapore's new cases each day, according to a Channel News Asia report on Wednesday.

So far, a total of 12,183 of the 323,000 migrant workers living in dormitories — about 3.77 per cent — have tested positive, putting the spotlight on their living conditions.

The total number of coronavirus cases in the city-state on Wednesday rose to 15,641 with a vast majority of them being migrant workers.

Shanmugam said a number of fake and "very malicious" videos were circulating on social media, with one suggesting that a Bangladeshi worker in Singapore committed suicide because of a lack of money and work.

Another video purportedly showed two men of South Asian origin fighting in a dorm in Singapore, when in fact the incident took place in Dubai, Shanmugam pointed out.

"It's to create panic, unhappiness, anger and hopefully violence," the minister told reporters via video conference.

Shanmugam said the videos also serve to make Singaporeans believe that foreign workers here were being treated badly, despite authorities ensuring they continued to get paid, three meals a day and "first-class medical treatment."

The minister acknowledged that while it was impossible that every worker would be satisfied with the quality of the free meals, a "majority of them" said the quality of the food they received was good, the report said.

"But even now, people are deliberately circulating old photographs of food packets; sometimes food being thrown away from some places, not necessarily Singapore, and saying, 'you see, these workers are being ill-treated'," he was quoted as saying.

"And (this is) also encouraging them to come out and complain, even when there's nothing to complain about." Shanmugam said the authorities were watching the people who spread these videos and photos "very closely" and added "where it's clearly criminal, we will charge (in court)."

However, he declined to give details on how many people were being investigated for circulating such posts, only adding that they comprised both locals and foreigners.

Shanmugam reiterated that such posts could lead to 'serious' law and order situations, including a "riot-like situation."

"You can see that when people are together and they are not going out to work, a small spark can create a serious incident," he said, referring to the 2013 Little India riots involving some 300 South Asian workers including those from India.

"We need to be very careful. We are taking care of them (the foreign workers), but at the same time they can be stoked into anger, creating law and order incidents through the use of falsehoods," the minister said.

[South Korea] Fire at Construction Site Kills 38 in South Korea (New York Times)
New York Times [4/29/2020 8:52 AM, Choe Sang-Hun, 40577K, Negative]

A blaze at a construction site southeast of Seoul killed 38 people on Wednesday in one of the deadliest fires to hit South Korea in recent years, police officers and local news reports said.

With emergency workers still looking for one other person who may remain trapped inside a building filled with toxic smoke, they have so far found 38 bodies, Seo Seung-hyeon, a local fire department chief, said during a news briefing. Ten others were injured, including eight

who were in serious condition, he said.

When the fire broke out, 78 workers were believed to be working in the four-story warehouse under construction in Icheon, 50 miles southeast of Seoul, the Fire Department said.

The blaze was the third devastating workplace fire to hit South Korea in recent years, and came as President Moon Jae-in has struggled to make good on his promise to put an end to the man-made disasters that have convulsed the country since a 2014 ferry sinking killed more than 300 people.

The Fire Department said it was investigating the cause of the blaze. But Mr. Seo said that investigators suspected that it was caused by an explosion in an underground level, where some workers used urethane, a combustible chemical used for insulation work.

Dozens of fire engines were sent to control the flames. Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun urged his government to dedicate every available resource to rescue the workers believed to be trapped in the warehouse.

The fire was extinguished in three hours, but firefighters searching for the missing workers were hampered by toxic gas in the warehouse.

Photos and TV reports showed orange-red flames and black clouds of smoke engulfing the warehouse and responders bringing out bodies from the building on stretchers to ambulances outside.

The Yonhap news agency quoted a survivor as saying that the smoke filled the building so quickly that he could barely find his way out.

South Korea, which has had strong economic growth in recent decades, has been prone to major disasters despite its leaders' repeated promises to make the country safer.

In 2014, an overloaded ferry capsized, killing more than 300 people, most of them high school students. In 2018, a fire at a hospital that doubled as a nursing home killed 47 people.

The blaze came two years after a hospital fire in the southern city of Miryang killed 41 people in a building that lacked sprinklers. That disaster occurred a month after another fire killed 29 people at a fitness center.

Mr. Moon took power in May 2017, replacing his predecessor, Park Geun-hye, who was impeached and jailed on corruption charges following weeks of huge anti-government protests. South Koreans grew cold toward Ms. Park after she was accused of mishandling the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster.

Keenly aware of that recent history, Mr. Moon repeatedly promised South Koreans that they would "never have to shed tears because of safety issues." He also vowed to "end governmental incompetence and irresponsibility" in making South Korea safer.

But after the Miryang fire, Mr. Moon said he felt "crushed" that his promise went unfulfilled.

In recent weeks, Mr. Moon's government has won global plaudits for its successful efforts to contain the coronavirus epidemic. His party won a landslide in the April 15 parliamentary elections largely seen as a midterm referendum on Mr. Moon's performance as president.

[Thailand] Migrants jobless and trapped under Thai coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:08 AM, Nanchanok Wongsamuth, Negative]

Htoo Gay War quit her job as a domestic worker in January because her employer refused to allow her to take one day off each week – just before Thailand reported its first case of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Three months later, the pregnant 30-year-old from Myanmar has been unable to find a new job as Thailand has declared a state of emergency, shutting malls, schools and bars to curb the spread of the virus, which has infected some 3,000 people.

"I want to go home to be with my parents, because at least they can take care of me while I'm out of work and don't have any money," she said from the central province of Pathum Thani.

"But I can't go back now that the borders are closed," she said, adding that her family are scraping by on her husband's salary of 8,000 baht (\$247) per month.

Thailand has about 2.8 million registered migrant workers mainly from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, government figures show. But the United Nations estimates that 2 million more work informally across the country.

At least half a million migrant workers in Thailand have been left unemployed as a result of the coronavirus crisis, estimates the Migrant Working Group (MWG), a network of non-governmental organisations promoting migrant rights.

"These workers will find it difficult to seek new jobs as many venues are still closed, and they also can't go back home and have very little access to government aid," said Adisorn Kerdmongkol, a coordinator at MWG.

Suchat Pornchaiwiseskul, director-general of the Department of Employment, said its policy was to help unemployed migrants find new jobs within 30 days.

"Thailand's labour law protects both Thai and foreign workers," Suchat said.

Thailand has introduced a raft of measures to help workers affected by the coronavirus, including financial aid for informal Thai workers and for Thai and foreign workers registered under the social security system.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation spoke to seven migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar who said they did not receive government assistance because they were not formally registered.

One female worker who earned 120 baht a day at a beauty salon before it closed, said she owed money to a grocery store because she could not afford to pay for basic goods.

"I've been looking for a new job, but no one has been willing to accept me," said the worker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because Thai law does not allow migrants to work in beauty salons.

About 60,000 migrant workers scrambled to leave Thailand in March before the land border was closed, as the shutting of businesses left them without an income.

Most migrant workers are not members of Thailand's social security scheme, said Jarrett Basedow, regional director of Issara Institute, a labour rights and anti-trafficking group.

"We have not yet talked to a migrant worker who has accessed this assistance," he said, adding that many work illegally, have not received a social security card or their employers have not paid the necessary contributions.

Unemployed people must contribute to social security for at least six months before they can receive benefits.

Basedow said many employers were laying off workers, often with no legal severance pay, by pressuring workers to sign resignation letters or not renewing their contracts.

"Many of these workers are worried about meeting their needs until they are able to return home, as they have no employment and high debt," he said.

Pasuta Chuenkhachorn, a lawyer with the Human Rights and Development Foundation, which provides legal aid to migrant workers and trafficking victims, said the government's financial aid measures discriminated against migrants.

"In times of crisis like this, the Thai government only takes care of Thai people," she said.

One glass factory worker from Myanmar said he and dozens of other workers were laid off on March 1, as orders had fallen.

He was unable to look for a new job because his passport and work permit were still with the agency that recruited him.

"There's no point in staying here anymore," he said by phone from Thailand's central Samut Prakan province.

"Once the borders are open, I'll go home. It's hard to find work here and I don't have my personal documents."

South and Central Asia

[Bangladesh] 'A life too often lived underwater': How tidal flooding is wreaking havoc in Bangladesh (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Kenneth Dickerman and Jashim Salam, Neutral]

Climate change is affecting everyone everywhere in myriad ways. I recently wrote about how rising sea levels are affecting Miami. Rising sea levels are a problem around the world. Photographer Jashim Salam has been documenting how this has been affecting him, his

family and his neighbors in the southeastern Bangladeshi city of Chittagong.

Salam notes Chittagong often is regarded as the commercial and industrial capital of Bangladesh. As such, it is densely populated, with people from all over the country heading there for work. Salam estimates the population of Chittagong at 6.5 million. Those people are living with the effects of climate change, particularly with regard to rising sea levels.

Salam, his family and his neighbors are badly affected by tidal surges. He told In Sight his home, in the Chaktai area of Chittagong, gets flooded every year from June to October, sometimes as much as twice a day, because of the rising tidal waters from the Karnaphuli River.

Salam says this flooding makes life difficult. It affects everyone's daily routine. "People have to save their belongings from tidal floods and also throw out water from their homes every time it's flooded," he says. "The main business areas of Chaktai and Khatungonj also are affected by the tidal floodwater." Because of the flooding, business is halted and products become waterlogged.

Residents are trying to find ways to cope. They've raised their ground-level floors and built barriers and walls to keep the water at bay. Still, the water finds a way in. This is all compounded by the annual monsoon season. "This is a recent phenomenon, one many blame on climate change and rising seas coupled with the annual monsoon season," Salam says. "Residents have had to adapt and adjust to the enormous hardships of a life too often lived underwater."

Salam's photos drive home the difficulties people face because of the recurrent tidal flooding. The rising water spares no thing and no one. We see people standing in water driven up to and past their calves, detritus floating through the murky waters and what were once keepsakes streaked, faded and waterlogged. As Salam told In Sight, "I am portraying a city that I am deeply connected with — and the suffering experienced by its inhabitants."

[Editorial note: consult source link for photographs]

[India] India has 1,000 coronavirus deaths but expert says no exponential rise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 9:11 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, Neutral]

India has recorded its 1,000th novel coronavirus death, but the head of a government think-tank said on Wednesday that its 1.3 billion people, strained from weeks of lockdown, were not experiencing the feared exponential surge in infections.

India has now reported 31,331 cases, including 1,007 deaths, according to figures from the Health Ministry. Neighbouring Pakistan has 15,282 confirmed cases amid concerns about worshippers gathering at mosques during the current holy month of Ramadan.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi must decide soon whether to extend the world's biggest lockdown, now 40 days old, beyond May 3.

Health officials say the shutdown has prevented an explosive surge of infections that would have crippled India's modest health care system.

"Our analysis finds that the rate of growth in positive cases and fatalities has been consistently lower – linear but non-exponential," said Amitabh Kant, chief executive of the government thinktank Niti Aayog.

Aayog urged a phased exit from the shutdown, but the government has a difficult decision ahead.

The big cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad – which are also India's economic growth engines – top the list of cases and there are no signs of the pandemic abating there, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said.

"When I see Delhi's COVID-19 map, I see only red and orange colours which is extremely worrying."

Red zones indicate infection hotspots, orange denotes some infection, while green indicates an area with no infections.

Wednesday's daily increase in cases, 1,897, was the highest in weeks.

Still, the scale of the outbreak is dwarfed by the United States or large western European countries.

In Afghanistan, 46 people tested positive in Kabul prisons, said Farhad Bayani, a spokesman for the prison administration, even as the Afghan government frees thousands of prisoners to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Some of them include Taliban fighters, freed as part of a prisoner swap with the insurgent group under a U.S.-brokered peace process.

Here are official government figures on the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia:

India has reported 31,331 cases, including 1,007 deaths

Pakistan has reported 15,282 cases, including 335 deaths

Afghanistan has reported 1,939 cases, including 61 deaths

Sri Lanka has reported 622 cases, including seven deaths

Bangladesh has reported 7,103 cases, including 163 deaths

Maldives has reported 200 cases and no deaths

Nepal has reported 57 cases and no deaths

Bhutan has reported seven cases and no deaths

[India] Asia Today: Indian businesses urge easing of virus lockdown (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:45 AM, Staff, Neutral]

With Chinese industries ramping up production, competing Indian businesses are urging

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to loosen India's 5-week-old coronavirus lockdown when it comes up for review on Sunday.

Gurcharan Das, former head of Procter & Gamble in India, said Wednesday that key industries such as pharmaceuticals, information technology and automobiles, which employ millions of people, can resume manufacturing at half or even one-third of their capacities in areas unaffected by the coronavirus. He said the manufacturers should ensure that safeguards are in place for their workers, including safe distancing and the wearing of masks.

If India is unable to bring its economy back on the track, it could lose 30-40 million jobs by the end of this year, leading to a devastating economic crisis, said Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, executive chairwoman of Biocon, a biopharmaceutical company.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said 300 of India's 720 districts are unaffected by the coronavirus. Another 300 have had very few cases, while 120 have hotspots. New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Indore and Ahmedabad are among the main troubled areas. India has so far confirmed more than 30,000 cases and 1,007 deaths.

India earlier this month changed rules to block Chinese foreign direct investment into the country through automatic routes. Chinese goods such as cars, cellphones, toys and furniture flood Indian markets. India also is getting ventilators, testing kits and other medical equipment from China.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a three-week lockdown on March 25 and later extended it until May 3, when he is scheduled to address the nation on its future.

In other developments in the Asia-Pacific region:

— **INDIA SHELVES HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE PLANS:** Public health officials in India have shelved plans to administer the untested anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, or HCQ, to thousands in Mumbai's crowded slums as a way of preventing infections in healthy people. Health officials in Mumbai said the plan to conduct tests was still in the cards but had not yet been approved by the Indian government. For now, they will follow federal guidelines that say the drug can only be used for high-risk groups including health care workers taking care of COVID-19 patients, contacts of confirmed patients and those in quarantine centers. Experts say there is little evidence to show that HCQ can help treat COVID-19 infections. The drug had been widely touted by President Donald Trump.

— **BANGKOK SET TO EASE RESTRICTIONS:** Officials in Thailand's capital say they're preparing to ease restrictions that were imposed to fight the coronavirus. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration said Wednesday that plans call for the reopening of restaurants, markets, exercise venues, parks, hairdressers and barbers, clinics and nursing homes, animal hospitals and pet salons, and golf courses and driving ranges. Restaurants will have to keep their seats at least 1.5 meters (5 feet) apart and practice a wide range of sanitary measures. Thailand has confirmed 2,947 cases, including 54 deaths.

— **CONCERNS OVER MALAYSIA LOCKDOWN PENALTIES:** Malaysian lawyers and an international rights group have voiced concern over what they say is excessive sentencing of violators of the country's coronavirus lockdown. Malaysia, which has confirmed 5,851

cases and 100 deaths from COVID-19, has arrested more than 21,000 people since a partial lockdown began March 8. Violators face a fine or a jail term of up to six months. The Bar Council, which represents some 15,000 lawyers, urged courts to temper justice with compassion because the offenses don't involve violent crime. Human Rights Watch said Malaysia should stop jailing violators because it's counterproductive to reducing the virus spread.

— HOLIDAY WORRIES IN SOUTH KOREA: South Korean officials have issued public pleas for vigilance to maintain hard-won gains against the coronavirus as the nation enters its longest holiday since infections surged in February. Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip said Wednesday that 180,000 people are expected to visit the resort island of Jeju during a six-day break from Thursday to Tuesday, despite the island government pleading travelers not to come. Kim urged travelers to wear masks, not to share food and stay at home if they have fever or respiratory symptoms. South Korea has confirmed 10,761 cases, including 246 deaths.

— TOKYO SITUATION STILL SERIOUS: Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike on Wednesday called for an extension of Japan's nationwide "state of emergency," which requests people to stay home and social distance. She noted that reported daily cases of COVID-19 in Tokyo have topped 100 people recently. The state of emergency lasts through May 6, which marks the end of the Golden Week holidays that began this week. The government has asked people not to travel during the holidays. There is no lockdown in Japan, and some businesses and restaurants remain open.

— CHINA CONGRESS SET: China has decided to hold the annual meeting of its ceremonial parliament late next month after postponing it for weeks because of the coronavirus outbreak. The official Xinhua News Agency said Wednesday that the National People's Congress would open in Beijing on May 22, according to a decision made by its standing committee, which handles most legislative affairs outside the annual two-week session of the full body. The convening of the full session, which would encompass about 3,000 members, indicates China's growing confidence that it has largely overcome the pandemic that was first detected in the country late last year.

— AUSTRALIAN MINING MAGNATE URGES INQUIRY DELAY: An Australian mining magnate and partner in the government's pandemic response says a global inquiry into the coronavirus should be delayed until after the U.S. presidential election. Andrew Forrest, who became a billionaire exporting iron ore to China as founder of Fortescue Metals Group, said such an inquiry made "common sense," but should be held after the November election so "there's not going to be a political dog in this fight." Australia's calls for an independent inquiry are damaging bilateral relations with China, which accused Australia of parroting the United States.

[India] Navy, Air Force to Lead Biggest Evacuation Plan Ever to Bring Back Indians Stranded in Gulf Nations (Yahoo News/News18)

Yahoo News/News18 [4/29/2020 2:11 AM, Staff, 3975K, Neutral]

The Navy is in the advanced stages of preparing at least three of its ships to The Navy is in the advanced stages of preparing at least three of its ships to evacuate thousands of stranded Indians, particularly migrant labourers, from the Gulf countries.

INS Jalashwa, Navy's second-biggest amphibious transport dock which can carry dozens of

tanks, is among the three ships modified to accommodate as many passengers as possible, while following strict social distancing norms. Each ship will have a quarantine facility and medical teams to monitor the health of those onboard.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain are home to 70% Indians living abroad. Embassies in these six countries are in the process of putting together details of those who need to be evacuated in a phased manner. According to sources, the government of India has decided to give priority to migrant labourers whose work permits have either expired or are about to expire as they might be running out of resources after month-long lockdowns.

"With thousands of Indians in Middle East wanting to come back, this could be the biggest evacuation ever by India. Navy ships will have to make multiple trips as one ship would be able to accommodate about 500 people at a time. Social distancing norms are sacrosanct," said a source close to developments.

"We don't want a situation like in the US and French Navy where the virus spread like wildfire. We will have to ensure that everyone who comes on board is Covid-negative and is in a position to undertake sea journey," he added.

Men will be in the upper decks and open spaces, while women, children and elderly will be given accommodation in the lower deck. "We are modifying the ships a bit to make space for people to stay at a safe distance from each other. Then extra food and medicines have to be stocked. After all, you don't want to be sailing for a week without adequate arrangements," a Navy officer told News18.

"All I can say is that we are ready. The full scope of the evacuation and the assets being used will become clear only after it's cleared at the highest level in the government," another Navy officer said. These large amphibious ships are being kept ready in Kochi, Vizag and Karwar.

Air Force and national carrier Air India are also working on Middle East evacuation plan. Put together, this is likely to become biggest evacuation exercise every by India, with one estimate projecting movement of over a lakh Indians from Middle East to India. Keeping these people in quarantine for two weeks post their return and ensuring safe movement into community is going to be another challenge. While states like Kerala have been making preparations for mass arrivals, Centre has asked all states to be prepared.

The Air Force is likely to use 11 C-17 Globemasters that can carry 100 passengers at a time and reach Middle East in less than four hours. Air India is likely to operate special flights as well.

Many Gulf countries have said they face a challenge with migrant workers. Some, including the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, have locked down areas with a large population of low-wage workers from South Asia.

Over eight million Indians live in the Gulf and only those with family emergencies and whose work permits have expired are likely to be evacuated in phase-I.

In an interview on Monday, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said the state is prepared

to rehabilitate Gulf returnees. He had also written a letter to the Prime Minister's Office asking the Centre to expedite the process of evacuation.

Earlier in the month, based on a petition moved by the Kerala Muslim Cultural Society, the Kerala High Court had sought the Centre to file a report on evacuating the stranded Indians in the UAE.

Similarly, MK Raghavan, Kozhikode MP, has also approached the Supreme Court seeking its intervention in bringing back the jobless people, pregnant women and those on visiting visas due to cancellation of flights and struck in the Gulf nations.

Since the outbreak, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have reported 17,522 and 10,349 positive coronavirus cases respectively. According to a report, the majority of Indians who tested positive for coronavirus infection abroad are located in the Gulf countries.

[Kyrgyzstan] Kyrgyzstan in talks to restructure \$1.8 billion in debt to China (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:17 AM, Olga Dzyubenko, 5304K, Neutral]

Kyrgyzstan is in talks with the Export-Import Bank of China to restructure its debt, Deputy Prime Minister Erkin Asrandiyev said on Wednesday.

The Central Asian nation, which owes the Eximbank \$1.8 billion, said last month it would seek debt relief due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on its economy.

[Pakistan] Pakistan Prepares to Ease Coronavirus Curbs With Infections Below Projections (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:25 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Pakistan is preparing to loosen coronavirus lockdown restrictions as the number of infections and deaths are well below previous projections, officials said on Wednesday.

The South Asian nation, which has registered more than 15,000 cases of COVID-19 including 335 deaths, has already granted exemptions to dozens of sectors to open up over the last few days.

"The mortality numbers are nowhere near the same as we see in other countries," Planning Minister Asad Umar, who oversees the response to the virus, told journalists.

He said infections and deaths in Pakistan were lower 30-35% lower than projections and, if things remained this way, the country could open up further in coming days.

Experts say Pakistan's low numbers are due to limited testing. Currently Pakistan, a country of more than 207 million people, conducts about 8,000 tests a day.

On Tuesday, the country registered 800 positive cases and 26 deaths – the highest number of deaths in a single day. Experts and officials say infections will peak in mid-May.

Umar said that despite the rising numbers, the disease was under control, but the economic cost had been "tremendous" as revenues and exports had been hit during a month-long lockdown.

The IMF has projected that Pakistan's economy will contract 1.5% this financial year.

Pakistan a few days ago launched a new "Test, Trace and Quarantine" system, which officials say will allow it to steadily open up commercial and industrial activities over the next few weeks without risking further infections.

Officials at the briefing did admit there remained areas of concern – particularly the high incidence of infections in health workers. Zafar Mirza, the top health official, said at least 480 health workers, including doctors, had been infected.

He added that because of the lockdown and the focus on the coronavirus, a number of other health programmes, such as an anti-polio campaign, had been affected.

Pakistan has also removed restrictions on congregations at mosques for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, leading doctors to raise the alarm on the risk of mass infections.

But Mirza said safety procedures for mosque gatherings had been worked out between the government and clerics.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Bolivia] Bolivia extends coronavirus lockdown until May 10 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:07 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Bolivia will extend its lockdown against the COVID-19 pandemic until May 10, the government announced on Wednesday, while planning to relax stay-at-home rules in parts of the country little affected by the illness starting May 11.

President Jeanine Anez, in a televised message to the nation, said Bolivia will move to a "dynamic" or "less rigid" quarantine on May 11, allowing some people to return to work.

Policy going forward will hinge on the country's success at containing the pandemic, which has killed 55 Bolivians so far with a total 1,053 cases confirmed.

"Opening the quarantine a little or closing it completely will depend on how the pandemic is being controlled in each region," she said. "The Ministry of Health will evaluate every seven days how the pandemic evolves in each region. On that basis, decisions will be taken to relax or harden the quarantine."

[Brazil] Brazil leaves its many poor hanging amid coronavirus surge (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:20 PM, Mauricio Savarese and Diarlei Rodrigues, Negative]

Work had already dried up for Ivanilson Gervásio when the coronavirus first emerged in Brazil in late February. As cases now surge amid a simultaneous implosion of Latin America's largest economy, hope of finding a job is gone, forcing Gervásio to line up for hours outside a state-owned bank for a \$110 monthly government handout.

His goal was to buy beef to feed his 6-year-old daughter, who hasn't had it for a month.

Multitudes of destitute Brazilians like Gervásio face bureaucratic delays in getting assistance, amid fraud and a disjointed emergency response by federal officials. Authorities

even launched a cell phone app for the payouts, although many people have only rudimentary mobile devices.

So Gervásio, like many Brazilians, had to leave home amid a lockdown aimed at halting the spread of the virus and go to a Caixa Econômica Federal bank.

As crowds swarmed the bank's branches across the country, President Jair Bolsonaro was hit with increasing criticism for a slow response in helping the poorest during the crisis.

He already had been slammed by the left and the right for downplaying the health risk and for delaying a rescue of the economy.

The coronavirus has killed over 5,000 people in Brazil, the most in Latin America, but even local policymakers admit the toll is much higher. They expect the deaths to peak sometime in May.

Big lines emerged across the country on Monday after the emergency aid announced at the start of April was finally freed up. The aid package will help as many as 24 million citizens working in the informal economy without any benefits, representing more than 10 percent of the population.

Gervásio, wearing an improvised black and yellow mask, was typical of the would-be recipients: He doesn't have a bank account and barely understands the aid distribution app. Unemployed for six years and getting by on odd jobs, he had to use a friend's phone to register for the benefit.

"There's no food at home," said Gervásio, tears welling as he described depending on neighbors for food. "We are not afraid of the coronavirus, but starvation is cruel."

In the same line was manicurist Maiara Sales, 31, who left her disabled 5-year-old son at home to go to the bank to report that someone had stolen her identity and her first \$110 payment.

"I can't even remove the email that was registered as mine," she said, adding that many in her neighborhood are hungry. "I see people crying, people who need to eat. The government needs to be more organized. Either they have the money to pay us or they don't."

Bolsonaro argues that workers in Brazil's informal economy are suffering because of the stay-at-home recommendations he opposes that were put in place by governors and mayors. He insists that most Brazilians should be allowed to go back to work, with exceptions for at-risk groups like the elderly or those with underlying health problems.

But the governors counter that Bolsonaro has not released enough federal funds for them to fight the pandemic. Most of the country's states and cities were already strapped for cash before the crisis, they say.

Even the wealthy governor of Sao Paulo state, João Doria, who made a fortune in marketing, backs stronger state intervention.

"By saving lives, we will be able to save the economy," Doria said last month.

Doria, one of Bolsonaro's strongest critics, said his own decision to shut down the state of Sao Paulo — Brazil's most populous — generated intense opposition from his private sector friends, including one who called him "upset, enraged."

"I told him that at the end of this pandemic, I will have helped save his life, his family," Doria said. "And that is because we are taking the right measures."

Sao Paulo received about \$20 billion in emergency federal funds at the start of April but nothing since then, Doria said.

Brazil's Senate is expected to vote next week on a package of nearly \$17 billion for states and cities to compensate for economic losses. Although the lower house of Congress approved it, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes has said handing out the emergency aid would be like doling out a blank check.

Guedes, a free market champion, had rallied much of the business community behind Bolsonaro's victorious 2018 presidential campaign with promises to privatize many state-owned companies, cut government spending and open up largely closed sectors of the economy to more foreign investment.

Despite Guedes' aversion to giving out federal funding, Bolsonaro's administration has acknowledged a need for financial relief.

Caixa slashed interest rates on overdrafts and credit card installment payments, and the government allowed all citizens to withdraw the equivalent of one month's minimum wage — about \$195 — from state-run retirement accounts required for all working Brazilians. The federal government is also sending doctors to some coronavirus hot spots, like the Amazon city Manaus, where coffins have piled up in common graves.

The market-friendly reforms that Bolsonaro and Guedes want to push through is the opposite of what the government should focus on for the foreseeable future, said Monica de Bolle, a Brazilian senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

De Bolle said she expects Brazil's economy to contract 9% this year, more than it did in the country's 2015-16 recession, and that unemployment will rise above 20%.

Bolsonaro's economic team was still focusing on economic reforms in March as coronavirus cases rose, instead of getting resources to those who most needed them, she told an online panel Tuesday sponsored by the Washington-based Wilson Center.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime crisis we've never seen before in Brazil," she said.

Bolsonaro also has been consumed this week with a political crisis that erupted after the exit of his justice minister, Sergio Moro.

Asked about the death toll in Brazil this week surpassing that of China, Bolsonaro responded: "So what?"

He added: "I am sorry. What do you want me to do?"

[Brazil] Brazil Top Court Suspends Nomination of Federal Police Chief (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:24 PM, Mario Sergio Lima, Neutral]

A Brazilian Supreme Court justice suspended the nomination of Alexandre Ramagem as the new chief of the country's federal police in a fresh blow to President Jair Bolsonaro.

Ramagem, who is close to the Bolsonaro family, was set to take office on Wednesday afternoon. Bolsonaro fired the previous police chief last week, prompting his justice minister to resign in protest.

In his decision, Justice Alexandre de Moraes determined that there was sufficient concern of "irreparable damage" in allowing Ramagem to take the post. "The federal police is not an intelligence agency of the Presidency," he wrote.

Moraes referenced an earlier ruling of the court determining that former Justice Minister Sergio Moro's accusations against Bolsonaro merit a formal probe. Moro had made his claims during his exit speech Friday, when he said Bolsonaro was replacing the police chief without cause and . The federal police is carrying out a number of investigations that could potentially implicate the president's family.

While the attorney general's office initially said it would challenge the ruling, Bolsonaro later withdrew Ramagem's nomination in a decree published at the official gazette.

The court's decision is a further setback for Bolsonaro, who's now struggling with a political crisis just as the number of coronavirus-related deaths climb to more than 5,000 in the country. The resignation of his popular justice minister, considered by many Brazilians as a hero for taking down a network of corrupt politicians and business leaders, has split his support base.

[Brazil] Brazil's Bolsonaro withdraws name of family friend as top cop (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:45 PM, Ricardo Brito and Lisandra Paraguassu, Neutral]

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on Wednesday withdrew the name of a family friend he had picked to run the federal police, after a Supreme Court justice blocked an appointment that opponents said would allow him inappropriate influence over law enforcement.

His decision to drop Alexandre Ramagem, who was director of the Brazilian intelligence agency Abin, was published in the government's official gazette.

The suspension of the appointment by Justice Alexandre de Moraes earlier on Wednesday came after the top court authorized an investigation into allegations by Bolsonaro's former justice minister that the president had abused his power by swapping the police chief.

Moraes wrote that he granted the injunction, which can still be appealed, because there were relevant signs that Ramagem, who was set to take office on Wednesday afternoon, could be compromised by his close relationship with Bolsonaro's family.

Ramagem, who joined the federal police in 2005 and has run the intelligence agency since

July, had the fewest years of service of any officer tapped to lead the force.

He took charge of Bolsonaro's security in 2018 after the soon-to-be president was stabbed on the campaign trail and grew close to the president's sons, who have been accused of taking part in embezzlement and misinformation schemes, which they deny.

Bolsonaro's shakeup of the federal police has spurred a political crisis in Brazil, distracting from the battle against an accelerating coronavirus outbreak in the country, whose official death toll climbed past 5,000 on Tuesday, passing that of China.

[Canada] Canada's coronavirus outbreak slows as cases top 50,000, but long fight looms (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:39 AM, Allison Martell and Moira Warburton, Neutral]

Canadian hospitals had beds to spare as the country hit 50,373 confirmed coronavirus cases on Wednesday, and several provinces were relaxing public health measures, but health experts were already worrying about a future wave of infections.

While it is too soon to say whether Canada's epidemic has peaked, it has slowed, thanks to swift workplace closures and other physical distancing measures: New cases doubled every three days early in the epidemic, and now double every 16 days, the government said on Tuesday. Since the first death on March 9, the virus has killed 2,904 in total. In the United States, an average of 2,000 died each day in April, a Reuters tally found.

"I really thought we were on track for something similar to what we were watching unfold in Italy and subsequently in New York (a month ago)," said epidemiologist Ashleigh Tuite of the University of Toronto. "I think big picture, across the country, we've done OK."

Hospitals fared well although the virus flared in long-term care homes and several prisons. Like the United States and European countries, Canada has struggled to contain the outbreak among seniors, and approximately 79% of deaths are linked to long-term care and seniors' homes.

In British Columbia, where cases spiked early on, partly due to its proximity to the first U.S. epicenter of Washington state, the number of coronavirus patients in hospital is falling. The province had a total of 94 COVID-19 patients in hospital on Tuesday, including 37 in intensive care, down from a peak of 149 on April 4, according to provincial data compiled by Reuters.

In Ontario and Quebec, the number in ICU has plateaued.

Non-ICU hospitalizations are still climbing in Ontario and Quebec, a consequence of transfers from overwhelmed long-term care homes, officials said. Ontario had 742 non-ICU patients as of Wednesday, up 17% from a week earlier, according to a Reuters tally. In hard-hit Quebec, the figure rose 38% on Tuesday from a week earlier, to 1,408 as more seniors were shifted to hospitals.

But the data suggests that the vast majority of Canadians have not been ill. Some may not know anyone who has been ill. And as the weeks stretch on, officials have started to acknowledge that people are getting impatient.

"The measures we've taken so far are working. In fact, in many parts of the country, the curve has flattened, but we're not out of the woods yet," said Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday. "We're in the middle of the most serious public health emergency Canada has ever seen and if we lift measures too quickly, we might lose the progress we've made."

The problem with successfully controlling the first wave of an epidemic is that it can set up a large second wave, said Gerald Evans, a Queen's University researcher and medical director of infection control at Kingston Health Sciences Centre, a hospital. Few have been exposed, so many are still susceptible to the virus.

"We've been able to provide care for people without overwhelming the system. The drawback is, we have to be prepared for that to happen again during a second wave," he said.

Jason Kindrachuk, a virologist at the University of Manitoba, is worried about the possibility of a second wave that could overlap with flu season, especially given how few people seem to have been exposed the first time around.

"We are doing well, but we certainly are nowhere near the end yet," he said. "This is a long game."

[Canada] Canada says its coronavirus death rate continues to spike despite a slower growth rate (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 2:44 AM, Paula Newton and Madeline Holcombe, 12317K, Neutral]
Canada has a higher coronavirus death rate than previously predicted, even though the country has a growth rates slower that most countries – including the United States – according to a new snapshot and updated modeling Tuesday.

The epidemic growth rate was doubling every three days, but now has slowed to doubling every 16, Canadian public health officials say. But Canada is now reporting nearly 3,000 coronavirus deaths, much higher than originally predicted.

"We are seeing the tragic paradox of the epidemic playing out," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, during a presentation of the new modeling Tuesday.

"As the epidemic comes under control, and the growth of cases slows, the severe outcomes and deaths continue to accrue, as Covid-19 takes a heavy toll among highly susceptible populations," said Dr. Tam.

Less than two weeks ago, Canadian officials had predicted a case fatality rate of about 2.2%. It now stands at 5.5% with hundreds more deaths possible in the next week alone. However, health experts have cautioned that fatality rates may be lower than reported because they do not always count asymptomatic or mild cases.

Canada is currently dealing with hundreds of outbreaks in long-term care homes throughout the country, and hundreds of those elderly and vulnerable residents have died. Government statistics released Tuesday show that 79% of deaths across the country are related to outbreaks in care centers.

"Outbreaks in long-term care and seniors' homes are driving epidemic growth in Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia and are responsible for the majority of all deaths in Canada," said Dr. Tam.

In response to the outbreaks and requests from provinces, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced last week that thousands of soldiers would be deployed to long term care homes to support seniors.

"This is not a long-term solution. In Canada we shouldn't have soldiers taking care of seniors," Trudeau said during his daily press conference in Ottawa Thursday.

The virus is clearly slowing down in Canada with a marked improvement in transmission rates. Earlier in the pandemic, each infected person was likely to infect 2.19 people, now that rate of transmission has slowed to only one.

Some regions are issuing guidelines and dates for reopening, like Quebec where elementary schools will open in phases beginning in May. Trudeau said he is collaborating with provincial leaders, but that there must be enough personal protective equipment throughout the country before it is safe for businesses and workplaces to reopen.

While Canada was flattening the curve, Trudeau said distancing measures and some closures would remain in place for some time.

"We're in the middle of the most serious public health emergency Canada has ever seen and if we lift measures too quickly, we might lose the progress we've made," said Trudeau during a press conference in Ottawa Tuesday.

[Cuba] Pandemic crisis squeezes Cuba's fragile private businesses (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:10 PM, Andrea Rodriguez, Neutral]

Until a few weeks ago, Julio Álvarez was the image of a successful Cuban entrepreneur. He had a dozen cars — classic Chevrolets and Fords that arrived before the 1959 revolution — conveying photo-snapping foreign tourists along Havana's seafront Malecon for \$30 an hour.

Now the new coronavirus has hit and the cars are parked, the tourists quarantined in their home countries and the drivers shut up in their own homes.

The pandemic that has frozen businesses around the world has been tough as well on the fragile private sector that has been permitted to blossom at times through the cracks of Cuba's socialist economy.

A record 600,000 people had taken out licenses to operate permitted forms of private businesses in Cuba under limited economic reforms launched by then-President Raul Castro in 2010. Many catered heavily to foreign tourists.

Then first three cases of the pandemic hit Cuba on March 11. Thirteen days later, authorities suspended classes, shut airports and told foreign tourists to stay in their hotels pending a trip off the island. Car rental services and recreational activities were closed.

Since then, at least 139,000 private businesses have temporarily handed back their licenses

— permits which otherwise require them to pay monthly fees.

"We are at an impasse," said Álvarez, co-owner of Nostalgicar, a family business launched nine years ago. "We have 19 workers contracted. We can't maintain them. They earned their money and are living on their savings."

It's become common to find "closed" signs on private cafes, bars, restaurants and lodging houses, to say nothing of the paralyzed taxi and car services like Nostalgicar that accounted for some 50,000 of those private business licenses.

Legal entrepreneurs, who first emerged in the tough days of the 1990s following the collapse of Cuba's aid and trade with the Soviet Union, have had to struggle with occasional waves of disapproval from the state, which has imposed strict limits on the size and types of activities allowed, as well as the impact of U.S. sanctions that have aimed to squeeze off the flow of tourists.

"The private sector, especially the most attractive businesses ... entered this already suffering a contraction due to the hardening of the (U.S.) embargo policy toward Cuba, which included the closure of cruise ships," said Omar Everleny Pérez, a local economist. "After the cancellation of (U.S. airline) flights to the provinces, there were limits on people who came."

Although 70% of Cubans work for the state, more than half a million had taken advantage of the 2010 opening to open businesses ranging from small repair and sewing shops to gourmet restaurants.

Many of private workers saw a sharp increase in their incomes. Alvarez said his mechanics earn about 2,000 Cuban pesos (\$80) a month, 10 times what they'd make in a state repair shop.

The pandemic, which has infected at least 1,400 people and claimed more than 50 lives in Cuba, hit at a time when the economy already was sluggish. The Trump administration has tightened the U.S. embargo and Venezuela, which had been a key supporter of the island, itself has plunged into crisis.

Cuba's government reported gross domestic product grew by just 0.5% last year, and long lines had once again become common for some types of foods because the government found it hard to raise hard currency. The U.N.'s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean last week estimated that Cuba's economy would contract by 3.7% this year. Pérez said the drop could be as sharp as 5%.

Cuba's also hurt by an expected drop in remittances sent back by Cubans and Cuban-Americans in the United States and elsewhere. That money often provides key capital for the small private businesses.

Economist Emilio Morales of the Miami-based Havana Consulting Group estimates Cuban citizens received some \$3.6 billion in remittances in 2018, in addition to an estimated \$3 billion in goods brought to the island by visiting emigrants.

Some entrepreneurs are trying to adjust rather than throw in the towel. Restaurants are

offering home delivery, beauty salons are trying to offer tips on social media and clothing stores are offering online sales. Álvarez said he was thinking of offering his workshop to repair the cars of others.

A few entrepreneurs said they think the crisis may eventually encourage the government to allow a greater expansion of private business, though still within a socialist system.

"I am optimistic," said Gregory Biniowsky, a Canadian living in Cuba and cofounder of the now-shuttered Nazdarovie restaurant. "Though we are going to recover slowly," he added.

"This crisis could shake the state and decisionmakers to be more open and to make changes within Cuba that help entrepreneurs, such as permitting us to import raw materials ... They can't permit themselves the luxury that the non-state sector collapses."

[Cuba] Magnitude 4.5 quake strikes near Guantanamo province, Cuba – EMSC (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

An earthquake of magnitude 4.5 has struck 41 kilometres (25 miles) southeast of Baracoa town in the province of Guantanamo, Cuba, the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) said on Wednesday.

The quake was at a depth of 8 km, EMSC said. It was revised from its initial measurement of magnitude 6.6 and depth of 2 km.

There were no immediate reports of damage from the temblor, which comes months after a major earthquake struck south of Cuba, sending shockwaves across the region.

Baracoa is a popular tourist destination in Cuba.

[Mexico] U.S. Factories Low on Inventory Show Reliance on Mexico's Restart (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Jenny Leonard, Neutral]

The past four weeks have been a real test for North American supply chains. Even as some U.S. states gradually begin to reopening their economies, some American manufacturers — especially small- and medium-sized ones — are finding themselves reliant on how and when Mexico will decide to lift its restrictions.

Mexico's stringent shelter-in-place order shut down of almost all manufacturing in the country. For U.S. companies like Bradford White, whose water heaters have been deployed in New York's Javits Center-turned hospital in the state's fight against the coronavirus outbreak, the shortage of inputs from Mexico could soon mean significant production interruptions.

The problem for businesses on both sides of the border is that the U.S. and Mexico don't agree on how to define an "essential" business or service. While the U.S. government deems entire supply chains essential, Mexico does not.

With inventory running low and no relief in sight, the squeeze is giving U.S. companies a stark reminder of their reliance on Mexican inputs and suppliers.

"With Mexico not allowing production, that's a bit of a problem for us right now," Scott Wine, the CEO of Polaris, in an interview Tuesday. The Minnesota-based recreational-vehicle maker relies on Mexico for parts such as engines, which it produces at a Monterrey plant located about 100 miles from the U.S. border.

Officials from both countries have been in touch but so far haven't found a solution.

Mexican ambassador to the U.S., Martha Barcena, said Tuesday that Mexico is not reluctant to coordinate with the U.S. on the matter.

"We have to acknowledge that the evolution of the pandemic has been different in the two countries," Barcena said on Twitter. "There is total awareness of the importance of preserving the value chains."

The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Christopher Landau, also weighed in over social media, offering the help of an embassy commercial attaché who will reach out to Bradford White.

Still, a lingering conflict could result in companies reconsidering their dependence on Mexican supplies, said Kevin Messner, senior vice president of policy and government relations at the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers.

"Businesses want stability and they want certainty, more than ever," he said.

[Mexico] Drugs, oil ... women? Mexican cartels turn to human trafficking (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:39 PM, Christine Murray, Neutral]

Organized crime is mutating in Mexico as gangs who steal oil and sell drugs try a lucrative new line of work trafficking people, according to a top official fighting money laundering.

Santiago Nieto, head of Mexico's financial intelligence unit (UIF), said his team had discovered that some of the country's most notorious cartels had branched out into sex trafficking, especially ones whose core business faced disruption.

"A lot of criminal groups are mutating," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at the unmarked office building that houses the UIF, responsible for unearthing illicit funds.

"When one possibility ends ... they start to link up with other kinds of criminal activities," Nieto said in an interview conducted at distance in his office.

Mexico is an origin, transit and destination country for human trafficking, a global business estimated to be worth \$150 billion a year.

Yet relative to the drugs trade, little is known about the shadowy groups in Mexico that deal in people.

High-profile cases often involve smaller, family-based U.S.-Mexico networks rather than the big cartels that grab headlines.

The Guanajuato-based Santa Rosa de Lima gang dedicated to tapping oil pipelines later turned to extortion and got involved in a table dancing bar staffed by trafficked women,

Nieto said.

He said the Mexico City Tepito Union drug gang had similarly branched out to guard women forced into commercial sex.

Nieto traced the web of criminal activities across a meter-wide sheet of paper with a complex diagram linking bank transfers, trips and shell companies that supported the rackets.

Human trafficking may be the third-largest illicit activity in Mexico, after drugs and guns, he estimated.

To help combat what is a fast-growing crime, Nieto said U.S., Canadian and Mexican financial intelligence teams had planned joint meetings, but the pandemic had put that on hold.

While it is often confused with consensual smuggling, trafficking victims are coerced or deceived into exploitation.

There have been isolated reports of drug cartels forcing men and women to cultivate or pack drugs and work as lookouts or hit men. But anti-trafficking justice efforts in Mexico have focused on sexual exploitation and been patchy.

More than half the state-level cases opened in 2019 were in just three of the nation's 32 states: Chihuahua, Mexico City and the state of Mexico.

The UIF has collaborated mostly with the latter two states, Nieto said, and presented four cases to the attorney general's office, responsible for federal prosecutions.

A fifth would be presented imminently, he added, related to an investigation into members of the Light of the World Church, whose head Naason Joaquin Garcia faced U.S. charges of rape and trafficking that were thrown out this month.

Nieto said progress on prosecuting federal cases was slow.

"We haven't seen that they've advanced much," he said. "It has to change for the good of the country, we need a more proactive attorney general's office."

Mexico's attorney general's office did not respond to a request for comment. The Light of the World church did not reply to a request for comment.

In March, the church's lawyers had said that legal issues with the UIF were being resolved in their favor in court.

Garcia had always denied the U.S. charges.

High volumes of cash and difficulty in securing arrest warrants made trafficking cases tricky, Nieto said, voicing hope that current cases go to trial so he could move on to new ones.

"The judges and public prosecutors have to realize how bad this issue is, trafficking at the end of the day is about ... human life," he said.

[Nicaragua] Nicaragua government failing to protect indigenous (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 10:22 AM, Christopher Sherman, Neutral]

Nicaragua's government has not only failed to enforce laws that protect its indigenous peoples and their communal lands, but is actively promoting illegal land grabs and granting concessions to mining and timber companies, according to a report released Wednesday.

Since 2015, more than 40 members of these communities along Nicaragua's northern Caribbean coast have been killed and many more wounded and kidnapped, according to The Oakland Institute, a California-based think tank. The complaints in many ways echo recent reports of U.N. and regional rights agencies.

Residents say non-indigenous settlers known as "colonos" have been responsible for the killings, but in many cases police do not even come to investigate.

The violence has increased in recent years, obscured first by the government's crackdown on protests that began in April 2018 and more recently by the world's attention being diverted by the coronavirus pandemic. So far this year, eight people have been killed in these communities, said Anuradha Mittal, the institute's executive director and author of the report. Four of those deaths came in late March.

"Violence is escalating when the world is focused on Covid," Mittal said "The people are like, 'forget about dying from Covid, we are dying from land invasions.'"

A request for comment from the Nicaraguan government on the contents of the report was not answered.

The spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned attacks that occurred in late January when dozens of settlers attacked the Mayangna community inside the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve.

"Most of the violence has been carried out by settlers as they seek to force indigenous people from their ancestral homes and use their lands for illegal logging and cattle farming," the U.N. agency's spokeswoman Marta Hurtado said in early February.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned that attack and said the government failed to protect the indigenous peoples and their territory. It noted such attacks had been occurring for years and called on Nicaragua's government to adopt policies "to protect the rights of indigenous peoples to life, integrity and territory."

On paper, Nicaragua appears to be one of the better countries in terms of protecting its indigenous people and their land. A pair of laws were lauded internationally for guaranteeing these communities' rights to their land and their right to manage it. One law includes a provision calling for the clearing of indigenous territories of settlers and outside corporations who are there without legal title.

But "the government has failed to enforce these laws, and instead colludes with business interests and plays an active role in the colonization of the protected lands by outsiders," the

institute said. "A constant stream of settlers, central government interventions, forestry and extractive industries, threaten their lands, economic well being, and political autonomy."

The communities have had success in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, but the government has not backed up those decisions from the regional court.

The situation is further complicated by the personal business interests of the family of President Daniel Ortega. The report outlines the family's ties to one of the most active timber companies working in protected areas.

The government has also promoted international mining opportunities that have advanced with government backing despite local resistance.

"The forest cover in Nicaragua has dropped from 76 percent in 1969 to 25 percent today," the report said.

Ortega's 2018 repression of street protests caused more than 328 deaths, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. More recently, the government has faced international criticism for not implementing social distancing measures and even promoting mass gatherings despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nicaragua's indigenous communities have turned to international courts, because they found no redress in Nicaragua's justice system, Mittal said.

"It becomes a responsibility of the international community to hold individual governments accountable," she said. "And that is what the intent of the report is, to drag this dracula out into the sunlight and let international attention be poured over it."

[Venezuela] Venezuela Asks Bank of England to Sell Its Gold to U.N. for Coronavirus Relief – Sources (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:34 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Venezuela is asking the Bank of England to sell part of the South American nation's gold reserves held in its coffers and send the proceeds to the United Nations to help with the country's coronavirus-fighting efforts, according to two sources with knowledge of the situation.

Venezuela for decades stored gold that makes up part of its central bank reserves in the vaults of foreign financial institutions including the Bank of England, which provides gold custodian services to many developing countries.

But the Bank of England has since 2018 refused to transfer the 31 tonnes of gold to the government of President Nicolas Maduro, whom Great Britain has refused to recognize as the country's legitimate leader after his disputed 2018 re-election.

The effort signals that Maduro is desperately seeking financial resources around the world as the country's economy struggles under low oil prices, crippling U.S. sanctions and a paralyzing coronavirus quarantine.

Consulted about the issue, the United Nations Development Programme said it "has been approached recently to explore mechanisms to use existing resources held by the Central

Bank of Venezuela in financial institutions outside the country to fund the ongoing efforts to address the ... the COVID-19 pandemic."

It was not immediately evident how much gold Venezuela was asking the Bank of England to sell. At current market prices, Venezuelan gold on deposit at the Bank of England would be worth around \$1.7 billion.

Venezuela's information ministry and central bank did not respond to requests for comment.

The Bank of England said it does not comment on individual customer relationships.

Former U.N. aid chief Jan Egeland on Tuesday called for sanctions on Venezuela and other countries to be lifted and urged the release of Venezuelan funds in banks in Britain, the United States and Portugal.

Venezuela has lived a six-year economic crisis driven by an collapsing socialist system and a decaying oil industry, driving a mass migration of nearly 5 million people and fueling hyperinflation that has left many unable to obtain basic food.

Recent tightening of U.S. sanctions meant to oust Maduro have strangled fuel imports, prompting Venezuelans to wait for hours in fuel stations queues or turn to the pricey black market.

Venezuela as of Tuesday had reported only 329 coronavirus cases and 10 deaths.

But critics have questioned the figures, and the United Nations has described the country as one of the most vulnerable due to lack of running water in many areas and a decayed public health system.

Maduro's government has for years raised cash by exporting gold, both from artisanal mines in the southern Amazon jungle and from gold reserves held by the central bank.

The central bank has continued to remove gold from its coffers in the last month with the hopes of exporting it, according to three sources, one of whom said eight tonnes have been removed since quarantine started in mid-March.

Central bank data shows that total monetary reserves fell more than \$500 million between April 14 and 24.

Employees who work in the wing of central bank where the gold vaults are located have been arriving to work despite the quarantine, according to three sources familiar with the matter.

It was not immediately evident how many gold sale operations had been carried out or where the gold was sold.

Part of the proceeds were used to acquire supplies to refine the country's crude, a source added, in response to the near collapse of the country's 1.3 million barrel-per-day refining circuit.

Six tons of gold had already been withdrawn from the central bank between the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 and sold to acquire euros in cash, which the institution channeled through local banks and the government used to pay suppliers.

Following the latest withdrawal, the central bank would still have more than 80 tonnes of gold in its vaults, according to sources, compared with 129 tonnes at the start of 2019.

[Venezuela] Venezuelan migrants block Bogota road, demand ability to travel home (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:41 PM, Oliver Griffin, Neutral]

A large crowd of Venezuelan migrants held up traffic on a Bogota highway on Wednesday, demanding to be allowed to leave Colombia and return to Venezuela.

Altogether, some 500 migrants arrived near the toll booths that mark the northern border of Bogota on Tuesday afternoon.

Some of these migrants said Colombian authorities were preventing the group of about 12 buses in which they were traveling from making their way to the border.

Colombia's migration agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but police at the site said Venezuela limits the number of migrants who can return each day. Venezuela has said the number of those returning is limited to 600, to allow for testing and organizing the necessary quarantines.

The mass movement of thousands of Venezuelans back to their economically devastated country has been triggered by a coronavirus lockdown in Colombia, which has made it impossible for them to earn a living.

Now in its sixth week, the suspension of Colombian businesses has decimated the informal economy in which many of these Venezuelan migrants work, plunging them deeper into poverty and triggering a reversal in migration flows.

Colombia is the top destination for Venezuelans who have fled their country's crisis, and some 1.8 million migrants have arrived here in recent years.

Now, a reverse migration has begun. Around 12,000 Venezuelans have returned to their home country as of Monday, according to Colombia's government.

"There are children here and we have no food to give them, we have no water, no resources, nor anywhere to stay. We are living on the street," said Jesus Bolivar, 34, a Venezuelan doctor who has been in Colombia for over a year.

Weary from travel, the returning migrants – including the elderly, diabetes patients and pregnant women – said Colombia's migration agency would not allow the buses to leave until Friday.

"We're in a bad way," said Dubraska Dubian, 26, who was trying to get back to Venezuela with her husband and their three young daughters.

"How are we going to manage here until Friday? We can't even wash our hands. We're

sleeping in the buses, we don't have food," Dubian added. "They have to let us leave."

At least 300 migrants were unable to cross the border in the city of Cucuta over the weekend.

"What we want is to travel, to go back to our country," Bolivar said.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Locusts, Pandemics, Floods: East Africa Can't Catch a Break (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 2:00 AM, Bobby Ghosh, 6400K, Negative]

How much more calamity can East Africa take? Already struggling with the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and a Biblical scourge of locusts, the region is now being lashed by exceptionally heavy rainfall, with floods that threaten life and livelihood from Ethiopia to Tanzania, and all parts in between.

For the continent's most economically vibrant region, the trifecta of tribulations may well add up to a fourth: food scarcity. This ghost from East Africa's past could hardly have picked a worse moment to return. The world is distracted by the pandemic, and traditional sources of succor—the U.S. and Europe—face their own economic distress. China, the region's economic partner of choice in recent years, has not yet demonstrated the ability (or indeed the desire) to fill the vacuum.

Even before the floods, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was warning of "an unprecedented threat to food security" in East Africa. Blame the emergence of huge new locust swarms. The Climate Prediction and Application Center in Nairobi says locusts are "invading the Eastern Africa region in exceptionally large swarms like never seen before."

The swarms are a product of climate change: Unusually wet weather over the past 18 months created perfect breeding conditions. The war in Yemen may also have played a role, by constraining the ability of local authorities to control the first swarms before they crossed over into the Horn of Africa.

The voraciousness of the locusts has hit East African farmers hardest. According to Gro Intelligence, a privately funded commodity data and analysis service, the insects have damaged more than 25 million hectares of farmland in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Worse is to come. The current wet conditions may swell new swarms in the summer, just as harvest season begins.

Fighting locust swarms requires pesticides, and an army of people to spray them. But the coronavirus pandemic is hampering the effort. It is delaying the delivery of pesticides and equipment, and jacking up shipping costs. Governments need to protect their populations from the virus, and travel restrictions designed to impede its spread are constraining efforts against the swarms.

But the danger to food security is so great, countries may feel they do not have the luxury of choosing between scourges. Uganda, for instance, is asking its farmers to go ahead with

crop planting, even though it is struggling to get them face masks — and despite the risk that locusts will ruin much of the harvest anyway.

The FAO is calling for \$153 million to assist East African countries, along with Sudan and Yemen, in fighting the swarms; so far, more than two-thirds of that sum has been pledged or received. But combating the food shortages, now exacerbated by the floods, will require much larger sums. And still more will be needed to put East African economies, until recently the envy of the continent, on life-support as the world recovers from the pandemic.

Where will the money come from? East African countries will compete with their African neighbors — and the wider developing world — for emergency funds from multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and eventually for bigger bailouts.

There will also be competition among African nations for the rescheduling, or outright forgiveness, of payments owed to China, the continent's largest creditor. Beijing has agreed to join other G-20 members in a \$20 billion debt moratorium for some poor nations, but is not committing itself to more. Some African governments say China is demanding strategic state assets in return for easing or erasing debt. Other lenders worry that any consideration they give African debtors will, in effect, benefit Chinese lenders.

Neither man nor nature, it seems, is inclined to give East Africa a break.

China silent amid global calls to give Africa debt relief (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 1:18 AM, Rodney Muhumuza, 2194K, Neutral]

African leaders are asking what China can do for them as the coronavirus pandemic threatens to destroy economies and wipe out some 20 million jobs across a continent where Beijing is both the top trading partner and top lender.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have announced immediate relief measures, including freeing up billions in debt payments and expectations for help from China are high across resource-rich Africa, but Beijing has remained silent.

China holds about a third of Africa's sovereign debt. Demand for Chinese-backed capital to build everything from highways to hydroelectric dams has left countries heavily indebted, leading to concerns about a debt trap and even loss of sovereignty.

Many of those countries, including oil exporters such as Angola, spend a substantial chunk of their budgets servicing debt while health and education suffer.

Any respite would be welcome for a country like Uganda, whose finance minister says "shocking deficits" in the past year have forced authorities to borrow to keep the government running. Uganda's national debt stood at over \$10 billion in 2018, nearly a third owed to China, according to official figures.

"We have strong bilateral relations with China, but they haven't come to us saying anything," the minister, Matia Kasaija, told The Associated Press.

China has been noncommittal beyond its support, as a member of the G-20 group of wealthy nations, for a moratorium that frees up to \$20 billion in debt payments through 2020

for low-income countries.

Some analysts predict that actual debt forgiveness looks unlikely and that China, despite its enormous influence in Africa, will avoid unilateral measures despite global pressure.

Ghana's finance minister has said he expects more from Beijing.

"My feeling is that China has to come on stronger," said Ken Ofori-Atta, speaking to the Washington-based Center for Global Development. "I think our Africa debt to China is over \$145 billion, about \$8 billion in payments required this year ... So that needs to be looked at. It's just an apocalyptic moment."

Asked whether China would offer debt relief to Africa, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on April 7 said he believed "China will resolve these countries' difficulties via consultation through diplomatic channels."

In a statement emailed to the AP, the foreign ministry said China had "overcome difficulties" in helping Africa with shipments of medical supplies to help fight the pandemic. "China will continue to provide assistance to Africa within its capabilities and in accordance with the development of the epidemic and Africa's needs," it said.

China's footprint on the continent has been expanding as some African leaders, favoring the perceived lack of political strings that come with Chinese capital, have turned to Beijing while other funders hesitate over corruption and other concerns.

In turn, China has been keen to exploit Africa's vast natural resources in countries such as war-ravaged South Sudan, where Chinese firms dominate the oil sector.

Angola had received up to \$42.8 billion in Chinese loans by 2017 and repays its debt partly by channeling more of its crude to China. This means Angola, Africa's second largest oil producer, is left with less oil to put on the market.

The Chinese government, banks and contractors extended \$143 billion in loans to African governments and companies from 2000 to 2017, according to the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University.

But Beijing's commercial focus on the region is one reason some analysts believe debt forgiveness or cash donations are out of the question. Countries seeking China's help to keep projects running likely will end up becoming more indebted, said Nathan Hayes, Africa analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"Many debt-financed projects will come under enormous strain this year as revenues dry up, and many will need to be refinanced and renegotiated. Many of these will be financed by China, giving the country opportunity to renegotiate terms," he said. "Debt-for-equity swaps may ultimately be a more sustainable deal for African countries, depending on the terms, and they may have little choice."

In a notable example, state-owned China Merchants Group bought back half of a port in Sri Lanka in 2017 after the Sri Lankans fell behind in repaying \$1.5 billion in loans from Beijing.

Even debt forgiveness can be an investment for China, which waived Ethiopia's outstanding interest on debts through 2018 at a conference on Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative to support infrastructure construction across many regions. That came just as the Chinese utility State Grid was buying a \$1.8 billion stake in Ethiopia's national power company.

Negotiating with individual African governments gives Beijing leeway to assert its interests with "a much smaller partner, rather than dealing with a whole continent, with greater economic and political weight," according to Hayes.

Africa's finance ministers have called for a \$100 billion stimulus package, of which \$44 billion would come from a freeze on servicing debt. They say an additional \$50 billion may be needed in 2021.

The EU has responded by planning a pledging conference in May. The IMF has cancelled six months' worth of debt payments — \$500 million — for 25 countries, 19 of them in Africa.

The coronavirus has infected relatively few people on the continent of 1.3 billion people. But with known cases nearing 35,000, lockdown measures could bring economic ruin and perhaps the continent's first recession in 25 years.

French President Emmanuel Macron says helping Africa, including with debt cancellations, is a moral duty. He has urged China to help.

Some say China's hand could be forced into rare acts of charity.

"China can respond by repurposing its debt ... as a tool to keep its African partners," said Angelo Izama, an analyst with the Uganda-based group Leo Africa Institute. "If there is a continental movement for debt relief, it would have no choice."

Africa Braces for a Record Wave of Locusts (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:22 AM, Nicholas Bariyo and Joe Parkinson, Neutral]

First came the floods. The waters swamped bean and corn fields and created a breeding ground for a swarm of desert locusts the size of Manhattan that fanned out and destroyed a swath of farmland across eight East African nations as large as Oklahoma earlier this year.

Now their offspring are threatening a historic infestation—a second wave of locusts, 20 times as large as the first, that the U.N. warns could chew their way through 2 million square miles of pastureland, farms and gardens, around half the size of Western Europe.

The swarms, which would be by far the largest on record, are expected to descend as the new coronavirus accelerates across East Africa, raising the prospect of a double-shock to some of the world's poorest and most heavily-indebted economies.

Aid agencies warn that, together, they could lead to a collapse in agricultural production and mass food shortages.

While confirmed cases of Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, are just over 30,000, with some 1,423 deaths, the World Health Organization this week warned that the infection curve on the continent is lagging behind Asia, Europe and the U.S. Some 300,000 Africans could die in the "best-case scenario," it said.

The timing could scarcely be worse. The next wave of locusts is due to coincide with planting season in East Africa. Experts including the African Development Bank are calling the new swarm "Locust-19," worried that it will have a similar economic impact as Covid-19. The World Food Program, a U.N. agency, says the impact could push 130 million people to the "brink of starvation" by the end of the year.

Farmers are still battling to contain the first generation that ate up crops across the Horn of Africa. Heavier-than-expected rains since March and coronavirus-related supply disruptions have hampered efforts to spray them with pesticides and created more of the wet, marshy habitats in which they like to breed.

"We have killed millions and millions of locusts, but they keep returning," said General Sam Kavuma, the commander of Uganda's 2,000-strong military unit fighting to halt the invading bugs. "We have never seen anything like this."

Compounding the problem, Gen. Kavuma's unit also spends much of its time on the lookout for people violating stay-at-home orders as Ugandan authorities attempt to halt the spread of the transmission of the coronavirus. Uganda's lockdown is one of the world's strictest. During the previous infestation, farmers banged drums, whistled and threw stones to protect their crops. But in recent days they have been forced to watch in frustration as the insects devoured their farms and gardens, trapped inside by fear of the virus and the security forces enforcing the lockdown.

Meanwhile, the insects can travel around 90 miles each day and consume their own body weight in cassava, corn and other crops. The World Bank has warned the locusts could cause more than \$8.5 billion in damage this year, more than triple the losses witnessed during the last major infestation in 2005.

That leaves farmers wrestling with the dilemma of whether to protect their crops as best they can, or follow the curfew orders now in place across much of the region.

"These are tough odds," said Lane Bunkers, country representative for Catholic Relief Services in Kenya. "The focus appears to be more on coronavirus pandemic but hunger could kill more people."

There is some expertise on the ground. The scale of the previous infestation brought agricultural specialists to the region who remain in place, despite coronavirus-related travel restrictions.

But the spread of the coronavirus means there is more competition for financing and resources. Commodity exports have ground to a near halt thanks to a slump in demand in China and elsewhere, sending currencies tumbling. Shipping costs have tripled in recent weeks.

That means some countries can't afford to properly tackle the locust infestation. In Sudan, the government says it is treating only 30% of the affected 2.5 million acres. Somalia only has enough pesticides to treat 20% of threatened farmlands, according to the U.N. In Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous nation, the locusts are moving too fast for the authorities to keep up—they already have destroyed half a million acres of farmlands.

There are also political and security factors at play. Insurgencies in Yemen and Somalia have hindered access to breeding grounds, allowing locusts to multiply into vast colonies since last summer, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. In Somalia, which hasn't had a stable government since 1991, locust control teams have had to negotiate with al-Shabaab militants for access to spray breeding grounds there.

In Uganda, Gen. Kavuma, who once led operations against the Lord's Resistance Army in the Central African Republic, now commands squads of soldiers who spread out across cassava fields toting spray pumps to douse fast-moving insects with pesticides. Some troops torched locust-infested bushes while school children have been mobilized to chase the insects from fields and gardens.

As recently as last month, mature locusts, bright yellow in color, were still forcing herders to flee the area. Now farmers have spotted the arrival of their offspring, pinkish in color and known as hoppers, looking for sprouting vegetation.

Hoppers are more destructive because they are at a stage where they feed heavily, said Keith Cressman, a locust forecasting expert at the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Association. A square-kilometer-sized swarm, just over a third of a square mile, can consume as much food as 35,000 people.

Experts say it is crucial to attack the second swarm before it lays eggs again and a third wave—which could be yet bigger, perhaps 20 times bigger—could arrive in June, the peak harvest season.

"The swarms can strip a community's entire agriculture production for a season bare in a matter of hours," said Kirk Prichard, Humanitarian director at Concern Worldwide, a humanitarian agency working in the region.

[Côte d'Ivoire] Ivory Coast Withdraws From African Human Rights Court (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 11:01 AM, Leanne de Bassompierre and Baudelaire Mieu, Neutral]
Ivory Coast withdrew from the African Human Rights and Peoples Court, a week after the tribunal ordered the West African nation to suspend an arrest warrant against presidential hopeful Guillaume Soro, who on Tuesday was sentenced to 20 years in jail.

The decision to pull out was taken at a weekly cabinet meeting, government spokesman Sidi Toure told reporters on Wednesday in the commercial capital, Abidjan.

"We respect our international commitments, but we also appreciate our sovereignty," he said.

Soro, a former speaker of parliament and rebel leader, was sentenced in absentia by an Abidjan court after a one-day trial. He was convicted on charges of money laundering and embezzlement, ruling him out of presidential elections scheduled to take place in October.

[Ethiopia] City demolitions expose Ethiopian families to coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 8:23 AM, Nita Bhalla and Emeline Wuilbercq, 5304K, Negative]
Scores of Ethiopian families are at risk of contracting the new coronavirus after authorities

demolished their makeshift houses and left them homeless, human rights groups said on Wednesday.

Authorities in the capital began destroying the informal settlements near Bole International Airport in February.

They say the settlement in Addis Ababa, home to more than 1,000 people, is illegal. Residents — mostly casual labourers who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 restrictions — say they bought the land in 2007 and have the documents to prove it.

"Having a home is critical to protecting oneself from COVID-19, stopping its spread and recovering from it," said Deprose Muchena, Amnesty International's Director for East and Southern Africa.

"The authorities must ensure that no one is put in a position of increased vulnerability to COVID-19 including by rendering them homeless."

Around the world, homeless communities and residents in slums and informal settlements are particularly at risk of the virus, as limited access to water and overcrowding turn hand-washing and social distancing into a luxury.

Muchena said parents and young children were now sleeping rough, in the cold and rain, with no place to go and at heightened risk of catching and spreading the deadly virus.

The East African nation declared a state of emergency to help curb the virus on April 8. Home to some 110 million people, Ethiopia has recorded 130 cases and three deaths.

LAND GRAB IN A CRISIS

City authorities say some Ethiopians are now abusing the global crisis to seize land that is not theirs.

Addis Ababa Mayor Takele Uma Banti told the Thomson Reuters Foundation the forced evictions aimed to stop people migrating to the capital and grabbing land from farmers and government.

He said people had used the pandemic to build houses while authorities' attention was set on enforcing social distancing.

"Demolition will continue because these buildings are informal, it is a source of land grabbing," Takele said, noting that similar demolitions were happening across Addis Ababa.

In Ethiopia, all land is owned by the state.

While buying and selling it is illegal, long-term leases can be bought from the government.

But homeowners and land law experts say there is a bustling underground market run by developers, brokers and local officials, who often turn a blind eye to illegal activity.

Amnesty International said satellite imagery verified claims made by the evicted

communities, showing about 40 structures had been damaged or destroyed since April 6.

Families were not given any notice, said the group, nor had authorities consulted residents in line with international laws.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission called for a moratorium on forced evictions of informal settlements until the pandemic was under control and the state of emergency lifted.

"Forced eviction of families during #COVID19 poses (a) great risk for vulnerable people including women and children," Daniel Bekele, EHRC's chief commissioner, said in a statement.

[Kenya] Kenya Cuts Interest Rate to Nine-Year Low to Boost Economy (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 10:40 AM, David Herbling, Neutral]

Kenya's central bank cut its benchmark interest rate for the fourth time in a row at a special meeting of the monetary policy committee to try cushion the economy from the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

The MPC reduced the rate to 7% from 7.25%, Governor Patrick Njoroge said in an emailed statement Wednesday from the capital, Nairobi. That brings the total easing since November to 200 basis points, with the rate now the lowest since September 2011. The median estimate of five economists in a Bloomberg survey was for a 50 basis-point cut.

Key Insights

The central bank cut its 2020 growth forecast for East Africa's largest economy to 2.3%. Expansion at 5.4% in 2019 missed government estimates. The World Bank said output could shrink 1% if the disruptions caused by the pandemic last for about three months.

The policy actions taken in March, when the MPC cut interest rates and lowered its cash-reserve ratio to free up liquidity, "are having the intended impact on the economy, and are still being transmitted," Njoroge said.

The virus has disrupted agriculture and tourism, which are Kenya's biggest foreign-exchange earners after remittances. The latest information shows that orders have started to return, reflecting the impact of mitigation measures put in place by the government targeted at maintaining cargo flights, the lifting of lockdown measures and easing of supply restrictions in some of the key destination markets, the central bank said.

Kenya is negotiating with the International Monetary Fund for a precautionary facility to cushion the economy against the Covid-19 shock. It also expects relief from special drawing rights of 75 billion shillings (\$700 million) by mid-May, Treasury Secretary Ukur Yatani said on Tuesday.

The MPC will meet again in a month and "stands ready to take additional measures as necessary," Njoroge said.

[Kenya] One of the World's Largest Refugee Camps Is Placed on Lockdown (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:44 AM, Pauline Bax, 6400K, Negative]

Kenya put one of the world's largest refugee camps under lockdown, even as humanitarian agencies warned there's no infrastructure in place to deal with a potential outbreak of the coronavirus.

All movement in and out of Dadaab, home to more than 220,000 people living in rickety, makeshift housing, as well as the smaller Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya, will be prohibited as of Wednesday, according to Kenya's Interior Ministry. The measure is an extension of a 21-day partial lockdown across the country that was imposed last week.

With only one dedicated Covid-19 health facility at Dadaab, "a possible outbreak of the coronavirus would be a disaster," Philippa Crosland-Taylor, country director at aid organization CARE, said in a statement. The camp "has no health infrastructure in place that could deal with an outbreak," she said.

Dadaab, situated near the Somali border, opened almost three decades ago and is home to mostly ethnic Somalis who crossed into Kenya to flee civil war, drought and famine. While the Kenyan government has often threatened to close the camps, it's never done so. Most facilities in the settlements are operated by international humanitarian organizations.

[Niger] UN: New Polio Outbreak in Niger After Vaccination Suspended (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 7:31 AM, Maria Cheng, Negative]

The World Health Organization says Niger has been struck by a new outbreak of polio, following the suspension of immunization activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.N. health agency reported that two children were infected by the highly infectious, water-borne disease and that one was paralyzed. The outbreak was sparked by a mutated virus that originated in the vaccine and was not connected to a previous polio epidemic Niger stopped last year, WHO said, in a statement last week.

"The poliovirus will inevitably continue to circulate and may paralyze more children as no high-quality immunization campaigns can be conducted in a timely manner," said Pascal Mkanda, WHO's coordinator of polio eradication in Africa.

In rare cases, the live virus in oral polio vaccine can evolve into a form capable of igniting new outbreaks among non-immunized children; stopping the epidemic requires more targeted vaccination.

Earlier this month, WHO and partners announced they were forced to halt all polio vaccination activities until at least June 1, acknowledging the decision would inevitably result in more children being paralyzed.

The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says there have been 33,500 cases and 1,469 deaths as of Tuesday, but experts suspect the real numbers are far higher due to lack of testing and poor surveillance.

Eradicating polio requires more than 90% of children being immunized, typically in mass campaigns involving millions of health workers that would break social distancing guidelines needed to stop the spread of the new coronavirus.

Across Africa, 14 other countries are struggling to contain their polio epidemics, which have also been caused by a rare mutation of the virus in the oral vaccine. Health officials had initially aimed to wipe out polio by 2000, but that deadline has been pushed back and missed repeatedly.

[South Africa] South Africa Covid-19 Cases Rise by Record for 24-Hour Period (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 3:26 PM, Janice Kew and Ana Monteiro, Negative]

The number of coronavirus cases in South Africa surged by a record for a 24-hour period as testing increased.

The nation has 5,350 confirmed cases as of Wednesday, 354 more than yesterday, the Health Ministry said in an emailed statement. A further 10 Covid-19 related deaths were recorded, bringing the total number of deceased to 103, it said. The ministry said 11,630 tests were conducted in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 197,127.

[South Africa] South Africa's HIV failures cost more than 300,000 lives. Now this painful past is helping in Covid-19 fight. (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 5:41 AM, David McKenzie and Brent Swails, 12317K, Neutral]

When President Donald Trump mused recently about injecting household disinfectants as treatment for Covid-19 in the White House briefing room, South Africans were reminded of their own dark past.

Two decades ago, the country's health minister announced that beetroot or garlic could treat HIV/AIDS.

South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki at the time falsely believed that HIV treatments could be poisonous, so he kept proven, lifesaving antiretrovirals (ARVs) from those in need.

In all, South Africa's official AIDS denials and misinformation cost the lives of more than 300,000 people, according to several studies.

"We can't have a large number of people dying," Dr. Yogan Pillay, a senior official at the Department of Health, said. "We came from a period where we had large numbers of South Africans dying from HIV. We can't repeat that now and we shouldn't."

An ambitious initiative

It is the memory of that past failure, South African health officials say, that is driving their fight against this new virus and it is the considerable resources they have since built up against HIV, that could provide their best weapon in fighting Covid-19.

After years of dithering under Mbeki, the South African government drastically changed course against HIV because of civil society lawsuits and a change in leadership.

They put millions of people on ARVs and recruited an army of community health workers to inform the public of the dangers of AIDS and the importance of testing.

They were able to mount this fight, in large part, because of an ambitious initiative launched

by another US Republican president.

Former President George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), announced in 2003, is arguably the single most successful international US public health response.

More than 14 million people are on ARVs because of PEPFAR. When it began, fewer than 50,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa could access the life-sustaining drugs.

"Quite frankly, without the PEPFAR investment in South Africa, we wouldn't have more than a million people on treatment, a significant reduction in the number of deaths from HIV and TB, or the significant increase in our life expectancy," Dr. Pillay said.

Pillay said that there are currently roughly eight million HIV positive people in South Africa, with more than two million infected people not on antiretrovirals.

A sweeping lockdown

Those numbers mean that South Africa has the world's largest HIV burden, which helped to convince South African scientists and officials to recommend a sweeping lockdown as Covid-19 struck the country.

Countries around the world are under lockdown, but South Africa's is one of the strictest and it was instituted before a single confirmed Covid-19 death and in a country already in an economic recession.

"This was a very tough decision for the government to take," Dr. Pillay said, "but they took it because they didn't want to repeat the mistakes of ... our early response to HIV."

In a middle-income country with the world's greatest levels of inequality, South Africa has managed to drastically flatten its infection curve early while much richer countries like the UK and the United States have struggled to do so.

South Africa has distinct disadvantages to those wealthy nations. Millions live in townships and informal settlements across the country where the lockdowns make sense in principle, but not really in practice.

Townships like Thokoza, in the southeast of Johannesburg, are a nightmare scenario for combating a respiratory disease.

But here, too, the country's experience with HIV is helping its battle.

Around 35,000 government and PEPFAR supported health workers are now actively screening for the disease in communities they already work, conducting routine health checks, according to Pillay.

They have already screened nearly six million people for Covid-19, according to the latest figures from the country's Department of Health.

Community health worker Anito Pato said that the trust she has built up with the community

allows her to address fear of the new virus right away. She goes door-to-door in Thokoza to check for symptoms of Covid-19 and refer the sick for testing.

"They didn't know much about Covid-19 and they think it is affecting the rich people, not them," Pato said. "We try to explain to them why we are screening and what corona is."

A man in a blue work shirt called Pato over during her visit. He wanted a test. Pato explained that there aren't enough tests right now and that he should go to the clinic or the mobile testing center they have set up if he gets the symptoms.

"AIDS is better because we have got treatment," the man, Salvin Tawananda, told CNN, "But corona, people are just scared."

The government and US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are closely monitoring efforts in Thokoza and other townships, where social distancing is all but impossible, and failure could be disastrous.

"It is very hard for people here to adhere to those lockdown rules and that is even more reason why we should be out there looking for the disease before it takes over these communities," said Dr. Meredith McMorrow, a CDC official based in South Africa.

"South Africa was certainly the hardest hit by HIV and it concerns us that it will be the hardest hit by Covid-19 as well that is why we are doing everything we can to get ready right now."

Covid-19's effect on HIV patients

McMorrow's concern comes from not yet knowing Covid-19's effects on HIV positive people.

To date, studies in China and elsewhere are inconclusive, but Megan Doherty, the head of the WHO's global HIV program, said it pays to be extremely cautious with any emerging disease.

"Because this is an unprecedented pandemic, we just don't know how it reacts in all situations," she said. "We just don't know enough about the interactions between HIV and Covid-19 and how patients with both infections will do."

ARVs are being tested as possible therapeutics for COVID-19 in clinical trials.

Dr. Larry Corey, now president and director emeritus of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, helped develop the first effective ARV treatment.

He said he is skeptical that ARVs designed for HIV will become a broad-based treatment for Covid-19.

"The best ARVs that are discovered are highly specific to each virus," he said.

Corey, who now leads the global HIV-vaccine trial network, said regardless of the results of ARV trials in Covid-19 treatment, South Africa is well placed to play a critical part in the next

phase of this pandemic, because of its HIV infrastructure and experience with HIV vaccine trials.

"I feel proud of my communities," said Pato, as she moved down a narrow path leading to another section of corrugated iron shacks. "I feel like I am a bullet to shoot this disease. It must not control us. We must control this corona."

[South Africa] Virus lockdown worsens suffering for Johannesburg beggars (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:07 AM, Bram Janssen, 2194K, Negative]

Inock Mukanhairi shows the small amount of food that he has for himself, his wife, Angeline, and five children — barely enough to make it through another week of South Africa's strict coronavirus lockdown.

The 58-year-old and his wife are both blind. Normally, they would be begging at traffic lights on Johannesburg's streets, relying on handouts from motorists, pedestrians and shop owners.

But the lockdown, now in its fifth week, has changed that.

Police are preventing them from leaving their dilapidated building to beg on the empty streets and barren sidewalks.

The building houses about two dozen blind or otherwise disabled foreigners who rely on handouts to make enough for food and rent. With their children, they make up about 70 people. Many have entered South Africa illegally from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi.

"I really understand that the coronavirus is killing a lot of people. But at the same time, I'm locked inside my room," said Mukanhairi. "So death is death, due to corona or due to hunger."

South Africa has the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Africa, with more than 4,360, including 86 deaths.

The country's far-reaching restrictions have been in effect since March 27 and residents must stay home, except for visits to grocery stores, pharmacies and health facilities. The lockdown will be eased starting May 1, but this is unlikely to help the beggars, because people will still be required to stay home.

Families of six to eight people are crammed into small rooms where they cook, eat and sleep. Under such conditions, social distancing is not possible. The building has a few taps for water, so regular hand-washing is also difficult.

The elderly and blind often just sit on their beds as their children play in the dimly lit and narrow hallways, where loose electric cords dangle from the ceiling.

Without any donations, they say they are uncertain about where they will get their next meals.

Last week, South Africa announced an increase in social grants for the poor, elderly and disabled, but these immigrants are not eligible for that aid.

At the start of the lockdown, authorities swept the homeless from the streets and took them to a housing facility where food is provided. The beggars say they fled to their own building at the time to avoid being rounded up.

They are not alone in being uncertain about how getting adequate food. The U.N. World Food Program said this month that the number of people around the world with acute hunger could almost double this year because of the pandemic. At least 265 million people could face food insecurity by the end of this year, a jump of 130 million.

Rosewite Prikise, 41, lives with her four children in one of the small rooms, where all share a bed.

"We have one week's worth of food left," she said. "So we cannot survive, especially us who are blind. We cannot go outside and our situation is not right."

[South Africa] Fears rise for illegal South African miners hiding underground in virus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:48 AM, Kim Harrisberg, Neutral]

At least 100 illegal gold miners in South Africa are hiding underground, too scared to surface with police on patrol to enforce the coronavirus lockdown, according to industry sources.

Many illegal miners, known as zama-zamas – a Zulu expression for "taking a chance" – were underground in abandoned or disused mines in Gauteng province when the lockdown began on March 27.

Lawyers, activists and illegal miners told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that zama-zamas had little choice but to continue working, worried about being arrested if they surfaced and knowing there was no other work.

"They are struggling to get to the surface (to buy food) as police are blocking the entrances and they fear arrest," said Johannesburg gold miner Zach, whose name was changed to protect his identity.

"At least 100 (zama-zamas) that I know of are trying to earn some money during the lockdown," said Zach, 29, adding he had been arrested many times since turning to mining six years ago.

Illegal gold mining has plagued South Africa's mining companies for decades, robbing the industry and state coffers of billions of rand through smalltime pilfering as well as networks run by organised crime.

The Minerals Council South Africa estimates seven tonnes of gold – from total national production of about 135 tonnes – is lost each year to illegal mining, which is driven by the joblessness and economic hardship that prevail across the country.

Thousands of zama-zamas are thought to be operating at any one time, many of them undocumented immigrants from neighbouring countries who provided migrant labour for South Africa's mines in the past but were then laid off.

Zama-zamas are now a permanent fixture of the shanties that ring Johannesburg and its satellite towns along the gold reef, and are blamed for outbreaks of violence, including underground shoot-outs between rival gangs.

Once the largest gold producer, South Africa now ranks about eighth globally with mining accounting for roughly 7% of GDP.

The sector braced for a heavy hit when the government last month ordered most underground mines and furnaces to be put into care and maintenance due to the coronavirus.

But after a lobbying campaign by miners, it said it would allow mines to operate at up to half capacity during the lockdown, recognising the chance of instability if deep-level mines closed for a long period.

Informal mining has continued nevertheless as it remains largely unrecognised by the government – just like many zama-zamas, who are unable to seek financial assistance, legal experts said.

Edwin Makwati, a lawyer from the Legal Resources Centre in Johannesburg said that "artisanal miners depend on mining to feed their families but they are categorised as criminals."

"Now they have to face the decision: do they die of hunger or risk arrest for violating the COVID-19 regulations?" he said in a phone interview.

Yvette, 32, a zama-zama from Soweto township whose name has also been changed, also believed there were still "at least 100 zama-zamas underground" in Gauteng province alone, sifting for gold in tunnels no longer maintained and at risk of collapse.

"There are (abandoned) shafts throughout the country where there could be more," she said.

A 2015 report by South Africa's Human Rights Commission identified 221 open holes and disused shafts alone in Gauteng, which is the most populous of the country's nine provinces.

Some had been covered by the government, but zama-zamas would likely find other entrances into the mines, some of which run up to four km (2.5 miles) deep, the report said.

Police spokesman Brigadier Vish Naidoo acknowledged it was likely that some zama-zamas were underground, adding that "they stay underground for months, even before lockdown."

"A crime is a crime. There are no good zama-zamas," he said in a phone interview.

A spokesman for the South African Department of Mineral Resources and Energy said the ministry only kept records of mine workers from legal operations.

"Illegal mining ... is fueled by highly organized dangerous, well-financed and complex local and international crime syndicates," he added in emailed comments.

Charmane Russell, spokeswoman for the Minerals Council South Africa, said that "illegal miners are not screened or protected in any way ... and the gathering of people clearly does not comply with social distancing requirements."

Scores of zama-zamas die each year in the labyrinth of tunnels that stretch beneath the streets of Johannesburg and beyond, although police and the government admit they have no idea of the precise toll.

But Sindile, a female zama-zama from Soweto township who helps process gold above ground, said the money that could be earned made it worth the risk for many.

Artisanal mining can fetch Zach and Sindile up to 5,000 rand (\$270) a month – more than the national minimum wage of roughly 3,600 rand (\$195).

"You know hunger?" said Sindile, a single mother of three, who also asked not to be identified. "It is not your friend. This is why we take chances."

The zama-zamas said that the lockdown and increased police presence have added additional challenges to their already dangerous work.

Reported cases of the coronavirus were close to 5,000 in South Africa and about 93 deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

"But we are more afraid of the police than the virus," said Yvette.

David Van Wyk, lead researcher at Bench Marks Foundation, a church-linked group that monitors corporate responsibility, said it was working on setting up co-operatives with informal miners.

"The coronavirus pandemic is going to bring a lot more unemployment," said Van Wyk, who predicted more South Africans desperate for work would take up illegal mining.

"We may even see informal mines collapse. This is a scary time for zama-zamas, especially those currently underground."

[Sudan] Sudan postpones key economic meeting due to coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:04 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Sudan has postponed a key economic conference meant to formulate subsidy reforms demanded by foreign donors until after the coronavirus pandemic, the state news agency SUNA reported on Wednesday.

The conference had been scheduled for June 2, with preparatory meetings in May. A new date will be set after Sudan's epidemic has been overcome, SUNA quoted the conference's preparatory committee as saying.

Sudan's struggling economy has not revived with the overthrow of long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir a year ago.

The transitional government has been trying to overcome shortages of imported – and heavily subsidised – fuel and flour. Inflation is running at more than 80%, according to official statistics.

Potential foreign donors are pressing for subsidy reforms and greater economic transparency.

But the government, in an awkward power-sharing arrangement with the military, is divided on how to tackle the issue and had postponed any action until after the economic conference, which was originally scheduled for March.

Sudan is also lobbying to be removed from a list of countries that the United States considers sponsors of terrorism, a designation that complicates efforts to negotiate a deal for its foreign debt, unblock international funding and connect to international banking systems.

On Tuesday, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet warned that Sudan, which has suffered from internal conflict and international isolation for decades, could experience “untold suffering” and a “humanitarian disaster” unless donors acted fast, with the threat from COVID-19 looming.

“We run the risk of a country which held such promise relapsing back into political instability and potential conflict,” she said in a statement, noting that Sudan was not eligible to access a \$50 billion trust fund set up by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to help countries fight the coronavirus.

Sudan said on Wednesday it had recorded 57 new cases of the coronavirus, bringing the total to 375, and three new deaths, for a total of 28.

[Sudan] Sudan's Bashir Seeks Jail Move as Aide Gets Virus, Lawyer Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 9:34 AM, Mohammed Alamin, Neutral]

Ousted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir is asking to be moved from prison after one of his former enforcers detained in the same facility was infected with the coronavirus, his lawyer said.

Ahmed Haroun, an ex-Interior Ministry official who became leader of Bashir's political party in the final days of his rule, has been transferred to the hospital in Khartoum's Kober prison after testing positive for Covid-19, although his condition isn't currently serious, according to the head of Bashir's defense team, Mohamed al-Hassan al-Amin.

Bashir, who's 76 and being held in the same jail, is also in danger from the virus and his legal representatives are appealing for his detention to be turned into a form of house arrest, al-Amin said by phone.

Haroun was sharing a cell with other former top officials from Bashir's government, he said. Health Minister Akram Ali Altoum declined to comment on al-Amin's claims.

Bashir, who was overthrown by the army a year ago amid mass protests against his three-

decade rule, was jailed in December after being found guilty of illicitly possessing millions of dollars in foreign currencies. Both he and Haroun have been indicted by the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes against humanity committed in the western region of Darfur.

The North African country, which has reported 318 cases of the virus and 25 deaths, has been ravaged by years of economic mismanagement and international sanctions. Medical officials have warned of severe shortages of protective gear and equipment.

[Uganda] Uganda restricts truckers on busy trade route to curb coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 4:57 AM, Elias Biryabarema, Neutral]

Uganda has stepped up restrictions on trucks passing through its territory — limiting them to one driver and banning them from stopping over in hotels — in a bid to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

The landlocked country sits on some of east Africa's busiest road cargo routes that funnel goods from ports in Kenya and Tanzania further inland to Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Drivers have already been complaining about long queues building up on the Uganda-Kenya border as officials from both countries carry out health checks, according to reports on NTV and other local media.

"One driver is enough," Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said as he announced the new restrictions late on Tuesday. Trucks were previously allowed three crew.

"He (the driver) must not stay in hotels, he must not stay in lodges. He must not stay in homes, he should park his vehicle in designated places ... to rest a bit and continue," Museveni added.

Uganda had registered 79 COVID-19 cases as of Tuesday, at least 16 of them truckers arriving from Kenya and Tanzania, according to health ministry figures.

Infection and fatality figures reported across Africa are still relatively low compared with the United States, parts of Asia and Europe.

But there are fears the infection could spread fast, particularly in areas with poor sanitation facilities, and overwhelm already stretched health services.

Uganda has banned public gatherings, closed schools, barred most vehicles from the roads and ordered all but essential businesses to shut down.

The lockdown, among the toughest imposed in Africa, is currently due to end on May 5. Museveni said on Tuesday restrictions may ease after that.

Museveni also criticised the country's lawmakers for allocating themselves a one-off payment of 20 million shillings (\$5,267.32) each in a supplementary budget meant to fund the fight against the coronavirus.

"It would be morally reprehensible for members of parliament to give themselves money for

personal use when the country is in such a crisis," he said. He ordered them to repay the cash.

Network TV News Coverage

Australia's Call for Investigation Draws Chinese Anger (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:17 AM, Staff]

When President Donald Trump openly and repeatedly accuses China of failing to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic and talks about an investigation, Beijing has been silent. When the Australian government calls for an independent international investigation, the response from China was swift and severe. China's ambassador in Canberra warned of a backlash by Chinese consumers over the push for an inquiry, including boycotting Australian goods. With China being Australia's biggest market, any type of boycott would be devastating to the economy already severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Ryan Patel, a senior fellow at the Drucker School of Management in California, says that with "\$190 billion in two-way trade with China" and 65% of Australia's trading partnerships in Asia, "they are going to need other countries to step in here" and back up Australia's request for an inquiry. Patel adds that China's strong response to Australia "sends a message to the rest of southeast Asia" since Australia is a part of a trade pact with them.

France, Spain Announce Plans to Lift Restrictions (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:12 AM, Scott McLean and Melissa Bell]

After six weeks of lockdown, Spain's prime minister has announced a four-phase plan to ease coronavirus restrictions with the goal of returning to "normalcy" by the end of June. Phase one will allow some stores to reopen, while restaurant terraces and churches can open at 30% capacity. There will be special times set for senior citizens to go out. Schools will not reopen until September; by then, the country should be on to phase two, when outdoor shows might be allowed with some restrictions. In the final phase, masks will be encouraged and social distancing will still be mandatory. Free movement will not be allowed throughout the country until all regions are on the final phase. None of the phases have set dates, but each phase will last a minimum of two weeks. In the meantime, France hopes to begin lifting its partial lockdowns starting May 11, when shops, businesses, and some schools will reopen. France's prime minister has been outlining what the lifting of France's partial lockdown will look like after six weeks of restrictions. Starting May 11, children will be allowed to go back to school on a voluntary basis, although that will be staggered according to their ages as they gradually reopen. Retailers will also reopen with restrictions on the number of people allowed inside shops at any given time. One major concern as people are allowed to go back to work and school is public transit being overwhelmed, which will be limited to those who really need it to take at peak hours. The staggered lifting of restrictions will continue into June, followed by a preliminary period to make sure that a second wave of the virus is avoided.

U.S. Accuses China, 32 Other Countries of Intellectual Property Theft (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [4/29/2020 11:02 AM, Staff]

The U.S. Trade Office reported on Wednesday that China and 32 other countries have been accused of intellectual property theft by the United States.

Zoom Users Targeted by Overseas Spies? (ABC World News Now)

(B) ABC World News Now [4/29/2020 2:37 AM, Pierre Thomas, 584K]

A new government warning says that Zoom, a video call service used by millions of Americans as schools and places of business are moving to remote meetings, could be the target of spies overseas. According to a new Department of Homeland Security report, Zoom, which is now seeing 300 million daily participants, could be used to eavesdrop on meetings and be an opening for espionage. The DHS report warns, "Any organization currently using — or considering using — Zoom should evaluate the risk of its use." According to the intelligence analysis, China is of particular concern of spying since some of Zoom's development is done there. "China's access to Zoom servers makes Beijing uniquely positioned to target U.S. public and private sector users," according to the government bulletin. This report comes a month after the FBI warned that hackers are able to interrupt Zoom calls with obscene messages. Since then, Zoom has upped security and added password protection to calls. The company disagrees with the intelligence analysis released, calling it "heavily misinformed," adding that workers in China lack "the power or access to make substantive changes to our platform or the means to access any meeting content."

[Lebanon] Lebanon's Economic Protests Turn Violent (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:33 AM, Arwa Damon]

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Lebanon was already seeing widespread unrest in response to high prices and unemployment. Now, after two months of a lockdown, demonstrators are back on the streets protesting the rising poverty and soaring food prices. Protests broke out across the country, but were primarily focused in the northern city of Tripoli, where buildings were set on fire and banks were attacked. Protests first broke out because of the economic situation in October of 2019. One protestor described the most recent demonstrations as the "fiercest" since the protests began. The coronavirus epidemic has exacerbated the existing economic problem, and now the Ministry of Social Affairs says that 75% of the Lebanese population is in need of aid. Banks have been imposing discretionary capital controls on people, meaning that citizens have not had their money released for months. In January and February, the Lebanese prime minister announced that \$5.7 billion was transferred out of cash-strapped Lebanon, confirming fears that average citizens would hurt financially while the elite would be able to access their funds.

{End of Report}



STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

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By TechMIS

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Secretary of State

Pompeo warns of consequences if any Americans wrongfully detained overseas die from coronavirus (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Andrew Blake, Neutral]

Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo issued a warning Wednesday to countries where U.S. citizens are being wrongfully imprisoned during the ongoing global coronavirus pandemic.

"If you are wrongfully detaining Americans during this time, and they become infected and die of coronavirus, we will hold your government strictly responsible," said Mr. Pompeo.

"All wrongfully detained Americans should be released immediately," President Trump's top diplomat stressed during a press conference held at State Department headquarters.

It is not clear how many Americans are imprisoned abroad, and the State Department did not immediately respond to an inquiry about the number of Americans it considers to be wrongfully detained in other countries.

The State Department previously singled out several Americans detained overseas while raising concerns about the coronavirus ravaging prisons around the world, however.

Mr. Pompeo issued a statement last month urging Venezuela to release five U.S. citizens and one U.S. resident jailed in Caracas – Citgo executives dubbed the “Citgo 6” – saying they each have weakened immune systems and face a grave health risk if they contract COVID-19, the infectious respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

More recently, the U.S. envoy to Russia raised concerns this week about the health and safety amid the pandemic of Paul Whelan, a former Marine jailed in Moscow for more than 15 months on accusations of conducting espionage. In a statement Tuesday, Amb. John Sullivan said the U.S. attempted to deliver masks, gloves and sanitizers to protect Mr. Whelan in prison from COVID-19 but were ultimately denied.

Worldwide, more than 3 million people have contracted COVID-19 since the coronavirus was discovered in late December, according to Johns Hopkins University. More than 225,000 people have died from the disease and over 950,000 have recovered, according to the university.

COVID-19 is highly contagious in addition to being potentially deadly, making people confined to cramped and unsanitary facilities like prisons at a disadvantage due to their inability to maintain social distancing practices meant to prevent the disease from spreading. Several prisons in the U.S. and abroad have accordingly released inmates rather than risk having them contract, spread and succumb to COVID-19 in their custody.

U.S. Borders to Remain Shut to Foreign Travelers as States Reopen (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 4:25 PM, Jessica Donati, Neutral]

The Trump administration has no immediate plans to reopen the country's borders after imposing a ban on foreign travelers from the European Union and the U.K. last month to slow the spread of the coronavirus, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

Mr. Pompeo told reporters Wednesday that the State Department was working with countries on plans to resume international travel, but declined to say whether borders would reopen before the summer.

“We hope we can get those back open as each country is ready to do that,” Mr. Pompeo said, “and as we’re confident that people who travel in from those countries won’t create tremendous increased risks to the United States.”

The administration's approach to travel restrictions signaled a somewhat more cautious position on U.S. borders than to reopening parts of the economy, as the Trump administration has come under pressure to balance demands to reopen business against warnings about restarting the economy too soon and risking a second wave of infections.

The U.S. has over 1 million confirmed coronavirus cases, accounting for just over a third of world-wide infections, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. More than 58,000 Americans have died, more than the combined death toll in Italy and Spain, the two worst affected countries after the U.S.

On March 11, President Trump announced a ban on travel to the U.S. for most foreign travelers who have been in Europe's 26-country Schengen Area during a two-week period before their arrival. He banned travel from the United Kingdom later that week.

The U.S. also has taken steps to slow travel over its land borders. It reached agreements with Canada and Mexico to shut down their borders to nonessential travel last month to curb the spread of the virus, with exceptions to allow trade and commerce to continue.

The Trump administration restricted travel to and from China in January, and has taken a series of actions to curb legal immigration to the U.S. as part of the effort to combat the virus.

The State Department last month suspended routine visa processing in most countries, and has declined to say when it might resume. Senior officials have said the department will look at each individual country's response to the outbreak before making a decision.

"It's really too early yet to say how we are going to go about fully re-establishing routine visa operations around the world," Ian Brownlee, the principal deputy assistant secretary for consular affairs, told reporters this week.

Illegal immigration has slowed to a trickle at its southern border, where the U.S. has stopped processing asylum requests made after March 20.

Last week, the administration also suspended green cards for prospective immigrants abroad for the next 60 days.

Pompeo urges end to overflight rights for Iran airline flying to Venezuela (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:51 PM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday called on countries to deny overflight rights to Mahan Air, an Iranian airline under U.S. sanctions, which he said recently delivered cargoes of "unknown support" to the Venezuelan government.

The United States maintains punishing sanctions on Iran aimed at containing its regional power in the Middle East and has hit Venezuela with similarly tough measures in an effort to force socialist President Nicolas Maduro from power.

Speaking at a State Department news conference, Pompeo said aircraft of privately owned Mahan Air, Iran's largest airline, in recent days delivered supplies to Maduro's government.

"Over the last few days, multiple aircraft belonging to Mahan Air have transferred unknown support to the Maduro regime," Pompeo said. "This is the same terrorist airline that Iran used to move weapons and fighters around the Middle East."

The flights "must stop," Pompeo continued, adding that countries should deny Mahan Air overflight rights "just as many have already denied landing rights to this sanctioned airline."

The Trump administration has waged a campaign of sanctions and diplomatic measures against Venezuela in an effort to oust Maduro, whose 2018 re-election was considered a sham by most Western countries.

The United States and dozens of other governments recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as interim president in January of last year. But Maduro – who derides Guaido as a U.S. puppet – remains in power, backed by Venezuela's military as well as Russia, China and Cuba. Some U.S. officials have said this has been a growing source of frustration for President Donald Trump.

Last week, a Venezuelan official said the country received materials via Iranian aircraft to help it start the catalytic cracking unit at the Cardon refinery, which is necessary to produce gasoline.

Planes flying from Tehran landed at the Las Piedras airport in western Venezuela, where Cardon is located, on April 21 and 22, according to data on flight-tracking service FlightRadar24 reviewed by Reuters. The planes were operated by Mahan Air.

Both oil-producing countries are OPEC members.

Washington in December and January sanctioned Mahan Air for alleged roles in the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and transporting arms and fighters to Syria as part of Iran's backing of Damascus in that country's civil war.

Those sanctions expanded on 2011 counterterrorism sanctions imposed on Mahan Air over its support for Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

[Iran] U.S. will not let Iran buy arms when U.N. embargo ends: Pompeo (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:51 PM, Humeyra Pamuk and Arshad Mohammed, Neutral]

The United States will not allow Iran to purchase conventional arms after a U.N. prohibition on this expires in October, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters at a news briefing. "We will work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales and then in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

The United States in 2018 withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal that sought to prevent Tehran from developing nuclear weapons in exchange for relief from economic sanctions. As part of that deal, a U.N. arms embargo on Iran expires in October.

A U.S.-drafted resolution to extend the embargo has been given to Britain, France and Germany, all parties to the nuclear deal, a U.S. official confirmed, but U.N. diplomats said it has not been shared with the remaining 11 U.N. Security Council members, including Russia and China. Russia and China, which hold vetoes on the council and are parties to the nuclear deal, are believed to be eager to sell armaments to Iran.

"The failures of the Iran nuclear deal are legion. One of them is now upon us ... where China, Russia, and other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapon systems to the Iranians in October, Pompeo said.

"We are urging our E3 partners to take action. This is within their capacity to do," he added, referring to Britain, France and Germany, each of which has the ability to force the "snapback" of all U.N. sanctions on Iran – including the conventional arms embargo – lifted

under the nuclear deal.

Several European diplomats said since Washington has pulled out of the nuclear deal, it may not be able to spark a sanctions snapback, but Pompeo on Wednesday pushed back on that argument.

"The U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231 is very clear. We don't have to declare ourselves as a participant ... It's there in the language ... It's unambiguous and the rights that accrue to participants in the UN Security Council resolution are fully available to all those participants," he said.

Some U.N. diplomats said that while legal opinions on whether the United States could do this were split, ultimately it would be up to council members to decide whether to accept a U.S. complaint of "significant non-performance" by Iran.

[Iran] Pompeo prepared to kill the Iran nuclear deal to block arms sales to Tehran (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/29/2020 3:56 PM, Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo is preparing to force the renewal of all international sanctions on Iran in order to bar the regime from purchasing conventional weapons this fall.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters Wednesday. "We are going to make sure that, come October of this year, the Iranians aren't able to buy conventional weapons that they would be given, what President Obama and Vice President Biden delivered to the world in that terrible deal."

Pompeo is trying to extend the embargo on conventional weapons sales to Tehran, a restriction that is scheduled to expire in October, according to the terms of the United Nations Security Council resolution that ratified the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The potential danger of such weapons sales could attract European support for Pompeo's initiative, but that partnership is complicated by lingering anger over the U.S. withdrawal from the accord.

"It's now just several months out where China, Russia, other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year," Pompeo said. "I think the world realizes that's a mistake."

The options for how to extend the arms embargo are limited, given that Russia or China could veto a new resolution banning such sales. Their expected recalcitrance leaves one alternative, according to Iran hawks: an allegation that Iran has violated the nuclear deal, culminating in the snapback of all international sanctions in place before the implementation of the 2015 deal.

"We're urging our E3 partners to take action, which is within their capacity to do," Pompeo said, referring to the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. "We'll work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales. And then, in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

"You cannot cherry-pick a resolution saying you implement only parts of it but you won't do it for the rest," a Western diplomat involved in the allied deliberations told Agence France-

Presse.

Iran hawks think that legal argument doesn't hold any water. "Someone suggested this is fancy lawyering," Pompeo said. "It's just reading."

The snapback process, this argument emphasizes, is governed by a U.N. Security Council resolution, not by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the 2015 deal is known.

That means that the total demise of the 2015 agreement could be just a few months away. "The only other option is a new arms embargo resolution, which Russia and China would veto, and then, we'll lose," a congressional Republican aide who follows Iran issues told the Washington Examiner.

[Iran] Pompeo Vows to Stop U.N. From Lifting Iranian Arms Embargo (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [4/29/2020 4:15 PM, Adam Kredo, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said the Trump administration will not permit the United Nations to lift a ban on Iran's purchase of advanced military technology later this year.

"We're not going to let that happen," Pompeo told reporters at the State Department.

Pompeo said the United States is laying the groundwork to stop U.N. member nations—primarily Russia and China—from lifting an international arms embargo on Iran that is set to expire under the terms of the landmark nuclear deal.

While President Donald Trump removed the United States from the nuclear accord, the administration maintains that it still has sufficient leverage at the U.N. to stop the arms embargo from lifting. If these efforts fail, the Trump administration could petition the U.N. Security Council for what is known as snapback, the reimposition of all global sanctions on Iran that were lifted as part of the nuclear deal signed during the Obama administration.

"The failures of the Iran nuclear deal are legion. One of them is now upon us," Pompeo said. "It's now just several months out where China, Russia, other countries from around the world can all sell significant conventional weapons systems to the Iranians in October of this year. This isn't far off. This isn't some fantasy by conservatives. This is a reality."

Pompeo said it is clear Iran will immediately move to purchase a range of advanced military equipment once the embargo is lifted. Russia and China, which have sold Iran military equipment in the past, have the most to gain if the embargo is removed, he said.

"Does anybody think that the nation that today is conducting terror campaigns by Lebanese Hezbollah or Iraqi Shia movements or firing military missiles into the air ought to be permitted to purchase conventional weapons systems in just a few months?" Pompeo asked. "I think the world realizes that's a mistake."

U.S. officials are currently working to convince their European counterparts the arms embargo remains critical to stopping Iran's terrorism enterprise.

"We're urging our E3 partners (France, Germany, and Italy) to take action, which is within

their capacity to do," Pompeo said. "We'll go—we'll work with the U.N. Security Council to extend that prohibition on those arms sales. And then in the event we can't get anyone else to act, the United States is evaluating every possibility about how we might do that."

While some nations have argued the United States has no right to sway the arms embargo debate since it abandoned the nuclear accord, Pompeo made clear the State Department rejects this view.

U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which codified the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—including the restrictions on the arms embargo and its subsequent expiration date—does not bar the United States from taking action.

"We don't have to declare ourselves a participant," Pompeo said.

"It's unambiguous and the rights that accrue to participants in the U.N. Security Council resolution are fully available to all those participants," he said. "We're going to—we are going to make sure that come October of this year, the Iranians aren't able to buy conventional weapons that they would be given what President Obama and Vice President Biden delivered to the world in that terrible deal."

[Iraq] Pompeo says Iraqi leaders must drop sectarian quota system to help form new government (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:42 AM, Humeysra Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

Iraqi leaders must put aside a sectarian quota system and make compromises to help the formation of a government and help the bilateral relationship between Washington and Baghdad, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday.

Earlier this month, Iraq's president named intelligence chief Mustafa al-Kadhimi as prime minister-designate, the third person tapped to lead Iraq in just 10 weeks as it struggles to replace a government that fell last year after months of deadly protests.

[China] Pompeo Says China Responsible for Outbreak, Must Detail Origin (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 12:29 PM, Josh Wingrove, Neutral]

China poses a threat to the world by hiding information about the origin of the coronavirus that it allowed to spread to other countries, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

President Donald Trump's top diplomat, speaking in a television interview Wednesday, ratcheted up the accusations between the U.S. and China over the virus. White House adviser Jared Kushner, who is Trump's son-in-law, also said Wednesday that the president has ordered an investigation into the origins of the virus and will hold those responsible accountable for its spread.

"The Chinese Communist Party now has a responsibility to tell the world how this pandemic got out of China and all across the world, causing such global economic devastation," Pompeo told Fox News on Wednesday morning, during an interview where he repeatedly criticized China's government. "America needs to hold them accountable."

Trump again criticized the World Health Organization during a White House meeting with

Louisiana Governor John Bel Edwards. The president has sought to cut off U.S. funding for the UN agency, accusing it of taking Chinese claims about the virus at "face value."

"They misled us," he said. "They're literally a pipe organ for China."

He said that nothing positive is happening in China and that the country shouldn't have allowed international air travel during its coronavirus outbreak.

The comments came after China Central Television's top evening news program on Wednesday questioned the transparency and accuracy of U.S. data on Covid-19 infections. In recent days, the state television program said Pompeo is "turning himself into the common enemy of mankind" and that he "has exceeded the bottom line of being human."

China knows that the virus outbreak originated in that country, Pompeo said, and is using "classic communist disinformation" to shift the focus from that, Pompeo said.

"I've been heartened to see Australia, other countries joining us, demanding an investigation, because while we know this started in Wuhan, China, we don't yet know from where it started," Pompeo said. "And in spite of our best efforts to get experts on the ground, they continue to try and hide and obfuscate."

Kushner, speaking in a separate Fox News interview on Wednesday morning, said Trump had asked his administration to investigate the origin of the virus.

"He has asked the team to look into, very carefully, what happened, how this got here, and to make sure that he will take whatever actions that are necessary to make sure the people who caused the problems are held accountable for it," Kushner said.

[China] U.S. believes many Chinese labs doing contagious pathogen work under unknown security – Pompeo (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:44 AM, Jonathan Landay, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday said the United States believes there are many laboratories in China working on contagious pathogens, but does not know if the facilities have adequate security to prevent future pandemics.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think, on contagious pathogens inside of China today," Pompeo told a State Department news conference. "And we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this (coronavirus pandemic) from happening again. Remember this isn't the first time that we've had a virus come out of China."

[China] Pompeo renews calls for China to provide U.S. access to Wuhan labs (The Hill)

The Hill [4/29/2020 1:53 PM, Laura Kelly, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday renewed calls for the U.S. to have access to Chinese virology labs in Wuhan, part of the Trump administration's effort to investigate the origins of the coronavirus.

The U.S. and China are in a war of words over the outbreak of COVID-19, which was first

detected in Wuhan, with Washington calling for probes into Beijing's role in the outbreak and accusing the Chinese Communist Party of covering up the virus threat early on.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the [Wuhan Institute of Virology]," Pompeo said in a briefing with reporters at the State Department. "We don't know precisely where this virus originated from."

The World Health Organization (WHO) and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have said the first cases of the coronavirus were first detected in people associated with an animal market in the city of Wuhan, China, saying the virus likely originated in bats.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology is situated near the market where the virus outbreak was first detected.

Researchers have said the strain of the virus in COVID-19 makes it unlikely that it is manmade.

Pompeo also called on China to be transparent about its safety regulations and precautions at such institutions.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think continue on contagious pathogens inside of China today," he said. "And we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this from happening again."

Pompeo said having access to the labs was akin to conducting oversight of nuclear facilities.

Sens. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) and Ed Markey (D-Mass.) on Tuesday requested the State Department provide information about its response to diplomatic cables reportedly sent in 2018 that raised the alarm over safety hazards at the lab. The senators said U.S. diplomats warned that the lab had "severe safety and management weaknesses."

President Trump on April 15 said the U.S. had launched "serious investigations" into China's role in the spread of the coronavirus.

"We are not happy with China," he said during a press briefing. "We believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

The U.S. in January first called for China to allow CDC experts to examine and investigate the origins of the virus.

In February, representatives from the CDC and the National Institutes of Health joined a WHO-sponsored delegation to China to evaluate the Chinese response to the coronavirus outbreak. The Wuhan Institute of Virology was not listed on the itinerary.

[China] Pompeo pushes China to provide access to Wuhan labs over coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:09 AM, HumeYra Pamuk and David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday again pushed China to provide the

world access to its virology labs in Wuhan, saying the world needed to understand how the COVID-19 pandemic originated and Beijing had an obligation to be transparent.

Ties between the United States and China have significantly deteriorated since the eruption of the coronavirus outbreak, which has now killed more than 200,000 people around the world, including more than 58,000 in the United States, after originating in the Chinese city of Wuhan late last year.

Washington and Beijing have been trading insults and accusations over the handling of the pandemic, with Pompeo last week saying United States "strongly believed" China failed to report the outbreak in a timely manner and then covered up how dangerous the respiratory illness caused by the virus was.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the WIV (Wuhan Institute of Virology) there. We don't know precisely where this virus originated from," Pompeo told a news conference at the State Department, and added that U.S. concerns over the safety of Chinese labs persisted.

"There are multiple labs that are continuing to conduct work, we think, on contagious pathogens inside of China today and we don't know if they are operating at a level of security to prevent this from happening again," Pompeo said.

"The Chinese Communist Party tells us they want to be our partners ... There is a continuing obligation on the part of reliable partners to share this information," he added.

President Donald Trump said on April 15 his government was investigating whether the coronavirus outbreak originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, where the virus emerged. Those claims have no basis in fact, the head of the lab told Reuters on Tuesday.

Pompeo was asked in a Fox News interview about a letter sent to him on Tuesday from Democratic Senators Chris Murphy and Ed Markey seeking information about his department's response to reported warnings about safety at WIV and recommending increased U.S. engagement and technical assistance.

A Washington Post opinion column this month said the U.S. State Department in 2018 warned in diplomatic cables about safety and management weaknesses at a Wuhan laboratory.

"We'll do our best to respond to those two senators," he said.

"The United States for a long time, and continuing today, tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens," Pompeo said.

"We do this, not only in China, but we try to bring our expertise from our National Institutes of Health, from our CDC to precisely prevent something like this."

Reuters reported in March that ahead of the coronavirus outbreak the Trump administration cut staff by more than two-thirds at the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention office in China, as part of a larger rollback of U.S.-funded health and science experts on the ground there.

In their letter, the senators asked why, in the context of alarming reports about WIV, "were key CDC staff positions, including the resident CDC advisor position in Beijing, eliminated in 2018 and 2019?"

Most scientists now say the new coronavirus originated in wildlife, with bats and pangolins identified as possible host species.

Yuan Zhiming, a director at the Wuhan Institute of Virology has rejected theories that the lab had accidentally released a coronavirus it had harvested from bats for research purposes.

[China] Pompeo hits back after China claims U.S. is lying about COVID-19: 'Classic communist disinformation' (FOX News)

FOX News [4/29/2020 12:30 AM, Talia Kaplan, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reacted to China's foreign ministry claiming that America is "lying through their teeth" about the coronavirus pandemic, calling it "classic communist disinformation."

Pompeo made the comment on "Fox & Friends" on Wednesday referring to the statement from China foreign ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

"We advise American politicians to reflect on their own problems and try their best to control the [coronavirus] epidemic as soon as possible instead of continuing to play tricks to deflect blame," Shuang said on Tuesday.

"They [Chinese officials] know that this happened in their country," Pompeo said. "This is classic communist disinformation. This is what communists do."

China's foreign ministry also accused the United States of "lying through their teeth" and suggested the country mind its own business as the war of words between the world's two biggest economic powers escalated.

"This very much is our own business," Pompeo said in response.

He added, "What the Chinese communist party did here in not preventing the spread of this around the world, they're responsible for it. America needs to hold them accountable."

Shuang's comments came on the heels of President Trump suggesting in a press conference on Monday that the U.S. would be seeking "substantial" compensation for China's handling of the global pandemic.

"We are not happy with China," Trump said. "We are not happy with that whole situation because we believe it could have been stopped at the source. It could have been stopped quickly and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

He added that the United States is considering several options to "hold them accountable."

On Wednesday, Pompeo noted that China kicked journalists out and suppressed information from doctors about the dangers of the virus.

"Those are the kind of things that communist institutions do," he continued. "We all know them from the soviet days. We know the kinds of things that communist parties do to try and manage information inside of their own country and around the world and so we see these efforts."

Multiple sources told Fox News earlier this month that there is increasing confidence that the COVID-19 outbreak likely originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology laboratory. An investigation into the matter is continuing.

On Wednesday Pompeo pointed out that "the United States for a long time and continuing today tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens."

"We do this not only in China, but we try to bring our expertise from our national institutes of health, from our CDC to precisely prevent something like this," he continued, referring to the COVID-19 outbreak, which has claimed more than 218,000 lives globally, according to Johns Hopkins.

Pompeo said the reason the U.S. spend American taxpayer dollars on efforts to monitor countries conducting research on highly contagious pathogens "is to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard."

The Wuhan Institute of Virology lab was reportedly the subject of multiple urgent warnings inside the U.S. State Department two years ago.

U.S. Embassy officials warned in January 2018 about inadequate safety at that lab and passed on information about scientists conducting risky research on coronavirus from bats. The Washington Post reported two weeks ago.

On Wednesday, Pompeo also brought up Australia, which has been on the receiving end of Beijing's ire as well.

China's ambassador to Australia warned on Monday that the government's call for an independent international inquiry into the origins of the pandemic could lead to a Chinese boycott of Australian products, The Australian Financial Review reported. Australia's Foreign Minister Marise Payne hit back, dismissing China's attempt at "economic coercion."

"I have been heartened to see Australia, other countries joining us, demanding an investigation because while we know this started in Wuhan, China, we don't yet know from where it started and in spite of our best efforts to get experts on the ground, they continue to try and hide," Pompeo said, adding that what China is doing is "wrong."

[China] Sec. Pompeo: U.S. needs to hold China's Communist Party accountable to prevent pandemic happening in future (Yahoo News/FOX News)

Yahoo News/FOX News [4/29/2020 9:12 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo discusses how the U.S. and other countries can join together to hold the China's Communist Party accountable for the coronavirus crisis.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Mike Pompeo Accuses China of Posing a Worldwide Threat for Hiding Origin of the Coronavirus (Yahoo News/Time Magazine)

Yahoo News/Time Magazine [4/29/2020 4:11 PM, Staff, Neutral]

China poses a threat to the world by hiding information about the origin of the coronavirus that it allowed to spread to other countries, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Mike Pompeo Defends U.S. Funding For Wuhan Virology Lab (The National Interest)

The National Interest [4/29/2020 4:15 PM, Matthew Petti, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo defended U.S. funding for the Wuhan Institute of Virology as a program "to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard" in a Fox and Friends interview on Wednesday.

U.S. officials have suggested that the 2019 novel coronavirus was initially released in an accident at the Wuhan laboratory. The institution's coronavirus research had been supported by U.S. grants, attracting the ire of Republican politicians who blame the laboratory for the pandemic.

Rep. Matt Gaetz (R-Fla.) attacked U.S. funding for the laboratory last week, telling Fox News host Tucker Carlson that "at best, Americans are funding people who are lying to us and at worst, we're funding people who we knew had problems handling pathogens, who then birthed a monster virus onto the world."

Democratic lawmakers have also called for confronting the Chinese government over a lack of transparency related to the coronavirus pandemic, although none have endorsed the laboratory-origin theory.

Pompeo, however, defended the research program against members of his own party.

"We spend American taxpayer dollars ... to protect American people from labs that aren't up to standard," he said. "We try to bring our expertise from our National Institutes of Health [NIH], from our [Centers for Disease Control], to precisely prevent something like this."

Recently-leaked State Department cables from 2018 show that U.S. officials had been concerned with safety issues at the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

Pompeo then addressed a Tuesday report in the New York Post pointing the finger at NIH infectious disease chief Dr. Anthony Fauci for \$7.4 million in U.S. government grants to the now-controversial coronavirus research.

"I don't know the details of the NIH grants," Pompeo told Fox News. "Look, the United States, for a long time and continuing today, tries to help countries around the world who are conducting research on highly contagious pathogens."

The Trump administration cut off one of the NIH grants for coronavirus research in China on Monday, stating that the NIH "does not believe that the current project outcomes align with the program goals and agency priorities."

The research involved both collecting bat coronaviruses from the wild and running "gain-of-

function" experiments aimed at determining whether the viruses could jump between species.

The NIH has defended its research as necessary for public health.

"Most emerging human viruses come from wildlife, and these represent a significant threat to public health and biosecurity in the US and globally, as demonstrated by the SARS epidemic of 2002-03, and the current COVID-19 pandemic," the organization told Newsweek.

Fox News reported earlier in April that some U.S. officials believe that the novel coronavirus originated in the Wuhan Institute of Virology and escaped in a laboratory accident.

U.S. officials have publicly dismissed this theory.

"It should be no surprise to you that we have taken a keen interest in that and we've had a lot of intelligence take a hard look at that," Gen. Mark Milley, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said on April 14. "I would just say at this point, it's inconclusive, although the weight of evidence seems to indicate natural [origin], but we don't know for certain."

Pompeo, however, has leaned into allegations, demanding increased transparency from China.

"We all need to get to the bottom of what actually happened here, not only for the current instant but to make sure something like this doesn't happen again," he said on Wednesday. "There are still many labs operating inside of China today, and the world needs to know that we're not going to see a repeat of this in the days and weeks and months ahead."

[North Korea] Pompeo says no sight of North Korea's Kim, real risk of famine in country (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:52 AM, David Brunnstrom, Neutral]

The United States has caught no sight of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and is watching reports about his health, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said on Wednesday, adding there was a real risk of famine in the country amid the coronavirus outbreak.

North Korean media has not reported on Kim's whereabouts since he presided over a meeting on April 11, provoking speculation about his health and raising concerns about instability in the nuclear-armed country that could affect other North Asian countries and the United States.

"We haven't seen him. We don't have any information to report today, we're watching it closely," Pompeo told Fox News after being asked about conflicting reports about Kim's health.

Pompeo said the United States was also monitoring the situation more broadly in North Korea, which borders China, given the risk presented by the coronavirus.

"There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea too," he added. "We're watching each of those things closely, as they have a real impact on our mission set, which to ultimately denuclearize North Korea."

Pompeo told a later State Department news conference the United States would continue to focus on North Korean denuclearization, "no matter what transpires there."

President Donald Trump met Kim three times in 2018 and 2019 in an attempt to persuade him to give up a nuclear weapons program that threatens the United States. While talks have stalled, Trump has continued to hail Kim as a friend.

Pompeo did not elaborate on the risk of famine in North Korea, but a North Korean economic delegation was due in Beijing this week to discuss food supplies and trade issues as the coronavirus outbreak has severely disrupted the country's food supply, two people with direct knowledge of the situation told Reuters.

Impoverished and isolated North Korea is prone to food shortages. As many as 1.1 million people died during the famines of the 1990s, according to South Korean estimates.

Officials in South Korea and the United States have said Kim may be staying at a coastal resort to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, and have expressed skepticism about media reports he had some kind of serious illness.

They caution, however, that Kim's health and location are closely guarded secrets and reliable information is difficult to obtain in North Korea.

[North Korea] Pompeo says 'still hopeful' for a North Korea deal (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 11:34 AM, Staff, Neutral]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday he remained hopeful for a nuclear agreement with North Korea, despite speculation about leader Kim Jong Un's health and a standstill in talks.

Pompeo, whose diplomacy paved the way for a breakthrough 2018 summit in Singapore between Kim and President Donald Trump, said for the second time in as many weeks that a leadership change in North Korea would not change US policy.

"Regardless of what transpires inside of North Korea with respect to their leadership, our mission remains the same – to deliver on that commitment that Chairman Kim made with President Trump back in Singapore, and that's the ... verified denuclearization of North Korea," Pompeo told reporters.

"We are still hopeful that we'll find a path to negotiate that solution to get the outcome that is good for the American people, good for the North Korean people and for the whole world," he said.

Speaking earlier Wednesday to Fox News, Pompeo voiced concern that North Korea could be hit either by the coronavirus pandemic or widespread hunger.

"There is a real risk that there will be a famine, a food shortage, inside of North Korea," he said.

The totalitarian state, which prides itself on self-reliance, was ravaged in the 1990s by a famine estimated to have killed at least hundreds of thousands of people.

Pompeo, who traveled four times to Pyongyang in 2018, declined to speculate on Kim's health and said that he had met much of the North Korean leadership including Kim's sister Kim Yo Jong – seen as a key player in the event of succession.

A top official in South Korea, which has been seeking reconciliation with its totalitarian neighbor, has said that Kim is "alive and well."

Daily NK, an online media outlet run mostly by North Korean defectors, reported that Kim underwent a cardiovascular procedure triggered by heavy smoking, obesity and fatigue.

Trump last week denied a report on Kim's health by CNN, his frequent nemesis, and on Monday said without further explanation that he had a "very good idea" about the North Korean leader's condition.

Trump, who has boasted that he prevented war with North Korea, met Kim twice more after Singapore but talks have been off for most of the past year.

North Korea is demanding an end to US sanctions and has shown anger by lobbing a series of projectiles into the sea.

Trump's aides, notably Pompeo, argue that North Korea must give up its nuclear arsenal before it reaps any rewards.

[North Korea] Mike Pompeo: U.S. mission won't change if Kim Jong-un replaced (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 11:33 AM, Guy Taylor, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo says the U.S. policy of seeking total and "verified denuclearization" of North Korea won't change if the isolated nation's young dictator, Kim Jong-un, is replaced by a new leader anytime soon.

Mr. Pompeo made the assertion at a press conference Wednesday as rumors that Mr. Kim's may be gravely ill continued to swirl following his disappearance from public view for the past several weeks.

While South Korean officials claim the rumors are inaccurate, saying Mr. Kim is likely keeping a low profile to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, U.S. officials have remained noncommittal in their comments on his status.

President Trump suggested Monday there may be classified intelligence on Mr. Kim.

"I do have a very good idea, but I can't talk about it now," the president told reporters when asked what he knows of Mr. Kim's health.

"I do know how he's doing, relatively speaking," Mr. Trump said. "We will see. You will probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future."

Mr. Pompeo suggested Wednesday that U.S. officials may be in the dark on Mr. Kim's status.

"We haven't seen him," the secretary of state told Fox News on Wednesday morning according to Reuters. "We don't have any information to report today. We're watching it closely."

"I don't have anything to add to the status of Chairman Kim," Mr. Pompeo said later during a press briefing at State Department headquarters.

He went on to suggest that U.S. officials would continue to pursue diplomacy and negotiations with whatever North Korean officials take control in Pyongyang should Mr. Kim no longer be the country's leader.

"We did have a chance to interact with a number of North Koreans on our various trips, the ones that I took," said Mr. Pompeo, who traveled personally to Pyongyang during the early years of the Trump administration to pursue talks with the Kim regime.

He added that Mr. Trump also met several North Korean officials during his summits with Mr. Kim, first in Singapore in 2018 and then in Hanoi in 2019.

"We've had a chance to meet Chairman Kim's sister and some of the other leaders there as well," Mr. Pompeo said, referring to Kim Yo-jong, the younger sister of Mr. Kim who is rumored to be in position to take over as leader should the North Korean dictator die.

"Our mission is the same, regardless of what transpires inside of North Korea with respect to their leadership," Mr. Pompeo said. "Our mission ... is to deliver on the agreement that Chairman Kim made with President Trump back in Singapore and that's the fully denuclearized, verified denuclearization of North Korea."

"We are still hopeful that we'll find a path to negotiate that solution to get the outcome that is good for the American people, good for the North Korean people and the whole world," the secretary of state said. "Our mission simply won't change, no matter what should transpire there."

[India] Mike Pompeo Praises India for Lifting Export Restrictions on Critical Medical Supplies (Yahoo News/News18)

Yahoo News/News18 [4/29/2020 1:37 PM, Staff, Neutral]

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Wednesday praised India for lifting export bans on critical medical supplies including pharmaceuticals used to treat COVID-19 patients, saying it was an example of working together with partner countries to tackle the challenges posed by the coronavirus pandemic.

"We're working with our friends in Australia, India and Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, and Vietnam to share information and best practices as we begin to move the global economy forward," Pompeo told reporters at a news conference here.

"Our conversation certainly involved global supply chains, keeping them running smoothly, getting our economies back to full strength and thinking about how we restructure the supply change chains to prevent something like this from ever happening again," he said.

The coronavirus has infected more than three million people and claimed over 211,000 lives worldwide.

"One example of our work together is with India. It's lifted export bans on critical medical supplies including pharmaceuticals used to treat some COVID-19 patients," Pompeo said.

Over the last few weeks, he has spoken over phone – at least four times – with External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar. Readout of the calls indicated that ensuring global supply chain figured prominently in their conversations.

Pompeo said that the US government has provided more than USD 32 million in funding to support the COVID-19 response in Pacific island countries.

"We're working with the Burmese government, the United Nations, NGOs, and others to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Burma, including among vulnerable populations," he said.

Referring to a recent report, Pompeo said that Americans have devoted nearly USD 6.5 billion in government and non-government contributions to help countries fight COVID-19.

"This is by far the largest country total in the world and more than 12 times that of China's combined contributions," he said.

Department of State News

Congressional Religious Freedom Report: Lift Syria Sanctions on Kurds (The National Interest)

The National Interest [4/29/2020 12:30 AM, Matthew Petti, Neutral]

A religious freedom watchdog appointed by Congress suggested on Tuesday that the United States should provide a "potential sanctions exemption" to the Kurdish-led autonomous entity in Northeast Syria.

The U.S. government has imposed harsh economic sanctions aimed at punishing Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad for human rights abuses. But critics have accused the sanctions of affecting areas outside of Assad's control, including the Autonomous Administration of Northeast Syria (AANES) controlled by U.S.-backed, Kurdish-led forces.

The criticism gained steam on Tuesday, when the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) released its annual report on religious freedom around the world.

The report recommends "examining" targeted sanctions relief as part of a program to "[e]xpand U.S. engagement with and assistance to the AANES."

This appears to be the first time a U.S. government body has acknowledged a problem with the sanctions on Syria, which are backed by even harsh congressional critics of other sanctions campaigns.

The report praised the AANES as "a crucial center of positive religious freedom conditions in Syria" and "the area that has shown the most potential for expanded religious freedom over the last two years," which was put "at serious risk" during a Turkish invasion of Syria in

October 2019.

Turkish forces and Turkish-backed militias streamed across the border after President Donald Trump gave Turkey a green light to attack the AANES, which had been under U.S. protection.

State Department officials downplayed allegations of Turkish war crimes before Congress and delayed a statement condemning the Turkish-backed militias for executing Kurdish politician Hevrin Khalaf.

The latest USCIRF report asked the Trump administration to "[e]xert significant pressure on Turkey to provide a timeline for its withdrawal from Syria" and prevent further Turkish attacks or human rights abuses, in addition to considering sanctions relief.

It also asked Congress to pass legislation threatening Turkish officials with sanctions for persecuting U.S. citizens and "press" the Trump administration "determine" whether Saudi officials could be subject to sanctions under U.S. human rights law.

Northeast Syria is the only case where the USCIRF report suggested lifting sanctions. The USCIRF recommended imposing sanctions on officials responsible for religious persecution in Myanmar, China, Eritrea, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Cuba, Iraq, and Nicaragua.

Congress created the USCIRF as part of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, which requires the U.S. government to monitor religious persecution around the world. Presidents are mandated to take actions ranging from diplomatic protests to economic sanctions against "Countries of Special Concern."

But the State Department can issue waivers shielding Countries of Special Concern from penalties if it is in the "national interest" of the United States.

The Department of State renewed waivers in December protecting Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

U.S. Panel Lists India Among Nations With Waning Religious Freedom (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:46 AM, Archana Chaudhary, 6400K, Neutral]

A U.S. government commission has recommended adding India to a list of countries with a worrying record on religious freedom for minorities. India has rejected the report's observations.

India has been listed, along with China, North Korea, Pakistan, Syria and Saudi Arabia, among 14 nations "of particular concern" by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom in its annual report released on Tuesday.

The country took a "sharp downward turn in 2019" as Prime Minister Narendra Modi's "national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national-level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims," the commission said.

The USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission.

Three members of the commission dissented with the decision to add India to the list. India's foreign ministry in a statement rejected the commission's report and called its comments "biased and tendentious."

"We regard it as an organization of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," India's foreign ministry said.

In its report, the USCIRF listed policies, including a new religion-based law that fast tracks Indian citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which has led to nationwide protests. The law "is meant to provide protection for listed non-Muslim religious communities – but not for Muslims – against exclusion from a nationwide National Register of Citizens and the resulting detention, deportation, and potential statelessness," it said.

The panel proposed a range of measures against Indian officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom, including targeted sanctions, banning their entry into U.S. and freezing their assets. These are unlikely to be followed as the comments aren't binding on the Trump administration, Michael Kugelman, deputy director and senior associate for South Asia at the Washington-based Wilson Center, said in a tweet.

U.S. panel on religious freedom urges targeted sanctions on India (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:38 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, 5304K, Neutral]

A U.S. government commission has criticised India for failing to protect religious minorities and called for sanctions on government officials responsible for violating religious freedoms enshrined in its constitution.

The Indian government rejected the annual report from the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom saying it had distorted reality to new levels.

Since it was re-elected to power last year, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi has introduced policies hurtful to the country's 172 million Muslims and allowed a campaign of hate and violence against them, the commission said in its report released late on Tuesday.

It criticised a new citizenship law that parliament enacted last year laying out a path for citizenship for six religious groups from neighbouring countries excluding Muslims.

"The national and various state governments also allowed nationwide campaigns of harassment and violence against religious minorities to continue with impunity, and engaged in and tolerated hate speech and incitement to violence against them," the commission said.

The commission is a bipartisan U.S. government advisory body that monitors religious freedom abroad and makes policy recommendations to the president, the secretary of state, and Congress. But these are not binding.

India should be designated a "country of particular concern," the worst category in its survey, because of the sharp downturn in religious freedom in 2019, the commission said.

Myanmar, China, Iran, Pakistan, Syria, Russia and Vietnam are among the 14 countries in that category.

The commission also urged the U.S. government to "impose targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious freedom by freezing those individuals' assets and/ or barring their entry into the United States."

It did not identify any agencies or officials it deemed responsible.

The Indian foreign ministry dismissed the findings of the commission saying it had crossed a new threshold.

"Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new. But on this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new levels," ministry spokesman Anurag Srivastava said.

He said some of the members of the commission had dissented from its conclusions. Two of them wrote in their dissenting notes that India, the world's largest democracy, could not be put in the same group as China and North Korea run by authoritarian regimes.

"It has not been able to carry its own commissioners in its endeavour. We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly," Srivastava said.

India rejects scathing U.S. religious freedom report as 'biased' (Yahoo News/BBC)

[Yahoo News/BBC](#) [4/29/2020 2:23 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

India has rejected the findings of a US religious freedom panel which has named it a "country of particular concern," since the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was re-elected.

The annual report by the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) places India alongside Pakistan, China and North Korea.

Delhi said the report was "biased" and a "new level of misrepresentation."

This is the first time India has been placed in this category since 2004.

In its key findings, the USCIRF report says that following the massive victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's BJP in 2019, "the national government used its strengthened parliamentary majority to institute national level policies violating religious freedom across India, especially for Muslims."

It also made special mention to India's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), adding that "Home Minister Amit Shah referred to migrants as "termites" to be eradicated."

Nadine Maenza, the Vice Chair for the religious freedom watchdog said that the CAA "potentially exposes millions of Muslims to detention, deportation, and statelessness when the government completes its planned nationwide National Register of Citizens."

"We reject the observations on India in the USCIRF annual report. Its biased and tendentious comments against India are not new," said external affairs ministry spokesperson Anurag Srivastava. "On this occasion, its misrepresentation has reached new

levels. We regard it as an organisation of particular concern and will treat it accordingly."

The religious freedom panel had even recommended "targeted sanctions on Indian government agencies and officials responsible for severe violations of religious rights."

Two of the nine member panel expressed dissent over the panel's recommendation. Commissioner Tenzin Dorjee said "India does not belong to the same category as authoritarian regimes like China and North Korea. India is the largest democratic nation in the world, where the CAA has been challenged openly by the opposition Congress Party and law makers, civil society, and various groups."

The Indian American Muslim Council, an advocacy group welcomed the report. In a statement, it said, "As a part of the Indian diaspora that only wishes well for the country of our birth, we view international criticism of India's religious freedom record as distressing but painfully necessary, given the escalating level of persecution of minorities."

It further said that in March, "along with its partners, International Christian Concern (ICC) and Hindus for Human Rights (HfHR), it had written to USCIRF urging it to bring India into its list of the worst offenders of religious freedom violations in the world."

Saudi cabinet calls on Yemen's southern separatists to rescind emergency (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 12:45 AM, Nayera Abdallah and Omar Fahmy, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's cabinet has urged Yemen's main separatist group, which has declared self-rule in the south, to abide by an agreement to end a previous standoff with the Saudi-backed government.

The declaration by the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) on Sunday, which included emergency rule in southern regions, threatens to renew conflict with the government.

They are both part of a military alliance formed by Saudi Arabia to battle Yemen's Iran-aligned Houthi movement, which ousted the internationally recognised government from power in the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014.

"Any step that is contrary to the Riyadh agreement should be cancelled," the Saudi cabinet said in a statement issued late on Tuesday, referring to a power-sharing deal agreed in November.

The virtual cabinet meeting was chaired by King Salman. State news agency SPA posted images of the monarch and his son, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, taking part at separate locations.

The Saudi-led coalition on Monday described the STC's announcement of emergency rule in the south, including the interim seat of government Aden, as an "escalatory action" at a time when all parties should focus on confronting the novel coronavirus.

The cabinet also lauded the coalition for extending by one month a nationwide ceasefire due to the coronavirus, which Riyadh said would also help alleviate the suffering of Yemenis during the holy month of Ramadan, which began on Friday, and support U.N. peace efforts.

The United States welcomed the coalition ceasefire announcement, Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya TV reported on Wednesday, citing U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs David Schenker.

Yemen has been mired in conflict since the coalition intervened in March 2015 against the Houthis, who control Sanaa and most big urban centres. They have not accepted the truce.

The war has killed more than 100,000 people and pushed millions to the verge of famine.

China embassy accuses Australia of 'petty tricks' in coronavirus dispute (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:45 AM, Kirsty Needham, 5304K, Neutral]

China accused Australia of "petty tricks" on Wednesday in an intensifying dispute over Canberra's push for an international inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak that could affect diplomatic and economic ties between the countries.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his proposed inquiry into how the coronavirus developed and spread would not be targeted at China but was needed given COVID-19 had killed more than 200,000 people and shut down much of the global economy.

"Now, it would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again," he said.

Australian government ministers have repeatedly said China, the country's largest trade partner, was threatening "economic coercion" after its ambassador, Cheng Jingye, said this week that Chinese consumers could boycott Australian products and universities because of the calls for the inquiry. The head of Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) called Cheng to express concern. The Chinese embassy then released a statement detailing what it said was discussed on the call, prompting another rebuke from DFAT.

On Wednesday, the Chinese embassy returned fire, saying on its website that details of the call had first been "obviously leaked by some Australian officials" and it needed to set the record straight.

"The Embassy of China doesn't play petty tricks, this is not our tradition. But if others do, we have to reciprocate," an embassy spokesman said in the statement.

Chinese state media has fiercely rounded on Morrison, with Australian studies scholar Chen Hong writing in the Global Times tabloid on Wednesday that Australia was "spearheading" a "malicious campaign to frame and incriminate China."

And Hu Xijin, the editor-in-chief of the paper which is affiliated to the Beijing-controlled People's Daily newspaper, said on Chinese social media that Australia was always making trouble.

"It is a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes. Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off," Hu wrote.

New Zealand, which also has China as its largest trading partner, on Wednesday sided with neighbouring Australia in supporting an inquiry into the pandemic.

"It's very hard to conceive of there not being a desire by every country in world, including the country of origin, for an investigation to find out how this happened," Deputy Prime Minister Winston Peters said.

Australia's call for an inquiry has so far only received lukewarm support more widely, with France and the United Kingdom saying it was not the right time to focus on an inquiry.

U.S. President Donald Trump has said China could have stopped the coronavirus before it swept the globe and that his administration was conducting "serious investigations" into what happened.

China bristles at Australia's call for investigation into coronavirus origin (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [4/29/2020 1:37 AM, Paul Karp and Helen Davidson, 3975K, Neutral]

The Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, has defied China and defended the "entirely reasonable and sensible" call for an investigation into the origins of coronavirus, as the international political fallout over the pandemic deepened.

China has been pushing back against criticism from other governments about how it handled the outbreak of Covid-19, which is believed to have started in Wuhan and which has now infected 3 million people worldwide and killed 200,000.

Donald Trump's accusation at the weekend that Beijing could have done more to prevent the deadly spread of the disease was met with fierce criticism from China's state media.

While Australia has eschewed the more strident approach of the US, which has stopped funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO), it has urged its allies to back an overhaul of the WHO and suggested recruiting independent investigators akin to "weapons inspectors" to determine the source of major disease outbreaks.

On Wednesday Morrison said his government "will of course continue to pursue what is a very reasonable and sensible course of action."

"This is a virus that has taken more than 200,000 lives across the world," he told reporters in Canberra. It has shut down the global economy. The implications and impacts of this are extraordinary.

"Now, it would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again."

Australia's stance has angered Beijing, which has denied wrongdoing during the pandemic. In recent days Chinese state media has run numerous inflammatory statements including that Australia was "gum stuck to the bottom of China's shoe," doing the work of the US but without holding any influence, and risking longterm damage to its bilateral relationship and trading partnership with China.

On Tuesday, the Chinese embassy released details of a call from Australia's Department of

Foreign Affairs and Trade (Dfat), and in a further move to embarrass the Morrison government, claimed the Dfat secretary had said it was "not the time to commence the review now and Australia has no details of the proposal."

The move came after warnings by China's ambassador to Australia, Jingye Cheng, on Monday over consumer boycotts, described by an Australian minister as "threats of economic coercion."

A Tuesday night editorial in the Global Times accused Australia of "panda bashing" and victim blaming, and Morrison of "adventurism" which could damage the bilateral relationship "beyond repair."

"The Morrison government's adventurism to fiddle with this mutually beneficial comprehensive strategic partnership is in defiance of rational thought and common sense," it said.

"Canberra is treading on a hazardous path that has no prospect for a U-turn during the Covid-19 pandemic, and likely for a long time afterward."

But on Wednesday Morrison insisted the investigation "is not targeted" and refused to buy in to the war of words with China, saying the response was "a matter for them."

"Australia will do what is in our interest, in the global interest, and we will of course continue to support moves to ensure there is a proper independent assessment of what has occurred here."

Morrison said Australia's relationship with China was "mutually beneficial" and noted its trade with China consisted mainly of export of resources. "I see no reason why that would alter in the future."

In other coronavirus developments around the world:

The number of US cases passed one million as Donald Trump predicted a "great" economic rebound in the fall and claimed the country would soon be performing 5m coronavirus diagnostic tests a day.

Brazil's total number of confirmed deaths overtook the WHO's figure for China as cases accelerate in Latin America's biggest country. The number of deaths in Brazil has now passed 5,000.

China's consultative parliament is set to hold its annual meeting on 22 May, the official Xinhua news agency reported on Wednesday, more than two months later than originally planned.

Nearly 70 residents infected with coronavirus died at a Massachusetts home for ageing veterans, as state and federal officials try to figure out what went wrong in the deadliest known outbreak at a long-term care facility in the US.

China reported zero new deaths as of the end of 28 April. There were 26 new asymptomatic cases, down from 40 the day before, but 21 new imported cases, compared to three a day

earlier, and 22 cases in the mainland.

The Academy Awards will for the first time allow films that debuted on a streaming service without a theatrical run to be eligible for nominations, a break with tradition in direct response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Australia defends call for an inquiry into COVID-19 origins (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:06 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Australia's calls for an independent inquiry into the origins of COVID-19 is "reasonable" and not targeted at any specific country, Prime Minister Scott Morrison said on Wednesday. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

UK envoy in Washington backs probe into origins of pandemic, WHO reforms (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain's ambassador to the United States on Wednesday backed calls for an investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus and the response of the World Health Organization, but said the first priority should be containing the outbreak.

The comments came after Britain's foreign affairs parliamentary committee asked the government whether it plans to use international bodies to hold China to account over the COVID-19 pandemic.

The cross-party body asked for the government's strategy in dealing with China, taking into account Beijing's role in giving early information on the pandemic, its role within medical and industrial supply chains and the reliance of the UK and its partners on the country.

The committee asked if the government planned to make representations at international gatherings such as the World Health Organization, Group of Seven (G7) advanced economies or Group of 20 (G20) major economies to "hold China accountable for its attempts to mislead the international community in order to control the narrative around COVID-19."

Asked about the issue during an online event with The Washington Post newspaper, British Ambassador Karen Pierce said an investigation was certainly needed into how the virus emerged and the health risks associated with wet markets in China, which have spawned at least three virus outbreaks since 2000.

The British government also favored a review of the WHO's handling of the outbreak and reforms of the organization, she said. "We need to learn after all these crises, just as we did after Ebola in 2014. We need to learn how we can always do things better," she said.

However, she underscored that it was crucial now to focus on bolstering international cooperation to respond to the pandemic.

"We would see these sorts of reviews and reforms and investigations as something to come later," she said.

The U.S. government has repeatedly criticized China's handling of the coronavirus

outbreak, which began late last year in the Chinese city of Wuhan and has grown into a global pandemic. The outbreak has killed nearly 217,000 people globally, including more than 27,000 in Britain and over 58,000 in the United States, according to a Reuters tally.

U.S. President Donald Trump has suspended U.S. funding of the WHO, accusing the U.N. agency of promoting China's "disinformation" about the outbreak. WHO officials have denied this and China has said it has been transparent and open.

U.S. Puts Amazon Foreign Websites on List of Platforms Blamed for Facilitating Piracy (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:27 PM, William Mauldin, Neutral]

The Trump administration hit Amazon.com Inc. over intellectual-property rights Wednesday, putting five of the online retailer's foreign platforms on a list of "notorious markets" believed to facilitate sales of counterfeit and pirated goods.

The U.S. trade representative's office listed Amazon's web domains in Canada, France, Germany, India, and the U.K. among the accused platforms that allow for piracy. The action doesn't target Amazon's U.S. platform.

In a statement, an Amazon spokeswoman called the action a "purely political act." Amazon founder and Chief Executive Jeff Bezos has been a frequent target of President Trump.

"Amazon makes significant investments in proactive technologies and processes to detect and stop bad actors and potentially counterfeit products from being sold in our stores," the spokeswoman said. "In 2019 alone, we invested over \$500 million and have more than 8,000 employees protecting our store from fraud and abuse."

The Wall Street Journal previously reported that the trade representative was considering taking the action. The notorious-markets list has been used to encourage foreign companies and countries to crack down on piracy and counterfeiting, so the targeting of foreign platforms of a prominent U.S. company is a milestone.

The trade office said it took the action in response to complaints from U.S. apparel makers that Amazon isn't taking sufficient steps to block the sale of counterfeits on the five foreign platforms.

On a call with reporters, a senior U.S. trade official said companies have complained that seller information on the platforms is misleading, making it hard to determine who is selling the good, and that the process for removing listings can be "lengthy and burdensome."

The American Apparel and Footwear Association had formally requested that the U.S. add the Amazon sales platforms in those five countries to the list. The association said its members flagged those sites as the biggest source of problems among Amazon's platforms, with thousands of counterfeit items and listings.

In the trade office's report Wednesday, U.S. officials said that companies complained that the seller information displayed by Amazon on the foreign sites is often misleading, making it "difficult for consumers and right holders alike to determine who is selling the goods and that anyone can become a seller on Amazon with too much ease because Amazon does not sufficiently vet sellers on its platforms."

Amazon's counterfeit-removal processes "can be lengthy and burdensome, even for right holders that enroll in Amazon's brand protection programs," according to the report.

Putting Amazon on the list highlights the tensions between the administration and Mr. Bezos.

President Trump blames Mr. Bezos for unfavorable coverage in the Washington Post, which Mr. Bezos bought in 2013 for \$250 million. The Post says its editorial decisions are independent.

Besides Amazon, the annual notorious-markets list once again included the Taobao.com website owned by Chinese e-commerce company Alibaba Group Holding Ltd.

"Taobao remains one of the largest sources of counterfeit sales in China," the report said. While the report noted improved response times and policies, it said the site is still known for the number of counterfeits "offered for sale on Taobao and the lack of transparency regarding filters and other proactive anticounterfeiting measures."

An Alibaba spokesman said the company "will continue to expand and enhance its robust enforcement programs, engage in meaningful dialogue and promote advanced collaboration."

Social-media platforms that allow users to buy and sell goods also are drawing scrutiny in Washington. "Right holders have expressed increasing concerns with a growing trend of counterfeit products being offered for sale on e-commerce features related to large platforms, such as WeChat, " Tencent Holdings Ltd.'s giant social-media platform in China, according to the report.

More broadly, the Trump administration has sought to boost intellectual-property protection for drugmakers, Hollywood, the music industry and consumer-products firms in trade agreements, including a recent "phase one" trade pact with China.

In recent years, lobbyists and lawmakers have wrangled over how to address the degree of liability that online platforms should face for identifying and removing pirated electronic content or goods. Consumer watchdogs warn that officials can go too far in guaranteeing companies' rights and that some firms, including big drugmakers, may benefit too much from long-term patent and market protections.

Besides the notorious-markets list, the trade representative's office on Wednesday also released its new list of countries that don't take sufficient steps to protect intellectual-property rights. The "priority watch list" includes Algeria, Argentina, Chile, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Ukraine and Venezuela.

China recently submitted a road map for addressing intellectual-property rights as a part of the "phase one" trade agreement, and the U.S. trade official said Wednesday that Washington is reviewing the blueprint and continuing to work with Beijing on the issue.

Exclusive: Amazon turns to Chinese firm on U.S. blacklist to meet thermal camera needs (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:00 PM, Krystal Hu and Jeffrey Dastin, Neutral]

Amazon.com Inc (AMZN.O) has bought cameras to take temperatures of workers during the coronavirus pandemic from a firm the United States blacklisted over allegations it helped China detain and monitor the Uighurs and other Muslim minorities, three people familiar with the matter told Reuters.

China's Zhejiang Dahua Technology Co Ltd (002236.SZ) shipped 1,500 cameras to Amazon this month in a deal valued close to \$10 million, one of the people said. At least 500 systems from Dahua – the blacklisted firm – are for Amazon's use in the United States, another person said.

The Amazon procurement, which has not been previously reported, is legal because the rules control U.S. government contract awards and exports to blacklisted firms, but they do not stop sales to the private sector.

However, the United States "considers that transactions of any nature with listed entities carry a 'red flag' and recommends that U.S. companies proceed with caution," according to the Bureau of Industry and Security's [here website](#). Dahua has disputed the designation, and Beijing has denied mistreatment of the minority groups.

The deal comes as the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned of a shortage of temperature-reading devices and said it wouldn't halt certain pandemic uses of thermal cameras that lack the agency's regulatory approval. Top U.S.-based maker FLIR Systems Inc (FLIR.O) has faced an up to weeks-long order backlog, forcing it to prioritize products for hospitals and other critical facilities.

Amazon declined to confirm its purchase from Dahua, but said its hardware complied with national, state and local law, and its temperature checks were to "support the health and safety of our employees, who continue to provide a critical service in our communities."

The company added it was implementing thermal imagers from "multiple" manufacturers, which it declined to name. These vendors include Infrared Cameras Inc, which Reuters previously reported, and FLIR, according to employees at Amazon-owned Whole Foods who saw the deployment. FLIR declined to comment on its customers.

"It's troubling to learn that well-known American companies are continuing to turn a blind eye to companies that are fueling the Chinese Communist Party's brutal treatment of so many of their own people," said the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Michael McCaul, in reaction to the news.

Dahua, one of the biggest surveillance camera manufacturers globally, said it does not discuss customer engagements and it adheres to applicable laws. Dahua is committed "to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19" through technology that detects "abnormal elevated skin temperature — with high accuracy," it said in a statement.

The U.S. Department of Commerce, which maintains the blacklist, declined comment. The FDA said it would use discretion when enforcing regulations during the public health crisis as long as thermal systems lacking compliance posed no "undue risk" and secondary evaluations confirmed fevers.

Dahua's thermal cameras have been used in hospitals, airports, train stations, government offices and factories during the pandemic. International Business Machines Corp (IBM.N) placed an order for 100 units, and the automaker Chrysler placed an order for 10, one of the sources said. In addition to selling thermal technology, Dahua makes white-label security cameras resold under dozens of other brands such as Honeywell, according to research and reporting firm IPVM.

Honeywell said some but not all its cameras are manufactured by Dahua, and it holds products to its cybersecurity and compliance standards. IBM and Chrysler's parent Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV (FCHA.MI) did not comment.

The Trump Administration added Dahua and seven other tech firms last year to the blacklist for acting against U.S. foreign policy interests, saying they were "implicated" in "China's campaign of repression, mass arbitrary detention, and high-technology surveillance against Uighurs, Kazakhs, and other members of Muslim minority groups."

More than one million people have been sent to camps in the Xinjiang region as part of China's campaign to root out terrorism, the United Nations has estimated.

Dahua has said the U.S. decision lacked "any factual basis." Beijing has urged the United States to remove the companies from the list.

A provision of U.S. law, which is scheduled to take effect in August, will also bar the federal government from starting or renewing contracts with a company using "any equipment, system, or service" from firms including Dahua "as a substantial or essential component of any system."

Amazon's cloud unit is a major contractor with the U.S. intelligence community, and it has been battling Microsoft Corp (MSFT.O) for an up to \$10 billion deal with the Pentagon.

Top industry associations have asked Congress for a year-long delay because they say the law would reduce supplies to the government dramatically, and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said last week that policies clarifying the implementation of the law were forthcoming.

FACE DETECTION & PRIVACY

The coronavirus has infected staff from dozens of Amazon warehouses, ignited small protests over allegedly unsafe conditions and prompted unions to demand site closures. Temperature checks help Amazon stay operational, and the cameras – a faster, socially distant alternative to forehead thermometers – can speed up lines to enter its buildings. Amazon said the type of temperature reader it uses varies by building.

To see if someone has a fever, Dahua's camera compares a person's radiation to a separate infrared calibration device. It uses face detection technology to track subjects walking by and make sure it is looking for heat in the right place.

An additional recording device keeps snapshots of faces the camera has spotted and their temperatures, according to a demonstration of the technology in San Francisco. Optional facial recognition software can fetch images of the same subject across time to determine,

for instance, who a virus patient may have been near in a line for temperature checks.

Amazon said it is not using facial recognition on any of its thermal cameras. Civil liberties groups have warned the software could strip people of privacy and lead to arbitrary apprehensions if relied on by police. U.S. authorities have also worried that equipment makers like Dahua could hide a technical "back door" to Chinese government agents seeking intelligence.

In response to questions about the thermal systems, Amazon said in a statement, "None of this equipment has network connectivity, and no personal identifiable information will be visible, collected, or stored."

Dahua made the decision to market its technology in the United States before the FDA issued the guidance on thermal cameras in the pandemic. Its supply is attracting many U.S. customers not deterred by the blacklist, according to Evan Steiner, who sells surveillance equipment from a range of manufacturers in California through his firm EnterActive Networks LLC.

"You're seeing a lot of companies doing everything that they possibly can preemptively to prepare for their workforce coming back," he said.

Developing Countries Draw Down Reserves to Shield Currencies (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:27 AM, Caitlin Ostroff and Avantika Chilkoti, Neutral]
Emerging-market countries last month depleted their foreign-exchange reserves at the fastest pace since the global financial crisis to contain a plunge in their currencies, leaving some nations vulnerable to further shocks.

Twelve of the largest developing countries, including Brazil and Russia, reduced their combined reserves by at least \$143.5 billion in March in the biggest drawdown since October 2008, according to data from research firm Arkera. That has left Turkey with its lowest foreign-exchange balance since November 2006. For Egypt, March marked the biggest monthly drain on its reserves on record.

Those countries dipped into their coffers to combat a precipitous slide in their currencies after the coronavirus pandemic brought the global economy to a jarring near-halt in March. Financial markets grew turbulent, with investors pulling funds out of risky assets such as emerging markets' stocks and bonds while scrambling for dollars.

The depletion in reserves is likely to leave countries like Turkey, Egypt and South Africa especially exposed to further market shocks, investors said. Some countries may struggle with debt owed to foreign investors, or paying for imports of oil, food and medicines priced in U.S. dollars. The continued strength of the American currency, widely held by governments, will also make replenishing those reserves in coming months a challenge.

"The experience from '08 was that the winners are those that let their currencies go," said Timothy Ash, senior sovereign strategist covering emerging markets at BlueBay Asset Management. "They have wasted reserves, they should have just let the currency go wherever."

In Turkey, which endured a currency crisis in 2018, authorities drew down almost \$19.2 billion from foreign-exchange reserves in March as the Turkish lira's decline against the dollar accelerated. Its already diminished reserves dropped to about \$56 billion, according to Refinitiv. That helped limit the decline in the lira to 15% this year.

The central bank's net reserves, a figure that deducts funds borrowed from the domestic banks, are below zero, estimated Brad Setser, a senior fellow at New York-based Council on Foreign Relations.

Turkey has \$12.5 billion of U.S.-dollar-denominated debt coming due through the end of 2021, according to Dealogic. The nation's banking sector, which had almost \$79 billion of short-term debt due by February 2021, may not be able to make payment if the lira falls further, said Per Hammarlund, chief emerging-market strategist at SEB Markets.

Turkey's central bank declined to comment on the drop in reserves, but said it has worked to provide banks with greater liquidity and credit.

Egypt's foreign-currency reserves fell by about \$5.4 billion last month—the biggest monthly drop on record—leaving the country with about \$36.4 billion, according to Refinitiv. Its currency has gained about 2% this year.

While the Egyptian pound is no longer pegged to the dollar, authorities aim to keep the currency from depreciating too much to control the cost of imported wheat and grains, and keep inflation in check. But a sharp decline in tourism in recent weeks is also eroding the country's foreign-exchange income and has fueled speculation about its ability to make debt payments.

Such concerns drove the yield on Egypt's dollar-denominated 10-year bond maturing Wednesday to 31% on April 24, from 4% at the beginning of March. The yield eased back down to under 6% this week after the International Monetary Fund said on Sunday that Egypt has asked for financial assistance. Egypt's central bank didn't respond to requests for comment.

The muted moves in the Turkish and Egyptian currencies suggest large-scale intervention by the central banks to stem their decline, according to analysts at the Institute of International Finance who weighed the fall in local currencies against changes in foreign-exchange reserves.

Mexico's peso, in contrast, has fallen 22% this year as the nation held off on intervening in currency markets.

"The Mexican peso got clobbered, but in many regards they're doing what you have to do: stand back, let the currency get clobbered and pick up the pieces after," said Robin Brooks, chief economist at the IIF.

Saudi Arabia used up \$27 billion from its reserves in March—the largest drop going back two decades—to maintain the riyal's value against the dollar as oil prices slid. That has left it with about \$479 billion.

Meanwhile, Brazil and Russia, which also have sizable reserves even after the recent drain

on their coffers, have let their currencies absorb more of the hit from the economic meltdown. That has left the Russian ruble down 16% this year, and the Brazilian real down 27%.

"The ones that have drawn down their reserves, they have bet this will be relatively short lived," said Mr. Hammarlund.

Nations Must Promote 'Green Recovery' From Virus, IMF Chief Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:15 AM, Ana Monteiro, Neutral]

With the world economy reeling from the fallout from the Covid-19 pandemic, nations must do all they can to promote a recovery that also fights against the climate-change crisis, International Monetary Fund Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.

"Taking measures now to fight the climate crisis is not just a 'nice-to-have,' it is a 'must-have' if we are to leave a better world for our children," she said in prepared remarks to be delivered at the Petersberg Climate Dialogue Wednesday.

The IMF's fiscal affairs department recommends nations mandate commitments to reduce carbon emissions when they provide financial lifelines to companies that are carbon-intensive, adding that record-low oil prices make this an opportune time to phase out subsidies.

State guarantees can be used to mobilize private finance for green investment, the lender said. It must be mandatory for financial firms to better disclose climate risks in their lending portfolios, and the industry must find better ways of pricing in this risk, it said.

The IMF also recommends a substantially higher carbon price to encourage climate-smart investment and accelerate the shift to cleaner fuels.

"The current global carbon price is only \$2 per ton, way below the levels needed to keep global warming under 2 degrees Celsius (35.6 degrees Fahrenheit), which we estimate to be \$75 per ton," Georgieva said. For the transition to be fair and growth-friendly, carbon-tax revenues can be used to provide upfront assistance to poorer households, lower burdensome taxes, and support investments in health, education, and infrastructure, she said.

[Iraq] Iraq Seeks More Aid From the U.S. to Manage Coronavirus Fallout (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 4:07 PM, Glen Carey, Neutral]

Iraq is seeking financial assistance from the U.S. to help the country combat the fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic and plummeting oil revenue, the country's health minister-designate said.

"We have been promised by the United States government as part of this strategy between Iraq and United States to help us financially," Jaafar Allawi said on Wednesday during an online policy forum organized by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "I think there is a team negotiating now, or in the process of negotiation, to get Iraq some support, financial support, from America."

The U.S. has proposed a strategic dialogue in June that aims for the two governments to

work together amid the pandemic and decreased oil revenue. Announcing the talks during a briefing on April 7, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo warned that the Covid-19 outbreak and "plummeting oil revenues" threaten an economic collapse in Iraq.

The virus outbreak hit OPEC's second-biggest producer as Iraq's government was trying to end months of damaging political deadlock that coincided with a slump in oil prices. Iraq's intelligence chief Mustafa Al-Kadhimi was picked to form a government after previous attempts failed.

The latest crisis in Iraq began when anti-government protests erupted in October as people lost patience with years of rampant corruption and poor services, forcing the prime minister to resign the following month. Tensions between the U.S. and Iran have also led to armed conflict in Iraq, threatening the country's tenuous stability.

"The challenges facing the Iraqi state have become more acute since the beginning of 2020 and represent real risks to the stability of the state," Ayham Kamel, head of Middle East and North Africa at the Eurasia Group consultancy, wrote in a note on Wednesday. "A shrinking revenue pie due to low oil prices will prove to be the most destabilizing factor over the next 12-18 months. Irrespective of who is leading the government, a large drop in revenues combined with rampant corruption is bound to create problems."

Al-Kadhimi is "well positioned to win confidence from the key political and sectarian blocks in parliament, and therefore succeed in forming a relatively reformist government," Kamel wrote. "However, this is far from a slam dunk as the list of obstacles and complications in Iraq's political system are endless."

Iraqi authorities have reported 2,003 cases of the coronavirus so far and imposed curfew measures in mid-March to try and control the outbreak. Kuwait has contributed a "large amount of money," and the Chinese government has provided Iraq with equipment to help combat the outbreak, Allawi said during the forum.

[Lebanon] Key U.S. official urges Lebanon to prove commitment to reforms: Al-Arabiya (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:18 AM, Maher Chmaytelli, 5304K, Neutral]

The U.S. State Department's top diplomat for the Middle East has urged crisis-hit Lebanon to prove its commitment to reform in order to secure international assistance, Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV channel said on Wednesday.

Lebanon is grappling with renewed protests following a collapse in its currency, soaring inflation and spiralling unemployment, but its dire financial straits have only been worsened by a shutdown to rein in the coronavirus pandemic.

The growing unrest threatens to tip Lebanon into more serious conflict, even as Beirut looks to pass an economic rescue plan and enter talks with foreign creditors after defaulting on hefty debt obligations last month.

An accumulation of bad financial decisions, inaction and entrenched corruption and cronyism, were the cause of Lebanon's crisis, Al Arabiya quoted David Schenker, the U.S. assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, as saying.

"For Lebanon to be in a position to receive assistance from international financial institutions it must prove that it is ready to make difficult choices and decisions to show it is 100% committed to reform," it quoted him saying in an interview.

Its subsidiary channel, Al Hadath, also interviewed Schenker, who specified reforms to the power sector, customs, telecommunications and tax collection.

Lebanon's government, formed in January with the support of the powerful Iranian-backed movement Hezbollah, has struggled to make economic reforms demanded by foreign donors. The United States has classified Hezbollah as a terrorist group.

The U.S. official also welcomed a ceasefire announcement by the Saudi-led coalition that has been battling the Iran-aligned Houthi movement in Yemen for five years. The truce was prompted by the pandemic and as a measure to support U.N. peace efforts.

[Lebanon] As Lebanon's Crisis Deepens, Politicians Trade Blame (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:11 PM, Tom Perry and Laila Bassam, Neutral]

Lebanese politicians who have led their country into financial disaster are squabbling over who is to blame, stirring up old rivalries that may spell even deeper trouble ahead.

Lebanon faces its gravest threat since the 1975-90 civil war as its currency sinks, inflation spirals and protesters return to the streets, angered by an economic crisis made worse by a coronavirus shutdown.

Unrest this week in Sidon and Tripoli, where banks were torched and a demonstrator killed, is seen as a sign of what's to come as poverty and unemployment soar. Prices of consumer goods have shot up 50% since October.

The government is trying to finalise a rescue plan, perhaps as soon Thursday. Many hope this will be taken straight to the IMF, widely seen as Lebanon's only source of vital financial aid, albeit with tough conditions attached.

The plan must address huge gaps in the national finances including a projected \$83 billion hole in the banking sector - an amount that will soon be equal to twice the size of the rapidly shrinking economy. How to divide the losses is one of the biggest problems ahead.

But while the government is backed by the pro-Iranian Shi'ite group Hezbollah and its Maronite Christian ally President Michel Aoun, it is opposed by important players in Lebanon's sectarian politics: Sunni politician Saad al-Hariri, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt and Aoun's Maronite rival Samir Geagea.

Once leaders of an alliance against Hezbollah and Syria, these three have grown increasingly critical of Prime Minister Hassan Diab, a little-known academic made premier by Hezbollah and its allies using their parliamentary majority.

Nabih Berri, the Shi'ite parliament speaker and Hezbollah ally, appears to be taking a position in the middle.

The old political fault line has emerged in a row over the role of central bank governor Riad Salameh, steward of the banking system since 1993 and architect of the fixed exchange

rate that has crumbled since mass protests against political corruption and incompetence began last October.

Diab has rebuked Salameh over the currency crisis and a lack of transparency at the central bank. Hezbollah has also been critical, its deputy leader saying Salameh was in part responsible for the pound's collapse.

Heavily armed and listed as a terrorist group by Washington, Hezbollah has its own axe to grind with Salameh: his application of U.S. sanctions that have shut the group and its followers out of the banking system.

Salameh has hit back, blaming successive governments' failure to reform and vowing to defend the central bank's independence.

Hariri, a traditional ally of Gulf Arab and Western states, has defended Salameh while accusing Diab of trying to destroy Lebanon's free market economy and ignoring state corruption.

Jumblatt has meanwhile painted Diab as a nonentity doing the bidding of Hezbollah and Aoun. While Salameh had made mistakes, he was not to blame for \$50-\$60 billion of waste in the state-run electricity company, the responsibility of an energy ministry run for years by the party Aoun founded, Jumblatt said.

Lebanon's leaders, all of whom are accused of complicity in the corruption that has led to the crisis, are trying to deflect accountability.

"This bickering will only lead to more suffering and deeper economic problems. If the exchange rate reaches extremely high levels, I don't see how the state can continue to function," said Mohanad Hage Ali, a fellow at the Carnegie Middle East Center.

The pound has more than halved in value since October.

A draft government reform plan set out the scale of the problem earlier this month, including the \$83 billion hole in the banking sector and \$40 billion of losses at the central bank.

The draft drew criticism from Hariri, Jumblatt and others, particularly because it called for an "exceptional contribution" from the banks' large depositors.

The banking association also weighed in, telling the government to "keep your hands off" the banks and accusing it of squandering the money lent to it, endangering deposits.

"Without a fair distribution of losses, the chances of coming up with a solution that would receive international support look slim," said Khalil Gebara, senior policy fellow at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. "In a country that is so sectarian, finding solutions ... is looking very difficult."

Governments that aided Lebanon in the past are insisting Lebanon enact a reform plan before getting help this time.

"For Lebanon to be in a position to receive assistance from international financial institutions

it must prove that it is ready to make difficult choices and decisions to show it is 100% committed to reform," David Schenker, U.S. assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs, told Saudi-owned Al Arabiya TV on Wednesday.

Nasser Saidi, a former vice governor at the central bank, says Lebanon needs a \$25-\$30 billion IMF package over three to five years. Lebanon must admit it needs the IMF and start negotiations as quickly as possible, he said.

Farouk Soussa, senior economist at Goldman Sachs, said the draft plan leaked this month was "technically extremely capable and thorough but politically naive".

"The space between where the technocrats are and where the political forces – in terms of what is an acceptable recovery plan – is quite wide," he said.

"It would have been very difficult under normal circumstances but in the context of COVID it only complicates the economic situation in Lebanon exponentially."

[Lebanon] Lebanon cities erupt against collapse in currency (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:27 AM, Libby Hogan, 5304K, Neutral]

Protests against growing economic hardship erupted in Tripoli and spread to other Lebanese cities on Tuesday, with banks set ablaze and violence boiling over into a second night. One demonstrator was killed in riots overnight Monday, according to security and medical sources, as a collapse in the currency, soaring inflation and spiraling unemployment convulse Lebanon, a country in deep financial crisis since October. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Russia] Russia slams U.S. arguments for low-yield nukes (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:17 PM, Vladimir Isachenkov, Neutral]

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Wednesday rejected U.S. arguments for fielding low-yield nuclear warheads, warning that an attempt to use such weapons against Russia would trigger an all-out nuclear retaliation.

The U.S. State Department argued in a paper released last week that fitting the low-yield nuclear warheads to submarine-launched ballistic missiles would help counter potential new threats from Russia and China. It charged that Moscow in particular was pondering the use of non-strategic nuclear weapons as a way of coercion in a limited conflict — an assertion that Russia has repeatedly denied.

The State Department noted that the new supplemental warhead "reduces the risk of nuclear war by reinforcing extended deterrence and assurance."

The Russian Foreign Ministry sees it otherwise.

The ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Zakharova, commented on the State Department's paper at a briefing on Wednesday, emphasizing that the U.S. shouldn't view its new low-yield warheads as a flexible tool that could help avert an all-out nuclear conflict with Russia.

"Any attack involving a U.S. submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), regardless of its weapon specifications, would be perceived as a nuclear aggression," Zakharova said.

"Those who like to theorize about the flexibility of American nuclear potential must understand that in line with the Russian military doctrine such actions are seen as warranting retaliatory use of nuclear weapons by Russia."

Zakharova cast the U.S. deployment of low-yield warheads as a destabilizing move that would result in "lowering the nuclear threshold."

U.S.-Russian differences on nuclear arms issues come as relations between Moscow and Washington are at post-Cold War lows over the Ukrainian crisis and the accusations of Russian meddling in the U.S. 2016 presidential election.

Last year, both Moscow and Washington withdrew from the 1987 Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

The only U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control agreement still standing is the New START treaty, which was signed in 2010 by U.S. President Barack Obama and then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. The pact limits each country to no more than 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads and 700 deployed missiles and bombers and envisages sweeping on-site inspections to verify the compliance.

Russia has offered to extend the New START that expires in February 2021, while the Trump administration has pushed for a new arms control pact that would also include China. Moscow has described that idea as unfeasible, pointing at Beijing's refusal to negotiate any deal that would reduce its much smaller nuclear arsenal.

In a statement Wednesday marking the 10th anniversary of signing the New START, the Russian Foreign Ministry hailed the treaty as an instrument that helps ensure predictability in the nuclear sphere and reaffirmed Moscow's offer to extend it without any preconditions.

[Turkey] Erdogan Reaches Out to Trump in Letter Accompanying Medical Aid (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 3:22 AM, Cagan Koc, 6400K, Neutral]

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan continued his charm offensive on U.S. President Donald Trump, with a letter praising his coronavirus measures and calling for stronger collaboration between the NATO allies.

The letter accompanied Turkey's shipment of a military cargo plane carrying medical supplies to the U.S. to boost its fight against the pandemic, in a gesture of solidarity after years of fractious relations. The donation ordered by Erdogan included 500,000 surgical masks, 40,000 protective overalls, disinfectants, goggles and face shields.

"I am following with appreciation your determined struggle to control the pandemic in the U.S., and I am very pleased to observe that, thanks to your measures, America has taken the first steps towards normalization by achieving a downward trend in the number of new cases," Erdogan said in the letter, according to a statement by the presidency in Ankara.

Erdogan told Trump that Turkey will continue to be a "reliable and strong partner of the U.S." to meet basic needs during the outbreak and normalization process thereafter. He underlined the importance of collaboration between the two countries on measures to restore order, saying he looks forward "to exchanging ideas and suggestions on this issue

at the earliest convenience."

The U.S. and Turkey have been at odds over a series of flashpoints, most recently Turkey's purchase last year of a Russian missile-defense system that the U.S. says could help Moscow gather critical intelligence on NATO systems. Erdogan's personal relationship with Trump has remained publicly warm despite the disputes, even as Washington threatened Turkey with sanctions if it deployed the S-400 missile batteries.

Turkey has "slowed down" the planned April activation of the missiles, top defense industry official Ismail Demir told state-run TRT television on Tuesday.

Erdogan said he hopes the U.S. Congress and media also understand the strategic importance of the relationship between the two countries and "act in a way that our common fight against our common problems necessitates."

[Turkey] Turkey vows solidarity with U.S. in fighting virus outbreak (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:59 AM, Staff, 2194K, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has promised to stand in solidarity with the United States in its struggle against the coronavirus pandemic and as it recovers from the outbreak.

In a letter sent to President Donald Trump, Erdogan also said he was following "with appreciation" the American leader's efforts to control the outbreak.

The letter was sent Tuesday along with a planeload of personal protective equipment that Turkey donated to the U.S. It was made public on Wednesday.

Erdogan wrote: "I am very pleased to observe that, thanks to your measures, America has taken the first steps towards normalization by achieving a downward trend in the number of new cases."

"You can be sure, as a reliable and strong partner of the U.S., we will continue to demonstrate solidarity in every way possible," Erdogan wrote.

Turkey sent 500,000 surgical masks, 4,000 overalls, 2,000 liters (528 gallons) of disinfectant, 1,500 goggles, 400 N-95 masks and 500 face shields. Turkey has sent similar medical equipment aid to a total of 55 countries — including Britain, Italy and Spain.

Erdogan and Trump have maintained a close personal relationship despite a series of differences between Ankara and Washington, including policy on Syria and Turkey's decision to purchase the S-400 Russian missile defense system that the U.S. says poses a threat to its F-35 stealth fighter jets and to NATO.

The U.S. removed Turkey from the fighter jet program and has threatened sanctions if the Russian system is deployed.

[Turkey] Turkey donates protective gear to U.S., asks for improved solidarity in return (Washington Times)

Washington Times [4/29/2020 9:38 AM, Lauren Meier, Neutral]

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has issued a new letter to President Trump calling for increased solidarity between the two countries after years of a strained relationship.

Along with the letter, released Wednesday, Mr. Erdogan sent a host of medical supplies to the U.S. to aid its fight against the coronavirus outbreak including surgical masks, disinfectant, N-95 masks, and face shields.

The U.S. has been the hardest hit country by COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus, and has infected more than 1 million and killed over 58,000 across the country.

"I hope that this humble assistance will assist your fight against this pandemic and contribute to the speedy recuperation of your citizens who contracted this virus," Mr. Erdogan wrote.

"I hope that in the upcoming period, with the spirit of solidarity we have displayed during the pandemic, Congress and the U.S. media will better understand the strategic importance of our relations," he said.

U.S.-Turkey relations have been tense in recent years over disputes regarding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally's military involvement in Syria and its purchase of a Russian missile defense system, which prompted the Pentagon to halt Turkey's involvement in the F-35 program and threaten sanctions.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo took to Twitter to express gratitude for Turkey's donation.

"During times of crisis, @NATO Allies must stand together," he said.

"We thank Turkey for their generous donation of medical supplies and protective equipment to help us fight #COVID19 in our hardest hit areas. Americans are grateful for your friendship, partnership and support."

Turkey has reported 114,653 confirmed cases of COVID-19, marking the highest of any Middle Eastern country, 2,992 deaths and 38,809 recoveries, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker.

[China] Ortagus: Our countries have to solve this pandemic together (Yahoo News/FOX News Videos)

Yahoo News/FOX News Videos [4/29/2020 5:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus speaks out on the lack of transparency from China over the coronavirus outbreak. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Trump administration asks intelligence agencies to find out whether China, WHO hid info on coronavirus pandemic (NBC News)

NBC News [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube and Carol E. Lee, 7718K, Neutral]

The White House has ordered intelligence agencies to comb through communications intercepts, human source reporting, satellite imagery and other data to establish whether

China and the World Health Organization initially hid what they knew about the emerging coronavirus pandemic, current and former U.S. officials familiar with the matter told NBC News.

A specific "tasking" seeking information about the outbreak's early days was sent last week to the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency, which includes the National Center for Medical Intelligence, an official directly familiar with the matter said. The CIA has received similar instructions, according to current and former officials familiar with the matter.

President Donald Trump appeared to refer to the request at his news conference Monday. "We're doing very serious investigations," Trump said. "We are not happy with that whole situation, because we believe it could have been stopped at the source, it could have been stopped quickly, and it wouldn't have spread all over the world."

As part of the tasking, intelligence agencies were asked to determine what the WHO knew about two research labs studying coronaviruses in the Chinese city of Wuhan, where the virus was first observed. NBC News has previously reported that the spy agencies have been investigating the possibility that the virus escaped accidentally from one of the labs, although many experts believe that is unlikely.

The move coincides with a public effort by the White House, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Trump's political allies to focus attention on China's inability to contain the virus shortly after it emerged. As NBC News previously reported, U.S. intelligence officials have said China initially failed to disclose the seriousness of the outbreak, robbing the rest of the world of information that might have led to earlier containment efforts.

"As the president has said, the United States is thoroughly investigating this matter," White House spokesman Hogan Gidley said. "Understanding the origins of the virus is important to help the world respond to this pandemic but also to inform rapid-response efforts to future infectious disease outbreaks."

The CIA declined to comment. An official from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said, "We are not aware of any such tasking from the White House."

Trump has shifted from initially praising China's handling of the outbreak to sharply criticizing it as the threat the pandemic poses to the U.S. economy and his re-election prospects has crystallized. Blaming China for America's economic struggles has proven effective for Trump with his political base, and his allies believe it's a message that could resonate in November with voters in the Midwest.

"The president is now running against China as much as anyone," said a person close to the president.

The Trump administration has also accused the WHO of erring in January when it reported no evidence of human-to-human transmission. Trump, alleging that China exercised undue influence over the agency, has suspended U.S. funding of the WHO.

Initially, the WHO used conservative language. In a statement about the disease on Jan. 14 — regarding the first case outside China, in Thailand — the WHO said, "There is no clear

evidence of human-to-human transmission."

The agency soon stopped saying that, and by mid-January it was clear that the virus was spreading well beyond China.

Critics see the White House focus on China and the WHO as an effort to distract attention from the open question of what warnings Trump got in January and February from his own health and intelligence advisers during a time when he was downplaying the severity of the virus.

The Washington Post reported Monday that the intelligence reporting and analysis about the pandemic appeared in the president's daily intelligence brief more than a dozen times, although the newspaper did not specifically describe what information was passed along.

An administration official confirmed to NBC News that the President's Daily Brief, or PDB, included more than a dozen mentions in January and February of U.S. intelligence about the coronavirus in China, as well as Beijing's attempts to cover it up and suppress information about it.

The official played down the significance of the intelligence, saying there was not much more detail in the briefings than what was in the public domain. The official also said the briefings did not include any warning about how widespread and deadly the virus has now become around the globe.

An ODNI official told NBC News that "details in the Washington Post story are not true," but declined to say what specifically is disputed, citing the highly classified nature of the PDB.

Asked Tuesday to clarify what intelligence officials were telling him in January and February, the president said, "I would have to check."

"I want to look to the exact dates of warnings," he said.

NBC News has reported that U.S. intelligence agencies saw early warning signs of a health crisis in Wuhan as far back as November and that the National Center for Medical Intelligence predicted that the coronavirus would cause a global pandemic in February, well before the WHO declared one.

The House and Senate intelligence committees have requested access to all intelligence products produced about the pandemic and are closely examining what has already been turned over to them, officials from both committees have told NBC News.

The committees typically are not granted access to the PDB, the officials said. The congressionally sponsored commission that investigated the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, was allowed to review presidential briefs and determined that President George W. Bush was warned in the summer of 2001 that Osama bin Laden was "determined to strike" inside the United States.

[China] Senior Chinese official challenges Trump over coronavirus response, says U.S. wasted weeks (NBC News)

NBC News [4/29/2020 7:12 AM, Janis Mackey Frayer and Adela Suliman, 7718K, Negative] A senior Chinese government official challenged President Donald Trump's handling of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States, accusing him of wasting weeks after the threat posed by the virus first became apparent.

In a wide-ranging interview with NBC News conducted in Mandarin on Tuesday, the official, Executive Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng, also hit back at the politicization of the virus.

Le, a rising star within the country's political establishment, rejected claims that China had covered up the initial outbreak or that it should be held financially liable for COVID-19. Instead, he termed the virus a "natural disaster" and called for greater cooperation and an end to accusations.

"On Jan. 23 when Wuhan went under lockdown, the United States reported only one confirmed case, but on March 13 when President Trump announced a national emergency, the United States reported over 1,600 confirmed cases," Le said, referring to the city in China's Hubei province where the virus is believed to have emerged.

"In this interval of 50 days, what was the U.S. government doing? Where have those 50 days gone?" said Le, who was born on China's industrial east coast and began his diplomatic career in what was then the Soviet Union, and is fluent in Russian.

The White House, the Department of State and the National Security Council did not respond to requests for comment on the interview. On Monday, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted that the Chinese Communist Party needed to be "transparent."

"The world seeks answers to COVID19 and its origins ... China has a responsibility to cooperate," he wrote, referring to the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. Pompeo has previously stated that Beijing will "pay a price" for its actions, while often adding he didn't yet know what form that would take.

On Tuesday, the number of cases of the coronavirus in the U.S. passed 1 million, a milestone that Trump said was due to "much better" testing than other countries.

The U.S. has recorded more than 58,000 deaths so far, due to COVID-19, according to an NBC News tally.

China has been hounded by questions over missteps in its initial response to contain the virus. So far, more than 200,000 people globally have died from COVID-19, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

Trump has heaped criticism on Beijing since the outbreak of the pandemic, at times questioning the accuracy of its official death toll and saying he was looking into speculation that the infection originated in a Wuhan laboratory — a possibility that Chinese officials have repeatedly rejected.

"Do you really believe those numbers in this vast country called China. ... Does anybody really believe that?" Trump said at a White House news briefing April 15. "Some countries are in big, big trouble and they're not reporting the facts — and that's up to them," he added.

Trump also shocked the international community when he pledged to stop funding the global public health body, the World Health Organization, accusing it of being too close to Beijing and mishandling the outbreak.

The White House has since ordered intelligence agencies to comb through communications intercepts and satellite imagery to establish whether China and the WHO initially hid what they knew about the emerging coronavirus pandemic, current and former U.S. officials familiar with the matter told NBC News this week.

As part of this, intelligence agencies were asked to determine what the WHO knew about two research labs studying coronaviruses in Hubei province. NBC News has previously reported that the spy agencies have been investigating the possibility that the virus escaped accidentally from one of the labs, although many experts believe that is unlikely.

After years of on-and-off trade talks, the coronavirus pandemic is the latest issue to create an impasse between the world's two largest economies.

When Chinese medical professionals first reported cases of the virus in Wuhan late in 2019, reports were suppressed. Some, including Dr. Li Wenliang — who later died from the virus — were reprimanded for spreading what officials claimed was false information when the medical staff warned of the danger posed by the newly discovered disease, causing an outcry on Chinese social media.

Le stood by the country's official data and said China's response had been "fast" compared to other countries.

"I want to say China has not covered anything up. We did not cause any delay," he said.

Trump and senior U.S. officials have previously emphasized the Chinese origins of the disease, infuriating Beijing by referring to it as the "Wuhan" or "China virus."

Le, 57, offered his "heartfelt sympathy" to Americans fighting the crisis. Widely considered a likely candidate to be China's next foreign minister, he lived in New York when he was deployed to the United Nations in the late 1990s.

He urged greater cooperation between the two countries, stating that "the true enemy of the United States is the COVID-19 virus," not China.

"I think it's really important for the U.S. government to find the right focus, the real enemy," said Le, a senior member of China's Communist Party who has been the second-ranking official at the Foreign Affairs Ministry under Foreign Minister Wang Yi since 2018.

Earlier this month, both the Republican and the Democratic parties released TV ad campaigns accusing the other of mishandling the Chinese political relationship.

Le said it was "short-sighted" and "irresponsible" to seek electoral gain as a result of the crisis. He added that the Chinese public was "angry" and "entitled to express their outrage" at the U.S. politicization of the pandemic.

"Unfortunately, some political figures are politicizing this COVID-19. They're using this virus to stigmatize China. This is not something we are willing to see," he said.

In Missouri last week, while anti-lockdown protesters demonstrated, state Attorney General Eric Schmitt filed a lawsuit against the Chinese government. The first of its kind to seek damages, the suit accused China of lying about the virus and causing financial damage to the state.

Le said any claims asking China to make reparations were "preposterous" and presented an "out-and-out political farce."

"There is no international law that supports blaming a country for simply being the first to report a disease," Le said.

But he said he wouldn't object to some scientific investigation that kept away from "conspiracy theories."

"We do not oppose normal communication and mutual learning between scientists," he said. "What we do oppose is arbitrary investigations based on the presumption of China's guilt. That is something we firmly oppose."

[North Korea] Satellite images of luxury boats further suggest North Korea's Kim at favoured villa: experts (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:02 AM, Josh Smith, 5304K, Neutral]

Satellite imagery showing recent movements of luxury boats often used by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and his entourage near Wonsan provide further indications he has been at the coastal resort, according to experts who monitor the reclusive regime.

Speculation about Kim's health and location erupted after his unprecedented absence from April 15 celebrations to mark the birthday of his late grandfather and North Korea's founder, Kim Il Sung.

On Tuesday, North Korea-monitoring website NK PRO reported commercial satellite imagery showed boats often used by Kim had made movements in patterns that suggested he or his entourage may be in the Wonsan area.

That followed a report last week by a U.S.-based North Korea monitoring project, 38 North, which reported satellite images showed what was believed to be Kim's personal train was parked at a station reserved for his use at the villa in Wonsan.

Officials in South Korea and the United States say it is plausible Kim may be staying there, possibly to avoid exposure to the new coronavirus, and have expressed scepticism of media reports he had some kind of serious illness.

They caution, however, that Kim's health and location are closely guarded secrets and reliable information is difficult to obtain in North Korea.

The last time official media in North Korea reported on Kim's whereabouts was when he presided over a meeting on April 11, but there have been near-daily reports of him sending letters and diplomatic messages.

Kim's seaside compound in Wonsan, on the country's east coast, is dotted with guest villas and serviced by a private beach, basketball court, and private train station, according to experts and satellite imagery. An airstrip was bulldozed last year to build a horse riding track, while a boathouse nearby shelters Kim's Princess 95 luxury yacht, valued at around \$7 million in 2013.

"It's one of his favourite houses," said Michael Madden, a North Korea leadership expert at the U.S.-based Stimson Center, who has compared Kim's affinity for Wonsan to U.S. President Donald Trump's favoured resort, Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

Madden said Kim is believed to have about 13 significant compounds around the country, though he appears to only regularly use about half of them.

"All of them are set up to serve as the leader's headquarters, so they are all equipped for him to run the country," he said.

Wonsan is one of the larger and better appointed compounds, but it also has a useful location that allows Kim to easily travel to other areas along the coast, or return quickly to Pyongyang in his private train or along a special highway designated for use only by the Kim family or top officials, Madden said.

FAVOURED SPOT

Wonsan also holds symbolic power for the Kim dynasty: It was there Kim Il Sung, who helped found North Korea at the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, first landed with Soviet troops to take over the country.

Wonsan is believed by some experts to be Kim Jong Un's birthplace, partly because he spent his early years at the family's palace there, although official history has never confirmed where he was born.

The Japanese chef Kenji Fujimoto, who worked for the Kims and visited Wonsan, recounted in his memoirs how a young Kim Jong Un described rollerblading, playing basketball, riding jet skis and playing in the pool at the compound.

Later, photos showed Kim sipping drinks there with American basketball player Dennis Rodman when the star visited North Korea in 2013.

The Wonsan area has also become emblematic of Kim's strategy for survival based on a combination of economic development, tourism, and nuclear weapons. He is rebuilding the city of 360,000 people and wants to turn it into a billion-dollar tourist hotspot.

In recent months, the project has been repeatedly delayed, undermined in part by international sanctions imposed over the North's nuclear and missile programmes, which have restricted its ability to seek foreign investment.

Wonsan has also been the scene of some of Kim's renewed military drills and missile tests, which he resumed amid increasing frustration with a lack of progress in denuclearisation talks with the United States and South Korea.

[Afghanistan] Afghan officials: Suicide bomber kills 3 civilians in Kabul (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:58 AM, Rahim Faiez, 2194K, Negative]

A suicide bomber on Wednesday targeted a base belonging to Afghan special forces on the southern outskirts of the capital, Kabul, killing at least three civilians and wounding 15, officials said.

The government blamed the Taliban for the attack, which took place a day after the country's defense minister and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan visited the facility.

The bombing happened outside the base for army commandos as civilian contractors working in the facility waited outside to get into the base, said a military official, speaking on condition of anonymity as he was not authorized to talk to the media about the attack.

Tareq Arian, a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, said the site of the bombing was in the Chahar Asyab district and blamed the Taliban for the attack, calling it a crime against humanity.

"The target was likely the base itself, but the bomber failed to reach his target and instead killed innocent civilians," Arian said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, but both the Taliban and the Islamic State group are active in Kabul and its surroundings and have repeatedly struck military and civilian targets.

On Tuesday, the Afghan defense minister, Gen. Assadullah Khalid, and the commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, U.S. Gen. Scott Miller, visited the base, known as Army Commando Corps, praising achievements of the Afghan commandos and their dedication in defending the country.

Also Wednesday, a sticky bomb attached to vehicle detonated elsewhere in Kabul, wounding three civilians, according to Firdaus Faramarz, spokesman for the Kabul police chief. No one claimed responsibility for that attack.

The Taliban have continued to attack security outposts, even as the U.S. and NATO proceed with a full troop withdrawal that is set to be completed next year under a deal signed at the end of February between the U.S. peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the Taliban.

On Sunday, Khalilzad called on the country's feuding political leaders to set their differences aside to combat the coronavirus pandemic and advance the stalled peace agreement signed with the Taliban.

He said Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival Abdullah Abdullah, who each declared himself the victor in September's election, should "put the interest of the country ahead of their own" during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which began last week.

He urged the government and the Taliban to carry out a prisoner exchange that was part of the U.S.-Taliban agreement. The agreement had called for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 government personnel held by the insurgents.

To date, Ghani has released 550 detainees based on age, vulnerability to the virus and time served behind bars. The Taliban have not said if those released are among the prisoners referred to in the agreement. For their part, the Taliban have freed 60 prisoners.

In a statement Wednesday, the Taliban expressed concern that coronavirus could spread unchecked in Afghan government prisons, and urged international right organizations to act swiftly to save lives.

"If the novel coronavirus were to enter these prisons, it could prove catastrophic," the statement said.

The insurgents also delivered a veiled threat, saying they would exact revenge "upon the cold-hearted enemy" if Taliban prisoners lose their lives to the virus.

Afghanistan has reported 1,939 cases and 58 deaths from the coronavirus.

[Afghanistan] Bombing near Afghan capital kills three amid unabated violence (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:38 AM, Abdul Qadir Sediqi and Abdul Matin Sahak, 5304K, Negative] A suicide bombing near Kabul, the Afghan capital, killed three people and wounded 15 on Wednesday, the interior ministry said, as violence in the war-torn nation threatens a fragile peace process.

It was not immediately clear who was behind the blast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, amid the coronavirus pandemic and United States-led efforts for peace talks between the Taliban militia and the Afghan government.

"A suicide bomber detonated his explosives among civilians," interior ministry spokesman Tariq Arian said in a statement, adding that the blast happened in the Char Asiab district of Kabul province, about 11 km (7 miles) from the capital.

Hopes for an end to Afghanistan's decades of war were raised in late February when the Taliban Islamist militants and the United States struck a deal for the withdrawal of U.S.-led foreign forces in exchange for Taliban security guarantees.

In the run-up to the pact, there was a one-week reduction in violence, but attacks and bombings have continued since, with the Taliban having rejected calls for a ceasefire.

The United Nations has expressed alarm at the number of civilians killed in March and the U.S. commander in Afghanistan this month travelled to Doha to meet Taliban leaders and warn them the violence must be reduced.

On Wednesday, another blast in Kabul wounded three civilians who were taken to hospital, police said.

Nine people were killed and seven hurt in a Taliban attack on security checkpoints controlled by pro-government militia in northern Semangan province on Tuesday, a provincial police spokesman said, with an unknown number of Taliban casualties.

The Taliban did not respond to a request for comment on the attack in Samangan and a spokesman said he was looking into the blast in Kabul.

Editorials and Op-eds

America First meets global pandemic, testing Trump worldview (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:20 PM, Michael Tackett and Jonathan Lemire, Neutral]

When terrorists struck the United States on Sept. 11, Nicholas Burns was the U.S. ambassador to NATO, and one memory still stands out: how swiftly America's allies invoked Article Five of the organization's charter, that an attack on one member was an attack on all.

It was a kinship among nations nurtured over decades and a muscular display of collective defense that has defined much of the post World War II era. It is also a worldview that Burns finds starkly at odds with President Donald Trump's "America First" foreign policy as NATO's members and other countries suffer from the deadly weight of the coronavirus pandemic.

America First has been a ready applause line for Trump, but now it is also a philosophy being put to a life-or-death test, with much of the world still looking to the U.S. for leadership and assistance.

Burns, a Harvard professor and a former top U.S. diplomat who served Republican and Democratic presidents, said it was "entirely reasonable and rational" to focus inward "in the first weeks of the crisis in March. The president's job is to protect the people of the United States ... Having said that, I think it is abundantly clear that we cannot succeed in fighting the pandemic and confront the global economic collapse if we are not cooperating globally."

"The America First attitude is a very fixed set of beliefs about the world and our role in it," said Burns, who is also an informal adviser to former Vice President Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee. "He thinks that alliances and partnerships weaken us and slow us down. He's not an isolationist. He's a unilateralist. That has not worked well the last three years."

Trump's guiding foreign policy mixed with his "I alone can fix it" ethos has made him an unpredictable partner for America's allies, who continue to struggle with how to manage the president and fortify strategic ties with the United States.

During the pandemic, Trump has been accused by allies like Germany and Canada of disrupting shipments of medical supplies, saying that the U.S. needed them first. But he has also offered to provide ventilators to other nations, both among allies and foes.

"President Trump has done a masterful job in the face of an unprecedented crises – safeguarding the health and well-being of the American people by ensuring our citizens have what they need first – then providing assistance to allies through an historic coordination of international efforts," Hogan Gidley, the deputy White House press secretary, said in a statement.

For much of his presidency, though, Trump has been alliance averse. He has withdrawn

from the Iran nuclear deal and Paris climate treaty while threatening to do the same for NATO. And he has rattled some of the United States' longest allies with aggressive rhetoric on trade deals and military alliances alike.

He has favored authoritarian leaders like President Vladimir Putin of Russia, Xi Jinping of China and Kim Jong Un of North Korea over those like German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron.

Now China has also moved to fill a gap in humanitarian aid in the form of supplies. Trump has become more bellicose toward China, saying that the country withheld critical information about the coronavirus outbreak and would pay an unspecified later price for it.

"This pandemic crisis shows the inherent limits to the 'America First' foreign policy," said Richard Haass, another top diplomat in both Bush administrations and president of the Council on Foreign Relations. "Sovereignty is not a guarantee of security. Borders aren't impermeable; oceans aren't moats. We were vulnerable to an infection that began in Wuhan, and it proves that globalization is a reality rather than a choice."

Had Trump truly implemented America First, he said, the nation would have been better prepared. "A true American First national security policy would have had in place more testing, ventilators, PPE. It would have been more self-reliant. This moment shows that America First is more of a slogan than a reality."

But Steve Bannon, a former senior adviser to Trump, said that America First does not mean America alone. "It means prioritizing national interest and that strong allies matters. You don't turn your back on them. America doesn't need to abandon a leadership position. It needs to be a global leader, the global leader. But you prioritize what you need."

Bannon said the crisis also underscored the lack of U.S. capacity to manufacture medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, businesses that have located primarily in China and India because of lower production costs. "This pandemic underscores that public health is a national security issue," he said, adding, "A new nationalism is going to be coming out of this: a stronger America, a more focused America."

The notion of America First flourished during World War I and was promoted by Republicans and Democrats alike until World War II. After World War II, when the U.S. emerged as a superpower, the country took on an expansionist view of how spreading American ideals and building alliances could ensure peace and the U.S. standing in the world.

The grandest show of influence was the Marshall Plan, when the U.S. spent about \$800 billion in today's dollars to rebuild Western Europe after World War II, an investment that built alliances that endure today, even though some of them have grown fragile in the Trump era.

"Broadly, the president has failed his Harry Truman moment," said Benn Steil, the author of the award-winning book "The Marshall Plan: Dawn of the Cold War." "He had the best opportunity he would ever have to show the world he could rally his nation and its allies around a pandemic response that would highlight the best features of democracy and capitalism – as the Marshall Plan did."

Instead, Steil said, he is "hearing shock and disappointment" from colleagues abroad. "They have never seen a United States so dysfunctional that it cannot even protect its own citizens, let alone mitigate suffering abroad and rally cooperation among allies."

On Coronavirus, National Security Threats, O'Brien Picks His Spots (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 8:00 AM, Michael C. Bender and Gordon Lubold, Neutral]
When President Trump was initially hesitant about curbing travel from China in January, his national security adviser, Robert O'Brien, described in stark terms the impending coronavirus threat.

"This will be the largest national security crisis of your presidency," Mr. O'Brien told the president, according to people familiar with the discussion.

Mr. Trump authorized the restrictions.

While Mr. O'Brien viewed the novel coronavirus as an imminent danger, he largely removed himself from the spotlight on the administration's response, instead picking moments to assert himself behind the scenes. He rarely attends coronavirus task force meetings, ceding those duties to his chief deputy, and has appeared just once, on March 19, at the president's evening news conferences on the topic.

After seven months on the job, Mr. O'Brien has settled into the role of facilitator. He is quicker than either of his predecessors, John Bolton or H.R. McMaster, to defer to the president's judgment.

Mr. O'Brien arrives at the office by 9 a.m. most mornings, often fielding phone calls from the president much earlier, and is comfortable in the Washington social scene. He travels with Mr. Trump to Mar-a-Lago, and sits at the middle of the table in the White House Situation Room. But he has told colleagues that he is more comfortable in the background, viewing himself as a "quiet professional," in the words of one associate, and sees himself as a senior aide, not a principal.

Publicly, the president has praised him for helping bring home some 75,000 Americans from foreign soil as coronavirus-related travel restrictions went into place. Mr. O'Brien, an attorney who has advised Republican presidential candidates including two of Mr. Trump's competitors in 2016, touts his decision to cut the size of the National Security Council to 110 from 180, describing the move as one aimed at deflating a bloated bureaucracy, according to aides. He has since restored about a dozen of those positions to help respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

Privately, Mr. O'Brien advocated bringing Dr. Deborah Birx into the White House to help coordinate the administration's response to the virus. He unsuccessfully lobbied his counterpart in Europe to institute similar travel restrictions on China, according to people familiar with the discussions.

Mr. O'Brien played a key role in scotching the president's meeting in February with the Austrian chancellor after his team told him there was a case of coronavirus inside the country's foreign ministry, White House officials said. Austrians disputed the claim but

agreed to postpone the meeting, a senior Austrian official said.

In March, Mr. O'Brien signed off on a meeting with Brazilian leaders during the president's Florida vacation. Two days after those meetings, one of the South American officials who met with Mr. Trump tested positive for the disease.

Away from the cameras, the typically soft-spoken and measured Mr. O'Brien has flashed a temper. He slammed the table during one meeting in February, interrupting Vice President Mike Pence to make a point to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, who was hesitant to take actions that could undermine the economy, according to a person familiar with the meeting.

As the pandemic unfolded earlier this year, Mr. O'Brien told senior White House officials to consider Matthew Pottinger, his chief deputy, as the voice of the National Security Council on coronavirus matters, aides said. The decision was viewed inside the NSC as a way of freeing Mr. O'Brien to deal with other national security issues, a spokesman said.

Mr. Pottinger, a former Wall Street Journal reporter and Marine, raised early concerns inside the White House about the virus. But an approach colleagues described as aggressive complicated the knotty internal politics at the White House as the administration was struggling to find its footing in dealing with the pandemic.

Some senior officials said they became concerned when Mr. Pottinger wore a mask to the White House complex while the administration was asking Americans to leave the supply of masks for medical professionals. Mick Mulvaney, who was acting chief of staff until March, criticized Mr. Pottinger's approach to senior staff, officials said.

At Mr. Pottinger's urging, the National Security Council, the White House's primary arm for coordinating the federal government's response to national security issues, had called the first administration-wide coronavirus meeting in the Situation Room on Jan. 27. But when the White House formally created its task force a few days later, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar was put in charge.

A month later, Mr. Azar was replaced by Vice President Pence. The NSC's role has diminished as the administration's focus shifted to disaster response.

Mr. O'Brien's low-key approach has distinguished him from his predecessors in the Trump administration.

Mr. Bolton's aggressive policy activism frustrated Mr. Trump, and he eventually resigned over the president's interest in meeting with leaders of Iran and the Taliban. Mr. McMaster, who was an active-duty Army lieutenant general when he served as national security adviser, had a professorial style that wore on Mr. Trump. Mike Flynn, who was a retired Army lieutenant general when he served, was removed after more than a month in the job for lying to Vice President Mike Pence.

Mr. O'Brien was viewed by some to be an unlikely pick to join Mr. Trump in the White House. He was an adviser to Mitt Romney, a fellow Mormon, for his 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. He backed Scott Walker's Republican bid in 2016. When the former Wisconsin governor dropped out, he advised Sen. Ted Cruz's campaign.

Mr. O'Brien was privately wary of Mr. Trump, according to friends and former colleagues, and publicly described Mr. Trump's view on the defense budget as "troubling" and his approach to national security giving anxiety to "peace through strength" Republicans.

He took a more optimistic view once Mr. Trump won the party's nomination, saying the real-estate magnate and reality TV star could grow into the job.

Mr. O'Brien first attracted Mr. Trump's attention as the administration's special envoy for hostage affairs at the State Department, said friends and associates. Under Mr. O'Brien, more than 40 Americans were released from various countries.

In the White House, Mr. O'Brien has focused the National Security Council more on China, officials said. He has written that the president's focus on competition with China has been the administration's most important foreign policy development.

While his two predecessors were known for their experience on Middle East policy, Mr. O'Brien, officials said, is more closely aligned with Peter Navarro, the president's trade adviser who wrote the book, "Death by China."

Messrs. Navarro and O'Brien struck up a correspondence when both were living in California, the former as a university professor and the latter as a law firm partner, after Mr. Navarro read an article and deemed Mr. O'Brien's views on China sufficiently tough.

"For the first time we have a national security adviser whose strategic views and hard-nosed analytics are in line with the president's," Mr. Navarro said in an interview.

Mr. O'Brien has internal critics who believe he isn't strong enough on other issues, such as the Middle East and Afghanistan. Many Pentagon leaders urge a robust American military presence to counter Iran, for example. Mr. O'Brien, believing the focus should be on countering China, has labored to advise the president on finding the right balance. But ultimately it is the president's decision, aides say.

"What he doesn't try to do is teach the president that his world view is wrong," said one U.S. official. "It's different from advising versus fundamentally trying to change his view."

We've Lost Time in the Race for a Covid-19 Cure (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:00 AM, Lionel Laurent, 6400K, Neutral]

It's been three months since the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus a public health emergency of international concern on its way to becoming a full-blown pandemic.

Despite much hype around several existing drugs, we still haven't found a proven, evidence-based treatment for Covid-19. The stakes are clearly high, with a vaccine at least a year away, if at all, and countries around the world facing a potential second wave of infections as they start to lift draconian lockdown measures. A conclusive finding that one of the already-available medicines can reduce the viral load or severity of symptoms in infected patients would be a "game changer," as French state medical adviser Jean-Francois Delfraissy said on local radio on Monday.

For now, we're still waiting for convincing evidence of whether potentially promising drugs actually work. A European trial of four treatments, dubbed "Discovery," began in March; it was due to give early results in the first week of April. That date was pushed back to this week after a slow start getting off the ground. In that time, tens of thousands of people have died.

It's tempting to imagine the blame for lost time lies with bureaucratic red tape and squabbling scientists who prefer idle box-ticking to daring experiments with drugs on the pandemic's front lines. That's the narrative favored by supporters of Didier Raoult, the flamboyant French doctor who first flagged anti-malaria drug chloroquine as a promising treatment in February. While the scientific establishment waits for conclusive trial results, self-declared "maverick" Raoult has been using hydroxychloroquine (a less toxic derivative of chloroquine) on patients. U.S. President Donald Trump's endorsement of the drug, and his pressure on regulators to fast track it, have made it a household name.

But, if anything, it's the mavericks not the bureaucrats who have slowed things down.

Recent trials of hydroxychloroquine, for example, have been criticized for cutting a lot of corners without showing clinically significant effects. Raoult's test in Marseilles used a small sample size of 42 patients, their enrollment wasn't randomized and one patient who died was excluded from the results. Subsequent trials elsewhere were also found to be of limited quality. A review by Birmingham University's Robin Ferner and Oxford University's Jeffrey Aronson found that most hadn't been blinded, meaning those involved knew which treatment was being administered to whom. Other drawbacks included inconsistent treatment procedures, such as the addition of the antibiotic azithromycin, which when combined with hydroxychloroquine can cause dangerous heart problems. Of the 142 hydroxychloroquine trials registered as of April 14, only about 35% were designed to be blinded, the review found.

Sacrificing standards for speed hasn't just resulted in a lack of evidence; it has hampered and delayed follow-up studies. When the "Discovery" mega-study began enrolling patients in March, it immediately hit a big hurdle — patients swayed by headlines only wanted to be treated with hydroxychloroquine. In the U.S., one patient who was offered the chance to trial Gilead Sciences Inc.'s remdesivir asked for "Trump's drug" instead. The hype around potential treatments has also spurred countries to hoard drugs, hurting their availability.

Doctors are understandably in an ethical bind in this pandemic. The urge to "try everything" is strong when patients and their families are visibly suffering. Yet speed has to be balanced against other trade-offs like patient safety, too. And the grim truth is that a double-blind, randomized trial of several drugs could have been conducted by now. This week, the Paris region's hospital association announced that a randomized 129-patient trial of tocilizumab (marketed by Roche Holding AG as Actemra) launched just a month ago has already shown "significant" improvement for Covid-19 sufferers — though the results aren't yet peer reviewed.

There are other ways to accelerate research in a pandemic. One option is the use of adaptive platform trials, in which several treatments are monitored at the same time so that resources can be shifted toward those that are the most effective, as my colleague Max Nisen has written. Artificial intelligence can also help. The University of Pittsburgh is using machine learning to power its own adaptive trial of potential Covid-19 treatments across 40

hospitals. Even before testing, researchers are being called upon to use computational methods to screen existing treatments quickly, as in one initiative by a European moon-shot foundation called JEDI.

And if there is conclusive evidence that a cheap generic drug like hydroxychloroquine works, then the pharmaceutical supply chain may find new ways to meet a rise in demand. French firm Rondol Industrie is testing the ability of drug-blending machines to make more efficient doses of hydroxychloroquine that would improve absorption into the human body. The benefits of a lower dose for the same treatment result could include fewer side effects and lower production costs. It would also make it possible to treat more patients with the same quantity of active pharmaceutical ingredient.

Without that evidence, though, we will only be wasting time. Clinical trials are logistically and financially costly, but they're invaluable. A new pledge by world leaders such as France's Emmanuel Macron and Germany's Angela Merkel to raise \$8 billion for the development and accessibility of possible treatments for Covid-19 will help. This is a race without an obvious shortcut.

Antibody tests show we're nowhere near herd immunity (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 10:26 AM, Natalie E. Dean and Caitlin Rivers, Neutral]

A wave of preliminary results of antibody tests is adding to our understanding of how the novel coronavirus is moving through the American population. But there are reasons to be cautious about interpreting the findings.

In contrast with tests for active infection, these tests detect antibodies the body creates after someone has been infected with the virus. So they should identify people who got sick and recovered from the disease covid-19, or who carried the virus but had no symptoms.

In recent weeks, in separate studies, researchers have announced that roughly 2.5 to 4 percent of residents in Santa Clara County, Calif.; 3 to 6 percent of people in Los Angeles County; 6 percent in Miami-Dade County; and 14 percent across New York state have been infected at some point by the coronavirus. That last study estimated that as many as 1 in 5 residents of New York City had been infected.

Unfortunately, these new antibody tests can have high error rates, and in the studies involving Los Angeles County, Miami-Dade County and New York, the full scientific reports are not yet available for scientists to review. The Santa Clara County study also came under criticism from other scholars for its methodology and statistical analysis.

What can we learn from these studies? First, they reveal that even in the hardest-hit communities, most people are still at risk of being infected by the virus. We are a long, long way from developing "herd immunity" — meaning that so many are immune that there are not enough susceptible people left for the virus to circulate. This would require at least 60 percent of the population to be infected. With low levels of immunity in the population, if we lift restrictions on movement and "reopen" the economy without proper precautions, the coronavirus outbreak could again take off.

Even more worrisome are some of the other conclusions that people are drawing from the results. Last month, two Stanford Medicine professors who contributed to the Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties studies, Eran Bendavid and Jay Bhattacharya, wrote an opinion

article in the Wall Street Journal titled "Is the Coronavirus as Deadly as They Say?" They argued that previous overestimates of the death rate for coronavirus infection — now "corrected" by the antibody studies — meant that massive shutdowns and stay-in place orders were likely excessive.

It was already widely known, however, that we often only identify the most severe covid-19 cases, through testing swab samples. Early (rough) estimates are that a quarter or even as many as half of infections have no symptoms at all; those would be totally missed as well. The current official tally in Santa Clara County is 100 deaths and 2,084 confirmed cases, which would crudely suggest that 4.7 percent of cases are fatal. Naturally, antibody tests can help us pin down the true death rate following infection by allowing us to include everyone, even infections with no symptoms, in the denominator. Based on the Santa Clara and Los Angeles counties studies' results, only 0.1 to 0.2 percent of infections are fatal.

It's unclear that this estimate will hold up to further scrutiny. Notably, if the fatality rate were truly only 0.1 percent, that implies that all 8 million people in New York City have already been infected — which seems unlikely. That supposition is also contradicted by the New York antibody test results, which suggest that fatality rates there are closer to 0.5 or 1 percent. But even if the California numbers are accurate, they in no way warrant a conclusion that shutdowns were an overreaction.

Anti-vaxxers will fight the eventual coronavirus vaccine. Here's how to stop them.

If we know anything about this virus, it is that it spreads easily. Unlike influenza, there is virtually no population-level immunity, meaning many more people can be infected, millions in the United States alone. We also know that it overwhelms health-care systems. In New York City, there have been more than 40,000 hospitalizations and nearly 17,000 deaths — and that follows the Italian catastrophe, in which some hospitals, including in the Lombardy region, were reportedly forced to triage care, choosing who would receive scarce ventilators.

With the potential for huge numbers of people to be infected, taking comfort in a lower death rate would be the wrong way to think about the results — and easing up efforts to blunt this deadly public health threat would be a serious mistake. We know firsthand that covid-19 can quickly spiral out of control in cities and entire regions of countries, with devastating consequences. Preventing the disasters we've seen in Wuhan, New York City and Lombardy must remain our first priority. Antibody studies alone cannot tell us if we are ready to reopen the economy. That will instead depend on our preparedness to test, trace and isolate infected people so that we don't end up back where we started.

The next pandemic could be even worse (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 6:31 AM, Jamie Metz, Andrew Hessel and Hansa Bhargava, 12317K, Neutral]

This is war.

A world war.

Not against a country or regime, but a virus — an enemy invader that is as alien to most people as it is invisible, and completely unaffected by humanity's borders, politics or morality.

After dangerously slow starts first in China, Europe and the United States, the world is now mobilizing to face the Covid-19 pandemic in an all-hands-on-deck moment. This counterattack is already showing preliminary results, but much of our effort will be for naught if we fully demobilize once this battle is won.

There's a reason why militaries don't demobilize after each war. To face ongoing threats, our militaries maintain ongoing capabilities. Even though we've faced terrible pandemics before, we're now suffering unnecessarily because we've not applied their lessons to our ongoing war with deadly pathogens.

If any military had failed as spectacularly as the world's governments have in preparing for and preventing this crisis, their leaders would have been summarily fired. The commanders who replaced them would then be judged by their ability to do everything possible to prevent the next crisis.

As the levers of state power and public health around the world now shift into gear, we can expect better results over the coming months, potentially including ongoing development of one or more Covid-19 vaccines and therapeutic strategies for critical care.

But even once we have a vaccine, we can't allow a full demobilization because as bad as this virus is, future pandemics could be even worse.

The novel coronavirus hits the rare sweet spot for infectious diseases. It causes illness but many people have mild symptoms or are asymptomatic, facilitating spread. It wasn't so deadly that it immobilized its new hosts immediately or, as would be the case with Ebola, provoked an immediate quarantine of affected areas. It succeeded in part because the true threat wasn't immediately recognized.

The world of biology is dynamic by definition, so there has always been the chance that deadly viruses like this would jump from animals to humans. It's always been a question of when, not if. Through our destruction of natural habitats, population growth, international travel, industrial scale animal husbandry and other actions, however, our species has massively exacerbated this threat.

But naturally occurring viruses might pale in comparison to the viruses that could potentially be created by the powerful new tools of synthetic biology – agents precision-engineered to cause harm.

A recent piece in the journal Nature Medicine assessing the likely origins of the novel coronavirus concluded that, whatever the origins of the outbreak itself, SARS-CoV-2 is most likely naturally occurring because of the relatively inefficient way it hijacks human cells. In other words, if a malicious genetic engineer was intentionally manipulating a virus to be deadly and contagious, they could potentially do a much better job.

In 2017, University of Alberta in Canada synthesized an extinct horsepox virus, a cousin of smallpox, for around \$100,000.

This science has advanced so rapidly and the cost has come down so precipitously that the same feat could today be achieved for just a few thousand dollars. Unlike nuclear weapons,

the development of which need the type of massive infrastructure usually reserved for nation states, developing a synthetic pathogen is now within the capacity of many groups or even individuals distributed across the globe. The next pandemic may not be an accident of nature.

But if we think about our struggle against any and all infectious agents as a battlefield, which we should, then we should learn from our most effective militaries about how best to prepare for what may be heading our way.

Here's the plan:

1. Maintain essential capabilities: The soldiers in our fight against deadly pathogens are our public health officials, doctors, government planners and data modelers. To build the standing capabilities we'll need for this fight, we must invest the necessary time and money to prepare for rare but inevitable events. With disease outbreaks, you pay a bit now for readiness or you pay a lot later for response, only with more human suffering added to the price tag. Once we have these personnel in place, we must plan and train like our lives depend on it. They do.

2. Develop global and local surveillance networks: Militaries invest massive resources in monitoring their enemy's every action through satellite networks, spies and data analytics. To be ready for the next pandemic, we must develop new sensor systems that can identify new infectious agents in real time and use advanced data analytics to identify worrisome patterns of diseases well before a major outbreak emerges.

3. Build and maintain a network of alliances: Few militaries can succeed alone, and no country can protect itself from a deadly pathogen on its own. Pandemic preparedness must become a core and ongoing component of international cooperation. The World Health Organization can play the central role in this process, but only if it has the resources, staff and mandate to succeed. We must make that happen.

4. Build emergency response capacity: Militaries have expeditionary forces to take the battle to the enemy wherever a threat originates. We need the same capabilities for pandemics. The moment a tripwire is triggered indicating a potential pathogenic outbreak, trained emergency response teams, both national and international, must be ready to mobilize and equipped with tools and authority to respond.

5. Forward-deployed personnel and weaponry: Transporting personnel and equipment to faraway locations is expensive and slow, which is why leading militaries deploy people and equipment near the theaters where they will most likely be needed. The organization of the US Strategic National Stockpile may need a review to put more medical equipment closer to the front lines in major urban centers. In recent years, the US government pulled back some of the personnel on the ground in foreign countries working in disease prevention. As we are now seeing, if we don't fight the skirmish of a pathogenic agent at its source, we can end up fighting a major war everywhere else.

6. Invest in the defensive weapons of the future: Militaries are always building the next generation of weapons and working to counter the enemy's latest innovations. We now need to step up our efforts to create vaccine platforms that can rapidly counter novel threats as well as universal vaccines designed to target entire classes of viruses. Here, the growing

power of synthetic biology to quickly design, build and deploy countermeasures in near-real time can be a powerful force for good.

There is little doubt that we were not ready for the terrible and largely preventable crisis we now face. Our poorly planned, underresourced and haphazard global response has led to over 200,000 deaths, massively disrupted our lives and caused trillions of dollars in economic fallout.

Shame on us if we are caught unprepared the next time.

A Scramble for Virus Apps That Do No Harm (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 10:32 AM, Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, Natasha Singer and Aaron Krolik, 40577K, Neutral]

Faced with a growing coronavirus threat, the governor of North Dakota last month posed a question to a friend from his private-sector days. The friend, a software engineer, had once created a location-tracking app for football fans at North Dakota State University who liked to meet up when traveling to big games.

"Can you track people for Covid?" asked the governor, Douglas Burgum. Within days, the engineer, Tim Brookins, had reworked the football app to do just that, he recalled in an interview. The app is now being used in North and South Dakota as part of statewide efforts to ramp up contact tracing for people infected with the coronavirus.

The new app is part of a worldwide scramble to deploy smartphone tools to rein in the pandemic. If the virus's path can be tracked, even predicted, the hope is that more people will be able to resume at least part of their normal routines — and fewer will need to confine themselves at home.

At their core, the apps are intended to gather information about the movements of people who have tested positive for the virus, alert others who might have crossed their paths, and in some cases make sure infected people stay quarantined. They use smartphone technologies, such as GPS and Bluetooth, to collect and share the data, which make them agile and easy to use but also provide an enticing target for hackers or government surveillance.

Several dozen countries, states, universities and companies are racing to develop and begin using the digital tools, which public health experts said could improve person-to-person contact tracing but are not a panacea. The mad dash has left some places with a confusing mishmash of options, and has some computer security researchers worried about vulnerabilities in hastily written software.

There is no evidence that the apps will be effective without widespread testing for the virus and without enormous numbers of voluntary participants, which could be hampered by years of privacy scandals involving both governments and companies.

Aware of the problems, Apple and Google announced this month they were creating software that public health authorities could use to make apps. The tool will allow different apps to work together and has the support of many privacy experts. But several technology law scholars expressed concern that even well-intentioned digital surveillance tools could become problematic and are difficult to withdraw.

"We've already learned what moving fast and breaking things can do to society," said Woodrow Hartzog, a professor of law and computer science at Northeastern University, referring to the negative consequences of a tech mind-set that values speed and disruption above all else.

Only 25,000 people in North Dakota, about 3 percent of the population, have downloaded the state's app, which before last week was available only for iPhones. Last month, Singapore introduced a voluntary contact-tracing app, but only about 1.1 million people — 20 percent of the population — have downloaded it. Norway's app has caught on more quickly, with nearly 30 percent of residents signing up for it since it was released about a week and a half ago.

Still, a recent study by epidemiologists at Oxford University estimated that 60 percent of the population in a given area would need to use an automated app that traces contacts and notifies users of exposure, combined with other tactics such as broader testing and the quarantining of the most vulnerable people, for the app to contain the virus.

While some compliance is better than none, the researchers found, low rates of adoption in many areas suggest voluntary programs may not provide a breakthrough.

"With 10 percent, 20 percent, 30 percent uptake of the app, you get a progressive reduction in the size of the epidemic," said Christophe Fraser, an expert in infectious disease dynamics and control at the Big Data Institute at Oxford, who has advised Britain's National Health Service on an app it is developing.

Despite the uncertainty, some health experts say the virus spreads so quickly and stealthily that there is an urgent need for new mechanisms to combat it. Even with partial participation, for example, the apps can allow traditional contact tracing to focus on people without phones, who are often poorer, older and more vulnerable. Only about half of Americans age 65 or over have a smartphone.

"Automated contact tracing is a big idea, an ambitious idea," said Dr. Louise Ivers, the executive director of the Center for Global Health at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, who has been working with a team at M.I.T. to develop contact-tracing technology.

"But it's important to be ambitious right now."

On the Trail of the Pandemic

The proliferation of coronavirus apps has trailed the spread of the pandemic around the globe. Often, the differences among apps are technical ones but can create vast differences in their security, privacy and effectiveness.

In February, China began requiring residents in more than 200 cities to download a health code app that automatically dictates whether people must quarantine. Location data is sent to the government from the phones, but it is unclear how the quarantine decisions are made.

By contrast, Singapore's app uses Bluetooth rather than location data to identify nearby phones, and the information is stored on the phones unless a person tests positive for the virus and agrees to share the data with contact tracers, who can then notify others who may

have been exposed.

In Norway, the app sends data from the phone's GPS and Bluetooth to central servers that can be accessed by government health authorities. A new law mandates that the information be used only for the pandemic, and that it be deleted every 30 days.

Tora Sanden Dorskeland, a graduate student in Norway, said she had downloaded the app despite her concerns about governments and corporations that collect data on people.

"I'm not an expert in this disease or technology or law, but I trust people who are, and I believe the government is relying on them when it tells us to make this choice," she said. "There are pros and cons, but we need to do something together."

North Dakota's app, Care19, uses Wi-Fi, cell towers and GPS to gauge people's locations, usually within about 175 feet, making it much less accurate than Bluetooth-based apps. This means it is now useful only to help patients tell contact tracers where they were while they were contagious.

An analysis by The New York Times confirmed that the app sends people's location data to a private server hosted on Microsoft's cloud platform. Mr. Brookins, the developer, said only he and one other person have access to the server, and health officials can get the data only of people who test positive for the coronavirus and then agree to share it.

India, which, like the United States, is relying on a combination of state and federal efforts to tackle the pandemic, is a case study in the rush for new technologies.

A quarantine app in the Indian state of Maharashtra, which includes the country's most populous city, Mumbai, uses GPS data collected from people's smartphones to create a virtual perimeter around their homes. If users move beyond their permitted radius, the app notifies local authorities.

Another app, called Quarantine Watch, in the state of Karnataka, also records the locations of certain people under quarantine and requires them to take selfies to prove they are staying home.

In an effort to coordinate public health surveillance, the central government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi introduced its own contact-tracing app in early April. The app, called Aarogya Setu — or health care bridge — uses smartphone location data and Bluetooth to log people's travel routes and the other phones they encounter. With urging from Mr. Modi, more than 77 million people, about 5.6 percent of the population, have downloaded it so far. Local authorities are now promoting the Modi government's app along with their own.

An expert advising the Modi government on its app said it had already helped public health monitors pinpoint hot spots for the virus and speed their door-to-door visits to certain neighborhoods to alert residents, many of whom did not own smartphones.

But civil liberties groups have warned that the rush to adopt virus-tracking technologies may entrench new forms of government surveillance and social control even if the apps do not prove effective in fighting the coronavirus.

"They just pilot it out, see how it works and, as the debate is taking place, they scale the project — and once it's scaled, then it becomes a lot harder to roll back," said Sidharth Deb, the policy and parliamentary counsel for the Internet Freedom Foundation, a digital rights group in New Delhi.

An analysis by The Times found that the Quarantine Watch app, which is available on Google Android, lacked common security measures, and that the Android version of the Aarogya Setu app leaked a user's latitude and longitude to a YouTube server.

Google, which owns YouTube, said that the Aarogya Setu app appeared to have sent the location data inadvertently and that YouTube would delete it. The app developers said on Sunday they had fixed the problem. An official in Karnataka said that the app used essential security measures and that the issues identified by The Times had been resolved.

Preventing Surveillance

The wide range of efforts, and their varying quality, have led to calls for industry standards related to privacy and other matters.

Whether to send data to central health authorities is the biggest sticking point.

Technologists who focus on privacy say the best way to prevent governments from using data to surveil people is to never let them have it in the first place.

"You can look at what happened after 9/11," said James Larus, the dean of the School of Computer and Communications Science at EPFL, a science-focused university in Switzerland. "There were all these consequences for privacy made possible by a crisis."

But centralized collection of the data may be essential for effective contact tracing, others argue.

"Having location history helps you better identify where infections might be, helps you identify the hot spots," said Lalitesh Katragadda, the founder of Indihood, a group developing technologies for underserved populations, and an adviser on the Indian government's app.

Some officials in Europe have said they also want information about nearby phones to be shared with public health officers, so they can then contact those people personally.

The Apple and Google program, which draws on ideas from Singapore and from academics, aims to answer the question in favor of privacy experts. The app software will keep track of nearby phones using secret codes, but the data will stay on users' phones. When people test positive for the coronavirus, they can allow their own codes to be put on a list. The phones of all other users will regularly check that list and provide an alert if there is a risk of infection.

So far, the companies have refused to change their system to allow governments to collect data about people's contacts, and it is unclear whether the gathering of more general location data will be possible. On Friday, the companies changed the name of their system — to "exposure notification" from "contact tracing" — to underline its focus on directly alerting people.

Another point of contention surrounds how virus symptoms are reported. Should people voluntarily self-report, or should health workers do so after confirming a diagnosis?

And some significant technological questions need to be worked out, including making sure that the Bluetooth detection accounts for when people are separated by walls and that the apps do not drain batteries or interfere with headphones. Engineers working on programs at M.I.T. and Stanford said they thought the problems were surmountable.

A key to making the apps successful, proponents said, is persuading people that the apps will help keep them safe and allow them to emerge from lockdowns.

"When you hear people saying there will never be takeup of the app," said Dr. Fraser, the Oxford epidemiologist, "they are talking like we are not in the world we are currently in."

Coronavirus Complicates the Expat Adventure (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 9:17 AM, Kathryn Dill, Neutral]

Abe Chuang, an American working in Japan, is riding out the coronavirus pandemic far from his native Los Angeles with no regrets about his expatriate experience.

"The U.S. is always going to be home, but I honestly could not have picked a better place to be locked down," said Mr. Chuang, who likens the atmosphere these days near his central Tokyo apartment to a quiet Sunday.

For generations, adventurous Americans have moved internationally to see the world, polish language skills, find or follow romance and chase career opportunities. According to estimates by the U.S. State Department, roughly 9 million Americans currently live overseas. For some expatriates, the pandemic has emphasized the miles between their address and wherever they call home, particularly as restrictions on nonessential travel have tightened around the world.

Even among Americans with established lives abroad, the crisis has emphasized the distance between family members. Beth Darvell has lived in Hong Kong since she was 19, when her family relocated there from Jacksonville, Fla. She was charmed by the city, which she said is both lively and relaxed.

Her parents have since moved to Honolulu, but Ms. Darvell, now 29, said Asia feels like home. Before the pandemic, she and her husband, a British expat, had been pondering a move to the U.S. to be closer to her parents but shelved the idea once travel was restricted.

"It's changed a lot of my perspective on whether I want to be this far away from people that I love," she said, adding they are now talking about whether to relocate closer to one set of their parents once the crisis is over.

The pandemic is unlikely to prompt many expats to move back to the U.S., but it may change the way those planning moves evaluate potential destinations, said Betsy Burlingame, founder of Expat Exchange, a social network for people moving and living abroad.

"They may look at health care in the countries that they are thinking of moving to a little

more, especially younger people who often go abroad and don't really think that much about the health-care systems in the countries they'll be moving to," she said.

Mr. Chuang, who moved to Tokyo in 2019 following nearly five years in New York City, has government-provided health insurance in Japan. As the pandemic intensified, his mother called and asked if he wanted to come home, but he feared putting his elderly grandmother, who lives in the same house, at risk if he returned to California. Mr. Chuang, a 38-year-old copywriter from Los Angeles, opted to stay in Japan, where he works at an advertising agency.

"My mom and I, after we talked it through, she said, 'You know what? Stay there. It would probably be worse if you came home,'" Mr. Chuang said.

A number of expatriates expressed concern for their American families and friends and said they feel safer abroad, citing swift government responses to the crisis, community-minded cultures and subsidized or free health insurance.

Heather Stone, who grew up in New Jersey, lives with her two children in Tel Aviv. Ms. Stone, 56, has lived in Israel since 1990, and said that over the past 30 years her family in the U.S. has often worried about her safety. Now she is the one who fears for them.

"I think it's the first time that I've really felt that the country that I'm living in has been better prepared for a crisis," she said, "and that the people that I'm living among are better prepared for a crisis than the people that I grew up with."

Jennifer Ortiz also worries about family back in the U.S. Ms. Ortiz, 28, lives in Lisbon with her husband, who is Portuguese. As coronavirus swept Europe and intensified in Santa Barbara, Calif., where her parents live, she spent a lot of time on the phone trying to persuade them to stop going to the gym and instead shelter in place. She considered joining them, concerned by the prospect of one parent getting sick and the other having to carry that burden alone. So far, she has stayed put and checks on them by phone.

Returning home to Sarasota, Fla., wasn't an option for Grant Golub, a first-year student working on his doctorate at the London School of Economics. His father is a general surgeon on the front lines of the coronavirus fight, and he didn't want to risk getting his dad sick, or vice versa. He also said he wouldn't have been productive in the U.S.—at least not without lugging a stack of heavy books he had checked out from British libraries for his examination of American foreign policy during World War II.

Mr. Golub, 24, said his British acquaintances were slower than others to take the threat seriously. "There is a cultural norm in Britain to not try to fret about things," he said, "to not panic when it's not normal."

Being far from home during a lockdown can cause its own stresses, as some expatriates are discovering. Over the past two months, social interactions around the world largely have moved online, which can be tough on those in unfamiliar places. Caroline Kosse and James Schumacher, both 31, had been living in Amsterdam for 12 months when the coronavirus struck.

"They say you don't really know a place until a year," said Mr. Schumacher, a freelance art

director. "We hit our year and got locked inside."

The couple, who are both from Louisville, Ky., had to cancel a long-planned summer trip to see relatives, attend weddings and meet their newborn niece. They have a standing Friday night videoconference call with other Americans living in Amsterdam, but face-to-face meetings with local friends aren't easy, they said. A socially distanced bike ride with another couple was lovely, but difficult.

"We didn't get off our bikes," Mr. Schumacher said. "Then we stood on a canal 10 feet away from each other."

Merkel's revived hold on power forces Trump to work with a leader he dislikes to confront China (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Joel Gehrke, 727K, Neutral]

President Trump will unexpectedly be forced to work with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, with whom he has been at loggerheads in the past, to confront poised threats from China amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump has flogged Merkel's policies throughout his campaign and presidency. Meantime, Merkel had been in a weakened state, expected to leave office next year. Yet the woman deemed the most powerful leader in Europe, prior to the backlash against her embrace of Syrian refugees in 2015, has recovered some of her old strength due to German approval of her response to the pandemic.

"She's gotten a second lease on life," the German Marshall Fund's Sudha David-Wilp, a Berlin-based expert in transatlantic foreign policy issues, told the Washington Examiner. "She was basically considered a lame duck a couple months ago."

In short, the shock of the coronavirus pandemic might make Trump and Merkel into a geopolitical odd couple over the next year, if not longer.

Merkel's popularity has surged at a delicate time in the domestic German political scene. Her chosen successor, Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, was forced in February to abandon her hope to take over as chancellor after failing to consolidate control of their Christian Democrat Union party.

"If CDU remains very strong, and her personal leadership, it will raise questions of whether she would possibly seek a fifth term because of the extraordinary nature of the crisis," Center for Strategic and International Studies analyst Heather Conley, who directs the Europe program, told the Washington Examiner.

Both Conley and David-Wilp agree that it is unlikely for Merkel to extend her political career; she has a reputation for refusing to make such dramatic shifts after making a major decision. Still, it's undeniable that she lacks an heir at a time when "the crisis is fueling Germans' comfort level with the stability that Angela Merkel has provided for the last 15 years," as Conley put it.

Nevertheless, the German assessment of China's ambitions has moved toward Trump's, offering him an opportunity if the rancor can be held in check.

"The German position on China, as well as the European position, has been changing and leaning towards the direction of the U.S.," said Conley. "So, the U.S. has an opportunity, with skillful leadership, to help move that relationship where we want it to be and have a much more allied, joined approach towards China."

"Merkel is going to have to get tougher now on China, and there will be greater scope for U.S.-German cooperation in confronting Beijing over the course of the next year," the Heritage Foundation's Nile Gardiner told the Washington Examiner. "The damage that has been inflicted by the pandemic is being heavily blamed, in Europe, on China — as it is in the United States. And Merkel will have to reflect that in her administration's policies."

Merkel famously had a close bond with then-President Barack Obama, in part due to their agreement on the refugee policies that Trump denounced during his rise to the White House. Trump, by contrast, has treated Germany as a diplomatic foil since taking office. Merkel has exchanged compliments with Trump in public, but she hasn't succeeded in hiding that she finds it "sobering and a bit depressing" to watch him clash with other allies — a view that German citizens share, according to public polling.

"The general mood in Germany regarding this president in the United States is really very bad," the European official noted. "I hope that this style of Merkel will help to keep this relationship from falling down further, but it's very difficult to say how it will evolve, actually."

Their own domestic politics makes it harder for German officials to partner with the Trump administration, but the emerging anger at China could create more space for such traditional cooperation.

"The tide was turning against China already, and I think that Merkel will adopt a harder and harsher line towards Beijing," Gardiner said. "It's important because Germany often sets the lead in the European Union."

Oil's Collapse Is a Geopolitical Reset In Disguise (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Meghan L. O'Sullivan, 6400K, Neutral]

The world is on the cusp of a geopolitical reset. The global pandemic could well undermine international institutions, reinforce nationalism and spur de-globalization. But far-sighted leadership could also rekindle cooperation, glimmers of which appeared in the G-20's offer of debt relief for some of the world's poorest countries, a joint plea from more than 200 former national leaders for a more coordinated pandemic response and an unprecedented multinational pact to arrest the crash in oil markets.

The remarkable effort to address the turmoil in the oil markets will be critical to oil's eventual balance — although the past two weeks have shown that its promised production cuts were too slow and insufficient in the face of oil demand's plunge. The challenges and opportunities that the collapse in the oil market is pushing to the fore are perhaps just the first taste of Covid-19 induced geopolitical crises that world leaders and policy makers will need to grapple with in the coming months and years.

As history has shown, a big change in energy markets often precipitates a big change in geopolitics. For instance, the shift from coal to oil catapulted Middle Eastern countries to strategic significance. And the recent technology-driven boom in shale oil elevated the United States to net oil exporter status, changing its outlook on the importance of oil in

global affairs. We now face a disruption of such proportions that it, too, will reorder some power relationships.

Right now, the focus in Washington is on how to save the U.S. oil industry, much of which is under enormous pressure given the drop in prices. While this is understandable and necessary, Washington needs to make room on its list of priorities for a number of strategic shifts that the crisis has created. For starters, policy makers should consider four challenges and opportunities that are already manifest.

Prepare for more fragile, or even failed, states and the risks that can accompany them.

For dozens of oil producers, the plunge in oil prices is devastating. No major oil producer can balance its budget at prices below \$40; according to the International Monetary Fund, with the exception of Qatar, every country in the Middle East requires at least \$60, with Algeria at \$157 and Iran at a whopping \$390. The average Brent price of oil over the past month has been a hair above \$20.

Of course, fiscal break-even prices are only one factor when gauging which oil producers are the most vulnerable to deep economic dislocation and its accompanying social and political turmoil. Those with (comparatively) more diversified economies — such as the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and Russia — are obviously better off. Countries with fixed exchange rates — like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia — are at a particular disadvantage, as they need to use their precious foreign exchange reserves to prop up their currencies. Some countries have the capacity to cut expenditures, and others to borrow. And some have legitimate political institutions to manage the inevitable hardships as subsidies are slashed, jobs are lost and capital spending is curtailed.

But many do not. And, unlike the last price plunge in 2016, this shock does not come after a period of stable, high oil prices, which allowed some countries to bolster their finances. Instead, oil prices have been middling, as America's surging shale oil production and OPEC+ production cuts kept them roughly in the \$50-\$70 range, below many oil exporters' fiscal break-even levels.

Iraq, Oman, Algeria, Nigeria, Ecuador, Angola, Suriname — not to mention two countries already on the brink, Iran and Venezuela — are particularly vulnerable. They may not all fail in the sense of state collapse, but many could cease to meet their public sector payrolls, never mind expenditures related to health care, education and other services, including security.

The mere prospect of many countries unable to fund their security budgets should sound alarm bells in the United States and beyond. It adds urgency to a question that national security professionals, foreign policy makers and politicians have grappled with since 9/11: How to keep ungoverned territories from becoming safe havens for terrorist groups or drug cartels looking to target the West or undermine its security in other ways. Of particular concern to U.S. policy makers should be Iraq, Nigeria and Mexico. Each faces its own looming crisis, with potentially profound implications for U.S. interests.

In Iraq, a caretaker government confronts deep fiscal travails: Its oil revenues — which make up 90% of budgetary income — plunged by 46% for March, even before the full impact of the coronavirus on oil was apparent. This fiscal collapse has dire implications for

the country's struggle to stave off ISIS, for Iraq's ability to stand up to interference by its neighbors and for its efforts to meet the demands of its young and restive population.

Nigeria's economy is likewise beleaguered, having just begun to climb out of a recession before the imposition of strict pandemic containment measures. Signs of social discontent are on the rise, and President Muhammadu Buhari — a former military man — could resort to the army to maintain law and order. That would undermine the legitimacy and effectiveness of Nigeria's battle against an Islamist insurgency in the northeast of the country, with ripple effects throughout an already vulnerable region.

With its diversified economy, a hedge on its oil for 2020 and relatively developed institutions, Mexico is much better positioned to manage the turmoil in energy markets. But President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's apparent unwillingness to grasp the severity of the pandemic should be cause for concern. Even as other countries deliver eye-popping relief to the newly unemployed, Lopez Obrador has barely budged from earlier pledges of austerity or moved to revisit other elements of his economic plans. The federal government is struggling to wrest control of parts of the country from drug cartels, and to meet U.S. demands to contain Central American migrants heading north. Should Mexico be forced to cut back spending on security forces as seems highly likely, both those problems could metastasize.

How might the United States and its partners prepare for more turmoil in these countries, and in ungoverned territories, particularly in the Sahel or the Middle East where extremist groups already have footholds? One answer is obviously the need to maintain and increase aid and humanitarian assistance to the many countries that will face existential crises, either from the oil plunge, the coronavirus, or both. Another answer, strangely enough, can be found in Syria. Far from being the "forever war" that President Donald Trump called it, the small, behind-the-scenes contingent of U.S. troops supporting a much larger group of indigenous forces against extremist fighters is the sort of arrangement that the United States — ideally with others — should replicate in countries that ask for help. Faced with the demands and fears of their own citizens, politicians in North America, Europe and elsewhere may struggle to justify security and other support for countries whose institutions wobble or collapse under the combined weight of low oil prices and the coronavirus. But being prepared to build more limited military partnerships — and, importantly, to explain to their citizens why such arrangements aren't "forever wars" — will be part of managing the foreign policy fallout of this moment.

Double-down on contingency planning and red-teaming for Iran and Venezuela.

Both Iran and Venezuela were careening before the coronavirus materialized. Under severe U.S. sanctions, oil exports — a lifeline for both countries — had been dramatically curtailed before the pandemic and the oil price collapse. The impact of cratering oil prices will therefore be far less than in the past, but each will still suffer as foreign exchange dwindles further, constraining imports even more.

Many in the Trump administration may hope that this confluence of historical factors leads to the downfall of the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela and the Islamic revolution in Iran. Yet is the United States prepared if either scenario unfolds?

The fall of Venezuela's Nicolas Maduro may lead not to the transitional government many

have hoped for, but to complete state collapse and an epic humanitarian and security disaster. Alternatively, if the country is hit hard by Covid-19, pressures for political accommodation between Venezuela's opposition and the government could extend Maduro's tenure. Iran's government is much more entrenched, and it is hard for outsiders to accurately assess what's happening there right now. If the regime is under unprecedented pressure, the most likely outcome is not for a democratic alternative to emerge, but for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps to assume more power, heightening U.S.-Iran tensions and the potential for hot conflict.

Now would be a good time for the U.S. not only to step up its contingency planning for such outcomes, but also to consider whether changes to American policy toward either country would better advance its interests and mitigate human suffering. In particular, the United States should reconsider its earlier decision not to establish some version of an Oil for Food program for Venezuela. Such a program could save Venezuelan lives, stem the tide of refugees that risks destabilizing the whole region and bolster the political opposition; in the face of a global pandemic, these benefits should now outweigh any concerns policy makers may have had about prolonging the life of the Maduro regime.

Defuse a looming U.S. crisis with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia and other OPEC+ members had multiple motives for agreeing on April 12 to curb oil production. In Saudi Arabia's case, however, among those reasons was a sharp increase in hostility from members of the U.S. Congress who in the past appeared to appreciate the multifaceted relationship between Riyadh and Washington. Once willing to speak in favor of the U.S.-Saudi partnership, these members suddenly revealed that they were willing to upend economic, military, and diplomatic ties if Saudi Arabia did not curb its production to arrest the free fall of oil prices (and protect the American oil industry).

Such threats no doubt gave President Trump leverage when pressuring Saudi leaders to agree to a deep cut. But they also exposed the fragility in the bilateral relationship. If oil prices continue to fall, members of Congress may well try to punish Riyadh for a situation largely not of its own making. It would be a painful pressure point on the kingdom at a time when neither the United States nor the region can afford any greater destabilization. To avert that possibility, the administration should work closely with key members of Congress. It should not cede management of the bilateral relationship to the legislative branch.

Expand contacts over managing the oil market into more lasting areas of détente.

Recent efforts to pull the global oil market back from the brink exposed some new common interests and triggered intense contacts between leaders. Might this prompt greater cooperation in otherwise fraught relationships? As President Trump's about-face on the value of OPEC demonstrates, now is a time for rethinking old orthodoxies and finding new ways to approach problems.

Despite Trump's insistence that the United States needs and wants a better relationship with Russia, this dysfunctional dyad so far has been impervious to recalibration. Moscow and Washington are unlikely to come to any meaningful détente, given President Putin's need to demonize the United States and the certainty that Russia is in for hard economic times. Putin has repeatedly tried to compensate for economic bad news by asserting Russia more aggressively on the world stage. He could well do the same again.

Yet a small opening exists to professionalize a segment of bilateral U.S.-Russia ties. Russia has long been interested in pulling the United States into coordinating the global oil market. Although the United States does not need to join OPEC+ and its pledges to mandate production cuts, having regular exchanges about global energy trends could create a niche for constructive discussions between Russian and U.S. officials. It is not crazy to think that a dialogue around common energy interests could evolve into a more meaningful conversation about how to deal with Venezuela's collapse, for instance.

Similarly, although China was not a central player in trying to stem the oil market collapse, the United States and others should bring Chinese officials into regular consultations on the topic. As the world's largest oil importer and its sixth largest producer, China's interests are mixed. But as the world's second largest economy, China may have its own tools to influence global supply and demand. Energy (and climate) are areas in which the United States and China have common interests, and where they have had productive exchanges, even during periods of tension. Again, it is not crazy to think that such dialogues, if intensified, could be a net positive in a critical but rapidly deteriorating bilateral relationship.

Finally, by giving Mexico, Saudi Arabia and Russia a face-saving way to paper over Mexico's partial compliance with the April 12 production cut agreement, Trump should have secured some goodwill with Mexico's president. That could come in handy as both countries, with their intertwined economies, cooperate to smooth the transition to normalcy, whenever that comes.

Foreign policy makers and leading thinkers do need to consider how the global order will change in response to the coronavirus. As John Ikenberry pointed out elsewhere, history suggests that initial moves toward isolation could be followed by global efforts to re-create needed institutions. But a U.S. failure to address the more immediate challenges stemming from the Covid-19 oil market collapse will not bode well for any larger effort to remake the world order.

[France] Pandemic Shakes France's Faith in a Cornerstone: Strong Central Government (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 6:51 AM, Norimitsu Onishi and Constant Méheut, 40577K, Negative]

A couple of baguettes tucked under her arm, Maha Rambousek fiddled with a face mask that kept sliding off her nose. After a local decree made masks mandatory in public, she had quickly stitched it together, but was left confused when the policy was overturned two days later by the central government.

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right," Ms. Rambousek said. "And I can't turn to anybody for certainties."

The measure in Sceaux, a well-to-do suburb just south of Paris, was one of an increasing number of exceptional local challenges to the government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, which has shaken confidence in a cornerstone of French society: the primal authority of the centralized state.

The city of Perpignan lodged contagious patients in a hotel after the central government told people to self-isolate at home. Officials in the city of Marseille carried out widespread testing

of both the sick and healthy even as the government ordered that only the seriously ill be tested. The city of Paris tightened a national lockdown by banning daytime jogging.

While France's vaunted health care system has staved off disaster, France has suffered the world's fourth-biggest death toll — now at 23,660 official deaths, behind the United States, Italy and Spain — a consequence, critics say, of the central government's failure to anticipate the onslaught of the contagion.

That failure and a critical shortage of masks and testing kits — also resulting from gaps in state policies — led to the virus's rapid early spread, prompting France to impose one of the world's strictest nationwide lockdowns, now in its seventh week.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a tentative plan on Monday to gradually reopen the country starting on May 11. Schools and businesses would start reopening, though not restaurants or cafes. He urged companies to keep their employees working at home. And he promised that masks and testing would be made sufficiently available.

But it was not clear that those steps would halt what polls show is declining confidence in the government's handling of the pandemic.

"Trust in the state has been eroding for some time, since the state is no longer able to respond to the need for security," said Phillipe Laurent, the mayor of Sceaux and the secretary general of the Association of Mayors of France.

About a dozen complaints have been lodged by individuals and medical organizations with the French Court of Justice, a special court that hears accusations of government mismanagement. Several officials have been accused of willfully failing to take appropriate measures to combat the virus, endangering people's lives.

The government's failure to stem the initial outbreak undermined the important social contract between the state and the people, said Pierre Vermeren, a historian.

"We have some of the highest taxes and biggest public spending in the world, and the French people accept that because, implicitly, their protection was guaranteed by the state," said Mr. Vermeren, who teaches at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Critics blame France's poor showing, at least in part, on the excessive centralization of the French state, embodied by a president, Emmanuel Macron, who has spoken of his belief in the "top-down" exercise of power and has employed martial language in describing the fight against the virus.

Like many leaders, Mr. Macron initially derived a boost from the crisis, but that has begun to fade. Nearly 60 percent of respondents described him as a "bad president" in one recent poll, while another poll showed confidence in the government's management of the crisis declining steadily to 39 percent from 55 percent in the past month.

In keeping with his reputation for aloofness and heavy-handedness, Mr. Macron initially angered many French by harshly blaming them for not respecting social distancing measures during the same weekend last month that he allowed local elections to be held — a decision widely condemned since then.

He is also held responsible for the government's flip-flopping messages on masks, which many French now perceive as a deception to cover up a blunder by the state, which allowed its stockpiles to decline.

Still, there is no doubt that the French state has been better equipped than most on many levels.

France's traditionally strong health care system has succeeded in treating the sick and avoiding the kind of triage seen in Italy. The government mobilized high-speed trains to transfer hundreds of patients to relieve overwhelmed regional hospitals. It spent tens of billions of euros to support businesses and workers, softening the crippling effects of the lockdown.

But challenges, like that from Sceaux, population 20,000, to the authority of the state have been met with a stiff rebuke, regardless of the shifting understanding of the virus.

France's interior minister quickly condemned Sceaux's mask ordinance as a threat to "fundamental freedoms," and the Council of State, the country's highest administrative court, overturned it. The city of Nice, which was about to make masks mandatory, backed down.

Critics say the French state's shutting down of any challenges was a sign of weakness by a government left in a defensive crouch after it failed to quickly grasp the threat.

Even after the coronavirus had raged through Asian nations, Mr. Macron and his wife, Brigitte, made a point on March 6 of attending the theater to encourage people to keep going out despite the pandemic. Eleven days later, when Mr. Macron imposed the nationwide lockdown, the virus was out of control in France, too.

In a recent interview with Le Point, Mr. Macron acknowledged that France became aware of the pandemic in China at the beginning of January. By Jan. 24, the first cases of Covid-19 were recorded in France.

In Asia, countries close to the epicenter of the pandemic in China, like Taiwan and South Korea, reacted quickly with contact tracing and testing, limiting official deaths to six and 246, respectively.

Despite the extra time afforded by geography, France's enduring vision of itself as a "great power" prevented it from seeking pointers in Asian nations' nimble response, said Jean-Jacques Roche, a specialist on French foreign policy at the University Paris 2 Panthéon-Assas.

"France can't compare itself to South Korea or Taiwan, it can only compare itself to another great power," Mr. Roche said. "To compare itself to countries that are not great powers is in some ways unbearable."

In a written reply, Mr. Philippe's office said that the "French state was on alert very early on," adding that hospitals and health associations were warned of the pandemic by mid-January.

The collective failure by some of the West's leading nations to respond quickly and effectively to the virus has left experts elsewhere in the world bewildered.

"Contact tracing and isolation are the basics of a response to any epidemic," said Dr. Mosoka Fallah, a Liberian epidemiologist who is managing the response to the coronavirus in his country and led contact tracing efforts there during the 2014 Ebola outbreak. "I'm really surprised that they didn't do that."

But France was — it has become clearer over the weeks — desperately short of both masks and test kits. In late February, France had the capacity to carry out only 3,000 tests a week. Even today, the weekly number of tests in France, 175,000, is a fraction of the 840,000 tests carried out weekly in Germany.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, the French authorities tracked and tested the infected in two small clusters. But they quickly ran out of capacity when a major outbreak occurred in mid-February following a large gathering at an evangelical church in the Grand Est in eastern France, the second-most affected region after Paris.

After the gathering, the church's congregation of 2,000 worshipers spread the virus across the country before the authorities realized the scale of the contamination, said Jean Rottner, the president of the Grand Est region and an emergency physician. By then, he said, "it was pointless" to try to track the people who had attended the gathering.

But in South Korea, where the first major outbreak also originated in a church, health officials did just that — quickly imposing emergency measures and retracing worshipers' movements. Those efforts stemmed the contamination.

The French government, having failed at that, imposed some of the world's tightest lockdown restrictions, confining 67 million to their homes and deploying security forces to keep people off the streets.

"It's not only medieval, but we've never experienced this in our history," said Mr. Vermeren, the historian, adding that past pandemics had put French cities under quarantine, but never confined an entire population to their homes.

As infections and deaths rose exponentially after the start of the lockdown — forcing Mr. Macron to extend it to two months — several regions in France ordered millions of masks, mainly from China. By that time, though, they were engaging in a worldwide competition for supplies that at times pitted them against their own government.

As France prepares to open up starting on May 11, some regions, feeling bitten, are hedging their bets.

Mr. Rottner, the president of the Grand Est, said that he was already ordering millions of test kits. He said he didn't want to "make the same mistake again."

[China] White House aides torn over trade hawk's proposal as President Trump weighs action on China (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 7:49 AM, Jeff Stein, Robert Costa and Josh Dawsey, 18460K, Neutral]

A debate over an executive order to boost American production of medical supplies has gripped the White House, as President Trump weighs how to confront China over the coronavirus outbreak without exacerbating the economic crisis sparked by the pandemic.

Trump has groused about China during several recent Oval Office meetings and expressed interest in an executive order crafted by White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, the president's leading China hawk and a divisive figure within the administration. The executive order would over time require the federal government to buy medical supplies and pharmaceuticals manufactured in the United States, aiming to reduce dependency on imports and increase domestic production.

But Trump has stopped short of signing the measure. Several of Trump's confidants, including Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, have voiced reservations about embracing's Navarro strategy, according to three officials familiar with the deliberations.

The unresolved debate underscores the tensions inside the West Wing as Trump publicly expresses the desire to exact compensation from China over the coronavirus, but is warned privately against jeopardizing the chances of a U.S. economic recovery or access to medical supplies from abroad, all as he turns toward his reelection campaign.

Navarro's draft, which has circulated among senior officials for several weeks, would require the federal government to only purchase essential medical equipment and pharmaceuticals manufactured in America. Navarro has argued it would make the United States less dependent on foreign nations for critical medical supplies. The order gives firms substantial time to figure out the new requirements, reducing the shock it could have on prices and production, two former officials familiar with its contents said.

Although it has the support of some officials at the State Department and the National Security Council, Mnuchin and several business leaders close to Trump are averse to making a major push on supply chains at a fragile moment for the economy, they said. And Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner, shares Mnuchin's caution about Navarro's push to do this executive order at this time, two officials said, and has been focused on responding to the pandemic.

Some White House aides privately insist the order could still be approved, but others say it could be stuck in the Office of Legal Counsel under review for weeks to come since it lacks sufficient support within Trump's inner circle. Still, the lag on Trump's signature has frustrated some of Navarro's allies inside and outside the administration.

Officials interviewed for this story spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak frankly about sensitive internal deliberations.

The internal struggle over Navarro's proposal highlights a long-standing White House rift over China that has gained new dimension and significance as the president considers his response to Beijing's handling of the coronavirus.

For decades, Trump has assailed his predecessors for being weak in confronting Beijing, arguing the Chinese have for decades exploited clueless American politicians to ravage the

U.S. economy. In White House coronavirus news conferences, he has repeatedly returned to the trade deal with China reached by his administration last year.

"In the history of any country, nobody has been ripped off like the United States by China — and many other countries. And we stop it," Trump said at a White House press briefing last week. "Nobody has been tougher before the deal ever, on China, than Trump."

But confronted with a deadly global pandemic that originated in China and devastated the U.S. economy, Trump has appeared at times ambivalent in his response. The president initially praised Chinese Premier Xi Jinping's handling of the outbreak, saying Xi is doing "a very good job with a very, very tough situation." When the virus spread to the United States, Trump resisted major swipes at Xi and instead targeted his fury at the World Health Organization. Senior aides say this a way for Trump to vent and reassure his base that he is battling an organization with ties to China, even if he's not battling China and Xi daily.

Trump has sometimes stuck to a "wait-and-see" approach, suggesting China may not bear responsibility for the outbreak and ensuing damage.

"If it was a mistake, a mistake is a mistake," Trump said last week of China and the coronavirus. "But if they were knowingly responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences."

At other times, Trump has struck a more aggressive tone. On Monday, the president strongly suggested the United States would seek hundreds of billions of dollars in damages from China because of the virus.

"We haven't determined the final amount yet. It's very substantial," Trump said. "This is worldwide damage."

Inside the administration, some officials are wary of an aggressive confrontation with Beijing. In private discussions, Mnuchin, Kushner and their allies have warned that Trump could jeopardize critical protective gear for American medical workers if the White House ramps up its attacks on Xi or accedes to Navarro's demands for remaking the U.S. supply chain. They have also urged Trump to wait to act until further investigations of China's role are concluded, officials said.

"Nobody except Peter wants to slam China over and over again, because we're going to need what China is making, whether it's equipment or a vaccine down the road, you never know," one White House official said.

Navarro, 70, has for decades blamed China for many of America's most serious social and economic problems and feels vindicated by the outbreak, according to three people he has spoken to in recent weeks. Navarro warned in private memos in January about the danger posed by the coronavirus, and circulated to White House advisers an "official coronavirus response plan," which included PowerPoint slides and other written materials about the potential impact of the virus, one person familiar with the documents said.

Navarro has accused China of creating the virus and using the deadly outbreak to "profiteer" off the world's pain. Chinese officials have adamantly denied this. Regardless, Navarro has asserted Beijing created the virus in a government laboratory, then "knowingly

hid" proof of its spread. He, and others pushing this theory, have not produced any evidence to back up their claim. Alleging China committed "four kills" in its handling of the virus, Navarro has said the Chinese bought the world's supply of personal protective gear, then deliberately sold those goods back to the world at inflated prices.

"The Chinese effectively declared war. They spawned that virus," Navarro said on Fox News on Saturday.

In an interview, Navarro said the proposed executive order was not aimed at China or any other specific country but instead intended to secure the United States' ability to produce critical medicines, supplies, and equipment. Navarro said he and other administration officials are focused on the current crisis of rapidly mobilizing and repurposing industrial capacity to meet U.S. demand.

More than 75 other nations have imposed export restrictions on crucial medical supplies, which Navarro said demonstrates "how countries realistically act in their own self-interest to the exclusion of others when globalist push comes to nationalist shove."

"This is a defensive measure for the American people not aimed at any other country," Navarro said. "Onshoring America's public health industrial base is both a national imperative and the logical conclusion to draw from a pandemic that has exposed the weak underbelly of globalized supply chains and the risks of not domestically producing your essential medicines and medical countermeasures."

Navarro has in recent days circulated Pew polling data showing a sharp turn in public sentiment against China. Bipartisan proposals have emerged in the Senate to require onshoring of U.S. pharmaceutical supplies. Sen. Josh Hawley (R-Mo.) has introduced legislation requiring firms to return production to the United States, while numerous Republican senators, including White House ally Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), have argued that China "needs to pay" for the pandemic and face sanctions for its role in the virus.

Leading Democrats such as Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (N.Y.) have also called for Trump to act more aggressively toward China. Former vice president Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee, recently released an ad attacking Trump for not being sufficiently tough on China.

"Everybody I talk to in the Senate is thinking about how Communist China has treated America as an adversary. Even the globalists, even those who say we need a free economy — they look at it now and say, 'The coronavirus is the tipping point that pushed it over the edge,'" Sen. Rick Scott (R-Fla.) said. "Peter has been clear in his belief that China is an adversary and not to be trusted, and the coronavirus has shown he's been right."

Navarro may prove too personally polarizing within the White House to push Trump toward confrontation. Navarro's memos on coronavirus, for example, were disregarded by other administration officials. Administration communications officials worry about Navarro on TV and have sought in the past to keep him off the air. "Peter sends a lot of memos," one official said.

Navarro has repeatedly clashed with top administration officials, recently questioning the

medical judgment of Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's leading infectious-disease expert.

Former White House economic adviser Gary Cohn tried sidelining Navarro by assigning him to an office that "amounted to a broom closet," one former senior administration official said.

Some international trade experts warn Navarro's demands could have devastating consequences for Americans on the front-lines of responding to the pandemic, arguing that foreign countries could devastate U.S. access to supplies through retaliation. Earlier this month, the Trump administration faced an international backlash when it tried to impose additional controls on exports of American-made PPE. Canada, for instance, manufactures a specialized tree pulp the United States imports for production of its masks. The administration later added significant exemptions to its proposed restrictions.

"You're exposing yourself to retaliation," said Chad Bown, a trade expert at the Peterson Institute for International Economics, who is critical of Navarro. "You're making yourself vulnerable to being cut off from supplies from other countries. It's a huge benefit to have access to international markets to have a diverse source in a time of need."

But others say the United States must try to force production back to domestic soil. "The notion that an angry Chinese government would limit medicine and PPE imports on which we are incredibly reliant in retaliation for the U.S. enacting policies to incentivize more domestic manufacturing of such supplies precisely spotlights why it's critical to expand domestic capacity," said Lori Wallach, a trade expert at Public Citizen, a left-leaning organization.

Bob Bland, founder of Masks for America, which has secured hundreds of thousands of masks for nurses across the country, said the United States' dependence on China for personal protective gear has dramatically undercut its ability to protect its front-line medical personnel.

"Countries all over the world are realizing we don't have the ability to make any of this locally, but local production is the only way to scale up quickly enough and avoid price gouging," Bland said. "The answer to that has to be regional production for PPE. It would give us a fighting chance against pandemics like this in the future."

[China] Seeking Real Voices in China, Despite Censorship and Fear (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 2:10 AM, Raymond Zhong, 40577K, Negative]

In retrospect, one of the bigger regrets I have about my time in China is that I never took up smoking.

I'm exaggerating, but only slightly. Nothing helps you talk to strangers in China like a cigarette. Whenever I wanted to find out what was going on inside a big company, I would look for someone outside an office or factory having a nicotine break. A shared smoke is a way to freeze time. And for a foreign reporter in a place where people aren't always eager to speak to foreign reporters, even a little extra time can make the difference between a good interview and no interview at all.

Access to regular people in China might be the part of foreign correspondents' jobs there that the Chinese authorities find hardest to control, though they certainly try. With a dose of

charm and persistence from a reporter, people do open up, despite the country's rigid curbs on speech and thought.

Last month, though, the Chinese government cut off that access for me and almost all of the other Americans working for The Times, The Wall Street Journal and Washington Post, ordering us out of the country as part of the intensifying standoff between the Trump administration and Beijing.

I spent much of my two years in China covering that standoff, and from the great heights at which we journalists often write about such matters — through politicians' statements and government policies, through trade data and corporate decisions — it could seem as if titanic forces in both nations were drawing them inexorably toward conflict.

But the situation usually looked different when speaking to ordinary people in China. Like people everywhere, they tend to be less dogmatic and more curious about the world than their leaders. Seen through their eyes, the wider costs of the hostility came into focus, as did the degree to which it was driven by anxieties that felt distant to the communities most directly affected by it.

Last year, for instance, I went to the southern city of Zhuhai to visit a plant run by the American manufacturer Flex. The Trump administration was clamping down on one of Flex's customers, the Chinese tech giant Huawei, and the company was letting workers in Zhuhai go.

In the baking August heat, I met Zhan Yuanxian, 38, who had just turned in his employee ID. He said it was hard to be mad at Flex or the United States for what happened. Over the years, the company's presence had transformed a once-rough part of the city, bringing in shops, restaurants and housing.

Another employee, Gong Yian, said working at Flex was good but had been even better before, when the company flew in foreigners to run the plant. Lately, more bosses were Chinese, he said, and they ruled with an iron fist.

In the beginning, "if we weren't working, we'd feel bad," Mr. Gong said. "As more Chinese came in, it became management by oppression."

The next day, in the nearby city of Dongguan, I met Bruce Xu, whose company made cowboy boots for the American market. He was dreading the next wave of tariffs. But he was equally concerned for his American customers, whom he visited regularly.

I asked him what he thought of the United States.

"America is better than China," he said. It's cleaner, and the people are better mannered. In the United States, "you can't even smoke," he said. "No matter which floor you live on, you have to run downstairs and go outside to smoke."

Using a handful of interviews to find the true pulse of a nation of 1.4 billion might seem foolhardy. But it beats the alternatives — like scanning social media, for instance. Recently, as the Chinese government beefs up its online propaganda, censorship and disinformation efforts, it is becoming nearly impossible to tell, through the digital veil, what people in China

actually think.

When social media mobs attacked the N.B.A. last year for an executive's tweet supporting the Hong Kong protests, how much did that tell us about nationalist sentiment in China, and how much did it merely reflect the efficacy of Beijing's paid internet trolls? If someone got angry after reading a state propaganda outlet, did that person's outrage count as manufactured or genuine? What did it even mean to be genuinely offended? All the layers of unreality could be suffocating.

Even face to face with people in China, it could be tough to have real conversations, and not just because of my distaste for nicotine. People ended interviews when they started to seem hazardous — too personal, too political. This is how the authoritarian system keeps a lid on criticism: It gives everyone reason to think that personal matters are political, that they can get in trouble just for talking about their own lives and opinions.

Often enough, though, I found people in China who were relieved that someone was finally listening.

Hog farmers pleading for aid from the local government after their herds were devastated by an incurable plague. Truckers whose incomes had been gutted by new, Uber-like apps that brought Silicon Valley efficiency to their happily inefficient industry. Recyclers driven underground by a clumsy antipollution crackdown. Coders fed up with the tech industry's callousness toward its workers.

I'm leaving China more convinced than ever of how much ordinary people can teach us about a place — which might be one reason the government was so eager for us to leave.

One of the last conversations I had in the country was with two cops in Beijing. They were helping me obtain a temporary visa so I could stay a little longer and pack up everything I owned.

Officer Shao and his partner were relaxed and friendly, seemingly unbothered by my pariah status. As we waited for my visa, they asked me about The Times. If the paper isn't controlled by the government, then who ensures that what you write is accurate? If it's all up to your editors, then who appoints your editors?

We talked about the fear and xenophobia that the coronavirus had brought out in both China and the United States. They said they had even heard that Americans were stockpiling guns, though they weren't sure if the news was fake. I was sorry to inform them that it was not.

Were those two officers the voice of real China? Maybe not. But they gave me a glimpse of life in the country at that moment, and they put familiar things in a new light. As far as I'm concerned, that was plenty.

[China] To Confront China After Coronavirus, We Must See the Bigger Picture (Yahoo News/The National Review)

Yahoo News/The National Review [4/29/2020 6:30 AM, Lewis Libby, 12818K, Negative]

In a popular movie two decades ago, hard-eyed criminals released into Sydney a woman infected with a virus, knowing that unsuspecting Australians would catch the highly

contagious disease and, traveling on, unwittingly spread death across a hundred homelands. This past winter, the hard-eyed leaders of China did worse. They allowed not one, but thousands of infected to leave China and enter an unsuspecting world, a world lulled by Beijing. The crucial question is: Why?

"China caused an enormous amount of pain [and] loss of life ... by not sharing the information they had," Secretary of State Pompeo said on April 23. America is angry, he added, and while much remains to be known, China "will pay a price."

No subpoenas, no oversight committees, no tell-all books will expose President Xi's calculations as the novel coronavirus spread inside China. The unelected of Beijing guard well their secret debates. The CCP knows the virtues of opacity, of letting uncertainty, complacency, and wishful thinking paralyze the West. Exploiting these has been its way.

In 2018, a major Trump-administration speech called CCP misdeeds to task. Some, including, notably, Japan's prime minister, applauded. But many nations looked toward their feet, too reluctant, too sophisticated, perhaps too intimidated to bestir. Staggering COVID-19 losses may yet remind the world of the dangers of drift as great powers go astray.

Today's American, European, Japanese, and Asian policymakers, like those of centuries past, bear the burdens of judgment. Uncertainty has ever been the statesman's curse. America's famed diplomat, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger, has written, "Nations learn only by experience, they 'know' only when it is too late to act. But statesmen must act as if their intuition were already experience ..."

A reassessment of Xi and the CCP looms. From their actions and practices, from assessments of their motives and apparent long-term aims, today's statesmen, like their forebears, must judge future risks and craft the surest course ahead. These are early days, but the picture of Beijing presented so far is troubling.

Even before the virus spread in Wuhan, Xi brooded over a worrying hand. The CCP could not intimidate prolonged protests on the streets of freedom-loving Hong Kong. And the Party's oppression there, in determined violation of treaty commitments, spurred voters in Taiwan to rebuff Beijing's hopes for a more amenable regime in Taipei. The world was finally awakening to Xi's increasingly autocratic surveillance state, his harsh repression of Uighur Muslims, and his predatory Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China's economy, essential to Xi's hold on power, had stumbled, in part because of the Trump administration's move to counter China's unfair, neo-mercantilist practices and to condemn their grim geopolitical implications. Worse yet, America's markets hummed, raising reelection hopes within the Trump administration, which had also surpassed modern predecessors in challenging China. Rumors of Party dissatisfaction with Xi seeped out.

COVID-19's outbreak in Wuhan further darkened Xi's prospects. As long as the virus raged primarily inside China — derailing only her economy, stigmatizing only her government — his troubles would soar. All the while, the world predictably would have leapt ahead, taking Chinese customers, stealing China's long-sought glory.

The disease's spread to Berlin and Paris, New York and Tokyo, improved Xi's prospects, at least in the near term. Pandemic diverted foreign eyes from Hong Kong's and the Uighurs' plight. Desperate needs rendered disease-weakened nations more susceptible to China's

goods and BRI's short-term appeal. Asian states, wary of Beijing, had new cause to doubt the commitment of a pandemic-preoccupied Washington, while a weakened economy and vastly increased debts would likely constrain future U.S. defense spending, essential to Asian security. An unpredictable element had entered into America's 2020 election.

As events unfolded, might Xi have recognized that COVID-19's leap into the wider world promised such political and geopolitical gains? Some say a desire to protect itself first fed a CCP cover-up, as if putting this before the health of innocents were not bad enough. But were CCP leaders blind, as days passed, to other benefits? It is the Chinese way, the noted French Sinologist François Jullien has written, to exploit the potential inherent in unfolding situations. CCP leaders still study China's legendary strategist, Sun Tzu, who advised centuries ago that if, "in the midst of difficulties, we are always ready to seize an advantage, we may extricate ourselves from misfortune."

As the CCP realized the imminent disaster COVID-19 posed inside China, Xi suppressed the world's appreciation of its dangers. By sometime in December, Chinese authorities had learned that a novel, highly infectious coronavirus similar to deadly SARS was on the loose. Yet for weeks PRC authorities, including China's National Health Commission, suppressed inquiries and, directly or through the WHO, misled the world about the risks. When Chinese authorities finally acknowledged human-to-human transmission, the CCP took steps to isolate Wuhan from other parts of China, but continued to permit international travel. After the U.S. on January 31, and later Australia, restricted travelers from China, Beijing's spokesmen, artful and indignant, rose to denounce such acts as ill-founded and ill-intentioned.

For days, even weeks, after the CCP first knew of the danger, Chinese authorities and customs officers let tens of thousands of travelers, infected among them, leave China and enter an unwary world. In late January, China extended Lunar New Year celebrations, inviting greater international travel. PRC border guards stamped more exit papers. When America restricted such travelers, Beijing allowed more to leave for less cautious lands.

Then, as pandemic gripped the world, the CCP brazenly blamed America for COVID-19. Xi once more preened over his authoritarian "China model's" efficiencies, now cauterizing troubles he denies having caused. In Europe, Beijing postured as a savior offering needed medical supplies — albeit that its sales favored states where it sought geopolitical gains, often bore high prices, included defective products that could undermine defenses, and drew on CCP surpluses bolstered by January purchases of world supplies at pre-pandemic prices. In Southeast Asia, Beijing proved "relentless in exploiting the pandemic," a respected, former high-level Filipino bemoans, as it pushed its "illegal and expansive" territorial claims. Inside China, the Party seized the moment to round up leaders of Hong Kong's democracy movement and reassert unilateral efforts to curtail the city's special, self-governing status.

Even after the virus began to spread inside China, events might have taken a different course. Many had once hoped for better from CCP leaders. Dreams of a mellowing CCP had floated widely among academics and policy elites, perhaps buoyed by the way such illusions avoided, rather than imposed, hard choices. Some yet hold to such views. The benign CCP of their reveries would have alerted others promptly as the novel virus's dangers became known, shared information, welcomed foreign scientists, ceased reckless practices, and guarded against the pandemic's spread.

Indeed, under different leadership, China could have followed such a path. Traditions of humane governance, venerable and Confucian, are not alien to that land. China's ancient text, the Tao-te Ching, favors just such a response:

"A great nation is like a man:

When he makes a mistake, he realizes it.

Having realized, he admits it.

Having admitted it, he corrects it.

He considers those who point out his faults

As his most benevolent teachers."

The learned will debate how much such leadership would have eased the wider world's suffering. Metrics and estimates will vary, but the consensus will be clear enough: The harm would have decreased manyfold.

Such openness and grace have not been Xi's way. As he built up islets in the South China Sea, he promised never to militarize them, then dishonored his promise, disregarded international rulings, and dispatched ships in packs to intimidate neighboring states and expand Beijing's writ. Pledging to protect intellectual property, he enabled ongoing theft and coercion, ineluctably undermining industries of the advanced democracies, and then pressed forward on China's newly gained advantages. His BRI professes to aid, then exploits poor countries' weaknesses. Citing the betterment of all in the cause of greater China, he has imprisoned Uighurs, undermined Tibetan culture, and threatened the peaceful regional order that had enabled China's rise. He violates treaty commitments to curb Hong Kong's freedoms. Behind an anti-corruption façade, his prosecutors ruined scores of his rivals, as he consolidated and extended his personal powers. These wrongs he continues still. Xi's are not the ways of grace and remorse.

An angry narrative drives this man. Under his hand, the CCP highlights Chinese suffering and humiliation roughly a century ago under Western and Japanese imperialists, while eliding the democratic world's helping hand and Japan's benign democracy over four generations since. He slides past the Chinese millions massacred in the intervening decades by the CCP and Mao — China's legendary leader who spread cruelty and death as he judged useful. In imitation of Mao, Xi has issued his own "little red book" of wisdom. Mao's iconic image looms over Tiananmen still. Coveting Mao's autocratic power, Xi strove and won it; now he dare not let it go.

The bitter recall of ancient Chinese glories; resentment of past humiliations; insecurity bred by corruption and illegitimacy; disdain, even hatred of America's easy ways — these are the pathogens coursing through Xi's circle. A fever for Chinese primacy burns among them. For a time, they might pander to a Western-inspired, rules-based order, a liberal conceit; but this is not their dream. A historic economic rise, technological mastery, a rapidly expanding navy, all causes to be proud of, have freed them to be brazen. Xi now bares the teeth Deng Xiaoping's smile hid. From South China Sea islets to the New Silk Road's arid ends, the

CCP, ruthless and defiant, pounds the stakes it holds to advance its aims. For Xi's CCP, it is the fate of small states to bend to the strong.

Rules should soon be theirs to set, the CCP believes, and not without some reason. Before Trump, a subtle and experienced Chinese diplomat confessed, CCP leaders marveled at America's ineffectual response. In the South and East China Seas, on India's long border, Beijing's hostile and determined quest had followed Lenin's line: "Probe with bayonets, if you find mush, you push; if you find steel, you withdraw." It is to our shame, Trump observed on China's unfair trade practices, that Beijing had not been held to account by prior administrations. Unanswered, history has shown, the ambitious calculate and, at times, miscalculate.

In past American forbearance, CCP leaders have seen a once great power on the wane. In foreign capitals they confided, inside China they proclaimed: It will soon be America's turn to bend. They claim their own version of the right side of history.

The keys to victory, Sun Tzu counseled, lie in knowing your enemy and deceiving them. The cunning men of Beijing have taken heed. They have an instinct for a divided, self-doubting, and weary West. Cloaking their aggressions in ambiguity, they weigh the likely costs against desired gains.

Straining to contain COVID-19, President Trump and Secretary Pompeo rightly extend a hand to international, including Chinese, cooperation. But in post-pandemic days to come, the democracies must carefully take the measure of the CCP and hold it to account, crafting strategies for what it is, not what they wish it to be. That is leadership's task.

The late, great professor Fouad Ajami warned, "Men love the troubles they know" — too ready to slip into a comfortable neglect, too reluctant to face strategic change. Some cite an arc of history, he lamented, to hide behind, hoping it might bear the burdens they would rather shun.

With all doubts resolved in their favor, the untouchable leaders of the CCP have much for which to answer. Perhaps in reality, even more.

In a time of death, Ajami cautioned: "There is no fated happiness or civility in any land." As a great river may abruptly rise or fall, "Those gauges on the banks will have to be read and watched with care."

[China] The GOP's No. 1 coronavirus China hawk (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 4:30 AM, Burgess Everett, 4207K, Neutral]

Investment banker Warren Stephens was on the phone with Sen. Tom Cotton in January, when the Arkansas Republican gave an abrupt goodbye.

"I gotta go. I've got a meeting at the White House. This virus deal in China, we're behind the curve on this thing," Stephens recounted Cotton telling him. "I said: 'Whoa whoa whoa, what do you mean?' 'Cause you know at that time, it was nowhere.'"

Since January, the first-term senator has warned that China was covering up the lethality of the disease and doing little to stop what became a global pandemic — taking his coronavirus concerns to President Donald Trump and the Department of Health and Human

Services. He says Washington must "exact a very steep price" from China in the months to come.

So, as the rest of the Republican Party now races to condemn China as the disease's greatest villain, Cotton finds himself with a three-month head start.

And with a series of ambitious Republican senators and governors beginning to maneuver to succeed Trump in 2024, Cotton is front and center in the debate over the GOP's future. His emergence as the party's fiercest China hawk could position him well regardless of Trump's fate in November.

And as usual, the sharp-edged Cotton is taking it to the max.

"Their criminal negligence allowed what could have been a health outbreak in Wuhan to become a devastating global pandemic," Cotton said in a telephone interview. "Their malign, deliberate actions to send the virus around the world by allowing international travel to continue in December and January represents just how little regard for human life they have."

Cotton wants American citizens to be able to sue Chinese officials for the economic and public health fallout from the pandemic and move production of key medical supplies to the United States from China. He says he will seek to attach that legislation to upcoming must-pass coronavirus bills, which could have the Senate debating China's culpability in a matter of weeks.

And he's stepping up his rhetoric too, asserting that "senior leaders in Beijing made a deliberate and calculated decision" to keep air travel flowing out of China. The Chinese government, he said, "did not want to see a relative diminution of their power as against the rest of the world, especially against the United States."

It's vintage Cotton: Take a hard-line position early and go for the jugular in an uncompromising manner.

The senator is also playing a notable role in Congress' coronavirus rescue efforts, serving as a vocal advocate of direct payments to Americans in previous discussions, though he now advocates a go-slow approach to the next big tranche of aid.

Regardless, the 42-year-old Arkansan has long been a young man in a hurry.

After attending Harvard and taking classes from then-law professor Elizabeth Warren, Cotton joined the Army. After he returned from service in the Middle East, Stephens recalls Cotton telling him he was going to run for the House. Stephens tried to dissuade him, arguing he was not well-known enough in the state GOP, but Cotton plunged in anyway: "My advice to him was to not do it."

Cotton won, and just two years later, defeated a longtime Democratic incumbent to join the Senate. Now as his first term winds down, he finds himself firmly in the national mix with other high-profile Republicans vying to take the White House in 2024 or beyond.

"He's certainly never said that to me," said Stephens, who runs a private equity firm based

in Arkansas, of whether Cotton is plotting to be president. "But, you know, he'd be a really good one."

Cotton himself spurns talk of higher office. He says his focus is on restarting the economy, winning reelection in a race in which he has no Democratic opponent and bringing China to heel.

But targeting China is an increasingly popular position in the Republican Party, so much so that Senate Republican strategists distributed a memo advising GOP candidates to concentrate their fire on China in the battle for the Senate. Even some Democratic senators are also asking tough questions.

Cotton drew several critical headlines in February for suggesting that the virus could have come from research labs in Wuhan. Some reporting has bolstered Cotton's statements, but there is no consensus in either the medical or political world on the matter.

Many lawmakers in both parties are careful about how closely to link Chinese labs with the virus.

"I think it is possible," said Sen. Pat Toomey (R-Pa.). "I for one don't know where it came from, but we certainly should find out."

Cotton is as certain as ever.

"The presence of two different virology labs in Wuhan forces any reasonable and responsible leader to at least ask the question if the virus could have emerged in those labs," Cotton said in the interview. "It's not conclusive and it rarely is in the world of intelligence, but all of the evidence we have at this point points to those labs."

Cotton spoke to Trump in January and lobbied him to ban flights to China. Now Trump cites the travel ban multiple times a day when defending his national leadership. Cotton also urged Americans to leave China and in early February warned coronavirus would likely become a pandemic, more than a month before the World Health Organization made it official.

Some critics say he could have done more.

"If you were so clever and saw that China was lying, then why did the president believe them?" said former Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D-N.D.), who served with Cotton for four years.

"You can't have it both ways. You can't say 'I saw it coming.' If you saw it coming, what did you do to stop it?" she said. "It just drives me frickin' crazy. What I'm saying is, did you write a note to yourself in your basement? Who cares if you were right. What did you do about it?"

Cotton is one of the sharpest-edged combatants in the Capitol. He led a successful effort to tank an immigration compromise Heitkamp crafted in 2018 and organized a Republican letter to Iran undermining President Barack Obama's nuclear agreement. He helped sink then-Speaker Paul Ryan's "border adjustment tax" idea and nearly stopped a popular criminal justice reform bill from becoming law.

Yet on China issues, he's been relatively bipartisan — working closely with Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) on curbing Chinese influence abroad. Schumer sometimes refers to him as "Mr. ZTE," a reference to Cotton's efforts to bar the Chinese telecom company from the United States.

The Chinese Embassy did not respond to a request for comment, but it's clear the Chinese government is keenly observing the flurry of GOP rhetoric targeting its role in the spread of the disease.

"It's just all too obvious why some political forces in the U.S. have been obsessively attacking China using the pandemic as a weapon," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang on Monday. "We firmly oppose the attempts of some people in the U.S. to grab more votes and undermine China's interests by smearing China."

But even Republicans with wildly different dispositions than Cotton praise his early warnings on China.

"Sen. Cotton is absolutely right to point the finger at China and to make sure the world knows from where this virus came and why we collectively had a delayed response to it," said Sen. Mitt Romney (R-Utah), the party's 2012 nominee. "You have to tip your cap to Sen. Cotton."

**[North Korea] Where's North Korea's Kim? Let's see what the satellites say.
(Washington Post)**

Washington Post [4/29/2020 1:17 PM, Simon Denyer, Neutral]

In the spycraft arts of trying to peer into the world's most secretive regime, commercial satellite images have become an indispensable power.

It is the North Korean version of Kremlinology adapted for the modern age — with images taken from orbit a key part of trying to monitor Pyongyang's missiles, nuclear sites and more. Now, the views from commercial satellites offer potential clues as the world tries to figure out Kim Jong Un's whereabouts.

New satellite images of luxury boats owned by the North Korean leader have been spotted at his villa in the coastal resort of Wonsan, providing more evidence that Kim is probably holed up by the beach, according to NK Pro, a specialist news and analysis service based in Seoul.

The revelation comes days after satellite photos also showed what is probably Kim's personal train parked at a railway platform reserved for his use near the villa in Wonsan, according to researchers at 38 North, a website affiliated with the Stimson Center.

As rumors swirl about Kim's health, they provide some of the best evidence yet that reports of Kim's demise might be premature. But they certainly do not show whether he is fit and well.

North Korea watchers still pore over the phrasing of state media reports and the placement of officials at important events for clues about what is in Kim's mind, for hints of ideological debates and power struggles, for clues about who is up and who is down among his

entourage — and sometimes even for signs of who might have been executed or imprisoned.

The satellite image scrutiny usually goes for bigger targets such as military activity. But the current analysis into Kim's personal world reinforces how much North Korea remains a puzzle to the world despite Kim's groundbreaking outreach to South Korea and the United States, including two summits with President Trump.

But the experts at NK Pro, 38 North and other specialist groups now have access to regular eyes in the sky from commercial services Planet and Maxar, as well as less frequent historical images from Google Earth.

Images come in every day and are scoured for clues about North Korea's nuclear and missile programs: a trailer being parked here, steam coming from a facility there, scaffolding or a platform being put up somewhere else.

But they are also being used to look for planes, motorcades, trains and boats.

It's like a giant game of "Where's Waldo?" — with an entire country to scour and just a few clues.

"In a country like North Korea, there's no noise when it comes to luxury facilities," said Colin Zwirko at NK Pro. "It's only Kim family facilities. There's no other people that could be just freely enjoying boat parties or having mansions in remote places."

When reports emerged that Kim might have had a cardiovascular operation at a hospital near Mount Myohyang on April 12, experts looked for confirmation from the skies.

Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, reportedly died at a mansion on the top of the mountain in 1994, although that mansion was demolished in 2012. There are still some villas in the area, but no obvious signs in satellite photos of unusual activity, said Zwirko.

There was also talk that Kim might have attended a missile test near Wonsan on April 14. The complex at Wonsan on North Korea's east coast has a private beach, guest villas, a horse racing track and a basketball court, and it is believed to be one of Kim's favorite places to stay.

First, 38 North spotted that Kim's train had arrived at Wonsan sometime between April 15 and April 21. It was still present April 23, "when it appeared to be repositioned for departure," 38 North reported.

On Tuesday, Zwirko announced that he had spotted an approximately 60-meter (200-foot) leisure boat positioned for use in the villa's private harbor, as well as two other large leisure boats used by Kim in the area. The main boat was seen in a photograph when basketball star Dennis Rodman visited Kim and went to Wonsan in 2013, and it is believed to have a pool on board under a roof.

But Zwirko also did what he called a baseline survey, cross-checking years of satellite imagery against state media reports and NK Pro's own database.

He has spotted Kim's train at Wonsan on eight occasions since 2013. On seven, he was able to confirm that Kim was staying at Wonsan or attending an event in the area.

Similarly, he has listed 23 occasions since 2013 when the boats were taken out of storage and placed ready for use. On 14 of those occasions, he was able to confirm that Kim had been in the area.

In other words, he said, the boat appears to be brought out of storage for Kim to use. Along with the train, the images indicate that the leader is likely to be staying at Wonsan, an assessment backed by senior South Korean officials with access to intelligence reports.

That does not mean that Kim is in perfect health, although a flurry of official letters in his name suggests to many observers that he is at least alive and conscious.

The alternative, of course, is that North Korea is playing an elaborate trick to buy time — issuing statements, moving boats and trains around — to fool the outside world.

"What I can conclude from my research is that there has been a high correlation of these boat activities in Wonsan when Kim is around," said Zwirko. "And I would expect this to be no different, unless the theory of purposefully moving boats around to trick us is true. I have confidence that the pattern should hold — the boat movement activities indicate a high chance he's in the area."

Chad O'Carroll, who founded NK Pro, said commercial satellite images are really helping with investigations of contemporary issues in North Korea in ways that simply were not possible when Kim's father and predecessor, Kim Jong Il, died in 2011.

"What people have been able to do recently with the train out at Wonsan and now the boats, it's really impressive and probably worries the North Koreans somewhat because this technology is only going to keep improving," he said. "And by another 10 years from now, just imagine what we'll be able to see — it should be pretty mind-blowing."

[North Korea] Amid health worries, Kim Jong Un's role looms large (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 2:01 AM, Foster Klug, 2194K, Neutral]

New rumors about Kim Jong Un pour in daily. The North Korean leader is dead. Or he's very ill. Or maybe he's just recuperating in his luxury compound.

As speculation about his health builds, an underlying question looms for professional spies, outside policymakers, academics and curious news-consumers alike.

What do we really know about the man who leads North Korea?

The answer is crucial because Kim's intentions, and the as-yet-unknown state of his health, play an outsized role in the workings of Northeast Asia, an uneasy collection of wary neighbors at the best of times and home to two of the three biggest economies in the world and a huge buildup of American military machinery and manpower.

Sandwiched amid goliaths, North Korea is a small, impoverished, extraordinarily proud nation that through sheer force of will — and a relentless cult of personality built around a single family — has been at the center of a half-century security headache for its neighbors.

No matter how successful China, South Korea and Japan become — and their collective transformation from war, poverty and domestic infighting into political and economic might has been spectacular — North Korea, and its single-minded pursuit of nuclear-tipped missiles meant to protect the Kim family, has made it impossible to ignore, holding the region and Washington hostage to its narrow ambitions.

THE DISAPPEARANCE

There's not much to go on here despite the building media coverage.

Some unconfirmed, lightly or unsourced news reports say that he is in fragile condition or even a vegetative state following heart surgery.

The South Korean government, however, maintains that Kim still appears to be in power and that there have been no signs that something big has happened in the North.

What's uncontested is that Kim hasn't appeared in public since an April 11 meeting focused on the coronavirus. This sort of vanishing act has happened before, but what has set rumors ablaze now is that for the first time as leader he missed the most important holiday of the North Korean year, the April 15 celebration of his grandfather's birth.

There have been no photographs and no video of the leader in nearly three weeks, only state media reports of him sending written greetings to world leaders or citizens of merit.

THE MAN

Those looking to understand Kim face a problem. Much of what the outside world sees is filtered through relentless North Korean propaganda meant to build him into an infallible paragon of leadership.

Add to that vaguely sourced or misleading outside media reports and the extreme difficulty of cracking the North's ultra-secrecy surrounding anything to do with the leader, and the picture that emerges of Kim is often more mosaic than profile.

In South Korea, he is seen as both demon and statesman. He has repeatedly threatened to burn Seoul to the ground. He has also rolled out the red carpet for a visit to Pyongyang by South Korea's president and sent his own sister south for the 2018 Olympics.

In the West, portrayals of Kim often run to caricature. His broken friendship with Dennis Rodman, the former basketball star he reportedly idolized as a schoolboy; the rumors about his extreme love of cheese and his allegedly creative ways of disposing of officials who displease him.

Then there's the stunning series of summits over the last two years with the leaders of Russia, China, the United States and South Korea.

Kim was likely born in 1984 and attended boarding school for several years in Switzerland.

Early on, some observers argued that his time in the West would lead him to eventually embrace Chinese-style reforms.

That has not happened so far, though he has taken a markedly different approach to leadership than his publicity-shy father, Kim Jong Il, who died in 2011.

Outside governments and experts initially questioned the ability of a man then in his 20s to lead, but Kim Jong Un quickly consolidated power. He ordered the 2013 execution of his uncle and mentor, Jang Song Thaek, who was accused of treason. Kim is also suspected of ordering the assassination of his estranged half brother, and potential rival, at a Malaysian airport in 2017.

Kim has shown a growing confidence on the world stage, most clearly with the high-stakes diplomacy that followed a run of nuclear and missile tests in 2017 that had many fearing war.

The sight of a North Korean leader meeting with his South Korean and U.S. rivals was extraordinary, though it's not yet clear whether the diplomacy will settle an uneasy region.

Kim entered 2020 vowing to bolster his nuclear deterrent in the face of "gangster-like" U.S. sanctions, and he supervised a series of weapons launches and military drills in March.

Much of what happens now will depend on Kim's health.

North Korea, despite its poverty, has long commanded world attention because of its sustained, belligerent pursuit of what it calls self-defensive measures in the face of U.S. hostility — and what critics call an illegal accumulation of nuclear bombs.

There's debate about whether North Korea ever intended to give up its nukes during the summits with Washington and Seoul. But the diplomacy seems inconceivable without Kim.

That raises fears, at a time of massive political instability, to a return to threats and increasingly powerful weapons tests meant to perfect the nuclear weapons seen as the only real guarantee of the Kim family's power.

[North Korea] Trump Isn't Ready for Kim Jong Un's Death (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 4:28 AM, Jung H. Pak, 4207K, Neutral]

The internet is ablaze with rumors, chatter and circular reporting about North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's whereabouts. U.S. and regional media have variously reported that Kim is recovering from heart surgery, in "grave danger," "in a vegetative state" or even dead, setting off a torrent of speculation about who might succeed him and the implications for regime stability. President Donald Trump did little to shed light on the rumors, stating first, "I've had a very good relationship with him. I can only say this, I wish him well," and later adding, "I do know how he's doing, relatively speaking ... You will probably be hearing in the not-too-distant future." Trump also boasted, "If somebody else were in this position, we would've been right now at war with North Korea."

Trump has often bragged about his approach to North Korea, touting his relationship with Kim in and of itself as progress toward bilateral ties and denuclearization. But Kim's absence is now showing us just how fragile Trump's approach really is.

Trump's strategy toward North Korea has consisted of sidestepping established diplomatic processes and reducing U.S. ties with North Korea to a single, superficial leader-to-leader channel. Trump's direct outreach didn't lead to any diplomatic breakthroughs: It simply gave Kim legitimacy as he continued to build up his nuclear arsenal. It also allowed Kim to shun Trump's State Department officials at all other levels, shutting down working-level talks and limiting Washington's ability to glean insights into the country. Now, with North Korea potentially facing an uncertain future, the Trump administration is ill-equipped to handle it.

Kim's absence triggers visions of massive regional disruption with catastrophic consequences. North Korea has possibly dozens of nuclear weapons, a substantial cache of biological and chemical weapons, a diverse array of ballistic missiles and a million-person military. State propaganda has made it clear that Kim alone controls these levers of military power. A power struggle in North Korea as a result of Kim's death or incapacity could lead officials to jockey for control of the regime's nuclear weapons, either to use them or sell them for cash. Such a development might invite U.S., Chinese and South Korean military intervention, setting the stage for confrontation and miscalculation that could spiral into a larger conflict.

Nuclear war or "loose nukes" isn't the only prospect worrying Washington, Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo. Internal collapse in North Korea could spark armed clashes among competing factions for control and trigger massive refugee flows, taxing the region's ability to respond.

The current pandemic would only amplify a humanitarian disaster in North Korea. Of its total population of 25 million people, North Korea has 10 million citizens who are malnourished and 8 million who lack access to clean water, making them more vulnerable to the coronavirus and other diseases. Internal instability could also unravel the state's strict measures to contain the coronavirus. Last week, the state ramped up its anti-coronavirus campaign, including reinforcing existing border lockdowns and the inspection and quarantining of imported goods—an acknowledgement of the ongoing necessity of pandemic vigilance, even though Pyongyang still insists that it has zero infections. A few days earlier, the regime reportedly announced restrictions on some imports to "prevent the spread of the virus," alarming North Koreans whose survival depends on smuggling and trading goods from China. Pyongyang residents this week are reportedly panic-buying, according to NK News, mirroring similar behavior around the world as a result of the uncertainty about the pandemic and availability of daily necessities. Adding to the North's woes, one of China's biggest cities in its northeast, close to North Korea, is tackling an outbreak of coronavirus.

The Trump administration is not ready to handle a post-Kim North Korea beset with problems. Trump's unilateral decision in 2018 to engage directly with Kim, as well as the latter's sidelining or purging of his negotiators since the failed February 2019 summit in Hanoi, shriveled bilateral diplomacy between the two countries down to shallow letters between Trump and Kim. Trump has little to show for his efforts: Kim has only built a more dangerous and powerful nuclear arsenal while providing hollow assurances that he would "work toward the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," a pledge falling far short of previous agreements, like the Joint Statement of 2005 in which North Korea "committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs."

In the meantime, Trump's desire for a grand deal with Kim undermined his own diplomats

who have struggled to gain traction with their North Korean counterparts on even defining what "denuclearization" means. It's hard to say how much success U.S. diplomats would have had in establishing substantive and sustained contacts had Trump not pursued his one-on-one détente, but Trump's actions certainly didn't help. Trump flattered Kim, postponed military exercises with South Korea, and blocked large-scale sanctions on North Korea, even as Kim continued with his missile tests and human rights violations—giving Kim little reason to invest in working-level talks with the U.S. Thus, U.S. diplomats never had a chance to establish contacts that might have proved critical now, as North Korea potentially heads toward chaos.

Trump's gutting of the national security bureaucracy hasn't helped. The current acting director of National Intelligence—a position that requires leading the intelligence community, a sprawling organization with 17 entities—is a political loyalist with no security or intelligence experience. Key positions on Asia and North Korea policy remain vacant or in limbo. These are the people who would ordinarily be able to help with information collection and analysis, diplomacy, humanitarian aid, and military planning in the event of Kim's death.

Further, dealing successfully with North Korea will require China's help. And yet Trump has been waging a war of words with the Chinese government over who's more at fault in the coronavirus pandemic. There are plenty of reasons to be critical of Beijing's suppression of information to hide the scale of the health crisis, but Trump might want to look more to the future: If Kim's absence leads to a destabilizing power struggle or even internal collapse, China's early cooperation will be necessary to stem a potential humanitarian crisis, secure North Korea's nuclear weapons and avoid conditions that might spark armed conflict among the U.S., China and South Korea as the three sides move to protect their interests.

Trump has also reportedly scuttled a potential deal with South Korea on burden-sharing, undermining U.S.-South Korea military readiness and the decades-old alliance, even as he requested Covid-19 testing kits from Seoul. A long-time critic of alliances, Trump for nearly a year has ignored North Korean missile tests that threaten South Korea, calling them "very standard." The perceived erosion of U.S. commitment to alliances increases the potential for North Korean adventurism and reduces the ability of the U.S. to exert influence in the region.

Trump has spent two years boasting that he has North Korea policy under control because of his personal rapport with Kim. And yet, he has been unable to use that relationship to push denuclearization or improve bilateral ties. All he's done is made the United States ill-prepared for a North Korea without Kim.

[North Korea] Who Would Succeed Kim Jong Un in North Korea? Look to Mount Paektu (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:52 PM, Timothy W. Martin and Dasl Yoon, Neutral]

For seven decades, North Korea's ruling Kim family maintained its grip on power with a simple conceit: nobody but the Supreme Leader could rule the country.

And that leader, they insisted, needed to be a Kim, a way to keep control within the family and guarantee fealty in a nation that's endured famines, economic hardship and widespread human rights abuse. Only those from the "Mount Paektu bloodline," or those with a direct lineage to the country's founder Kim Il Sung, are deemed legitimate successors.

But that design now may be a vulnerability. The conspicuous absence of North Korea's third-generation leader, Kim Jong Un, has ignited fresh debate over a question that's all but unmentionable inside the country: Who could replace him?

Mr. Kim, 36 years old, doesn't appear to have launched any formal grooming for his successor before his unexplained absence, close Pyongyang watchers say, though many believe some form of contingency planning exists.

His health status has come into question after he skipped an April 15 ceremony and hasn't reappeared publicly since. A flurry of media reports have since suggested the North Korean leader could be alive, comatose or dead.

South Korea's government, which closely monitors the North, claims to know his current whereabouts without elaborating and has repeatedly asserted he is alive. President Trump said this week he had a "very good idea" of Mr. Kim's health status and that people would hear about it "in the not-too-distant future."

There is little doubt the next leader up would be a Kim family member, though the options look limited.

The oldest of Kim Jong Un's three children is a son born in 2010, according to Seoul's spy agency. Mr. Kim's older brother is assumed to have long ago given up any political aspirations. His great uncle, a younger sibling of Kim Il Sung, is around 100. Mr. Kim's aunt, Kim Kyong Hui, only recently reappeared in public after her once-powerful husband, Jang Song Thaek, was executed for allegedly trying to overthrow the government.

That leaves Mr. Kim's sister, Kim Yo Jong, 32, a confidante who was recently reinstated to the country's Politburo, the top decision-making body. She has been her brother's mouthpiece of late, issuing two statements in March aimed at the U.S. and South Korea. She has attended three inter-Korean meetings, both U.S.-North Korea summits with Mr. Trump and the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea.

Ms. Kim's increasingly central role in domestic North Korean politics makes her a likely "official Mount Paektu bloodline successor," according to a report published Wednesday by a South Korea government-affiliated think tank.

Whether tradition-bound North Korea is ready for a female leader is the wrong question to be asking given the Kim family's entrenchment and Kim Yo Jong's credentials, said Soo Kim, a North Korean expert at Rand Corp., a policy think tank, and a former Central Intelligence Agency analyst.

"The bloodline is going to trump everything else," she said.

The "Mount Paektu bloodline" is a reference to Korea's tallest and most sacred mountain, where Kim Il Sung based his guerrilla forces battling the Japanese and where his son and successor, Kim Jong Il, was allegedly born, according to North Korean history. Historians suspect his birth place was Russia.

Though his father spent more than a decade being prepped for power, Kim Jong Un's grooming unfolded in just over a year after Kim Jong Il suffered a stroke in 2008. After that,

Kim Jong Un accompanied his father to inspection sites and quickly assumed leadership roles in the military and the ruling Workers' Party, becoming the equivalent of a four-star general.

"We learned Kim Jong Il would groom a successor in 2009. At the time, we couldn't even nail down how to spell Kim Jong Un's name," said Cho Sung-ryul, a researcher at the South Korean government-funded Institute for National Security Strategy.

Even after assuming power, a new Kim leader wouldn't be able to rest solely on the family name, Pyongyang watchers say. Mr. Kim exiled, jailed or executed hundreds of other senior officials—including his uncle, Mr. Jang. In 2017, his half brother Kim Jong Nam was assassinated in Malaysia, an attack that South Korean officials have blamed on North Korea, which it denies.

It's uncertain if a new Kim leader, now or in the future, would have the smarts, power and skills of the predecessors, posing a challenge to a country that's long revolved around a singular, dynastic leader, said Kongdan Oh, a Washington-based North Korea expert who has written several books on the Kim regime.

"Kim's death, if it happened now or soon, would be the beginning of a chaotic and painful process of transformation for North Korea," Ms. Oh said.

Other North Korean experts have presumed Kim Yo Jong may be pegged as a potential successor. Ms. Kim has been seen playing a supportive role, often taking notes by her brother's side or handing him a pen. An iconic image before last year's nuclear summit in Hanoi was her trailing Kim Jong Un with an ashtray.

Domestically she is considered a powerful political figure as the second North Korean woman to become a member of the Politburo. Since 2014, she has served as deputy director of the North's propaganda and agitation department—the same role her father held before becoming the North Korean leader.

Some security analysts say Ms. Kim could take charge in Mr. Kim's temporary absence but she is too inexperienced to govern the state. But the same concerns arose about Mr. Kim in 2011 when he suddenly succeeded his father before he ultimately consolidated power.

Mr. Kim's prolonged absence, or passing, would bring significant security implications due to the North's nuclear weapons program and the possibility for domestic instability, said Lee Seong-hyon, director of the Center for Chinese Studies at the Sejong Institute in Seoul.

"The death of a nuclear-state leader is a risk to the entire world," Mr. Lee said.

[Taiwan] Taiwan Emerging From Pandemic With a Stronger Hand Against China (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 8:46 AM, Iain Marlow, Neutral]

Few governments around the world are likely to emerge from the pandemic with a stronger standing than before. Taiwan is one of them – and that's not good for China.

Taiwan was forced to contain the outbreak without official help from the World Health Organization and other international bodies, thanks to China's longstanding push to isolate

the democratically ruled island that it claims as its territory. For weeks, leaders in Taipei struggled to evacuate residents from the virus epicenter in Wuhan, as Beijing rejected basic conditions such as having Taiwanese medical personnel aboard the aircraft.

Around the same time, the People's Republic of China flew bombers and fighter jets around the island, prompting President Tsai Ing-Wen to scramble warplanes.

Despite those hurdles, Taiwan has led the world in its fight against the virus, with only about 400 infections and six deaths for a population of 23 million. By comparison, New York state – with slightly fewer people – had almost 300,000 cases and more than 22,000 deaths.

Taiwan's success against Covid-19 has shown that democracies could fight the virus without resorting to authoritarian measures, serving as a key rebuttal against Chinese propaganda showcasing the strength of its system against the West. Taipei's openness also contrasted sharply with the lack of transparency about the initial outbreak and subsequent diplomatic pressure from the Beijing, generating goodwill that could pay dividends in the future.

"I can't think of another issue with such global resonance that has broken so favorably for Taiwan, and so negatively for the PRC, since perhaps the Tiananmen Square massacre," said Kharis Templeman, an adviser to the Project on Taiwan in the Indo-Pacific at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

While the overall geopolitical dynamics were unlikely to change much given China's growing economic clout, Taiwan's "international stature has done well out of this crisis," Templeman said. "Taiwan has been dealing with Chinese opacity and propaganda campaigns for decades. So there's definitely some rise in sympathy for Taiwan."

A call this week between Taiwan's health minister and the Trump administration's top health official served to reinforce the island's importance to the global community, while also signaling that it could become a point of tension between the U.S. and China. Support for Taipei has surged in Washington after President Donald Trump held an unprecedented 2016 phone call with Tsai, launched a bruising trade war against Xi Jinping's government and sold Taiwan long-coveted F-16 fighter jets.

China's foreign ministry objected to the latest phone call, demanding that the U.S. "immediately correct its mistake, stop manipulating the Taiwan issue by taking advantage of the pandemic, and stop official contacts with Taiwan." The ministry urged "the U.S. side to adhere to one-China principle," referring to Washington's long-held position that the PRC is China's sole legal government.

Last year, Xi reaffirmed Beijing's desire to govern Taiwan under the same "one country, two systems" framework as the former British colony of Hong Kong. That position is deeply unpopular in Taiwan, which re-elected Tsai in a landslide in January. Tsai's Democratic Progressive Party views Taiwan as a sovereign, independent nation.

For the moment, Taiwan is basking in the glow of international praise. It's won plaudits for not only stemming infections, but also pledges to ship millions of surgical masks to Europe, the U.S. and its few remaining diplomatic allies around the world that China hasn't picked off. Taipei has also held virtual seminars with countries such as India and the Philippines,

according to Wang Ting-yu, a lawmaker in Tsai's party and member of Taiwan's foreign affairs and national defense committee.

"This year will be the closest moment for Taiwan to participate in international organizations," Wang said. "Not only have we shown our capability to stop the virus from spreading, we're also using democracy to stop it from spreading -- we're communicating with our people and the government and the people are on the same side fighting the virus. This message can provide a reference for the world."

Taiwan's successful virus approach – led by a National Health Command Center set up following the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, outbreak in 2003 – combined proactive testing, big data and new technologies. That included early screening of flights, the rapid identification and containment of potential cases, integrating its national health insurance and immigration databases, and ensuring quarantine compliance via mobile phone tracking. The government quickly took more than 120 separate public health measures.

In some ways, Taiwan's adversity also helped underwrite its response. Taipei has little room for error because it can't seek help from multilateral agencies and Beijing would pounce on any missteps, said Rupert Hammond-Chambers, a managing director at the consultancy Bower Group Asia.

"Today, Taiwan's standing is at a historic high," said Hammond-Chambers, who is also president of the U.S.-Taiwan Business Council. Still, he added, over the longer term "the stark reality of the PRC's financial muscle and heavy-handed political strategies will mitigate much of the positive equity Taiwan has built amongst nations."

The pandemic served as an ideal springboard for Taiwan's long-standing campaign for diplomatic inclusion. A high-profile exchange between a journalist and WHO official Bruce Aylward, who repeatedly tried to avoid mentioning Taiwan, "did a great job of highlighting the silliness of excluding what is effectively a nation of 23 million people from important international bodies," said Graeme Smith, a fellow at the Australian National University who researches China's influence across Asia.

China's veto power in many international bodies is likely to continue to keep Taiwan on the outside looking in, said Shelley Rigger, a political science professor at Davidson College and author of "Why Taiwan Matters: Small Island, Global Powerhouse." Still, she said, the favorable attention Taiwan was earning would still have an impact.

"It does matter, because if things get ugly, Taiwan will benefit from a positive image and high profile," Rigger said. "And if opportunities to loosen Beijing's stranglehold on its international space do appear, Taiwan needs for people around the world to respond quickly to take advantage of them."

[Afghanistan] One thing quarantine reminds me of: My deployment to Afghanistan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Jackie Munn, 18460K, Neutral]

It's a beautiful April day. My 5-year-old son is weeding one of our garden beds while I cut into a bag of soil conditioner. We work silently in tandem, watching as people walk their dogs and children pedal past on bikes. With so many of our neighbors practicing social

distancing to try to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus, the outside world feels more alive than usual, reminding me what spring looked like before the Internet and social media. When you're not going to the office, no wonder people are relishing the ability to change their scenery, welcoming the reprieve of being outdoors instead of taking fresh air for granted.

My son pulls a stubborn weed and smiles as he stumbles backward. I'm grateful for our little vegetable garden and the time we're able to spend together on it. We planted one last year, but growing our own food this year, in the middle of a pandemic, seems more important. In a few weeks, we'll be able to harvest what we sowed, hopefully reducing the need for grocery shopping a little.

Lost in thought, I use my gloved fingers to poke holes into the soil, preparing it for seeds. I stop when I feel dirt collecting underneath my right index fingernail. Looking down at my gloves, an old pair of Army-issued tactical shooting gloves, I notice a small hole in the trigger finger. The material looks worn down, even beneath a new layer of dirt. The gloves remind me of wintertime shooting drills at Fort Bragg, N.C., and carrying around a rifle and body armor for 10 months in Paktia, Afghanistan. If I close my eyes, I can still feel the way the simulated leather creaks when it's gripping the handles of my M4 rifle. I realize using combat gloves to garden is bizarre, but I enjoy the idea of repurposing them: Instead of handling bullets and smelling like gunpowder, they now smell like mulch and drive tools into the earth.

And the gloves underscore a sentiment I'd been noticing: The past several weeks of social distancing remind me a lot of my deployment to Afghanistan.

Back in 2012, I lived on a small combat outpost, the size of two football fields, that housed fewer than 150 people. I was one of four women, and if not for my female teammate, I would have felt horribly isolated. There was no grocery store, shopping mall, barber shop or amenities to occupy our time. Every day we worked out — either running multiple figure-eights across the rocky post or visiting the small plywood shed that housed the bare essentials for a gym: a squat rack, dumbbells, barbells, benches and a power cage. We ate two meals a day in a trailer converted into a kitchen before or after missions. We tried to keep regular hours when not on missions, waking up the same time each morning and going to bed around the same. We Skyped with loved ones back home and wrote emails, doing our best to keep in touch with our communities and the daily comings and goings of our families and friends. Deployments felt especially miserable because everyone back home was living a normal life. Instead of FOMO, "fear of missing out," many deployed soldiers experienced SFMO, "sadness from missing out." We missed birthdays, graduations, weddings, school plays, vacations and funerals. We were unable to say goodbye when loved ones back home died, and we were often unable to say our final goodbyes when friends died in combat. Being deployed is like putting your life on pause — going to a dangerous and uncertain place to spend months doing the exact same thing, with the exact same people, while eating the exact same food.

Being isolated at home during this pandemic is inconvenient, but at least everyone is suffering similar hardships together. My husband and I are able to spend quality time with my son, something my husband always missed when he deployed after I got out of the service — even though managing distance learning at home requires a hefty amount of patience, determination and grace. I am also, for the first time in our professional careers,

able to spend more time with my husband. Instead of rushing around to and from work, from school, from gymnastics or swimming, we're able to live a much slower lifestyle. We play more board games, build puzzles, cook together and spend more time asking each other questions and telling one another stories. We've seen family on FaceTime more often in the past few weeks than we have in the past three months.

I know my family is lucky. Unlike many Americans, my husband and I are still earning paychecks, our son's teachers are still engaged in his daily learning activities, we have adequate supplies of essentials, we are in good health, and we don't have to worry about the mortgage or putting food on the table. But we're not without stress.

While I'm not on the front lines in an ER or an ICU, I do work in a public health department that cares for low-income and usually uninsured maternity patients in our outpatient clinic. We also manage the county's investigation for positive covid-19 cases, managing outbreaks, keeping track of those with symptoms, notifying their close contacts and contacting health care facilities with exposures to positive cases. The tension circulating throughout the clinic and department is palpable: Everyone's hands are chapped, and many look nervous behind their masks. As coronavirus cases and deaths rise, staff members whisper to each other in between patients. One clinic nurse tells me her concerns about the potential for unwittingly exposing her immunocompromised husband, while another worries about her own health as an asthmatic. Before the governor of Virginia issued his stay-at-home order, nurses assigned to track covid-19 cases initially vented about positive cases not adequately isolating, or expressed frustration over close contacts who had symptoms but continued to go to work or out and about in the community.

Now that everyone is ordered to stay home, county residents with positive tests and active symptoms are monitored daily from afar. Staff listen quietly as residents detail their temperature and symptoms; many sound miserable, with audible coughs and voices that shake. It's like you can almost feel their feverish chills. Other's sound healthy and normal, eagerly awaiting their isolation period to end. An Indian immigrant in his 30s who works in the food industry asked me why this happened to him. He was young and healthy, he washed his hands all the time, he tried to practice social distancing. Why him? He was just unlucky — simple as that.

It was a familiar feeling of random unfairness: Some soldiers are wounded and make it home, others don't.

At one point, one of my colleagues mentioned that she felt like the world had turned into a war zone. Some days, it certainly reminds me of the monotony and apprehension I felt in Afghanistan. For 10 months, we treated everything as a potential threat. I knew that small-arms fire, mortars or improvised explosive devices could kill me at any moment, and many times, we had no idea who the bad guys were or who was trying to harm us. It could be a farmer, a teacher or a local soldier working with us during the day, only to plot against us at night. Our team was hypervigilant pulling security on dirt roads in Afghanistan, and I notice the same creeping feelings as I go for walks around my neighborhood and local parks. I also feel it when I'm with patients, since some of them may be spreading the coronavirus without any symptoms. I have no idea whether the patients I'm seeing are infected, so I just assume that they are. It's safer to be vigilant.

But this type of vigilance can be exhausting, and it can be detrimental for those constantly

on guard while working on the front lines. This type of mental, physical, spiritual and emotional fatigue can be found in every war ever fought. I worry what this pandemic will do to the mental health of health-care workers, essential employees and those without support systems. Undoubtedly, there will be those who will walk away unscathed, but there is also a decent probability that several will be casualties of this fight.

As the sun begins to set, my son walks over, handing me a packet of seeds to plant. They'll need nurturing and protection over the next several weeks to survive. We'll have to be patient, doing our best to tend to our garden, waiting patiently to see if our hard work pays off. Health-care providers across the globe will have to be like diligent gardeners or combat veterans, hoping that their efforts will yield positive results and watching out for themselves and their comrades. Similarly, we all will need to be vigilant, ready and willing to do our part, sowing the seeds for a better tomorrow.

Coronavirus News

As Coronavirus Deaths Spike in Brazil, Bolsonaro Says, 'So What?': Live Updates (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Fighting fears and travel bans, countries and businesses are trying to rescue summer vacation. In Bangkok, a high-end restaurant has transformed into an aid operation.

Faith in the central government fractures over France's coronavirus response

A couple of baguettes tucked under her arm, Maha Rambousek fiddled with a face mask that kept sliding off her nose. After a local decree made masks mandatory in public, she had quickly stitched it together, but was left confused when the policy was overturned two days later by the central government.

"I don't know who's wrong or who's right," Ms. Rambousek said. "And I can't turn to anybody for certainties."

The measure in Sceaux, a well-to-do suburb just south of Paris, was one of an increasing number of exceptional, local challenges to the government's handling of the outbreak, which has shaken confidence in a cornerstone of French society: the primal authority of the centralized state.

The city of Perpignan lodged contagious patients in a hotel after the central government told people to self-isolate at home. Officials in the city of Marseille carried out widespread testing of both the sick and healthy even as the government ordered that only the seriously ill be tested.

While France's vaunted health care system has staved off disaster, France has suffered the world's fourth-biggest death toll — now at 23,293 official deaths, behind the United States, Italy and Spain — a consequence, critics say, of the central government's failure to anticipate the onslaught of the contagion.

That failure and a critical shortage of masks and testing kits — also resulting from gaps in state policies — led to the virus's rapid early spread, prompting France to impose one of the

word's strictest nationwide lockdowns, now in its seventh week.

Prime Minister Édouard Philippe announced a tentative plan on Monday to gradually reopen the country starting on May 11. Schools and businesses would start reopening, though not restaurants or cafes. He urged companies to keep their employees working at home. And he promised that masks and testing would be made sufficiently available.

But it was not clear that those steps would halt what polls show is declining confidence in the government's handling of the epidemic.

Live updates: Trump to hold virtual town hall at Lincoln Memorial on Sunday; possible health advances help lift stocks (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 4:34 PM, Kim Bellware, Mark Berman, Miriam Berger, Siobhan O'Grady, Felicia Sonmez, Meryl Kornfield, Candace Buckner, Michael Brice-Saddler and Colby Itkowitz, Neutral]

President Trump will participate in a Fox News virtual town hall Sunday evening shot live from the Lincoln Memorial. The event will include a sit-down interview with Fox anchors followed by a round of audience-submitted questions related to the reopening of the economy. The president also suggested Wednesday that he does not plan to extend federal social-distancing guidelines amid the coronavirus pandemic, noting that the country's governors will make decisions on what guidelines work best given the conditions in their states.

Meanwhile, small but significant health advances against the coronavirus sent the Dow Jones industrial average up 532 points, about 2.2 percent, to 24,634, all but ignoring sobering data that shows a U.S. economy far from being awakened from its self-induced coma. Stocks are on pace for one of their best months in decades as the nation ramps up its coronavirus tests and states take steps to awaken their economies from the weeks-long lockdown.

Here are some significant developments:

-Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said a second wave of infections is "inevitable" in the United States, which has recorded more than 1 million confirmed cases — nearly one-third of the global total.

-As antsy Americans show growing signs of "quarantine fatigue" and officials face pressure to ease restrictions, factories, malls and state governments in many parts of the country are taking steps toward reopening.

-'Frostbite' toes and 'second-week crashes' are among the curious and sometimes dangerous phenomena among some covid-19 patients that have caught the interest of medical experts in recent weeks.

-The U.S. economy shrank by 4.8 percent from January through March as it saw the worst slowdown in growth since the Great R

-Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe warned that holding the Tokyo Olympics in 2021 will be "impossible" if the pandemic is not contained.

-Signaling confidence that it has contained the virus, China scheduled its big legislative meetings for late May. The "Two Sessions" meetings had been postponed at the height of the outbreak.

UN warns coronavirus fallout will lead to the next pandemic – global starvation (FOX News)

FOX News [4/29/2020 2:00 PM, Hollie McKay, Negative]

The next global pandemic may very well be a hunger pandemic as a result of the fallout from coronavirus.

While the World Health Organization warns that stringent guidelines need to stay in place to combat the spread of COVID-19, fellow United Nations agency World Food Program (WFP) believes that it will lead to an uptick in global poverty and starvation, and the response to the virus itself may end up killing more people by the end of 2020.

Last week, WFP's executive director David Beasley cautioned the UN Security Council that the risk of large-scale famine in much of the developing world was now "of biblical proportions" as a result of the global pandemic.

"While dealing with a COVID-19 pandemic, we are also on the brink of a hunger pandemic," Beasley told the council. "There is also a real danger that more people could potentially die from the economic impact of COVID-19 than from the virus itself."

Even before the outbreak, 2020 was on track to be the worst humanitarian crisis since World War II due to the ongoing wars in places like Yemen, Syria and South Sudan, compounded with natural disasters and desert locust swarms across Africa.

That grim reality has been exacerbated by efforts to curb the coronavirus, which has led to cratering economies, mass job losses and crashing oil prices.

"We can confidently state that levels have risen. Quarantine regulations, shipping challenges, and overall supply chain issues are compounding and adding to previously existing starvation conditions," Ian Bradbury, CEO of the Canada-based humanitarian organization 1st NAEF, told Fox News.

"We can expect more global deaths due to secondary impacts of COVID-19 than the virus itself — the World Food Program currently estimates that 265 million will be on the brink of starvation by the end of the year."

At the beginning of 2020, some 130 million were already facing dire levels of hunger. That figure could now more than double the number of people facing acute hunger to 265 million by the end of this year.

As it already stands, 820 million people globally are considered undernourished, according to UN statistics, with 22 percent of children younger than 5 classified as "stunted" as a consequence of malnutrition.

Almost 700 million people, roughly 9 percent of the planet's population, are "severely food insecure" and nearly two billion – one in four – are assessed as "moderately or severely food insecure."

That statistic is expected to rise as the planting, harvesting and transporting of food items has been dwindling, and the almost 400 million children who rely on schools for meals can no longer attend. Experts have cautioned that while rashes of hunger have long been experienced in different pockets of the globe, never before has it been experienced on such a global scale.

"My father was killed in the war, and my brother and I work to care for our family. The [impact] that this sickness has created on us means that everything has become more expensive, and so the money we make is not enough to meet our monthly needs," Suleiman Hussein Suleiman, a 22-year-old logistics worker from Hemo village in Syria, decried.

"We lived in hardship before, and now it is even harder. It is hard for us to find food every day. If things go on like this, the people will erupt like a volcano — they will say, 'Better that we go back to work and die of coronavirus than that our children starve to death!'"

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, barely recovered from years of fighting ISIS, many are expressing the renewed challenges of struggling to find work and the loss of dignity that comes with that.

"The coronavirus pandemic has had an impact [on us] as it has on many countries around the world. We announced strict measures from the very start of the pandemic and put in place a series of regulations that helped contain the number of our cases and avoid overwhelming our health system," said Jutiar Adil, a spokesperson for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). "Financially, we're feeling the pinch."

And in the already famished and crumbling Venezuela, which has been embattled with closures and stay-at-home orders, locals are further feeling the pangs of daily life.

"Besides hunger, as there is no food, nor gasoline which truly complicates life, tension and even paranoia has become an everyday issue for me and others I talk to, friends and other people. The quarantine is taking a big toll in my life besides everything else I have been dealing with," said Aidiana Martinez, a 41-year-old living in the capital, Caracas. "[The food shortages] are getting so bad that it is hard to explain."

Maria Teresa Herrera, a 39-year-old administrator in Caracas, concurred that everyday decisions are a weighing up of life and death.

"I live in constant fear, thinking if I get contagious, I will pass it to my daughter, but if I don't go to work, my daughter will starve. This is terrifying," she continued. "It is complicated to find food, first because of the new schedule for stores ... and also the total lack of gasoline, affecting even the transportation chain of the limited food that is distributed. I am terrified this pandemic can go on for way more time, then we will die from starvation and COVID."

Lilia Martinez, a 45-year-old banker in Caracas' Baruta Municipality, stressed that "poverty had reached inhuman levels before this crisis, and now there is no immediate or near future light of recovery."

Meanwhile, in Afghanistan many contend that life has become untenable.

"It has been three months now that I haven't gotten any salary from office, and I am hardly surviving, and it is getting more difficult to come over home expenses. My brother's business is also going below zero because of the lockdown," said Zaki Nadry, a 27-year-old Kabul-based government official. "Poverty has become worse as you see more beggars in the streets. Daily laborers are suffering because of no daily projects, which have made them turn to beggars as well."

In many countries, especially those in Africa that have largely avoided a direct hit from the virus, the tight restrictions have induced a sense of sheer frustration. While the likes of Zimbabwe have only documented 32 confirmed coronavirus cases and four deaths, the fear of overwhelming the already fragile health care system has meant a continued government-mandated lockdown — and subsequently, thousands going to bed hungry.

In Kenya earlier this month, dozens were injured and two people died in a stampede in a rush to obtain food handouts. In Colombia, those starving are tying red clothing items outside their homes to signal their empty stomachs.

Dominique Burgeon, director of Emergency and Resilience Division of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), has also issued warnings urging governments to do everything possible to keep trade avenues and supply chains functioning, underscoring that "now more than ever, we need international cooperation and supply arrangements to preserve the fluidity of global food markets."

Food security experts are also lamenting that funding from donor nations, organizations and individuals is fast drying up due to economic assault that the novel pathogen has cast on much of the world, meaning that the monies necessary to deliver humanitarian relief in some of the hardest-hit areas may all but fall apart.

The WFP estimates that they require an immediate injection of \$350 million to keep operations afloat, bemoaning that only about a quarter of the sum been met.

"We have to keep our food security programs running, not only because of increased needs from COVID-19 but also because war and violence continue and the needs that existed before all of this are still there," noted Elizabeth Shaw, a spokesperson for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). "In East Africa, it is now the most important planting season. We have to get the seeds and farming tools out to people now, or they won't have things to eat come July or August."

Nonetheless, the widespread lockdowns and travel prohibitions also present unprecedented logistical hurdles for many charities and nongovernmental organizations that are no longer able to reach the hungry and those most in need, especially in far-flung places.

It is anticipated that the impact will not only be felt everywhere from Africa and Asia to the Middle East and Central America, but will deeply scar Americans struggling to make primary ends meet.

"From East to West and everywhere in between, coronavirus has left its mark on our global society, and food insecurity is a real issue here at home. Millions of hard-working Americans live paycheck to paycheck and rely on every dollar to keep their families fed and lives

afloat," added New York-based Assemblyman Mike LiPetri.

"When you take away their income and don't provide real economic relief, the situation goes from manageable to dire real fast."

Don't forget the homeless once coronavirus crisis ends, U.N. expert urges (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:04 PM, Zoe Tabary, Neutral]

Life-saving measures to house the most vulnerable amid coronavirus lockdowns risk falling by the wayside after the pandemic, a United Nations expert has warned, calling for stronger action to eradicate housing insecurity.

Governments around the world have been racing to house the estimated 1.8 billion people who are homeless or live in inadequate housing and are uniquely at risk of being infected and infecting others during the pandemic.

But many of those efforts are emergency measures rather than "the structural change we actually need" to guarantee affordable and secure housing for all, said Leilani Farha, U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing.

"Housing has become both central and invisible in the pandemic," Farha told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"Governments are telling people to stay home, wash your hands and physical distance," said Farha, whose six-year tenure as U.N. Special Rapporteur comes to an end on Thursday.

"But that mantra was ordered without any consideration being given to the fact that millions of people worldwide can't do those three things."

More than 3.1 million people have been infected by the novel coronavirus across the world and about 220,000 have died, according to a global tally by Johns Hopkins University.

Health experts say the homeless are more likely to contract illnesses such as the coronavirus, in part because of weakened immune systems due to additional stress, and lack of nutrition and sleep.

Those living in cramped housing are also at heightened risk, with a surge of coronavirus cases in foreign-worker dormitories across Singapore and in the slums of India drawing attention to the squalid housing conditions of migrant labourers.

Farha said she had seen encouraging innovations worldwide to house the vulnerable, such as the Northern Irish city of Belfast ending rough sleeping by housing homeless people in hotels.

"We're seeing governments stepping in – like providing water and sanitation in Nairobi slums – in ways that hadn't been done previously," she said.

Authorities in India and South Africa have set up impromptu shelters and camps, sometimes using stadiums and soccer fields, while U.S. and British cities have taken steps to prevent homelessness with eviction bans and rent freezes.

But housing efforts risk losing steam once countries start lifting lockdown measures and focus on averting an economic recession, Farha warned.

"We talk about rent referral but what about rent forgiveness? People will come out of the pandemic burdened with debt and unable to pay rent for months longer," she said, adding there was an economic case for tackling homelessness.

"Homelessness has a huge economic cost as it creates a burden on healthcare systems," Farha said. "A stable, housing-secure society is good for the economy."

Farha, who will remain in her native Canada as head of The Shift, a new initiative to secure the right to housing, said she would continue visiting cities around the world to expose housing and human rights issues.

She will be replaced as U.N. Special Rapporteur by Indian academic Balakrishnan Rajagopal, an urban planning expert who teaches at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).

President Trump hails U.S. coronavirus testing as infections cross a million (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 2:34 AM, Kanishka Singh, 5304K, Neutral]

The United States has reported more than a million coronavirus infections only because of its testing, President Donald Trump said on Wednesday, hailing the effort as being "much better than any other country in the world."

The Twitter comments came amid warnings from state public health officials that shortages of trained workers and materials have limited testing capacity.

"The only reason the U.S. has reported one million cases of coronavirus is that our testing is sooo much better than any other country in the world," Trump said on Twitter.

"Other countries are way behind us in testing, and therefore show far fewer cases."

A Reuters tally shows the United States has by far the world's largest number of confirmed cases at more than a million, with total deaths topping 58,000 by late Tuesday.

Cases exceeded 3.1 million worldwide, with more than 216,000 deaths, Reuters calculations show.

The rise pressures efforts to boost testing capacity and health officials flagged the challenge of getting tests to those who need them most.

"One of the problems has been is the tests getting to the people who need them," U.S. infectious diseases expert and health official Anthony Fauci told CNN in an interview on Tuesday.

Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said every American in need of a virus test should be able to get one by the end of May or the beginning of June.

"Everyone who needs a test, according to the way we're approaching the identification,

isolation, contact tracing — keeping the country safe and healthy, hopefully, we should see that as we get toward the end of May, the beginning of June,” Fauci said.

The virus has taken an unprecedented toll of the U.S. economy, with a likely contraction in the first quarter at its sharpest pace since the Great Recession, as stringent measures to slow the virus spread almost shut down the nation, ending the longest expansion in its history.

The number of Americans seeking jobless benefits over the past five weeks has soared to 26.5 million, or nearly one in six U.S. workers, and the Trump administration has forecast an April unemployment rate exceeding 16%.

What You Need to Know About the Covid-19 Antibody Test (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Tim Herrera, 40577K, Neutral]

As states across the country weigh options for reopening after weeks of stay-at-home orders, antibody tests have emerged as a potential pathway on how — and when — to do it.

But there are many caveats, as a recent study found that many of the antibody tests available currently provided inaccurate results.

Antibody tests look for signs in the blood that a person has been exposed to the novel coronavirus. Knowing who has been exposed, along with how many people have been, may help to better understand the spread of the virus. This is especially important as studies continue to show that significant percentages of all coronavirus carriers — in some studies, up to half — show no symptoms at all.

The Food and Drug Administration in the United States said this month that “the question of when we can return to work and resume our normal activities is one of the most critical issues facing our nation. Antibody tests — also known as serological tests — may have the potential to play a role in this complex calculation.”

But should you get one? Can you get one? What do they actually tell us? Here’s everything you need to know.

What is an antibody test, and how does it work?

When your body is exposed to a foreign pathogen, like a virus that causes illness, your body’s response is to produce antibodies that live in the blood and tissue. These are proteins that bind to and destroy the virus, preventing it from making copies of itself and further spreading the infection.

The antibody test, also called a serology test, looks at whether your body has developed those antibodies; the presence of them most likely means you were exposed to Covid-19, the illness caused by the virus. Some tests, like the one used by the Mount Sinai Health System in New York, can measure the level of antibodies in your system — your titer.

But in general, most of the tests being made available across the country detect only whether the antibodies are present, said Dr. Jeffrey Jhang, medical director of clinical laboratories and transfusion services for the Mount Sinai Health System. A direct-to-consumer test announced on Tuesday from Quest Diagnostics — more on that below —

measures only presence or absence.

Antibodies can take generally anywhere from about a week to 14 days to develop, Dr. Jhang said, and the levels of antibodies vary based on time since exposure and a person's immune system. This means that a lack of antibodies does not necessarily mean you were not exposed to the virus.

The test is similar to other blood tests you may have had before: A sample of blood is taken from the patient and is then analyzed to determine the presence of antibodies. Most tests will generally return results within a few days, but that may vary, as some tests can return results in a few hours.

If I have antibodies, I'm immune, right?

Not necessarily.

The antibody test does not test for immunity to Covid-19. There is no test yet that can tell if you are immune. It is simply too early to know if the presence of antibodies confers immunity, as this is a new virus, meaning we've never seen it before.

But experts generally agree that, based on experiences with other viruses, including SARS, the presence of antibodies most likely does confer some level of protection, though we don't know to what extent or for how long.

"The difficult thing is we do not have clinical evidence yet of whether the presence of antibodies actually prevents the individual from getting the disease again," Dr. Jhang said, adding, "I think most people believe that the presence of antibodies in most cases would confer some protection given our experience with other viruses."

"But we really have to wait to see some evidence of that before we can be confident in being able to say that these antibodies can be protective," he said.

If I get an antibody test, can it tell if I have the virus?

An antibody test is not the same thing as a diagnostic test for Covid-19, and it will not diagnose whether you currently have it.

Remember that antibodies take time to develop, so a lack of antibodies may just mean your body hasn't had enough time to develop them postinfection.

Do I still need to practice social distancing if I have antibodies?

Yes. If you test positive for antibodies, it is important that you continue to practice social distancing and proper general hygiene, as we still don't know if antibodies confer immunity. Wear a mask, wash your hands regularly, socially distance yourself and clean your home often.

Why does this matter?

As we just learned, knowing your antibody level will help you determine whether you've

been exposed to the coronavirus. This does not mean you're immune, and you should still practice all of the safety precautions you have been. But it does mean you may be eligible to donate convalescent plasma, which can potentially help patients still suffering from Covid-19 by allowing them to "borrow" your antibodies to accelerate their recovery time.

Widespread antibody testing may also give us a clearer picture of the scope of the disease. Results from a random testing of 3,000 people in New York City recently suggested that as many as one in five residents — or about 2.7 million people — might have encountered the disease without realizing it. When describing the results, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo said that because the rate of infection might be far higher than initially thought, the death rate of the virus might be far lower than we thought.

Once the medical community determines whether antibodies confer immunity — which experts say will take at least six months or so to determine — we'll have a better sense of who may be less at risk emerging from lockdown.

"Once we understand that the antibodies are protective, then the testing means something," Dr. Jhang said, as it may help "figure out who can go back to work and be protected and not spread the disease, or when kids can go back to school, teachers going in to teach."

Are the tests accurate?

A study of 14 available antibody tests published last week found that only three delivered consistently reliable results. The study, which has yet to be peer-reviewed, found that only one test never returned a false positive, which is when the test incorrectly confirms the presence of coronavirus antibodies in people who didn't have them. The other two tests with consistently reliable results returned false positives about 1 percent of the time.

Further, these three tests confirmed the presence of antibodies in infected people only 90 percent of the time.

Part of the reason for the inaccuracies, Dr. Jhang said, may be what's called cross-reactivity: This is when a test misidentifies antibodies for a different, but similar, coronavirus.

Florian Krammer of the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York told The New York Times that false positives weren't necessarily an issue when determining how widespread the disease is, as a given test's false-positive rate can be accounted for in estimates. They do, however, matter greatly on an individual level.

"You don't want anybody back to work who has a false positive — that's the last thing you want to do," Dr. Krammer said.

And the World Health Organization, citing ideas for an "immunity passport" or "risk-free certificate" from some countries, last week advised against relying on the tests for policy decisions.

Should I get a test?

If you think you currently have Covid-19, or have experienced in the last few days symptoms like coughing, fever, loss of taste or smell, or difficulty breathing, you should not

get a test. Again, the antibody test is not the same as a diagnostic test for Covid-19.

The test is generally intended for people who either have had a positive test for Covid-19 and have recovered; or who think they were exposed to Covid-19 and no longer have symptoms.

Quest Diagnostics, which on Tuesday announced it is selling a direct-to-consumer antibody test — meaning you don't need to first see a physician to take it — offered these guidelines for people interested in an antibody test:

- Have had a positive test for Covid-19 and it has been at least seven days and you want to know if you have detectable levels of immunoglobulin G, or IgG, antibodies.

- Have not experienced a fever or felt feverish in the last three days.

- Have not experienced new or worsening symptoms of Covid-19 in the past 10 days: loss of smell or taste, shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, feeling weak or lethargic, lightheadedness or dizziness, vomiting or diarrhea, slurred speech and/or seizures.

Where can I get a test?

While getting a test to diagnose Covid-19 is still somewhat difficult, antibody testing seems to be rolling out a little more smoothly. Many organizations nationwide are beginning to offer the test, perhaps most notably Quest, which is offering the test without a physician's referral at the 2,200 patient service centers it operates around the country, the company said.

LabCorp, a competitor of Quest, announced on Monday that, with a physician's referral, patients could get an antibody test at any of its more than 2,000 patient service centers, as well as its 100 locations in Walgreens.

In New York City, the walk-in clinic CityMD said in an email to patients that, as of Tuesday, it would also offer antibody testing that would "indicate with high accuracy if you had the virus in the past whether or not you experienced symptoms."

CityMD advises that people "wait two to four weeks after the end of symptoms to get the antibody test." For more information about getting tested through CityMD, [click here](#).

Last, you can just ask your doctor about antibody testing, as doctors can refer patients to many locations running the test nationwide. Most insurance providers should cover the test, but check with yours to be sure.

Gilead Drug Helped Advanced Covid-19 Patients Recover Faster, U.S. Study Finds (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 3:51 PM, Joseph Walker, Neutral]

A closely-watched drug from Gilead Sciences Inc. GILD 5.67% helped hospitalized Covid-19 patients recover faster, U.S. government researchers said, results that might be enough to lead to its authorization for emergency use.

The National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said Wednesday that advanced Covid-19 patients taking remdesivir in the institute's study had a speedier recovery than

patients taking placebo.

The reported benefit was moderate, however, with remdesivir patients recovering four days faster. All told, it took the patients 11 days to recover.

Also on Wednesday, a separate study in China posted negative results for the drug. The researchers urged more testing, however, because their trial was stopped early due to problems recruiting subjects as the pandemic slowed there.

Researchers run drug trials to establish whether a drug works safely. The varying outcomes for remdesivir point to the challenges scientists face finding definitive proof while racing to come up with a treatment in the middle of a pandemic.

The NIAID-funded study could carry more weight for U.S. health regulators weighing whether to approve wider use of remdesivir, however, since the study was carried out by government researchers and was fully enrolled.

NIAID Director Anthony Fauci said at the White House the results appeared to open the door to drug treatment of Covid-19, though he indicated drugmakers would probably need to build upon the findings to improve the benefit. "This will be the standard of care," he said.

"The FDA, literally as we speak, is working with Gilead to figure out mechanisms to make this easily available to those who need it with regard to getting to the market," Dr. Fauci said. "The FDA is very well aware that this is something that is important so I'm sure they'll move very expeditiously."

The U.S. study compared recovery times for 1,063 hospitalized patients taking either remdesivir or placebo.

NIAID said in a news release that patients taking remdesivir recovered in 11 days, compared with 15 days for patients taking placebo, a 31% improvement that was statistically significant.

A lower proportion of remdesivir patients died than in the placebo, but the difference wasn't statistically significant, though the NIAID said the data suggested a survival benefit. In the remdesivir group, 8% of patients died, compared with 11.6% of patients in the placebo arm.

The data are based on an interim analysis, and more detailed data will be released in the future, the agency said.

The separate study in China showed that remdesivir didn't have a statistically significant benefit over placebo, researchers said.

The median time to clinical improvement in patients taking remdesivir was 21 days, compared with 23 days for patients taking placebo in the China study, but the difference wasn't statistically significant, according to a paper published in the Lancet, a medical journal.

The rate of death was similar in both groups, with 14% of the patients taking remdesivir dying compared with 13% of patients in the placebo group. The difference wasn't

statistically significant.

Bin Cao, a physician who led the Chinese study, said in an interview that he thinks remdesivir did perform somewhat better than placebo in the study, but that the difference was small.

He also said remdesivir may have a role to play in treating Covid-19, but that further studies would have to be done to determine how early in the disease to treat patients and if it should be combined with other drugs.

Dr. Cao noted that patients in the Chinese study were extremely sick and weren't treated with remdesivir until a median of 10 days after their symptoms appeared. Patients may be too sick at that stage for a single antiviral drug to clear the virus, he said.

He also noted that the remdesivir group had a higher proportion of patients with pre-existing conditions like diabetes and hypertension, which may have also influenced the results.

Some experts said the Chinese study data were inconclusive because the trial was stopped early due to a lack of patients. Researchers intended to enroll 453 patients, but had only 237 patients enrolled when the study was stopped.

"The study has not shown a statistically significant finding that confirms a remdesivir treatment benefit of at least the minimally clinically important difference, nor has it ruled such a benefit out," wrote John David Norrie of the Usher Institute's Edinburgh Clinical Trials Unit, in a commentary accompanying the Lancet paper.

Gilead's remdesivir, an antiviral drug administered intravenously and previously tested in Ebola, is among the most closely watched experimental treatments for Covid-19, and is being studied in multiple clinical trials around the world. If approved by regulators, the drug would be the first proven to be effective against Covid-19.

The drug is unlikely to prove a panacea against the new coronavirus, and it won't prevent healthy people from being infected as a vaccine would, doctors and analysts say. Doctors have been looking for evidence from testing whether it reduces the risk of death in patients with Covid-19.

Also on Wednesday, Gilead said a separate study it funded showed that Covid-19 patients taking remdesivir for five days had similar results as patients taking a 10-day course of the drug. The study didn't compare the drug with a control group of patients not taking the drug, making the results difficult to interpret.

The results, while positive, far from definitively demonstrate that remdesivir safely fights Covid-19. The purpose of the study was to compare the two dosing timeframes, and see whether a five-day treatment course achieved similar results as a 10-day course. A shorter course would mean more patients could get the drug.

"The study demonstrates the potential for some patients to be treated with a 5-day regimen, which could significantly expand the number of patients who could be treated with our current supply of remdesivir," Chief Medical Officer Merdad Parsey said.

The company said it is conducting the study at 180 sites, including in countries with high levels of Covid-19 infection such as China, the U.S. and Italy. The study's initial phase involved 397 patients, and the company will enroll another 5,600 patients, Gilead said.

Gilead expects data at the end of May from another study assessing the two dosing durations of remdesivir in patients with moderate Covid-19 compared with patients receiving standard treatment.

Remdesivir hasn't been approved anywhere and has yet to be deemed safe or effective for Covid-19 treatment.

Not just hospitals: U.N. uncovers surprise tools needed to beat coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:09 AM, Nellie Peyton, Neutral]

How countries cope with the new coronavirus depends on more than hospital beds and income levels, the United Nations said on Wednesday, highlighting forgotten factors like internet access and reliance on tourism.

The U.N. Development Programme's (UNDP) analysis of countries' vulnerability to pandemics produced some surprising results, said its chief statistician Milorad Kovacevic.

Small island developing states, such as Jamaica and Haiti, are among the most at risk economically due to their reliance on remittances, tourism and aid, UNDP found, despite the fact they have recorded only a handful of deaths from coronavirus.

"This may ruin the development achievements that some of these countries had over the last 30 years," Kovacevic said.

The global economy is collapsing at a pace not seen since World War Two, with many countries under lockdowns to curb the spread of an outbreak which has infected some 3 million people.

As governments and central banks scramble to provide unprecedented support to combat recession and unemployment, there are concerns over developing countries' limited firepower to fund health and economic rescue efforts.

This does not mean that the poorest countries will suffer most. More important than income level are health and education systems, inequality and social services, according to UNDP.

Inequality in developed countries is often associated with weaker social cohesion and lower trust in government, which could make it harder to beat the disease, said Kovacevic, while more than 40% of the world's people have no social safety net.

One of the most important factors that may be overlooked is connectivity, since internet access determines whether people can continue their education and jobs at home, Kovacevic said.

"The digital divide has become more significant than ever at this moment," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Some 6.5 billion people – 86% of the global population – do not have access to reliable

broadband internet, UNDP said.

Croatia also emerged as another unexpected result. While it is well-prepared based on health and development measures, 20% of its gross domestic product (GDP) comes from tourism, which means it could be hard hit by travel bans and lockdowns.

Experts have warned that the 2030 deadline to meet the U.N.'s development goals is at risk as economies suffer in the fight against the virus, public financing dries up and international cooperation wanes.

Prepare for less privacy (Axios)

Axios [4/29/2020 5:40 AM, Jennifer A. Kingson, 526K, Neutral]

Whether in the workplace or the mall, people can expect that an opened-up world will involve more intrusive security measures and surveillance.

Why it matters: All the new coronavirus protocols that companies are considering for their workers and customers — from contact tracing and temperature-taking to heat mapping and "immunity passports" — have privacy and civil liberties implications.

Where it stands: While there's evidence that people are less concerned with privacy than before the pandemic hit — and more concerned with health — they still may not be ready for a world where their blood is tested for antibodies before boarding an airplane, as Dubai-based Emirates airlines has started doing.

The CEO of Delta, Ed Bastian, said the airline is considering "immunity passports" that would be required for boarding.

Other options could have a far broader reach.

Employers are entitled to mandate that workers get their temperature taken at the workplace (per a coronavirus-specific EEOC decision), report any symptoms to their boss, and get a COVID-19 vaccine if one is developed, per the WSJ.

Apple and Google are collaborating on an app-based system for contact tracing that "uses Bluetooth to determine if users have recently been in close proximity to someone with the coronavirus," Axios' Ina Fried reports.

While the tech giants envision an opt-in system, that would limit its utility, since it might not attract a critical mass of people.

Where it's going: Companies are going to be collecting a lot more information about people — through contactless payment systems, which will be in growing use as people avoid face-to-face transactions, and through the various technologies in development that will track people's virus exposure.

But the security of that information will be vulnerable to hacking or misuse, as well as public skepticism.

"For people to adopt a technology, it's very important to get privacy right," Omer Tene of the

International Association of Privacy Professionals tells Axios. 'If there's the fear that it's creepy or spying on them — or even draining their battery — people won't opt in to it.'

And in the same way that closed-circuit cameras stationed around London in advance of the Olympics became permanent fixtures, some surveillance measures to combat COVID-19 could turn out to be anything but temporary.

"Civil liberties rarely roll backwards," Cillian Kieran, CEO of the data privacy management company Ethyca, tells Axios.

The intrigue: Companies are still contemplating what measures they'll put in place for workers and customers once they reopen — and few have stated their plans openly yet. But many options under discussion would bump up against a hodgepodge of existing rules, like the medical privacy law HIPAA and the California Consumer Privacy Act.

Contact tracing services rely on databases like the ones that the CCPA allows people to remove themselves from, for example.

But erring too far on the side of privacy could expose companies to liability lawsuits from people who say they contracted COVID-19 on the job or in a store or restaurant.

For companies, "privacy is essential to getting the adoption and cooperation you need," Jules Polonetsky, CEO of the Future of Privacy Forum, tells Axios.

"For any of these measures to succeed, employers need to figure how to ensure that employees don't feel penalized by cooperating or reporting."

People need to feel like companies are doing things in the least intrusive way, being transparent in what's being collected and how it's used and making sure that data isn't held indefinitely, Sean Joyce, PwC's cybersecurity and privacy leader, tells Axios.

"Are you doing things to respect the privacy of each individual?" he says, "So it's not like there's a line or 20 people and you're saying, 'Hey, Sean — you registered 102 degrees, step out of line.'"

Be smart: Going forward, "we're going to be forced to be more biosecure, because my infection could infect an entire village," James Canton, CEO of the Institute for Global Future, tells Axios.

People might exchange biosecurity information routinely — or even wear or carry a physical token signaling they're immune, he predicts.

"It sounds Orwellian to some, or draconian to others, but it'll protect lives."

Navy Secretary Orders Deeper Inquiry Into Virus-Stricken Ship (New York Times)
New York Times [4/29/2020 4:11 PM, Eric Schmitt and Helene Cooper, Neutral]

The acting secretary of the Navy on Wednesday ordered a wider investigation into events aboard the aircraft carrier Theodore Roosevelt, shelving for now a recommendation by the Navy's top admiral to restore Capt. Brett E. Crozier to command the virus-stricken warship.

"I have unanswered questions that the preliminary inquiry has identified and that can only be answered by a deeper review," the acting secretary, James E. McPherson, said in a statement.

Mr. McPherson said he was directing the chief of naval operations, Adm. Michael M. Gilday, to investigate, expanding a preliminary review that the Navy completed and presented to Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper last week.

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak aboard U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt," Mr. McPherson said.

His announcement came just days after Admiral Gilday recommended giving Captain Crozier his job back. But Mr. Esper, who initially said he would leave the process largely with the military chain of command, declined to endorse the findings last week, saying that he wanted to review the Navy's investigation into the matter first.

Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had also told associates that he favored a wider inquiry into the Roosevelt matter.

The decision essentially kicks down the road any action on Admiral Gilday's recommendation that Captain Crozier be reinstated, and was seen by some people within the Defense Department as reflecting concern among both civilian and military officials at the Pentagon over getting on the wrong side of President Trump. Captain Crozier was fired in part because of fears that Mr. Trump wanted him gone, and not knowing how the president feels about reinstating the captain has cast a shadow over the actions since.

"More and more, this looks like the military leadership and civilian leadership having very divergent goals," said Jon Soltz, an Iraq war veteran who is the chairman of VoteVets.org. "The military seems to not be interested in punishing a captain for taking desperate action to save the lives of his crew members."

But the Defense Department's civilian leadership, he said, "seems more interested in protecting the Trump administration's image, even if that means hanging commanders out to dry."

Reinstating Captain Crozier could be a remarkable reversal to a story that has seized the attention of the Navy, the military and even a nation struggling with the coronavirus. Instead, it is unclear who will be at the helm of the nuclear-powered carrier as its 4,800-member crew prepares to leave its weeklong quarantine in Guam to resume operations in the western Pacific.

Mr. McPherson's two-paragraph statement made no mention of Captain Crozier's fate. A spokeswoman for Mr. McPherson said that Capt. Carlos Sardiello, a former commanding officer of the Roosevelt who was summoned back after Captain Crozier was dismissed, would remain in charge for now.

Navy officials said the broader investigation would be conducted by an admiral outside the Pacific region and would most likely take about 30 days.

Senior lawmakers reacted with some skepticism to the Navy's latest decision.

"It's perfectly legitimate to extend the investigation about everything that happened with the Roosevelt," Representative Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat who heads the House Armed Services Committee, told reporters on a conference call.

But, Mr. Smith added, "I personally think that Captain Crozier should be reinstated."

Senator Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the senior Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement, "This investigation should be thorough and expeditious." He added, "The removal of Captain Crozier was highly unorthodox and the recommendations of the military leadership on his reinstatement should be heavily weighed."

From the moment his letter pleading for assistance from top Navy officials became public, Captain Crozier has assumed the role of an unlikely hero, willing to sacrifice a three-decade career for the sake of his sailors.

After Captain Crozier was fired by the acting Navy secretary at the time, his personal setback took on momentum as a larger cause. Videos of hundreds of sailors cheering their skipper as he walked off the ship's gangway went viral on social media.

An ill-fated trip to the carrier afterward by the acting secretary, Thomas B. Modly, backfired when he criticized the crew for supporting its deposed captain. Mr. Modly resigned.

General Milley had agreed with Admiral Gilday, the Navy's top officer, in advising that Captain Crozier not be removed until an investigation into the events aboard the Roosevelt was complete. But Mr. Modly waved off those warnings, fearing that Mr. Trump wanted Captain Crozier fired, according to his acquaintances, and dismissed the skipper.

Mr. Trump's position appeared to ease, however, given the support for Captain Crozier in the Navy and among the general public. The president has not made clear where he stands on Captain Crozier's reinstatement, leading some Pentagon officials to conclude that Mr. Esper's hesitation in accepting the Navy's recommendations would allow time to account for the views of the president.

The announcement on Wednesday comes as the crew of the Roosevelt begins its long-scheduled turnover: swapping out those sailors who remained behind to clean the ship with healthy crew members who were isolated on Guam for the past several weeks.

In the coming days, the Roosevelt will start a series of sea trials, requalifying flight crews and pilots, before carrying on with its deployment in the western Pacific.

This week, the Kidd, the second deployed American warship stricken with the virus, returned to port in San Diego with at least 64 members of its crew testing positive for the illness, according to a Navy news release. The Kidd, a destroyer, was previously operating in the eastern Pacific and the Caribbean as part of a counternarcotics operation.

Navy opening full investigation of coronavirus outbreak on USS Theodore Roosevelt (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 11:21 AM, Dan Lamothe, Neutral]

The U.S. Navy will open a full investigation of the coronavirus outbreak aboard an aircraft carrier, acting Navy secretary James McPherson said Wednesday, days after the service's top officer recommended the reinstatement of a captain who raised concerns about the handling of the issue.

McPherson said Wednesday that after carefully reviewing a preliminary inquiry into what happened, he has "unanswered questions" that "can only be answered by a deeper review."

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions, and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the COVID-19 outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt," McPherson said in a statement.

The statement did detail McPherson's questions, and Navy officials did not offer clarification Wednesday morning. It was not immediately clear who will lead the investigation for Adm. Mike Gilday, the chief of naval operations.

The outbreak on the ship in the Pacific had resulted in 940 confirmed coronavirus cases and 29 recovered cases so far among a crew of more than 4,800, the Navy said. The virus began spreading after a port visit to Vietnam in early March, although Navy officials have said the outbreak could have originated with a resupply flight to the carrier.

As the outbreak spread among the crew, Navy Capt. Brett Crozier, the commanding officer, sent an email to three admirals with a memo attached raising concerns as the ship arrived in Guam for quarantining, testing and cleaning.

"I fully realize that I bear responsibility for not demanding more decisive action the moment we pulled in, but at this point my only priority is the continued well-being of the crew and embarked staff," Crozier wrote in the March 30 email, later obtained by The Washington Post. "I believe if there is ever a time to ask for help it is now regardless of the impact on my career."

The memo attached to the email leaked to the media and was initially published in the San Francisco Chronicle a day later. Crozier wrote in it that "decisive action is required."

"We are not at war. Sailors do not need to die," Crozier wrote. "If we do not act now, we are failing to properly take care of our most trusted asset — our sailors."

Acting Navy secretary Thomas Modly removed Crozier from his job April 2, saying the captain had not safeguarded his message to senior Navy officials and had shown poor judgment. Modly resigned on April 7 after traveling from Washington to Guam and delivering a speech over the Theodore Roosevelt's loudspeaker in which he insulted Crozier and lectured the crew for supporting him.

Gilday recommended Crozier be reinstated last week, following the preliminary inquiry. But McPherson and Defense Secretary Mark T. Esper sought more information before making a decision.

President Trump initially criticized Crozier for sending the memo and email to Navy officials

but softened his tone when videos emerged showing the ship's crew cheering Crozier off the ship after he was relieved of command. Trump said that he did not "want to destroy somebody for having a bad day," and that he might intervene in the case.

Navy Will Reopen Investigation of USS Roosevelt Coronavirus Outbreak (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 12:18 PM, Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, Neutral]

The U.S. Navy will open a second investigation into the coronavirus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt, a top official said Wednesday, delaying action on a recommendation that the aircraft carrier's commander, Capt. Brett Crozier, be reinstated to duty.

Capt. Crozier was removed from his post April 2 after writing and distributing a memo demanding a more aggressive Navy response to the coronavirus outbreak. Following a first investigation, the Navy recommended last week that Capt. Crozier be reinstated.

But the acting Navy secretary, James E. McPherson, asked the U.S. chief naval officer, Adm. Mike Gilday, for a broader probe of the outbreak, citing unanswered questions left by the earlier inquiry, which he called a preliminary investigation. Mr. McPherson announced the follow-on probe in a statement Wednesday.

The decision extends a tumultuous period following an upheaval over the military's response to the virus outbreak aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt. Nearly 1,000 sailors eventually were infected, with one death.

"This investigation will build on the good work of the initial inquiry to provide a more fulsome understanding of the sequence of events, actions and decisions of the chain of command surrounding the Covid-19 outbreak aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt," Mr. McPherson said of the new probe.

Adm. Gilday met last week with Mr. McPherson, Defense Secretary Mark Esper and Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on the initial probe and the recommendation that Capt. Crozier be reinstated. Mr. Esper last week asked for more time to consider the recommendation.

The Navy opened the first investigation on April 1, the week after the first coronavirus cases began appearing on the Theodore Roosevelt and days after the ship was diverted to port in Guam.

Capt. Crozier on March 30 wrote and distributed a memo pleading for a faster and more thorough response to the outbreak. At the time, about 70 crew members had tested positive for the coronavirus.

On April 2, Capt. Crozier was relieved of command by the acting Navy secretary at the time, Thomas Modly, who said he lost confidence in the naval commander.

Mr. Modly, in turn, resigned the following week after an uproar over disparaging remarks he made about Capt. Crozier over the aircraft carrier's public address system. Mr. McPherson was named the new acting secretary.

When Capt. Crozier left the vessel following his removal, he was cheered by throngs of sailors in a salute that was captured on video and circulated world-wide on social media.

The saga over the outbreak has divided the Navy as it battles coronavirus outbreaks among crew members among other ships as well.

Chief Petty Officer Charles Robert Thacker Jr., 41 years old, of Fort Smith, Ark., died April 13 at Naval Hospital Guam, the Navy said in a statement.

Trade

[China] Trump Administration Remains Hopeful on China Trade Pact Despite Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 4:32 PM, William Mauldin, Neutral]

A senior U.S. trade official expressed confidence Wednesday that Beijing will meet its obligations under the trade deal with Washington, despite fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and doubts by experts about China's ability to meet purchase targets.

"There have been certain challenges presented by the coronavirus, but overall the experience that we've had is that the Chinese are very, very committed to implementing their commitments," the senior official said during a briefing with reporters.

Many others question whether China, with its economy hit hard by the pandemic, is able to meet the trade deal's mandate that it increase purchases of U.S. goods and services by \$200 billion over 2017 levels.

"Looking at the supply-and-demand trends, and looking at how ambitious those targets were to begin with, in my view it's inconceivable that we're going to hit those targets this year," said Wendy Cutler, a former senior U.S. trade official and current vice president at the Asia Society Policy Institute.

The American Petroleum Institute, the trade group for the oil-and-gas industry, last week sent a letter to U.S. trade representative Robert Lighthizer and other senior officials reminding them of China's commitment to purchase \$18.5 billion in additional U.S. energy products this year—and suggesting that China might even increase that commitment.

"Further examination of this Agreement may present opportunities to address our domestic oversupply and at the same time, further advance U.S. international objectives," API President Mike Sommers said in the letter.

Still, even large quantities of oil won't yield the same revenue as previously given the major drop in energy prices and so may not help satisfy the dollar requirement for purchases.

"You can cover this up a bit because of the virus, but pretty soon we're going to see all of this exposed, and we're going to be able to judge whether China begins to make the purchases they promised," said Michael Wessel, a member of the congressionally mandated U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

A spokesman for the Chinese embassy in Washington didn't immediately respond to a

request for comment. The China deal, signed in January, has a clause that allows Beijing to consult with Washington on the purchase agreements in case of a sudden economic setback.

The limited trade agreement, which consists mostly of concessions made by Beijing, is the main tangible result of President Trump's 2016 campaign promise to raise pressure on the world's second-biggest economy to balance trade and respect global rules of commerce.

With the U.S. economy also faltering, Mr. Trump is relying on the first phase of the China pact and an amended version of the North American trade rules with Canada and Mexico as his main economic achievements as he seeks reelection this fall.

China's required purchases include not only U.S. agricultural exports but American energy products, transportation equipment and other goods. The exact product breakdown is classified.

U.S. officials say they expect China to follow through on its commitments. "There have been some issues related to purchases and we really have been talking extensively to the Chinese to stay on track to make the purchases and meet the purchase commitments," the senior trade official said.

Some progress has been made. This month China belatedly published a required "action plan" for improving intellectual-property protection in the country, a key issue that kicked off the trade spat in 2017, according to a report by the Xinhua state news agency. The road map was supposed to be published within 30 business days of the agreement's effective date in mid-February.

The senior U.S. trade official said Washington is reviewing the intellectual-property plan and will stay in touch on intellectual-property measures as China rolls them out.

"They took some action on intellectual property that seemed to be in the spirit of the agreement," said Sen. Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa), chairman of the Finance Committee, in a call with reporters on Tuesday.

Despite the hopeful signs on trade, U.S.-Chinese ties have deteriorated in recent weeks, notably with finger-pointing over the coronavirus epidemic.

"Relations between the U.S. and China politically are at a low point with concerns over China's withholding of information about the virus," said Kelly Ann Shaw, a former economic and security official in the Trump White House and current partner at law firm Hogan Lovells.

Even so, she said, that "based on my experience negotiating with them that China will comply where it is physically possible to do so."

[China] China committed to Phase 1 trade deal despite pandemic – U.S. official (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

China remains "very, very committed" to meeting its commitments under a Phase 1 trade deal with the United States, despite the unprecedented economic and health impacts of the

new coronavirus pandemic, a senior U.S. trade official said on Wednesday.

The official told reporters that U.S. officials were talking regularly, and often daily, about implementation of the trade deal and to make sure that China fulfilled its extensive agreements to buy U.S. goods and services.

The U.S. Trade Representative's office kept China on its priority watch list for concerns about intellectual property protections and enforcement, and was watching closely to see if it implemented changes agreed as part of the trade agreement, the official said.

Near East & North Africa

Saudi TV Series Sparks Rare Ramadan Debate on Ties With Israel (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 8:59 AM, Vivian Nereim, 6400K, Neutral]

A Saudi television series in which the taboo topic of ties with Israel became a plot line has spurred speculation it's a prelude to a real-life push for a rethink toward a country long viewed as a public enemy in the Arab world.

The show, called "Exit 7," is a comedic special for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan, exploring rapid changes in Saudi Arabia through a bumbling father figure who's trying to adapt. In the controversial episode earlier this week, he discovers his son has befriended an Israeli through an online game. The revelation divides the family: shocking the father, infuriating his daughter and leading his father-in-law to declare "so what?"

"Israel is there whether you like it or not," says the unperturbed elder, played by Saudi actor Rashid Al Shamrani. He later says he'd happily do business with Israelis and argues that Palestinians are the real enemy for "insulting" Saudi Arabia "day and night."

The fact that the episode was aired by MBC – a private broadcaster majority-owned by the Saudi government – led some Saudis to predict that officials want to pave the way for closer relations with Israel. Gulf Arab states and Israel don't have diplomatic relations, but there have been closer informal contacts in recent years which officials say stem from shared concerns over Iran.

'Not My Issue'

"The notion of a real Saudi-Israeli normalization is still far-fetched," said Abdulaziz Alghashian, a lecturer of international relations at the U.K.'s University of Essex. But the TV show did at least start to normalize discourse about normalization, he said, and it could be "a way of gradually introducing the Saudi public to very early stages of sporadic Saudi-Israeli cooperation."

Across the Gulf, the idea of treating Israel as just another country is deeply contentious. Former Saudi intelligence chief Prince Turki Al Faisal recently appeared on Saudi television to declare "the Zionist lobby" was among the kingdom's biggest enemies in the U.S.

Yet there's also been a nationalistic reaction against long-established support for Palestinians and their demands for the return of land occupied by Israel, partly due to perceived Palestinian criticism of Saudi Arabia. Most recently a political cartoon by a

Palestinian in Sweden that appeared to mock the damage of falling oil prices on the kingdom stirred anger. Saudi Twitter users have shared a "Palestine is not my issue" hashtag.

To some extent, it's a generational shift. Supporting the Palestinians remains a key element of state rhetoric. But some Saudis closer in age to 34-year-old Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman argue it's time to focus on their own country, not pan-Arab dilemmas that absorbed years of attention with little result.

Kuwait Row

"Exit 7" underscores how complex Saudi discourse on the topic is, Alghashian said. While the sister character declares a crusade against "the Zionist danger," a delivery man she asks about the topic replies that he wants nothing to do with politics and is more concerned about finding a job.

It's one of several Ramadan series to court controversy on the issue this year. Another MBC show called Umm Haroun, set in 1940s Kuwait, depicts a multi-religious village with Jewish residents and stars Kuwaiti actress Hayat Al-Fahad as a Jewish midwife. In a statement, MBC said the drama showcases "a Middle East where acceptance of one another was the norm." But it set off a backlash in Kuwait, with Al-Fahad criticized by some for taking on the role.

Meanwhile, Egyptian Ramadan series "The End" took the opposite tack: Set in the year 2120 in a dystopian post-Israel Jerusalem, it predicts the destruction of the Jewish state and imagines a future without it.

"Inside every Arab, there's the idea of liberating any occupied Arab territory," show writer Amr Sami Atef said in an interview with Saudi television channel Al-Arabiya Al-Hadath.

Israel's foreign ministry condemned the drama, which stood in stark contrast to the cooperation between governments in Egypt and Israel, which established full diplomatic ties in 1980, especially over security.

[Israel] Israel deems women's ritual baths essential, leaving some conflicted over virus risk (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 5:00 AM, Ruth Eglash, 18460K, Neutral]

As covid-19 spread rapidly in the first weeks of March, Esther grew nervous. It was nearly time for her monthly visit to the ritual bath that many observant Jewish women use to purify themselves after every menstrual cycle, and she worried she might catch the virus at the very place meant for physical and spiritual cleansing.

"I have a disability and many underlying health issues," said Esther, 43, an ultra-Orthodox mother of seven. "Deciding whether or not to go was very, very stressful."

Even as Israel closed down its public sphere to stem the spread of the coronavirus, the government deemed that some 700 of these ritual baths, or mikvahs, were essential and permitted them to remain open along with supermarkets and pharmacies. When most of the country was completely locked down for the Passover holiday, the women's mikvahs were not.

Without a dip in a mikvah, observant women are forbidden to have any physical contact with their husbands, leaving these wives with a dilemma: go to the mikvah and resume intimate relations or stay clear of the ritual bath to avoid any chance of infection.

"I deliberated for a long time about whether I should even go. I thought about waiting until after this crisis was over," said Esther, a Jerusalem resident who spoke on condition that her full name be withheld so she could discuss an intimate matter. "But the truth is, I am a woman and my husband a man; we need to be together. Without the mikvah we would not be able to be intimate, and that would make this difficult time even more stressful and lonely."

She decided to go, but took precautions she hoped would keep her safe. She arrived early, when the water was still fresh. She sprayed disinfectant on every surface before touching it. She spent as little time there as possible.

According to Jewish law, women are required to visit the mikvah, a small pool containing water mainly from a natural source, on the conclusion of a 12-to-14-day period that begins with the onset of menstruation. Until a full-body immersion is carried out, any form of physical contact between a husband and wife is prohibited. For observant Jews, ignoring this commandment is as unthinkable as eating pork or driving on the Sabbath.

Dvora Eiferman, the official at the Ministry of Religious Services overseeing public mikvahs, said that even when emergency measures were imposed in mid-March, shuttering stores, restaurants, gyms and ritual baths for men, and later when synagogues and other religious spaces were closed down, it was clear the women's mikvahs would remain open.

"We are talking about the most important ritual, a basic need, and there was no choice but to keep them open," she said.

In the United States, many Jewish communities have also tried to keep their mikvahs open, although as the coronavirus crisis has deepened, particularly in the New York area where the Jewish population has been especially hard hit, the ritual baths have been shuttered along with other religious institutions.

The Israeli government, in keeping mikvahs open, issued new safety guidelines. These require women to register in advance, allowing the mikvah attendant to track those entering and have time to clean the bath between appointments. The chlorine levels in the baths must be measured after every two or three immersions. While women would previously shower on site in private bathrooms before entering the mikvah, such preparations are no longer permitted on the premises.

So far, there are no reported cases of women who have become infected at a mikvah in Israel, according to Mitchell Schwaber, director of the National Center for Infection Control.

But there have been scares, and many women remain fearful about going, though they feel there is no choice.

In Efrat, a Jewish settlement in the occupied West Bank where one of the first Israeli outbreaks of coronavirus occurred, a woman visited the mikvah without realizing she was

infected. When that was discovered, the bathhouse, one of two in the town, was ordered closed. Every woman who had been there that day was ordered into a 14-day quarantine. The mikvah was reopened a week later after a thorough cleaning.

"It is a little uncomfortable doing this when the [attendant] is guiding you from a distance, wearing a face mask," said Hindy Ginsberg, 36, who lives in Efrat. "But I am grateful the option is still there."

Ginsberg, who is a consulting expert on Jewish purity laws, stressed the importance of the mikvah for Jewish married life. "Even if you take sex out of the equation, we would still not be able to hold hands, and that would just be too difficult with everything that is going on," she said.

For many observant Jewish women, mikvah visits have long been meant to be discreet, carried out in the evening without any notice to family members. Under the new guidelines, women must use a newly created app to register their appointments. Names and contact details must be logged in case of another scare.

"My local women's WhatsApp group was joking about what excuses we could give our children or the police about where we are going when everyone is meant to be staying home," Ginsberg said. "I had to pretend I was going to the supermarket."

Not everyone agrees that the baths need to remain open in the midst of a pandemic. Rabbi Haim Amsalem, a former parliament member from the ultra-Orthodox Shas party, has urged that health and safety should always come first.

"The question was posed to me by communities in Europe and the U.S., where mikvahs have been closed for months and where there are strict directives not to leave the house at all," said Amsalem. "My approach is that Torah commandments are not supposed to be a punishment. We have to find a way to live with these rules but not put ourselves in danger."

He determined that women can fulfill Jewish law with an immersion in a large bath, a hot tub or a private swimming pool.

For Esther, returning to the mikvah during the coronavirus outbreak no longer seems like an option. She said she was so unsettled by her last visit there that she convinced her doctor to prescribe contraceptive pills to stave off her next menstrual cycle.

"I'll take it for a month or two and by then I hope this situation will be better," she said.

[Libya] Libya's Hifter declares cease-fire in Tripoli fighting (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:29 PM, Samy Magdy, Neutral]

Eastern Libyan forces laying siege to the country's capital of Tripoli said Wednesday they have agreed on a humanitarian pause in fighting during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

Ahmed al-Mosmari, a spokesman for the forces of military commander Khalifa Hifter, said at a news conference that they have stopped all military operations across Libya in response to international appeals for a humanitarian truce so authorities could focus on dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

The recent round of fighting in war-torn Libya began last April when Hifter's forces launched an offensive trying to take Tripoli, clashing with an array of militias loosely allied with the U.N.-supported but weak government in the capital.

There was no immediate comment from the Tripoli-based administration, known as the Government of National Accord.

Violence has escalated in recent weeks, with the two warring sides accusing each other of shelling civilian neighborhoods. The U.N. has said the violence and worsening humanitarian crisis in Libya could amount to war crimes.

Stephanie Williams, acting U.N. envoy in Libya, on Tuesday called for a humanitarian truce during Ramadan that could pave the way for a permanent cease-fire.

The cease-fire announcement came after Hifter, in an attempted show of strength, declared on Monday that a 2015 U.N.-brokered political deal to unite the oil-rich country was "a thing of the past."

Al-Mosmari, the spokesman, said Wednesday that Hifter's self-styled Libyan Arab Armed Forces would announce constitutional declaration including a "road map" that would lead the country to elections.

The Tripoli-based government had said it wasn't surprised by Hifter's announcement and urged Libyans to join "a comprehensive dialogue and continue on the democratic path to reach a comprehensive and permanent solution based on ballot boxes."

While the 2015 agreement has failed to bring unity or stability to the divided country, Hifter's announcement threatened to further complicate U.N. efforts to broker a political settlement to the civil war.

The clashes in Libyan have complicated efforts to fight the coronavirus outbreak. Libya has confirmed more than 60 cases, including two deaths, most of them the country's west.

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011, when a civil war toppled long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who was later killed. The chaos has worsened in the recent round of fighting as foreign backers increasingly intervened despite pledges to the contrary at a high-profile peace summit in Berlin earlier this year.

[Saudi Arabia] Saudi foreign reserves fall at fastest for two decades (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:58 AM, Marwa Rashad and Davide Barbuscia, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's central bank foreign reserves fell in March at their fastest rate in at least 20 years and to their lowest since 2011, while the kingdom slipped into a \$9 billion budget deficit in the first quarter as oil revenues collapsed.

The world's largest oil exporter is suffering from historic price lows, while at the same time measures to fight the new coronavirus are likely to curb the pace and scale of economic reforms launched by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

The Saudi Arabian Monetary Authority said late on Tuesday its net foreign assets, which

include securities such as U.S Treasuries and foreign deposits, fell in March to \$464 billion, their lowest in 19 years.

The nearly \$27 billion decline – the biggest monthly drop in at least two decades – signals the kingdom's urgent need to tap into reserves to offset economic damage from oil prices and a severe coronavirus-driven slowdown of non-oil sectors.

"We believe that the magnitude of the drop ... reflected both higher government funding to cover the budget deficit and the support packages announced in March to help counterbalance the impact of COVID-19," said Monica Malik, chief economist at Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank (ADCB).

Finance Minister Mohammed al-Jadaan said last week the kingdom would limit its draw down to a maximum of \$32 billion from reserves this year to fill a widening deficit which it plans to cover instead by increasing borrowing to nearly \$60 billion.

Early on Wednesday the finance ministry reported a first quarter budget deficit of \$9 billion, mostly because of a drop in oil revenues that reversed a first quarter surplus of around \$7.4 billion in 2019.

Oil revenues in the first three months of the year posted a 24% annual decline to \$34 billion and pushed total revenues down 22% year on year.

Saudi Arabia, which had registered more than 20,000 coronavirus cases as of Tuesday with 152 deaths, had originally projected a \$50 billion deficit this year, or 6.4% of gross domestic product (GDP), widening from around \$35 billion last year.

Jadaan has said the deficit could now widen to up to 9% of GDP this year, but some analysts have predicted 22% with oil prices at \$30 a barrel.

International oil prices LCOc1 have shed around two thirds value since the start of this year and are trading around \$21.

"If Finance Minister al-Jadaan's plans are for merely \$32 billion of reserves drawdown then, following a \$27 billion reduction in March alone, that means almost all the remainder will be covered by new sovereign debt issuance, assuming there are no further privatisations, because of market conditions," said Hasnain Malik, head of equity strategy at Tellimer.

Saudi Arabia and other large producers recently agreed to cut output by almost 10 million barrels per day (bpd), in May-June, in an attempt to balance the market, but demand kept falling nonetheless due to the global slowdown.

Jadaan said last week he expects the pandemic to cause a slump in activity in the non-oil private sector too this year and that the government could take more actions on top of \$32 billion in emergency stimulus measures announced last month.

Private sector loan growth, however, was solid in March, central bank data showed, "potentially reflecting the higher borrowing requirements of corporates with COVID-19 impacting cash flows," said ADCB's Malik.

Non-oil revenues in the first quarter fell 17% compared to the same period one year earlier, with revenues from taxes on goods and services plunging, in a sign of overall slowdown.

Saudi Arabia has already cut its 2020 budget by nearly 5% and further spending curbs are likely.

In Q1, however, capex spending declined only 4%, the finance ministry said.

Riyadh last month raised its debt ceiling to 50% of GDP from 30%. It has already borrowed \$12 billion in international bonds this year.

[Tunisia] Tunisia announces lockdown easing, timeline for students (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 3:39 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Tunisian officials on Wednesday announced a partial easing of lockdown measures in place to curb the spread of novel coronavirus, although schools will largely remain closed until September.

Education Minister Mohamed Hamdi, Health Minister Abdellatif Mekki and other officials told a joint news conference that work was expected to resume with reduced staffing in some sectors from Monday.

A broader relaxation is planned for June 14 but will depend on how the health situation develops, officials said, warning of the risk of a second wave of infection.

People aged over 65 and those suffering from chronic illnesses were among those not covered by Wednesday's easing of restrictions.

Students in their final year of high school are set to restart classes on May 28 and sit their end-of-year exams in July, the education minister said.

Other students will return to school for the new academic year in September.

Schools in Tunisia have been closed since mid-March.

Medicine and pharmacy students will return to university on May 11, with other departments opening later, said Higher Education Minister Slim Choura.

Tunisia has officially declared 975 cases of novel coronavirus including 40 deaths, and has put strict social distancing measures in place, including a night-time curfew.

Tunisia's Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh had said earlier this month that lockdown measures would be progressively eased after May 3.

[Yemen] Yemen records multiple coronavirus cases for first time; U.N. fears more (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:24 PM, Mohammed Mukhashaf and Mohammed Ghobari, Neutral]

Yemeni authorities reported multiple coronavirus infections for the first time on Wednesday after the United Nations said it feared the disease could be spreading undetected in a

country where millions face famine and lack medical care.

The five new COVID-19 cases were detected in Aden, a southern port which is interim headquarters of a government ousted from the capital Sanaa more than five years ago by the Iran-aligned Houthi group in a war that has created the world's largest humanitarian crisis.

Previously Yemen had detected only a single case.

International health officials have long warned that Yemen's population could be extremely vulnerable to an outbreak, which would be difficult to detect in a country where health infrastructure has been degraded by poverty and war.

An emergency committee for coronavirus maintained by the Aden-based government said in a tweet that it would release more details about the five new cases.

Authorities told Reuters they have been unable to track down "patient zero" for Yemen's infections, an important step in tracing people potentially exposed to infection and containing an outbreak.

On Tuesday the United Nations said there was a "very real probability" the virus was circulating within communities.

Health workers say the virus could spread rapidly in a country where 24 million people – 80% of the population – rely on aid, and 10 million are at risk of famine.

Yemen's only previous laboratory-confirmed case was detected on April 10 in the southern port of Ash Shihr. The 60-year-old port official has since recovered and tested negative for the virus, the committee said on Monday.

Two sources familiar with the matter have told Reuters there has been at least one confirmed case in the capital Sanaa, which is controlled by the Houthis.

But the Houthi Health Ministry denied this and said all suspected cases had tested negative for COVID-19.

On Wednesday the Aden-based government's emergency coronavirus committee said it had concerns that Sanaa authorities were not admitting to a coronavirus outbreak there.

Responding to the newly confirmed cases, authorities in Aden announced a three-day, 24-hour curfew starting at midnight.

The announcement came from the Southern Transitional Council (STC), a separatist group that declared self-rule on Sunday in southern Yemeni governorates including Aden.

Mosques were also closed until further notice in Aden, and shopping centres and restaurants for two weeks. Markets selling qat, the mildly stimulant green leaf chewed daily by many Yemenis, will continue to be closed across all southern governorates and its sale banned in and around towns.

Wholesalers will be asked to store a certain amount of reserve goods, before certain amounts are allowed for export, the STC statement said.

Europe and Eurasia

[Albania] Albanian economy to shrink by 5% due to virus, quake – World Bank (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:09 PM, Benet Koleka, Neutral]

Albania's economy, hit by an earthquake that left 17,000 homeless last year and coronavirus-containment measures, could shrink by as much as 5% in 2020, even if most economic activities restart in early summer, the World Bank said.

In its semi-annual report on the Western Balkans released on Wednesday, the bank described the double hit to Albania as "destructive," noting the new coronavirus had frozen large parts of the economy.

The bank said dependence on tourism, close ties with hard-hit Italy across the Adriatic Sea and limited fiscal options made Albania especially vulnerable right now.

"Even according to the baseline scenario, which assumes most economic activities could re-start by the beginning of summer, the annual gross domestic product is expected to shrink by 5% in the year 2020," the World Bank said.

However, the bank said its forecast had an unusually high degree of uncertainty. The downside scenario, which assumed economic activity would start later in the summer, saw the economy shrink by 6.9%.

The recession and measures to prop up the economy would widen the budget deficit to 5.4% of gross domestic product in 2020 and increase public debt to 75.8% of GDP, it added.

Albania's last assessment at the end of March saw economic growth slowing to 2% from 4.1%, the budget deficit rising to 3.9% from 2.2% and public debt rising four percentage points to 68.8% of gross domestic product.

Once the crisis was over, "the normalisation of economic activity and the reconstruction to soothe the consequences of the quake are expected to back rapid growth, but structural reforms are needed in the medium term," the bank added.

[Austria] Austrian president's office briefly cleared after bomb threat (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:17 AM, Francois Murphy, Neutral]

Part of the former imperial palace in central Vienna housing Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen's office was evacuated on Wednesday after a bomb threat and the president was taken to safety, but police soon gave the all-clear.

A police spokesman said the threat was made by email against the Hofburg, a sprawling palace complex that includes reception rooms, the headquarters of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and temporarily the debating chamber of Austria's lower house of parliament.

Police sealed off the area around Van der Bellen's office, including a square that separates it from the office of the head of Austria's government, conservative Chancellor Sebastian Kurz.

"The search was negative. All closures can be lifted!" the Vienna police said on Twitter on Wednesday evening.

Van der Bellen, a former leader of the left-wing Greens whose role is largely ceremonial, had been evacuated, a spokesman for his office confirmed, though he added that he did not know details of the threat or its target.

It remains unclear who made the threat or why.

The part of the complex temporarily occupied by parliament while its main building nearby is being renovated was not evacuated, a parliament spokesman said. That area is at the opposite end of the palace.

[Bosnia] Bosnia Reports Sharp Rise in Coronavirus Cases After Relaxing Lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:19 AM, Staff, Negative]

Bosnia reported on Wednesday its sharpest daily rise in new coronavirus infections this month after its two autonomous regions had gradually begun to ease lockdowns.

There were 93 new infections and two deaths in the previous 24 hours, compared with 20 new infections a day earlier and 49 the day before that, officials said.

The total number of infected people rose to 1,677 with 65 deaths, while 29,130 have been tested.

Both the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb Republic imposed lockdowns last month after the outbreak of COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus. Their measures included barring people aged over 65 and children up to 18 from leaving home at all.

The Serb Republic, which started on Monday to let senior citizens leave home for three hours each workday and some businesses to reopen, reported 59 new cases. Its officials urged citizens to continue to avoid gatherings and to wear masks at all times.

"The percentage of positive cases in relation to those tested is revealing a lowering of individual discipline in obeying the prescribed measures," Serb Republic Health Minister Alen Seranic said, adding that 8% of those tested in the past 24 hours were found to be positive, up from 5% previously.

"The whole community is behaving in a more relaxed manner than before, when we had a different number of cases from now," said Seranic, who is a trained epidemiologist.

In the northern town of Banja Luka, which has recorded the highest number of coronavirus cases in Bosnia, Pedja Kovacevic, head of the intensive care department at the main hospital, said health workers had been able to cope with the pandemic so far.

"What is terrifying is that we have the largest number of sick and hospitalised patients in the hospital in the ninth week, and I call on the public and every citizen to think twice (before leaving home)," Kovacevic said.

The Bosniak-Croat Federation lifted its night curfew last Friday and abolished a measure of obligatory quarantine. It also allowed senior citizens and children to leave home every second day for several hours.

These measures will be reinstated during the three-day Labour Day holidays, officials said, adding that people there too were behaving in a more relaxed manner.

"We are aware that we'll see new peaks and trends of the disease, but we have to go back to normal life," said Goran Cerkez, the federation assistant health minister.

"We shall see how that proceeds, and whether we have to reinstate restrictions will depend on the citizens."

Bosnia's economy has been hit hard by the lockdowns and the closure of many businesses. The International Monetary Fund has forecast growth to shrink 5% this year.

[France] Labs see bottlenecks in France's plan to scale-up COVID-19 testing (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:26 AM, Matthias Blamont, Neutral]

The leaders of two federations representing thousands of private laboratories across France cast doubt on the country's ability to more than double coronavirus testing before the country begins unwinding its lockdown on May 11.

The industry officials cited two looming bottlenecks: a potential shortage of workers able to conduct tests and the availability of government-approved reagents, with countries around the world racing to get hold of testing kits.

Mass testing is critical to France's ability to emerge safely from a now six-week old lockdown.

France will switch to an aggressive doctrine on COVID-19 testing from May 11, aiming for 700,000 nasal swab tests per week, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe on Tuesday said.

This means France must nearly triple its current capacity in just a fortnight.

"I'm not sure this goal of 700,000 is reasonable," Francois Blanchecotte, head of the Syndicat des Biologistes federation representing some 4,000 labs, told Reuters. "One limitation will be the number of people able to do testing on such a scale."

France is not alone in scrambling to test more widely. Britain was on track to meet a target of 100,000 tests per day by Thursday, its health minister said this week, although recent data shows about 43,000 daily tests being completed.

Swab tests involve collecting a sample from either a person's nasal passage or throat. A reagent is then added to determine whether there is an infection.

France has authorised about 40 reagents for use in COVID-19 testing, manufactured by large pharmaceutical groups like Switzerland's Roche and the United States' Abbott Laboratories, as well as small and mid-sized companies.

Lionel Barrand, who leads the Syndicat National des Jeunes Biologistes Medicaux federation, cautioned this number might be inadequate and that laboratories were already having difficulties sourcing reagents in France and from abroad.

China, where the global pandemic originated, is an important source market of reagents.

"Will there be enough reagents? We're still seeing tensions on supply at a national level," Barrand said.

France had the logistics to scale up testing, he said. "But that will work only if we have enough reagents and swabs."

A health ministry spokeswoman said France had taken steps with international suppliers to secure supplies of reagents. Meanwhile the French health industry regulator had approved a new locally made cotton swab to ease pressure on swab imports.

Countries around the world hope blood tests meant to show whether people exposed to the disease have developed antibodies thought to offer some immunity will also guide efforts to restart their economies.

But serological testing has so far proved unreliable and questions persist over the human body's immunity memory after coronavirus infection.

That places more pressure on nasal swab testing. Barrand said clarity was needed on which symptoms — which include headaches, fever, dry coughs and a loss of taste — necessitated testing.

"If every person presenting with a small symptom turns up, the system will collapse," he said.

[Germany] Germany to extend travel warning for tourist trips abroad to mid-June – report (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:48 AM, Michelle Martin, 5304K, Neutral]

The German cabinet will on Wednesday extend a travel warning for all tourism trips abroad until at least June 14, magazine Der Spiegel reported, saying that a Foreign Ministry document to that effect had been agreed with other ministries.

[Germany] Germany hopes there will be coordinated EU decision on foreign travel – minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The German government warned foreign travel would not be risk-free even if travel restrictions were lifted, Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said on Wednesday, adding that Germany hopes to discuss a coordinated solution with its European Union partners.

Maas told reporters that the government would revisit on a weekly basis the question of whether travel restrictions could be lifted, but advised against leisure travel even if they were, adding that there could be no guarantee that travel warnings would not be reintroduced at short notice.

Although a Europe-wide solution would be desirable, he could not rule out that there would be differences in travel regimes between the EU's member states, he added.

[Germany] Prosecutors charge neo-Nazi with German politician's murder (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 8:48 AM, Staff, Negative]

German prosecutors have charged a far-right extremist with the killing of a regional politician from Chancellor Angela Merkel's party and in a near-fatal attack on an Iraqi asylum-seeker a few years before.

Federal prosecutors said Wednesday that Stephan Ernst, who has previous convictions for a string violent anti-migrant crimes, is accused of murder, attempted murder, serious bodily harm and firearms offenses.

A second man, identified only as Markus H., was charged with accessory to murder and breaking firearms laws for allegedly helping Ernst improve his marksmanship while suspecting that he was considering a politically motivated attack, the prosecutors said.

Walter Luebcke, who led the regional administration in Germany's the central region of Kassel, was shot on his porch on June 1, 2019, and died later that night.

Prosecutors said in a statement that Ernst and Markus H. had visited an October 2015 town hall event where Luebcke defended the German government's decision to allow hundreds of thousands of refugees into the country.

Angered by sexual assaults in Cologne months later and an Islamist truck attack in Nice, France, in July 2016, Ernst allegedly decided to kill Luebcke to "send a publicly noticeable signal against the current state order, which he rejected," according to prosecutors.

Around the same time, Ernst allegedly attacked the Iraqi asylum-seeker from behind with a knife, injuring the victim's spine and severing two nerves.

Prosecutors said the attack was rooted in Ernst's "right-wing extremist hatred of refugees."

After his arrest in June, authorities said they found numerous illegal firearms that Ernst had stored in various locations, including three revolvers, two pistols, two rifles and a submachine gun, as well as 1,400 bullets.

[Holy See] Knights of Malta Grand Master who healed rift with Vatican dies (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:14 AM, Philip Pullella, 5304K, Neutral]

Giacomo Dalla Torre, the Grand Master of the Knights of Malta who steered the global Catholic chivalric order and charity to reconciliation with the Vatican after a period of conflict, died on Wednesday.

The Knights said Dalla Torre, 75, had been ill for several months.

He was elected interim leader in 2017 following the abrupt resignation of Matthew Festing, whose final months of governance were marred by a dispute with the Vatican over the running of the group.

The group's Grand Masters usually rule for life and Festing, a Briton, was the first in several centuries to step down.

The conflict laid bare tensions between a reformist Pope, Francis, and his conservative critics, led by American Cardinal Raymond Burke, the Knights' chaplain.

After the Burke faction lost an internal power struggle, Dalla Torre reconciled the group with the Vatican and began a process of reform.

Dalla Torre was the 80th grand master of the group, whose formal name is Sovereign Military Hospitaller Order of St. John of Jerusalem, of Rhodes and of Malta.

It was founded in Jerusalem nearly 1,000 years ago to provide medical aid for pilgrims in the Holy Land.

It now has a multi-million dollar budget, 13,500 members, 80,000 volunteers and 42,000 medical staff running refugee camps, drug treatment centres, disaster relief programs and clinics around the world.

Since the upheavals that led to Festing's resignation, the order - which is a sovereign entity and has bilateral diplomatic relations with 110 states - has been working on a new constitution.

Reformers, backed by the Vatican, want to revamp its constitution to make its government more transparent and better able to respond to the massive growth it has seen in recent years.

They also want to make it possible for commoners to reach top positions. Under the current monarchical hierarchy, the top Knights are required to have noble lineage. The late Grand Master had the rank of prince and his full name was Giacomo Dalla Torre del Tempio di Sanguinetto.

Under normal conditions, senior members be required to gather in Rome in three months to elect a new grand master but the period likely will be extended because of the coronavirus pandemic, a source in the order said.

[Kosovo] UK climate activists stranded in historic town in Kosovo (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:51 AM, Visar Kryeziu, 2194K, Neutral]

British climate activists Rosie Watson and Mike Elm were on an international bicycle and running tour to promote their green campaign when they got stuck in Kosovo because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Watson, 25, from Loweswater in northwestern England, and Elm, 32, from Edinburgh, Scotland, have been stranded in Prizren, a town in Kosovo, 85 kilometers (50 miles) southwest of the capital, Pristina.

Since mid-March, Kosovo has been in a lockdown with all of its land and air border crossings shut. The virus has killed at least 22 people in the Balkan nation, which has more than 790 confirmed cases.

The couple decided against getting on an evacuation flight organized by the British government, saying they are against plane travel and they want to continue their journey once it's possible to do so. Their trip is low-budget and they have had free accommodation since the start.

They are enjoying the historic, cobblestone streets of Prizren, a town along the Bistrica River and the Sharri Mountains that was founded in the second century A.D. and has a medieval castle. They have also been sampling fli, a local butter pie, and been reassured by a traditional welcome from residents.

In Prizren, they have focused on writing about their trip. Watson has a blog as does Elm.

Watson started her "The New Story Run" in August last year from the United Kingdom, planning a two-year tour on foot to Mongolia "to tell stories of people finding a better and more equal and healthy way of living for us and the planets and tackling the climate crisis." After running 3,570 kilometers (2,220 miles), or 17 kilometers (around 10 miles) per day, she has a lot to write about.

Inspired by her efforts, Elm joined her in November aiming to cycle a total of 12,000 kilometers (7,450 miles), or 50 kilometers (30 miles) a day. Before getting stuck, they took different routes, but they met up time and again along the way.

Elm met people in Prizren trying "to improve this beautiful city by bringing more trees and green space." Previously, he was in Zlarin, which aims at becoming Croatia's first single-use plastic free island. In neighboring Albania, Watson met with a community battling against hydroelectric operations that he says are endangering nearby Valbona National Park.

"A better world for our children needs a better world for us right now," Elm said.

The pandemic will urge people to "see some of the benefits of having less cars in the city and the cleaner air, the nicer sound, the quieter environment," he added.

When borders reopen, their plan is to continue their journey through Bulgaria, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and finally Mongolia.

"This virus has shown that we, and governments, have the ability to transform society and whole countries very fast — something which we need to do to avoid the impacts of the climate crisis," Watson said.

[Poland] Poland to reopen hotels and shopping malls on May 4 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:49 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Polish hotels and shopping malls will reopen on May 4 and pre-schools will have the option to open on May 6, Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said on Wednesday, part of efforts to ease restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

Poland, the largest economy in the European Union's eastern wing, started relaxing some of its curbs on public life earlier in April, alongside other countries keen to prop up industry damaged by the pandemic.

Morawiecki also reaffirmed the government's plan to hold a presidential election as scheduled on May 10, or with a delay of a couple of weeks at most, despite calls from opposition parties and others for a much longer delay.

Further steps to unfreeze the economy, including a reopening of restaurants, will be announced at a later date, Morawiecki said. Poles are still required to wear masks in public and schools will remain closed until May 24.

The government has also not given any indication when it might re-open the country's borders.

Poland, which has a population of 38 million, had reported 12,415 cases of the new coronavirus and 606 deaths as of Wednesday.

On the plans for the presidential election, Morawiecki urged the Senate, the upper chamber of parliament, to speed up its discussions on a legislative proposal to allow postal voting instead of polling booths.

Morawiecki's nationalist Law and Justice party (PiS) says it would be safe to hold a postal vote at this time, but a final decision on whether election rules are changed to allow it rests with the legislature.

Although PiS and its allies have a majority in the lower house Sejm, the opposition controls the Senate.

The election has become a highly divisive issue in Poland, with the opposition and human rights groups accusing PiS of putting political gain ahead of public health in its insistence the vote takes place on time.

Opinion polls show the incumbent Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, is likely to win the vote.

[Poland] EU opens new legal case against Poland over muzzling judges (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:52 AM, Gabriela Baczynska, 5304K, Neutral]

The European Union's executive on Wednesday started a new legal case against the nationalist Polish government over what it said was the muzzling of judges in the bloc's largest ex-communist country.

The EU has long accused the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party of undermining Polish democracy by increasing direct state control over the courts, media and civic society, a charge the party rejects.

The European Commission said it was giving Poland two months to address its concerns about a law introduced earlier this year that would allow to punish judges who criticise the government's reforms of the judicial system.

"There are clear risks that the provisions regarding the disciplinary regime against judges can be used for political control of the content of judicial decisions," said Vera Jourova, the Czech member of the executive Commission who is responsible for upholding the EU's democratic values.

"This is a European issue because Polish courts apply European law. Judges from other countries must trust that Polish judges act independently. This mutual trust is the foundation of our single market," she told a news conference.

Should Warsaw refuse to budge, the Commission would sue it in the European Court of Justice, which could eventually lead to hefty fines as well as a court order telling the Polish government to change tack.

The case is one of multiple battles being waged between the EU and Poland over upholding the rule of law.

The Commission has also recently criticised Warsaw's decision to press ahead with a presidential election next month despite concerns over public health due to the coronavirus pandemic.

The PiS-led government is considering holding the election by postal ballot, saying this would ensure public safety, but opposition parties and pro-democracy groups say such a vote, held at such short notice, could not be fair or transparent.

"We cannot compromise or put in lockdown our fundamental rights and values," Jourova said on Wednesday. "The virus must not kill democracy."

Opposition parties and rights groups have urged a lengthy delay to the presidential election. If held on schedule, on May 10, opinion polls suggest incumbent Andrzej Duda, a PiS ally, will win re-election.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki reaffirmed on Wednesday the government's plan to hold the election on time, or with a small delay of a couple of weeks at most.

[Russia] Russia's coronavirus case tally nears the 100,000 milestone (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:33 AM, Gleb Stolyarov and Maria Kiselyova, 5304K, Negative]
Russia's nationwide tally of confirmed coronavirus cases neared the 100,000 mark on Wednesday after 5,841 new cases of the virus were registered overnight along with a record daily rise in the death toll.

Russia, the world's largest country by territory, has been on lockdown since President Vladimir Putin announced the closure of most public spaces in late March.

It this week overtook China and Iran in the number of confirmed cases. The figures mean Russia now ranks eighth worldwide for the number of confirmed cases, though it has so far recorded far fewer deaths than many of the most hard-hit countries.

The nationwide case tally now stands at 99,399, the country's coronavirus crisis response centre said on Wednesday. It said 108 people diagnosed with the novel coronavirus had died in the last 24 hours, a record daily rise. That means the official overall death toll now

stands at 972 people.

Authorities began recording a sharp rise in cases this month.

Russia is now in its fifth week of a lockdown that, together with the collapse of oil prices, has put the economy on course for a 4-6% contraction, according to the central bank.

Putin, addressing the nation on television on Tuesday, said the lockdown measures would have to be rolled over for another two weeks. He warned the outbreak's peak was still ahead.

"The situation is still very difficult," said Putin. "We are facing a new and perhaps the most intense stage in countering the epidemic."

[Russia] Russia sees tentative signs of fuel demand recovery in Europe: minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:04 AM, Vladimir Soldatkin and Darya Korsunskaya, 5304K, Neutral] Russian Energy Minister Alexander Novak on Wednesday said the country is seeing tentative signs of recovery in fuel demand on the European market.

Speaking at an online meeting chaired by President Vladimir Putin, Novak added that Russia's oil output is expected to drop by 10% this year.

Putin said that Russia should continue cooperating with its partners to balance global oil markets.

[Russia] Russia flies nuclear-capable bombers over Baltic Sea in training exercise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:32 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia has flown two nuclear-capable Tu-160 strategic bombers over the neutral waters of the Baltic Sea, the Russian Ministry of Defence said on Wednesday, a move that prompted Finland, Denmark, Poland and Sweden to scramble jets to escort them.

The ministry said the flight was routine in nature and strictly adhered to international airspace regulations.

Russia carries out similar training flights over the Arctic, Atlantic and Pacific oceans, as well as over the Black and Baltic Seas on a regular basis, a policy some NATO members regard as unhelpful sabre-rattling.

The two Tupolev T-160 aircraft, which can carry up to 12 short-range nuclear missiles, were in the air for eight hours, the Russian Defence Ministry said.

"At specific stages of the route, the aircraft were escorted by the Finnish Air Force's F-18s, Royal Danish and Polish Air Force F-16s, as well as by the Swedish Air Force's Saab JAS 39 Gripen fighter jets," it said.

Russia made a similar statement on Tuesday, saying two Russian Tupolev Tu-22M3 strategic bombers had flown a routine four-hour flight over the neutral waters of the Barents

and Norwegian seas, prompting Norway to scramble its jets to escort them.

Also on Tuesday, it said advanced jets belonging to its Baltic Fleet had rehearsed striking naval targets in the Baltic Sea.

[Russia] Russia's Aging Infrastructure Threatens Oil Output Pact (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 11:14 AM, Georgi Kantchev, Neutral]

Russia's adherence to a hard-fought oil production deal with Saudi Arabia and the U.S. could be imperiled by its aging industrial infrastructure and the unique challenges of winding down a broad network of wells across its vast landmass.

Moscow, Riyadh and Washington agreed in early April to lead a multinational coalition that aims to cut 13% of global oil production through the end of June. The curbs are meant to address a sharp drop in demand caused by global travel restrictions and business shutdowns to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The demand erosion, along with a Saudi-Russian price war and an unprecedented shortage of oil storage space, have contributed to a 63% decline in the global benchmark oil price, since the start of the year.

As part of the pact, set to begin on Friday, Russia has committed to its biggest reduction ever, a cut of 2 million barrels a day, or around a fifth of its current production.

But Russia's oil infrastructure isn't geared to quick and deep production cuts, analysts say. The country faces considerable obstacles, from the frigid Siberian climate where pipelines can burst without oil in them, to low-yielding Soviet-era fields that are expensive to maintain and restart.

Russia has some 200,000 active wells—more than most other oil-producing countries—each with unique characteristics and geology. Most of its wells are old and require costly, labor-intensive techniques—such as water or gas injection and hydraulic fracturing—to get the oil out of the ground. Around 90% of Russia's crude is produced that way, according to Darya Kozlova, head of regulatory affairs at energy advisory Vygon Consulting.

Wells in Saudi Arabia have more underground pressure and higher yields. Shale producers in the U.S. have also been nimble in reacting to price fluctuations.

"Production cuts of such magnitude have never been done in Russia so we are venturing into the unknown," said Vladimir Milov, a former deputy energy minister and now an opposition politician. "There are just too many technical challenges to achieve these cuts."

Many producers are finding it hard to come up with the necessary volumes to cut, said Mikhail Krutikhin, a partner in the independent RusEnergy consulting agency who has advised oil companies on the cuts in recent weeks.

"They just don't know how to do it," he said. "It's a completely new paradigm."

Major Russian oil companies are lobbying the energy ministry for exemptions from the cuts, according to people familiar with the matter.

The ministry didn't respond to a request for comment.

The cuts will be distributed proportionally among all companies and Russia will fully comply with the deal, Energy Minister Alexander Novak said Wednesday in an interview with Russian newswire, Interfax.

Russia has a checkered history of sticking to supply agreements and its production has typically been steady in recent years, despite commitments to reduce it. In January last year, Russia had complied with only 18% of its pledge at the time to join OPEC in collective cuts, according to the International Energy Agency.

"Companies will try to cheat again and inflate their numbers," Mr. Krutikhin said.

To achieve a national 20% output reduction, Russian producers plan to abandon some of their least effective wells and postpone new drilling. But those decisions will need time for analysis and testing, experts say.

Tatneft, one of Russia's largest producers, will shut around 40% of its wells, starting with the least efficient sites, the company said Tuesday.

Some producers fear shutting wells because, in many cases, restarts require new pumps and other equipment, as well as repairs to burst or clogged pipes. The average cost of suspending a well in Western Siberia, home to most of Russia's production, is about \$5,000 a well, according to Ms. Kozlova. Reopening costs about \$16,000.

Many wells that are shut will likely be abandoned for good, analysts say. For firms like Capital Oil, a small producer in the southeastern Saratov region, Russia's cuts present an existential crisis.

The company has fully suspended production, but restarting might be financially impossible. Capital Oil is close to bankruptcy and has no money to pay salaries, said its co-owner Khamzat Askhabov.

"Production is becoming unprofitable," he said. "If low oil prices persist for six months, we expect massive bankruptcies of companies" like ours.

According to Russia's Association of Independent Oil and Gas Producers, all but four of Russia's 132 independent companies—representing around 4% of Russia's oil production—could go bankrupt.

"The Russian oil industry is at risk of falling asleep like the beautiful princess in the fairy tale, but then not waking up the way we know her," Mr. Milov said.

[Serbia] Serbs bang pots to protest govt and strict coronavirus measures (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 3:07 PM, Aleksandar Vasovic, Neutral]

For two nights, a cacophony of tin pans, drums, whistles, and horns has reverberated through much of Serbia as citizens, stuck at home under curfew, vent their anger at the government and its tough containment measures to curb the new coronavirus.

Serbia, which has reported 8,497 confirmed cases and 173 deaths from COVID-19, introduced stringent measures last month, including a state of emergency, closure of borders, daily curfew from 1600 GMT, and total lockdowns all weekend, including all four days of the Easter holiday.

The government has started to lift restrictions as the rate of infections slows, but said that a lockdown during the Labour Day holiday on May 1, an important celebration in Serbia, should remain in place.

The banging is due to continue on Wednesday evening, and recalls similar popular protests from 1996 to 1997 when Serbians rebelled against election fraud and the former strongman Slobodan Milosevic.

At the balcony of his apartment in Belgrade's Vracar neighbourhood, Dragan Djilas, the head of the opposition Alliance for Serbia, and a former leader of the student protests of the 1990s, used a wooden spoon to bang a pot.

"This energy (from the 1990s) has re-emerged as the people cannot endure any longer ... these lockdowns, these 80-hour incarcerations," Djilas told Reuters.

The protests also express many people's discontent with the policies of President Aleksandar Vucic, a former nationalist firebrand and former information minister under Milosevic who later adopted pro-European values, and with his Serbian Progressive Party.

Many in Serbia accuse Vucic and the ruling coalition of autocracy, oppression against political opponents, stifling of media freedoms, corruption, cronyism, and ties with organised crime. Both Vucic, in power since 2012, and his allies deny such accusations.

Most of Serbia's opposition parties, which are frequently divided and bickering, have boycotted parliament. They have said they will not take part in elections initially set for April and postponed until later in the year.

Bojan Klacar, the executive director of the Belgrade-based pollster CESID said the protest could damage the Serbian president and his allies, but added that a divided opposition was unable to tap into its energy. He added that heavy-handed handling of the crisis did not dent popularity of Vucic among his supporters.

From his window in a concrete, Communist-era building in the Novi Beograd neighbourhood, Dobrica Veselinovic, a prominent activist of the Ne Davimo Beograd (Do Not Drown Belgrade) rights group, played Bella Ciao, a song of Italian antifascist fighters during the World War II.

He also projected a banner reading "noise against dictatorship" and "raise your voice every evening from 2005" (1805 GMT) onto the wall of a nearby building.

"The most important thing is that people (who disagree with the government) realize that they are not alone ... We invited people to raise their voice against what is happening in society," Veselinovic said.

[Slovenia] Slovenia to ease coronavirus restrictions, gradually reopen schools (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:50 PM, Marja Novak, Neutral]

Slovenia will from Thursday lift a restriction imposed at the end of March that prohibited citizens from travelling outside their local municipalities, Prime Minister Janez Jansa said on Wednesday.

Education Minister Simona Kustec told national TV Slovenia later on Wednesday that schools and kindergartens, which have been closed since the middle of March, would gradually start reopening from May 18. She did not give details.

Slovenia, which has 2 million residents and borders Italy, Austria, Hungary and Croatia, has so far confirmed 1,418 coronavirus cases and 89 deaths.

Jansa thanked citizens for following restrictions imposed from the middle of March to curb the pandemic and said in a speech sent to the media: "Thanks to you, Slovenia is the most successful (in curbing the coronavirus) among all neighbours of the focal country Italy."

He added that Slovenia was also among countries that had suffered less economic and social damage than most because of the government's quick response, which included financial help of about 3 billion euros or some 6% of gross domestic product to companies and citizens hurt by the outbreak.

Jansa said more restrictions would be lifted on Monday, but gave no details. The government said earlier that hairdressers and beauty parlours, as well as outdoor bars and restaurants and a number of shops, would be able to open from Monday. Libraries and museums are also expected to open on Monday.

He said, however, that large public events, including large sports gatherings, in Slovenia and the rest of Europe would "most probably" only be possible after a vaccination or medication for the coronavirus is discovered and widely used. He also called on citizens to remain disciplined in the coming weeks to prevent the spread of the virus.

On Monday, several hundred people protested in various Slovenian cities against Jansa's centre-right government and its coronavirus restrictions.

Slovenia closed all schools, bars, restaurants, hotels, cultural and sports centres, and shops, apart from food and drug stores, and suspended public transport in the middle of March. It has prohibited any socialising in public spaces and introduced an obligatory quarantine for most people entering the country.

The first restrictions were lifted last week when car service centres and shops that sell cars, bicycles, furniture and construction material were allowed to open. Residents are obliged, however, to wear face masks in all indoor public spaces.

The Bank of Slovenia said last month the country's GDP could fall by 6% to 16% this year due to the coronavirus, while the government expects a budget deficit of 8.1% of GDP this year after a surplus of 0.5% in 2019. Slovenia's export-oriented economy expanded by 2.4% last year.

[Spain] Spain readies to ease lockdown, warns will need discipline (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:00 PM, Clara-Laeila Laudette and Into Landauro, Neutral]

Spain's lockdown is making progress against the new coronavirus but a gradual easing from next week will require even more discipline, officials said on Wednesday, after the country recorded 325 deaths from the infection overnight.

The lockdown, one of the toughest in Europe, has halted public life since March 14 and nearly paralysed the economy.

In Madrid, workers were painting "keep your distance" signs on to zebra crossings in the capital in preparation for restrictions to be gradually removed.

The country's overall death toll from the virus rose by 453 to 24,275, the health ministry said, adding that the additional cases were from the previous days in the region of Galicia.

The number of diagnosed cases rose by 2,144 from Tuesday to 212,917, the world's second-highest tally after the United States, the ministry said.

"The evolution we are seeing is still very favourable and is in line with what we expected," health emergency coordinator Fernando Simon told a news briefing on Wednesday.

He said the so-called 'R' rate – the average number of infections that one person with the virus causes – stood at below 1, signalling a downward trend, in almost all areas of the country.

The daily number of deaths has decreased sharply from the high of 950 seen in early April.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez announced late on Tuesday a four-phase plan to lift the lockdown that would culminate in a return to normality by the end of June.

FOREIGN TOURISM

But Interior Minister Fernando Grande-Marlaska told a news conference on Wednesday "the period of easing measures would take more discipline than lockdown" itself.

Implementation will vary from province to province depending on factors such as how the rate of infection evolves, the number of intensive care beds available locally and compliance with distancing rules. These targets are yet to be announced.

Health Minister Salvador Illa said the rules on visiting friends and family would be provided in the coming days.

The Hotel Business Association of Madrid on Wednesday expressed its "serious concern" over the plan, as well as its "disbelief" that the government was contemplating reopening hotels "when the arrival of clients is impossible" because of closed borders and suspended flights.

The government's plan does not specify when Spain will be able to reopen its tourism industry, which is worth 12% of Gross Domestic Product.

"Foreign tourism is the hardest part to manage. We look at what has happened to those ahead of us (in Asia); when they started cross-border mobility there were outbreaks of imported cases," said a government official who declined to be named.

"We also want to take the decision at (European) Community level, especially in view of the Schengen area," he added.

Data released on Wednesday showed Spanish retail sales fell 14.1% in March from a year earlier on a calendar-adjusted basis, after rising 1.8% in February.

Most stores closed during the second half of last month as part of the lockdown and have remained shut in April.

[Sweden] Swedish leader defends coronavirus approach, shrugs off far-right embrace (Politico)

Politico [4/29/2020 2:30 PM, Ryan Heath, Neutral]

Sweden's foreign minister says there's been a "misunderstanding" in the United States about her country's Covid-19 policies — which have been distinctly more liberal than the strict lockdowns instituted across much of the rest of Europe and North America.

Ann Linde told POLITICO that Sweden is not a libertarian nirvana: the government has moved to limit online gambling in recent days, is closing restaurants that break social distancing rules, and has forbidden family visits to nursing homes.

But, added Linde, "this is a marathon not a sprint" and policy "needs to be on a level that's acceptable to the people."

Sweden's public health agency believes "It's good for people to be outdoors, to have walks" she said. "If you're locked inside there's risk of depression, domestic violence, alcohol abuse" Linde continued, echoing a point President Donald Trump has often made.

Sweden's relatively lax approach to controlling the coronavirus pandemic — keeping restaurants, other businesses and most schools open — has made the country a symbol for far-right activists in the United States and Europe as they push to ease domestic restrictions in their own countries.

But Linde brushed off that support in remarks to POLITICO Wednesday, her first public comments in Washington since the coronavirus crisis began shuttering the globe last month.

Linde said she clarified the country's approach during a virtual meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, as well.

The endorsement of far-right groups, "doesn't mean much", she said, because Sweden is managing the pandemic "according to our tradition" and won't change strategy because of outside voices.

And she noted that inside Sweden, it's not just the far-right Sweden Democrats who are supporting the government's approach: all eight parties represented in the Swedish Parliament are in agreement.

Linde believes Sweden can afford to have looser rules because the government enjoys "high levels of trust."

"Government advice is not some tip that you follow if you want, it's seen as something that you should follow," she explained. By way of example, Linde pointed out that although internal travel in Sweden is not banned, there was a 96 percent decrease in travel to the popular vacation island of Gotland over the Easter weekend holiday.

Critics of Sweden's approach, however, note that the country has a much higher Covid-19 death rate than its Scandinavian neighbors, including 11 times the number of deaths as neighboring Norway, with only twice the population. Linde, however, told POLITICO, "It's not much use comparing" the two countries, because so many factors determine how a virus spreads, and different countries use different measures for classifying Covid-19 deaths.

Linde did express concern for Sweden's failure to keep the coronavirus out of nursing homes, one of the few settings where the country has implemented strict social distancing rules, including forbidding family visits. "There are far too many deaths in the nursing homes," Linde conceded. "We don't know why."

The Swedish government recently set a \$500-a-week limit for individuals playing online casino and slot machines. And Linde highlighted five restaurants that were also closed this week for breaking social distancing rules.

"We are totally prepared to go in with harder measures if (the rules) are not followed," Linde said, adding that the government has the legal power to immediately close schools if pandemic circumstances change.

With roughly half of Sweden's GDP dependent on exports, the government there is working feverishly to hold off the push for more tariffs, and to eliminate them on medical goods. "Global value chains are not working the way they have to work. It's definitely a bad situation for Sweden," Linde said.

In her meeting with Pompeo, Linde raised concerns about the state of global trade links. She acknowledged, however, that the United States and Sweden "have different views" on the importance of multilateral trading systems.

Linde was critical of the initial policy response of EU countries to the merging pandemic.

"It was bad at the beginning, better now," Linde said, citing an end to medical export restrictions and sales taxes on medical products. While willing to contribute to some joint recovery efforts, Sweden, which sits outside the Euro single currency, opposes European Union governments issuing joint bonds to pay for the added costs.

Given its low government debt and the headroom for its own large stimulus package Linde said Sweden prefers to safeguard its own financial stability.

Sweden is following the European Union in keeping its borders closed to non-EU residents, which Linde said it will maintain until the EU collectively decides to re-open. And Linde said

her government will "support the United Nations in every way."

"We have always been big fans of multilateralism," she added.

[Turkey] Turkey's coronavirus death toll rises by 89 to 3,081 – health minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:29 PM, Staff, Negative]

The number of people who have died from COVID-19 in Turkey has risen by 89 in the last 24 hours to 3,081, Health Ministry data showed on Wednesday, continuing a downward trend.

The total number of cases rose by 2,936 to 117,589, the data showed, the highest total outside Western Europe or the United States.

A total of 44,022 people have so far recovered from the new coronavirus, which causes the respiratory disease COVID-19. The number of tests carried out in the past 24 hours was 43,498, higher than in previous days.

Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said earlier that the number of cases in the country has peaked and was starting to decline, adding that he did not expect a second wave if measures against the outbreak were followed.

[Turkey] Epidemic's Hidden Victims, Syrian Workers Left Penniless in Turkey (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:39 AM, Dominic Evans and Umit Bektas, Negative]

When the clothing factory where Syrian refugee Mohammed Eid had worked since arriving in Istanbul closed because of the coronavirus lockdown, his manager had a bleak message for laid-off staff: you're on your own.

Like millions across Turkey, Eid lost his wage packet overnight. But unlike Turkish workers idled by the enforced shutdown, he found no safety net to help him and his family through the sudden crisis.

With a wife, three-year-old daughter and second child due any day, Eid has no income to pay bills or the rent on his basement apartment in the working class district of Esenyurt, where many Syrian refugees live.

"When the factory closed, the boss told us 'This break is at your expense, not mine'," Eid said in the small home he found after arriving from Jordan in December. "I have to sort out my costs of living, eating. He gave me nothing."

While Turkish workers laid off since March are entitled to 1,200 lira (\$170) a month from the state, that benefit does not extend to hundreds of thousands of Syrians, most of whom work in the informal economy, many as day labourers.

Clothing retailers and shopping malls have closed across the country and many of their suppliers have shut down too as Ankara attempts to contain an outbreak that has killed close to 3,000.

The government aims to begin reviving the economy in late May, a senior official said this week, and Eid said he expected to hear from his own employer at around that time. Until then he and others wait in limbo, fearing eviction and worrying how to feed their families.

"We don't know how many Syrians could have been laid off. We're talking about somewhere between 700,000 to 800,000 potential informal Syrian workers in the labour market," said Omar Kadkoy a policy analyst at the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey (TEPAV) in Ankara.

NO SUPPORT

Turkey hosts 3.6 million Syrians, the world's largest refugee population, who have fled the nine-year conflict that has killed hundreds of thousands of people in their country. Most live in Istanbul or near Turkey's southern border with Syria, only a small minority in refugee camps.

They mostly work in clothing companies, manufacturing, construction or the hospitality sector.

A Labour Ministry spokeswoman said only Turkish workers could benefit from the government's coronavirus aid package, and that Syrians were already supported by United Nations and European Union aid projects.

However, an EU-funded scheme which distributes monthly cash payments via Turkey's Red Crescent to refugees is limited to families with three or more children, or those without working-age men, Syrians say.

"We have not received any support from ... anywhere," said Suhaib al-Bakr, a 33-year father of two from Syria's northeastern province of Hasaka.

Bakr, a veterinarian in his own country, worked for the past four years as an assistant at tailoring companies in Istanbul, taking daily work where it was available for about \$13 a day.

He hasn't worked for six weeks. His landlord agreed to cancel his rent payment last month, but is expecting the next instalment. If he could, Bakr says he would even return to the ruins of his own country to escape the uncertainty.

"The situation is bad there, worse than here. But my mother and father are there. We can go and live with them," he said. "But the way is closed. What can I do?"

[United Kingdom] UK now has world's third-highest virus-related death toll (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 2:40 PM, Pan Pylas, Neutral]

The U.K. has the third-highest coronavirus death toll in the world after the British government published new figures Wednesday that include deaths outside of hospitals.

After factoring in deaths in all settings such as care homes, the number of people in Britain who have died after testing positive for the virus has now hit 26,097, way ahead of the 21,678 announced on Tuesday. Until now, hospital deaths have been reported daily, while deaths in nursing homes and other settings were reported separately on a weekly basis.

Under the new measurement, the U.K. has leapfrogged Spain and France in Europe, with only Italy ahead. The U.S. has the world's highest death toll.

The upward revision prompted renewed criticism of the government's approach throughout the crisis. The new leader of the main opposition Labour Party, Keir Starmer, said the scale of deaths in the U.K. is "truly dreadful" and has accused the Conservative government of being too slow in putting the country into lockdown, in testing people for the virus and in getting critical protective gear for medical workers.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab sought to ease any worries, saying the additional deaths were a cumulative total going back to March 2.

"They don't represent a sudden surge in the number of deaths," he said at the government's daily press briefing.

In spite of that, it is becoming increasingly clear that the U.K. could end up with the second-highest coronavirus death toll in the world, partly because Italy is considered to be around a couple of weeks ahead in the epidemic.

There is also an acknowledgement that the new figures underestimate the total death toll in care homes as they only include those who have tested positive for the coronavirus. Also, the death certificates of those dying in care homes can take a couple of weeks to be issued.

Professor Yvonne Doyle, medical director at Public Health England, said the new figures, which her organization helped to compile, provide "a comprehensive picture, and this is most important for control."

In spite of the grim death news, the trends in most of the virus-related numbers are heading in the right direction. The number of people being hospitalized with the coronavirus has been falling for the best part of three weeks, particularly in London, which was the epicenter of the outbreak in the country. Also the number of coronavirus-related deaths are falling when measured on a seven-day rolling basis.

Doyle said she could not yet say whether deaths in care homes were falling but that "we should know that soon because the hospital curve has declined."

Raab said it was too soon for the government to make an assessment as to whether its five tests on easing the lockdown restrictions have been met. Among those tests are a "sustained and consistent fall" in daily coronavirus-related daily deaths, and reliable data showing that the rate of inflection has moderated to manageable levels.

"We are coming through the peak but we are not there yet, which is why we are keeping our focus on the social distancing measures," he said.

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, or SAGE, is due to deliver its latest advice to ministers in the next few days but all the signs are that the government will extend most of the lockdown restrictions from May 7.

Earlier this week on his return to work after recovering from COVID-19, Prime Minister Boris

Johnson, said the country was at "the moment of maximum risk." Johnson missed Prime Minister's Questions earlier Wednesday because his partner gave birth to a baby boy.

[United Kingdom] UK death toll 27,241, opposition Labour leader Starmer says (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:12 AM, Guy Faulconbridge and Elizabeth Piper, 5304K, Neutral]

The United Kingdom's COVID-19 death toll is probably higher than 27,241, making it one of the worst-hit countries in Europe, opposition Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said on Wednesday as he questioned the government's response to the outbreak.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government is facing growing criticism for its response to the outbreak as the death toll continues to rise.

While the government's chief scientific adviser said last month that keeping the death toll below 20,000 would be a "good outcome," the hospital toll passed that milestone last week.

Broader data published on Tuesday showed fatalities topped 24,000 nine days ago, but Starmer said his calculations showed 27,241 had died.

"We are possibly on track to have one of the worst death rates in Europe," Starmer told parliament. "Far from success, these latest figures are truly dreadful."

Starmer appears to have added the latest hospital death toll of 21,698 to the most recent English care home death toll of 4,343 and the non-hospital COVID-19 death tolls in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

If his calculations are accurate, the United Kingdom would have the second or third worst official death toll in the world after the United States and possibly Italy.

The United States has a death toll of 58,605, Italy 27,359, Spain 23,822 and France 23,660, according to a Reuters tally.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab, standing in for the prime minister during questions in parliament, said it was "far too early" to make international comparisons.

"If they are to be done, they should be done on a per capita basis," he said.

Other countries measure death numbers in different ways, he added.

'TOO SLOW'

Starmer, after speaking to Johnson, said in a letter to the prime minister that mistakes had been made in the government's response – including being too slow to impose a lockdown – and called for Johnson to publish an exit strategy.

"We were too slow to enter the lockdown, too slow to increase the uptake of testing and too slow to get personal protective equipment to frontline NHS and care staff," Starmer said in the letter.

"We have already seen the consequences of poor planning and preparation. This cannot

happen again."

Johnson initially resisted introducing the lockdown but changed course when projections showed a quarter of a million people could die.

Since the lockdown started on March 23, his government has faced criticism from opposition parties and some doctors for initially delaying measures, for limited testing capabilities, and for a lack of protective equipment for health workers.

Government, party and scientific advisers are divided over how and when Britain should start returning to work, even in limited form. The government is next due to review social distancing measures on May 7.

[United Kingdom] Britain's coronavirus testing capacity over 73,000 a day – Raab (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:21 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Britain now has capacity to conduct more than 73,000 tests for the coronavirus per day, foreign minister Dominic Raab said on Wednesday.

The government set itself a target to conduct 100,000 tests per day by the end of April. Raab said the actual daily number of test carried out was 52,429.

East Asia and Pacific

China, South Korea Move to Revive Business Travel Between Them (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 9:51 AM, Chun Han Wong, Neutral]

South Korea says it has agreed with China to start facilitating some business travel between the two Asian neighbors, in Beijing's first formal bilateral program to ease border controls and help revive economic activity stalled by the coronavirus pandemic.

Under a "fast-track" immigration arrangement starting May 1, South Korean business personnel can travel to seven provinces and three major cities in China—Shanghai, Tianjin and Chongqing—after passing through health-screening and quarantine procedures, the South Korean Foreign Ministry said Wednesday.

Chinese business travelers can also visit South Korea by going through a similar health-screening process, the ministry said. It said the two governments would continue discussing ways to improve and expand the program.

China's Foreign Ministry didn't immediately respond to an emailed request for comment sent after business hours.

The arrangement is the first so-called fast-track, or "green lane," immigration program that China has launched since Chinese officials began approaching a number of countries over recent weeks to discuss the possibility of allowing some cross-border business travel to resume.

China's travel curbs are among the strictest world-wide, imposed to halt the reintroduction

of the coronavirus into the country where the pandemic first erupted. Since late March, China has suspended entry for nearly all foreigners and slashed the volume of international passenger flights to and from the country.

As China signaled initial success in containing its domestic coronavirus contagion, its officials have proposed efforts to facilitate essential travel with foreign counterparts from more than a dozen countries across the Asia-Pacific region and elsewhere, The Wall Street Journal reported earlier this month.

On Tuesday, senior Chinese diplomats discussed proposals for "fast-track" travel arrangements in phone calls with counterparts from Austria, Germany and Singapore, according to China's Foreign Ministry. Talks are already under way between China and Singapore on a "green lane" program facilitating essential business travel.

To visit China under the new program, prospective South Korean travelers must have an invitation from a China-based company, monitor their own health for two weeks, and undergo coronavirus testing up to 72 hours before departure, according to the South Korean Foreign Ministry. Those who test negative will receive government health certification allowing them to proceed with their trips.

After arriving in China, travelers will be quarantined for one to two days at a government-designated facility and must pass another coronavirus test before they can continue their journey, the ministry statement said.

The arrangement allows South Korean business travelers to visit the Chinese provinces of Anhui, Guangdong, Jiangsu, Liaoning, Shaanxi, Shandong and Sichuan. The Chinese capital of Beijing, which currently imposes a 21-day quarantine on international travelers arriving in the city, isn't included in the program.

Chinese business travelers must also test negative for the coronavirus up to 72 hours before departing for South Korea, according to the South Korean statement. These travelers must again test negative for the pathogen after arriving in South Korea, before they can conduct economic activities under "surveillance procedures," the statement said, without elaborating.

Some Chinese local governments to allow fast-track entry of Koreans (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Ten Chinese local governments have agreed to allow a fast-track entry of businessmen from South Korea under which they are exempt from strict coronavirus quarantine measures, South Korean authorities said on Tuesday.

China has blocked entry for nearly all foreigners in an effort to curb risks of coronavirus infections posed by travellers from overseas. China's foreign ministry said last week it was in talks with some countries to establish fast-track procedures to allow travel by business and technical personnel to ensure the smooth operation of global supply chains.

A person in Korea has to get tested for coronavirus within 72 hours before departure, and again get tested in China during a couple of days of quarantine period.

Starting May 1, the rules will apply to employees of Korean companies or Chinese firms that

have operations in China and want to visit 10 areas, including Shanghai, Chongqing and Tianjin.

South Korea is the first country who have received fast-track status from China, its biggest trading partner, the South Korea foreign ministry said in a statement.

fast-track status will ensure that essential economic activity is guaranteed while honouring quarantine principles to prevent the spread of Covid-19, the ministry said.

Both New Zealand and Australia Contained Coronavirus, but One Is Set to Pay a Heavier Price (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Rachel Pannett and Stephen Wright, Neutral]

New Zealand imposed one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, aiming to stamp out the new coronavirus. Australia took a different approach, adopting social-distancing restrictions but keeping more of its economy open, in an effort to suppress the pathogen.

Both strategies appear to have delivered similar health outcomes: New infections have dropped markedly—to just a couple a day on average in New Zealand and around 10 a day in Australia. But the economic and social costs look likely to be significantly bigger in New Zealand, providing a cautionary example of the potential trade-offs as countries weigh imposing and lifting restrictions.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern warned New Zealanders in late March that tens of thousands might die without dramatic measures. At the time, there were roughly 100 confirmed infections and no deaths in the remote island nation.

The new rules closed nearly all businesses, aside from grocery stores and pharmacies, and restricted people from interacting with others outside their household, even to attend funerals. The lockdown was ranked among the most severe globally by Oxford University's stringency index of government responses.

"We will never know what would actually have happened without our Level 4 restrictions and we can look overseas and see that this devastating scenario has played out in many other countries," Ms. Ardern said Monday, as she declared victory over the virus.

Australia, in comparison, put in place strict social-distancing measures—limiting social gatherings to just two people—but kept many businesses open, including mining, construction and restaurants for takeout.

On Tuesday, New Zealand began to loosen the restrictions on some areas of the economy, including allowing service businesses to take orders online and construction and forestry companies to operate. Prohibitions against some leisure activities, such as surfing and hunting on private land, were also lifted.

New Zealand's strategy has been controversial. Simon Thornley, a lecturer in epidemiology at the University of Auckland, has said striving for elimination is bound to fail and would generate worse economic and health outcomes than the virus itself. He is part of a group of six academics, calling themselves Plan B, who lobbied to loosen the restrictions.

"The biggest risk of this will be chronic unhappiness within citizens" as people deal with the

consequences of the long lockdown, including rising joblessness, said Peter Gluckman, who previously served as New Zealand's chief science adviser. "Lots of small businesses have been disrupted and may not recover."

Governments around the world are balancing the relaxation of restrictions to ease economic pain against the risks of fueling fresh coronavirus outbreaks. A paper published in the journal *Science* on April 14 said one-time lockdowns likely won't be enough and that physical-distancing measures may need to be in place intermittently until 2022.

New Zealand's known and probable infections are stabilizing at around 1,500. Australia, with its larger population of roughly 25 million versus about 5 million in New Zealand, has around 6,700 cases. That puts both of them closer to countries such as South Korea and Taiwan, where a combination of social distancing with aggressive testing and widespread mask usage has contained local outbreaks.

New Zealand and Australia were quick to close their borders to China, taking advantage of their remote island geographies. And both rolled out generous government stimulus packages to offset the impact on key industries including tourism, foreign education and retail: the equivalent of 6% of GDP in New Zealand and about 16% in Australia, among the biggest responses globally.

Their differing growth trajectories now, however, reflect the severity of New Zealand's lockdown. Economists expect New Zealand's economy to contract by more than 20% in the three months through June, compared with the quarter immediately prior, whereas Australia's economy is expected to shrink some 13% over the same period.

"This reflects the fact that our lockdown is very strict. We also see quite a protracted recovery here," said Elizabeth Kendall, an economist with Australia & New Zealand Banking Group Ltd. in New Zealand.

ANZ expects New Zealand's economy to be 10.4% smaller at the end of 2020 than it was at the start of the calendar year. For Australia, the contraction is forecast at 4.7%.

New Zealand's jobless rate may rise to 13.5% from 4% at the end of last year, according to government forecasts. Australia's central bank has forecast the country's unemployment rate will roughly double to 10% by June.

In Australia, bars and restaurants were allowed to offer takeout services, to help avoid mass layoffs of hospitality workers. Key industries such as mining and construction were able to keep their operations running even as other businesses were shut down.

In one such example, BHP Group Ltd., the world's largest listed miner, relocated some tugboat pilots and their families from their homes in the island state of Tasmania to Western Australia as the closure of state borders threatened to disrupt the use of fly-in, fly-out workers, in which companies fly workers in to remote regions rather than relocating them there permanently.

Paul Bloxham, chief economist at HSBC in Sydney, said the silver lining for New Zealand might be a sharper, V-shaped recovery—as often occurs after a hurricane or an earthquake, aided by rebuilding efforts—whereas Australia is more likely looking at a U-

shaped recovery with a prolonged bottom.

"When things open again, people will want to do all the things they haven't been able to do for a while. And that supports the idea of a bounceback," said Mr. Bloxham.

Yvette Edwards, a florist in the New Zealand capital, Wellington, said her business has seen exceptionally high demand since reopening; they delivered about 70 flower arrangements on Tuesday, the first day of reduced restrictions. About 90% of those were people buying for themselves, likely celebrating the end of the lockdown, she said.

She said it was strange not to have people coming into the store, but seeing her two employees after four weeks of lockdown was poignant.

"One of the most amazing things when we arrived in the morning was just seeing each other's faces again. We literally spent five minutes staring at each other," she said. "It was the most surreal feeling. We all just stood there laughing."

[Australia] Australia marks 250th anniversary of Cook landing in muted fashion (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/29/2020 3:12 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

The 250th anniversary of Captain James Cook's contentious landing in Australia went largely unmarked Wednesday as the coronavirus pandemic forced the cancellation of long-planned commemorative events.

On April 29, 1770, Captain Cook sailed the Endeavour into Botany Bay – called Kamay in the local indigenous language – an event that is increasingly being seen through the eyes of the Aboriginal Australians who were on the shore.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said the anniversary represented "a merging of histories," calling Cook an "extraordinary individual."

"The day Cook and the local indigenous community at Kamay first made contact 250 years ago changed the course of our land forever," he said.

"It's a point in time from which we embarked on a shared journey which is realized in the way we live today."

Australia's government was forced to cancel events marking 250 years since Cook's landing due to the COVID-19 outbreak, including the planned Aus\$6.5 million (\$4.3 million) circumnavigation of Australia by a replica of the Endeavour.

The first contact between the British navigator and Aboriginals foreshadowed the colonization of the continent and centuries of dispossession for indigenous Australians.

During his voyage, Cook declared Australia "Terra Nullius" – or legally unoccupied land – and claimed it as British territory despite Aboriginal history stretching back more than 60,000 years.

The British later established a penal colony in New South Wales in 1788.

Gujaga Foundation chair Ray Ingrey said the indigenous Dharawal people had been working with Australia's National Museum for 18 months to showcase their ancestors' recollections of encountering Cook.

"Australian society has matured quite a lot over last 50 years since the last anniversary came around, the 200th anniversary," he told AFP.

"A lot of the messages being received by the National Museum was the broader community saying 'We've heard about Cook's side of story, or the story from the ship, and we want to hear more about the story from the shore'."

An online exhibition features the "largely missing" stories passed down through generations of indigenous Australians of those encounters with Cook and his crew.

"As the longboats started to row towards the shore, my ancestors realized that they weren't Aboriginal people at all, they were in fact alien people because they looked so different to ourselves. We actually thought they was ghosts," elder Shayne Williams said in a video released by the museum.

The warriors on the shore started yelling and gesturing for them to leave, before beginning to throw rocks and then throwing spears, which landed at the crew's feet.

"If our people wanted to spear one of those sailors they could have easily done that. But it was just warning shots," Williams said.

"So what Cook and his crew did, they returned fire with their muskets. Actually hit one of the warriors in the legs."

Ingrey said the anniversary was a "significant event for all Australians" but the indigenous side of the story had long been overlooked or misrepresented.

"It was the first act of violence towards our people by the British, however it is our shared history and we have shared present, so it's only common sense that we have a shared future," he told AFP.

"Both stories need to be respected and that's all that we would hope for, that we have the opportunity to tell our story the way that we want to tell it and be respected to do that.

"We can only then move forward as a nation when both histories are acknowledged and accepted."

[China] China Sets Date for Congress, Signaling Coronavirus Is Under Control (New York Times)

New York Times [4/29/2020 9:28 AM, Keith Bradsher, 40577K, Neutral]

China delivered its strongest statement of confidence yet that it has tamed the country's coronavirus epidemic, announcing on Wednesday it would hold a much-delayed top political gathering late next month and ease quarantine restrictions in the capital.

The most important event on China's political calendar, the annual session of the National People's Congress will provide the Communist Party with a platform intended to inspire

national pride and reassert its primacy. The gathering of top officials from across China will also allow the party to demonstrate unity at a time when many in North America, Europe, Africa and Australia are highly critical of China's initial efforts to conceal the severity of the outbreak.

"The narrative is that the Chinese way of doing things, the China model, is better than other countries in controlling the virus," said Willy Lam, a specialist in Beijing politics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. "This is a symbolic event, showing China has won the war."

The congress is largely ceremonial, with delegates gathering every year to rubber-stamp major decisions. But the decision in February to delay this year's session came as a shock to many in China, and sent a global signal of the seriousness of the epidemic. Even during the SARS outbreak in 2003, the annual legislative session went ahead as scheduled.

But the outbreak in China has subsided in recent weeks, with most cases coming from travelers returning from abroad. On Wednesday, only one case of local transmission was reported.

The announcement that the congress was scheduled for May 22 suggests that officials feel assured that the gathering can be held without placing the central leadership and delegates at risk.

The government did not say how this year's meeting would be conducted. But in past years, it has drawn nearly 3,000 delegates from every province, including officials, party members, army generals in olive green and a smattering of representatives of ethnic minorities in traditional dress. They have assembled in tight rows on the main floor of the cavernous Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square to attend carefully scripted meetings.

The congress will portray Xi Jinping, China's top leader, as firmly in charge, said Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a political scientist at Hong Kong Baptist University. Mr. Xi mostly disappeared from public view during the worst days of the outbreak in Wuhan, where the virus first emerged.

By holding the session, "he wants to show again he's very much in the saddle," Mr. Cabestan said.

In another sign that the government wants to project confidence in its strategy to tame the virus, the authorities in Beijing said on Wednesday that most domestic travelers arriving in the city would no longer be required to spend two weeks in quarantine. Quarantines will now be limited to people coming from overseas or from areas in China with recent cases, such as Hubei Province and its capital, Wuhan.

But the situation in China remains far from normal. The country has almost completely closed its borders and halted nearly all international flights in recent weeks, preventing many of its own citizens from coming home. China has urged foreign governments not to transfer diplomats to Beijing.

China has already acknowledged that the epidemic has set off the country's worst slowdown in nearly half a century, with the economy shrinking 6.8 percent in the first three

months of the year compared with a year ago. The figure highlights the impact of China's drastic efforts to stamp out the coronavirus, which included a lockdown that expanded to cover half the population and the temporary closure of factories and offices across the country.

Mr. Xi struck a cautious but optimistic tone on Tuesday about the country's resolve to restore normal business activity in the world's second-largest economy.

"Thanks to our strenuous efforts, we have emerged from the most challenging time," Mr. Xi told the president of Nepal in a phone conversation, according to the Foreign Ministry. "Yet we remain soberly aware of the situation."

"We have every confidence that China's economic fundamentals underpinning long-term growth remain solid," he was described as saying.

China is practically alone among major countries in not having begun an extensive government spending program as an economic stimulus in response to the pandemic, even as the entire economy has slowed sharply and appears to suffer from continued weakness in consumer spending. One popular theory for why China has not yet acted is that it may be waiting for the congress to approve a comprehensive spending plan.

"This is a very important legal issue: Any important stimulus needs to be sealed by the congress," said Yu Yongding, a senior economist at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.

The standing committee of the congress, which announced the opening date, did not say how long the session would last. Recent annual sessions have lasted about two weeks. Health concerns might yet shorten this year's event.

The meetings are usually staid affairs in which the premier delivers an annual work report that in past years has provided a target for the Chinese economy's full-year growth. Economists expect that the economic growth target for this year is likely to be considerably below the usual 6 percent or so, if one is set at all.

This year's agenda is also likely to be focused on helping the country weather the impact of a possibly lengthy global recession triggered by the pandemic.

One key sign of how the government plans to address the downturn will be seen in the annual government budget, which may include economic stimulus measures.

Also on the agenda is a plan to overhaul China's laws for the handling of public health emergencies, including statutes on wildlife trade — which has drawn criticism for its links to disease outbreaks — and biosecurity.

The epidemic not only set back the country's economic activity, but also placed in jeopardy Mr. Xi's pledge to eradicate rural poverty this year. The government will most likely use the legislative session to reaffirm its commitment to this goal, on which Mr. Xi has staked his legacy.

[China] In a sign the virus is largely contained, China schedules big political meetings for late May (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 7:36 AM, Anna Fifield, Neutral]

China signaled its confidence that its novel coronavirus epidemic has finally been brought under control, scheduling for next month its highest-profile annual legislative meetings, which had been postponed at the height of the outbreak.

Known as the "Two Sessions," the meetings are always a piece of important political theater for China's ruling Communist Party, a venue for the leaders to trumpet their achievements of the past year and lay out their plans and targets for the year ahead.

But that will be particularly tricky this year, with China still emerging from a coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan at the end of last year, killing 4,643 people and sickening almost 85,000 in the country.

"A big part of these meetings is to be an accountability mechanism," said Ryan Manuel, managing director of Official China, a consultancy specializing in China's domestic political environment.

He predicted a lot of pushback this year if the party's leaders try to set overly ambitious growth targets or move aggressively to centralize power. "That will result in a lot of squealing," Manuel said.

The Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, a mostly ceremonial advisory body, is to start meeting on May 21, and the National People's Congress, the rubber-stamp parliament, will convene the following day, China's official Xinhua News Agency announced Wednesday. The NPC usually sits for at least 10 days, but no end date was reported.

The meetings had been scheduled to begin on March 5 but were postponed because of the coronavirus outbreak. Ironically, it was because Wuhan was holding its municipal meeting, a precursor to the national congress, in mid-January that authorities decided against alerting the public to a potential outbreak and risk upsetting the political calendar.

"The COVID-19 epidemic prevention and control situation in China is improving steadily, and the normal economic and social life is gradually resuming," the NPC Standing Committee said in a statement cited by Xinhua.

The meeting would "unite the thoughts" of the deputies on China's challenges and consider the "progress" of its poverty eradication program, Tam Yiu-chung, a Hong Kong representative on the Standing Committee, quoted Li Zhanshu, the committee chairman, as saying.

The annual meetings bring more than 5,000 delegates from all over the country to Beijing and to the main event: a huge NPC meeting in the majestic Great Hall of the People on Tiananmen Square. There, the delegates listen as President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang review the past year and lay out the government's targets for the year ahead.

The NPC has made "special arrangements" to protect the deputies against the coronavirus this time around, Tam told reporters, according to the South China Morning Post.

Chinese citizens abroad seek refuge from the coronavirus pandemic — at home

It wasn't clear whether that meant the meetings would use video conferencing rather than going ahead in person, as usual. The Standing Committee meeting held this week was a mixture of the two, with Beijing members attending in person and those outside the capital joining remotely.

The Global Times, a nationalist newspaper linked to the Communist Party, suggested last week that the Two Sessions meetings might be held in a similar way, noting that it has "become a trend to have video conferences."

While most of China is returning to life as normal — some areas faster than others — the capital, Beijing, continues to be under tight restrictions ahead of the politically significant meetings.

All people arriving in Beijing must undergo a quarantine period of as long as 21 days, and the national borders remain closed to foreign citizens.

Even after declaring victory over the virus, which began at the end of last year in the central province of Hubei, China has experienced secondary waves of infection as its citizens have returned from countries hit by the epidemic, especially from Iran, Italy and, most recently, Russia.

But now, with hospitals and quarantine centers set up on the northern border with Russia, authorities appear confident that they can manage the contagion.

[China] China to hold annual parliament meeting after two-month delay in signal that coronavirus is under control (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 2:43 AM, Nectar Gan, 12317K, Neutral]

China announced Wednesday it will hold the country's biggest annual political meeting in May following a two-month delay, the strongest signal yet from the Chinese government that it considers the novel coronavirus outbreak to be under control.

The annual meeting of the National People's Congress (NPC), China's top legislative body, is usually held in early March. This year, it was postponed for the first time in decades due to the coronavirus outbreak.

On Wednesday, the NPC Standing Committee announced the parliamentary session will kick off on May 22, citing the "continuously improving situation of epidemic prevention and control on Covid-19" and a "gradual return to normal of economic and social life" in China, according to state news agency Xinhua.

The announcement is a symbolic display of confidence by Beijing that it has successfully contained the coronavirus, which was first reported in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December last year. It has since spread worldwide, infecting more than 3.1 million people and killing at least 216,000, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The highly choreographed meeting of the rubber-stamp parliament will see nearly 3,000 delegates from around the country gathered in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, unveiling the country's key economic targets, approving budgets, and passing legislation in

sessions that last for about 10 days.

Allowing thousands of people to travel to the Chinese capital and sit side by side for days in an indoor setting would have been unthinkable two months ago, when much of the country was under varying types of restrictive lockdown measures intended to stop the fast-spreading virus.

But the country has turned a corner in recent weeks, with the number of newly reported infections slowing to a trickle. Lockdowns have also been lifted across China, including the original epicenter of Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province. People have returned to work, and some provinces have allowed final year high school students to return to classrooms in advance of university entrance examinations.

Beneath the surface, however, fears about a potential second wave of infections remain high. China last month banned the entry of most foreign nationals, following outbreaks around the world and a surge in imported cases. As of Wednesday, a total of 1,660 imported cases have been reported, mostly Chinese nationals returning from overseas. In many cities, all overseas arrivals are required to go into mandatory quarantine for at least two weeks.

Concerns have been particularly heightened over the recent spike in imported and locally transmitted infections near the Chinese-Russian border in northeastern Heilongjiang province. According to provincial health authorities, 386 Covid-19 cases have entered China through the Heilongjiang, and 556 local cases have been reported.

Chinese citizens have rushed to return home as the outbreak worsens in Russia, which has now recorded 93,000 confirmed cases – nearly 10,000 more than reported in China, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Earlier this month, the city of Suifenhe, which lies right by the Russian border, announced a city-wide lockdown, confining all residents to their homes and allowing only one person per household to go out for grocery shopping every three days. It also opened a makeshift hospital to treat coronavirus patients, converted from an office building.

Last week, the provincial capital of Harbin, a city of more than 10 million people, banned public gatherings, and residents would only be allowed to socialize with people in their respective households.

Locally transmitted cases have also been reported in recent weeks in Guangdong province, in the country's south.

At this year's belated NPC meetings, much attention will be placed on the central government's work report, to be delivered to delegates by Chinese Premier Li Keqiang. The report will reveal the country's key economic targets and map out major policies for the coming year.

The Chinese economy has been hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic, after its growth had already slumped to a near three-decade low last year following the US-China trade war.

In the first quarter of 2020, the world's second largest economy shrank 6.8% compared to a

year earlier, according to government statistics. It was the first time China has reported an economic contraction since 1976, when Communist Party leader Mao Zedong's death ended a decade of social and economic tumult. The economy shrunk 1.6% that year.

The NPC's annual plenary session has kicked-off every year on March 5 since the date was first formalized in 1995. It went ahead as scheduled in 2003 amid the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic, which originated in China and hit the country hard. SARS eventually spread across the world to infect more than 8,000 people, killing at least 774.

[China] China to roll out economic measures to support virus-hit Hubei (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:51 AM, Colin Qian and Ryan Woo, 5304K, Neutral]

China will roll out a basket of measures including tax, credit and foreign trade policies to support economic development in central Hubei province, the ruling Communist Party's politburo said on Wednesday, state television reported.

Hubei, the epicentre of the new coronavirus outbreak in the country, should speed up development in auto-making, 5G and artificial intelligence areas, it said.

Wuhan, capital of Hubei and the city hit hardest by the epidemic in China, reported on Wednesday a 40.5% slump in its gross domestic product in the first quarter compared with a year earlier.

Like the rest of the province, Wuhan's manufacturing sector led the decline in output, paralysed by a lockdown that was only lifted on April 8.

No new confirmed cases have been reported in Wuhan and Hubei since early April.

Wuhan, a city of 11 million people, has reported more than 3,800 fatalities from the coronavirus outbreak.

[China] How foreigners, especially black people, became unwelcome in parts of China amid COVID crisis (ABC News)

ABC News [4/29/2020 5:11 AM, Alice Chambers and Guy Davies, 3795K, Negative]

For Andrew, a black American living in China and teaching English for the past two years, life had been pretty good.

"As a black foreigner, because China was closed for so long, there is a novelty about seeing foreigners," he said. "It's part of life that you just get used to here, and it's never been malicious."

But about two weeks ago, that all changed, he said.

As COVID-19 cases originating in China appeared to decrease, and cases that the government said were brought into the country from abroad increased, being foreign in China, and especially being black, meant feeling unwelcome in certain places.

"In the past couple of weeks, things have changed drastically," Andrew, who has been teaching in the southern metropolis of Guangzhou, told ABC News. He asked that ABC use

only his first name, as he and his employer are wary of the risk of retaliation from Chinese authorities.

American authorities appear to be well-aware of the issue. In an April 13 health alert, the U.S. Consulate General warned about discrimination against African Americans in Guangzhou. "As part of this campaign, police ordered bars and restaurants not to serve clients who appear to be of African origin. Moreover, local officials launched a round of mandatory tests for COVID-19, followed by mandatory self-quarantine, for anyone with 'African contacts,' regardless of recent travel history or previous quarantine completion. African-Americans have also reported that some businesses and hotels refuse to do business with them," the bulletin read.

The consulate general said it "advises African-Americans or those who believe Chinese officials may suspect them of having contact with nationals of African countries to avoid the Guangzhou metropolitan area until further notice."

"At a moment when the international community urgently needs to work together to fight the pandemic, the US side is making unwarranted allegations in an attempt to sow discords and stoke troubles," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said on April 13. "This is neither moral nor responsible. We suggest that the US had better focus on domestic efforts to contain the spread of the virus. Attempts to use the pandemic to drive a wedge between China and Africa are bound to fail."

Lijian also said that "new measures" were adopted in Guangzhou to address "the concerns of some African citizens."

ABC News reached out and placed an official request to comment with the information department of the Foreign Ministry as well as the one in Guangzhou but has not heard back at time of publication.

By mid-March, Chinese propaganda had shifted, from praising the country's quick action dealing with the virus, to worrying about its reintroduction from abroad. It was around this time that Keenan Chen, a researcher and reporter with First Draft, an organization that tracks misinformation online, told ABC News he began to see unconfirmed speculation that community transmission in China was not as serious as cases coming in from the outside.

"China is very concerned about a second wave coming from abroad," Evanna Hu, a partner and an expert on China at Omelas, a Washington-based firm that tracks online extremism and information manipulation, told ABC News.

Despite many of the new imported cases in China coming from Chinese students returning from studying overseas, state and social media more often than not simply say the new cases are brought into the country coupled with images of the coronavirus ravaging the United States and Europe, leaving the impression that foreigners were the ones infected.

A reported attack and a swift crackdown

Guangzhou has one of the largest African populations in China (400,000-500,000 by some estimates) and reports in early April showed discrimination against those residents, some of whom were left homeless or subject to arbitrary COVID-19 testing after authorities said that

five Nigerians had tested positive for the virus. Significantly, the People's Government of Guangzhou Province announced that a Nigerian man at a COVID ward had attacked and wounded a female nurse while allegedly attempting to flee, Chen told ABC, adding that this news circulated widely on social media. ABC News could not independently verify if the original report was true.

Andrew said a taxi driver drive off when he saw him, and has also had issues with the authorities when riding on the metro.

For no apparent reason, Andrew said he was asked by local police to produce his passport as he was trying to get the metro. When he asked why, he was told there was a new rule in place, and was given no explanation. Eventually he ceded to their demands: "I realized I was standing there, frustrating a group of people who did not create this rule," he said. Now he mostly stays at home.

"The narrative that I have seen about foreigners is that foreigners are spreading the virus because they're irresponsible," Andrew told ABC News. "So if you have a population doing their very best to take care of themselves and they're told that some are not, that explains why it happens so quickly."

Matt Slack, a white man from New Jersey who has run a chain of pizza restaurants in Guangzhou for the past four years, said the change in the disposition towards foreigners "was like a light switch."

"I'm privileged to say that that I've gone 36 years of my life without experiencing racism," he told ABC News. Now, he's been refused entrance to restaurants, other people won't get in the elevator with him. "People won't sit beside you in the subway," he said.

Chen said that the Chinese people know the information they get online is unreliable. In the past 10 years the censorship machine has become so sophisticated that it's hard to access the internet seen by the outside world.

"There's absolutely tons of racism and xenophobia online," he said. "[But] racist content and xenophobic content is rarely censored online, unlike comments against the government."

Anti-black racism

Slack said he recalls how, on April 6, his businesses were visited by the local city management. He said he was never given an official note, but his store managers reported to him that they were given a blue sign that they were instructed to show to customers. It was written in English and said that their pizza restaurants were only offering take-away. The message was meant for foreigners, Slack said his manager reported to him, "especially [for] black people."

Slack also said he was not allowed to eat in a restaurant in a different neighborhood one day recently, even though he saw Chinese people eating there. Andrew said his foreign friends don't want to dine out because of concerns they'd be denied.

Both expats painted a picture of a shifting information landscape in which it's difficult to determine where directives are coming from. Andrew said his fear is that "they could show

up at your door and tell you you're under quarantine." "And we don't know who 'they' is. It's inconsistent," he added.

Since the outbreak of the novel coronavirus in China in December, controlling the epidemic block by block has fallen on the most grass-roots level of the Chinese civil-service: the neighborhood committee. Under immense pressure to deliver results to their supervisors, some overeager neighborhood controllers have resorted to sometimes sweepingly extreme measures like welding families inside their home in Jiangsu Province back in early February. Provincial officials later found out and forbade the practice. What is happening in certain areas of Guangzhou may be part of the same phenomenon of overzealous low-level leaders taking matters into their own hands.

"The signs that I've seen are not on letterheads," said Hu. "Which the reason why I think it might be very low level CCP officials, but it probably wasn't sanctioned from the top."

International backlash

Last week, the authorities in Guangzhou published a multi-lingual statement, addressed to everyone in the province, to say that the government has "zero tolerance over discriminatory language or acts."

But reports of racism have drawn international condemnation from senior politicians in both Africa and the United States.

Some of this appears to have stemmed from the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) putting forth "many contradictory stories" about the origins of coronavirus, including alleging that the U.S. Army and Italy were the true sources, and not Wuhan, where the outbreak is believed to have begun, according to Dr. Matthew Kroenig, associate professor at the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University,

"There is longstanding and well-documented racism, especially against black people, in China," he said. "The state has seized on this sentiment in recent days to find a scapegoat."

Some of the apparent increase in racism will likely have a political rationale, he said.

"Most CCP actions are driven by its two foremost goals of domestic stability and increased international leadership," Kroenig continued. "Similarly, China's disinformation campaign is driven by a desire to deflect blame, so the regime can appear competent both at home and abroad."

However, this has become an economic and foreign policy problem for China, as the country's economic interests in Africa means they have been keen to play down accusations of racism, according to Hu. "The Chinese propaganda machine has gone into overdrive since April 12th to dispel rumors of Africans being targeted," she said. "The Chinese Communist Party is trying their hardest right now to dispel those rumors, which I've never seen before as part of their foreign policy."

Hope for the future

Slack has refused to follow the local authority's direction not to allow foreigners into his

restaurants and doesn't know if his business will survive.

His restaurants normally employ about 45 people, around 20 of whom are currently working given the COVID-19 restrictions still in place.

Slack says there are a hundred ways to shut a business down in China, but that he can't keep quiet right now. "We just won't operate anywhere in which our business is encouraged to discriminate even if we get shut down for it," he wrote in a public LinkedIn post.

In an email sent on April 24 and reviewed by ABC News, the U.S. embassy in Beijing assured American citizens stated that: "In response to reports of discrimination against foreign citizens the Chinese government has reiterated that all public health measures, including mandatory testing and quarantine policies, apply equally to both Chinese citizens and foreigners." The embassy has urged US citizens to report cases of discrimination to the police and, after reporting, asked them to inform the nearest American Citizens Services Unit of the incident.

Andrew, however, is more hopeful for his future. He has the support of his employer and a wide circle of friends and acquaintances both foreign and Chinese. He says he has been touched by shows of solidarity – local Chinese volunteers have stepped up to support Africans evicted from their homes. On the other hand, he wouldn't recommend foreigners to move to China right now.

"I don't think that this is a permanent thing," he said. "I don't think it reflects on the people of China. I think it reflects on the fear that people are living in, and the desire that anyone has to explain away this situation that is fraught for literally everyone."

[Hong Kong] As virus infections dwindle, Hong Kong protests gain steam (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:58 AM, Zen Soo, Neutral]

Demonstrators chanted pro-democracy slogans in a luxury mall in Hong Kong on Wednesday, the latest in a string of small but determined protests as the city's coronavirus outbreak slows.

More than 100 protesters gathered at lunchtime in the Landmark Atrium mall in Central, a prestigious business and retail district, despite social distancing rules that prohibit public gatherings of more than four.

They sang a protest anthem, "Glory to Hong Kong," and held up signs reading "Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now" and "Hong Kong Independence." One protester hung a banner cursing Hong Kong police and their families.

"The protests had calmed down previously because of the coronavirus, but now we must step up and let the world know that we have not given up," said Mich Chan, who works in the legal industry. "We're still fighting for what we fought for last year."

Holding up a sign calling for the movement's five demands to be met, Chan said she was not worried about possible transmission of the virus during the protests because the people of Hong Kong are "disciplined and know how to protect themselves" by wearing masks.

Police entered the mall about half an hour after the protest began, urging people to leave

and warning those assembled that they were violating social distancing rules and participating in an unlawful assembly. The police detained several protesters but later let them go, with no arrests made.

The protest followed similar ones in malls on Sunday and Tuesday in which police dispersed the crowds. They are a continuation of a movement that began last June to protest an extradition bill that would have allowed detainees in Hong Kong to be transferred to mainland China. Although the bill was later withdrawn, the demonstrations continued, with protesters demanding full democracy and an independent inquiry into police behavior.

Organizers are planning further protests in May, with an eye to a major march on July 1, the day when Britain returned Hong Kong to China in 1997. Activists expect protesters to return to the streets again, as the city's daily virus cases have dwindled to single digits for over two weeks.

Adrian Wong, who works in banking, said he came out to protest despite worries about the coronavirus.

"I am concerned about the virus but I think I still have to come out, so that Hong Kong's people won't forget what happened in the last year," Wong said. "The violence of the Hong Kong police force is destroying Hong Kong, and the five demands have not been met yet."

The protests this month are also fueled by the perception that mainland China is interfering in Hong Kong's affairs, after Beijing's liaison office accused pan-democrat lawmakers of damaging public interest by filibustering and delaying the election of a chairman of the Legislative Council House Committee.

Protesters also criticized the arrests of 15 pro-democracy activists and lawmakers earlier this month on charges of unauthorized assembly during several large-scale demonstrations last year.

"Whether people protest depends on the government's actions. If the Beijing liaison office continues to criticize lawmakers, disqualify them or even put pressure on people, then people will be angry and come out to protest more eagerly," activist Ventus Lau said.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong court rejects appeal by protest leader Edward Leung (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 5:04 AM, Jessie Pang, 5304K, Neutral]

A Hong Kong court on Wednesday rejected an appeal by pro-democracy activist Edward Leung against a six-year jail term for his part in demonstrations in the Chinese-ruled city in 2016 that turned violent.

Leung, 28, one of the leaders of a movement advocating independence from China, was jailed for rioting and was handed the harshest sentence to a pro-democracy leader since Britain returned Hong Kong to Beijing in 1997.

The appeal court judges said in their judgement the law must ensure that public order and peace are preserved and not threatened by the use of violence.

"If public order is not preserved, the freedom and rights of citizens will be lost," they said.

In his appeal, Leung's lawyer argued his sentence was disproportionate to his offence, citing other, more violent protesters receiving lighter sentences.

The ruling comes as the financial hub is gearing up for demonstrations over the next few months after a relative lull this year as the new coronavirus and social distancing restrictions aimed at curbing its spread saw many protesters stay indoors.

Authorities have repeatedly said the city is facing the risk of "home-grown terrorism" after several police reports of explosive materials being found.

More than 7,800 protesters have been arrested since opposition to a now-withdrawn extradition bill escalated in June last year, with 564 of those charged with rioting, which carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

Although Leung was jailed before the demonstrations erupted last year, many regard him as a "spiritual leader" of the movement.

One of his old slogans — "Liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times" — is one of the most popular chants of the new generation of protesters.

[Japan] Japan's Abe says impossible to hold Olympics unless pandemic contained (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:12 AM, Leika Kihara, Neutral]

It will be impossible to host the Tokyo Olympic Games next year unless the coronavirus pandemic is contained, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said on Wednesday.

"The Olympic Games must be held in a way that shows the world has won its battle against the coronavirus pandemic," Abe told parliament.

"Otherwise, it will be hard to hold the Games."

He was replying to a query from an opposition lawmaker whether Tokyo could host the Games next year, after this year's delay caused by the pandemic.

[Japan] Japan firms back same-sex partnership certificate campaign in gay rights push (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:08 AM, Beh Lih Yi, Neutral]

A Japanese charity has won the backing of businesses from banks to insurers for a new scheme offering digital partnership certificates that allow same-sex couples to tap into the same staff benefits as heterosexual ones.

The Famiee Project said it wanted to spur change by tapping into growing business support for LGBT+ rights in socially conservative Japan and aims to sign up 100 businesses by the time it launches the scheme in July.

Gay marriage is illegal in Japan and although about two dozen cities, towns and wards issue same-sex partnership certificates, they lack legal standing and prejudice persists.

"If we have a big network of corporations that support us, we can persuade the government to change the law," said Famiee Project founder Koki Uchiyama.

"That kind of movement is already happening in Japan," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone from Tokyo, referring to the growing business support for LGBT+ rights.

The scheme has so far been endorsed by 17 companies including banking firm Mizuho Financial Group, insurer Sampo Japan and Hotto Link, a public-listed data firm where Uchiyama is the chief executive.

Some of the 17 firms have already recognised certificates issued by local authorities, but these documents can only be used in the area they are issued.

Famiee Project said its digital certificates will use blockchain technology and QR codes for record and verification, making it easier for nationwide use.

The project aims to get 100 companies on board by July to provide same-sex couples with benefits such as marriage or parental leave.

It also wants the firms to accept the certificates for services such as opening joint bank account or naming insurance beneficiaries.

The Justice Ministry and Welfare Ministry did not respond to a request for comment.

Japan's laws on LGBT+ issues are relatively liberal compared with many Asian countries, with same-sex relations legal since 1880, but being openly gay remains largely taboo.

About a third of Japanese companies have measures in place to support gay couples, but discrimination is still common, according to Nijiro Diversity, which campaigns for LGBT+ rights in the workplace.

"This certificate alone is not effective. The government should give more support to companies working towards measures on LGBT+ rights," said the group founder Maki Muraki.

Activist Ai Nakajima said she hoped the scheme would spur government into action.

"Companies are changing, but the government is not changing. So tax benefits or health insurance benefits are still not possible," said Nakajima, who was among 13 same-sex couples to sue the government over the right to gay marriage last year.

Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party has said that same-sex marriage was "incompatible" with the constitution, although public polls showing growing acceptance in recent years.

[Malaysia] After virus outbreak tied to religious event, Malaysia puts the brakes on Ramadan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 9:07 AM, Emily Ding, Neutral]

Over several days in late February, at least 12,500 Muslims convened at the Jamek

Mosque on Kuala Lumpur's outskirts to pray, eat and listen to sermons in an annual act to renew their faith.

On the eve of the gathering in the suburb of Sri Petaling — organized by Jemaah Tabligh Malaysia, the local chapter of a religious pilgrimage movement founded in India about a century ago — the World Health Organization had not yet declared the novel coronavirus a pandemic, and Malaysia had 22 reported cases. Initially, the event came and went as it had in years before.

The first sign of trouble came March 9, when a participant from Brunei was reported to be infected. A few days later, a Malaysian participant tested positive. By March 17, cases linked to the religious celebration had become Malaysia's largest cluster and now account for 37 percent of its total of almost 6,000 cases. Some of the 1,500 foreign attendees carried the virus home to Brunei, Singapore, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam.

With the holy month of Ramadan underway, this year's religious festivities are unlike any in memory. It's a time when Muslims usually come together to break their dawn-to-sunset fast with family and friends, and for nightly prayers at mosques. But such activities now pose a risk of coronavirus transmission.

Two weeks after the Kuala Lumpur event, about 9,000 Muslims gathered in South Sulawesi, Indonesia, as part of another tabligh chapter — until authorities shut it down. Attendees spread the virus to neighboring countries, including Malaysia and Thailand.

"Ramadan is a very high-risk event," said Pandu Riono, an epidemiologist at the University of Indonesia. "The infections from the tabligh gathering in South Sulawesi spread to many different islands. Then you have all these small clusters around the country that can become a big fire engulfing the whole country."

Indonesia, the largest Muslim-majority nation, recently banned people from traveling back to their hometowns in an exodus that traditionally happens at the end of Ramadan for the Eid al-Fitr holiday. Yet it has not imposed a national lockdown, and social distancing measures vary among provinces.

"It's going to be very difficult to keep the people from going to the mosque every night," or dropping by a relative's house to break fast together, Riono said. Indonesia has more than 9,000 coronavirus cases and 700 deaths.

In Malaysia, the government has extended restrictions on movement until at least May 12 — midway through Ramadan. The country has closed its borders, banned events and gatherings, shut schools and houses of worship, and allowed only essential businesses to operate. Most people can travel only for necessities — exceptions require police approval — within six miles of their home, with one person allowed in each car.

"We have leaders who decided to be brave and initiated the lockdown relatively early in comparison with other countries, once we knew we had made a mistake," said Nirmala Bhoo Pathy, an epidemiologist at the University of Malaya. The Health Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Malaysia's Islamic affairs minister, Zulkifli Mohamad al-Bakri, has advised Muslims to order

food and have it delivered to friends and relatives instead of visiting them at home. Officials have also halted the food bazaars that normally pop up across the country and have established a fund for mosques and prayer houses to distribute food to the needy.

"We should welcome Ramadan with the new normal," Zulkifli said on the eve of the holy month.

As the world battles the pandemic, the Kuala Lumpur mosque gathering highlights how a localized hot spot can quickly become a wider outbreak.

Attendees have reportedly said that precautions against the coronavirus were not observed, and that people prayed closely together and shared food.

By late March, the mosque cluster had spread to five generations as family members infected neighbors, their neighbors infected their friends, and so on. Participants in the gathering also had visited Islamic schools, contributing to new subclusters of infections among students and teachers.

In early April, Malaysian officials said about 3,000 tabligh participants had yet to be screened — in part because some had gone abroad. One of the organizers, Abdullah Cheong, publicly disputed this figure, citing discrepancies in earlier estimates. Cheong declined to comment further about the gathering when contacted by The Washington Post.

Khairi Akbar, a 41-year-old Malaysian who took part in the gathering, learned in March that he was an asymptomatic carrier of the virus. After being admitted to the hospital for 18 days and self-quarantined for another 14, he was looking forward to spending Ramadan at home with his wife and children — although he worries about his mother, who lives alone in another state.

"We believe that Allah is the doer of all things, so even if the current situation means that we cannot perform our normal prayers in the mosque, there must be something that he wants us to learn," he said. "I believe we can achieve the same purpose of Ramadan staying in our homes, but I definitely miss breaking fast together at the mosque and doing prayers at night."

To deter people from contravening stay-home orders, Defense Minister Ismail Sabri Yaakob said police would increase roadblocks around the country. Eleven temporary prisons have been set up to house violators, he said. Since March 18, more than 19,000 have been arrested. Some have since been released, others fined or imprisoned.

The clampdown appears to be having an effect. In recent days, Malaysia has registered daily cases of the coronavirus in the double digits — down from a high of more than 200 in early April. Malaysia's director general of health, Noor Hisham Abdullah, recently said the country is in "the recovery phase."

"But it's not impossible to have an exponential surge if we let our guard down," he added.

Rahmah Ghazali, a 36-year-old freelance journalist who is normally based in Britain, said her family could still mark Ramadan together but that they have had to modify their plans. She has been living with her husband and two sisters in her parents' house in Kajang, near

Kuala Lumpur, with her parents' domestic helper and their seven grandchildren.

"We're cooking more than ever," she said. "We don't go out and don't really order deliveries because it can get expensive, and currently neither I nor my husband are working. We won't be spending like in previous years."

[Myanmar] UN human rights expert accuse Myanmar army of fresh abuses (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 9:25 AM, Staff, 2194K, Negative]

The U.N.'s human rights expert on Myanmar has called for a new investigation into allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity during recent fighting in the Southeast Asian country as she approaches the end of her appointment.

Yanghee Lee, whose formal title is special rapporteur, accused Myanmar's military of "inflicting immense suffering" on ethnic minorities in Rakhine and Chin states, where the government is battling the Arakan Army, a well-armed and well-trained guerrilla force representing the Buddhist Rakhine minority.

"While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine state, targeting the civilian population," Lee said in a statement issued Wednesday in Geneva.

She accused the military of "systematically violating the most fundamental principles of international humanitarian law and human rights," and said its conduct toward civilians "may amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity."

Lee, a South Korean whose term ends this month, has been a sharp critic of Myanmar's military since her appointment in 2014, focusing especially on human rights abuses against the Muslim Rohingya minority in Rakhine state.

In August 2017, the military – known as the Tatmadaw – launched what it called a clearance campaign in northern Rakhine state in response to attacks by a Rohingya insurgent group. The campaign forced more than 700,000 Rohingya to flee to neighboring Bangladesh. Security forces were accused of mass rapes and killings and burning thousands of homes.

The International Court of Justice in the Netherlands agreed last year to rule on charges of genocide lodged against Myanmar. U.N. agencies and human rights organizations have extensively documented atrocities. Myanmar's government says it acted justifiably and denies any major abuses.

Lee linked the current situation in Rakhine and Chin to the government's actions against the Rohingya, for which no senior officers have faced justice and token punishments were given to a handful of low-ranking security personnel.

"Having faced no accountability, the Tatmadaw continues to operate with impunity. For decades, its tactics have intentionally maximized civilian suffering; we all know what they did to the Rohingya in 2017," Lee said. "They are now targeting all civilians in the conflict area, with people from Rakhine, Rohingya, Mro, Dagnet and Chin communities being killed in recent months. Their alleged crimes must be investigated in accordance with international standards, with perpetrators being held accountable."

The Arakan Army, which says it is seeking self-determination, has engaged in increasingly fierce combat with government forces since late 2018.

Lee said government air and artillery strikes in recent weeks have killed and injured scores of adults and children.

"More than 157,000 people have been displaced, and hundreds including women and children killed and wounded since the conflict started," she said.

Lee was also critical of the Arakan Army, which she said "has also conducted its hostilities in a manner that has had negative impacts on civilians, including kidnapping local officials and parliamentarians."

She added that the guerrilla force had declared a unilateral cease-fire, citing the need to combat the spread of COVID-19.

"The focus of all authorities, including security forces, should be on dealing with the COVID-19 crisis," Lee said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar military may be committing new war crimes, says departing rights envoy (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 12:45 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The departing U.N. human rights envoy for Myanmar said its military is engaged in activities against rebels that may amount to "war crimes and crimes against humanity" in Rakhine and Chin states, and that she was "enraged" and "saddened" by the situation in the country after six years in the role.

The South Korean special rapporteur said the basis for her conclusion about possible war crimes was that the armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, have ramped up attacks against civilians in recent weeks with air and artillery strikes.

Two military spokesmen did not answer phone calls seeking comment. A government spokesman also did not answer phone calls seeking comment. The army has denied targeting civilians and has declared the insurgent group it is fighting, the Arakan Army, a terrorist organisation.

"While the world is occupied with the COVID-19 pandemic, the Myanmar military continues to escalate its assault in Rakhine State, targeting the civilian population," Yanghee Lee said on Wednesday in her final statement as rights envoy, calling for an investigation into the accusations "in accordance with international standards."

Government troops and fighters from the Arakan Army, which wants greater autonomy for Myanmar's western region and recruits largely from the region's Buddhist majority, have been fighting for more than a year, but clashes have intensified recently.

Dozens of people have been killed and tens of thousands displaced.

The government has repeatedly refused requests by Lee to enter Myanmar. She has previously accused the army of genocide and other war crimes against the Rohingya

Muslim minority in Rakhine in 2017, when some 700,000 fled an army crackdown.

The army and government have consistently rejected such accusations and said the military was responding to attacks by Rohingya Muslim insurgents.

Lee told Reuters by phone from South Korea that the democratic opening that brought Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi to power in 2016, ending half a century of military rule, had failed to bring the hoped-for expansion of rights and freedoms.

She criticized what she described as the "systemic failure" of the international community, including the United Nations, to stop grave human rights violations.

"We repeat the phrase, 'Never again'. It goes on and on," she said.

Lee has been a divisive figure inside Myanmar. Her defense of the Rohingya made her a popular target of Buddhist nationalists. The last time she was allowed to visit the country was in 2017, shortly after the expulsion of tens of thousands of Rohingya during a military campaign.

[Papua New Guinea] Zijin warns Papua New Guinea of China anger over end of gold mine lease (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:52 AM, Tom Westbrook and Tom Daly, 5304K, Neutral]

China's Zijin Mining has warned Papua New Guinea that its failure to renew the lease of a gold mine it jointly owns with Barrick Gold Corp there could damage bilateral relations.

Papua New Guinea on Friday said it would not renew a 20-year mining lease at its Porgera gold mine, citing environmental damage and social unrest even as gold prices have soared to more than seven-year highs.

Barrick (Niugini) Limited (BNL), the local venture in which both miners have a 47.5% stake, suspended operations on Saturday, saying the government had not given it formal notification that it would not renew the lease, or any details of a planned transition.

Zijin, which is a state-controlled company, said that Papua New Guinea needed to conduct negotiations to extend the mining lease in good faith, and that a failure to resolve the issue could impair relations between the two countries.

"As a Chinese enterprise, Zijin would like to contribute to the existing good economic, trade, cultural and inter-governmental relations between China and PNG," Chen Jinghe, chairman of Zijin's board said in a letter addressed to Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister James Marape.

"However, if Zijin's investment in Porgera mine is not properly protected by the PNG government, I am afraid there will be significant negative impact on the bilateral relations between China and PNG," he said in the letter, dated Monday, seen by Reuters. Chen's office confirmed the letter had been sent.

China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs didn't immediately respond to a faxed request for comment. China's embassy in Port Moresby did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment. The office of Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister did not respond to a

request for comment.

China has steadily increased its influence and spending in the Pacific in recent years, and is Papua New Guinea's biggest creditor, budget figures show.

The BNL joint venture had run into opposition from local landowners and residents. Critics say the Porgera mine has polluted the water and created other environmental and social problems, with minimal economic benefits for locals.

Marape warned Barrick in a social media post on Monday that the government would take control of the mine if it closed during the transition period.

Both miners have said they would pursue all legal means to protect their interests and recover damages.

Zijin also said that it understood the need for greater benefits distribution among governments, landowners and stakeholders.

But if the special mining lease extension is not granted, the mine will be forced to close, the company said.

That would also result in "the removal of the installations and facilities in the mine ... (which) would render the mine's operation impossible for years," the company added.

[Singapore] Singapore warns against spreading fake news about foreign workers living in dorms (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [4/29/2020 6:43 AM, Gurdip Singh, 3975K, Neutral]

Singapore on Wednesday warned against spreading fake news and videos about migrants workers, saying this could disturb the law and order situation in dormitories where a large number of foreign workers, including Indian nationals, have been tested positive for COVID-19.

Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam warned that such videos can lead to serious law and order incidents. He said the authorities are watching individuals who spread the videos "very carefully."

Warning those spreading fake news maliciously, he said, they will be charged if a crime was committed.

The Indian-origin minister's warning came as hundreds of thousands of foreign workers have been barred from leaving their cramped dormitories to curb the spread of COVID-19, as they make up a majority of Singapore's new cases each day, according to a Channel News Asia report on Wednesday.

So far, a total of 12,183 of the 323,000 migrant workers living in dormitories — about 3.77 per cent — have tested positive, putting the spotlight on their living conditions.

The total number of coronavirus cases in the city-state on Wednesday rose to 15,641 with a vast majority of them being migrant workers.

Shanmugam said a number of fake and "very malicious" videos were circulating on social media, with one suggesting that a Bangladeshi worker in Singapore committed suicide because of a lack of money and work.

Another video purportedly showed two men of South Asian origin fighting in a dorm in Singapore, when in fact the incident took place in Dubai, Shanmugam pointed out.

"It's to create panic, unhappiness, anger and hopefully violence," the minister told reporters via video conference.

Shanmugam said the videos also serve to make Singaporeans believe that foreign workers here were being treated badly, despite authorities ensuring they continued to get paid, three meals a day and "first-class medical treatment."

The minister acknowledged that while it was impossible that every worker would be satisfied with the quality of the free meals, a "majority of them" said the quality of the food they received was good, the report said.

"But even now, people are deliberately circulating old photographs of food packets; sometimes food being thrown away from some places, not necessarily Singapore, and saying, 'you see, these workers are being ill-treated'," he was quoted as saying.

"And (this is) also encouraging them to come out and complain, even when there's nothing to complain about." Shanmugam said the authorities were watching the people who spread these videos and photos "very closely" and added "where it's clearly criminal, we will charge (in court)."

However, he declined to give details on how many people were being investigated for circulating such posts, only adding that they comprised both locals and foreigners.

Shanmugam reiterated that such posts could lead to 'serious' law and order situations, including a "riot-like situation."

"You can see that when people are together and they are not going out to work, a small spark can create a serious incident," he said, referring to the 2013 Little India riots involving some 300 South Asian workers including those from India.

"We need to be very careful. We are taking care of them (the foreign workers), but at the same time they can be stoked into anger, creating law and order incidents through the use of falsehoods," the minister said.

[South Korea] Fire at Construction Site Kills 38 in South Korea (New York Times)
New York Times [4/29/2020 8:52 AM, Choe Sang-Hun, 40577K, Negative]

A blaze at a construction site southeast of Seoul killed 38 people on Wednesday in one of the deadliest fires to hit South Korea in recent years, police officers and local news reports said.

With emergency workers still looking for one other person who may remain trapped inside a building filled with toxic smoke, they have so far found 38 bodies, Seo Seung-hyeon, a local fire department chief, said during a news briefing. Ten others were injured, including eight

who were in serious condition, he said.

When the fire broke out, 78 workers were believed to be working in the four-story warehouse under construction in Icheon, 50 miles southeast of Seoul, the Fire Department said.

The blaze was the third devastating workplace fire to hit South Korea in recent years, and came as President Moon Jae-in has struggled to make good on his promise to put an end to the man-made disasters that have convulsed the country since a 2014 ferry sinking killed more than 300 people.

The Fire Department said it was investigating the cause of the blaze. But Mr. Seo said that investigators suspected that it was caused by an explosion in an underground level, where some workers used urethane, a combustible chemical used for insulation work.

Dozens of fire engines were sent to control the flames. Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun urged his government to dedicate every available resource to rescue the workers believed to be trapped in the warehouse.

The fire was extinguished in three hours, but firefighters searching for the missing workers were hampered by toxic gas in the warehouse.

Photos and TV reports showed orange-red flames and black clouds of smoke engulfing the warehouse and responders bringing out bodies from the building on stretchers to ambulances outside.

The Yonhap news agency quoted a survivor as saying that the smoke filled the building so quickly that he could barely find his way out.

South Korea, which has had strong economic growth in recent decades, has been prone to major disasters despite its leaders' repeated promises to make the country safer.

In 2014, an overloaded ferry capsized, killing more than 300 people, most of them high school students. In 2018, a fire at a hospital that doubled as a nursing home killed 47 people.

The blaze came two years after a hospital fire in the southern city of Miryang killed 41 people in a building that lacked sprinklers. That disaster occurred a month after another fire killed 29 people at a fitness center.

Mr. Moon took power in May 2017, replacing his predecessor, Park Geun-hye, who was impeached and jailed on corruption charges following weeks of huge anti-government protests. South Koreans grew cold toward Ms. Park after she was accused of mishandling the 2014 Sewol ferry disaster.

Keenly aware of that recent history, Mr. Moon repeatedly promised South Koreans that they would "never have to shed tears because of safety issues." He also vowed to "end governmental incompetence and irresponsibility" in making South Korea safer.

But after the Miryang fire, Mr. Moon said he felt "crushed" that his promise went unfulfilled.

In recent weeks, Mr. Moon's government has won global plaudits for its successful efforts to contain the coronavirus epidemic. His party won a landslide in the April 15 parliamentary elections largely seen as a midterm referendum on Mr. Moon's performance as president.

[Thailand] Migrants jobless and trapped under Thai coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 7:08 AM, Nanchanok Wongsamuth, Negative]

Htoo Gay War quit her job as a domestic worker in January because her employer refused to allow her to take one day off each week – just before Thailand reported its first case of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

Three months later, the pregnant 30-year-old from Myanmar has been unable to find a new job as Thailand has declared a state of emergency, shutting malls, schools and bars to curb the spread of the virus, which has infected some 3,000 people.

"I want to go home to be with my parents, because at least they can take care of me while I'm out of work and don't have any money," she said from the central province of Pathum Thani.

"But I can't go back now that the borders are closed," she said, adding that her family are scraping by on her husband's salary of 8,000 baht (\$247) per month.

Thailand has about 2.8 million registered migrant workers mainly from Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos, government figures show. But the United Nations estimates that 2 million more work informally across the country.

At least half a million migrant workers in Thailand have been left unemployed as a result of the coronavirus crisis, estimates the Migrant Working Group (MWG), a network of non-governmental organisations promoting migrant rights.

"These workers will find it difficult to seek new jobs as many venues are still closed, and they also can't go back home and have very little access to government aid," said Adisorn Kerdmongkol, a coordinator at MWG.

Suchat Pornchaiwisukul, director-general of the Department of Employment, said its policy was to help unemployed migrants find new jobs within 30 days.

"Thailand's labour law protects both Thai and foreign workers," Suchat said.

Thailand has introduced a raft of measures to help workers affected by the coronavirus, including financial aid for informal Thai workers and for Thai and foreign workers registered under the social security system.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation spoke to seven migrant workers from Cambodia and Myanmar who said they did not receive government assistance because they were not formally registered.

One female worker who earned 120 baht a day at a beauty salon before it closed, said she owed money to a grocery store because she could not afford to pay for basic goods.

"I've been looking for a new job, but no one has been willing to accept me," said the worker, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because Thai law does not allow migrants to work in beauty salons.

About 60,000 migrant workers scrambled to leave Thailand in March before the land border was closed, as the shutting of businesses left them without an income.

Most migrant workers are not members of Thailand's social security scheme, said Jarrett Basedow, regional director of Issara Institute, a labour rights and anti-trafficking group.

"We have not yet talked to a migrant worker who has accessed this assistance," he said, adding that many work illegally, have not received a social security card or their employers have not paid the necessary contributions.

Unemployed people must contribute to social security for at least six months before they can receive benefits.

Basedow said many employers were laying off workers, often with no legal severance pay, by pressuring workers to sign resignation letters or not renewing their contracts.

"Many of these workers are worried about meeting their needs until they are able to return home, as they have no employment and high debt," he said.

Pasuta Chuenkhachorn, a lawyer with the Human Rights and Development Foundation, which provides legal aid to migrant workers and trafficking victims, said the government's financial aid measures discriminated against migrants.

"In times of crisis like this, the Thai government only takes care of Thai people," she said.

One glass factory worker from Myanmar said he and dozens of other workers were laid off on March 1, as orders had fallen.

He was unable to look for a new job because his passport and work permit were still with the agency that recruited him.

"There's no point in staying here anymore," he said by phone from Thailand's central Samut Prakan province.

"Once the borders are open, I'll go home. It's hard to find work here and I don't have my personal documents."

South and Central Asia

[Bangladesh] 'A life too often lived underwater': How tidal flooding is wreaking havoc in Bangladesh (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/29/2020 6:00 AM, Kenneth Dickerman and Jashim Salam, Neutral]

Climate change is affecting everyone everywhere in myriad ways. I recently wrote about how rising sea levels are affecting Miami. Rising sea levels are a problem around the world. Photographer Jashim Salam has been documenting how this has been affecting him, his

family and his neighbors in the southeastern Bangladeshi city of Chittagong.

Salam notes Chittagong often is regarded as the commercial and industrial capital of Bangladesh. As such, it is densely populated, with people from all over the country heading there for work. Salam estimates the population of Chittagong at 6.5 million. Those people are living with the effects of climate change, particularly with regard to rising sea levels.

Salam, his family and his neighbors are badly affected by tidal surges. He told In Sight his home, in the Chaktai area of Chittagong, gets flooded every year from June to October, sometimes as much as twice a day, because of the rising tidal waters from the Karnaphuli River.

Salam says this flooding makes life difficult. It affects everyone's daily routine. "People have to save their belongings from tidal floods and also throw out water from their homes every time it's flooded," he says. "The main business areas of Chaktai and Khatungonj also are affected by the tidal floodwater." Because of the flooding, business is halted and products become waterlogged.

Residents are trying to find ways to cope. They've raised their ground-level floors and built barriers and walls to keep the water at bay. Still, the water finds a way in. This is all compounded by the annual monsoon season. "This is a recent phenomenon, one many blame on climate change and rising seas coupled with the annual monsoon season," Salam says. "Residents have had to adapt and adjust to the enormous hardships of a life too often lived underwater."

Salam's photos drive home the difficulties people face because of the recurrent tidal flooding. The rising water spares no thing and no one. We see people standing in water driven up to and past their calves, detritus floating through the murky waters and what were once keepsakes streaked, faded and waterlogged. As Salam told In Sight, "I am portraying a city that I am deeply connected with — and the suffering experienced by its inhabitants."

[Editorial note: consult source link for photographs]

[India] India has 1,000 coronavirus deaths but expert says no exponential rise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 9:11 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, Neutral]

India has recorded its 1,000th novel coronavirus death, but the head of a government think-tank said on Wednesday that its 1.3 billion people, strained from weeks of lockdown, were not experiencing the feared exponential surge in infections.

India has now reported 31,331 cases, including 1,007 deaths, according to figures from the Health Ministry. Neighbouring Pakistan has 15,282 confirmed cases amid concerns about worshippers gathering at mosques during the current holy month of Ramadan.

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi must decide soon whether to extend the world's biggest lockdown, now 40 days old, beyond May 3.

Health officials say the shutdown has prevented an explosive surge of infections that would have crippled India's modest health care system.

"Our analysis finds that the rate of growth in positive cases and fatalities has been consistently lower – linear but non-exponential," said Amitabh Kant, chief executive of the government thinktank Niti Aayog.

Aayog urged a phased exit from the shutdown, but the government has a difficult decision ahead.

The big cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Ahmedabad – which are also India's economic growth engines – top the list of cases and there are no signs of the pandemic abating there, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said.

"When I see Delhi's COVID-19 map, I see only red and orange colours which is extremely worrying."

Red zones indicate infection hotspots, orange denotes some infection, while green indicates an area with no infections.

Wednesday's daily increase in cases, 1,897, was the highest in weeks.

Still, the scale of the outbreak is dwarfed by the United States or large western European countries.

In Afghanistan, 46 people tested positive in Kabul prisons, said Farhad Bayani, a spokesman for the prison administration, even as the Afghan government frees thousands of prisoners to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

Some of them include Taliban fighters, freed as part of a prisoner swap with the insurgent group under a U.S.-brokered peace process.

Here are official government figures on the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia:

India has reported 31,331 cases, including 1,007 deaths

Pakistan has reported 15,282 cases, including 335 deaths

Afghanistan has reported 1,939 cases, including 61 deaths

Sri Lanka has reported 622 cases, including seven deaths

Bangladesh has reported 7,103 cases, including 163 deaths

Maldives has reported 200 cases and no deaths

Nepal has reported 57 cases and no deaths

Bhutan has reported seven cases and no deaths

[India] Asia Today: Indian businesses urge easing of virus lockdown (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:45 AM, Staff, Neutral]

With Chinese industries ramping up production, competing Indian businesses are urging

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government to loosen India's 5-week-old coronavirus lockdown when it comes up for review on Sunday.

Gurcharan Das, former head of Procter & Gamble in India, said Wednesday that key industries such as pharmaceuticals, information technology and automobiles, which employ millions of people, can resume manufacturing at half or even one-third of their capacities in areas unaffected by the coronavirus. He said the manufacturers should ensure that safeguards are in place for their workers, including safe distancing and the wearing of masks.

If India is unable to bring its economy back on the track, it could lose 30-40 million jobs by the end of this year, leading to a devastating economic crisis, said Kiran Mazumdar Shaw, executive chairwoman of Biocon, a biopharmaceutical company.

Health Minister Harsh Vardhan said 300 of India's 720 districts are unaffected by the coronavirus. Another 300 have had very few cases, while 120 have hotspots. New Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Indore and Ahmedabad are among the main troubled areas. India has so far confirmed more than 30,000 cases and 1,007 deaths.

India earlier this month changed rules to block Chinese foreign direct investment into the country through automatic routes. Chinese goods such as cars, cellphones, toys and furniture flood Indian markets. India also is getting ventilators, testing kits and other medical equipment from China.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a three-week lockdown on March 25 and later extended it until May 3, when he is scheduled to address the nation on its future.

In other developments in the Asia-Pacific region:

— **INDIA SHELVES HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE PLANS:** Public health officials in India have shelved plans to administer the untested anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine, or HCQ, to thousands in Mumbai's crowded slums as a way of preventing infections in healthy people. Health officials in Mumbai said the plan to conduct tests was still in the cards but had not yet been approved by the Indian government. For now, they will follow federal guidelines that say the drug can only be used for high-risk groups including health care workers taking care of COVID-19 patients, contacts of confirmed patients and those in quarantine centers. Experts say there is little evidence to show that HCQ can help treat COVID-19 infections. The drug had been widely touted by President Donald Trump.

— **BANGKOK SET TO EASE RESTRICTIONS:** Officials in Thailand's capital say they're preparing to ease restrictions that were imposed to fight the coronavirus. The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration said Wednesday that plans call for the reopening of restaurants, markets, exercise venues, parks, hairdressers and barbers, clinics and nursing homes, animal hospitals and pet salons, and golf courses and driving ranges. Restaurants will have to keep their seats at least 1.5 meters (5 feet) apart and practice a wide range of sanitary measures. Thailand has confirmed 2,947 cases, including 54 deaths.

— **CONCERNS OVER MALAYSIA LOCKDOWN PENALTIES:** Malaysian lawyers and an international rights group have voiced concern over what they say is excessive sentencing of violators of the country's coronavirus lockdown. Malaysia, which has confirmed 5,851

cases and 100 deaths from COVID-19, has arrested more than 21,000 people since a partial lockdown began March 8. Violators face a fine or a jail term of up to six months. The Bar Council, which represents some 15,000 lawyers, urged courts to temper justice with compassion because the offenses don't involve violent crime. Human Rights Watch said Malaysia should stop jailing violators because it's counterproductive to reducing the virus spread.

— HOLIDAY WORRIES IN SOUTH KOREA: South Korean officials have issued public pleas for vigilance to maintain hard-won gains against the coronavirus as the nation enters its longest holiday since infections surged in February. Vice Health Minister Kim Gang-lip said Wednesday that 180,000 people are expected to visit the resort island of Jeju during a six-day break from Thursday to Tuesday, despite the island government pleading travelers not to come. Kim urged travelers to wear masks, not to share food and stay at home if they have fever or respiratory symptoms. South Korea has confirmed 10,761 cases, including 246 deaths.

— TOKYO SITUATION STILL SERIOUS: Tokyo Gov. Yuriko Koike on Wednesday called for an extension of Japan's nationwide "state of emergency," which requests people to stay home and social distance. She noted that reported daily cases of COVID-19 in Tokyo have topped 100 people recently. The state of emergency lasts through May 6, which marks the end of the Golden Week holidays that began this week. The government has asked people not to travel during the holidays. There is no lockdown in Japan, and some businesses and restaurants remain open.

— CHINA CONGRESS SET: China has decided to hold the annual meeting of its ceremonial parliament late next month after postponing it for weeks because of the coronavirus outbreak. The official Xinhua News Agency said Wednesday that the National People's Congress would open in Beijing on May 22, according to a decision made by its standing committee, which handles most legislative affairs outside the annual two-week session of the full body. The convening of the full session, which would encompass about 3,000 members, indicates China's growing confidence that it has largely overcome the pandemic that was first detected in the country late last year.

— AUSTRALIAN MINING MAGNATE URGES INQUIRY DELAY: An Australian mining magnate and partner in the government's pandemic response says a global inquiry into the coronavirus should be delayed until after the U.S. presidential election. Andrew Forrest, who became a billionaire exporting iron ore to China as founder of Fortescue Metals Group, said such an inquiry made "common sense," but should be held after the November election so "there's not going to be a political dog in this fight." Australia's calls for an independent inquiry are damaging bilateral relations with China, which accused Australia of parroting the United States.

[India] Navy, Air Force to Lead Biggest Evacuation Plan Ever to Bring Back Indians Stranded in Gulf Nations (Yahoo News/News18)

Yahoo News/News18 [4/29/2020 2:11 AM, Staff, 3975K, Neutral]

The Navy is in the advanced stages of preparing at least three of its ships to The Navy is in the advanced stages of preparing at least three of its ships to evacuate thousands of stranded Indians, particularly migrant labourers, from the Gulf countries.

INS Jalashwa, Navy's second-biggest amphibious transport dock which can carry dozens of

tanks, is among the three ships modified to accommodate as many passengers as possible, while following strict social distancing norms. Each ship will have a quarantine facility and medical teams to monitor the health of those onboard.

The UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain are home to 70% Indians living abroad. Embassies in these six countries are in the process of putting together details of those who need to be evacuated in a phased manner. According to sources, the government of India has decided to give priority to migrant labourers whose work permits have either expired or are about to expire as they might be running out of resources after month-long lockdowns.

"With thousands of Indians in Middle East wanting to come back, this could be the biggest evacuation ever by India. Navy ships will have to make multiple trips as one ship would be able to accommodate about 500 people at a time. Social distancing norms are sacrosanct," said a source close to developments.

"We don't want a situation like in the US and French Navy where the virus spread like wildfire. We will have to ensure that everyone who comes on board is Covid-negative and is in a position to undertake sea journey," he added.

Men will be in the upper decks and open spaces, while women, children and elderly will be given accommodation in the lower deck. "We are modifying the ships a bit to make space for people to stay at a safe distance from each other. Then extra food and medicines have to be stocked. After all, you don't want to be sailing for a week without adequate arrangements," a Navy officer told News18.

"All I can say is that we are ready. The full scope of the evacuation and the assets being used will become clear only after it's cleared at the highest level in the government," another Navy officer said. These large amphibious ships are being kept ready in Kochi, Vizag and Karwar.

Air Force and national carrier Air India are also working on Middle East evacuation plan. Put together, this is likely to become biggest evacuation exercise every by India, with one estimate projecting movement of over a lakh Indians from Middle East to India. Keeping these people in quarantine for two weeks post their return and ensuring safe movement into community is going to be another challenge. While states like Kerala have been making preparations for mass arrivals, Centre has asked all states to be prepared.

The Air Force is likely to use 11 C-17 Globemasters that can carry 100 passengers at a time and reach Middle East in less than four hours. Air India is likely to operate special flights as well.

Many Gulf countries have said they face a challenge with migrant workers. Some, including the UAE, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, have locked down areas with a large population of low-wage workers from South Asia.

Over eight million Indians live in the Gulf and only those with family emergencies and whose work permits have expired are likely to be evacuated in phase-I.

In an interview on Monday, Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan said the state is prepared

to rehabilitate Gulf returnees. He had also written a letter to the Prime Minister's Office asking the Centre to expedite the process of evacuation.

Earlier in the month, based on a petition moved by the Kerala Muslim Cultural Society, the Kerala High Court had sought the Centre to file a report on evacuating the stranded Indians in the UAE.

Similarly, MK Raghavan, Kozhikode MP, has also approached the Supreme Court seeking its intervention in bringing back the jobless people, pregnant women and those on visiting visas due to cancellation of flights and stuck in the Gulf nations.

Since the outbreak, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have reported 17,522 and 10,349 positive coronavirus cases respectively. According to a report, the majority of Indians who tested positive for coronavirus infection abroad are located in the Gulf countries.

[Kyrgyzstan] Kyrgyzstan in talks to restructure \$1.8 billion in debt to China (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:17 AM, Olga Dzyubenko, 5304K, Neutral]

Kyrgyzstan is in talks with the Export-Import Bank of China to restructure its debt, Deputy Prime Minister Erkin Asrandiyev said on Wednesday.

The Central Asian nation, which owes the Eximbank \$1.8 billion, said last month it would seek debt relief due to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on its economy.

[Pakistan] Pakistan Prepares to Ease Coronavirus Curbs With Infections Below Projections (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 10:25 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Pakistan is preparing to loosen coronavirus lockdown restrictions as the number of infections and deaths are well below previous projections, officials said on Wednesday.

The South Asian nation, which has registered more than 15,000 cases of COVID-19 including 335 deaths, has already granted exemptions to dozens of sectors to open up over the last few days.

"The mortality numbers are nowhere near the same as we see in other countries," Planning Minister Asad Umar, who oversees the response to the virus, told journalists.

He said infections and deaths in Pakistan were lower 30-35% lower than projections and, if things remained this way, the country could open up further in coming days.

Experts say Pakistan's low numbers are due to limited testing. Currently Pakistan, a country of more than 207 million people, conducts about 8,000 tests a day.

On Tuesday, the country registered 800 positive cases and 26 deaths – the highest number of deaths in a single day. Experts and officials say infections will peak in mid-May.

Umar said that despite the rising numbers, the disease was under control, but the economic cost had been "tremendous" as revenues and exports had been hit during a month-long lockdown.

The IMF has projected that Pakistan's economy will contract 1.5% this financial year.

Pakistan a few days ago launched a new "Test, Trace and Quarantine" system, which officials say will allow it to steadily open up commercial and industrial activities over the next few weeks without risking further infections.

Officials at the briefing did admit there remained areas of concern – particularly the high incidence of infections in health workers. Zafar Mirza, the top health official, said at least 480 health workers, including doctors, had been infected.

He added that because of the lockdown and the focus on the coronavirus, a number of other health programmes, such as an anti-polio campaign, had been affected.

Pakistan has also removed restrictions on congregations at mosques for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, leading doctors to raise the alarm on the risk of mass infections.

But Mirza said safety procedures for mosque gatherings had been worked out between the government and clerics.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Bolivia] Bolivia extends coronavirus lockdown until May 10 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:07 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Bolivia will extend its lockdown against the COVID-19 pandemic until May 10, the government announced on Wednesday, while planning to relax stay-at-home rules in parts of the country little affected by the illness starting May 11.

President Jeanine Anez, in a televised message to the nation, said Bolivia will move to a "dynamic" or "less rigid" quarantine on May 11, allowing some people to return to work.

Policy going forward will hinge on the country's success at containing the pandemic, which has killed 55 Bolivians so far with a total 1,053 cases confirmed.

"Opening the quarantine a little or closing it completely will depend on how the pandemic is being controlled in each region," she said. "The Ministry of Health will evaluate every seven days how the pandemic evolves in each region. On that basis, decisions will be taken to relax or harden the quarantine."

[Brazil] Brazil leaves its many poor hanging amid coronavirus surge (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 4:20 PM, Mauricio Savarese and Diarlei Rodrigues, Negative]

Work had already dried up for Ivanilson Gervásio when the coronavirus first emerged in Brazil in late February. As cases now surge amid a simultaneous implosion of Latin America's largest economy, hope of finding a job is gone, forcing Gervásio to line up for hours outside a state-owned bank for a \$110 monthly government handout.

His goal was to buy beef to feed his 6-year-old daughter, who hasn't had it for a month.

Multitudes of destitute Brazilians like Gervásio face bureaucratic delays in getting assistance, amid fraud and a disjointed emergency response by federal officials. Authorities

even launched a cell phone app for the payouts, although many people have only rudimentary mobile devices.

So Gervásio, like many Brazilians, had to leave home amid a lockdown aimed at halting the spread of the virus and go to a Caixa Econômica Federal bank.

As crowds swarmed the bank's branches across the country, President Jair Bolsonaro was hit with increasing criticism for a slow response in helping the poorest during the crisis.

He already had been slammed by the left and the right for downplaying the health risk and for delaying a rescue of the economy.

The coronavirus has killed over 5,000 people in Brazil, the most in Latin America, but even local policymakers admit the toll is much higher. They expect the deaths to peak sometime in May.

Big lines emerged across the country on Monday after the emergency aid announced at the start of April was finally freed up. The aid package will help as many as 24 million citizens working in the informal economy without any benefits, representing more than 10 percent of the population.

Gervásio, wearing an improvised black and yellow mask, was typical of the would-be recipients: He doesn't have a bank account and barely understands the aid distribution app. Unemployed for six years and getting by on odd jobs, he had to use a friend's phone to register for the benefit.

"There's no food at home," said Gervásio, tears welling as he described depending on neighbors for food. "We are not afraid of the coronavirus, but starvation is cruel."

In the same line was manicurist Maiara Sales, 31, who left her disabled 5-year-old son at home to go to the bank to report that someone had stolen her identity and her first \$110 payment.

"I can't even remove the email that was registered as mine," she said, adding that many in her neighborhood are hungry. "I see people crying, people who need to eat. The government needs to be more organized. Either they have the money to pay us or they don't."

Bolsonaro argues that workers in Brazil's informal economy are suffering because of the stay-at-home recommendations he opposes that were put in place by governors and mayors. He insists that most Brazilians should be allowed to go back to work, with exceptions for at-risk groups like the elderly or those with underlying health problems.

But the governors counter that Bolsonaro has not released enough federal funds for them to fight the pandemic. Most of the country's states and cities were already strapped for cash before the crisis, they say.

Even the wealthy governor of Sao Paulo state, João Doria, who made a fortune in marketing, backs stronger state intervention.

"By saving lives, we will be able to save the economy," Doria said last month.

Doria, one of Bolsonaro's strongest critics, said his own decision to shut down the state of Sao Paulo — Brazil's most populous — generated intense opposition from his private sector friends, including one who called him "upset, enraged."

"I told him that at the end of this pandemic, I will have helped save his life, his family," Doria said. "And that is because we are taking the right measures."

Sao Paulo received about \$20 billion in emergency federal funds at the start of April but nothing since then, Doria said.

Brazil's Senate is expected to vote next week on a package of nearly \$17 billion for states and cities to compensate for economic losses. Although the lower house of Congress approved it, Economy Minister Paulo Guedes has said handing out the emergency aid would be like doling out a blank check.

Guedes, a free market champion, had rallied much of the business community behind Bolsonaro's victorious 2018 presidential campaign with promises to privatize many state-owned companies, cut government spending and open up largely closed sectors of the economy to more foreign investment.

Despite Guedes' aversion to giving out federal funding, Bolsonaro's administration has acknowledged a need for financial relief.

Caixa slashed interest rates on overdrafts and credit card installment payments, and the government allowed all citizens to withdraw the equivalent of one month's minimum wage — about \$195 — from state-run retirement accounts required for all working Brazilians. The federal government is also sending doctors to some coronavirus hot spots, like the Amazon city Manaus, where coffins have piled up in common graves.

The market-friendly reforms that Bolsonaro and Guedes want to push through is the opposite of what the government should focus on for the foreseeable future, said Monica de Bolle, a Brazilian senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics in Washington.

De Bolle said she expects Brazil's economy to contract 9% this year, more than it did in the country's 2015-16 recession, and that unemployment will rise above 20%.

Bolsonaro's economic team was still focusing on economic reforms in March as coronavirus cases rose, instead of getting resources to those who most needed them, she told an online panel Tuesday sponsored by the Washington-based Wilson Center.

"This is a once-in-a-lifetime crisis we've never seen before in Brazil," she said.

Bolsonaro also has been consumed this week with a political crisis that erupted after the exit of his justice minister, Sergio Moro.

Asked about the death toll in Brazil this week surpassing that of China, Bolsonaro responded: "So what?"

He added: "I am sorry. What do you want me to do?"

[Brazil] Brazil Top Court Suspends Nomination of Federal Police Chief (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 1:24 PM, Mario Sergio Lima, Neutral]

A Brazilian Supreme Court justice suspended the nomination of Alexandre Ramagem as the new chief of the country's federal police in a fresh blow to President Jair Bolsonaro.

Ramagem, who is close to the Bolsonaro family, was set to take office on Wednesday afternoon. Bolsonaro fired the previous police chief last week, prompting his justice minister to resign in protest.

In his decision, Justice Alexandre de Moraes determined that there was sufficient concern of "irreparable damage" in allowing Ramagem to take the post. "The federal police is not an intelligence agency of the Presidency," he wrote.

Moraes referenced an earlier ruling of the court determining that former Justice Minister Sergio Moro's accusations against Bolsonaro merit a formal probe. Moro had made his claims during his exit speech Friday, when he said Bolsonaro was replacing the police chief without cause and . The federal police is carrying out a number of investigations that could potentially implicate the president's family.

While the attorney general's office initially said it would challenge the ruling, Bolsonaro later withdrew Ramagem's nomination in a decree published at the official gazette.

The court's decision is a further setback for Bolsonaro, who's now struggling with a political crisis just as the number of coronavirus-related deaths climb to more than 5,000 in the country. The resignation of his popular justice minister, considered by many Brazilians as a hero for taking down a network of corrupt politicians and business leaders, has split his support base.

[Brazil] Brazil's Bolsonaro withdraws name of family friend as top cop (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 4:45 PM, Ricardo Brito and Lisandra Paraguassu, Neutral]

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro on Wednesday withdrew the name of a family friend he had picked to run the federal police, after a Supreme Court justice blocked an appointment that opponents said would allow him inappropriate influence over law enforcement.

His decision to drop Alexandre Ramagem, who was director of the Brazilian intelligence agency Abin, was published in the government's official gazette.

The suspension of the appointment by Justice Alexandre de Moraes earlier on Wednesday came after the top court authorized an investigation into allegations by Bolsonaro's former justice minister that the president had abused his power by swapping the police chief.

Moraes wrote that he granted the injunction, which can still be appealed, because there were relevant signs that Ramagem, who was set to take office on Wednesday afternoon, could be compromised by his close relationship with Bolsonaro's family.

Ramagem, who joined the federal police in 2005 and has run the intelligence agency since

July, had the fewest years of service of any officer tapped to lead the force.

He took charge of Bolsonaro's security in 2018 after the soon-to-be president was stabbed on the campaign trail and grew close to the president's sons, who have been accused of taking part in embezzlement and misinformation schemes, which they deny.

Bolsonaro's shakeup of the federal police has spurred a political crisis in Brazil, distracting from the battle against an accelerating coronavirus outbreak in the country, whose official death toll climbed past 5,000 on Tuesday, passing that of China.

[Canada] Canada's coronavirus outbreak slows as cases top 50,000, but long fight looms (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 11:39 AM, Allison Martell and Moira Warburton, Neutral]

Canadian hospitals had beds to spare as the country hit 50,373 confirmed coronavirus cases on Wednesday, and several provinces were relaxing public health measures, but health experts were already worrying about a future wave of infections.

While it is too soon to say whether Canada's epidemic has peaked, it has slowed, thanks to swift workplace closures and other physical distancing measures: New cases doubled every three days early in the epidemic, and now double every 16 days, the government said on Tuesday. Since the first death on March 9, the virus has killed 2,904 in total. In the United States, an average of 2,000 died each day in April, a Reuters tally found.

"I really thought we were on track for something similar to what we were watching unfold in Italy and subsequently in New York (a month ago)," said epidemiologist Ashleigh Tuite of the University of Toronto. "I think big picture, across the country, we've done OK."

Hospitals fared well although the virus flared in long-term care homes and several prisons. Like the United States and European countries, Canada has struggled to contain the outbreak among seniors, and approximately 79% of deaths are linked to long-term care and seniors' homes.

In British Columbia, where cases spiked early on, partly due to its proximity to the first U.S. epicenter of Washington state, the number of coronavirus patients in hospital is falling. The province had a total of 94 COVID-19 patients in hospital on Tuesday, including 37 in intensive care, down from a peak of 149 on April 4, according to provincial data compiled by Reuters.

In Ontario and Quebec, the number in ICU has plateaued.

Non-ICU hospitalizations are still climbing in Ontario and Quebec, a consequence of transfers from overwhelmed long-term care homes, officials said. Ontario had 742 non-ICU patients as of Wednesday, up 17% from a week earlier, according to a Reuters tally. In hard-hit Quebec, the figure rose 38% on Tuesday from a week earlier, to 1,408 as more seniors were shifted to hospitals.

But the data suggests that the vast majority of Canadians have not been ill. Some may not know anyone who has been ill. And as the weeks stretch on, officials have started to acknowledge that people are getting impatient.

"The measures we've taken so far are working. In fact, in many parts of the country, the curve has flattened, but we're not out of the woods yet," said Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Tuesday. "We're in the middle of the most serious public health emergency Canada has ever seen and if we lift measures too quickly, we might lose the progress we've made."

The problem with successfully controlling the first wave of an epidemic is that it can set up a large second wave, said Gerald Evans, a Queen's University researcher and medical director of infection control at Kingston Health Sciences Centre, a hospital. Few have been exposed, so many are still susceptible to the virus.

"We've been able to provide care for people without overwhelming the system. The drawback is, we have to be prepared for that to happen again during a second wave," he said.

Jason Kindrachuk, a virologist at the University of Manitoba, is worried about the possibility of a second wave that could overlap with flu season, especially given how few people seem to have been exposed the first time around.

"We are doing well, but we certainly are nowhere near the end yet," he said. "This is a long game."

[Canada] Canada says its coronavirus death rate continues to spike despite a slower growth rate (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 2:44 AM, Paula Newton and Madeline Holcombe, 12317K, Neutral]
Canada has a higher coronavirus death rate than previously predicted, even though the country has a growth rates slower that most countries – including the United States – according to a new snapshot and updated modeling Tuesday.

The epidemic growth rate was doubling every three days, but now has slowed to doubling every 16, Canadian public health officials say. But Canada is now reporting nearly 3,000 coronavirus deaths, much higher than originally predicted.

"We are seeing the tragic paradox of the epidemic playing out," said Dr. Theresa Tam, Canada's Chief Public Health Officer, during a presentation of the new modeling Tuesday.

"As the epidemic comes under control, and the growth of cases slows, the severe outcomes and deaths continue to accrue, as Covid-19 takes a heavy toll among highly susceptible populations," said Dr. Tam.

Less than two weeks ago, Canadian officials had predicted a case fatality rate of about 2.2%. It now stands at 5.5% with hundreds more deaths possible in the next week alone. However, health experts have cautioned that fatality rates may be lower than reported because they do not always count asymptomatic or mild cases.

Canada is currently dealing with hundreds of outbreaks in long-term care homes throughout the country, and hundreds of those elderly and vulnerable residents have died. Government statistics released Tuesday show that 79% of deaths across the country are related to outbreaks in care centers.

"Outbreaks in long-term care and seniors' homes are driving epidemic growth in Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia and are responsible for the majority of all deaths in Canada," said Dr. Tam.

In response to the outbreaks and requests from provinces, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced last week that thousands of soldiers would be deployed to long term care homes to support seniors.

"This is not a long-term solution. In Canada we shouldn't have soldiers taking care of seniors," Trudeau said during his daily press conference in Ottawa Thursday.

The virus is clearly slowing down in Canada with a marked improvement in transmission rates. Earlier in the pandemic, each infected person was likely to infect 2.19 people, now that rate of transmission has slowed to only one.

Some regions are issuing guidelines and dates for reopening, like Quebec where elementary schools will open in phases beginning in May. Trudeau said he is collaborating with provincial leaders, but that there must be enough personal protective equipment throughout the country before it is safe for businesses and workplaces to reopen.

While Canada was flattening the curve, Trudeau said distancing measures and some closures would remain in place for some time.

"We're in the middle of the most serious public health emergency Canada has ever seen and if we lift measures too quickly, we might lose the progress we've made," said Trudeau during a press conference in Ottawa Tuesday.

[Cuba] Pandemic crisis squeezes Cuba's fragile private businesses (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 3:10 PM, Andrea Rodriguez, Neutral]

Until a few weeks ago, Julio Álvarez was the image of a successful Cuban entrepreneur. He had a dozen cars — classic Chevrolets and Fords that arrived before the 1959 revolution — conveying photo-snapping foreign tourists along Havana's seafront Malecon for \$30 an hour.

Now the new coronavirus has hit and the cars are parked, the tourists quarantined in their home countries and the drivers shut up in their own homes.

The pandemic that has frozen businesses around the world has been tough as well on the fragile private sector that has been permitted to blossom at times through the cracks of Cuba's socialist economy.

A record 600,000 people had taken out licenses to operate permitted forms of private businesses in Cuba under limited economic reforms launched by then-President Raul Castro in 2010. Many catered heavily to foreign tourists.

Then first three cases of the pandemic hit Cuba on March 11. Thirteen days later, authorities suspended classes, shut airports and told foreign tourists to stay in their hotels pending a trip off the island. Car rental services and recreational activities were closed.

Since then, at least 139,000 private businesses have temporarily handed back their licenses

— permits which otherwise require them to pay monthly fees.

"We are at an impasse," said Álvarez, co-owner of Nostalgicar, a family business launched nine years ago. "We have 19 workers contracted. We can't maintain them. They earned their money and are living on their savings."

It's become common to find "closed" signs on private cafes, bars, restaurants and lodging houses, to say nothing of the paralyzed taxi and car services like Nostalgicar that accounted for some 50,000 of those private business licenses.

Legal entrepreneurs, who first emerged in the tough days of the 1990s following the collapse of Cuba's aid and trade with the Soviet Union, have had to struggle with occasional waves of disapproval from the state, which has imposed strict limits on the size and types of activities allowed, as well as the impact of U.S. sanctions that have aimed to squeeze off the flow of tourists.

"The private sector, especially the most attractive businesses ... entered this already suffering a contraction due to the hardening of the (U.S.) embargo policy toward Cuba, which included the closure of cruise ships," said Omar Everleny Pérez, a local economist. "After the cancellation of (U.S. airline) flights to the provinces, there were limits on people who came."

Although 70% of Cubans work for the state, more than half a million had taken advantage of the 2010 opening to open businesses ranging from small repair and sewing shops to gourmet restaurants.

Many of private workers saw a sharp increase in their incomes. Alvarez said his mechanics earn about 2,000 Cuban pesos (\$80) a month, 10 times what they'd make in a state repair shop.

The pandemic, which has infected at least 1,400 people and claimed more than 50 lives in Cuba, hit at a time when the economy already was sluggish. The Trump administration has tightened the U.S. embargo and Venezuela, which had been a key supporter of the island, itself has plunged into crisis.

Cuba's government reported gross domestic product grew by just 0.5% last year, and long lines had once again become common for some types of foods because the government found it hard to raise hard currency. The U.N.'s Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean last week estimated that Cuba's economy would contract by 3.7% this year. Pérez said the drop could be as sharp as 5%.

Cuba's also hurt by an expected drop in remittances sent back by Cubans and Cuban-Americans in the United States and elsewhere. That money often provides key capital for the small private businesses.

Economist Emilio Morales of the Miami-based Havana Consulting Group estimates Cuban citizens received some \$3.6 billion in remittances in 2018, in addition to an estimated \$3 billion in goods brought to the island by visiting emigrants.

Some entrepreneurs are trying to adjust rather than throw in the towel. Restaurants are

offering home delivery, beauty salons are trying to offer tips on social media and clothing stores are offering online sales. Álvarez said he was thinking of offering his workshop to repair the cars of others.

A few entrepreneurs said they think the crisis may eventually encourage the government to allow a greater expansion of private business, though still within a socialist system.

"I am optimistic," said Gregory Biniowsky, a Canadian living in Cuba and cofounder of the now-shuttered Nazdarovie restaurant. "Though we are going to recover slowly," he added.

"This crisis could shake the state and decisionmakers to be more open and to make changes within Cuba that help entrepreneurs, such as permitting us to import raw materials ... They can't permit themselves the luxury that the non-state sector collapses."

[Cuba] Magnitude 4.5 quake strikes near Guantanamo province, Cuba – EMSC (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

An earthquake of magnitude 4.5 has struck 41 kilometres (25 miles) southeast of Baracoa town in the province of Guantanamo, Cuba, the European Mediterranean Seismological Centre (EMSC) said on Wednesday.

The quake was at a depth of 8 km, EMSC said. It was revised from its initial measurement of magnitude 6.6 and depth of 2 km.

There were no immediate reports of damage from the temblor, which comes months after a major earthquake struck south of Cuba, sending shockwaves across the region.

Baracoa is a popular tourist destination in Cuba.

[Mexico] U.S. Factories Low on Inventory Show Reliance on Mexico's Restart (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:00 AM, Jenny Leonard, Neutral]

The past four weeks have been a real test for North American supply chains. Even as some U.S. states gradually begin to reopening their economies, some American manufacturers — especially small- and medium-sized ones — are finding themselves reliant on how and when Mexico will decide to lift its restrictions.

Mexico's stringent shelter-in-place order shut down of almost all manufacturing in the country. For U.S. companies like Bradford White, whose water heaters have been deployed in New York's Javits Center-turned hospital in the state's fight against the coronavirus outbreak, the shortage of inputs from Mexico could soon mean significant production interruptions.

The problem for businesses on both sides of the border is that the U.S. and Mexico don't agree on how to define an "essential" business or service. While the U.S. government deems entire supply chains essential, Mexico does not.

With inventory running low and no relief in sight, the squeeze is giving U.S. companies a stark reminder of their reliance on Mexican inputs and suppliers.

"With Mexico not allowing production, that's a bit of a problem for us right now," Scott Wine, the CEO of Polaris, in an interview Tuesday. The Minnesota-based recreational-vehicle maker relies on Mexico for parts such as engines, which it produces at a Monterrey plant located about 100 miles from the U.S. border.

Officials from both countries have been in touch but so far haven't found a solution.

Mexican ambassador to the U.S., Martha Barcena, said Tuesday that Mexico is not reluctant to coordinate with the U.S. on the matter.

"We have to acknowledge that the evolution of the pandemic has been different in the two countries," Barcena said on Twitter. "There is total awareness of the importance of preserving the value chains."

The U.S. Ambassador to Mexico, Christopher Landau, also weighed in over social media, offering the help of an embassy commercial attaché who will reach out to Bradford White.

Still, a lingering conflict could result in companies reconsidering their dependence on Mexican supplies, said Kevin Messner, senior vice president of policy and government relations at the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers.

"Businesses want stability and they want certainty, more than ever," he said.

[Mexico] Drugs, oil ... women? Mexican cartels turn to human trafficking (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 1:39 PM, Christine Murray, Neutral]

Organized crime is mutating in Mexico as gangs who steal oil and sell drugs try a lucrative new line of work trafficking people, according to a top official fighting money laundering.

Santiago Nieto, head of Mexico's financial intelligence unit (UIF), said his team had discovered that some of the country's most notorious cartels had branched out into sex trafficking, especially ones whose core business faced disruption.

"A lot of criminal groups are mutating," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation at the unmarked office building that houses the UIF, responsible for unearthing illicit funds.

"When one possibility ends ... they start to link up with other kinds of criminal activities," Nieto said in an interview conducted at distance in his office.

Mexico is an origin, transit and destination country for human trafficking, a global business estimated to be worth \$150 billion a year.

Yet relative to the drugs trade, little is known about the shadowy groups in Mexico that deal in people.

High-profile cases often involve smaller, family-based U.S.-Mexico networks rather than the big cartels that grab headlines.

The Guanajuato-based Santa Rosa de Lima gang dedicated to tapping oil pipelines later turned to extortion and got involved in a table dancing bar staffed by trafficked women,

Nieto said.

He said the Mexico City Tepito Union drug gang had similarly branched out to guard women forced into commercial sex.

Nieto traced the web of criminal activities across a meter-wide sheet of paper with a complex diagram linking bank transfers, trips and shell companies that supported the rackets.

Human trafficking may be the third-largest illicit activity in Mexico, after drugs and guns, he estimated.

To help combat what is a fast-growing crime, Nieto said U.S., Canadian and Mexican financial intelligence teams had planned joint meetings, but the pandemic had put that on hold.

While it is often confused with consensual smuggling, trafficking victims are coerced or deceived into exploitation.

There have been isolated reports of drug cartels forcing men and women to cultivate or pack drugs and work as lookouts or hit men. But anti-trafficking justice efforts in Mexico have focused on sexual exploitation and been patchy.

More than half the state-level cases opened in 2019 were in just three of the nation's 32 states: Chihuahua, Mexico City and the state of Mexico.

The UIF has collaborated mostly with the latter two states, Nieto said, and presented four cases to the attorney general's office, responsible for federal prosecutions.

A fifth would be presented imminently, he added, related to an investigation into members of the Light of the World Church, whose head Naason Joaquin Garcia faced U.S. charges of rape and trafficking that were thrown out this month.

Nieto said progress on prosecuting federal cases was slow.

"We haven't seen that they've advanced much," he said. "It has to change for the good of the country, we need a more proactive attorney general's office."

Mexico's attorney general's office did not respond to a request for comment. The Light of the World church did not reply to a request for comment.

In March, the church's lawyers had said that legal issues with the UIF were being resolved in their favor in court.

Garcia had always denied the U.S. charges.

High volumes of cash and difficulty in securing arrest warrants made trafficking cases tricky, Nieto said, voicing hope that current cases go to trial so he could move on to new ones.

"The judges and public prosecutors have to realize how bad this issue is, trafficking at the end of the day is about ... human life," he said.

[Nicaragua] Nicaragua government failing to protect indigenous (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 10:22 AM, Christopher Sherman, Neutral]

Nicaragua's government has not only failed to enforce laws that protect its indigenous peoples and their communal lands, but is actively promoting illegal land grabs and granting concessions to mining and timber companies, according to a report released Wednesday.

Since 2015, more than 40 members of these communities along Nicaragua's northern Caribbean coast have been killed and many more wounded and kidnapped, according to The Oakland Institute, a California-based think tank. The complaints in many ways echo recent reports of U.N. and regional rights agencies.

Residents say non-indigenous settlers known as "colonos" have been responsible for the killings, but in many cases police do not even come to investigate.

The violence has increased in recent years, obscured first by the government's crackdown on protests that began in April 2018 and more recently by the world's attention being diverted by the coronavirus pandemic. So far this year, eight people have been killed in these communities, said Anuradha Mittal, the institute's executive director and author of the report. Four of those deaths came in late March.

"Violence is escalating when the world is focused on Covid," Mittal said "The people are like, 'forget about dying from Covid, we are dying from land invasions.'"

A request for comment from the Nicaraguan government on the contents of the report was not answered.

The spokeswoman for the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights condemned attacks that occurred in late January when dozens of settlers attacked the Mayangna community inside the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve.

"Most of the violence has been carried out by settlers as they seek to force indigenous people from their ancestral homes and use their lands for illegal logging and cattle farming," the U.N. agency's spokeswoman Marta Hurtado said in early February.

The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights condemned that attack and said the government failed to protect the indigenous peoples and their territory. It noted such attacks had been occurring for years and called on Nicaragua's government to adopt policies "to protect the rights of indigenous peoples to life, integrity and territory."

On paper, Nicaragua appears to be one of the better countries in terms of protecting its indigenous people and their land. A pair of laws were lauded internationally for guaranteeing these communities' rights to their land and their right to manage it. One law includes a provision calling for the clearing of indigenous territories of settlers and outside corporations who are there without legal title.

But "the government has failed to enforce these laws, and instead colludes with business interests and plays an active role in the colonization of the protected lands by outsiders," the

institute said. "A constant stream of settlers, central government interventions, forestry and extractive industries, threaten their lands, economic well being, and political autonomy."

The communities have had success in the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, but the government has not backed up those decisions from the regional court.

The situation is further complicated by the personal business interests of the family of President Daniel Ortega. The report outlines the family's ties to one of the most active timber companies working in protected areas.

The government has also promoted international mining opportunities that have advanced with government backing despite local resistance.

"The forest cover in Nicaragua has dropped from 76 percent in 1969 to 25 percent today," the report said.

Ortega's 2018 repression of street protests caused more than 328 deaths, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights. More recently, the government has faced international criticism for not implementing social distancing measures and even promoting mass gatherings despite the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nicaragua's indigenous communities have turned to international courts, because they found no redress in Nicaragua's justice system, Mittal said.

"It becomes a responsibility of the international community to hold individual governments accountable," she said. "And that is what the intent of the report is, to drag this dracula out into the sunlight and let international attention be poured over it."

[Venezuela] Venezuela Asks Bank of England to Sell Its Gold to U.N. for Coronavirus Relief – Sources (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 3:34 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Venezuela is asking the Bank of England to sell part of the South American nation's gold reserves held in its coffers and send the proceeds to the United Nations to help with the country's coronavirus-fighting efforts, according to two sources with knowledge of the situation.

Venezuela for decades stored gold that makes up part of its central bank reserves in the vaults of foreign financial institutions including the Bank of England, which provides gold custodian services to many developing countries.

But the Bank of England has since 2018 refused to transfer the 31 tonnes of gold to the government of President Nicolas Maduro, whom Great Britain has refused to recognize as the country's legitimate leader after his disputed 2018 re-election.

The effort signals that Maduro is desperately seeking financial resources around the world as the country's economy struggles under low oil prices, crippling U.S. sanctions and a paralyzing coronavirus quarantine.

Consulted about the issue, the United Nations Development Programme said it "has been approached recently to explore mechanisms to use existing resources held by the Central

Bank of Venezuela in financial institutions outside the country to fund the ongoing efforts to address the ... the COVID-19 pandemic."

It was not immediately evident how much gold Venezuela was asking the Bank of England to sell. At current market prices, Venezuelan gold on deposit at the Bank of England would be worth around \$1.7 billion.

Venezuela's information ministry and central bank did not respond to requests for comment.

The Bank of England said it does not comment on individual customer relationships.

Former U.N. aid chief Jan Egeland on Tuesday called for sanctions on Venezuela and other countries to be lifted and urged the release of Venezuelan funds in banks in Britain, the United States and Portugal.

Venezuela has lived a six-year economic crisis driven by an collapsing socialist system and a decaying oil industry, driving a mass migration of nearly 5 million people and fueling hyperinflation that has left many unable to obtain basic food.

Recent tightening of U.S. sanctions meant to oust Maduro have strangled fuel imports, prompting Venezuelans to wait for hours in fuel stations queues or turn to the pricey black market.

Venezuela as of Tuesday had reported only 329 coronavirus cases and 10 deaths.

But critics have questioned the figures, and the United Nations has described the country as one of the most vulnerable due to lack of running water in many areas and a decayed public health system.

Maduro's government has for years raised cash by exporting gold, both from artisanal mines in the southern Amazon jungle and from gold reserves held by the central bank.

The central bank has continued to remove gold from its coffers in the last month with the hopes of exporting it, according to three sources, one of whom said eight tonnes have been removed since quarantine started in mid-March.

Central bank data shows that total monetary reserves fell more than \$500 million between April 14 and 24.

Employees who work in the wing of central bank where the gold vaults are located have been arriving to work despite the quarantine, according to three sources familiar with the matter.

It was not immediately evident how many gold sale operations had been carried out or where the gold was sold.

Part of the proceeds were used to acquire supplies to refine the country's crude, a source added, in response to the near collapse of the country's 1.3 million barrel-per-day refining circuit.

Six tons of gold had already been withdrawn from the central bank between the end of 2019 and beginning of 2020 and sold to acquire euros in cash, which the institution channeled through local banks and the government used to pay suppliers.

Following the latest withdrawal, the central bank would still have more than 80 tonnes of gold in its vaults, according to sources, compared with 129 tonnes at the start of 2019.

[Venezuela] Venezuelan migrants block Bogota road, demand ability to travel home (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 2:41 PM, Oliver Griffin, Neutral]

A large crowd of Venezuelan migrants held up traffic on a Bogota highway on Wednesday, demanding to be allowed to leave Colombia and return to Venezuela.

Altogether, some 500 migrants arrived near the toll booths that mark the northern border of Bogota on Tuesday afternoon.

Some of these migrants said Colombian authorities were preventing the group of about 12 buses in which they were traveling from making their way to the border.

Colombia's migration agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but police at the site said Venezuela limits the number of migrants who can return each day. Venezuela has said the number of those returning is limited to 600, to allow for testing and organizing the necessary quarantines.

The mass movement of thousands of Venezuelans back to their economically devastated country has been triggered by a coronavirus lockdown in Colombia, which has made it impossible for them to earn a living.

Now in its sixth week, the suspension of Colombian businesses has decimated the informal economy in which many of these Venezuelan migrants work, plunging them deeper into poverty and triggering a reversal in migration flows.

Colombia is the top destination for Venezuelans who have fled their country's crisis, and some 1.8 million migrants have arrived here in recent years.

Now, a reverse migration has begun. Around 12,000 Venezuelans have returned to their home country as of Monday, according to Colombia's government.

"There are children here and we have no food to give them, we have no water, no resources, nor anywhere to stay. We are living on the street," said Jesus Bolivar, 34, a Venezuelan doctor who has been in Colombia for over a year.

Weary from travel, the returning migrants – including the elderly, diabetes patients and pregnant women – said Colombia's migration agency would not allow the buses to leave until Friday.

"We're in a bad way," said Dubraska Dubian, 26, who was trying to get back to Venezuela with her husband and their three young daughters.

"How are we going to manage here until Friday? We can't even wash our hands. We're

sleeping in the buses, we don't have food," Dubian added. "They have to let us leave."

At least 300 migrants were unable to cross the border in the city of Cucuta over the weekend.

"What we want is to travel, to go back to our country," Bolivar said.

Sub-Saharan Africa

Locusts, Pandemics, Floods: East Africa Can't Catch a Break (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 2:00 AM, Bobby Ghosh, 6400K, Negative]

How much more calamity can East Africa take? Already struggling with the twin crises of the coronavirus pandemic and a Biblical scourge of locusts, the region is now being lashed by exceptionally heavy rainfall, with floods that threaten life and livelihood from Ethiopia to Tanzania, and all parts in between.

For the continent's most economically vibrant region, the trifecta of tribulations may well add up to a fourth: food scarcity. This ghost from East Africa's past could hardly have picked a worse moment to return. The world is distracted by the pandemic, and traditional sources of succor—the U.S. and Europe—face their own economic distress. China, the region's economic partner of choice in recent years, has not yet demonstrated the ability (or indeed the desire) to fill the vacuum.

Even before the floods, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) was warning of "an unprecedented threat to food security" in East Africa. Blame the emergence of huge new locust swarms. The Climate Prediction and Application Center in Nairobi says locusts are "invading the Eastern Africa region in exceptionally large swarms like never seen before."

The swarms are a product of climate change: Unusually wet weather over the past 18 months created perfect breeding conditions. The war in Yemen may also have played a role, by constraining the ability of local authorities to control the first swarms before they crossed over into the Horn of Africa.

The voraciousness of the locusts has hit East African farmers hardest. According to Gro Intelligence, a privately funded commodity data and analysis service, the insects have damaged more than 25 million hectares of farmland in Ethiopia, Kenya and Somalia.

Worse is to come. The current wet conditions may swell new swarms in the summer, just as harvest season begins.

Fighting locust swarms requires pesticides, and an army of people to spray them. But the coronavirus pandemic is hampering the effort. It is delaying the delivery of pesticides and equipment, and jacking up shipping costs. Governments need to protect their populations from the virus, and travel restrictions designed to impede its spread are constraining efforts against the swarms.

But the danger to food security is so great, countries may feel they do not have the luxury of choosing between scourges. Uganda, for instance, is asking its farmers to go ahead with

crop planting, even though it is struggling to get them face masks — and despite the risk that locusts will ruin much of the harvest anyway.

The FAO is calling for \$153 million to assist East African countries, along with Sudan and Yemen, in fighting the swarms; so far, more than two-thirds of that sum has been pledged or received. But combating the food shortages, now exacerbated by the floods, will require much larger sums. And still more will be needed to put East African economies, until recently the envy of the continent, on life-support as the world recovers from the pandemic.

Where will the money come from? East African countries will compete with their African neighbors — and the wider developing world — for emergency funds from multilateral lenders like the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and eventually for bigger bailouts.

There will also be competition among African nations for the rescheduling, or outright forgiveness, of payments owed to China, the continent's largest creditor. Beijing has agreed to join other G-20 members in a \$20 billion debt moratorium for some poor nations, but is not committing itself to more. Some African governments say China is demanding strategic state assets in return for easing or erasing debt. Other lenders worry that any consideration they give African debtors will, in effect, benefit Chinese lenders.

Neither man nor nature, it seems, is inclined to give East Africa a break.

China silent amid global calls to give Africa debt relief (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 1:18 AM, Rodney Muhumuza, 2194K, Neutral]

African leaders are asking what China can do for them as the coronavirus pandemic threatens to destroy economies and wipe out some 20 million jobs across a continent where Beijing is both the top trading partner and top lender.

The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have announced immediate relief measures, including freeing up billions in debt payments and expectations for help from China are high across resource-rich Africa, but Beijing has remained silent.

China holds about a third of Africa's sovereign debt. Demand for Chinese-backed capital to build everything from highways to hydroelectric dams has left countries heavily indebted, leading to concerns about a debt trap and even loss of sovereignty.

Many of those countries, including oil exporters such as Angola, spend a substantial chunk of their budgets servicing debt while health and education suffer.

Any respite would be welcome for a country like Uganda, whose finance minister says "shocking deficits" in the past year have forced authorities to borrow to keep the government running. Uganda's national debt stood at over \$10 billion in 2018, nearly a third owed to China, according to official figures.

"We have strong bilateral relations with China, but they haven't come to us saying anything," the minister, Matia Kasaija, told The Associated Press.

China has been noncommittal beyond its support, as a member of the G-20 group of wealthy nations, for a moratorium that frees up to \$20 billion in debt payments through 2020

for low-income countries.

Some analysts predict that actual debt forgiveness looks unlikely and that China, despite its enormous influence in Africa, will avoid unilateral measures despite global pressure.

Ghana's finance minister has said he expects more from Beijing.

"My feeling is that China has to come on stronger," said Ken Ofori-Atta, speaking to the Washington-based Center for Global Development. "I think our Africa debt to China is over \$145 billion, about \$8 billion in payments required this year ... So that needs to be looked at. It's just an apocalyptic moment."

Asked whether China would offer debt relief to Africa, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian on April 7 said he believed "China will resolve these countries' difficulties via consultation through diplomatic channels."

In a statement emailed to the AP, the foreign ministry said China had "overcome difficulties" in helping Africa with shipments of medical supplies to help fight the pandemic. "China will continue to provide assistance to Africa within its capabilities and in accordance with the development of the epidemic and Africa's needs," it said.

China's footprint on the continent has been expanding as some African leaders, favoring the perceived lack of political strings that come with Chinese capital, have turned to Beijing while other funders hesitate over corruption and other concerns.

In turn, China has been keen to exploit Africa's vast natural resources in countries such as war-ravaged South Sudan, where Chinese firms dominate the oil sector.

Angola had received up to \$42.8 billion in Chinese loans by 2017 and repays its debt partly by channeling more of its crude to China. This means Angola, Africa's second largest oil producer, is left with less oil to put on the market.

The Chinese government, banks and contractors extended \$143 billion in loans to African governments and companies from 2000 to 2017, according to the China Africa Research Initiative at Johns Hopkins University.

But Beijing's commercial focus on the region is one reason some analysts believe debt forgiveness or cash donations are out of the question. Countries seeking China's help to keep projects running likely will end up becoming more indebted, said Nathan Hayes, Africa analyst at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

"Many debt-financed projects will come under enormous strain this year as revenues dry up, and many will need to be refinanced and renegotiated. Many of these will be financed by China, giving the country opportunity to renegotiate terms," he said. "Debt-for-equity swaps may ultimately be a more sustainable deal for African countries, depending on the terms, and they may have little choice."

In a notable example, state-owned China Merchants Group bought back half of a port in Sri Lanka in 2017 after the Sri Lankans fell behind in repaying \$1.5 billion in loans from Beijing.

Even debt forgiveness can be an investment for China, which waived Ethiopia's outstanding interest on debts through 2018 at a conference on Beijing's "Belt and Road" initiative to support infrastructure construction across many regions. That came just as the Chinese utility State Grid was buying a \$1.8 billion stake in Ethiopia's national power company.

Negotiating with individual African governments gives Beijing leeway to assert its interests with "a much smaller partner, rather than dealing with a whole continent, with greater economic and political weight," according to Hayes.

Africa's finance ministers have called for a \$100 billion stimulus package, of which \$44 billion would come from a freeze on servicing debt. They say an additional \$50 billion may be needed in 2021.

The EU has responded by planning a pledging conference in May. The IMF has cancelled six months' worth of debt payments — \$500 million — for 25 countries, 19 of them in Africa.

The coronavirus has infected relatively few people on the continent of 1.3 billion people. But with known cases nearing 35,000, lockdown measures could bring economic ruin and perhaps the continent's first recession in 25 years.

French President Emmanuel Macron says helping Africa, including with debt cancellations, is a moral duty. He has urged China to help.

Some say China's hand could be forced into rare acts of charity.

"China can respond by repurposing its debt ... as a tool to keep its African partners," said Angelo Izama, an analyst with the Uganda-based group Leo Africa Institute. "If there is a continental movement for debt relief, it would have no choice."

Africa Braces for a Record Wave of Locusts (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/29/2020 7:22 AM, Nicholas Bariyo and Joe Parkinson, Neutral]

First came the floods. The waters swamped bean and corn fields and created a breeding ground for a swarm of desert locusts the size of Manhattan that fanned out and destroyed a swath of farmland across eight East African nations as large as Oklahoma earlier this year.

Now their offspring are threatening a historic infestation—a second wave of locusts, 20 times as large as the first, that the U.N. warns could chew their way through 2 million square miles of pastureland, farms and gardens, around half the size of Western Europe.

The swarms, which would be by far the largest on record, are expected to descend as the new coronavirus accelerates across East Africa, raising the prospect of a double-shock to some of the world's poorest and most heavily-indebted economies.

Aid agencies warn that, together, they could lead to a collapse in agricultural production and mass food shortages.

While confirmed cases of Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, are just over 30,000, with some 1,423 deaths, the World Health Organization this week warned that the infection curve on the continent is lagging behind Asia, Europe and the U.S. Some 300,000 Africans could die in the "best-case scenario," it said.

The timing could scarcely be worse. The next wave of locusts is due to coincide with planting season in East Africa. Experts including the African Development Bank are calling the new swarm "Locust-19," worried that it will have a similar economic impact as Covid-19. The World Food Program, a U.N. agency, says the impact could push 130 million people to the "brink of starvation" by the end of the year.

Farmers are still battling to contain the first generation that ate up crops across the Horn of Africa. Heavier-than-expected rains since March and coronavirus-related supply disruptions have hampered efforts to spray them with pesticides and created more of the wet, marshy habitats in which they like to breed.

"We have killed millions and millions of locusts, but they keep returning," said General Sam Kavuma, the commander of Uganda's 2,000-strong military unit fighting to halt the invading bugs. "We have never seen anything like this."

Compounding the problem, Gen. Kavuma's unit also spends much of its time on the lookout for people violating stay-at-home orders as Ugandan authorities attempt to halt the spread of the transmission of the coronavirus. Uganda's lockdown is one of the world's strictest. During the previous infestation, farmers banged drums, whistled and threw stones to protect their crops. But in recent days they have been forced to watch in frustration as the insects devoured their farms and gardens, trapped inside by fear of the virus and the security forces enforcing the lockdown.

Meanwhile, the insects can travel around 90 miles each day and consume their own body weight in cassava, corn and other crops. The World Bank has warned the locusts could cause more than \$8.5 billion in damage this year, more than triple the losses witnessed during the last major infestation in 2005.

That leaves farmers wrestling with the dilemma of whether to protect their crops as best they can, or follow the curfew orders now in place across much of the region.

"These are tough odds," said Lane Bunkers, country representative for Catholic Relief Services in Kenya. "The focus appears to be more on coronavirus pandemic but hunger could kill more people."

There is some expertise on the ground. The scale of the previous infestation brought agricultural specialists to the region who remain in place, despite coronavirus-related travel restrictions.

But the spread of the coronavirus means there is more competition for financing and resources. Commodity exports have ground to a near halt thanks to a slump in demand in China and elsewhere, sending currencies tumbling. Shipping costs have tripled in recent weeks.

That means some countries can't afford to properly tackle the locust infestation. In Sudan, the government says it is treating only 30% of the affected 2.5 million acres. Somalia only has enough pesticides to treat 20% of threatened farmlands, according to the U.N. In Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous nation, the locusts are moving too fast for the authorities to keep up—they already have destroyed half a million acres of farmlands.

There are also political and security factors at play. Insurgencies in Yemen and Somalia have hindered access to breeding grounds, allowing locusts to multiply into vast colonies since last summer, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization. In Somalia, which hasn't had a stable government since 1991, locust control teams have had to negotiate with al-Shabaab militants for access to spray breeding grounds there.

In Uganda, Gen. Kavuma, who once led operations against the Lord's Resistance Army in the Central African Republic, now commands squads of soldiers who spread out across cassava fields toting spray pumps to douse fast-moving insects with pesticides. Some troops torched locust-infested bushes while school children have been mobilized to chase the insects from fields and gardens.

As recently as last month, mature locusts, bright yellow in color, were still forcing herders to flee the area. Now farmers have spotted the arrival of their offspring, pinkish in color and known as hoppers, looking for sprouting vegetation.

Hoppers are more destructive because they are at a stage where they feed heavily, said Keith Cressman, a locust forecasting expert at the U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Association. A square-kilometer-sized swarm, just over a third of a square mile, can consume as much food as 35,000 people.

Experts say it is crucial to attack the second swarm before it lays eggs again and a third wave—which could be yet bigger, perhaps 20 times bigger—could arrive in June, the peak harvest season.

"The swarms can strip a community's entire agriculture production for a season bare in a matter of hours," said Kirk Prichard, Humanitarian director at Concern Worldwide, a humanitarian agency working in the region.

[Côte d'Ivoire] Ivory Coast Withdraws From African Human Rights Court (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 11:01 AM, Leanne de Bassompierre and Baudelaire Mieu, Neutral] Ivory Coast withdrew from the African Human Rights and Peoples Court, a week after the tribunal ordered the West African nation to suspend an arrest warrant against presidential hopeful Guillaume Soro, who on Tuesday was sentenced to 20 years in jail.

The decision to pull out was taken at a weekly cabinet meeting, government spokesman Sidi Toure told reporters on Wednesday in the commercial capital, Abidjan.

"We respect our international commitments, but we also appreciate our sovereignty," he said.

Soro, a former speaker of parliament and rebel leader, was sentenced in absentia by an Abidjan court after a one-day trial. He was convicted on charges of money laundering and embezzlement, ruling him out of presidential elections scheduled to take place in October.

[Ethiopia] City demolitions expose Ethiopian families to coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 8:23 AM, Nita Bhalla and Emeline Wuilbercq, 5304K, Negative]

Scores of Ethiopian families are at risk of contracting the new coronavirus after authorities

demolished their makeshift houses and left them homeless, human rights groups said on Wednesday.

Authorities in the capital began destroying the informal settlements near Bole International Airport in February.

They say the settlement in Addis Ababa, home to more than 1,000 people, is illegal. Residents — mostly casual labourers who have lost their jobs due to COVID-19 restrictions — say they bought the land in 2007 and have the documents to prove it.

"Having a home is critical to protecting oneself from COVID-19, stopping its spread and recovering from it," said Deprose Muchena, Amnesty International's Director for East and Southern Africa.

"The authorities must ensure that no one is put in a position of increased vulnerability to COVID-19 including by rendering them homeless."

Around the world, homeless communities and residents in slums and informal settlements are particularly at risk of the virus, as limited access to water and overcrowding turn hand-washing and social distancing into a luxury.

Muchena said parents and young children were now sleeping rough, in the cold and rain, with no place to go and at heightened risk of catching and spreading the deadly virus.

The East African nation declared a state of emergency to help curb the virus on April 8. Home to some 110 million people, Ethiopia has recorded 130 cases and three deaths.

LAND GRAB IN A CRISIS

City authorities say some Ethiopians are now abusing the global crisis to seize land that is not theirs.

Addis Ababa Mayor Takele Uma Banti told the Thomson Reuters Foundation the forced evictions aimed to stop people migrating to the capital and grabbing land from farmers and government.

He said people had used the pandemic to build houses while authorities' attention was set on enforcing social distancing.

"Demolition will continue because these buildings are informal, it is a source of land grabbing," Takele said, noting that similar demolitions were happening across Addis Ababa.

In Ethiopia, all land is owned by the state.

While buying and selling it is illegal, long-term leases can be bought from the government.

But homeowners and land law experts say there is a bustling underground market run by developers, brokers and local officials, who often turn a blind eye to illegal activity.

Amnesty International said satellite imagery verified claims made by the evicted

communities, showing about 40 structures had been damaged or destroyed since April 6.

Families were not given any notice, said the group, nor had authorities consulted residents in line with international laws.

The Ethiopian Human Rights Commission called for a moratorium on forced evictions of informal settlements until the pandemic was under control and the state of emergency lifted.

"Forced eviction of families during #COVID19 poses (a) great risk for vulnerable people including women and children," Daniel Bekele, EHRC's chief commissioner, said in a statement.

[Kenya] Kenya Cuts Interest Rate to Nine-Year Low to Boost Economy (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/29/2020 10:40 AM, David Herbling, Neutral]

Kenya's central bank cut its benchmark interest rate for the fourth time in a row at a special meeting of the monetary policy committee to try cushion the economy from the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

The MPC reduced the rate to 7% from 7.25%, Governor Patrick Njoroge said in an emailed statement Wednesday from the capital, Nairobi. That brings the total easing since November to 200 basis points, with the rate now the lowest since September 2011. The median estimate of five economists in a Bloomberg survey was for a 50 basis-point cut.

Key Insights

The central bank cut its 2020 growth forecast for East Africa's largest economy to 2.3%. Expansion at 5.4% in 2019 missed government estimates. The World Bank said output could shrink 1% if the disruptions caused by the pandemic last for about three months.

The policy actions taken in March, when the MPC cut interest rates and lowered its cash-reserve ratio to free up liquidity, "are having the intended impact on the economy, and are still being transmitted," Njoroge said.

The virus has disrupted agriculture and tourism, which are Kenya's biggest foreign-exchange earners after remittances. The latest information shows that orders have started to return, reflecting the impact of mitigation measures put in place by the government targeted at maintaining cargo flights, the lifting of lockdown measures and easing of supply restrictions in some of the key destination markets, the central bank said.

Kenya is negotiating with the International Monetary Fund for a precautionary facility to cushion the economy against the Covid-19 shock. It also expects relief from special drawing rights of 75 billion shillings (\$700 million) by mid-May, Treasury Secretary Ukur Yatani said on Tuesday.

The MPC will meet again in a month and "stands ready to take additional measures as necessary," Njoroge said.

[Kenya] One of the World's Largest Refugee Camps Is Placed on Lockdown (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 7:44 AM, Pauline Bax, 6400K, Negative]

Kenya put one of the world's largest refugee camps under lockdown, even as humanitarian agencies warned there's no infrastructure in place to deal with a potential outbreak of the coronavirus.

All movement in and out of Dadaab, home to more than 220,000 people living in rickety, makeshift housing, as well as the smaller Kakuma refugee camp in northwest Kenya, will be prohibited as of Wednesday, according to Kenya's Interior Ministry. The measure is an extension of a 21-day partial lockdown across the country that was imposed last week.

With only one dedicated Covid-19 health facility at Dadaab, "a possible outbreak of the coronavirus would be a disaster," Philippa Crosland-Taylor, country director at aid organization CARE, said in a statement. The camp "has no health infrastructure in place that could deal with an outbreak," she said.

Dadaab, situated near the Somali border, opened almost three decades ago and is home to mostly ethnic Somalis who crossed into Kenya to flee civil war, drought and famine. While the Kenyan government has often threatened to close the camps, it's never done so. Most facilities in the settlements are operated by international humanitarian organizations.

[Niger] UN: New Polio Outbreak in Niger After Vaccination Suspended (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 7:31 AM, Maria Cheng, Negative]

The World Health Organization says Niger has been struck by a new outbreak of polio, following the suspension of immunization activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The U.N. health agency reported that two children were infected by the highly infectious, water-borne disease and that one was paralyzed. The outbreak was sparked by a mutated virus that originated in the vaccine and was not connected to a previous polio epidemic Niger stopped last year, WHO said, in a statement last week.

"The poliovirus will inevitably continue to circulate and may paralyze more children as no high-quality immunization campaigns can be conducted in a timely manner," said Pascal Mkanda, WHO's coordinator of polio eradication in Africa.

In rare cases, the live virus in oral polio vaccine can evolve into a form capable of igniting new outbreaks among non-immunized children; stopping the epidemic requires more targeted vaccination.

Earlier this month, WHO and partners announced they were forced to halt all polio vaccination activities until at least June 1, acknowledging the decision would inevitably result in more children being paralyzed.

The Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says there have been 33,500 cases and 1,469 deaths as of Tuesday, but experts suspect the real numbers are far higher due to lack of testing and poor surveillance.

Eradicating polio requires more than 90% of children being immunized, typically in mass campaigns involving millions of health workers that would break social distancing guidelines needed to stop the spread of the new coronavirus.

Across Africa, 14 other countries are struggling to contain their polio epidemics, which have also been caused by a rare mutation of the virus in the oral vaccine. Health officials had initially aimed to wipe out polio by 2000, but that deadline has been pushed back and missed repeatedly.

[South Africa] South Africa Covid-19 Cases Rise by Record for 24-Hour Period (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 3:26 PM, Janice Kew and Ana Monteiro, Negative]

The number of coronavirus cases in South Africa surged by a record for a 24-hour period as testing increased.

The nation has 5,350 confirmed cases as of Wednesday, 354 more than yesterday, the Health Ministry said in an emailed statement. A further 10 Covid-19 related deaths were recorded, bringing the total number of deceased to 103, it said. The ministry said 11,630 tests were conducted in the past 24 hours, bringing the total to 197,127.

[South Africa] South Africa's HIV failures cost more than 300,000 lives. Now this painful past is helping in Covid-19 fight. (CNN)

CNN [4/29/2020 5:41 AM, David McKenzie and Brent Swails, 12317K, Neutral]

When President Donald Trump mused recently about injecting household disinfectants as treatment for Covid-19 in the White House briefing room, South Africans were reminded of their own dark past.

Two decades ago, the country's health minister announced that beetroot or garlic could treat HIV/AIDS.

South Africa's president Thabo Mbeki at the time falsely believed that HIV treatments could be poisonous, so he kept proven, lifesaving antiretrovirals (ARVs) from those in need.

In all, South Africa's official AIDS denials and misinformation cost the lives of more than 300,000 people, according to several studies.

"We can't have a large number of people dying," Dr. Yogan Pillay, a senior official at the Department of Health, said. "We came from a period where we had large numbers of South Africans dying from HIV. We can't repeat that now and we shouldn't."

An ambitious initiative

It is the memory of that past failure, South African health officials say, that is driving their fight against this new virus and it is the considerable resources they have since built up against HIV, that could provide their best weapon in fighting Covid-19.

After years of dithering under Mbeki, the South African government drastically changed course against HIV because of civil society lawsuits and a change in leadership.

They put millions of people on ARVs and recruited an army of community health workers to inform the public of the dangers of AIDS and the importance of testing.

They were able to mount this fight, in large part, because of an ambitious initiative launched

by another US Republican president.

Former President George W. Bush's President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), announced in 2003, is arguably the single most successful international US public health response.

More than 14 million people are on ARVs because of PEPFAR. When it began, fewer than 50,000 people in sub-Saharan Africa could access the life-sustaining drugs.

"Quite frankly, without the PEPFAR investment in South Africa, we wouldn't have more than a million people on treatment, a significant reduction in the number of deaths from HIV and TB, or the significant increase in our life expectancy," Dr. Pillay said.

Pillay said that there are currently roughly eight million HIV positive people in South Africa, with more than two million infected people not on antiretrovirals.

A sweeping lockdown

Those numbers mean that South Africa has the world's largest HIV burden, which helped to convince South African scientists and officials to recommend a sweeping lockdown as Covid-19 struck the country.

Countries around the world are under lockdown, but South Africa's is one of the strictest and it was instituted before a single confirmed Covid-19 death and in a country already in an economic recession.

"This was a very tough decision for the government to take," Dr. Pillay said, "but they took it because they didn't want to repeat the mistakes of ... our early response to HIV."

In a middle-income country with the world's greatest levels of inequality, South Africa has managed to drastically flatten its infection curve early while much richer countries like the UK and the United States have struggled to do so.

South Africa has distinct disadvantages to those wealthy nations. Millions live in townships and informal settlements across the country where the lockdowns make sense in principle, but not really in practice.

Townships like Thokoza, in the southeast of Johannesburg, are a nightmare scenario for combating a respiratory disease.

But here, too, the country's experience with HIV is helping its battle.

Around 35,000 government and PEPFAR supported health workers are now actively screening for the disease in communities they already work, conducting routine health checks, according to Pillay.

They have already screened nearly six million people for Covid-19, according to the latest figures from the country's Department of Health.

Community health worker Anito Pato said that the trust she has built up with the community

allows her to address fear of the new virus right away. She goes door-to-door in Thokoza to check for symptoms of Covid-19 and refer the sick for testing.

"They didn't know much about Covid-19 and they think it is affecting the rich people, not them," Pato said. "We try to explain to them why we are screening and what corona is."

A man in a blue work shirt called Pato over during her visit. He wanted a test. Pato explained that there aren't enough tests right now and that he should go to the clinic or the mobile testing center they have set up if he gets the symptoms.

"AIDS is better because we have got treatment," the man, Salvin Tawananda, told CNN, "But corona, people are just scared."

The government and US Centers for Disease Control (CDC) are closely monitoring efforts in Thokoza and other townships, where social distancing is all but impossible, and failure could be disastrous.

"It is very hard for people here to adhere to those lockdown rules and that is even more reason why we should be out there looking for the disease before it takes over these communities," said Dr. Meredith McMorow, a CDC official based in South Africa.

"South Africa was certainly the hardest hit by HIV and it concerns us that it will be the hardest hit by Covid-19 as well that is why we are doing everything we can to get ready right now."

Covid-19's effect on HIV patients

McMorow's concern comes from not yet knowing Covid-19's effects on HIV positive people.

To date, studies in China and elsewhere are inconclusive, but Megan Doherty, the head of the WHO's global HIV program, said it pays to be extremely cautious with any emerging disease.

"Because this is an unprecedented pandemic, we just don't know how it reacts in all situations," she said. "We just don't know enough about the interactions between HIV and Covid-19 and how patients with both infections will do."

ARVs are being tested as possible therapeutics for COVID-19 in clinical trials.

Dr. Larry Corey, now president and director emeritus of the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center in Seattle, helped develop the first effective ARV treatment.

He said he is skeptical that ARVs designed for HIV will become a broad-based treatment for Covid-19.

"The best ARVs that are discovered are highly specific to each virus," he said.

Corey, who now leads the global HIV-vaccine trial network, said regardless of the results of ARV trials in Covid-19 treatment, South Africa is well placed to play a critical part in the next

phase of this pandemic, because of its HIV infrastructure and experience with HIV vaccine trials.

"I feel proud of my communities," said Pato, as she moved down a narrow path leading to another section of corrugated iron shacks. "I feel like I am a bullet to shoot this disease. It must not control us. We must control this corona."

[South Africa] Virus lockdown worsens suffering for Johannesburg beggars (AP)

AP [4/29/2020 5:07 AM, Bram Janssen, 2194K, Negative]

Inock Mukanhairi shows the small amount of food that he has for himself, his wife, Angeline, and five children — barely enough to make it through another week of South Africa's strict coronavirus lockdown.

The 58-year-old and his wife are both blind. Normally, they would be begging at traffic lights on Johannesburg's streets, relying on handouts from motorists, pedestrians and shop owners.

But the lockdown, now in its fifth week, has changed that.

Police are preventing them from leaving their dilapidated building to beg on the empty streets and barren sidewalks.

The building houses about two dozen blind or otherwise disabled foreigners who rely on handouts to make enough for food and rent. With their children, they make up about 70 people. Many have entered South Africa illegally from Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi.

"I really understand that the coronavirus is killing a lot of people. But at the same time, I'm locked inside my room," said Mukanhairi. "So death is death, due to corona or due to hunger."

South Africa has the most confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Africa, with more than 4,360, including 86 deaths.

The country's far-reaching restrictions have been in effect since March 27 and residents must stay home, except for visits to grocery stores, pharmacies and health facilities. The lockdown will be eased starting May 1, but this is unlikely to help the beggars, because people will still be required to stay home.

Families of six to eight people are crammed into small rooms where they cook, eat and sleep. Under such conditions, social distancing is not possible. The building has a few taps for water, so regular hand-washing is also difficult.

The elderly and blind often just sit on their beds as their children play in the dimly lit and narrow hallways, where loose electric cords dangle from the ceiling.

Without any donations, they say they are uncertain about where they will get their next meals.

Last week, South Africa announced an increase in social grants for the poor, elderly and disabled, but these immigrants are not eligible for that aid.

At the start of the lockdown, authorities swept the homeless from the streets and took them to a housing facility where food is provided. The beggars say they fled to their own building at the time to avoid being rounded up.

They are not alone in being uncertain about how getting adequate food. The U.N. World Food Program said this month that the number of people around the world with acute hunger could almost double this year because of the pandemic. At least 265 million people could face food insecurity by the end of this year, a jump of 130 million.

Rosewite Prikise, 41, lives with her four children in one of the small rooms, where all share a bed.

"We have one week's worth of food left," she said. "So we cannot survive, especially us who are blind. We cannot go outside and our situation is not right."

[South Africa] Fears rise for illegal South African miners hiding underground in virus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 6:48 AM, Kim Harrisberg, Neutral]

At least 100 illegal gold miners in South Africa are hiding underground, too scared to surface with police on patrol to enforce the coronavirus lockdown, according to industry sources.

Many illegal miners, known as zama-zamas – a Zulu expression for "taking a chance" – were underground in abandoned or disused mines in Gauteng province when the lockdown began on March 27.

Lawyers, activists and illegal miners told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that zama-zamas had little choice but to continue working, worried about being arrested if they surfaced and knowing there was no other work.

"They are struggling to get to the surface (to buy food) as police are blocking the entrances and they fear arrest," said Johannesburg gold miner Zach, whose name was changed to protect his identity.

"At least 100 (zama-zamas) that I know of are trying to earn some money during the lockdown," said Zach, 29, adding he had been arrested many times since turning to mining six years ago.

Illegal gold mining has plagued South Africa's mining companies for decades, robbing the industry and state coffers of billions of rand through smalltime pilfering as well as networks run by organised crime.

The Minerals Council South Africa estimates seven tonnes of gold – from total national production of about 135 tonnes – is lost each year to illegal mining, which is driven by the joblessness and economic hardship that prevail across the country.

Thousands of zama-zamas are thought to be operating at any one time, many of them undocumented immigrants from neighbouring countries who provided migrant labour for South Africa's mines in the past but were then laid off.

Zama-zamas are now a permanent fixture of the shanties that ring Johannesburg and its satellite towns along the gold reef, and are blamed for outbreaks of violence, including underground shoot-outs between rival gangs.

Once the largest gold producer, South Africa now ranks about eighth globally with mining accounting for roughly 7% of GDP.

The sector braced for a heavy hit when the government last month ordered most underground mines and furnaces to be put into care and maintenance due to the coronavirus.

But after a lobbying campaign by miners, it said it would allow mines to operate at up to half capacity during the lockdown, recognising the chance of instability if deep-level mines closed for a long period.

Informal mining has continued nevertheless as it remains largely unrecognised by the government – just like many zama-zamas, who are unable to seek financial assistance, legal experts said.

Edwin Makwati, a lawyer from the Legal Resources Centre in Johannesburg said that “artisanal miners depend on mining to feed their families but they are categorised as criminals.”

“Now they have to face the decision: do they die of hunger or risk arrest for violating the COVID-19 regulations?” he said in a phone interview.

Yvette, 32, a zama-zama from Soweto township whose name has also been changed, also believed there were still “at least 100 zama-zamas underground” in Gauteng province alone, sifting for gold in tunnels no longer maintained and at risk of collapse.

“There are (abandoned) shafts throughout the country where there could be more,” she said.

A 2015 report by South Africa’s Human Rights Commission identified 221 open holes and disused shafts alone in Gauteng, which is the most populous of the country’s nine provinces.

Some had been covered by the government, but zama-zamas would likely find other entrances into the mines, some of which run up to four km (2.5 miles) deep, the report said.

Police spokesman Brigadier Vish Naidoo acknowledged it was likely that some zama-zamas were underground, adding that “they stay underground for months, even before lockdown.”

“A crime is a crime. There are no good zama-zamas,” he said in a phone interview.

A spokesman for the South African Department of Mineral Resources and Energy said the ministry only kept records of mine workers from legal operations.

"Illegal mining ... is fueled by highly organized dangerous, well-financed and complex local and international crime syndicates," he added in emailed comments.

Charmane Russell, spokeswoman for the Minerals Council South Africa, said that "illegal miners are not screened or protected in any way ... and the gathering of people clearly does not comply with social distancing requirements."

Scores of zama-zamas die each year in the labyrinth of tunnels that stretch beneath the streets of Johannesburg and beyond, although police and the government admit they have no idea of the precise toll.

But Sindile, a female zama-zama from Soweto township who helps process gold above ground, said the money that could be earned made it worth the risk for many.

Artisanal mining can fetch Zach and Sindile up to 5,000 rand (\$270) a month – more than the national minimum wage of roughly 3,600 rand (\$195).

"You know hunger?" said Sindile, a single mother of three, who also asked not to be identified. "It is not your friend. This is why we take chances."

The zama-zamas said that the lockdown and increased police presence have added additional challenges to their already dangerous work.

Reported cases of the coronavirus were close to 5,000 in South Africa and about 93 deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

"But we are more afraid of the police than the virus," said Yvette.

David Van Wyk, lead researcher at Bench Marks Foundation, a church-linked group that monitors corporate responsibility, said it was working on setting up co-operatives with informal miners.

"The coronavirus pandemic is going to bring a lot more unemployment," said Van Wyk, who predicted more South Africans desperate for work would take up illegal mining.

"We may even see informal mines collapse. This is a scary time for zama-zamas, especially those currently underground."

[Sudan] Sudan postpones key economic meeting due to coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/29/2020 1:04 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Sudan has postponed a key economic conference meant to formulate subsidy reforms demanded by foreign donors until after the coronavirus pandemic, the state news agency SUNA reported on Wednesday.

The conference had been scheduled for June 2, with preparatory meetings in May. A new date will be set after Sudan's epidemic has been overcome, SUNA quoted the conference's preparatory committee as saying.

Sudan's struggling economy has not revived with the overthrow of long-time autocrat Omar al-Bashir a year ago.

The transitional government has been trying to overcome shortages of imported – and heavily subsidised – fuel and flour. Inflation is running at more than 80%, according to official statistics.

Potential foreign donors are pressing for subsidy reforms and greater economic transparency.

But the government, in an awkward power-sharing arrangement with the military, is divided on how to tackle the issue and had postponed any action until after the economic conference, which was originally scheduled for March.

Sudan is also lobbying to be removed from a list of countries that the United States considers sponsors of terrorism, a designation that complicates efforts to negotiate a deal for its foreign debt, unblock international funding and connect to international banking systems.

On Tuesday, U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet warned that Sudan, which has suffered from internal conflict and international isolation for decades, could experience “untold suffering” and a “humanitarian disaster” unless donors acted fast, with the threat from COVID-19 looming.

“We run the risk of a country which held such promise relapsing back into political instability and potential conflict,” she said in a statement, noting that Sudan was not eligible to access a \$50 billion trust fund set up by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to help countries fight the coronavirus.

Sudan said on Wednesday it had recorded 57 new cases of the coronavirus, bringing the total to 375, and three new deaths, for a total of 28.

[Sudan] Sudan's Bashir Seeks Jail Move as Aide Gets Virus, Lawyer Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/29/2020 9:34 AM, Mohammed Alamin, Neutral]

Ousted Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir is asking to be moved from prison after one of his former enforcers detained in the same facility was infected with the coronavirus, his lawyer said.

Ahmed Haroun, an ex-Interior Ministry official who became leader of Bashir's political party in the final days of his rule, has been transferred to the hospital in Khartoum's Kober prison after testing positive for Covid-19, although his condition isn't currently serious, according to the head of Bashir's defense team, Mohamed al-Hassan al-Amin.

Bashir, who's 76 and being held in the same jail, is also in danger from the virus and his legal representatives are appealing for his detention to be turned into a form of house arrest, al-Amin said by phone.

Haroun was sharing a cell with other former top officials from Bashir's government, he said. Health Minister Akram Ali Altoum declined to comment on al-Amin's claims.

Bashir, who was overthrown by the army a year ago amid mass protests against his three-

decade rule, was jailed in December after being found guilty of illicitly possessing millions of dollars in foreign currencies. Both he and Haroun have been indicted by the International Criminal Court for alleged crimes against humanity committed in the western region of Darfur.

The North African country, which has reported 318 cases of the virus and 25 deaths, has been ravaged by years of economic mismanagement and international sanctions. Medical officials have warned of severe shortages of protective gear and equipment.

[Uganda] Uganda restricts truckers on busy trade route to curb coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [4/29/2020 4:57 AM, Elias Biryabarema, Neutral]

Uganda has stepped up restrictions on trucks passing through its territory — limiting them to one driver and banning them from stopping over in hotels — in a bid to curb the spread of the new coronavirus.

The landlocked country sits on some of east Africa's busiest road cargo routes that funnel goods from ports in Kenya and Tanzania further inland to Burundi, Rwanda, South Sudan and eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Drivers have already been complaining about long queues building up on the Uganda-Kenya border as officials from both countries carry out health checks, according to reports on NTV and other local media.

"One driver is enough," Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni said as he announced the new restrictions late on Tuesday. Trucks were previously allowed three crew.

"He (the driver) must not stay in hotels, he must not stay in lodges. He must not stay in homes, he should park his vehicle in designated places ... to rest a bit and continue," Museveni added.

Uganda had registered 79 COVID-19 cases as of Tuesday, at least 16 of them truckers arriving from Kenya and Tanzania, according to health ministry figures.

Infection and fatality figures reported across Africa are still relatively low compared with the United States, parts of Asia and Europe.

But there are fears the infection could spread fast, particularly in areas with poor sanitation facilities, and overwhelm already stretched health services.

Uganda has banned public gatherings, closed schools, barred most vehicles from the roads and ordered all but essential businesses to shut down.

The lockdown, among the toughest imposed in Africa, is currently due to end on May 5. Museveni said on Tuesday restrictions may ease after that.

Museveni also criticised the country's lawmakers for allocating themselves a one-off payment of 20 million shillings (\$5,267.32) each in a supplementary budget meant to fund the fight against the coronavirus.

"It would be morally reprehensible for members of parliament to give themselves money for

personal use when the country is in such a crisis," he said. He ordered them to repay the cash.

Network TV News Coverage

Australia's Call for Investigation Draws Chinese Anger (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:17 AM, Staff]

When President Donald Trump openly and repeatedly accuses China of failing to prevent the COVID-19 pandemic and talks about an investigation, Beijing has been silent. When the Australian government calls for an independent international investigation, the response from China was swift and severe. China's ambassador in Canberra warned of a backlash by Chinese consumers over the push for an inquiry, including boycotting Australian goods. With China being Australia's biggest market, any type of boycott would be devastating to the economy already severely hit by the coronavirus pandemic. Ryan Patel, a senior fellow at the Drucker School of Management in California, says that with "\$190 billion in two-way trade with China" and 65% of Australia's trading partnerships in Asia, "they are going to need other countries to step in here" and back up Australia's request for an inquiry. Patel adds that China's strong response to Australia "sends a message to the rest of southeast Asia" since Australia is a part of a trade pact with them.

France, Spain Announce Plans to Lift Restrictions (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:12 AM, Scott McLean and Melissa Bell]

After six weeks of lockdown, Spain's prime minister has announced a four-phase plan to ease coronavirus restrictions with the goal of returning to "normalcy" by the end of June. Phase one will allow some stores to reopen, while restaurant terraces and churches can open at 30% capacity. There will be special times set for senior citizens to go out. Schools will not reopen until September; by then, the country should be on to phase two, when outdoor shows might be allowed with some restrictions. In the final phase, masks will be encouraged and social distancing will still be mandatory. Free movement will not be allowed throughout the country until all regions are on the final phase. None of the phases have set dates, but each phase will last a minimum of two weeks. In the meantime, France hopes to begin lifting its partial lockdowns starting May 11, when shops, businesses, and some schools will reopen. France's prime minister has been outlining what the lifting of France's partial lockdown will look like after six weeks of restrictions. Starting May 11, children will be allowed to go back to school on a voluntary basis, although that will be staggered according to their ages as they gradually reopen. Retailers will also reopen with restrictions on the number of people allowed inside shops at any given time. One major concern as people are allowed to go back to work and school is public transit being overwhelmed, which will be limited to those who really need it to take at peak hours. The staggered lifting of restrictions will continue into June, followed by a preliminary period to make sure that a second wave of the virus is avoided.

U.S. Accuses China, 32 Other Countries of Intellectual Property Theft (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [4/29/2020 11:02 AM, Staff]

The U.S. Trade Office reported on Wednesday that China and 32 other countries have been accused of intellectual property theft by the United States.

Zoom Users Targeted by Overseas Spies? (ABC World News Now)

(B) ABC World News Now [4/29/2020 2:37 AM, Pierre Thomas, 584K]

A new government warning says that Zoom, a video call service used by millions of Americans as schools and places of business are moving to remote meetings, could be the target of spies overseas. According to a new Department of Homeland Security report, Zoom, which is now seeing 300 million daily participants, could be used to eavesdrop on meetings and be an opening for espionage. The DHS report warns, "Any organization currently using — or considering using — Zoom should evaluate the risk of its use." According to the intelligence analysis, China is of particular concern of spying since some of Zoom's development is done there. "China's access to Zoom servers makes Beijing uniquely positioned to target U.S. public and private sector users," according to the government bulletin. This report comes a month after the FBI warned that hackers are able to interrupt Zoom calls with obscene messages. Since then, Zoom has upped security and added password protection to calls. The company disagrees with the intelligence analysis released, calling it "heavily misinformed," adding that workers in China lack "the power or access to make substantive changes to our platform or the means to access any meeting content."

[Lebanon] Lebanon's Economic Protests Turn Violent (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/29/2020 12:33 AM, Arwa Damon]

Before the coronavirus pandemic, Lebanon was already seeing widespread unrest in response to high prices and unemployment. Now, after two months of a lockdown, demonstrators are back on the streets protesting the rising poverty and soaring food prices. Protests broke out across the country, but were primarily focused in the northern city of Tripoli, where buildings were set on fire and banks were attacked. Protests first broke out because of the economic situation in October of 2019. One protestor described the most recent demonstrations as the "fiercest" since the protests began. The coronavirus epidemic has exacerbated the existing economic problem, and now the Ministry of Social Affairs says that 75% of the Lebanese population is in need of aid. Banks have been imposing discretionary capital controls on people, meaning that citizens have not had their money released for months. In January and February, the Lebanese prime minister announced that \$5.7 billion was transferred out of cash-strapped Lebanon, confirming fears that average citizens would hurt financially while the elite would be able to access their funds.

{End of Report}

From: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>
To: noreply@techmis.com <noreply@techmis.com>
Subject: State Department News Clips (5-1-20 - 9 PM ET)
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Secretary of State

Pompeo Emerges as Point Man in War of Words With China (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Department of State News

U.S. Moves to Address 'Extraordinary Threat' From Some Foreign Electric Gear (Wall Street Journal)

Trump Looks to Secure U.S. Power Grid From Foreign Attacks (Bloomberg)

Chinese propaganda tactics shifting to elevate, amplify Russian disinformation (FOX News)

IRS mistakenly sends stimulus checks to foreign workers (Politico)

WHO ministerial to open on May 18; UNICEF seeks flights for vaccines (Reuters)

OPEC Output Surged Most in 30 Years During Price War Last Month (Bloomberg)

[Iran] U.S. sanctions Iranian-Iraqi businessman over support of Iran's Quds Force (Reuters)

[Iran] Trump Works to Disrupt Iranian Weapons Smuggling Operation With New Sanctions (Washington Free Beacon)

[Iran] US pushing to punish Iran by invoking nuclear deal Trump abandoned (Yahoo News/Independent)

[Libya] East Libyan forces bomb Tripoli despite cease-fire; 2 killed (AP)

[Russia] Russia bills US \$660K for aid that included gas masks, household cleaning gloves (ABC News)

[United Kingdom] Harry Dunn's mother hopeful 'door slightly ajar' after response to Trump letter (Yahoo News/PA Media)

[China] Trump contradicts US intel community by claiming he's seen evidence coronavirus originated in Chinese lab (CNN)

[China] Trump claims to have seen evidence that Covid virus originated in Wuhan lab (Yahoo News/RFI)

[China] U.S.-China Virus Feud Undercuts UN Bid for Cease-fire Resolution (Bloomberg)

[Hong Kong] Foreign criticism of activists' arrests 'unfounded': Hong Kong (Reuters)

[Afghanistan] Taliban step up attacks on Afghan forces since signing US deal: data (Reuters)

[Afghanistan] Afghanistan suffers upsurge in fighting and in coronavirus (Reuters)

[Afghanistan] Afghanistan likely facing coronavirus health disaster -U.S. watchdog (Reuters)

Editorials and Op-eds

East Africa has weathered pandemics — and has a few things to teach the U.S. (Washington Post)

Coronavirus is a global crisis. 'Every country for itself' doesn't work (Los Angeles Times)

The Coronavirus Is Creating a Crisis on Europe's Borders (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Vaccines for Millions Ready This Year: The Impossible Dream? (Bloomberg)

Why the WHO, often under fire, has a tough balance to strike in its efforts to address health emergencies (Yahoo News/The Conversation)

[Iran] A steadfast brother shows that men have a role in the liberation of Iran's women (Washington Post)

[Italy] Rome Has Been Sacked, Conquered and Abandoned. Now It's the Coronavirus's Turn. (New York Times)

[Sweden] No, Sweden Isn't a Miracle Coronavirus Model (Bloomberg)

[Australia] Racing Against the Virus From Inside Australia's Healthcare System (New York Times)

[China] Was the new coronavirus accidentally released from a Wuhan lab? It's doubtful. (Washington Post)

[China] COVID coverup only the beginning of China's malign influence in global human rights bodies (Washington Examiner)

[North Korea] Nobody Has Seen Kim Jong-un for 19 Days? What Does It Mean? (New York Times)

[South Korea] Trust, testing and tracing: How South Korea succeeded where the US stumbled in coronavirus response (ABC News)

[South Africa] This is South Africa's third major pandemic in 100 years. It has learned its lessons. (Washington Post)

Coronavirus News

WHO Warns Countries Could Face Food Shortages Due to Virus Travel Restrictions (Wall Street Journal)

WHO says COVID-19 emergency declaration gave world 'enough time' (Reuters)

WHO: Investment bank AIB to help organization tackle coronavirus (Yahoo News/PA)

Stranded in the United States, with no way home or health insurance: 'We're just trapped' (Washington Post)

Too risky to come home, crew of 'clean' U.S. warship in coronavirus limbo (Reuters)

Cruise Ships Set Sail Knowing the Deadly Risk to Passengers and Crew (Wall Street Journal)

FDA Authorizes Emergency Use of Gilead Drug for Covid-19 Patients (Wall Street Journal)

Trade

Coronavirus Slows But Won't Halt Shipping's Focus on Global Trade (Wall Street Journal)

African free trade deal launch unlikely this year, AfCFTA Secretary-General says (Reuters)

[China] Treasuries Rise After Trump Renews Threat of China Trade War (Bloomberg)

[China] Currencies fall as Sino-U.S. trade concerns resurface (Reuters)

[China] Offshore yuan tumbles after Trump tariff threat against China (Reuters)

ISIS

[\[Egypt\] Islamic State claims responsibility for Egypt's Sinai attack \(Reuters\)](#)

Near East & North Africa

[Turkey Lashes Out at U.A.E. For Supporting Libya 'Coup Plotters' \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran Satellite Launch Reveals Gains in Missile Program \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran condemns Germany's ban on Hezbollah activity \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran death toll from coronavirus rises by 63 to 6,091: Health Ministry \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] Iraq's revenues plummet, raising fears of economic collapse \(AP\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israeli bank fined nearly \\$1 billion in U.S. tax evasion, money laundering cases \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israel Mulls Coronavirus Points System After Lockdown \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Muslims in Jerusalem Pray Outdoors Amid Virus Lockdown \(AP\)](#)

[\[Kuwait\] Kuwait to provide full cooperation to India's mega evacuation plan to bring back its citizens \(Yahoo News/PTI\)](#)

[\[Lebanon\] Lebanese protest despite government's economic rescue plan \(AP\)](#)

[\[Lebanon\] Lebanon banks reject rescue plan as government asks IMF for help \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Lebanon\] Lebanon banking association rejects gov't rescue plan \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Syria\] Explosions hit Syrian military warehouse, 10 civilians hurt \(AP\)](#)

[\[Syria\] Syria says casualties in Homs blast, war monitor says Israel behind it \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Syria\] Coronavirus quarantine in Syria's northwest looks to shield most vulnerable \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Yemen\] Clashes in Yemen UNESCO site threaten rare species \(AP\)](#)

[\[Yemen\] Yemen records first coronavirus case in Taiz province as virus spreads \(Reuters\)](#)

Europe and Eurasia

[EU chief denies disinformation report was watered down for China \(CNN\)](#)

[\[Azerbaijan\] Azerbaijan extends lockdown measures until May 31, shops set to reopen \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Bulgaria\] Quake with 4.5 magnitude felt in Bulgaria's capital \(AP\)](#)

[\[France\] Life won't be normal after May 11, Macron tells French \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[France\] France's death toll from COVID-19 rises by 218 to 24,594 \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Germany\] Local, Practical, Apolitical: Inside Germany's Successful Coronavirus Strategy \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Germany\] Germany's confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 1,639; deaths up 193: RKI \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Greece\] Using Plastic Markers, Greek Workers Defy Ban to Mark Labour Day \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Ireland\] Irish PM unveils plan to slowly lift coronavirus restrictions \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Italy\] Easing of lockdown begs the question: Who's family in Italy? \(AP\)](#)

[\[Malta\] Malta refuses to let migrant ship dock, awaits EU deal \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Poland\] In Poland, Abortion Access Worsens Amid Pandemic \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Putin's critics try to tap discontent over coronavirus lockdown pain \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Sweden\] Trump's Latest Attack on Sweden Revives Coronavirus Controversy \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Turkey\] Turkish Police Detain Gathered Union Leaders on May Day \(AP\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] U.K. Provides 122,347 Tests, Claiming Key Coronavirus Target Met \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Britain hits coronavirus testing target as death toll leaps again \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Ethnic minorities in England and Wales dying from coronavirus at higher rates than white peers, study suggests \(CNN\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] UK virus toll rises 739 as stats show disadvantaged worst hit \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

East Asia and Pacific

[Australia's coronavirus disputes with China are growing. So are debates over its deep economic ties to Beijing. \(Washington Post\)](#)

[China-Australia Rift Deepens Over Calls for Virus Inquiry \(AP\)](#)

[Australian PM says no evidence coronavirus originated in China laboratory, urges inquiry \(Reuters\)](#)

[Australian PM says relationship with China "mutually beneficial" \(Reuters\)](#)

[Australia] Australia accelerates decision on whether to lift COVID-19 restrictions (Reuters)

[Australia] How did Australia flatten its coronavirus curve? Restrictions easing as infection rate continues to fall (CNN)

[Australia] Australian police fatally shoot man after stabbings at mall (AP)

[China] Chinese embassy publishes 16-point coronavirus rebuttal (Axios)

[China] Chinese journalist jailed for 15 years for 'vilifying the Communist Party and government' (CNN)

[China] The place Chinese travelers want to visit in 2020 is... Wuhan (CNN)

[Indonesia] May Day Marks Pain, Not Celebration for Workers Hit by Virus (AP)

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Protesters, Police Clash Again After Lull Brought by Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Police Spray Tear Gas in Protest at Shopping Mall (AP)

[Malaysia] Malaysia detains hundreds of refugees and migrants during virus lockdown: rights groups (Reuters)

[Myanmar] Myanmar dismisses fresh war crimes allegations by U.N. rights envoy as 'biased' (Reuters)

[North Korea] 'Kim Jong Un is Dead, Sister Kim Yo Jong Will Succeed Him', Claims North Korean Defector Amid Death Rumours (Yahoo News/Latestly)

[Singapore] Singapore confirms 932 new COVID-19 cases, death toll rises to 16 (Reuters)

South and Central Asia

[Bangladesh] Bangladesh factories resume work, risking new virus cases (AP)

[India] India to Run Special Trains to Help Stranded People Reach Home (Bloomberg)

[India] Indian Migrant Workers Take 1st Train Home Since Lockdown (AP)

[India] India extends nationwide lockdown, to allow relaxations in lower-risk zones (Reuters)

[Nepal] Old explosive from Nepal's insurgency kills 4 children (AP)

[Pakistan] Report gives Pakistan failing grade on human rights (AP)

[Pakistan] Pakistani Parliament's Speaker Tests Positive for COVID-19 (Reuters)

[Sri Lanka] Sri Lanka extends virus lockdown through May 11 (Yahoo News/AFP)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

U.S. Probes University of Texas Links to Chinese Lab Scrutinized Over Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Trump admin pulls NIH grant for coronavirus research over ties to Wuhan lab at heart of conspiracy theories (ABC News)

Not so fast: US against release of Colombian cocaine kingpin (AP)

Accused embassy gunman said he feared Cuban organized crime (AP)

[Bolivia] Bolivian Parliament approves law calling for elections in 90 days, defying interim government (Reuters)

[Brazil] Virus surge in Brazil brings a coffin shortage, morgue chaos (AP)

[Brazil] Brazil ups forecast for COVID-19 emergency measures to \$64 bln (Reuters)

[Canada] Canada announces immediate ban on 'military-grade' assault weapons (Washington Post)

[Canada] Canada Bans More Than 1,500 Types of Military-Style Firearms (Wall Street Journal)

[Canada] Canada Bans More Than 1,500 Assault Weapons After Mass Shooting (Bloomberg)

[Canada] Canada bans assault-style weapons after shooting rampage (AP)

[Canada] Canadian Crew on NATO Mission Presumed Dead After Crash (Wall Street Journal)

[Canada] Remains found, 5 presumed dead from chopper crash off Greece (AP)

[Canada] As meat plant infections rise, Canada lets packers choose when to close (Reuters)

[Cuba] Communist-run Cuba dedicates subdued May Day to white coat army of doctors (Reuters)

[Guatemala] Maya villages in Guatemala spurn U.S. deportees as infections spike (Reuters)

[Peru] Peru authorizes bond issuance of up to \$4 bln to offset coronavirus impact (Reuters)

[Venezuela] Ex-Green Beret led failed attempt to oust Venezuela's Maduro (AP)

[Venezuela] Wildfires pose heightened risk to Venezuelan crude output (Reuters)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Congo] Congo GDP to Shrink for First Time Since War, Central Bank Says (Bloomberg)

[Ethiopia] Thousands of Ethiopian migrants quarantined in universities wait to go home (Reuters)

[Ethiopia] IMF Approves \$411 Million in Emergency Funding for Ethiopia (Bloomberg)

[South Africa] South Africa eases lockdown of battered economy (Reuters)

[Sudan] Covid-19 could push Sudan into 'perfect storm' of ill-health, sanctions, Darfur crisis (Yahoo News/RFI)

[Zambia] Climate-smart cassava gets new use in Zambia: hand sanitiser (Reuters)

[Zimbabwe] Zimbabwe extends coronavirus lockdown, announces \$720 million stimulus (Reuters)

Network TV News Coverage

Global Tensions Between Reopening and Restrictions (CNN Newsroom)

Rejuvenating U.S. Uranium and Nuclear Industries (FOX's Mornings With Maria Bartiromo)

[Iraq] U.S. Coalition Forces Destroy ISIS Cave System (FOX and Friends)

[China] Trump Contradicts U.S. Intel, Says COVID-19 Started in Wuhan Lab (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

[North Korea] North Korean Media Reports on Kim Jong-Un's Official Duties Despite Questions About His Absence (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

Secretary of State

Pompeo Emerges as Point Man in War of Words With China (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [5/1/2020 4:56 PM, Robbie Gramer, 722K, Neutral]

In recent weeks, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has emerged as the face of the administration's hard-line China strategy, relying on the conservative media landscape to spread its message on Beijing's blame for the coronavirus pandemic with a raft of hits on Fox News and conservative radio talk shows.

"We've been very clear to the Chinese Communist Party they have a special responsibility," Pompeo told Dan "Ox" Ochsner, one of four conservative radio talk show hosts he spoke to on Thursday alone. "This virus originated in Wuhan. They have a special responsibility to

share with the world the data, the information, the need to be transparent.”

To outsiders and former diplomats, Pompeo’s media blitz in the conservative bubble appears designed to rally U.S. President Donald Trump’s base around what could be a key 2020 election issue as the pandemic lockdown draws the global economy to a standstill and fuels a surge in unemployment across the United States. Critics have knocked Pompeo for serving as the administration’s attack dog rather than coordinating a global response to the pandemic, a charge his supporters dismiss as partisan spin.

China has shot back at Pompeo, with its state-run media machine targeting him in a barrage of unusually personal attacks in the past week as it tries to deflect U.S. criticisms that it mishandled the initial outbreak of the virus, contributing to its global spread.

“Politicians like Pompeo have only prejudice, hatred, and private interests in their minds,” read one editorial in the People’s Daily, the official newspaper of the Chinese Communist Party. “Pompeo has made people wonder if he believes he can ‘make America great again’ just by bullying and talking nonsense.”

In April alone, Pompeo had more than 90 interviews with U.S. news outlets and international press roundtables—a stark shift from the early months of the pandemic. He has also held semiregular press briefings at the State Department in the past month, where a group of reporters from a variety of national outlets can question him. Additionally, the department has organized almost daily phone briefings with other State Department officials on the department’s response to the pandemic and other issues.

Still, some former diplomats have criticized Trump’s top diplomat for focusing too much on a select domestic audience with a political bent—many of his recent one-on-one interviews were with conservative outlets and talk shows. (The State Department publishes transcripts of Pompeo’s interviews on its website for public availability.) Several former diplomats told Foreign Policy that Pompeo sticking to Trump-friendly outlets allows him to skirt tough lines of questioning, and he’s doing so at the expense of more interviews with foreign media outlets where he can better convey America’s foreign policies to an international audience.

“He’s spending a heck of a lot less time communicating to the world about why the Trump administration is doing what it’s doing. The other effect is he’s made the role of secretary of state much more partisan, and historically they were supposed to stay above the fray,” said Brett Bruen, a former career diplomat and director of global engagement at the White House under President Barack Obama. “While I may disagree with the policies, I would be the first to advocate that a secretary of state needs to be out in front in the international media explaining the rationale for what we’re doing.”

Others point out that Pompeo’s focus on domestic outlets was due to the State Department’s unprecedented task of repatriating tens of thousands of Americans trapped abroad, after the pandemic grounded international air travel and led to a wave of travel bans in foreign countries. U.S. embassies and consulates abroad have helped bring more than 70,000 Americans home since the end of January through organizing commercial or charter flights, according to State Department officials.

Pompeo’s media blitz fits into the Trump administration’s broader strategy of pushing for independent probes into whether China mishandled its outbreak response and pressuring

China to open its virology labs to international inspectors amid questions about the origins of the virus. The administration has also blamed the World Health Organization (WHO) for its role in the pandemic response, accusing the international health body of bowing to Chinese pressure. Critics say the administration is deflecting blame for its own slow domestic response to the pandemic, which has infected more than 1.1 million Americans and killed some 65,000.

The Trump administration announced that it would temporarily cut funding to WHO in order to undergo a review of whether the international health body submitted too much to Chinese pressure.

Democratic lawmakers criticized such measures, saying that WHO, despite its flaws, needed continued U.S. support. "The inherent complexity of responding to and containing a pandemic demands greater U.S. leadership to coordinate an international response," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer; Sen. Bob Menendez, the top Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee; and others wrote in a letter to Pompeo on April 20. "The solution to countering Chinese influence at the WHO is American leadership and engagement, not [American] absenteeism."

Department of State News

U.S. Moves to Address 'Extraordinary Threat' From Some Foreign Electric Gear (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 3:53 PM, Timothy Puko and Rebecca Smith, Neutral]

President Trump signed an executive order intended to limit the use of foreign-supplied components in the nation's electric grid, declaring that the practice poses an "extraordinary threat to national security."

Friday's order reflects a consensus among senior intelligence officials that foreign adversaries including Russia and China have secured hidden footholds in the electric system and could use that access to cause blackouts at some future date.

The executive order declares a national emergency and asserts federal oversight over private utility purchases of gear from suppliers deemed controlled or influenced by foreign adversaries. In effect, the government has signaled that it no longer will defer to utilities in their purchasing decisions because the nation's most critical infrastructure—the one on which all others rely—is increasingly at risk of infiltration and sabotage.

The order also creates the nation's first federally controlled process for rooting out compromised gear that already is embedded in electric networks. And it tacitly signals a belief that the nation would be safer if more critical systems were manufactured domestically.

"National security will greatly benefit," said Thomas Popik, president of the Foundation for Resilient Societies, a group focused on grid security. He said the order confronts the problem of relying "on a manufacturing base for the most critical equipment in countries like China whose national interests may be adverse to those of the United States."

The order gives Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette—in consultation with other officials including the secretary of defense and head of national intelligence—the ability to help retool the defenses of the electric grid. In the past, utility-sector security largely has been left to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, which has created critical infrastructure protection rules in cooperation with the utility-dominated North American Electric Reliability Corp. Although utilities must follow rules intended to protect the grid from attacks, they have been generally regarded as porous.

The order identifies parts of the grid that will receive special focus, including control centers and the software they use to manage flows of electricity, protective relays, voltage regulators, transformers and automatic circuit reclosers. Many older pieces of gear have embedded software that lack security features because they predate the internet. That makes them susceptible to manipulation by adversaries that gain access to utilities' operational networks. And the electric grid increasingly relies on remote access to control equipment, such as at substations, instead of employees at those sites.

"It is imperative the bulk-power system be secured against exploitation and attacks by foreign threats," Mr. Brouillette said in a statement. "This Executive Order will greatly diminish the ability of foreign adversaries to target our critical electric infrastructure."

The process being created by the Energy Department is also intended to solve a problem in which information uncovered by U.S. intelligence agencies gets bottled up within the government and can't be used to maximum effect to protect the grid because it is largely owned by private utility companies. A senior Energy Department official said that the administration will build on intelligence agencies's work in determining what countries and gear pose the greatest threats.

"This is what we've been trying to get for the last 20 years," said Joe Weiss, a power systems security expert in Cupertino, Calif. "This plugs a hell of a lot of holes."

The order doesn't address the cost of replacing vulnerable systems but there is a general principle, known as the filed-rate doctrine, which allows utilities to recover the cost of expenses incurred as a result of federal action.

The Edison Electric Institute, a trade group for investor-owned utilities, said it appreciates Mr. Trump's efforts and that power companies are actively working with the administration and the Energy Department on grid security.

"This [order] reflects this ongoing collaboration with the federal government and provides new ways to mitigate threats to electric-sector critical infrastructure," Tom Kuhn, president of the group, the institute said. "Reliable electricity and a secure energy grid are essential to the nation's economy and our way of life."

Government agencies have warned repeatedly that the nation's electricity grid is an attractive target for overseas hackers. The U.S. blamed the Russian government for a hacking campaign in 2017. National-security officials have said that Russia and China have the ability to temporarily disrupt the operations of electric utilities and gas pipelines.

"Foreign adversaries are increasingly creating and exploiting vulnerabilities in the United

States bulk-power system," Mr. Trump said in his order. "A successful attack on our bulk-power system would present significant risks to our economy, human health and safety... ."

The order doesn't mention any country by name, and part of the process will be to determine what nations pose the biggest risk. The senior official said there hasn't been any new threat that prompted the action.

But the administration is taking action specifically because of those prior efforts to infiltrate U.S. electric and natural-gas systems, said the senior department official, who pointed to the government reports that connected those efforts directly to Russia and China. Two other nations—Iran and North Korea—are regarded as capable cyber adversaries but they aren't major suppliers of equipment, unlike China.

The president's order charges the Energy Secretary to work with other parts of the administration to set criteria for what power companies can safely purchase from international vendors. The secretary will create a task force to establish procurement policies and can create a process for prequalifying international vendors to sell products for U.S. systems.

The Trump administration has made addressing those types of risks a priority across several industries. Officials have frequently cited threats from countries, especially China and Russia, that give financial support to suppliers in telecommunications, pharmaceuticals, nuclear power, and rare-earths mining and processing, and may have influence over them.

A Wall Street Journal investigation published last year revealed Russian hackers looking to gain access to critical American power infrastructure.

Trump Looks to Secure U.S. Power Grid From Foreign Attacks (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 12:28 PM, Ari Natter and Stephen Cunningham, Neutral]

President Donald Trump has signed an executive order aimed at securing the nation's electricity system from foreign adversaries, a move that could restrict certain overseas companies from exporting products to the U.S.

The order, which doesn't name any specific countries or companies, blocks U.S. purchases of certain power-system equipment from entities deemed a risk to national security. It empowers the secretary of energy to identify those parties and establish criteria for restricting transactions with them. The order also establishes a new task force on federal energy infrastructure procurement.

"It is imperative the bulk-power system be secured against exploitation and attacks by foreign threats," U.S. Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette said in a statement. "This executive order will greatly diminish the ability of foreign adversaries to target our critical electric infrastructure."

Foreign-produced equipment subject to the restrictions include transformers, capacitors, and metering equipment used in power transmission. The order could result in more of those parts being manufactured in the U.S., according to a senior Energy Department official, who asked not be named, citing agency policy.

In his order, Trump declared a national emergency relating to threats against the bulk power system and accused foreign adversaries of "increasingly creating and exploiting vulnerabilities" in the U.S. grid. The task force has to submit a report to the president within a year of the date of the order.

In recent years, members of Congress and the Trump administration have raised concerns about the power grid's vulnerability to foreign interference. A report by the Director of National Intelligence last year warned that both China and Russia have the ability to launch cyber-attacks targeting both the electrical grid and natural gas pipelines.

"Moscow is mapping our critical infrastructure with the long-term goal of being able to cause substantial damage," the report said.

Huawei Technologies Co., the Chinese producer of solar panels, energy-storage technology and telecommunications infrastructure, has been singled out as a particular threat to the American power grid.

A group of senators in December called on the administration to protect the power system, arguing that inverters produced by the company could put the grid at risk of foreign surveillance.

Trump has already effectively blocked Huawei and certain other Chinese firms from the U.S. telecommunications market.

Chinese propaganda tactics shifting to elevate, amplify Russian disinformation (FOX News)

FOX News [5/1/2020 12:56 PM, Rich Edson, Neutral]

Chinese Communist Party tactics have shifted to imitate classic Russian disinformation campaigns, as well as amplify bogus stories from Moscow to pin the blame for coronavirus on the U.S., according to a State Department official and analysts.

U.S. officials said they're now seeing Russian disinformation migrate from social media to state media and even official press conferences.

"Beijing is pursuing a comprehensive and coordinated influence campaign to advance its interest and undermine the United States," said U.S. Special Envoy Lea Gabrielle, Global Engagement Center. "The CCP is employing a whole-of-government approach, using political, economic, military, and information tools to advance its influence"

American officials cite Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang this week openly questioning safety at U.S.-funded biological laboratories in the former Soviet Union and requested the U.S. "heed the concerns from the international community."

The narrative quickly spread throughout state-run media and is included in articles like CGTN's "10 conflicting things in U.S. government's handling of the pandemic" warning the U.S.-funded labs raise "serious questions as to what research is being conducted by these labs and why the U.S. keeps tight-lipped about it."

U.S. officials also pointed to a Chinese government spokesperson demanding earlier this week that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo clarify when COVID-19 originated in the U.S., suggesting the American government is hiding that information.

"China has traditionally operated in the information space as an actor that tries to prop itself up," said Kristine Lee, an associate fellow with the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security. "The negative messaging is a new dimension to its information operations that we're seeing unfold today, and that may become more prominent in its influence campaigns in the future as well."

Like officials in Moscow, China's government is increasingly leveraging automated bots and trolls on social media. They're also employing Chinese-designed social media apps, state-owned media, government spokespeople and even American platforms like Twitter to create a "mutually reinforcing feedback loop," according to Lee.

While the approach of government officials in Beijing and Moscow merge, U.S. officials said their aims are different.

"While the Kremlin seeks to chaotically disrupt the current world order to accomplish its goals, the CCP seeks to deliberately shape it to Beijing's advantage," said Gabrielle.

To counter these narratives, State Department officials said they've launched public messaging campaigns across the world, engaged diplomats and funded projects with local organizations in Africa, South America, and Europe.

Officials said the disinformation campaign continues from Beijing to promote the Chinese government as the global leader in the COVID-19 response and the West as failing to protect its citizens and help other countries.

"Whether there is actual public buy-in, I would be skeptical that countries and their populations don't see this sort of the patently manufactured nature of these narratives," said Lee of the Chinese government campaign. "Once the dust settles and we are in a world in which we're grappling with the after-effects of the pandemic, there may be a backlash against China's actions, particularly in the information space."

IRS mistakenly sends stimulus checks to foreign workers (Politico)

Politico [5/1/2020 3:14 PM, Ian Kullgren, Neutral]

Thousands of foreign workers, many living overseas, are receiving stimulus checks designated for U.S. residents due to an unforeseen glitch that funneled taxpayer dollars to other countries, according to tax consultants and the recipients themselves.

College-age workers who spent time in the U.S. in the last two years — some of whom returned home long before the coronavirus pandemic — have been surprised to find \$1,200 checks deposited into their bank accounts. And with no clear guidance on how to return it, they're holding onto the money or racing to spend it before the Internal Revenue Service realizes the mistake.

The incorrect payments were likely distributed to thousands of foreigners in April, said Donna Kepley, president of the tax firm Arctic International who has spoken with dozens of clients over the past two weeks. The error stems from a common tax-filing blunder, particularly for those on F-1 student and J-1 exchange visas. These workers, studying at universities and working summer jobs, often turn to TurboTax and other e-filing systems without knowing that the systems are designed only for U.S. residents.

As a result, many temporary foreign workers each year file the wrong tax forms. The IRS rarely catches the error because nonimmigrant workers' Social Security numbers have the same number of digits as those of U.S. citizens, and therefore appear to be identical, accountants say.

Usually, the error doesn't much matter, but this year it's causing the IRS to think certain foreign workers are eligible for one-time stimulus payments. The glitch affects both workers in the U.S. and those who recently left the country.

The IRS and TurboTax did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

There were 1.1 million foreign students in the U.S. last year, according to the Institute of International Education, and the government granted nearly 400,000 J-1 temporary visas. Accountants with expertise in nonresident taxes say the majority of these workers either don't file or file incorrectly, and in recent days they've been flooded with calls about mistaken payments.

"We were contacted by a lot of our clients all of a sudden, on the one day when they started hitting their accounts or that the checks started going out, asking what to do," Kepley said. "And so we had to try to figure out how to return it, which is not easy."

Three student visa holders who spoke to POLITICO said they had received the payments this month but had been unable to contact the IRS. All of them were motivated to return the money out of fear they would be banned from receiving visas in the future — or worse, deported — if the government learned they had committed tax fraud.

"One day I just saw my account and I had 1,200 bucks without even requesting anything," said a French citizen who completed a graduate program at University of Toledo in 2018. "I knew they were planning to give stimulus payments but I didn't know when it was happening."

The student left the U.S. in January 2019 and now lives in Zurich. After scouring online forums to see if others were having the same problem, the student learned that he had filed the wrong form — 1040 instead of 1040-NR — through TurboTax. The IRS, believing him to be a U.S. resident or citizen, deposited the money into his account on April 15.

The same week, the student said he called and emailed the IRS at least three times but never got through.

"I never tried to commit fraud or anything," the student said. "I contacted the IRS to tell them that I'm not in the U.S. anymore and that I should not have received this stimulus check and I wanted to find a way to give the money back."

"I don't really want to use that money because it doesn't really belong to me," he added.

In an email, a University of Toledo spokesperson said the university recently gave additional information to students on how they could file an amended tax return to send back their stimulus checks.

The problem is common among universities. In a survey of more than 500 schools last week, 43 percent said they had students and scholars who believed they received a payment in error.

"There are so many people who aren't getting the check who could use it, and so when you see people who weren't intended it's disconcerting," said Enda Kelleher, vice president for Sprintax, the tax firm that conducted the survey.

The consequences of misfiling go beyond stimulus repayment. Nonimmigrant workers who claim to be residents also receive the \$12,200 standard deduction. That prompts some students and workers to submit the wrong form intentionally, not understanding that it could jeopardize their immigration status and require them to pay penalties to the government.

"They don't think they'll necessarily ever be caught or they don't think there's really that big a problem," said Kepley, the Arctic International president.

But many others were caught off guard. Robert Zheng, a student from China who recently graduated from University of Rochester in New York state, discovered \$1,200 in his bank account last week, deposited after a friend told him that she had wrongly received the check. Zheng, who has a finance job in New York, said he combed the IRS website and online forums to find out how to return the check. But he still does not know how he will do it.

A student from New Zealand studying at a Pennsylvania university said she frantically called her bank when she realized she got the stimulus check to see if she could send it back — and was told, incorrectly, that she should just spend it.

Skeptical of the advice, she called the IRS but was directed to an automated line.

"I'm definitely worried that it's either going to affect my status now or affect it if I ever try to apply for a different visa in the future," the student said.

But for the time being, she and others who received wrong payments have little to do but wait.

"It's in my savings account right now," she added. "If it sits there for awhile at least I'll get a couple dollars from it."

WHO ministerial to open on May 18; UNICEF seeks flights for vaccines (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 5:58 AM, Stephanie Nebehay, 5304K, Positive]

The annual meeting of health ministers will take place virtually from May 18, with the focus

on the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Friday.

The shortened agenda will include items essential for "governance continuity" such as election of its executive and a speech by WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, spokesman Tarik Jasarevic told a U.N. briefing in Geneva.

UNICEF called for unlocking a "massive backlog" in vaccine shipments amid a huge drop in commercial flights and limited availability of charters in the pandemic.

"UNICEF is appealing to governments, the private sector, the airline industry, and others, to free up freight space at affordable cost for these life-saving vaccines," spokeswoman Marixie Mercado said.

OPEC Output Surged Most in 30 Years During Price War Last Month (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 10:04 AM, Grant Smith, Neutral]

OPEC's crude production surged by the most in almost 30 years last month as its biggest members fought to dominate a global market devastated by the coronavirus crisis.

Saudi Arabia, the cartel's most powerful member, pumped a record of more than 11 million barrels a day as it waged a price war against its former ally Russia, a Bloomberg survey showed.

Though they reached a truce by mid-April, striking a deal to cut vast amounts of supply, the Saudis continued to keep production high for much of the month -- even with demand suffering an unprecedented free-fall.

The kingdom's surge leaves OPEC nations with an even bigger glut to deal with now, with the brief price war adding almost 100 million barrels of additional supply into an already oversupplied market, according to Bloomberg calculations.

Production from the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries soared by 1.73 million barrels a day in April, the biggest monthly increase since September 1990, according to survey data compiled by Bloomberg. It's based on information from officials, ship-tracking data and estimates from consultants including Rystad Energy AS and JBC Energy GmbH.

The organization pumped 30.36 million barrels a day in April -- almost four times the amount they need to produce on average this quarter, data from the International Energy Agency shows. In the same month that OPEC opened the taps, world demand slumped by almost 30 million barrels a day as lockdowns to contain the virus grounded flights and froze economic activity.

The price war erupted between Saudi Arabia and Russia in early March, when Riyadh failed to persuade Moscow that deep supply cutbacks were needed to deal with the loss of demand from the pandemic. The OPEC+ alliance they had led for three years, aimed at coordinating output to prevent surpluses, fell apart.

Seeking to either change Russia's mind, or at least defend its share of a shrinking market, Riyadh propelled output to a previously unseen 12 million barrels a day in early April.

Under immense pressure from its political allies in Washington, the kingdom then reversed course, reaching an agreement with Russia and the rest of OPEC+ on April 12 to slash supplies again. Those new cutbacks formally take effect on Friday.

Toward the end of April, the Saudis began to pare back in preparation for the new agreement, tempering their output average for the month to 11.4 million barrels a day, the survey showed.

Fellow Persian Gulf exporter Kuwait joined them in preemptive application of the curbs. Others, such as Nigeria, also began cutting early -- but only because a lack of customers and storage space forced them to do so.

The OPEC+ curbs, though adding up to a massive 9.7 million barrels a day, probably won't offset the massive contraction in demand. The global oil industry is bracing for the abrupt and disorderly shutdown of oil fields producing crude with nowhere to go.

Oil prices sank to their lowest since 2002 in London this week, falling below \$20 a barrel. The collapse was even more severe in the U.S., where futures briefly fell below zero last month because nobody wanted to buy expiring contracts.

[Iran] U.S. sanctions Iranian-Iraqi businessman over support of Iran's Quds Force (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:42 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The United States on Friday imposed sanctions on an Iranian-Iraqi businessman and his mining company, accusing him of involvement in efforts by Iran's elite Quds Force to generate revenue illegally and smuggle weapons abroad, the U.S. Treasury Department said.

Amir Dianat has supported Quds Force smuggling operations for years, including efforts aimed at shipping weapons such as missiles and smuggling shipments from Iran to Yemen, the department said in a statement.

The sanctions freeze any U.S.-held assets of Dianat or his company Taif Mining Services, which the U.S. Treasury Department alleged was a front company for the Quds Force, and generally bar Americans from dealing with them.

"The Iranian regime and its supporters continue to prioritize the funding of international terrorist organizations over the health and well-being of the Iranian people," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in the statement.

In addition to the blacklisting, the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia filed criminal charges against Dianat and his business associate, Iranian Kamran Lajmiri, alleging they violated sanctions and money laundering laws.

A related complaint was also filed alleging that \$12 million is subject to forfeiture as funds involved in the crimes and as assets of a foreign terrorist organization, the U.S. Department of Justice said in a statement.

The forfeiture action marks the largest ever seizure of Quds Force-related funds, it said.

The complaint alleges that Dianat and Lajmire in 2019 conspired to purchase a petroleum tanker in a scheme involving the National Iranian Oil Company, the National Iranian Tanker Company and the Quds Force, all blacklisted by the United States.

If convicted of the criminal charges, Dianat and Lajmire would face a maximum of 20 years imprisonment.

"These defendants purchased a crude oil tanker valued at over \$10 million by illegally using the U.S. financial system, defiantly violating U.S. sanctions," Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Demers said in the statement.

Tensions between Washington and Tehran have spiked since U.S. President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew in 2018 from the Iran nuclear deal struck by his predecessor, Barack Obama, and began reimposing sanctions that had been eased under the accord.

[Iran] Trump Works to Disrupt Iranian Weapons Smuggling Operation With New Sanctions (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [5/1/2020 1:00 PM, Adam Kredo, 108K, Negative]

The Trump administration on Friday issued new sanctions to disrupt a weapons smuggling operation run by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the country's elite military group.

The new sanctions target Amir Dianat, "a longtime associate of senior officials" of the IRGC, according to the Treasury Department. Dianat is accused of running "efforts to generate revenue and smuggle weapons abroad."

Sanctions also have been levied on Taif Mining Services, a company run by Dianat that the Treasury Department says violated "sanctions and money laundering laws." A concurrent criminal lawsuit was filed by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the District of Columbia alleging "that approximately \$12 million is subject to forfeiture as funds involved in these crimes and as assets of a foreign terrorist organization."

The sanctions are part of the latest effort by the Trump administration to "enforce and expand" its maximum pressure campaign on Iran, as the Washington Free Beacon reported earlier this week. More sanctions are likely to be issued as the administration works at the United Nations to ensure an embargo on Iran's purchase of advanced military equipment is not lifted later this year.

"The Iranian regime and its supporters continue to prioritize the funding of international terrorist organizations over the health and well-being of the Iranian people," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement. "The United States remains committed to working with financial institutions, non-profit organizations, and international partners to facilitate humanitarian trade and assistance to the Iranian people."

Information provided by the Treasury Department indicates that Dianat and his company

worked with IRGC officials to ship weapons and missiles across the region. The IRGC's Quds Force "relied on Dianat to secure entry for vessels carrying IRGC-QF shipments and has used his business connections to facilitate logistics requirements." This includes shipping weapons to Yemen, where Iranian-backed terror forces are stationed.

The Trump administration issued similar sanctions in late 2019 on an Iranian shipping network that smuggled "lethal aid from Iran to Yemen" on behalf of the IRGC. Earlier this year, the administration designated 20 Iran- and Iraq-based companies for their work with the IRGC.

[Iran] US pushing to punish Iran by invoking nuclear deal Trump abandoned (Yahoo News/Independent)

Yahoo News/Independent [5/1/2020 11:13 AM, Borzou Daragahi, Neutral]

The United States is pushing ahead with a scheme to extend a United Nations arms embargo on Iran that is due to be lifted in October as part of the nuclear deal that Washington abandoned two years ago.

To force the extension, Washington will attempt to lobby the Security Council to continue the arms embargo, which bars weapons sales to or from Iran.

But it also is making what legal experts and diplomats describe as a convoluted argument that it is still part of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action it left, and hence able to use one of its provisions to "snapback" the embargo.

The administration's plan is to claim it is still part of the Security Council resolution that enshrined the nuclear deal in international law even though Mr Trump trashed the agreement, meant to curtail Tehran's atomic technology programme, as the "worst deal" in history.

The plan was first reported by The New York Times earlier this week.

"We are one of the participants, and the participants have the right to invoke snapback in a way that will prevent this expiration of the arms sales," US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told Fox News on Thursday.

Many diplomats worry about the ultimate goal of the push. Iran already sells and buys weapons through intermediaries and on the black market. Europeans will never sell it weapons, for fear of invoking other US sanctions, and both China and Russia have rarely sold Iran any advanced weaponry.

But diplomats and scholars fear that the Trump administration's latest gambit is a move by hardline Washington fixtures aimed at both permanently damaging any prospects for a future deal with Iran, as well as part and parcel of far-right efforts to damage international multilateral institutions.

"The administration is trying to force everyone's hand by creating yet another crisis that they hope this time would bring down the JCPOA for good," said Ali Vaez, of the International Crisis Group, a conflict-resolution advocacy organisation.

Iran, which has severely downgraded its adherence to provisions of the nuclear deal in response to crippling US sanctions, has vowed that any reimposition of international sanctions would prompt it to leave the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and potentially open the door for it to pursue nuclear weapons.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has been warning for months about the October removal of the arms embargo. The administration's plan to attempt to bend the Security Council over Iran was only formally rolled out this week, announced in a series of interviews and briefings Thursday night it has been in the works for as many nine months, say diplomats.

The push coincides with US-friendly Estonia taking the helm of the Security Council for a month, giving Washington the ability to squeeze a weak, militarily dependent NATO ally into introducing any measures it likes.

China and Russia have already vowed to use any means to block the US plan. France's Emmanuel Macron has been working behind the scenes to sabotage the Trump scheme because of what it sees as an attempt by the White House to destroy international legal norms, said a well-placed European diplomat.

Senior European diplomats have scoffed at the US gambit. "The US has not participated in any meetings of activities within the framework of this agreement since then," EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borell told Radio Free Europe on Thursday. "So it's quite clear for us that the US is no longer a participating member in this agreement."

Complicating matters for the administration, not only has it renounced the 2015 deal, but it's own point person on Iran policy has repeatedly said it was up to European signatories to the nuclear deal with Tehran to "snapback" any of its provisions.

"We're no longer in the deal and so the parties that are still in the deal will have to make their decisions with respect to using or not using the dispute resolution mechanism," Brian Hook told reporters last year.

The anti-Iran hawk reiterated in January that the "snapback" of United Nations sanctions on Iran removed as part of the 2015 nuclear deal was a decision to be made by the UK, France, and Germany.

"What makes their legal argument much more difficult is that you have had officials coming out on the record saying we have no rights or obligations under the JCPOA including the UN snapback is no longer in their remit," said Ellie Geranmayeh, of the European Council on Foreign Relations. "They're doing a complete U-turn."

Diplomats and specialists say it illustrates the disarray and incompetence of the Trump team, who have been egged by a clique of hawkish Washington insiders seemingly determined to exert maximum pressure on Iran as a way to settle scores with Tehran as well as rival foreign policy architects in the Democratic Party's camp.

Had Mr Trump remained in the deal and agitated against Iran from within it, Washington

might have been in a stronger position to pursue its hawkish aims, many have argued.

"The international prohibition on weapons going to/from Iran ends in October," US Senator Elizabeth Warren wrote on Twitter. "To extend this arms embargo, the Trump administration is suddenly arguing that the US is a party to the same Iran Deal it abandoned. That makes no sense. Make up your mind."

Mr Pompeo responded by accusing Ms Warren of favouring the sale of Chinese tanks to Iran.

Despite scoffing at the administration's scheme, some diplomats and scholars suggested the move could push the Security Council into uncharted terrain, and that Trump's team could exert pressure and threats on enough Security Council members to push for an extension of the arms embargo, although the current composition of the body has only four or five surefire pro-Washington votes.

"At the end of the day it's not a legal issue; it's a political issue," said Mr Vaez, "The odds of being able to snap back sanctions are higher than its failure."

Still, the EU members on the Security Council, which include permanent members UK and France, as well as Germany and Belgium, will do what they know best: absolutely nothing, and delay any consideration of the move in the hopes they can ride out the Trump administration if it loses office in November.

"The US won't go into this blind. They'll use pressure and threats," said the well-placed EU official. "I wouldn't understand why any country would seriously engage with the US before November. I would want to wait and see the outcome of the elections."

[Libya] East Libyan forces bomb Tripoli despite cease-fire; 2 killed (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 3:31 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Libya's eastern-based forces trying to capture the country's capital bombed civilian homes on Friday, killing at least two people, health authorities in the U.N.-supported government in Tripoli said.

The intensified bombardment of the city by forces under the command of Khalifa Hifter came just days after their unilateral cease-fire declared for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The Tripoli-based government rejected the overture, blaming their rivals for sabotaging past peace efforts.

The health ministry in Tripoli also said that three civilians, including a woman, were wounded when rockets crashed through their roofs in the Zinata neighborhood, burying them under the rubble.

Hifter's so-called Libyan Arab Armed Forces launched their assault on Tripoli last year, backed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia. For months his forces, bolstered by shipments of powerful missiles, jets and drones, held an advantage over the coalition of fractious militias defending the beleaguered Tripoli government. But Turkey's escalating military support for the U.N.-supported administration has recently shifted momentum of the

conflict.

Western forces have thwarted Hifter's advances, recaptured coastal cities near the Tunisian border, attacked Hifter's key western airbase and tightened their siege on his stronghold of Tarhuna. On Friday, their Facebook page reported launching at least three airstrikes on fuel tankers supplying Hifter's forces and a bus full of militiamen. It warned humanitarian convoys carrying food and COVID-19 supplies to steer clear of areas of fighting or seek permission for the deliveries.

On both sides, fighting has taken a heavy toll on civilians. While Hifter's forces fire into densely populated neighborhoods and even target medical facilities — at least eight times last month, the World Health Organization reported — the forces defending Tripoli have displaced at least 3,100 civilians from Tarhuna and killed over a dozen in Turkish drone attacks last month.

The idea of a meaningful compromise between east and west Libya has become even more far-fetched following Hifter's dismissal this week of the 2015 U.N.-brokered unity deal.

U.S. Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland said he spoke on Friday to Aguila Saleh, speaker of the east-based parliament, and stressed "the importance of respect for democratic processes" and the U.N.-brokered political process, undermined by Hifter's action.

Meanwhile, as the intractable conflict and the coronavirus pandemic loom over Libya, the migrants who pass through the war-torn coastal country hoping to get to Europe are uniquely vulnerable.

On Friday, the U.N. migration agency said 51 migrants, including three women and two children, were intercepted by the Libyan Coast Guard in the Mediterranean Sea and returned to the western city of Zawiya. Some 30 people, among them a pregnant woman, were taken to a detention center, while the rest managed to escape, according to IOM spokeswoman Safa Msehli.

Libya, a major conduit for migrants fleeing war and poverty across Africa and the Middle East, is notorious for its crowded detention centers run by militias and rife with abuse. Over 1,500 migrants are currently detained, according to the IOM.

With temperatures rising and the war worsening, the U.N. refugee agency has reported an increase in migrant departures from Libya despite a lack of rescue missions along the precarious central Mediterranean route. All charity rescue vessels have halted operations because of COVID-19 restrictions, while Malta has announced its resources are too strained by the pandemic to conduct rescues.

[Russia] Russia bills US \$660K for aid that included gas masks, household cleaning gloves (ABC News)

ABC News [5/1/2020 2:00 PM, Anne Flaherty, Conor Finnegan, Mike Levine, and Katherine Faulders, Neutral]

Russia billed the U.S. nearly \$660,000 for its medical aid flight last month that included

thousands of pieces of equipment not typically used by hospitals, including chemical warfare-style gas masks and household cleaning gloves, according to a government record of the shipment.

The cargo also included 45 ventilators that were not immediately useable because of voltage-related issues, according to two U.S. officials.

It was not immediately clear how useful the April 1 shipment to New York City's John F. Kennedy airport has been for nearby hospitals. The federal government said it transferred the supplies to New York and New Jersey state officials, who did not immediately respond to questions about whether the cargo was provided to health care workers or remains in storage.

Thousands of respirators, surgical gloves, medical clothing and antiseptic packets were also included in the flight.

Still, the details and price tag of the shipment, which have not been previously reported, challenge public descriptions by the Kremlin and President Donald Trump and raise questions about whether the shipment served primarily as a public relations coup for Russia, known by U.S. intelligence for waging disinformation campaigns.

"I'm not concerned about Russian propaganda. Not even a little bit," Trump told reporters during an April 2 press briefing.

Trump said the cargo was offered by Russian President Vladimir Putin in a private phone call.

"He offered a lot of medical, high quality stuff that I accepted and that may save a lot of lives. I'll take it every day," Trump said.

Moscow referred to the flight in its state-run media as "humanitarian aid" that New Yorkers would be grateful to receive. Russia's foreign ministry said the Kremlin was covering the cost of half the value of the cargo with the other half being covered by the United States.

"In New York, there really is a tough situation, it seems to me, every make, every piece of protective gear counts, and so it's hard to overstate the importance of this aid," said Dmitry Polyansky told Russian reporters after meeting the plane at JFK airport, according to the state news agency TASS.

"It's a good gesture of solidarity with New Yorkers. They appreciate it," he said.

Trump agreed.

"It was a very nice gesture on behalf of President Putin and I could have said 'no thank you' or I could have said 'thank you' and it was a large plane of very high-quality medical supplies, and I said 'I'll take it,'" Trump told reporters April 2.

Foreign policy experts though have questioned the move by Trump, saying it was a propaganda coup for the Kremlin as it continues to try to undercut U.S. interests.

According to Russia's foreign ministry, the money for the supplies came from the Russian Direct Investment Fund – Russia's sovereign wealth fund that was sanctioned by Treasury in June 2015 as part of sanctions punishing Russia for its annexation of Crimea from Ukraine.

Also, at least some of the ventilators were made by a Siberian factory that is owned by a Russian state company sanctioned by the U.S. over Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

The State Department did not respond to a request for comment about the utility of the cargo. On the question of sanctions, a senior administration official said the sanctions on the Russian Direct Investment Fund don't apply to medical equipment and supplies.

A record of the supplies was provided to ABC News by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is coordinating the federal response to coronavirus.

According to FEMA, the supplies included a total of 4,000 M-95 "full face masks with filters," which are military-grade masks used to protect against chemical and biological agents. The mask needed by U.S. health care workers and other frontline responders is the "N95" respirator, which does not cover a person's entire face.

The agency said the flight also included 15,000 respirators, some 80,000 packs of skin antiseptic, 30,000 surgical gloves and about 400,000 pieces of medical clothing.

Questions to FEMA about the utility of the 45 ventilators were referred to the New York and New Jersey health departments. U.S. equipment requires 110 volts, whereas Russia relies on 220-volt electricity.

At the time of the flight, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said he feared the state could face a ventilator shortage and complained the federal government wasn't doing enough to ensure ventilators would go to the areas that need them most.

"It's like being on eBay with 50 other states bidding on a ventilator," Cuomo said on March 31.

Trump dismissed Cuomo's claim and said the federal government had already supplied New York with the equipment. The president has since repeatedly referred to the U.S. as the "king of ventilators," and fears of a ventilator shortage in New York City have subsided somewhat as cases plateaued.

"The State Department received a final invoice from the Government of Russia for \$659,283," a FEMA spokesperson told ABC News. "Once the routing instructions are received, the State Department will remit payment and FEMA will reimburse the State Department."

The president did not disclose the price tag in his April 2 press briefing. When asked if he would take more supplies from Russia, Trump said yes.

"If they send things that we need, I'd take it. Sure," he said.

[United Kingdom] Harry Dunn's mother hopeful 'door slightly ajar' after response to Trump letter (Yahoo News/PA Media

Yahoo News/PA Media [5/1/2020 5:44 AM, Josh Payne, 12818K, Negative]

The mother of Harry Dunn has said she is hopeful the "door is slightly ajar" despite the US government maintaining its position on the diplomatic immunity granted to her son's alleged killer.

Charlotte Charles said she was "disappointed" with the response of the US State Department to a letter she sent on Tuesday and remains optimistic about receiving a "personal response" from President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

The letter, from Mrs. Charles and Harry's father, Tim Dunn, came after the PA news agency reported that lawyers acting on behalf of 42-year-old Anne Sacoolas had opened up a dialogue with the Foreign Office earlier this year to work towards a "resolution."

Downing Street backed the teenager's parents' attempts to lobby the president after Mrs. Charles and Mr. Dunn asked the pair to review the decision to block an extradition request for the suspect.

The parents urged the president and the secretary of state to reconsider the decision to refuse the Home Office's request to extradite Mrs. Sacoolas, saying the UK justice system has "fairness at its heart."

They took their campaign for justice to the US in October, two months after their 19-year-old son was killed when his motorbike collided with a car outside a US military base in Northamptonshire.

Mrs. Sacoolas, the wife of a US intelligence official based at RAF Croughton, claimed diplomatic immunity following the crash and was able to return to her home country, sparking an international controversy.

She was charged with causing the death by dangerous driving of Mr. Dunn in December but an extradition request was rejected by Mr. Pompeo in January.

On Thursday, a spokeswoman for the US State Department reiterated its position that at the time of the accident, and for the duration of her time in the UK, the driver had immunity from criminal jurisdiction.

She told PA that the Foreign Secretary had made that clear in Parliament on October 21, 2019 and since the accident occurred, the United States had been closely engaged with the UK Government and have been transparent about their positions on legal and diplomatic matters.

The family's spokesman, Radd Seiger, said the response to the letter was "shockingly poor" – adding the Foreign Secretary's address to the House of Commons would be something he would "live to regret."

Reacting to the response from the US State Department, Mrs. Charles told PA: "Although we are disappointed with the response, it seems to me that they have left the door slightly

ajar.

"I hope Tim and I get a personal response.

"We want to engage with President Trump and Secretary Pompeo to deal with this on a friendly basis.

"They know I made a promise to my son to get him justice and we won't stop until that happens."

Also commenting on the response, Mr. Seiger told PA: "With all due respect to the State Department, that is a shockingly poor response to what was a warmhearted and genuine letter to President Trump and Secretary Pompeo from Harry's parents which was sent in good faith.

"I see they seize on Dominic Raab's ill-judged words to the House of Commons on October 21 when he stated Anne Sacoolas had diplomatic immunity as justification for their unlawful and egregious conduct in denying Harry's family the justice they deserve.

"As is now becoming clear, that was a highly misleading statement to parliament which Mr. Raab will live to regret."

[China] Trump contradicts US intel community by claiming he's seen evidence coronavirus originated in Chinese lab (CNN)

CNN [5/1/2020 3:32 AM, Zachary Cohen, Alex Marquardt, Kylie Atwood, and Jim Acosta, 12317K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump contradicted a rare on-the-record statement from his own intelligence community by claiming Thursday that he has seen evidence that gives him a "high degree of confidence" the novel coronavirus originated in a laboratory in Wuhan, China, but declined to provide details to back up his assertion.

The comments undercut a public statement from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued just hours earlier which stated no such assessment has been made and continues to "rigorously examine" whether the outbreak "began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan."

"Yes, I have," Trump said when asked whether he's seen evidence that would suggest the virus originated in the lab. Later, asked why he was confident in that assessment, Trump demurred.

"I can't tell you that. I'm not allowed to tell you that," he said.

Trump officials have been pushing the US intelligence community to determine the exact origins of the coronavirus outbreak in pursuit of an unproven theory that the pandemic started because of a laboratory accident in China, multiple sources told CNN.

In acknowledgment of that effort, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence issued an unprecedented public statement Thursday prior to Trump's comments making clear the

intelligence community is currently exploring two possibilities but cannot yet assess if the outbreak "was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan" or began "through contact with infected animals."

It is unusual for the intelligence community to comment publicly on its work before a formal assessment is made. Thursday's statement appears to have come in response to growing questions over the origins of the virus as Trump administration officials have spent weeks repeatedly floating the theory that the virus originated inside a Chinese lab.

Trump said Thursday there were "a lot of theories" that he would assess but seemed to hold out hope that Beijing would eventually be forthcoming with what it knows about the virus' origin.

"China may tell us," he said.

Pressure from Trump officials

Despite warnings from scientists and intelligence professionals that the US may never know the precise origin of the virus, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has continued to push the intelligence community for precise details about the origin of the virus, CNN has learned.

As a result, intelligence officials are facing enormous pressure to determine whether the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, two sources familiar with their frustrations told CNN. While the intelligence community has been wary to share details about the demands coming from the Trump administration, officials have told allies that the situation on the inside is alarming.

The New York Times was the first to report Thursday that a number of top officials in the Trump administration have pushed US intelligence agencies looking into the origin of the novel coronavirus to "hunt for evidence" linking the virus to a Chinese laboratory.

While the White House and State Department have urged intelligence officials to find evidence that backs up the theory that the outbreak can be traced back to a Chinese lab, the intelligence community made clear Thursday that they have not reached a definitive conclusion beyond ruling out theories that the virus was man-made or genetically modified.

"The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan," the statement issued by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on behalf of the entire community said.

While the statement suggests the intelligence community has not yet developed a clear assessment as to how the outbreak started, it does say that officials have ruled out the possibility that the virus was "man-made or genetically modified," agreeing with a near consensus among scientists and refuting conspiracy theories.

Trump was asked about the statement for the first time shortly after it was released but responded by defending his handling of the situation and pushing back on reports that warnings about an emerging outbreak were included in his daily briefs dating back to

January and February.

"Well I haven't seen the report yet, but I will tell you, if you speak to the head of intelligence right now, you speak to the head, they did say that I was given a briefing when I said I was given it, not before and they also said that it wasn't specific and it was not a panicked briefing," Trump said, appearing to refer to acting DNI Richard Grenell despite the fact he wasn't tapped for the job until February.

Trump's more direct comments about the outbreak's origins came when he was asked about the issue for a second time Thursday.

'He doesn't like information'

Trump's tenuous relationship with the intelligence community dates back to the earliest days of his presidency as he has routinely questioned their assessments, particularly their conclusion that Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential election.

The pressure on the intelligence agencies to provide evidence related to the pandemic's origins stems, in part, from Trump's handling of intelligence more broadly, the former senior administration official said.

Trump does not spend much time pouring through the daily briefs. Instead, the President prefers intelligence officials to present him with policy ideas, rather than raw information, which is a practice that runs contrary to the tradition of the intelligence community, a former official said.

"He doesn't like information," the official said. "He likes decision points."

Normally, the IC presents information so the administration can make a policy decision, they added.

Earlier this week, the White House defended its focus on the Chinese labs saying the intelligence community had been tasked with determining whether the virus originated in a Chinese lab, a spokesperson for the National Security Council referred to a statement from White House spokesperson Hogan Gidley.

Earlier this week, the White House defended its focus on the Chinese lab.

"As the president has said, the United States is thoroughly investigating this matter," White House spokesperson Hogan Gidley said. "Understanding the origins of the virus is important to help the world respond to this pandemic but also to inform rapid-response efforts to future infectious disease outbreaks."

But the lack of evidence to back up claims that the outbreak began in a Chinese lab has not stopped top administration officials, including Pompeo, and some Republican allies of the President from raising the possibility in public comments.

"We still haven't gained access, the world hasn't gained access to the WIV (Wuhan Institute of Virology) there. We don't know precisely where this virus originated from," Pompeo said

Wednesday.

And it appears that messaging campaign is a coordinated effort between the administration and like-minded lawmakers who have been in consistent contact with the White House in recent weeks, according to multiple sources.

Republican Sen. Ted Cruz of Texas is among those who have spoken regularly with White House officials throughout the lockdown about the origins of the virus, including personal calls with NSC and member briefings, according to a senior staff member who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss sensitive matters.

The administration came to the conclusion long ago that it is plausible, if not likely, the virus escaped from the lab and spread through the marketplace, not the other way around, the Cruz staffer said.

Rep. Michael McCaul of Texas, the top Republican on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, has also called for an investigation into the virus' origins and China's handling of the outbreak.

Like Cruz, McCaul believes it is plausible that the virus escaped from a Chinese lab accidentally but has requested additional information from the White House on the matter, according to aides.

Meanwhile, the uncertainty over the virus' origins extends to the closest intelligence partners of the US. The US evidence shared with the allied intelligence-sharing group known as Five Eyes doesn't rule one theory in or out, according to a foreign official in regular contact with the Trump administration.

"No one's able to stay one way or the other," the official said, highlighting -- as American officials have -- the lack of an independent team on the ground. "We just don't know enough," the official added.

Vice President Mike Pence said Thursday that Trump has directed a full investigation into the nature and origination of coronavirus in China as well as China's conduct once the US gets through the ongoing epidemic.

"I fully expect that the President will consider a range of options to ensure that those who were not forthcoming with the American people, be that in China or in the World Health Organization, are held to account."

[China] Trump claims to have seen evidence that Covid virus originated in Wuhan lab (Yahoo News/RFI)

Yahoo News/RFI [5/1/2020 5:30 AM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

US president Donald Trump claims he has seen evidence that the virus causing the current pandemic originated in a Chinese laboratory. He has threatened to impose tariffs to punish Beijing for its alleged role in the global outbreak. But the president's assertion was immediately undermined by his intelligence chief and by his top diplomat, who have admitted that there is no definite evidence.

Trump's remarks came during a two-hour press conference on the latest US latest employment figures. Statistics show that 30 million Americans have lost their jobs during the lockdown aimed at slowing down the spread of the virus.

Scientists believe the virus jumped from animals to humans, emerging in China late last year, possibly from a market selling exotic animals for meat.

But speculation and conspiracy theories have suggested that the virus was created at a top-secret laboratory in the Chinese city of Wuhan, a claim reinforced by internet rumours and increasingly taken up by the US president.

Asked if he had seen evidence that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was the source of the outbreak, Trump replied, "Yes, I have." But the president refused to give details.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, however, indicated he had not seen definitive evidence.

"We don't know precisely where it began," he said.

"We don't know if it came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology. We don't know if it emanated from the wet market or yet some other place. We don't know those answers."

Meanwhile, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said analysts "will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine" the source of the outbreak.

Beijing has denied the laboratory was the source of the virus.

Attacked by a bat

In early February, Chinese scientists Dr Xiao Botao from the South China University of Technology in Guangzhou, and Dr Xiao Lei, from Wuhan University of Science and Technology, seemed to suggest the opposite.

They published an article describing a researcher who was "once attacked by a bat and the blood of the bat shot on his skin," after which he self-isolated for 14 days.

The article claims that experiments with bats were performed in the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which is only 280 meters away from the Seafood Market.

"Speculation was that Sars-CoV or its derivative might leak from the laboratory," writes Xiao, adding that "in addition to origins of natural recombination and intermediate host, the killer virus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan."

But after stern denials by China's state media and a letter, published on 19 February in the medical journal The Lancet, signed by 27 scientists saying that "conspiracy theories do nothing but create fear, rumours, and prejudice that jeopardise our global collaboration in the fight against this virus," Beijing quickly cracked down.

The article by Xiao Botao and Xiao Lei disappeared from the international academic data base Research Gate, but can be re-traced through the Wayback Machine, the Internet's archive.

Last month, Chinese foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian pointed out that World Health Organization officials have repeatedly stated that there is no reliable evidence that the new coronavirus was produced in a laboratory. "Many well-known medical experts also believe that the so-called laboratory leak hypothesis has no scientific basis,"

President Trump is making Beijing's handling of the outbreak a major issue in his November re-election campaign.

When asked about reports that he could cancel US debt obligations to China, Trump said he could "do it differently" and act in "more of a forthright manner."

[China] U.S.-China Virus Feud Undercuts UN Bid for Cease-fire Resolution (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 1:22 PM, David Wainer, 6400K, Neutral]

The deepening U.S.-China feud is standing in the way of a United Nations Security Council effort to swiftly endorse a 90-day global cease-fire to help countries in conflict deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

For weeks, the U.S. and China have been unable to settle on language for a resolution, paralyzing the diplomatic body as it attempts to advance Secretary-General Antonio Guterres's effort to demand an immediate cessation of armed conflict in war zones. Guterres argues the move would allow for the safe delivery of humanitarian aid during the pandemic.

After weeks of negotiations, the 15-member Security Council has largely coalesced around a joint Tunisian-French resolution. But Chinese-U.S. feuding has slowed the talks, with Beijing seeking language in support of the World Health Organization's work while the U.S. -- which has suspended funding to the WHO -- demands language on the need for transparency, diplomats said.

"People are losing hope on diplomacy," Tunisian Ambassador Kais Kabtani said in an interview, his first public comments on the dispute. "These kind of political disagreements need to be dealt with outside the UN and outside the Security Council. We have to show solidarity. We have to overcome these difficulties and put aside these disputes."

The Trump administration is increasingly pointing the finger at China for what it says are early missteps that delayed an effective response to Covid-19 by other nations, including the U.S., where at least 62,000 people have died. China has disputed that, and said the U.S. should have better prepared in the weeks before the virus reached America.

The UN Council's failure to respond to the virus underscores a dysfunction in global diplomacy exposed by the pandemic: no clear global leader has emerged to help rally a coordinated response, while nations close borders and stockpile equipment.

"The COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated how crucial multilateral cooperation is to our collective health and security," Sven Jürgenson, UN ambassador for Estonia, which takes over as security council president this month, said in an interview. "Finding a compromise on difficult issues can take time but we must keep trying."

A call for a global cease-fire would be unprecedented, yet it's not clear what such a resolution could realistically accomplish as the global reported death toll from coronavirus passes 234,000 and confirmed cases exceed 3.2 million.

Guterres, who's seized on the pandemic as an opportunity to press for a halt to fighting in places like Yemen and Syria, criticized world powers for their foot-dragging.

"It is obvious that there is a lack of leadership," he told journalists on Thursday. "It is obvious the international community is divided in a moment where it would be more important than ever to be united," he added, noting "that the relation between the major powers in the world today is very dysfunctional, and that makes it difficult for the Security Council to decide."

Kabtani and other diplomats say they remain optimistic that a resolution can be reached soon. And French President Emmanuel Macron's effort to convene a summit with the Security Council's five permanent members -- China, Russia, U.S., France and the U.K. -- is still likely to succeed, diplomats said.

But Kabtani, who together with French Ambassador Nicolas de Rivière is trying bridge the Beijing-Washington rift, warned the major powers that if an agreement can't be struck soon, the rest of the council will put a resolution for a vote by next week regardless.

"I don't think anyone will veto a resolution urging a cease-fire," he said. "We will propose something and move forward. It's our credibility on the line."

[Hong Kong] Foreign criticism of activists' arrests 'unfounded': Hong Kong (Reuters)
Reuters [5/1/2020 6:28 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Hong Kong hit back on Friday at Washington and London for condemning the arrests in April of 15 pro-democracy activists, saying that their criticism was "unfounded" and "grossly irresponsible."

Police arrested the activists, including Democratic Party founder Martin Lee, 81, and millionaire publishing tycoon Jimmy Lai, 71, on 18 April, in the biggest crackdown on the pro-democracy movement since the outbreak of mass protests last year.

Foreign governments and human rights groups condemned the arrests, with Britain's Foreign Office saying at the time that the right to peaceful protest was "fundamental to Hong Kong's way of life" and authorities should avoid "actions that inflame tensions".

In its strongest response to the criticism so far, the Hong Kong government said the remarks by the United States, Britain and the European Parliament were "totally unfounded and amounted to a serious intervention in Hong Kong's affairs".

"The allegation by some that those arrests amounted to an attack on Hong Kong's freedoms ... is absurd and can hardly stand the test of any law-abiding jurisdiction," a spokesman for the government said.

Hong Kong returned to Chinese rule in 1997 under a "one country, two systems" style of governance that grants it broad freedoms, including the right to protest and an independent judiciary, not seen in the mainland.

Critics say Beijing is increasingly encroaching on those freedoms, which the central government rejects.

The 15 activists were arrested on charges of organising and participating in anti-government protests last year that crippled parts of the city and posed the gravest popular challenge to Chinese President Xi Jinping.

The outbreak of the novel coronavirus and measures adopted to curb its spread have seen a relative lull in protests this year, although smaller demonstrations have emerged in the past week amid renewed concerns over Beijing's tightening grip on the city.

Fuelling those worries, questions have been raised in recent weeks over the role of Beijing's institutions overseeing the city's affairs - the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office and Liaison Office.

The government said criticism over remarks by the offices "only illustrates an ignorance of the constitutional order" of Hong Kong.

[Afghanistan] Taliban step up attacks on Afghan forces since signing US deal: data (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:40 PM, Hamid Shalizi, Abdul Qadir Sediqi, Rupam Jain, 5304K, Negative]

The Taliban have mounted more than 4,500 attacks in Afghanistan, marking a sharp escalation in violence, in the 45 days since signing a deal with the United States that paves the way for a U.S. troop drawdown, according to data seen by Reuters.

Two sets of data, one from a Western military source and one from an independent body, both show attacks by the hardline Islamist group up by more than 70 percent between March 1 and April 15 compared with the same period a year ago.

Separately, Afghan government data indicates that more than 900 Afghan local and national forces were killed during that same period, up from about 520 a year earlier.

Meanwhile, Taliban casualties fell to 610 in the period, down from roughly 1,660 a year ago, as U.S. and Afghan forces have reduced the number of offensive attacks and air strikes following the U.S.-Taliban accord.

Senior Western, Afghan and independent officials tracking the ground situation say that the increase in attacks shows the insurgent group's wilful disregard of a pledge to reduce violence made as part of the accord signed in late February.

The violence in the war-damaged nation has coincided with the rapid spread of the coronavirus infection.

In Washington, Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman told reporters that while the Taliban have adhered to a commitment in the Feb. 29 deal not to mount attacks on U.S.-led coalition forces or major cities, the militants' level of violence "is unacceptably high" and "not conducive to a diplomatic solution."

"We have continued to do retaliatory attacks, defensive attacks to help defend our partners in the area and we will continue to do that," Hoffman added.

The four provinces that have reported the highest number of cases of the infection have also been the ones hit the most by Taliban violence in recent weeks, according to the two data sets and at least three senior Afghan and Western officials.

As of May 1, Afghanistan has reported over 2,335 coronavirus cases and 68 deaths, but international observers believe numbers could be much higher, give the lack of testing.

"Taliban fighters are not hitting large government centres or cities, they are focusing on villages in Herat, Kabul, Kandahar and Balkh provinces that have reported the highest number of coronavirus cases," a senior Western security official said on condition of anonymity.

Western security officials, diplomats and international observers said the Taliban's strategy to slowly erode government control of rural areas and then position themselves to besiege cities during the pandemic could derail the peace deal.

"They are slowly encircling all of Afghanistan's major cities," said Jonathan Schroden, an expert with the Center for Naval Analyses who has provided assessments on the security situation in Afghanistan to the U.S. military and Congress.

"So it's either a matter of time before they get a deal satisfactory to them or they put those major cities under siege."

Two Taliban spokesman said the group was not responsible for a majority of the attacks in recent weeks. They accused the United States of jeopardising the peace agreement by supporting Afghan security forces and not releasing 5,000 Taliban prisoners as part of a prisoner swap stipulated under the accord.

The Taliban say the group's attacks between the start of March and April 15 fell 54.7% compared with a year ago to 537.

The group said its attacks were not "as intense" compared with the previous year and Afghan security forces members killed fell 54.2% to 935 while the number wounded fell 55.9% to 742.

The Defence Ministry said army troops were in "active defence mode" and using the air force to stop Taliban advances.

On Friday, clashes between Taliban fighters and Afghan forces intensified in northern Balkh and southern Logar province as warring sides fought to control checkpoints. Dozens of Afghan security men and Taliban fighters were killed.

Last month, General Scott Miller, commander of U.S. forces and the NATO-led non-combat Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan, travelled to Qatar amid the pandemic to meet Taliban political leaders.

Security officials said Miller issued a "stern warning" to stop operations against Afghan forces and adhere to pledges under the accord aimed at ending nearly two decades of war.

Some of the attacks included four cases in which Taliban fighters allegedly used insiders to poison food eaten by Afghan forces at checkpoints in the north. Those checkpoints were now manned by Taliban fighters, Western security officials said.

Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said he was aware of recent insider attacks in which several Afghan force members were fatally poisoned, but denied the group was responsible and said recent violence at checkpoints involved Afghan forces attacking civilians.

He added, however, that the Taliban did not deny using infiltrators or causing insider attacks as part of its war strategy.

[Afghanistan] Afghanistan suffers upsurge in fighting and in coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [5/1/2020 9:45 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Clashes between Taliban fighters and Afghan forces intensified in northern Balkh and southern Logar province as warring sides fought to control checkpoints and the number of coronavirus cases in Afghanistan rises, officials said on Friday.

In recent weeks, the Taliban has attacked several provinces, ignoring a pledge to reduce violence as part of a peace deal signed with the U.S. government on Feb. 29.

The fighting also defies an appeal from international aid agencies for a ceasefire on humanitarian grounds to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

At least 14 members of the Afghan forces were killed and more than 20 injured during the Taliban's attack on a district centre in the Zare district of Balkh province, Shamsurrahman Rahmani, the governor of Zare, said.

"The district centre is on the brink of collapse and Afghan forces may suffer more casualties if reinforcements are not deployed soon," Rahmani said.

Taliban spokesmen have so far not commented on the clashes in Balkh that shares a border with Uzbekistan. The province has reported 173 positive cases of the coronavirus and 10 deaths.

As of May 1, Afghanistan reported 2,335 cases of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus, and 68 deaths, but international observers and medics on

the ground believe the real number of infections could be much higher.

Afghan forces said they killed Qari Momen, a Taliban commander along with eight other fighters during an airstrike in the Khanabad district of north eastern Kunduz province on Thursday night.

A Taliban spokesman could not be contacted immediately to confirm the airstrike.

In southern Logar province, Afghan forces quelled Taliban fighters from a checkpoint of the National Defense and Security Forces in the Baraki Barak district on Thursday night.

"Afghan forces repulsed the Taliban's attack as part of an active defence operation...killed 15 Taliban fighters, wounded six others, and destroyed large quantities of weapons and ammunition," the federal defence ministry said in a statement.

At least four members of the Afghan forces were killed and five were injured in the clashes, it stated.

The Taliban's spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said 10 Taliban fighters and 14 members of the Afghan forces were killed in Logar.

[Afghanistan] Afghanistan likely facing coronavirus health disaster -U.S. watchdog (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 12:28 PM, Jonathan Landay, 5304K, Negative]

Afghanistan, beset by a poor healthcare system, malnutrition, war and other vulnerabilities, likely is facing a "health disaster" from the coronavirus, a watchdog report to the U.S. Congress warns.

The report released late on Thursday by Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) John Sopko could heighten concerns among U.S. officials and lawmakers that the pandemic threatens to derail stalled U.S.-led peace efforts.

The spread of COVID-19 - the illness caused by the novel coronavirus - already has significantly impacted Afghanistan, the report said, from complicating the peace initiative to forcing border crossing closures that have disrupted commercial and humanitarian deliveries.

"Afghanistan's numerous and, in some cases, unique vulnerabilities - a weak healthcare system, widespread malnutrition, porous borders, massive internal displacement, contiguity with Iran, and ongoing conflict - make it likely the country will confront a health disaster in the coming months," the report said.

Rising food prices in the impoverished country is likely to worsen the crisis, Sopko said in a letter accompanying the report.

As the pandemic has spread, Washington has pressed the Taliban and Afghan President Ashraf Ghani to free thousands of at-risk militant and government prisoners as a precursor to peace talks originally set to begin on March 10.

Kabul, however, was not a party to a Feb. 29 U.S. troop withdrawal deal between the Taliban and Washington that called for the releases. Differences over the pace and numbers of prisoners to be freed have helped stall the peace effort, which could suffer a major blow if many prisoners were to die.

Afghanistan has confirmed nearly 2,200 coronavirus cases and 64 deaths, according to local news reports quoting the Health Ministry.

The report said the NATO-led international coalition declined to make available for public release data on the number of attacks launched by the Taliban in the first three months of 2020.

It was the first time that publication of the data has been denied since SIGAR began using them to track levels and locations of violence in 2018, the report said.

The coalition, it said, explained that the data are "now a critical part" of internal U.S. government deliberations on negotiations with the Taliban, who have escalated attacks on Afghan security forces since the Feb. 29 deal.

Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman on Friday said the data was withheld because they are "part of diplomatic discussions with the Taliban and with State Department and other parties in an effort to bring a diplomatic solution" and releasing them "would not move that ball forward."

"It will be released in the future," he added.

Editorials and Op-eds

East Africa has weathered pandemics — and has a few things to teach the U.S. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 12:00 PM, Edward H. Carpenter and Charli Carpenter, 18460K, Neutral]

The current pandemic won't be the last the world faces. And while it is functionally too late for the United States to do anything but fight its way through the coronavirus crisis, it can start to look for examples of better ways to deal with the next one.

Those ways can be found in East Africa.

It's easy to look toward South Korea and Taiwan for examples. High-tech societies — with a cultural bias toward such transmission-blocking behaviors as wearing masks, a history of strong direction by central governments, and the resources to deploy testing and contact tracking on a massive scale — have been highly successful at containing the virus. Less noticed is how well other countries are doing relative to the United States, including many in East Africa.

This may seem surprising to those raising the alarm about what to expect when the virus sweeps the developing world. The World Health Organization's regional director recently

warned of "social and economic devastation" in Africa, as confirmed cases and deaths began to climb. Even some stable African countries have high poverty rates and minimal access to health care, which create a tinderbox for pandemics.

In addition, many countries in Africa, like elsewhere, suffer from conflict and civil war — conditions that exacerbate the potential for deadly disease beyond what is already seen in stable, wealthy countries. Conditions in refugee camps can make social distancing impossible. Health and humanitarian services may already be overstretched; donor money may wane as wealthy countries turn inward. And warring parties may take advantage of the situation.

These factors make it all the more remarkable that emerging economies of East Africa are far better prepared for this crisis than the United States was even two weeks ago. These countries include some of the more stable African nations (Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia and Eritrea) and some of the most unstable (Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan). What they share is a relatively low incidence of the coronavirus and a strong, proactive and coordinated response to the crisis.

Three things stand out in East Africa's preparedness.

First, their governments took early preventive measures. In March, while President Trump was saying that the virus was "something that we have tremendous control of," the presidents of South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda issued detailed proclamations and decreed strong measures to delay the arrival of it and suppress its spread — in most cases before any cases had been detected.

Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni was particularly eloquent and detail-oriented, explaining what the virus was, how it was transmitted and who was at risk, before laying out a plan to systematically close schools, churches and borders, to begin social distancing, and to put a hold on weddings and funerals. South Sudan, Kenya and Uganda all shut down cross-border air and ground travel for passengers, while maintaining the regional cargo links that are especially important for landlocked South Sudan.

Notably, all of these measures were rolled out in a controlled manner without political posturing, and with reasonable time built in to set the guidelines in motion. Kenya gave 48 hours for foreign visitors to leave the country or enter quarantine; Uganda systematically shut primary schools and then universities over the course of a week. While economic costs were noted (the travel restrictions effectively killed the major tourism sector for Kenya and Uganda), the governments put public health over profits.

Second, experience seeded these states' ability to respond quickly and effectively; this is not their first time dealing with a deadly pandemic. Cholera, influenza, HIV-AIDS and Ebola preceded covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus. The United States has also had its share of pandemics: yellow fever, the 1918 flu, HIV-AIDS and SARS. The difference may be a willingness to put lessons learned into action. As Museveni put it, "By confronting this disease with enlightened, scientifically based actions, we shall defeat it as we did with Ebola three times, with Marburg and with AIDS." As a result, case counts and fatalities have so far been extremely low in Africa generally (not quite 40,000 cases and 1,640 deaths so far across a continent with a population of over a billion, according to Africa

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) and particularly low in East Africa. Most countries in this region have fewer than 500 recorded cases.

And a third reason for the region's preparedness, relative to that of the United States, is an emphasis on international cooperation. These countries make up the membership of the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). The organization met March 30 by video-teleconference and resolved to jointly formulate a regional response, establish an emergency fund and mobilize support from the global community and from IGAD medical professionals in the diaspora.

The crisis has even caused some prominent local leaders to double down on a global approach to economic policy, with Museveni saying: "I have warned our people to stop talking like the selfish foreigners by trying to stop the little we have being exported to other African countries. We can keep a bit for ourselves, but we shall share with the others whatever we have."

The arrival of the virus on the continent has also given rise to local innovation. Researchers at Uganda's Makerere University are developing a faster, cheaper coronavirus test, while college students and manufacturers in Kenya are piloting ways to assemble ventilators from locally sourced components.

The region has willingly benefited from international beneficence: Chinese billionaire Jack Ma has donated millions of test kits and face masks, and tens of thousands of sets of protective equipment to African states; the United States, Canada, Germany and China have given millions of dollars in coronavirus-related aid to South Sudan alone; and there is already an extensive network of humanitarian organizations operating in the region, which can help shore up countries whose national medical infrastructure is weak.

None of this means that IGAD states will remain largely immune to the impact of the global pandemic. As in most of the world, testing has remained limited, and in Africa, communicable diseases (lower respiratory tract infections, HIV, diarrhea, malaria and tuberculosis) already account for 35 percent of all deaths. Respiratory illness and malaria have symptoms similar to covid-19, so the actual infection and death rates may be grossly underestimated, with those who die and those who recover being written off as just having had a case of malaria. Conversely, absent testing, those showing such symptoms as fever, chills, headaches and stomach pain may be assumed by local populations to be suffering from covid-19, as opposed to malaria. This could drive panic and even persecution of the victims and their families.

What is notable about these East African states, however, is their proactive and symbiotic approach to the overall crisis, and their apolitical information management. For example, while most IGAD states halted their international and regional passenger flights, Ethiopia kept a single air connection into the region open to the rest of the world, thus minimizing the regional risk of contagion while keeping a pipeline open for such critical cargo as the donations from Ma and for aid workers and medical personnel to enter under strict guidelines. South Sudan, which had formed its Transitional Government of National Unity just weeks before, has a covid-19 task force, led by First Vice President Riek Machar. The task force publishes detailed updates almost daily, and President Salva Kiir has made public addresses calling on the population to remain calm and not blame aid workers for the

crisis.

The East African situation has implications for the United States. First, there is a high probability that the difference between the American and Chinese approaches to helping the countries deal with the pandemic will further tilt the region toward China's sphere of influence. This could be exacerbated if the American military and diplomatic planners choose to pull their people out, as has already happened with the Peace Corps, whose forced evacuation of all volunteers resulted in over 1,000 "ambassadors of goodwill" leaving East African countries at a time when they are needed most. Such a move, even done in the name of risk avoidance, would most likely cause irreparable reputational harm to the United States in a region that may be one of the great emerging markets.

The United States and powerful developed countries can benefit from the example of Africa, where humility about the capacity to treat diseases makes societies favor measures to prevent them; where there's a willingness to learn from experience, rather than disregard science and rewrite history; and where reaching out to neighbors in a spirit of mutual assistance and cooperation helps stave off transnational threats.

Coronavirus is a global crisis. 'Every country for itself' doesn't work (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [5/1/2020 3:00 AM, Nicholas Goldberg, 2343K, Neutral]

Has there ever been a crisis as truly global as this one? If I email with my cousin Susanne outside Vienna, she's locked in her house, avoiding the virus. So is my old colleague, Said, who is at home in his apartment in East Jerusalem. So was Luly in Beijing, until a few weeks ago when restrictions there were eased.

This microscopic virus knows no national borders. And it kills indiscriminately — Italians as well as Iranians, Americans as well as Russians.

There are a couple of ways to respond to this if you're Donald Trump or Xi Jinping or Angela Merkel. You can conclude, quite rationally, that we're all in this together and that we need to reach out across borders and oceans to encourage cooperation to understand and beat back the pandemic that threatens us all.

Or, you can hunker down inside your own country, bar outsiders from entering, wrestle other nations for scarce resources, seek your own cures and hurl blame at each other to divert attention from your own mistakes.

Guess which of those two approaches our country has opted for?

That's right!

Among other xenophobic responses, President Trump has repeatedly called COVID-19 the "Chinese virus," tried to ban the export of protective masks, cut funding to the World Health Organization and declined to participate last week when world leaders pledged cooperation on vaccines and treatments.

But it's not just Trump who is misbehaving. China has falsely blamed the U.S. for the

coronavirus outbreak, has spread disinformation on social media to sow panic and has been less than straightforward about its caseload numbers.

For that matter, European countries didn't do much for their Italian neighbors in the early days of the pandemic. Instead, several imposed export bans on vital medical equipment.

But it is glaringly obvious that global crises require global solutions, and that "every country for itself" is exactly the wrong rallying cry. We need to share information about the transmission and spread of the disease in every country; we need to share research on treatments. Other international disagreements should be put to the side while we speed up testing and get ventilators, masks and equipment to wherever they are needed,

In the more congenial days of the Ebola epidemic, the HIV/AIDS crisis and the SARS outbreak, the United States worked closely with other countries, and with the World Health Organization, other United Nations agencies and humanitarian groups to lead recovery efforts.

"In the 2014 Ebola epidemic, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control took over at the operational level. We helped create emergency hospitals; we were training people," said Dr. Barry Bloom, a professor at the T.H. Chan School of Public Health at Harvard University. "China worked in some countries, France was in francophone countries. We divided the world, with different countries taking different roles, but coordinated. There was a lot of shared knowledge and information."

Another example: In 2004, President George W. Bush set up the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, in an attempt to help African countries protect themselves from the disease. Rather than eliminate it because it was started by his predecessor, President Obama expanded the program, which funds anti-AIDS work in 60 countries and which has been credited with saving millions of lives. PEPFAR is considered one of the most successful global health initiatives ever undertaken.

This time is different. The U.S. and other countries are turning inward.

Sure, at the doctor and scientist and lower governmental level there's some cooperation. The CDC, for instance, still has offices around the world, although their budget has been cut since 2016, says Bloom.

But as William Burns, former deputy Secretary of State and president of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says, the right tone needs to be set at the top.

"What sets us apart from lonelier powers like China and Russia is our ability to build alliances, to mobilize other countries, to influence international institutions," says Burns. "That's a capacity the United States exercised for many decades in crises."

But not these days. Two separate forces are standing in the way of a strong response by the United States and the so-called post-war liberal international order. One is what Charles A. Kupchan, a professor of international affairs at Georgetown University, called "an unstoppable shift in the global balance of power" away from the U.S. and its democratic allies. By 2030, if current trends continue, the world's leading economic power will not be a

democracy at all; it will be China.

The second force is the increasing movement toward populism and nativism in many of the world's democracies, Kupchan said, including the United States.

COVID-19 is, among other things, a test of the world's ability to respond to emergencies in the future. Next time, it may not be a pandemic, but a bioterror threat, a nuclear incident, a global financial meltdown or an international cybercrisis. None of those can be addressed from behind defensive walls.

The biggest threat of all is global climate change. If COVID-19 offers any lessons for that looming disaster, they are that we should not dismiss science so cavalierly, not blithely ignore what's barreling toward us, and not retreat into our own narrow worlds.

As this crisis has made clear, what harms our neighbors is likely to harm us too, and what protects us, protects them. We are all in this together.

The Coronavirus Is Creating a Crisis on Europe's Borders (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [5/1/2020 1:58 AM, Sinan Ulgen, 722K, Neutral]

For Europe, the internal economic shock created by the coronavirus is set to be compounded by an external security shock triggered by the economic collapse of its neighborhood. For many reasons, Europe's southern and eastern neighbors remain highly vulnerable to such a disaster scenario.

These generally middle-income countries—including Turkey, Ukraine, Egypt, and Morocco—do not benefit from global initiatives like the debt relief programs led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which target less developed nations. Yet they lack the domestic resources to rebound effectively from the deep recession that awaits them. The rising risk aversion in global markets has constrained their debt-raising options. Their economic well-being has further been undermined by the coronavirus-related economic downturn, raising fears about economic dislocation and political instability.

Europe is now looking at the emergence of exactly the type of scenario of regional instability that it sought to preempt. A key recommendation of its 2016 Global Strategy was to improve the political and economic resilience of its regional partners.

But now the economic resilience of Europe's neighbors is clearly at risk. A major revenue stream for many of Europe's southern and eastern neighbors is tourism. In 2018, tourism revenues as a share of total exports of goods and services reached 41 percent in Jordan and 25 percent in Egypt, according to the United Nations World Tourism Organization.

In absolute numbers, Turkey's tourism revenues including international transport were the highest at \$37 billion, amounting to around 5 percent of GDP. This important revenue source is now set to evaporate as the virus takes its toll. The collapse of the tourism industry will also have significant repercussions for the sustainability of employment. For Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia, tourism provided for around 7 percent of total employment, compared with the global median of 3.8 percent.

This critical gap in foreign exchange earnings comes at a time when these economies are also suffering from a global reversal of capital flows. Emerging-market capital inflows have dramatically declined in response to the rapid spread of the coronavirus, putting further pressure on capital accounts.

The Turkish lira, for instance, has depreciated by 7 percent in the last month alone against the U.S. dollar. Europe's neighbors are set to endure even more hardship when it comes to trade imbalances as their exports are due to collapse. They will be among the most affected from the ongoing fall in consumer demand in Europe given their heavy reliance on the continental market. The European Union's share of total exports stands at some 65 percent for Morocco, 50 percent for Turkey, and 43 percent for Ukraine.

The world is now witnessing the formation of a perfect storm on Europe's borders. The world is now witnessing the formation of a perfect storm on Europe's borders. The combination of recessionary economics, balance of payments difficulties, and surging unemployment has created a formidable challenge that will jeopardize domestic social contracts.

Just like the current protests unfolding in Lebanon, governments will come under pressure by an ever larger group of unemployed and disenfranchised citizens. The ensuing political and economic instabilities would not only create the conditions for the rise of radicalization in these afflicted societies but also trigger new cross-border movements and refugee flows across the Mediterranean.

Yet the EU's response so far has been very timid. Brussels has earmarked 15.6 billion euros (\$17 billion) in its Team Europe package, which was launched in April to support partner countries in their efforts to address the impact of the coronavirus crisis. This amount corresponds to about 3 percent of the initial funding of 500 billion euros (\$547 billion) allocated to EU governments for the same purpose.

It is understandable that EU leaders prefer to prioritize their own societies in this time of acute need. But this task should not be seen as a zero-sum game. The assistance to neighbors should not necessarily cannibalize the resources set aside for helping EU governments. There are at least two costless options that remain unexplored.

First, there have been calls for the IMF to substantially increase Special Drawing Rights (known as SDRs) from the current level of \$286 billion to about \$1 trillion as a means to provide all countries with more resources to combat the impact of the virus. SDRs are an international reserve asset created by the IMF in 1969 to supplement its member countries' official reserves. But this proposal has been blocked by the U.S. government. Washington rightly argues that the increase would disproportionately benefit richer countries; U.S. reticence may also be linked to a recalcitrance to provide financial help to countries like Iran and Russia.

In the absence of a global consensus, EU governments should consider shifting their IMF-held SDRs to financially strained neighboring countries. That would amount to a financial stimulus of about \$95 billion with no fiscal impact on EU and national budgets.

Second, the European Central Bank (ECB) should be more actively involved in establishing swap arrangements with the central banks of partner countries. Under such a scheme,

beneficiary countries would obtain euros from the ECB against a collateral in their own currency.

These arrangements would provide beneficiary countries with foreign exchange liquidity and replenish their reserves. There is no reason why the ECB should not follow in the footsteps of the U.S. Federal Reserve, which has already set up this mechanism with some 14 countries.

The EU is finally eager to shape a more concerted response to the coronavirus crisis after an initial era of prevarication. The danger now is that European governments' responses remain too introverted—and largely oblivious to the severity of the regional crisis surrounding them.

Vaccines for Millions Ready This Year: The Impossible Dream? (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 8:55 AM, Riley Griffin, 6400K, Neutral]

The race is on to be the first developer of a coronavirus vaccine, with global drugmakers and the White House seeking to compress into just months a process that normally takes several years. Whether it can happen remains an enigma.

For the Trump administration, news of a successful vaccine could calm the virus's toxic effects on the U.S. economy in the midst of an ongoing presidential campaign. Donald Trump's goal with "Operation Warp Speed," a covert push reported on this week, is for hundreds of millions of doses to be produced by year's end.

"I'm not over-promising," Trump said in a White House meeting with New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy on Thursday. "You know who's in charge of it, honestly? I am."

The White House initiative aims to compress research, testing and manufacturing of a vaccine by as much as eight months, pulling in health agencies, military resources and drugmakers. The plan, which could result in billions of dollars in government spending, hasn't been rolled out in full.

The idea is that the government would bear some of the financial risk that would normally fall to individual drugmakers, according to people familiar with the plan. The administration would facilitate the running of multiple processes in parallel to build out manufacturing for vaccines, some of which could fail, said the people who asked not to be identified because the specifics aren't yet public.

Mimic or Incorporate

But many parts of the Trump administration push appear to mimic, or incorporate, individual initiatives already underway by large drugmakers and others. And while the Trump plan involves U.S. drugmakers and assets, it isn't reaching across borders for global assistance.

Johnson & Johnson, which has been working on its vaccine for months, has said it plans to produce 1 billion doses by the end of 2021, if it is successful in trials that kick off this September. And it's not alone among drugmakers moving as quickly as they can. More than 100 experimental vaccines against the virus are in development. Those who can flex their

resources muscle -- like J&J, Pfizer Inc., Sanofi and Moderna Inc. -- are already buying, building and scaling up manufacturing capacity, even before their vaccine candidates are evaluated by U.S. regulators. In some cases, production gears are already cranking.

Not all production sites are created equal, however. Depending on the scientific approach taken, facilities must be fitted with different equipment. The speed in which they're able to make the product can vary as well. And everything is contingent on the facilities surpassing the red-tape of regulatory requirements. While the U.S. Food and Drug Administration is likely to focus on expediting its review of clinical trial data during an emergency use approval process, the bottom line is that making a product that can be quickly deployed to millions of healthy individuals can be cumbersome.

New York-based Pfizer, which just dosed its first dozen patients with its experimental mRNA vaccine, said it will be ready to immunize patients with tens of millions of doses this fall, should it get an emergency use authorization, and hundreds of millions of doses by early 2021. Pfizer is jointly developing the vaccine with BioNTech Se, a German biotechnology company.

Moderna, a leader among U.S. companies testing experimental coronavirus vaccines, said Friday that it had entered a pact with Swiss company Lonza Group AG aimed at manufacturing 1 billion doses a year. The companies expect the first batches to be produced in the U.S. in July.

Trade-Offs

"I'm not certain we'll have an approved vaccine by the end of the year, but depending on the actual manufacturing process, producing that scale of doses can be done," said Nicolette Louissaint, executive director of the nonprofit Healthcare Ready, which facilitates public-private partnerships to protect the health-care supply chain.

There are big-time trade-offs the industry must make in order to mass-produce a Covid-19 vaccine, according to Louissaint, a former senior adviser to the State Department's Special Coordinator for Ebola during the 2014 crisis.

"How do we maintain production for other products?" she said. "We have limited capacity, globally, so we're going to have to acknowledge those trade-offs as we pivot to making hundreds of millions of doses."

If the government or business community did it alone, it couldn't be done, she added. "Meeting this timeline requires dual investment because of the sheer amount of risk, and the volume and scale that's needed."

While the Trump Administration promises to ramp up efforts among major drugmakers in the U.S., companies in other countries, and even Bill Gates, the Microsoft co-founder, are also pushing to get vaccines out quickly.

Two Candidates

French drugmaker Sanofi has two Covid-19 vaccine candidates in the works. One uses

technology already employed in a flu vaccine, which could speed up both R&D and production. The company is using facilities in New York, Pennsylvania and Japan to that end, and it's also turned to GlaxoSmithKline Plc for additional manufacturing power.

Together, they have enough existing capacity for as many as 600 million doses per year, Sanofi CEO Paul Hudson said on April 24. "For the record," Hudson said, "we have 10,000 people producing over billion doses right now of our own vaccine portfolio."

Sanofi's other candidate with Translate Bio Inc. uses messenger RNA to prompt the body to make a key protein from the virus, creating an immune response. It could be produced at up to 350 million doses per year. Two shots on goal gives the French drugmaker better odds in the fight against Covid-19.

Even if Sanofi's two assets prove successful, the company likely can't serve global demand alone, said John Shiver, Sanofi's senior vice president of global vaccine R&D, in an interview. "The call is big enough that we actually do need several vaccines to succeed" and move into mass-production, he said. "We need for more than one company to supply a vaccine."

Processes in Parallel

The key to all of these efforts is pretty much the same: Launch several processes in parallel rather than in sequence, even at the risk that its candidate may not prove effective.

For J&J, which hasn't yet put its vaccine into human trials, that means signing two deals to secure manufacturing capacity at facilities in Baltimore and Bloomington, Indiana. It's begun preparing to produce the vaccine at one of its own sites in the Netherlands, and is looking for additional facilities across Europe and Asia. J&J CEO Alex Gorsky, like many others, said he's committed to bringing the vaccine to the public on "a not-for-profit basis for emergency pandemic use."

Not all Covid-19 vaccine candidates have the backing of the drug industry to make these risky manufacturing plays. But scientists working at smaller companies with no marketed products or at highly-accredited research labs without production infrastructure are scrambling to get it.

The University of Oxford's Jenner Institute, for example, has turned to AstraZeneca Plc. The London-based drugmaker announced it has agreed to manufacture its vaccine, with a goal of 100 million doses before the end of the year. It's one of the most ambitious near-term production goals that's been set by a manufacturer.

Gates is also putting his resources toward manufacturing well before a proven vaccine is ready for the public. The billionaire has said the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation will build new facilities for seven potential vaccines from the ground-up, despite the fact that it's likely to only settle on two candidates.

"It will be a few billion dollars we'll waste on manufacturing for the constructs that don't get picked because something else is better," Gates said on The Daily Show on April 2. "But a few billion in this situation we're in, where there are trillions of dollars" being lost

economically is worth it.

Through this kind of effort, Gates believes a vaccine could be ready in as fast as nine months -- one of the most optimistic predictions to-date.

"We can save months," Gates said, "and every month counts."

Why the WHO, often under fire, has a tough balance to strike in its efforts to address health emergencies (Yahoo News/The Conversation)

Yahoo News/The Conversation [5/1/2020 8:16 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The Trump administration recently declared, in the midst of the coronavirus emergency, that it would suspend the United States' financial support for the World Health Organization, a United Nations agency that coordinates a wide range of international health efforts. The United States typically contributes more than US\$400 million per year to the organization, roughly 15% of its annual budget.

In announcing the suspension of U.S. funding, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that WHO had failed to provide "real information about what's going on in the global health space." President Trump suggested that the agency had colluded with the Chinese government in withholding information about the nature of the outbreak: "I have a feeling they knew exactly what was going on," he said. And he sought to deflect blame for his administration's disorganized response by pinning responsibility on global health officials: "So much death has been caused by their mistakes."

To assess these claims, it is important to understand the context in which WHO officials make critical decisions at the early stages of a disease outbreak. As I explore in my recent book, "Unprepared: Global Health in a Time of Emergency," WHO is constrained in its ability to gather knowledge about disease outbreaks and to intervene in national settings. It must rely on national governments for information about an outbreak and for permission to send investigators to learn more details. The agency's power is limited to providing technical assistance and issuing recommendations.

In January 2020, infectious disease experts scrambled to understand key aspects of the novel coronavirus, such as its rate of transmission and its severity. At that point, it was not yet possible to know exactly what was going on with the disease. Nonetheless, WHO officials had to make urgent decisions -- such as whether to declare a global health emergency -- in a situation of uncertainty.

More generally, much critical information about what is happening in the global health space can be known only in retrospect, once data on the event has been gathered, analyzed and disseminated by the scientific community.

Two other recent global health emergencies are instructive: the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic and the 2014 Ebola epidemic. In the aftermath of each of these outbreaks, WHO was sharply criticized for its early response.

When a novel strain of H1N1 influenza was first detected in the spring 2009, global health officials feared that it could spark a catastrophic pandemic. Within weeks of the virus's

appearance, WHO officially declared a global health emergency. The declaration urged countries to put their existing pandemic preparedness plans into action. In response, a number of national governments implemented mass vaccination campaigns, making advanced purchases of millions of doses of H1N1 vaccine from pharmaceutical companies.

Over the next several months, as the vaccine was manufactured and vaccination campaigns were implemented, epidemiological studies revealed that H1N1 was a relatively mild strain of influenza, with a case fatality ratio similar to that of seasonal flu.

In many countries, when the H1N1 vaccine finally became available in the fall 2009, there were few takers. National governments had spent hundreds of millions of dollars on campaigns that immunized, in some cases, less than 10% of the population.

Critics in Europe accused WHO of having exaggerated the pandemic threat in order to generate profits for the pharmaceutical industry, pointing to consulting arrangements that the agency's influenza experts had with vaccine manufacturers. According to one prominent critic, the WHO declaration of a health emergency in response to H1N1 was "one of the greatest medical scandals of the century."

A later investigation exonerated the WHO experts from wrongdoing, noting that the severity of the disease had not yet been determined when vaccine orders were made, and that "reasonable criticism can be based only on what was known at the time and not on what was later learnt."

Five years later, in the aftermath of the Ebola epidemic in West Africa, WHO officials again found themselves under sharp attack for their initial response to a disease outbreak. This time, officials were accused not of acting too hastily but rather of having failed to act in time.

At the earliest stages of the epidemic, in Spring 2014, the agency's experts did not consider the event to be a "global emergency." Based on prior experience, they felt that Ebola, while dangerous, was easily containable – the disease had never killed more than a few hundred people, and had never spread much beyond its initial site of occurrence. "We know Ebola," as one expert recalled the early stages of response. "This will be manageable."

It was not until August 2014, well after the epidemic had spun out of control, that WHO officially declared a global health emergency, seeking to galvanize international response. By this point it was too late to avoid a region-wide catastrophe, and multiple critics assailed the agency's slow response. "WHO's response has been abysmal," as one commentator put it. "It's just shameful."

Today, as the world confronts the coronavirus pandemic, the agency finds itself again under a storm of criticism, now with its very financial survival under threat. To what extent can we say that the agency did not provide adequate information in the early stages of the pandemic – that it failed to "do its job," in Secretary of State Pompeo's scolding words?

It is worth remembering that we are still in the early stages of the event as it unfolds, still seeking answers to critical questions such as how quickly the virus spreads, what its severity is, what proportion of the population has been exposed to it, and whether such exposure confers immunity. We also do not yet know whether the Chinese government fully

informed global health officials about the seriousness of the initial outbreak. We do know, however, that while WHO made its most urgent call for vigilance by national governments in late January, with the declaration of a global health emergency, it was not until nearly two months later that the U.S. began — haltingly — to mobilize in response.

[Iran] A steadfast brother shows that men have a role in the liberation of Iran's women (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 9:00 AM, Roya Hakakian, Neutral]

Last fall, Iranian authorities arrested Alireza Alinejad, a 45-year-old father of two, who has not broken any laws, not even according to the officials who jailed him. There would be nothing newsworthy about yet another unwarranted arrest in Iran, except that this one involves an unusual story of familial love, with a brother making a profound sacrifice for the sake of his sister.

Amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, Iran has temporarily freed more than 50,000 prisoners to combat the disease's spread in the country's crowded jails, but Alinejad remains in the notorious Evin prison in Tehran, vulnerable to covid-19 infection. At his first court hearing last week, the judge would not specify the charges against him and refused to grant parole. According to Alinejad's defense attorney, the judge's questioning focused on his sister's activities.

His sister is Masih Alinejad, an exiled journalist and prominent critic of the clerical regime's human rights abuses. She fled Iran in 2009 and has lived since 2014 in New York, where she hosts a TV show on the Voice of America's Persian service. Her followers on social media, 3.5 million on Instagram alone, outnumber those of the country's president and the supreme leader combined.

Over the past few years, Masih's family members in Iran have come under increasing government pressure to cut ties with her. In 2018, one of Masih's sisters appeared on national television and denounced her. No one in the family, Masih says, not even her mother, has dared to keep in touch with her — except for Alireza, or Ali, as he is known. In the days leading to his arrest, he had a sense of foreboding and recorded a video message, telling Masih to carry on with her work even if he was detained.

The Revolutionary Guards came for him at dawn on Sept. 24, handcuffed and blindfolded him in front of their 10-year-old daughter and 6-month-old son, his wife reports, and took him away. Ali's lawyer says that he has since been kept in ward 2A of Evin prison, a special section for political prisoners operated by the Revolutionary Guards.

Ali and Masih grew up in a small village in northern Iran in a poor, devout Muslim family of diehard supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini, who led the nation's 1979 revolution overthrowing the shah, Iran's last monarch. As Masih recounted in her 2018 memoir "The Wind in My Hair," Ali was an ideal brother, loving and gentle, in a community where women were treated like an underclass. He believed that his sister deserved all the freedoms he enjoyed, Masih wrote.

It was through watching Ali, Masih wrote, that she found the contours of her own dreams — to have the freedom to bike, or swim in the village river as he did, to ultimately become the

woman she is: a fierce, independent spirit and advocate for women's rights. As the best-known critic of the Iran's compulsory dress code, particularly the oppressive hijab law, Masih has inspired thousands of women to defy the government and walk the streets of Iran without covering their hair.

In dozens of self-recorded videos posted online, Iranian women address Masih affectionately as they walk while holding up their mobile phones, speaking with pride and conviction, assuming themselves in charge of their bodies, and deserving of human rights and dignity.

The regime's propaganda has tried to portray Masih as a disgrace to her family, but she says that she has found great comfort in Ali's reassurance that he is proud of her and believes in her. His refusal to further isolate Masih by ceasing to communicate with her is almost certainly what landed him in prison.

Ali appeared in court last week before Judge Mohammad Moghisseh, whom the Treasury Department has announced sanctions against for miscarriages of justice and violations of religious freedom. Ali's defense attorney, Saeed Dehghan, said on his Instagram account, which has since been made private, that the judge essentially treated Ali as a stand-in for his sister.

"My brother's only crime is that he's related to me," Masih said in a news release. "He is subjected to this cruel punishment just to keep me silent."

No doubt Ali would be released if only he would denounce his sister. By refusing to do so, he is becoming a new kind of martyr in a region that sanctifies martyrdom. He is suffering to uphold the rights of women, but in doing so he is redefining for many Iranians what it means to be a man. For too long, brothers, husbands and fathers have empowered the oppressors, if not through their support, then through silence. A doting brother has shown that men, too, can play a role in the liberation of his nation's women.

[Italy] Rome Has Been Sacked, Conquered and Abandoned. Now It's the Coronavirus's Turn. (New York Times)

New York Times [5/1/2020 12:08 PM, Jason Horowitz, 40577K, Neutral]

Rome turned 2,773 last week.

To mark the legendary founding of the city and its past glory, there is usually a crowded birthday parade of re-enactors dressed up as gladiators and vestal virgins. The coronavirus took care of that, leaving eerily abandoned streets that evoked something closer to a disastrous sacking in the 6th century, when the population of Rome plunged to zero.

The coronavirus has no marauding army breaching the walls, dumping bodies in the Tiber or burning down buildings. In some ways, the city has bloomed under the epidemic.

With so few cars and people on the streets, the scent of wisteria, draping over ancient defensive walls and garden fences, floats further. At the quiet Ponte Sisto bridge, usually crowded with street artists, I watched five mallards, their necks flashing green, land in formation to skim on the Tiber.

Without car exhaust and onion-thick smoke billowing out of trattorias, the air has become so limpid that from my apartment on the Gianicolo Hill — the site of a French cannon-fire attack on the city during a 19th-century siege — I can count the windows on the usually hazy palaces of the city center.

Beyond the ochre city, the surrounding mountainsides are now sharply drawn. The far-off towns appear like white patches of snow.

Unlike conquests, fires and floods, the virus is clearly not a danger to Rome's beauty. But what will it do to its spirit?

Last week, days after Rome's birthday, I went into the city center to get some supplies from the office. The state of the city was, as one would expect, weird.

Campo de' Fiori, a square that is usually home to a bustling, touristy market, was pretty much empty except for a little girl riding her bicycle around the statue of Giordano Bruno. The philosopher and astronomer was burned alive at the spot in 1600, only decades after imperialist Spanish and German-speaking mercenaries ransacked the city in a gory 1527 sacking.

A few masked figures moved around Hadrian's Mausoleum, which popes had turned into a fortress that had provided protection from invaders for ages.

In Rome's old Jewish Ghetto, where Nazis dragged Italian Jews out of their homes during the German occupation, I walked to the normally swamped Portico d'Ottavia. Absent the cacophony of modern life, it recalled an 18th-century Piranesi engraving, the black-and-white Instagram travel posts of their day, which drew Europe's interest to Rome after another downturn.

But as I wandered around in a mask, I tried to imagine what the city must have felt like when all Romans abandoned it for about 40 days after the sixth-century sacking.

Only a century and a half earlier, Rome had close to a million inhabitants, but then "for the first time in its existence," as Matthew Kneale writes in his book "Rome, A History in Seven Sackings," it was deserted.

Things, I thought looking around at no one, can change fast.

The Ostrogoth leader Totila led that sixth-century assault. But few here really remember Totila. Or for that matter the Gauls, the Visigoths and the Normans, or the cruel nobles or reactionary popes who governed the city so badly, or the plagues, measles, typhus, malaria and syphilis that brought Rome low at various points.

Last century's fascists and Nazi occupiers are fresher but fading memories, an erasure accelerated by the virus's decimation of older Italians.

I wondered if these months — maybe years — of quarantine or living with the virus would irrevocably change Romans or become another in a long line of hardships that have shaped

a Roman character known for irreverence, anti-authoritarianism and more than a drop of cynicism.

The government will begin loosening Europe's longest lockdown on Monday. Italy's prime minister, Giuseppe Conte announced on Sunday that people could soon start seeing their "congiunti," a word that loosely means relations, and that he later clarified, with his typical vagueness, to mean those with whom one has "stable emotional relations."

Romans immediately began offering broad interpretations.

"Sweethearts are relatives too," the Roman daily, *Il Messaggero*, asserted in a headline. "Seeking Congiunto, Near the Beach," read one of the memes Romans shared.

Romans have a reputation for getting around the rules — in traffic, in line, in life. Fans call it endearing creativity; critics, insupportable incivility. Will living with the virus enhance or expunge that?

The virus demands a brutal efficiency to life: Stay home, work, go to the supermarket. But the lifeblood of Rome is languid; it doesn't rush, it meanders, gets caught in eddies and occasionally pools, sometimes for a century, sometimes for an afternoon at the wine bar.

Old men stroll slowly with their hands interlaced behind their backs. Students lean against cars and spend the entire night talking about what they will do that night. There is a pleasant idleness, a sense of "dolce far niente," or sweetness of doing nothing, that is raised to a public art form. The result is a perpetual outdoor theater. The streets reverberate with comments from the peanut gallery.

That sensibility is out of step with the current crisis. With Romans forced inside, their iconoclasm and ennui is stashed away; the feeling is one of public service and patriotic mission. It's admirable and saving lives. But it makes for a different Rome.

Outside, there are still some echoes of the pre-virus city.

Under my apartment the other day, a bus, carrying no one and essentially cruising the city, hit a scooter, the only other vehicle on the road. They both wanted to go first. Around the corner, city workers painted fresh white crosswalk stripes around a parked Smart car, leaving what will be a faded dark spot when the car moves.

During Easter, a sweets shop illegally sold chocolate eggs out a half-closed door. And as the weather has become warmer, I have noticed a lot more oh-funny-seeing-you-here-wink-wink meetings of families on street corners, and an explosion of people carrying shopping bags and dogs — the get-out-of-jail-free-cards of the epidemic.

An awful lot of people also seem to be ditching the communal rooftops, where at the beginning of the lockdown, they jogged laps or even hit tennis balls. Now more are on the streets, taking morning constitucionals, pushing strollers or riding bicycles wearing yellow kitchen gloves. All of this is supposedly within 650 feet of their homes.

There is an undercurrent of a city about to burst.

The popular Roman cartoonist and humorist, Michele Rech, better known as Zerocalcare, has been satirizing the Romans disregarding the lockdown. In this week's cartoon, he is invited by a friend to a party celebrating the fourth birthday of a dog.

"Guys I can't," he responds, "there's the quarantine."

"Madonna," says the friend in a thick Roman accent, drawing out the vowels and tripling the consonants. "You're still going on with this quarantine business?"

Authorities appear to be cracking down in anticipation of Monday's loosening of restrictions.

On Saturday two black police helicopters hovered menacingly over my neighborhood, looking for violators of the lockdown. After they had buzzed off, two women came out onto their balcony in the building across the street and sang the old partisan song *Bella Ciao* to celebrate the 75th anniversary of Liberation from Italy's fascists.

Nine jets screamed overhead, trailing Italy's red, white and green colors across a blue sky.

That was a nice, patriotic, spectacle. But my wife, a Roman, was more moved by the three young women, apparently neighbors, who sneaked up to the roof of that same building to flout social distancing rules by drinking wine and smoking (mostly) cigarettes and talking together for six consecutive hours.

Amazed, I told my wife that I couldn't imagine that anybody could possibly laze and talk in the sun for so long.

She looked longingly across the balcony and said she'd give anything to be able to join them.

[Sweden] No, Sweden Isn't a Miracle Coronavirus Model (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 2:30 AM, Lionel Laurent, 6400K, Neutral]

The World Health Organization has been generous with its praise throughout this pandemic. China, Singapore and Ireland have all received plaudits for their handling of the coronavirus crisis. Now that a new turning point is in sight, with the infection's spread slowing and draconian lockdown measures being gradually lifted, the WHO is promoting the Swedish way of doing things. "Sweden represents a future model... if we wish to get back to a society in which we don't have lockdowns," the WHO's Mike Ryan said, praising the way Swedes are trusted to "self-regulate."

Sweden's hands-off approach to lockdown has certainly been different to that of other countries, from France and Italy to the U.S. and China. Large public gatherings are banned but restaurants, bars and schools have stayed open, and social distancing is encouraged rather than enforced by police. Trust in the public is high, and so is the public's trust in the strategy. Swedes seem happy with the global attention. "Many countries are starting to come around to the Swedish way," Anders Tegnell, the country's chief epidemiologist, told *USA Today*.

But like so many stories of national exceptionalism in this crisis — the U.K. at one point was convinced it could avoid strict closures, painting them as unscientific, before eventually doing a U-turn — this one is debatable and premature.

U.S. President Donald Trump, no doubt annoyed at stories in the American media heaping praise on the Swedes, tweeted one obvious riposte this week, noting the high price that Swedes have had to pay in terms of Covid-19 fatalities. Sweden's 2,586 deaths compare poorly with Denmark's 452, and Norway's 207. Taking population into account, Sweden has suffered more deaths per million people than the U.S. (although deaths aren't always counted in the same way).

When looking at all-cause mortality — which is probably a better gauge of the real level of coronavirus deaths — Sweden has been hit with "very high" excess deaths since the start of the year, according to the European body monitoring these statistics. In Denmark, they've been "low."

The counterargument is that Sweden has accepted more deaths in exchange for trying to achieve group immunity more quickly and protecting its economy from lasting collapse. Several big countries in Europe with stricter lockdowns have suffered more excess deaths and greater economic damage than Sweden while being more aggressive about halting infections. But they felt they had no other way to relieve their overrun hospitals, a problem that Sweden doesn't have.

We don't know what other nations might have gone through if they'd followed the Swedish model — France estimates its own lockdown saved 60,000 lives. We also don't know how much immunity has been acquired by the Swedes. An official report estimating that a third of Stockholm's population would develop antibodies to the virus by May 1 was withdrawn after an error.

We do know that Sweden's Covid-19 journey hasn't been exceptional. Like other countries, it has experienced a surge in deaths in care homes, where about one in three virus deaths is estimated to have taken place. Visiting relatives and staff are expected to "self-regulate" but, according to reports, they don't always do so. The Swedes have also had a lack of systematic testing and equipment shortages.

Things might have been even worse without the Swedes' demographic and cultural defenses. This is a population that does social distancing already in many ways. More than half of the country lives in single-person households, working from home is common and access to fast broadband is everywhere. But Swedes are becoming increasingly unconcerned about keeping their distance as time goes on, as images of packed restaurants indicate. Public-health officials have warned about their behavior. In Stockholm they've threatened to shut bars and restaurants.

At the same time, migrant workers in the country are being infected disproportionately, according to a recent national survey. The hyper-individualist expectation to "self-regulate" looks too complacent for immigrant communities who lack access to information.

Sweden may very well turn out to be a relative winner of sorts, especially economically. It will probably experience a shorter and less severe slowdown than its European neighbors,

says Torbjorn Isaksson, an analyst at Nordea Bank. That will cheer the lockdown critics such as Swedish industrialist Jacob Wallenberg, who in March warned of the long-term damage of putting economies in deep freeze. Whether that's much of a win for an economy where trade accounts for 89% of GDP is doubtful. Leapfrogging European Union trading partners in a single market that's been paralyzed by the virus scare can't be that meaningful. And it probably won't be fondly remembered.

Given that we haven't reached the end of this pandemic, more circumspection might be in order. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said: "Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards." As we approach a turning point in the crisis, it's tempting to look back and single out winners as the model to follow. But we don't know what's going to happen next. None of us has lived through it yet. And that includes Sweden.

[Australia] Racing Against the Virus From Inside Australia's Healthcare System (New York Times)

New York Times [5/1/2020 1:29 AM, Amaali Lokuge, 40577K, Negative]

When my director cut short his camping holiday on Australia Day, to come back to the emergency department at the Melbourne hospital where I work as an emergency physician, I thought he was unnecessarily sacrificing his life for the sake of his work. Covid-19 was still mainly confined to China. Italy was not yet in crisis and New York wasn't even on our radar. But in hindsight, his return was prudent.

The fever clinic attendances surged. We were seeing 30 to 100 extra patients per day in an already stretched system. A coordinated emergency department and hospital strategy was required, and unfolded as if by magic.

It wasn't magic though; If you looked closely, you could see the signs of people working way beyond their scheduled hours. Doctors and nurses and support staff were at the hospital hours before the day shift began and we would see them late into the evening shift. The tired lines around doctors' eyes etched a little deeper each day as they rushed past at a speed just below running.

It wasn't until March that the reality of what we were facing started to filter through. A hundred patients died overnight in Italy and we were speechless with grief. Was this what was coming for us?

We would not be able to cope with a similar onslaught. There are around 30 ICU beds in our hospital — how quickly would these be full? This is not something we have had to face before.

People often ask me how I cope with the stress of emergency room medicine. But the reality is, we have so many resources where I work that when patients come in sick and dying we can usually resuscitate them. People rarely die because we don't have the facilities to help them.

But this disease was different. It seemed to take and take and take, until there was no more to give. We were not ready to face patients dying because we didn't have a ventilator to help them breathe, or because we didn't have the nursing staff to care for them.

In those early weeks of March, we worked at what felt like superhuman speeds to get ready. Always at the back of our minds, the mantra we kept repeating: it's coming, it's coming, and we are not prepared.

Somewhere deeper down lingered other anxieties: Would we get sick like the health workers overseas? Would our loved ones be safe? How would we cope with so much death?

Everyone was worried about someone: the elderly parent; the child with an immune deficiency, which may be deadly; the sister who was currently immunosuppressed from chemotherapy.

To add to our anxieties, the emergency department became eerily quiet. The patients would trickle in at single digits per hour. Was this the quiet before the storm?

Every morning we would read the international news with dread and horror. People were dying because systems were overwhelmed. Health care workers were preparing their wills before it was too late. Families with emergency physician parents were sending their children away to safety. We devoured the information, always wondering when it was coming for us.

Then something miraculous happened. Restrictions applied with lightening speed were curtailing the spread. People stayed home despite the chafing irritations of isolation. Everyone was doing what was necessary to look after the weak and the elderly. And in a way they were to looking after us, the health care workers, too.

The surge did not occur when it was supposed to. We worked so hard, filled the hospital to capacity with extra staff and equipment, wrote guidelines on treatment and made plans for the influx of patients, all within days. But the patients failed to arrive. The wave never swelled to a tsunami.

We are now caught in a limbo of waiting. People aren't dying in the numbers we predicted when observing the disease in other countries. The tragedy has, so far, failed to unfold.

Economists have started to write about the cost of this strategy in terms of money spent per human life years saved. People question the wisdom of Australia's harsh social distancing restrictions, which will have repercussions for years to come.

But as I think of what we might have faced — the sheer sadness of so many lives lost in so short a time, the trauma of being helpless in the face of a disease we don't know how to control — I am so grateful that my country may be spared what others have had to suffer.

The tyranny of distance and the shocking bushfires that kept the tourists away delayed the inevitable spread of virus in Australia, enabling a brief glimpse into our possible futures. This has meant that we were able to choose the path of humanity — and not economic rationalism — to deal with this disease.

We will have to pay for our response for years to come. But my hope is that we will still be whole, and free from the scars of failure and grief.

[China] Was the new coronavirus accidentally released from a Wuhan lab? It's doubtful. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 3:00 AM, Staff, 18460K, Neutral]

President Trump isn't the only one hearing this tale. The political world, Internet theorists, intelligence analysts and global public health officials are abuzz with a big question: Is it possible that the new coronavirus — which causes covid-19 — leaked from a lab?

For months, Chinese authorities have pointed to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market in Wuhan as the virus's likely origin. A cluster of early cases had contact with the market. It sold a wide variety of wildlife which, officials hypothesized, was critical to the virus's formation and spread. Severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), which cause similar symptoms, were formed after a coronavirus from a bat transformed in another animal and then jumped to humans.

The logic seems straight forward. But a more complete analysis of early cases suggested locating the origin of the virus may not be so simple. A study published in the New England Journal of Medicine found that of the first 425 patients, only 45 percent had connections to the market. A separate Jan. 24 analysis published in the Lancet found that three of the first four cases — including the first known case — did not have market links.

Daniel R. Lucey, a pandemics expert at Georgetown University, put it simply: "In my opinion, the virus came into the market before it came out of the market."

That tinge of uncertainty was bolstered after Washington Post columnist Josh Rogin revealed two 2018 cables in which State Department officials warned of safety issues at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a laboratory studying bat coronaviruses. Renewed questions about the virus's origin brought a rush of alternative theories. Some claimed the virus was a bioweapon. Others suggested it had been altered for a scientific experiment or was simply a viral sample that escaped from a lab.

Let's be clear: No scientist we spoke to thinks the new coronavirus was designed as a bioweapon. When asked, Milton Leitenberg, a biological weapons expert at the University of Maryland, responded with a flat, "No."

Most experts say the new coronavirus was the product of a natural process. Still, the safety issues described in the 2018 cables, the Chinese government's response and the proximity of the labs to the market have raised eyebrows.

As college professors are fond of saying, the absence of evidence is not the same as the evidence of absence. Let's explore.

The Facts

The Labs

In Wuhan, at least two labs study coronaviruses that originate in bats — the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) and the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention (WHCDC). Both are close to the seafood market. WIV is about eight miles away. WHCDC is right around the corner.

Despite the overlap in research, what the two labs actually do is quite different. WIV is home to China's first laboratory to receive the highest level of international bioresearch safety (known as BSL-4). In addition, it houses lower-level (BSL-3 and BSL-2) labs. WHCDC is home only to a BSL-2 lab.

"BSL-2 is what we normally think of when we think of a lab," explained Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. It is a lab where "somebody is wearing a lab coat and gloves, they're at a bench." (BSL-4 is akin to what is seen in movies like Contagion.)

She explained the seemingly relaxed security is because coronaviruses found in bats "don't infect human cells very well, if at all. So often they're not considered major potential pathogens because they just don't grow very well in other species besides bats." If scientists were being particularly cautious, she explained, they might work in a BSL-3 lab.

Researchers from both labs faced criticism in recent years that they have not followed appropriate safety protocols. A video published in December 2019 shows Tian Junhua, a prominent researcher based at WHCDC, conducting field research on bats without appropriate protective equipment.

Warnings from U.S. diplomats in 2018 appeared to refer to the BSL-4 lab at WIV. They reported: "During interactions with scientists at the WIV laboratory, they noted the new lab has a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory."

But Rasmussen cautioned against putting too much weight in these reports: "Without fail, every single BSL-4 lab in the U.S. gets some type of safety violation, some type of thing that they could do better."

A 2019 paper written by WIV researchers about China's effort to add more high-level bioresearch labs warned, "The experience of laboratory biosafety personnel training is relatively lacking. ... Insufficient training staff and training problems such as uneven standards require urgent improvement and improvement." A separate 2019 paper by Yuan Zhiming, a chief scientist at Wuhan, described systemic deficiencies at high-security labs: "Maintenance cost is generally neglected; several high-level BSLs have insufficient operating funds for routine, yet vital processes." Most laboratories "lack specialized biosafety managers and engineers," he wrote.

Months after the new coronavirus was discovered, Global Times, a state-run news site, published an article outlining new government guidelines aimed at fixing "chronic management loopholes at virus labs." The article noted some labs have paid "insufficient attention to biological disposal."

Could a safety lapse have opened the door for the new coronavirus to escape one of these

labs, just as SARS had? (To be clear, SARS escaped after it had been identified. The initial outbreak did not begin this way.) Accidents happen. Records reveal multiple accidents have led to the escape of dangerous pathogens and inadvertent infections at U.S. laboratories.

While no comparable records exist in China, one of the world's foremost experts on these viruses, Shi Zhengli, based at WIV, thought it was possible. In March, Shi told the *Scientific American* that in the early days of the outbreak, even she wondered whether coronaviruses were to blame. "Could they have come from our lab?" After all, her lab had collected and sequenced tens of thousands of coronaviruses over the past decade. (She has since adamantly denied that the new coronavirus could have emerged from her lab. Her boss and WIV issued similar denials.)

The Virus

Safety protocols aren't a virus's only barrier between a life in a test tube and one infecting millions. The virus would need to be able to infect humans (or another animal that can then infect humans), and that infection needs to be strong enough that it isn't immediately beaten by the immune system, allowing it to spread among people.

Most known bat coronaviruses can't do either of these things. The novel coronavirus, however, can do both. That said, it is called "novel" for a reason: It had never before appeared in scientific research.

Viruses — like people — have distinct genetic sequences that give scientists clues to their origin. Research published in the journal *Nature* on Feb. 3 found that this virus falls within a family of known coronaviruses that come from bats. It shares nearly 80 percent of the genome as the original SARS-CoV and 96 percent of the genome of a virus (RaTG13) that Shi's team had previously sampled.

While 96 percent may sound like a big overlap to nonscientists, the 4 percent difference is found in the part of the virus that binds to human cells. Without that adaptation, Lucey, the Georgetown professor, put it simply: "It's interesting, but it's not going to cause any outbreaks in people."

Moreover, the two viruses are generations apart. Edward Holmes, an evolutionary virologist from the University of Sydney who has written about the origin of the new virus, explained via email that the two viruses "shared a common ancestor that lived a long time ago. What this means is that [the new coronavirus] is NOT derived from RaTG13." Holmes noted another virus that — like RaTG13 — was sampled 1,000 miles from Wuhan in a cave in Yunnan is a closer relative to the new virus, but "not close enough to be the direct ancestor." And critically, he said, this other virus, "is not from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, nor from anywhere else in Wuhan."

So how did this virus end up 1,000 miles from the nearest known relative? There are any number of potential explanations. A wildlife trafficker might have brought an infected bat into the city. Another animal might have picked up the virus from bats years ago, allowing it to transform in just the right way to infect humans. There are thousands of bat viruses scientists have not sampled and even more coronaviruses that circulate in other species, so there's no guarantee it actually came from thousands of miles away.

But even if that virus from Shi's lab is not the source for the virus, her lab is full of bat coronavirus variants. That left us wondering: Could this virus have been the accidental product of an experiment gone awry? A 2015 paper cautioned the "gain of function" experiments with which Shi's team was involved. In this kind of experiment, the researchers mutate virus strain to enhance a pathogen's natural traits. Even though the most dangerous part of that experiment was not conducted at WIV, the 2018 State Department cables referenced similar research by Shi and her team.

In 2017, Shi and her team published a study revealing that they had found a coronavirus from a bat that could be transmitted directly to humans. After reviewing the study, Rasmussen said via email that just because these viruses could attach to human cells, it "does not show that they are particularly effective at doing so." Binding is only one part of the process. "It is not the sole determinant of viral fitness (the ability of the virus to replicate robustly in a given host) or pathogenicity (the ability of the virus to cause disease)." Moreover, genomic analysis reveals none of the virus samples used to conduct these experiments were or could have been transformed to be the new coronavirus that causes covid-19.

That, however, is just one study. Shi's lab published dozens of academic papers researching bat coronaviruses. The Washington Post reviewed academic studies that described "scores of encounters with animals that are known hosts to deadly viruses, including strains closely related to the pathogen behind the covid-19 outbreak."

"While the scientists wore gloves and masks and took other protective measures, U.S. experts who reviewed the experiments say the precautions would not necessarily protect the researchers from harmful exposures, in caves or in the lab," The Post reported.

This kind of research filled in critical gaps in scientific understanding of SARS-like coronaviruses. It also increased the risk of accidental exposure and lab accidents. But many scientists are still dubious.

Kristian G. Andersen, an immunology and microbiology professor at Scripps Research, alongside Holmes and other researchers, stated firmly, "Our analyses clearly show that SARS-CoV-2 is not a laboratory construct or a purposefully manipulated virus." Trevor Bedford, a researcher in computational biology and infectious diseases at the University of Washington, was more specific. "You don't see kind of large chunks of genomic material that are somehow inserted or absent," he said. Rather, it is the opposite. "The differences are these small mutations, as you'd expect from nature."

(Shi did not return our emails. None of her current collaborators we spoke to could precisely speak to her current research.)

Still, no scientist was willing to completely dismiss the idea — and only said that it was highly unlikely. After all, we neither know what either lab was specifically working on, nor do we have an archive of every animal in the lab and virus sequence in their freezer. Without identifying the earliest case and the evolution of the virus, everything is a hypothesis.

Richard H. Ebright, a microbiologist and biosafety expert at Rutgers University, said: "The

question whether the outbreak virus entered humans through an accidental infection of a lab worker is a question of historical fact, not a question of scientific fact. The question can be answered only through a forensic investigation, not through a scientific investigation."

The Chinese Response

The actions of Chinese officials have done little to quash suspicion of lab leak. Before the government had even alerted the World Health Organization to the growing epidemic, scientists were told to destroy early samples of the virus, according to the Straits Times.

Then, in an unusual move for the government, officials quickly pinned the outbreak on the market. But they have done little to provide supporting evidence for this theory. Officials reported 33 of 585 environmental samples from the market contained the new coronavirus. Thirty-one of the positive samples were located in the area of the market known to sell wildlife. But where exactly these samples were taken is not clear. They could just as well have been taken from animal cages or a bathroom. Moreover, China has not divulged the results of any tests done on any animals that were recovered from the market before it was cleaned.

Several doctors, journalists and researchers based in China appear to have suddenly gone quiet over this issue. The New York Times reported by mid-January — shortly after the sequence of the virus was made public — that "Chinese scientists cut off official communications" with their American counterparts.

On Feb. 6, Botao Xiao, a molecular biomechanics researcher at South China University of Technology, published a paper arguing that "the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan." He pointed to the previous safety mishaps and the kind of research both labs undertake as evidence. After the paper gained international attention, Chinese authorities flatly denied that an accident happened. Xiao later withdrew the paper, explaining in a brief email to the Wall Street Journal on Feb. 26: "The speculation about the possible origins in the post was based on published papers and media, and was not supported by direct proofs."

The Chinese government's actions have inhibited the scientific community's ability to trace the origin of the virus and only serve to raise suspicions.

"It just seems like such a remarkable coincidence that you have an outbreak of a coronavirus in theory from a bat in the same city where there is this high-level BSL-4 laboratory, where not only are there foreign concerns about its safety, but there are Chinese articles about the safety protocols not being sufficient. And obviously there's no smoking gun," said Emily de La Bruyère, a China expert with Horizon Advisory. "It's all circumstantial, but it's pretty remarkable."

In a statement via email, the Chinese Embassy in Washington told The Fact Checker: "The source of the virus is a serious and complex matter of science that must be studied by scientists and medical experts. Many scientists have already pointed out that COVID-19 has a natural origin."

But the U.S. government is not convinced. The intelligence community "will continue to

rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan," the director of national intelligence said in a statement on April 30.

The Bottom Line

The balance of the scientific evidence strongly supports the conclusion that the new coronavirus emerged from nature — be it the Wuhan market or somewhere else. Too many unexpected coincidences would have had to take place for it to have escaped from a lab. But the Chinese government has not been willing or able to provide information that would clarify lingering questions about any possible role played by either Wuhan lab.

That's why intelligence agencies are still exploring that possibility, no matter how remote it may be. And even then, it's unclear when or if we will ever know the origin story of this new virus that is causing death and economic turmoil around the globe.

[China] COVID coverup only the beginning of China's malign influence in global human rights bodies (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [5/1/2020 12:34 AM, Kristina Olney, 727K, Neutral]

"Hide your dagger behind a smile." According to a classic Chinese text of geopolitical strategy, one should charm enemies while moving in secret against them. This principle sums up how Beijing has manipulated and usurped international institutions for decades to further its geopolitical ambitions and disguise its communist tyranny.

The coronavirus pandemic has let the world see the oversight deficit of the Chinese Communist Party's stranglehold over the World Health Organization. As was noted in our organization's Coronavirus Cover-up Timeline, the WHO has promoted and helped legitimize the CCP's lies since the emergence of the virus.

In December, Chinese doctors like Dr. Li Wenliang began sounding alarm bells over the virus and Taiwan reported evidence of transmission among humans to both the WHO and Chinese authorities. Yet as late as mid-January, the WHO unquestioningly repeated the claim of Beijing that no evidence existed of human-to-human transmission. The organization urged countries not to close borders to foreigners from China, even as President Xi Jinping himself had shut down travel from Wuhan within China. WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom even had the gall to express confidence in the quality of China's investigations and praise China's efforts in late January.

Under the 2005 International Health Regulations, which the WHO is responsible for enforcing, member states are required to notify the WHO within 24 hours of assessment of any events which may constitute a public health emergency of international concern. The inaction of the WHO in the cover-up of the pandemic has cost tens of thousands of lives and tens of millions of livelihoods. And this is not the first time the WHO witnessed misinformation from Beijing concerning global health issues.

International Health Regulations had already been strengthened in the aftermath of the SARS epidemic, specifically to eliminate the possibility of a future cover-up. Yet the WHO failed to properly investigate any evidence of a potential epidemic weeks after it had

emerged. The WHO officially declared the coronavirus a global pandemic on March 11, yet on March 25, Director General Tedros admitted that "the time to act was actually a month ago, two months ago..."

Due to the objections of Beijing, the WHO has also sidelined Taiwan—an advanced democracy whose pandemic response has been exemplary, including its early warning to the WHO about the virus. It has been rebuffed from participation in the organization. According to reports, Taiwan has seen only hundreds of cases compared to the thousands that most developed countries have confirmed.

WHO negligence in investigating the emergence of the virus has resulted in unprecedented international criticism of the organization and in particular of Tedros — a member of the Maoist political party of Ethiopia, who has previously quashed news of cholera outbreaks in Africa.

Last month, President Trump announced the United States will halt funding to the WHO. Also, a group of U.S. Senators sent Tedros a letter about their investigation of the international response and, specifically, that of the WHO to the virus. Other governments including Japan and Australia, have criticized its response. Rightly so, the Japanese deputy prime minister has called it the "Chinese Health Organization."

This complicity of the WHO in the Chinese cover-up of the coronavirus pandemic is the tip of the iceberg concerning increasing lack of oversight of China's human rights practices at international organizations. Just last month, China was appointed to a seat on the Consultative Group of the United Nations Human Rights Council, tasked with appointing independent human rights experts. It is outrageous that a country inflicting a campaign of cultural genocide against its ethnic and religious minorities, such as the incarceration of over 1 million Uighur Muslims, should be given any responsibility to oversee human rights practices. It is an institutional oxymoron.

In recent years, China has gained increasing influence over UN human rights bodies, and has used this influence to obstruct civil society participation and human rights mechanisms to establish accountability for human rights violations. This is also the reason why UN bodies have failed to hold China accountable for the horrific practice of forced organ harvesting.

The moral scandal only gets worse. Despite mounting evidence of extrajudicial killing in China for organ harvesting, the WHO has praised China for its organ transplantation reforms and given it leadership on the WHO Taskforce responsible for its oversight. Officials have even admitted that oversight of China on this issue is based on China's own self-assessment. Recently, our organization released an extensive research report detailing how the Chinese Communist Party has falsified official datasets on organ transplantation and evidence of the victimization of Muslim Uighurs and Falun Gong practitioners.

China has won global trust and used its dagger against Western institutions. As the history of communism shows, it is all strategically sound, from infiltrating international bodies to extra-judicially dissecting human ones. As the coronavirus pandemic has made the daggers visible, it is about time we stopped smiling too.

[North Korea] Nobody Has Seen Kim Jong-un for 19 Days? What Does It Mean? (New York Times)

New York Times [5/1/2020 5:01 AM, Rachel Minyoung Lee, 40577K, Neutral]

Nineteen days have elapsed since North Korea's leader, Kim Jong-un, was seen on his country's state media, on April 12, a day after he presided over a meeting of the Politburo of the ruling Workers' Party.

Intense speculation about Mr. Kim's disappearance has followed. Some experts have tried to decipher his location by examining satellite images of traffic around key buildings in Pyongyang, the capital; others have speculated openly about potential candidates for succession.

The questions repeatedly being asked are: Why did he not join the April 15 birthday ceremony at the mausoleum for Kim Il-sung, his grandfather and the founding father of the country? Has he undergone a cardiovascular procedure at Hyangsan Hospital, a clinic dedicated to treating the Kim family, as a Seoul-based website has claimed?

Kim Yeon-chul, South Korea's unification minister, who refuted the reports of Mr. Kim being ill, suggested that his absence from the April 15 ceremony could be related to the government scaling back on such commemorations as it intensifies the battle against the coronavirus pandemic.

There might be more to it: Mr. Kim seems to be ensuring that he is moving out of his famous grandfather's shadow.

The Supreme People's Assembly, the North Korean Parliament, revised the Constitution in April and August of last year, and Mr. Kim was described as the one who "represents the state," a phrase competing with Kim Il-sung's title ("the head of the state") while he was president. The revisions also granted Mr. Kim the right to appoint and recall diplomatic representatives, a power that not even his grandfather possessed.

The North Korean state media's propaganda has been magnifying Mr. Kim's image while de-emphasizing the accomplishments of his grandfather after the collapse of the summit between Mr. Kim and President Trump in Hanoi, Vietnam, in February of last year. The glorification of Mr. Kim above his forefathers was obvious during the party's founding anniversary in October.

This year, for the first time since Mr. Kim came to power in 2012, Pyongyang did not hold a large-scale national meeting attended by officials, foreign visitors and citizens marking Kim Il-sung's birthday.

Another key feature of Kim Il-sung's birth anniversary celebrations has been the publication of an editorial in Rodong Sinmun, the party paper, dedicated to glorifying his achievements. This April, the birthday editorial was published three days late — a remarkable decision that likely was made at the higher levels of the Workers' Party. Neither questions about Mr. Kim's health nor concerns about quarantine explain the belated publication of the newspaper's birthday editorial.

Pyongyang has adhered to a longstanding tradition of maintaining silence on speculation

about its top leader and his family, including their health. Questions about whether Mr. Kim has been unwell and has had surgery will not be answered. Information about his health is seen as most sensitive as it can have repercussions for regime stability.

Pyongyang seems to consider addressing speculation about its leadership through its state media as inappropriate and unnecessary. In 2014, Mr. Kim remained absent from public view for 41 days. His father, Kim Jong-il, remained absent from the public eye for 51 days in 2008. In both cases, North Korea did not respond officially or through its state media to rumors about their health.

Mr. Kim will undoubtedly return to the public view when he can, most likely at a time of his choice, and won't be seen to be responding to international rumors.

North Korea's supreme leader may be deliberately prolonging his absence to mislead and confuse audiences. Since late last year, the country has drastically reduced foreign policy messaging and stopped publishing the party daily commentaries on foreign affairs as well. These moves could be aimed at making its foreign policy calculus harder to decipher.

Yet Mr. Kim's 19-day absence from the public view is not highly unusual considering the increased intervals between his public appearances of late. Between 2012 and 2020, most of his appearances in public have been after gaps of less than 15 days. But this year alone, Mr. Kim disappeared for 21 days between Jan. 26 and Feb. 16, and for 19 days between March 22 and April 10.

We should attempt to track Mr. Kim's movements with more caution and reason — and perhaps less speculation — using context and past examples of longer gaps between his appearances to guide us.

[South Korea] Trust, testing and tracing: How South Korea succeeded where the US stumbled in coronavirus response (ABC News)

ABC News [5/1/2020 4:10 AM, Soo Rin Kim, Dr. Tiffany Kung, and Dr. Mark Abdelmalek, 3795K, Neutral]

Imagine that you're in a midsize city, the lock-down has been lifted and you finally go back to the office and see your colleagues for the first time in months.

The next morning, you wake up with a tickle in your throat. You also notice a bit of a headache, and more alarmingly, a mild fever. No need to panic.

You call the COVID-19 hotline to get information on local testing sites, walk to the nearest one, have a brief one-on-one visit with a doctor, and have your nasal or oral sample collected. The whole process takes less than 30 minutes. Later that evening, you get a text message letting you know whether you're COVID positive. All this for free or just under \$20.

You aren't extremely worried because the country is taking prompt action for each confirmed COVID-19 case to find and alert anyone who might've been exposed and isolating them immediately. The daily new case count in the entire country has mostly stayed in the single digits for a few days straight now.

But if you do test positive, again no need to panic. If you're really sick, you'll immediately get admitted to a designated hospital, free of charge. If you are asymptomatic or only have mild symptoms but are worried about infecting your family and if you qualify, you can go to a designated quarantine facility for two weeks.

There you'll be given a personal necessity kit -- a kind of care package with everything you need to stay safe including gloves, masks, garbage bags, soap and even disposable thermometers -- and another box full of non-perishable food to last you through the quarantine, including basic foods and ready-made meals.

The government may even pay you a salary during the isolation. Throughout the isolation, a health official will regularly call you to check how you're feeling and ask you if you've checked your temperature.

This is not some fantasy of what America's response to the novel coronavirus pandemic could have been. It's reality -- on the ground, right now -- but in South Korea. And it's a model that experts say the U.S. could look to replicate as best it can, despite some fundamental differences between the two democracies, as it continues the long fight against the virus and prepares for a potential second wave.

"We had a chance to contain this outbreak, but we didn't," said Ashish Jha, K.T. Li Professor of Global Health at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and Director of the Harvard Global Health Institute. "And as a result of that testing failure, over 60,000 Americans are dead and our economy has been shut down. It didn't have to be this way."

South Korea announced on Thursday it had the first day in months without a new diagnosed case of the coronavirus, other than four cases detected at the border from those coming into the country.

The first confirmed COVID-19 case in South Korea was reported on Jan. 20, just a day before the first confirmed case in the U.S. was reported.

But South Korea quickly activated a response system put in place during the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, known as MERS, outbreak five years ago and expanded its testing capacity and contact tracing. MERS had a fatality rate of about 20% in South Korea, so many South Koreans knew instinctively how devastating a viral epidemic could be.

"This experience taught them to move quickly and early," said Yong Suk Lee, deputy director of the Korea Program at the Freeman Spogli Institute at Stanford University. "Let's track each individual and inform all the people so that they can be prepared and get tested. They communicated transparently with plain, factual, straightforward information."

In the last 100 days, the American ally in the Far East has normalized daily life in the face of the coronavirus pandemic by a robust testing system coupled with an expansive contact tracing operation -- all built on a foundation of massive amounts of data.

In the U.S., some states are acting to bring some features of life back to normal, but testing still lags far behind levels considered safe by medical experts, while medical staff continues to sound the alarm about shortages in supplies of the critical protective gear they need to do

their jobs. Contact tracing programs are just ramping up.

The two democracies certainly have their differences, chief among them their size -- South Korea's population is about one-seventh of America's -- and the more decentralized nature of the U.S. federal system of governance. South Korea also has a universal health care that has served as a backbone of the country's strong COVID response.

Experts with whom ABC News spoke said South Korea's greater success in fighting the outbreak came in part due to its ability to institute widespread coronavirus testing and contact tracing far earlier in the pandemic, cheap and effective care for those who got infected, and, perhaps most importantly, a greater cultural trust in the government whose transparent and consistent messaging prompted citizens to take more protective measures ahead of the virus and generally support more aggressive contact tracing methods in its wake.

By the time South Korea reported 204 confirmed cases on Feb. 21, the country had conducted a total of 16,400 tests. By the time the U.S. had 207 confirmed cases on March 4, it had performed 1,597 tests, 10 times fewer, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

"Politicians say that the United States has performed a greater number of tests than anywhere else in the world," said Jennifer Nuzzo, Senior Scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "While that may be true about the number of tests alone, that isn't what we should pay attention to. On a per-capita basis, that's not true."

The U.S. reported more than 1 million confirmed cases and 63,019 deaths as of Thursday. South Korea has reported 10,765 confirmed cases and 247 deaths. That is .3% of the U.S. population testing positive and .02% dying from the virus. In South Korea, .02% tested positive and a tiny .0005% of the population have died from COVID-19.

To see how South Korea differentiated itself from the United States in its pandemic response, it's necessary to look back to the very beginning, to the time when South Korean leaders were warning of a possible crisis with just the first few positive cases, while some top American officials were alternating between ignoring it and calling it a hoax. President Donald Trump did place a limited travel ban on flights from China at the end of January but didn't declare an official national emergency until March 13. By that time, more than 3,000 cases and 55 deaths had already been reported in the U.S.

"At one point, South Korea had one of the fastest-growing epidemics in the world, but they've been able to keep their numbers quite low since the government acted early," Nuzzo said. "Comparatively, the U.S. has struggled, in large part because we haven't been able to test. There's no replacement for government leadership defining what should be done and making it happen."

Before testing, a question of trust in the government

Perhaps the most surprising difference in the countries' response was that South Korea never instituted a true lock-down the way the U.S. has in most states -- in part because the government assumed the people would properly social distance without a mandate. Businesses weren't forced to close, and borders weren't shut down to prevent people from

coming in from abroad.

"People were willing to follow social distancing and voluntarily wear masks when they went out," Lee said. "There was a lot of trust in how the government was responding. South Koreans have a collective spirit when confronted with disaster."

From the very beginning of the outbreak, South Koreans diligently complied with the government directive to wear N95 masks in public, already having become accustomed to wearing masks due to air pollution. When the demand for the masks skyrocketed in mid- to late-February, the government quickly took over the distribution and rationed two N95 masks per week per person.

Even as the curve appears to be flattening and the country reopens, South Koreans continue to protect themselves by wearing masks whenever out in public.

In the U.S., many people have abided by, and vocally encouraged, social distancing measures on their own, but a segment of the population balked at what some called draconian government-imposed restrictions as states locked down. Across the U.S., residents went to parties and beaches, and in some places thousands gathered for "anti-lockdown" protests -- encouraged at one point by the president himself.

Adding to the confusion were changes in official U.S. health recommendations. In the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) initially discouraged the general public from wearing masks amid an extreme shortage at healthcare systems across the country. The CDC later reversed course and recommended people to cover up their faces even with make-shift masks, while some municipalities took extra steps to make face coverings in public mandatory.

Recently Vice President Mike Pence was photographed during a hospital visit not wearing a mask, contrary to what the hospital said was its policy. Thursday, Pence did wear a mask when visiting a ventilator factory.

Easy access to testing and health care

From local public health centers to drive-through testing sites around every corner, the easy access to testing has been one of the most important tactical success stories of South Korea's pandemic response, public health experts say.

Since the first confirmed case in January, the South Korea government quickly ramped up its testing operation, running thousands of tests within a month of the first case. This allowed South Korea to rapidly detect its mass outbreak when the virus spread through a church group in the large, southeastern city of Daegu.

By late February -- within two weeks of the outbreak in Daegu -- the country was testing tens of thousands of people a day. At the same time, the U.S., a nation more than six times the size, was only administering 300 to 400 tests per day.

"Testing is very important because it tells you where the problem is," said Professor Michael Ahn of University of Massachusetts Boston, whose research focuses on technological

innovations in public policy.

Under the Korean CDC guidelines and because of South Korea's universal health care system, those presenting with respiratory symptoms and a fever, international travel history, and potential close contacts with a positive patient, are guaranteed access to free tests. Even those without symptoms can get tested just as easily and pay their own fees, costing about \$140.

The coronavirus has been circulating around both countries for a few months, but only in the last two weeks did the U.S. surpass the Asian nation in per capita testing rate, according to an analysis of official figures compiled by Our World in Data. As of Thursday, with at least 6 million tests administered in the U.S., one in every 53 people in the country has been tested so far. In South Korea, with a total of 619,881 tests, one in every 83 people has been tested so far.

In the U.S., public labs and private, commercial labs alike have been plagued by testing backlogs and capacity issues, allowing only those people at the highest risk to get tested in some places. States are racing to increase their testing capacity, and calling on the federal government for help. California Gov. Gavin Newsom announced last week that the state is drastically ramping up its daily testing capacity to a minimum of 60,000-80,000, and the Los Angeles Mayor announced on Wednesday that the city would offer free coronavirus tests to all residents, regardless of symptoms.

Experts said it's also important to consider the test-positivity rate -- meaning the percentage of tests performed that turn out to be positive. In the U.S., it's been around 15% to 20%, while it's been close to 1% - 2% in South Korea, according to public data reviewed by ABC News. This suggests that the U.S. is only testing people who already have a high likelihood of being infected, meaning that the U.S. is missing those with milder symptoms or no symptoms, Nuzzo said.

Top U.S. health officials have said that more than 25% of those with the coronavirus may have mild or no symptoms, though they can still infect others.

In South Korea, universal healthcare also allows people to walk into any designated testing site or care facility without the fear of cost. But in the U.S., even as many states and cities plan to roll out free testing, the cost of care should the person test positive and the hurdles of going through their healthcare providers covered by their insurance have continued to slow down widespread testing efforts.

"In Korea, if you're potentially exposed to the virus, the government is going to cover everything starting with testing," Lee said. In the U.S., "just getting testing alone is challenging and expensive. And people think, 'What will be the cost of my health bill if I go through this?' We're not provided a clear understanding of health care costs."

Then, in South Korea, government-supported quarantine efforts, which helped separate COVID patients from their family members, even for those showing mild symptoms, played a key role in preventing household spread of the virus. About 80% of clusters have occurred in families, according to a World Health Organization report that looked at the spread of the virus in China.

Aggressive and systematic contact tracing

Few people in South Korea have gone outside the Korean CDC's guidelines to get tested voluntarily and cover their own fees, in part because South Koreans are better informed of their potential exposure to the virus in the first place, experts say.

It's the result of an aggressive contact tracing operation, which integrates GPS data, credit card data and surveillance footage as well as other information from 28 different data sources to perform real-time analysis to quickly and precisely identify those who might have come into close contact with a COVID-19 patient, according to health experts.

South Korea was able to quickly launch an aggressive contact tracing effort because of a legal basis and infrastructure for the operation that had been established during the MERS outbreak.

The system, developed within weeks of the first mass outbreak in February, has allowed the South Korean government to pinpoint those who might have gotten exposed to the virus and proactively offer them tests or quarantine support, officials say.

In the U.S., states have begun pushing forward aggressive contact tracing operations only in recent weeks. California announced last week that it is building a massive army of 10,000 volunteer contact tracers as part of its efforts to prepare for future reentry, and Massachusetts recently hired more than 300 people to begin tracing in the first week of the program and an additional 2,200 volunteer tracers to help with the effort. Some other states, like Connecticut and Colorado, are using tech-based systems to help COVID-patients self-report and manage data.

But much of the contact tracing efforts in the U.S. have been focused on individual surveys and voluntary disclosure, not the real-time collection and analysis of mass data like in South Korea. Whether the U.S. can or will implement a similar system remains a question, determined more by the cultural difference that comes from the decentralized government system in the U.S. and privacy concerns that can be resolved from setting legal boundaries like South Korea has, than the actual technology, according to Ahn.

South Korea "is somewhat more centralized, and also it's a smaller country with less population," Ahn said. "However, in American context too, you can have the legal basis and safety features in place. We have the technology and we have the data. It's America, right?"

Privacy concerns have been raised in South Korea, but the public consensus has mostly been favorable towards the contact tracing efforts, especially after the government's initial contact tracing effort using patient surveys faced difficulties earlier in the outbreak when some members of the church group in Daegu refused to voluntarily reveal their contacts.

Katherine Baicker, dean of the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, said contact tracing, with the help of large-scale public cooperation with voluntary data collection through technology, can be done without violating individual confidentiality.

"There are ways to assess the health risk posed by specific businesses in specific areas,"

Baicker stated. "We could begin to reopen more of the economy safely if we focused on those businesses that provided the greatest benefit at the lowest risk."

Preparing for a second wave

Screening and quarantining for travelers arriving into South Korea is more thorough than ever.

Every person coming in through the airport -- with or without symptoms -- is either tested immediately on site or within three days of entry depending on their length of stay. If they test positive, the patient is moved to a hospital or care facility. If they test negative, the person is still moved to a government-designated facility for 14 days, where they have to report their physical condition through an app -- another measure to which many Americans would likely object.

Most of the new cases reported in the past few days have come from those entering the country, according to the South Korean government's daily status update.

Meanwhile, the U.S. issued a Presidential Proclamation prohibiting foreign nationals who have visited countries across Europe, China, and Iran in the past 14 days from entering the U.S. The proclamation doesn't mention U.S. citizens, and for those who do arrive from other countries, there is no uniform testing system other than the CDC guidance to stay home and monitor temperature for 14 days upon arrival.

More generally, as the pandemic appears to subside in South Korea and more and more people are coming out on the street, officials say the South Korean government is still on high alert and working to prepare for a potential second outbreak in the fall, echoing warnings from top U.S. officials like Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert.

As part of those efforts, the South Korean government has also just begun antibody testing, which can determine if someone has been exposed to the virus in the past.

Korean CDC director-general Jung Eun-kyeong said during a press conference this week that getting a sense of how wide the spread of the virus in the community was, including those not already discovered through the mass testing, is critical in determining how much of the population remains vulnerable to a second wave.

"We need to know what percentage of the population has developed antibodies against COVID-19 to figure out the real spread of the virus," Jung said.

The U.S. is also fielding mass antibody testing, but the effort can be scattershot and the reliability of some of the tests have been called into question.

South Korean Deputy Health Minister Kim Ganglip said during an interview with South Korea's Yonhap News that the public's loosening attitude toward social distancing amid the flattening curve is the biggest risk factor in causing another outbreak.

"An increase in outdoor activities could become the kindling for a large-scale transmission,"

Kim said, urging people to practice social distancing guidelines until May 5.

It's a fear shared by U.S. health experts, as they watch U.S. beaches fill up and nail salons, among other businesses, reopen in parts of the country.

But should a second wave happen, Ahn said, South Korea is still better positioned to quickly detect and respond to it. The U.S., he said, needs to catch up to their ally's effort, and fast.

"If you don't do this and open up, knowing how contagious the disease is, then we are going to come back to a citywide or nationwide lock-down," Ahn said.

[South Africa] This is South Africa's third major pandemic in 100 years. It has learned its lessons. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 2:06 PM, Palesa Morudu, Neutral]

When the novel coronavirus hit South Africa in early March, there were reasons to fear the worst. The world's most unequal country had been severely affected by both the Spanish flu and the HIV/AIDS pandemics. But with this history in mind, South Africa launched one of the most vigorous public health responses on the African continent.

Over the past five weeks, Pretoria has taken rigorous measures to "to flatten the curve" with aggressive testing and screening and by preparing health centers. The government deployed 28,000 health workers to test and screen communities across the country, drawing on the health infrastructure that had been built in response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

As of this week, 6.1 million people had been screened and 207,530 tested for covid-19, with 5,647 active coronavirus cases, 2,073 recoveries and 103 deaths. So far, South Africa appears to be on course to flatten the curve far earlier than the United States and many other countries.

These measures were accompanied by an extreme lockdown. Except for essential grocery shopping and medical visits, people were prohibited from going to work (apart from essential services personnel), exercising outdoors, walking their dogs and buying cigarettes or alcohol. The police and army have controlled access to public spaces and the streets — and often enforce these restrictions with gratuitous brutality. The lockdown is set to ease marginally on Friday — the first in a five-stage relaxation.

What has informed South Africa's covid-19 response? This is the third major pandemic or epidemic of this kind to hit the southern tip of Africa in just over 100 years. During the 1918-19 influenza pandemic, which claimed an estimated 50 million lives globally, South Africa had the fourth-highest mortality rate in the world. According to University of Cape Town historian Howard Phillips, during the second wave of the pandemic in 1918, between 300,000 and 350,000 South Africans died — an estimated 6 percent of the country's population.

The flu arrived in Cape Town on warships carrying South African troops returning from European battlefields via the port of Freetown, Sierra Leone, where they contracted the virus. After showing no symptoms two days into their quarantine, the men were let go and

began returning to their homes. In a matter of days, "Cape Town was a stricken city," according to media reports. Phillips estimates that the flu laid low up to 60 percent of the country's population, with the "complete paralysis of every activity in the country."

When the flu broke out, the central government's public health department was staffed by all of three people. The burden of care and treatment fell heavily on local authorities. This experience led to legislation that created the country's first national public health structure.

In a cruel twist of history, the second major pandemic intensified just as South Africa was ending decades of white-minority rule. By the time Nelson Mandela became the country's first democratically elected president in 1994, HIV/AIDS had begun to infect large numbers of people — and South Africa soon became the epicenter of the HIV/AIDS scourge. AIDS-related illnesses claimed an estimated 2.8 million lives between 1997 and 2010 — a trend fueled in large part by the refusal of former president Thabo Mbeki to yield to science and to accelerate the distribution of lifesaving antiretroviral drugs.

According to UNAIDS, 7.7 million South Africans are currently living with HIV. Such a large number of people with compromised immune systems, combined with close living quarters and crowded transport in urban and rural townships, provides fertile ground for the spread of the novel coronavirus.

These considerations have loomed large in the public health response since the first coronavirus cases were detected in early March, as President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national state of disaster, banned international travel and prohibited gatherings of more than 100 people on March 22, and ordered a strict national shutdown 10 days later.

While it is too early to declare victory, South African medical experts are cautiously optimistic that the country acted with sufficient speed and determination to get ahead of the curve. The key factor seems to have been that the government listened to scientists and allowed them to lead the public health response.

Yet there have also been serious problems with South Africa's approach. The economic freeze has increased hunger and hardship. And the state has let loose the army and police with few restrictions. The United Nations names South Africa as one of the countries with the worst cases of police brutality during the global lockdowns.

So, while the South African government has admirably learned from history, it has a lot more studying to do. Addressing mass poverty and unemployment and improving public health will require the kind of development that does not emerge from the end of a police baton.

Coronavirus News

WHO Warns Countries Could Face Food Shortages Due to Virus Travel Restrictions (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 2:53 PM, Lukas I. Alpert, Neutral]

The World Health Organization warned of possible food shortages in some countries due to global travel restrictions in place to limit the spread of coronavirus.

The WHO raised the concern on Friday following a meeting of its emergency committee, which reconvened to update its coronavirus guidance. The WHO urged countries to coordinate to safely reopen transport links and ensure food is delivered.

"The WHO has grave concerns about what will happen when the pandemic accelerates in countries with weaker" health and food-distribution systems, WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said. He didn't name any countries at risk.

"The Covid-19 pandemic is not finished," said Didier Houssin, the emergency committee's chairman. "We still know too little about the transmission of the virus."

The committee issued several recommendations—as countries develop strategies for an eventual return to normal travel—designed to mitigate the disruption of food supplies to what the panel refers to as vulnerable countries.

When the panel issued its Jan. 30 declaration, 82 coronavirus cases had been detected and no deaths had been recorded in 18 nations outside of China. The vast majority of the then-7,818 cases world-wide were in China.

As of Friday, there have been 3.3 million cases confirmed globally in 187 countries and regions, with more than 235,000 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University.

The Trump administration has criticized the WHO for deferring too much to China, citing the organization's delay declaring an emergency and statements praising China's response.

In April, the United States moved to freeze more than \$400 million in annual funding while it investigated the WHO's actions.

Some public-health experts have also criticized WHO's decision to wait on declaring a global health emergency, as well as Dr. Tedros's unqualified praise for China's response early on.

Dr. Tedros defended the WHO's actions and the work of the emergency committee.

"The emergency committee isn't like a parliament, and if they are divided, they seek more information," he said. "This public global health emergency was declared in a timely fashion and gave the world enough time to respond."

WHO says COVID-19 emergency declaration gave world 'enough time' (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:22 PM, Stephanie Nebehay and Kate Kelland, 5304K, Neutral]

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus gave a robust defence on Friday of his and the World Health Organization's (WHO) "timely" actions in declaring the new coronavirus an international health emergency at the end of January.

The Jan. 30 declaration was made in "enough time for the rest of the world to respond" because there were at that stage only 82 cases of infection and no deaths outside China, Tedros told a virtual media briefing at the WHO's Geneva headquarters.

Tedros said the WHO, which is seeking to lead the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic, had used the days before declaring the global emergency as time to visit China to learn more about the new virus.

During that visit, they also won a "ground-breaking agreement" with China to send in investigators, Tedros said.

Tedros, asked about relations with the United States - its biggest donor which has suspended funding after criticising WHO's handling of the pandemic, said: "We are actually in constant contact and we work together."

Confirming that the COVID-19 pandemic is clearly still a global health emergency, Tedros said he had "grave concerns about the potential impact" of the disease "as it starts to accelerate in countries with weaker health systems".

The WHO's head of emergencies, Mike Ryan, said the agency was seeing worrying increases in cases of COVID-19 in Haiti, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Yemen, Syria, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, and northern Nigeria.

Ryan also said that while the WHO recognised that some countries are beginning to consider easing lockdown measures, it was important that they are "constantly on the look out for a jump in infections" and should be ready to put some measures back in place if needed.

Tedros said the WHO would "continue working with countries and partners to enable essential travel needed for pandemic response, humanitarian relief and cargo operations, and for countries to gradually resume normal passenger travel."

"As we have done clearly from the beginning, we will continue to call on countries to implement a comprehensive package of measures to find, isolate, test and treat every case, and trace every contact," he said.

WHO: Investment bank AIB to help organization tackle coronavirus (Yahoo News/PA)
Yahoo News/PA [5/1/2020 12:43 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Director-general of the World Health Organisation, Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, has announced that investment bank AIB, along with the European Union, will be helping the WHO in its effort against coronavirus. [Editorial Note: consult source link for video]

Stranded in the United States, with no way home or health insurance: 'We're just trapped' (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 6:00 AM, Danielle Paquette, 18460K, Negative]

She was supposed to stay in New York for a month, exploring the city and swapping business cards. Then the pandemic struck, and her country shuttered its airports.

Now, Nuong Faalong, a broadcast journalist from Ghana, is trapped on a friend's pullout couch.

"This is a terrible nightmare," said Faalong, 33, who doesn't have American health insurance — or any idea when she can leave.

Thousands of Africans are thought to be stranded in the United States after borders tightened around the world, thrusting them into coronavirus limbo at the outbreak's epicenter. There is no database of marooned travelers, but more than 62,000 visitors from the continent entered the United States in March — just as cases began to skyrocket in a nation where a stay in intensive care can cost tens of thousands of dollars.

The coronavirus has grounded people across the globe, including thousands of Americans, who have posted pleas for help from Peru, Morocco, Nepal and elsewhere. (The State Department has organized dozens of repatriation flights.)

Getting back to an African country is particularly hard when 34 of the continent's 57 international airports have closed or dramatically cut flights. Panicked people are calling embassies, diplomats say, but national budgets are strained from fighting outbreaks — and repatriation flights are astronomically costly.

The South African embassy has fielded more than 1,000 requests for assistance, Ambassador Nomaindiya Mfeketo said in a late April video message.

"A sizable number of people find themselves stranded in the United States," she told viewers. "We have been working tirelessly to find ways of getting you home."

The nation of roughly 58 million — Africa's second-largest economy — was unable for weeks to charter repatriation flights from the United States, Mfeketo said. The first are tentatively scheduled for early May. (Otherwise, only a Florida company has organized a trip home for its South African employees.)

Consulates across the United States have been making lists of the stranded and setting up WhatsApp support groups.

Senegal started handing out \$500 checks last week to help people cover lodging and medical expenses. Guinea and Mali have raised money for burial costs after several in their stateside community died of covid-19.

"We are very concerned about the situation," said Malian Ambassador to the United States Mahamadou Nimaga.

Neo Lehoko, an architecture student from South Africa, had to suspend her studies at the University of Oregon this year after running out of cash for tuition and practically everything else. Her health insurance evaporated.

But before she could book a flight to Pretoria, the country halted international travel, blocking her path to her mother.

"I've been talking to consulates constantly for the last two weeks," she said. "Nothing happens."

By Thursday, Lehoko said she had not been able to book a seat on this weekend's repatriation flights.

Her visa forbids her from finding new work, so her roommates have been covering the rent and groceries. She tries to bake away the guilt, serving banana muffins and black forest cake.

American friends are getting stimulus checks and unemployment benefits. Who is supposed to help her?

"The hardest part," she said, "is being stuck in a situation that nobody can see."

Pam Cyril-Nwokeke, a 20-year-old nursing student in Toledo, was supposed to return to southeastern Nigeria next month.

She planned to spend the summer with her family. Now she doesn't know when she can safely leave her apartment.

"It's like the apocalypse," she said. "We're just trapped. Trapped is the key word."

Cyril-Nwokeke cooks okra soup, an old favorite, to feel closer to home and urges her dad not to watch American news.

"He's worried about what he's seeing on CNN," she said of the clogged hospitals and the refrigerated trucks moving bodies. "He's super scared."

Faalong, the reporter from Ghana, landed in February — a couple of weeks before New York reported its first case.

People were still having boozy brunches at sidewalk cafes. Central Park was crowded. On March 4, the American president called the coronavirus risk "very mild."

Back home, her West African nation was imposing strict steps to curb the spread. Foreign visitors, she heard, would be barred entry, but citizens could return from abroad and go into quarantine.

She didn't expect commercial flights to abruptly end.

"The scariest thing for me is: what if I catch corona?" Faalong asked on a recent afternoon. "Are they going to treat you right if you're not American?"

One trip to the emergency room here could deplete her savings.

She would know what to do in Accra. Her family is there. Her boyfriend is there. She has a trusted doctor.

"I'd be better taken care of in Ghana," said Faalong, who has been staying indoors and chugging vitamin C. "You want to be home in a crisis."

Too risky to come home, crew of 'clean' U.S. warship in coronavirus limbo (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 9:52 AM, Phil Stewart and Idrees Ali, Neutral]

On any given day, the U.S. aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman can be found off the Atlantic coast of the United States, probably somewhere between Virginia and Florida. Its crew would love to come home to their families. But they can't. They're just too valuable right now.

That's because the Truman is a "clean" ship, free from the coronavirus thanks to a longer-than-expected deployment at sea that started in November. The deployment has kept its battle-ready 4,500 crew out of reach of a pandemic that is wreaking havoc elsewhere in the Navy.

Captain Kavon "Hak" Hakimzadeh and members of his crew described to Reuters in exclusive interviews the mixed emotions of being so close to home, but too precious to pull into port, as the Truman settles into a pandemic-driven operational limbo.

"This is a really weird situation for us," Hakimzadeh told Reuters by phone, the only way to speak to anyone on board given a ban on visitors.

The crew members interviewed said they understood why the Truman needed to remain offshore to ensure combat readiness. The virus ripped through another carrier, the Theodore Roosevelt, infecting more than 1,100 sailors.

The hope is that once the Nimitz aircraft carrier strike group is up and running, the Truman can finally come home. But with the coronavirus proving dangerous and the world being unpredictable, the Navy doesn't want to put a date on the Truman's return.

Being so close to home is a constant reminder for sailors of the strain on their families in the United States, where in just months coronavirus-related deaths have reached at least 62,800, surpassing the number of Americans killed in the Vietnam War.

For Lieutenant Elise Luers, a 28-year-old helicopter pilot, her mind wanders to a family friend who died and a brother-in-law who works at a hospital treating coronavirus patients. She also worries about her wedding plans in October.

"It's absolutely frustrating. There's absolutely anxiety and stress, not knowing when we're going home," she told Reuters, adding "it's nothing we can't handle." She and others say they are proud to serve and have learned to expect the unexpected.

The U.S. Navy boasts that it draws the kind of people who want to run toward danger, while keeping their families safe back home. It's the kind of thinking that has become deeply embedded in the military since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks that led to the war in Afghanistan.

But the coronavirus is upending those instincts, since home is where the danger is most acute.

"The emotional toll of wanting to get home, to be on the front lines (against the virus) and protect our families is a tough one," Hakimzadeh said.

In a world awash with dark Hollywood dramas, one television show that's been popular among the Truman crew is "The Last Ship." It imagined a U.S. Navy destroyer that was at sea, in radio silence, when a deadly pandemic devastated the world.

Senior Chief Petty Officer Kevin Dublynn said one of his shipmates had mentioned it to him.

"He felt like, 'Oh, man. This is just like 'The Last Ship' show,'" Dublynn said. "I was like, 'No, it's not,'" adding the Navy had plenty of ships.

Steven Kane, the TV show's co-creator and executive producer, said the 2014-2018 TNT drama explored how ill-intentioned people could exploit a pandemic and how easily a virus could wipe out a ship.

Kane acknowledged that readiness was crucial "but my heart breaks for the families and the sailors who are stuck now just off the coast."

The Pentagon has been trying to warn adversaries that ships such as the Truman are by no means the exception and the U.S. military remains ready for war despite the pandemic. "The U.S. Navy has 90 ships at sea on watch for the American people," U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper said on Twitter here April 17.

In some ways, the Truman is perhaps one of the world's biggest quarantine bubbles. Beyond an increased pace of disinfections on board, the ship's day-to-day activities are much the same as before the pandemic - no testing, no six-feet of space between sailors, according to crew members.

Every entry onto the ship carries risk, so the Truman has stopped everything but essential resupply flights, and under tight controls.

"The biggest threat is always going to be from people coming on board," said Commander Veronica Bigornia, the Truman's senior medical officer.

Once the Truman does come home, its crew risk infection and cannot be presumed to be clear of the virus, requiring lots of testing and quarantines.

U.S. officials told Reuters that more than two dozen warships have counted coronavirus infections among their crews while at port.

After 22 years in the Navy, Dublynn from Brooklyn, New York, is used to being the family hero. But now, he says his attention is on his brother, who is a nurse at Coney Island Hospital.

"Right now, he's my hero," said Dublynn, the carrier's air traffic control watch center supervisor.

While at sea, some crew have lost family to the virus while others have seen their personal lives at home upended.

The Truman's deployment itself has already been full of surprises.

Its departure was delayed until November because of electrical troubles. Then it steamed to the Middle East as tensions with Iran soared.

"Every time it looked like it was time to kind of head back home, tensions flared up a little bit," Captain Hakimzadeh said.

Petty Officer Second Class Justin Dallarosa, 34, recalled the roller coaster of emotions breaking the news to his wife on April 13 that they would be coming home later than expected. He has two daughters, both under three. The youngest will turn one in May.

Still, like other members of the crew, he takes comfort in knowing his family is provided for during economic uncertainty.

"I've got some friends back home who lost their jobs with COVID," he said. "My family is taken care of."

Cruise Ships Set Sail Knowing the Deadly Risk to Passengers and Crew (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 11:21 AM, Jacquie McNish, Rebecca Smith, Erin Ailworth, and Rachel Pannett, Neutral]

Early in March, the world's cruise-ship operators had ample evidence to believe their fleet of luxury liners were incubators for the new coronavirus.

Yet they continued to fill cruise ships with passengers, endangering those aboard and helping spread Covid-19 to the U.S. and around the globe, a Wall Street Journal investigation found.

All told, the Journal found that the cruise industry launched voyages on more than 100 ships on or after March 4—the day of the first confirmed Covid-19 death of a passenger from a cruise stopping in the U.S., a marker of the pandemic's long reach.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has so far determined that 17 of the vessels, which were on international voyages and had entered at least one U.S. port, carried people who tested positive for Covid-19 within two weeks of disembarking.

The virus passed among ship crews and travelers, finding easy passage to ports of call as well as the hometowns of those aboard, according to interviews with passengers and relatives, epidemiologists, ship employees and port and health officials in more than 20 countries.

Cruise companies allowed passengers to travel home without telling them about fellow travelers who fell ill with symptoms of Covid-19 or tested positive for the coronavirus disease, or those who were sent to hospitals.

Government officials in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, as well as communities in Iowa, Ohio, California, Minnesota, Florida, Hawaii and Puerto Rico, traced either their first Covid-19 cases or an acceleration of local infections to

cruise-ship travelers.

By March 13, the CDC had linked cruise passengers to 17% of reported Covid-19 cases in the U.S. at the time.

The U.S. Coast Guard said it was investigating whether two cruise ships owned by Carnival Corp. violated federal law by failing to alert health authorities about sick travelers disembarking in San Francisco and Puerto Rico, the Journal found. A criminal investigation and a separate government-ordered probe are under way in Australia about similar suspicions regarding a third Carnival-owned cruise ship. The company said it didn't believe it broke any laws.

As early as January, with the virus overtaking Wuhan, China, a number of cruise lines, including Carnival, Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd. and MSC Cruises SA, began canceling voyages in Asia after governments urged people to avoid infected areas.

News of the shipboard danger soon circulated world-wide. On Feb. 5, some 3,700 passengers and crew were quarantined aboard the Diamond Princess, a Carnival-owned ship docked in Yokohama, Japan. By late February, more than 700 of the passengers and crew tested positive for the virus and six people died, according to the World Health Organization. The ship also yielded one of the first confirmed Covid-19 cases in the U.S.

On Feb. 27, the Braemar, a ship owned by British-based Fred.Olsen Cruise Lines, was denied port access by the Dominican Republic for what the company called "an overreaction" to a small number of passengers with influenza-like symptoms.

Nine days later, the company said two passengers had been diagnosed with Covid-19 after returning home. Fred.Olsen didn't respond to questions from the Journal.

Reports of the virus kept spreading. On March 4, MSC—the largest privately owned cruise line—said an Austrian passenger who disembarked in Genoa, Italy, had tested positive for Covid-19. And in California that day, authorities announced a recent passenger on Carnival's Grand Princess died from the coronavirus disease.

Carnival, with more than 100 ships and nine cruise-line brands, including Costa Cruises, Holland America Line and Princess Cruises, largely continued full steam ahead. They were joined by the biggest names in the industry, including brands from Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings Ltd. and Royal Caribbean.

Once at sea, passengers said it was difficult to get information. "Other people are sick here," Tom Sheehan, a passenger on a trans-Atlantic Costa Luminosa cruise, said in a March 13 text to his son Ryan Sheehan. "They won't tell us anything." He died from the virus in a Florida hospital 15 days later, Mr. Sheehan said.

The list of coronavirus-infected ships continues to grow as health authorities trace the source of outbreaks. Travelers from 20 ships that had stops in U.S. ports and set sail during the first 15 days of March have tested positive for Covid-19, according to the CDC. Those passengers started showing symptoms either during the cruise or within two weeks of disembarking.

The ships identified by the CDC include: Carnival's Carnival Imagination and Crown Princess; Royal Caribbean's Celebrity Eclipse and Oasis of the Seas; and Norwegian Cruise's Norwegian Bliss and Norwegian Breakaway.

The Cruise Lines International Association said in a statement to the Journal that the cruise industry was one of many businesses that continued to operate in early March. "We know now that, tragically, this virus affects every setting where people come together to socialize and enjoy shared experiences, which includes cruise ships, as well as restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, and the like," the statement said. "That knowledge will serve us well in the future."

Carnival Corp. spokesman Roger Frizzell said, "It's easy to look back once you know the future and second-guess decisions made in the past. Just like the rest of the world, we were responding in real time based on the very best information available at the time."

Royal Caribbean said in a statement it had "no higher priority" than keeping guests and crew safe, and the company was working with authorities to get crew members home. Norwegian didn't respond to requests for comment.

Arnold Donald, Carnival's chief executive, said at an April 16 news conference that "cruise ships aren't the cause of the virus nor are they the reason for the spread in society."

Seven ships owned by Carnival accounted for 49 of the roughly 70 deaths of passengers and crew with Covid-19 on vessels that began voyages or boarded new passengers in the first two weeks of March, the Journal found.

Australia began a probe that could lead to criminal charges against Carnival or its staff regarding the March 8 voyage of the Ruby Princess around New Zealand. Authorities are trying to determine whether Carnival, or its Princess Cruises subsidiary, knew or should have known about potential Covid-19 cases before allowing some 2,700 passengers to disembark in Sydney.

In public hearings that began April 22, the ship's senior physician, Ilse Von Watzdorf, was asked why she didn't update the ship's medical log books to show that some ill people aboard the ship had been swabbed for possible Covid-19. "I did not have enough hours, I think" to update records, she testified.

Dr. Von Watzdorf said she wasn't sure why ship officers told shore officials it had no crew displaying possible Covid-19 symptoms before docking in Sydney. She also said the cruise company didn't brief her on the Diamond Princess Covid-19 outbreak, which she followed on social media.

Princess Cruises said in a written statement that "it would be inappropriate for us to comment" on matters under official inquiry.

Shortly before returning to Sydney on March 19, ship officers told New South Wales health authorities that 104 passengers and crew had acute respiratory infections, including 36 who visited the ship's clinic with influenza-like illnesses. Ship officers, though, didn't notify other

passengers aboard.

A day after Lyn Davidson disembarked, she learned in a text from local health authorities that other passengers from the Ruby Princess had tested positive for Covid-19. By then, Ms. Davidson had traveled by train to her home in Blayney, about a four-hour trip from Sydney. She was sweating and had a cough. After she got home, she got tested for the virus.

Ms. Davidson, a retired paramedic, said she wouldn't have taken the train had she known she might have been exposed. Instead, she said, she would have stayed in Sydney to self-quarantine.

"They never let us know that there was the possibility of the virus on board," she said. "We didn't know that the danger was all around us at that time, and we were part of it." Her test returned positive for the virus, she said.

Australian authorities traced 973 Covid-19 cases and 28 deaths, more than a quarter of the country's total fatalities, to the Ruby Princess, including community transmissions. At least two more passengers died outside the country, including two Americans, making it the deadliest of all cruise ships in the pandemic.

Health authorities on Australia's island state of Tasmania concluded Wednesday that returning Ruby Princess passengers likely triggered a hospital outbreak and 114 local Covid-19 cases. Twelve people died, including three passengers, and thousands were quarantined, authorities said, prompting the closing of two hospitals because of infections among staff and patients.

New Zealand is considering its own investigation into whether the cruise line gave misleading information to health authorities about illnesses on board, including at a stop in Napier, where authorities say the ship's visit led to a cluster of cases. Health officials have attributed 22 local cases to the cruise. Princess Cruises declined to comment on the matters for this article.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

FDA Authorizes Emergency Use of Gilead Drug for Covid-19 Patients (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 4:31 PM, Michelle Hackman and Thomas M. Burton, Neutral] The Food and Drug Administration authorized the emergency use of the drug remdesivir in Covid-19 patients after researchers reported that it shortened the recovery times in people who have fallen ill from the new coronavirus.

The FDA action limits the use of the drug, produced by Gilead Sciences Inc., for only through the duration of the pandemic, but health regulators could grant full approval if more benefits emerge from a large study by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and other clinical trials under way.

The institute said that a preliminary analysis of its study showed that hospitalized Covid-19

patients taking remdesivir had a speedier recovery than patients taking placebo—though the reported benefit was moderate, with remdesivir patients recovering in 11 days, or four days faster than the placebo group.

Remdesivir, an antiviral drug administered intravenously and previously tested as a treatment for Ebola, is among the most closely watched experimental treatments for Covid-19, and is being studied in multiple clinical trials around the world. The drug is the first to show a benefit in treating Covid-19 in a major clinical trial.

President Trump, speaking in the Oval Office Friday next to Gilead Chief Executive Daniel O'Day, called the drug "the hot thing" and "an important treatment for hospitalized coronavirus patients."

The president has said he had urged the FDA to grant the drug emergency approval.

"We feel a tremendous responsibility—we're humbled by this being an important first step for hospitalized patients," Mr. O'Day said.

With emergency approval granted, Gilead can work with the government to directly ship the drug to hospitals with the greatest need, Mr. O'Day, told The Wall Street Journal earlier this week.

Gilead expects to manufacture 1.5 million doses by the end of May, or up to 210,000 treatment courses, assuming that most patients are treated for five days, and the company would donate the supply to hospitals and doctors free of charge, Mr. O'Day said. He declined to say how much Gilead might charge for remdesivir that it manufactures after June.

The FDA's standards for an emergency-use authorization aren't as high as they are for its typical drug approvals. Emergency authorizations provide speedy access to treatments for serious diseases during a health crisis. So far, remdesivir's use for Covid-19 has been limited to patients in clinical trials or for those whose doctors were able to make the case for its compassionate use.

Anthony S. Fauci, the Institute's director and the government's leading infectious-disease doctor, said in an interview that the reduction in time to recovery was "highly statistically significant." A data safety and monitoring board analyzed the trial data on Monday and shared its findings with the investigators in the study.

Preliminary analysis of 468 recovered patients showed that patients on remdesivir took a median time of 11 days to recover from their disease, whereas those on placebo took 15 days, a difference of 31%. Recovery, defined as a patient being well enough to leave the hospital or to return to normal activity, is a standard measure in flu studies, the NIAID said in its discussion of the research.

The results so far also pointed in a positive direction regarding the death rate. Among the roughly 1,060 patients enrolled in the study, there was an 8.0% death rate among the remdesivir patients, versus 11.6% in the placebo group. The results weren't considered robust enough to be clinically significant, but data from the full study will continue to be

analyzed. About 485 patients in the study are still being evaluated because they haven't recovered or died yet.

The study is headed by Andre Kalil, a professor of internal medicine at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. It encompasses 68 sites, of which 47 are in the U.S. and 21 in European and Asian countries. Full results, including rates of adverse events, haven't yet been published.

The research demonstrates, Dr. Kalil said in an interview, "not only that high-quality science can be done in the middle of a pandemic, but also that new therapies can be successfully discovered to treat patients severely affected by Covid-19."

Two antimalaria drug, chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine, already have emergency-use authorizations from the FDA, though the evidence supporting their expanded access was thinner. Both drugs are also undergoing clinical study.

Mr. Trump and members of his administration initially touted their use in Covid-19 treatment, but the FDA last month issued a warning against their use in nonhospital settings after they were linked to serious heart problems.

The NIAID study of remdesivir was a large randomized, controlled trial, the gold standard in drug research, lending it added prominence for U.S. health regulators. A separate recent study in China posted negative results for the drug, but that study's researchers urged more testing because their trial was stopped early due to problems recruiting subjects as the pandemic slowed there.

Trade

Coronavirus Slows But Won't Halt Shipping's Focus on Global Trade (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 5:30 AM, Costas Paris, Neutral]

The coronavirus pandemic has exposed the fragile nature of businesses and economies built on the flow of goods around the world, with supply chains rattled by factory shutdowns, expensive ships sitting idle and cargo terminals closed for the lack of trade.

That has led to growing calls by world leaders to rein in global supply lines and bring more manufacturing back to domestic markets. But the operators of the mammoth vessels that are the backbone of the trading economy aren't banking on a retreat from globalization soon.

The owners of ships, from the hulking bulk carriers that haul iron ore and other metals to the improbably large container ships that ferry retail goods and manufacturing parts across oceans, have slimmed down their sailings in response to the global downturn. But for seagoing companies, the pandemic is a detour from entrenched strategies, not a change of course.

That is because they believe the enormous production network China has built over the past 20 years, a sprawling system of factories that churns out electronics, toys, clothing,

medicine and industrial goods for the rest of the world, will remain a driving force of trade.

"China will continue to be the world's factory because nothing else comes even close," said Peter Sand, chief shipping analyst at industry trade body BIMCO. "They built a massive logistics ecosystem that keeps global trade ticking, and they are really good at it."

With China's labor costs around four times lower than those of the U.S., according to the World Bank, and its distribution channels designed to facilitate mass exports, setting up factories in the West to replace Chinese goods or make up for temporary production lapses would be a daunting proposition.

China's maritime infrastructure on its own would be all but impossible to duplicate in Western countries.

China boasts seven of the world's 10 biggest ports, including that of Shanghai. The runaway leader in terms of volumes, the Port of Shanghai handles nearly three times more containers every year than the top U.S. gateway at the neighboring ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach combined.

Shipping companies have adapted to the China volumes by deploying a special class of container ships that are as long as three football fields and that can each move 23,000 containers.

These vessels are shared even among rival operators to move cargo and make port calls, cutting the cost of moving boxes by about a third from that of the earlier class of big ships, provided they are full.

Cratering demand from the Covid-19 lockdowns has left many of those ships sailing half empty or shuffled into storage. But operators aren't looking to replace them with anything smaller.

"There are some factories for medicine, medical equipment and masks that are based only in China," said a spokesman for German liner Hapag-Lloyd AG. "That might change if companies feel that they are dependent on a single location, but globalization will by no means be withdrawn and neither will those ships."

Most operators see a gradual economic turnaround after the Coronavirus carnage. This means the big ships will wait for longer to fill up and make fewer port calls that could push back deliveries for scores of products.

"We don't see a fast, V-shaped recovery," the Hapag-Lloyd spokesman said. "We have to wait and see how the routes will recover. It will take some time, but we are expecting a good recovery in the fourth quarter."

The top 10 container lines are looking at steep losses in the third quarter. For Hapag-Lloyd, this means postponing its order for six new ultralarge ships—to add to the six it already has—to next year.

"The industry will see the financial effects of the lockdowns from March and April in June

and June and July. So the third quarter will be the most difficult," the Hapag-Lloyd spokesman said. "But we need the big ships, because the world will reopen and volumes will pick up. That model won't change."

Executives at other operators said they had received many complaints about long delivery delays during the Chinese lockdown, when handling at China's ports ground nearly to a halt. The chief operating officer of a big Asia liner said, "We brainstorm together with clients looking for possible supply-chain alternatives. But honestly I don't think there are any."

China's role as a global producer and supply-chain heavyweight was reflected in an American Chamber of Commerce in China survey conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP in March. More than 70% of survey respondents said they had no plans to relocate production and supply-chain operations outside the country because of the pandemic.

"In contrast to some global narratives, our China-based data suggests that the majority of our members won't be packing up and leaving China soon," Alan Beebe, president of AmCham China, said in a statement.

Instead, he said, the group expects "to see companies adopting a 'China + 1' strategy as a way to diversify supply-chain risks while tapping into China market opportunities."

African free trade deal launch unlikely this year, AfCFTA Secretary-General says (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 11:21 AM, Libby George, Neutral]

A blockbuster African trade deal is unlikely to be implemented before early next year, an official said on Friday, after the disruption caused by the new coronavirus made the current July 1 deadline unworkable.

Wamkele Mene, Secretary-General of the African Continental Free Trade Area, told Reuters that while only the heads of state of the 55-member AfCFTA could sanction changes to the deadlines, the cancelled summit between leaders planned for May in South Africa left few options.

"It is only after the summit that you can say we have a new trading date. The next opportunity of a summit is on 2 January 2021," Mene said.

The continental free-trade zone would, if successful, become the largest since the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1994, stitching 1.3 billion people together in a \$3.4 trillion economic bloc.

Mene's role is effectively chief adviser to government leaders, who hold the exclusive right to approve all parts of the deal and its implementation.

He has advised them to defer the July 1 implementation deadline due to the extraordinary circumstances.

It would have required nations to liberalize at least 97% of their tariff lines and 90% of imports. Mene is instead advising them to allow free movement of goods, despite borders

being closed to human traffic as part of virus containment efforts, and to allow zero duties on 40 specific goods that would help combat the virus, such as soap, disinfectant and personal protective gear.

"The current circumstances simply are not conducive to the comprehensive trade we had imagined," he said.

On the advice of the African Centre for Disease Control, the final phase of in-person trade negotiations were halted in March. This cut off two months of crunch-time talks over technical details that would have seen hundreds of negotiators spending 17-hour days passing thousands of documents back and forth, whilst translating between the bloc's four official languages.

Moving these discussions online, Mene said, is unrealistic.

"The technical difficulties are immense," he said. "I'm not convinced...that doing them over video conference is feasible."

He said efforts would be redoubled once negotiators could meet in person, and that African leaders are fully committed to the deal.

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[China] Treasuries Rise After Trump Renews Threat of China Trade War (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/1/2020 7:23 AM, Anooja Debnath, 6400K, Neutral]

Treasuries climbed after U.S. President Donald Trump revived his attack on China, speculating it could have spread the coronavirus and threatening trade tariffs.

Haven demand pushed U.S. bonds higher along with the dollar and yen. Benchmark yields headed for their first drop in three days, with dismal corporate news and deteriorating economic data adding to the gloom. Trump was also said to be exploring blocking a government retirement fund from investing in Chinese equities on grounds of it being a security risk.

This is shifting focus from the virus back to a potential breakdown in relationship between the world's two largest economies, according to Peter Chatwell, head of multi-asset strategy at Mizuho International Plc.

"If this escalates then it can cause material harm to sentiment, and flatten U-shaped recovery hopes to more of a L-shape," London-based Chatwell said. "I would expect this to drive a large bout of risk-off, pushing U.S. Treasury yields lower, and may also mean the Federal Reserve increases its monetary support, having slowed it from its recent peak."

Yields on longer-dated bonds fell further, flattening the curve, with those on 10-year Treasuries down three basis points to 0.61% as of 12:00 p.m. in London. A gauge for the dollar rose as much as 0.4%, poised to end its longest losing run in a month, with the greenback up 0.6% against the offshore yuan.

Mizuho's Chatwell sees U.S. 10-year yields falling to 0.25% by July, even without a flare up in the trade war.

If the dispute is reignited, "zero would not be far away, but I would expect the more significant impact would be to flatten the U.S. Treasury curve down to distressed levels," he said.

A trade war couldn't come at a worse time, analysts said, given the global economy is grappling with recessionary fears. The pandemic has severely hampered supply chains and hurt otherwise robust businesses. Amazon.com Inc. saw profits shrink and warned it may incur a loss.

Uncertainty created by U.S.-China trade spats will lower global gross domestic product by 0.6% by 2021 relative to a no-trade-war scenario, Bloomberg Economics predicted last September, before the pandemic shuttered the global economy.

"The last thing the financial market needs now as it grapples with COVID-19 is a renewal of the trade war between the U.S. and China," said Derek Halpenny, the head of global market research at MUFG. "Given the scale of the COVID-19 impact there is certainly a high risk of geopolitical tensions escalating considerably as lockdowns reverse, and now this could include the U.S. imposing additional trade tariffs on China."

[China] Currencies fall as Sino-U.S. trade concerns resurface (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 4:28 AM, Ambar Warrick, 5304K, Neutral]

Emerging market currencies slipped on fears of a renewed Sino-U.S. trade war on Friday, amid thin trading volumes as most financial markets in Europe, Africa and Asia were closed for Labour Day.

U.S. President Donald Trump on Thursday threatened fresh tariff action against China over the coronavirus outbreak.

The move set a dour tone for future negotiations, given that Washington and Beijing were yet to fully de-escalate their nearly two year-long trade war, with a phase-one deal in 2019 serving only as a placeholder.

Russia's rouble and the South African rand fell more than 1% each to the dollar. The MSCI's index of developing world currencies retreated 0.5%, having gained 0.6% in April.

"This is likely to put a serious dent in the head-scratching, math-defying risk-on rally we have seen for much of the week," Michael Every, global strategist at Rabobank, wrote in a note.

"...(as) now month-end positioning is out of the way, it has the potential to open up an entire new phase of USD buying vs. EM in particular."

He added that the Chinese yuan would not be spared from the pressure, in offshore and onshore trade.

While emerging market currencies had benefited from some recovery in risk appetite over the past month, a renewed Sino-U.S. trade tiff could exacerbate the economic damage caused by the coronavirus and result in massive capital outflows from the developing world.

South Africa's economy, which was already in recession prior to the outbreak, is expected to contract by 5.8% in 2020. The outbreak is expected to weigh heavily on developing markets that lack the fiscal strength to combat the economic shock.

Central European currencies such as the Hungarian forint and the Czech koruna fell to the euro after the European Central Bank held back from providing another hit of stimulus to the economy.

Data also showed the euro zone economy shrinking at a record rate in the first quarter.

[China] Offshore yuan tumbles after Trump tariff threat against China (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 4:31 AM, Sujata Rao, 5304K, Negative]

The Chinese yuan slumped 0.7% against the dollar in offshore trade, its biggest drop in six weeks, after U.S. President Donald Trump threatened new tariffs on Beijing as a retaliatory measure for the coronavirus outbreak.

Trump said on Thursday he was confident COVID-19 may have originated in a Chinese virology laboratory.

The comments reflected his frustration over the pandemic, which has cost tens of thousands of lives in the United States alone, sparked an economic contraction and is threatening his chances of re-election in November.

The offshore yuan posted its biggest one-day fall since mid-March and fell to a one-month low of 7.13 per dollar. Mainland Chinese markets were closed for a holiday on Friday.

ISIS

[Egypt] Islamic State claims responsibility for Egypt's Sinai attack (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 2:43 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Islamic State on Friday claimed responsibility for an attack on an Egyptian military vehicle in North Sinai province that killed and wounded several military personnel, the group's Amaq news agency reported.

The attack occurred on Thursday south of Bir al-Abd city in the Northern Sinai region. Egypt's military said that 10 military personnel were killed or wounded in a blast targeting an armoured vehicle.

Amaq said Islamic State militants targeted an Egyptian army armoured vehicle yesterday in Bir al-Abd by detonating an explosive device, without giving any evidence or details on how many were involved.

Egypt has been fighting Islamist insurgents who have killed hundreds of police and soldiers

in the northern part of the Sinai Peninsula since the ousting of Mohamed Mursi of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2013 following mass protests against his rule.

Near East & North Africa

Turkey Lashes Out at U.A.E. For Supporting Libya 'Coup Plotters' (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 3:47 AM, Asli Kandemir, 6400K, Neutral]

Turkey accused the United Arab Emirates of supporting "coup plotters" and destabilizing the region after the Gulf country renewed its backing for General Khalifa Haftar, who leads an army based in eastern Libya that's set siege to the capital, Tripoli.

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Hami Aksoy said in a statement late Thursday that the U.A.E.'s criticism of Turkey was an attempt to cover up its "hypocritical policies."

"For years, the U.A.E. has been providing putschists in Libya with weapons, military equipment and mercenaries," Aksoy said. He accused the country of also disturbing peace and stability in Yemen, Syria, and the wider region.

Ankara has been backing the United Nations-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli against the onslaught by Haftar, an eastern commander backed by the U.A.E., Egypt, and Russian mercenaries.

"We invite the U.A.E. government to renounce its hostile attitude towards Turkey and to know its place," Aksoy said. He said stability and security could be achieved by supporting a Libyan political agreement and the Government of National Accord.

[Iran] Iran Satellite Launch Reveals Gains in Missile Program (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 8:57 AM, Sune Engel Rasmussen, Neutral]

When Iran launched its first military satellite into orbit last week, commanders in the control center erupted in cheers, some of them wearing surgical masks to protect against the new coronavirus, others kissing the bare cheeks of their comrades.

"Thanks to God, today we are a superpower," Brig. Gen. Amir-Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' aerospace force, declared the next day.

While the scenes on state television on April 22 marked a foray into space, they revealed something more: the use of technology that can be developed into missiles with the potential to reach Europe and the U.S.

The launch marked the coming out of a military program that Tehran has kept mostly under wraps for a decade. U.S. officials and arms-control experts say that for Iran, following a path similar to North Korea's, the satellite program likely serves as a guise for the development of intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"It is a very sophisticated program with very sophisticated technology," said Fabian Hinz, a research associate at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies in Monterey, Calif., said of the satellite. "They can move beyond this if they want."

There are strong indications that the Revolutionary Guard's space program is aimed at acquiring long-range ballistic missile technology, he added.

The key piece of technology on display was the rocket carrying the satellite, which used a motor with several features that were new for Iran. Those included a light carbon fiber casing and a moving nozzle for flight control that is also used in long-range ballistic missiles.

The rocket's motor also used solid fuel, rather than liquid, enabling the use of smaller missiles and more mobile launch vehicles that would be less exposed to enemy airstrikes and could be deployed on short notice.

"We can do this from anywhere in the country," Gen. Hajizadeh said on state television the day after the launch.

The first stage of the rocket used a liquid-fueled Ghadr missile, which Iran has used several times in the past. It has a range of about 2,000 kilometers (1,243 miles).

An intercontinental ballistic missile has a range of at least 5,500 kilometers. The rocket used by Iran last week can be converted into this type of weapon relatively easily, arms-control experts say.

Iran's civilian space program uses outdated liquid-fuel technology, which requires vehicles that are less mobile and less viable for weapons systems.

The launch of the satellite, called Nour—or "Light"—also occurred with no warning. The surprise recalled North Korea's 2017 test of its first intercontinental ballistic missile after years of secretive development while under international pressure to disarm. Concern about North Korea's program, from enemies such as the U.S. and its biggest patron, China, stemmed mainly from the risk that the reclusive dictatorship might fit a nuclear warhead on the missile.

The international community has sought for decades to stop Iran's leadership from obtaining nuclear weapons, most notably with the 2015 nuclear deal that imposed limits on Tehran's nuclear enrichment in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Intercontinental ballistic missiles remain a red line for the six world powers that signed the deal with Tehran. A United Nations resolution linked to the accord calls on Iran to not undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons. Four of them—the U.S., U.K., France and Germany—condemned Iran's satellite launch last week.

"This week's launch of a military satellite...makes clear what we have said all along: Iran's space program is neither peaceful nor entirely civilian," U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement issued Saturday.

When the Trump administration withdrew from the nuclear deal in 2018, it said the accord didn't do enough to curb Iran's conventional military capabilities, including its missile

program. The U.S. subsequently imposed economic sanctions on Iran and designated the Revolutionary Guard as a terrorist organization.

Tehran says the Nour satellite was intended for peaceful purposes and didn't violate the nuclear agreement, which doesn't prohibit satellite launches. Foreign Minister Javad Zarif cited the U.N. Security Council resolution regarding the Iran nuclear deal, saying on Twitter: "Iran neither has nukes nor missiles 'DESIGNED to be capable of carrying' such horrific arms."

Arms control experts doubt Iran will stop developing more sophisticated missile technology. As a next step, Iran is likely to develop its solid-fuel technology for the missile, which is in the first stage of the launch rocket, according to Jeffrey Lewis, an arms control expert with the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

Satellite imagery showed that Iran had already conducted tests in the desert of larger engines for possible future use, Mr. Lewis said.

"It's quite plausible that within the next few years, Iran will test a system that can be used as a missile, which can reach most of Europe," he said.

The Nour satellite launch marked a comeback for the Revolutionary Guard's space program. In 2011, an explosion killed the architect behind Iran's ballistic missile program, Hassan Tehrani Moghaddam, along with over a dozen senior personnel. Iran said it was an accident, and afterward kept the program out of the limelight.

In recent months, the Guards have become more open about promoting their space achievements. In late 2019, the IRGC released footage featuring Mr. Moghaddam standing in front of a large, solid-fuel motor—a key component in intercontinental ballistic missiles—followed by footage in February of the Salman motor, which was used last week.

U.S. sanctions meant to curb Iran's military ambitions have forced it to cut its military spending, which shrunk 15% in 2019, to \$12.6 billion, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

To advance its military technology, Iran continues to invest heavily in its premier security force. In Iran's 2020 budget, the Revolutionary Guard was allocated a 22% increase to \$4.4 billion from about \$3.6 billion, despite overall cuts to the defense budget. Spending for the military space program wasn't disclosed.

Iran is unlikely to risk a military confrontation with the U.S. or wreck relations with European countries that provide tenuous links to global markets. As has been the case with its nuclear program, Iran is likely to adopt a gradual step-by-step approach to gain political leverage in dealings with Western countries, analysts said. The launch of the Nour satellite was the latest such move.

"If they manage to develop these capabilities, and are willing to put them on the table," said Mr. Hinz, the arms control expert, "it would give them an insane amount of leverage."

[Iran] Iran condemns Germany's ban on Hezbollah activity (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 7:15 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Iran has condemned Berlin's ban of Hezbollah activity in Germany and its designation of the Iranian-backed Lebanese group as a terrorist organization, saying the move serves U.S. and Israeli interests, Iranian state media reported on Friday.

German police on Thursday raided mosque associations alleged to be close to Hezbollah and banned all the group's activity on its soil after designating it a terrorist organization, a much-anticipated step long urged by Israel and the United States.

"It appears that certain countries in Europe are adopting their stances without considering the realities in the West Asia region and by paying regard only to the objectives of the propaganda machine of the Zionist regime and the confused U.S. regime," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Musavi said in a statement late on Thursday.

He criticized the German government for accusing Hezbollah "of promoting armed struggle with terrorist means." He said the group was "an official and legitimate" member of the Lebanese government and parliament and a force of "political stability."

According to the German Interior Ministry, the ban means that Hezbollah symbols cannot be shown at gatherings and in publications or in the media and Hezbollah assets can be seized. Because it is a foreign organisation, it is not possible to ban and dissolve it, the ministry said in a statement.

Israel, which with the United States had been pushing Germany to ban the group, praised the move. Israel urged other European Union countries to take similar action.

The EU classifies Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist group, but not its political wing. Britain introduced legislation in February of last year, before it left the EU, that classified Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.

[Iran] Iran death toll from coronavirus rises by 63 to 6,091: Health Ministry (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 5:49 AM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

Iran's death toll from the outbreak of the new coronavirus increased by 63 in the past 24 hours to 6,091, Health Ministry spokesman Kianush Jahanpur said in a statement on state TV on Friday.

The total number of diagnosed cases of the new coronavirus in the Islamic Republic, one of the Middle Eastern countries hardest hit by the outbreak, has reached 95,646, including 2,899 in critical condition, he added.

[Iraq] Iraq's revenues plummet, raising fears of economic collapse (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 12:14 PM, Samya Kullab, Neutral]

Iraq's revenues plummeted in April amid a historic oil price crash, the Oil Ministry said Friday, raising concerns over how the country will cope severe financial shortfalls while struggling to contain the coronavirus pandemic.

The crude-dependent economy earned just \$1.4 billion in oil revenues last month, at an

average price of \$13.8 per barrel, according to data released by the ministry, a sixth of average figures from before the oil price crash. Oil traded between \$20 and \$30 in April, but Iraq sells its crude at a discounted rate.

The figures provide the first tangible indication of the desperate circumstances facing Iraq as officials struggle to determine how to implement austerity measures — expected to be widely unpopular — while operating on dwindling revenues.

Meanwhile, a political leadership vacuum also looms as Iraq's prime minister-designate faces opposition to forming a government and the current leadership is hobbled by the limits of its caretaker status.

Iraq officials are deliberating cuts to social benefits payments to public sector employees as a means to cut spending, but a decision has not been made over how much to cut and from whom. Compensation to the country's bloated public sector and pensions have historically been a drain on the state budget, amounting to nearly \$45 billion in annual expenditure.

Officials said payment spending could be cut by 30% to 50%.

In another cost-saving measure, the federal government recently decided to cut \$383 million in budget allocations to the semi-autonomous northern Kurdish region, which has an independent oil policy, citing a breach of the 2019 budget law under which the region is obligated to provide a share of its oil to the federal government in exchange for state funding to pay salaries.

A delegation from the Kurdish region recently arrived to Baghdad to negotiate the move.

Neither measure is expected to be enough to plug the deficit.

Iraq has also agreed to comply with OPEC measures to cut production by 23% in May and June, just over 1 million barrels per day for Iraq, which will additionally strain state spending.

While Iraqi state-run oil fields have typically shouldered cuts in the past, this time fields operated by international oil companies must participate, the ministry said, something that will require difficult negotiations over new contract terms.

[Israel] Israeli bank fined nearly \$1 billion in U.S. tax evasion, money laundering cases (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 4:00 AM, Steve Hendrix, 18460K, Negative]

Israel's largest bank will pay more than \$900 million after admitting it helped U.S. customers evade taxes in illegal offshore accounts and, separately, that it laundered money as part of a bribery scheme in the ranks of international soccer, U.S. prosecutors said Thursday.

Bank Hapoalim and its Swiss subsidiary pleaded guilty to aiding U.S. customers in setting up accounts under false names and avoiding U.S. reporting requirements for more than a decade, prosecutors said in a release, helping them evade taxes on more than \$7.6 billion in deposits. The banks have agreed to pay \$874 million in penalties, tax arrears and forfeited assets.

The payment represents the second-largest penalty in an ongoing crackdown of offshore tax evasion by the U.S. Department of Justice. Hapoalim's activities involved at least four senior executives, including two former members of the bank's board of directors, prosecutors said.

"Israel's largest bank, Bank Hapoalim, and its Swiss subsidiary have admitted not only to failing to prevent but actively assisting U.S. customers to set up secret accounts, to shelter assets and income, and to evade taxes," said U.S. Attorney Geoffrey S. Berman of the Southern District of New York. "The combined payment approaching \$1 billion reflects the magnitude of the tax evasion by the Bank's U.S. customers, the size of the fees the Bank collected to provide this illegal service, and the gravity of the illegal conduct."

A spokeswoman for Bank Hapoalim said the company had no comment on either investigation. The bank filed a required report on an event "outside the normal business of the corporation" with the Tel Aviv Stock Exchange Thursday, acknowledging the plea agreements and the amounts, totaling \$904 million, to be paid.

In the money laundering case, prosecutors said Bank Hapoalim and its Swiss affiliate had agreed to pay more than \$30 million in forfeited assets and fines after admitting that some employees helped launder millions in bribes and kickbacks paid to officials in FIFA, the international soccer body.

For five years between 2010 and 2015, according to prosecutors, the bank's Miami branch laundered illicit payments to officials that included Luis Bedoya, the former head of Colombian football and a member of FIFA's executive committee. Bedoya, who was banned from international soccer in 2015, is awaiting sentencing after pleading guilty to racketeering and wire fraud in New York.

In November 2015, Bedoya pleaded guilty to racketeering conspiracy and wire fraud conspiracy in the Eastern District of New York. He is awaiting sentencing.

Accounts in the Miami branch were also used by an Argentine sports marketing company to pay bribes and kickbacks to FIFA officials, according to prosecutors. The activities continued despite concerns raised by Hapoalim's own compliance teams, they said.

"Instead, the banks' relationship managers continued executing illicit bribe and kickback payments on behalf of Full Play," said a statement by the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, which has pursued the FIFA bribery scandal.

"For nearly five years, Bank Hapoalim employees used the U.S. financial system to launder tens of millions of dollars in bribe payments to corrupt soccer officials in multiple countries," Assistant Attorney General Brian A. Benczkowski said in the statement. "Today's announcement demonstrates the Department's commitment to holding financial institutions to account when they knowingly facilitate corruption and other criminal conduct."

In addition to its international business, Hapoalim is a familiar retail bank in Israel, with more than 250 branches across the country.

[Israel] Israel Mulls Coronavirus Points System After Lockdown (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 11:11 AM, Felicia Schwartz and Dov Lieber, Neutral]

As Israel begins to lift lockdowns aimed at containing the spread of the coronavirus, the government is considering a points-based system to help determine who should consider isolating even after measures are removed.

Governments across the world are studying different plans that would allow them to restart their economies while minimizing the risk of new infections and deaths. Most will be left on the drawing board, considered too controversial, but the proposals illustrate authorities' scramble to revive economic activity and limit the damage to society.

Clalit Health Services, a semipublic health-care provider that serves half of the Israeli population, has proposed a system that would assign points to help people determine their risk level and decide whether to remain at home after restrictions are lifted.

The government is considering the proposal among a number of others, according to officials.

Under Clalit's system, risk would be assigned based on the person's health and age. Pre-existing conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure would be worth a point each on one's risk profile, as would a history of smoking, obesity or hospitalizations.

Depending on the number of points, vulnerable people would be categorized as extreme-risk or high-risk. Anyone aged 70 or older would automatically be considered high-risk, with three points or more putting them in the extreme risk category and seeing them advised to stay at home. Those between 50 and 69 with two points would be considered high-risk, as would those under 50 with four points or more.

Clalit is deliberating whether to issue blanket recommendations for those considered high-risk or tailor advice depending on location and vocation. For example, kindergarten teachers might receive a different set of recommendations than desk workers in cubicles.

Clalit, which is advising the government on reopening procedures, proposes that the government should offer extra support to high-risk individuals to encourage them to isolate.

Ran Balicer, Clalit's chief innovation officer, said that Israeli authorities are already using a version of the points system to decide how to prioritize coronavirus tests for patients.

Israeli officials declined to comment on the points-based proposal. They say they are looking for creative ways to return life to a new normal as they come under pressure from businesses and workers to reopen the economy.

They cautioned that any system that singles out segments of society, including the elderly, could generate a backlash, and said the government was loath to require people to remain at home after the lockdowns are lifted. Instead, this system and others could help guide individuals' decisions, said government officials and executives at Clalit.

The pressure to strike the right balance between safeguarding public health and containing economic damage is high.

Israel's economy is expected to shrink 6.3% this year, according to the International Monetary Fund. The unemployment rate is currently 27% and could spike further if the lockdown continues, according to Israel's employment service.

Israel has imposed varying degrees of lockdown since March to curb the spread of the virus, with most stores closed and a ban on arrivals of foreigners and nonresidents. The country has reported 16,004 coronavirus cases, including 8,758 people who have recovered. Two hundred and twenty three have died.

Buoyed by data showing that more people have recovered than are currently infected and lower mortality rates than in many other countries, Israel is gradually reopening its economy, working in two-week increments.

Earlier this week, it reopened many businesses, including hair salons and barber shops. Gyms, restaurants, cafes and bars remain closed, except for takeout. A limited reopening of schools will begin Sunday.

The government is providing extra social services for the elderly and other vulnerable people, and is urging health-care providers to offer them separate hours to visit doctors. But it hasn't imposed any formal restrictions on them.

"We are recommending strongly that this population stay at home, but we are not forcing it," said Asher Salmon, director of international relations at the Ministry of Health. "There was a big debate whether by regulation we should ask them to avoid stepping out to the public. It didn't happen."

Clalit's Dr. Balicer is advising the Israeli government on its strategy for reopening the economy and has proposed the points-based model as a possible tool.

"One of our safety measures during the exit should be a differential policy for populations at risk," he said. "We need to have a new social contract with those populations to support them in this time of need."

Clalit itself is using a more complex model that scans a patient's entire health record and employs artificial intelligence to locate those at risk. Family physicians then contact high-risk patients, coach them on ways to protect themselves and offer access to at-home health care. They reached out to older Israelis early in the pandemic to help guide them in how to manage the risk.

The body serves about 52% of Israel's population and over 60% of its elderly population, Dr. Balicer said. The simplified model proposed to the government was developed for national use, he said.

Israel is currently using a purple badge system to decide whether workplaces can reopen. This scheme also recommends that older and at-risk people don't yet return to work.

Businesses in Israel have to self-certify that they meet purple badge standards, which require each business to assign someone to be responsible for coronavirus procedures.

That person must make sure no one gathers in kitchenettes and coffee areas and that employees eat separately. He or she also oversees temperature checks and arrangements for transportation for employees to ensure they don't all arrive at the same time. Officials said they are looking at how to apply these standards to larger venues, including malls.

[Israel] Muslims in Jerusalem Pray Outdoors Amid Virus Lockdown (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 10:55 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Muslims in Jerusalem are praying outside in small groups during the holy month of Ramadan as measures aimed at curbing the coronavirus pandemic remain in place, including a halt to prayers at the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, the third holiest site in Islam.

Prayers at Jerusalem's world-famous religious sites, sacred to Muslims, Christians and Jews, were halted or heavily restricted last month as Israel and the Palestinian Authority imposed sweeping lockdowns to prevent the spread of the virus.

Some regulations have been lifted in recent days, allowing many non-essential businesses to reopen. But the ban on large gatherings remains in place. Group prayers can only be held outside by up to 19 people standing at least two meters (yards) apart.

Ramadan usually brings tens of thousands of worshippers to the Al-Aqsa mosque and the adjacent Dome of the Rock for evening prayers known as "taraweeh." The site is administered by an Islamic endowment, which halted prayers there several weeks ago.

Al-Aqsa is the third holiest site in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. The sprawling esplanade is the holiest site for Jews, who refer to it as the Temple Mount because it was the location of the ancient Jewish temples.

Shops in Muslim-majority areas are required to close at 6 p.m. every night but can make deliveries. The measure is aimed at preventing people from gathering after the daily dawn-to-dusk fast. After nightfall, Muslims traditionally feast with family and friends.

Israel imposed similar measures to prevent gatherings during recent Jewish and national holidays. The Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the occupied West Bank, has also heavily restricted movement over the last six weeks.

The virus causes mild to moderate symptoms in most patients, who recover within a few weeks, but it can cause severe illness or death, particularly older people and those with underlying health problems.

Israel has reported more than 16,000 cases and 223 deaths. More than half of those infected in Israel have recovered. The Palestinian Authority has reported nearly 330 cases and two fatalities.

[Kuwait] Kuwait to provide full cooperation to India's mega evacuation plan to bring back its citizens (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [5/1/2020 12:58 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Kuwait will provide all cooperation to India's massive evacuation plan to bring back Indians

wanting to return to their country in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, the Gulf country's envoy here said on Friday.

The Indian government is working on a mega plan to deploy a raft of naval ships as well as military and commercial aircraft to evacuate thousands of Indians stranded in the Gulf and other regions after the nationwide lockdown ends, official sources had said on Wednesday.

The government has already reached out to several states asking them to make necessary arrangements for the Indians when they are brought back home under the multi-agency operation.

Kuwait Ambassador to India Jassem Al-Najem extended his gratitude and appreciation to the Indian government for the facilities provided to evacuate Kuwaiti citizens stranded in India last Friday and Saturday through Kuwait Airways airlines.

The Ambassador also thanked the Indian government for sending a 15-member medical team and providing two tonnes of medical equipment by a special military aircraft which reached Kuwait on April 11 as a humanitarian gesture to help fight the spread of COVID-19 pandemic.

The Indian medical team in coordination with its Kuwaiti counterparts carried out its work for two weeks, the Kuwaiti Embassy said in a statement.

The Ambassador highly appreciated the Indian government's gestures to continue supply of medicine including Paracetamol tablets and foods to Kuwait, the statement said.

Ambassador Al-Najem highlighted the Kuwaiti government's efforts to evacuate all illegal workers of different nationalities, including Indian nationals who were granted general amnesty by Kuwait and offered to send them back to their respective countries free of cost and by its own civil airlines.

Kuwait is looking forward to working with the Indian government to implement its massive evacuation plan to bring back the Indians who are willing to come back voluntarily to India after the complete lockdown ends, the statement said.

Earlier, the Ambassador had reiterated in a press statement made to the Kuwait News Agency lauding the historic relationship between Kuwait and India.

The joint committee meeting between the two countries was scheduled for the first quarter this year but due to the coronavirus, has forced postponement of the meeting and Kuwait and India are working on a new date mutually acceptable.

[Lebanon] Lebanese protest despite government's economic rescue plan (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 2:41 PM, Hassan Ammar, Neutral]

Hundreds of Lebanese rallied Friday outside the central bank in Beirut and elsewhere in the country, a day after the prime minister said he will seek a rescue program from the International Monetary Fund to deal with a spiraling economic and financial crisis.

The protesters criticized the government's handling of the unprecedented crisis that saw the local currency crash, devastate their savings and send prices and inflation soaring. Scuffles broke out outside a private bank and troops were seen beating and pulling away at least one protester.

The government "is not even providing the most basic needs," said a protester in Beirut, Ahmad Demashqia. There were also rallies in northern and southern Lebanon to commemorate May Day, the international Labor Day.

Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab on Friday signed the official request for assistance from IMF. He said the government has taken "the first step on the path to saving Lebanon from the deep financial pit." On Thursday, the Cabinet had adopted a long-awaited rescue plan.

But the protesters seemed skeptical. In the southern city of Sidon, 19-year-old Omar al-Mughrabi said the country needs radical change — not reform of failing or ineffective policies.

"Going to the IMF is not the solution," al-Mughrabi said. "We don't need any more debt than we already have."

Lebanon, one of the most indebted nations in the world, defaulted for the first time in March on its sovereign debt. Anti-government protests that erupted in October subsided during a nationwide lockdown since mid-March to blunt the spread of the coronavirus. Lebanon, a country of 5 million people, has reported only 729 cases and 24 deaths, and began to ease some virus restrictions this week.

Many of the protesters wore face masks against the virus.

The lockdown worsened the recession's sharp bite, increasing unemployment and popular resentment. In recent days, protesters ignored social distancing measures and calls to stay home to rally outside the central bank and private banks, setting off clashes with the security forces and the army. In the northern city of Tripoli, a protester was killed earlier this week.

Prices of basic goods have increased, in some cases by over 60%. The Lebanese pound, pegged to the dollar for 30 years, lost nearly 60% of its value.

With a stable national currency, the Lebanese had used their pound and the dollar interchangeably, many keeping their savings in dollars. To deal with a liquidity crunch and a massive imports bill, the central bank decreed that most withdrawals could only be in the local currency. The decision further weakened the pound.

[Lebanon] Lebanon banks reject rescue plan as government asks IMF for help (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 2:57 PM, Eric Knecht and Tom Arnold, Neutral]

An economic rescue plan that will form the basis of Lebanon's talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) was panned by banks on Friday as one that would "destroy

confidence" in the country.

The comments, which could hold sway with the IMF given banks are among the largest holders of Lebanon's debt, coincided with Beirut signing a request for assistance from the Fund on Friday in what Prime Minister Hassan Diab described as "a historic moment in the history of Lebanon".

The rescue plan, approved by Diab's government on Thursday, sets out tens of billions of dollars in financial sector losses and tough measures to claw out of a crisis that has seen the currency crash, unemployment soar, Lebanon default on its sovereign debt and street protests.

Some economists and diplomats welcomed the plan as a critical first step to recovery, but they were sceptical that ambitious reforms to cut public sector spending and overhaul the banking sector could be enacted after years of feet dragging.

"This means the onset of serious negotiations with the IMF so this is very important and good news because it removes a lot of uncertainty. Having said that, the issue in Lebanon has always been one of execution," former economy minister Nasser Saidi said of the 53-page plan passed on Thursday.

Lebanon's banking association said it could in "no way" endorse a plan it was not consulted on despite being "a key part of any solution".

The association called on members of parliament to reject it in part for infringing on private property rights. The plan does not require the parliament to pass it.

"As laid out in the Plan, the domestic (bank) restructuring will further destroy confidence in Lebanon both domestically and internationally ...(and) is likely to deter investment in the economy thereby hindering any recovery prospects," the association's statement said.

A central plank of the plan rests on covering financial sector losses of roughly \$70 billion in part by a bank shareholder bail-in that would wipe out their capital and cash from large depositors that would be restored later.

The banking association called revenue and expenditure measures "vague" and not backed by a precise timeline, and said the plan did not address inflationary pressures that could lead to hyperinflation.

A source close to the banking sector said the IMF was likely to consult the banks on the rescue plan before moving forward. The source said the association was planning to present a plan of its own to the government in one to two weeks.

The government is hoping that with an IMF programme in hand, foreign donors will release about \$11 billion pledged at a Paris conference in 2018 which was tied to long-stalled reforms.

The rescue plan, which calls for an additional \$10 billion in external support over five years, also forms the backbone of talks with foreign bondholders that have yet to start after Beirut

defaulted on \$31 billion in Eurobonds in March.

"In large part its a big PR move for the government as there was a feeling that the government was starting to lose control of the narrative. This plan shows they're really trying to work towards something," said Nafez Zouk, emerging markets strategist at Oxford Economics.

A rapid slide in the Lebanese pound, which has lost more than half its value since October, has led to renewed violence over the past week, with a demonstrator killed in riots targeting banks that have frozen savers out of U.S. dollar deposits.

"Implementation is the hard bit, and Lebanon has consistently failed on this. Progress will only be possible with that, on the basis of greater political and public consensus," a Western diplomat told Reuters.

With measures such as recovering stolen assets abroad, the plan could take years to return funds to depositors while some economists say it places too heavy a burden on a banking sector that has helped finance decades of large state budget deficits.

"This is basically a takeover of the banking sector by the state. I don't understand how this will restore confidence," said Nassib Ghobril, chief economist at Byblos Bank. "When you go this way, where is lending going to come from?" Ghobril asked.

[Lebanon] Lebanon banking association rejects gov't rescue plan (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:18 PM, Eric Knecht, 5304K, Neutral]

Lebanon's banking association said on Friday it can in "No way" endorse a government economic rescue plan it was not consulted on and which would destroy confidence in Lebanon, deter investment, and hurt any chance for recovery.

In a statement, the association called the plan's revenue and expenditure measures "Vague" and not backed by a precise timeline for implementation, and said it did not address inflationary pressures that could lead to hyperinflation.

The association urged MPs to reject it, in part because it violated private property, and said it would soon present a plan of its own that could restore growth.

[Syria] Explosions hit Syrian military warehouse, 10 civilians hurt (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 10:16 AM, Sarah el Deeb, Negative]

Explosions at a Syrian military base housing a weapons warehouse Friday were the result of "human error" while moving ammunition, the defense ministry said. Ten civilians outside the base were hurt, a local doctor said.

However, the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitoring group, said the blasts at the base near the central city of Homs were caused by a suspected Israeli rocket attack. The group said Syrian air defenses were activated before the explosions, suggesting they were responding to an incoming attack.

The Observatory said the warehouse was used by Lebanon's Iran-backed militant

Hezbollah group, which is fighting alongside Syrian government forces in the country's nine-year civil war.

The Israeli military, which declined to comment, has in the past targeted Iranian and Iranian-backed targets in Syria, saying it won't tolerate Tehran's increasing influence along its borders.

There have recently been several reports of suspected Israeli strikes inside Syria, the last on Monday, when the Syrian military and state media said Israeli warplanes flying over Lebanon fired missiles toward areas near the Syrian capital, Damascus, killing three civilians. The Observatory said four Iran-backed fighters were also killed.

The divergent accounts for Friday's explosions could not be immediately reconciled. The Syrian government rarely acknowledges Iran and Iranian-backed groups, which have been instrumental in turning the tide of the war in favor of the government, use its military bases and facilities.

After the blasts, which were heard inside the city, smoke could be seen from a distance. The local health director, Hassan al-Guindi, told state media that 10 civilians were injured as they walked by the site.

The provincial governor, Talal Barazi, said the base houses a weapons warehouse. The Observatory said the explosions damaged the base and sent debris flying outside its perimeters.

Separately, Syrian state media reported late Thursday that Israeli helicopters flew over the occupied Golan Heights firing at unidentified targets and causing material damage.

Israel has acknowledged carrying out scores of airstrikes over the years, most aimed at alleged Iranian weapons shipments believed to be bound for Hezbollah. Israeli officials have expressed concerns Hezbollah is trying to establish production facilities for precision-guided missiles.

In recent weeks, suspected Israeli attacks included the targeting of Iranian-backed fighters in the desert near the central Syrian town of Palmyra, and an Israeli drone attack on a SUV carrying Hezbollah members close to the border with Lebanon.

In other developments Friday, residents in opposition-held northwest Syria, which is home to 3 million people, rallied against the al-Qaida-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham group, a day after its militants shot at demonstrators and killed a protester.

Thursday's demonstration was called to denounce the militants' plan to set up a crossing point between the opposition areas and towns and villages captured by government forces in March. The crossing was to help the militants' tax collection from the trade of goods between the areas. Taxation on otherwise smuggled goods are the main source of income for the al-Qaida-linked group.

The shots killed 41-year-old protester Salah Maree, who was buried Friday. Ezzeddin al-Idlibi, an activist who was at the protest in the town of Maarat al-Nassan on Thursday, said

Maree had already lost three of his children in the war and was a former political prisoner of the Syrian government.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the most powerful militant group in Syria's opposition-held areas, said it was "saddened" by the death and that it would suspend the opening of the crossing.

Although the group has sought to distance itself from the al-Qaida network, the U.S and Turkey have placed it on their list of terrorist groups.

[Syria] Syria says casualties in Homs blast, war monitor says Israel behind it (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 7:07 AM, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, 5304K, Neutral]

The Syrian army said on Friday a series of blasts at an ammunition depot east of Homs city led to casualties but was not caused by an attack as earlier announced, but a war monitor said it was the result of an Israeli strike.

The army said in a statement released on state television there were civilian losses without elaborating on details.

The U.K. based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said Israeli strikes on a military base run by Iranian-backed Lebanese Hezbollah, which lies on the Homs-Palmyra road, caused the series of blasts.

The war monitor echoed reports by residents of the area that the sounds of the explosions were heard across Homs city.

The attack follows overnight strikes by Israeli helicopters from the Israeli occupied Golan Heights on Iranian bases in southern Syria, according to the monitor and intelligence sources.

Syria announced after midnight Israel had attacked, but did not elaborate on the targets in Quneitra province. It rarely says Iranian bases are hit.

Israel in recent years has launched hundreds of attacks on Iranian-backed militias and their bases in Syria, where they have a large presence across the country.

Israel was stepping up its raids in Syria at a time when world attention and the region, including Syria, was distracted with tackling the new coronavirus, a regional intelligence source said.

[Syria] Coronavirus quarantine in Syria's northwest looks to shield most vulnerable (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 12:43 PM, Khalil Ashawi, 5304K, Neutral]

At a quarantine centre in war-torn northern Syria, doctors near the Turkish frontier are providing a first line of defence to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading to one of the world's most vulnerable populations.

The centre was set up last month in the countryside of Jisr al Shughour, part of the last

major pocket of the country still in rebel hands after nine years of war, where nearly a million people were driven from their homes this year.

The area has yet to record its first confirmed case of the coronavirus. But tests are scarce, medical infrastructure has crumbled, and doctors fear any outbreak in the overflowing camps for the displaced would lead to a humanitarian disaster.

The quarantine centre makes it possible for Syrians to return safely to the area from neighbouring Turkey, where more than 3,000 people have died of the virus so far.

"No one likes to be quarantined, but when you look at it as a way to save the lives of 4 million people, of course it is excellent for us," said Omar Al-Khaled, 27, who arrived at the centre this week from Turkey.

Fouad Moussa, the centre's 33-year-old director, said people coming from Turkey are taken by private car across the border and directly to the facility, where they enter a sterilisation room before being given a mattress and pillow.

During a visit by journalists, men under quarantine wearing medical masks were mostly playing video games on their phones on beds in a large dormitory room.

"The number of people arriving is increasing everyday. Each day we receive new groups, so we are requesting any support in order to set up other centres because of the growing numbers and tightness of the place," said Moussa.

The centre has brought some peace of mind to nervous families in northern Syria welcoming back relatives from Turkey, said Khaled.

"Personally, I was surprised by the capabilities of the centre. The place is sterilized four times a day, and they give us food to break our (Ramadan) fast...and masks and medical gloves are distributed on a daily basis," said Khaled.

[Yemen] Clashes in Yemen UNESCO site threaten rare species (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 8:53 AM, Ahmed Al-Haj, Neutral]

Explosions rocked Yemen's Socotra archipelago, a UNESCO World Heritage site, Friday, as an armed unit funded by the United Arab Emirates fought to wrest control of the provincial capital Hadebo, the former prime minister and witnesses said.

The unit is part of the UAE-backed separatist Southern Transitional Council, which declared self-rule earlier this week in the south, sparking fears of new violence in the country already mired in more than five years of civil war.

The governors of Socotra and several other southern provinces rejected the self-rule bid and voiced support for President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Yemen's internationally recognized leader who is based in the Saudi capital, Riyadh.

Witnesses said tanks and artillery pounded the mountainous district of Haybat, 20 kilometers (12.5 miles) outside of Hadebo early Friday as fighting raged between STC

forces and forces loyal to Hadi's government. Shells struck residential areas outside Hadebo.

A local radio journalist in Socotra said the Saudis deployed forces including armored vehicles to stop the clashes. He said for weeks government forces had been setting up checkpoints and clashing with the STC, carrying out raids and arresting militiamen plotting to take over the governor's office.

He said one government soldier was killed and others were wounded. "It's the first time ever we witness such violence," he said. "Since dawn, we have been hearing bombings and heavy gunfire." He and other residents spoke on condition of anonymity because of fear of retribution.

Socotra Gov. Ramzi Mahrous said in brief comments broadcast on state TV that his forces confronted the separatist militia and "managed to stop their advance."

Former Yemeni prime minister Ahmed Obeid bin Daghar, in a post on his official Twitter page, called for help and warned that the militia was trying to take control of the provincial capital "using all types of heavy weapons."

The fighting threatens to cause irreversible damage to Socotra, designated a UNESCO World Heritage site because of its rare Dragon Blood Tree, plant species, spices and marine life, many of which are found nowhere else.

The militias who are part of the Southern Transitional Council had been the on-the-ground allies of the United Arab Emirates, once Saudi Arabia's main coalition partner in the war against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

Last summer, the UAE announced it was ending its role in the conflict. However, observers believe the Gulf country continues to be active through its proxies. The STC raises the flag of the former communist state in the south and has pushed to again split the country in two, as it was from 1967 to 1990.

Before its withdrawal, the UAE set up a military base in Socotra, which enjoys a strategic location overlooking a vital international shipping lane, and taken control of the airport. It awarded Emirati citizenship to hundreds of residents and has recruited scores of others to help consolidate its grip over the island, raising tensions with Hadi. After protests from Hadi's government, Saudi Arabia deployed forces to the island, restoring relative calm.

The infighting threatens to exacerbate the grinding war in Yemen that has pushed the Arab world's poorest nation to the brink of famine and killed over 100,000 people.

[Yemen] Yemen records first coronavirus case in Taiz province as virus spreads (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 4:27 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Yemen reported the first case of the novel coronavirus in a third province on Friday, raising the number of diagnosed infections to seven with two deaths in one of the world's most vulnerable countries.

The United Nations says it fears the virus could be spreading undetected in the country where a five-year war has shattered health systems and left millions acutely malnourished.

"A new confirmed case of coronavirus was reported, the first in (southwestern) governorate of Taiz, in a man in his 40s," the national emergency coronavirus committee said in a Twitter post.

"The patient is receiving care at a quarantine centre and measures have been taken by the monitoring teams and the health department for those who interacted with him."

Yemen recorded its first case of COVID-19 in southern Hadharamout province on April 10. On Wednesday, it announced five infections in the southern port of Aden, with two deaths.

Yemen is already grappling with the world's largest humanitarian crisis caused by the war between a Saudi-led coalition and the Houthi group that ousted the government from power in the capital, Sanaa, in late 2014.

The World Health Organisation has said it fears the worst about the COVID-19 impact in Yemen as its population has some of the lowest levels of immunity and most acute vulnerability to disease compared with other countries.

Around 80% of the population, or 24 million people, rely on humanitarian aid and 10 million are at risk of starvation. Disease is rife and some like dengue fever share the same symptoms as the novel coronavirus, making it harder to detect.

Yemen is also split into rival power centres. On Wednesday the Aden-based government's emergency coronavirus committee voiced concern that Houthi officials were not admitting to a coronavirus outbreak in Sanaa. The group's health authorities said all suspected cases there had tested negative for COVID-19.

Europe and Eurasia

EU chief denies disinformation report was watered down for China (CNN)

CNN [5/1/2020 10:49 AM, Hannah Ritchie, Neutral]

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has denied allegations that the EU watered down a report on coronavirus disinformation after being pressured from China.

The allegations arose after Politico Europe quoted an excerpt from a draft version of the report on April 21, which explicitly accused China of running "a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image."

The report appears to have been delayed, and when published on April 24, the excerpt on China had been replaced with a watered-down version.

In an interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour, who asked von der Leyen if China had pressured the EU to change the report's language, the EU chief denied the allegation and

swiftly diverted her answer to the issue of lessons learned from the pandemic.

"No, this is an independent report done by the external service, and indeed what I think what we will have to do -- I was talking about lessons learned. If there's one lesson we've learned, that is we did not have robust data," she said.

When pressed again and asked whether the EU was self-censoring, von der Leyen denied the accusation and turned to the issue of unfit medical material coming out of China as an example of the EU being unafraid to criticize Beijing.

"No, not at all, what I think is important is that we have [made] very clear, our position. And you know that there were many critical voices concerning material coming from China that was not fit for purpose. So, there are points when there are critics that have to be issued at the level of the European Union. It happens, and we do that, and there are other points that go well," she said.

After the report's publication, The New York Times cited EU diplomatic sources saying that China had put pressure on the bloc. The Times also published parts of a leaked email that showed how the draft report was on the verge of publication when Esther Osorio, a senior adviser to the European Union's top diplomat, Josep Borrell, ordered it be held.

When CNN reached out to Osorio for comment, a spokesperson from the EU's Foreign Affairs and Security Policy responded, saying that the emails published by the New York Times article were reported out of context. The spokesperson, Virginie Battu-Henriksson, did not respond to the question of whether Osorio personally called for the draft to be held.

She denied that the report's language had been changed and said, rather, that the original document cited by Politico was not actually a draft report.

"The allegations seen in some media refer to the fact that there are two different documents. One, the Information Environment Assessment, is a document for internal information and consumption. The other one, the EEAS special report, is for public consumption. The public reports often contain similar information to the internal documents, as it was the case with the report published on Friday and the last Information Environment Assessment," she said.

The original excerpt explicitly accusing China of a disinformation campaign was replaced with a softened sentence: "Official and state-backed sources from various governments, including Russia and -- to a lesser extent -- China, have continued to widely target conspiracy narratives and disinformation."

Borrell faced questions from European lawmakers on Thursday over whether the document was delayed and then revised.

"Did China put pressure? Look, it's clear and evident that China expressed their concerns," Borrell said during the specially convened meeting of the European Parliament's foreign affairs committee.

"I can assure you that no changes have been introduced to the report published last week

to allay the concerns of a third party, in this case China."

China's foreign affairs spokesman Geng Shuang would not confirm that China had pressured the EU over the report when asked at a press conference on Monday, claiming the country was a "victim rather than a source of disinformation."

"It is fair to say that we earned the international recognition with our arduous efforts, sincerity and fulfillment of responsibilities, not through spreading disinformation."

Disinformation and recriminations are not good for global cooperation in this fight. The international community should cooperate in good faith to assist each other, vanquish this pandemic at an early date, and jointly safeguard global public health security."

China is the EU's second-largest trading partner and the EU is China's biggest trading partner. China and the EU trade on average over €1 billion (\$1.1 billion) a day.

The pressure on von der Leyen comes as she faces pointed criticism over the bloc's failures to establish an early coordinated coronavirus response.

The first coronavirus case arrived on the continent in France on January 24, according to the European Center for Disease Prevention and Control, yet it wasn't until March 2 that the commission even created a coronavirus emergency response group.

A few days later, as Italy faced crippling medical shortages and a climbing death toll, member states, including Germany, France and the Czech Republic, banned the export of medical protective gear to avoid shortages at home, and no EU country initially responded to Italy's call for aid via the bloc's emergency mechanism.

"At the beginning of the crisis it was difficult, because member states started to withdraw into themselves ... and we had border closures and we had export bans," von der Leyen told Amanpour.

"This looking inwards and trying to protect their own people is a reflex that is understandable. It did a lot of harm, but it was understandable ... it took a few days, and then everybody realized that we can only fight this virus together," she added.

Von der Leyen also spoke to Amanpour about a vaccine-pledge event organized by the Commission, which will begin on Monday.

Known as the "Coronavirus Global Response," the event will attempt to kick-start international cooperation by getting G20 governments to pool resources for the development of coronavirus treatments and vaccines.

"The only way to fight this virus is to find a vaccine, and not only to find and produce the vaccine, but to make sure it is deployed in every corner in the world. This is a big global endeavor, and we need money for that," von der Leyen said.

When pressed on the US government's decision not to take part in the pledge effort, von der Leyen said she still hoped the country would consider joining the effort.

"Well, the United States are doing a lot domestically ... they are informed about our global initiative, and I hope that, in one or the other way, they decide to join," she said.

[Azerbaijan] Azerbaijan extends lockdown measures until May 31, shops set to reopen (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 11:42 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Azerbaijan has extended partial lockdown measures to tackle an outbreak of the coronavirus until May 31 as the number of cases reached 1,854 in the country, the government said on Friday.

The government also said it would progressively begin lifting some restrictions on commercial activity starting next week, allowing shops, beauty salons and hairdressers to reopen in the capital Baku and in certain other regions.

Azerbaijan, the third largest oil producer among ex-Soviet countries after Russia and Kazakhstan, has felt the economic impact of low oil prices and an outbreak of the new coronavirus in the country.

The country of around 10 million has so far recorded 25 deaths from the virus.

[Bulgaria] Quake with 4.5 magnitude felt in Bulgaria's capital (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 11:00 AM, Staff, Neutral]

An 4.5-magnitude earthquake shook central Bulgaria on Friday but there were no reports of any injuries or damage.

The quake occurred just after 2 p.m. local time (1101 GMT) in the Balkan nation. Its epicenter was 10 kilometers (6 miles) north of Bulgaria's second largest city of Plovdiv at a shallow depth of two kilometers (slightly over one mile), according to the National Geophysical Institute.

The temblor was followed by a series of minor aftershocks and was felt in the capital, Sofia, and elsewhere in the Balkan country.

[France] Life won't be normal after May 11, Macron tells French (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 7:41 AM, John Irish, Neutral]

President Emmanuel Macron warned on Friday that the end of the national lockdown on May 11 would only be a first step as France looks to pull out of the crisis created by the outbreak of the coronavirus.

Traditional Labour Day protests that usually see thousands of demonstrators on streets were cancelled this year due to the virus outbreak that has killed 24,000 people across France.

"May 11 will not be the passage to normal life. There will be a recovery that will need to be reorganised," Macron said in a speech at the presidential palace after a meeting with horticulturists. "There will be several phases and May 11 will be one of them."

Unions organised online activities for labour day, asked people to bang pans and put out banners on their balconies to mark the day. Police disbanded a small protest in central Paris.

It was in stark contrast to this time last year when tens of thousands of labour union and "yellow vest" protesters were on the streets across France demonstrating against Macron's policies.

The protests were marred after dozens of masked and hooded anarchists clashed with riot police.

Macron, in a message on his Twitter account, lauded the traditional parades and French workers, urging unity and solidarity during these tough times.

But highlighting the rocky path ahead, union officials and far-right opposition leader Marine Le Pen were quick to underscore their concerns amid the crisis.

"Even if today we are confined, our demands are not," Yves Veyrier, head of the Force Ouvriere union, told France Inter radio.

Le Pen pressed ahead with her party's annual May 1 tradition of honouring mediaeval heroine Joan of Arc by laying a wreath at the golden statue of the 15th century warrior in central Paris, despite the lockdown.

"I've never said I had doubts about the confinement. I just said that complete confinement was the solution when we failed to prevent the epidemic," Le Pen, wearing a mask, told reporters.

"A successful end to the lockdown is with tests for everybody, masks for everybody and I am opposed to schools opening before September."

From May 11, schools will gradually reopen and businesses will be free to resume operations after the country's 67 million population has been in confinement since mid-March.

The government has said it is prepared to slow or delay the unwinding of the lockdown if the virus infection rate spikes markedly higher, with administrative departments divided into 'red' and 'green' zones.

Opposition lawmakers and some experts have questioned the practicalities of schools reopening, the broad use of public transport and the tough measures that will continue to impact areas less affected by the virus.

Question marks have also been raised about the government's ability to reach its target of 700,000 COVID-19 tests by May 11, their implementation and the possible isolation of people who tested positive for the illness.

[France] France's death toll from COVID-19 rises by 218 to 24,594 (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 2:19 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The number of people who have died from coronavirus infection in France rose by 218 to 24,594 on Friday, while hospitalizations for the disease and people in ICU units continued to decline, France's public health chief said on Friday.

Jerome Salomon said the death toll had increased 0.9% compared with Thursday, a lower rate of increase than over the previous 24 hours.

The number of people in hospital with the COVID-19 infection fell further to 25,887 from 26,283 on Thursday, and the number of people in intensive care fell to 3,878 from 4,019. Both numbers have been on a downward trend for more than two weeks.

The disease' reproduction rate, known as the RO, in France had risen to between 0.6-0.7 on average from 0.5, Salomon told a news conference.

"This is because of a progressive return to activity," he said.

The number is one of several indicators authorities are watching when deciding on loosening coronavirus restrictions for the public.

Public health experts say that an R number of 1 or above would make it impossible to loosen lockdowns.

A number of 0.7 means that, on average, 100 people infected with Covid-19 infect 70 other people. This would mean the number of new infections would come down over time.

France plans to begin ending its lockdown from May 11, but strict guidelines will remain in place with regions categorised into red and green zones depending on the spread of the virus.

[Germany] Local, Practical, Apolitical: Inside Germany's Successful Coronavirus Strategy (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 9:37 AM, Bojan Pancevski and Bertrand Benoit, Neutral]

Germany's success in battling the coronavirus pandemic has drawn international attention. The main lessons: Fight the virus locally, and keep politics out of it.

Germany's campaign against the virus has largely been fought by regional authorities that created and policed social-distancing rules, worked with businesses to manage shutdowns and safety measures, and prepared the already-robust health-care infrastructure for the illness's onslaught.

Germany had 162,530 confirmed Covid-19 cases by Thursday, according to data from Johns Hopkins University, making it the world's sixth-most-affected country. But its death rate, both relative to the number of patients and to the country's population, is remarkably low, at 6,572.

This translates to 79 deaths per million inhabitants, compared with 463 for Italy, 364 for France, and 191 for the U.S.

New daily cases have been trending lower since early April from a peak of 6,559 down to 1,478 on Thursday, according to the Robert Koch Institute, which monitors pathogens and advises the government on fighting infectious diseases.

Germany has achieved this despite imposing some of Europe's mildest restrictions on the economy, allowing most factories and offices to stay open throughout its five-week lockdown of schools, nonessential stores and restaurants.

Things could still go wrong. Addressing parliament last week, Chancellor Angela Merkel warned that the slightest error in calibrating the lifting of confinement measures, a move that had begun days earlier, could send new infections rising again. Germany, she warned, was on "the thinnest of ice."

According to official data, the death rate among diagnosed Covid-19 patients has risen from 0.7% on March 29 to 3.8% on Wednesday.

Yet as Europe's largest economy revs up after a relatively loose shutdown, policy makers and business leaders from Warsaw to San Francisco are scrutinizing it for clues about how to return to a level of normalcy in the absence of any vaccine or treatment.

Germany in the coronavirus crisis is like a card player who was dealt a lucky hand but also played it well. The first German patients were young people who infected themselves on skiing holidays in Italy and Austria. Today, the median age of German Covid-19 patients is 50—though it is up from 40 in the early weeks of the epidemic it is far lower than the median of 62 in Italy and France, which doctors say partly explains the different death rates.

The country also entered the crisis with a dense net of hospitals and diagnostic labs—a byproduct of federal Germany's decentralized health-care system. Today, it has around 34 intensive-care unit beds per 100,000 inhabitants, more than twice as many as France and three times the British and Italian levels. Before the pandemic the U.S. also had about 34 intensive-care beds per 100,000 residents.

Germany has so much capacity that it has been treating some 200 patients flown in from other countries, costing the German health system about €20 million (\$21.7 million) to date, the federal health minister said last week.

The same oversupply explains why Germany has conducted more than two million Covid-19 diagnostic tests so far, almost twice as much per population as the U.S. The government is now pushing to increase testing capacity from nearly 900,000 to 4.5 million a week by corralling animal health labs—this would be equivalent to testing 18 million Americans a week.

The state of Baden-Württemberg, in southern Germany's industrial heartland, is a good example of how Germany's states, whose prerogatives include both health care and the rules governing business activities, have tackled the challenge.

The affluent region is home to car makers Daimler AG and Porsche and thousands of engineering companies that contribute to the country's mammoth trade surplus. It was hit

hard and early by the pandemic and still has the country's second largest number of patients per inhabitant.

Yet the state, ruled by a cross-party alliance between a Green premier and Ms. Merkel's center-right bloc, has run one of the country's most vigorous and successful campaigns against the virus.

"We had an early and consistent containment strategy," said Manfred Lucha, the state health minister. "We saw the tsunami rolling toward us, and we built up our hospital, care and diagnostic capacities even before it hit us."

Mr. Lucha's government quickly set up 160 special clinics for Covid-19 patients to dispense immediate and tailored care without allowing the virus to enter the hospital system, all the while gathering valuable data about the spread of the epidemic. With support from the state government, Mr. Lucha said, local clinics developed their own tests that could quickly be manufactured en masse.

The 11-million-strong state initially had only 560 officials tasked with tracing the contacts of each infected person but quickly boosted this number to over 3,000. Porsche, the car maker, used its contacts in China to help the government set up a procurement deal with mask and protective equipment manufacturers there.

The state government also tapped Baden-Württemberg's two biggest university hospitals, in Ulm and Tübingen, to help it draft a strategy for coronavirus patients known as "test & treat"—mass testing among risk groups such as the elderly, and immediate treatment for infected people before they display severe symptoms.

As a result, the number of hospitalizations dropped, and Baden-Württemberg today has more unoccupied ventilators than Spain and Italy together, said Mr. Lucha.

Boris Palmer, mayor of Tübingen, population 90,000, made sure each of the 15,000 residents over age 65 received a face mask and ordered systematic testing for all residents and employees of nursing homes.

In the early days of the epidemic, when countries such as Britain struggled to even procure testing kits, Mr. Palmer organized mobile testing in the form of medical vans that provided walk-in swabbing in his city's squares. Cross-party support at the state level helped quickly mobilize funds for the testing, Mr. Palmer said.

Germany's federal structure means the states have also had broad latitude to design their confinement measures, with the central government acting as coordinator. Now, Baden-Württemberg is working to gradually lift the constraints on stores and schools—factories were encouraged to adopt strict safety measures but never actually asked to shut down.

In the village of Markdorf, near Lake Constance, Peggy Müller, director of the Leimbach primary school, is leafing through the Baden-Württemberg education ministry's guidelines ahead of the school's gradual reopening starting May 4 after a near-two-month closure.

The list leaves little to chance. The school's 245 children will start class at different times

and use separate entrances to avoid overcrowding. Breaks should be staggered and access to the yard will be limited. In the classroom, pupils are to be seated 6 feet apart.

"Door handles, handrails, toilet seats, light switches will be disinfected regularly," she said. "We are ordering extra supplies of soap and paper towels. Teachers, assistants, everybody will help."

So far, Markdorf has been spared by the virus despite the state's higher-than-average infection rates. Ms. Müller said she knows the illness will be around for the foreseeable future. But she hopes the safeguards will prevent a roller coaster of closures and reopenings.

"We can live with the virus for the time being, that's OK," she said. "But we need to be able to offer families and the kids a level of structure and predictability."

[Germany] Germany's confirmed coronavirus cases rise by 1,639; deaths up 193: RKI (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 2:51 AM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Germany increased by 1,639 to 160,758, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for infectious diseases showed on Friday.

The death toll rose by 193 to 6,481.

[Greece] Using Plastic Markers, Greek Workers Defy Ban to Mark Labour Day (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 5:37 AM, Renee Maltezou, 40577K, Neutral]

Greek workers and students wearing masks and gloves lined up outside parliament to commemorate May Day, defying a government ban on movement imposed to fight the coronavirus.

Using colourful plastic markers placed on the ground to help them observe distance rules, hundreds of protesters joined a rally organised by the Communist-affiliated group PAME.

The protesters waved flags, chanted slogans and held banners reading "No sacrifice for the bosses."

Movement restrictions, imposed in March as part of a nationwide lockdown, will be gradually eased in the coming months, starting on Monday. Some retail businesses, including hair salons and bookshops, will also open on Monday.

Most businesses have been hurt by the lockdown. The conservative government has promised to protect jobs in a country that has only just emerged from a decade-long debt crisis that wiped out a quarter of its economic output.

Greece hopes a step-by-step revival of economic activity won't trigger a new wave of infections. The country has so far registered 2,591 cases and 140 deaths.

[Ireland] Irish PM unveils plan to slowly lift coronavirus restrictions (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:56 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Ireland on Friday announced the first small steps to easing restrictions to slow the spread of the coronavirus and laid out a roadmap for a gradual re-opening of the economy over the coming months if the virus can be kept under control.

Acting Prime Minister Leo Varadkar told "cocooning" over 70s that they could leave their homes to go for a walk or a drive from Tuesday and extended the travel limit for exercise to 5 kilometres from 2 kilometres.

The economy will reopen in five stages between May 18 and Aug. 10, with each stage dependent on the number of COVID-19 infections remaining under control, he said.

[Italy] Easing of lockdown begs the question: Who's family in Italy? (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 3:13 AM, Frances D'Emilio, 2194K, Neutral]

When Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte said the government would relax some parts of a nationwide lockdown, residents entering an eighth week of home confinement to inhibit the coronavirus dove for their dictionaries.

Conte announced that starting May 4, people in Italy will be permitted to travel within their home regions for visits with "congiunti," a formal Italian word that can mean either relatives, relations or kinsmen. Under the lockdown, Italians only have been able to leave home for essential jobs or vital tasks such as grocery shopping.

The country's cooped-up citizens therefore sought clarification. Which relatives? What relation? Would a second-cousin count as kin? A brother-in-law? The additional freedom previewed by the premier Sunday night seemed to rest on a clunky, archaic-sounding noun.

The correct definition is more than pedantic in Italy, a country where the generous concept of family embraces extended clans tied by blood or marriage. Whatever the government's intent, "congiunti" would be part of what stitches much of Italian life together.

The next day, Conte sought to clear up the confusion. Instead, he created more. The premier allowed that "congiunti" is a "broad and generic formula." What he meant, he said, was Italians could pay visits to "relatives, and to those with whom they have relationships of steady affection."

Godparents? Longtime lovers? Couples engaged for years but without setting a wedding date, as is frequently the case in Italy?

An early morning talk show on state radio tried to parse what ties of "steady" or "stable" affection mean. Calls and text messages poured in.

One guest, a lawyer who specializes in marriage law, said he has met couples together for only a week with more stable relationships than some spouses who have been married for years.

As far as the issue of home regions is concerned, the show's host raised the possibility that someone who lived, say, in eastern Sicily, could drive hundreds of kilometers (miles) across

the island to see relatives, but couldn't visit a loved one just a handful of kilometers away in Calabria, a different region across the Strait of Messina.

For Bianca Amodeo, 17, that host's hypothetical scenario is painful reality. Her boyfriend of 1 1/2 years — for many adolescents that equates to an exceedingly stable tie of affection — lives not far measured in kilometers but just across the Marche region border in the region of Abruzzo.

Deepening the teenager's anguish: Bianca has friends with boyfriends who live farther away but in the same region, and they are excitedly planning to see their sweethearts next week.

Said the girl's mother, Olga Anastasi, before passing the phone to her daughter: "There's a deep sense of injustice."

"When a Carabinieri (police officer) stops to ask where you are going, can he determine what's a steady relationship?" wondered Anastasi, a lawyer who deals with divorce and juvenile matters.

Some see more serious inequality in the government's policy. Same-sex marriages are not legal in Italy, so civil rights advocates worry that same-sex couples and their children might be excluded from the "stable affection" category.

When Italians finally determine whom they can visit, they'll have to puzzle out how to express affection when they arrive. The new measure requires all to wear masks and stay a safe distance apart when visiting.

[Malta] Malta refuses to let migrant ship dock, awaits EU deal (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 12:26 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Malta plans to keep 57 rescued migrants aboard a private ship anchored just outside territorial waters until the European Union finds a way to rehouse them, Prime Minister Robert Abela said on Friday.

The migrants were plucked from a dinghy earlier this week inside Malta's search and rescue zone by a commercial fishing vessel that had been chartered by the Maltese government to intercept possible asylum seekers.

The group were subsequently transferred to a launch normally used for tourist harbour cruises, with the EU agreeing to meet the cost of the operation until a decision had been made on where the men should go, Abela said.

"This is not Malta's problem, although we are doing more than is expected of us. Other EU member states must shoulder the burden too. Malta and Italy cannot be left alone," Abela told a news conference.

"We closed our ports and airport to cruise passengers and tourists and it does not make sense to then let migrants in," he said, referring to restrictions introduced in March to try to halt the spread of the coronavirus.

Abela said "hundreds of thousands" of people were in Libya, waiting to cross the Mediterranean to Italy or Malta.

"We will be firm in our commitment not to open our ports," he said, adding that he was "not satisfied" with the EU response over how to handle the latest newcomers.

Malta saw a surge of migrant arrivals at the start of this year, with some 1,500 reaching the country by early March, against 3,400 for all of 2019. The government says its reception centres are full and has complained that EU allies have not always followed through on pledges to take in the migrants.

When the coronavirus hit in March, Malta employed private boats to intercept would-be migrants before they reached the island.

The NGO group Alarm Phone says that on one occasion a migrant boat was left adrift for days before a contracted fishing vessel finally drew alongside, with 12 people drowning or starving to death as they awaited help.

Maltese magistrates are investigating the case.

Roughly 50 survivors were picked up from the boat and taken straight back to Libya.

The United Nations says Libya is not a safe port because of the long-running conflict there and has previously said that forcing boat migrants to return to the country would breach international law.

However, Abela said his government had done nothing wrong.

He said international law obliged states to coordinate sea rescues, but did not order them to use their own navies for such missions. He added that with Malta's ports closed, migrants had been taken to an open port in Libya.

"It is our duty to protect the national interest and balance that with our obligations," he said.

[Poland] In Poland, Abortion Access Worsens Amid Pandemic (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [5/1/2020 9:17 AM, Jessica Bateman and Marta Kasztelan, Neutral]

The woman was 21 weeks pregnant when she contacted Abortion Without Borders (AWB), a network of activist groups that advises Polish women on how to access safe terminations. Normally, it would have been relatively simple to book a flight to the United Kingdom, where she could legally access a second-trimester abortion. But the coronavirus outbreak changed everything.

"We got her an appointment, but travel was a different matter," said Mara Clarke, the founder of Abortion Support Network (ASN), which is part of AWB and helps women obtain abortions overseas. Poland closed its borders and grounded all flights and cross-border public transportation on March 15, meaning the woman would have had to travel to the

German border, cross it, and take a train to one of Berlin's airports. While flights still run from Germany, they are regularly canceled with little notice, making it a gamble as to how long she would be waiting. All in all, a journey that would usually take a few days would take at least a week, followed by 14 days of quarantine on her return to Poland.

"She had no one to watch her young child, and she was scared of getting trapped in another country if more borders closed," Clarke said. "Eventually she decided it was just impossible."

Poland has one of the harshest abortion laws in Europe, a relic of its Catholic revival after the fall of communism. Referred to as the "abortion compromise," the law is a result of pressure from the Roman Catholic Church, which played a seminal role in the fight against communism and has since held sway over those in power. Termination is only allowed when the fetus is malformed, the health or life of the mother is endangered, or in the event of rape or incest. Even in these cases, however, abortions can be difficult to obtain as medical professionals often invoke a controversial clause that allows for conscientious objection. These natalist policies extend to a strong anti-abortion and anti-sex education movement. Since 2017, the law has required a prescription for emergency contraception.

Officially, just over 1,000 terminations were carried out in Poland in 2018. But as many as 150,000 women find other ways to access abortion each year, according to Krystyna Kacpura, the executive director of the Federation for Women and Family Planning, known as Federa.

The majority either order medical abortion pills online early in their pregnancy or travel abroad for termination, which is legal in Poland. Popular destination countries include Germany, which allows abortion up to 12 weeks, and the Netherlands and the U.K., which permit abortion up to 24 weeks. As activist networks have strengthened and expanded, illegal surgical abortions have become rarities in Poland. But as the coronavirus closes borders and weakens supply chains, safe abortions are becoming harder to access.

The AWB helpline, which was launched in December 2019, usually receives an average of 300 calls a month. When Poland announced its border closures, it received 114 calls in the following two days. "People are usually worried when they contact us, but now the level of panic is so high, you can literally feel it coming off an email," Clarke said.

Even if a woman can cross the border, hotel and Airbnb closures mean women often need to be hosted by volunteers. That's logistically complicated in the best of times but far more difficult at a moment when homes are meant to be off-limits to outsiders. And as Germany has now introduced a 14-day quarantine on arrival that can be circumvented only for approved reasons, women must bring a doctor's letter confirming they have a procedure, which needs to be translated into Polish so border guards can read it. "We guide everyone through these steps, but we can't assume everyone who crosses the border for an abortion is in contact with activists," Clarke said. "It's the women we don't hear from that keep us up at night."

Medical abortions, which can generally be done from home to terminate pregnancies up to 10 weeks, carry their own complications. The pills aren't sold in Poland, as helping someone obtain an abortion can result in a three-year jail term, so women need to order

them independently from vetted Western organizations. Typically, women would carry out the procedure at home in privacy. For women who need to hide their abortions from family members for reasons of safety or mental well-being, having to carry them out in homes in which all are quarantined together comes with its own risk.

Meanwhile, women are having increasing difficulty accessing contraception. Federa has reported pharmacies refusing to extend prescriptions for contraceptives or issue prescriptions for emergency contraception and sent a notice to the Chief Pharmaceutical Inspectorate last week urging it to address the situation.

A Polish Health Ministry spokesperson told Foreign Policy in an email that the national health service regional units are monitoring the situation and taking action whenever patients face difficulties accessing medical services and that the ministry "hasn't received any information about possible shortages of contraception."

The many hurdles caused by the pandemic may lead to a surge in pregnancies, Kacpura warned, hitting the most vulnerable women hardest—those in smaller cities, without access to the internet, and without the means to travel overseas. With recession just around the corner, "families won't be able to afford to bring another child into this world," Kacpura said. She is concerned that some women will attempt to terminate unwanted pregnancies "without any supervision, support, or help."

Poland's conservative government is not easing pressure on reproductive rights even during the pandemic. This month, President Andrzej Duda, an ally of the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party, expressed his support for a 3-year-old citizen's bill that would ban abortion when the fetus is malformed—which accounts for most in-country terminations. The bill was written by the anti-abortion activist Kaja Godek, who called abortion a "pandemic much worse than the coronavirus." Under the Polish Constitution, citizens can introduce new legislation if they gather at least 100,000 signatures. Godek's "Stop Abortion" project, which secured 830,000 signatures, first arrived in the lower house in 2017. It lay dormant in a parliamentary commission until the government brought it up for vote on April 16. Under Polish law, it would have needed to be voted on by May. It was debated alongside a handful of other controversial citizen's bills, including one criminalizing sex education.

To the anger of many Poles, the vote came at a time when mass protests were impossible. Activists made history in 2016 when thousands filled the streets, wielding black umbrellas, to protest another citizen's bill seeking a complete abortion ban. Back then, the PiS-led government gave into the pressure and stated the protests had given deputies "food for thought." Amid the current restrictions, some activists still managed to make their voices heard. Thousands protested online and by hanging up posters in the windows of their homes and cars. Others circumvented the ban by cycling around or standing in lines outside grocery stores, maintaining 6 feet between one another, holding posters and carrying the now symbolic umbrellas. But their ability to get their message across had been greatly diluted.

"This is not the moment to discuss this topic," said Urszula, a protester who works for a state institution and requested her surname be withheld for fear of reprisal. "When thousands of women are losing their jobs ... and on top of that will be told to give birth to

children that might not survive. And if they do survive, their upbringing will cost much more than a healthy child."Although she sported a face mask and left home for what she deemed an everyday necessity, Urszula and other protesters are now facing fines of up to \$7,000 for alleged breaches of social distancing rules or laws pertaining to behavior in public places. The bill wasn't passed, but neither was it rejected outright. Instead, the lower house, where PiS still has a narrow majority, sent it to a parliamentary commission for more work, where observers say it is likely to remain indefinitely. A PiS spokesperson declined to comment for this article.

While Polish women are facing particularly tough obstacles while seeking abortions, they are not the only Europeans struggling with this at the moment. This month, a coalition of 100 nongovernmental organizations signed a letter calling on governments across Europe to do more to ensure safe abortion access, warning that many women and nonbinary people across Europe are struggling to access reproductive services. Clarke said ASN is receiving higher numbers of calls from all over Europe, including countries it doesn't usually deal with such as Italy, where medical abortions are not allowed and hospitals are overwhelmed with coronavirus cases. However, she also hopes the situation will lead politicians to liberalize abortion laws. Already, Germany has allowed its mandatory pre-abortion counseling to be carried out remotely, and the U.K. has allowed abortion pills to be taken at home.

"These things that people said were not possible, well the crisis has shown that they are," she said. Remote counseling, for instance, will make things easier for Polish women traveling for terminations in Germany once the lockdown lifts, as they will now need to travel only for the procedure and not the counseling. "The world is about to be plunged into a huge recession, so it's going to be even more critical for people to decide when they have children and how many they have. And we also have to really think about what it means for some people to be in lockdown with their partners. Not everybody gets to choose when they have sex or how they have sex or whether birth control is used."

[Russia] Putin's critics try to tap discontent over coronavirus lockdown pain (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 7:51 AM, Tom Balmforth, Neutral]

Emboldened by a dip in President Vladimir Putin's ratings, the Kremlin's critics are campaigning for the government to step up economic support for individuals hit by the coronavirus lockdown as they try to tap signs of discontent.

Three petitions launched by Putin critic Alexei Navalny that have garnered over 1.2 million signatures between them accuse the government of failing to provide adequate economic aid and demand it provide more from its vast reserves.

The petitions have no binding power, but they suggest anger in some quarters over the economic pain inflicted on households by the shutdown that began in late March and is still underway.

Signatories want every Russian adult to be paid 20,000 roubles (\$270) for April and for utility bills and taxes for small businesses to be waived. They also say 2 trillion roubles should be set aside to help small businesses.

The Kremlin has called Navalny's proposals populist and superficial.

Putin on Tuesday rolled over the lockdown until May 11, extending a period during which employers are expected to pay their staff. Many entrepreneurs say they can't afford to do that.

To ease the pain, Putin and his government have offered the highest band of unemployment benefit - 12,130 roubles - to anyone who lost their job after March 1. Some small businesses will receive 12,130 roubles a month per employee to pay staff.

Small businesses have also been offered access to loans at preferential rates and tax breaks. But the bulk of the economic aid is earmarked for big business, critics say, and others stand to get far less at a time when Russia has more than \$560 billion in international reserves.

"We think Putin will emerge from this situation with serious image and electoral losses. How deep they are remains to be seen," said Leonid Volkov, a close ally of Navalny.

"We have the sense this is a severe crisis, that people don't like how the authorities are dealing with the problems or rather how they are being left to face the problems on their own."

Putin, whose term in office does not expire until 2024, has survived many crises before, and there is no sign that he is about to be toppled. But the economic fallout from coronavirus is creating a headache for him.

The lockdown, compounded by the crash in oil, Russia's main export, has put the economy on course for a 4-6% percent contraction, the central bank says, and economists warn of a looming surge in unemployment and a wave of bankruptcies.

Polling data on Putin is sometimes contradictory.

This week, the VTsIOM state pollster said that public trust in Putin had dipped to its lowest level since January 2006 according to one measure. But measured another way, trust was still high at around 70%, it said.

Some slippage is apparent though. Even before the severity of the crisis had crystallised, Putin's approval ratings, though still robust, fell 6% last month to 63%, their lowest since 2013, the Levada pollster said.

[Sweden] Trump's Latest Attack on Sweden Revives Coronavirus Controversy (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 11:11 AM, Morten Buttler and Nick Rigillo, 6400K, Neutral]

Donald Trump's latest verbal attack on Sweden has reignited a debate on whether the country's relaxed approach to fighting Covid-19 is madness or genius.

The U.S. president, who is facing criticism at home for initially playing down the threat of a

pandemic, on Thursday sought to direct attention toward developments in Sweden.

"Despite reports to the contrary, Sweden is paying heavily for its decision not to lockdown," he tweeted.

Johan Carlson, the director general of Sweden's public health agency, said Trump's comments aren't weighing on his deliberations. "The important thing is that you make sure you keep the disease under control so that the health-care system isn't overloaded, and so far we've managed that," he said, according to a report in Aftonbladet.

But Trump's latest outburst has once again drawn attention to Sweden's controversial response to fighting the coronavirus. The country has left schools, hairdressers, restaurants, gyms and much of the rest of society open. Instead, the government has urged citizens to act responsibly and observe social distancing guidelines.

Initially, there was near universal condemnation of Sweden's decision to avoid a full lockdown. But more recently, opinions have evolved after the country's top epidemiologist declared the strategy a success amid signs the rate of infections is stabilizing.

Johns Hopkins University data shows Sweden's death rate is about 24 per 100,000 versus 19 in the U.S. But according to Sweden's health minister, Lena Hallengren, the data don't yet tell the full story.

"We're in different phases, and we're just, unfortunately, in the beginning of this pandemic. So it's too early to draw any firm conclusions," she said in an interview with Bloomberg Television.

Anders Tegnell, the mastermind behind Sweden's approach, says the idea is to come up with a model that can stay the course, based on an assumption that Covid-19 isn't going away any time soon.

In a recent interview with Danish state broadcaster DR, Tegnell said, "The long-term sustainability of strict rules isn't that big. You can only impose such restrictions for a limited time. So you need to find a different way, and our model may prove more sustainable."

It's a notion that won the support of the World Health Organization this week. Michael Ryan, who runs WHO's health emergencies program, says that "if we are to reach a new normal, in many ways Sweden represents a future model."

Importantly, Sweden's laissez-faire approach has at no point resulted in a rate of infections that has overburdened the country's health-care system, thanks to its universal, state-funded model.

There's also some confusion as to what the statistics on national death rates actually measure. Swedish authorities say they've been meticulous in reporting fatalities in nursing homes, which isn't the case in some other countries. On Friday, Sweden reported another 67 Covid-19 deaths, bringing the total to 2,653, according to national data. The number of people infected with the virus is 21,520.

Others have pointed to Sweden's comparative affluence as an important factor in helping the country deal with the virus. HSBC Global Research economist James Pomeroy notes that more than half of Swedish households are single-person, making social distancing easier to carry out. More people work from home than anywhere else in Europe, and everyone has access to fast Internet, which helps large chunks of the workforce stay productive away from the office.

Tegnell, the country's chief epidemiologist, says that "other countries might be able to learn something from Sweden now."

[Turkey] Turkish Police Detain Gathered Union Leaders on May Day (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 5:28 AM, Zeynep Bilginsoy, Neutral]

Police in Istanbul detained at least 15 people Friday, including trade union leaders who tried to stage a May Day march in defiance of a coronavirus lockdown and a ban on demonstrations at a historic square.

The Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey, or DISK, tweeted that its head Arzu Cerkezoglu and several other union leaders were detained near Taksim Square, where they wanted to lay wreaths of carnations.

Images showed police and demonstrators wearing masks and face guards in tense, close contact.

The Istanbul governor's office said the demonstrators were later released. The statement added that various trade unions had left wreaths in Taksim Square as permitted by the governor's office but that DISK had insisted on collectively marching to the square, which was in breach of lockdown and social distancing rules.

Taksim Square holds a symbolic value for Turkey's labor movement. In 1977, 34 people were killed there during a May Day event when shots were fired into the crowd from a nearby building.

Opposition lawmakers were later allowed to take DISK's damaged wreath to the square.

Turkey has imposed partial lockdowns in 31 provinces every weekend and on national holidays. Exemptions apply, including for many laborers who continue to work amid the pandemic. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has said the country must continue production to ensure the economic "wheels continue turning."

The ban on May Day demonstrations in Taksim has been in effect for several years, due to security concerns. Police closed all roads leading to Taksim Square with barricades and increased security presence Friday.

Trade unions began marking May Day on Thursday ahead of the COVID-19 lockdown and also urged people to celebrate from their balconies Friday night and participate on social media.

Turkey ranks seventh in the world for the number of confirmed infections with 120,204

cases, according to Johns Hopkins University, although experts believe the actual toll of the pandemic is higher than the tally. The country's official death toll stands at 3,174.

[United Kingdom] U.K. Provides 122,347 Tests, Claiming Key Coronavirus Target Met (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 2:12 PM, Alex Morales, Robert Hutton, and Joe Mayes, Neutral]
U.K. Health Secretary Matt Hancock declared he had met his target of carrying out 100,000 coronavirus tests a day -- a crucial political goal -- but his assessment was immediately called into question amid claims he had massaged the numbers.

After weeks of criticism that the government had failed to roll out an adequate testing program, Hancock set a target at the beginning of April to complete 100,000 coronavirus a day tests by the end of the month. Officials and health specialists say testing is vital to getting a grip on the outbreak and enabling lockdown measures to eventually be lifted safely.

Speaking on Friday, Hancock said the target had been achieved, with 122,347 tests "provided" on Thursday.

"I knew that it was an audacious goal, but we needed an audacious goal," Hancock said at the daily Downing Street press conference. "This unprecedented expansion in British testing capability is an incredible achievement. It's not my achievement, it's a national achievement."

Yet within minutes of the minister's declaration of success, he was facing questions over what the figures referred to. The 122,347 total announced by Hancock included 40,369 tests that had been sent out -- including to people in homes, care homes and some hospitals -- but that had not necessarily been processed.

"Many would have expected the 100,000 promise to have been met by actually carrying out testing," said opposition Labour Party health spokesman Jon Ashworth said. "Tonight's headline figure shouldn't count tests that hadn't been used, or indeed, might never be used as a completed test."

Ed Davey, leader of the Liberal Democrats, accused the government of massaging the numbers -- a suggestion the government rejected.

"The Health Secretary's arbitrary target of 100,000 tests by the end of April was always a hostage to fortune, and the truth is, he missed it," Davey said in an email. "It's extremely disappointing the government have decided to massage the metrics rather than admit they fell short, as this will only undermine public confidence."

Hancock set the target for Covid-19 tests at a time when Boris Johnson's government was under fire over its response to the pandemic, especially after it abandoned community testing in the middle of March -- a decision scientists and political critics have said may have contributed to the rapid spread of the disease in the following weeks.

The total number of deaths in the U.K. rose to 27,510 on Friday, up 739 on the previous

day.

Hancock's 100,000 testing target was controversial from the day it was announced on April 2. Some of Johnson's officials have in the past played down the significance of testing, especially when reporters drew comparisons with much greater number of tests done in countries including Germany.

While the U.K. is now past the peak of infections, health officials are warning the outbreak may last until a vaccine is found. That means the need to track the spread of the disease will be critical to lifting movement restrictions in a way that avoids a second peak, they said.

Similar track-and-trace systems have been credited with reducing the spread of the virus in countries including South Korea, which has so far avoided the need for a full lockdown.

John Newton, the health official running the government's testing program, said the lack of testing in the early stages of the outbreak had not lengthened the nation's lockdown. The virus was already spreading too widely to be tracked when the restrictions were introduced, he said.

[United Kingdom] Britain hits coronavirus testing target as death toll leaps again (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 2:00 PM, Paul Sandle, Alistair Smout, 5304K, Neutral]

Britain has hit its target of carrying out 100,000 COVID-19 tests a day, health minister Matt Hancock said on Friday, stressing that the programme was crucial to helping ease a national lockdown.

Hancock also announced that the British death toll had risen by 739 to 27,510 deaths - just below that of Italy which was one of the first and worst-hit European states.

Hancock set the target of reaching 100,000 tests by the end of April after being criticised for moving too slowly on mass testing compared to other countries like Germany.

Since then, the government has increased the number of drive-through testing sites, begun sending out home tests and has rapidly expanded the number of people eligible to apply for a test.

At a news conference on Friday, Hancock said 122,347 tests were conducted in the 24 hours to 0800 GMT.

"This unprecedented expansion in British testing capability is an incredible achievement," he said. "Testing is crucial to suppress the virus ... It helps remove the worry. It helps keep people safe, and it will help us to unlock the lockdown."

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday that Britain had passed through the coronavirus peak, and promised to set out next week how the country will start returning to normal life.

Nearly six weeks into the most stringent restrictions on daily life in Britain's peacetime

history, Hancock was asked whether people could plan family gatherings and holidays for late summer.

"It's still too early to say and I'm really sorry to have to give that answer, but it is," he replied.

A mass testing programme to gauge the spread of the virus through the population is seen as key to any easing of the social distancing measures that have all but shut down the economy and forced millions to stay at home.

The number of tests carried out has increased rapidly in recent days, and has risen from levels of around 10,000 per day in early April.

But political opponents immediately accused Hancock of manipulating the data.

Testing programme coordinator John Newton said that home testing and some other testing kits were being included in the number of tests completed at the point they were sent out, not when they were analysed. These accounted for around 40,000 of the latest total.

"Tonight's headline figure shouldn't count tests that hadn't been used, or indeed, might never be used as a completed test," said Labour Party health spokesman Jon Ashworth.

Johnson and his government have been criticised not only for not quickly stepping up testing, but also for moving slowly on bringing in the lockdown and for a lack of protective equipment for health workers.

Opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer renewed his criticism of the prime minister in an interview with the Evening Standard newspaper, saying Johnson had been "slow, slow at every turn".

He called for testing to be ramped up to a quarter of a million tests every 24 hours and for 50,000 contact-tracers to be deployed to keep the nation safe.

[United Kingdom] Ethnic minorities in England and Wales dying from coronavirus at higher rates than white peers, study suggests (CNN)

CNN [5/1/2020 8:43 AM, Zamira Rahim, Neutral]

Ethnic minorities in England and Wales are dying from coronavirus at far higher rates than their white peers, according to analysis by the London-based Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS).

The study is likely to further heighten concerns about deaths in the UK's minority black and Asian communities.

The think tank found that after eliminating age and geography, people from black African backgrounds were 3.7 times as likely to die in hospital from the disease than their white British counterparts.

Death rates for those from Pakistani backgrounds were 2.9 times higher than the white British group, while Bangladeshi fatalities were twice as high.

The report compared six groups -- white other, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, black African and black Caribbean -- to their white British peers.

According to the document, the excess deaths cannot be explained by differences in geography and demography alone -- nor is it accounted for by non-hospital deaths.

Indian, black Caribbean and "other white" ethnic groups also had excess fatalities, though the difference with the white British group is smaller.

The figures echo data released from some US cities, where African Americans make up a disproportionately high proportion of coronavirus victims.

In Chicago, 72% of people who died were black, officials said in April, despite African Americans only making up 30% of the city's population.

In Louisiana, African Americans make up 32% of the population, but account for around 70% of deaths.

The IFS said the British study highlighted "stark inequalities" between different ethnic groups in England and Wales.

"Once you take account of age and geography, most minority groups 'should' have fewer deaths per capita than the white British majority," the report states.

"Black Africans and Pakistanis would be expected to have fewer fatalities per capita than white British but at present they are comparable."

The think tank said several factors were causing the higher death rate, including increased exposure to the virus through work.

Among the factors at play is the significant over-representation of minority groups in key worker categories, which have a higher risk of infection.

"More than two in ten black African women of working age are employed in health and social care roles. Indian men are 150% more likely to work in health or social care roles than their white British counterparts. While the Indian ethnic group makes up 3% of the working-age population of England and Wales, they account for 14% of doctors," the report said.

Experts have previously raised fears that long-term health inequalities could also be driving the higher death rates.

"We know through a government commissioned review that if you are poorer, have high rates of child poverty, have insecure work -- all of those factors are linked to poor health outcomes," Zubaida Haque, the deputy director of the race and equality think tank Runnymede Trust, previously told CNN.

The IFS report found that "underlying health conditions, occupational exposure, and a range

of other factors are likely to be important" to understanding the excess deaths.

"At-risk underlying health conditions are especially prevalent among older Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and black Caribbeans," the report states.

Minority groups are also more economically vulnerable to the virus, according to the think tank, due to working in sectors currently shut down in the UK, such as the restaurant and taxi industry,

The deaths of those in minority communities gained widespread public attention in April, after several UK health workers from diverse backgrounds died from coronavirus.

Questions on the issue were raised by British media. Health Secretary Matt Hancock said at the time that he found the deaths "upsetting," in an interview with the BBC.

The UK government has since ordered an inquiry into the issue.

[United Kingdom] UK virus toll rises 739 as stats show disadvantaged worst hit (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [5/1/2020 2:09 PM, Alice Ritchie and James Pheby, Neutral]

Britain's overall death toll from the coronavirus outbreak rose by 739 to 27,510 on Friday, as new data indicated that people in disadvantaged areas were worse hit.

The increase came as Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced the country had met its goal of achieving 100,000 tests a day by the end of April.

A total of 122,347 tests were achieved on Thursday, he told a daily briefing about the government's response to the pandemic, calling the increase an "incredible achievement".

"The testing capacity that we've built together will help every single person in this country," he said. "Testing is crucial to suppress the virus."

The 100,000 target had looked out of reach at the beginning of the week, when only 43,000 people were being tested per day despite a capacity for 73,000.

Friday's number includes thousands of home testing kits that have been sent in the post but not yet returned. The minister paid tribute to delivery companies including Yodel for helping to send out the tests.

The government has faced weeks of criticism, particularly from health and social care workers, who say they have been unable to get tests despite dealing with COVID-19 patients.

It also faced a backlash for not including deaths in care homes and the wider community in official statistics, forcing a change on Wednesday.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Thursday that Britain was "past the peak" of the outbreak, and that wider testing would be key to keeping transmission rates down.

Hancock said testing would also be crucial to lifting stringent lockdown measures imposed in late March and restoring social and economic freedoms.

Hancock also said the government was concerned about Office for National Statistics (ONS) figures about the effect the virus has had on more deprived parts of the country.

The virus has had a disproportionate impact on black and ethnic minority communities, the elderly, men and the obese.

The ONS earlier revealed that areas of England with the worst rankings for income, health, education and crime, suffered 55.1 deaths per 100,000 people due to COVID-19.

That compared to 25.3 per 100,000 in the least deprived areas.

"This is something that we're worried about," Hancock said.

"We're... trying to understand the impact of the virus as much as we possible can as and when we get new evidence."

According to the ONS, general mortality rates involving all causes of deaths, including COVID-19, were 88 percent higher in the most deprived areas than in the least.

But when looking at the impact of deprivation on COVID-19 mortality, the rate in the most disadvantaged areas of England was 118 percent higher than in more well-off locations.

"People living in more deprived areas have experienced COVID-19 mortality rates more than double those living in less deprived areas," said Nick Stripe, ONS head of health analysis.

The ONS figures, which analysed deaths between March 1 and April 17, confirmed London was the epicentre of Britain's outbreak, which is the second worst in Europe behind Italy.

The capital had the highest mortality rate in the country, with 85.7 deaths per 100,000 people involving COVID-19.

This was more than double the next highest area, the West Midlands -- which includes the city of Birmingham -- where there were 43.2 deaths involving coronavirus per 100,000 people.

The east London borough of Newham was worst hit, with 144.3 deaths per 100,000 people.

London and Birmingham are the most diverse areas of Britain, a fact that has been used to explain why ethnic minorities have been particularly affected by the outbreak.

But a new study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) think tank on Friday suggests a more complex picture.

It notes that most minorities are younger on average than the general population, so should

be less vulnerable.

But "after stripping out the role of age and geography, Bangladeshi hospital fatalities are twice those of the white British group, Pakistani deaths are 2.9 times as high and black African deaths 3.7 times as high", it said.

"Bangladeshi men have high rates of underlying health problems, and black Africans and Indian men are particularly exposed to the virus due to their prevalence in healthcare roles."

East Asia and Pacific

Australia's coronavirus disputes with China are growing. So are debates over its deep economic ties to Beijing. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 11:35 AM, Gerry Shih, Neutral]

Soon after Australian officials called in April for a joint international investigation of the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, the Chinese government ratcheted up pressure on Canberra to drop a proposal that it believed would unfairly target China.

In an interview last weekend, Chinese Ambassador to Australia Cheng Jingye hinted that Beijing held a powerful card: a boycott. Persist with the inquiry, Cheng said, and "ordinary people might ask: **Why should we drink Australian wine? Why eat Australian beef?**"

Cheng hoped to quickly squelch the investigation. Instead, he sparked a furor — and reignited a years-long debate in Australia over how a self-described "middle power" in China's shadow should balance its economic and other national interests.

A similar call by the Trump administration and allies for probes into the pandemic's beginnings — including unsupported claims that the virus leaked from a Wuhan lab — has both sides in attack mode.

Senior U.S. officials are exploring proposals for punishing or demanding financial compensation from China. The ideas include stripping China of its "sovereign immunity" to enable the U.S. government or coronavirus victims to sue China for damages, according to senior administration officials with knowledge of the discussions.

At the same time, however, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence knocked back the theories that the virus came from a lab, saying it was "not man-made or genetically modified." But the statement Thursday noted that intelligence agencies were still evaluating theories linking the outbreak to the lab.

Australian officials told the Sydney Morning Herald this week that their intelligence contained no evidence linking the virus to the lab.

China has fired back at Washington with an onslaught of swipes aimed at Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, including calling him a "super-spreader" of a "political virus."

Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne on Monday reiterated her call for a global inquiry and denounced China's attempt at "economic coercion." Hours later, Penny Wong, a top

figure from the opposition Labor Party, said she hoped China was not threatening Australia, adding that the inquiry was "the right thing to do" for humanity. On Wednesday, Andrew Forrest, a mining tycoon who is Australia's most prominent advocate of deeper relations with China, said he, too, believed it was "common sense" to conduct an investigation, although he urged Prime Minister Scott Morrison to wait a few months.

By midweek, bilateral relations had scraped their lowest point in years, as a Chinese consul general appeared unexpectedly at the Australian health minister's news conference to argue China's case and Australian officials accused the Chinese Embassy of breaking diplomatic protocol by leaking private conversations to the media.

The week vividly illustrated the limits of China's economic leverage in a politically charged time, as well as the hardening public attitudes it faces around the world.

Although China's government has for years controlled access to its vast market as both an enticement and a political cudgel, the tactic could be less effective when tourism and trade have plummeted and distrust of an increasingly assertive Communist Party is coloring domestic discourse in the United States, the European Union, Australia, Japan and South Korea, experts say.

This week, the shrill Chinese response to a proposal that garnered bipartisan support in Australia forced even the country's influential business sector, a usually reliable advocate from Beijing's perspective, to tread lightly.

"This 'Wolf Warrior' diplomacy hasn't made it any easier for those hoping to inject some balance into an increasingly febrile debate," said Michael Clifton, chief executive of China Matters, an Australian policy institute, and a board member of the Australia China Business Council. "If the ambassador's remarks were intended to sway sentiment and encourage business to call for a reversal of the government's position, they were poorly chosen. Indeed, they have achieved precisely the opposite effect."

The Australian government has not yet revealed details about its vision for the independent investigation or officially pitched the proposal in venues such as the United Nations or the World Health Organization executive board.

Since the beginning of the outbreak, officials such as Morrison and Payne have been critical of China's handling of it, but they have not been as confrontational as the Trump administration or leaned as heavily into speculation that the virus was bioengineered or leaked from a Wuhan lab.

Commentary from state media, meanwhile, echoed Cheng's view that Australia should not antagonize a crucial trade partner. Australia "is a bit like chewing gum stuck on the sole of China's shoes," influential Global Times editor Hu Xijin wrote on Weibo, a major social media platform in China. "Sometimes you have to find a stone to rub it off."

The Chinese warnings reflect an economic reality: China buys \$87 billion — or 36 percent — of Australia's annual exports, more than Japan, South Korea and the United States combined. Chinese students studying in Australian universities contribute as much as \$12 billion a year in fees.

But the warnings were also a gambit: In echoes of the U.S. debate over “decoupling,” hawks in Australia have called for years for “market diversification” away from the country’s biggest trade partner, arguing that the increasingly assertive government of President Xi Jinping poses a threat. Since reaching a high in 2015 with a free-trade agreement, relations have steadily worsened over allegations of Communist Party interference and espionage in Australian politics, as well as Australia’s decision to ban Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant.

China critics seized on Cheng’s comments this week as proof of exactly why Australia should wean itself from China.

“What the ambassador and his officials have done is accelerated the narrative that China isn’t a friend, that they can’t be trusted, that they’re bullies,” said Andrew Hastie, the chairman of a parliamentary committee on intelligence and security. “It’s sweet irony.”

Just last year, Hastie said, he was ridiculed by Australian officials and business leaders for sounding the alarm about China. Today, his ideas are entering the politically mainstream, he said: “The debate has shifted.”

Since 2010, China has used its growing economic clout to devastating effect.

After a Norwegian committee awarded dissident writer Liu Xiaobo the Nobel Peace Prize that year, China, the world’s largest seafood consumer, blocked salmon imports worth hundreds of millions of dollars until 2016.

In 2012, a maritime dispute with Japan badly dented Toyota and Nissan sales. After South Korea agreed to install a U.S. radar system in 2017, China informally blocked tour packages and state media fanned boycotts that some estimates say shaved 0.5 percent off South Korean gross domestic product.

In October, China blocked National Basketball Association games from television and streaming sites after the league refused to fire Houston Rockets executive Daryl Morey, who retweeted a message in support of Hong Kong protesters. As a result, the league lost a “significant” amount of money — “probably less than \$400 million,” NBA Commissioner Adam Silver estimated — but U.S. lawmakers urged it to not bow to Beijing.

The threat of Chinese boycotts may now seem less potent than in 2010 because “companies realize that advocating fixing things with China doesn’t look good for their political image,” said Darren Lim, an international relations scholar at Australian National University who has studied each of the boycott campaigns.

“The public is concerned about China’s rise,” Lim said. “The politics shifted in the last three years.”

China-Australia Rift Deepens Over Calls for Virus Inquiry (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 4:10 AM, Rod McGuirk, Negative]

China’s warning of trade repercussions from Australia’s campaign for an independent

inquiry into the coronavirus has rattled Australian business leaders as President Donald Trump's administration urges other governments to back such a probe.

China has accused Australia of parroting the United States in its call for an inquiry independent of the World Health Organization to determine the origins of COVID-19 and how the world responded to the emerging pandemic.

Chinese Ambassador Cheng Jingye used an Australian newspaper interview this week to warn that pursuing an inquiry could spark a Chinese consumer boycott of students and tourists visiting Australia as well as of sales of major exports including beef and wine.

When senior Australian diplomat Frances Adamson raised concerns about the interview, Cheng took the extraordinary step of making public his account of their telephone conversation. Cheng said he told Adamson to "put aside ideological bias" and "stop political games."

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo attacked China's coercion and urged U.S. partner countries to also demand transparency and answers.

"I saw some comments from the Chinese foreign ministry talking about coercive activity with respect to Australia, who had the temerity to ask for an investigation. Who in the world wouldn't want an investigation of how this happened to the world?" Pompeo told reporters in Washington.

The Chinese foreign ministry has said the allegation of economic coercion was unfounded.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison on Friday stood firm on his call for an inquiry and denied any motivation other than to prevent such a pandemic happening again.

"I don't think anybody's in any fantasy land about where it started. It started in China and what the world over needs to know -- and there's a lot of support for this -- is how did it start and what are the lessons that can be learned," Morrison told Sydney Radio 2GB.

"That needs to be done independently and why do we want to know that? Because it could happen again."

Some Australian business leaders have warned of economic damage from a boycott by Australia's biggest trading partner. Corporate leaders have advised against any inquiry until after U.S. presidential elections in November to avoid political blame-shifting.

Australian media magnate Kerry Stokes used the front page of The West Australian newspaper to urge Morrison to appease China.

"If we're going to go into the biggest debt we've had in our life and then simultaneously poke our biggest provider of income in the eye, it's not necessarily the smartest thing you can do," his newspaper quoted Stokes as saying, referring to billions of dollars in debt the government has run up trying to keep the economy afloat.

Relations between China and Australia have been strained by Australia's outlawing of

covert foreign interference in politics and institutions. China is particularly angry that Australia has banned Chinese communications giant Huawei from involvement in critical infrastructure on security grounds.

Long delays in moving Australian wine from Chinese wharfs and in offloading shipments of Australian coal with little or vague explanation have been linked to the bilateral dispute.

But the coronavirus has brought a new intensity to the rift.

The Chinese foreign ministry has repeatedly scolded Australian Foreign Minister Marise Payne and Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton when they argued for more transparency.

Payne has accused Ambassador Cheng of "economic coercion," government lawmaker Trent Zimmer has condemned his boycott comments as "downright despicable and menacing," while former Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer says the ambassador has "gone rogue."

Chinese diplomat Long Shou, a state consular-general, has been accused of gatecrashing Health Minister Greg Hunt's coronavirus news conference on Tuesday by turning up without a government invitation and speaking about China-Australia relations.

"Beijing's message around the world today is: tremble and obey, and we will reward you with goodies if you do," The Australian newspaper's Foreign Editor Greg Sheridan wrote.

Asia Society Policy Institute President Kevin Rudd, a Mandarin-speaking former Australian prime minister and student of China, said that whether China carried out economic retaliation against Australia "would be very much a wait-and-see process."

"The bottom line is, put megaphones away and use private lines of communication to solve very complex, very difficult and very hard questions," Rudd said. "That's the best way for all parties into the future."

Australian PM says no evidence coronavirus originated in China laboratory, urges inquiry (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 5:47 AM, Colin Packham and John Mair, 5304K, Neutral]

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who has angered Beijing by calling for a global inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak, said he had no evidence to suggest the disease originated in a laboratory in the Chinese city of Wuhan.

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Thursday he was confident the coronavirus may have originated in a Chinese virology lab, but declined to describe the evidence he said he had seen.

Morrison said on Friday that Australia had no information to support that theory, and said the confusion supported his push for an inquiry to understand how the outbreak started and then spread rapidly around the world.

"What we have before us doesn't suggest that that is the likely source," Morrison told a

news conference in Canberra when asked about Trump's comments.

"There's nothing we have that would indicate that was the likely source, though you can't rule anything out in these environments," he said.

"We know it started in China, we know it started in Wuhan, the most likely scenario that has been canvassed relates to wildlife wet markets, but that's a matter that would have to be thoroughly assessed."

The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), based in the city where the disease was first identified, has rejected suggestions the coronavirus came from its laboratory.

Most scientists now say the virus originated in wildlife, with bats and pangolins identified as possible host species.

Relations between Australia and China have been strained since the government began canvassing support in mid-April for an international inquiry into the outbreak.

Beijing sees the inquiry call as part of U.S.-led propaganda against China, while Morrison says the world needs to understand exactly what happened to prevent a repeat of an outbreak that has so far killed more than 200,000 people and shut down much of the global economy.

"That's why it is just so important to understand what happened, to make sure that we can prevent such a broadbased global catastrophe from happening again," Morrison said.

Beijing's ambassador to Australia said that Chinese consumers could boycott Australian beef, wine, tourism and universities in response to the push for an inquiry, comments members of Morrison's government have called "threats of economic coercion."

AUSTRALIA MAY EASE RESTRICTIONS

Australia has successfully contained the outbreak so far, but measures implemented to do that are set to see unemployment surge, the economy sink into recession for the first time in three decades and government debt increase massively.

The Australian government said on Friday it would meet next Friday, a week ahead of schedule, to decide whether to ease social distancing restrictions, as the numbers of new infections dwindle and pressure mounts for business and schools to reopen.

Australia has reported about 6,700 cases of the new coronavirus and 93 deaths, well below the levels reported in the United States and Europe. Growth in new infections has slowed to less than 0.5% a day, compared to 25% a month ago.

Morrison said it was imperative to lift social distancing restrictions as early as possible as 1.5 million people were now on unemployment benefits and the government forecast the unemployment rate to top 10% within months.

"We need to restart our economy, we need to restart our society. We can't keep Australia

under the doona," Morrison said, using an Australian word for quilt.

Morrison's government has pledged spending of more than 10% of GDP to boost the economy but the central bank still warns the country is heading for its worst contraction since the 1930s.

With less than 20 new coronavirus cases discovered each day, Morrison said state and territory lawmakers would meet on May 8 to determine whether to lift restrictions.

"Australians deserve an early mark for the work that they have done," he told reporters.

Australia attributes its success in slowing the spread of COVID-19 to social distancing restrictions imposed in March, including the forced closures of pubs, restaurants and limiting the size of indoor and outdoor gatherings.

Morrison said 3.5 million people had downloaded an app on their smartphones designed to help medics trace people potentially exposed to the virus, though the government is hoping for about 40% of the country's 25.7 million population to sign up to ensure it is effective.

Cabinet will also decide next week how to restart sport across the country, the prime minister said.

The government says any resumption of sport should not compromise the public health, and recommends a staggered start beginning with small groups that play non-contact sport outdoors.

Australian PM says relationship with China "mutually beneficial" (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:01 AM, Swati Pandey, 5304K, Negative]

Australia's Prime Minister Scott Morrison called the country's relationship with China "mutually beneficial" on Friday, amid an intensifying row with Beijing over a proposed international inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak.

China, Australia's No.1 trading partner, has accused Canberra of "petty tricks" in the dispute that could affect diplomatic and economic ties between the countries.

[Australia] Australia accelerates decision on whether to lift COVID-19 restrictions (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 5:33 AM, Colin Packham, John Mair, 5304K, Neutral]

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[Australia] How did Australia flatten its coronavirus curve? Restrictions easing as infection rate continues to fall (CNN)

CNN [5/1/2020 12:39 AM, Nectar Gan, 12317K, Neutral]

When it comes to the coronavirus, South Australia ought to now be considered among the safest places in the world. That was the message from one of the country's leading public health officials this week, as much of Australia began the slow process of easing restrictions.

That many Australians now find themselves in such an enviable position would have been unthinkable only a month ago, during which time nationwide daily infection rates reached into triple figures. But on Friday, the entire country reported just 16 new cases, a sharp decline from a peak of 460 new infections on March 28.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Friday the National Cabinet will meet on May 8 to consider easing lockdown measures, bringing forward the discussion from the week beginning May 11.

"Australians have earned an early mark," Morrison said. "We need to restart our economy, we need to restart our society."

In some states, the curve has completely flattened: Queensland hasn't reported any new cases since Monday, and South Australia has seen no new infections for more than a week.

"No more cases in South Australia. This is a landmark for us," South Australia Chief Public Health Officer Nicola Spurrier said with a big smile during a press briefing on Wednesday.

The southern state of 1.6 million people, home to the country's fifth most populous city Adelaide, has reported 438 confirmed Covid-19 cases, with only 14 remaining active cases and four deaths, according to the SA government.

"I think many people are surprised in Australia at how well we have done. Really, when you look across all the states and territories, this is the safest place to be in the world, perhaps other than New Zealand," she said.

Neighboring country New Zealand recently achieved its ambitious goal of "eliminating" the coronavirus, meaning that while the daily infection rate has yet to reach zero, the country is able to track the origins of each new case.

In total, Australia, which has a population of around 25 million people, has reported 6,762 confirmed cases. Ninety two of those cases have resulted in death, and 5,720 have since recovered, according to the federal health authority.

"We're continuing to do very well around Australia to suppress the virus and we have well and truly flattened the curve of cases and new infections," said a spokesperson for the Australian Department of Health in a statement Thursday to CNN.

"Safety has been our fundamental focus and the success of our suppression strategy has meant Australia is in a very similar (place) to New Zealand, which has stated its strategy is aimed at elimination."

Some Australian states have already started to begin the process of easing restrictive measures and social-distancing rules. West Australia and South Australia relaxed the limit on public gatherings, up from two people to 10 people.

In Western Australia, which saw several "zero-case" days in the past week, national parks reopened on Friday, and nearly 60% public school students have returned for the start of a new term.

In the remote Northern Territory, where no new cases have been reported for three weeks, residents will be able to use public swimming pools, waterparks, go fishing with friends and play golf starting from Friday. The state has also laid out plans to restart its economy, allowing restaurants, pubs and gyms to reopen on May 15 and lifting the remaining restrictions on June 5.

Restrictive measures

Australia's success in taming the outbreak started with early measures to bar entry from high-risk areas.

On February 1, Australia joined the United States in closing its borders to all foreign visitors who had recently been in China, where the outbreak was first reported in December last year.

As the virus spread and outbreaks flared beyond China, Australia barred entries from Iran, South Korea and Italy in early March, before closing its borders completely to all non-citizens and non-residents on March 19.

But the country has also had its shares of missteps. On March 19, it allowed more than 2,600 passengers to disembark from the Ruby Princess cruise ship in Sydney, despite multiple previous outbreaks elsewhere in the world involving cruise ships. Over 600 cases and 15 deaths have since been linked to the ship, according to public broadcaster ABC.

As the number of cases soared in late March, Morrison announced on March 22 all bars, clubs, cinemas, gyms and places of worship would be closed indefinitely, while restaurants and cafes would be restricted to take-away only – but supermarkets, clothing stores, chemists and beauty salons would be allowed to remain open.

"What we're doing is closing down gatherings in pubs and clubs and things of that nature, we're not putting in place lockdowns that would confine people to their home," Morrison said at the time.

The state of Victoria closed schools, and some states, such as West Australia and South Australia, closed their borders, requiring anyone to enter to go into two weeks of quarantine.

By the end of March, authorities imposed stricter social-distancing rules, limiting public gathering to two people from the previous 10. People were urged to stay home and only go out if it is "absolutely essential," such as shopping for food, exercising, and for medical reasons.

Ever expanding testing

While closure of businesses, schools, travel restrictions and social distancing rules are common measures adopted by many governments around the world, Australia also paired these restrictions with widespread testing.

To date, more than 570,000 tests have been conducted across Australia, according to the Department of Health.

In comparison, the United Kingdom, with a population more than 2.5 times of Australia, has carried out 763,387 tests.

On March 25, Australian expanded its testing criteria to include all health care workers, aged care workers, prisoners and people in other identified hotspots who have fever or acute respiratory symptoms. Previously, only people who recently returned from overseas or who had come into contact with a confirmed coronavirus case could be tested.

Last week, the criteria was further expanded to anyone displaying even the mildest

symptoms for Covid-19, Federal Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy announced.

"Anybody with acute respiratory symptoms, cough, sore throat, runny nose, cold symptoms, flu-like symptoms, can get tested," Murphy said at a press conference Friday, according to ABC.

On Monday, Murphy said Australia will start testing asymptomatic cases for the first time "to be absolutely sure that we are capturing every case that we can and that we're not missing cases."

Drawing ire from Beijing

While Australia appears to be successfully containing the coronavirus, it has become embroiled in a diplomatic spat with China after it demanded an international inquiry into the coronavirus outbreak.

The bipartisan push for a global inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic, including China's handling of the initial outbreak in the city of Wuhan, begun last week, with Foreign Minister Marise Payne urging China to allow transparency in the process, according to ABC.

The push quickly drew the ire of Beijing, which slammed the move as "political maneuvering."

In an interview with the Australian Financial Review, Chinese Ambassador Jingye Cheng even warned of an economic backlash if Australia continued its push for an independent inquiry, suggesting that the Chinese public may boycott Australian products or decide not to visit Australia in the future.

A day after Cheng's stern warning, Morrison vowed to continue to push for the inquiry at a press conference on Wednesday, calling it a "fairly obvious and common sense suggestion."

"This is a virus that has taken more than 200,000 lives across the world. It has shut down the global economy. The implications and impacts of this are extraordinary," he said.

"It would seem entirely reasonable and sensible that the world would want to have an independent assessment of how this all occurred, so we can learn the lessons and prevent it from happening again...I believe there will be support for at the right time, to ensure we do that," added Morrison.

[Australia] Australian police fatally shoot man after stabbings at mall (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 3:29 AM, Staff, 3795K, Negative]

Police shot dead a man who stabbed and slashed several people at an Australian shopping mall on Friday, an official said.

Officials have not revealed how many people were injured in the northwest coastal town of South Hedland or detailed their conditions. No motive for the attacks has been revealed.

"A person has engaged in multiple stabbings or slashings of people," Western Australia state Premier Mark McGowan told reporters.

"He has been Tasered by police. That didn't stop him and he lunged at police officers and then he was shot by police officers," McGowan said.

"He died at the scene and a number of people have been injured in this tragic and awful set of events," McGowan added.

Witnesses said the man wielded a knife to stab several people in car parks near the mall, The North West Telegraph reported.

The injured were being treated at Hedland Health Campus, a police statement said.

"Police will investigate the circumstances surrounding how these people received the injuries," the statement said.

St. John Ambulance said in a statement multiple people were treated at the scene but did not detail their conditions.

[China] Chinese embassy publishes 16-point coronavirus rebuttal (Axios)

Axios [5/1/2020 8:47 AM, Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Neutral]

The Chinese embassy in Germany has posted to its website a 4,600-word rebuttal of 16 common criticisms of China's handling of the coronavirus outbreak, depicting Beijing itself as a victim of disinformation.

The rebuttal comes amid a "global battle of narratives" between China and western governments over blame for the pandemic.

Written in a "true or false" fact-checking style, the German-language post seamlessly blends fact with propaganda in a sophisticated attempt to persuade German audiences that China's response to the coronavirus was blameless.

The 16 statements — or as the post calls them, "myths" — include a mix of conspiracy theories about the virus's origins, racist stereotypes against Chinese people, and factual reporting that the Chinese government casts as flawed.

"Many uncertainties have crept into the discussion about the origin and spread of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus. Lies, myths and conspiracy theories are spreading on social media — but not only there," the post states.

"China is particularly affected by this 'infodemic.'"

The Chinese embassy's message utilizes three strategies to blur the nature of truth.

It intersperses obvious conspiracy theories with accurate factual reporting in the list of claims it seeks to debunk.

It cites both highly reputable sources, such as scientific journals and European research institutes, and highly disreputable sources, such as conspiracy websites.

It equates Chinese laws and policies with on-the-ground reality.

The Chinese embassy in Germany did not respond to a request for comment.

Some examples:

"Myth # 1: China created the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus in a lab."

The embassy's take: "Fact: The SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus is of natural origin."

Axios fact-check: The list starts off with what is indeed a widely debunked conspiracy theory, citing the prestigious science journal Nature in its rebuttal.

"Myth # 6: China arrested doctors who warned the world about the virus early on to cover up the outbreak."

The embassy's take: "Fact: No doctor in China has been arrested for warning of an epidemic. Doctors who have reported a possible outbreak have been recognized by the government."

Axios fact-check: Eight Chinese doctors were detained and interrogated by the Wuhan security bureau on Jan. 1 after they shared information about the new virus and warned colleagues of its dangers. It is technically true that detention and interrogation are not arrest.

Three months after this incident occurred — and after the coronavirus-related death of the one of the doctors, which spurred intense national anger and demands for freedom of speech — the central government changed course and recognized the doctor as a national hero.

"Myth No. 9: China is preventing Taiwan from joining the WHO, which endangers the health of the people of Taiwan."

The embassy's take: "Fact: Taiwan is part of China and not a member of the United Nations. It is therefore not legally permitted to join the WHO."

This equates a Chinese foreign policy position with fact. It also fails to mention that Taiwan lost its membership in the UN, and thus its membership in the WHO, only because of Beijing's lobbying.

China is currently waging a major diplomatic campaign to refute western government attempts to hold the country accountable for the coronavirus's global spread.

Chinese diplomats and state media have repeated information criticizing the U.S. response and suggesting the virus may have originated outside China.

The People's Daily, the Chinese Communist Party's flagship newspaper, published an article on May 1 implying the coronavirus may somehow be linked to a U.S. army lab in Maryland or a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services virus outbreak simulation.

They also suggested the U.S. was intentionally underreporting the number of coronavirus deaths.

The embassy's fact-check is part of a global strategy to improve China's image, a strategy which at times has involved disinformation.

[China] Chinese journalist jailed for 15 years for 'vilifying the Communist Party and government' (CNN)

CNN [5/1/2020 4:21 AM, James Griffiths, 12317K, Negative]

A former Chinese state media journalist turned anti-corruption blogger has been sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Chen Jieren was detained in mid-2018 after he published two articles on his personal blog claiming corruption by Hunan party officials. On Thursday, a court in the southern province jailed him for "picking quarrels and provoking trouble," extortion, blackmail and bribery, in what one human rights group said was an attempt to "punish him for his political speech on WeChat and other social media platforms."

Chen, the court said, "attacked and vilified the Communist Party and government" by publishing "false information" and "malicious speculation."

China is the biggest jailer of journalists in the world, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and tightly controls the press at home while censoring most foreign media outlets via the Great Firewall, its vast online censorship and surveillance apparatus.

In March, China expelled journalists from the New York Times, Washington Post and Wall Street Journal, in an unprecedented move against the foreign press. Beijing said the move was a response for recent restrictions by Washington on how Chinese state media operates in the US.

While Chen's case is unrelated to the country's coronavirus outbreak, his jailing comes as its censors reassert their control over the Chinese media and internet following criticism over the initial handling of the situation in Wuhan.

In a statement, Chinese Human Rights Defenders, a Hong Kong-based NGO, said Chen's sentence "sends a chilling signal to online independent commentators and citizen journalists."

Speaking to CNN Business last week, RSF spokeswoman Rebecca Vincent said that "if there had been a free press in China, if these whistleblowers hadn't been silenced, then this could have been prevented from turning into a pandemic."

"Sometimes we can talk about press freedom in a theoretical way, but this shows the impact can at times be physical. It can affect all of our health," she said.

[China] The place Chinese travelers want to visit in 2020 is... Wuhan (CNN)

CNN [5/1/2020 6:50 AM, Maggie Hiufu Wong, 12317K, Neutral]

This might be one of the most unexpected turn of events during the novel coronavirus outbreak -- Wuhan has been named the no.1 destination Chinese citizens want to visit after the crisis is over.

The study on travel needs and trends during the Covid-19 outbreak was jointly conducted by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Tourism Research Center and Tencent Culture and Tourism Industry Research Center.

The results, released on April 28, are based on 15,163 questionnaires, big data from more than 20 million posts on social media accounts and forums as well as a dozen in-depth one-on-one interviews.

Wuhan overtook Beijing as the top domestic city on Chinese travelers' wish list after the lockdown.

The city, closely associated with the outbreak of the virus, ranked only eighth according to the data collected between December 2019 and mid-January 2020. The second place was originally taken by Chongqing.

The hashtag "武汉成为疫情后网民最想去旅游的城市" (which roughly translates as "Wuhan becomes the top city netizens want to visit after the epidemic") has become one of the hottest trending topics on Weibo, with 25,000 discussions and 270 million views on the topic.

"I think the real reason why netizens would want to visit Wuhan is to see the city that has experienced the historical moments. The epidemic situation has imprinted Wuhan on our minds. We have seen the perseverance and industriousness of Wuhan people," wrote one Weibo user using the hashtag.

Hubei province, where Wuhan is located, became the second most desired province to visit after Beijing province. It wasn't listed in the top 10 before the outbreak. Shennongjia, a 3,253-square-kilometer forest area in Hubei province, and Yellow Crane Tower in Wuhan city also rose into the top 20 tourist attractions, according to the study.

"It could be said that the result of the study embodied the deep emotions from the people from around the country, expressing the public's concerns and supports towards the 'hero city,'" Song Rui, the director of the tourism research center, told local media.

How the coronavirus affect how Chinese travel

Internationally, Thailand was the destination Chinese travelers wanted to visit the most in 2020, followed by Russia and Japan.

The United States, which had been top of the list, has dropped out of the top ten entirely, following the outbreak.

The pandemic has affected some travel behaviors and plans.

Travelers with children are 30-44% less likely to want to travel with family in 2020 compared with the year before.

Around a third of interviewees said that they would travel again within three to six months after the crisis has passed.

The study also said that Chinese travelers expected to spend RMB5,746 (\$813) on travel in 2020, RMB734 (\$103) more than last year.

[Indonesia] May Day Marks Pain, Not Celebration for Workers Hit by Virus (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 1:55 AM, Edna Tarigan, Sopheng Cheang and Julhas Alam, 40577K, Neutral] May Day usually brings both protest rallies and celebrations rallies marking international Labor Day. This year, many in Asia are shut up at home, riding out the coronavirus pandemic.

Among the ten of millions of people left idle or thrown out of work by the crisis, garment workers have been among the hardest hit as orders dry up and shutdowns leave factories shuttered, giving workers plenty to protest at a time when lockdowns are keeping them at home.

Wiryono, a father of two was laid off from his main job as a sample producer at a garment factory in North Jakarta in late April. His side gig, delivering coffee by motorcycle to construction workers, dried up when work halted as part of Indonesia's shutdown to fight the pandemic.

So, for now Wiryono has rented a small space and runs a clothing repair shop.

"I don't earn as much as I got from the clothing factory. But I have to feed my wife and kids every day," he said.

Millions of jobs have vanished in countries like Bangladesh, Indonesia, Cambodia and Myanmar that rely heavily on garment manufacturing as fashion brands cancelled or suspended billions of dollars' worth of orders.

More than 2 million garment factory workers in Indonesia have lost their jobs, and factories are operating at about 20% of capacity, according to the Indonesian Textile Association.

In Cambodia, which also relies heavily on apparel, footwear and textile exports, about 130 factories have laid off some 100,000 people, said Heng Sour, spokesman for the labor ministry.

The country's 1,000 clothing and shoe factories normally employ nearly 800,000 people and shipped nearly \$10 billion worth of products to the United States and Europe last year.

"COVID-19 is like a faceless murderer or terrorist, killing several hundred thousand people and infecting millions around the globe," Heng Sour said. Like many other governments, Cambodia has asked workers to forego the usual rallies and protests and celebrate Labor Day at home.

Likewise, in Muslim-majority Indonesia, where the month-long daytime fasting of Ramadan is underway and the government has likewise asked people not to gather in large groups as a precaution against the virus.

The shutdown has cut into sales of new clothing for Eid al-Fitr, the festival that follows Ramadan, after the Tanah Abang Market, Southeast Asia's biggest textile bazaar, closed in mid-March, said Rizal Tanzil Rakhman, executive secretary of the textile association.

The industry wants government help in covering fixed expenses and loans, he said.

"It's not just those who make the clothes, but the production chain, such as the makers of fibers and yarns, thread producers and dye and printing operators," Rakhman said. The situation is bad enough now but it will get worse without government help."

The pressures from the pandemic come at a time when countries like Cambodia and Myanmar already are threatened with the withdrawal of trade privileges under the "Everything But Arms" scheme that gives them preferential access to the EU market for products other than weapons.

The EU plans to withdraw those advantages for Cambodia, which are worth about one-fifth of the billion euros (\$1.1 billion) of its exports to the bloc each year, because of concerns about its poor record in human and labor rights.

In Myanmar, which has sought to build up its garments exports to industrialize an impoverished economy based mainly on farming, mining and logging, more than 60,000 factory workers have lost their jobs.

"With the factories being shut down, it has meant they have lost their only means of livelihood, that's their lifeline really, for themselves and the families that they support," said Araddhya Mehtta, the country director of the NGO ActionAid Myanmar.

The crisis has left many women more vulnerable to sexual and domestic violence, said Mehtta, whose group says it provides health guidance, food relief, hand sanitizer and cash support to some 150,000 garment workers.

The fierce competition in an industry where slim profit margins leave factories scant leverage with the global, wealthy customers, the pressure to go back to work is building.

Nearly a month after Bangladesh ordered its garment factories shuttered to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, more than 800 factories have reopened or plan to do so soon, despite risks the disease might spread. Labor activists say the number of factories that have gone back to work is higher.

Bangladesh has the world's second largest garment industry after China and normally earns about \$35 billion a year from exports, mainly to the United States and Europe. The pandemic has cost manufacturers more than \$3 billion in cancelled or suspended orders, said Rubana Huq, president of the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, or BGMEA.

Most of Bangladesh's 4 million garment workers, mostly women from rural areas, were sent home in late March. Production is starting back up before the virus outbreak has been fully controlled: the number of newly confirmed infections has continued to rise this week.

"The global brands, especially the European ones, want their racks full of cheap Bangladeshi products. They are directly and indirectly telling the owners that they will move to our competitors like Vietnam, Cambodia or China, said Kalpona Akter, executive director of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity.

"Some owners are perfectly maintaining good safety measures in place, but many others are ignoring them. This is dangerous," she said.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Protesters, Police Clash Again After Lull Brought by Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 12:44 PM, Joyu Wang, Neutral]

Riot police used pepper spray to clear demonstrators from a shopping mall Friday, the first clash in months as the city's antigovernment movement sought to revive protests after a lull during the coronavirus pandemic.

After police banned the annual May Day protest organized by trade unions, riot officers were out in force across the city, which has imposed a law prohibiting more than four people gathering as part of social-distancing efforts to tackle the virus.

Scores of masked protesters, however, gathered at the mall, standing one or two meters apart, to sing the unofficial anthem of the movement, before riot officers moved in, using pepper spray to clear the venue.

With no community coronavirus infections for more than a week, Hong Kong residents packed beaches and shops Friday, the Labor Day public holiday, in signs of normality returning. For some, that meant resuming hostilities with the government. As the summer approaches, pro-democracy demonstrators are looking to revive mass support they received last year, when up to two million people joined one rally in June to oppose a now-dead extradition bill.

With broader goals, including an inquiry into alleged police abuses, the opposition camp is facing increasing pressure from Beijing and the city's government. Several high-profile figures have been arrested and Chinese officials are demanding Hong Kong enact national-security laws to criminalize behavior such as sedition or promoting secession from the mainland.

The city's leader, Chief Executive Carrie Lam, Thursday urged people against further unrest, which drove the city into recession before the coronavirus wrought further carnage

on businesses and people's livelihoods. Hong Kong's economy might be able to survive the winter with the government's stimulus package, but "we might not be able to survive continuous political torture and resurgent violence," she posted on her Facebook page.

Many residents chose to back the movement and bolster the economy by supporting protester-friendly businesses during a four-day holiday weekend. In the bustling shopping area of Causeway Bay on Friday, long lines were seen at bubble-tea shops that decorated their storefronts with protest messages.

"You know, after being trapped for so long, it's normal that you want to get out and spend money and to support the 'yellow' shops," said a 60-year-old medical worker who goes by Cat but declined to give her last name for fear of being targeted by authorities. The color yellow is widely used in Hong Kong to indicate support for the pro-democracy movement.

On Friday evening, hundreds of masked protesters gathered in the New Town Plaza mall in the Sha Tin district of Hong Kong, singing and chanting pro-democracy slogans. Around 7 p.m., squads of police officers with riot gear stormed in and set up blockade lines at the mall, the scene of some bloody arrests during last year's protests. By 8 p.m., they fired pepper spray at protesters, including at least two elected district council members.

A few people were seen on live-video feeds getting fined for violating the ban on social gathering, a pandemic measure now being criticized as a means to crack down on protesters.

Police had refused permission for a rally Friday, organized by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions.

Across the city, union groups instead set up dozens of booths, each with no more than four representatives to avoid falling foul of the social-distancing law. Many were watched closely by phalanxes of police patrolling the streets.

Lee Cheuk-yan, the secretary-general of the pro-democracy union, distributed fliers at a street booth in the shopping area of Mong Kok, advocating for more workers to set up unions in Hong Kong.

"Many people now see unions as one of the future's front lines in our fight," Mr. Lee said.

A strike by hospital workers in February to demand a full closure of the border with mainland China, where the pandemic began and was spreading to Hong Kong, was followed by government moves to close many immigration checkpoints. The strike was a good example that "reminds Hong Kong people of this path that might work," Mr. Lee said.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Police Spray Tear Gas in Protest at Shopping Mall (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 10:28 AM, Zen Soo, Neutral]

Hong Kong police used pepper spray on Friday to disperse over a hundred protesters in a shopping mall who were singing and chanting pro-democracy slogans.

The demonstrators sang the protest anthem "Glory to Hong Kong" and chanted "Glory to

Hong Kong, revolution of our times" in the New Town Plaza mall in Hong Kong's New Territories.

As protesters gathered in the mall, riot police stopped and searched some and later told them to leave, saying they were violating social-distancing rules. The police then sprayed tear gas to disperse the crowd before cordoning off the atrium of the mall.

The protest was one of several that went ahead on May 1, Labor Day, despite rules that forbid public gatherings of more than four people.

Small groups of protesters also gathered near Kowloon's Mong Kok and Kwun Tong subway stations.

Organizers initially planned citywide protests but many were canceled, with the organizers urging people to support pro-democracy restaurants instead.

Friday's protests were the latest in a string of demonstrations over the past week in which protesters gathered in shopping malls. They follow the arrest of 15 pro-democracy activists and former lawmakers last Saturday.

The demonstrations are a continuation of a movement that began last June to protest an extradition bill that would have allowed detainees in Hong Kong to be transferred to mainland China. Although the bill was later withdrawn, the demonstrations continued for months before a lull starting in January as the coronavirus pandemic broke out.

[Malaysia] Malaysia detains hundreds of refugees and migrants during virus lockdown: rights groups (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:32 PM, Rozanna Latif and A. Ananthalakshmi, Neutral]

Malaysia on Friday detained hundreds of refugees and migrant workers for illegally living in the country, rights groups said, at a time of movement and travel restrictions imposed to contain the spread of the new coronavirus.

There has been growing public anger in recent days over the presence of migrant foreigners with some in Malaysia accusing them of spreading the coronavirus and being a burden on government resources.

Malaysia has around 2 million registered foreign workers but authorities estimate many more are living in the Southeast Asian country without proper documents. Malaysia does not formally recognise refugees, regarding them as illegal migrants.

The arrests followed immigration raids in a neighbourhood in capital Kuala Lumpur where thousands of migrant workers and refugees live, according to human rights groups and photos shared on social media.

Human Rights Watch and the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network said over 700 migrants were taken into custody including young children. Rohingya refugees from Myanmar were among those detained, other rights groups said.

Malaysian police and the immigration department did not immediately respond to requests

for comment.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees said a "small number of asylum seekers" had been detained and it had informed by authorities that refugees and asylum-seekers were being held for the purpose of identity verification.

A Malaysian official who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity said the foreign workers, mostly from South Asia, were detained because they did not have the necessary permits and that more raids would be conducted in the coming days.

Rachel Tan, programme officer at the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, said the arrests were a "criminalisation of a people who toil in difficult and dangerous work conditions".

The neighbourhood where the raids took place was close to an area with three buildings that had been placed under strict lockdowns last month after a surge in coronavirus cases there.

Around 9,000 people live in the buildings, most of whom are foreign nationals, and 235 of them have tested positive for COVID-19, the respiratory illness caused by the virus, the government has said.

Malaysia has reported a total of 6,071 coronavirus cases and 103 deaths, and its prime minister said on Friday that most businesses will reopen from Monday following six-week long curbs that have caused a damaging economic slowdown.

Photos shared on social media showed dozens of migrant workers lined up in close quarters as authorities watched from the sidewalk. Some officials were seen wearing full protective equipment, while the migrant workers only had masks on.

Other photos seen by Reuters showed dozens of migrants packed in trucks that typically carry illegal foreign nationals to immigration detention centres, which are known to be cramped and unhygienic.

"This is not at all humane," rights advocate Tan said. "Even innocent children and babies were being dragged onto the trucks like cattle."

Migrant workers have been a particularly vulnerable community during the pandemic. In neighbouring Singapore, thousands of infections have been linked to migrant worker dormitories.

[Myanmar] Myanmar dismisses fresh war crimes allegations by U.N. rights envoy as 'biased' (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 7:59 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A Myanmar government spokesman on Friday dismissed allegations by the departing United Nations rights envoy that the military was committing fresh war crimes in Rakhine state as "biased", blaming rebels for violations.

"We found that her investigation has no balance and was biased," government spokesman

Zaw Htay told a press conference on Friday.

Yanghee Lee, special rapporteur for human rights in Myanmar, said in her final statement on Wednesday the army was engaged in activities against rebels that may amount to "war crimes and crimes against humanity" in Rakhine and Chin states.

She said the basis for her conclusion was that the armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, have ramped up attacks against civilians in recent weeks with air and artillery strikes.

Dozens have died and tens of thousands been displaced in the region in recent weeks.

Two military spokesmen did not answer phone calls from Reuters seeking comment, but the army has denied targeting civilians.

Addressing the media on Friday, Zaw Htay said that troops from the Arakan Army, an insurgent group that wants greater autonomy for the western region, dress as civilians when they carry out attacks.

"When the military responds with counter-attacks to those who pretend as civilians, there is collateral damage," he said. "There is no intention. From the military side, they have done the necessary investigations."

The Arakan Army did not immediately publish a statement in response.

Zaw Htay also said the group was responsible for attacking a World Health Organization vehicle in late April, killing the driver. The Arakan Army has blamed that attack on the army.

The government has formed an investigative committee to probe the incident.

[North Korea] 'Kim Jong Un is Dead, Sister Kim Yo Jong Will Succeed Him', Claims North Korean Defector Amid Death Rumours (Yahoo News/Latestly)

[Yahoo News/Latestly](#) [5/1/2020 6:17 AM, Staff, 3975K, Negative]

A North Korean defector who has now become a lawmaker in South Korea recently said he is 99 percent sure that "Kim Jong Un is dead and his sister Kim Yo Jong will take over the reins." According to a report in [Mirror.co.uk](#), Ji Seong-ho said he was informed that Kim Jong Un died last weekend after undergoing a cardiovascular operation. He also said that he believes Pyongyang may announce Kim's demise this weekend.

"I've wondered how long he could have endured after cardiovascular surgery. I've been informed that Kim died last weekend," Ji told Yonhap News Agency. "It is not 100 percent certain, but I can say the possibility is 99 percent," he added. According to Ji Seong-ho, North Korea is holding the news of Kim Jong Un's death because it is "grappling with a complicated succession issue." Kim hasn't been seen in public since April 11.

The deaths of Pyongyang's only two previous leaders — Kim's grandfather Kim Il-sung, the country's founder, and father Kim Jong-il — were announced by state media two days after they had died. According to Japanese media, Kim Jong Un is in a "vegetative state." A Hong Kong-backed news channel's vice director, who's apparently the niece of a Chinese

foreign minister, said Kim is dead.

While there are disputed reports about Kim Jong Un's health condition, South Korea has said that it had not seen any unusual development. Last month, the US media had reported that the North Korean leader was gravely ill following heart surgery. North Korea's state media is putting out reports on Kim sending diplomatic letters and receiving replies but did not release reports or photos featuring his public activity.

[Singapore] Singapore confirms 932 new COVID-19 cases, death toll rises to 16 (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 12:01 PM, Rabekah Mathew, 5304K, Neutral]

Singapore reported 932 new coronavirus cases on Friday, the health ministry said, taking the city-state's total infections to 17,101.

The island nation also reported one death, a 60 year-old male Singapore citizen, bringing the virus-related death toll in the country to 16.

Among the new cases, five are Singaporeans or permanent residents, while 905 cases are foreign workers living in dormitories, the health ministry said.

South and Central Asia

[Bangladesh] Bangladesh factories resume work, risking new virus cases (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 5:27 AM, Julhas Alam, 2194K, Negative]

Bangladesh has reopened hundreds of its garment factories this week after nearly one month of closures to fight the coronavirus pandemic in a move critics say risks igniting a sharp increase in infections among workers.

An industry group said about 850 factories are operating with fewer workers than usual and following safety guidelines. Labor advocates say not enough is being done to ensure safety for the 4 million workers in Bangladesh's roughly 4,000 garment factories.

The number of factories that have reopened is in dispute. Activists and analysts said Friday about 2,000 garment factories have restarted production.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association says only 850 factories had opened by Thursday, using a limited number of workers who live nearby.

"The global brands are happy to see the factories opening up as otherwise a whole season would have been lost," Mohammad Abdur Razzak, secretary of the industry group, said in an email.

Razzak said the factories were complying with health guidelines and that inspections found that only four of 105 visited were not meeting standards.

As is true elsewhere workers and their employers are torn between suffering still more loss of income by staying closed and risking a surge in infections if they stop taking precautions too soon.

The resumption of manufacturing followed a government decision to allow companies to reopen that was made under heavy pressure from businesses. Factories went ahead, fearing they might lose business to competitors in Vietnam, Cambodia, India, Sri Lanka and India.

A senior government health official in a major industrial zone near Dhaka urged factories to close down again.

Bangladesh has confirmed 7,667 people infected with coronavirus and 168 deaths since its first case was reported on March 8. About 500 new cases are being confirmed daily in the nation of 160 million people, which has only 25 testing facilities and a fragile healthcare system.

Thousands of workers reportedly are rushing back to reclaim their jobs in the capital, Dhaka and nearby industrial districts, alarming labor advocates.

"Who will take the responsibility if hundreds of workers become ill?" said Kalpona Akter, executive director of the Bangladesh Center for Workers Solidarity.

Ahsan H. Mansur, executive director of the local think tank Policy Research Institute, said at least another week should have been allowed to better prepare for reopening.

"The factories have resumed operations without giving it much thought," he said. "There is a huge risk of virus transmission among workers."

[India] India to Run Special Trains to Help Stranded People Reach Home (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/1/2020 9:09 AM, Divya Patil, Neutral]

India will run special trains to help people separated from their families by a nationwide lockdown to reach back home.

The government will run the trains from May 1 to move migrant workers, pilgrims, tourists, students and other people stranded across the country due to the lockdown, the Ministry of Home Affairs said in a statement Friday. The lockdown, which was scheduled to end on May 3, was extended by two weeks.

The development will be a relief for the thousands of people who couldn't reach their destinations when Prime Minister Narendra Modi suddenly ordered a lockdown starting March 25 to prevent the spread of coronavirus pandemic. In a scene reminiscent of the days immediately after India's independence in 1947, hundreds of thousands of the country's poorest fled cities for their villages, many by foot, after the lockdown was announced.

The trains will run from point-to-point on the request of state governments. The local authorities also have to screen the passengers and only those found asymptomatic would be allowed to travel, the ministry said.

[India] Indian Migrant Workers Take 1st Train Home Since Lockdown (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 8:25 AM, Biswajeet Banerjee, Neutral]

India on Friday ran the first train service for thousands of migrant workers desperate to return home since it imposed a nationwide lockdown to control the spread of the coronavirus.

Relieved and smiling, 1,200 people clapped as they boarded the train at Lingampally in southern Telangana state for Hatia in the eastern state of Jharkhand — a 19-hour journey.

However, railroad authorities said Friday's service was only a one-off special train and a decision on running more trains will be taken soon.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is due to announce on Sunday his decision whether to extend the 40-day-old lockdown or gradually ease it to resume economic activity. Earlier this week, the government allowed some shops to reopen and manufacturing and farming to resume.

On Friday, India registered another daily high of nearly 2,000 infections, bringing totals to 35,043 with 1,147 deaths.

Several states, including Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Bihar, Kerala, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Telangana have demanded special trains for returning workers because they couldn't arrange enough buses.

The Uttar Pradesh government in northern India has announced distribution of free food grains, but a majority of the migrant workers do not have cards issued by the state government to avail of the facility.

"The situation is aggravated because first these people do not have work and secondly there are more mouths to feed than the food available in the village," said Nomita P. Kumar of Giri Institute of Development Studies in Lucknow, the state capital.

State Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath ordered that those who do not have the government ration cards should not be denied food grains and should be given a provisional card.

The state government spokesman, Awanish Awasthi, said more than 12,000 workers and students had returned from northern Haryana and western Rajasthan states after the lockdown was announced on April 25 using more than 600 buses.

Around 1 million migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh are still stranded in other Indian states, he said.

[India] India extends nationwide lockdown, to allow relaxations in lower-risk zones (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 12:21 PM, Nigam Prusty and Rajendra Jadhav, Neutral]

India said on Friday it would extend its nationwide coronavirus lockdown for another two weeks after May 4, but would allow "considerable relaxations" in lower-risk districts marked as green and orange zones.

Some activities will remain prohibited throughout the country, regardless of the zone, the ministry of home affairs said in a statement.

Those include travel by air, rail and metro and inter-state movement of people by road; and schools and colleges, hotels, restaurants, shopping malls, cinema halls and places of worship will remain closed.

There will be no restriction on movement of goods between states and on the manufacturing and distribution of essential items, the ministry said.

Authorities are trying to chart a path out of the world's biggest lockdown, which they credit with preventing an exponential surge in infections and which Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed on March 25.

Authorities have mapped the country into red, orange and green zones, depending on the severity of the outbreak. Health Secretary Preeti Sudan detailed the plan in a letter to regional officials that was seen by Reuters.

The biggest and most economically-important cities, including New Delhi, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai and Ahmedabad, would all be classed as red zones, infection hotspots, and kept under strict lockdown.

To qualify as a green zone, eligible for quicker lifting of restrictions, an area would have had to report no new infections for three weeks. The classifications would be "dynamic" and updated at least weekly as conditions change, Sudan wrote.

India has reported more than 35,000 cases and 1,147 confirmed deaths from the virus. The true extent of infection may be higher in a country where millions of people do not have access to sufficient healthcare.

The shutdown has pummelled India's economy, depriving millions of day labourers of income and stranding rural migrants in cities where they can no longer afford rent or food.

The government issued an order on Friday to provide special trains for stranded migrant workers, pilgrims, tourists and students to return home.

[Nepal] Old explosive from Nepal's insurgency kills 4 children (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 2:32 AM, Staff, 3795K, Negative]

An old explosive device left during Nepal's decadelong communist insurgency has killed four children in a mountain village, official said Friday.

The children picked up the device from the jungle and were playing with it when it exploded Thursday night and killed them, said government administrator Navaraj Sharma.

Government investigators had reached the village in Rolpa district on Friday but were unable to retrieve the bodies because of safety concerns. Villagers were also angry and protesting the deaths.

Nepal's communist insurgency began in 1996 and ended a decade later after the rebels entered a United Nations-monitored peace process. Some 17,000 people are believed to have been killed in the fighting.

[Pakistan] Report gives Pakistan failing grade on human rights (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 7:53 AM, Kathy Gannon, Negative]

An annual human rights report released this week gives Pakistan a failing grade, charging that too little is being done to protect the country's most vulnerable, including women and children.

The 264-page report by the Independent Pakistan Human Rights Commission laid out a litany of human rights failings. They include unabated honor killings, forced conversions of minority Hindu under-age girls and continued use of a blasphemy law that carries the death penalty to intimidate and settle scores.

In December, Pakistan was ranked 151st out of 153 by the World Economic Forum on the Global Gender Gap Index.

"Despite the legislation enacted to protect and promote women's rights in recent years, violence against women has escalated," the report released Thursday said.

It also criticizes increased restrictions on media freedom and criticism of state institutions and a growing number of cases of sexual and physical abuse of children.

There was no immediate comment from the government.

Pakistan has been slow to enact laws to protect the country's most vulnerable and even where laws are in place they are often not enforced by police. Law enforcement agencies in Pakistan are often corrupt or refuse to take the word of a woman over a man in Pakistan's deeply male-dominated society. In April, a powerful cleric who has the ear of the prime minister blamed the global coronavirus pandemic on women who dress immodestly.

Social media outrage greeted cleric Tariq Jameel after he blamed women, particularly young women who "choose the path of indecency and ... vulgarity," for the coronavirus pandemic. His charges were made during a live TV fundraising drive to feed Pakistan's poorest hurt by a weeks-long lock-down to stem the virus's spread. Jameel also shamed girls for dancing and wearing "skimpy clothing."

Jameel, who did not rescind his remarks, later said he was addressing the failings of the "collective" society.

Pakistan on Friday recorded 16,817 positive cases of COVID-19, the illness caused by the new coronavirus, with 385 deaths. Pakistan also recorded its largest single day hike in positive cases with 990 new infections. However, Pakistan has also increased its testing to around 8,000 per day, considerably less than the 20,000 daily target the government has promised.

"The weakest segments of society remained invisible, unheard, neglected, and undermined

when it came to the real priorities of the state — be it children who were malnourished, subjected to hazardous labor, sexually abused, physically tortured and murdered; or women who continued to face violence and discrimination at home, at the workplace and in public spaces," the report said.

"Pakistan continued to bear a dismal human rights record in terms of complying with the constitutional guarantees to its own citizens and the international obligations to which it is a state party," it said.

The government's own National Commission on Human Rights has been without a chairperson and six of its seven members for nearly a year.

Requests for country visits by U.N. special investigators on a number of issues are still pending. Those include extrajudicial killings and freedom of religion and the promotion and protection of human rights while countering terrorism.

[Pakistan] Pakistani Parliament's Speaker Tests Positive for COVID-19 (Reuters)
Reuters [5/1/2020 7:11 AM, Asif Shahzad, 40577K, Neutral]

The speaker of Pakistan's National Assembly said late on Thursday that he had tested positive for COVID-19, after hosting an iftar dinner to celebrate Ramadan, and meeting Prime Minister Imran Khan and other high officials earlier in the week.

It is not immediately known if Khan will be tested, but he was checked in April, and tested negative, after meeting with the head of Pakistan's biggest charity organisation, who was subsequently confirmed to have caught the disease.

Faisal Edhi had met Khan in the prime minister's office.

The National Assembly, the lower house of parliament, is currently in recess, though opposition parties have been calling for it to convene to discuss the government's handling of the coronavirus outbreak in the country, where the number of cases has risen to 16,817, including 385 deaths.

The decision on whether to convene rested with Speaker of the Assembly, Asad Qaiser, who on Thursday night revealed he had tested positive in the capital, Islamabad.

"I have quarantined myself at home," Qaiser, who is also a close aide to Khan, said on Twitter. Qaiser met with the prime minister on Monday, and has met several other leading figures during the past few days.

The speaker had hosted an Iftar, the evening meal to break fast during Ramadan, attended by politicians and dignitaries on Monday.

Daily detection of the virus has hit record highs on each of the last three days as the country ramps up its testing. On Thursday, 990 people tested positive. Daily testing is still around 8,000 in the country, which has over 207 million people.

The government says infections are well below projections and that it plans to further ease

precautionary curbs after already opening dozens of industries and commercial activities, as well as mosque congregations.

Qaiser is the second high official to be infected in Pakistan after the Governor of the southern province of Sindh, Imran Ismail, tested positive on Monday.

Pakistan's government agreed to allow mosque congregations after senior clerics and religious leaders threatened to violate restrictions during Ramadan.

The two sides worked out safety protocols for the mosque gatherings, but a social research organization earlier this week reported that protocols were not being followed.

Prominent doctors pleaded with the government to reconsider the decision, warning that mosque congregations, which are typically larger in Ramadan, could lead to a spike in infections, with hospitals already nearing capacity.

[Sri Lanka] Sri Lanka extends virus lockdown through May 11 (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [5/1/2020 12:59 PM, Staff, 12818K, Neutral]

Sri Lanka on Friday extended its anti-virus lockdown for a second time, through May 11, as health authorities warned that the crisis was not yet under control in the island nation.

The government also said that for the first time ever, the country's most important Buddhist festival will go on next week under a nationwide curfew, with no public gatherings allowed.

"We cannot say that the spread of the virus is 100 percent under control," Sri Lanka's Director General of Health, Anil Jasinghe, said in a statement.

"At the same time, the control of the virus is not out of our hand either."

The two-day holiday for the Vesak festival -- commemorating the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha -- begins Thursday.

Jasinghe said social distancing measures and strict health guidelines on washing hands and wearing masks in public places will have to be observed during and after the event.

Large crowds usually flood the streets to view huge lanterns and coloured lights put up to celebrate Vesak across the nation of 21 million people.

Sri Lanka has been under lockdown measures since March 20. The first extension moved the end date from April 27 to May 4.

The South Asian country has officially recorded 690 infections and seven deaths.

The biggest virus hotspot was at a navy camp near Colombo where 4,000 personnel and their families have been placed under quarantine after more than 250 sailors tested positive.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

U.S. Probes University of Texas Links to Chinese Lab Scrutinized Over Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 5:30 AM, Kate O'Keeffe, Neutral]

The Education Department has asked the University of Texas System to provide documentation of its dealings with the Chinese laboratory U.S. officials are investigating as a potential source of the coronavirus pandemic.

The request for records of gifts or contracts from the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its researcher Shi Zhengli, known for her work on bats, is part of a broader department investigation into possible faulty financial disclosures of foreign money by the Texas group of universities.

The Education Department's letter, reviewed by The Wall Street Journal, also asks the UT System to share documents regarding potential ties to the ruling Chinese Communist Party and some two dozen Chinese universities and companies, including Huawei Technologies Co. and a unit of China National Petroleum Corp.

The department is also seeking documents related to any university system contracts or gifts from Eric Yuan, a U.S. citizen who is the chief executive officer of Zoom Video Communications Inc.

An official at the University of Texas System said it plans to respond to the department in a timely manner and declined to provide information about any potential links to the entities mentioned in the letter.

Huawei and CNPC didn't respond to requests for comment. A spokesperson for Zoom said Mr. Yuan has "not given any gifts to the University of Texas."

Neither the Wuhan lab nor Dr. Shi—dubbed "Bat Woman" by Chinese media—responded to requests for comment.

The Wuhan lab has come under scrutiny from U.S. officials who accuse Beijing of withholding information about the origins of the outbreak, which was first detected in Wuhan.

Dr. Shi and the Chinese government have said the lab isn't the source of the pandemic. There is no concrete public evidence to confirm the theory that the outbreak resulted from an accident at the lab, which studied ways to prevent the spread of infectious diseases.

Some scientists say a lab accident remains a possibility, but the current dominant theory is that bats passed the virus to humans either directly, or more likely, through another animal.

The Education Department's investigation into the UT System's disclosures is part of a continuing national review begun in 2019 that the department says has prompted universities to report more than \$6.5 billion in previously undisclosed foreign funding. Officials have sent letters to at least eight other schools, including Harvard and Yale Universities, who have said they are responding to the inquiries.

Universities are required to disclose to the Education Department all contracts and gifts

from a foreign source that, alone or combined, are worth \$250,000 or more in a calendar year. Though the statute is decades old, the department only recently began to enforce it rigorously.

The Education Department has accused schools of actively soliciting money from foreign governments, companies and nationals hostile to the U.S. One goal of the new enforcement campaign, according to department officials, is to better enable the public to see where schools get their money.

U.S. universities have defended their international collaborations and said the Education Department's reporting requirements remain unclear. Department officials dispute that claim.

In its letter dated April 24, the department asked the chancellor of the University of Texas System to provide records related to its dealings with the Wuhan lab, citing UT's Galveston National Laboratory's relationship with the Chinese government-run lab.

The letter cites a November 2018 article in Science magazine cosigned by officials at the Galveston and Wuhan labs stating: "We engaged in short- and long-term personnel exchanges focused on biosafety training, building operations and maintenance, and collaborative scientific investigations in biocontainment. We succeeded in transferring proven best practices to the new Wuhan facility."

The magazine article, also available on the Galveston lab's site, adds that the Wuhan and Texas labs recently signed formal cooperative agreements but that "funding for research and the logistics of exchanging specimens are challenges that we have yet to solve."

The university system previously reported to Education Department officials a series of contracts with Chinese universities and Huawei, purportedly collectively worth nearly \$13 million, according to the letter. But it questioned whether the UT schools had reported all relevant foreign gifts and contracts.

The request for information about the American chief executive of U.S. videoconferencing firm Zoom stands out on a list of otherwise Chinese entities.

The department has said its statutory authority enables it to seek information on gifts or contracts from any entity, including a U.S. person, who could be acting as an agent of a foreign source. Department officials believe the broad statute provides the basis for many lines of inquiry at universities, according to a person familiar with the department's thinking.

U.S. national security officials and independent cybersecurity researchers have raised concerns about Zoom and its reliance on China-based engineering, especially as more people turn to the service amid the pandemic to discuss company and government business as well as private health information.

Mr. Yuan has said the Chinese government has never asked for information on traffic from foreign users. "Zoom is no different than any other U.S. technology company with operations in China, including many of our videoconferencing peers," the company said in a statement. "Zoom is an American company, publicly traded on the Nasdaq, with

headquarters in California and a founder and CEO who is an American citizen," the statement said, adding that his inclusion in a letter focused on UT's ties to China indicates the letter's authors "did not do their homework."

The Education Department's scrutiny of money that could have flowed from the China-based lab to the U.S. comes after other U.S. officials criticized money that went in the opposite direction. In an April 21 letter to House and Senate leadership, members of Congress led by Sen. Martha McSally (R., Ariz.) and Rep. Matt Gaetz (R., Fla.) criticized a grant by the National Institutes of Health that supported global research on coronaviruses, including at the Wuhan lab.

"We're sure you agree that taxpayers' money should not be sent to a dangerous Chinese state-run bio-agent laboratory that lacks any meaningful oversight from U.S. authorities," the members wrote. "We hope to ensure that WIV will not receive federal funds in any future spending packages," they wrote.

Less than a week later, EcoHealth Alliance Inc., a New York-based grantee working on the project with the Wuhan lab, said the NIH had terminated coronavirus research funding.

"International collaboration with countries where viruses emerge is absolutely vital to our own public health and national security here in the USA," the group said in a statement, declining to comment further.

The NIH confirmed in a statement that the six-year, \$3.4 million grant had been terminated. It said the money was distributed among both the primary awardee, EcoHealth Alliance, and sub-awardees including the Wuhan Institute of Virology, East China Normal University in Shanghai, the Institute of Pathogen Biology in Beijing, and Duke-NUS Medical School in Singapore.

The NIH added: "Please note, scientific research indicates that there is no evidence that suggests the virus was created in a laboratory."

Trump admin pulls NIH grant for coronavirus research over ties to Wuhan lab at heart of conspiracy theories (ABC News)

ABC News [5/1/2020 5:08 AM, Conor Finnegan, 3795K, Neutral]

The Trump administration has pulled funding for a group of scientists studying coronaviruses in bats and the risk of their spillover into humans -- the very kind of infection that started the COVID-19 pandemic -- according to EcoHealth Alliance, the New York-based nonprofit organization conducting the research.

The cancellation of the grant after more than a decade of work in this field seems to be tied to EcoHealth Alliance's partnership with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the biomedical lab at the heart of conspiracy theories that the Chinese government created or unleashed the virus or the unproven thesis that the outbreak started with an accident because of faulty safety standards in the lab.

Either way, the group expressed regret at the decision by the National Institutes of Health to terminate funding, saying its work has helped in "designing vaccines and drugs to protect us

from COVID-19 and other coronavirus threats" and pointing out the Wuhan Institute's participation had been approved by the NIH for years, including just last year under President Donald Trump.

The president has taken a harder line on China in recent days, saying Thursday he has seen evidence that the Wuhan Institute is responsible for the outbreak, although he wasn't clear whether he believes it was somehow manufactured in the lab or the result of an accident. Most experts have told ABC News the first human infection -- what's known a "zoonotic spillover" -- is much more likely to have happened in the wild, where that kind of transmission occurs increasingly often.

"It's a terrible thing that happened," Trump told reporters at the White House Thursday evening. "Whether they made a mistake or whether it started off as a mistake and then they made another one, or did somebody do something on purpose?"

The U.S. intelligence community agrees with the scientific consensus that the virus is "not man-made or genetically modified," the Office of the Director of National Intelligence said in a rare statement Thursday, but it announced its intel agencies are investigating whether the outbreak could be "the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan."

EcoHealth Alliance has worked with that lab for over a decade, according to a source familiar with the grant, as has the U.S. Agency for International Development's PREDICT project, which for over 10 years has also studied viruses in animals and prepared local partners around the world to detect that kind of "spillover."

But in a letter last Friday, the National Institutes of Health informed the EcoHealth Alliance it was terminating the grant and denying it access to the remaining \$369,819 in its account for Fiscal Year 2020.

"At this time, NIH does not believe that the current project outcomes align with the program goals and agency priorities," Michael Lauer, NIH's deputy director for outside research, wrote, according to a copy obtained by Politico, which first reported the news.

Lauer's letter made no direct reference to the president, according to the source familiar with the grant, but just one week prior, Trump said he would terminate it "very quickly" and blamed the Obama administration for it, even though his administration also approved the funding.

Last Friday's termination letter came after NIH asked EcoHealth Alliance not to send any more funding to the Wuhan Institute of Virology earlier this month, according to the source. The group had halted funding, but largely because the pandemic had put a halt to nearly all its research operations.

The NIH did not respond to requests for comment. EcoHealth Alliance's spokesperson referred ABC News to the statement on its website.

"International collaboration with countries where viruses emerge is absolutely vital to our own public health and national security here in the USA. We stand by our work, and by our mission," the group's statement said in part.

EcoHealth Alliance has received NIH funding for this work since 2008, amounting to \$5.96 million over 12 years, according to NIH data. That work has helped "develop predictive models of global 'hot spots' for the future emergence of bat viruses" and used its "large repository of bat biological samples to conduct targeted surveillance in these 'hot spots' for known and undiscovered bat pathogens," according to the group.

That work is now at risk, according to the source, who said U.S. access to those samples and at least some of that data held by the Wuhan Institute would be cut off.

Since Fiscal Year 2014, that work has been awarded to EcoHealth Alliance's "Understanding the Risk of Bat Coronavirus Emergence" project in particular, which is explicitly focused on China and done in partnership with the Wuhan Institute and others.

"This project aims to understand what factors increase the risk of the next CoV [coronavirus] emerging in people by studying CoV diversity in a critical zoonotic reservoir (bats), at sites of high risk for emergence (wildlife markets) in an emerging disease hotspot (China)," the group's NIH-approved research abstract said.

Scientists have determined that the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 originated in a bat, although there's been no conclusion yet about how it jumped from bats to humans. Many of the earliest cases were connected to a wet market in Wuhan, where live and freshly killed animals are sold, but some scientists have cast doubt on it being the original source. The Wuhan municipal government closed the market on Jan. 1 and cleaned it, potentially making the investigation more difficult.

But while U.S. intelligence agencies look for clues of a potential lab accident, epidemiological experts say it's highly unlikely the first transmission happened that way. Virus samples in labs are almost never still infectious, after being frozen in nitrogen during the collection process and then inactivated in the lab to preserve their genetic sequence.

"It's an unlikely probability because the laboratory is a controlled setting and people wear personal protective equipment. I've seen hearsay that they maybe didn't have enough or they weren't skilled enough, but there are barriers, huge barriers between people and viruses in the laboratory setting," said Dr. Christine Johnson, principal investigator with USAID's PREDICT project, which will end this September after 10 years and two six-month extensions as USAID launches a new project that applies the data PREDICT collected.

The probability of infection "is so much higher in the real world, where there are more people and more bats. It's vastly more likely than the potential for a human-bat interaction in the lab," added Johnson, a professor of epidemiology and ecosystem health at UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine and director of its EpiCenter for Disease Dynamic.

In the face of that, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has now started to call into the question of China's biomedical labs, demanding that they provide international inspectors access to them, although it's unclear if the administration has formally requested that of the Chinese government. Many of the scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology have been trained by the U.S. government's PREDICT project.

Some experts believe there was likely an intermediary animal infected by a bat that then infected a human, such as a pangolin, a scaly-skinned mammal that resembles an armadillo and is sold for meat and traditional medicine, or a civet, a slinky cat-like mammal eaten as a delicacy and believed to be the intermediary responsible for the 2003 SARS outbreak.

But it could also be from direct exposure to a bat. A 2017 report by EcoHealth Alliance's project, whose authors include Wuhan Institute scientists, was published in the research journal *Virologica Sinica* and warned that "some bat SARSr-CoVs [severe acute respiratory syndrome-related coronaviruses] are able to directly infect humans without intermediate host."

Not so fast: US against release of Colombian cocaine kingpin (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 1:38 PM, Curt Anderson, Neutral]

Federal prosecutors oppose a bid for early prison release by former Medellin cocaine cartel kingpin Fabio Ochoa, contending that his request far underplays the vast amount of drugs he helped smuggle into the U.S. over two decades.

The lawyer for Ochoa argues that new retroactive sentencing guidelines should shave about five years from his 30-year prison sentence. This is based on a relatively small amount of cocaine that could be directly attributed to Ochoa during his 2003 trial in Miami, according to Ochoa's attorney.

That amount is about 150 kilograms (330 pounds). But Assistant U.S. Attorney Ricardo Del Toro argues that trial evidence showed Ochoa had some type of involvement in at least 19 tons (19,000 kilograms) of cocaine smuggled into the U.S. — and that was after he had been a senior member of the Medellin cartel once led by Pablo Escobar.

"The incapacitation of unrepentant major criminals like Ochoa is one of the goals of the sentencing law and guidelines," Del Toro wrote. "Since the time he was a teenager and continuously into his 40s, Ochoa has refused to turn away from criminal misconduct."

U.S. District Judge K. Michael Moore had directed prosecutors to respond to Ochoa's early release request by Friday. There was no immediate indication when Moore would rule.

Ochoa, who turns 63 on Saturday, was initially arrested in 1990 in Colombia under a government program promising drug kingpins would not be extradited to the U.S. At the time, he was on the U.S. list of the "Dozen Most Wanted" Colombia drug lords and officials say he essentially ran the cartel at the time with his brothers Jorge Luis and Juan David.

In those years, the Ochoa brothers were listed as billionaires by Forbes magazine. Fabio Ochoa also was portrayed by an actor in the Netflix series "Narcos" that chronicles the Escobar empire.

Almost a decade later, Ochoa was arrested again in Colombia and extradited to the U.S. in 2001 as part of a drug trafficking indictment in Miami naming more than 40 people. Of those, Ochoa was the only one who went to trial, resulting in his conviction and the 30-year sentence. The other defendants got much lighter prison terms because most of them cooperated with the government.

One of those cooperators, Alejandro Bernal, was shot and killed shortly after his return to Colombia in 2012. Del Toro said in his filing this shows the danger someone like Ochoa could still pose.

"While there is no specific evidence that Ochoa was involved in the killing (other than the obvious motive), this event illustrates the magnitude of the stakes in this case, and contrasts Ochoa's mendaciousness with the sacrifice of his cooperating co-defendants," the prosecutor wrote.

"He is worthy of no leniency," he added.

Ochoa has a wife and three grown children in Colombia, court records show. He served about eight years in a Colombian prison after his initial arrest related to the Medellin cartel operations, focusing after his release on breeding horses until he was extradited to the U.S. on the later indictment.

Accused embassy gunman said he feared Cuban organized crime (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 5:44 PM, Michael Balsamo and Ben Fox, Neutral]

A Cuban man who sought asylum in the U.S. opened fire with an AK-47 at the Cuban Embassy in Washington, spraying the front of the building with nearly three dozen rounds because he wanted to "get them before they could get him," according to court papers. Alexander Alazo, 42, of Aubrey, Texas, was taken into custody shortly after the shooting early Thursday morning in northwest Washington.

Alazo, who told investigators he was born in Cuba and served in the Cuban Army, had moved to Mexico in 2003 before claiming political asylum in the U.S. a few years later. He went back to Cuba in 2014 to preach at a church and began receiving threats from organized crime groups there, he told police.

Alazo, who had been living in his car and moving from state to state for several months, drove to Washington on Wednesday to target the Cuban Embassy "because he wanted to get them before they got him, referring to the Cuban government, for the constant threats from the organized Cuban criminal organization," according to court papers.

Police believe Alazo had been sleeping at rest stops and in parking lots for at least nine months because he said he believed Cuban organized crime figures were after him and he wanted to protect his family.

Alazo told investigators that he had been treated at a psychiatric hospital and his wife, a nurse, had told him to seek treatment when he was hearing voices in his head, he said. He was prescribed medication in March after a visit to a psychiatric facility but hasn't been "completely compliant with his medication," court papers said.

He bought a Glock 19 handgun in Texas but traded it about a month ago for an AK-47 because he thought the rifle would give him better protection for his family, he told investigators. He drove to Washington and when he arrived at the embassy around 2 a.m. Thursday morning, he began yelling and tried to light a Cuban flag on fire but wasn't successful, the documents said.

Alazo then grabbed an American flag and was continuing to shout that he "was a Yankee" before he grabbed the AK-47 from his car and opened fire toward the embassy, court papers said. Investigators recovered 32 shell casings from the street where Alazo had been standing, officials said.

There were employees inside the embassy at the time, including the Chief of Mission, police said. No one was hurt.

When officers arrived, they found Alazo holding a Cuban flag — which had writing on it and was doused in what they believe was an accelerant — and "yelling nonsensical statements," the court papers said.

Officers recovered the rifle, ammunition and after he was brought to a police station, they discovered a white powdery substance that was found in a small baggie found in the back of a patrol car that tested positive for cocaine, according to the court papers.

He was charged with a violent attack on a foreign official or premises, willfully damaging property of a foreign government and firearms charges.

Alazo remained in custody on Friday and the name of his attorney was not immediately known.

Cuba's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement that embassy staff members were "safe and protected" but that the shooting caused "material damage" to the building. Photos showed large holes left in the building's facade near the front door and in pillars outside the building.

[Bolivia] Bolivian Parliament approves law calling for elections in 90 days, defying interim government (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 10:48 AM, Daniel Ramos, Neutral]

Bolivia's opposition-controlled parliament approved a law Thursday night that calls for presidential elections within 90 days, prompting outcry from the country's interim president who has put the country under mandatory lockdown due to coronavirus.

Assembly members from Movement Towards Socialism (MAS), the political party of former long-term leftist leader Evo Morales, backed the measure, which establishes that the general elections must occur by August 2.

The ballot, initially meant to be held on May 3, is a re-run of a fraught October election last year that sparked widespread protests and violence, and eventually led to Morales' resignation.

The May 3 date was postponed in March due to the global coronavirus pandemic and a mandatory quarantine in Bolivia that is to last until May 10. The electoral tribunal had proposed a new election date between June 7 and September 6.

Interim president Jeanine Anez, who is a candidate in the upcoming elections, accused

Morales and MAS presidential candidate Luis Arce of putting the lives of Bolivians at risk in an attempt to regain control of the country, which is under mandatory quarantine.

"In Bolivia, voting is mandatory and forcing almost 6 million people to move on the street in a single day and in the midst of a pandemic will bring thousands and thousands of infections, and that can generate hundreds of fatalities," Anez said in a statement.

The Bolivian Constitution allows the president of Parliament, MAS member Eva Copa, to enact a law if it is determined the executive branch rejects it without solid arguments.

Bolivia has more than 1,100 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 62 deaths, according to the Ministry of Health.

[Brazil] Virus surge in Brazil brings a coffin shortage, morgue chaos (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 3:42 PM, Diane Jeantet and Alan Clendenning, Neutral]

In Brazil's bustling Amazon city of Manaus, so many people have died within days in the coronavirus pandemic that coffins had to be stacked on top of each other in long, hastily dug trenches in a city cemetery. Some despairing relatives reluctantly chose cremation for loved ones to avoid burying them in those common graves.

Now, with Brazil emerging as Latin America's coronavirus epicenter with more than 6,000 deaths, even the coffins are running out in Manaus. The national funeral home association has pleaded for an urgent airlift of coffins from Sao Paulo, 2,700 kilometers (1,700 miles) away, because Manaus has no paved roads connecting it to the rest of the country.

The city of about 2 million people carved from the jungle has been overwhelmed by death in part because it's the main site where those from remote Amazon communities can get medical services, according to Lourival Panhozzi, president of the Brazilian Association of Funeral Service Providers.

As of April 30, Brazil's Health Ministry said that there were over 5,200 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Amazonas state and 425 deaths, although there are concerns that inadequate testing for the virus has meant that the numbers may be much higher.

Before the outbreak, the city of Manaus, the capital of the state, was recording an average of 20-35 deaths a day, according to the mayor. Now, it is recording at least 130 a day, data from the state's health secretary show.

People in the region also have been widely ignoring isolation measures.

There also are signs in the much larger cities of Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo that suggest authorities may not be able to handle a huge increase in the death toll. A field of fresh graves that was dismissed in April by President Jair Bolsonaro as excessive has since been filled.

Latin America's grimmest scenes occurred last month in Ecuador's city of Guayaquil, where residents said they had to leave bodies on the street after morgues, cemeteries and funeral homes were overwhelmed.

Many in Brazil fear the rising deaths will hit hardest in the favelas, the vast neighborhoods of the poor that are well-known in Rio and Sao Paulo but which also exist in most big Brazilian cities and even in smaller ones.

"There is a great fear that uncontrolled contamination will happen there," said Panhuzzi, whose group represents Brazil's 13,400 private funeral companies.

In Rio's Complexo do Alemao cluster of favelas, the body of Luiz Carlos da Rocha, 36, lay untouched for more than 12 hours Tuesday. Relatives didn't know why he died but said he had epilepsy.

The state's military police, which normally picks up bodies found outside, no longer does so for nonviolent deaths, said an officer at the scene who would not give his name. He said without elaborating that the policy change was due to the coronavirus. The military police press office did not respond to requests for comment.

The next day at Rio's Hospital Salgado Filho in a lower-middle class neighborhood, Clovis de Castro, whose ailing sister Genina had just died, found himself helping out in the hospital's morgue. He waited six hours to sort out death certificate paperwork in what he described as a chaotic scene in the morgue, with grieving relatives arriving to identify bodies and only one worker available to move corpses. At one point, he was asked to lend a hand.

"I had to help a person to put a body in a coffin," de Castro said, adding that the experience made him "realize that people need help, the hospital needs help, the country needs help."

De Castro left with a death certificate saying his sister's cause of death was undetermined. He was angry that no autopsy was conducted that might have confirmed his suspicion she died of COVID-19 or complications from the disease.

"Why hide this stuff?" he asked.

Sao Paulo director of ambulance services Francis Fuji blamed a recent surge of deaths in homes on coronavirus patients who were discharged from hospitals with mild symptoms, only to have their conditions deteriorate rapidly.

Paramedics don't have the training to identify COVID-19 as a cause of death, he said, and many relatives have lied about their loved ones' symptoms to avoid the corpses being handled as though they were contagious.

"They think that if they get that diagnosis, then their loved one will be removed in a sealed plastic bag, they'll never see him or her again, and they won't even have a funeral," Fuji said.

Authorities in Sao Paulo dug hundreds of graves last month in anticipation of a rise in deaths. Bolsonaro has likened the coronavirus to "a little flu" and insists that sweeping state measures to close all but essential business are more damaging than the illness. On April 2, he questioned whether photos by The Associated Press of the new graves were "fake

news" or "sensationalism."

By Thursday, all those graves were filled with the dead, as were dozens of other new ones, according to images by the AP photographer who took the original photos and revisited the site on Sao Paulo's eastern region. Refrigerated trucks to hold overflows of bodies are now seen outside hospitals and cemeteries.

In Manaus early Thursday, Raimundo Costa do Nascimento, 86, died of pneumonia in his home. Funeral workers were so swamped that his relatives had to wait 10 hours for someone to retrieve his body.

A week after Panhozzi's association appealed for the coffins for Manaus, he said the request is still being considered.

"That won't work," he said. "I need it now."

[Brazil] Brazil ups forecast for COVID-19 emergency measures to \$64 bln (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 12:40 PM, Ana Mano, 5304K, Negative]

The Brazilian government's emergency measures to fight the coronavirus-fueled health and economic crises will have a 349.4 billion reais impact on this year's primary budget balance, the Economy Ministry said on Friday.

That is up from the estimated 285.4 billion reais impact from two weeks ago, reflecting the prospect of increased spending and a steeper decline in tax revenues.

Emergency outlays, including cash transfers to workers and to companies to help pay salaries, will come to 333.4 billion reais, the ministry said in a presentation published on Friday. It also estimated a 16 billion reais drop in tax revenue this year.

Assuming the economy shrinks by 3.3% this year, according to the consensus forecast in the central bank's weekly "FOCUS" survey of economists, the fiscal impact will be the equivalent of 4.81% of gross domestic product, the ministry said.

[Canada] Canada announces immediate ban on 'military-grade' assault weapons (Washington Post)

Washington Post [5/1/2020 12:46 PM, Amanda Coletta, Neutral]

The Canadian government on Friday announced an immediate ban on some 1,500 makes and models of "military-grade" assault weapons, including two weapons used by the gunman who killed 22 people in rural Nova Scotia during the country's deadliest mass shooting last month.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said there will be a two-year amnesty period for gun owners to comply with the prohibition. He said legislation will be drafted in the coming months to provide "fair compensation" to them.

"There is no use and no place for such weapons in Canada," Trudeau said in a news conference in Ottawa on Friday that began with him listing several mass shootings in the country's history.

He said that while most firearms owners are law-abiding citizens, "you don't need an AR-15 to bring down a deer."

Trudeau, who pledged stricter gun-control measures during last year's federal election, said his government had planned to introduce tougher rules in March but was delayed by the coronavirus pandemic. The ban will be enacted through regulations approved by cabinet, not through legislation in Parliament.

Andrew Scheer, the interim leader of the opposition Conservative Party, told the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. that it was "completely inappropriate" for the government to make a "major policy change" at a time when Parliament has been effectively shut down because of the pandemic.

[Canada] Canada Bans More Than 1,500 Types of Military-Style Firearms (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 2:13 PM, Paul Vieira, Neutral]

Canada on Friday banned over 1,500 models of military-style assault firearms, effective immediately, a move that fulfills an election-campaign promise from last year and emerges roughly two weeks after the deadliest shooting rampage in the country's modern history.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau added officials intend to work with other levels of governments with the eventual aim of giving cities the power to ban handguns.

Mr. Trudeau said the immediate ban, which will be implemented through regulatory orders, is required to bring an end to a spate of gun violence in the country, most notably a roughly 14-hour shooting rampage in rural Nova Scotia last month that left 22 dead. Among those killed were a police officer, a nurse, elementary school teacher and a woman in her teens.

Canada's Public Safety Minister, Bill Blair, said Friday that two of the assault weapons now banned were used by the suspect in the Nova Scotia shooting, Gabriel Wortman, without identifying the specific make. Canadian police have also said they believe Wortman acquired some of his firearms from the U.S.

"These weapons were designed for one purpose and one purpose only: to kill the largest number of people in the shortest amount of time," Mr. Trudeau said at a press conference, alongside Mr. Blair and other officials. "There is no use and no place for such weapons in Canada." Mr. Trudeau also brought up previous episodes of deadly gun violence, such as in 1989 when a gunman killed 14 women at a Montreal engineering school; and a shooting in 2017 at a Quebec City mosque where six men died while praying.

The roughly 1,500 firearms now prohibited were previously designated as either mostly restricted or unrestricted, according to documents released explaining the ban. Under current Canadian laws, individuals are required to hold a license to purchase and possess a firearm and buy ammunition. According to data from Canada's national police, there were 2.2 million firearms licenses in force. Officials said it was unclear how many of these license holders would be affected, but estimates there are 90,000 firearms allowed under a restricted basis would be affected.

Mr. Trudeau acknowledged the vast majority of gun owners, among them members of rural and remote indigenous communities, use their firearms safely and in accordance with the law. Nevertheless, he said, "you don't need a AR-15 [a lightweight, semiautomatic rifle] to bring down a deer."

The most recent Canadian annual criminal-justice data covers 2018, and they indicate that a firearm was used in 243 homicides. Of those, the majority, 143, involved a handgun, whereas 20 involved either a fully-automatic firearm or a sawed-off shotgun.

Canada's decision—akin to what New Zealand did last year in the aftermath of the Christchurch mosque attack—is likely to exacerbate an urban-rural split in Canada over gun control. While the debate might not be as heated or as contentious as in the U.S., gun control remains a divisive issue. People in larger cities and suburbs tend to favor strict controls, while rural residents argue tougher restrictions target law-abiding gun owners who use the weapons for hunting and self-protection.

Canada's Conservative Party, which when in power resisted stricter gun-control measures, criticized Friday's announcement, calling it opportunistic. "Justin Trudeau is using the current pandemic and the immediate emotion of the horrific attack in Nova Scotia to push the Liberals' ideological agenda and make major firearms policy changes. That is wrong," said Andrew Scheer, the party's leader. The Conservatives count on rural communities and western Canada as the bedrock of their support.

Mr. Trudeau said the government was considering introducing this ban in late March, but officials needed to pivot and focus on public-health and economic measures as related to the pandemic.

Along with the ban, Canada has introduced a two-year amnesty period to protect Canadians who are in lawful possession of a newly prohibited firearm from criminal liability. Officials said they intend to implement a buyback plan to compensate affected firearm owners, as well as the option to participate in a grandfathering regime. Details for both schemes aren't yet available, and would likely require approval from Parliament.

[Canada] Canada Bans More Than 1,500 Assault Weapons After Mass Shooting (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 1:29 PM, Kait Bolongaro, Neutral]

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his government is banning more than 1,500 types of assault weapons after one of the deadliest mass shootings in Canada's history.

It will now be illegal to buy, sell, import or use the military-grade guns in the country, effective immediately, Trudeau told reporters in Ottawa.

A 51-year-old man killed 22 people in a rampage in rural Nova Scotia on April 18 and 19. Thirteen of the victims were shot, while another nine died in fires. The gunman was shot and killed by police.

"Today we are closing the market for military-grade assault weapons in Canada," Trudeau

said. "These weapons were designed for one purpose and one purpose only: to kill the largest amount of people in the shortest amount of time. There is no use and no place for such weapons in Canada."

Gun owners will have a two-year amnesty period to turn over their firearms in exchange for payment. Details of the buyback program need to be determined by Parliament, Trudeau added.

Trudeau said his government had planned to roll out the new laws in late March, a timetable that was derailed by the Covid-19 pandemic. His Liberal Party made stronger gun control part of its platform during October's election campaign.

Recent polls suggest Canadians overwhelmingly support the policy. Nearly four in five support a ban on civilians owning assault-style weapons, according to new polling from the Angus Reid Institute.

The opposition Conservatives said they opposed the move. "Justin Trudeau is using the current pandemic and the immediate emotion of the horrific attack in Nova Scotia to push the Liberals' ideological agenda and make major firearms policy changes. That is wrong," Andrew Scheer, the party's leader, said in an emailed statement.

[Canada] Canada bans assault-style weapons after shooting rampage (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 2:34 PM, Rob Gillies, 2194K, Negative]

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Friday that Canada is banning the use and trade of assault-style weapons immediately.

Trudeau cited numerous mass shootings in the country, including the killing of 22 people in Nova Scotia April 18 and 19. He announced the ban of over 1,500 models and variants of assault-style firearms, including two weapons used by the gunman as well as the AR-15 and other weapons that have been used in a number of mass shootings in the United States

"Canadians need more than thoughts and prayers," Trudeau said.

The Cabinet order doesn't forbid owning any of the military-style weapons and their variants but it does ban the use and trade in them. He said the order has a two-year amnesty period for current owners, and there will be a compensation program that will require a bill passed in Parliament.

In the meantime, they can be exported, returned to manufacturers, and transported only to deactivate them or get rid of them. In certain limited circumstances, they can be used for hunting.

"You do not need an AR-15 to take down a deer," Trudeau said. "So, effective immediately, it is no longer permitted to buy, sell, transport, import or use military-grade, assault weapons in this country."

Trudeau said the weapons were designed for one purpose and one purpose only: to kill the

largest number of people in the shortest amount of time.

"There is no use - and no place - for such weapons in Canada," he said.

Mass shootings are relatively rare in Canada, but Trudeau said they are happening more often. Trudeau noted he was nearby when in Montreal when gunman Marc Lépine killed 14 women and himself at Montreal's École Polytechnique college in 1989. The Ruger Mini-14 Lépine used is among weapons included in the ban.

Trudeau has said his government would introduce further gun control legislation prohibiting military-style assault weapons, a measure that had already been planned before the coronavirus pandemic interrupted the current parliamentary session.

"As of today the market for assault weapons is closed. Enough is enough," Public Safety Minister Bill Blair said.

The gunman in Nova Scotia, 51-year-old Gabriel Wortman, shot 13 people to death and set fires that killed nine others in one of the worst mass shootings in the country's history. Police have said he used a handgun that was obtained in Canada and long guns that he obtained in the U.S., but they have not specifically said what guns he used. The rampage started with an assault on his girlfriend and it ended with 22 people dead in communities across central and northern Nova Scotia. A number of people had disputes with the gunman.

Blair said two of the illegal long guns that Wortman used are now on the list of weapons banned. He declined to identify them. He said making such guns illegal in Canada will make it harder for criminals to obtain them.

"Every firearm begins legally and then moves into an illegal market," Blair said.

Opposition Conservative leader Andrew Scheer accused Trudeau of using the "immediate emotion of the horrific attack in Nova Scotia to push the Liberals' ideological agenda and make major firearms policy changes."

Scheer said the Nova Scotia shooter did not have a firearms licence, so all of his guns were illegal.

"Taking firearms away from law-abiding citizens does nothing to stop dangerous criminals who obtain their guns illegally," Scheer said in a statement. "The vast majority of gun crimes are committed with illegally obtained firearms. Nothing the Trudeau Liberals announced today addresses this problem."

[Canada] Canadian Crew on NATO Mission Presumed Dead After Crash (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [5/1/2020 3:08 PM, Paul Vieira, Neutral]

Canada's defense department said Friday the five missing air force and navy officers aboard a military helicopter that crashed this week off the coast of Greece following a training exercise are now presumed dead.

The death toll, as a result, stands at six, or all aboard the helicopter at the time it lost contact with Canadian Navy personnel on Wednesday.

Rescue efforts led by a group of North Atlantic Treaty Organization ships that patrol the Mediterranean and Black Seas have now shifted into a search-and-recovery operation, the Canadian military said. The search uncovered some human remains, but officials said they were unable to identify them.

"The Canadian Armed Forces will be doing everything possible over the next several days to confirm known details with the families," Canada's military said.

On Thursday, the military identified a single member of the crew, a sub-lieutenant from the Canadian Navy, as deceased. Those presumed dead Friday include four members of the country's air force, among them two pilots, and a naval officer.

The Cyclone Sikorsky CH-148 helicopter was based on the Canadian frigate HMCS Fredericton, and crashed while operating in waters between Greece and Italy. The frigate is part of a group of nine NATO ships, known as Standing NATO Maritime Group 2, that are part of a wider effort to deter Russia since the Kremlin annexed Ukraine's Crimea in 2014.

Canada has taken a leading role in other efforts to deter Moscow, commanding one of four multinational NATO battalions deployed on the alliance's eastern flank with Russia.

Canada said the HMCS Fredericton was at the time conducting training exercises with Italian and Turkish ships. The Canadian ship is now en route to a port in Italy, the military said, while its NATO allies continue to operate in the Mediterranean and Black seas.

[Canada] Remains found, 5 presumed dead from chopper crash off Greece (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 3:28 PM, Rob Gillies, Neutral]

Additional remains have been found and five missing Canadian military members from a helicopter crash off Greece are now presumed dead, the Canadian military said Friday.

The Canadian Armed Forces said in a statement that NATO's search and rescue efforts are now a search and recovery effort.

"We have found additional remains but unfortunately we have not been able to identify them," said Rear-Admiral Craig Baines, adding that identification will not happen until they are in Canada.

Officials previously recovered the body of Sub-Lt. Abigail Cowbrough and said the missing five members who were aboard the aircraft are now presumed dead. They include the pilots Capt. Brenden Ian MacDonald and Capt. Kevin Hagen, the Air Combat Systems Officer Captain Maxime Miron-Morin as well as Sub-Lt. Matthew Pyke and Master Corp. Matthew Cousins.

The Cyclone helicopter was deployed on board the Halifax-class frigate HMCS Fredericton and was participating in a NATO training exercise off the coast of Greece when the accident

occurred on Wednesday evening, the military said. The ship lost contact with the aircrew and flares were spotted from the water minutes later. Officials said flares would have been fired automatically when the aircraft hit the water.

The flight data recorder had been recovered but the cause of the accident was still under investigation. Multiple NATO countries were helping in the search operation in the Ionian Sea.

The accident hit Nova Scotia hard as the helicopter was based in the province, which is already dealing with the killings of 22 people by a gunman who went on a rampage on April 18 and 19.

The Royal Canadian Air Force's Cyclone helicopter carries a crew of four, including two pilots, a tactical operator and a sensor operator with space for several passengers. They are primarily based on naval vessels and used for hunting submarines, surveillance and search and rescue.

The Canadian military started using the aircraft on missions in late 2018, after more than a decade of developmental challenges, delays and cost overruns. The crash is also likely to raise questions about the aircraft.

The military was originally supposed to have received 28 Cyclones from manufacturer Sikorsky starting in November 2008. But the first helicopter wasn't delivered until June 2015 and even then was missing vital equipment and software and only suitable for training.

Lockheed Martin, which owns Sikorsky, is sending an investigator to assist at the request of the Canadian military.

[Canada] As meat plant infections rise, Canada lets packers choose when to close (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 7:50 AM, Rod Nickel, 5304K, Negative]

In Cargill Inc's High River, Alberta plant, supplier of more than one-third of Canada's beef, 391 workers were sick with coronavirus when the company suspended operations, according to provincial health officials.

But Maple Leaf Foods (MFI.TO) decided to idle a poultry plant for eight days, in Brampton, Ontario, after just three workers were infected.

In Canada's fight against the pandemic, public health officials are mostly leaving decisions on closing meat plants to the companies, even though the authorities have power to do so. Alberta Health Services (AHS), for example, could close a plant with unsafe conditions, spokesman Tom McMillan said.

The impact of such decisions extends beyond plant walls. They are at the heart of Alberta's two largest community outbreaks, and could foreshadow dilemmas likely to emerge as other industries restart.

Canada's stance contrasts a more active U.S. political role with infected plants, as close-

quarters work has led workers in numerous North American plants to fall ill or walk off the job. President Donald Trump ordered meat plants on Tuesday to stay open, and state and local officials earlier pushed successfully for some to close, including Smithfield Foods' South Dakota slaughterhouse.

Jon Nash, President of Cargill Protein North America, said Cargill reduced production at its Alberta plant on April 13 and remained open before closing entirely a week later to avoid wasting food, and because ranchers needed a market for cattle.

Factors outside the Cargill plant, such as crowded households and carpooling, contributed to the spread in High River, health officials said.

Cargill said on Wednesday that High River would resume reduced production on May 4 after a two-week closure for cleaning and additional safety measures.

Cargill's decision to operate as long as it did before the temporary closure rankled some workers.

"It absolutely pisses me off," said Jamie Welsh-Rollo, a single mom who seals meat in plastic in the High River plant, and is a United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW) shop steward. "We're looked at as numbers."

At least eight Canadian meat plants have closed temporarily due to the pandemic. As of Wednesday, 821 Cargill workers at High River, about 37% of the workforce, were infected, including one death.

And Cargill is not alone. A JBS SA (JBSS3.SA) beef plant in Brooks, Alberta slowed production but remains open after 276 infections and one death.

CAUTION AT MAPLE LEAF

Maple Leaf, in closing its Ontario plant, considered that the city of Brampton itself was a coronavirus hotspot and that the company was short of face masks to supply all 340 workers, said Randy Huffman, its chief food safety officer.

The few initial cases eventually tallied 26 after more testing.

"There were some challenging discussions," Huffman said in an interview. "We needed to have greater confidence that the plant could operate safely."

A deadly illness outbreak 12 years earlier due to contaminated meat in a Maple Leaf plant factored in its response, he said.

While Maple Leaf made the decision to close, it consulted widely, Huffman said — with an occupational health doctor, local and federal health authorities.

"I don't think leaving it up to any one entity is the best outcome."

In rare examples of Canadian authorities stepping in, British Columbia health regions closed

United Poultry on April 21 after 28 cases were found at the Vancouver plant, and shut Superior Poultry on April 24 after two initial cases.

In High River, Welsh-Rollo feared passing the virus to her four-year-old son, who has an auto-immune deficiency, and saw problems with Cargill's precautions.

Cargill asked health screening questions in English to workers entering the plant, many of whom are immigrants or foreign workers, she said. The 31-year-old plant was too cramped to make distancing measures effective, she said.

Cargill's Nash said the company has worked closely with AHS on safety protocols, including face masks for workers.

Adrienne South, spokeswoman for Alberta's Labour Minister, said multiple ministries helped ensure the plant's safety but added that "the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is responsible for the plant."

CFIA said in a statement that it cannot suspend plant operations over coronavirus, since its authority to stop food production over health risks is limited to food safety concerns.

The decisions to prolong operations baffle Sylvain Charlebois, director of the Agri-Food Analytics Lab at Dalhousie University, an institute that analyzes food and agriculture issues.

"I don't understand why it took so long (to close) at High River and I don't understand why Brooks is still operating," he said.

[Cuba] Communist-run Cuba dedicates subdued May Day to white coat army of doctors (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 2:50 PM, Sarah Marsh, Mario Fuentes, 5304K, Neutral]

With Communist-run Cuba on lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic, Havana's Revolution Square was eerily empty and gray on Friday for International Workers Day, bereft of the usual parade of thousands of flag-toting Cubans.

Encouraged by authorities to celebrate May Day in their homes, some Cubans sung along to the national anthem when it was played on state television early in the morning, while others strung the Cuban flag from their balconies and windows.

Ulises Guilarte, of the Cuban Workers' Confederation, said on the TV broadcast that the day was dedicated to the "army of white coats" - Cuba's doctors - tackling the coronavirus pandemic at home and abroad.

Cuba, which has one of the highest rates of doctors per capita worldwide and has engaged in medical diplomacy and service exports for decades, has sent brigades of doctors to more than 20 countries worldwide to help.

"We hold the most firm conviction that united, we will conquer," Guilarte said, using an old revolutionary slogan.

"#MyHomeIsMySquare, celebrating the first of May," President Miguel Diaz-Canel wrote on Twitter, posting a photo of him with his arm around his wife in front of a Cuban flag, both wearing white face masks embroidered with the word 'Cuba.'

It was an altogether more subdued affair than the rallies in which millions of Cubans nationwide have participated each year since late revolutionary leader Fidel Castro's 1959 leftist revolution. Even the weather was downcast.

Cuba has only skipped the largest parade through Revolution Square a handful of times, such as during an economic depression following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"Unfortunately the coronavirus has kept us at home but we were not about to ignore (May Day)," said Havana resident Alejandra Varo Carrillo, who waved the Cuban flag from her rooftop.

Since the island nation registered its first cases of the coronavirus in March, it has closed borders to travelers, and suspended schools, public transport, and group activities.

While many sectors of the economy continue, authorities have asked residents to otherwise only leave their homes for essential tasks like shopping for food.

With less than 1,600 cases confirmed and 64 deaths, Cuba's leaders have said their approach appears to be working, but have warned the peak of the outbreak is still ahead.

[Guatemala] Maya villages in Guatemala spurn U.S. deportees as infections spike (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 9:07 AM, Sofia Menchu, Neutral]

Guatemala's indigenous Maya towns are spurning returned migrants, threatening some with burning their homes or lynching as fear spreads about more than 100 deportees from the United States who tested positive for the new coronavirus.

In one city in the Guatemalan highlands, home to a large indigenous population, residents tried to burn down a migrant shelter. In some villages, locals are rebuffing the recently returned and threatening relatives of the deportees with expulsion from their homes.

To date, Guatemalan health officials have said that nearly one fifth of the 585 confirmed cases of coronavirus in the Central American country can be traced to people deported from the United States, most of them on two flights in a single day.

That has fueled an angry backlash against migrants as they make their way home.

Carlos Cumes, an 19-year-old whose American dream ended a few weeks ago with his deportation, saw his luck sour again when he returned to the village of Santa Catarina Palopo, hoping to reunite with his family. The village, on the shore of the volcanic Lake Atitlan, is a center for the Kaqchikel Maya whose women wear traditional blue and purple dress.

Walking the final leg to his parents' home, Cumes was confronted by an angry group of

locals who had seen televised footage of him being transported toward the village in an ambulance earlier in the day.

He was showered with insults and accused of bringing the disease with him, despite having undergone four days of medical observations in the capital and carrying a document from the health ministry pronouncing him symptom-free of coronavirus.

But none of that allayed the mob's worst fears.

"They threatened to set my family on fire," said Cumes. "I was really afraid and I could only think about leaving the village so that I wouldn't cause any more trouble."

"If I had stayed, they would have burnt my house down and who knows what else," Cumes said in a telephone interview from Guatemala City, where he is observing a mandatory 15-day period of isolation.

Some of his own relatives, he said, also turned their back on him.

Biting poverty has made Guatemala one of the main sources of migrants to the United States in recent years, along with neighboring El Salvador and Honduras.

The confirmation by President Alejandro Giammattei that 103 Guatemalans deported from the United States on three flights since late March have tested positive for the virus has fostered popular anxiety and the volatile mood in the impoverished highlands, home to many migrants.

Mob justice is not uncommon in the mostly indigenous region and although Guatemala suspended the flights from the United States in response to the infections, deportations from Mexico continue apace, stoking residents' fears.

The U.S. Immigration and Enforcement Agency (ICE) has said deportees were screened before the flights for elevated temperatures and symptoms associated with COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. Yet migrants returned by the United States to Colombia, Mexico, Haiti and Jamaica have also tested positive for the virus in recent weeks, raising broader concerns over the deportation program.

Steady pressure from the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump could see the U.S. flights to Guatemala restored, after U.S. authorities agreed to start testing some deportees for the virus. The United States has sent three "humanitarian" flights carrying children since Guatemala imposed its ban.

While until recently Guatemalans looked favorably on migrants, due in part to the vital remittances they provide to many families, fear of them has grown dramatically in just a short time.

"Only a few months ago, most people were very happy (with migrants) because they came bringing remittance checks, but now they treat them like criminals," Giammattei said in a national broadcast on April 19.

This month, in the highland capital of Quetzaltenango, a couple of buses carrying 80 migrants deported from Mexico had barely arrived at a make-shift shelter when a rumor began circulating that some sick migrants had fled the shelter and were at large in the community.

Upset residents descended upon the shelter demanding that the deportees be taken away, and the local governor rushed to the scene in an effort to ease the tension.

He publicly confirmed all the deportees had been accounted for and none were on the loose.

The crowd, nonetheless, continued to shout: "Make them leave!"

"Mr. Governor, think about our kids," Governor Julio Queme recalled the residents pleading, speaking to Reuters in a later interview. He said some of the outraged locals were brandishing sticks.

Still others threatened to burn down the shelter, and only dispersed after Queme warned they could be detained for violating Guatemala's curfew, which starts at 6:00 p.m.

But the worry remains among many that returned migrants will infect more locals unless aggressive measures are taken.

"It's scary if any migrants were to escape (the shelter) or if the people who work there were to get infected and go back to their homes and infect everyone else," said Roberto Gomez, a 60-year-old local who says he rarely leaves home due to the risk of contracting the coronavirus.

In another nearby, mostly Maya town called Paxtoca, local officials have prohibited the entry of deported migrants, after a neighboring village last month saw two deportees returned from the United States who later tested positive for coronavirus.

"This decision was made to protect the health of all our neighbors," said Paxtoca Mayor Santiago Perez.

Prior to the pandemic, many deported Guatemalans could expect to be welcomed back home by balloon-toting family members at an air force base in the capital where most would arrive.

Today, that scene is a distant memory.

"I don't know if I should go back to my village or not," said Cumes, who celebrated his birthday on Friday and added that he has faithfully complied with his mandatory isolation.

"I'm really scared," he said. "I'm confused and I don't know what to do."

[Peru] Peru authorizes bond issuance of up to \$4 bln to offset coronavirus impact (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:21 PM, Marco Aquino, 5304K, Neutral]

Peru's government said on Friday it had approved the issuance of a bond worth up to \$4 billion to help offset the impacts of the coronavirus crisis in the South American nation.

[Venezuela] Ex-Green Beret led failed attempt to oust Venezuela's Maduro (AP)

AP [5/1/2020 5:25 PM, Joshua Goodman, Neutral]

The plan was simple, but perilous. Some 300 heavily armed volunteers would sneak into Venezuela from the northern tip of South America. Along the way, they would raid military bases in the socialist country and ignite a popular rebellion that would end in President Nicolás Maduro's arrest.

What could go wrong? As it turns out, pretty much everything.

The ringleader of the plot is now jailed in the U.S. on narcotics charges. Authorities in the U.S. and Colombia are asking questions about the role of his muscular American adviser, a former Green Beret. And dozens of desperate combatants who flocked to secret training camps in Colombia said they have been left to fend for themselves amid the coronavirus pandemic.

The failed attempt to start an uprising collapsed under the collective weight of skimpy planning, feuding among opposition politicians and a poorly trained force that stood little chance of beating the Venezuelan military.

"You're not going to take out Maduro with 300 hungry, untrained men," said Ephraim Mattos, a former U.S. Navy SEAL who trained some of the would-be combatants in tactical medicine.

This bizarre, untold story of a call to arms that crashed before it launched is drawn from interviews with more than 30 Maduro opponents and aspiring freedom fighters who were directly involved in or familiar with its planning. Most spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing retaliation.

When hints of the conspiracy surfaced last month, the Maduro-controlled state media portrayed it as an invasion ginned up by the CIA, like the Cuban Bay of Pigs fiasco of 1961. An Associated Press investigation found no evidence of U.S. government involvement in the plot. Nevertheless, interviews revealed that leaders of Venezuela's U.S.-backed opposition knew of the covert force, even if they dismissed its prospects.

Planning for the incursion began after an April 30, 2019, barracks revolt by a cadre of soldiers who swore loyalty to Maduro's would-be replacement, Juan Guaidó, the opposition leader recognized by the U.S. and some 60 other nations as Venezuela's rightful leader. Contrary to U.S. expectations at the time, key Maduro aides never joined with the opposition and the government quickly quashed the uprising.

A few weeks later, some soldiers and politicians involved in the failed rebellion retreated to the JW Marriott in Bogotá, Colombia. The hotel was a center of intrigue among Venezuelan exiles. For this occasion, conference rooms were reserved for what one participant described as the "Star Wars summit of anti-Maduro goofballs" — military deserters accused

of drug trafficking, shady financiers and former Maduro officials seeking redemption.

Among those angling in the open lobby was Jordan Goudreau, an American citizen and three-time Bronze Star recipient for bravery in Iraq and Afghanistan, where he served as a medic in U.S. Army special forces, according to five people who met with the former soldier.

Those he interacted with in the U.S. and Colombia described him in interviews alternately as a freedom-loving patriot, a mercenary and a gifted warrior scarred by battle and in way over his head.

Two former special forces colleagues said Goudreau was always at the top of his class: a cell leader with a superb intellect for handling sources, an amazing shot and a devoted mixed martial arts fighter who still cut his hair high and tight.

At the end of an otherwise distinguished military career, the Canadian-born Goudreau was investigated in 2013 for allegedly defrauding the Army of \$62,000 in housing stipends. Goudreau said the investigation was closed with no charges.

After retiring in 2016, he worked as a private security contractor in Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria. In 2018, he set up Silvercorp USA, a private security firm, near his home on Florida's Space Coast to embed counter-terror agents in schools disguised as teachers. The company's website features photos and videos of Goudreau firing machine guns in battle, running shirtless up a pyramid, flying on a private jet and sporting a military backpack with a rolled-up American flag.

Silvercorp's website touts operations in more than 50 countries, with an advisory team made up of former diplomats, experienced military strategists and heads of multinational corporations -- none of them named. It claims to have "led international security teams" for the president of the United States.

Goudreau, 43, declined to be interviewed. In a written statement, he said that "Silvercorp cannot disclose the identities of its network of sources, assets and advisors due to the nature of our work" and, more generally, "would never confirm nor deny any activities in any operational realm. No inference should be drawn from this response."

Goudreau's focus on Venezuela started in February 2019, when he worked security at a concert in support of Guaidó organized by British billionaire Richard Branson on the Venezuelan-Colombian border.

"Controlling chaos on the Venezuela border where a dictator looks on with apprehension," he wrote in a photo of himself on the concert stage posted to his Instagram account.

"He was always chasing the golden BB," said Drew White, a former business partner at Silvercorp, using military slang for a one-in-a-million shot. White said he broke with his former special forces comrade last fall when Goudreau asked for help raising money to fund his regime change initiative.

"As supportive as you want to be as a friend, his head wasn't in the world of reality," said White. "Nothing he said lined up."

According to White, Goudreau came back from the concert looking to capitalize on the Trump administration's growing interest in toppling Maduro.

He had been introduced to Keith Schiller, President Donald Trump's longtime bodyguard, through someone who worked in private security. Schiller attended a March 2019 event at the University Club in Washington for potential donors with activist Lester Toledo, then Guaidó's coordinator for the delivery of humanitarian aid.

Last May, Goudreau accompanied Schiller to a meeting in Miami with representatives of Guaidó. There was a lively discussion with Schiller about the need to beef up security for Guaidó and his growing team of advisers inside Venezuela and across the world, according to a person familiar with the meeting. Schiller thought Goudreau was naive and in over his head. He cut off all contact following the meeting, said a person close to the former White House official.

In Bogota, it was Toledo who introduced Goudreau to a rebellious former Venezuelan military officer the American would come to trust above all others — Cliver Alcalá, ringleader of the Venezuelan military deserters.

Alcalá, a retired major general in Venezuela's army, seemed an unlikely hero to restore democracy to his homeland. In 2011, he was sanctioned by the U.S. for allegedly supplying FARC guerrillas in Colombia with surface-to-air missiles in exchange for cocaine. And last month, Alcalá was indicted by U.S. prosecutors alongside Maduro as one of the architects of a narcoterrorist conspiracy that allegedly sent 250 metric tons of cocaine every year to the U.S.

Alcalá is in now federal custody in New York awaiting trial. But before his surrender in Colombia, where he had been living since 2018, he had emerged as a forceful opponent of Maduro, not shy about urging military force.

Over two days of meetings with Goudreau and Toledo at the JW Marriott, Alcalá explained how he had selected 300 combatants from among the throngs of low-ranking soldiers who abandoned Maduro and fled to Colombia in the early days of Guaidó's uprising, said three people who participated in the meeting and insisted on anonymity to discuss sensitive conversations.

Alcalá said several dozen men were already living in three camps he maintained in and around the desert-like La Guajira peninsula that Colombia shares with Venezuela, the three said. Among the combatants in the camps was an exiled national guardsman accused of participating in a 2018 drone attack on Maduro.

Goudreau told Alcalá his company could prepare the men for battle, according to the three sources. The two sides discussed weapons and equipment for the volunteer army, with Goudreau estimating a budget of around \$1.5 million for a rapid strike operation.

Goudreau told participants at the meeting that he had high-level contacts in the Trump

administration who could assist the effort, although he offered few details, the three people said. Over time, many of the people involved in the plan to overthrow Maduro would come to doubt his word.

From the outset, the audacious plan split an opposition coalition already sharply divided by egos and strategy. There were concerns that Alcalá, with a murky past and ties to the regime through a brother who was Maduro's ambassador to Iran, couldn't be trusted. Others worried about going behind the backs of their Colombian allies and the U.S. government.

But Goudreau didn't share the concerns about Alcalá, according to two people close to the former American soldier. Over time, he would come to share Alcalá's mistrust of the opposition, whose talk of restoring democracy was belied by what he saw as festering corruption and closed-door deal making with the regime, they said.

More importantly to Goudreau, Alcalá retained influence in the armed forces that Maduro's opponents, mostly civilian elites, lacked. He also knew the terrain, having served as the top commander along the border.

"We needed someone who knew the monster from the inside," recalled one exiled former officer who joined the plot.

Guaidó's envoys, including Toledo, ended contact with Goudreau after the Bogota meeting because they believed it was a suicide mission, according to three people close to the opposition leader.

Undeterred, Goudreau returned to Colombia with four associates, all of them U.S. combat veterans, and begin working directly with Alcalá.

Alcalá and Goudreau revealed little about their military plans when they toured the camps. Some of the would-be combatants were told by the two men that the rag-tag army would cross the border in a heavily armed convoy and sweep into Caracas within 96 hours, according to multiple soldiers at the camps. Goudreau told the volunteers that — once challenged in battle — Maduro's food-deprived, demoralized military would collapse like dominoes, several of the soldiers said.

Many saw the plan as foolhardy and there appears to have been no serious attempt to seek U.S. military support.

"There was no chance they were going to succeed without direct U.S. military intervention," said Mattos, the former Navy SEAL who spent two weeks in September training the volunteers in basic tactical medicine on behalf of his non-profit, Stronghold Rescue & Relief, which works in combat zones.

Mattos visited the camps after hearing about them from a friend working in Colombia. He said he never met Goudreau.

Mattos said he was surprised by the barren conditions. There was no running water and men were sleeping on the floors, skipping meals and training with sawed-off broomsticks in

place of assault rifles. Five Belgian shepherds trained to sniff out explosives were as poorly fed as their handlers and had to be given away.

Mattos said he grew wary as the men recalled how Goudreau had boasted to them of having protected Trump and told them he was readying a shipment of weapons and arranging aerial support for an eventual assault of Maduro's compound.

The volunteers also shared with Mattos a three-page document listing supplies needed for a three-week operation, which he provided to AP. Items included 320 M4 assault rifles, an anti-tank rocket launcher, Zodiac boats, \$1 million in cash and state-of-the-art night vision goggles. The document's metadata indicates it was created by Goudreau on June 16.

"Unfortunately, there's a lot of cowboys in this business who try to peddle their military credentials into a big pay day," said Mattos.

AP found no indication U.S. officials sponsored Goudreau's actions nor that Trump has authorized covert operations against Maduro, something that requires congressional notification.

But Colombian authorities were aware of his movements, as were prominent opposition politicians in Venezuela and exiles in Bogota, some of whom shared their findings with U.S. officials, according to two people familiar with the discussions.

True to his reputation as a self-absorbed loose cannon, Alcalá openly touted his plans for an incursion in a June meeting with Colombia's National Intelligence Directorate and appealed for their support, said a former Colombian official familiar with the conversation. Alcalá also boasted about his relationship with Goudreau, describing him as a former CIA agent.

When the Colombians checked with their CIA counterparts in Bogota, they were told that the former Green Beret was never an agent. Alcalá was then told by his hosts to stop talking about an invasion or face expulsion, the former Colombian official said.

It's unclear where Alcalá and Goudreau got their backing, and whatever money was collected for the initiative appears to have been meager. One person who allegedly promised support was Roen Kraft, an eccentric descendant of the cheese-making family who — along with former Trump bodyguard Schiller — was among those meeting with opposition envoys in Miami and Washington.

At some point, Kraft started raising money among his own circle of fellow trust-fund friends for what he described as a "private coup" to be carried out by Silvercorp, according to two businessmen who he asked for money.

Kraft allegedly lured prospective donors with the promise of preferential access to negotiate deals in the energy and mining sectors with an eventual Guaidó government, said one of the businessmen. He provided AP a two-page, unsigned draft memorandum for a six-figure commitment he said was sent by Kraft in October in which he represents himself as the "prime contractor" of Venezuela.

But it was never clear if Kraft really had the inside track with the Venezuelans.

In a phone interview with AP, Kraft acknowledged meeting with Goudreau three times last year. But he said the two never did any business together and only discussed the delivery of humanitarian aid for Venezuela. He said Goudreau broke off all communications with him on Oct. 14, when it seemed he was intent on a military action.

"I never gave him any money," said Kraft.

Back in Colombia, more recruits were arriving to the three camps — even if the promised money didn't. Goudreau tried to bring a semblance of order. Uniforms were provided, daily exercise routines intensified and Silvercorp instructed the would-be warriors in close quarter combat.

Goudreau is "more of a Venezuelan patriot than many Venezuelans," said Hernán Alemán, a lawmaker from western Zulia state and one of a few politicians to openly embrace the clandestine mission.

Alemán said in an interview that neither the U.S. nor the Colombian governments were involved in the plot to overthrow Maduro. He claims he tried to speak several times to Guaidó about the plan but said the opposition leader showed little interest.

"Lots of people knew about it, but they didn't support us," he said. "They were too afraid."

The plot quickly crumbled in early March when one of the volunteer combatants was arrested after sneaking across the border into Venezuela from Colombia.

Shortly after, Colombian police stopped a truck transporting a cache of brand new weapons and tactical equipment worth around \$150,000, including spotting scopes, night vision goggles, two-way radios and 26 American-made assault rifles with the serial numbers rubbed off. Fifteen brown-colored helmets were manufactured by High-End Defense Solutions, a Miami-based military equipment vendor owned by a Venezuelan immigrant family.

High-End Defense Solutions is the same company that Goudreau visited in November and December, allegedly to source weapons, according to two former Venezuelan soldiers who claim to have helped the American select the gear but later had a bitter falling out with Goudreau amid accusations that they were moles for Maduro.

Company owner Mark Von Reitzenstein did not respond to repeated email and phone requests seeking comment.

Alcalá claimed ownership of the weapons shortly before surrendering to face the U.S. drug charges, saying they belonged to the "Venezuelan people." He also lashed out against Guaidó, accusing him of betraying a contract signed between his "American advisers" and J.J. Rendon, a political strategist in Miami appointed by Guaidó to help force Maduro from power.

"We had everything ready," lamented Alcalá in a video published on social media. "But

circumstances that have plagued us throughout this fight against the regime generated leaks from the very heart of the opposition, the part that wants to coexist with Maduro.”

Through a spokesman, Guaidó stood by comments made to Colombian media that he never signed any contract of the kind described by Alcalá, who he said he doesn't know. Rendon said his work for Guaidó is confidential and he would be required to deny any contract, whether or not it exists.

Meanwhile, Alcalá has offered no evidence and the alleged contract has yet to emerge, though AP repeatedly asked Goudreau for a copy.

In the aftermath of Alcalá's arrest, the would-be insurrection appears to have disbanded. As the coronavirus spreads, several of the remaining combatants have fled the camps and fanned out across Colombia, reconnecting with loved ones and figuring out their next steps. Most are broke, facing investigation by Colombian police and frustrated with Goudreau, who they blame for leading them astray.

Meanwhile, the socialist leadership in Caracas couldn't help but gloat.

Diosdado Cabello, the No. 2 most powerful person in the country and eminence grise of Venezuela's vast intelligence network, insisted that the government had infiltrated the plot for months.

“We knew everything,” said Cabello. “Some of their meetings we had to pay for. That's how infiltrated they were.”

[Venezuela] Wildfires pose heightened risk to Venezuelan crude output (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 11:20 AM, Mircely Guanipa and Luc Cohen, Neutral]

Wildfires during Venezuela's dry season are posing heightened risk to crude output this year due to lack of maintenance in state-owned oil company's PDVSA's oilfields and fuel shortages leaving firefighters without fuel, according to interviews with a half-dozen workers and other industry sources.

The fires come as Venezuela's crude output has already fallen by 20% so far this year to around 700,000 barrels per day (bpd), its lowest level in decades, due to years of underinvestment, U.S. sanctions on cash-strapped PDVSA, and more recently the collapse in crude prices as demand falls due to the coronavirus pandemic.

At least three forest fires reached oil infrastructure in the Orinoco extra-heavy oil belt in eastern Venezuela, one of the world's largest crude deposits, during the month of April, according to incident reports seen by Reuters and the sources, some of whom spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution.

Wildfires are common in Venezuela's eastern plains in the dry season in the first half of the year. Most key infrastructure have firebreaks intended to halt the flames, and PDVSA units have their own teams of firefighters.

But with PDVSA short on resources, several workers said the company has not trimmed

scrubs in recent years as much as it used to, and that small puddles of spilled crude around pumping stations and storage tanks have gone uncleaned, adding to the fire risk.

"Vegetation fires are seasonal, but what is happening now is they have not done maintenance around the installations," said Guillermo Morillo, an oil consultant and former PDVSA manager in eastern Monagas state, where several of the fires have occurred.

The most severe incident so far took place at PDVSA's Morichal operating center earlier this week, which began when a spark from a welding shop in the plant set the outside vegetation on fire on Sunday, according to two people familiar with the matter.

The fire took more than 24 hours to put out, disrupting crude output at the Petrocarabobo and Petroindependencia fields, which together produced some 26,000 bpd in March, according to PDVSA figures.

PDVSA did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The other fires affecting infrastructure in the Orinoco belt took place on April 11 at the 6,000 bpd Petrocedeno field and the PDVSA's 57,000 bpd Morichal field. Those incidents did not affect output.

"These fires never used to hit the stations before because they did the necessary maintenance," said one PDVSA Morichal worker.

The response has been hampered by an acute fuel shortage across Venezuela, the result of the near-total collapse of the country's 1.3 million bpd refining network and U.S. sanctions complicating fuel imports.

"There's not even gasoline for people to get in their cars to get to the fire trucks," said Igor Miranda, president of the Monagas chapter of the Oil Chamber of private oilfield services company, adding that his company has provided water and equipment to help PDVSA to put out fires this year.

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Congo] Congo GDP to Shrink for First Time Since War, Central Bank Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [5/1/2020 6:17 AM, Michael Kavanagh, 6400K, Negative]

Democratic Republic of Congo's economy will probably shrink 1.9% this year, the first contraction since 2001 when the nation was in a civil war, because of the global slowdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, the central bank said.

The decline compares with expansion of 4.4% last year, and will be led by a slowdown in extractive activity, which the central bank sees shrinking 5.6% in 2020, it said in a statement Thursday. It held the benchmark interest rate at 7.5%, after cutting it from 9% on March 24.

Mining, particularly of copper and cobalt, is responsible for more than 90% of Congo's export earnings. Prices for both minerals have tumbled since the beginning of the year.

The government is running a 620 billion-franc (\$358 million) deficit through April due to lower-than-expected revenue, the bank said. Emergency funding from the World Bank and International Monetary will address some of that gap, it said.

A \$363 million credit facility from the IMF last week increased the central bank's reserves to \$978 million, or about three weeks of imports, the statement said. The IMF funds will eventually be used to support the government's response to the pandemic.

The bank will increase its bond offerings and may intervene in the foreign-exchange market to support the franc, it said.

Congo's government asked the bank on Wednesday to prop up the local currency, which fell 4.8% against the dollar in the parallel market during April. Since the beginning of the year, the franc has lost 6.8% against the dollar on the parallel market and 3% at the official rate, the bank said.

[Ethiopia] Thousands of Ethiopian migrants quarantined in universities wait to go home (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 1:07 PM, Emeline Wuilbercq, 12818K, Negative]

Thousands of Ethiopian migrants expelled from the Middle East and African countries are being quarantined in universities in a sign of the strain placed on vulnerable nations by mass deportations amid the coronavirus crisis.

Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, Somalia and other countries have deported more than 5,000 illegal migrants to Ethiopia since April 1, according to the U.N. migration agency.

Health minister Lia Tadesse said Ethiopia was providing for the migrants - 13 of whom had tested positive for COVID-19 - and acknowledged concerns about spreading the virus to villages by sending them home.

"We are taking care of them and will continue to take care of them although, of course, it's demanding in many aspects," Tadesse told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone.

The U.N. has warned that mass expulsions of illegal migrants by Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia risks spreading the virus and overwhelming quarantine efforts.

An internal U.N. memo seen by Reuters said Saudi Arabia was expected to deport some 200,000 Ethiopian migrants in total.

Tadesse said that no migrants had been deported by Riyadh in the past week.

Ethiopia, which has around 110 million people, has only recorded 133 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and three deaths but experts say its public health system could swiftly be overwhelmed.

Tens of thousands of Ethiopians are estimated to migrate illegally every year in search of better-paid work, mainly to Gulf Arab nations, where many end up exploited in homes as

maids or on building sites.

Many of those now returning endured trauma and require medical attention. Tadesse said that medics and therapists were offering support.

Last month, a U.N. source told the Thomson Reuters Foundation hundreds of migrants who had recently returned from Djibouti were turned back by regional authorities after undergoing quarantine in the eastern city of Dire Dawa.

"There were some concerns among the regional governments about the quarantined returnees ... but this is now being handled through education and regional leadership," Tadesse said.

Over 1,000 migrants who were quarantined for 14 days and who did not present symptoms were sent home this week, according to the International Organization for Migration (IOM).

"There has always been the fear that migrants are purveyors of disease, but the evidence does not bear this out at all," said Maureen Achieng, IOM's chief of mission to Ethiopia, adding the agency was trying to combat stigma surrounding coronavirus in the region.

"We are trying to ensure that ... people begin to dissociate the disease from migrants."

[Ethiopia] IMF Approves \$411 Million in Emergency Funding for Ethiopia (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [5/1/2020 6:58 AM, Eric Ombok, 6400K, Neutral]

The International Monetary Fund approved \$411 million in emergency funding to help Ethiopia cope with the fallout from the coronavirus outbreak.

"Ethiopia is facing a pronounced economic slowdown and an urgent balance of payments need owing to the Covid-19 pandemic," the Washington-based lender said in an emailed statement. The Horn of Africa country will also get debt relief that the fund is extending to the poorest and most vulnerable countries.

A fall in exports and restrictions to curb the virus spread will slow growth and weaken external and fiscal accounts. The immediate priority is to increase spending on health care and provide emergency assistance, including food assistance, according to the fund.

[South Africa] South Africa eases lockdown of battered economy (Reuters)
Reuters [5/1/2020 9:29 AM, Nqobile Dlodla, Emma Rumney, and Promit Mukherjee, Neutral]

South Africa took its first shaky steps on Friday towards rolling back one of the world's strictest COVID-19 lockdowns, seeking a balance between containing the disease and providing much-needed relief for the economy.

Five weeks ago, President Cyril Ramaphosa ordered most citizens to remain indoors and shuttered all but essential businesses. The response to the pandemic won praise from the World Health Organization.

But Africa's most advanced economy was in a recession even before the pandemic, and the

shutdown has threatened to send already rampant unemployment soaring.

Reopening the economy is proving harder than closing it down.

New regulations were finalised only on Wednesday and led to some confusion. Under the first phase of easing, only some sectors may restart operations, and with limited staff.

Restaurants, for example, can now resume business, but just for food deliveries.

Many businesses are weighing whether to reopen at all.

"Opening for delivery only will lose Nando's and our franchise partners more money than being closed," said Mike Cathie, CEO of the spicy chicken chain, which has remained shut.

McDonald's South Africa (MCD.N) is partially reopening. Famous Brands (FBRJ.J) said its Steers, Wimpy, Debonairs Pizza, Fishaways and Mugg & Bean chains would trial delivery-only service.

In the Soweto township outside Johannesburg, Sakhumzi Maqubela said he did not know if his popular sit-down restaurant would survive with just deliveries.

"I have 110 staff. I have paid them with my savings till now. I don't think I can pay them any more," he said.

SEVERE DAMAGE

South Africa has recorded 5,647 coronavirus cases and 103 deaths out of a population of 58 million, relatively low numbers compared with COVID-19 hotspots in Europe or the United States.

But the economic hardship has been severe. There has been looting in some areas during the lockdown. Images of kilometres-long queues for charity food aid have been beamed around the world.

The National Treasury forecasts the economy will contract 5.8% this year.

The authorities' new five-level system allows lockdown restrictions to be eased or reintroduced based on the disease's progression.

Trade Minister Ebrahim Patel told a parliamentary briefing that if infection levels remain steady and testing is expanded, more easing could come soon.

LOST BUSINESSES AND HOUSES

The new rules initially allow industries including mining, steel production and some clothing retail stores to gradually ramp up to 50% employment.

But employers worry the regulations will disrupt supply chains and undermine the efficiency and scale needed to turn a profit.

"We are having a serious conversation about whether we should indeed open at all," said Ken Manners, chief executive of SP Metal Forgings, a supplier to the auto industry, which makes up around 7% of national output.

Car makers are lobbying the government to allow their entire workforce to return over coming weeks.

Meanwhile workers in the mining sector worry measures are not yet in place to protect them from infection.

Most sectors are being asked to await further signs the disease has been contained before resuming work.

Industry organisations say many businesses cannot hold out much longer.

"I get calls daily from workers pleading for assistance and members who have lost their businesses and houses," said Johann Baard, executive director of the South African Apparel Association.

South Africa's neighbours are watching it closely.

Namibia, which has recorded just 16 cases of the disease, will begin easing restrictions on Monday. Zimbabwe must decide on whether to extend its five-week lockdown, which expires on Sunday.

"These measures have brought our economy to virtual shutdown," Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa said during a Labour Day address on Friday. "I empathise greatly, but dread the inevitable horror of any let-up."

[Sudan] Covid-19 could push Sudan into 'perfect storm' of ill-health, sanctions, Darfur crisis (Yahoo News/RFI)

Yahoo News/RFI [5/1/2020 11:32 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Sudan is in a precarious position as the transitional government deals with soaring inflation, high unemployment and a food shortage, but battling infectious Covid-19 could push it over its tipping point, according to Michele Bachelet, UN high commissioner for human rights.

"The health system is simply not equipped to handle an outbreak on the scale we have seen elsewhere in the world. There is only one way to prevent a humanitarian disaster, and that is for the donors to step up and extend a helping hand to Sudan," Bachelet said this week.

Basic medical supplies, such as masks, have tripled in price as Sudanese on lockdown try to protect themselves.

Sudan does not have the resources to test suspected cases, and the numbers of people suffering from Covid-19 have risen to 375 with 28 deaths, according to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The idea of the perfect storm is overused, but in this context it actually may be apt because of this interlocking between political problems, healthcare problems, economic problems, and food problems," says Harry Verhoeven, senior advisor for the European Institute of Peace (EIP), a Brussels-based non-profit foundation.

"The clouds are unusually dark, hanging over a region that is quite used to bad news, this is not good," he adds.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke with Sudanese Prime Minister Abdallah Hamdok in April to discuss the possibility of removing Sudan from the US list of state sponsors of terrorism.

Some called it yet another empty gesture from the US, which has banned Sudanese from obtaining visas under the Trump administration.

"The United States has moved the goalposts for 15 to 20 years... so Pompeo's statement will not necessarily be seen as truly credible," says Verhoeven.

Verhoeven says that reaching a political settlement in Sudan will not necessarily result in the US removing sanctions. "It's a promise that has been broken too many times," he adds.

Lifting the pariah state sanctions could help during the Covid-19 crisis, according to the UN's Bachelet. Sudan is ineligible to access the US\$50-billion fund made available by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank to assist countries to fight coronavirus.

"The only way Sudan will ever be able to break out of this cycle of poverty and desperation is to be freed from the impediments of sanctions imposed at the time of the previous government," says the UN official.

"This would enable Sudan to attract investment for its much-needed economic reforms, and to fully access funds of the international financial institutions," she adds.

Reports of breakthroughs made in the Juba peace talks, which are now conducted remotely due to Covid-19, including allocating 40 percent of Darfur's natural resources to the region itself, were treated with scepticism this week.

"After 20 years of war, there are massive questions around land ownership, tenure, about changes in economic livelihood - compensation for those who've lost," says EIP senior advisor Verhoeven.

But he tells RFI that conducting the Juba peace talks "indicates that some in the government believe Darfur really needs to be solved after 20 years of fighting, of killing, of displacements."

"These are very tricky political questions, questions that will be difficult even without the legacy of war. They're particularly fraught," he adds.

The situation is further compounded by the state of emergency in Darfur, according to Salih

Osman, vice president of the Darfuri Bar Association, a human rights law organisation.

"This state of emergency is a tool that was used by the previous regime to suppress people in Darfur, with regular government forces and the Janjaweed using this to 'implement the law'," says Osman, referring to soldiers and armed militias who hunted down Darfuris on behalf of Omar al-Bashir's government.

The state of emergency enabled the authorities to carry out human rights violations, stop people from gathering, communicating and having their voice heard, according to Osman.

Osman went to Darfuri internally displaced camps late last year to speak to people there. Even after the installation of the transitional government, they told him violations continue to occur.

According to the UN, nearly 2 million of Sudan's 42 million population remain internally displaced as a result of conflicts in Darfur, South Kordofan, and Blue Nile state.

"Most face dire conditions, living in camps or settlements, unable to meet their basic needs," according to UN's Bachelet.

In South Darfur, internally displaced people at Kalma camp, which houses 90,000, are not allowed to even go to Nyala city, the capital of the state, which is on the outskirts of the camp, according to Osman.

The lack of accountability, arbitrary arrest and detention during the state of emergency is demonstrated by the recent reports of violence, including murder, rape, and arson, says Osman.

"Crimes are happening on a daily basis. There is still an absence of justice and accountability, because [the old regime members] are beyond the reach of justice," says Osman.

One member of the power-sharing transitional government, General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, aka Hemeti, deputy of the Sovereignty Council, was the head of the Janjaweed militia, later rebranded as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

The RSF carried out numerous human rights abuses, as alleged by Human Rights Watch, a US-based rights watchdog, against the Darfuri people, crimes that date from 2002.

"People are disappointed that they don't feel that there is a change at all, they are telling me that elements of the previous regime are still controlling the institutions of the government in Darfur," lawyer Osman says.

Osman says that even with the new government, there is no accountability, not even in terms of sending Omar al-Bashir, the former president of Sudan, and three others to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The men are charged with committing genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity in Darfur.

"The government had been saying 'we are assessing with the ICC how to surrender the

accused [Omar al-Bashir and three associates]' but they have dropped this issue, because of coronavirus," says Osman.

"Inequality, and economic and social grievances, were the main triggers of Sudan's revolution last year. If these and other root causes are not addressed as a matter of priority, Sudan's successful transition to achieving a durable peace remains distant," says Bachelet.

[Zambia] Climate-smart cassava gets new use in Zambia: hand sanitiser (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 6:56 AM, Danstan Kaunda, 5304K, Neutral]

To deal with drier conditions brought by a shifting climate, farmer Pamela Nyirenda last year shifted to growing drought-hardy cassava, among other new water-sipping crops such as groundnuts and cowpea.

But this year her cassava field has brought not just a secure harvest but also a financial windfall, as buyers snap up the tubers to produce ethanol for alcohol-based hand sanitiser.

As the coronavirus pandemic hits Africa, cassava flour in Zambia is this year selling for up to 5,000 kwacha (\$270) a tonne, a steep rise from less than 2,000 kwacha last year at this time, according to the Zambia National Farmers Union.

Small-scale farmers like Nyirenda, 39, who has a two-hectare family farm near the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo, say they're fast reaping the benefits of switching to hardier crops, both in terms of better food security in a time of uncertainty and more income.

"This is my second year cultivating (it) and I have managed 10 tonnes of cassava tubers," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in a telephone interview.

She said she expects to earn nearly twice as much from her cassava this year as last.

As they struggle with longer and more frequent droughts linked to climate change, a growing number of farmers in Zambia — and across sub-Saharan Africa — are switching to water-saving crops more likely to ensure a harvest, even in poor conditions.

Now that switch away from staples such as maize and rice to millet, cassava, sorghum and other crops is having multiple payoffs, particularly for farmers who depend solely on rain-fed fields for a harvest, agricultural experts say.

SURGING DEMAND

Musika, a Zambian agricultural non-profit, noted that over 25,000 farmers in Zambia — many of them women — are now growing particularly drought-tolerant varieties of cassava, up from 5,000 five years ago.

Pamela Hamasaka, head of corporate affairs for Musika, said demand for cassava ethanol has surged in Zambia as companies rush to churn out more hand sanitiser to control the spread of the deadly coronavirus pandemic.

Zambia has so far recorded close to 100 confirmed cases of the novel coronavirus, with

three deaths. Public gatherings and non-essential travel have been halted, and in April the president declared use of face masks mandatory in public.

Currently, 250 tonnes of cassava flour a day are being turned into ethanol for hand sanitiser and other products sold locally or exported to neighbouring countries in the region, Hamasaka said.

"The advent of COVID-19... has pushed the demand for bi-products of ethanol high," she said.

But some experts fear turning food crops like cassava into ethanol could hit the region's food security as a COVID-19 global economic slowdown leads to more export bans.

Zambia's Ministry of Agriculture projects the country will produce just over a million tonnes of cassava flour this year.

The country has seen an average 6% rise in production annually over the last five years, according to ministry figures.

Cassava is now grown by about a half million small-scale farmers in Zambia, as part of a push to diversify agriculture beyond maize, the country's drought-vulnerable staple, ministry officials said.

[Zimbabwe] Zimbabwe extends coronavirus lockdown, announces \$720 million stimulus (Reuters)

Reuters [5/1/2020 11:36 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa extended a nationwide lockdown to fight the new coronavirus by two more weeks and announced a \$720 million stimulus package for distressed companies, most which will be allowed to reopen on Monday.

The southern African nation first announced a three-week lockdown in March and then extended that, prior to the latest extension. The lockdown has shuttered an economy struggling with acute shortages of foreign currency, food, electricity and medicines.

Informal markets - where more than 80% of Zimbabweans earn their living - will remain shut, while big businesses will reopen under supervision.

Mnangagwa said public gatherings of more than 50 people and the use of public taxis remain suspended, while schools will remain closed.

He said the 18 billion Zimbabwe dollar stimulus package (\$720 million), which is just more than a quarter of this year's national budget, would also benefit smaller businesses which are hardest hit by the lockdown.

Mnangagwa did not say how the package would be funded.

"The package is proportionate to the disruption the virus has caused to the national economy," he said in a televised speech.

Health workers would not be taxed for the next six months to boost their earnings, the president said.

Zimbabwe has recorded 40 cases of the new coronavirus and four deaths so far.

Network TV News Coverage

Global Tensions Between Reopening and Restrictions (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [5/1/2020 11:00 AM, Staff, 1.7M]

The coronavirus's global case count is quickly closing in on 3.3 million infections. Russia has recorded its biggest surge in cases with 8,000, and its prime minister says that he is now infected. London's mayor says he does not see pubs reopening any time soon, but Malaysia says it will start reopening businesses on Monday. Australia is also set to reopen, in its case, earlier than anticipated.

Rejuvenating U.S. Uranium and Nuclear Industries (FOX's Mornings With Maria Bartiromo)

(B) FOX's Mornings With Maria Bartiromo [5/1/2020 6:49 AM, Staff, 90K]

The Trump administration laid out a plan last week aimed at pulling uranium and nuclear industries back from near collapse. A report from the Nuclear Fuel Working Group (NFWG) suggests creating a national uranium stockpile while relaxing regulations for mining on public lands. Admir Adnani, the co-founder and CEO of the Uranium Energy Corporation, calls the NFWG report "historic" and "the strongest policy statement made by the U.S. government in support of nuclear knowledge and uranium mining since the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s." Adnani says that the state of nuclear energy is a "national security challenge" since uranium is "key to 20% of the U.S. power supply and multiple vital defense needs." None of the U.S. uranium is mined domestically, and Adnani says that the U.S. needs a domestic source of resources rather than importing uranium, 40% of which comes from Russia and other former Soviet states.

[Iraq] U.S. Coalition Forces Destroy ISIS Cave System (FOX and Friends)

(B) FOX and Friends [5/1/2020 7:31 AM, Staff, 1.5M]

Video footage has recently been released of the U.S. coalition joint task force destroying an ISIS cave system in northeast Iraq. Ten of the caves were targeted in the attack. The tunnel complex is used by ISIS fighters to smuggle weapons and help move terrorists. Forces searching the mountain hideout found ISIS documents, weapons, and other devices. At least five ISIS fighters were killed.

[China] Trump Contradicts U.S. Intel, Says COVID-19 Started in Wuhan Lab (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [5/1/2020 9:28 AM, Kylie Atwood, 1.2M]

President Trump is openly contradicting the U.S. intelligence community, claiming that he has seen evidence that gives him a "high degree of confidence" that the coronavirus originated in a Wuhan government lab. This claim is in direct conflict with what the Office of the Director of National Intelligence released only hours earlier. The official report, released on Thursday, does say that the virus certainly originated in China, and the intelligence

community agrees with the scientific consensus that this was not a man-made or genetically modified virus. The statement goes on to say that it is unclear where exactly in Wuhan the virus originated. "The IC will continue to rigorously examine emerging information and intelligence to determine whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or if it was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan." Serious consideration is being made for punishing China. President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo have repeatedly said that China will pay a price for this pandemic. Secretary Pompeo has said that the time will come for recriminations, but officials across U.S. government agencies are reportedly currently working on several options, such as sanctions, new trade policies, and canceling U.S. debt obligations.

[North Korea] North Korean Media Reports on Kim Jong-Un's Official Duties Despite Questions About His Absence (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)
(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [5/1/2020 9:57 AM, Will Ripley, 1.2M]

State-run media in North Korea is claiming that leader Kim Jong-Un is continuing his official duties, even though no one has seen him in person for several weeks. President Trump has said that he has "a very good idea" of where Kim is, but he refuses to elaborate. When President Trump said he received a letter from Kim Jong-Un, North Korean government officials were quick to make a statement, denying that claim just a day after it was made. More than a week after reporting that Kim Jong-Un might be in poor health after surgery, government officials have still not made an official statement on the matter. Small reports have gone out in North Korean papers saying that Kim has sent thank-you letters to several workers' groups. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has acknowledged that the U.S. has not seen Kim in public for two weeks, something he says is unusual, but not unheard of. In 2014, Kim disappeared for 40 days only to reemerge into public view with a cane. At that time, there were rumors of political upheaval, while this time, there has been specific intelligence about Kim Jong-Un's health potentially being in danger.

{End of Report}

Sender: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>

Recipient: noreply@techmis.com <noreply@techmis.com>