



United States Department of State

Washington, D.C. 20520

August 28, 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 July 17, 2023, we are processing your request for material under the Freedom of Information Act (“FOIA”), 5 U.S.C. § 552. The Department of State (“Department”) has identified an additional 23 responsive records subject to the FOIA. We have determined 4 records may be released in full and 19 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. Where applicable, the Department has considered the foreseeable harm standard when reviewing these records and applying FOIA exemptions. 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 a horizontal flourish at the end.

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: "Feith, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: FW: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis
Date: Mon, 4 Jan 2021 20:13:50 +0000

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

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
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)@who.eop.gov; Ruggiero, Anthony J. EOP/NSC (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.

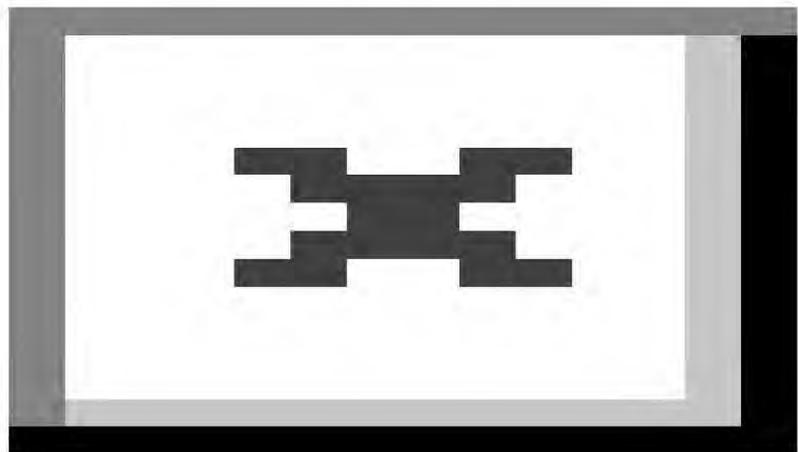
"No Credible Evidence"

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 Gutel 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.) Husseini 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 Husseini 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 Chi-tai, 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.”

v.

“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.

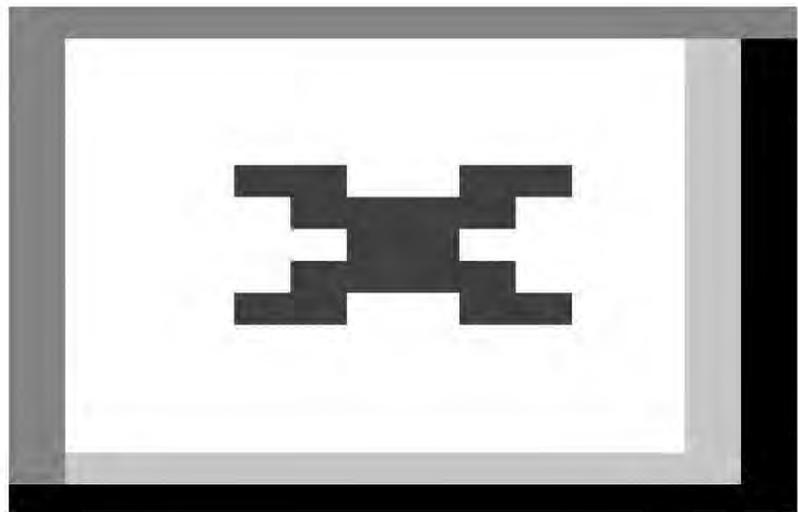
VI.

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 biotreats 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 biotreat 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.

X.

“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 scorching 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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More on the author:

Nicholson Baker

Novelist

Nicholson Baker is an American novelist and essayist. His fiction generally de-emphasizes narrative in favor of careful description and characterization. His early novels such as *The Mezzanine* and *Room Temperature* were distinguished by their minute inspection of his characters' and narrators' stream of consciousness. Out of a total of ten fiction books, he also wrote three erotic novels: *Vox*, *The Fermata* and *House of Holes*. Amongst others, Baker has published articles in *Harper's Magazine*, the *London Review of Books* and *The New Yorker*.

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From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 3:24 PM
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Subject: RE: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

We've passed it.

From: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, January 4, 2021 3:18 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; SES_FO Paper <SES_FOPaper@state.gov>
Subject: FW: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis

Just re-upping in case S has time to scan before the 1600 event.

From: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
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)@who.eop.gov; Ruggiero, Anthony J. EOP/NSC (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.

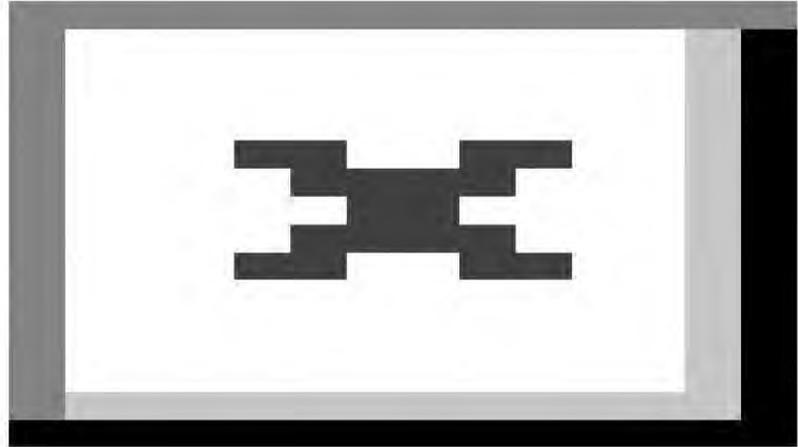
“No Credible Evidence”

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.

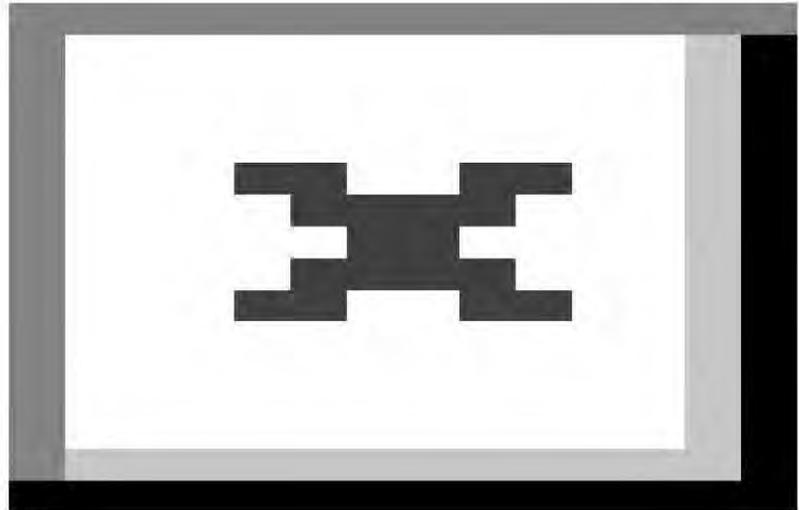
In November or December of 2019, the novel coronavirus began to spread. Chinese scientists initially named it “Wuhan seafood market pneumonia virus,” but soon that idea went away. The market, closed and decontaminated by Chinese officials on January 1, 2020, was an amplifying hub, not the source of the 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 scorching 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 Ebricht 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.”

“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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(b)(6)@state.gov

Sender: "Stilwell, David R"

Recipient: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: "Asher, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
CC: DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fw: Scientific murder board—with NIH potentially
Date: Wed, 23 Dec 2020 01:39:28 +0000

Adrienne is a excellent public servant and old friend. Hope she can facilitate a productive dialog with NIH experts and help us be informed by their internal investigation.

<https://www.nih.gov/olpa/adrienne-hallett>

Adrienne Hallett | National Institutes of Health (NIH)



Adrienne A. Hallett is the Associate Director for Legislative Policy and Analysis and the Director of the Office of Legislative Policy and Analysis (OLPA).

www.nih.gov

From: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, December 22, 2020 8:21 PM
To: Hallett, Adrienne (NIH/OD) [E] (b)(6)@nih.gov>
Cc: DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: Scientific murder board

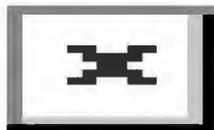
Adrienne,

Thanks very much for following up. A key issue for us with NIH remains whether the sequencing/bioinformatics research of COV19 can truly reveal any gain of function and non natural zoonotic genetic engineering. The answer we have received from our premier national biodefense lab is that it is hard to conclude anything definitive from the sequences studied about natural versus "supernatural origins" but there is a very aberrational combination of BAT RATG13 and a pangolin receptor. In grossly oversimplified words, a key question is how on earth this bizarre genetic combination could have occurred in nature (did a bat bite the pangolin or the pangolin ate the bat etc?). What is the record of natural evolution record that provides a sufficient alternative base of evidence? We don't take a 2016 thesis on Yuunan that apparently only emerged after the epidemic began to spread in 2020 seriously. Why/how have the Chinese covered this epidemic's origins up — as described on the front page of the NYT today—and provided next to no cooperation to the USG and our allies, friends, and even foes in

the face on a cascade of requests, demarches, and demands? Moreover, why is the PRC being allowed to railroad the WHO investigation, including appointing a US scientific authority who is obviously conflicted and who has a track record which is downright disturbing, including under USG contract. Trust me, we have asked the same of our State Department Ambassador at WHO and I anticipate there will be a statement of opposition soon.

Given the extensive —and public —gain of function work at the WIV into bats, pangolins, and other SARS conveyors there has been a swirling cloud of suspicion that there were programs underway there and elsewhere which were undeclared and which may have constituted bio-offense R&D in significant violation of the BWC. I suspect a lot will come clearer into view in the coming weeks. Having NIH's help in objectively understanding the possible origins issue would be invaluable as we conclude a detailed verification and compliance investigation. No one feels the facts support deliberate release but there is a growing body of data illuminating the possibility that something went very wrong in Wuhan and that this was not conveyed appropriately to the outside world.

I personally don't yet see major political opposition to GOF — under controlled circumstances — and there is widespread acknowledgment that pioneering work done at NIH with synbio vaccine development via mRNA and other approaches likely will contribute hugely to put an end to this epidemic and socio-economic disaster. However, as the NAS reported in 2018, synthetic biology, including with viruses, that is not properly safeguarded, monitored, and reported could become a major bio defense threat or stealthy dual-use offense vector. <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/24890/biodefense-in-the-age-of-synthetic-biology>. No one has definitively concluded remotely that a biological Chernobyl or global Swerdlow-B incident led to what we now face as a globe but we are legally mandated to investigate this matter and get to bottom of it. Likely senior members of the incoming administration seem equally concerned. <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2020-11-12/national-security-covid-19-biological-weapon>



Op-Ed: COVID-19 lesson: Diseases can be ideal biological weapons - Los Angeles Times

The devastation COVID-19 has wrought on the U.S. population is staggering. Yet the risks it poses to our national security are also chilling: Diseases are, in many terrible ways, ideal weapons.

www.latimes.com

All the best and hope we can set up a conference call soon with your experts and see if they can review some unclassified information published in peer reviewed journals as well as material independently submitted by scientific authorities questioning the solidity of the natural origins issue and providing alternative hypotheses.

David

PS- I copy our senior official in AVC, Tom DiNanno who leads all WMD Treaty compliance. Tom is a good friend and we can have an off the record, personal discussion as well tomorrow or

after Christmas on the best way to approach this sensitive terrain appropriately, sensitively, and carefully.

David L. Asher, Ph.D
NSRI Strategic Advisor

Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance (AVC)

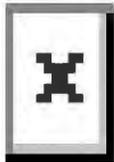
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Biodefense in the Age of Synthetic Biology - The National Academies Press

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www.nap.edu

From: Hallett, Adrienne (NIH/OD) [E] (b)(6)@nih.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, December 22, 2020 6:44 PM
To: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Scientific murder board

Hey David,

I've now connected with a few different folks at NIH as a result of our conversation. While I think there are a number of scientists who can add significant insight to the issues you raise, I think it's going to be tricky to find one scientist who can meet all of your needs.

Can you tell me more about the goals of the murder board and I can work on finding the right person to whom you should extend the invitation?

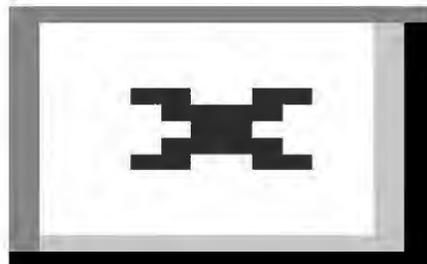
Thanks!
Adrienne

Sender: "Asher, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Recipient: Jih, Rongsong (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: "Feith, David"
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Atul Keshap (Colombo)(b)(6)@state.gov (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: FW: The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin
Date: Wed, 18 Nov 2020 14:38:49 +0000

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Wednesday, November 18, 2020 7:55 AM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David
(b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David
(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

Thanks, (b)(6) Wiley (the publisher) has a simple cartoon that depicts the main point of this paper as follows:



From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Tuesday, November 17, 2020 5:53 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov> (b)(6)
(b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: Re: The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

Just out, (below and attached) a report that comes highly recommended from a very reliable source:

From the conclusion:

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned¹⁶⁶ and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in Nature¹⁶⁷ affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.¹⁶⁸

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,¹⁶⁹ or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."¹⁷⁰

The genetic structure of SARS-CoV-2 does not rule out a laboratory origin

SARS-COV-2 chimeric structure and furin cleavage site might be the result of genetic manipulation

Rossana Segreto

Yuri Deigin

17 November 2020

<https://doi.org/10.1002/bies.202000240>

Abstract

Severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus (SARS-CoV)-2's origin is still controversial. Genomic analyses show SARS-CoV-2 likely to be chimeric, most of its sequence closest to bat CoV RaTG13, whereas its receptor binding domain (RBD) is almost identical to that of a pangolin CoV. Chimeric viruses can arise *via* natural recombination or human intervention. The furin cleavage site in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 confers to the virus the ability to cross species and tissue barriers, but was previously unseen in other SARS-like CoVs. Might genetic manipulations have been performed in order to evaluate pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-derived CoVs that were originally unable to bind to human receptors? Both cleavage site and specific RBD could result from site-directed mutagenesis, a procedure that does not leave a trace. Considering the devastating impact of SARS-CoV-2 and importance of preventing future pandemics, researchers have a responsibility to carry out a thorough analysis of all possible SARS-CoV-2 origins.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly a year has passed since the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) in Wuhan, China, and its origin is still controversial. Despite the international research effort conducted, a natural host, either direct or intermediate, has not yet been identified. The hypothesis that the Wuhan Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market was the first source for animal-human virus transmission has now been conclusively dismissedⁱ and the few market samples that were collected showed only human-adapted SARS-CoV-2, with no traces of zoonotic predecessor strainsⁱⁱ. Almost all scientific papers published to date purport that SARS-CoV-2 has a natural origin, and the only published paper considering possible a lab originⁱⁱⁱ focuses on serial passage as the technique that could justify SARS-CoV-2 special adaptation to human cells. We here describe how the two main SARS-CoV-2 features, (1) the presence of a furin cleavage site missing in other CoVs of the same group and (2) an receptor binding domain (RBD) optimized to bind to human cells^{iv} might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site-directed mutagenesis. The acquisition of both unique

features by SARS-CoV-2 more or less simultaneously is less likely to be natural or caused only by cell/animal serial passage.

SARS-COV-2'S CLOSEST RELATIVES ARE BAT AND PANGOLIN CORONAVIRUSES

Zhou et al.^[3] from the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) were the first to identify and characterize a new coronavirus (CoV), SARS-CoV-2. The genomic sequences obtained from early cases shared 79% sequence identity to the CoVs that caused severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS-CoV) in 2002–2003 and 96.2% sequence identity to RaTG13 (MN996532), a CoV sequence detected from a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat. RaTG13 is currently the closest phylogenetic relative for SARS-CoV-2 found,^[4] but its complete genomic sequence was not published before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 and the original sample was collected in the Yunnan province (China) by the same group of WIV researchers in 2013. Zhou et al.^[3] stated to have found a match between SARS-CoV-2 and a short region of RNA-dependent RNA polymerase (RdRp) of a CoV in their database and then fully sequenced the original sample collected in 2013, which they called RaTG13.

We discovered that the RdRp of RaTG13 has 100% nucleotide identity with the sequence BtCoV/4991 (KP876546), which was identified by Ge et al.^[5] in a *Rhinolophus affinis* bat in the Yunnan province in 2013, same location and year as RaTG13. BtCoV/4991 was collected in a mine colonized by bats near Tongguanzen, Mojiang, Yunnan. The WIV researchers were invited to investigate the mine after six miners there had contracted severe pneumonia in 2012ⁱⁱⁱ, and three of the miners have died.^[6] The miners have been tasked with clearing out bat droppings in the mine, and the severity of their pneumonia correlated with the duration of exposure to the mine.^[7] Four miners' samples subsequently underwent testing at WIV, where Immunoglobulin G (IgG) antibodies against SARS were identified in all samples.^[8] Considering that only about 5300 people were infected in mainland China during the SARS outbreak of 2002–2004, most of whom resided in Guangdong, the odds of four miners in Yunnan retaining antibodies from the 2002–2004 SARS outbreak are negligible. On the other hand, it is possible that the SARS antibody test administered to the miners cross-reacted with a novel SARS-like bat virus that the miners had acquired at the mine. Ge et al.^[5] have identified a number of CoVs in the mine, but based on the phylogenetic analysis, BtCoV/4991 was the only SARS-related strain, clearly separated from all known alpha- and beta-CoVs at that time. BtCoV/4991 was also different from other bat CoVs in the phylogenetic analysis carried out by Wang et al. in 2019.^[9] Chen et al.^[10] identified BtCoV/4991 as the closest sequence to SARS-CoV-2 because

RaTG13 had not yet been published at that time. BtCoV/4991 and RaTG13 have been later asserted to be two different coding names of the same strain, as their original authors at WIV registered the two strains as one entry in the Database of Bat-associated Viruses (DBatVir).^{iv}

In late July 2020, Zhengli Shi, the leading CoV researcher from WIV, in an email interview ^[11] asserted the renaming of the RaTG13 sample and unexpectedly declared that the full sequencing of RaTG13 has been carried out as far back as in 2018 and not after the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, as stated in Zhou et al.^[12] The reversal in WIV's stance on when exactly RaTG13 was fully sequenced could have been due to the discovery by independent researchers into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 that the filenames of the raw sequencing reads deposited by WIV on May 19, 2020^v seem to indicate that sequencing for RaTG13 was done in 2017 and 2018.^{vi} However, no formal erratum about year of sequencing and sample renaming from the authors of Zhou et al. ^[12] has yet appeared, or as far as is currently known, has been submitted.

The second non-human RdRp sequence closest to BtCoV/4991 (91.89% nucleotide identity) is the CoV sequence MP789 (MT084071) isolated in 2019 in a Malaysian pangolin (*Manis javanica*) from the Guangdong province (GD), China.^[13] The envelope protein of MP789 shows surprisingly 100% aminoacidic identity with the corresponding protein in RaTG13, in bat-SL-CoVZXC21 (MG772934.1), in bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and in some early SARS-CoV-2 isolates (e.g. YP_009724392).^[13] The envelope protein of CoVs is involved in critical aspects of the viral lifecycle, such as viral entry, replication and pathogenesis.^[14]

BAT COVS HAVE BEEN THOROUGHLY STUDIED AND GENETICALLY MANIPULATED

Many studies have reported that bats are natural reservoirs for a broad diversity of potentially pathogenic SARS-like CoVs.^[15, 16] Some of these viruses can potentially directly infect humans^[17], whereas others need to mutate their spike protein in order to effectively bind to the human angiotensin 1-converting enzyme 2 (hACE2) receptor and mediate virus entry.^[18] In order to evaluate the emergence potential of novel CoVs, researchers have created a number of chimeric CoVs, consisting of bat CoV backbones, normally unable to infect human cells, whose spike proteins were replaced by those from CoVs compatible with human ACE2. These chimeras were meant to simulate recombination events that might occur in nature.^[19, 20] Such gain-of-function experiments have raised a number of biosafety concerns and stirred controversy among researchers and the general public. One of the main arguments in favor of gain-of-function studies is the need to be prepared with an arsenal of drugs and vaccines for the next

pandemic.^[21] By contrast, one of the main arguments against them is that the next pandemic itself could be caused by those experiments, due to the risk of lab escape.^[22-23]

In recent years, the field of corona-virology had been focused on pan-CoV therapies and vaccines, as evident from research conducted in the past 5 years,^[24-27] as well as from media reports.^{vii} Synthetically generating diverse panels of potential pre-emergent CoVs was declared a goal of active grants for the EcoHealth Alliance, which funded some of such research at WIV, in collaboration with laboratories in the USA and other international partners.^{viii}

CREATING CHIMERIC COVS WITH NOVEL RBDS HAS GONE ON FOR DECADES

Researchers have been generating chimeric CoVs for over two decades, long before the advent of modern sequencing or genetic engineering techniques. For example, in 1999, a group from Utrecht University used targeted RNA recombination to create a “cat-and-mouse” CoV chimera: the RBDs of a feline and murine CoV were swapped, demonstrating that this exchange swapped also species tropism during *in vitro* experiments.^[28]

In 2007, the Shi group at WIV created a series of “bat-man” CoV chimeric spike proteins while trying to determine what exactly confers CoVs the ability to jump from one species to another. The researchers used different segments of the spike protein of the human SARS virus to replace corresponding segments in the spike protein of a bat viral backbone. It was concluded that a relatively short region (aa 310 to 518) of the spike protein “was necessary and sufficient to convert Rp3-S into a huACE2-binding molecule,”²⁹ that is to provide the bat CoV spike protein with a novel ability of binding to a human ACE2 receptor.

In 2008, the Baric group at the University of North Carolina (UNC) took the WIV research one step further: instead of using human immunodeficiency viruses (HIV) pseudo-viruses with bat CoV spike proteins, a live chimeric CoV was created. Following the experiments of their 2007 WIV colleagues, the Baric group used a bat SARS-like CoV as a backbone and replaced its RBD with the RBD from human SARS.^[30]

In 2015, the Shi and Baric groups joined forces and published probably the most famous gain-of-function virology paper, which described the creation of another synthetic chimeric virus.^[31] This time the RBD of a mouse-adapted SARS backbone (SARS-MA15) was replaced by the RBD of RsSHC014, a bat strain previously isolated from Yunnan bats in 2011 by the Shi group. In 2016, the Baric group repeated their 2015 experiment using the same SARS-MA15

backbone and the RBD from Rs3367,^[121] a close relative of RsSHC014 also previously found in Yunnan by WIV and renamed "WIV1" after live culturing.^[122]

Probably the largest reported number of novel chimeric viruses created was described in a 2017 paper from the Shi group at WIV,^[123] in which the authors reported creating eight chimeric viruses using WIV1 as a backbone and transplanting into it various RBDs from bat SARS-like viruses. These viruses were collected over a span of 5 years from the same cave near Kunming, Yunnan Province, where the Shi group originally found Rs3367 and RsSHC014. Only two of the eight live chimeric viruses were successfully rescued, and those two strains were found to possess the ability to bind to the human ACE2 receptor, as confirmed by experiments in hACE2-expressing HeLa cells and RT-PCR quantification of viral RNA.

SARS-COV-2 SHARES ITS RBD WITH A PANGOLIN COV

The possibility that pangolins could be the intermediate host for SARS-CoV-2 has long been under discussion.^[12-34] The biggest divergence between SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 is observed in the RBD of their spike proteins.^[4] Although its overall genome similarity is lower to SARS-CoV-2 than that of RaTG13, the MP789 pangolin strain isolated from GD pangolins has an almost identical RBD to that of SARS-CoV-2. Indeed, pangolin CoVs and SARS-CoV-2 possess identical amino acids at the five critical residues of the RBD, whereas RaTG13 only shares one amino acid with SARS-CoV-2.^[35] ACE2 sequence similarity is higher between humans and pangolins than between humans and bats. Intriguingly, the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 has a higher predicted binding affinity to human ACE2 receptor than to that of pangolins and bats.^{ix} Before the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, pangolins were the only mammals other than bats documented to carry and be infected by SARS-CoV-2 related CoV.^[12] Recombination events between the RBD of CoV from pangolins and RaTG13-like backbone could have produced SARS-CoV-2 as chimeric strain. For such recombination to occur naturally, the two viruses must have infected the same cell in the same organism simultaneously, a rather improbable event considering the low population density of pangolins and the scarce presence of CoVs in their natural populations.^x Moreover, receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 showed that it does not bind to pangolin ACE2.^{xi}

THE FURIN CLEAVAGE SITE: THE KEY DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SARS-COV-2 AND ITS CLOSEST RELATIVE RATG13

SARS-CoV-2 differs from its closest relative RaTG13 by a few key characteristics. The most striking difference is the acquisition in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 of a cleavage site activated by a host-cell enzyme furin, previously not identified in other beta-CoVs of lineage b^[36] and similar to that of Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) coronavirus.^[35] Host protease processing plays a pivotal role as a species and tissue barrier and engineering of the cleavage sites of CoV spike proteins modifies virus tropism and virulence.^[32] The ubiquitous expression of furin in different organs and tissues have conferred to SARS-CoV-2 the ability to infect organs usually invulnerable to other CoVs, leading to systemic infection in the body.^[38] Cell-cultured SARS-CoV-2 that was missing the above-mentioned cleavage site caused attenuated symptoms in infected hamsters,^[39] and mutagenesis studies have confirmed that the polybasic furin site is essential for SARS-CoV-2's ability to infect human lung cells.^[40]

The polybasic furin site in SARS-CoV-2 was created by a 12-nucleotide insert TCCTCGGCGGGC coding for a PRRA amino acid sequence at the S1/S2 junction (Figure 1). Interestingly, the two joint arginines are coded by two CGGCGG codons, which are rare for these viruses: only 5% of arginines are coded by CGG in SARS-CoV-2 or RaTG13, and CGGCGG in the new insert is the only doubled instance of this codon in SARS-CoV-2. The CGGCGG insert includes a *FauI* restriction site, of which there are six instances in SARS-CoV-2 and four instances in RaTG13 (and two in MP789). The serendipitous location of the *FauI* site could allow using restriction fragment length polymorphism (RFLP) techniques ^[41] for cloning ^[42] or screening for mutations, ^[43] as the new furin site is prone to deletions *in vitro*.^[39, 44]

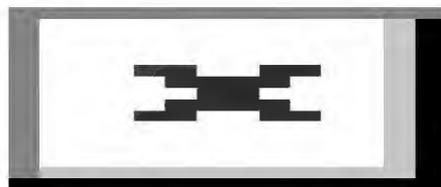


FIGURE 1

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Nucleotide sequence of the S protein at the S1/S2 junction in SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) showing the furin cleavage site (in blue) that includes a *FauI* enzyme restriction site

A study by Zhou et al.^[45] reported the discovery of a novel CoV strain RmYN02, which the authors claim exhibits natural PAA amino acid insertions at the S1/S2 cleavage site where SARS-CoV-2 has the PRRA insertion. However, upon close examination of the underlying nucleotide sequence of RmYN02 in comparison with its closest ancestors bat-SL-CoVZC45 and bat-SL-CoVZXC21, no insertions are apparent, just nucleotide mutations (Figure 2).

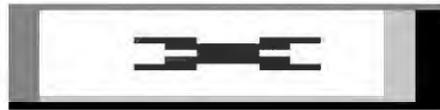


FIGURE 2

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from bat-SL-CoVZC45 (MG772933.1) and RmYN02 at the S1/S2 junction site. No insertions of nucleotides possibly evolving in a furin cleavage site can be observed (in blue)

Therefore, SARS-CoV-2 remains unique among its beta CoV relatives not only due to a polybasic furin site at the S1/S2 junction, but also due to the four amino acid insert PRRA that had created it. The insertion causes a split in the original codon for serine (TCA) in MP789 or RaTG13 to give part of a new codon for serine (TCT) and part of the amino acid alanine (GCA) in SARS-CoV-2 (Figure 3).



FIGURE 3

[Open in figure viewerPowerPoint](#)

Alignment of nucleotide and amino acid sequences of the S protein from RaTG13 (MN996532), MP789 (MT084071) and SARS-CoV-2 (NC045512.2) at the S1/S2 site. The common nucleotides and amino acids are given in black, SARS-CoV-2 unique nucleotides and amino acids in red, RaTG13 unique nucleotides and amino acids in green and common nucleotides and amino acids in SARS-CoV-2 and RaTG13 that differ in MP789 in blue. The codon for serine (TCA) in RaTG13 and MP789 is split in SARS-CoV-2 to give part of a new codon for serine (TCT) and part of the amino acid alanine (GCA)

The insertion of the furin cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is not in frame with the rest of the sequence, when compared with the MP789 and the RaTG13 sequences (Figure 3). Therefore, it is possible to exclude that such insertion could have originated by polymerase slippage or by

releasing and repriming, because insertion mutations generated by these mechanisms have been postulated to maintain the reading frame of the viral sequence.^[46] The possibility that the furin cleavage site could have been acquired by recombination has been recently questioned by Seyran et al.,^[47] because the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein seems to lack any further recombination event in contrast with the recombination model of other CoVs.

CRITIQUE OF "THE PROXIMAL ORIGIN OF SARS-COV-2"

Due to the broad-spectrum of research conducted over almost 20 years on bat SARS-CoVs justified by their potential to spill over from animal to human,^[46] a possible synthetic origin by laboratory engineering of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be excluded. The widely cited article of Andersen et al.^[2] stated that SARS-CoV-2 has most likely a natural origin. The main argument brought by the authors is that the high-affinity binding of the SARS-CoV-2 spike protein to hACE2 could not have been predicted by models based on the RBD of SARS-CoV. Based on the structural analysis conducted by Wan et al.,^[49] SARS-CoV-2 has the potential to recognize hACE2 more efficiently than the SARS-CoV, which emerged in 2002. Moreover, generation of CoV chimeric strains has recently demonstrated that bat CoV spikes can bind to the hACE2 receptor with more plasticity than previously predicted.^[13] All amino acids in the RBD have been extensively analyzed and new models to predict ACE2 affinity are available.^[50] In this regard, BatCoV Rs3367 (99.9% identity to WIV1) has been shown to share with SARS-CoV-2 four out of six critical residues in the RBD. Considering that WIV1 was shown to directly bind to hACE2, the same assumption could easily have been made about SARS-CoV-2 RBD.^[51]

As described above, creation of chimeric viruses has been carried out over the years with the purpose of studying the potential pathogenicity of bat CoVs for humans. In this context, SARS-CoV-2 could have been synthesized by combining a backbone similar to RaTG13 with the RBD of CoV similar to the one recently isolated from pangolins^[12], because the latter is characterized by a higher affinity with the hACE2 receptor. Such research could have aimed to identify pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-CoV potentially pathogenic for humans. Subsequent serial cell or animal passage, as described by Sirotkin & Sirotkin^[10] could have provided the perfect adaptation of the RBD to the hACE2.

Regarding the furin cleavage site, Andersen et al.^[2] state that "the functional consequence of the polybasic cleavage site in SARS-CoV-2 is unknown." New studies from several groups have lately identified this activation site as possibly enabling the virus to spread efficiently between

humans and attack multiple organs.^[52] Experiments on proteolytic cleavage of CoV spike proteins have been recently suggested as future key studies to understand virus transmissibility in different hosts.^[50]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state, based on the work of Almazan et al.^[53] that “the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone.” In the last 6 years before the outbreak of SARS-CoV-2 the number of potential bat backbones has been undeniably increased by several bat CoV screenings, last but not least bringing RaTG13 to scientific attention in January 2020. Other possible backbones could, as well, still wait for publication.

Andersen et al.^[2] affirm that “the acquisition of both the polybasic cleavage site and predicted O-linked glycans also argues against culture-based scenarios.” Methods for insertion of a polybasic cleavage site in infectious bronchitis CoV are given in Cheng et al.^[54] and resulted in increased pathogenicity. Concerning the predicted O-linked glycans around the newly inserted polybasic site, it should be noted that this prediction was not confirmed by Cryo-EM inquiry into the SARS-CoV-2 spike glycoprotein.^[55] Nevertheless, while it is true that O-linked glycans are much more likely to arise under immune selection, they could be added in the lab through site-directed mutagenesis^[56] or arise in the course of *in vivo* experiments, for example, in BLT-L mice with human lung implants and autologous human immune system^[57] or in mice expressing the hACE2 receptor.^[31] To overcome problems of bat CoV isolation, experiments based on direct inoculation of bat CoV in suckling rats have been carried out.^[58] Humanized mice, ferrets, primates and/or other animals with similar ACE2 conformation could have all been used for serial passage experiments, as described in detail by Sirotkin and Sirotkin.^[11]

Andersen et al.^[2] also state that “subsequent generation of a polybasic cleavage site would have then required repeated passage in cell culture or animals with ACE2 receptors similar to those of humans, but such work has also not previously been described.” It should not be excluded that such experiments could have been aborted due to the SARS-CoV-2 outbreak, before a possible publication of the results or that the results were never intended to be published.

It is important to mention that RaTG13 and the pangolin CoV sequences from smuggled pangolins confiscated in the GD province in March 2019, and to which most of published papers supporting a natural origin of SARS-CoV-2 refer,^[2] have recently been questioned as to the accuracy of their assembly data^{xii} and require further analyses to prove their correctness.^(xiii -xiv) It should also be noted that *in vitro* receptor binding studies of reconstituted RaTG13 yielded some peculiar results.^[59] The most surprising observation was that RaTG13,

unlike SARS-CoV-2, is unable to bind ACE2 in *R. macrotis* bats, a close relative of RaTG13's purported host, *R. affinis*^[52] (whose ACE2 receptor has not yet been tested). At the same time, RaTG13 was observed to bind hACE2^[60], but not as well as ACE2 of rats and mice, to which SARS-CoV-2 did not bind at all. Is it possible that just as SARS-MA15 was a mouse-adapted strain of SARS, RaTG13 is actually a mouse-adapted version of a CoV extracted from the Mojiang cave, rather than a strain obtained from a bat fecal swab? Unfortunately, the RaTG13 sample has been exhausted and it is no longer available for external examination,^[11] which is unfortunate given a number of inconsistencies in its sequencing raw data. Also, the status and availability of the Mojiang miners' samples remain as well an open and highly relevant question. Several samples from the miners have been collected^[13, 8] and likely stored, and it would be of great value to test them for the presence of SARS-CoV-2-like CoVs.

Another open question is the reason for modification and subsequent deletion of WIV's own viral database. In May 2020, several media outlets have reported that the change tracking system of WIV's internal database showed that the database was renamed from "Wildlife-borne viral pathogen database" to "Bat and rodent-borne viral pathogen database," and its description was edited to replace instances of "wild animal" by "bat and rodent"; in addition, mention of "arthropod vectors" was deleted.^{xv} The database description reported that it contained over 60 Mb of data in structured query language (SQL) format, but as of early May 2020 the download link no longer worked.^{xvi} Subsequently, the database page was taken down in its entirety but its snapshot is still available on Web Archive.^{xvii} It is possible that other international CoV labs might have downloaded the SQL archive of the WIV database before it was taken down, in which case such groups should make those data publicly available.

HOW COULD THE VIRUS HAVE ESCAPED FROM A LAB?

The leak of highly dangerous pathogens from laboratories is not a rare event and occurrences have been documented in several countries. The most notable lab leak known is the 1977 H1N1 lab escape from China that caused a worldwide pandemic.^[61] The most recent one is the November 2019 outbreak of brucellosis that occurred in two research centers in Lanzhou, China, infecting over 100 students and staff members.^[62] Several lab escapes of the first SARS virus have been reported as well: in the summer of 2003 in Singapore,^[63] then in December 2003 in Taiwan,^{xviii} and in the spring of 2004 twice in China.^{xix}

Concerns about WIV's lab safety were raised in 2018 by U.S. Embassy officials after visiting the Institute and having an interview with Zhengli Shi. The lab auditors summarized their worries in subsequent diplomatic cables to Washington.^{xx} Chinese experts have also raised concerns about lab safety in their own country, lamenting that "lab trash can contain man-made viruses, bacteria or microbes" and that "some researchers discharge laboratory materials into the sewer after experiments without a specific biological disposal mechanism."^{xxi}

American labs have also had their share of safety issues. Recently, research operations in the Biosafety level (BSL)-4 United States Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) facility in Fort Detrick were interrupted in August 2019 following safety violations, in particular, relating to the disposal of infective materials.^{xxii} Other US labs have been cited for safety issues as well.²²¹

A number of scenarios causing SARS-CoV-2 to leak from a lab can be hypothesized. For example, an infected animal could have escaped from a lab or it could have scratched or bitten a worker (a concern raised in 2017 about the establishment of a BSL-4 primate vaccine testing facility in Kunming, Yunnan⁽⁶¹⁾), or a researcher could have accidentally stuck themselves with inoculate (as happened in two cases in Russia^{xxiii}). Until 2020, CoVs were not considered particularly deadly or virulent. SARS-like CoVs did not require BSL-4 and could be manipulated under BSL-2 and BSL-3⁽⁶²⁾ conditions, making an accidental leak more likely. Aerosol experiments with CoVs⁽⁶³⁾ could result in lab leak as well, because a failure in the equipment used could go unnoticed for a long time before infection of lab workers is detected. Finally, the virus could potentially have leaked through the sewage system if proper waste disposal and/or decontamination procedures were not followed.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

On the basis of our analysis, an artificial origin of SARS-CoV-2 is not a baseless conspiracy theory that is to be condemned⁽⁶⁶⁾ and researchers have the responsibility to consider all possible causes for SARS-CoV-2 emergence. The insertion of human-adapted pangolin CoV RBD obtained by cell/animal serial passage and furin cleavage site could arise from site-directed mutagenesis experiments, in a context of evolutionary studies or development of pan-CoV vaccines or drugs. A recent article in Nature⁽⁶⁷⁾ affirms that a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 cannot be ruled out, as researchers could have been infected accidentally, and that gain-of-function experiments resulting in SARS-CoV-2 could have been performed at WIV. Genetic manipulation of SARS-CoV-2 may have been carried out in any laboratory in the world

with access to the backbone sequence and the necessary equipment and it would not leave any trace. Modern technologies based on synthetic genetics platforms allow the reconstruction of viruses based on their genomic sequence, without the need of a natural isolate.^[63]

A thorough investigation on strain collections and research records in all laboratories involved in CoV research before SARS-CoV-2 outbreak is urgently needed. Special attention should be paid to strains of CoVs that were generated in virology laboratories but have not yet been published, as those possibly described in the deleted WIV database. Because finding a possible natural host could take years, as with the first SARS,^[62] or never succeed, equal priority should be given to investigating natural and laboratory origins of SARS-CoV-2.

Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at Berkeley, recently stated: "To understand exactly how this virus has originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."^[xxii]

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are very grateful to Prof. Allan Krill (NTNU) for proof reading the manuscript, all the valuable comments and being open-minded about controversial hypotheses; Prof. Heribert Insam (Head of the Department of Microbiology; University of Innsbruck) for his support and Dr. Lawrence Sellin for all the useful information. A special thanks goes to Dr. Fernando Castro-Chavez (former Post-Doc at the New York Medical College) for his support with Research Gate. We are very thankful to René Bergelt, for having discovered the database that confirmed our finding that BtCoV4991 and RaTG13 refer to the same sample. Finally, we are extremely grateful to members of the D.R.A.S.T.I.C. (Decentralised Radical Autonomous Search Team Investigating COVID-19) Twitter group for all their work in uncovering many previously unpublished facts about SARS-CoV-2 and its relative strains. In particular, we are grateful to Luigi Warren for continuously probing the possible connection of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak to WIV and SARS-CoV-2, to @TheSeeker268 for finding Chinese-language 2013 Xu MSc and 2016 Huang PhD theses, which have confirmed the SARS-like viral nature of the 2012 Mojiang pneumonia outbreak and have elucidated WIV's role in investigating that outbreak,^{xxiv} including WIV's collection of the 4991/RaTG13 strain from the Mojiang mine, and to Francisco de Asis de Ribera Martin for providing us the English translation of the two theses, and also discovering the RaTG13 amplicon dates.

Sender: "Feith, David"

Recipient: Stilwell, David R (b)(6) @state.gov>;

Atul Keshap (Colombo) (b)(6)@state.gov (b)(6)@state.gov>

SARS-CoV-2

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SARS-CoV-2

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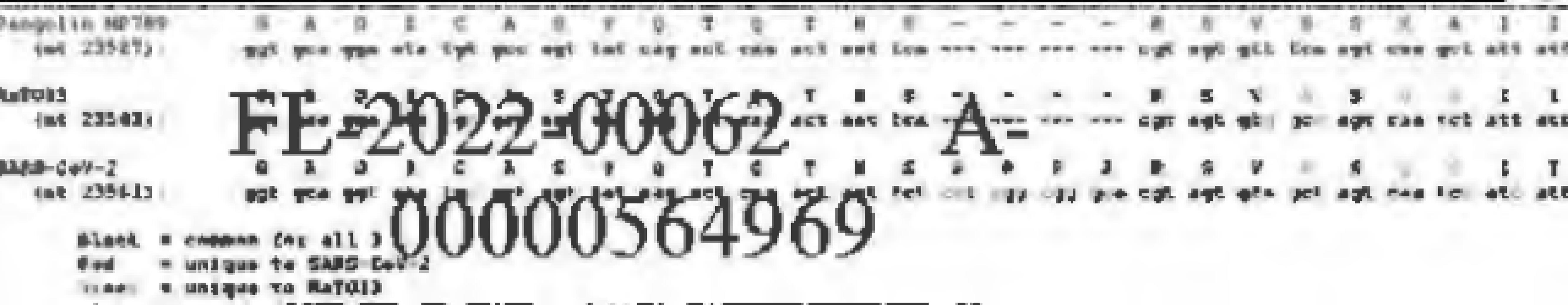
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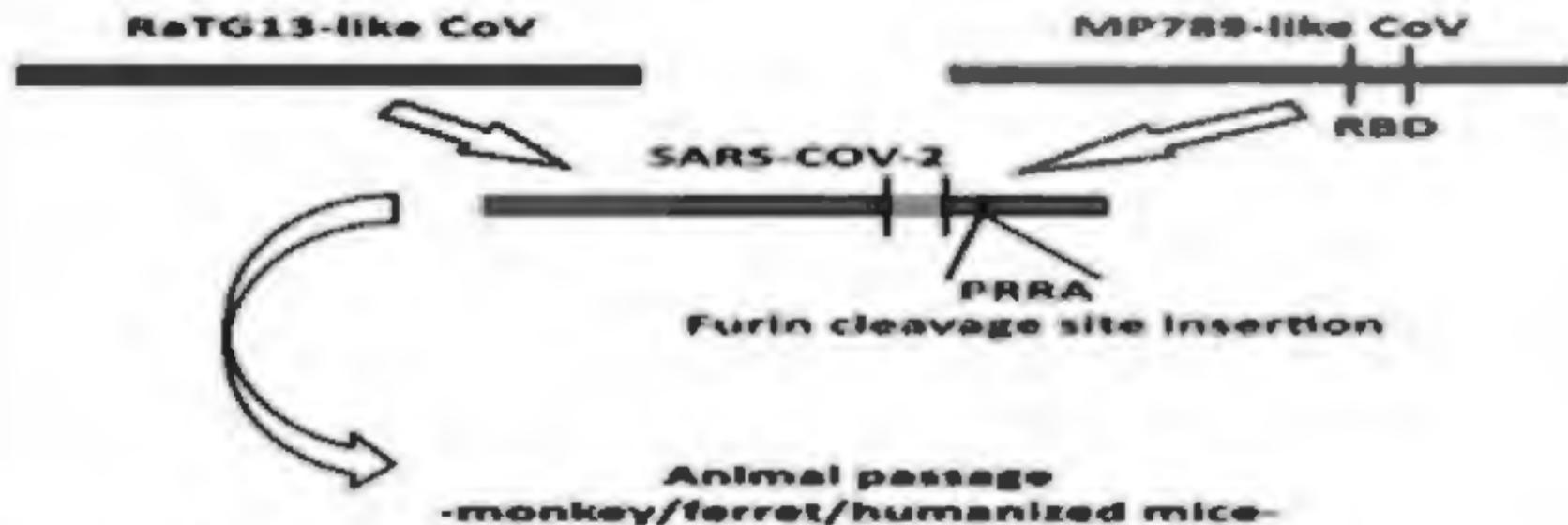
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Fed = número da FED
Mat = número da MATRIZ

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8/26/2023

Lab experiment



Lab leak ?

From: "Feith, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Kanapathy, Ivan (b)(6)
Subject: FW: Why researchers reject a genetic engineer ed evolution of COVID19—but can't seem to identify a natural evolution path
Date: Mon, 9 Nov 2020 23:48:21 +0000

From: Michael Pease (b)(6)
Sent: Monday, November 9, 2020 12:00 PM
To: David Asher (b)(6)@hudson.org>
Cc: Rich Muller (b)(5)@gmail.com>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Christopher Yeaw (b)(5)@nsri.nebraskaresearch.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Yu, Miles (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: Why researchers reject a genetic engineered evolution of COVID19—but can't seem to identify a natural evolution path

I have yet to find a document pointing to a spillover source "in the wild". Were there a credible document I would think it would be huge news around the globe.

If there truly is a zoonotic source, after almost a year, one would think the PRC would be able and keen to identify it, if only to:

- Back up their story
- Reduce their culpability
- Help prevent future outbreaks

Questions for our virologists:

- If there is a zoonotic source, wouldn't the virus from the earliest patients with COVID-19 be expected to be able to survive and multiply within at least one species of potential spillover host?
- Has this been tested?

On Mon, Nov 9, 2020 at 9:35 AM David Asher (b)(6)@hudson.org> wrote:

Mike, Rich, Have you found a single paper describing a likely and plausible natural evolutionary pathway? See below for some prominent analyses

David, Miles, I propose we ask AIT to schedule a discussion with Dr. Lai and other leading Academia Sinica experts later this week to get the latest on their research and analysis.

We know from the work being done in 2016 with UNC and the WIV that there was significant gain of function and reverse generation work being done together. Could that alone have plausibly evolved in live animals into SARS COVID 19?

What I don't find acceptable is the trite rejection of at least a partial synthetic bio pathway when scientists have no other good explanation. Syn bio and gain of function can be done simply to test potential adverse disease vectors that could potentially evolve. Such a vector quite plausibly could be released. That would make it an "unintentional weapon." I.E. the Chernobyl of bio-disasters.

David

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41564-020-0771-4>

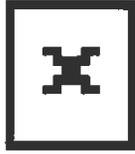
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There's another scenario though, in which scientists took a coronavirus and put it in lab conditions that sped up its evolution. This is known as **simulated natural selection**. This would create a virus without the obvious signs of human interference.....

13 JULY 2020

How do we know COVID isn't a bioweapon?



*Posted by*RUBY PROSSER SCULLY



It's a virus that has infected more than 12 million people and caused more than half a million deaths worldwide.

If you have listened to US President Donald Trump and several of his colleagues, the leader of Iran, and official sources in China at various points, this threat came not from nature but was intentional.

The conspiracy theory that SARS-CoV-2 actually came from a laboratory has gained traction in recent months, with many accounts blaming the pandemic on a leak (or malicious release) from the Wuhan Institute of Virology in China near where the virus was first detected.

Whether the politicians themselves believe this conspiracy, or it is simply a political ploy, the sticking power has prompted many in the scientific community to try to debunk such claims.

But what makes the scientists so certain? When gene-editing technology is progressing at such a rapid rate, and there are still major questions around the origin of the virus, how can we really know that we aren't victims of a bioterrorist attack?

We'll probably never be 100% certain, says virologist Dr Megan Steain, lecturer in infectious diseases & immunology at the University of Sydney. "But I'd say we're pretty confident – 95-to-98% confident – that this is naturally occurring," she says.

This is because the genome has been sequenced by many labs around the world and pored over by scientists.

Like archaeologists looking at fossils for clues about a creature's evolution, virologists analyse the genetic code for signs of human interference. They have compared the sequence to those from other similar viruses to find out what it's most closely related to. This is used to create what's called a phylogenetic tree, which looks just like an ancestry tree, to show us the virus's closest relatives.

So far, the closest relative scientists have found to SARS-CoV-2 is one found in horseshoe bats known as Bat CoV RaTG13. Importantly, the major difference in the coronavirus affecting humans, and the part that makes it so effective at infecting humans, is its spike protein.

Dr Christian Stevens, at the Mount Sinai university in the US, explained in his blog why the receptor binding domain on the spike protein made it such a threat.

Firstly, it has tweaks that make it far better at binding to ACE2 receptors on our cells than other coronaviruses, such as the first SARS virus. It

is also able to work on a range of cells and tissues in our bodies.

And lastly, it can be coated in sugar molecules, known as a glycan shield, which appears to help it hide from our body's immune systems, he

says.

Conspiracy theorists believe that this perfect set of tools must be the result of human engineering.

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- 1. 1
- 2. 2

However, creating this virus in a lab and knowing that it could be a pandemic-inducing pathogen seems to be more in the realms of science

fiction than present-day science.

If you were a scientist designing such a virus, the first thing you would need is an existing template, explains Dr Steain. "You don't just

assemble it from nothing in the lab."

We would expect engineers to choose a virus that already causes disease, such as the first SARS-coronavirus, as the backbone for the new virus, she says.

"And if you were to do that, you can't make sweeping changes across the whole genome, you would generally just mutate in specific regions as you go."

The end result would be something that looks a lot like the virus backbone that you started with, but has particular mutations in a particular region.

"Whereas when we look at the genome to this virus, it doesn't look like it's come from any of those existing backbones," Dr Steain says.

Instead, the virus with the most genetic similarities, RaTG13, is unlikely to be able to efficiently infect human cells. This would make it an unlikely candidate to base your weapon on if you were a scientist aiming to make a deadly and very infectious virus.

Others have jumped on a preprint that claimed to have found HIV-like insertions on the coronavirus genome, suggesting the virus may have been engineered in a lab. The authors wound up retracting the paper when they realised that these insertions were much more similar to mammals, insects, bacteria and other viruses, than HIV-1.

There's another scenario though, in which scientists took a coronavirus and put it in lab conditions that sped up its evolution. This is known as simulated natural selection.

This would create a virus without the obvious signs of human interference.

However, Dr Steain thinks this, too, is improbable.

For starters, the sugar molecules that help the virus avoid detection by antibodies only evolve when a virus is trying to hide from an immune system.

"When you're culturing the virus in the lab in cells, there's no immune system pressure there," says Dr Steain. "So there's no reason that the virus would evolve over time to gain that mutation."

And the features that make this virus so good at infecting humans are things that scientists wouldn't at all predict, either.

Computer models can help predict how mutations could affect the function of the virus. However, they aren't accurate and it would be difficult to predict what mutation worked best in reality.

In particular, models suggest the spike protein on SARS-CoV-2 wouldn't actually bind that well to the ACE2 receptor, giving scientists no reason to engineer a bioweapon with it. "By mutating something you might gain a function, but you might lose another function at the same time," Dr Steain says.

Moreover, the virus doesn't appear to have the telltale signs you would expect if it was created through rapid evolution in a lab. Each time a virus replicates, random errors are introduced. Some of these mutations will actually change how the virus functions, and others won't do anything.

Mutations that don't change anything should occur pretty consistently, because they have no effect on the virus's survival. Mutations that do change the virus's function, on the other hand, will happen more or less commonly depending on how well they suit the environment the virus lives in.

As Dr Stevens explains in his blog, if the virus was being forced to rapidly evolve in a laboratory, you would expect to see plenty of changes that affect the virus's function in at least some part of the virus' genome.

However, an analysis by virologist Associate Professor Trevor Bedford, at the US Fred Hutch research centre, indicates the ratio of mutations found in this novel coronavirus is about the same as you would expect from a virus that arose out of natural selection, not accelerated evolution like that found in a lab.

So the steps that the bioengineers would have needed to follow in order intentionally to create this virus would have been illogical from a virologist's perspective.

"Nobody in the world could have predicted that the changes that had occurred naturally would have caused this virus to be so pathogenic," says Professor Andreas Suhrbier, head of the Inflammation Biology Laboratory at the QIMR Berghofer Medical Research Institute.

It takes scientists many years to understand what effect certain genetic changes have on the way the virus functions in the community, so there was no rational basis for choosing a bat virus or choosing to re-engineer the spike protein.

"If you're trying to make a biological weapon, why would you re-engineer a harmless virus?" Professor Suhrbier asks.

Instead, malicious actors have a host of known pathogenic viruses and bacteria that they could, and in the past have, modified to turn them into effective warfare agents.

Ultimately, we still don't know the exact origins of SARS-CoV-2. This means that questions may remain until a smoking gun is found.

Some believe that this will be finding a wild animal infected with a virus that looks extremely similar to this virus, probably in the region close to the first outbreak.

But with most resources currently diverted to combating the spread of the virus, and treating its victims, we may be waiting for some years.

This article was originally published under the headline 'How we know COVID didn't come from a lab'.

In the Shadow of Biological Warfare: Conspiracy Theories on the Origins of COVID-19 and Enhancing Global Governance of Biosafety as a Matter of Urgency


Jing-Bao Nie

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The devastating consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic for individuals, families, communities, countries, and the world as a whole offers vivid proof that microbes could be just as destructive and terrifying—if not more so—than the use of nuclear weapons. And it is much less difficult to forge biological weapons than nuclear ones. As a result, driven by their hunger for power and dominion, states and terrorist groups may feel increasingly tempted to access and exercise such super-biological means of destruction. Furthermore, the safety of the scientific laboratories where the most dangerous pathogens are researched (and sometimes created) has long been a sword of Damocles hanging over humankind.

Through examining two popular conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID-19 and the historical background of biological warfare (BW) during the mid-twentieth century, this article will demonstrate the urgency of a much higher level of global governance of biosafety and biosecurity. Moreover, the key elements of an ethical framework for such a governance will be outlined.

[Go to:](#)

Conspiracy Theory Version 1: A P4 Lab in Wuhan

In recent years, China has been investing heavily in strategically important sectors in science, technology, and biomedicine. A plan exists to establish half a dozen labs of the highest level of biocontainment, biosafety level-4 (BSL-4) or P4 (pathogen or protection level 4), in several cities. As a fruit of international cooperation primarily with France, the first BSL-4 lab was built at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) of the Chinese Academy of Science in 2017. When it became fully operational in 2018, authorities and scientists enthusiastically celebrated the lab as another landmark in science achieved by China, that is, in the typical spirit of patriotism or nationalism (Xinhua News [2018](#)).

However, overseas experts were raising questions about the safety and even the necessity of such labs. Their concerns included the possible leakage of pathogens as well as the potential development of biological weapons (Cyranoski [2017](#)). In 2018, U.S. intelligence also warned about the safety risks of the lab (Rogin [2020](#)).

A few days after the lockdown of Wuhan in late January 2020, a U.S. newspaper prone to circulating conspiracy theories linked the origins of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2, then called 2019-nCoV) to China's covert biological weapons programme, citing an Israeli biological warfare expert (Gertz [2020](#)). More sensationally, scientists from the Indian Institute of Technology published a preprint scientific paper where they reported their findings on four unique inserts of key structural proteins of HIV-1 in 2019-nCoV, a result which was "unlikely to be fortuitous in nature" (Pradhan et al. [2020](#)). In other words, the novel coronavirus had been genetically engineered. Soon afterwards, the researchers withdrew their paper, citing a need for "re-analysing of the data."

Many Chinese also suspected a connection between the virus and the WIV. As a response, Shi Zhengli, an internationally known virologist at the WIV who discovered that the SARS virus originated in bats, posted in the Twitter-like Chinese social media platform Weibo—a post which was reported in many media outlets:

The 2019-nCov is nature's punishment on the human race for uncivilized behaviour [i.e., eating wild animals]. I swear on my own life that the virus has no connection with the laboratory. To those people who believe in and are spreading the rumours perpetrated by third-rate media outlets, as well as believing in the unreliable "academic analysis" of Indian scholars, I would like to give this advice: Shut your dirty mouths!

Not surprisingly, this response has hardly helped to scotch the conspiracy theory, however understandable Shi's indignation may have been. Scientific truth can never be guaranteed by swearing on one's own or anyone else's life but must be grounded on objective evidence. Asking people to "shut their mouths" can only be counterproductive when it comes to convincing them with sound theories and establishing trust and trustworthiness. Ideally, the final say on the issue should come from an independent party—in this case, Shi herself and the WIV itself have an obvious conflict of interest.

Mainstream scientific research and the more reputable mass media denounced the theory that the novel coronavirus had been genetically engineered or was a bioweapon (e.g., Andersen et al. [2020](#); Barclay [2020](#)). Yet, the fact that the virus is not human-made does not necessarily exclude the possibility that the virus escaped the lab by accident (Field [2020](#); Guterl et al. [2020](#)). This remains an open question; without independent and transparent investigations, it may never be either proven or disproven. The leakage of dangerous pathogens had already occurred more than once in other labs, as will be discussed in the fourth section of this paper.

China's official reaction has added fuel to the fires of suspicion. In mid-February, Chen Wei, a major general in the People's Liberation Army and a leading biological weapons expert at the Academy of Military Science, was appointed to take the helm at the WIV. In April, new rules were set in place for academic publications on COVID-19. In particular, studies of the origins of the novel coronavirus were to be subject to special scrutiny and official approval (Gan et al. 2020). Above all, supreme leader Xi Jinping, in order to "to strengthen areas of weakness and close the loopholes exposed by the epidemic," ordered the establishment of a law on biosecurity and the incorporation of biosecurity in the national security system (Xinhua News 2020). These remarks were taken by some commentators in the West as a tacit admission of the lab origins of SARS-CoV-2. Yet, in the Chinese context, they may also be interpreted as a way of lessening the risk of BW attacks by foreign countries.

[Go to:](#)

Conspiracy Theory Version 2: The United States

Immediately after the epidemic (initially called "Wuhan pneumonia") became public knowledge in late January, an unsettling theory started to circulate in China. Posts with certain variations—but containing exactly the same information and similar wording—spread like wildfire, particularly on Chinese social media WeChat. They tied the origins of the virus to the first China-hosted international military multi-sport event which involved the participation of nearly ten thousand athletes from over one hundred countries.

The original message is a masterpiece of conspiracy theory rhetoric. It is worthwhile citing it in full (in English translation):

Compatriots: In this time of the Wuhan pneumonia epidemic, please do not forget the Seventh World Military Games in Wuhan three months ago. Of course, some international athletes came from Africa, where infectious diseases frequently break out. Some athletes came from the United States, which has long attempted to carry out biological warfare against China. When [the authorities] investigated the source of the virus responsible for the 2003 SARS epidemic, many clues pointed to the United States and its biological warfare conspiracy against China.

So, doesn't this coronavirus pneumonia outbreak in Wuhan have something to do with the USA? This outbreak coincides with respect to the timeline, coincides with respect to the place, and coincides with respect to the gathering of people. And it also coincides in a major way with the China-US trade war, which is still raging fiercely. Shouldn't we put all these coincidences together to analyse, synthesize, theorize, and verify so as to reach a clear conclusion? While carrying out its trade war with China, the U.S. government took advantage of the Seventh World Military Games, where many American athletes had numerous personal interactions with Chinese, hiding the novel coronavirus in their equipment with the aim of infecting the people of Wuhan. As the virus has an incubation period of two or three months, outbreaks on a massive scale would occur around the Spring Festival Holiday when vast numbers of people return home for the Chinese New Year.

In this way, the U.S. government plotted to utilize the novel coronavirus to carry out a devastating attack on the polity, economy, livelihoods, and people of New China so as to realize its evil goals of containing China's economy and thwarting the rise of New China. Do not forget: the United States is the best equipped country in BW materials, the country that most desires to contain China's development, and the country that pushes hardest for its own interests.

Kind-hearted people of China, what is stopping us from seeing that it is the U.S. government that has been plotting behind the scenes and is the evil perpetrator of this coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan? Why should we falsely put the blame on a wild animal market? Please repost this item immediately so that more Chinese will know the truth. (WeChat Post)

Designed for social media, this post, along with its variations, presents a masterclass in disinformation writing in a number of ways. It revives an earlier conspiracy theory on the origins of the SARS epidemic in 2003 which has been circulating in China for years and received new attention after the outbreak of "Wuhan pneumonia." The anonymous document is built on and reinforces a fundamental historical narrative which emphasizes how, since the early nineteenth century, China has been humiliated by the Western powers through their imperialist and colonizing endeavours. It appeals to a long-rooted xenophobia, growing anti-United States and anti-Western sentiments, and China's dominant ideology of patriotism or nationalism. The theory implicitly but deftly exploits the fear of BW embedded in the historical memory of China as a victim of BW in the mid-twentieth century (see the next section). Forceful in tone, the post nevertheless appears to invite recipients to think about the issue and decide for themselves. Its author(s) is a master at manipulating the minds of its target audience, Chinese people. Little wonder that not only people in China but also many overseas Chinese have accepted the theory it presents—or at least do not consider it to be totally baseless.

This message uses a single stone to kill many birds. It responds to people's need for an answer about the origins of the novel coronavirus. Implicitly, but cleverly, it addresses the serious issue of accountability. The first official explanation linked the origins of then mysterious SARS-like pneumonia to the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, which was shut down in early January, three weeks before locking down the city of Wuhan. While the wet market theory still implies failures at the local level to prohibit the consumption and sale of wild animals, blaming a powerful foreign country for the origins of the pandemic effectively absolves China of all responsibility.

No available scientific or other trustworthy evidence supports the claims made by this theory. However, it is evident that the authorities have been orchestrating this flow of disinformation. As WeChat is controlled and closely monitored by the government, the wide circulation of the above post and its variations on the social media platform would never have been possible without official endorsement or promotion. In March, without offering any evidence, the chief public health expert in China's national leadership against the epidemic, Zhong Nanshan, declared that "the first occurrence of Covid-19 in Wuhan does not mean it originated in Wuhan." Reported by Xinhua News (2018), this bold claim has been frequently cited as a scientific statement in the Chinese mass media and social media, receiving only scant criticism.

The theory of the U.S. origins of the virus serves a crucial role in a large-scale propaganda campaign aiming to define and reshape the metanarratives on the role of China in the world. According to the official discourse, due to the "strong leadership" of the Party-government

and the "huge sacrifice" made by Chinese people, China has achieved "great success" in containing COVID-19. Such success becomes even more remarkable when compared to the inept response of most Western countries, particularly the United States. Above all, China's success "evidently" shows the superiority and global applicability of China's authoritarian response to COVID-19 as well as the Chinese political system (China's State Council Information Office [2020](#)).

While the conspiracy theory is mostly targeted at Chinese, official attempts were made to advance it in the international community. In one case, utilizing Twitter (which is banned in China), Zhao Lijian, spokesperson and deputy director of the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stated: "It might be the US army personnel which brought the epidemic to Wuhan." Such official remarks caused a crisis in China-U.S. relations (Myers [2020](#)). A contextual factor is the Party-government's return to the Maoist totalitarian style of ruling in recent years, such as advancing the "philosophy of struggle" in foreign affairs and "wolf warrior diplomacy."

On the United States side, President Trump and members of his administration have called the virus "the China virus" on numerous occasions. The broader settings of the China-U.S. "fights" on the origins of COVID-19 lies in the rapidly deteriorating relations and even the looming "New Cold War" or "Cold War II" between the two nations, one existing superpower versus an emerging one.

[Go to:](#)

The Historical Context: The BW Episodes during the Mid-Twentieth Century

How should bioethics respond to the conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID-19 or, more generally, the pandemic of disinformation and misinformation in the post-truth age? At least two tasks are involved: 1) to detect and address legitimate concerns—and differentiate them from groundless claims, and 2) to identify the sociopolitical and historical context in which certain conspiracy theories have thrived.

History often haunts the present in both predictable and unexpected ways. The wide spread of the two conspiracy theories presented above reflects a series of longstanding and damaging trends in the international scene which include deep mistrust, mutual animosities, the power of ideologies such as nationalism, and the sacrifice of truth in propaganda campaigns for political purposes. Identical or very similar political themes and ideological forces were manifested in the main episodes of BW in the mid-twentieth century.

China is so far the only nation whose people have suffered BW attacks. Prior to and during the Second World War, the Japanese Army established highly secret but extensive programmes of bacteriological warfare throughout China. The "secret of the secrets" in these "factories of death," such as the now-infamous Unit 731, was the barbaric experiments conducted by Japanese doctors and scientists upon thousands of living human beings, mostly Chinese nationals. In addition, biological weapons were deployed against both military and civilian targets in at least a dozen "large-scale field tests" throughout China. Hundreds of thousands of civilians died or suffered horribly from these human-made plagues (e.g. Harris [2002](#); Nie et al. [2009](#), [2010](#); Yang and Tam [2018](#)).

After the Second World War, and with the (first) Cold War looming, the U.S. authorities made a secret deal with Japanese perpetrators, granting them immunity from war crimes prosecution. The purpose was to monopolize the scientific data gained through inhuman human experimentation so as to advance the United States' own BW programme (Harris [2002](#); Moreno [2001](#); Nie et al. [2010](#); Brody et al. [2014](#)). While the Soviet Union tried to publicize internationally the overwhelming evidence from the Khabarovsk trial in the late 1940s, the public in the West was ignorant of Japan's BW crimes until the late 1980s or 1990s mainly because the U.S. authorities dismissed the trial as a "communist propaganda" (Nie [2004](#)). For the sake or in the name of national interest and national security, the U.S. government trampled justice and morality underfoot and engaged in what the English common law tradition defines as "complicity after the fact." The U.S. government has never issued a public statement on its cover-up of Japan's wartime medical atrocities, let alone a public apology (Nie [2006](#); Devolder [2015](#)).

China-U.S. conflict intensified during the Korean War (1950-1953). China, North Korea, and the Soviet Union accused the United States of Nie et al. [2009](#), [2010](#) employing bacteriological weapons against both military and civilian targets in Korea and China. An International Scientific Commission ([1952](#)) led by Joseph Needham—a prominent biologist in the United Kingdom who later became arguably the most influential China scholar in the West—confirmed the allegations. The United States denied the allegations. Because the commission's work was under the control of the North Korean and Chinese governments, the United States demanded more impartial investigations. The International Red Cross and the World Health Organization offered to convene a special commission, a move which was rejected by China and North Korea as a disguised attempt at espionage. A resolution on the matter was submitted to the United Nations by the United States and fifteen other countries but was blocked by the Soviet Union (Lederberg [1999](#)).

The world may never know the truth about the issue of BW in the Korean War. Historians are still heatedly debating the subject. On one side of the debate, through examining declassified U.S., Canadian, and British documents, as well as materials in the Chinese Central Archives, Canadian scholars have presented strong evidence in support of the allegations (Endicott and Hagerman [1998](#)). On the other side, research based on recently obtained memoirs of Chinese personnel involved and declassified documents from the Soviet Union has led to the conclusion that the allegations were "false, a grand piece of political theatre" (Leitenberg [2016](#)).

Now, one wonders whether the world will never know the truth on the origins of SARS-Cov-2. It is very likely that this will be an issue for future historians to debate.

[Go to:](#)

Enhancing Global Governance of Biosafety and Biosecurity: A Matter of Urgency

More robust global governance of biosafety and biosecurity is long overdue. Such a governance should include these three key areas: 1) a more effective ban on offensive BW programmes, 2) much improved prevention and preparation for bioterrorism, and 3) more transparent

and routine surveillance of biological research labs (particularly P4 and P3 labs) in which scientists investigate the most dangerous pathogens such as the Ebola virus and the coronavirus.

In response to the horrors of the First World War, including the use of chemical weapons, the 1925 Geneva Protocol was created to ban the use of biological and chemical weapons. More significantly, the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) began taking signatures in 1972 and entered into force in 1975. Signed by most countries, it established an international milieu opposed to all forms of BW. However, as is widely recognized, the BWC, like many other international declarations and agreements, lacks compliance monitoring and verification mechanisms so that it is far from effective in controlling biological armament (see, e.g., Lederberg 1999; Guillemin 2005; Sims 2009).

From the mid-twentieth century, world powers including Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Soviet Union as well as other countries like Canada and South Africa have formulated clandestine, state-sponsored schemes to harvest new knowledge in bacteriology and virology with the aim of devising and manufacturing biological weapons (see, e.g., Alibek and Handelman 1999; Mangold and Goldberg 1999; Harris and Paxman 2002; Miller et al. 2002; Guillemin 2005; Wheelis et al. 2006). Compared to nuclear bombs—the ultimate weapon of the twentieth century—which changed history forever, so far BW has not proved highly effective. Nevertheless, as a result of some remarkable discoveries and innovative tools in biology in recent decades, biological agents have the potential to become the ultimate weapon of the twenty-first century.

Biological weapons are “unfortunately characterized by low visibility, high potency, substantial accessibility, and relatively easy delivery” (Lederberg 1999, 9; see also Preston 2002). This can make them very tempting choices for not only states but terrorist groups or even individual terrorists. However, neither the international community nor any individual country is well prepared for bioterrorism.

Safety issues of high-level biocontainment labs have long been raised. For instance, in August 2019, the U.S. government shut down its Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases in Fort Detrick due to safety concerns. The institute has been regarded as the top BW-related research programme in the world (where the data of Japanese wartime human experimentation are stored). While no detailed information was given for the “national security” reason, the government determined that deadly germs and toxins would have “the potential to pose a severe threat to public, animal or plant health or to animal or plant products” (Grady 2019, 18). (In China, because the shutdown occurred just a few months before the initial outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan, this event has been treated as a piece of “strong evidence” for the theory on the U.S. origins of the novel coronavirus.) Almost two decades earlier, a microbiologist employed by the U.S. army institute had been a leading suspect, albeit never charged, for the anthrax mailings in 2001—bioterrorist attacks—that killed five people (ibid.).

Infections and even small-scale outbreaks associated with the escape of pathogens have already occurred in other labs as well. In China, for example, after the SARS epidemic in 2003, there was a small-scale outbreak in Anhui Province in 2004. A joint investigation by the Ministry of Health and the World Health Organization linked it to problems of biosafety management in a lab where the SARS virus was being researched (China Central Television 2004). Quite a few other accidents related to other biological labs have happened in other places in China in the past decades (Field 2020). While great progress in regulations and management of biosafety has been made in China in recent years (Yuan 2019), so far no evidence from independent investigation is available to assure the world that SARS-Cov-2 was totally disconnected to the relatively new PSL-4 lab in Wuhan.

It is, therefore, absolutely necessary and urgent that the international community takes coordinated actions to prevent any human-made pandemic. However there is no international organization, in the United Nations system or elsewhere, charged with overseeing biosafety and biosecurity at the global level (The Economist 2020).

Unfortunately, “Cold War II” is approaching, one between China and the United States, with willing and compelled allies on each side. Nationalist trends and other developments in global politics threaten international cooperation in the global governance of biosafety. Nevertheless, ironically, it is precisely because of these detrimental political and ideological forces that a higher form of global governance of biosafety and biosecurity is an urgent imperative.

[Go to](#)

An Ethical Framework for the Common Good of Humanity

Enhancing global oversight of biosafety and biosecurity needs new ethical visions. Any new structure must move beyond the sweeping ideologies like nationalism and the current practices dominated by secrecy, mistrust, and animosities. Here, an ethical framework is proposed, a framework that underlines the triple ethical values of transparency, trust, and trustworthiness, and the common good of humanity.

Secrecy is a salient and common feature in the history of state-sponsored BW programmes since the mid-twentieth century. But, as widely recognized, transparency and openness are essential for public health and any ethical global governance. The ethical justifications for transparency include not only people’s rights to know the truth but also the social utility it promotes. Furthermore, transparency nourishes and sustains trust. Transparency and openness may appear to cause distrust, especially when betray of trust is disclosed. But, although secrecy may result in a kind of false trust temporarily, it can seriously undermine or destroy trust in the long run.

While being a marginal topic in global bioethics, trust constitutes an essential but extremely fragile good for interpersonal relationships, social life, and global governance. The popularity of conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID-19 shows how badly lacking trust has been in the transnational settings today. Meanwhile, well-coordinated global responses to COVID-19 or the serious lack of them shows how indispensable trust is for containing the pandemic, indeed, for any global public health effort. A higher level of global governance of biosafety must be built upon trust and should aim to promote mutual trust too. Furthermore, trust can never be forced, but has to be won. The real question is thus not so much trust per se, but how to achieve trustworthiness.

In 1902, William Osler, one of the greatest physicians of modern times, delivered an address on "Chauvinism in Medicine" to the Canadian Medical Association. For Osler, chauvinism and nationalism constitutes a vicious human sin, "the great curse of humanity." He lamented that humans, physicians included, have subordinated themselves to the nation, "forgetting the higher claims of human brotherhood." Yet, he was optimistic that, due to "the liberal and friendly relationship between different nations," "the worst aspects of nationalism in medicine are disappearing." Having witnessed massive violence sanctioned by states and supported by science in the past century, we can never be as optimistic as Osler. Nevertheless, now more than ever, we need to keep upon his general universalistic moral spirit.

Long before Osler, traditional Chinese medical ethics has advocated the principle of *yi nai renshu* (medicine as the art of humanity). It offers a counter thesis to the exaltation of nationalism in medicine and science in the modern world. It is founded upon the fundamental Confucian universalist ideal of *ren* (humaneness, universal love, humanity) as well as the Confucian moral sentiment of "all people under heaven" as brothers and sisters, an ancient Eastern version of internationalism. The old Chinese designation of medicine as a means for the great Tao (Way) and as the art of humanity defines the primary goal of medicine and science not as glorifying any particular nation-state but serving the common welfare of humanity. In the age of COVID-19, to revive such an age-old Chinese ethical vision can be vital for the cause of enhancing the global oversight of biosafety and biosecurity.

[Go to:](#)

Conclusion

Chinese wisdom advises that one should push aside groundless worries—like the foolish man from the state of Qi in the ancient fable who worried constantly about what he would do if the sky fell down (hence the saying *Qi ren youtian*—the man of Qi fears the sky falling). At the same time, this ancient wisdom tradition also encourages us to take sensible measures to prevent possible future disaster (as in the idiom *wangyang bulao*—it is not too late to mend the fold even after the sheep has been lost). While conspiracy theories on the origins of COVID-19 are scientifically groundless, the fear behind them is not. For the sake of the common good of humanity, developing a much more robust global governance of biosafety and biosecurity than exists at present is an urgent imperative for the international community.

[Go to:](#)

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[Go to:](#)

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~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

Sender: "Feith, David" (b)(6) @state.gov>

Recipient: Kanapathy, Ivan (b)(6)

From: "Stilwell, David R" <(b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Feith, David <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: FW: WIV Document Declass
Date: Tue, 19 Jan 2021 17:23:59 +0000

Just getting to this; here's Beigun's take. To his great credit he accepted our position and let it go.

From: Biegun, Stephen E <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, January 14, 2021 11:00 PM
To: Stilwell, David R <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: Palladino, Robert J <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: WIV Document Declass

OK. Maybe the problem is that this statement is trying too hard. This is what is getting tangled up with the IC, with HHS, and even within our own building. Have you considered a simple demand for access and answers rather than an enumeration of various issues and insinuations that attempts to make the case in such a complicated manner that it is easy to undermine? Shorter, simpler and more to the point should be more effective.

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 14, 2021, at 8:59 PM, Stilwell, David R <(b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:

Sir

Thank you for your consideration and apologies for adding to the last-minute close-out thrash. We had this ready before Christmas, but it keeps getting pushed.

After POTUS and then S statements on WIV origins in April were savaged by the media, we're very sensitive to the question of credibility. The intent is to provide enough information to pre-empt a Chinese Potemkin Circus by establishing that no investigation will be complete without access to the WIV--Beijing will not allow the team access in the current WHO agreement. That narrative is already growing in the media; story below is one of three in the last two weeks. No need to read the whole thing, but the excerpt at the top is of interest.

Since Beijing controls access, it's impossible to say for sure what happened. But there's no reason why it should have been left off the agenda. The statement does not seek to prove it was the WIV—the goal is to make clear that any investigation that does not include the most obvious possible origin of the outbreak would be incomplete. The ultimate goal is to prevent this from ever happening again.

Best
Dave

Among scientists, suspicions about the WIV have been ongoing since January—this article lays out the sequence well. It also paints a disturbing picture of supposedly objective scientists actively supporting a theory they know is false:

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.”

This researcher, Alina Chan, was too young and too idealistic to be cowed by the scientific apparatus—her persistence helped change the narrative in the scientific world. Dr Peter Dazsak (that name keeps coming up) tried to undermine her research, but she held her ground and he eventually had to concede.

Our task isn’t to sit in judgment of Fauci or Dazsak or the Virology world. It’s to get them to admit that the WIV was the most likely cause of the pandemic. This article suggests the following outcome:

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.

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.

PRINT

Get a compelling long read and must-have lifestyle tips in your inbox every Sunday morning — great with coffee!

<image001.jpg>

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.

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.”

<image002.jpg>

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 Twitterverse, 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: Biegun, Stephen E (b)(6) @state.gov>
Sent: Thursday, January 14, 2021 8:24 PM
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6) @state.gov>
Cc: Palladino, Robert J (b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: Re: WIV Document Declass

I brought the latest draft home and will try to complete my read through once I am done with my Korea and Japan calls tonight — or by tomorrow morning at the latest.

During the course of my work on COVID-19 since January, I have had numerous opportunities to review the intelligence and also to discuss this very question with both Dr. Fauci and Dr. Redfield, head of the CDC. Well there is much that we still do not know about this virus, our leading medical experts were quite definitive in conversations with me as late as June that they simply could not draw any solid conclusions as to the origin of this virus.

After this statement was drafted, I took calls this week expressing deep concerns from counterparts at DNI and HHS, — and I received a lengthy memcon from the former acting T with a very contrarian view.

I agree with your objective, and I think the the concerns I heard were that early drafts miscast this as if it were an intelligence assessment, called out actions that we ourselves are doing, and demanded access that we would never ourselves provide. I asked my DNI and HHS counterparts to look again at the statement today and they got back to me late today. That is what I need to review once more.

The worst outcome is that we issue a statement that is impeached by anonymous press leaks and expert analysts. I see every indication that this outcome is likely.

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 14, 2021, at 7:30 PM, Stilwell, David R <(b)(6)>@state.gov> wrote:

Secretary Biegun

S briefed his SEYES counterparts on the declassified information no 4 Jan, and announced that he would release a statement in the near future. The partners were interested and at least one has made a public statement of their own encouraging China to give the WHO Investigation Team full access. The Team landed today and has generated media chatter as to whether they'll get access. Anything we can do to keep pressure on China to cooperate would be good.

We'd like to release the statement tomorrow morning if at all possible, while the subject is still warm.

V/R

Dave

DAVID R. STILWELL

Assistant Secretary, East Asia Pacific

(b)(6)

<mime-attachment>

Sender: "Stilwell, David R" <(b)(6)>@state.gov>

Recipient: Feith, David <(b)(6)>@state.gov>

From: "Feith, David"

To: Bremberg, Andrew P (Geneva) (b)(6)@state.gov>

Subject: FW: Wuhan statement

Date: Wed, 13 Jan 2021 15:05:56 +0000

Thanks as ever. Drafts language here/attached. Yellow text is IC-coordinated. NODIS, please.

(b)(5)

Withheld pursuant to exemption

(b)(5)

(b)(5)

Sender: "Feith, David"

Recipient: Bremberg, Andrew P (Geneva) (b)(6) @state.gov>

From: ANDREEA PAULOPOL (b)(6)
To: PAULOPOL @ STATE (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin
Date: Thu, 21 Jan 2021 09:31:36 -0500

Sent from my iPhone

Begin forwarded message:

From: "U.S. Department of State" <usstatebpa@public.govdelivery.com>
Date: January 15, 2021 at 7:38:06 PM EST
To: (b)(6)
Subject: Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin
Reply-To: usstatebpa@public.govdelivery.com

You are subscribed to East Asia and the Pacific for U.S. Department of State. This information has recently been updated, and is now available.

Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin

01/15/2021 07:23 PM EST

Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State

The United States has repeatedly called for a transparent and thorough investigation into the origin of COVID-19. Understanding the origin of this pandemic is essential for global public health, economic recovery, and international security.

To assist the vital work of the World Health Organization (WHO) investigative team that arrived in China this week, the United States government is today sharing new information concerning the activities inside China's government laboratories in 2019.

In particular, we urge the WHO to press the government of China to address the following:

- 1. Illnesses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV):** The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was "zero infection" among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.
- 2. WIV Research on "RaTG13" and "gain of function":** Starting in at least 2016, WIV researchers studied RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as

its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible "gain of function" experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality.

- 3. Secret WIV Links to Military Research:** Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.

The COVID-19 pandemic was avoidable. Any responsible country would have invited world health investigators to Wuhan within days of an outbreak. China instead refused offers of help – including from the United States – and punished brave Chinese doctors, scientists, and journalists who tried to alert the world to the dangers of the virus. Beijing continues today to withhold vital information that scientists need to protect the world from this deadly virus, and the next one.

The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report. Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world.

Fact Sheet: Activity at the Wuhan Institute of Virology

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Sender: ANDREEA PAULOPOL (b)(6)@aol.com>
Recipient: PAULOPOL (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: "David Asher" (b)(5)@hudson.org>
To: Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: Christopher Yeaw (b)(5)@nsri.nebraskaresearch.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: Gain of function
Date: Thu, 3 Dec 2020 15:55:17 +0000

This is one of the questions we should ask the all knowing IC....See the debate on GOF in the Lancet. You can find many other debates. And, to be clear, GOF was banned for several years, not just put on temporary hold.

David L. Asher, Ph.D
Senior Fellow
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Washington, DC 20004
o. | c. (b)(6)
<https://www.hudson.org/experts/1299-david-asher>

Begin forwarded message:

From: David Asher (b)(5)@hudson.org>
Date: December 3, 2020 at 05:08:08 EST
To: (b)(6)@state.gov
Subject: Gain of function

Chris,

It is interesting that Chris Park quoted Dr. Andersen regarding the natural and apparently "obvious" zoonotic origin or COVID-19—an increasingly debatable conclusion, including based on the presentation I provided. His colleague then defended the proposition that gain of function research is commonplace—included into pathogens. It is precisely this gain of function research that of all people, Dr. Andersen personally trashed in Nature in 2018 (see below). Does this everyday GOF research include work on super biological pathogens like COV 19—several generations ahead of what nature could produce, based on history? What is State's official policy on supporting gain of function research into pathogens with super spreader characteristics like COV 19? Did we actually help support the WIV? I doubt it but recommend that you take steps to separate from funding any such activities or exchanges for the foreseeable future.

Sorry to drop names and places yesterday but I actually have a bit of on the ground experience with several of the most suspect entities in China and elsewhere. Current suspicions of BW are hardly new, as you know full well.

Best regards,

David

<https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S1473-3099%2818%2930006-9>

Below: Nature commentary pointing out the futility, waste, and opportunity costs associated projects pursued by Ecohealth, WIV, NIAID, et al, in the name of “predicting the next outbreak”. Though they don’t address the grave hazards, and BW dual use issues, involved with the gain of function work in WIV’s prediction research, they laid out other important fundamental flaws with Ecohealth and WIV’s approach. The authors go on to make the more compelling case for better bio surveillance instead. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-05373-w>

COMMENT

07 JUNE 2018

Pandemics: spend on surveillance, not prediction

Trust is undermined when scientists make overblown promises about disease prevention, warn Edward C. Holmes, Andrew Rambaut and Kri(stian G. Andersen.

The resurgence of Ebola virus in the Democratic Republic of the Congo this May is a stark reminder that no amount of DNA sequencing can tell us when or where the next virus outbreak will appear. More genome sequence data were obtained for the 2013–16 Ebola epidemic than for any other single disease outbreak. Still, health workers in Mbandaka, the country’s northwestern provincial capital, are scrambling to contain a growing number of cases.

Over the past 15 years or so, outbreaks caused by viruses such as Ebola, SARS and Zika have cost governments billions of US dollars. Combined with a perception among scientists, health workers and citizens that responses to outbreaks have been inadequate, this has fuelled what seems like a compelling idea. Namely, that if researchers can identify the next pandemic virus before the first case appears, communities could drastically improve strategies for control, and even stop a virus from taking hold^{1,2}. Indeed, since 2009, the US Agency for International Development has spent US\$170 million on evaluating the “feasibility of preemptively mitigating pandemic threats”¹.

Various experts have flagged up problems with this approach (including the three of us)^{3,4}. Nonetheless, an ambitious biodiversity-based approach to outbreak prediction — the Global Virome Project — was announced in February this year, with its proponents soliciting \$1.2 billion in funding from around the world (see ‘High stakes’). They estimate that other mammals and birds contain 1.67 million unknown viruses from the families of viruses that are most likely to jump to humans, and will use the funding to conduct a genomic survey of these unknown viruses, with the aim of predicting which might infect people¹.

Sources: NIH; Global Virome Project

Broad genomic surveys of animal viruses will almost certainly advance our understanding of virus diversity and evolution. **In our view, they will be of little practical value when it comes to understanding and mitigating the emergence of disease.**

We urge those working on infectious disease to focus funds and efforts on a much simpler and more cost-effective way to mitigate outbreaks — proactive, real-time surveillance of human populations.

The public has increasingly questioned the scientific credibility of researchers working on outbreaks. In the 2013–16 Ebola epidemic, for instance, the international response was repeatedly criticized for being too slow. And during the 2009 H1N1 influenza epidemic, people asked whether the severity of the virus had been overblown, and if the stockpiling of pharmaceuticals was even necessary⁵. Making promises

about disease prevention and control that cannot be kept will only further undermine trust.

Forecasting fallacy

Supporters of outbreak prediction maintain that if biologists genetically characterize all of the viruses circulating in animal populations (especially in groups such as bats and rodents that have previously acted as reservoirs for emerging viruses), they can determine which ones are likely to emerge next, and ultimately prevent them from doing so. With enough data, coupled with artificial intelligence and machine learning, they argue, the process could be similar to predicting the weather⁶.

Reams of data are available to train models to predict the weather. By contrast, it is exceedingly rare for viruses to emerge and cause outbreaks. Around 250 human viruses have been described, and only a small subset of these have caused major epidemics this century.

Advocates of prediction also argue that it will be possible to anticipate how likely a virus is to emerge in people on the basis of its sequence, and by using knowledge of how it interacts with cells (obtained, for instance, by studying the virus in human cell cultures).

This is misguided. Determining which of more than 1.6 million animal viruses are capable of replicating in humans and transmitting between them would require many decades' worth of laboratory work in cell cultures and animals. Even if researchers managed to link each virus genome sequence to substantial experimental data, all sorts of other factors determine whether a virus jumps species and emerges in a human population, such as the distribution and density of animal hosts.

Influenza viruses have circulated in horses since the 1950s and in dogs since the early 2000s, for instance⁷. These viruses have not emerged in human populations, and perhaps never will — for unknown reasons.

In short, there aren't enough data on virus outbreaks for researchers to be able to accurately predict the next outbreak strain. Nor is there a good enough understanding of what drives viruses to jump hosts, making it difficult to construct predictive models.

Biodiversity-based prediction also ignores the fact that viruses are not fixed entities. New variants of RNA viruses appear every day. This

speedy evolution means that surveys would need to be done continuously to be informative. The cost would dwarf the proposed \$1.2-billion budget for one-time sequencing.

Even if it were possible to identify which viruses are likely to emerge in humans, thousands of candidates could end up being identified, each with a low probability of causing an outbreak. What should be done in that case? Costs would skyrocket if vaccines and therapeutics were proposed for even a handful of these.

Screen and sequence

Currently, the most effective and realistic way to fight outbreaks is to monitor human populations in the countries and locations that are most vulnerable to infectious disease. This can be done by local clinicians, health workers in non-governmental organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF; also known as Doctors Without Borders), and global institutions such as the World Health Organization (WHO).

We advocate the detailed screening of people who are exhibiting symptoms that cannot easily be diagnosed. Such tests should use the latest sequencing technologies to characterize all the pathogens that have infected an individual — the human ‘infectome’⁸. To track previous infections, investigators should also assess each person’s immune response, by analysing components of their blood using broad-scale serology⁹.

Emerging diseases are commonly associated with population expansions — when people encroach on habitats occupied by animals — as well as with environmental disturbances and climate change. Deforestation, for instance, can promote human interactions with animals that carry new threats, and can increase encounters with new vector species such as ticks and mosquitoes¹⁰. Animal die-offs, for example that of bar-headed geese (*Anser indicus*) at Lake Qinghai in China in 2005 (which was caused by the H5N1 influenza virus), can also flag problem regions or emerging pathogens. Surveillance efforts should therefore focus on communities that live and work in such environments.

Identifying which pathogen is causing an outbreak is no longer the bottleneck it once was. It took researchers two years to determine HIV as the cause of AIDS in the early 1980s using microscopy and other

techniques. By contrast, in 2012 it took only weeks for investigators using genomic technologies to discover the coronavirus that caused Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS).

Rapid identification of viruses can be achieved only if such technologies — and the people trained to use them — are globally available, including in resource-limited regions where the risk of outbreaks might be higher. Thankfully, relevant capacity-building programmes are now beginning to be established, such as the Human Heredity and Health in Africa (H3Africa) Initiative, run by the UK Wellcome Trust and the US National Institutes of Health¹¹.

Once an emerging outbreak virus has been identified, it needs to be analysed quickly to establish what type it is; which molecular mechanisms (such as receptor type) enable it to jump between individuals; how it spreads through human populations; and how it affects those infected. In other words, at least four kinds of analysis are needed: genomic, virological, epidemiological and clinical. And the data must be passed to key stakeholders, from researchers and health workers on the ground to international agencies such as the WHO and the MSF. Data must be kept as free of restrictions as possible, within the constraints of protections of patient privacy and other ethical issues. This will best be achieved through an established global network of highly trained local researchers, such as the WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN). Real-time tools for reconstructing and tracking outbreaks at the genomic level, such as portable sequencing devices, are improving fast⁸. Information gathered during recent outbreaks has quickly had tangible impacts on public-health decisions, largely owing to data generation and analysis by many research teams within days of people being infected¹².

For instance, in the 2013–16 Ebola epidemic, genome sequencing of the virus proved that a person could sexually transmit the disease more than a year after becoming infected. This prompted the WHO to increase its recommended number of tests for persistent infection in survivors of the disease.

Ultimately, the challenge is to link genomic, clinical and epidemiological data within days of an outbreak being detected,

including information about how people in an affected community are interacting. Such an open, collaborative approach to tackling the emergence of infectious disease is now possible. This is partly thanks to technology, but is mainly due to a shift in perception about the importance of this approach. At least in genomic epidemiology, there is a growing move towards real-time, open-access data and analysis, aided by the use of preprint servers and wikis such as Virological (<http://virological.org>). This type of collaborative effort can complement the work of agencies including the WHO and the MSF, which focus predominantly on providing information, isolating those who have been infected, and so on.

So far, researchers have sampled little of the viral universe. Surveys of animals will undoubtedly result in the discovery of many thousands of new viruses. These data will benefit studies of diversity and evolution, and could tell us whether and why some pathogens might jump species boundaries more frequently than others. But, given the rarity of outbreaks and the complexity of host–pathogen interactions, it is arrogant to imagine that we could use such surveys to predict and mitigate the emergence of disease.

New viruses will continue to emerge unexpectedly. There is a lot we can and must do to be better prepared.

Nature **558**, 180-182 (2018)

doi: <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-05373-w>

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<https://www.hudson.org/experts/1299-david-asher>

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Rethinking Gain-of-Function Experiments in the Context of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT Proponents of the use of gain-of-function (GOF) experiments with pathogens with pandemic potential (PPP) have argued that such experiments are necessary because they reveal important facets of pathogenesis and can be performed safely. Opponents of GOF experiments with PPP have argued that the risks outweigh the knowledge gained. The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the vulnerability of human societies to a new PPP, while also validating some arguments of both camps, questioning others, and suggesting the need to rethink how we approach this class of experiments.

KEYWORDS biosafety, bioterrorism, policy

At the turn of the 21st century, scientists and public health officials were concerned about a possible pandemic, with the greatest worry being the emergence of a highly pathogenic avian influenza virus. A number of human cases of infection with an avian influenza virus H5N1 strain had been reported in China, all of which appeared to be the result of direct contact between birds and people. The major reason for concern was that the mortality rate of those infected was extremely high, approximately 60%. However, those H5N1 viruses could not spread from person to person. Thus, if the H5N1 virus acquired the ability to transmit from human to human, the potential consequences could have been disastrous.

Two laboratories, the Kawaoka laboratory at the University of Wisconsin in the United States and the Fouchier laboratory at Erasmus Medical Center in the Netherlands, decided to test experimentally whether this H5N1 virus could evolve to transmit in such a way, using the well-established ferret model for transmission. Both laboratories, using different approaches, were able to isolate viruses that could spread via aerosols from one ferret to another (1, 2).

Their attempts to publish their results initiated a major debate about so-called gain-of-function (GOF) experiments with pathogens that have pandemic potential. Here, the GOF was the ability to spread from one mammalian host to another. The history of this debate has been described and analyzed extensively by us and others, and will not be repeated here (3, 4). What is relevant in 2020, however, is that one of the major concerns raised about these experiments has been that if there were an accidental release of a highly transmissible, highly pathogenic pathogen from a laboratory, it could spread very rapidly and cause significant morbidity and mortality. One analysis predicted an extremely high level of spread while another, from one of the laboratories involved in this research, reached a very different conclusion (5–7).

The arguments of that debate are relevant during the current COVID-19 pandemic because the spread of SARS-CoV-2 has uncovered a significant gap in global preparedness to handle a pathogen of this type, be it natural or laboratory derived. Most experts who have been studying and discussing preparedness agree that the source of the pathogen does not significantly change the nature of the response. Does this deficiency

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in handling the COVID-19 pandemic change how we as a research community should think about these GOF experiments? Our answer is yes, as follows.

We preface this discussion with the key point that we are not concerned with the notion of gain-of-function experiments writ large: many experiments in many biological systems confer an additional function on a gene or a protein or an organism. Rather, we are specifically talking about experiments involving pandemic pathogens, the experiments to which we refer with the uppercase GOF moniker.

We have argued previously that GOF experiments are sometimes the only way to address important questions about the biology of a pathogen (8). In the H5N1 situation, public health officials, including from the WHO, made the argument that it was critical to know whether this influenza virus could acquire a human-to-human transmission trait. We have therefore proposed an important criterion for proceeding with such experiments, namely, that there be a compelling medical reason to do so (4). That has not changed: one should not be performing GOF experiments simply to "see what would happen" without strong evidence that it could happen naturally. In other words, just because an experiment can be done does not mean that it should be done. We also argued that it is incumbent upon the scientific community to perform these experiments using strict biocontainment infrastructure and procedures, and we even admonished the community a few years ago after a rash of accidents with less pathogenic organisms (9).

In recent months, the argument was raised that SARS-CoV-2 may have accidentally escaped from a high-containment laboratory in Wuhan, China (10). At this time, the scientific consensus is that the virus emerged as a zoonosis whereby it jumped from an animal host, possibly bats or pangolins, to humans (11), and arguments about a laboratory origin for SARS-CoV-2 are more akin to a conspiracy theory than to a scientifically credible hypothesis. In the very unlikely event that SARS-CoV-2 had emerged by accidental escape from a lab, however, that would be a great cause for concern because the Wuhan facility was state of the art and presumably operating with a high degree of care.

Regardless of how SARS-CoV-2 found its way into humans, what is certain is that the world's governments were caught off guard about how to respond. The ubiquitous ability of people to travel around the globe allowed the virus to spread rapidly before we knew what hit us, and even once we became aware, many countries reacted either too late or in arguably inappropriate ways, leading to many thousands of avoidable deaths.

Taking all of this into consideration, we posit three solutions moving forward. First, we reinforce our call for transparent review of all GOF experiments prior to their being commenced, to ensure that they are indeed addressing medically important questions and that GOF is the best way to obtain the answers. These discussions must be public, and decisions cannot be made behind closed doors, as it appears was the case for decisions late last year by the NIH to allow new GOF experiments on H5N1 to resume (12). A lack of openness only breeds distrust and suspicion and, if something untoward were to occur, might result in a draconian response that could have far-reaching implications for the future of all research involving pathogens.

Second, we call once again for a rededication of effort and attention to biosafety. All laboratories that carry out experiments on highly pathogenic organisms should be required to adhere to a common set of protocols and procedures, including appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE). Again, in the interest of transparency, the results of regular inspections should be made publicly available. Some may argue that following these first two recommendations might require disclosure of proprietary information, such as what is found in an application for funding from the NIH or any other agency. However, we would argue that the stakes here are high enough that some form of transparency is necessary. Most importantly, laboratories must institute strict screening measures for their workers that regularly evaluate exposure, and protocols must be in place to ensure that exposed workers do not transmit to others.

Our third solution requires a concerted effort, in the United States and worldwide, to enhance our capability to mitigate the risks posed by GOF experiments. This must be part of a broader effort to be prepared for biosecurity threats and future zoonotic threats from nature. With respect to the former, it is concerning to us that a bad actor may see the way COVID-19 has been (mis)handled as evidence that a bioweapon can be used to inflict a great degree of damage. We must have strong mitigation efforts in place, starting with the ability to detect and prevent planned attacks. Similarly, we must have a strong surveillance program that watches for zoonotic events. Such a program will require goodwill and cooperation with other countries and the WHO.

It is also essential that we develop better ways to respond to any future events. For any transmissible disease, first and foremost one would like to have a containment process in place that uses surveillance, testing, isolation, and contact tracing to prevent spread. The utility of this approach was evident and successful during the first SARS outbreak in 2003. That success has been more difficult (or, some might argue, impossible) to achieve with SARS-CoV-2 because this virus is highly contagious and can be spread prior to the appearance of symptoms. Despite this, some countries have been able to achieve an equivalent outcome by quickly locking down while the number of confirmed cases was very low (e.g., New Zealand) or extensive testing coupled with use of big data (e.g., South Korea).

Another important part of the response is the ability to test and produce therapeutics and vaccines. The global efforts to do this for COVID-19 have been extensive and impressive. Drugs that have already been approved for other indications are being tested for their ability to treat the disease: if one is efficacious, it would save a significant amount of time obtaining regulatory approval. Dozens of vaccine candidates are in development, including tried-and-true approaches such as inactivated and subunit vaccines, and new technologies such as adenovirus and RNA platforms. One of us has helped to organize an effort to use convalescent-phase serum, which contains antibodies that neutralize the virus (13).

One way to bolster these efforts would be to create a civilian equivalent of the U.S. military reserve system. The members of this reserve force could be drawn from various communities including scientists, public health experts, health care workers, ethicists, and anyone with an interest in serving society when there is a future infectious disease crisis. Like military reservists, they could dedicate time each year to train for responding as necessary and be deployed to assist federal, state, and local authorities with the numerous tasks required to contain an outbreak.

So, almost a decade after the great GOF debate of 2011 to 2012, the COVID-19 pandemic has shown that the arguments from both sides had merit. The anti-GOF camp's central argument that these experiments were too dangerous to conduct because humanity was too vulnerable to a pandemic proved correct in the sense that the world was unprepared for COVID-19. On the other hand, the pro-GOF camp's central argument that these experiments were necessary because we needed information on mechanisms of virulence and transmission also proved correct as humanity faced a new coronavirus with scant knowledge of how it spread and caused disease. Going forward, we need the humility to recognize that both sides had important points and find ways to obtain the information that we need to know while minimizing risks.

Humans are always going to be faced with new infectious threats. We live in an interconnected world in which deadly pathogens with the right traits have the ability to spread very rapidly. As a society, we must invest in (i) basic research to understand the biology of these microorganisms and how they interact with their hosts; (ii) applied research to develop new diagnostics, therapeutics, and preventative measures; (iii) better training for individuals working with dangerous pathogens and guidelines for monitoring potential laboratory exposures; (iv) transparent review of proposed experiments for their benefits and risks; (v) public health capacity to monitor for potential new species jumps and outbreaks; and (vi) the ability to respond more rapidly and nimbly to events when they occur. A holistic approach such as this will provide the maximum benefits to society.

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Estimated cost of surveying 1.67 million animals in 2023 is equal to one-quarter of the NIAID's budget for infectious-diseases research.

8/26/2023



Requested amount for Global Virome Project

From: "Feith, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fwd: Re: Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin; Activity at the Wuhan Institute of Virology
Date: Sun, 17 Jan 2021 00:51:06 +0000

This is surprising. Did we know of these requests? Could they have gone to ISN?

--
David Feith
Deputy Assistant Secretary
Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs (EAP)
U.S. Department of State
(b)(6)
(b)(6)@state.gov

----- Forwarded message -----

From: Schiffer, Michael (Foreign Relations) (b)(6)@foreign.senate.gov>
Date: January 15, 2021 at 8:42:09 PM EST
Subject: Re: Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin; Activity at the Wuhan Institute of Virology
To: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

David,
We have been asking — and State has been refusing — to provide us a classified briefing for almost ten months now on COVID origins. My expectations given the release of this "fact sheet" is that you all are prepared brief, and back it up with factual evidence, on Monday morning.
Michael

Sent from my iPhone

On Jan 15, 2021, at 7:43 PM, Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov> wrote:

<https://www.state.gov/ensuring-a-transparent-thorough-investigation-of-covid-19s-origin/>

Ensuring a Transparent, Thorough Investigation of COVID-19's Origin
Michael R. Pompeo
January 15, 2021

The United States has repeatedly called for a transparent and thorough investigation into the origin of COVID-19. Understanding the origin of this pandemic is essential for global public health, economic recovery, and international security.

To assist the vital work of the World Health Organization (WHO) investigative team that arrived in China this week, the United States government is today sharing new information concerning the activities inside China's government laboratories in 2019.

In particular, we urge the WHO to press the government of China to address the following:

1. **Illnesses at the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV):** The United States government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was "zero infection" among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.
2. **WIV Research on "RaTG13" and "gain of function":** Starting in at least 2016, WIV researchers studied RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). Since the outbreak, the WIV has not been transparent nor consistent about its work with RaTG13 or other similar viruses, including possible "gain of function" experiments to enhance transmissibility or lethality.
3. **Secret WIV Links to Military Research:** Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.

The COVID-19 pandemic was avoidable. Any responsible country would have invited world health investigators to Wuhan within days of an outbreak. China instead refused offers of help – including from the United States – and punished brave Chinese doctors, scientists, and journalists who tried to alert the world to the dangers of the virus. Beijing continues today to withhold vital information that scientists need to protect the world from this deadly virus, and the next one.

The United States reiterates the importance of unfettered access to virus samples, lab records and personnel, eyewitnesses, and whistleblowers to ensure the credibility of the WHO's final report. Until the CCP allows a full and thorough accounting of what happened in Wuhan, it is only a matter of time until China births another pandemic and inflicts it on the Chinese people, and the world.

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<https://www.state.gov/fact-sheet-activity-at-the-wuhan-institute-of-virology/>

Fact Sheet: Activity at the Wuhan Institute of Virology
Office of the Spokesperson
January 15, 2021

For more than a year, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has systematically prevented a transparent and thorough investigation of the COVID-19 pandemic's origin, choosing instead to devote enormous resources to deceit and disinformation. Nearly two million people have died. Their families deserve to know the truth. Only through transparency can we learn what caused this pandemic and how to prevent the next one.

The U.S. government does not know exactly where, when, or how the COVID-19 virus—known as SARS-CoV-2—was transmitted initially to humans. We have not determined whether the outbreak began through contact with infected animals or was the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan, China.

The virus could have emerged naturally from human contact with infected animals, spreading in a pattern consistent with a natural epidemic. Alternatively, a laboratory accident could resemble a natural outbreak if the initial exposure included only a few individuals and was compounded by asymptomatic infection. Scientists in China have researched animal-derived coronaviruses under conditions that increased the risk for accidental and potentially unwitting exposure.

The CCP's deadly obsession with secrecy and control comes at the expense of public health in China and around the world. The previously undisclosed information in this fact sheet, combined with open-source reporting, highlights three elements about COVID-19's origin that deserve greater scrutiny:

1. Illnesses inside the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV):

- The U.S. government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli's public claim that there was "zero infection" among the WIV's staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.
- Accidental infections in labs have caused several previous virus outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing that infected nine people, killing one.
- The CCP has prevented independent journalists, investigators, and global health authorities from interviewing researchers at the WIV, including those who were ill in the fall of 2019. Any credible inquiry into the origin of the virus must include interviews with these researchers and a full accounting of their previously unreported illness.

2. Research at the WIV:

- Starting in at least 2016 – and with no indication of a stop prior to the COVID-19 outbreak – WIV researchers conducted experiments involving RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). The WIV became a focal point for international coronavirus research after the 2003 SARS outbreak and has since studied animals including mice, bats, and pangolins.
- The WIV has a published record of conducting “gain-of-function” research to engineer chimeric viruses. But the WIV has not been transparent or consistent about its record of studying viruses most similar to the COVID-19 virus, including “RaTG13,” which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners died of SARS-like illness.
- WHO investigators must have access to the records of the WIV’s work on bat and other coronaviruses before the COVID-19 outbreak. As part of a thorough inquiry, they must have a full accounting of why the WIV altered and then removed online records of its work with RaTG13 and other viruses.

3. Secret military activity at the WIV:

- Secrecy and non-disclosure are standard practice for Beijing. For many years the United States has publicly raised concerns about China’s past biological weapons work, which Beijing has neither documented nor demonstrably eliminated, despite its clear obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention.
- Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the United States has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China’s military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.
- The United States and other donors who funded or collaborated on civilian research at the WIV have a right and obligation to determine whether any of our research funding was diverted to secret Chinese military projects at the WIV.

Today’s revelations just scratch the surface of what is still hidden about COVID-19’s origin in China. Any credible investigation into the origin of COVID-19 demands complete, transparent access to the research labs in Wuhan, including their facilities, samples, personnel, and records.

As the world continues to battle this pandemic – and as WHO investigators begin their work, after more than a year of delays – the virus’s origin remains uncertain. The United States will continue to do everything it can to support a credible and thorough investigation, including by continuing to demand transparency on the part of Chinese authorities.

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David Feith

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From: "Asher, David" (b)(6) @state.gov>
To: Feith, David (b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: Just to encapsulate the BS were dealing with
Date: Tue, 15 Dec 2020 02:43:43 +0000

You deserve great credit for leadership. I'm retreating to Hudson and welcome you speaking up.

From: Asher, David (b)(6) @state.gov>

Sent: Monday, December 14, 2020 9:22 PM

To: (b)(6) @state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6) @state.gov> (b)(6)

(b)(6) @state.gov>; (b)(6) @state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G

(b)(6) @state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6) @state.gov>; Gross, Laura J

(b)(6) @state.gov>

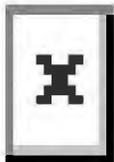
Cc: (b)(6) @state.gov>

Subject: Re: (b)(6) summary of post cables

These cables meticulously document a situation that was already out of control in January. I'm reading February now. Why hasn't any of this official record figured into draft AVC compliance reports, thus far? What are "we" so scared of? The USG did not unleash the coming plague. How and why this emerged from PRC remains mysterious but the science — according to over a dozen world famous scientists I have consulted — is clear that viro-vectors as postulated by the Nat Academy of Sciences report below—are possible to be logical protagonists, if not probable given the actual evidence. So where did COV 19 come from? Outer Space? What are the odds of zoonotic origin? Please give a percentage of confidence. Seriously—let's not assume it was deliberate — but evaluate an unintentional spillover as a hypothesis. Based on our research, some insiders who who were at WIV or in close touch with researchers there, may offer a cogent way to describe the pattern of apparent causation.

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

...

www.nap.edu

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

Page 2

Suggested Citation: "Summary." National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2018. *Biodefense in the Age of Synthetic Biology*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

doi: 10.17226/24890. 

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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

Page 3

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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

Page 5

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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.

Page 6

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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	Bootlegging	Demonstrations of bootlegging viruses with synthesized genomes
Re-creating known	DNA synthesis and	Improvements in synthesis

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
pathogenic bacteria	assembly	and assembly technology for handling larger DNA constructs
	Bootling	Demonstrations of bootling bacteria with synthesized genomes
Making existing viruses more dangerous	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
	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
Manufacturing chemicals or biochemicals by	Tolerability of toxins to the host organism	Pathway elucidation, improvements in circuit

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
exploiting natural metabolic pathways	synthesizing the toxin	design, and improvements in host ("chassis") engineering to make toxins tolerable to the host organism synthesizing the toxin
	Pathway not known	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
Manufacturing chemicals or biochemicals by creating novel metabolic pathways	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

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
Modifying the human microbiome	Limited understanding of microbiome	organisms and host processes 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

Page 7

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

Capability	Bottleneck or Barrier	Relevant Developments to Monitor
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.

Page 8

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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: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Monday, December 14, 2020 11:47 AM
To: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: RE: (b)(6) summary of post cables

Good Morning,

This may be OBE'd by (b)(6) 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.

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

Acting Director, Office of Verification, Planning, and Outreach
Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

(b)(6)@state.gov

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

From: Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, December 13, 2020 6:30 PM
To: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: (b)(6) summary of post cables

Many of you may have read this article but it remains important as reminder of several inconvenient facts. Don't underestimate cognitive dissonance and wishful disbelief in science and government. The level of groupthink on the COVID19 origins issue is ridiculous. I personally pray it came straight out of Mother Nature but, thus far, have found no objective scientific analysis to explain it. So 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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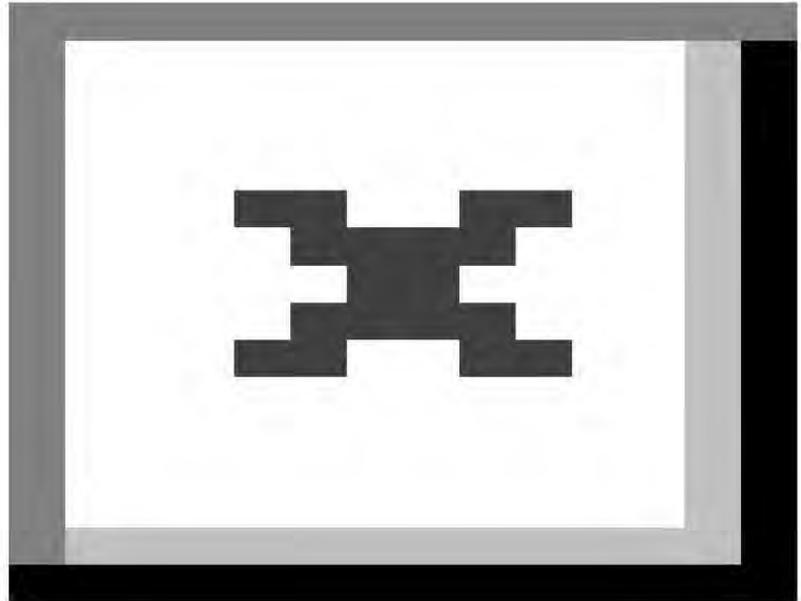


Illustration by Benjamin Purvis

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.

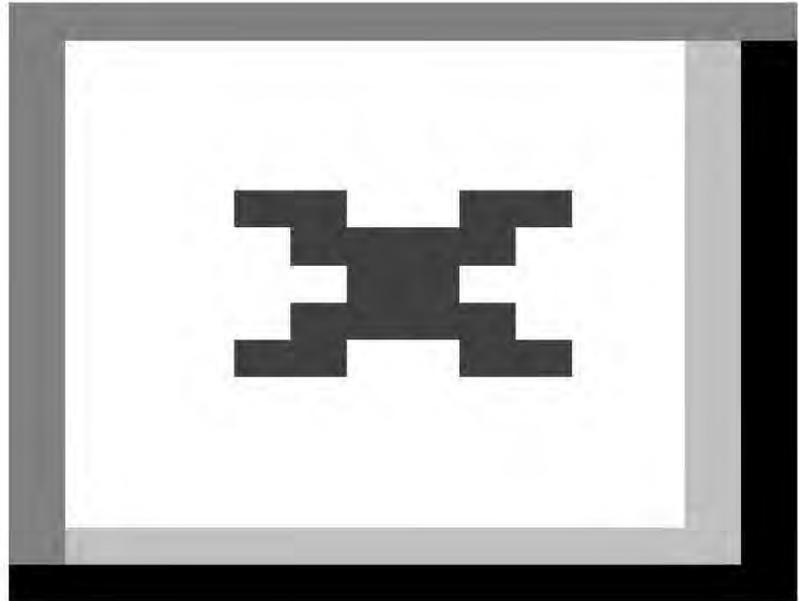
That left a third possibility: The missing phase had happened in a lab, where the virus had been trained on human cells. Chan knew this was the third rail of potential explanations. At the time, conspiracy theorists were spinning bioweapon fantasies, and Chan was loath to give them any ammunition. But 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)@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, December 13, 2020 2:42 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov; (b)(6)@state.gov; DiNanno, Thomas G <(b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea J <(b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David <(b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov; (b)(6)@state.gov
Subject: Re:(b)(6) summary of post cables

Great. Points 2, 4, and 5 are key and form a basis for raising concerns about adherence to Article X at least, questions under Article V, and separately, possible concerns about compliance with Article V. I will to get a copy of the WHO regs as well.

Jeff Gibbs

Senior Adviser AVC

SSD/AVC

(b)(6)

From: (b)(6)@state.gov
Sent: Saturday, December 12, 2020 12:43 PM
To: (b)(6)@state.gov; DiNanno, Thomas G <(b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea J <(b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David <(b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov; (b)(6)@state.gov; Gibbs, Jeffrey J <(b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov
Subject: (b)(6) summary of post cables

Thanks, (b)(6)

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: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, December 12, 2020 11:46 AM
To: DiNanno, Thomas G (b)(6)@state.gov>; Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>; Asher, David (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>
Cc: (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>
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:

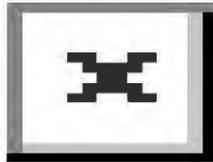
- Gross corruption and ineptitude by the local government officials (some of whom were later fired). Arguably, these officials enabled COVID-19 to go from outbreak to epidemic to pandemic.
 - Frequent requests from USG via multiple channels to try to assist, scientifically collaborate, and more importantly, 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~~

Sender: "Asher, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
Recipient: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: "Pease, Michael" (b)(6) @state.gov>
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
To: Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6) @state.gov>;
(b)(6) @state.gov>
(b)(6) @state.gov>;
CC: David Asher (b)(6) @hudson.org>;
Cindric, Thomas E (b)(6) @state.gov>
Subject: METZL - Origins of SARS-CoV-2
Date: Sat, 23 Jan 2021 23:42:34 +0000

<https://jamiemetzl.com/origins-of-sars-cov-2/>



Origins of SARS-CoV-2 | Jamie Metzl

NOTE: This post was originally published on April 16, 2020 and has been updated regularly. A number of people have reached out to me questioning my assertion that "the most likely starting point of the coronavirus crisis is an accidental leak from one of the Chinese virology institutes in W ...

jamiemetzl.com

NOTE: This post was originally published on April 16, 2020 and has been updated regularly.

A number of people have reached out to me questioning my assertion that "the most likely starting point of the coronavirus crisis is an accidental leak from one of the Chinese virology institutes in Wuhan" (see this CNN interview, this Newsweek editorial, this WSJ editorial, and this The Hill editorial). As referenced in this Forbes profile, I have been making this claim consistently since January 2020 and will continue to do so until this issue gets the attention it deserves. We owe everyone who has died from COVID-19, all the people who have lost their loved ones and livelihoods, and future generations a thorough, unbiased, and unrestricted investigation of how the tragedy began and has unfolded.

Let me be clear, I do not believe this was likely a genome edited virus (although this paper suggests how it could have been and we should not discount this possibility), just that it had very likely been isolated and cultured in one of the Wuhan labs (the Wuhan CDC or, more likely, the Wuhan Institute of Virology, WIV). I also want to be clear that this is only highly informed inference based on publicly available information and my application of Occam's razor (and mathematical probabilities). I have no definitive way of proving this thesis but the evidence is, in my view, extremely convincing. If forced to place odds on the confidence of my hypothesis, I would say there's an 85% chance the pandemic started with an accidental leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology or Wuhan CDC and a 15% chance it began in some other way (in fairness, here is an article making the case for a zoonotic jump "in the wild"). If China keeps preventing a

full and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of the pandemic, I believe it is fair to deny Beijing the benefit of the doubt.

The purpose of this post is to present the evidence and my views so that readers can come to their own conclusions. If there is additional evidence I am missing, please let me know. I do not have a political agenda other than finding out why so many people around the world are dead from COVID-19 and how we can learn the lessons from this catastrophe to prevent the next ones. What we need, and should all be calling for regardless of our nationalities or political persuasions, is a full and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of COVID-19 with full access to all relevant data, lab records, biological samples, and people in China and beyond. Getting to the bottom of this essential question should be an unrestricted and unbiased data-driven pursuit. While access to essential information is being denied, we are forced to be more speculative than we otherwise would be.

Because there is a lot of material to get through below, let me just summarize what I believe to be the most likely scenario.

- In 2012, six miners working in a bat-infested copper mine in southern China (Yunnan province) were infected with a bat coronavirus. All of them developed symptoms exactly like COVID-19 symptoms. Three of them died.
- Viral samples taken from the Yunnan miner were taken to the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the only level 4 biosecurity lab in China that was also studying bat coronaviruses.
- The WIV carried out gain of function research, almost certainly on these and a range of related and other samples (which is different than genetically engineering the viruses). Chimeric viruses were likely developed in this process. There has never been a full and public accounting for what viruses are in the WIV sample set and database, and key elements of the database have been taken off line or deleted.
- Given the close relationship of the Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army (PLA) in the development and construction of the Wuhan Institute of Virology, it is fair to assume a connection between the PLA and the WIV.
- In late 2019 the SARS-CoV-2 virus appeared in Wuhan. The closest known relative of this virus is the RaTG13 virus sampled from the Yunnan mine where the miners had been infected.
- The difference between the RaTG13 virus and SARS-CoV-2 could potentially be explained by the gain of function research pushing the development of chimeric viruses.
- It is also plausible that SARS-CoV-2 could have been among the viruses held in or derived from a different virus in the WIV repository.
- In the earliest known stage of the outbreak, the virus was already very well-adapted to human cells.
- In the critical first weeks after the outbreak, Wuhan authorities worked aggressively to silence the whistleblowers and destroy evidence that could prove incriminating.
- When Beijing authorities got involved a bit later, they likely faced a choice of implicating the Wuhan authorities, and, in effect, taking blame for what was quickly emerging as a

major global problem, or turning into the curve and going all in for the coverup. I believe they likely chose the second option.

- The Chinese government then massively lobbied the WHO to prevent the WHO from declaring COVID-19 as an international emergency and prevented WHO investigators from entering China for nearly a month.
- In late January 2020, PLA Major General Chen Wei was put in charge of containment efforts in Wuhan. This role included supervision of the WIV, which had previously been considered a civilian institution. General Chen is China's top biological weapons expert. Allegations that the PLA was conducting covert dual civilian-military research on bat coronaviruses at WIV have not been proven.
- The Chinese authorities have gone to great lengths to destroy evidence and silence anyone in China who might be in a position to provide evidence on the origins of COVID-19.
- Although nothing can be fully conclusive in light of Chinese obfuscation, the continued absence of any meaningful evidence of a zoonotic chain of transmission and mutation in the wild and the accretion of other evidence is pointing increasingly, in my view, toward an accidental lab leak as the most likely origin of COVID-19. Given the extent to which China would benefit from discovering evidence of a transmission in the wild, we can assume Chinese authorities are doing all they can to find this kind of evidence without success. This failure would explain why Chinese officials have recently begun, with little credible evidence, asserting that the outbreak started in India or Bangladesh.
- In light of all of this, only a full and unrestricted international forensic investigation into the origins of the pandemic, with complete access to all samples, lab records, scientists, health officials, etc. will suffice.
- Ensuring the most thorough and highest quality investigation exploring all possible hypothesis is and should be in all of our interest, including that of the Chinese government and people.

I want to be clear that I am a progressive who believes in asking tough questions and seeking the truth. I in no way seek to support or align myself with any activities that may be considered unfair, dishonest, nationalistic, racist, bigoted, or biased in any way. I also believe that whatever the original reasons for the outbreak, the reason why so many more Americans have died from COVID-19 than most anyone else is the catastrophic failure of the Trump administration to respond effectively.

As I argued in my Newsweek piece:

Just as we wouldn't imagine having a plane crash and not immediately trying to figure out what happened, we can't let the COVID-19 crisis unfold without urgently understanding how our systems have so spectacularly failed. There are plenty of fingers to point, and we must thoughtfully point them now, at all of us, for our own good. For all we know, a new and even worse pandemic could begin even before we have overcome this one... Until we get to the bottom of all these failures and work to fix them, we remain dangerously susceptible to the next pandemic... Whatever the origins of the outbreak, including the possibility of an accidental leak from the Chinese virology lab in Wuhan, China's dangerous and ongoing information suppression activities are the foundations of this

crisis. We have to find out fast where and how this outbreak began... The WHO could have raised hell when China denied access to WHO experts for those critical early weeks, did not need to initially parrot Chinese propaganda and could certainly have sounded the alarm earlier. We have to ask how we can help the WHO do better... The United States had all the information it needed by January to mount a massive response, but Trump actively undermined the findings of his own intelligence and health officials. Worse, he passed misinformation to the American people that potentially led to many thousands of deaths. We've got to ask why this happened... Until we get to the bottom of all these failures and work to fix them, we remain dangerously susceptible to the next pandemic... We are all on the same plane with a shared interest in not letting it crash... Let's work together to safely land the plane.

Although I do not necessarily ascribe to all of the assertions made in each of these documents, my sources include:

- This [Nature Medicine](#) study
- This [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) article
- This [Epoch Times](#) documentary (which should be viewed with significant caution due to its propagandistic tone)
- This [Lancet](#) piece
- This [Washington Post](#) article
- This [The Diplomat](#) editorial
- The [Nature](#) article
- This [Project Evidence](#) site
- This [Cell](#) study
- This [Science Direct](#) study
- This [New York Times](#) report
- This [Newsweek](#) article
- This [Washington Post](#) article
- This [Daily Telegraph](#) story
- This [Guardian](#) article
- This [Bloomberg](#) article
- This [Asia Times](#) story
- This [NBC News](#) story
- This [New Yorker](#) piece
- This [NPR](#) report
- This [E-PAI \(Electronically Available Public Information\)](#) report
- This [BioRxiv](#) pre-publication research paper
- This [Atlantic](#) piece
- This [National Review](#) article
- This [Associated Press](#) story
- This [Nerd Has Power](#) post
- This [Nature](#) article
- This [Telegraph](#) piece

- This [QRB Discovery](#) manuscript
- This [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) editorial
- This [Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists](#) article
- This [Independent Science News](#) piece
- This [Daniel Lucey](#) blog post
- This [Science](#) article
- This [Independent Science News](#) piece
- This [Wiley](#) preprint essay
- This [Wiley](#) preprint letter
- This [Cell Host & Microbe](#) paper
- This [Frontiers in Public Health](#) article
- This [Unherd](#) post
- This [New York Times](#) story
- This [BioEssays](#) paper
- This [BioEssays](#) paper
- This [PNAS](#) opinion piece
- This [New York Times](#) article
- This [Daily Mail](#) article
- This [Associated Press](#) article
- This [Quantitative Biology](#) paper
- This [New York](#) magazine article
- This [Nature Medicine](#) editorial
- This [France Culture](#) article
- This [Wall Street Journal](#) editorial

I am extremely open to other perspectives and welcome any additional information. If you have anything you believe relevant, I would be grateful for you to pass it along. I am not wedded to any particular outcome other than getting to the deepest possible understanding of what went wrong and how we can fix it.

As I have already stated publicly, "Even if the coronavirus is an accidental leak from a Wuhan lab, we are all one interconnected humanity who must work together to get through this crisis." It is my view that Chinese researchers at these institutes were studying these viruses with the best intentions of developing surveillance systems, treatments, and vaccines for the good of humanity. Countries make mistakes, even terrible and deadly ones. I was in the White House when the US bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade. We believed it was an accident but many Chinese people thought it was a deliberate act. I understood why.

Moments like these are inherently difficult and we should all do our very best to find the answers to our most important questions in the most honest, careful, and considered manner possible.

We must also be doing everything we can to build the surveillance, response, treatment, vaccine development, and public health capacities we need to make all of us safe. COVID-19 has been a terrible catastrophe, but there could very well be much worse facing us in the future.

In this spirit, I have compiled this summary of the available evidence. Because China is still restricting access to the relevant data and people, the case remains speculative by necessity.

- Beginning on December 10, 2019, increasing numbers of people, many of who had visited the Hunan Seafood Market in Wuhan, fell ill due to a new disease.
- The novel coronavirus outbreak did not originate in the seafood market (Lancet). (This was clear early on but Chinese officials held to this story until late May 2020, when the evidence against this claim became wholly indefensible, more below.)
- The Huanan Seafood Market didn't have bats for sale, and most bats species in Wuhan would be hibernating at the time of outbreak. It was reported that 34% of cases had no contact with the market, and 'No epidemiological link was found between the first patient and later cases.' (Lancet)
- According to a DIA report, "about 33 percent of the original 41 identified cases did not have direct exposure" to the market. That, along with what's known of the laboratory's work in past few years, raised reasonable suspicion that the pandemic may have been caused by a lab error, not the wet market. (Newsweek)
- A Broad Institute study asserts that genetic examination of four samples containing the virus from the seafood market to those taken from the Wuhan patient are '99.9 per cent' identical. This suggests it came from infected visitors or vendors, indicating 'Sars-CoV-2 had been imported into the market by humans'. The authors found no evidence 'of cross-species transmission' at the market.
- This market is less than 9 miles away from The Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), Chinese Academy of Sciences, which:
 - Developed chimeric SARS-like coronaviruses
 - Conducted 'dangerous' gain-of-function research on the SARS-CoV-1 virus, some of which had been funded by the US government (Asia Times)
 - Established a 96.2% match with SARS-CoV-2 and a virus they sampled from a cave over 1,000 miles away from Wuhan
 - Injected live piglets with bat coronaviruses as recently as July 2019
 - Published a paper on a close descendant of SARS-CoV-1, MERS-CoV, in November 2019
 - Was hiring researchers to work on bat coronaviruses as recently as November 2019
- United States embassy and consular officials who visited the Wuhan Institute of Virology in January 2018 were deeply concerned. Their cable sent to the State Department noted:
 - "the new lab has a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators needed to safely operate this high-containment laboratory"
 - "the researchers also showed that various SARS-like coronaviruses can interact with ACE2, the human receptor identified for SARS-coronavirus. This finding strongly suggests that SARS-like coronaviruses from bats can be transmitted to humans to cause SARS-like diseases. From a public health perspective, this makes the continued surveillance of SARS-like coronaviruses in bats and study of

the animal-human interface critical to future emerging coronavirus outbreak prediction and prevention." (Washington Post)

- (For more on laboratory safety in China, see [this link](#).)
- The market is also less than 3 miles away from the Wuhan Centre for Disease Control, which:
 - Was accused of being the source of the outbreak from a now-withdrawn academic paper from a notable Chinese scholar at the South China University of China
 - Once kept horseshoe bats, a known reservoir of SARS-CoV-1, within its labs
 - Once performed surgery on live animals within its labs
 - Had a researcher who quarantined on two separate occasions; once upon coming into contact with bat blood after being 'attacked' and another time when he was urinated upon in a cave while wearing inadequate personal protection
 - Had previously done bat virus research funded by the US NIH (in a grant to EcoHealth Alliance)
 - possessed the virus that is the most closely related known virus in the world to the outbreak virus, bat virus RaTG13. This virus was isolated in 2013 and had its genome published on January 23, 2020. Seven more years of bat coronavirus collection followed the 2013 RaTG13 isolation. One component of the novel-bat-virus project at the Wuhan Institute of Virology involved infection of laboratory animals with bat viruses. Therefore, the possibility of a lab accident includes scenarios with direct transmission of a bat virus to a lab worker, scenarios with transmission of a bat virus to a laboratory animal and then to a lab worker, and scenarios involving improper disposal of laboratory animals or laboratory waste. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)
 - began its gain of function research program for bat coronaviruses in 2015. Using a natural virus, institute researchers made "substitutions in its RNA coding to make it more transmissible. They took a piece of the original SARS virus and inserted a snippet from a SARS-like bat coronavirus, resulting in a virus that is capable of infecting human cells." (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)
- Even before this outbreak, China had a very poor safety record at many of its biosecurity facilities.
- In the years since the SARS outbreak, many instances of mishaps involving the accidental release of pathogens have taken place in labs throughout the world. Hundreds of breaches have occurred in the U.S., including a 2014 release of anthrax from a U.S. government lab that exposed 84 people. The SARS virus escaped from a Beijing lab in 2004, causing eleven infections and one death. An accidental release is not complicated and doesn't require malicious intent. All it takes is for a lab worker to get sick, go home for the night, and unwittingly spread the virus to others. (Newsweek)
- Although it does not appear likely this virus was engineered (Nature Medicine), trying to determine the exact pattern and genomic ancestry of the virus is difficult, particularly as many of the recombinant regions may be small and are likely to change as more viruses related to SARS-CoV-2 are sampled. (Cell)

- Using the current standard genetic engineering technology, many alterations of several bases in the RNA genome would be undetectable, including construction of a chimeric coronavirus encoding an unpublished spike protein in an unpublished genome. (Independent Science News)
- After months of speculation and with the market origin story indefensible, the Chinese Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finally admitted only in late May 2020 that it has ruled the site out as the origin point of the outbreak. According to Gao Fu, the director of the Chinese CDC, "It now turns out that the market is one of the victims."
- Nikolai Petrovsky and colleagues at Flinders University in Australia have found that SARS-CoV-2 has a higher affinity for human receptors than for any other animal species they tested, including pangolins and horseshoe bats. He suggests that this could have happened if the virus was being cultured in human cells, adding that "We can't exclude the possibility that this came from a laboratory experiment." (Wall Street Journal)
- According to the WHO, "the virus has been remarkable stable since it was first reported in Wuhan, with sequences well conserved in different countries, suggesting that the virus was well adapted to human transmission from the moment it was first detected."
- This [Quantitative Biology paper](#) by Nikola Petrovsky et al makes the very strong case that that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was already pre-adapted to humans by the time it appeared in late 2020.
- Similarly, Sirotkin and Sirotkin assert in their Wiley preprint essay: "Unless the intermediate host necessary for completing a natural zoonotic jump is identified, the dual-use gain-of-function research practice of viral serial passage should be considered a viable route by which the novel coronavirus arose. The practice of serial passage mimics a natural zoonotic jump, and offers explanations for SARS-CoV-2's distinctive spike-protein region and its unexpectedly high affinity for angiotensin converting enzyme (ACE2), as well as the notable polybasic furin cleavage site within it. Additional molecular clues raise further questions, all of which warrant full investigation into the novel coronavirus's origins and a re-examination of the risks and rewards of dual-use gain-of-function research.
- The two known coronaviruses genetically closest to SARS-CoV-2, RaTG13 and RmYN02, were discovered in bats in Yunnan, China. The genome of RaTG13 is 96.2% similar to SARS-CoV-2. That of RmYN02 is 93.3 % similar. Given that the SARS-CoV-2 genome is made up of 30,000 nucleotides (aka letters), the genetic distance between RaTG13 and SARS-CoV-2 is a significant 1,200 nucleotides. Under normal circumstances in wild, this would suggest that the two viruses diverged decades ago. But an essential question is whether gain of function research could have massively sped up this evolutionary rate, including by inducing the development of chimeric viruses well adapted to human cells. This type of research could have been done using the tools of genome editing (which I believe is highly unlikely in this case) or by exposing different viruses to human cells or humanized mouse or other animal cells in a laboratory.
- Stanford's [David Relman](#) states: "SARS-CoV-2 is a betacoronavirus whose apparent closest relatives, RaTG13 and RmYN02, are reported to have been collected from bats in 2013 and 2019, respectively, in Yunnan Province, China. COVID-19 was first reported in

December 2019 more than 1,000 miles away in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China. Beyond these facts, the “origin story” is missing many key details, including a plausible and suitably detailed recent evolutionary history of the virus, the identity and provenance of its most recent ancestors, and surprisingly, the place, time, and mechanism of transmission of the first human infection... Some have argued that a deliberate engineering scenario is unlikely because one would not have had the insight a priori to design the current pandemic virus. This argument fails to acknowledge the possibility that two or more as yet undisclosed ancestors (i.e., more proximal ancestors than RaTG13 and RmYN02) had already been discovered and were being studied in a laboratory—for example, one with the SARS-CoV-2 backbone and spike protein receptor binding domain, and the other with the SARS-CoV-2 polybasic furin cleavage site. It would have been a logical next step to wonder about the properties of a recombinant virus and then create it in the laboratory... there is probably more than one recent ancestral lineage that contributes to SARSCoV-2 because its genome shows evidence of recombination between different parental viruses. In nature, recombination is common among coronaviruses. But it’s also common in some research laboratories where recombinant engineering is used to study those viruses.”

- (Alina Chan, a junior scientist at the Broad Institute demonstrates how shoddy much of the pangolin research has been in [this important Twitter thread](#).)
- The Brufsky et al [Wiley pre-print letter](#) lays out the underlying science which seems to explain why the gain of function research at the WIV is the most likely origin of the pandemic. To be fair, the conclusion these authors draw is extremely cautious: “These unique features of SARS–CoV–2 raise several questions concerning the proximal origin of the virus that require further discussion.” They do not list the question but the implication is clear enough.
- The [analysis](#) by Boni, Robertson, and their colleagues made those researchers believe that despite the genetic closeness, RaTG13 and SARS-CoV-2 split up quite a long time ago, possibly in 1969. This analysis, however, does not account for the ability of gain of function research to speed up the evolutionary timeline and potentially push the “natural” formation of chimeric viruses.
- It could also be possible that SARS-CoV-2 might be the result of gain of function research on another virus in the Wuhan Institute of Virology repository. Quoting a private communication from a scientist I trust (who chose to remain anonymous out of personal safety concerns), “the issue is that there is this internal database at the WIV that even other Chinese scientists can’t access. Even the first team to point out the similarity of SARS2 to the 4991 sequence — they had no idea that 4991 aka RaTG13 had been fully genome sequenced. What other viruses are in this database? Was the pangolin CoV RBD also in this database by mid 2019?”
- In an [August 12, 2020 BioEssays paper](#), Sirotkin and Sirotkin assert that the WIV is sitting on somewhere in the neighborhood of 2,000 undisclosed wild viruses, and Dr. Shi herself disclosed that [9 previously undisclosed betacoronaviruses that had been held in a WIV lab repository](#). The database issues are further explored in [in this thread](#) as well as [in this thread](#).)

- All the Wuhan Institute of Virology virus databases were taken down early in 2020 and remain offline. There are estimated to be at least 100 unpublished sequences of bat betacoronaviruses in these databases which need to be sequenced by international scientists. Based on information and links provided here, these databases include:
 - WIV Database 1:<http://batvirus.whiov.ac.cn/> (Archive seems to be unavailable)
 - WIV SQL online Database 2: <http://csdata.org/p/308/>,
Archived:<https://web.archive.org/web/20200507214518/http://csdata.org/p/308/> and:<http://archive.is/HLuio>
 - WIV Database 3:<http://www.viruses.nsd.cn/vri.jsp>,
Archived:<https://web.archive.org/web/20200125203943/http://www.viruses.nsd.cn/vri.jsp>, Discussion of significance here: Guoke Faji 2019/236 and the SARS-CoV-2 Outbreak <http://archive.is/uHqSw#selection-29.0-29.47>
 - WIV Database 4:<http://www.viruses.nsd.cn/chinavpi>,
Archived:<https://web.archive.org/web/20200404100024/http://www.viruses.nsd.cn/chinavpi>, Referenced in a paper by Zhiming Yuan of the Key Laboratory of Special Pathogens and Biosafety, Wuhan Institute of Virology, (+86-27-87197242, Email: yzm@wh.iov.cn), "*Investigation of Viral Pathogen Profiles in Some Natural Hosts and Vectors in China*",
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6178075/>
 - WIV Database 5: http://www.wfcc.info/ccinfo/collection/col_by_country/c/86/,
Archived:https://web.archive.org/web/20200515223251/http://www.wfcc.info/ccinfo/collection/col_by_country/c/86/ which in turn links to:http://wfcc.info/ccinfo/collection/by_id/613, Archived:
https://web.archive.org/web/20200108181714/http://wfcc.info/ccinfo/collection/by_id/613 links to:<http://www.virus.org.cn/> (404 for the database in question),
Archived:<https://web.archive.org/web/20191230091754/http://www.virus.org.cn/>, And an archived description of the WIV database:
https://web.archive.org/web/20200117011358/http://www.whiov.ac.cn/xwdt_105286/zhxw/201804/t20180423_5000795.html
- Sirotkin and Sirotkin also state: "Unless the intermediate host necessary for completing a natural zoonotic jump is identified, the dual-use gain-of-function research practice of viral serial passage should be considered a viable route by which the novel coronavirus arose."
 - "The long-standing practice of serial passage is a form of gain-of-function research that forces zoonosis between species, and requires the same molecular adaptations necessary for a natural zoonotic jump to occur within a laboratory, leaving the same genetic signatures behind as a natural jump but occurring in a much shorter period of time... serial passage through a live animal host simply forces the same molecular processes that occur in nature to happen during a zoonotic jump, and in vitro passage through cell culture mimics many elements of this process—and neither necessarily leaves any distinguishing genetic traces."

- “A coronavirus that targets the ACE2 receptor like SARS-CoV-2 was first isolated from a wild bat in 2013 by a team out of Wuhan. This research was funded in part by EcoHealth Alliance, and set the stage for the manipulation of bat-borne coronavirus genomes that target this receptor and can become airborne. Many more viruses have been collected in Wuhan over the years, and one research expedition captured as many as 400 wild viruses, which were added to a private repository that has since grown to over 1500 strains of virus, meaning that the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention has a massive catalogue of largely undisclosed viruses to draw from for experiments... But for whatever reason, the Wuhan Institute of Virology has refused to release the lab notebooks of its researchers, which are ubiquitous in even the simplest laboratories and are expected to be meticulously detailed given the sensitive and delicate work that takes place in BSL-4 research labs intent on documenting their intellectual property, despite the fact that these notebooks would likely be enough to exonerate the lab from having any role in the creation of SARS-CoV-2.”
- “The prospect that serial passage through lab animals or on commercial farms may have played a role in the creation of SARS-CoV-2 is also raised by an April 2020 preprint, which appears to have been retracted after Chinese authorities implemented the censorship of any papers relating to the origins of the novel coronavirus.” (For the last point, see [this link](#).)
- “These data do not support the idea that SARS-CoV-2 was circulating in humans prior to the outbreak began in Wuhan in the early winter or fall of 2019, making a zoonotic jump even more unlikely since natural jumps leave wide serological footprints in their new host populations as early variants of a prospective virus make limited and unsuccessful jumps into individuals of the new host species, a trial-and-error that must occur before mutations that allow adaptation to a new host species are selected.”
- In a [BioEssays paper](#), issued November 17, 2020, authors Deigin and Segreto assert: “Severe acute respiratory syndrome-coronavirus (SARS-CoV)-2’s origin is still controversial. Genomic analyses show SARS-CoV-2 likely to be chimeric, most of its sequence closest to bat CoV RaTG13, whereas its receptor binding domain (RBD) is almost identical to that of a pangolin CoV. Chimeric viruses can arise *via* natural recombination or human intervention. The furin cleavage site in the spike protein of SARS-CoV-2 confers to the virus the ability to cross species and tissue barriers, but was previously unseen in other SARS-like CoVs. Might genetic manipulations have been performed in order to evaluate pangolins as possible intermediate hosts for bat-derived CoVs that were originally unable to bind to human receptors? Both cleavage site and specific RBD could result from site-directed mutagenesis, a procedure that does not leave a trace. Considering the devastating impact of SARS-CoV-2 and importance of preventing future pandemics, researchers have a responsibility to carry out a thorough analysis of all possible SARS-CoV-2 origins.” At very least, this paper credibly raises a serious hypothesis worthy of far deeper exploration. Some key points made in the paper include:

- “the two main SARS-CoV-2 features, (1) the presence of a furin cleavage site missing in other CoVs of the same group and (2) an receptor binding domain (RBD) optimized to bind to human cells might be the result of lab manipulation techniques such as site-directed mutagenesis.”
- “In order to evaluate the emergence potential of novel CoVs, researchers have created a number of chimeric CoVs, consisting of bat CoV backbones, normally unable to infect human cells, whose spike proteins were replaced by those from CoVs compatible with human ACE2. These chimeras were meant to simulate recombination events that might occur in nature... Synthetically generating diverse panels of potential pre-emergent CoVs was declared a goal of active grants for the EcoHealth Alliance, which funded some of such research at WIV, in collaboration with laboratories in the USA and other international partners.”
- “Due to the broad-spectrum of research conducted over almost 20 years on bat SARS-CoVs justified by their potential to spill over from animal to human, a possible synthetic origin by laboratory engineering of SARS-CoV-2 cannot be excluded... SARS-CoV-2 could have been synthesized by combining a backbone similar to RaTG13 with the RBD of CoV similar to the one recently isolated from pangolins.”
- “Another open question is the reason for modification and subsequent deletion of WIV’s own viral database.”
- China has taken a series of steps since the beginning of this crisis which seem consistent with a coverup. Although the coverup began with local and provincial Wuhan authorities, it later involved decisions made by the Chinese leadership at the highest level. These steps include:
 - On December 31, Chinese authorities started censoring news of the virus from search engines, deleting terms including “SARS variation,” “Wuhan Seafood market” and “Wuhan Unknown Pneumonia.” (Daily Telegraph)
 - Officials closed the market the day after notifying the WHO and sent in teams with strong disinfectants. Samples from animals were taken but, four months later, the results have not been shared with foreign scientists. The actions led to claims that they were deliberately wiping away crucial traces. (Daily Telegraph)
 - Many China scholars noted that it was quite unusual for Chinese government authorities to identify Wuhan’s Huanan South China Seafood Market so quickly as the source of the outbreak. They thought this behavior so uncharacteristic that it raised suspicions in their minds.
 - The Hubei health commission ordered genomics companies to stop testing for the new virus and to destroy all samples.
 - On January 1, an employee of a genomics company in Wuhan received a phone call from an official at the Hubei Provincial Health Commission, ordering the company to stop testing samples from Wuhan related to the new disease and to destroy all existing samples. (Caixin Global)
 - On January 1, Wuhan Institute of Virology’s director general, Yanyi Wang, messaged her colleagues, saying the National Health Commission told her the lab’s COVID-19 data shall not be published on social media and shall not be

disclosed to the media. And on January 3, the commission sent this document, never posted online, but saved by researchers, telling labs to destroy COVID-19 samples or send them to the depository institutions designated by the state. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)

- On January 3, China's National Health Commission (NHC) ordered institutions not to publish any information related to the unknown disease and ordered labs to transfer any samples they had to designated testing institutions or destroy them. (Caixin Global)
- Even with full sequences decoded by three state labs independently, Chinese health officials remained silent. (AP)
- China sat on releasing the genetic map, or genome, of the virus for more than a week after three different government labs had fully decoded the information. Tight controls on information and competition within the Chinese public health system were to blame, according to dozens of interviews and internal documents. (AP)
- WHO officials complained in internal meetings that they were making repeated requests to the Chinese authorities for more data, especially to find out if the virus could spread efficiently between humans, but to no avail. "We have informally and formally been requesting more epidemiological information," WHO's China representative Galea said. "But when asked for specifics, we could get nothing." (AP)
- Beijing did not notify the World Health Organization of the outbreak for at least four days after Wuhan officials were notified. A WHO investigation team was not allowed to visit Wuhan until three weeks after that, and the team was not given full and unrestricted access even during this preliminary field visit
- The Chinese government closed the laboratory in Shanghai that first published the genome of COVID-19 on January 10, explaining that it had been shuttered for "rectification." Chinese citizens who reported on the coronavirus were censured and, in some cases, "disappeared." These have included businessman Fang Bin, lawyer Chen Qiushi, former state TV reporter Li Zehua and, most recently, Zhang Zhan, a lawyer. They are reportedly being held in extrajudicial detention centers for speaking out about China's response to the pandemic. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)
- Chinese government labs only released the genome after another lab published it ahead of authorities on a virologist website on Jan. 11. Even then, China stalled for at least two weeks more on providing WHO with detailed data on patients and cases, according to recordings of internal meetings held by the U.N. health agency through January — all at a time when the outbreak arguably might have been dramatically slowed. (AP)
- Although international law obliges countries to report information to WHO that could have an impact on public health, the U.N. agency has no enforcement powers and cannot independently investigate epidemics within countries. Instead, it must rely on the cooperation of member states. According to WHO's chief of emergencies, Dr. Michael Ryan, this type of obfuscation and interference

“would not happen in Congo and did not happen in Congo and other places.”
(AP)

- Not only did China block the WHO investigation team from going to Wuhan for nearly a month, it also severely curtailed its activities after that.
- On Jan. 14, the head of China’s National Health Commission said in a confidential teleconference with provincial health officials that the situation was “severe and complex,” that “clustered cases suggest that human-to-human transmission is possible,” and that “the risk of transmission and spread is high.” The Commission issued a 63-page document on response procedures that same day that was labeled “internal” and “not to be publicly disclosed.” The next day, the head of China’s disease control emergency center, announced on state television that “the risk of sustained human-to-human transmission is low.” This same message was delivered to the World Health Organization. (Washington Post)
- Between the day the full genome was first decoded by a government lab on Jan. 2 and the day WHO declared a global emergency on Jan. 30, the outbreak spread by a factor of 100 to 200 times, according to retrospective infection data from the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (AP) Chinese officials actively lobbied the WHO to prevent the emergency declaration, which almost certainly slowed the international response,
- Offers from the United States to send medical experts Wuhan in early January were rejected by the central government. (Diplomat)
- This Chinese preprint paper was released in February 2020 and then mysteriously retracted. In it, two Chinese experts assert that, “Somebody was entangled with the evolution of 2019-nCoV coronavirus. In addition to origins of natural recombination and intermediate host, the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan... Regulations may be taken to relocate these laboratories far away from city center and other densely populated places.”
- Although WIV officials have commented publicly about social media posting alleging that one of their prior researchers may be “patient zero,” the WIV has not provided any information about that person
- A WIV researcher who publicly accused the director of the Institute of selling infected lab animals to vendors on Weibo (with pictures of herself and her employee ID included) later claimed she was ‘hacked’ and disavowed her prior allegation
- In contrast to its earlier (and inaccurate) assertion that the outbreak originated in the Wuhan seafood market, a Ministry of foreign Affairs spokesperson on March 12 accused the United States Army of intentionally bringing SARS-CoV-2 to Wuhan
- Beijing disinfected the Wuhan market before a full international investigation could be conducted and has yet to provide U.S. experts with samples of the novel coronavirus collected from the earliest cases.
- The Shanghai lab that published the novel coronavirus genome on Jan. 11 was quickly shut down by authorities for “rectification.” Several of the doctors and

journalists who reported on the spread early on have disappeared. (Washington Post)

- On Feb. 14, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a new biosecurity law to be accelerated. On Wednesday, The Chinese government has placed severe restrictions requiring approval before any research institution publishes anything on the origin of the novel coronavirus. (Washington Post)
- This was followed immediately by a China Ministry of Science & Technology announcement of new guidelines for laboratories, especially in handling viruses. Almost at the same time, the Chinese newspaper Global Times published an article on “chronic inadequate management issues at laboratories, including problems of biological wastes.”
- Labs analyzing the pathogen were instructed to destroy samples, a health center that had published the virus’s genome sequence was temporarily shut down the following day, and doctors were prevented from submitting case information to the country’s infectious disease tracking network. (Diplomat)
- Reports of health care workers falling ill, an early indicator of human-to-human transmission, were suppressed. More indirectly, state media coverage of doctors being penalized reportedly had a chilling effect on other medical professionals who might have sounded the alarm. (Diplomat)
- In an official document marked “internal document, please keep confidential” reported out by CNN, Hubei provincial officials listed 5,918 new cases for Feb. 10, more than twice what was reported publicly for all of China on that day. On March 7, the total death toll in Hubei was listed in the report at 3,456 but publicly stated as 2,986. According to the Washington Post, “the Hubei documents add weight to the conclusion that China deliberately hid the true dimensions of the disaster.”
- In March 2020, Beijing announced the expulsion of American journalists working for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, the media organizations who have exposed some of the most significant misdeeds and coverups by the Chinese government over recent decades
- In April 2020, with the outbreak in full swing, the WIV deleted a press release detailing the January 2019 U.S. State Department visit
- The Chinese government has now banned any researcher from publishing anything on the origins of this crisis without prior approval of the Ministry of Science and Technology (Nature)
- On April 24, the New York Times reported that Beijing has successfully pressured European Union officials to water down references to China in an EU report. The original language had stated, “China has continued to run a global disinformation campaign to deflect blame for the outbreak of the pandemic and improve its international image... Both overt and covert tactics have been observed.”
- It appears there may have been a sudden drop in cellphone usage at WIV in early October followed by a cellphone blackout, suggesting the possibility of an accident inside WIV on October 6 followed by a traffic closure. Without further

detail about sourcing, however, this information remains speculative. (E-PAI report)

- Zhang Zan, a Chinese citizen journalist arrested by Chinese authorities in May for asking tough questions about the origin of the pandemic and accused, absurdly, of “picking quarrels and provoking troubles,” was sentenced to four years in prison on December 28, 2020. According to Quartz: Three other citizen journalists—Chen Qiushi, Fang Bin, and Li Zehua—all disappeared in February as soon as their coverage of Wuhan during the pandemic started to gain traction online. Li Zehua resurfaced in April, saying he had been taken by police on suspicion of disturbing public order but was later released as the authorities did not press charges. Meanwhile, Chen and Fang’s whereabouts still aren’t known, though Chen is reportedly staying under home surveillance at his parents’ house.
- On November 25, 2020, Kyodo News reported that “Chinese authorities warned doctors, who responded to the novel coronavirus in the early stage of the outbreak in Wuhan, that they could be punished for espionage if they revealed what went on during the period.”
- Also in November, 2020, the Chinese government launched a concerted propaganda campaign claiming, without meaningful evidence, that the pandemic began in the Indian subcontinent.
- This December 19, 2020 New York Times article outlines in stunning detail the extent to which China actively and aggressively suppressed information about the pandemic, silenced whistleblowers and people raising essential questions, the manipulated outgoing information in order to hoard essential supplies from abroad. This history, in the context of COVID-19 and many other “sensitive” issues, suggests that an international investigation into the origins of COVID-19 that relies primarily on data gathered and information provided by the Chinese authorities, as the WHO investigation appears to do, can not be considered legitimate.
- According to a December 30, 2020 AP article, “More than a year since the first known person was infected with the coronavirus, an AP investigation shows the Chinese government is strictly controlling all research into its origins, clamping down on some while actively promoting fringe theories that it could have come from outside China. The government is handing out hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants to scientists researching the virus’ origins in southern China and affiliated with the military, the AP has found. But it is monitoring their findings and mandating that the publication of any data or research must be approved by a new task force managed by China’s cabinet, under direct orders from President Xi Jinping, according to internal documents obtained by the AP. A rare leak from within the government, the dozens of pages of unpublished documents confirm what many have long suspected: The clampdown comes from the top.”
- Here is a link to the official Chinese regulation.
- On April 18, 2020, Director of the Wuhan Institute of Virology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences said in an interview that “there is no way this virus came from us.”

- In early May, the World Health Organization's representative in China, Gauden Galea, publicly complained that China had refused repeated requests to permit the WHO to participate in whatever investigations the Chinese government was undertaking itself. He said that the WHO had not been given access to laboratory logs at the WIV or the Wuhan Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)
- On May 3, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said "There is a significant amount of evidence that this came from that laboratory in Wuhan." China's Global Times, run by the ruling Communist Party's official People's Daily, said in an editorial responding to this interview that "The Trump administration continues to engage in unprecedented propaganda warfare while trying to impede global efforts in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic."
- On May 4, the Guardian claimed its sources insisted a "15-page dossier" highlighted by the Australian Daily Telegraph accusing China of a deadly cover up was not culled from intelligence from the Five Eyes Network, an alliance between the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada.
- Bloomberg reported on May 5 that a majority of the 17 agencies that provide and analyze intelligence for the U.S. government believe the pandemic started after the virus was leaked from the Wuhan lab, but based mostly on circumstantial evidence.
- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security and Britain's National Cyber Security Center recently issued a statement saying hackers are "actively targeting organisations ... that include healthcare bodies, pharmaceutical companies, academia, medical research organisations, and local government." This was widely construed as suggesting that state-sponsored Chinese hackers were attempting to steal COVID-19 research. (NPR)
- On May 19, the World Health Assembly agreed to an "impartial, independent and comprehensive evaluation" of the international response to COVID-19. China did not object to the resolution but Chinese president Xi Jinping said the investigation should only take place after the pandemic is contained. This is not likely to happen any time soon.
- Investigating the range of possible spillover sites—from the wet market, to an accidental lab or fieldwork infection, or an unnoticed lab leak—requires a forensic investigation. Obtaining case histories, epidemiological data, and viral samples from different times and places, including the earliest possible samples from infected individuals and samples from wildlife, is paramount... A forensic investigation would additionally involve auditing and sampling viral collections at relevant labs that had been studying coronaviruses, examining the types of experiments carried out and the viruses used, and reviewing the safety and security practices in place... A COVID-19 origins investigation will need to be negotiated and begun rapidly before relevant data diminishes or disappears entirely as time passes. (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists)
- Determining whether WIV had anything to do with the virus will require a forensic investigation, say several scientists. Investigators would be looking for viruses that matched the genetic sequence of SARS-CoV-2 and, if they found one, any evidence that it could have escaped. To do that, authorities would need to take samples from the lab,

interview staff, review lab books and records of safety incidents, and see what types of experiment researchers had been doing. An independent investigation at the WIV facility is probably the only way to convincingly rule out the lab as a possible source of the outbreak, but such a probe is still being blocked by the Chinese authorities. (Nature) This is outrageous.

- On June 7, China issued a white paper called, "China's Actions to Fight the Covid-19 Epidemic." This document asserted: "China's action composes the heroic paean to the people's lives above all else, highlighting the responsibility of a great power to life, the people, history and the international community. China has always adhered to the concept of a community of a shared future for mankind. It has always worked hand in hand with other countries and fought side by side, making unremitting efforts to fight for an early global epidemic prevention and control." Some observers noted this narrative did not reflect an accurate assessment of the historical record of the COVID-19 pandemic or Chinese history more generally. It is estimated that 47 million people died senselessly under former Chinese Leader Mao Tse Tung.
- On July 10, the WHO announced that a two-member advance team of experts has left for China to organize an investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus. It is unlikely this team will have the authority to conduct the type of full forensic investigation that is required.
- In fact, the WHO has agreed with the Chinese government that investigations into the first patients in China and the market's role in the outbreak will be led by Chinese scientists, with WHO experts able to review and "augment, rather than duplicate," studies undertaken by China officials. The exact language from the WHO Terms of Reference document states that "Some of the abovementioned work may already be partially done or documented by the time the international team initiates its work, and the study will therefore build on existing information and augment, rather than duplicate, ongoing or existing efforts." It also asserts that "The final composition of the international team should be agreed by both China and WHO." In light of all the evidence of active efforts by the Chinese government to destroy evidence, deny access to key records, and silence relevant domestic (and even international) voices, this level of deference to Beijing falls well below the standard of even basic accountability. As I have written elsewhere, it would be wrong to blame the WHO for this given the designed weakness of its mandate, the result of efforts by many states over decades to defend state sovereignty at the expense of our common good as humans sharing the same planet (sorry to throw in more idealism here, but I invite you to join OneShared.World if you are interested in addressing our world's dangerous collective action problem).
- Here is an annotated version of the WHO Terms of Reference with comments provided by Giles Demaneuf. It is abundantly clear that the Chinese government aggressively negotiated compromises, structural limitations, and borderline falsehoods into the document. I have great faith in the personal integrity of many of the ten people chosen to represent the international community in this investigation, but they will almost certainly not be able to fulfill their obligation to humanity and future generations if they follow the terms of reference to the letter. It is my hope they will demand the most

thorough investigation of all possible hypotheses, demand full access to all relevant people and materials, demonstrate full transparency, and speak publicly and forcefully, in their collective and/or personal capacities, if they don't have full access to everything and everyone they need.

- On July 15, Chinese virologist Shi Zhengli, the noted WIV bat virus specialist, sent written comments to Science magazine refuting allegations of a leak. Nothing in her comments in any way reduces the pressing need for a full and unrestricted international investigation into the origins of the pandemic.
- In my July 29, 2020 Washington Post editorial, I write: "The closest known relative to SARS-CoV-2 is a virus sampled by Chinese researchers from six miners infected while working in a bat-infested cave in southern China in 2012. These miners developed symptoms we now associate with Covid-19. Half of them died. These viral samples were then taken to the Wuhan Institute of Virology—the only facility in China that's a biosafety Level 4 laboratory, the highest possible safety designation. The Level 4 designation is reserved for facilities dealing with the most dangerous pathogens. Wuhan is more than 1,000 miles north of Yunnan province, where the cave is located. If the virus jumped to humans through a series of human-animal encounters in the wild or in wet markets, as Beijing has claimed, we would likely have seen evidence of people being infected elsewhere in China before the Wuhan outbreak. We have not. The alternative explanation, a lab escape, is far more plausible. We know the Wuhan Institute of Virology was using controversial 'gain of function' techniques to make viruses more virulent for research purposes. A confidential 2018 State Department cable released this month highlighting the lab's alarming safety record should heighten our concern. Suggesting that an outbreak of a deadly bat coronavirus coincidentally occurred near the only level 4 virology institute in all of China—which happened to be studying the closest known relative of that exact virus—strains credulity."
- Understanding the link between the Chinese miners exposed in the Yunnan cave in 2012 and the potential outbreak in Wuhan in late 2019 is essential. Anyone with a serious interest in getting to the bottom of the origins questions should be require to read the July 15 Latham and Wilson Independent Science News paper in full. It states: "We suggest, first, that inside the miners RaTG13 (or a very similar virus) evolved into SARS-CoV-2, an unusually pathogenic coronavirus highly adapted to humans. Second, that the Shi lab used medical samples taken from the miners and sent to them by Kunming University Hospital for their research. It was this human-adapted virus, now known as SARS-CoV-2, that escaped from the WIV in 2019." This Frontiers in Public Health article raises similar questions.
- It is impossible to overstate the implications of the SARS-CoV-2 virus being so well adapted to humans from the outset. Zhan and Chan in their May 2 paper state that "by the time SARS-CoV-2 was first detected in late 2019, it was already pre-adapted to human transmission to an extent similar to late epidemic SARS-CoV. However, no precursors or branches of evolution stemming from a less human-adapted SARS-CoV-2-like virus have been detected... In comparison to the SARS-CoV epidemic, the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic appears to be missing an early phase during which the virus would be expected to accumulate adaptive mutations for human transmission. However, if this

were the origin story of SARS-CoV-2, there is a surprising absence of precursors or branches emerging from a less recent, less adapted common ancestor among humans and animals." The Latham and Wilson July 15 paper provides by far the best explanation: this virus that escaped from the lab had likely come from a human sample (one of the miners).

- In my Washington Post editorial, I say: "Not getting to the bottom of this crisis would be the height of absurdity. Too much is at stake. To ensure everyone's safety, the WHO and outside investigators must be empowered to explore all relevant questions about the origins of the pandemic without limits. This comprehensive forensic investigation must include full access to all of the scientists, biological samples, laboratory records and other materials from the Wuhan virology institutes and other relevant Chinese organizations. Denying that access should be considered an admission of guilt by Beijing."
- In my August 17 editorial in *The Hill*, I state that "Congress should immediately establish a bipartisan national commission, modeled on the 9/11 Commission, to prepare a full, complete account of four essential failures and what we can do to address them." These four failures are ones made by China, the WHO, the US government, and all of us in not preparing for the full panoply of global existential threats. "Some may feel that establishing such a commission while the pandemic still rages would be like launching the 9/11 commission while the Twin Towers were still falling. But would it not have been better to do exactly that, rather than blindly charge into two wars without deep analysis and a long-term strategy? Getting to the bottom of our current crisis is not just an intellectual exercise. The COVID-19 pandemic is far from over but there are no guarantees that an even worse pandemic, possibly supercharged by a synthetic pathogen, might be just around the corner."
- In September 2020, the Lancet released the first statement of its COVID-19 commission. The statement asserts: "The origins of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) are yet to be definitively determined, but evidence to date supports the view that SARS-CoV-2 is a naturally occurring virus rather than the result of laboratory creation and release. Research into the origins of SARS-CoV-2 should proceed expeditiously, scientifically, and objectively, unhindered by geopolitical agendas and misinformation." It makes little sense for an investigation commission to claim an initial finding before a full investigation has been carried out. It would be far more credible to state that the commission would explore all possible hypothesis to help get to the bottom of the origins issue. Further, by contrasting "a naturally occurring virus rather than the result of laboratory creation and release," the commission completely disregards the possibility of gain of function work followed by a lab leak, the exact scenario that could potentially compromise commission chair, Peter Daszak.
- Selecting Peter Daszak to lead the Lancet commission is also questionable. As I wrote in my message to Lancet editor, Richard Horton: "Peter's organization worked closely with the Wuhan Institute of virology and supported gain of function research on bat coronaviruses. If the pandemic stems from an accidental leak of one of these viruses, Peter would potentially be implicated. I am not at all suggesting that he did anything wrong, just that one of the possible origin stories includes him. Because so much is

riding on this investigation, I think it essential that we make sure the commission itself represents a balance of perspectives, while excluding conspiracy theorists and people with political axes to grind... Putting together a commission that is both impartial and balanced and seen as being impartial and balanced will be critical for everything that follows." ([Here is a Twitter link](#) to Peter describing in his own words the process for manipulating the spike proteins of coronaviruses in a lab.)

- In November, 2020, The WHO released the names of the 10 scientists selected in coordination with the Chinese government to visit Wuhan to assess the origins of the pandemic. Surprisingly, Peter Daszak was on this list. As I mentioned in a 11/27 tweet, "I have great respect for Peter but his clear conflict of interest and [prior] funding relationship with WIV should preclude him from these types of roles." I also tweeted that the key to making this a legitimate process will be "ensuring full & unrestricted access to all samples, records, scientists, etc. as part of a deep forensic investigation with no political interference" and the ability to "interview any scientist in China in conditions of complete privacy & security." I have deep reservations about the leading role the Chinese government will play in this investigation on its own failure, which already includes significant oversight of which scientists are selected as investigators and the ability to have Chinese government and government-related scientists doing the primary investigations (would we let the DRC negotiate these kinds of terms as Ebola raged?). Doing a serious investigation will absolutely require significant whistleblower protections for any Chinese scientists who may wish to come forward. This should include an anonymous and safe digital portal and significant protective safeguards including the possibility of asylum.
- This open letter to the WHO COVID-19 international investigations team outlines essential questions which must be addressed by the WHO investigation. A question not included in the petition but which I believe must be asked is: "What was and is the relationship between the Chinese People's Liberation Army and the Wuhan Institute of Virology? Was the PLA engaged in any research at the WIV and did the PLA store any viral samples in the facility prior to the outbreak?"
- On January 6, 2021, after the Chinese government failed to provide visa's for members of the WHO COVID-19 expert committee, foreign ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying stated: "on the issue of COVID-19 origin-tracing, China has always been open, transparent and responsible and taken the lead in carrying out scientific cooperation in tracing the origin with WHO with the purpose of promoting international research on origin-tracing. In February and July last year, when China was faced with daunting domestic epidemic prevention and control tasks, China invited WHO experts to China twice to carry out cooperation on origin-tracing and formulate the China part of a global scientific cooperation plan on origin-tracing. In October last year, the Chinese side reached agreement on the members of the international expert group. Since then, the experts of the two sides have maintained frequent interactions. Four video meetings were held on October 30, December 3, December 10 and December 18 respectively. With a scientific attitude, Chinese experts shared the outcomes of China's origin-tracing efforts in a science-based and candid manner, and the cooperation between the two sides has made positive progress. Recently, in a positive and constructive attitude, China

has maintained close communication with WHO on the expert panel's trip to China for cooperation on origin-tracing. At present, the global pandemic situation remains very serious, and China is also making all-out efforts to prevent and control the epidemic. Chinese health and epidemic prevention departments and experts are devoting themselves to intense anti-epidemic work. Having all this said, in order to support international COVID-19 cooperation, China has overcome difficulties, accelerated preparatory work at home and tried its best to create favorable conditions for the international expert team's visit to China. WHO knows that clearly. The issue of origin-tracing is very complicated. In order to ensure the smooth progress of the work of the international expert group in China, necessary procedures need to be fulfilled and relevant specific arrangements need to be made. At present, the two sides are in negotiating on this." This (technical term, baloney) answer begs the question that has been clear from the earliest days of the pandemic — what is China trying to hide?

- Nature Medicine published on January 13, 2021, an [opinion piece by Angela Rasmussen](#) seeking to debunk what she called "often contradictory and sometimes outright ridiculous conspiracy theories that spread faster than the virus itself." As a foundation of her argument, she asserted that "A favorite version of the laboratory-origin stories relies on the fact that SARS-CoV-2 was engineered for gain-of-function studies that were also previously performed with bat SARS-like coronaviruses to understand cross-species transmission risk (*Nat. Med.* **21**, 1508–1513; 2015). The irony is that those gain-of-function studies provided valuable information about the biology of SARS-CoV-2. Gain-of-function research is also subject to intense scrutiny and governmental oversight, precisely because of the high risk involved in conducting it safely; thus, it is extremely unlikely that gain-of-function research on hard-to-obtain coronaviruses (such as bat SARS-like coronaviruses) could occur under the radar." By definition, therefore, this argument would fail if it were shown that animal pathogen research was being carried out at WIV in secret and "under the radar."
- On January 15, 2021, the US State Department issued a [Fact Sheet](#) in which the following assertion was made: "Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the United States has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China's military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017." This claim was vetted with all relevant US government agencies and appears credible. In my Twitter response to this assertion I call for additional evidence of this claim to be released and for Five Eyes intelligence services to issue a joint statement assessing this claim.
- It has always been, and remains, my position, that we need to actively examine all possible origin hypothesis. This certainly includes both zoonotic jump and an accidental lab leak. Any credible investigation into the origins of COVID-19 must actively explore both of these hypotheses.
- [belgrade](#)
- [Biden](#)
- [Broad Institute](#)

- [Chen Wei](#)
- [china](#)
- [coronavirus](#)
- [covid19](#)
- [crisis](#)
- [Daszak](#)
- [epoch times](#)
- [nature medicine](#)
- [pandemic](#)
- [PLA](#)
- [RaTG13](#)
- [SARS-CoV-2](#)
- [sars-cov2](#)
- [trump](#)
- [united states](#)
- [whistleblower](#)
- [World Health Organization](#)
- [Wuhan](#)
- [Wuhan Institute of Virology](#)
- [xi jinping](#)
- [Yunnan](#)

24 Comments

-
-
- [Dennis](#)[April 16, 2020 at 3:03 pm](#)
Keep on keeping on Jaime! We're here for the truth. I'm sure your going to dig it up somehow?.... balanced but true.???
[Reply](#)
 - [Emily](#)[April 20, 2020 at 1:00 pm](#)
Thank you
[Reply](#)
 - [The triple truth ruth](#)[May 19, 2020 at 1:55 am](#)
The problem with speculation concerning the possibility of an accident is that we still end up in the same place A TWO to THREE YEAR PANDEMIC that can go either way—deadlier orr benign. As it is it will be hard enough for the rest of the world to get back to the task at hand rebuilding the global economy. I remember past futurists and they all ended up talking what ended up being garbage crystal eyeballing. Anything that makes this worse is exactly the sort of stupidity that got us all here. No one is looking good. Even New Zealand will

sooner or later have to deal with the economic consequences. Enough with the blaming and scapegoating. IT'S THE RNA, STUPID and the stupid too.

Reply

- KLC November 24, 2020 at 8:22 am

As the author lays out clearly at the beginning of the article the point is to fully investigate the origin of this outbreak so as to implement measures that are most likely to prevent future pandemic outbreaks. It's not about blaming – it's about fact-finding and improving safety. No one with an egregious conflict of interest such as Peter Daszak should be a party to the forensic investigation of the WIV lab(s) that needs to be conducted.

Reply

- HY April 20, 2020 at 7:14 pm

Just FYI, that wet market in Wuhan did sell a lot wild animals in addition to seafood. It even had a wild animal restaurant inside. Apparently not many seafood on the menu.

Reply

- Nova Vieho May 14, 2020 at 1:49 pm

There are identical wet markets in every small and large city all over China with it's vast 1.3 billion population. Certainly Guandong and Yunan where the suspects are from host countless such markets, and are ~1000 miles away from Wuhan. Everyone please I appeal to your commonsense and try not to believe that somehow this bat virus "choose" Wuhan all places in China to jump to humans, which would be an insane coincidence with no comparison in history.

Reply

- Aaron April 21, 2020 at 1:28 am

I have an article proving that they were studying Corona type viruses derived from bats at the wuhan lab.

If you are interested email me at

aaron@riderzlaw.com

Reply

- Davina Rhine April 21, 2020 at 9:46 pm

Thank you sharing your insight and review methodology. If you haven't you may want to look at Curtards published paper that came out early April. It was detailed and thorough. Curtard made the observation that he had only seen this combination of strains experiently. The link to the full paper is in pubmed. Thank you for asking the difficult questions which it seems for whatever reason the majority in postions of influence, media, institutions or policy arent asking at best or worst censoring those who are. This applies to questions not only of origin but of treatments and management including public policy decisions. Unfortunately the general public en masse are also getting angry about these questions being raised which is baffling; you cant make robust and critical decisions that affect many without vigirous review of all the data, science and scenarios especially from the perspective of cost benefit analysis and therapeutic management.

Reply

- Alex Hallatt April 23, 2020 at 6:02 pm

This is in that Nature Medicine paper you reference first:

“Theories of SARS-CoV-2 origins

It is improbable that SARS-CoV-2 emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus. As noted above, the RBD of SARS-CoV-2 is optimized for binding to human ACE2 with an efficient solution different from those previously predicted^{7,11}. Furthermore, if genetic manipulation had been performed, one of the several reverse-genetic systems available for betacoronaviruses would probably have been used¹⁹. However, the genetic data irrefutably show that SARS-CoV-2 is not derived from any previously used virus backbone²⁰. Instead, we propose two scenarios that can plausibly explain the origin of SARS-CoV-2: (i) natural selection in an animal host before zoonotic transfer; and (ii) natural selection in humans following zoonotic transfer. We also discuss whether selection during passage could have given rise to SARS-CoV-2.”

Reply

o Derek May 9, 2020 at 12:29 am

No one is asserting that this virus was manipulated with genome editing tools or even that it was grown via in vitro culture (evidence of immunoevasive adaptations make it most likely to have evolved in a host); but there is evidence that these labs were collecting wild type viruses and doing animal passage gain of function experiments, both of which could have brought this strain to Wuhan before an accidental release.

Reply

• Davina Rhine April 24, 2020 at 2:11 am

I referenced a paper looking at the covid19 strains earlier. In error I listed the scientist name as Curtard. Its Coutard. You can access it here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0166354220300528>

Reply

• Melinda Correll April 29, 2020 at 1:04 pm

Thank you so much for putting together this excellent summary. I've been following this closely since the beginning and you brought out some points that I was not aware of. We have the freedom to speak out and if we don't speak out we might find some day in the near future that we can no longer. So thank you and keep on keepin on.

Reply

o Steven Atukwase May 3, 2020 at 6:47 am

As some one with some knowledge in zoology, i think that it would be necessary for the habitat of the alleged animals ie bats that could have been the source of COVID-19 virus to be thoroughly scanned in minute detail to confirm or dismiss that hypothesis. Because if the virus was from bats that were taken from a natural ecosystem, then there must be other bats over the habitat which carry those pathogens. There is no way that only one animal (one bat) could have contracted and spread the virus because they normally live in large groups., there should be others which have it. If it is discovered that there are no other bats carrying the virus then this is likely to help question the validity of that hypothesis. With the natural occurrence of the virus eliminated, that would

leave the scientists to highly suspect the artificial (lab) hypothesis.

At the same time there is need to ask: If infected bats were experimented on, didn't other people e.g hunters at a different location or traders at a different market get into contact with bats from the same source and get infected? The assumption here is that the habitat was not restricted, but freely accessed. If it was restricted then the controller should be contacted for information.

The inquiry into the origin of COVID-19 is essential to prevent the resurgence of the disease after some time so it should be highly encouraged.

Mr Jamie Metzl, thank you for the interest to conduct that research as it will contribute to preventing the likely resurfacing of that virus.

Reply

- Diane May 1, 2020 at 2:21 pm

Hi Jamie, keep up your good work. At the moment we don't know why China behaved the way it did. This makes for conspiratorial thinking. While we have the freedoms to question China's behaviour and motives we should. If our conspiratorial ideas turn out to wrong at least we shall be sure of this. Keep up the investigating,

Diane

Reply

- Jon R May 3, 2020 at 4:39 pm

I used to manage a BSL-3 virology lab. I agree the most likely explanation is a laboratory accident. If this had occurred anywhere else in China I would have believed otherwise. As stated in the article these accidents happen, for instance, a very uncommon but highly lethal infection is monkey B virus which has killed researchers in the past:

<https://www.cdc.gov/herpesvirus/cause.html>

A comment that has troubled me coming out of the Chinese government was along the lines of how their authoritarian government was superior for fighting pandemic outbreaks. This was likely a reaction to some White House comment, but China is definitely a student of history and one has to wonder what steps they would take to finally become the biggest power in the world and have the Renminbi become the world's reserve currency. The later would require an enormous debt event, which we are now facing.

Reply

- Hazel Henderson May 11, 2020 at 4:45 pm

Thank you for this very useful summary. I co- wrote an article in March, 2020 with physicist Fritjof Capra, as a global systems -oriented futurist scenario , pointing to feedback loops from natural ecosystems to our unsustainable industrial lifestyles which not only make pandemics more likely, but also relate to all the crises in natural systems resulting from fossilized sectors emissions of greenhouse gases and other pollutants..This article " Pandemics :Lessons Looking Back from 2050 " is at <http://www.ethicalmarkets.com> , which is a global alternative media Certified B.Corporation I founded and have personally funded with my book royalties and our global TV series since 2004. We take no advertising and have 30,000 professional users .We would be happy to serve pro bono as one of your " media partners".I just signed up for your Newsletter .

Reply

- Gordon Guo May 14, 2020 at 2:04 pm

Thank you so much Jamie for helping everyone to focus on the “on the record” facts, common sense, and logic.

As someone with a strong connection to China, I can say that there are identical wet markets in every small, medium, and large city all over China with its vast 1.3 billion population. Certainly Guangdong and Yunnan province where the suspects bats are from, 1000 miles from Wuhan, have countless such markets. Everyone please I appeal to your commonsense and try not to believe that somehow this bat virus “choose” Wuhan near the WIV of all places in all of China to jump to humans, which would be an unbelievable coincidence with no comparison in history.

On more thing that is little mentioned. is that this prolific “bat woman” coronavirus research program based out of the WIV regularly treks to bat cave in Yunnan and elsewhere to collect virus samples. So the accident itself does not necessarily have to have happened inside the WIV. Despite the requirement for full hazmat suits and virus deactivation at collection, humans make mistakes and they could have accidentally infected themselves and brought it back to Wuhan where they work and live.

A final point is that the WIV is a very new lab, only commissioned 2-3 years ago as the flagship lab in China, widely praised by state media in print and even video documentaries. It’s China’s first attempt at the top BSL4 security. Again, common sense: new lab, new practices = higher likelihood of accidents.

Reply

- Mook Lan Fa May 17, 2020 at 5:59 am

I didn’t want to believe you at first because it’s the same theory that Chump is pushing but science is science and we must get to the bottom of this! 🤔 I believe you now because you don’t have a dog in the hunt and you said:

– There weren’t any bats for sale;

– They would’ve been hibernating during that time;

– The virus was a 96.4% match;

– China has a history of poor security; and

– Although you didn’t say this, I believe this theory now because Pompous said that he had significant evidence that he couldn’t share with a smug look on his face. It’s like he’s got the smoking gun document and he’s going to release it right before the election...

Anyway, what I don’t understand is why you don’t think the virus hasn’t been genetically manipulated? I’m not a scientist, but as a layman, I have been following COVID-19 closely, and I’ve noticed that it has attacked in sequence:

1) The elderly;

2) Those with comorbidities;

3) Those with latent comorbidities — almost like it’s accelerating whatever is going to kill you when you grow old;

4) People of color;

5) Now children; and

6) Possibly hiding and coming out later.

It’s acting like a bioweapon?

Reply

- dMay 22, 2020 at 7:16 am

Hi Jamie, it's a great summary and analysis, thanks.

I'd as well add here a link to the withdrawn paper of dr. Xiao, cited as well in

<https://project-evidence.github.io/>

https://chanworld.org/wp-content/uploads/wpforo/default_attachments/1581810860-447056518-Originsof2019-NCov-XiaoB-Res.pdf

I think that this is really important for these reasons:

– I think it's the first (only?) Chinese scientist paper which tries to explain the outbreak.

Some statements are actually also pretty serious and wild like

“the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan.”

and

“In summary, somebody was entangled with the evolution of 2019-nCoV coronavirus”

– dr Xiao also hypothesized two possible ways in which the contamination might have occurred:

1) from the WHCDC to the market:

“Surgery was performed on the caged animals and the tissue samples were collected for DNA and RNA extraction and sequencing

The tissue samples and contaminated trashes were source of pathogens. They were only ~280 meters from the seafood market.”

2) in another hypothesis he links a possible contamination between the WHCDC (WIV) and the adjacent Union hospital:

“The WHCDC was also adjacent to the Union Hospital where the first group of doctors were infected during this epidemic.

It is plausible that the virus leaked around and some of them contaminated the initial patients in this epidemic, though solid proofs are needed in future study.”

– and then he goes on explaining the chimeric researches performed at the WHCDC(or WIV) and why a lab accident is likely.

“The second laboratory was 12 kilometers from the seafood market and belonged to Wuhan Institute of Virology, Chinese Academy of Sciences.

This laboratory reported that the Chinese horseshoe bats were natural reservoirs for the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV) which caused the 2002-3 pandemic

. The principle investigator participated in a project which generated a chimeric virus using

the SARS-CoV reverse genetics system, and reported the potential for human emergence

. A direct speculation was that SARS-CoV or its derivative might leak from the laboratory.”

p.s.

typo: the market is 280 meters away from the WHCDC not 3 miles

“The market is also less than 3 miles away from the Wuhan Centre”

Reply

- Werner August 4, 2020 at 4:30 am

Typo: "It ((is)) my view that Chinese researchers at these institutes were studying these viruses with the best intentions of developing surveillance systems, treatments, and vaccines for the good of humanity. "

Reply

- green August 28, 2020 at 9:52 pm

"47 million people died senselessly under former Chinese Leader Mao Tse Tung"—it is a lie.

Reply

- Betty October 16, 2020 at 10:02 pm

why does the scientific community ignore these facts? You do not have to be a corona virologist to figure this sequence of events out! It is basic detective work: the viral sequence is the equivalent of finger prints.

Reply

- Frank November 24, 2020 at 3:48 am

Jamie: Your collection of information looks like a collection of partial conspiracy theories, not one compact coherent theory of how SARS-CoV-2 came to infect humans. It seems designed to appeal to our biases and emotions, not our reason. Some particulars:

The Chinese government would be behaving exactly the same way no matter how this pandemic began: The Chinese release information that places the Communist government in a good light or that punishes individuals and organizations the government wants to blame. Any information that reflects badly on the government is suppressed. It doesn't matter if the pandemic began with the transfer of the virus to people or wild animals eaten by people in bat-infested Southern China (the logical location) or the escape of the virus from a lab in Wuhan, the Chinese government would not permit an international investigation of the origins of the pandemic. They destroyed all of the samples from the Hunan Seafood (wild animal) Market, so no one could discover what role this market played a role in the pandemic – a danger that had been recognized from the first SARS outbreak and should have been eliminated. Some, but not all, of the December 2019 cases were linked to this wild animal market, but the earliest known case today dates apparently dates back to at least November 17, so the first transmission to humans could have occurred in this market in November or October. Alternatively, if the virus escaped from a lab, it wouldn't have made any difference if that virus evolved naturally, was the product of gain of function experiments or was produced for more nefarious purposes. We can't logically draw any reliable conclusions from China's behavior, because totalitarian governments suppress information whenever it is in their best interest. China would not want an international team discovering or confirming ANY of these possible origins.

Since SARS-CoV-2 can be transmitted by asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic infected patients, we can't be sure that the pandemic originated in Wuhan, a location where bats aren't a major problem. Two cases of COVID were identified in France in late December in 2019. Somehow, before even being identified, the virus had traveled halfway around the world, was transmitted between humans at least once in France, and the trail apparently ended. We now know the virus had infected a number of Americans in

Washington (state), California, and probably elsewhere by late January without being detected – even though doctors knew what to look for by then. Given that no one was alerted to the new disease until late December 2019 and given that asymptomatic or mildly symptomatic infected patients can transmit the virus to others, Patient Zero could have been infected **ALMOST ANYWHERE AND TRAVELED TO WUHAN UNDETECTED**. The disease could have been transmitted between humans a number of times in less densely populated areas without leaving a detectable trail.. What probably made Wuhan special and the “origin” of the pandemic is that it may have the site of the first super-spreader events that converted the infection into an epidemic.

The viruses from the first three SARS-CoV-2 patients were genetically different, so the disease pre-dated them. Analysis of all known variants suggests that the common ancestor to known strains existed in November 2019, or possibly October. The Chinese reported a suspected infection on November 17 in the vicinity of Wuhan. The South China Morning Post obtained a report showing the government has identified hundreds or suspected cases in December in the vicinity of Wuhan. The virus likely evolved in the logical location, bat-infected Southern China, and then traveled north to Wuhan undetected in a human or wild animal. We know that all of the December cases in Wuhan were not linked to wild animal market, but the November cases might have originated there.

Of course, it is suspicious that Wuhan contained two institutions where dangerous viruses were studied, especially a new BSL 4 institution. However, Wuhan was ALSO the site of the Hunan Seafood Market, the largest wild animal market in Central China. Wuhan is bigger than New York City, where the US pandemic first exploded. Wuhan had the sophisticated medical system needed to detect a new disease and the high population density to permit rapid growth of the pandemic.. There are probably institutes of virology half of Chinese large cities where the pandemic could have begun. There are 9 BSL 4 facilities in the US, all but one near or in a major city. There is nothing suspicious about the presence of a virology institute in the Chinese city where the pandemic began. The fact that research was being done on SARS-like viruses is also not surprising given the outbreak of SARS-CoV-1 in China two decades earlier.. News reports that US visitors to that new lab were concerned about safety were totally misrepresented; the US personnel who visited the institute reported it was being under-utilized, because a nervous Chinese government was unwilling to sanction work with dangerous viruses the facility was designed to handle and because of a shortage of trained staff. However they noted that the latter problems was being addressed by training some staff at laboratories outside the US.

“Gain of function” experiments are performed in laboratories to rapidly simulate the evolutionary process by which viruses acquire the ability to efficiently replicate in different types of cell. Such mutated viruses are studied as models of viruses that might evolve naturally and cause pandemics. Since SARS-CoV-2 was not closely related to any known SARS-like virus and appears to have arisen from recombination (not mutation) of sequences from several different coronaviruses (most likely in bats), it probably is NOT the product of a gain of function experiment. Nor does it appear to have been genetically engineered. US funding agencies stopped gain-of-function experiments for

several years (including experiments in Wuhan) while experts debated whether the information gained was worth the CUMULATIVE risk of running such experiments in dozens of labs over decades. The calculated cumulative risk was small and the risk from any one laboratory in any month (Wuhan in November 2019) was microscopic. EVERY VIRAL PANDEMIC BEFORE COVID BEGAN WHEN A VIRUS THAT REPLICATED IN A SPECIES IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH HUMANS MUTATED AND ACQUIRED THE ABILITY TO REPLICATE TO THE HIGH LEVELS IN HUMANS NEEDED FOR EFFECTIVE TRANSMISSION: Swine influenza, avian influenza. HIV (from a monkey virus that causes immunosuppression), SARS-CoV-1 (pangolins), MERS (camels), measles (cattle), smallpox (rodents), chickenpox, Hepatitis (birds?) etc. It is possible – BUT CERTAINLY NOT LIKELY ENOUGH TO WARRANT SUPPORTING CONSPIRACY THEORIES – that COVID is the first man-made pandemic. No evidence that this pandemic didn't evolve like every other pandemic in history.

Reply

- David December 12, 2020 at 2:04 pm

It's a question that may never be conclusively answered: Was the SARS-CoV-2 virus inside one of the Wuhan labs (Wuhan Institute of Virology, Wuhan CDC) before the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic?

At the start of the outbreak, Shi Zhengli, head of the WIV's centre for emerging infectious diseases, thought it was possible that the virus had come from the WIV. She admitted she was worried and said she lost sleep thinking about it. She spoke of her relief when she checked and found no record of the virus in her lab's records. A lab-leak hypothesis is clearly not far-fetched if Shi Zhengli herself thought it was possible and was worried sick by the idea.

It's worth re-reading Shi Zhengli's quotes from Scientific American's profile of her in March 2020: "If coronaviruses were the culprit, she remembers thinking, 'Could they have come from our lab?' ... she frantically went through her own lab's records from the past few years to check for any mishandling of experimental materials, especially during disposal. Shi breathed a sigh of relief when the results came back: none of the sequences matched those of the viruses her team had sampled from bat caves. 'That really took a load off my mind,' she says. 'I had not slept a wink for days.'"

If you accept Shi Zhengli's reassurances that there was no record of the virus in her lab, the matter is closed as far as the WIV goes. But there is good reason to be sceptical. For one thing, Shi Zhengli would not have been the one to decide whether to disclose to the world that the virus was stored in her lab. The Chinese state alone would have made that decision. And if the virus was in the lab, it is almost certain that the Chinese state would have covered it up. This is a government that recently detained up to one million Uyghurs in concentration camps and then denied the fact despite being confronted with irrefutable evidence.

And then there's the issue of the WIV virus database being deleted. Whether or not there's anything incriminating in the virus database, the decision to delete comes across as though they're hiding something. Surely the Chinese authorities must understand that their recent behaviour and their history of cover-ups makes the lab-leak hypothesis more believable.

If the virus was inside either of the labs, it does not seem likely that it will be uncovered by the WHO's investigation into the origins of the virus. Indeed, if the virus was in the labs, it may take years or decades for the facts to emerge. In time, scientists, journalists, and others will perhaps uncover conclusive evidence. Or a whistleblower in China may get the word out. Or, as happens from time to time with authoritarian regimes, future Chinese leaders may reveal the truth if they think it's in their interests to discredit their predecessors.

For now, anyone interested in the virus's origins will remain in one of three camps: 1. Convinced of natural zoonosis 2. Convinced of a lab leak 3. Undecided and awaiting more evidence.

Reply

Sender: "Pease, Michael" (b)(6)@state.gov>
Couch, Johnny N (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Recipient: Wright, Janey F (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
David Asher (b)(6)@hudson.org>;
Cindric, Thomas E (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: "Asher, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Kang, Eliot (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: (b)(6)
Date: Tue, 26 Jan 2021 04:30:13 +0000

Eliot,

Not surprisingly, I understand there is upset for my dogged pursuit of the facts surrounding whatever happened in Wuhan, including pulling an end run around Ford because the Secretary wanted to get some facts out that the world deserved to know. I sincerely tried to help advance the mission of T, not disrupt it. Biological warfare threats, even unintended lab releases of experiments into advanced gain of function applications that may or may not be defense related, have the potential to disrupt our state, society, economy, and world if not governed, monitored, and reported by the world community. The PRC's conduct has been criminal. I am highly confident in the findings of our work, despite certain gaps that may never be filled due to the scale of Chinese coverup. Why Ford could not take charge of the single most consequential issue related to BW in history is beyond my comprehension. It will go down in history as a huge policy error not to have demanded we get to the bottom of what the origins were (and, let's pray that our analysis is wrong and that this radical disease came randomly out of a bat cave where a Pangolin met an angry bat—but that will need to PROVED, not asserted without evidence).

For the record, getting the COVID story out was NOT the view of Donald Trump. In fact, I suspect the previous President had a hand in deflecting proper focus in the government into the natural or "super natural" causal pathway of COV 19 and its release because it might prove embarrassing that some USG funding for whatever reasons went into the WIV's Coronavirus R&D efforts. There are good reasons why I never voted for Trump, including the fact I knew him a bit from NY real estate finance. The man was and is a total jerk who deserves to be doubly impeached.

So even as I step away from working as a mere State contractor, my support for the T mission of advancing non proliferation and arms control under President Biden is unabated. We just need to get our heads around the power of synthetic biology and massive destructive potential of viral BW vectors. Right now our Department is simply lost on this critical issue as is the IC. The other issue that concerns me is that we are literally lost in space. We are facing a world of problems up there. Bio war and space war I believe will be transformational WMD problems in the coming decades.

No matter what, I promise to support you all from the Hudson Institute. Among many other matters, we will be looking hard into the pros and cons of gain of function research as well as the need to develop a global bio surveillance capability to protect against natural as well as man made pathogens. If State ever wants my confidential input, just give me a call. Also, I really hope to privately help Phil and you enhance your CP network and intel analytical fusion capabilities, especially around smart sanctions. The little NSRI team, especially (b)(6) could be incredibly helpful to ISN and I highly encourage you to bring them under your wing.

I will send a formal, far shorter and less expressive note to (b)(6) wishing her great success.

All the best,

David

(b)(6)

PS- If possible, I would appreciate State keeping my SCI clearance active for a short period of time so that I can move it to a place where my knowledge and experience can remain relevant to USG deep fight. I will not bill any more hours to the Department and stay out of the building while I transition, if acceptable. If not, I can come by and turn in my creds and read out ASAP.

Sender: "Asher, David" (b)(6)@state.gov>

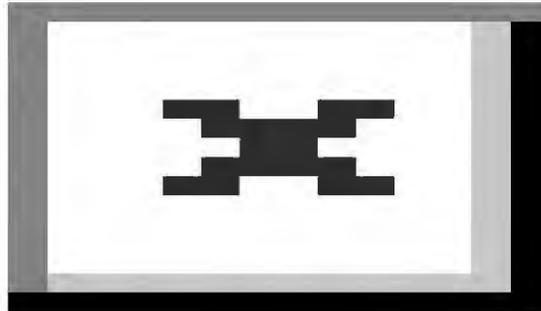
Recipient: Kang, Elliot (b)(6)@state.gov>

From: "Keshap, Atul" (b)(6)@state.gov>
To: Ortagus, Morgan D (b)(6)@state.gov>
Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Fritz, Jonathan D (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: New York Mag: The Lab Leak Hypothesis
Date: Fri, 8 Jan 2021 18:31:00 +0000

Morgan, welcome back. I am so happy for you and your family. Here's an article you might have seen, but I am sending it again for your interest.

Probably more than you ever wanted to know about the extreme risks to our species of experimenting with gain of function in chimeric bat coronaviruses.

Best wishes, atul



From: Feith, David (b)(5)@state.gov>
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)(5)@who.eop.gov; Ruggiero, Anthony J. EOP/NSC (b)(5)@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>

Feb 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.

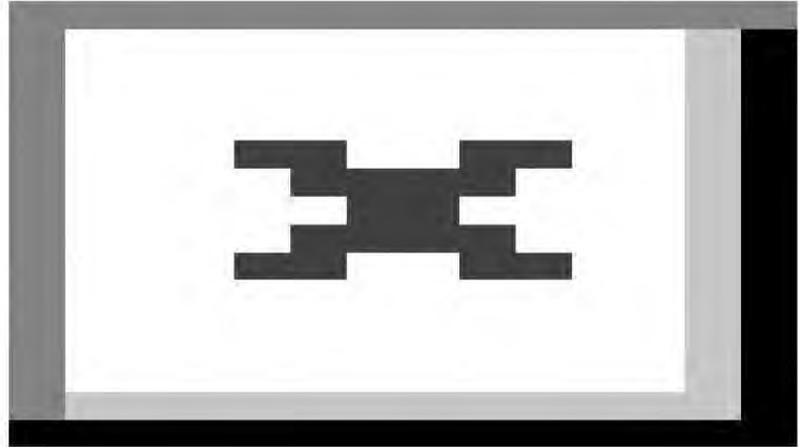
“No Credible Evidence”

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 Gutler 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.

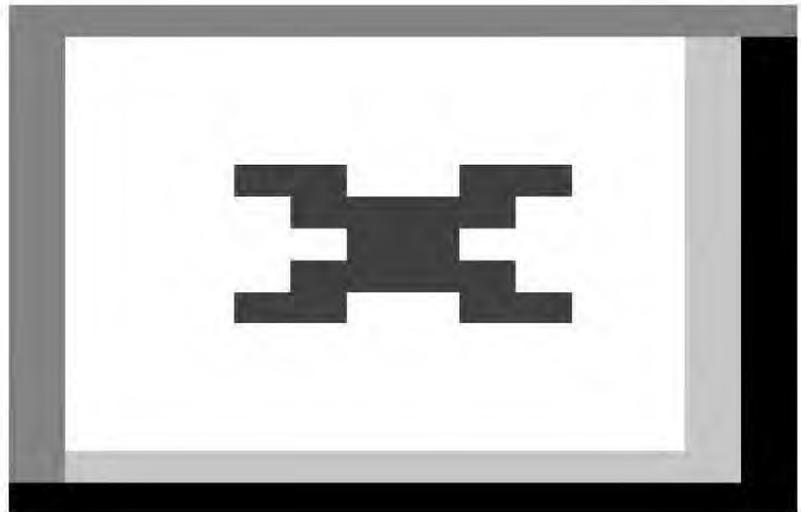
In November or December of 2019, the novel coronavirus began to spread. Chinese scientists initially named it “Wuhan seafood market pneumonia virus,” but soon that idea went away. The market, closed and decontaminated by Chinese officials on January 1, 2020, was an amplifying hub, not the source of the 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 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 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 scorching 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.”

“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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The 2-person team from the World Health Organization (WHO) traveling to China today [10 Jul 2020] to address the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic is unlikely to come home with answers. Rather, the duo -- an epidemiologist and an animal health expert whose names have not been released -- will discuss with Chinese officials the scope of a larger international mission later, according to a WHO statement.

But this initial trip offers real hope that the mystery of the virus' origins, which has become a political powder keg and the subject of

countless conspiracy theories, will finally be investigated more thoroughly and transparently. (A similar WHO-led mission to examine how China was handling its fight against the virus, launched after weeks of diplomatic wrangling, returned in February [2020] with a surprising wealth of information) [comment 1].

"Science must stay open to all possibilities" about the pandemic's origins, Mike Ryan, executive director of WHO's Health Emergencies Programme, said at a press conference on 7 Jul [2020]. "We need to lay out a series of investigations that will get the answers that I'm sure the Chinese government, governments around the world, and ourselves really need in order to manage the risk going forward into the future."

Questions range from hunting for animals that might harbor the virus to examining the possibility that it came from a laboratory. There are plenty of details to investigate, and it could be a long road. Origin riddles for other new infectious diseases often took years to solve, and the route to answers has involved wrong turns, surprising twists, technological advances, lawsuits, allegations of cover-ups, and high-level politics. Determining how a pathogen suddenly emerges in people requires a lot of sleuthing, but past successes offer clues of where to look for new insights, as do the few data points that now exist for SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.

The initial, tidy origin story told by health officials in Wuhan during the 1st few weeks of January [2020] was that a cluster of people connected to a seafood market developed an unusual pneumonia, and that the outbreak stopped after the market was closed and disinfected. But confusion about the origin of the novel coronavirus identified in Wuhan patients arose when researchers published the 1st epidemiologic studies of the city's outbreak: 4 of the 1st 5 cases confirmed to have SARS-CoV-2 infections had no link to the market.

Soon, other theories emerged. Some believe it's no coincidence that the city is host to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), home to leading bat coronavirus researcher Shi Zheng-Li. Her group, one of the 1st to isolate and sequence SARS-CoV-2, has trapped bats in the wild for 15 years, hunting for coronaviruses to help identify pandemic threats. In their 1st report about the new virus, the scientists described a bat coronavirus in their collection that was 96.2% similar to SARS-CoV-2 [comment 2].

U.S. President Donald Trump early on endorsed speculation that the virus entered humans because of an accident at WIV. A more contentious theory is that the lab created the virus. (Researchers at the lab

insist neither scenario has any merit, and evolutionary biologists elsewhere have argued the virus shows no evidence of having been engineered.)

The most popular hypothesis is that SARS-CoV-2 spread into humans from an intermediate host, an animal species susceptible to the virus that acted as a bridge between bats and humans. In the case of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), civets turned out to play that role for the responsible coronavirus. For Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), also a coronavirus disease, it quickly became clear camels were the culprit because highly similar viruses were found in the animals and people caring for them.

Chinese officials have reported conducting tests for SARS-CoV-2 at the Wuhan seafood market, but what they found remains sketchy. China's state-run news agency, Xinhua, said "environmental samples" tested positive for the virus in a zone of the market that sold wildlife, but the report had no details about the results or even a list of the species for sale. Other studies have discovered similarities between SARS-CoV-2 and a coronavirus found in pangolins, an endangered species that eats ants, but the pangolin virus is more divergent genetically from SARS-CoV-2 than the closest bat virus, and there's no evidence pangolins or their scales -- used in traditional Chinese medicine -- were sold at the market.

So, assuming WHO's team and the Chinese government work out a deal for an international mission to study the pandemic's origins, where would it start? Here are some key questions that need answers.

- What, exactly, did the studies of the Wuhan seafood market sample, and what did the researchers find? With SARS, which emerged in a person in China's Guangdong province in November 2002 -- but was not reported to WHO for 3 months -- extensive sampling of animals at marketplaces in the province found its virus in palm civets by October 2003.

- Does more epidemiological data exist about the earliest cases than have been made public so far here and here? Where had they traveled? Were they in contact with any animals? What interactions did they have with each other? Have antibody tests been done on any of their contacts? Do stored blood or tissue samples for any of their contacts exist that could show earlier infections?

For SARS, by June 2004, 14 months after the discovery of that virus, researchers had reported detailed epidemiological analyses of humans and animals: 39% of the earliest cases were food handlers, traders of

live animals were 13 times more likely to have antibodies to the virus, and in that group, 72% handled civets. New interviews with the earliest COVID-19 cases could reveal surprising links between them. COVID-19 clusters, for example, have occurred among people who were dining and drinking together, gathering at religious services, and even playing mahjong.

- How aggressively have Chinese researchers looked for SARS-CoV-2 in samples collected before the 1st known cases in Wuhan? Have they looked outside of Wuhan? How far back in time have they probed?

Hospitals and diagnostic labs sometimes store blood, nasal swabs, and tissue samples from patients, especially if they die from unexplained illnesses. Just such samples led to the realization that MERS, 1st recognized in Saudi Arabia in June 2012, had killed 2 people in Jordan in April of that year [2012]. Analyses of stored samples from those 2 people and blood sampling of others who became ill but survived that outbreak confirmed that they all had MERS. Scientists realized camels were the source of Middle East respiratory syndrome when highly similar viruses were found in the animals and people caring for them.

- Can widespread screens be done of bats and other wild animal species thought to be susceptible to SARS-CoV-2 and common in China, including primates, deer, and rodents? Animal feces or urine often contain genetic evidence of viruses. Shi's group at WIV has routinely found coronaviruses in fecal samples and nasal swabs of bats. The sampling of feces from chimpanzees in sub-Saharan Africa has greatly contributed to understandings of the origins of the HIV-1 epidemic, and the Nipah virus, which surfaced in Malaysian pig farmers in 1998, was found in flying bats 2 years later by sampling their urine and fruit that they had partially eaten.

- Can widespread screening of susceptible domesticated animals provide clues to COVID-19's origin? AIDS researchers discovered that pet monkeys harbored a simian immunodeficiency virus that is closely linked to HIV-2, a less common variant that also infects people. Shi's group did a study of domesticated and feral cats in Wuhan and found SARS-CoV-2 antibodies in 15% of the 141 samples tested. No antibodies were found in samples taken before the Wuhan outbreak surfaced, but do veterinarians possibly have additional stored samples? Can more feral cats be tested? Cats, notably, have a thing for seafood, and the Wuhan market at least played a role in amplifying early spread.

- Do stored samples from farmed animals exist? The genetic signature of the influenza virus that caused a pandemic in 2009 showed it clearly had a pig origin, but it wasn't until 2016 that researchers

reported the likely location of farms in Mexico that raised the infected pigs. Their study found 58 influenza viruses in respiratory samples stored by a central lab that diagnosed sick pigs. In all, the samples came from 22 farms in 6 Mexican states taken between 2010 and 2014. Phylogenetic analyses allowed the researchers to work backward from the genetic sequences of the viruses they found and pinpoint 2 states that likely were the origin of the pandemic. The data further suggest the virus initially came to Mexico from pigs imported from Europe.

- Can widespread screening take place of people in China who might come in contact with bats or other wildlife that harbor SARS-CoV-2? Peter Daszak of EcoHealth Alliance and Shi -- who had their funding from the National Institutes of Health cut in April [2020] after pressure from the White House -- published a study last year [2019] of blood taken from nearly 1500 people in Chinese provinces where bats carry SARS-related coronaviruses. They also interviewed people about their histories of illnesses and contact with animals. Only 9 people had evidence of being infected with a bat coronavirus, but as they noted, antibodies quickly wane. The team showed that spillovers from bats to humans occur routinely.

- Do government health reports contain any information about possible COVID-19 cases that predate 1 Dec 2019, the 1st confirmed case of SARS-CoV-2 in the scientific literature? The South China Morning Post reported having seen "government data" that a 55-year-old person from Hubei province had COVID-19 on 17 Nov [2019]. The article says 8 other cases of the disease occurred that month [November 2019]. Wuhan is Hubei's capital, but the government records did not specify where these people lived, the newspaper noted. It's possible the virus was first isolated from patients in Wuhan but emerged outside the city. The influenza virus that caused the pandemic in 2009 first was isolated in San Diego, California, not in Mexico, where it originated.

- Are there stored samples from sewage plants in China that can be probed? Studies of stored sewage samples in Italy described in a press release from that country's National Institute of Health suggest SARS-CoV-2 was circulating there in December 2019, even before doctors noticed the 1st case in Wuhan. A study from Barcelona, Spain, posted on medRxiv and not peer reviewed, claims to have found SARS-CoV-2 in sewage samples from March 2019. These reports have not been independently confirmed and have been subject to much criticism, but that does not undermine the potential value of studying archival sewage samples for SARS-CoV-2.

- What experiments with bat coronaviruses took place at WIV? This is the mother of all questions for those who suspect SARS-CoV-2 came out of the facility. Accidental lab releases do happen, and one even triggered a pandemic: An influenza strain that surfaced in 1977 was linked to strains in Russian labs collected 2 decades earlier.

- Is it possible that somebody at WIV became infected with the virus and then passed it on to others outside the lab? It's unknown which bat viruses WIV has in its collection of samples and whether any of them infect humans. And a controversy surrounds the closest bat virus to SARS-CoV-2, which is called RaTG13. As Shi and co-workers reported, they only fully sequenced this virus after SARS-CoV-2 surfaced, and they looked through their database for potential relatives. (The group often sequences only one small region of bat coronavirus genomes that mutates infrequently, so changes indicate distinct viruses.) A great deal of speculation has circled around the naming of the partial sequence: Shi's group earlier had reported a virus named BtCoV/4991 that exactly matches RaTG13 in that small region, but are they one and the same? Or could it be, as some assert, that BtCoV/4991 is SARS-CoV-2 itself? What other bat coronaviruses has the lab yet to fully sequence? Could any of them offer clues?

Another outstanding question is whether Shi's team or other researchers in Wuhan manipulated bat viruses in "gain-of-function" experiments that can make a virus more transmissible between humans. In 2015, Shi co-authored a paper that made a chimeric SARS virus by combining one from bats with a strain that had been adapted to mice. But that work was done at the University of North Carolina, not in Wuhan, and in collaboration with Ralph Baric. Did Shi's group later carry out other gain-of-function studies in Wuhan, and if so, what did they find?

Finally, diplomatic cables from the U.S. Embassy in Beijing in 2018 warned that a new, ultra-high-security lab at WIV had "a serious shortage of appropriately trained technicians and investigators." Did Shi's team ever work with coronaviruses in that lab, and, if so, why?

If history repeats itself, it might take years -- or even decades -- to crack this case. Scientists haven't unequivocally identified Ebola's source 45 years after its discovery. But the key, time and again, to clarifying the origins of emerging infectious diseases is unearthing new data. WHO's push to organize the probe promises to, at the very least, accelerate what has been a plodding pursuit for answers.

[Byline: Jon Cohen]

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[1. The report of the 1st WHO-China Joint Experts Mission on Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), 16-24 Feb 2020, was published on 28 Feb 2020. It included (p 8) the following segment, titled "Zoonotic origins": "COVID-19 is a zoonotic virus. From phylogenetics analyses undertaken with available full genome sequences, bats appear to be the reservoir of COVID-19 virus, but the intermediate host(s) has not yet been identified. However, 3 important areas of work are already underway in China to inform our understanding of the zoonotic origin of this outbreak. These include early investigations of cases with symptom onset in Wuhan throughout December 2019, environmental sampling from the Huanan Wholesale Seafood Market and other area markets, and the collection of detailed records on the source and type of wildlife species sold at the Huanan market and the destination of those animals after the market was closed." A link to the report and the said text were reproduced in posting

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200312.7081842&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032881646&sdata=9f7k519UjneGZITqD6R%2FKLjRRL2boLWT%2BqSN4AWdDo4%3D&reserved=0>, with the following commentary: "Wishfully, animal-health specialists were included among the members of the WHO Joint Mission." It is relieving to note this comment may have been acknowledged.

2. Zheng-Li Shi team's pre-print paper, "Discovery of a novel coronavirus associated with the recent pneumonia outbreak in humans and its potential bat origin," in which the virus strain RaTG13 was addressed publicly for the 1st time, was published on 23 Jan 2020 at

<<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fdoi.org%2F10.1101%2F2020.01.22.914952&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032881646&sdata=wu%2Fc%2FOz57d%2FmxW2PkBdLCUiG4n15JN6Jq%2BelhcS6nL8%3D&reserved=0>> and reviewed in the commentary of

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200201.6943858&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032881646&sdata=YOWcKTLBcraDLTua6wFMclZgc72FU8SNOFqj9K393d8%3D&reserved=0>. The paper's final version was published later in Nature (doi:

10.1038/s41586-020-2012-7).

Hopefully, the current visit of the 2 experts will pave the road to a thorough, science-based, fully transparent investigation into the origin of the pandemic, in the spirit of One Health and One World. In view of the Dutch experience, China's mink farms should be included in the investigation. Industries of other farmed animal species deserve consideration as well (e.g., rabbits, boars). - Mod.AS

HealthMap/ProMED-mail map:

China:

<<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fhealthmap.org%2Fpromed%2Fp%2F155&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=RPqjK3kzKshL9B6dgoJY0RgEXcbXBWF34GPCV5I4vhs%3D&reserved=0>>]

[See Also:

COVID -19 update (308): USA (TX) animal, dog conf.

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200708.7554832&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=FPwY2vMBKACftRBFbTfThHKRN7%2FFgK31R5dWB4qbwQ%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (299): USA (GA) animal, dog conf

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200703.7535112&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=2AWYNhvvgq8kzWJ4KyKVJVnukldq3eb9WUSF6Fth9qw%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (284): Denmark (ND) animal, farmed mink, spread, dog

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200624.7506728&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=mTVm9Qb9NULiTL93AYCSiAlcIuB7I2%2BUC6vP2Apx3k%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (281): Netherlands (NB, LI) farmed mink, spread, animal, global

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200623.7502849&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=kszl5UuzRgOS7SwPs6IH2Suy%2F5JM2QeimEsZeVaT8pk%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (280): animal, pangolin, research

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200623.7502805&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf>

45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=XGcdUfFeKrjDn7RCbpU3rmTHQIPSkYELImGGeHK1%2F7o%3D&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (267): animal, domestic, wild, cat, research

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200617.7480013&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=K8YMs8FDhKcVAIPWEZiuGcgwQelvL2geKT0ILfX3Rbl%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (266): Denmark (ND) animal, farmed mink, 1st rep

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200617.7479510&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=12D6nCh6BYRGue76S8rWaYdnwIwH5nzfi498CzinVBU%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (251): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, farmed mink, spread, culling

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200610.7453845&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=Po%2BWed%2Bc1tZPx105WI9gaByZtbQ46P%2FAYsGJbXthI4g%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (248): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, mink, spread, culling, cat

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200609.7446478&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=ETpQ4dS3y8EkzTzTeproBq0OYkJCh8MDN6cVuvIL9FI%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (238): USA (MN) animal, cat

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200605.7429133&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=xJ69ad7HYc8cFX%2BYnYhWJh4asw2RGWkMd20dzMxjJic%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (236): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, farmed mink, spread, culling

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200604.7427849&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=Q7Iy4B1x5AKOILAUGDNKu69xlcBpTo7Po9AbFTafpiw%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (231): USA (NY) animal, dog conf.

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200602.7420541&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146>

032891593&sdata=KO980vhdwYgZum70ZptHJ8bTmZbNR4605%2FJ8cS4Nzm0%3D&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (230): Netherlands (NB, LI) animal, farmed mink, spread, control

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200602.7420433&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=kxNAyDM5qjsjtkqtbILHfdb3SptEspOaxs6NWzRmO4%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (227): animal, cat, dog, research, experimental infection

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200601.7416648&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=un6DAI9aPu2Df4atWDt7TbZhK7UHn3oBECbRmCCWqFk%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (215): Netherlands (NB) animal, mink-to-human, epidem., control

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200527.7385049&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=gd86kfxlTeZOQVRKQ1jNxDWdjQ0wOO%2BaEln0xWKv6el%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (212): Russia (Moskva) animal, cat, OIE

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200526.7379578&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=BbGv5XaXFXVPhscEzyvhCW%2Fu0JL9v%2FLQYA7XnbDj8o1%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (209): Netherlands (NB) farmed mink, animal-to-human, cat, epid

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200525.7375359&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=Gqga288HZkzU3kuKQHM9EF8Or9QE99QmKRU%2B1UFn2sU%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (198): Netherlands (NB) farmed mink, animal-to-human infect susp

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200520.7359976&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&sdata=FTywewvEk3y0AbgQs9mQZhPHciSm3h0L7Q3CiAKCYoc%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (189): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, research, cat, dog

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost>

%2F20200517.7344274&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=TYZhIXSINdBxvomEw2c1d0ZvNeQM0Hp%2FyhD9KtvpbP4%3D&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (183): Japan/USA. animal, research, cat, experimental infection

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200514.7337185&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=Op3cnwzU3kqRvkeqavuA%2FCZNMbu7lug3xL4ynUUHoJQ%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (181): Germany (BY), France (AC). cat, OIE animal case definition

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200513.7332909&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=Brjs0cOMeACGNtoMncala3lqnfk2Bj1wilGzIMAyD%2BI%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (177): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, Spain (CT) cat susp

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200512.732858&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=CPfVe2w2hEqx5vyIgdvwNBfC3a7a0Hwu6TpWv48Ksag%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (174): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, comment

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200511.7323845&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032891593&data=vKuPKtbyQISFYSBudGK9V8qY6IUMxn5IWnoYp%2BacnbQ%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (169): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, spread, rabbit susp

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200509.7316646&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=CoeNLihdi8oQ54QTBINzrwRe%2BItNCHUXvdiB9xvFH3Q%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (154): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, research

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200503.7294846&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=mQbj7btETk4WUdZJqGmNh%2Bz0kXeilQ5AUNfdbELmOVs%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (146): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink, epidemiology

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200501.7286113&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=KqDXt7fwmPMedG40WQKzV1N5NIJXZ1WANnzWEFfQnc%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (143): USA (NY) animal, zoo, tiger, lion, tests

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200430.7284183&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=hifQ7cyQ0LRvD6gL20pUNJPPJoTciQ%2FCIUM6vLGwDOg%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (141): India, animal, wild tiger, susp. clarification.

RFI

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COVID-19 update (138): India, animal, wild tiger, fatal

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200428.7275765&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=r3PNjM6h%2Bc1BGsfJUsrvhkLP8yxDiHw7hoLyReib0RI%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (135): Netherlands (NB) animal, farmed mink

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200427.7272289&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=xAJ5LimAlm2R%2BVAIIF%2FzBLYOoOJEpwT2RLN3zeJrtJc%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (130): USA (NY) animal, zoo, tiger, lion, new cases

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200425.7266556&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=Y8pOc4er5LKg3UuPr7zzFUX5m4rMbuf3Kv%2FuviE1bo%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (124): USA (NY) animal, cat, lion, OIE

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200423.7259119&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=EE2eaEOZTOfadpTirrsc%2BZQUZ0pdc2DWaCah%2Fv7kxX0%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (123): USA (NY) animal, cat, conf

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200422.7256272&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146>

032901552&sdata=WT%2Fa1IUXTNYqZFS%2FcXyflUeEGgg4%2BQqHbXJ3ReYyaeg%3D&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (113): USA (NY) cat, animal, susp, RFI

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200418.7240811&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=5DIWA52mTeS1M2oieSL82Y%2BwKcymbQOZWRRqBmp26H0%3D&reserved=0>

D&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (88): Germany, animal, research, pig, chicken, bat, ferret

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200407.7196506&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=smOXGb9tBDZ3ix%2B3oHGniuiu%2FhW4jXHJg%2Fu8TPBgAIE%3D&reserved=0>

D&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (85): USA (NY) animal, tiger, OIE

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200406.7191480&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=NxskfMxN3SlcIsAop6XNKuEkCh51q6zMPyQJ0%2BByr8a8%3D&reserved=0>

;reserved=0

COVID-19 update (84): USA animal, tiger

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200406.7191352&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=QVyl3FNAbkn9iTpnnGiWLa6l4qv3glglhWaz8Bc19YA%3D&reserved=0>

eserved=0

COVID-19 update (76): China (HU) animal, cat, owned, stray, seropositive

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200403.7179946&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=Z%2BxOlynosxlfr6K2DPiRWwEkLPrShKem6%2FfJBRrGoBY%3D&reserved=0>

&reserved=0

COVID-19 update (75): China (Hong Kong) animal, cat, OIE

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200403.7179945&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=1uxppIXWeriCfVskocxOFTRFhV2x4CAP%2FIHONermjb8%3D&reserved=0>

p;reserved=0

COVID-19 update (70): China (Hong Kong) animal, cat, pets & stock

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200402.7173286&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&sdata=p3v6jrTfMP%2BCekzA0Z4%2BilFYEbOvsqjvQOQmlynhgak%3D&reserved=0>

mp;reserved=0

COVID-19 update (58): Belgium, animal, cat, clinical case, RFI

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200327.7151215&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=2oBq6M88rf2yx3i6Ay3JRqhz55U7YadXGLAd8ppQnY%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (56): China (Hong Kong) animal, dog, final serology positive

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200326.7146438&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=Gst2vtWv8%2B9zlsPHuej6OG5M625skSFXyhvMsrng8Pk%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (50): China (Hong Kong) animal, dog, 2nd case PCR positive, OIE

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200323.7129951&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=fahMfGiVEYIIxjapUJMaAJf3pflax0v%2FG%2B9cP23GXk%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (45): China (Hong Kong) animal, dog, 2nd case PCR positive

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200319.7112693&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=j4g%2BdbcQi%2B%2FAPMFN5S68C03hkZ416VDZ21v%2BpmE%2Fd8U%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (37): China (Hong Kong) animal, dog, prelim. serology negative

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200312.7081842&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=JnahUBgHL2aRxOjtXV0d%2B3mpMMxbu6wbt1ICQn9dKs%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (30): China (Hong Kong) animal, dog, susp, serology pending

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200306.7057595&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032901552&data=uyqonxVr5po0FuPL6YCjGmBsWvouTh6jSwBvH15rGfQ%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (25): China (Hong Kong) animal, dog, susp, OIE

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200302.7040373&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=3%2F4p3iQfViRS6jMzdy9JPbQsqXworCGUoKIvrdK95s%3D&reserved=0>

eserved=0

COVID-19 update (22): companion animal, dog susp, RFI

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200229.7036661&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=IZQZKwP9VOi1HoX13Q%2BC8HpWW2cheBBzF7LVK1MRLUU%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (17): China, animal reservoir, wildlife trade & consumption

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200225.7024245&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=qnY9prkvE65fOjjLGUMlaewIqXTy7IDRdlB5p3RTD5U%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (11): animal reservoir, intermediate hosts, pangolin susp

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200220.7009213&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=9hue0led%2BLQC%2BVgCNh%2Bloji%2FCCOWwxPGF91FhlTVP Mw%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (08): companion animal, RFI

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200218.7002276&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=ViOO%2Bm6udtfcwcxgYhvuwuuVGVFkLPffVsXO4ka1Ws%3D&reserved=0>

COVID-19 update (06): animal reservoir, intermediate hosts

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200217.6997782&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=27lppXbsvMbVpzpKFCbzyXexopgEgSaKWHWjxxLoic%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (40): animal reservoir, pangolin poss intermediate host, RFI

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200210.6972104&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=zz1rdXHWg%2FVOgKsO2pN8FEVxlxqqsV6CA0RXYefDNUI%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (28): China (HU) animal reservoir

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200201.6943858&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=pZouhzLtJYwiYbu184c%2F63H6ox3u0F9an4M1uPd0xQ4%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (22): reservoir suggested, bats

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200129.6930718&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=84i4ZrfwGF4JyXyLDukWSeuhi%2BsnQdqdnN3oGiLcJQ%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (20): China, wildlife trade ban

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200127.6922060&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=wR9kicGu4Rz5V7HzL%2BdseFMe%2FQ5EysFgxrkdQ9XSA%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (18): China (HU) animal reservoir

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200125.6915411&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=y8NL3%2FEn8kB4GH2gCTOfdikQpHQvr2CfFBSSOOab80%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (15): China (HU) wild animal sources

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200123.6909913&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=7wpGuz6lUA0YliC%2BDepoctQT8jwgLSDRyihcOD2yqDI%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (03): China (HU) animal reservoir suggested, RFI

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200114.6887480&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=fqeEL2httsP85zS%2FYM38nlRTMRI0fh7bwbvXSbQCKs%3D&reserved=0>

Novel coronavirus (01): China (HU) WHO, phylogenetic tree

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200112.6885385&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=jVqd6UAxDXy2XrZtiJ1Z%2BNoiI8Ezve8ypx5pfi5Vkk%3D&reserved=0>

Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (HU) (07): official confirmation of novel coronavirus

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200108.6878869&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&data=IkLAMSE%2BK4sEJxnXkP%2Fc83RAnIocapiXIMto0YHvGqE%3D&reserved=0>

Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (05): (HU) novel coronavirus identified

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200108.6877694&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1balcf>

45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=o%2BhFrXOP6wsNuovGZs9HJea1Hfv5D4MEqwar%2F1OsdZg%3D&reserved=0

Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (03): (HU) updates, SARS, MERS ruled out, WHO, RFI

https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200105.6872267&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=sfs%2F3YMrWUtvRXXxX98fwGvy2jD6RKn8ZHcc3AqVA%2FY%3D&reserved=0

Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (01): (HU) wildlife sales, market closed, RFI

https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fpromedmail.org%2Fpost%2F20200102.6866757&data=02%7C01%7CJeffersonMA%40state.gov%7C4447ef1ba1cf45b79f8108d826040710%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637301146032911505&sdata=pGcx2c0qGO%2FmawSp6MQnl8b%2FALs774Sh8Yby7yQxWYg%3D&reserved=0]

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5&sdata=O2C9%2BNKjNGugz3vdF%2BHioWa4udVFwNITvrg4EBfUIHk%3D&reserved=0>

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<promed-post@promedmail.org>;
To: <promed-edr-post@promedmail.org>;
<promed-ahead-post@promedmail.org>
Subject: PRO/AH/EDR> Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (HU) (08): novel coronavirus,
WHO
Date: Fri, 10 Jan 2020 16:37:53 +0000

UNDIAGNOSED PNEUMONIA - CHINA (HUBEI) (08): NOVEL CORONAVIRUS, WHO

A ProMED-mail post

<<http://www.promedmail.org>>

ProMED-mail is a program of the
International Society for Infectious Diseases

<<http://www.isid.org>>

In this update:

- [1] WHO statement
- [2] Sina Tech News: Evolution of pathogen identification
- [3] Stat News: Overview

[1] WHO statement

Date: Thu 9 Jan 2020

Source: WHO press release [edited]

<<https://www.who.int/china/news/detail/09-01-2020-who-statement-regarding-cluster-of-pneumonia-cases-in-wuhan-china>>

WHO statement regarding cluster of pneumonia cases in Wuhan, China

[9 Jan 2020] statement

Chinese authorities have made a preliminary determination of a novel (or new) coronavirus, identified in a hospitalized person with pneumonia in Wuhan. Chinese investigators conducted gene sequencing of the virus, using an isolate from one positive patient sample.

Preliminary identification of a novel virus in a short period of time is a notable achievement and demonstrates China's increased capacity to manage new outbreaks.

Initial information about the cases of pneumonia in Wuhan provided by Chinese authorities last week [week of 1 Jan 2020] -- including the occupation, location, and symptom profile of the people affected -- pointed to a coronavirus (CoV) as a possible pathogen causing this

cluster. Chinese authorities subsequently reported that laboratory tests ruled out SARS-CoV, MERS-CoV, influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, and other common respiratory pathogens.

Coronaviruses are a large family of viruses with some causing less-severe disease, such as the common cold, and others more severe disease such as MERS and SARS. Some transmit easily from person to person, while others do not. According to Chinese authorities, the virus in question can cause severe illness in some patients and does not transmit readily between people.

Globally, novel coronaviruses emerge periodically in different areas, including SARS in 2002 and MERS in 2012. Several known coronaviruses are circulating in animals that have not yet infected humans. As surveillance improves more coronaviruses are likely to be identified.

China has strong public health capacities and resources to respond and manage respiratory disease outbreaks. In addition to treating the patients in care and isolating new cases as they may be identified, public health officials remain focused on continued contact tracing, conducting environmental assessments at the seafood market, and investigations to identify the pathogen causing the outbreak.

In the coming weeks, more comprehensive information is required to understand the current status and epidemiology of the outbreak, and the clinical picture. Further investigations are also required to determine the source, modes of transmission, extent of infection, and countermeasures implemented. WHO continues to monitor the situation closely and, together with its partners, is ready to provide technical support to China to investigate and respond to this outbreak.

The preliminary determination of a novel virus will assist authorities in other countries to conduct disease detection and response. Over the past week, people with symptoms of pneumonia and reported travel history to Wuhan have been identified at international airports.

WHO does not recommend any specific measures for travellers. WHO advises against the application of any travel or trade restrictions on China based on the information currently available.

Media Contacts

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External Relations and Communication

World Health Organization

<wpchnmedia@who.int>

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Communicated by:
ProMED-mail Rapporteur Kunihiko Iizuka

[2] Sina Tech News: Evolution of pathogen identification
Date: Thu 9 Jan 2020 19:37:00 CST
Source: Sina Technology, Caijing Magazine report [in Chinese, trans.,
edited]
<<http://tech.sina.com.cn/roll/2020-01-09/doc-iihnzahk3089851.shtml>>

When a virus strikes, identifying the pathogen quickly and accurately is the key to success. This depends on the development of scientific research, the improvement of the disease surveillance system and the continuous openness and transparency of information.

The "new coronavirus" has caused several cases of unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan [Hubei] to be initially "identified."

According to Xinhua News Agency, on [9 Jan 2020], Xu Jianguo, the leader of the preliminary assessment of pathogenic test results and an academician of the Chinese Academy of Engineering, said that the expert group believes that the pathogen of this unexplained viral pneumonia case was initially determined to be a new type of coronavirus.

At 21:00 [9 PM] on [7 Jan 2020], the expert group detected a new coronavirus in the laboratory and obtained its entire genome sequence.

A scholar close to the expert group told the reporter of Caijing that the wild animals sold in the South China Seafood Market are currently under inspection to track down the source of the virus.

The Wuhan Municipal Health and Health Commission reported that as of [5 Jan 2020], there were 59 cases of viral pneumonia, of which 7 were critically ill patients, and the remaining patients had overall stable vital signs and no deaths.

On [8 Jan 2020], 8 patients were cured and discharged. In previous reports, viruses such as SARS and avian influenza have been excluded.

A person in charge of the pathogenic laboratory of a disease control center in a northwestern province told the Caijing reporter that after getting the specimens, the laboratory could screen for a known or

common virus within a day. These include influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, SARS, etc. However, it takes longer to detect and identify unknown viruses.

The SARS epidemic that broke out in 2003 took scientists more than 5 months to finally determine the new coronavirus; the H7N9 avian influenza epidemic in 2013 took more than one month from the 1st case to the diagnosis of the virus.

The Wuhan epidemic was first notified on [31 Dec 2019], and was initially identified as "new coronavirus" by research experts at an interval of 9 days. Relying on the progress of scientific research and the prevention and control system of infectious diseases, the detection time of pathogens has been greatly shortened.

Coronavirus disorder

The virus that causes unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan, like SARS, is a coronavirus. Under the microscope, the virus had obvious stick-shaped particle protrusions on the outer mold, so it looked like the crown of medieval European emperors and was named "Coronavirus".

The virus was first isolated from chickens more than 80 years ago. In 1965, scientists isolated the 1st human coronavirus.

[A] virus is a simple microorganism composed of nucleic acid and protein shell, including DNA and RNA viruses. Coronaviruses are RNA viruses. Its variability is high because its recombination rate between RNA and RNA is very high. In other words, the genetic material that determines its viral characteristics is constantly changing.

The current research progress is that the coronavirus family contains nearly 20 viruses of the genus [alpha, beta, gamma, delta] among which there are 6 types of coronavirus known to infect humans. Among them, the 4 coronaviruses are more common in the population, and they are less pathogenic, and generally cause only minor respiratory symptoms similar to the common cold. The other 2, SARS and Middle East respiratory syndrome coronavirus, can cause severe respiratory diseases. The former (SARS) has obvious interpersonal transmission, causing the disease to spread rapidly. Classical coronavirus infection, which mainly occurs in winter and spring, is an important cause of acute exacerbation of chronic bronchitis in adults. Due to the high variability of the coronavirus, the original vaccine will fail and immunity will fail.

Li Gang, director of the Wuhan Municipal Center for Disease Control

and Prevention, said in a media interview that the clinical manifestations of patients in Wuhan were viral pneumonia. More stringent preventive public health measures such as patient isolation and close contact tracing are needed.

According to the Wuhan Health Commission, the clinical manifestations of unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan were mainly fever, a few patients had difficulty breathing, and chest radiographs showed invasive lesions of both lungs. The main difference from SARS symptoms is that no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission has been found.

"No clear evidence of human-to-human transmission or medical staff infection was found." In 3 circulars issued by the Wuhan Health Commission, this sentence repeated. An influenza control expert told a Caijing reporter that whether human-to-human transmission occurs after infection with the virus depends on the characteristics of the virus, especially its binding to the receptor. This characteristic is also related to whether the virus is likely to infect humans. In 2003, H5N1 human bird flu cases continued to appear, causing a high lethality.

The flu control experts explained that the tissue structure of the avian influenza virus receptors is different compared to human influenza viruses. The human upper respiratory tract does not have avian influenza virus receptors, so it is difficult to infect humans. But people in the lower respiratory tract have receptors for avian influenza virus in the lungs. Once avian influenza virus affects human lungs, it can cause human infection and the symptoms are severe.

Despite a long history of confrontation with viruses, to this day, humans still cannot fully understand such a small, simple structure of acellular microorganisms.

9 days from initial notification

In the face of virus invasion, rapid and accurate identification of the pathogen is the key to success. "The pathogen of unexplained viral pneumonia cases was initially identified as a new type of coronavirus", which is the latest news of unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan. 9 days from the 1st notification.

At 1 pm on [31 Dec 2019], a staff member of the Wuhan Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told a reporter from Caijing that the Wuhan Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had tested the specimens, and the Hubei Province Centers for Disease Control and Prevention was organizing experts to review the case specimens.

Only by knowing the pathogen can we target medicine. In this race against time, "every second counts" is not an exaggeration. This depends on the development of scientific research, the improvement of the disease surveillance system and the continuous openness and transparency of information.

In April 2003, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced in Geneva that the pathogen of SARS is a new coronavirus known as SARS coronavirus. This time, more than 5 months away from the 1st case notification.

On the afternoon of [29 Mar 2013], the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention isolated 3 strains of H7N9 avian influenza virus from the specimens submitted for examination and confirmed the diagnosis. At this time, the 1st case had been onset for more than a month.

During the "unknown pneumonia" incident in Wuhan, the pathogen identification time was significantly reduced. The latest bulletin on [9 Jan 2020] showed that the laboratory used methods such as genome sequencing, nucleic acid detection, and virus isolation to etiologically detect samples from patients with alveolar lavage fluid, throat swabs, and blood.

To confirm the cause of an epidemic disease, 3 points need to be met: 1st, the suspected pathogen must be found in the patient, and the pathogenic nucleic acid can be detected in the patient's clinical sample. 2nd, pathogens can be successfully isolated from clinical samples of patients. In addition, isolated pathogens can cause the same disease symptoms when infecting a host animal. The patient's serum antibody titer during the recovery period increased 4-fold, which can help identify the pathogen. Scientific research, such as pathogen isolation and pathogenicity identification, typically takes weeks.

A director of the Respiratory Department of Beijing Top Three Hospital analyzed the reporter of Caijing that whether the cultured virus can grow depends on the amount and viability of the virus in clinical specimens. Immunological methods are able to detect viral antigens from respiratory secretions, but the final results also depend on a relatively high viral load. The person in charge of one of the aforementioned pathogen laboratories added that the virus lives in the cell and must find the specific cell it grows in, and mutation may occur during isolation. Even if the virus is isolated, animal experiments need to be performed to verify compliance with the clinical manifestations of existing patients and determine the virus

in question. After that, the virus must be cultivated, which is also a time-consuming task, sometimes it takes at least 20 days.

The emergence of molecular biology technology has enabled experimenters to find the pathogen's nucleic acid, genome and other evidence in a short period of time, and identify whether it is a known virus or a type of virus. One of the achievements of the "National Major Project for Infectious Diseases" released by the Ministry of Science and Technology in 2017 is to establish a detection technology system that identifies 300 known pathogens within 72 hours.

The genetic information of the virus is stored in the nucleic acid, which at the same time indicates the characteristics of the virus and also acts as an "identity card", which can help researchers distinguish the specific virus type. The main principle is to design another nucleic acid sequence that can match the virus identity information. In the vast ocean of nucleic acids, like a probe, paired with a specific "identity" virus.

The director of the Beijing Respiratory Department told the Caijing reporter that using the above principles, the existing technology can detect 12-15 viruses at the same time, which has become the standard method for respiratory virus detection. 1st, such technologies will be used to screen for known or common pneumonia viruses. The person in charge of the above-mentioned pathogen laboratory said, "In less than a day, it is possible to determine whether there are a dozen known pneumonia viruses." These include influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, SARS, etc.

If the specific virus type has not been identified, the laboratory director will commission a testing company to compare the specimen with the genetic information in the pathogen database to determine the virus type. The above method requires predicting the pathogen sequence, and is powerless against unknown pathogens and pathogens with large sequence variation. "If these methods are still uncertain, we will consider whether it is a new pathogen. The virus needs to be isolated and cultured, and then identified by various methods." The person in charge of the said pathogen laboratory said.

In the end, the expert group believed that the pathogen of unexplained viral pneumonia cases in Wuhan was initially determined as a new type of coronavirus.

Track down the root cause of the virus

Only by knowing where the virus came from can we control its outbreak

from the source. At present, the etiology of unexplained pneumonia in Wuhan is still ongoing. A scholar close to the expert group told Caijing that at present, wild animals appearing in the South China seafood market are being inspected to track down the source of the virus.

Taking the SARS coronavirus as an example, the traceability of the virus from civet to bat is not easy. It took more than 2 years. In 2003, researchers isolated 3 SARS-like viruses from 6 civet specimens, confirming that civet sold on the market is the direct cause of SARS infection. But it was not until 2 years later that the original host of SARS was discovered. An article published by Shi Zhengli's team at the Wuhan Institute of Virology of the Chinese Academy of Sciences in the journal Science revealed that bats are "natural hosts of SARS-like coronavirus."

Although many domestic markets for wildlife trading have been restricted or facing closures since the outbreak of SARS and bird flu, the phenomenon of buying, selling, and eating wildlife is still very common. In the South China Seafood Market in Wuhan, "wild meat" was never completely banned at the outbreak of viral pneumonia of unknown cause. According to previous reports by Red Star News, there are a lot of abandoned rabbit heads and animal offal in the corner of Sixth Street in the western part of the market. The owner of the stall said that there are several shops selling wild game in the market, including pheasant and snake.

The multiple unexplained pneumonia cases in Wuhan this time reminded the danger of wildlife trading again. Yuan Guoyong, a microbiologist at the University of Hong Kong who is involved in the SARS virus research, mentioned in an article in the famous scientific journal "Nature" that wildlife habitats should not be disturbed, and wildlife should not be brought into the market for circulation and trading. In Yuan Guoyong's view, learning to respect nature and respect it is "very important to prevent the occurrence of new infectious diseases."

This article is the exclusive cooperation content between Caijing and Tencent News.

[Byline: Wen, Zhu He, and editor Wang Xiao]

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Communicated by:

ProMED-mail Rapporteur Kunihiko Iizuka

[A very good review of the process involved in the identification of viral etiologies for respiratory diseases.

The ending conclusion on the need to respect the wildlife and the danger in wildlife trading leads one to remember that in the past 25 or more years, 75 percent of new human diseases involved species jumps from "domestic" animals (which include livestock and camels); and 70 percent of new disease in domestic animals involved species jumps from wildlife to domestic animals. With respect to the SARS-CoV, the jump was from bats, to civets, to humans via the wet markets and then human-to-human, and with the MERS-CoV, while the full transmission isn't completely defined yet, there was the jump from bats, to camels, to humans, and in selected settings, human-to-human transmission. - Mod.MPP]

[3] Stat News: Overview

Date: Thu 9 Jan 2020

Source: Stat News [edited]

<<https://www.statnews.com/2020/01/09/chinese-scientists-obtain-genetic-sequence-of-mysterious-virus-a-key-step-in-containment-efforts/>>

Chinese scientists have recovered a previously unknown virus from an infected individual and generated a full genetic sequence of it, a key step in efforts to learn more about the cause of an outbreak of unusual pneumonia in the city of Wuhan, state-run media reported [Thu 9 Jan 2020]. Fragments of the same virus were picked up in testing of 15 patients among the 59 who have been identified as infected with the mysterious pneumonia.

The speed of the findings is impressive; the 1st case in this outbreak became ill less than a month ago. "Preliminary identification of a novel virus in a short period of time is a notable achievement and demonstrates China's increased capacity to manage new outbreaks," the World Health Organization's representative in China, Dr Gauden Galea, said in a statement. But more work is needed to confirm whether the virus is the cause of the outbreak and, if it is, to identify what animal species transmitted the virus to people and whether there are other cases elsewhere, Galea said.

The report on CCTV appears to be the 1st official confirmation from Chinese authorities that they believe a new virus is responsible for this outbreak -- specifically a coronavirus, a type of virus in the family that includes SARS and MERS. When viewed under an electron microscope, it exhibits the crown-like halo that gives coronaviruses

their name, said Xu Jianguo, identified by CCTV as the leader of the preliminary assessment of the test results and a member of the Chinese Academy of Engineering.

The outbreak is occurring in Wuhan, about 700 miles [about 1127 km] south of Beijing. Wuhan is a leading center for virology research in China, and infectious diseases experts watching this outbreak have predicted scientists there would quickly find the cause. Still, they cautioned that this discovery does not mean the outbreak is over or the threat has passed. "Everybody's assuming ... that this coronavirus is the cause. We don't know that. They're assuming that market was the origin. We don't know that. And we don't know how many other cases are walking around right now," said Peter Daszak, president of EcoHealth Alliance, a non-profit organization that works in this sphere.

The 1st known case in the Wuhan outbreak became noticeably ill on [12 Dec 2019], according to a statement released [Sun 5 Jan 2020] by the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission. The discovery of an outbreak and identification of a new virus in a period of less than one month is exceptional, experts said. "I am stunned by the timeline and speed of this isolation and characterization, if it's all true," said Matthew Frieman, a coronavirus expert at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

The community of scientists who research emerging infectious diseases has been speculating for days that the source of the outbreak was a new coronavirus, a class of viruses that has shown itself adept at making the leap from animals to people. Coronaviruses originate in bats but are able to infect a number of mammals.

Confirmation that scientists have the genetic sequence of the virus will increase pressure on China to release at least part of that sequence, so that health facilities around the world know what to look for as they try to detect possible cases from this outbreak and prevent spread elsewhere. During the 2003 SARS outbreak, infected travelers spread the virus from China to Hong Kong and from there to Viet Nam, Singapore, Taiwan, and Toronto, Canada.

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on [Wed 8 Jan 2020] instructed doctors to ask patients with severe respiratory infections whether they have been to Wuhan. Hong Kong and other countries in Southeast Asia are isolating any such cases until they can be tested for influenza, rhinoviruses, and other viruses that cause colds and flu.

This type of very broad net will draw in many people who were in or

near Wuhan and who have a respiratory tract infection but who have nothing to do with this outbreak -- especially in the middle of flu season. That will eat up resources and the time of doctors, laboratories, and sick people who don't need to be isolated.

"If the Chinese truly have sequenced the virus and they've demonstrated that it's present in other patients, that means there's a PCR diagnostic test available. And the Chinese need to make that available to the rest of the world immediately," said Ralph Baric, a coronavirus expert at the University of North Carolina. "And the longer they wait, the more likely the scientific community will go from a positive response to a negative response, in terms of how China is handling this outbreak," he said.

The CCTV report did not provide details on the type of coronavirus that has been discovered -- for instance if it is one of several SARS-like viruses that have been found in bats in China, and if so, how genetically different it is from SARS. A number of these SARS-like viruses are able to infect human tissue cells in the laboratory, suggesting they might be able to spill over into people if given the right circumstances. Xu said more research on the new virus is needed.

There has been limited information about the nature of the illness in people who have been infected. Chinese authorities have said no one has died from this infection; 7, however, were in critical condition as of [Sun 5 Jan 2020]. In a statement that same day, the WHO said that the main symptom was fever; some patients had difficulty breathing.

The CCTV report also did not indicate whether scientists investigating the outbreak had identified the source of the virus -- which will be key to any effort to determine if the virus is spreading in other locations as well. [Baric] said coronaviruses could jump to people directly from bats, which are eaten in China. But this virus could have used what is known as an intermediate host -- an animal species that becomes infected with a bat virus that then transmits it to people. Daszak said he believes efforts to look for the virus in animals have not started. "There are probably a dozen to 2 dozen target species that you would go after to do a wildlife investigation. I don't know if they're doing that," he said, adding that EcoHealth Alliance hopes to partner with Chinese researchers on the work "once the politics have died down."

China was roundly criticized for its early bungling of the SARS outbreak and it is widely believed authorities there have no wish to

be embarrassed like that again. The capacity of the country to respond to infectious diseases outbreaks increased markedly in the aftermath of SARS. During that outbreak, it was determined that palm civets, a wild animal eaten as a delicacy in southern China, were transmitting the virus. Chinese authorities ordered a widespread culling of civets to help stop the outbreak.

The Wuhan outbreak has been linked to a large seafood market that also sells the meat of exotic animals for consumption. The market was closed and decontaminated on [1 Jan 2020]. But it is important to know if other markets are selling infected animals, said Malik Peiris, a microbiologist at the University of Hong Kong. "If it can jump once, then it will jump again," Peiris said of the virus. He was one of the scientists who first identified the coronavirus that caused the 2003 SARS outbreak, which infected more than 8000 people and killed nearly 800.

The WHO said [Wed 8 Jan 2020] that Chinese authorities believe the virus "does not transmit readily between people." Earlier statements from the Wuhan Municipal Health Authority said there has been no person-to-person spread, but disease experts challenged that claim, saying it is impossible to rule out at this stage in the exploration of a new disease. "I don't know how you know that at all," Frieman said of China's claim there is no person-to-person transmission. He noted the number of cases reported makes it seem unlikely that animal-to-human transmission is the only way this virus spreads.

There have been at least 1 or 2 clusters of cases within families that have raised suspicions of limited person-to-person spread, a source familiar with the outbreak told STAT.

News of the pneumonia cases first emerged on [30 Dec 2019], when the local health authority told hospitals to be on the lookout for cases. The next day Chinese authorities informed the WHO that they were dealing with what looked like an outbreak caused by an unknown virus.

[Byline: Helen Branswell]

--

Communicated by:
ProMED-mail
<promed@promedmail.org>

[A very good overview of the status of the investigation and the many questions that remain to be answered. One piece of new information in the report above is the mention that "there have been at least 1 or 2

clusters of cases within families that have raised suspicions of limited person-to-person spread...". Now that the virus has been identified, further work is needed on the epidemiology of the transmission, including how much community wide transmission may have occurred.

It is important to mention that more and more countries are announcing "suspected cases, with media reports on respiratory illnesses in individuals who had been in Wuhan. Countries include South Korea, Thailand, Viet Nam, and Taiwan. In addition, neighboring Hong Kong has now identified 48 individuals who have a febrile respiratory illness with a history of travel to Wuhan. The Hong Kong Center for Health Protection maintains a line listing that is updated daily and includes the viral etiologies from specimens of these suspected cases. Etiologies include influenza viruses, human metapneumovirus, adenovirus, and coronavirus HKU1, to name a few (see <https://www.chp.gov.hk/files/pdf/enhanced_sur_pneumonia_wuhan_eng.pdf>). There are patients who have not had any known viral pathogens isolated among these 48 cases, so it will be interesting to know results if and when testing for the novel coronavirus becomes available outside of Wuhan.

A map showing locations of major cities in China can be found at <<https://www.chinadiscovery.com/china-maps/city-maps.html>>. HealthMap/ProMED-mail map of China: <<http://healthmap.org/promed/p/5294>>. - Mod.MPP]

[See Also:

Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (HU) (07): official confirmation of novel coronavirus <http://promedmail.org/post/20200108.6878869>
Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (06): (HU) Hong Kong surveillance, USA CDC alert <http://promedmail.org/post/20200108.6876648>
Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (05): (HU) novel coronavirus identified <http://promedmail.org/post/20200108.6877694>
Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (04): (HU) Hong Kong surveillance <http://promedmail.org/post/20200106.6874277>
Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (03): (HU) updates, SARS, MERS ruled out, WHO, RFI <http://promedmail.org/post/20200105.6872267>
Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (02): (HU) updates, other country responses, RFI <http://promedmail.org/post/20200103.6869668>
Undiagnosed pneumonia - China (01): (HU) wildlife sales, market closed, RFI <http://promedmail.org/post/20200102.6866757>
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From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Re: FOR REVIEW//want to flag this for IPs
Date: Mon, 11 May 2020 02:47:40 +0000

Richard, et al.

Please share the attached anyway you see fit--it's unclassified. I have all the documents cited in this report if needed.

This is an updated report I sent to S Friday at his request. (I also sent him the E-PAI report separately for a technical reason.) The yellow highlighted parts are updated info from the week before. When sharing you can remove the highlights.

The issue is not about man-made or natural, the issue is biosafety and the escape is highly likely, as my report emphasizes. I found China's biosafety standard and practice very alarming.

Cheers!

(b)(6)

(b)(6)

Policy Planning Staff
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of State

(b)(6)

From: Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, May 10, 2020 9:29 PM
To: (b)(6); Feith, David
Cc: Stilwell, David R
Subject: RE: FOR REVIEW//want to flag this for IPs

+ A/S Stilwell,

We know that the Chinese have ordered virus samples destroyed which points to suspicion that they wanted knowledge about that lab hidden. Below is info that (b)(6) gathered that might be of interest. Defer to (b)(6) if there is other info to be shared. I would also add in your note that the Chinese need to grant the world access to this data and the labs which they have yet to do (until

they do that, nothing about the origin of the virus can truly be debunked)

THE DIRECTIVE:

On January 3, 2020, the PRC National Health Commission [NHC] issued a directive known as Document #3, entitled "Notice on Strengthening Management of Biological Sample Resources and Related Scientific Research Activities During Major Infectious Disease Outbreaks" (关于在重大突发传染病防控工作中加强生物样本资源及相关科研活动管理工作的通知) officially ordering all medical and research facilities nationwide to 1). destroy existing samples related to the Wuhan outbreak; or 2). send them to state-designated facilities for permanent storage ; 3). ban public sharing of any lab test results or lab activities, and 4). prohibit publication of any research papers without special organizations authorized by the government.

THE EVIDENCE :

1. Though the order is marked not for public distribution, it's leaked out of China and the scanned copy is made available. See Tab 1

2. The official government website of the PRC's Heilongjiang Province's Health Commission on Feb. 22, 2020 issued a "Notice on Preservation and Use of Test Samples of Patients with New Coronavirus Pneumonia,关于印发新型冠状病毒肺炎患者检测样本保存和使用的通知."

Section 5 of this notice refers to and cites extensively the Jan. 3 NHC order to destroy early virus samples and ban any unauthorized release of research and information sharing, as yellow highlighted in Tab 2. As of this email writing, the Heilongjiang government website still has this document undeleted, see the url here:

<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwsjkw.hlj.gov.cn%2Findex.php%2FHome%2FNews%2Fshow%2Fnewsid%2F8045%2Fnavid%2F37%2Fstypeid%2F&data=02%7C01%7CStilwellDR%40state.gov%7Cdcad58bb568648b8255908d7f22c01e9%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637244143169096062&sdata=TmTDVB9jmHjsGhP8CudaDJCXlvbcOh2DfEl0AWjEgzs%3D&reserved=0><<https://gcc01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwsjkw.hlj.gov.cn%2Findex.php%2FHome%2FNews%2Fshow%2Fnewsid%2F8045%2Fnavid%2F37%2Fstypeid%2F&data=02%7C01%7CYuMM%40state.gov%7Cabdccd99606b4a7ea13908d7f54ac1b1%7C66cf50745afe48d1a691a12b2121f44b%7C0%7C0%7C637247573732398697&sdata=TQDSyRAzn66cRFKofxeA5hMvO5WyCwJhQadiKZmPxIU%3D&reserved=0>> . Please note that the PRC has only two BSL4 or P4 labs authorized to handle the most deadly viruses. One is in the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the other is the Harbin Veterinary Research Institute in downtown Harbin, the capital of Heilongjiang Province, where the fear of a "second wave" of the virus hit is most rampant in China at present.

3. The Feb. 26 Caixin bombshell report, since censored in China, entitled "Tracing the Origins of the New Coronavirus Gene Sequencing: When Was the Alarm Sounded, 新冠病毒基因测序溯源：警报是何时拉响的," prominently mentions this Jan. 3 NHC directive on pages 11 and 12 and regards it a key event since the outbreak. See Tab 3

There is more evidence if interested. But the bottom line is that this NHC order to destroy virus samples does exist without any doubt and there has been no denial from the Chinese government because it can't. Various timelines of the virus crisis, including our own, mention it.

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Sent: Sunday, May 10, 2020 9:11 PM
To: Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>; (b)(6)@state.gov>; Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: Fw: FOR REVIEW//want to flag this for IPs

All.

Apologies for the Sunday evening email but 60 minutes ran a misleading report tonight and I would like to send to folks. Anything else i can add in here (with sources)?

Thanks,

(b)(6)

(b)(5)

Sender: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Buangan, Richard L (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Recipient: Feith, David (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Stilwell, David R (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: Feith, David <(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J <(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Asher, David <(b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: SBU COVID-19 Origins Timeline v5
Date: Sun, 27 Dec 2020 22:52:37 +0000

Attached is the latest, tagged, edition of my COVID-19 origins timeline (SBU version 5). It contains 606 unique excerpts from 1985 to 11/11/2020. Along with the complete timeline (first/red tab), I have extracted several thematic timelines which you can find in the tabs to the right. In order left to right they are labeled:

- "Censorship of health info"
- "Delayed admitting human xmsn"
- "Limited, false, delayed reporting"
- "Exporting the virus"
- "Catastrophic missteps"
- "Efforts to counter lab hypthesis"
- "WHO as PRC cheerleader"
- "GOF research"
- "Handling lethal pathogens"
- "Poor safety, lab leak history"
- "U5 offers of support"

These unclassified excerpts are meant to support efforts by (b)(6) and others by providing additional source information. Note: Many of the embassy cable excerpts are still SBU.

I will add these entries to the more comprehensive high side timeline when I go in tomorrow. I will also check to see if we received anything new from "Saint NIC".

If anyone needs anything before I leave (b)(6) on Tuesday, please let me know ASAP. Looks like I should be back on the 5th or 6th.

VR/MP

Sender: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Feith, David <(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Recipient: Gibbs, Jeffrey J <(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>;

(b)(6) gov>
Asher, David (b)(6) @state.gov>

From: (b)(6)@state.gov>
(b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
To: (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Gross, Laura J (b)(6)@state.gov>;
Paulopol, Andreea I (b)(6)@state.gov>;
(b)(6)@state.gov>
CC: (b)(6)@state.gov>
Subject: U-SBU COVID Excerpts - Timeline
Date: Mon, 14 Dec 2020 22:38:36 +0000

Attached is a spreadsheet of 600 relevant unclassified or SBU excerpts from cables, scientific studies, news reports, and web pages, which deal.

Note:

1. It is in an Excel table sorted from oldest to newest timeframe. It can also be easily sorted by source, or any other column.
2. As you will see, many of the key points in a given excerpt are highlighted, but I did not get a chance to highlight all of the excerpts.
3. It is a dynamic document (AKA "work in progress") – if you have any additional inputs I am happy to include them.
4. Another version of this spreadsheet that includes classified entries is available on INRISS.

(b)(6)

*Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance
US Department of State*

(b)(6)

NSTS: (b)(6) (NSTS)

JWICS: (b)(6)@state.ic.gov

SIPR: (b)(6)@state.sgov.gov

~~SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED~~

Sender: "Pease, Michael" <PeaseM@state.gov>
DiNanno, Thomas G <DiNannoTG@state.gov>;
Gibbs, Jeffrey J <GibbsJJ@state.gov>;
Couch, Johnny N <CouchJN@state.gov>;
Recipient: Gross, Laura J <GrossLJ@state.gov>;
Paulopol, Andreea I <PaulopolAI@state.gov>;
Jih, Rongsong <JihRS@state.gov>;
Wright, Janey F <WrightJF@state.gov>

From: "TechMIS - DOS Daily" <dos@techmis.com>
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STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

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TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Tuesday, April 14, 2020 9:00 PM ET

Secretary of State

U.S. seeks to 'fundamentally change' WHO, Pompeo says (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Russia] Russia ready to discuss hypersonic missiles with U.S. – RIA cites foreign minister (Reuters)

[Russia] Russia says it's ready for hypersonic missile talks with U.S. (Reuters)

Department of State News

U.S. State Department reports first coronavirus fatality among Washington staff (Reuters)

Trump to convene G7 leaders in video link to discuss pandemic (Reuters)

Global finance ministers say they are prepared to offer debt relief for struggling nations as world continues to reel from coronavirus fallout (Washington Post)

G-7 Countries Support Debt Relief for Poorest Countries If Joined by Full G-20 (Wall Street Journal)

G-7 Backs Debt Help for Poor Nations, Split on IMF Fillip (Bloomberg)

Top creditors to suspend poorest countries debt payments – France (Reuters)

Coronavirus-Afflicted Global Economy Is Almost Certainly in Recession (Wall Street Journal)

IMF predicts global contraction on par with Great Depression (Politico)

IMF Sees Great Lockdown Recession as Worst Since Depression (Bloomberg)

IMF: Global economy will suffer worst year since Depression (AP)

France Says U.S. Is Opposed to Increasing IMF Crisis Powers (Bloomberg)

Saudi Arabia affirms OPEC+ pact aims for market balance, stability (Reuters)

Americans stuck in Africa trying to bring adopted kids home (AP)

[Chinese ship returns to waters off Vietnam amid virus 'distraction' charges \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Amid coronavirus chaos, Russian spies see opportunity: Intelligence assessment \(ABC News\)](#)

[\[Turkey\] Turkey repeats working group offer to U.S. to solve row over Russian defense purchase \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[China\] State Dept. cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[China\] State Department leaked cables renew theories on origin of coronavirus \(FOX News\)](#)

[\[China\] U.S. sounded alarm on Wuhan lab studying coronavirus two years ago, report says \(FOX News\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korea Fires Missiles as South's Elections Loom \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korea Test-Fires Short-Range Missiles \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korea Fires Missile Barrage Ahead of South Korea Election \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korea fires barrage of missiles from ground and air \(AP\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korea test fires multiple short-range anti-ship missiles \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Korea\] South Korea set to double supply of coronavirus tests to U.S. \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Korea\] South Korea airlifts 600,000 coronavirus test kits to United States \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] Taliban say U.S. bombing insurgents at home contrary to deal \(AP\)](#)

[\[Guatemala\] U.S. deportation flights resume to Guatemala \(AP\)](#)

Editorials and Op-eds

[The world hasn't seen a recession this bad since the 1930s. The recovery is far from certain \(CNN\)](#)

[We Can Make the Post-Coronavirus World a Much Less Violent Place \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

[Leaders of developing countries are particularly vulnerable during this pandemic \(Washington Post\)](#)

[Lockdown or Starvation? Poorer Economies Weigh Impossible Choice \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

[CO2 Emissions Are Falling. That Doesn't Mean Virus Will Slow Warming \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It \(New York Times\)](#)

[Saudis Slashing Oil Prices to Asia Shows Supply War Isn't Over \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Virus becomes latest battle between Iran, U.S. amid tensions \(AP\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Will the Coronavirus End Israel's Political Paralysis? \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Saudi Arabia\] The U.S. needs to get its citizens out of Saudi Arabia's jails now \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[China\] China's 'Donation Diplomacy' Raises Tensions With U.S. \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[China\] China's bid to repair its coronavirus-hit image is backfiring in the West \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[China\] Communist China Uses Internet Trolls To Haze Wuhan Diary Author \(The Federalist\)](#)

[\[Brazil\] Brazil's Bolsonaro Meets His Fauci \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Canada\] In Canada, Patience Wearing Thin Over Trump's Antics \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

Coronavirus News

[Trump Stops U.S. Funding of W.H.O.; U.K. Coronavirus Deaths May Be Higher Than Official Toll \(New York Times\)](#)

[Live updates: Trump halts funding to the World Health Organization pending a review of its response to coronavirus pandemic \(Washington Post\)](#)

[The Latest: Trump halts U.S. payments to WHO \(AP\)](#)

[WHO Has 'Very Good' Relations With the U.S., Director-General Says \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[Spain, Austria ease curbs but WHO warns coronavirus 'certainly' has not peaked \(Reuters\)](#)

['Mixed picture' in Europe, COVID-19 vaccine at least 12 months off: WHO \(Reuters\)](#)

[UN chief: world faces misinformation epidemic about virus \(AP\)](#)

[Now joining the fight against coronavirus: The world's armed rebels, drug cartels and gangs \(Washington Post\)](#)

[China's mask diplomacy a hit in virus-plagued Eastern Europe \(AP\)](#)

[Why girls in poor countries will suffer the most from worldwide closing of schools during covid-19 \(Washington Post\)](#)

[USS Theodore Roosevelt sailor dies from coronavirus \(Politico\)](#)

[Coronavirus Pandemic Turns Locals Against Miners \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[Search for a COVID-19 vaccine heats up in China, U.S. \(AP\)](#)

[What are antibody tests and what do they mean for the coronavirus pandemic? \(CNN\)](#)

[COVID-19: Drug Remdesivir Shows Promise, But Do We Know Enough? \(Yahoo News/The Quint\)](#)

[What it's like to suffer from the coronavirus's weirdest symptom \(Washington Post\)](#)

ISIS

[\[Switzerland\] Swiss prosecutors indict alleged IS member arrested in 2017 \(AP\)](#)

Near East & North Africa

[Israeli spy agency deprioritizes Iran as national security threat during coronavirus pandemic \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[Gulf's migrant workers left stranded and struggling by coronavirus outbreak \(Reuters\)](#)

[Armed men seize, release tanker off Iran by Strait of Hormuz \(AP\)](#)

[Ship boarded by armed men in Gulf of Oman is released: UKMTO \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Egypt\] Egyptian policeman killed in gun battle with suspected militants: state TV \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran death toll from coronavirus outbreak reaches 4,683: health ministry spokesman \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] Stigma Hampers Iraqi Efforts to Fight the Coronavirus \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israeli PM and rival look to finalize emergency unity deal \(AP\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israel's Netanyahu, Gantz say near unity deal to end political deadlock \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Steepest Deflation Awaits Israel With Rate Already Stuck at Zero \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israeli police use drones to check in on virus patients \(AP\)](#)

[\[Libya\] Libya Broadens Military Offensive, Dismissing Talks With Haftar \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Libya\] Haftar forces pound Libya capital after losing towns \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

[\[Saudi Arabia\] Saudi Arabia Races to Contain Epidemic in Islam's Holiest City \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Syria\] As rebel-held Syria fears virus, just one machine is there to test \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Tunisia\] Tunisia Tackles Virus Impact \(Bloomberg\)](#)

Europe and Eurasia

[EU to Propose 'Ambitious' Budget in Response to Virus \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[EU to limit export control of virus protection gear to just masks \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[France\] Four U.S. sailors assigned to French aircraft carrier hit by coronavirus outbreak now in quarantine \(CNN\)](#)

[\[Germany\] Germany: Merkel's Party Will Have to Wait for New Leader \(AP\)](#)

[\[Germany\] Merkel's party likely to delay leadership vote until Dec: CDU chief \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Germany\] German tech startups plead for European approach to corona tracing app \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Italy\] Italy's daily coronavirus death toll climbs by 602 \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Malta\] Malta calls for EU aid to avert Libya humanitarian crisis \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russia's coronavirus cases surpass 20,000 in record daily rise \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Trump told Putin U.S. is ready to send Russia equipment for coronavirus fight – Ifax cites Lavrov \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Moscow warns it faces coronavirus hospital bed shortage within weeks \(Reuters\)](#)

[Russia] Russia will not ask EU for sanctions relief over coronavirus: TASS cites foreign minister (Reuters)

[Slovakia] Slovak government to expand help to firms hurt by coronavirus (Reuters)

[Spain] Spain seizes virus tests bound for returning Siemens Gamesa workers – union (Reuters)

[Spain] Spain denies requisitioning coronavirus tests bound for workers (Reuters)

[Turkey] Turkish parliament passes bill to free thousands from prison amid coronavirus (Reuters)

[Ukraine] Ukrainian officials: Fires out near Chernobyl nuclear plant (AP)

[United Kingdom] Coronavirus: Britain enters 4th week of lockdown amid financial services expectations 'deteriorating' (Yahoo News)

[United Kingdom] Tobacco giant BAT slides on report of U.S. criminal investigation (Reuters)

East Asia and Pacific

Virtual summit: SE Asia leaders meet by video on pandemic (AP)

Indonesia Overtakes Japan as Virus Upends Aviation Pecking Order (Bloomberg)

[China] World Watches China's Economy for Signs of Life After Lockdown (Bloomberg)

The Virus Is About to Hit Banana Supplies Next (Bloomberg)

[China] China Tightens Russia Border to Stem Surge of Coronavirus Cases (Wall Street Journal)

[China] China moves to block new virus flare-up on Russian border (AP)

[China] China rolls out software surveillance for the COVID-19 pandemic, alarming human rights advocates (ABC News)

[China] McDonald's China apologizes for banning black people from a store (CNN)

[Hong Kong] Special Report: Hong Kong judges battle Beijing over rule of law as pandemic chills protests (Reuters)

[Japan] Japan Needs to Telework. Its Paper-Pushing Offices Make That Hard. (New York Times)

[Philippines] Philippines ramps up coronavirus testing to find thousands of unknown infections (Reuters)

[South Korea] A Nation Holds Elections in the Pandemic. 'Covid-19: Relax and Come Vote!' (Wall Street Journal)

[South Korea] South Korea forges ahead with election – with masks, thermometers and lots of hand sanitizer (Los Angeles Times)

[Taiwan] Taiwan reports no new coronavirus cases for first time in a month (Reuters)

[Taiwan] For first time in a month, Taiwan reports no new cases of coronavirus (Yahoo News)

[Vanuatu] Pacific clean-up after homes 'blown to smithereens' by superstorm (Yahoo News/AFP)

South and Central Asia

[India] With 411 ceasefire violations being reported in March alone, India issues demarche to Pakistan (Yahoo News/Oneindia)

[India] Modi Extends India Lockdown as Coronavirus Fight Intensifies (Bloomberg)

[India] India extends world's biggest lockdown, ignites protest by migrant workers (Reuters)

[India] India's Modi extends nationwide coronavirus lockdown until May 3 (CNN)

[India] TN govt. says rapid kits from China will arrive in two days, but will they? (Yahoo News/The News Minute)

[India] Indians stuck in Dubai airport for 3 weeks desperate to return home (Yahoo News/Oneindia)

[India] Has India's 'airpocalypse' put the poor more at risk from coronavirus? (Reuters)

[Kazakhstan] Kazakhstan summons Chinese ambassador in protest over article (Reuters)

[Kyrgyzstan] Kyrgyzstan extends coronavirus emergency (Reuters)

[Pakistan] Pakistan Extends Coronavirus Lockdown, Some Industries to Reopen in Phases (Reuters)

[Pakistan] Pakistan clerics call for lifting of congregational prayer limits (Reuters)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil's lower house approves \$15.5 billion aid package for states and municipalities (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil govt makes 40 bln reais counter proposal to coronavirus-hit states (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil heading for almost 8% of GDP deficit this year – Treasury Secretary (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil confirms 74 offshore oil workers with coronavirus: regulator (Reuters)

[Brazil] Brazil cocaine trafficker nabbed in Mozambique as gang expands (Reuters)

[Canada] Canada economic shutdown to last for weeks more, death toll above 800 (Reuters)

[Canada] It will be weeks before Canada can start reopening economy – PM Trudeau (Reuters)

[Chile] Chile to let some prisoners out of jail, but not Pinochet-era human rights violators (Reuters)

[Colombia] Colombian businesses face sharp drop in sales, employee cuts amid coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

[Colombia] \$5 cans of tuna: Colombia corruption thrives during coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

[Ecuador] Ecuadorian firefighter livens up lockdown with trumpet (Reuters)

[\[Mexico\] Mexico president challenges critics to vote him out early \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Mexico-Trump oil deal raises question: At what cost? \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Exclusive: Nurses at Mexico hospital hit by coronavirus say they were told to avoid masks \(Reuters\)](#)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[IMF Projects a Recession for Sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 \(Reuters\)](#)

[Medical supplies airlifted to Ethiopia for distribution \(Reuters\)](#)

[Conservationists fear African animal poaching will increase during COVID-19 pandemic \(ABC News\)](#)

[\[Liberia\] Liberian dies of COVID-19 before sentencing, denying justice \(AP\)](#)

[\[Malawi\] Malawi joins other southern African nations in coronavirus lockdown \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mozambique\] Mozambique police dismiss jihadist threat in north after attacks \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

[\[Nigeria\] Six Years After #BringBackOurGirls, Freed Chibok Captives Face Fresh Danger \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[South Africa\] South Africa Coronavirus cases rise by 143 to 2,415 \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Africa\] South Africa coronavirus cases rise to 2,415, China donates equipment \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Africa\] South Africa won't consider IMF adjustment programme, finance minister says \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Africa\] Hungry S. Africans clash with police over food aid in Cape Town \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

[\[Uganda\] Uganda extends coronavirus lockdown for three more weeks \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Zimbabwe\] Zimbabwe president threatens 20 years jail over fake lockdown statement \(Reuters\)](#)

Network TV News Coverage

[Danger of 'Second Waves' of Virus Are a Real Possibility \(ABC World News Now\)](#)

[Europe Struggles with Coronavirus \(CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto\)](#)

[Europe Moves to Reopen Schools, Economy \(CBS News\)](#)

[South Korea to Hold Parliamentary Elections; North Korea Launches Missiles \(CNN Newsroom\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] 23 ISIS Fighters Killed in Airstrike \(FOX and Friends\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Britain's Elderly Not Counted in Official Coronavirus Statistics: Nursing Home Managers \(CBS News\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korea Launches More Test Missiles \(CBS News\)](#)

Secretary of State

U.S. seeks to 'fundamentally change' WHO, Pompeo says (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/14/2020 12:06 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The United States is seeking to "fundamentally change" the World Health Organization, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Tuesday after Washington threatened to withhold contributions during the coronavirus pandemic.

President Donald Trump has promised an announcement this week on US funding to the UN body at the forefront of the crisis. The United States is the top donor to the WHO, providing \$400 million last year.

"The World Health Organization in its history has done some good work. Unfortunately here, it didn't hit the top of its game," Pompeo told Florida radio program "Good Morning Orlando."

"We need to make sure that we push through efforts to fundamentally change that or make a different decision that says we're going to do our part to make sure that these important world health obligations – things that frankly keep Americans safe, too – actually function," he said.

The Trump administration, a frequent critic of UN bodies, says that the WHO relied too much on Chinese official accounts after the virus officially known as SARS-CoV-2 emerged late last year in the metropolis of Wuhan.

The WHO, quoting Chinese doctors, in the initial weeks said it had no information of human-to-human transmission and praised Beijing's transparency.

Critics say that Trump is eager for a foreign scapegoat as he comes under fire for his own handling of the pandemic, which he boasted in January was "totally under control" but has now killed more than 23,500 people in the United States – more than in any other country.

He went on the offensive against the WHO after agreeing to scale back tensions with China, a key source of medical supplies, following his earlier pointed accusations that Beijing bore responsibility for the spread of the "Chinese virus."

But Pompeo indicated that the United States still was looking to take action.

Asked in a separate interview about a proposal in Congress to let US coronavirus victims sue China, Pompeo said that all nations' records will eventually be scrutinized.

"Those who were responsible for both the loss of lives, the tragedy that's taken place here in the United States and the economic damage that has been done all around the world, I'm very confident that this administration will lead the way in holding both those countries and the individuals responsible for it accountable," Pompeo told Houston radio station KSEV.

Defenders of the WHO say that the UN agency would have been shut out had it

aggressively challenged China, and note that it similarly has been mild in its comments regarding the US response.

[Russia] Russia ready to discuss hypersonic missiles with U.S. – RIA cites foreign minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:41 AM, Maxim Rodionov, Neutral]

Russia is ready to discuss hypersonic missiles with the United States in the context of strategic stability, the RIA news agency cited Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying on Tuesday.

Lavrov said that he would speak to his U.S. counterpart Mike Pompeo over the telephone in the coming days, news agencies reported.

In August 2019, the United States pulled out of a landmark strategic arms accord, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), adding to tensions between the two former Cold War adversaries.

[Russia] Russia says it's ready for hypersonic missile talks with U.S. (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:54 AM, Alexander Marrow, Neutral]

Russia is ready to discuss hypersonic missiles and other arms control issues with the United States as part of wider discussions about strategic stability, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Tuesday.

Cold War-era arms control agreements have been in jeopardy as Russia's relations with the West have soured in recent years.

In August 2019, the United States pulled out of a landmark strategic arms accord, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), citing Russian non-compliance.

Both countries are developing hypersonic missiles to expand their defence capabilities, with Russian President Vladimir Putin overseeing a test in Crimea in early January.

Such missiles, which fly several times the speed of sound and can be steered in flight, are harder to stop than other generations of weapons. Some experts fear their deployment could trigger a new nuclear arms race.

Lavrov said he wanted to speak to U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo again after receiving a call from him a couple of days ago during which he said Pompeo touched on resuming talks on arms control and strategic stability.

"We welcome such interest from our American partners because we have encouraged them to address these problems more actively for a long time," Lavrov said.

"We are open to talks about new promising developments, including hypersonic weapons in the context of, and I emphasise this especially, taking into account all aspects and factors that influence strategic stability, without exception."

Moscow has taken steps to mend ties with the West since the coronavirus outbreak.

Russia has flown medical supplies and equipment to the United States and Italy to help them fight the epidemic. Lavrov said Moscow was prepared to fly over more supplies should Washington request them.

Department of State News

U.S. State Department reports first coronavirus fatality among Washington staff (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:00 PM, Humeyra Pamuk, Negative]

The U.S. State Department on Tuesday reported its first coronavirus fatality among the staff at its headquarters in Washington, bringing the total death toll in its global workforce due to the outbreak to five.

"The individual passed over the weekend," William Walters, deputy chief medical officer for operations in the Bureau of Medical Services told reporters in a teleconference. "He was hospitalized for some time fighting the coronavirus and ultimately did succumb."

Walters said that the deceased individual, a civil servant, had been out of the office for more than two weeks. He did not provide further details, including in what role the individual served at the State Department, citing privacy issues.

Among the other four fatalities in the State Department's global workforce, three others were locally employed staff in foreign missions while a fourth person, a contractor working in New York, died of the illness last week.

The Department is currently tracking a total of 297 cases overseas, including 182 active and 115 recovered, while domestically another 71 cases were also being monitored, Walters said. Four of those had also been recovered, he added.

More than 1.92 million people have been reported to be infected by the novel coronavirus globally and 120,670 have died, according to a Reuters tally. Infections have been reported in more than 210 countries and territories since the first cases were identified in China in December 2019.

The virus has upended normal life across the globe.

In the United States, which has recorded more fatalities from the illness than any other country, the death toll on Tuesday topped 25,000, doubling in one week, according to a Reuters tally.

Trump to convene G7 leaders in video link to discuss pandemic (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 4:30 PM, Steve Holland, Neutral]

U.S. President Donald Trump will hold a video teleconference with G7 leaders on Thursday to coordinate national responses to the coronavirus outbreak, the White House said on Tuesday.

Trump, who is head of the G7 this year, had planned to hold this year's summit at the presidential retreat of Camp David, Maryland, in June, but moved it to a virtual setting due to the virus.

The Group of Seven nations consists of the United States, France, Britain, Italy, Canada, Japan and Germany, and all seven of them have been hit hard by the virus.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was released from a London hospital this week after treatment for the virus, which left him in the intensive care unit for several days.

"Working together, the G7 is taking a whole-of-society approach to tackle the crisis across multiple areas, including health, finance, humanitarian assistance, and science and technology," said White House spokesman Judd Deere.

The Thursday session is a follow-up to their March 16 video conference, the first time G7 leaders had met in that format, to go over efforts to defeat the coronavirus.

In addition to the meeting this week, another session is expected in May to lay the groundwork for the June video conference.

Global finance ministers say they are prepared to offer debt relief for struggling nations as world continues to reel from coronavirus fallout (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 11:08 AM, David J. Lynch, Neutral]

Global finance ministers and central bank chiefs backed debt relief for the world's poorest nations as part of a coordinated response to the deepening global recession on Tuesday.

The finance leaders from the Group of Seven said they would suspend debt service payments the poor countries owe to other governments if all Group of 20 nations agreed to back the move, as anticipated. In a statement following a virtual meeting to discuss the crisis, the finance leaders endorsed efforts to get global banks to offer similar relief to the 76 countries eligible for the World Bank's easiest loan terms.

The aim is to free up money the countries need to fund medical care and to support their economies amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"The scale of this health crisis is generating unprecedented challenges for the global economy," the G-7 said.

The governments acted following last month's call by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to suspend payments on government-to-government loans. The G-20, whose member nations produce roughly 80 percent of global output, is expected Wednesday to issue its own debt proposal.

Tuesday's G-7 statement came as the IMF said the coronavirus pandemic is causing the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s. In its annual world economic outlook, the fund forecasts the global economy will shrink by 3 percent this year before staging a partial rebound in 2021.

Over the next two years, output will be \$9 trillion less than expected before the crisis, according to Gita Gopinath, the fund's chief economist. The fund says the U.S. economy will contract by 5.9 percent this year and grow by 4.7 percent next year. "This makes the Great Lockdown the worst recession since the Great Depression and far worse than the global financial crisis," Gopinath said.

Though the fund expects a punishing global recession, the downturn will not be as severe as in the 1930s, when the global economy shrank by an estimated 10 percent, she said. The current recession is expected to trim world output by 3 percent.

Still, this is the first time since the Depression that both advanced areas like the United States, Europe and Japan as well as developing nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America are simultaneously mired in recession, according to Gopinath, an Indian economist who joined the IMF last year.

While the fund expects the pandemic to peak by midyear, the United States will remain below its precrisis growth trend through 2021. And the fund acknowledged that its forecast could prove overly optimistic if the pandemic lingers.

More than 90 countries already have approached the fund seeking some type of financial assistance to help them weather the pandemic. Many developing countries are suffering a rising health-care burden along with the loss of revenue from tourism and commodities sales, Gopinath said.

"This is a truly global crisis, as no country is spared," she said.

The fund has been racing to extend financing help to hard-hit countries such as Senegal, Tunisia and Albania. On Monday, the global lending agency said it had approved \$1 billion for Ghana under a new "rapid credit facility."

IMF officials said individual governments should combat the pandemic by spending freely on medical care and aid for the unemployed before pivoting next year to stimulating economic growth.

Amid the crisis-fighting efforts, sovereign debt totals are expected to balloon. But assuming the global recovery emerges as expected next year and interest rates remain low, governments should be able to whittle away at their debt burdens, Gopinath said. New trade barriers represent a threat to the anticipated recovery, she said. Several countries, including the United States, have imposed restraints on exports of medical equipment needed to fight the pandemic. And Gopinath said the strong recovery the IMF projects will not materialize "if the world de-globalizes."

G-7 Countries Support Debt Relief for Poorest Countries If Joined by Full G-20 (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 10:56 AM, Josh Zumbrun, Neutral]

The Group of Seven countries—the world's largest advanced economies—said they would support an initiative to suspend the debt payments of the world's poor countries, so long as the initiative is taken up by a broader group of nations.

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank have called on the world's wealthy economies to allow poor countries to postpone their debt payments for up to 14 months, freeing up funds to fight the coronavirus pandemic. The forbearance proposal would apply to official bilateral debt—that is, debts that are held by government institutions.

"This initiative would provide liquidity support to help these countries deal with the health and economic impacts of the crisis," the G-7 said following a virtual meeting on Tuesday. The G-7 consists of the U.S., Japan, Germany, France, U.K., Canada and Italy.

But the G-7 qualified its support, saying it needed to see a broader swath of countries—the Group of 20 major economies, or G-20—all agree to the proposal. The G-20 includes the world's largest advanced economies and major emerging markets including China, India, Brazil and Russia. The G-20 is scheduled to meet later this week.

The G-7 officials said that they "support multilateral efforts to assist these countries and stand ready to provide a time-bound suspension on debt service payments due on official bilateral claims for all countries eligible for World Bank concessional financing, if joined by all bilateral official creditors in the G-20."

The agreement would also have to be ratified by the Paris Club, a negotiating group for bilateral creditors, the statement said.

G-7 Backs Debt Help for Poor Nations, Split on IMF Fillip (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 11:15 AM, Saleha Mohsin and William Horobin, Neutral]

The world's top industrial economies backed plans to help shield emerging and developing markets from the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic, although divisions remain over whether to provide the International Monetary Fund with more resources.

The Group of Seven finance ministers and central bankers said they are prepared to offer a limited moratorium on debt repayments from poor countries. They also backed the IMF's proposed new liquidity program to rapidly address a shortage of dollars in emerging markets.

"The scale of this health crisis is generating unprecedented challenges for the global economy," the group said in a two-page summary of the meeting released Tuesday, highlighting particular concerns for some of the world's poorest nations.

The G-7 also called for "urgent contributions" to an IMF fund for catastrophes and poverty reduction. U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin led the meeting, which was held virtually after a face-to-face meeting was called off due to the pandemic.

But a rift continues in the group over increasing the IMF's funding to cope with the virus, with Mnuchin blocking a request for more money, according to French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire.

Group of 20 finance ministers and central bankers are scheduled to hold a call on Wednesday.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has reiterated her institution's willingness to use its \$1 trillion lending power, but has also warned that she may need governments to bolster its resources if the crisis continues for longer than expected or if there's a second wave of the disease.

The fund, which in its World Economic Outlook Tuesday predicted the "Great Lockdown" recession would be the steepest in almost a century, this week approved debt-service relief for 25 countries for six months via its Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust.

The IMF has asked Group of 20 leaders to support creating more of the reserve assets known as special drawing rights, or SDRs, as it did to the tune of \$250 billion in the 2008 financial crisis. France says around twice as much should be created now, but that would require 85% of IMF votes, where the U.S. is the biggest shareholder.

"The U.S. response for now is negative," Le Maire told reporters early Tuesday ahead of a call with G-7 phone call.

The U.S. supports much of the IMF's work to provide quick and targeted assistance to countries in need, a Treasury Department spokeswoman said in response to a request for comment on Mnuchin's opposition to boosting the organization's funding.

Le Maire told reporters Tuesday that countries working within the Paris Club framework have agreed on a moratorium for 76 nations that are eligible for aid from the International Development Association of the World Bank. For the first time, the Paris Club agreement includes China and other Group of 20 countries.

The G-7 stands "ready to provide a timebound suspension on debt service payments due on official bilateral claims for all countries eligible for World Bank concessional financing," according to the group's statement.

The agreement covers \$12 billion in payments on bilateral government loans and \$8 billion in payments due to private creditors, Le Maire said. There are another \$12 billion of payments to multilateral organizations due in 2020 that could be added to the moratorium, he added.

The IMF's Georgieva has received full support to make available short-term loans to small groups of countries to avoid a cash crunch. It would essentially serve as a backup to a Federal Reserve campaign to keep greenbacks flowing around the world economy. The Fed dollar swap lines to foreign central banks require Treasuries in exchange, but the IMF facility would offer the same for nations that don't hold enough U.S. debt to participate in the Fed's program.

"The advantage of an IMF short-term liquidity loan is that they can use the resources that are already allocated. It can be put in place fairly quickly," said Nathan Sheets, chief economist at PGIM Fixed Income.

Top creditors to suspend poorest countries debt payments – France (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 7:09 AM, Leigh Thomas, 5304K, Neutral]

Major international creditors have agreed to suspend debt payments owed by the poorest countries this year, throwing a financial lifeline to help them through the coronavirus crisis, France's finance minister said on Tuesday.

Some 76 countries, of which 40 are in sub-Saharan Africa, were eligible to have debt payments worth a combined \$20 billion suspended, out of a total of \$32 billion the countries were to spend on debt servicing this year.

"We have obtained a debt moratorium at the level of bilateral creditors and private creditors for a total of \$20 billion euros," Bruno Le Maire told journalists.

The government creditors, including not only the Paris Club but also China, are to suspend \$12 billion under the agreement, which remains to be finalised on Wednesday.

Private creditors have agreed on a voluntary basis to roll over or refinance \$8 billion in debt, a French finance ministry source said.

Of the total \$32 billion due this year, the remaining 12 billion euros is owed by multilateral lenders, mainly the World Bank. Le Maire urged such lenders to join initiative.

Coronavirus-Afflicted Global Economy Is Almost Certainly in Recession (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 1:34 PM, Josh Zumbrun, Negative]

The global economy has almost certainly entered a recession affecting most of the world, with a severity unmatched by anything aside from the Great Depression, the International Monetary Fund said Tuesday.

The IMF, in a new outlook, said the world economy is expected to contract by 3% in 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic causes nations around the world to close down, compared with a contraction of 0.1% in 2009, the worst year of the previous recession. This year's decline amounts to about \$2.7 trillion of global losses for the roughly \$90 trillion global economy.

"It is very likely that this year the global economy will experience its worst recession since the Great Depression, surpassing that seen during the global financial crisis a decade ago," Gita Gopinath, the IMF's chief economist, said in a note introducing the quarterly global growth update. "The great lockdown, as one might call it, is projected to shrink global growth dramatically," she added.

Unlike in the previous recession, which began in 2007 in the U.S. but was at its worst point in 2009 in most countries, nearly no country will be able to escape the economic fallout this year. Even in the depths of the prior recession, about 40% of countries continued to post per capita growth. In 2020, less than 10% of them will see growth continue, the IMF said.

Though it has been clear for weeks that the global economy was entering a severe downturn, the new outlook gives numerical estimates of the severity of the crisis. The forecasts are fodder for the IMF and World Bank, which are conducting a virtual spring

meeting this week after the coronavirus pandemic led to a cancellation of an in-person Washington gathering. The international organizations have been slow to unify around a coordinated approach to confront the pandemic.

As a key part of the response, the IMF and World Bank are pushing the world's wealthy countries to temporarily suspend debt payments from low-income countries. World Bank President David Malpass has estimated the proposal would free up around \$14 billion a year of principal and interest payments.

The proposal won a key endorsement on Tuesday with the Group of Seven—the world's largest advanced economies of the U.S., Japan, Germany, France, U.K., Canada and Italy—saying that they would endorse the debt suspensions so long as the broader Group of 20 countries signs on. The G-20 also includes China and major emerging markets and is scheduled to meet virtually later this week.

Separately, the IMF announced on Monday that it would suspend \$500 million of payments, owed directly to the IMF from 25 low-income countries, to free up funds to fight the pandemic and support nations struggling amid lockdowns.

Even countries expected to still grow this year—such as China, which has reopened its economy after apparently containing the coronavirus—will post their weakest growth in decades. China will expand 1.2% this year, the IMF projects, compared with 6.1% last year.

The American economy will shrink 5.9%, a rate more than twice as severe as the 2.5% decline in 2009. The euro area will suffer more, shrinking 7.5%, compared with a decline of 4.5% in 2009.

The IMF projects that the global economy is likely to rebound in 2021. But even with that rebound, it would be the weakest two-year period since at least the early 1980s, leaving the global economy about 4% smaller at the end of 2021 than the IMF's forecasts had expected as recently as January,

“Like in a war or a political crisis, there is continued severe uncertainty about the duration and intensity of the shock,” Ms. Gopinath said.

Global trade, already experiencing its weakest growth since the financial crisis because of the two-year-long U.S.-China trade war, is likely to contract by 11% in 2020, a collapse that could strip countries of the ability to boost their recoveries through exports.

And while the IMF's report said it welcomed the fiscal and monetary policy measures that countries have announced to support economies during the lockdown, it said a lingering question is whether such support continues once the coronavirus has been contained and people begin to return to normal activity.

“Broad-based fiscal stimulus can pre-empt a steeper decline in confidence, lift aggregate demand, and avert an even deeper downturn,” the report said. “But it would most likely be more effective once the outbreak fades and people are able to move about freely.”

The IMF also said in a separate report released Tuesday that central banks and

governments had intervened early enough through interest-rate cuts, asset purchases and credit backstops to keep the global financial system from melting down. New bank rules requiring stronger capital buffers also helped.

"Thanks to these efforts, funding markets have remained functional and investor sentiment has shown signs of improvement," the report said.

Still, the IMF warned countries not to get too complacent. Banks and other financial institutions should be ready to restructure loans and avail themselves of new tools to inject liquidity into the financial system, the report said. Governments should also help struggling businesses and households remain solvent. And emerging markets should intervene where possible to keep exchange rates stable and to keep capital outflows under control.

IMF predicts global contraction on par with Great Depression (Politico)

Politico [4/14/2020 10:19 AM, Adam Behsudi, Negative]

The global economy is expected to contract by 3 percent in 2020 as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the International Monetary Fund predicted in its annual World Economic Outlook released Tuesday.

"It is very likely that this year the global economy will experience its worst recession since the Great Depression, surpassing that seen during the global financial crisis a decade ago," IMF Economic Counsellor Gita Gopinath wrote in the report. "The Great Lockdown, as one might call it, is projected to shrink global growth dramatically."

Economic recovery is expected in 2021, but the extent of any new growth will likely depend on the duration of the pandemic and policies that governments take to stimulate the economy.

If the pandemic fades in the second half of this year, the world economy is projected to grow by 5.8 percent in 2021 with the help of government support.

U.S. economic output is expected to contract by 5.9 percent in 2020 but could see 4.7 percent growth in 2021. Global trade in goods and services is expected to drop 11 percent this year but could increase by 8.4 percent next year.

"Countries urgently need to work together to slow the spread of the virus and to develop a vaccine and therapies to counter the disease," the report said. "Until such medical interventions become available, no country is safe from the pandemic (including a recurrence after the initial wave subsides) as long as transmission occurs elsewhere."

Also Tuesday, finance ministers and central bank governors representing G-7 nations met virtually and "reiterated their pledge to do whatever is necessary to restore economic growth and protect jobs, businesses and the resilience of the financial system," according to a summary of the meeting released by the Treasury Department.

The officials discussed the need to assist emerging and developing countries during the crisis, calling for more contributions to various IMF relief funds.

The ministers also agreed to provide a temporary suspension on debt service payments on bilateral financing provided to poorer countries as long as the broader G-20 agrees to a similar measure.

"Ministers and governors recognize that an extraordinary and well-coordinated international response is critical to reducing the depth of the crisis," the summary said.

IMF Sees Great Lockdown Recession as Worst Since Depression (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 10:06 AM, Eric Martin, 6400K, Neutral]

The International Monetary Fund predicted the "Great Lockdown" recession would be the steepest in almost a century and warned the world economy's contraction and recovery would be worse than anticipated if the coronavirus lingers or returns.

In its first World Economic Outlook report since the spread of the coronavirus and subsequent freezing of major economies, the IMF estimated on Tuesday that global gross domestic product will shrink 3% this year.

That compares to a January projection of 3.3% expansion and would likely mark the deepest dive since the Great Depression. It would also dwarf the 0.1% contraction of 2009 amid the financial crisis.

While the fund anticipated growth of 5.8% next year, which would be the strongest in records dating back to 1980, it cautioned risks are tilted to the downside. Much depends on the longevity of the pandemic, its effect on activity and related stresses in financial and commodity markets, it said.

Even if the IMF's forecast proves accurate, it said output in both advanced and emerging markets would undershoot their pre-virus trends through 2021, seemingly dashing any lingering hopes of a V-shaped economic rebound from the health emergency. The cumulative loss in global GDP this year and next could be about \$9 trillion – bigger than the economies of Japan and Germany combined, IMF chief economist Gita Gopinath said.

"This is a crisis like no other, which means there is substantial uncertainty on the impact it will have on people's lives and livelihoods," Gopinath said in an online briefing.

In its forecasts, the IMF assumes that countries experiencing severe epidemics will lose about 8% of working days this year during containment efforts and the loosening of restrictions.

In a further sign of pessimism, the IMF sketched out three alternative scenarios in which the virus lasted longer than expected, returned in 2021 or both. A lengthier pandemic would wipe 3% off GDP this year compared to the baseline, while protraction plus a resumption next year would mean 8% less output than projected in 2021, it said.

As with the virus's reach, the economic hit is sweeping. In the U.S., GDP is expected to contract 5.9%, compared with a 2% expansion in its last global outlook in January. It may grow 4.7% next year, the IMF said. The euro area will probably shrink 7.5% in 2020 and expand 4.7% in 2021, it said.

"Many countries face a multi-layered crisis comprising a health shock, domestic economic disruptions, plummeting external demand, capital-flow reversals and a collapse in commodity prices," the IMF said. "Risks of a worse outcome predominate."

The grim projections are a stark reversal from the IMF's outlook less than two months ago. On Feb. 19, the fund told Group of 20 finance chiefs that "global growth appears to be bottoming out." Three days later, Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva predicted the virus would likely cut just 0.1 percentage point from the fund's global growth forecast for this year, although she acknowledged "more dire scenarios" were being studied.

The fund sees advanced economies shrinking the most, contracting 6.1%. Emerging-market and developing economies will see a 1% drop. Growth in China and India will decelerate but their economies will still manage to expand 1.2% and 1.9% respectively, the fund said.

The IMF's baseline scenario assumes that the pandemic fades in the second half of this year and that containment measures can be gradually wound down.

Global trade volume in goods and services will probably tumble 11% this year, the fund said.

Growth in consumer prices in advanced economies may average 0.5% this year, accelerating to 1.5% in 2021, it said. The jobless rate in the U.S., which was at a half-century low before the pandemic, may swell to 10.4% in 2020, the IMF said.

Most central banks around the world have cut interest rates to around or below zero to blunt the effect of the coronavirus, with the Federal Reserve launching an unprecedented range of emergency programs to support as much as \$2.3 trillion in loans. Fiscal stimulus packages have varied more. The U.S. is providing about 10% of GDP in support and Germany about 4.5%, while Japan's program is worth about 20% of GDP, according to Bloomberg Economics.

The IMF said that fiscal measures will need to increase if stoppages to economic activity persist, or if the pickup in activity once restrictions are lifted is too weak. Economies with financing constraints may also require external support, the fund said. Georgieva had repeatedly pledged to use the IMF's \$1 trillion in loan capacity to help its members.

The IMF and World Bank are holding their spring meetings via video conference for the first time ever this week. Their normal in-person meetings typically draw thousands of delegates, observers and journalists from 189 member countries. The program has been pared down to mostly media briefings and private meetings, skipping the typical seminars and public discussions.

IMF: Global economy will suffer worst year since Depression (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 8:32 AM, Paul Wiseman and Martin Crutsinger, 1512K, Negative]

Beaten down by the coronavirus outbreak, the world economy in 2020 will suffer its worst year since the Great Depression of the 1930s, the International Monetary Fund says in its latest forecast.

The IMF said Tuesday that it expects the global economy to shrink 3% this year — far worse than its 0.1% dip in the Great Recession year of 2009 — before rebounding in 2021 with 5.8% growth. It acknowledges, though, that prospects for a rebound next year are clouded by uncertainty.

The bleak assessment represents a breathtaking downgrade by the IMF. In its previous forecast in January, before COVID-19 emerged as a grave threat to public health and economic growth worldwide, the international lending organization had forecast moderate global growth of 3.3% this year. But far-reaching measures to contain the pandemic — lockdowns, business shutdowns, social distancing and travel restrictions — have suddenly brought economic activity to a near-standstill across much of the world.

"The world has been put in a great lockdown," the IMF's chief economist, Gita Gopinath, told reporters. "This is a crisis like no other."

Gopinath said the cumulative loss to the global gross domestic product, the broadest gauge of economic output, could amount to \$9 trillion — more than the economies of Germany and Japan combined.

The IMF's twice-yearly World Economic Outlook was prepared for this week's spring meetings of the 189-nation IMF and its sister lending organization, the World Bank. Those meetings, along with a gathering of finance ministers and central bankers of the world's 20 biggest economies, will be held virtually for the first time in light of the coronavirus outbreak.

In its latest outlook, the IMF expects economic contractions this year of 5.9% in the United States, 7.5% in the 19 European countries that share the euro currency, 5.2% in Japan and 6.5% in the United Kingdom. China, where the pandemic originated, is expected to eke out 1.2% growth this year. The world's second-biggest economy, which had gone into lockdown, has begun to open up well before other countries.

Worldwide trade will plummet 11% this year, the IMF predicts, and then grow 8.4% in 2021.

Last week, the IMF's managing director, Kristalina Georgieva, warned that the world was facing "the worst economic fallout since the Great Depression." She said that emerging markets and low-income nations across Africa, Latin America and much of Asia were at especially high risk. And on Monday, the IMF approved \$500 million to cancel six months of debt payments for 25 impoverished countries.

The IMF cautioned that its forecast is shrouded by unknowns. They include the path that the virus will take; the effectiveness of policies meant to contain the outbreak and minimize the economic damage; and uncertainty over whether, even many months from now, people will continue to isolate themselves and depress spending as a precaution against a potential resurgence of the virus.

On a hopeful note, the IMF noted that policymakers in many countries have engineered what it calls a "swift and sizable" response to the economic crisis. In the United States, for instance, the Federal Reserve has intervened aggressively to smooth lending markets. And Congress has enacted three separate rescue measures, including a \$2.2 trillion aid

package — the largest in history — that is meant to sustain households and businesses until the outbreak recedes and economic life begins to return to normal.

That package includes direct payments to individuals, business loans, grants to companies that agree not to lay off workers and expanded unemployment benefits. And Congress is moving toward approving a possible fourth economic aid measure.

Gathering at their own virtual meeting, finance officials of the Group of Seven major industrial countries, including U.S. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Fed Chairman Jerome Powell, pledged to “use all available policy tools” to achieve a strong recovery.

Meghan Clem, CEO of the wedding and party-planning company Intertwined Events, says she is hoping that some government loans come through so she can continue to pay her staff. The next two to three months will likely be the worst of the crisis for Intertwined Events.

“All events have been canceled or postponed to the fourth quarter, so we are seeing a full stop of revenue for May, June and likely July,” said Clem, whose company is based in Irvine, California.

In Europe, the sudden downturn has spotlighted the vulnerabilities of the shared euro currency. The 19-country bloc lacks a powerful central treasury. And it’s struggled to settle on a unified fiscal response, with northern European countries like the Netherlands and Germany blocking proposals for shared borrowing backed by all countries. The member countries did agree on what could amount to a half-trillion euros in stimulus. But conditions on part of the package mean that some of the money may never be tapped.

Italy, which has been deeply hurt by the crisis, is expected to suffer a 9% drop this year in its gross domestic product, and its debt load could soar from an already high 135% of GDP. Fears have arisen of a renewed debt crisis, though for now stimulus from the European Central Bank has calmed lending markets.

European governments are deploying plans that subsidize worker pay at companies that have had to put employees on shorter hours or send them home. The idea is that companies keep workers on board so that they can quickly resume without having to recruit and train new staffers later. Their workers’ spending also helps support other businesses. The system represents a sharp contrast to practices in the United States, where applications for unemployment benefits have skyrocketed.

In Germany, 2.35 million workers are expected to take part in the program. They will receive at least 60% of net pay.

Some countries can’t afford sufficiently aggressive rescue plans, the IMF said, and “may require external support.” Georgieva has said that the IMF is prepared to commit its \$1 trillion in lending capacity to support nations that need help in dealing with the pandemic.

France Says U.S. Is Opposed to Increasing IMF Crisis Powers (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 8:34 AM, William Horobin, 6400K, Neutral]

France said the U.S. is blocking an attempt to increase the International Monetary Fund's capacity to help countries in financial trouble because of the coronavirus.

The IMF has asked Group of 20 leaders to support creating more of the reserve assets known as special drawing rights, or SDRs, as it did to the tune of \$250 billion in the global financial crisis. France says around twice as much should be created now, but that would require 85% of IMF votes, where the U.S. is the biggest shareholder.

G-20 finance ministers and central bankers are scheduled to hold a call on Wednesday. Germany would support a crisis package that includes more SDRs, as well as a short-term liquidity line without conditionality for developing nations, according to a German government official who asked not to be identified.

French Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said the SDR idea is proving "difficult" with the U.S. though, and he's spoken to Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin about it twice already.

"The U.S. response for now is negative," Le Maire told reporters on Tuesday ahead of a call with Group of Seven finance chiefs Tuesday and virtual meetings of the IMF and World Bank this week. "But we continue to think it is a response that is not costly for IMF members and very effective for developing countries."

While no agreement is likely on Wednesday, France will keep pushing because the measure is more monetary than fiscal so would be less of a burden on budgets, according to a finance ministry official, who declined to be identified in line with government policy.

Debt Moratorium

Another IMF request, a debt moratorium for the world's poorest nations, is going ahead, according to both Le Maire and the German government official.

Le Maire said countries working within the Paris Club framework have agreed on a moratorium for 76 nations that are eligible for aid from the International Development Association of the World Bank. For the first time, the Paris Club agreement includes China and other Group of 20 countries.

The agreement covers \$12 billion in payments on bilateral government loans and \$8 billion in payments due to private creditors, Le Maire said. There are another \$12 billion of payments to multilateral organizations due in 2020 that could be added to the moratorium, he added.

It's a significant first step, particularly with the involvement of China, he said. Any cancellations for countries with debt sustainability problems will have to be considered at the end of the year in a multilateral framework.

Money Creation

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has reiterated her institution's willingness to use its \$1 trillion lending power, but has also warned that she may need governments to

bolster its resources if the crisis continues for longer than expected or if there's a second wave of the disease.

More SDRs could help ensure emerging markets avoid a cash crunch as they deal with the health crisis, economic stagnation and capital outflows. The IMF's executive board on Monday approved debt service relief for 25 countries for six months via its Catastrophe Containment and Relief Trust.

In a recent report, Mark Sobel, the U.S.'s former executive director at the IMF, has said there are "better and more effective solutions" for the IMF to embrace than seeking more SDRs, such as offering short-term loans of dollars.

"Some major members remain unconvinced for now, but ultimately concerns about the negative effects of money creation at the IMF would be the same as on the national level where central banks have been rapidly expanding money supply," Bank of America Corp. analysts said in a report on Tuesday. "In a world of massive demand shortage and deleveraging, inflation seems a rather unlikely concern."

Saudi Arabia affirms OPEC+ pact aims for market balance, stability (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 9:07 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's cabinet of ministers affirmed on Tuesday that a recent multilateral crude supply reduction pact is an extension of the kingdom's previous efforts to achieve market balance and stability, state news agency SPA reported.

OPEC and allies led by Russia, a group known as OPEC+, agreed on Sunday to cut oil output to prop up prices amid the coronavirus pandemic in an unprecedented deal that could curb global supply by up to 20%.

Americans stuck in Africa trying to bring adopted kids home (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 12:39 PM, David Crary, Neutral]

Stranded in Nigeria for months, a Colorado couple had a rare chance to catch an evacuation flight to the U.S. recently during the coronavirus outbreak. But they refused because they would have had to leave behind their adopted daughter, who has yet to get a U.S. visa.

"After we found our daughter and our daughter found us, it was out of the question to leave her," Robin Gallite said.

Gallite and her husband, Adebambo Alli, who live in Denver, are among several American families facing similar predicaments as the pandemic disrupts travel and slows the final steps needed to bring home children who were adopted abroad.

The Virginia-based National Council for Adoption says it is following dozens of cases where the foreign adoption is complete and American parents are waiting for their child to receive a visa from the State Department.

"We need to do the right thing and prioritize the health and safety of these families," council vice president Ryan Hanlon said.

The State Department says foreign adoptions remain a priority but has told families that with routine visa services suspended during the pandemic, their requests for emergency visas may not be granted swiftly, if at all.

The adoption council says nearly all of the cases it's tracking are from Africa — where many countries, including Nigeria, are not part of the main international convention on adoption and investigations can take longer even under normal circumstances.

Gallite, 41, and Alli, 42, have been in Nigeria since last August, when they arrived to complete the adoption of a baby girl. A Nigerian judge signed off in November, but obtaining a U.S. visa has moved slowly and is now in deeper limbo because of virus-related shutdowns.

While the couple delight in their daughter's love for dancing and jumping, they ache to return to Denver with 17-month-old Adenike-Rae — nicknamed Nike — and are frustrated by the uncertainty of when that might be possible.

"We're resilient people — we have to be strong and tough for Nike," Gallite said. "The stress comes from trying to figure out how to get home."

In the meantime, they're staying with Adebambo Alli's sister. Alli, who was born in the U.S. to a Nigerian family, has worked in Colorado's energy industry but now has no job and is trying to line one up from Lagos. Gallite is supporting the family by working remotely as deputy director of an arts center in Denver.

Also stranded in Lagos — with her nearly 9-month-old adopted daughter Zoe — is Ufuoma Sada of Columbus, Ohio.

Sada has been in Nigeria since September while her husband, Ebenezer, works as an engineer in Ohio to keep the family afloat. Nigerian authorities approved the adoption in December, but Sada says she has faced delays and communication gaps as she tries to get the U.S. Consulate to make progress on a visa for Zoe.

"We're now into the fourth month, and nothing has been done," said Sada, who worries increasingly about the COVID-19 outbreak in Nigeria and wants U.S. authorities to expedite their return.

About 800 miles (more than 1,200 kilometers) east of Lagos, another American family is stranded in Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, waiting for the U.S. Embassy to issue visas for 2-year-old twin girls they adopted in Chad in 2018.

David Parker, 29, a former youth pastor at a church in Denver, North Carolina, and his wife, Michaela, 24, moved to Chad two years ago to serve as Christian missionaries.

In January, the couple were told to come to Cameroon to complete the U.S. portion of the adoption process and get U.S. immigration visas for the girls, which the embassy in Chad does not handle.

Because of the pandemic, Parker says it has been difficult to gather all the evidence that U.S. officials requested as part of their investigation. He's increasingly worried the delays will endanger the health and safety of his family, which includes a 6-month-old son, Philip, as well as twins Ariella and Clair.

"Everything's basically shut down," Parker said by phone. "We don't know when or if we're going to be able to complete this."

Like Gallite and Alli, the Parkers were told they could board a U.S.-bound evacuation flight with their biological son but would have to leave their daughters behind.

"For us, that's not an option," said Parker, whose family is now restricted to a missionary compound in Yaounde.

The parents are hoping the U.S. government will issue them emergency visas. There's also a rarely used process called "humanitarian parole," which allowed some Haitian orphans to come to the U.S. in 2010 after Haiti's devastating earthquake.

Gallite has asked the State Department to work with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services to obtain humanitarian parole for Nike.

"We are stuck abroad and our health and safety is extremely vulnerable here in Nigeria during a pandemic," she wrote to the State Department last week. "Please bring your U.S. citizens home and our legally adopted daughter."

In a memo sent to The Associated Press on Monday, the State Department said humanitarian parole is granted "only in rare circumstances where no other immigration avenue exists." It said families should contact USCIS directly with questions and that requests "generally take several weeks or longer to process."

The State Department's Office of Children's Issues said it had received many inquiries about emergency visas, which can be sought from embassies or consulates where the adoptions took place.

"Because routine visa services have been suspended, parents should be prepared to explain how their circumstances constitute an emergency," the office said.

Chinese ship returns to waters off Vietnam amid virus 'distraction' charges (Reuters)

[Reuters](#) [4/14/2020 2:04 AM, Khanh Vu and James Pearson, 5304K, Neutral]

A Chinese ship embroiled in a standoff with Vietnamese vessels last year has returned to waters near Vietnam as the United States accused China of pushing its presence in the South China Sea while other claimants are pre-occupied with the coronavirus.

Vietnamese vessels last year spent months shadowing the Chinese Haiyang Dizhi 8 survey vessel in resource-rich waters that are a potential global flashpoint as the United States challenges China's sweeping maritime claims.

On Tuesday, the ship, which is used for offshore seismic surveys, appeared again 158 km

(98 miles) off Vietnam's coast, within its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), flanked by at least one China Coast Guard vessel, according to data from Marine Traffic, a website that tracks shipping.

At least three Vietnamese vessels were moving with the Chinese ship, according to data issued by the Marine Traffic site.

The presence of the Haiyang Dizhi 8 in Vietnam's EEZ comes towards the scheduled end of a 15-day nationwide lockdown in Vietnam aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus.

It also follows the sinking of a Vietnamese fishing boat near islands in the disputed waters this month, an act that drew a protest from Vietnam and accusations that China had violated its sovereignty and threatened the lives of its fishermen.

The United States, which last month sent an aircraft carrier to the central Vietnamese port of Danang, said it was "seriously concerned" about China's reported sinking of the vessel.

"We call on the PRC to remain focused on supporting international efforts to combat the global pandemic, and to stop exploiting the distraction or vulnerability of other states to expand its unlawful claims in the South China Sea," the U.S. State Department said in a statement, referring to China.

'BASELESS'

The Philippines, which also has disputed claims in the South China Sea, has raised its concerns too.

On Saturday, China's Global Times, published by the official People's Daily newspaper of China's ruling Communist Party, said Vietnam had used the fishing boat incident to distract from its "ineptitude" in handling the coronavirus.

Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not immediately respond to a request from Reuters for comment.

Helped by a mass quarantine and aggressive contact-tracing, Vietnam has recorded 265 cases of the novel coronavirus and no deaths. Nearly 122,000 coronavirus tests have been carried out in Vietnam.

China and Vietnam have for years been at loggerheads over the potentially energy-rich waters, called the East Sea by Vietnam.

China's U-shaped "nine-dash line" on its maps marks a vast expanse of the waters that it claims, including large parts of Vietnam's continental shelf where it has awarded oil concessions. Malaysia and Brunei claim some of the waters that China claims to the south.

During the standoff last year, at least one China Coast Guard vessel spent weeks in waters close to an oil rig in a Vietnamese oil block, operated by Russia's Rosneft, while the Haiyang Dizhi 8 conducted suspected oil exploration surveys in large expanses of Vietnam's EEZ.

"The deployment of the vessel is Beijing's move to once again baselessly assert its sovereignty in the South China Sea," said Ha Hoang Hop, at the Singapore-based ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute.

"China is using the coronavirus distraction to increase its assertiveness in the South China Sea, at a time when the U.S. and Europe are struggling to cope with the new coronavirus."

[Russia] Amid coronavirus chaos, Russian spies see opportunity: Intelligence assessment (ABC News)

ABC News [4/14/2020 4:09 AM, Josh Margolin, 2182K, Neutral]

As Russia's leaders concede coronavirus is now an "emergency" in that country, Moscow's intelligence services remain hard at work searching for an angle amid tragedy that could give them an upper hand over the U.S., according to a new U.S. intelligence analysis obtained by ABC News.

The assessment says U.S. intelligence suspects that their Russian counterparts have been trying to sow discord and chaos in America by amplifying social media messages that push conspiracy theories and other narratives that could cause people to lose faith in their government and communities.

At the same time, analysts say Russians would have been closely monitoring the well-documented failings in the U.S. healthcare system laid bare by the coronavirus pandemic.

"Russia has devised an asymmetric military doctrine to be used in combination with conventional tactics," according to the April 6 document distributed to U.S. law enforcement by the Department of Homeland Security. The Russians hope to "sap the will to fight from its adversary by, among other things, putting pressure on the population at the same time as engaging militarily."

"During peacetime," the analysis says, "Russia prepares the ground in the event of hostilities by collecting intelligence on the vulnerabilities of each target. During degraded relations, Russia conducts some operations to keep its adversary off balance, such as disinformation campaigns and possibly mapping the medical supply chain."

For instance, the document says that medical first responders "as of mid-March lacked enough supplies of COVID-19 test kits, personal protection equipment, and ventilators because the supply chain was unprepared for a pandemic, according to credible press reporting."

"This information could fulfill Russia's collection requirements to understand vulnerabilities in the US medical supply chain," the document says.

Such efforts by Russian intelligence should come as no surprise, according to ABC News contributor John Cohen, who used to lead intelligence operations at DHS.

"Russia, terrorist groups and other adversaries are watching carefully how the U.S. responds to the COVID-19 pandemic so that they can identify weaknesses in our defenses

that could be exploited to conduct future attacks," said Cohen, a former acting undersecretary of DHS. "There is no doubt that Russia would seek to exploit the current public health crisis to achieve their objectives."

The intelligence analysis was distributed last week, just days before the Kremlin admitted Saturday for the first time that there was a "huge influx" of patients in Moscow and that hospitals are now working in "emergency mode." The day before, a deputy to Moscow mayor said that the number of hospital admissions had doubled in a week.

Russia's confirmed coronavirus numbers have been jumping by over 1,000 a day for the past few days, and Monday saw a huge leap of over 2,500 new cases in 24 hours. The country's total now stands at 18,328 cases, with a reported 130 deaths.

Adding to the concerns is the reality that Russia's ramshackle health service could be no match for the health crisis if it worsens, especially outside Moscow. Outside some cities, the Russian military has been building special coronavirus hospitals, which authorities say are intended to create thousands more beds for those being treated.

[Turkey] Turkey repeats working group offer to U.S. to solve row over Russian defense purchase (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:31 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Turkey on Tuesday repeated an offer to the United States to establish a technical working group including NATO to help solve a dispute over Ankara's purchase of Russian missile defenses that angered Washington.

Ties between the NATO allies were badly strained last year when Turkey bought Russian S-400 defense systems, prompting Washington to threaten sanctions and to suspend Turkish involvement in its F-35 jet program.

The United States says the S-400s are not compatible with NATO systems and threaten the stealth capabilities of its Lockheed Martin F-35 jets. Turkey rejects this and says the S-400s will not be integrated into the alliance's defenses.

Before the outbreak of the coronavirus shifted focused away from the issue, Ankara's bilateral ties with Moscow took a heavy blow over Russia's support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's military offensive on northwestern Syrian town of Idlib.

In early March as fighting between Syrian government forces and the Turkish military and allied Syrian rebels intensified, Ankara sought help from the United States to give it ammunition as well as humanitarian assistance for hundreds of thousands of civilians fleeing the battle.

Since then, both Turkey and the United States have largely kept silent on the S-400 issue. Turkey had previously said it would make the Russian missile defense systems operational in April but so far there has been no sign of such a move.

Speaking at a virtual Atlantic Council event, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkey's stance on how to solve the issue had not changed.

"We offer the U.S. to establish a technical working group with NATO's inclusion and NATO can lead this technical working group actually. And this offer is still on the table," he said.

He also added that Turkey was still willing to purchase Patriot batteries if it had a good offer. Washington has repeatedly said it was unwilling to provide Patriots to Turkey unless it returned the S-400s.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan visited Washington last November and met with U.S. President Donald Trump and agreed him with about setting up a working group but the effort made little progress.

[China] State Dept. cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 6:00 AM, Josh Rogin, 12625K, Neutral]

Two years before the novel coronavirus pandemic upended the world, U.S. Embassy officials visited a Chinese research facility in the city of Wuhan several times and sent two official warnings back to Washington about inadequate safety at the lab, which was conducting risky studies on coronaviruses from bats. The cables have fueled discussions inside the U.S. government about whether this or another Wuhan lab was the source of the virus — even though conclusive proof has yet to emerge.

In January 2018, the U.S. Embassy in Beijing took the unusual step of repeatedly sending U.S. science diplomats to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV), which had in 2015 become China's first laboratory to achieve the highest level of international bioresearch safety (known as BSL-4). WIV issued a news release in English about the last of these visits, which occurred on March 27, 2018. The U.S. delegation was led by Jamison Foush, the consul general in Wuhan, and Rick Switzer, the embassy's counselor of environment, science, technology and health. Last week, WIV erased that statement from its website, though it remains archived on the Internet.

What the U.S. officials learned during their visits concerned them so much that they dispatched two diplomatic cables categorized as Sensitive But Unclassified back to Washington. The cables warned about safety and management weaknesses at the WIV lab and proposed more attention and help. The first cable, which I obtained, also warns that the lab's work on bat coronaviruses and their potential human transmission represented a risk of a new SARS-like pandemic.

"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," states the Jan. 19, 2018, cable, which was drafted by two officials from the embassy's environment, science and health sections who met with the WIV scientists. (The State Department declined to comment on this and other details of the story.)

The Chinese researchers at WIV were receiving assistance from the Galveston National Laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch and other U.S. organizations, but the Chinese requested additional help. The cables argued that the United States should give

the Wuhan lab further support, mainly because its research on bat coronaviruses was important but also dangerous.

As the cable noted, the U.S. visitors met with Shi Zhengli, the head of the research project, who had been publishing studies related to bat coronaviruses for many years. In November 2017, just before the U.S. officials' visit, Shi's team had published research showing that horseshoe bats they had collected from a cave in Yunnan province were very likely from the same bat population that spawned the SARS coronavirus in 2003.

"Most importantly," the cable states, "the researchers also showed that various SARS-like coronaviruses can interact with ACE2, the human receptor identified for SARS-coronavirus. This finding strongly suggests that SARS-like coronaviruses from bats can be transmitted to humans to cause SARS-like diseases. From a public health perspective, this makes the continued surveillance of SARS-like coronaviruses in bats and study of the animal-human interface critical to future emerging coronavirus outbreak prediction and prevention."

The research was designed to prevent the next SARS-like pandemic by anticipating how it might emerge. But even in 2015, other scientists questioned whether Shi's team was taking unnecessary risks. In October 2014, the U.S. government had imposed a moratorium on funding of any research that makes a virus more deadly or contagious, known as "gain-of-function" experiments.

As many have pointed out, there is no evidence that the virus now plaguing the world was engineered; scientists largely agree it came from animals. But that is not the same as saying it didn't come from the lab, which spent years testing bat coronaviruses in animals, said Xiao Qiang, a research scientist at the School of Information at the University of California at Berkeley.

"The cable tells us that there have long been concerns about the possibility of the threat to public health that came from this lab's research, if it was not being adequately conducted and protected," he said.

There are similar concerns about the nearby Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention lab, which operates at biosecurity level 2, a level significantly less secure than the level-4 standard claimed by the Wuhan Institute of Virology lab, Xiao said. That's important because the Chinese government still refuses to answer basic questions about the origin of the novel coronavirus while suppressing any attempts to examine whether either lab was involved.

Sources familiar with the cables said they were meant to sound an alarm about the grave safety concerns at the WIV lab, especially regarding its work with bat coronaviruses. The embassy officials were calling for more U.S. attention to this lab and more support for it, to help it fix its problems.

"The cable was a warning shot," one U.S. official said. "They were begging people to pay attention to what was going on."

No extra assistance to the labs was provided by the U.S. government in response to these cables. The cables began to circulate again inside the administration over the past two

months as officials debated whether the lab could be the origin of the pandemic and what the implications would be for the U.S. pandemic response and relations with China.

Inside the Trump administration, many national security officials have long suspected either the WIV or the Wuhan Center for Disease Control and Prevention lab was the source of the novel coronavirus outbreak. According to the New York Times, the intelligence community has provided no evidence to confirm this. But one senior administration official told me that the cables provide one more piece of evidence to support the possibility that the pandemic is the result of a lab accident in Wuhan.

"The idea that it was just a totally natural occurrence is circumstantial. The evidence it leaked from the lab is circumstantial. Right now, the ledger on the side of it leaking from the lab is packed with bullet points and there's almost nothing on the other side," the official said.

As my colleague David Ignatius noted, the Chinese government's original story — that the virus emerged from a seafood market in Wuhan — is shaky. Research by Chinese experts published in the Lancet in January showed the first known patient, identified on Dec. 1, had no connection to the market, nor did more than one-third of the cases in the first large cluster. Also, the market didn't sell bats.

Shi and other WIV researchers have categorically denied this lab was the origin for the novel coronavirus. On Feb. 3, her team was the first to publicly report the virus known as 2019-nCoV was a bat-derived coronavirus.

The Chinese government, meanwhile, has put a total lockdown on information related to the virus origins. Beijing has yet to provide U.S. experts with samples of the novel coronavirus collected from the earliest cases. The Shanghai lab that published the novel coronavirus genome on Jan. 11 was quickly shut down by authorities for "rectification." Several of the doctors and journalists who reported on the spread early on have disappeared.

On Feb. 14, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for a new biosecurity law to be accelerated. On Wednesday, CNN reported the Chinese government has placed severe restrictions requiring approval before any research institution publishes anything on the origin of the novel coronavirus.

The origin story is not just about blame. It's crucial to understanding how the novel coronavirus pandemic started because that informs how to prevent the next one. The Chinese government must be transparent and answer the questions about the Wuhan labs because they are vital to our scientific understanding of the virus, said Xiao.

We don't know whether the novel coronavirus originated in the Wuhan lab, but the cable pointed to the danger there and increases the impetus to find out, he said.

"I don't think it's a conspiracy theory. I think it's a legitimate question that needs to be investigated and answered," he said. "To understand exactly how this originated is critical knowledge for preventing this from happening in the future."

[China] State Department leaked cables renew theories on origin of coronavirus (FOX News)

FOX News [4/14/2020 12:45 PM, Barnini Chakraborty, Neutral]

A Chinese laboratory at the center of new theories about how the coronavirus pandemic started was the subject of multiple urgent warnings inside the U.S. State Department two years ago, according to a new report.

U.S. Embassy officials warned in January 2018 about inadequate safety at the Wuhan Institute of Virology lab and passed on information about scientists conducting risky research on coronavirus from bats, The Washington Post reported Tuesday.

Those cables have renewed speculation inside the U.S. government about whether Wuhan-based labs were the source of the novel coronavirus, although no firm connection has been established. The theory, however, has gained traction in recent days.

The United Kingdom has said that the idea that the virus, which has turned into a full-blown global pandemic, was leaked from a Wuhan lab is "no longer being discounted."

A member of the U.K. government's emergency committee of senior officials claimed Sunday: "There is a credible alternative view (to the zoonotic theory) based on the nature of the virus. Perhaps it is no coincidence that there is a laboratory in Wuhan."

Foreign affairs expert Gordon Chang said in a recent opinion piece on Fox News that "many Chinese believe the virus either was deliberately released or accidentally escaped from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, a P4-level bio-safety facility."

He added: "This lab, known for studying coronaviruses, is not far from the market that had been initially identified as the source of the outbreak."

In a series of diplomatic cables labeled "Sensitive But Unclassified," U.S. Embassy officials warned that the lab had massive management weaknesses, posed severe health risks and warned Washington to get involved.

The first cable, which was obtained by the Post, also sent red flags about the lab's work on bat coronaviruses and more specifically how their potential human transmission represented the risk of a new SARS-like pandemic.

"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," the Jan. 19, 2018 cable, written by two officials from the embassy's environment, science and health sections who met with the WIV scientists, said.

The cable argued that the United States should give Chinese researchers at the Wuhan lab more support because its research on bat coronaviruses was important and dangerous. The lab had already been receiving assistance from the Galveston National Laboratory at the University of Texas Medical Branch.

The cable also called attention to Shi Zhengli, the head of the research project, who in

November 2017 published a paper that showed the horseshoe bats collected from a case in Yunnan province were most likely from the same bat population that had been behind the first SARS coronavirus in 2003.

The cable states that "the researchers also showed that various SARS-like coronaviruses can interact with ACE2, the human receptor identified for SARS-coronavirus. This finding strongly suggests that SARS-like coronaviruses from bats can be transmitted to humans to cause SARS-like diseases. From a public health perspective, this makes the continued surveillance of SARS-like coronaviruses in bats and study of the animal-human interface critical to future emerging coronavirus outbreak prediction and prevention."

Despite evidence that points to dangerous practices inside the Wuhan labs, top U.S. military brass, as well as other senior officials, have told Fox News that the origins of COVID-19 did not come from a laboratory nor was it the result of a bioweapon.

"And if I could just be clear, there is nothing to that," Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs told Fox News last week. "Someone asked me if I was worried. That is not something that I'm worried about. I think, you know, right now what we're concerned about is how do we treat people who are sick, how do we prevent people from getting sick. But no, I am not worried about this as a bioweapon."

Still, there are others who have been trying to trace the origin of the novel coronavirus back to the Wuhan lab.

[China] U.S. sounded alarm on Wuhan lab studying coronavirus two years ago, report says (FOX News)

FOX News [4/14/2020 2:45 PM, Gillian Turner, Neutral]

State Department cables obtained by The Washington Post warned about the safety and security of coronavirus testing on bats in China in 2018; Gillian Turner reports. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[North Korea] North Korea Fires Missiles as South's Elections Loom (New York Times)

New York Times [4/14/2020 3:11 AM, Choe Sang-Hun, 23673K, Negative]

North Korea fired several short-range missiles off its east coast on Tuesday, a day before South Korea is scheduled to hold elections for its 300-seat Parliament.

The projectiles, launched from the town of Munchon, were believed to be cruise missiles, the South Korean military said in a statement.

Under a series of United Nations resolutions, North Korea is banned from testing ballistic — but not cruise — missiles. Thus, its launchings on Tuesday were considered less provocative than its recent tests of ballistic missiles.

But South Koreans remain sensitive to any move by the North to raise tensions during an election time for fear it might sway how voters cast their ballots.

South Korea has decided to go ahead with voting on Wednesday even though many other

countries, including Britain and France, have postponed elections because of the coronavirus epidemic.

South Korea is not in lockdown, and its governing Democratic Party is hoping that the country's successful efforts to contain the virus early will help its candidates on Wednesday, bolstering President Moon Jae-in's grip on power.

Voters are being required to wear masks and use sanitizer and plastic gloves before casting their ballots. Those under self-quarantine will be allowed to leave their homes with government escorts to vote after 6 p.m. Wednesday, when the balloting for the general public ends.

Nearly 27 percent of the country's 44 million eligible voters already cast their ballots on Friday and Saturday in advance voting to avoid the crowds on Wednesday.

North Korea carried out no weapons tests in 2018, when its leader, Kim Jong-un, was engaged in diplomacy with President Trump. But it resumed short-range missile launches last May, three months after Mr. Kim's second summit with Mr. Trump, held in Vietnam, collapsed over differences on how to denuclearize North Korea and when to ease American-led international sanctions.

North Korea began large-scale live-fire military training last month as the coronavirus pandemic was raging in much of the world, including in neighboring China and South Korea. It has since conducted five weapons tests that involved short-range missiles or rockets, including the one on Tuesday.

North Korea has claimed it has no coronavirus cases, but Mr. Kim convened the Political Bureau of his ruling Workers' Party on Saturday, calling for stricter enforcement of measures against the epidemic. When the North's rubber-stamp parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly, met on Sunday, it made the same vow. It also increased the budgets for defense and public health.

[North Korea] North Korea Test-Fires Short-Range Missiles (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 4:45 AM, Dasl Yoon, Negative]

North Korea test-fired short-range cruise missiles off its east coast on Tuesday morning, South Korea's military said, a day before the country's holiday commemorating founder Kim Il Sung and a South Korean national election.

The missiles were launched around 7 a.m. near the North's coastal city of Munchon and splashed into the waters between the Korea Peninsula and Japan, according to the South's military. The projectiles flew more than 93 miles and for roughly 40 minutes, it added.

The Tuesday launch was Pyongyang's fifth weapons test of the year. Its previous launch was March 29.

The U.S. and North Korea haven't held formal denuclearization talks since October. A diplomatic rekindling any time soon appears unlikely, security analysts say, as both countries deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Pyongyang says it has no confirmed cases, a

claim viewed with skepticism by U.S. officials and health experts familiar with North Korea.

The North's weapons launch occurred even though mass celebrations commemorating Kim Il Sung's birth on Wednesday haven't been scheduled because of the new coronavirus, according to South Korea's Unification Ministry. On Sunday, North Korea's senior officials gathered for a parliamentary meeting and vowed to intensify the "anti-epidemic campaign" against Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, state media reported.

Health experts and aid groups have said North Korea is extremely vulnerable to infectious diseases because of an ill-equipped health-care system. The country ranks among the world's lowest in terms of preparedness for a disease outbreak, according to the Global Health Security Index published by Johns Hopkins University. Hospitals and households outside Pyongyang often lack electricity and running water, North Korea watchers say.

Last month, President Trump sent a letter to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, offering U.S. assistance to combat the coronavirus in the isolated regime, Pyongyang's state media reported.

A week after receiving Mr. Trump's letter, North Korea's Foreign Ministry said it had lost interest in dialogue with the U.S. and criticized Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for urging other Group of Seven nations to continue diplomatic and economic pressure against the regime.

As the U.S. grapples with the pandemic, Mr. Trump has little capacity for North Korean denuclearization progress, even as Pyongyang returns to short-range weapons testing, policy experts say.

"I do not believe the U.S. will engage with North Korea on issues other than Covid-19 under the current administration and the ongoing health crisis," said Kevin Shepard, a defense-policy specialist and former deputy director for U.S. Forces Korea, which oversees American military personnel in South Korea.

The North kept a low profile for the first three months of the year. On Jan. 1, Mr. Kim unveiled a policy shift regarding the U.S., claiming he no longer felt bound to a moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile launches or nuclear tests. He also vowed to reveal a new strategic weapon soon.

Tuesday's short-range launch featured guided cruise missiles that could be used for anti-ship defenses, military experts say. On the same day, Pyongyang flew several Sukhoi jet fighters and fired air-to-ground missiles into waters between South Korea and Japan, Seoul's military said.

North Korea's state media didn't have immediate comment on Tuesday's military activity.

Last month, Pyongyang conducted four separate launches and fired nine short-range projectiles thought by Seoul's military to be ballistic missiles. Such tests violate United Nations sanctions on the Kim regime.

[North Korea] North Korea Fires Missile Barrage Ahead of South Korea Election (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 4:34 AM, Jihye Lee and Shinhye Kang, 6400K, Negative]

North Korea fired multiple missiles from its eastern coast Tuesday, in a show of military might ahead of parliamentary elections in South Korea.

The projectiles were fired Tuesday morning from sites near Munchon and neighboring Wonsan on the east coast, the South Korean Ministry of National Defense said in a statement. North Korea launched short-range cruise missiles from Munchon that flew more than 150 kilometers (90 miles), the ministry said, while fighter jets conducted exercises with air-to-surface rockets.

The exercise comes on the eve parliamentary elections in South Korea, a vote that will shape the remaining tenure of President Moon Jae-in. The South Korean leader, who was elected in 2017 on a pledge to improve ties with North Korea, has had his efforts frustrated by renewed tensions between Washington and Pyongyang.

Wednesday is also North Korea's Day of the Sun, a holiday marking the birthday of state founder Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of the current leader, Kim Jong Un. The younger Kim test-fired an intermediate-range missile to mark the day in 2017, but the rocket exploded soon after takeoff.

North Korea often times its military provocations to coincide with major political events, trying to exert its influence beyond its borders. Elections in South Korea have been no exception, where there has been a divide between conservatives pushing a tough line toward Pyongyang and progressives seeing engagement with their neighbor to the north as a way to reduce tensions.

In the weeks before the last round of South Korean parliamentary elections in 2016, North Korea successfully test fired three ballistic missiles, according to data from Japan's Defense Ministry. About a week before 2012 presidential elections where conservative Park Geun-hye was the front-runner, North Korea launched a long-range rocket that moved it closer to developing an intercontinental ballistic missile.

Kim entered 2020 by saying he was no longer bound by his pledge to halt nuclear and major missile tests put in place when he engaged in unprecedented nuclear diplomacy with U.S. President Donald Trump. But Kim began testing shorter-range missiles last year when the talks sputtered over relief from sanctions meant to punish Pyongyang for its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and he threatened a new path for his weapons program this year.

Kim recently inspected an air base in the country's west, the state-run Korean Central News Agency reported Sunday. North Korea test-launched a record nine short-range ballistic missiles in March, in a sign of more potential provocations in the days ahead.

The latest launches were believed to have been part of defense drills being conducted by North Korea, the ministry said. The Edaily news site separately reported that the live-fire exercises started at 7 a.m. and lasted for more than 40 minutes.

[North Korea] North Korea fires barrage of missiles from ground and air (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 1:50 PM, Hyung-Jin Kim, Negative]

A barrage of North Korean missiles fired from the ground and fighter jets splashed down on the waters off the country's east coast on Tuesday, South Korea's military said, a show of force on the eve of a key state anniversary in the North and parliamentary elections in the rival South.

The back-to-back launches were the latest in a series of weapons tests that North Korea has conducted in recent weeks amid stalled nuclear talks and outside worries about a possible coronavirus outbreak in the country.

North Korean troops based in the eastern coastal city of Munchon first launched several projectiles — presumed to be cruise missiles — on Tuesday morning, South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

The weapons flew more than 150 kilometers (93 miles) at a low altitude off the North's east coast, a South Korean defense official said. If confirmed, it would be the North's first cruise missile launch in about three years, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, citing department rules.

Later Tuesday, North Korea launched several Sukhoi-class fighter jets that fired an unspecified number of air-to-surface missiles toward the North's eastern waters, the defense official said.

The official said North Korea has recently appeared to be resuming its military drills that it had scaled back due to concerns about the coronavirus pandemic. He said other North Korean fighter jets also flew on patrol near the border with China on Tuesday.

All the recently tested missiles were short-range and didn't pose a direct threat to the U.S. mainland. A test of a missile capable of reaching the U.S. homeland would end North Korea's self-imposed moratorium on major weapons tests and likely completely derail nuclear diplomacy with the United States.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed concern at the latest missile launches by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or DPRK, the country's official name.

"Once again we call on the DPRK leadership to comply fully with its obligations under relevant Security Council resolutions," Guterres' spokesman Stephane Dujarric said, referring to U.N. bans on ballistic missile launches.

The secretary-general reiterates that "diplomatic engagement remains the only path with sustainable peace and complete and verifiable denuclearization," Dujarric said.

U.S.-led diplomacy aimed at ridding North Korea of its nuclear weapons has largely been deadlocked since the February 2019 collapse of a summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Hanoi. Negotiations faltered after the U.S. rejected North Korean demands for broad sanctions relief in exchange for a partial surrender of the North's nuclear capabilities.

Some experts say North Korea likely used the latest weapons launches to bolster its striking capability against South Korea, which has been introducing U.S.-made stealth F-35 jets and other sophisticated conventional weapons systems in recent years. Others say the latest weapons tests were also aimed at shoring up internal unity in the face of U.S.-led sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic.

Go Myong-Hyun, an analyst at the Seoul-based Asan Institute for Policy, said North Korea also wants to maintain tensions to secure leverage over the U.S. in future negotiations.

"North Korea wants to create and maintain tensions, but still aims to prevent those tensions from growing too much and pressuring the U.S. a lot," Go said.

Cruise missiles fly at a lower altitude and slower speed than ballistic missiles, making them easier to intercept, but they are still considered more accurate. U.N. Security Council resolutions ban North Korea from engaging in any ballistic activities, but not cruise missile tests.

If the cruise missiles tested on Tuesday were newly developed weapons, they would still present a challenge to the South Korean and U.S. militaries, Go said. South Korea's military said it was analyzing details of the launches. The launches came a day before North Korea marks the 108th birthday of the country's late founder, Kim Il Sung, the grandfather of Kim Jong Un. They also came a day ahead of South Korean parliamentary elections.

In the South Korean elections, President Moon Jae-in's liberal ruling party, which espouses greater reconciliation with North Korea, is expected to defeat the main conservative opposition amid a slowdown in the number of new coronavirus infections in South Korea, according to pre-election surveys.

North Korea has repeatedly said there has been no coronavirus outbreak on its soil. But many foreign experts are skeptical of that claim and have warned that an outbreak in the North could become a humanitarian disaster because of the country's chronic lack of medical supplies and fragile health care infrastructure.

[North Korea] North Korea test fires multiple short-range anti-ship missiles (Reuters)
Reuters [4/14/2020 4:41 PM, Hyonhee Shin and Josh Smith, Negative]

North Korea launched multiple short-range anti-ship cruise missiles into the sea and Sukhoi jets fired air-to-surface missiles on Tuesday as part of military exercises, South Korea's military said.

The missile tests were done on the eve of a national holiday in North Korea to celebrate the birthday of Kim Il Sung, the founder of the country and grandfather of the current leader, Kim Jong Un.

Launched at around 7 a.m. (2200 GMT), the anti-ship missiles plunged into the sea more than 150 kilometres (93 miles) off the east coast town of Munchon, while the Sukhois carried out firing tests, officials at South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) told reporters.

The JCS gave no indication of how many missiles were fired, but said a detailed analysis of

the launches was being conducted together with U.S. intelligence.

The top U.S. general played down the tests on Tuesday.

"I don't think it is particularly provocative or threatening to us ... it may be tied to some celebrations that are happening inside North Korea as opposed to any deliberate provocation against us," Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters.

The latest tests were part of wintertime drills the North has been carrying out in recent weeks after coronavirus concerns caused delays, a South Korean military official told Reuters.

"There has been an increase in air force activities which we think was intended to make up for the lack of winter training that they would've otherwise wrapped up in late March," the official said. "And they usually hold military events around the April 15 birthday."

The official noted that the North used a similar anti-ship cruise missile in June 2017, the last time it was known to have tested such a weapon.

North Korea has been conducting weeks of military drills, including several launches of short-range ballistic missiles. Last month, it fired nine ballistic missiles in four rounds of tests, according to nonproliferation analysts.

On Sunday, North Korean state media reported that Kim Jong Un had visited an airbase and observed drills by fighter jets and attack aircraft.

[South Korea] South Korea set to double supply of coronavirus tests to U.S. (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:58 AM, Hyunjoo Jin and Heekyong Yang, Neutral]

South Korea's SolGent has secured an order to supply a U.S. government agency with an additional 7,500 kits which can each perform 100 coronavirus tests, the CEO of the biotech firm told Reuters.

That will double the number of tests U.S. authorities can perform using kits sourced from South Korea to 1.5 million.

SolGent has already sent kits for 150,000 tests while South Korean peers Osang HealthCare and SD BIOSENSOR are due to ship kits capable of performing 600,000 tests on Tuesday, company sources told Reuters.

The kits are being sent to the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) after an appeal from U.S. President Donald Trump.

Trump made a request for medical devices in a telephone call with South Korean President Moon Jae-in on March 25.

The U.S. death toll from COVID-19, the lung disease caused by the virus, topped 23,600 on

Monday, the highest of any country.

SolGent CEO You Jae-hyung told Reuters that the company is in talks on a long-term contract with FEMA and about building a factory in the United States to manufacture the testing kits, but that a decision has not been made.

U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Harry Harris said on Twitter Tuesday that testing kits had been loaded at Incheon Airport bound for the United States.

He called the alliance between the two countries "ironclad" and thanked South Korea's foreign ministry for its help.

FEMA did not immediately respond to Reuters' emailed inquiries. The foreign ministry declined to comment.

The ministry had said that three companies had won preliminary approval from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to export kits, but did not identify the firms.

After struggling with the first large outbreak of the virus outside of China, South Korea has largely managed to curb its spread without lockdown orders helped by a massive testing campaign and intensive contact tracing.

[South Korea] South Korea airlifts 600,000 coronavirus test kits to United States (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/14/2020 5:24 PM,Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

South Korea is sending about 600,000 coronavirus test kits to the United States following agreements brokered by the two governments and three private companies.

"We are grateful to the Republic of Korea for making the purchase of these tests possible, and for its assistance to the people of the United States in our fight against COVID-19," a State Department spokeswoman told the Washington Examiner.

The test kits "have been airlifted" from South Korea and are expected to arrive by Wednesday, according to the State Department. The deal helps address a testing shortfall that has plagued the American response to the coronavirus outbreak since the contagion reached crisis proportions in the U.S.

"The United States has now conducted nearly 3 million tests for the virus," President Trump said Monday. "We are performing approximately 150,000 tests every single day, and our rate of testing is especially high in areas hardest hit by the virus if you look."

The tests play an essential role in managing the outbreak, according to public health officials who called for widespread social distancing when it became apparent that the U.S. didn't have enough tests on hand to identify coronavirus patients. Healthcare workers are expected to be testing at a rate of 1 million tests per week in the coming days, but that's still not enough to end social distancing and repair the U.S. economy, according to a former Trump administration official.

"Getting to the point where you have a 2 [million to] 3 million test capacity per week — which is probably where you need to be initially as you do this transition — is going to be very hard," former Food and Drug Administration Commissioner Scott Gottlieb said Tuesday. "We've tapped out the available platforms, and now we're dependent upon creating new platforms and new supply chains to fuel those platforms."

The lack of supplies to manufacture new test kits increases the value of the test kits inbound from South Korea. The shipment comes less than a month after a phone conversation in which Trump asked South Korean President Moon Jae-in, whose country has been among the most successful in containing the virus, to "provide medical equipment and supplies" to the U.S.

"During times of crisis, close coordination among like-minded allies and private sector partners is key to developing a swift and effective response," the State Department spokeswoman said. "As our linchpin ally in the Indo-Pacific, the Republic of Korea has been on the front lines of this pandemic, and we thank them for their collaboration in combating this disease in an open and transparent manner."

[Afghanistan] Taliban say U.S. bombing insurgents at home contrary to deal (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 2:19 PM, Kathy Gannon, Neutral]

Washington peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad met with Pakistan's military chief Tuesday, a day after discussing the lagging U.S.-Taliban peace deal in Afghanistan with the chief negotiator for the insurgent movement.

The meetings included Gen. Scott Miller, head of U.S. forces in Afghanistan. Statements from the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad and the U.S. military in Kabul said Washington was engaged in "ongoing efforts" to find a sustainable peace after decades of relentless war but the U.S. officials released no details.

Taliban political spokesman Suhail Shaheen said the insurgent group's chief negotiator, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, used Monday's meeting at the Taliban's political office in Qatar to protest attacks against Taliban fighters in their homes, contrary to provisions of the Feb. 29 agreement.

"Our men have been targeted in their residential areas while there is no room for such attacks in the agreement, either by the U.S. or their internal (Afghan) supporters," he said, a reference to Afghan National Security Forces.

The U.S. military has refused to address the Taliban's specific complaint but has said that it is abiding by the agreement and will continue to come to the aid of the Afghan military.

At the meeting with Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, Pakistan's military leaders reaffirmed their support for U.S. efforts and renewed their "commitment to act to advance a political settlement to the conflict," according to a statement released by the U.S. Embassy in the Pakistani capital.

At the heart of most of the talks, say Taliban and U.S. officials, is the demand for a reduction of violence. The Taliban have not been attacking U.S. and NATO troops since the

agreement was signed, instead attacking Afghan forces in outlying areas. Washington wants a reduction to those attacks.

Shaheen said the Taliban are ready to negotiate a countrywide cease-fire but only during intra-Afghan negotiations, the next critical step of the deal. However, getting to intra-Afghan negotiations, which Washington had hoped would begin weeks earlier, has mostly been held up by political turmoil in Kabul as dueling presidents fight over who is the real winner in last year's presidential elections and the government squabbles over the deal's call for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 government prisoners.

"The Kabul regime is creating hurdles in the way of intra-Afghan negotiation by not releasing our prisoners as it is a prerequisite for commencement of intra Afghan negotiations," Shaheen told The AP.

The government has freed 300 men they say are Taliban but who have yet to be verified by the insurgents and the Taliban have freed 20 government employees.

The call for a reduction in violence has taken on greater importance as the coronavirus pandemic threatens to overwhelm Afghanistan's beleaguered and war-ravaged health care system.

The U.N. secretary-general has asked for a cease-fire to conflicts around the world to focus resources on fighting the pandemic. Afghanistan has more than 700 confirmed cases and 23 deaths, but testing is limited and more than 200,000 Afghans have returned home in recent months from neighboring Iran, where the virus has infected nearly 75,000 and killed more than 4,600.

[Guatemala] U.S. deportation flights resume to Guatemala (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 10:02 AM, Neutral]

Guatemala again began receiving deportation flights from the United States this week after a one-week pause prompted by three deportees testing positive for COVID-19.

The Guatemalan government had asked the United States to not send more than 25 deportees per flight, to give them health exams before departure and to certify that they were not infected.

However, the flights resumed Monday with 76 migrants aboard the first and 106 on the second. Guatemala's foreign ministry did not immediately clarify why the U.S. had not complied with its requirements, but the flights came on the same day that the U.S. State Department announced that aid would continue to Guatemala and the other Northern Triangle countries.

At least three of the migrants who arrived Monday were taken directly to a hospital for COVID-19 testing. One of the flights also included 16 unaccompanied minors, according to the Guatemalan Immigration Institute. Citing the epidemic, the U.S. has started swiftly deporting unaccompanied minors rather than holding them in protective settings as specified by law.

Also on Monday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that he had informed Congress that the U.S. government would continue assistance for Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras in order to continue to lower illegal immigration and accomplish other policy objectives.

Pompeo said that since illegal immigration from those three countries peaked in May 2019, "encounters" with migrants from those countries had fallen by 76%. The U.S. government has effectively ended any possibility of seeking asylum at the southern border with emergency restrictions applied in the face of the epidemic.

Before the epidemic, the U.S. had also started sending Hondurans and Salvadorans to Guatemala and similarly had agreements in place to begin doing so in Honduras and El Salvador.

Editorials and Op-eds

The world hasn't seen a recession this bad since the 1930s. The recovery is far from certain (CNN)

CNN [4/14/2020 8:30 AM, Charles Riley, 5551K, Negative]

The coronavirus pandemic is plunging the global economy into its deepest slump since the Great Depression of the 1930s and governments and health officials must work together to prevent an even worse outcome.

That's the stark warning from the International Monetary Fund, which said on Tuesday there was a risk of the recession extending into 2021 if policymakers fail to coordinate a global response to the virus.

In its latest outlook for the world economy, the IMF said it expects GDP will contract by 3% in 2020, a far worse recession than the one that followed the global financial crisis of 2008, and a 180-degree reversal of its previous forecast in January when it was expecting growth of 3.3% this year.

"The Great Lockdown, as one might call it, is projected to shrink global growth dramatically. A partial recovery is projected for 2021 ... but the level of GDP will remain below the pre-virus trend, with considerable uncertainty about the strength of the rebound," the IMF said. "Much worse growth outcomes are possible and maybe even likely," it added.

In the United States, where lawmakers have approved over \$2 trillion in stimulus and where the Federal Reserve has unleashed trillions more to keep the financial system from seizing up, the IMF expects the economy to shrink by 5.9% this year. That would be the worst slump since 1946, but a smaller decline in output than some European countries are likely to experience.

Growth in China, the world's second-largest economy and the first to be slammed by the coronavirus, will meanwhile plummet to 1.2%. It hasn't seen growth that weak since 1976.

The outlook is bleak even in countries where governments and central banks have responded forcefully in an effort to help workers and businesses. The IMF expects

Germany's economy, the largest in Europe and heavily exposed to global trade, to contract by 7% in 2020. The Canadian economy is forecast to shrink by 6.2%, while the United Kingdom can expect a decline of 6.5%.

Japan, the world's third largest economy, will contract by 5.3% even though it has so far avoided imposing harsh nationwide restrictions on travel, work and public life that have frozen economic activity in other parts of the world.

EU countries have committed huge sums of money to supporting companies and households, and limits on budget deficits have been relaxed to allow them to borrow more. But Spain and Italy, which have been hit hard by the virus, are predicted to lose 8% and 9.1% of their economies respectively, underscoring the urgent need for the bloc to find a way of financing a recovery plan.

The IMF forecast suggests the world is in the early stages of the most severe economic crisis in nearly a century, and that efforts to contain the pandemic will cost tens of millions of people their jobs and put tens of thousands of companies out of business. Unemployment in the United States will rise to 10.4% this year, according to the IMF, and 9.1% in 2021.

The IMF expects the global economy to rebound in 2021, with growth hitting 5.8% if the pandemic fades in the second half of this year. But the group warns that its outlook is highly uncertain, and any number of factors could mean that efforts to contain the coronavirus remain in place for much longer than expected.

"The pandemic could prove more persistent than assumed ... Moreover, the effects of the health crisis on economic activity and financial markets could turn out to be stronger and longer lasting, testing the limits of central banks to backstop the financial system and further raising the fiscal burden of the shock," the IMF warns in its report.

Consumer confidence may fail to improve, for example. Companies and households may change their behavior, leading to weak demand and further disruption to supply chains. Reduced investment and bankruptcies could leave "scars" that "may run more extensively through the economy," the IMF said.

Global response needed

The best way to ease the economic trauma is for governments and public health officials to increase their cooperation, according to the IMF.

"Countries urgently need to work together to slow the spread of the virus and to develop a vaccine and therapies to counter the disease. Until such medical interventions become available, no country is safe from the pandemic," the group's report states.

The IMF recommends that governments spend more on testing, rehiring retired medical professionals and purchasing equipment such as ventilators and personal protective equipment. Trade restrictions on medical products should be lifted.

The group praised developed economies including Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States for their fiscal response to the crisis, while also crediting China,

Indonesia and South Africa. But more may need to be done.

"Fiscal measures will need to be scaled up if the stoppages to economic activity are persistent, or the pickup in activity as restrictions are lifted is too weak," the IMF said.

Governments should also provide relief to workers. In places where paid sick and family leave are not standard, "governments should consider funding them to allow unwell workers or their caregivers to stay home without fear of losing their jobs during the pandemic," the IMF said.

We Can Make the Post-Coronavirus World a Much Less Violent Place (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [4/14/2020 11:00 AM, Robert Muggah and Steven Pinker, Positive]

The world is convulsed by the novel coronavirus, but that is not the only pathogen that afflicts us. Criminal violence is also endemic, contagious, and highly virulent. More than 464,000 people were killed in homicides in 2017 (the last year for which we have reliable data), at least five times as many as were killed in war. Millions more suffer from physical and psychological injuries left by domestic abuse, gang fights, and extrajudicial violence.

The coronavirus pandemic will surely affect the patterns of this violence, but how? Conventional wisdom suggests that times of great stress produce more violence, but the data doesn't bear that out: During the horrific Spanish flu pandemic of 1918-1919, neither the United States nor Britain experienced a significant increase in violence. Homicide rates actually fell during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They also declined during the recession that began in 2007. Conventional wisdom suggests that times of great stress produce more violence, but the data doesn't bear that out.

With nighttime curfews and enforced quarantines keeping people off the streets and out of the bars, some forms of violent crime are dropping quickly in North America and parts of Latin America. But with people cooped up and getting agitated, domestic abuse appears to be increasing. Cybercrime is rising as well. And in countries such as Mexico that are beset by organized crime, homicide rates have spiked to record highs—which suggests a breakdown of public order as the pandemic spreads.

The longer-term prospects are even less clear. A major worry is what will happen if food prices rise when supply chains break down. The price of basic food products is a life-or-death issue for the more than 60 percent of the world's population who depend on the informal economy. There are also fears of increased social disorder when governments violently enforce lockdowns and quarantines, as they are doing in Kenya, South Africa and Uganda. In the Philippines, the president has issued shoot-to-kill orders for those protesting the lockdown. Meanwhile, in Brazil, El Salvador, and Italy, gangs and mafia groups are imposing their own curfews to keep the virus from spreading.

But the potential for certain forms of violence to escalate in the wake of the pandemic should not blind us to the fact that the world, on average, has become a much safer place. Most countries experienced sharply declining rates of lethal violence over the past two decades. Just as importantly, we are starting to understand, based on evidence from

around the world, which kinds of policies and programs actually work to diminish violent crime, and which don't. Armed with this evidence, we have the power to reduce violence further—whether it is caused by the pandemic or not.

The scale of these reductions in lethal violence has been stunning. Between 1990 and 2015, North America halved its homicide rate, which is now close to historic lows in the United States and Canada. European countries also registered sharp drops. In Asia, the homicide rate was 38 percent lower in 2017 than in 2000. Declines of more than 50 percent were recorded in countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Estonia, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Sri Lanka.

In many cities and neighborhoods, the drop in homicides has been staggering. In the United States, most of the 30 largest cities are much safer today than a few decades ago. New York recorded more than 2,200 murders in 1990, but barely 300 in 2019. Washington, D.C., experienced a drop from more than 700 homicides in 1990 to just 163 in 2019. Other North American and Western European cities have followed a similar trend.

Good news even comes from some of the world's most violent places. The onetime murder capital of the planet, Medellín, Colombia, experienced a dizzying decline of lethal violence, from a high of 266 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in the early 1990s to 30 per 100,000 in 2015, a fall of nearly 90 percent. Bogotá's homicide rate fell from 81 per 100,000 in 1993 to roughly 17 per 100,000 in 2015. São Paulo, a notoriously homicidal city, is currently registering the lowest homicide rate since records began.

Notwithstanding these improvements, homicide rates remain stubbornly high in Latin America and the Caribbean. The region still registers a third of the world's homicides, even though it contains less than 9 percent of the world's population. Of the 50 most murderous cities in the world in 2016, 43 were in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Why has life in so many places become so much safer? As so often happens, there are many causes, and they are not easy to separate with confidence. Individual violence is largely a young man's game, and societies with a higher proportion of teens and young adults tend to have higher levels of violent crime. By contrast, countries with older populations such as Japan, Italy, and Germany are often more peaceful.

But a country's age distribution changes slowly and cannot explain a halving of violence in a decade by itself. When we compare regions, violence is statistically correlated to the level of inequality, perhaps because men at the bottom of a steeply unequal income distribution become more sensitive to social status and react violently to minor affronts. But that hypothesis cannot explain why violence is poorly correlated with inequality over time: Violence has dramatically decreased even as income inequality has increased in many countries.

It may not be inequality in income that predicts violence but inequality in protection against violence by institutions. In *A Savage Order*, the security expert Rachel Kleinfeld observes that in the most violent societies, the state acts as a security force for elites rather than a universal guarantor of peace. When societies begin to entrust their protection in a capable police force and justice system, they come to enjoy more law and order for all. Political leaders need to decide that homicide reduction is an achievable goal, not a campaign

slogan or source of pork-barrel spending.

A common thread in regions that have reduced violence is larger and better-trained police forces targeted at reducing violence in the places where it is worst. Social and political solidarity are essential parts of this virtuous circle. When political leaders enlist police and communities as partners in enforcing norms that sanction delinquent behavior and promote collective safety, violent crime declines.

The virtuous circle of crime reduction often starts when cities and regions set clear targets spanning multiple election cycles and administrative fiefs. Political leaders need to decide that homicide reduction is an achievable goal, not a campaign slogan or source of pork-barrel spending, and commit adequate resources to the task. Implementing these plans requires sustained buy-in from mayors, police chiefs, and civic and business leaders.

The policies and programs must be selected on the basis of reliable data showing that they work, rather than on fads, slogans, or utopian hopes of extirpating root causes such as poverty and racism. Police must be seen not as antagonists but as service providers delivering what everyone in the community wants: safer streets and homes. And because criminal violence is so concentrated—we know from the data that a small number of neighborhoods and perpetrators account for a large share of the violence—successful crime reduction must focus resources on the places that are most violent.

These efforts can draw on a growing body of evidence about what works and what doesn't. In his book *Bleeding Out*, which reviews a literature of thousands of studies on violence reduction, the criminal justice researcher Thomas Abt shows that one of the most effective tactics is hot-spot policing, which homes in on the cities, neighborhoods, and street corners where violence is most rampant. A complementary proven strategy is focused deterrence, which singles out the most aggressive gangs and individuals and sends them the clear message that they will be punished for committing violence and rewards them (with jobs, training, and other opportunities) for refraining from it.

When potential troublemakers are identified, another strategy whose effectiveness is clear from evidence is cognitive behavioral therapy. These interventions are designed to override the maladaptive thought habits and impulsive behavior that cause criminal delinquency, and to teach strategies of self-control that can stop an escalation into aggression before it begins. They include training in anger management and social skills, together with counselling in strategies that are explicitly designed to prevent recidivism.

These good habits can be reinforced by engineering urban environments with fewer temptations to resist—with earlier bar closings and fewer dark streets, secluded corners, and abandoned buildings. According to the sociologist Patrick Sharkey, urban renewal and local mobilization efforts to reclaim parks, city blocks, and open plazas in the United States played a pivotal role in reducing crime and victimization.

Just as important as knowing what works is knowing what doesn't. Aggressive, zero-tolerance policing, three-strikes-and-you're-out mandatory sentencing, police-led drug awareness programs, so-called scared-straight interventions exposing young children to prisons and inmates, firearm buybacks, and slum clearance programs are either ineffective or make things worse.

The goal of preventing people from killing each other in large numbers is not just desirable but achievable. The goal of reducing the global homicide rate by 50 percent by 2030—about 6.5 percent a year—has been embraced by Pathfinders for Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies, a coalition of governments, national and international organizations, and foundations and private sector partners.

The first order of business is to double down on evidence-based interventions in the most dangerous countries, cities, and neighborhoods, capitalizing on our knowledge of what works and what doesn't, and on the fact that lethal violence tends to concentrate in a few areas and among a small number of people. When the right measures are applied in the right places, homicide and other forms of violent crime can drop quickly.

The moral value of looking at data is not just that it's the only basis for choosing policies that actually save lives. Quantifying goals for reducing violence is also ethical because it treats all lives as equally valuable. Actions to prevent the greatest number of murders prevent the greatest amount of human tragedy. As the pandemic reminds us, there is no more important goal than saving lives.

Leaders of developing countries are particularly vulnerable during this pandemic (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 12:31 PM, Grant T. Harris, Neutral]

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's hospitalization and time in the intensive care unit after he contracted the novel coronavirus is a reminder of the dangers the pandemic poses to world leaders. Johnson is relatively young at 55, and had access to world-class health care to treat the disease covid-19 before his release. But for older leaders, particularly those in developing countries, the coronavirus poses an even greater threat. Worryingly, the psychological and practical impacts of these age dynamics can have a detrimental effect on decision-making and the global response to the pandemic.

People older than 60 have a significantly higher risk of mortality and severe illness from covid-19. This group includes heads of state worldwide, and the majority in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean. While any head of state or minister will probably have the best health-care available, that might not be enough in a developing country with a weak and overwhelmed health system. Many African countries, for example, have fewer intensive care unit beds nationwide than the average American hospital. Normally this isn't a problem for elites because they can go abroad for quality care, but travel restrictions make that option unavailable.

These leaders regularly face stress and crises, but their security, money and access to medical care normally shield them from the personal vulnerability that they feel right now. The coronavirus pandemic is unlike economic shocks, natural disasters, or other infectious diseases that do not discriminate based on age or, as is often the case, principally endanger the young and poor. So, while faced with perhaps the greatest challenge of their careers, leaders who are senior in both age and responsibility will also naturally be preoccupied with their personal health and safety, which could impede their response to the coronavirus crisis.

Many leaders could likely make poorer decisions, because heightened stress and prolonged uncertainty can impair cognitive functions and make it harder to see and weigh options. Leadership during any crisis is stressful, but extrapolating from psychology research, the personal risk involved could make leaders even less able to think creatively, solve problems and carry on important functions. These instinctive pressures work against what is most needed in times of crisis, such as inclusive decision-making, resisting impulsive actions and projecting empathy and hope.

Leaders' fears might also trigger a self-preservation instinct as they weigh trade-offs between efforts to slow the spread of the disease (such as sheltering in place) and the needs of those who must leave their homes and work each day to survive (an estimated 736 million people live on less than \$1.90 per day). As lives hang in the balance, these are incredibly difficult decisions. The psychology of being at direct risk may affect how older leaders balance the interests at stake, and their personal health considerations may unwittingly color their perspective. It implies no malice to observe that these older officials face a relatively high risk of coronavirus infection and virtually no risk of starvation.

But perhaps the largest threat the pandemic poses is to cause government to slow down precisely when it must speed up. Governments in developing countries are typically beset by uneven capacity and weaker — and more highly personalized — institutions of governance. Older leaders may act more conservatively, such as enacting longer or more extreme forms of social distancing than their younger counterparts to try to avoid sickness, making government communication and decision-making harder. As the senior director responsible for Africa for the Obama administration during the Ebola epidemic, I saw firsthand the importance of close government coordination with community and religious leaders and foreign and private-sector partners. But this becomes more difficult as senior officials take extra steps to avoid the more easily transmissible contagion of the coronavirus.

All of this will be happening as government messaging might be less trusted and effective. In gerontocracies where government officials are much older than the average citizen, these leaders might face even higher levels of distrust. In sub-Saharan Africa, where the average age of a head of state is 65 but the median age of the population is 19, distrust of governments already runs high. As happened during the Ebola crisis, misconceptions about the disease on social media and WhatsApp groups are rampant. Citizens may be prone to discount government messages, perceiving "old" leaders as acting in their own self-interest, which will reduce governments' ability to encourage safe practices to tamp down the virus.

This is not to say that every aged leader will be affected equally, become incapacitated or act based on personal fear. Leadership styles and personalities vary, and some leaders are more adept than others at responding to crises. Nor does this imply that leaders of developed countries are better at managing highly personal psychological impacts of the virus. But these effects can be blunted by the access to higher quality health care and stronger, more resilient government institutions that developed countries tend to have.

As the world seeks to make sense of and respond to this pandemic and the associated loss, fear and economic devastation it brings, the psychological effect and emotional toll on global leaders must be taken into account. This pandemic is unlike emergencies we have faced in the past. If senior leaders recognize and confront possible blind spots, biases and

capacity gaps (for instance, by listening to a diverse network of advisers and experienced public health officials), they can build trust and a more effective response.

Lockdown or Starvation? Poorer Economies Weigh Impossible Choice (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [4/14/2020 3:20 PM, Ravi Agrawal, Neutral]

In a televised address to the nation on Tuesday, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi extended the country's lockdown until at least May 3. "From an economic only point of view, it undoubtedly looks costly right now. But measured against the lives of Indian citizens, there is no comparison," he said. India's neighbors have made similarly tough decisions. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan also announced a two-week extension of his country's shutdown but said that some industries such as construction would reopen soon.

Bangladesh extended its lockdown until April 25, and Nepal is shut down until April 27.

As the rapidly rising cases across the region show, the worst still appears to be ahead for South Asia—especially with secondary waves of infection highly likely. Across the region, tens of millions of migrant workers and daily wage laborers are struggling to put food on the table, and social distancing remains a luxury for hundreds of millions in the lower middle classes.

How long can things continue as they are? I've been thinking about the research by Yale University's Ahmed Mushfiq Mobarak and Zachary Barnett-Howell that found significant differences in the value of social distancing across countries. In *FP*, the two write that "flattening the epidemiological curve of the coronavirus to buy time until a vaccine can be developed may prove counterproductive for poorer countries if it increases ...other causes of mortality," such as hunger, malnutrition, and other health problems. They suggest alternative policies for developing nations such as universal mask-wearing, improved access to clean water and sanitation, restrictions on religious gatherings, and information campaigns.

Each country will ultimately make its own decision. Even within countries, states may need to tailor policies to their unique demographics. There are no clear options: A blanket lockdown in South Asian economies risks transferring the epidemic risk from the rich to the poor. Reversing lockdowns too quickly, however, would overwhelm health care systems in an unimaginable way.

CO2 Emissions Are Falling. That Doesn't Mean Virus Will Slow Warming (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 4:00 AM, Eric Roston, 6400K, Negative]

Springtime is a difficult moment to puzzle out what the ongoing economic shutdown means for global warming. Carbon-dioxide levels always drop throughout the spring and summer in the Northern Hemisphere, as hungry plants absorb the primary greenhouse gas. This seasonal effect is occurring as pandemic lockdowns have stopped billions of people from driving and working, slashing fossil-fuel use and lowering carbon-dioxide emissions.

"If we were to continue like this for months, instead of weeks, we will see a drop in carbon emissions that we haven't seen in my lifetime," said Rob Jackson, a professor at Stanford University and chair of the Global Carbon Project. "And probably since the end of World

War II. That's where we're heading."

But even a sustained decrease in new emissions this year—under a scenario in which the ongoing economic collapse is more severe than the 2008 recession—would have little impact on the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere. In fact, CO₂ levels will almost certainly continue to rise.

Looking at the major trackers of atmospheric CO₂ concentrations shows the consistent, clockwork turn of the Earth's carbon cycle. The number goes up over time but falls slightly under the seasonal influence. Scientists measure the atmosphere's CO₂ concentration in parts per million, or ppm. Right now, CO₂ makes up about 415 ppm of the atmosphere. That's up from 280 ppm in the 18th century, before industrialization. The higher the CO₂ count goes, the more dangerous climate change becomes.

These readings of CO₂ concentration—what stays in the atmosphere for the long haul—are different from CO₂ emissions, or the amount of gas that leaves power plants, vehicles and other sources of pollution. What we know of the impact of the pandemic on global emissions is incomplete, with rough estimates from some of the earliest hit nations. Not long after China began to close down economic activity because of Covid-19, analysts began to estimate how much climate pollution would be prevented due to quarantines. The conclusion so far: about 25%, and only temporarily.

The collapse in emissions has moved around the globe with the new coronavirus. Over the last two weeks, analysts at BloombergNEF found electricity demand at 17% below normal in the U.K., 23% lower in Italy, and down by 15% in New York City. Air pollution in the U.S. Northeast dropped 30% in March. The U.S. Energy Information Agency forecast that emissions from cars, power plants and other sources may fall an unheard of 7.5% this year as a result of people sheltering at home.

These snapshot views of individual sectors within individual countries can't add up—just yet—to a global statement about the amount of CO₂ emissions from 2020 that will end up lingering in the atmosphere. Watching CO₂ levels rise and fall, with the impact of the pandemic overlapping normal seasonal variation, only explains part of this uncertainty.

Most of the CO₂ people emit every year doesn't stay in the atmosphere. Just 45% stays airborne, about 30% goes into land ecosystems, and another 25% sinks into the oceans. There's still randomness in the amount of annual emissions that end up in the atmosphere, which depends not only on pollution but how well or poorly the rest of the planet is absorbing it. Scientists have become increasingly concerned that tropical forests are losing their ability to take down as much CO₂ as they have in the past.

Routine help from the land and sea makes it very difficult to know how the year in emissions will end, even when the first three months appear to have lower pollution than normal. Only a sustained year-long drop in global emissions of about 10 percent would clearly show up in CO₂ concentrations, according to Ralph Keeling, a geochemist at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. Even previous economic cataclysms, such as the 2008 financial crisis and the collapse of the Soviet Union, have failed to show up in the CO₂ readings taken at Hawaii's Mauna Loa, which began keeping records in 1958.

The CO₂ count has been rising by an average of almost 2.5 ppm a year since 2010. Even a significant cut in emissions from 2020 wouldn't do much to dent this dynamic. Pierre Friedlingstein of the University of Exeter estimates that a 10% drop in annual emissions would still translate to an increase of 2 ppm in the CO₂ count.

Keeling likens climate pollution to water flowing into a bathtub. If less water starts flowing, it's easier to judge by diminished strength at the tap than in the slower rise in the tub itself. With CO₂, it's easier to notice emissions fall from factories, cities or even entire countries than it is to detect a decrease in the atmosphere.

The White House Blessed a War in Libya, but Russia Won It (New York Times)
New York Times [4/14/2020 9:11 AM, David D. Kirkpatrick, 23673K, Neutral]

Early last spring, just before a planned American-backed peace conference between warring factions in Libya, the aspiring Libyan strongman Khalifa Hifter arranged a phone call with John R. Bolton, then the White House national security adviser.

Mr. Hifter did not want to talk peace.

A former Libyan Army general and onetime C.I.A. client, Mr. Hifter wanted a White House blessing for a surprise attack to seize Tripoli, the capital, before the peace talks commenced.

Mr. Bolton did not say no.

The attack, launched last April 4, backfired badly. Mr. Hifter failed to capture Tripoli, overextended his forces and restarted a civil war — killing thousands and displacing hundreds of thousands more. The fighting has cut off the flow of Libyan oil, injected new volatility into the region and severely diminished Washington's influence.

But one apparent winner has emerged: the Kremlin. Russia has operated with cold-eyed cynicism, taking advantage of three years of muddled messages from the Trump administration to become a critical kingmaker in Libya, a geopolitical prize with vast energy reserves and a strategic location on the Mediterranean.

Mr. Bolton's call with Mr. Hifter — described by a former senior administration official as well as three Western diplomats briefed by both Mr. Hifter and American officials — appears to have played into the Russian machinations.

Days before the call, private Russian operatives in Libya reported to Moscow that Mr. Hifter was a flawed and outmatched military leader sure to fail if he ever tried to conquer the capital, according to secret Russian documents seized in Tripoli and viewed by The New York Times. The operatives saw opportunity in his weakness and suggested that Russia could win leverage over Mr. Hifter if it sent mercenaries to bolster his so-called Libyan National Army.

"Russia will maintain a loyal and strong ally in the structure of the LNA," the operatives argued, "which Hifter will have to contend with."

Washington's inconsistent position on Libya — officially supporting the peace process even as the White House has signaled that President Trump favors Mr. Hifter — has played a major role in prolonging the chaos. The absence of a strong American policy has opened the door to interference from competing American partners, including Turkey, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates.

Yet it is Russia that is now best positioned to dominate Libya.

An arm of the Kremlin controls dozens of social media accounts promoting Mr. Hifter and other favored clients, including the eldest son of Col. Muammar el-Qaddafi, Libya's former dictator, according to the operatives' report. The same Kremlin operation has acquired an ownership stake in a pro-Qaddafi Libyan satellite network and advised a pro-Hifter network as well, the operatives wrote.

At the same time, the Russian military has worked behind the scenes to surround Mr. Hifter with many of its old partners from the Qaddafi-era security forces, encouraging Qaddafi henchmen to return from exile. The Kremlin also has built ties to a potential governing party-in-waiting, the documents show.

And the Kremlin followed the operatives' prescient advice. When Mr. Hifter's assault stalled, Moscow propped up his sagging advance with thousands of trained mercenaries who continue to operate in Libya.

Representatives for the White House and Mr. Bolton declined to comment.

But alarmed American lawmakers have begun asking how the White House appears to have ended up backing the same side as Moscow.

During a recent Senate hearing on Libya, lawmakers wondered how the United States could fault Russia for propping up a client when the White House appeared to like him as well. The president sounded "inclined to support Hifter" even as the State Department seemed to oppose him, said Senator Mitt Romney, the Utah Republican.

"Is there consistency?" Mr. Romney asked.

"I can say unequivocally," David Schenker, the assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, insisted with exasperation, "We do not support the Hifter offensive."

Courting the President

A campaign to get the White House behind Mr. Hifter started almost as soon as Mr. Trump was elected.

Mr. Hifter's most important patron, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed of the United Arab Emirates, pitched Mr. Hifter to members of Mr. Trump's foreign policy team at a secret meeting in New York in December 2016, according to a person with knowledge of the meeting.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, whom Mr. Trump has jokingly called "my favorite dictator," also took up the Hifter cause five months later when he visited the White House.

"Hifter was a core talking point in every meeting with the Egyptians and Emiratis," said Andrew Miller, a member of the National Security Council staff at the beginning of the Trump administration and now a researcher at the Project on Middle East Democracy, a Washington-based nonprofit.

Libya had foundered in chaos since a NATO air campaign helped oust Colonel Qaddafi during the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011. Extortionist militias, militant extremists and migrant traffickers ran amok as the country was divided into fiefs. Officially, the United States recognized only the United Nations-sponsored provisional government in Tripoli.

But Crown Prince Mohammed and Mr. el-Sisi told Mr. Trump that the provisional government was hopelessly weak and riddled with Islamists. They argued that only Mr. Hifter could prevent Islamists from taking power in Tripoli, which the Arab leaders said would create a domino effect across the region, according to two former senior administration officials.

Mr. Hifter had vowed since 2014 to eradicate political Islam and take power as Libya's new military ruler. Yet he had quietly formed an alliance with a rival faction of extremists, Saudi-style ultraconservatives known as Salafis.

As they lobbied Mr. Trump, Crown Prince Mohammed and Mr. el-Sisi overlooked that contradiction. They were also simultaneously working closely with Russia. Egypt had opened a secret Russian base to supply Mr. Hifter's forces, to the alarm of Western officials worried about Moscow's expanding influence.

The two Arab leaders, though, found a sympathetic ear in Mr. Bolton, who became national security adviser in the spring of 2018 and had previously led a far-right think tank known for sweeping attacks on political Islam.

The Bolton-Hifter phone call last spring came at a critical moment. Even as the peace talks were approaching, Mr. Hifter had moved his forces into a strategic oasis town south of Tripoli and was poised for a surprise attack.

When Mr. Hifter asked for consent, Mr. Bolton's answer was "a yellow light," not a green or a red one, the former senior administration official said. Yet three Western diplomats briefed on the call by both Mr. Hifter and senior American officials described Mr. Bolton as less equivocal: If you are going to attack, do it quickly, he told Mr. Hifter, according to all three diplomats.

Mr. Hifter counted that as an explicit assent, all three diplomats said.

The April 4 attack stunned the world. The United Nations secretary general, António Guterres, had just landed in Tripoli for the peace talks. He urged Mr. Hifter to pull back, a message endorsed by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. American military forces hurriedly left the city.

But as the fighting was underway, Mr. Hifter's powerful allies were lobbying Mr. Trump to show his support, White House officials said. Mr. el-Sisi pressed the president in person last year on April 9, and Crown Prince Mohammed over the phone on April 18.

The next day, the White House said in a statement that the president had called Mr. Hifter to commend his "significant role in fighting terrorism." A day after the call, Mr. Hifter's forces began shelling civilian neighborhoods of Tripoli.

"It seemed as if the Americans were switching sides in a way that didn't make sense," said Peter Millett, the British ambassador to Libya until 2018, noting that the Tripoli government had been the main Libyan partner to the United States military in counterterrorism.

"There was confusion and massive surprise in the international community," he said.

Col. Ahmed Mismari, a spokesman for Mr. Hifter, declined to comment on the call with Mr. Bolton but said the Libyan commander appreciated the president's support.

Russian Hedging

Even before the assault on Tripoli began, the Russians had concluded it would be a disaster for Mr. Hifter.

The Russian operatives in Libya worked for an obscure research center linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close ally of the Russian president, Vladimir V. Putin. Mr. Prigozhin is also described by American officials as the leader of a Kremlin-linked private security company, the Wagner Group. Their teams of mercenaries have overseen Russian efforts to meddle in the politics of Ukraine, Syria and several African countries.

The leader of the Libyan team, Maxim Shugaley, had been identified in news reports in 2018 trying to pay bribes and spread disinformation to turn elections in Madagascar. Tipped off by American intelligence, according to a person involved, a militia allied with the Tripoli provisional government eventually detained Mr. Shugaley and his interpreter. A third operative eluded capture, Libyan officials said.

After detaining Mr. Shugaley, the security agents found a report in his hotel room that his team had sent to Moscow in March of last year, shortly before the Hifter-Bolton call. Dossier, a London research center critical of Mr. Putin, obtained a copy of the seized report and provided portions to The New York Times. Senior Libyan officials authenticated the text independently.

For several years, Russia had provided military supplies to Mr. Hifter and printed millions of dollars in newly minted Libyan currency for him to distribute.

But the secret report showed that the operatives were much more skeptical of Mr. Hifter than were the Arab rulers advising the White House.

Mr. Hifter, now 76, had recurring health problems. He won few military victories and had instead gained territory by "buying off local tribal groups for the right to place the flag," so that he could "raise his significance in the eyes of internal and external players," the report

stated.

Not only did the operatives conclude that any advance on Tripoli was almost certain to fail, as did an offensive in 2014, they also warned that Mr. Hifter was stubborn and had become increasingly "difficult" to his Russian advisers.

"Hifter is using Russian help to increase his significance," the operatives wrote, but "there is a serious basis to suggest that in the event of his military victory, Hifter will not be loyal to Russian interests."

The operatives recommended the Kremlin hedge its bets on Mr. Hifter by allying with Seif al-Islam el-Qaddafi, the eldest son of the former dictator. The operatives said their "company" had acquired a stake in a pro-Qaddafi satellite network and revitalized its broadcasts.

A longtime partner to Russia under his father, Mr. Qaddafi, now 47, was imprisoned in Libya in 2011 before somehow regaining his freedom. Now he is at large and plotting a comeback, according to Libyans close to him and Western diplomats familiar with intelligence reports on his movements.

But the Russians also identified a new opening with Mr. Hifter: The Kremlin should insert paid mercenaries loyal to Russia into his faltering military. Sudanese paramilitary forces were ready to do the job, the operatives insisted, and could give Moscow crucial leverage.

Game Changer

The contingents of mercenaries from the Wagner Group began arriving via Sudan last September, according to Western diplomats tracking their movements.

"That was the big game changer," Ambassador Richard Norland, the American envoy to Libya, said at a recent briefing. "It's clear the Russians see strategic advantage now in Libya — low risk and high gain."

To deepen its influence, the Kremlin has also organized secret meetings in Moscow between Mr. Hifter's supporters and former officers in the Qaddafi-era military and security services, according to Western diplomats and other analysts who have spoken to Libyan participants.

Musa Ibrahim, a former Qaddafi spokesman, declined to comment on specific meetings in Moscow but acknowledged that Russia had been "bringing together" the Hifter and Qaddafi officers, especially since the assault on Tripoli.

This month, on the anniversary of Mr. Hifter's attack, the United Nations urged a halt to the fighting to respond to the coronavirus pandemic now spreading in Libya.

But Mr. Hifter has continued shelling Tripoli, even targeting a major hospital. And the Russian mercenaries have given Russia a de facto veto over any end to the conflict.

"This has been Russia's dream since World War II," said Fathi Bashagha, the interior

minister of the Tripoli government, quoting Winston Churchill's wartime statement that Moscow saw Libya as the "soft underbelly" of Europe.

"To get Russian feet on Libyan soil."

Saudis Slashing Oil Prices to Asia Shows Supply War Isn't Over (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 4:59 AM, Sharon Cho and Serene Cheong, 6400K, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia might have just signed off on one of the most notable oil output deals in history, but challenges lie ahead as the kingdom faces keen competition from rival suppliers to the prized Asian market.

That perhaps explains why the de-facto leader of OPEC slashed its official selling prices to Asian customers for May by larger-than-expected margins this week. Eight of eleven refiners across the region surveyed by Bloomberg welcomed Saudi Aramco's aggressive marketing strategy, while the remaining three said they had expected even steeper discounts.

Despite the price war being defused over the weekend, there's no reason to think that the deluge of cheap crude washing over Asia will ebb quickly as the coronavirus continues to depress demand. Varieties such as Russia's Urals, Mars from the U.S. and several Abu Dhabi grades crude were being offered in recent weeks to buyers on a delivered basis with flexible arrival dates as traders moved supertankers filled with unsold oil toward Asia.

Aramco cut the May official selling price of its flagship Arab Light crude to Asian customers by \$4.20 a barrel from the previous month, exceeding estimates for a reduction of \$3.63. That was even after it signed a deal with other producers to cut global output by around 10% to try and support prices.

Strong Competition

About 20 million barrels of April-loading crude remains unsold from West Africa alone, according to traders who asked not to be identified. That's on top of unsold May-loading supplies from the region that are estimated to be at least triple that of the month before, they said.

Crude from non-Saudi producers in the Middle East is also available with grades including Oman and Upper Zakum being offered on a flexible basis, allowing buyers' to pick out their preferred arrival periods, three separate traders said.

As well as the supply glut, Aramco and others are grappling with demand that's continuing to shrivel, particularly in India, which has enforced the world's biggest lockdown. Iraq said earlier this week that it had trouble marketing its crude amid the supply glut, lower prices and what the country's oil minister called a "recession" in refining around the world.

Refiners in Asia have until the middle of this week to decide on the amount of oil they want to buy from Aramco. Other producers such as Kuwait, Iraq and Abu Dhabi are set to issue their official prices shortly.

[Iran] Virus becomes latest battle between Iran, U.S. amid tensions (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 4:24 AM, Jon Gambrell, Neutral]

Even as both face the same invisible enemy in the coronavirus pandemic, Iran and the United States remain locked in retaliatory pressure campaigns that now view the outbreak as just the latest battleground.

Initially overwhelmed, Tehran now seeks to sway international opinion on U.S. sanctions by highlighting its struggles with COVID-19, the illness caused by the virus. Iran asked for \$5 billion from the International Monetary Fund even as it enriches uranium beyond the limits of its 2015 deal with world powers.

The U.S., which unilaterally withdrew from the deal in 2018 under President Donald Trump, insists that aid can reach the Islamic Republic — though humanitarian organizations say Washington's sanctions disrupt even permitted trade.

At the same time, the U.S. is now withdrawing troops from Iraqi bases, redeployments it insists are pre-planned even as Trump alleges Iran plans "a sneak attack" against them.

The risk of open conflict between the countries is overshadowed by the pandemic. Yet it persists — some say at levels as high as immediately after the January drone strike by the U.S. that killed Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Iraq.

"After Soleimani's killing, everybody thought there will be war, but nothing happened," said Mahsa Rouhi, a research fellow at the International Institute for Strategic Studies. "Whereas we were so close to war that it's not that nothing happened. And we are not back to normal. ... We are back to a situation where any move could easily escalate into a conflict."

The current tensions can seem trivial, compared to the pandemic, which has infected at least 1.9 million people worldwide and killed over 119,000. This perception has been helped by mocking social media posts from the U.S. State Department and a former leader of Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard seemingly backing the fringe idea of California seceding from the U.S.

The stakes, however, are anything but. The night Iran retaliated for the Soleimani killing, it also accidentally shot down a Ukrainian jetliner, killing all 176 people aboard. Allied Shiite militias in Iraq also continue to threaten American forces deployed there in the aftermath of the fight against the Islamic State group.

While largely silent in the initial days of the outbreak in Iran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif has begun a concerted campaign targeting American sanctions. It's a way to absolve Iran's civilian government of responsibility for an outbreak it hasn't contained. But Zarif's allegations of "medical terror" by the U.S. also highlight the challenge Tehran faces in accessing some medical supplies.

While the U.S. says medical and humanitarian aid remains exempt, Human Rights Watch said American laws as written affect Iran's access to crucial equipment, "including ventilators, CT scanners, decontamination equipment and full-mask respirators." Meanwhile, international firms remain leery of running afoul of U.S. sanctions even for authorized transactions with Iran.

"One of the problems for international aid has been to clarify the legal issues related to sanctions to ensure that medical supplies and medicines can be brought into Iran," Olivier Vandecasteele, Relief International's country director for Iran, said in a statement "This slowed down the health response in the first weeks of the outbreak."

A European system called INSTEX did get aid through, as has a Swiss channel. China also has contributed, as have regional Gulf Arab countries, likely worried about Iran further spreading the virus into their own nations. Meanwhile, Iran insists it can produce masks and gloves, something the U.S. has argued undercuts Tehran's \$5 billion request to the IMF, which would be its first loan since 1962.

All this comes as Iran continues to produce low-enriched uranium with equipment and sites barred by the nuclear deal. Its nuclear program chief recently reiterated a threat that Iran could withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, though Iran didn't make a show of its program during its recent annual National Day of Nuclear Energy.

That bolsters suspicions of behind-the-scenes talks between intermediaries, particularly over the release of U.S. prisoners and other Westerners. Iran's judiciary acknowledged ongoing prisoner-swap discussions on April 6, without elaborating.

But overall tensions remain extraordinarily high. Online video and Iranian media reports suggest Iran has deployed Fajr-5 missile batteries on beaches along the crucial Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which a fifth of all oil traded in the world passes.

There have been reported maritime incidents in and around the strait as well. On March 27, two boats with a raised ladder approached a U.S.-flagged container ship, while Revolutionary Guard vessels approached a ship on April 2, according to private maritime security firm Dryad Global.

The U.S. Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet, which routinely has tense interactions with Iranian forces, declined to comment. However, last summer saw a series of tense encounters at sea and on land that included the seizure of oil tankers.

The U.S. pressure campaign in part seeks to force Iran into spending at home rather than on its regional allies. Tehran views such groups as part of its defensive deterrence in the region.

Meanwhile, people continue to die of the virus in Iran in the pandemic that could spread further into American allies in the region, forcing the world to still work with Tehran, Rouhi said.

"At the end of the day, it's still that bad actor that is governing a country of more than 80 million," she said. "You don't have an alternative."

[Israel] Will the Coronavirus End Israel's Political Paralysis? (New York Times)

New York Times [4/14/2020 12:21 PM, Isabel Kershner, Neutral]

After three inconclusive elections resulting in a yearlong impasse, Israel's president has given Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his chief rival, Benny Gantz, until Wednesday midnight to form a unity government.

If no agreement is reached by then, Israel will edge closer to a fourth election, despite the state of national emergency created by the coronavirus crisis.

On Tuesday, six weeks after the March 2 election and a series of rancorous on-again, off-again negotiations, the two sides met for talks and again failed to finalize a deal. Here's a look at what's at stake for the two sides and why Israel still has no elected government.

The last election, like the two before it, produced no clear winner.

Mr. Gantz, a former army chief and leader of the centrist Blue and White party who entered politics not much more than a year ago, came out in a slightly better position than Mr. Netanyahu, the conservative incumbent and Israel's longest-serving prime minister.

With more endorsements from members of Parliament, Mr. Gantz was afforded the first chance to build a coalition. But the anti-Netanyahu camp, encompassing Arab, Islamic and Jewish ultranationalist parties, proved too disparate to form a government.

Mr. Netanyahu's Likud party and his right-wing and religious partners fell short of a majority to form their own government in the 120-seat Parliament.

The only way forward was for Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Gantz to join forces in a national unity government. Mr. Gantz resisted at first because it meant reneging on his repeated election promises not to sit in a government with a prime minister under indictment. Mr. Netanyahu is facing trial on charges of bribery, fraud and breach of trust. He has denied any wrongdoing.

Then the coronavirus hit Israel.

Mr. Netanyahu, a canny political survivor, publicly beseeched Mr. Gantz to join him in a national emergency government to combat the health crisis. He proposed sharing the job of prime minister, with Mr. Netanyahu holding it for the first 18 months, and Mr. Gantz taking over for the next 18.

Citing the common good in the face of a growing public health and economic crisis, and seeking to avoid a fourth election, Mr. Gantz relented and agreed in principle last month.

The pandemic has sickened thousands of Israelis and killed at least 118 so far. But negotiations over the government bogged down over political and legal details.

First, Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Gantz differ in their approaches to President Trump's proposal to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mr. Netanyahu has pledged to swiftly and unilaterally annex large swaths of the occupied West Bank, while Mr. Gantz's Blue and White party has said it is opposed to unilateral annexation in the absence of broad international consensus.

The two sides have reportedly come to an agreement on this issue.

More problematic was what critics describe as Mr. Netanyahu's singular goal of ensuring he can remain in office despite his legal troubles.

Mr. Netanyahu tried to change the procedures for appointing Supreme Court judges, according to Blue and White officials. Then, analysts said, he was seeking a way to circumvent any future Supreme Court decision barring a candidate charged with crimes — like himself — from forming a government.

By remaining in office, Mr. Netanyahu gains crucial leverage should he try to negotiate a deal with state prosecutors, or he might try to secure immunity from prosecution.

These demands appeared to be a sticking point for Mr. Gantz, who said he was holding out to protect fundamental democratic values, particularly the rule of law.

"Netanyahu and Likud know that we are reasonable partners," he said on Monday night. "They also know that there are certain areas on which we won't compromise — foremost among them, protecting the rule of law and safeguarding Israeli democracy. Those are always important, but even more so during times of crisis."

But Mr. Gantz has come under bitter attack from many former allies and supporters who saw his willingness to enter into a Netanyahu-led government, along with Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing and religious coalition partners, as a betrayal. His party has broken up, with about half its members headed into the opposition, leaving him with less leverage and few political options.

"At least don't call this an emergency government," Yair Lapid, a former Gantz ally, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday, noting the lack of attention to health and economic issues in the negotiations.

After a year of political deadlock, a unity deal may provide a temporary balm for a deeply divided and anxious Israel under lockdown to fight the coronavirus. But a unity coalition is unlikely to resolve Israel's longstanding divisions.

Since Mr. Gantz's party would be joining a coalition that would include Mr. Netanyahu's ultra-Orthodox allies, there is likely to be little movement to resolve the religious-secular tensions that have roiled Israeli society for years.

With Mr. Netanyahu's right-wing partners in the government — and with Mr. Trump still in office — there is also unlikely to be any resumption of peace talks with the Palestinians. The Palestinians have rejected the Trump administration's peace plan as hopelessly biased toward Israel.

If a unity government were to move ahead with annexing parts of the occupied West Bank, Israel's relations with Egypt and Jordan could also be severely undermined.

Mr. Netanyahu has taken pride in his handling of the coronavirus crisis so far.

"Dear citizens of Israel, our ability to respond quickly and flexibly to the coronavirus challenge is arousing appreciation in many countries," he said in a televised address on Monday.

But once the lockdown is lifted, many will find themselves out of work. So far, the crisis has left more than a million Israelis, out of a population of nine million, on indefinite unpaid leave or unemployed.

Mr. Netanyahu has said that under his continued stewardship, the country will prevail.

"Previously, in the two major economic crises of this millennium, I succeeded — with your help — in moving the Israeli economy on to great achievements," he said in the Monday address. "We emerged from the crises and the Israeli economy flourished. It is my intention, together with you, to do this again."

[Saudi Arabia] The U.S. needs to get its citizens out of Saudi Arabia's jails now (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 12:58 PM, Ali Al-Ahmed, Neutral]

The coronavirus pandemic has led to the release of nonviolent offenders from U.S. prisons with the aim of reducing overcrowding. Meanwhile, the United States has called on other countries to release American citizens from detention, especially those imprisoned on false charges or no charges at all.

In March, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged, "The United States will not rest until all Americans wrongfully detained abroad are returned home." Pompeo not only called on Iran to release Americans in Iranian prisons but also called for all those with foreign citizenship to be released.

Pompeo's demands were largely directed at Iran, a U.S. adversary. But at the very least, he should be calling also for the release of American citizens from Saudi Arabia, a U.S. ally. Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman — whom President Trump recently called "my friend" — has unjustly imprisoned at least two dual U.S.-Saudi citizens. They must be released.

A year ago, the Saudi government arrested Bader al-Ibrahim, an epidemiologist and writer. He is an American citizen; he is also my cousin. In addition to practicing medicine, Bader wrote articles on political developments in Saudi Arabia and the Middle East. He also wrote a book about Shiite activism.

The other detained American citizen is Salah al-Haidar, a young journalist whose writing focused on human rights in Saudi Arabia. His YouTube program ("That's the Point") was deleted after his arrest.

Salah's mother, women's rights activist Aziza al-Yousef, has also been imprisoned for her work on behalf of human rights.

The Trump administration has been completely silent on the cases of these two Americans

held in Saudi prisons 20 miles from the U.S. Embassy in Riyadh. To this day, neither of them has been charged with any crime.

Since Bader's and Salah's arrests, family members have visited the State Department and spoken with members of Congress multiple times, asking for their help in securing the release of our relatives and other prisoners in Saudi Arabia who are either Americans or close relatives of American citizens, but to little avail.

The State Department yet to make a public statement on their cases, let alone call for their release.

The Trump administration has shown that it can get Americans out of prison. It secured the release of Princeton doctoral student and U.S. citizen Xiyue Wang from Iran in December, even before the coronavirus pandemic. And last month it arranged the dramatic airlift release of Lebanese American Amer Fakhoury from a Lebanese prison.

In mid-March, Iran released Michael White, a U.S. Navy veteran, along with tens of thousands of prisoners on medical furlough. Pompeo immediately went before the press and made this solemn pledge: "The United States will continue to work for Michael's full release as well as the release of all wrongfully detained Americans in Iran."

Even in normal times, this lack of urgency for the cases of detained Americans would be troublesome. But the present situation is anything but normal. At last count, there were 2,795 covid-19 cases and 41 deaths in Saudi Arabia, according to the Saudi government.

The number of cases could climb as high as 200,000, according to the Saudi health minister. The country, like much of the world, is on lockdown. Riyadh, where the two Americans are being held, has been locked down 24 hours day, seven days a week. As we all know, overcrowded and unsanitary prisons are vectors for this frightening disease.

Our loved ones, citizens of the United States, are prisoners of conscience in the infected jails of a "strategic ally" of their own government.

Clearly, private entreaties to Saudi Arabia by the United States have not succeeded. Covid-19 is now adding a cruel and potentially fatal layer of fear and oppression for these Americans and their families. As an epidemiologist, Bader could be put to much better use helping on the front lines of the coronavirus battle rather than sitting in a jail cell.

If the United States cannot hold the Saudi leadership accountable for the safety and welfare of American citizens, then what is the utility of the U.S.-Saudi alliance? Or the value of American citizenship?

It is the duty of U.S. government officials to protect Americans, regardless of their national origin or religion — or of whether their jailer is labeled an ally.

It is long past time for the secretary of state and senior U.S. officials to publicly demand action from — and hold accountable — those whom the president calls his friends.

As much as the State Department might prefer a cautious, low-key approach to helping

Bader and Salah get out of jail, the clock is ticking. Saudi Arabia should be made to honor its commitment to the United States and to respect the rights of our citizens — even as it abuses its own people.

[China] China's 'Donation Diplomacy' Raises Tensions With U.S. (New York Times)

New York Times [4/14/2020 4:35 PM, Edward Wong and Paul Mozur, Neutral]

When President Trump spoke with Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, late last month to reach a truce to the sniping over the coronavirus pandemic, he did so partly to pave the way for steady shipments of much-needed medical supplies from China.

But as the death toll in the United States has surpassed 25,000 and hospitals still struggle with equipment shortages, American officials and executives point to new problems in buying equipment or taking donations from China.

Shipments have run into unexpected delays as Chinese officials impose new regulations in response to complaints of low-quality products. And some American officials remain reluctant to accept gifts of gear because they fear giving the Chinese Communist Party a propaganda win.

The two superpowers are vying to project global leadership roles during the crisis, despite deep failures in how senior officials in both nations responded to outbreaks. At the moment, Chinese officials have the power to make it easy or difficult for vital supplies to flow to the United States and other nations. The two sides must work closely to orchestrate the shipments, even as American officials harbor deep suspicions over China's "donation diplomacy," a global effort by Beijing involving planeloads of medical gear and delegations of health experts.

The complications could bolster the arguments of some Trump administration officials that American companies should move their supply chains out of China.

On Monday, Mr. Trump signaled in a news conference that he may be ending the détente with China when he used the term "Wuhan virus," a label despised by Beijing that emphasizes the city where the virus was first detected.

Chinese regulators, embarrassed by reports of shoddy medical equipment sent to Europe, imposed a new rule on Friday mandating that customs officers inspect every shipment of masks, ventilators and other medical gear before they leave the country. That was the latest in a series of regulatory actions that had begun to hinder shipments. One American businessman said a new list of items to be inspected was so broad that it even included cotton balls. American officials said that after hearing complaints from U.S. companies, they have had to scramble to deal with the delays on a case-by-case basis.

In some cases, the Chinese authorities eventually helped untangle the snarls. But the bureaucratic bungling has exasperated American officials, who say the red tape has held up equipment at a desperate moment.

American executives are increasingly complaining of delays. Charter planes from the United States have sat empty in China for days. Millions of masks and thousands of ventilators

have sat on factory and warehouse floors, sometimes for weeks.

Jacob Parker, the senior vice president at the U.S.-China Business Council, said the restrictions were "the top issue for some of the biggest companies in the world."

"It is a good intentioned policy that has a variety of unintended consequences across a variety of areas," he said. "It remains a big issue for our members."

Zhao Lijian, a Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman, said Friday that Beijing would work with other nations "to safeguard international public health security." The country exported more than \$1.4 billion of pandemic supplies from March 1 to April 4, he said, and scores of countries had signed contracts.

However, many of the shipments are part of regular, long-term commercial arrangements between non-Chinese companies like 3M and factories or contractors in China.

The State Department appears determined to compete with China on publicity over aid. Its website says it has given nearly \$500 million in foreign aid to help with the pandemic. Last week, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a call with reporters in Europe that "there is no country in the world that will provide as much aid and assistance through multiple forms as the United States of America will."

One new rule in China dictates that supplies heading to the United States must have approval not just from the Food and Drug Administration, but now also from China's National Medical Products Administration, which many importers do not have.

The regulations have threatened to disrupt ventilator supply chains for companies like General Electric and have impeded shipments of masks managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, according to people familiar with the matter. This week, a plane bound for Massachusetts took off with less than half of the 10 million masks it was supposed to carry. Several major makers of virus tests have struggled, too. One, PerkinElmer, has had a large shipment delayed for days, the people said.

But it is American officials who are responsible for the stalling of one batch of gear. For weeks, officials in Washington have debated whether to accept a donation of masks from the Chinese Foreign Ministry, American officials said. Though medical workers are desperate for the masks, some officials argue that taking the donation would aid China's propaganda campaign.

That debate is a sign of the growing fury and frustration in Washington over that campaign. American officials who see the Chinese Communist Party as malevolent are irate at what they view as the party's efforts to reshape the narrative of the pandemic, which spread quickly beyond central China in part because of cover-ups by officials. (The State Department did not reply to questions on the offer or its position on donations from China.)

The American officials say China is trying to turn the spotlight away from the pandemic's roots through the shipments of purchased supplies and some donations. Often, Chinese officials tell counterparts abroad that they must publicly thank China in return for the shipments, say Western officials, executives and analysts with knowledge of the

exchanges.

"What is most striking to me is the extent to which the Chinese government appears to be demanding public displays of gratitude from other countries; this is certainly not in the tradition of the best humanitarian relief efforts," said Elizabeth C. Economy, the director for Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations. "It seems strange to expect signed declarations of thanks from other countries in the midst of the crisis."

The equipment has helped save lives, and officials around the world — among them, Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York — have thanked the Chinese government or private citizens.

Chinese state-run news organizations have highlighted the exports in stories and social media posts.

Some Chinese officials abroad have been surprisingly aggressive in pushing Beijing's narrative.

Twice since late February, a Chinese diplomat in the consulate in Chicago has emailed State Senator Roger Roth, the president of the Wisconsin Senate, to ask that that Senate pass a resolution recognizing that China has taken heroic steps to fight the virus, according to reviews of the emails by The New York Times.

The emails had proposed drafts of the resolution that included lines saying that "China has adopted unprecedented and rigorous measures" and that the actions "have been effective in curbing the virus from spreading to other parts of China and the world." One sentence said that China had been "transparent and quick" with sharing information.

"I was really taken back at the brazenness of their government to try and influence what we're doing here," said Mr. Roth, a Republican.

Mr. Roth sent back a one-word reply — "Nuts" — and on March 26 introduced a resolution in the State Senate that said that the "Communist Party of China deliberately and intentionally misled the world on the Wuhan coronavirus" and that Wisconsin stood "in solidarity with the Chinese people to condemn the actions" of the party. The Wisconsin Examiner first reported on the resolution.

The diplomat, Wu Ting, did not reply to a request for comment.

"Beijing may come to regret its rapid pivot from domestic crisis to international triumphalism, for there is already a rising tide of nationalist anger coming its way as citizens from countries around the world face prolonged economic hardship and are in search of culpable parties," said Jude Blanchette, a China scholar at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

China's new regulations on exports could also hamper its own propaganda efforts, even if the purpose of the rules — to ensure that only functional medical equipment leaves China — is a valid one.

And the start-and-stop nature of the shipments is adding momentum to a yearslong push by some U.S. officials to enact policies intended to compel American companies to move their supply chains.

Some have already relocated their supply chains out of China in response to the tariffs Mr. Trump imposed as part of the trade war he started in 2018. Now, both the economic shutdown in China during the pandemic and the global shortage of Chinese-made medical products are increasing the calls for more "decoupling."

Peter Navarro, a White House trade adviser and China hawk, has drafted an executive order to prod American pharmaceutical companies to move manufacturing to the United States, though some administration officials and lawmakers oppose the effort.

"One of the things that this crisis has taught us, sir, is that we are dangerously overdependent on a global supply chain," Mr. Navarro said last week during a news conference with Mr. Trump. "Never again should we rely on the rest of the world for our essential medicines and countermeasures."

Some American officials point to the potential for local governments in China to seize vital personal protective equipment produced there as part of the supply chains. This year, when the pandemic was still largely centered in China, some American manufacturers found themselves being forced to sell masks and other supplies made in China to local governments and hospitals, effectively leaving none for export.

The American manufacturer 3M could find itself in a similar situation, some officials said, with the company struggling to hit a target it brokered with the Trump administration to supply 166.5 million masks over the next three months if Chinese authorities chose to seize masks produced in the country for their own needs.

A recent article in Chinese state media signaled that possibility. Pointing out that a local Chinese manufacturer in Shanghai can produce more than one million masks per day, the article mentioned an often-cited unofficial policy: Masks can be exported abroad, "provided that the domestic needs are secured."

[China] China's bid to repair its coronavirus-hit image is backfiring in the West (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 6:38 AM, Gerry Shih, 12625K, Neutral]

As China in March became the first major country to recover from the coronavirus outbreak that spread from the central city of Wuhan, its officials kicked off another campaign: to heal its tattered international image.

President Xi Jinping held a flurry of phone calls with world leaders to promise aid. More than 170 Chinese medical experts were dispatched to Europe, Southeast Asia and Africa. State media outlets flooded the Internet with photos of Chinese masks arriving in 100 countries and stories questioning the epidemic's origins. Ambassadors inundated international newspapers with op-eds hailing the sacrifices Beijing made to buy time for other countries without acknowledging how the outbreak erupted in the first place.

One month later, that campaign has yielded mixed results. In many cases, it has outright backfired.

In Britain, a parliamentary committee on foreign relations urged the government to fight a surge in Chinese disinformation. Officials in Germany and at least one U.S. state — Wisconsin — exposed quiet outreach attempts from Chinese officials hoping to persuade them to publicly praise China.

In Spain, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands, governments announced recalls of Chinese masks and testing kits after large batches were found to be defective, undercutting what China sought to portray as goodwill gestures. In Nigeria, the country's professional medical association slammed a government decision to invite a team of Chinese doctors, going as far as claiming that they might carry the disease with them.

And on Twitter, Chinese diplomats have not only spread China's message but gone on the counterattack. They publicly feuded with the Brazilian president's son and his education minister, who accused Beijing of seeking "world domination" by controlling protective-equipment supplies. They tangled with Iran's Health Ministry spokesman, who questioned the accuracy of Chinese epidemic data, and lashed out at a Sri Lankan businessman who criticized China's epidemic response.

The wave of skepticism, sometimes from nations friendly toward China, underscores the size of the challenge facing foreign policymakers in Beijing as they look toward the post-pandemic global landscape. While governments from Washington to Brussels have been faulted for mismanaging the crisis or failing to galvanize an international response, China's standing has taken a hit precisely at a moment when the country was positioning itself as an up-and-coming leader in world affairs.

"They know when the dust settles and people turn their eye toward whether Beijing was responsible, it's going to be a very difficult situation," said Nadège Rolland, a senior fellow at the National Bureau of Asian Research, who described China's globe-spanning, hard-sell campaign in recent weeks as public relations "on steroids."

"They're trying to get ahead of that narrative" of blame, Rolland added. "It's as much out of fear as it is confidence."

Chinese officials have appeared frustrated by the emerging backlash to what they say is simply altruism. Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said this month that China was not using coronavirus diplomacy to burnish its image or extend its influence over countries. Chinese officials have also pledged to immediately crack down on shoddy medical equipment.

"We would like to share China's good practices and experience with other countries, but we will not turn it into any kind of geopolitical weapon or tool," Hua said. "Leadership is not gained by boasting or jostling."

To be certain, many countries with growing investment ties with China, particularly across Southeast Asia, have responded positively. In Serbia, a billboard reading "Thank You, Big Brother Xi" went up in the streets of Belgrade. Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, a

member of the Euroskeptic Five Star Movement, uploaded a Facebook video showing him receiving shipments of Chinese medical equipment.

He said the Chinese aid validated his party's decision to distance itself from the European Union.

"Joining China's Belt and Road Initiative saved Italian lives," Di Maio declared, referring to Xi's signature policy to expand Beijing's influence through infrastructure and loan programs, in comments widely reported in Chinese state media.

In several African countries, China's reputation was bolstered by speedy donations made by Jack Ma, the billionaire co-founder of Chinese tech behemoth Alibaba.

"China led a master class in modern public diplomacy with its medical donations, leveraging a vast propaganda network that it built in Africa over the past 10 to 15 years," said Eric Olander, co-founder of the China Africa Project.

Losing momentum

China started to lose momentum in the "donation diplomacy" narrative after reports emerged that the quality of the masks may have been suspect, Olander added. But in the early weeks, the Chinese aid was "warmly received by the governing elites," he said. "People were impressed."

In many Western countries, it has not been so much China's medical assistance that has drawn consternation, but rather Beijing's departure from its traditional diplomacy into the realm of disinformation that had rarely been seen from China before the coronavirus emerged in Wuhan in late 2019.

Last month, when Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian and other diplomats questioned whether the virus was brought to China by U.S. military personnel, it provoked a furious response from Washington. A disinformation watchdog agency of the European Union rejected the Chinese officials' conspiracy theory.

After Chinese state media widely reported that a renowned Italian researcher had said the coronavirus may have originated in Italy, not Wuhan, the nephrologist Giuseppe Remuzzi spoke to Italian daily *il Foglio* to correct the record, saying his words had been distorted for propaganda purposes.

Zhiqun Zhu, chair of international relations at Bucknell University and author of the book "China's New Diplomacy," said the coronavirus has sharpened a long-standing debate within Chinese diplomatic circles: Should China wage an all-out "discourse" war to beat back critics like Trump administration officials and assert its prerogatives as a world power? Or should it present a more humble, less confrontational face?

"There is no consensus in diplomatic establishment circles," Zhu said. "Surely some diplomats know that outside, the world blames China, that the propaganda projecting China as its savior is counterproductive. But right now, the leadership also wants to boost nationalism at home."

No room for 'gloating'

Zhu said more traditional-minded Chinese diplomats, including the long-serving ambassador to Washington, Cui Tiankai, have sought to tamp down the spread of fringe theories and the bureaucracy's most combative impulses. In a couched essay in the Communist Party's flagship newspaper this month, another senior official, former vice foreign minister Fu Ying, said Chinese diplomats should uphold "the spirit of humility and tolerance, and adhere to communication, learning, and openness."

Chinese intellectuals have also worried about their country's deteriorating image under the current diplomatic tack. A drumbeat has grown from conservative politicians in both the United States and Britain to demand economic reparations from China, although it's not clear whether such an effort would succeed in international court.

In a series of widely distributed essays, leading economist Hua Sheng warned China against spreading conspiracy theories about the origins of the virus or "gloating" when other countries were still struggling to overcome the pandemic. He urged China to have the courage to conduct an accounting of what went wrong in Wuhan.

"Some people say if we investigate our country's culpability, we would be giving evidence to outsiders and give them a tool to hurt our national interests," Hua wrote. "I must say, it's precisely the opposite."

Lucrezia Poggetti, a researcher at the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin, said China's internal dynamics and the emphasis on saving face for the domestic population meant it was highly unlikely that the government would thoroughly admit fault or show weakness on the international stage.

But even if Chinese diplomats successfully manage the near-term public relations crisis, they might struggle to counter the longer-term trends already set in motion by the pandemic. As an example, Poggetti said, European countries — including France, Germany and Britain — and the United States and Japan are reassessing their dependence on China for critical health and national security-related supplies.

"There will be a reckoning after the pandemic ends," she said.

[China] Communist China Uses Internet Trolls To Haze Wuhan Diary Author (The Federalist)

The Federalist [4/14/2020 6:20 AM, Helen Raleigh, Negative]

Two types of people usually emerge after living under tyranny for a long period of time. One is willing to risk their lives to speak truth, demand change, and preserve historical records and lessons for the next generation. The other group suffers Stockholm syndrome, a psychological response wherein "a hostage captive begins to identify closely with his or her captors, as well as with their agenda and demands."

Communist China's nationalist trolls belong to the latter group. A number of incidents that took place last week on social media demonstrate how insufferable this group is.

Wang Fang, a Wuhan-based writer who publishes under the pen name "Fang Fang," is one of the more than 11 million Wuhan residents who lived through the two months of quarantine as a result of the coronavirus outbreak. On Jan. 25, she learned the tragic news of the passing of Dr. Li Wenliang, one of the eight whistleblowers who warned the public about the Wuhan virus back in December 2019.

Fang wrote her first entry of what later became known as "Wuhan Diary" on WeChat, a popular Twitter-like social media platform in China owned by Weibo. From then on, she wrote 60 entries until Beijing lifted the Wuhan lockdown.

Fang's Diary Grants a Window to Wuhan

Fang's online diary was very conversational. She talked about the weather, her flowers, the price of food, and daily challenges she faced, such as running low on her diabetic medicine. She also chronicled the sufferings and deaths she observed, as well as what she had heard from others. She didn't shrink from criticizing the government's cover-ups and propaganda.

For instance, when Wuhan's Communist Party leader demanded that Wuhanese undergo "gratitude education" to thank the Communist Party for its leadership in winning the "people's war" against the coronavirus outbreak, Fang wrote: "The government is the people's government. It exists to serve the people. Please take back your arrogance and humbly show gratitude to your masters — the millions of Wuhan people. The government should apologize to people as soon as possible. It's time to reflect and find people who are responsible for today's situation."

Her simple and straightforward writing style attracted millions of Chinese readers. Every day, people waited eagerly to devour her new entry. Of course, for the Chinese government, such truth-speaking is dangerous because it counters the government's narrative that "the Communist Party has everything under control" and "the party knows what's best for the Chinese people."

Chinese censors deleted each of Fang's posts within hours. Still, many Chinese netizens and human rights organizations managed to save digital copies of some of her entries. Some even left notes to censors, such as this one:

"I am deeply touched by Ms. Fang's essay and the difficult lives that people in Wuhan have endured. Not only are they quarantined from the rest of the world, they are also not allowed to speak the truth. When you are doing your censoring, please show mercy and see if you can let this piece stay in the public forum as long as you can before you have to delete it. Ordinary folks in Wuhan and in the rest of China are counting on someone like Ms. Fang to speak on behalf of them."

Fang expressed her censorship frustration in one of her entries:

"The article I posted on WeChat yesterday was deleted again, and my Weibo account has also once again been blocked. I thought I couldn't post on Weibo anymore, and then found out that they only censored yesterday's post and that new posts can still be published. It made me instantly happy. Alas, I am like a frightened bird. I no longer know what I can say

and what I can't. When it comes to something as important as this fight against the epidemic, I'm cooperating fully with the government and obeying all their commands. I'm now just short of taking an oath with a fist over my heart — is this still not enough?"

On March 25, in her last diary entry, Fang wrote, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith." What she didn't expect was that the fight to defend her reputation had just begun.

Chinese Media Will Twist Any Story

Fang's outspokenness has attracted admirers as well as detractors. Chinese nationalist trolls started viciously attacking Fang, initially on Chinese social media platforms, publishing her home address, spreading rumors about her finances, implying she was paid by the West to fabricate her diary all this time. Some have even threatened to go to Wuhan to kill her.

After publisher Harper Collins announced it would publish a translated version of Fang's "Wuhan Diary" this summer, these Chinese nationalist trolls began to vehemently attack her on Twitter, some insulting her appearance through fat-shaming, some claiming she's never been a good writer, but most calling her a "liar" and a "traitor" and her diary "a tool deployed by the west to sabotage Chinese government's heroic effort to contain the outbreak."

The attack was led by one of communist China's propaganda mouthpieces, the Global Times, which indicates the attack on her was not a grassroots effort. You can see a few examples [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#).

Fang isn't the only one subjected to vicious attacks on Twitter by these Chinese trolls last week. Jiayang Fan is an American journalist of Chinese descent who writes for New Yorker Magazine. She tweeted last week that for unknown reasons, security guards of Henry J. Carter Specialty Hospital forcefully removed a Chinese-speaking health worker from her mom, who has ALS. Fan said if the hospital wouldn't restore the aid worker her mother's survival depended on, she would have to try to get her mom out of the hospital and may have to acquire a ventilator to care for her on her own.

Chinese media quickly picked up the tweet and twisted her story. They told Chinese readers that American police forcefully removed the ventilator from a Chinese American senior infected by the coronavirus, and her daughter had to watch her die alone. Chinese media used this twisted narrative to drive home the message to domestic audiences that America treats Chinese immigrants inhumanly.

You may love America, but America doesn't love you back, was the message. So only the Chinese Communist Party can guarantee a happy and secure life for all Chinese.

As this twisted story spread in China, Chinese nationalist trolls took delight in Fan's mom's suffering and attacked her on Twitter for Fan's support for Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement last year and critical reports of communist China in the past. These Chinese trolls used similar language they used to attack Fang, calling Fan a sellout and a "traitor" even though she is a naturalized U.S. citizen. Fan said she also received death threats and reprimands from these Chinese trolls.

A Profile of Chinese Nationalist Trolls

Who are these Chinese nationalist trolls? Some are nicknamed "Wumao" or "50 cents," because the Chinese government supposedly pays them 50 cents for each tweet. Some became trolls on their own initiative, but no matter their origin, they are easy to identify on Twitter.

Keep in mind that Twitter is blocked in China, so to get over China's internet firewall, trolls have to use a virtual private network, or VPN. Their account activation dates are often recent because they open accounts only when they identify someone to attack. They usually have very few followers and rarely follow many others because their goal is not to encounter new ideas and different opinions, but to defend Beijing's propaganda and attack anyone who criticizes China or doesn't tow Beijing's official line on issues related to Hong Kong and Taiwan.

These nationalist trolls are angry most of the time, and the way they throw their insults reminds people of red guards from Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution. They are especially malicious toward ethnic Chinese who think differently. They often use the most racist, sexist, violent, and hateful language to go after ethnic Chinese women, as evident by Fang and Fan's experiences. It is a shame Twitter has done little to rein in these trolls.

The good news is that they do not represent the majority of Chinese people. If you go through tweets about Fang and Fan, you will also find supportive and kind messages from other Chinese. Still, anyone who openly criticizes Beijing's policies should be aware that these Chinese nationalist trolls are especially active now as Beijing is eager to deploy its digital army to deflect any coronavirus-related blame and point fingers elsewhere.

How to deal with them? Most people who were attacked by Chinese nationalist trolls chose either to block them, report them, or simply ignore them. Last week, creative Twitter users in Thailand also showed you can use satire to drive these trolls crazy.

These Chinese nationalist trolls are insufferable. They are only too happy to be locked inside a firewall. Ironically, after they have gone through all the trouble to climb over the wall, all they want to do is defend the wall's existence and the regime that put it up. They may think they are defending and protecting China's image, but they are actually causing more damage to China's reputation.

[Brazil] Brazil's Bolsonaro Meets His Fauci (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 9:30 AM, Mac Margolis, Neutral]

Although nearly every headline now stokes dread, Brazilians can take comfort in some salutary news: The earth is not flat. Even as President Jair Bolsonaro scoffs at social distancing and other effective measures to keep the coronavirus pandemic at bay — and is booed and pot-banged as a result — Brazil's Health Minister Luiz Henrique Mandetta has won plaudits for his steady nerves and calming mantra of "science, discipline, planning and focus." One of the rare pluses of the coronavirus pandemic is that health professionals suddenly have become some of Latin America's most credible public figures.

This wasn't always the case. As recently as 2018, the region's scientists had relatively little cachet. According to the Wellcome Global Monitor, based on a Gallup poll surveying more than 140 countries, a quarter of South Americans said they had little or no trust in doctors and nurses, making them almost as skeptical as respondents from Central Africa, the least trusting region. Fewer than 7 in 10 said they would look to health professionals for medical advice, outdone only by Middle Easterners (65%). No region had less confidence in hospitals and clinics: 37% of those surveyed compared with the world average of 19%.

Fortunately, as the coronavirus sweeps the region, the skepticism appears to be losing traction. To judge by the two-kilometer line of cars stretching before my neighborhood health clinic late last month, even the storied anti-vaccine movement is on the retreat: 8.7 million elderly Brazilians took seasonal flu shots during the opening week of the vaccination drive, double the number of the 20-day 2019 campaign. While a few hardcore science deniers still howl, Rio de Janeiro state authorities and bishops held an Easter light show projecting the city's postcard Christ the Redeemer monument dressed in a lab coat and stethoscope.

Mandetta, a pediatric orthopedist, has seen his approval ratings soar to 76% as he leads Brazil's fight against the outbreak; another survey found that 87% of Brazilians approved of the country's health professionals. Mandetta's daily press briefings alongside the health ministry's top officials have become obligatory national viewing. Not so the public performances by President Jair Bolsonaro, who has seethed as his minister consistently outshone him. (Hence his 42% disapproval rating, compared with 29% in February.) Only a counteroffensive by Bolsonaro's inner circle of military men and level-headed legislators reportedly dissuaded him from sacking Mandetta mid-crisis. For now, at least: A leader who takes his management cues from Donald Trump is unlikely to let some tropical Anthony Fauci keep taking the bows.

The stakes are especially dire for Brazil, where illness is accelerating — officially, more than 23,700 stricken and 1,355 dead from Covid-19. (Independent studies say the real case load may be 12 times greater.) Although scientists have clawed back credibility from the corona-denialists, those gains will be threatened unless national leaders put more money into public hospitals, scale up mass clinical testing and increase the supply of ventilators and emergency health equipment. Getting Brazil's quack-in-chief to follow that prescription is another matter.

Moreover, Bolsonaro is not the only leader in a bubble. His Mexican counterpart, left-wing populist Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, blithely ignored the country's epidemiologists until the outbreak started to take off. Now the health minister has taken center stage — an encouraging if unstated nod to the growing regional consensus that only hard science and proper health protocols can beat the outbreak.

Colombia's Ivan Duque, Ecuador's Lenin Moreno and Nayib Bukele of El Salvador have named new ministers in mid-pandemic, trusting the national response to physicians and public health specialists. Peru's President Martin Vizcarra went further: Declaring that the moment calls for "someone with more expertise," he swapped out his health minister in late March and created a Covid-19 Command, led by a noted surgeon and former health minister Pilar Mazzetti. After following their health establishment's advice to cocoon the economy and enforce lock-downs and social distancing, Uruguayan President Luiz Alberto

Lacalle Pou, Vizcarra and Duque lead the list of Latin American leaders whose approval ratings have surged.

While Costa Rica has been sluggish in announcing fiscal measures to respond to the economic crisis, the country quickly launched widespread testing and monitoring of suspected infections, Economist Intelligence Unit Latin America analyst Giancarlo Morelli told me. Morelli should know: A Costa Rican native, he recently tested positive for Covid-19; every day someone from the health ministry checks in on him and his family, either by phone or house call. With one of the region's lowest per capita rates of hospital beds (half the world average and one fourth that of the advanced OECD nations), Costa Rica's diligent epidemic monitoring and patient control are vital. "The virus will not go away," health minister Daniel Salas said last month, warning his compatriots against complacency. "We need to react."

In authoritarian Latin America, health professionals have a tougher assignment. The Nicaraguan government under President Daniel Ortega has defied its health professionals and drawn a red flag from the Pan American Health Organization for dismissing social distancing safeguards, keeping open schools and shops and even allowing football matches. Tellingly, perhaps, the ruling autocrat himself, long rumored to be ailing, hasn't been seen in public since late March.

In Venezuela, President Nicolas Maduro has been flogging elixirs and wonder drugs, and ordered anyone testing positive to be hospitalized. No matter that the hospitals are bereft of running water, basic medication and ventilators. On April 4, Venezuelan security forces arrested a 30-year-old biomedical researcher who texted colleagues a medical directive on testing for Covid-19 as it spread in Trujillo, a western state. She was fired from her hospital post and charged with "treason to the fatherland."

The earth may not be flat, but declaring that truth can still prove hazardous for some of those on the front lines of Latin America's biggest health emergency.

[Canada] In Canada, Patience Wearing Thin Over Trump's Antics (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [4/14/2020 9:39 AM, Stéphanie Fillion, Neutral]

Ever since U.S. President Donald Trump took office, Canada's approach to dealing with its southern neighbor has centered largely on quiet diplomacy and damage control. But COVID-19 has changed Ottawa's most basic calculations. With more than 570,000 confirmed cases and more than 23,000 deaths, the United States now has the highest number of cases in the world. Canada, which has been lauded for its response, has seen more than 25,500 cases and more than 750 deaths. Today, Canada's number of diagnosed cases per capita is about one-third that of the United States.

As Trump continues to bungle the response to the pandemic at home, while seeking to block medical supplies from reaching Canada and other countries, Ottawa seems to have had enough. Canada's patience has worn thin in the past two weeks, particularly amid two decidedly Trumpian acts. In late March, leaked memos obtained by the Nation revealed that U.S. Customs and Border Protection had requested 1,000 troops to guard the U.S.-Canada border. While militarizing the border would have benefited Canada more than the United

States—as there is more irregular crossing from south to north than in the other direction—Ottawa considered it an overblown move. As talks of a militarized northern border grew stronger within the United States, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took pains to push back against the White House. Thus far, the effort has been successful, but whether it will stay that way remains to be seen. Days later, Trump drew outcry from Canada after invoking the 1950 Defense Production Act to bar 3M from exporting N95 masks to Canada. As with the border issue, the Trump administration has since walked back its threats, signing an agreement allowing the exports to move forward. But such wrangling has begun to change the tenor of the relationship.

“The U.S.-Canada relationship will survive this,” Bruce Heyman, former U.S. ambassador to Canada, told *Foreign Policy*. “[But] like anything else, that’s a wound that’ll take time to heal and the next administration is going to work hard to repair the relationship and the reestablishment of trust.”

At the outset of the crisis, Canada handled the U.S. relationship with special care, even as it required some social distancing between neighbors. When Canada closed its borders to the world on March 16, it left out a crucial exception: the United States. While both countries’ outbreaks were much smaller at the time, cases in the United States were growing at a far faster clip—sped by a slow response and inadequate testing. If Trudeau’s reason for banning all foreigners was to protect Canadians from the virus, letting Americans in undercut his entire premise. Chrystia Freeland, Canada’s deputy prime minister, then called U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to strike a deal. But doing so was part of a tactful strategy: Trudeau arrived at the same destination by letting Trump take the lead.

“We will be, by mutual consent, temporarily closing our Northern Border with Canada to non-essential traffic. Trade will not be affected. Details to follow!” Trump tweeted the next day. The border was closed to all nonessential movement, though the estimated \$2 billion in goods that passes each day can still cross. (Closing the borders fully is something that the two countries have never done, save for briefly following 9/11.) By allowing Trump to lead the way on a two-sided closure that still permitted essential and trade movement, Trudeau saved the country from a geopolitical (or Twitter) fight with the U.S. president and the prospect of any ruinous economic retaliation. A full closure of the border would hit the two countries hard: Automobiles, for example, are shipped back and forth between Canada and the United States many times during their fabrication. Complete shutdown would have been detrimental to both countries and something to be avoided at all cost. “Canada’s approach has been taking [Trump’s] personality into consideration and effectively communicating widely about the importance of the relationship and what the United States is doing is wrong in terms of how it’s impacting the United States itself,” Heyman said.

Keeping a good and healthy relationship with the United States has been a chief domestic challenge in recent years. Trudeau’s office even includes a “war room” dedicated solely to handling a volatile Trump. Canada has nevertheless not been immune to Trump’s wild-card antics. In 2018, Trump caught Trudeau off guard with surprise tariffs on aluminum and steel—removed only after a nearly yearlong standoff. And while the two leaders have mostly maintained cordial relations, awkward encounters at international summits (including a leaked video showing Trudeau making fun of Trump) have led to name-calling and tensions. Typically, those tensions have been diffused by Trudeau.

The pandemic has changed this dynamic, however. When it came to talking Trump down from sending troops to the longest nonmilitarized border in the world, Trudeau took a different tack. He started making what some called threats, albeit the Canadian way: polite and almost apologetic. Over and over, Trudeau reminded his U.S. counterpart of the "mutually beneficial relationship" and, more importantly, the thousands of Canadian health care workers who cross the border every day to work in U.S. hospitals.

Even as nerves are fraying in Ottawa, there is much at stake to maintaining the relationship. Some 75 percent of Canadian exports go to the United States, while 18 percent of U.S. exports are sent to Canada.

But while there is hardly any "Canada first" policy, the country will take the actions most needed to protect itself. Or as Freeland put it: Ottawa will "do whatever it takes to defend the national interest."

Coronavirus News

Trump Stops U.S. Funding of W.H.O.; U.K. Coronavirus Deaths May Be Higher Than Official Toll (New York Times)

New York Times [4/14/2020 7:15 PM, Staff, Neutral]

"The W.H.O. pushed China's misinformation about the virus," President Trump said at a news conference at the White House, adding that the administration was conducting a review of the W.H.O.'s handling of the coronavirus pandemic.

Virus-related deaths in Britain may be 10 percent higher than the official toll.

Britain, with the fastest-growing outbreak in western Europe, has understated the human and economic cost of the coronavirus, according to new information released on Tuesday.

The government's Office of National Statistics released figures indicating that deaths could be at least 10 percent higher than the official toll — 12,107 as of Tuesday — which does not take into account many people who die in nursing homes or at home.

More than 2,000 nursing homes, about 13 percent of the country's total, have had coronavirus cases, said Dr. Chris Whitty, the government's chief medical adviser. Workers in many of the homes have complained of an acute shortage of protective gear.

Care England, a charity representing independent care agencies, has estimated that nearly 1,000 Covid-19 deaths in nursing homes have gone uncounted. Two major home operators have reported 521 deaths in recent days, many of which are not yet included in official totals.

Critics say the government has focused on shoring up the National Health Service and its hospitals, neglecting the nursing home industry.

The financial outlook in Britain, which has almost 94,000 confirmed coronavirus cases, also darkened on Tuesday. The Office for Budget Responsibility, a fiscal watchdog group, said the country's lockdown could shrink the economy by 35 percent in the second quarter,

erasing 2 million jobs.

The government has been criticized for being slow to lock down the country, and for not providing more testing and more protective gear.

The undercounting of deaths in Britain, which had almost 94,000 confirmed coronavirus infections by Tuesday, parallels those in other countries, where many deaths outside of hospitals have not been included in the official counts.

One hint at the true toll comes from the number of deaths from all causes. In the week of March 28 to April 3, more than 16,000 people died in Britain — about 6,000 more than average for the time of year.

Live updates: Trump halts funding to the World Health Organization pending a review of its response to coronavirus pandemic (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 7:17 PM, Brittany Shammass, Felicia Sonmez, Siobhan O'Grady, Adam Taylor, Candace Buckner, Samantha Pell and Keryl Kornfield, Neutral] President Trump announced Tuesday that he instructed his administration to stop funding the World Health Organization until a review is completed on what he calls a mismanagement of the pandemic.

The WHO has been criticized for its slow response in the early days of the outbreak in Wuhan, but by Jan. 30, the organization declared a global health emergency, after which the president continued to downplay the outbreak and compare it to the flu.

The hold on funding was expected this week as the Trump administration and conservative allies have ramped up their criticism that the United Nations agency catered to China early in the outbreak and jeopardized global health.

Here are some significant developments:

-As world leaders consider how to restart a crashing global economy, the governors of California and Oregon on Tuesday laid out a framework to reopen public life and businesses in their states. "Science and public health, not politics, must be the guide," California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) said, a day after President Trump incorrectly claimed that he is the final arbiter on when the United States will reopen.

-The U.S. reported more than 2,070 deaths on Tuesday, a new daily high, and total confirmed fatalities surpassed 25,000 with more than 600,000 infections.

-Covid-19 checkpoints targeting out-of-state residents in several states, including Rhode Island, Florida and Texas, are drawing complaints and legal scrutiny.

-The International Monetary Fund said the pandemic is causing the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression of the 1930s.

-More than 9,000 U.S. health-care workers have been infected, according to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention analysis.

-In Britain, the government's daily covid-19 tallies appear to be seriously undercounting the true mortality figures.

-More than 2,100 U.S. cities are now bracing for budget shortfalls, with many planning cuts and layoffs, according to a new survey.

The Latest: Trump halts U.S. payments to WHO (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 7:15 PM, Staff, 1512K, Neutral]

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump says he is halting U.S. payments to the World Health Organization pending a review of its warnings about the coronavirus and China.

Trump says the outbreak could have been contained at its source and spared lives had the U.N. health agency done a better job investigating reports coming out of China.

The president says the world depends on the World Health Organization to work with countries to make sure accurate information about health threats are shared in a timely manner.

Trump claims the organization failed to carry out its "basic duty" and must be held accountable.

But Trump says the U.S. will continue to engage with the organization in pursuit of what he calls meaningful reforms.

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WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has announced a new public-private partnership aimed at making as many as 60,000 ventilators available to patients in coronavirus hot spots.

Trump says the partnership will allow hospitals to lend unused ventilators to other hospitals with greater need. He says that more than 20 of the nation's largest health systems have pledged to lend more than 4,000 ventilators where needed.

Trump was joined by executives from several health systems around the country to tout the new program during a press briefing at the White House.

Governors have expressed concerns about the availability of ventilators as their states experienced a surge in critically ill patients. Trump says some governors requested far more than what they ultimately needed. He also asserts that the federal government has smartly rationed ventilators and that there are currently about 10,000 ventilators in a federal stockpile should they be needed.

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SALEM, Ore. — Oregon Gov. Kate Brown, asked at a news conference what she thought of President Donald Trump's insistence he has "total authority" to order states to open their economies, said it has been the states at the front lines of combating the COVID-19 pandemic: addressing the needs around personal protective equipment, testing capacity

and hospital bed capacity.

"Governors were also the folks that had to make the very tough and hard decisions to shutter parts of our economy," Brown said. "And I think it's really important that those of us who are co-located regionally, that we work together, that we align our efforts as we work to make this hard task of reopening our economy."

A flattening of the number of coronavirus cases in Oregon should persist until at least mid-May, but modeling that shows what to expect beyond then is uncertain and it's too soon to tell when the stay-home restrictions can be relaxed, top officials said.

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NEW YORK — Pope Francis is keeping New York in his prayers as the city grapples with the coronavirus crisis.

The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York said the pontiff called Cardinal Timothy Dolan from the Vatican to express his love and concern for the city and hard-hit boroughs of Queens and Brooklyn, where two priests have died of the disease.

Dolan said the pope told him New Yorkers were "in his prayers in a special way at this time" and asked him to relay his "prayerful best wishes to the sick, the doctors, nurses, EMT's, medical professionals, and caregivers who are tending to them, our civic leaders, as well as our priests, religious, and lay people."

Pope Francis visited New York City in 2015, addressing the United Nations, parading through Central Park and celebrating Mass at Madison Square Garden.

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NEW ORLEANS — Mayor LaToya Cantrell said major New Orleans spring and summer festivals that have already been postponed to later this year because of the virus should not be held in 2020.

"My recommendation is, absolutely, no large events such as French Quarter Festival, Jazz Fest, even Essence," Cantrell said.

Cantrell said she had begun talking with organizers about further delays. She stopped short of calling for a delay in the professional football season.

"The NFL is struggling with that right now," Cantrell said. She said she has not discussed the season with NFL officials or New Orleans Saints owner Gayle Benson.

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CHICAGO — Officials say dozens of immigrant children living in three Chicago-area shelters have tested positive for COVID-19 and the number could increase as test results come back.

The Chicago Tribune reports 37 of 69 children, who are all under 18 years old, are positive. Heartland officials say the children's prognosis is "very good" and staff members are taking precautions.

The Chicago-based Heartland Alliance runs the shelters where children in the custody of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement are waiting to be released to a relative or legal guardian.

UNITED NATIONS — The United Nations envoy for Colombia says former combatants are now making face masks to respond to the coronavirus pandemic, but COVID-19 hasn't stopped violence against social leaders, human rights defenders and ex-fighters despite a nationwide stay-at-home order.

Carlos Ruiz Massieu told the U.N. Security Council that three social leaders and three former combatants were killed in recent weeks, bringing the total number of ex-combatants killed since the government signed a peace agreement with Colombia's main rebel group, the FARC, in 2016 to 195.

In response to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres' call for a global cease-fire to tackle COVID-19, the U.N. envoy said the National Liberation Army, known by its Spanish acronym ELN, which is one of Colombia's last remaining rebel groups, declared a month-long unilateral cease-fire in April.

However, Ruiz Massieu said, "armed clashes continue between illegal armed groups in several departments."

BATON ROUGE, La. — Gov. John Bel Edwards is pushing back Louisiana's presidential primary again because of the coronavirus, this time to July 11. The state's chief elections officer is asking lawmakers to expand mail-in balloting and early voting.

The primary originally had been scheduled for April 4. Edwards, a Democrat, has delayed the election twice at the request of Republican Secretary of State Kyle Ardoin as Louisiana continues to grapple with the virus outbreak, which has hit the state especially hard.

In the past month, more than a dozen states have postponed their primaries to give them time to adjust and plan.

Ardoin also is asking lawmakers to approve emergency procedures for the election. The secretary of state wants to expand early voting from one week to two weeks, allow mail-in ballots for more people and change some precinct locations.

RIO DE JANEIRO — Rio de Janeiro's Gov. Wilson Witzel says he has tested positive for the new coronavirus after a month of pushing for confinement measures in the Brazilian state.

In a video posted to his official Twitter account, Witzel says he has experienced fever and sore throat since Friday. His positive test results came back on Tuesday, he says, adding that he feels well.

"I will continue working," he says. "I request once again that you stay at home. This sickness, as you can all perceive, does not choose and contagion is rapid."

Witzel, 52, has been one of Brazil's foremost proponents of self-quarantine, and last month he imposed restrictions on business, transit and gatherings to contain the spread of COVID-19. This week he extended shutdown measures through the end of the month.

That stance has put him at odds with President Jair Bolsonaro, who has played down the severity of the virus that has thus far killed more than 1,500 people in Latin America's largest country.

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Tennessee corrections officials are looking into whether to test all state inmates for the new coronavirus after positive tests have come back for staffers and inmates, a Department of Correction spokeswoman said.

On Friday, the department mass tested 1,145 workers at Northwest Correctional Complex and Bledsoe County Correctional Complex, finding that 13 department staff and six contract workers tested positive after showing no symptoms at the time of testing. The widespread testing came in reaction to six workers previously testing positive at the facilities.

The department's website says five inmates have tested positive, including confirmed cases at Trousdale Turner Correctional Center and Turney Center Industrial Complex. As of Tuesday, only 55 state inmates had been tested, the department said.

TORONTO — All non-essential businesses in Canada's most populous province will be closed until at least May 12 after Ontario extended its state of emergency for another 28 days.

Ontario Premier Doug Ford also says Ontario's schools will not re-open on May 4. Ford says it is too soon to relax measures as the province continues to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.

WASHINGTON — The U.S. has released nearly 700 people from immigration detention around the country amid concerns about the spread of the new coronavirus.

Acting Deputy Homeland Security Director Ken Cuccinelli says the 693 people who were deemed eligible for release are people who are considered medically vulnerable to the virus and are not considered to pose a security or flight risk if the U.S. seeks to take them into custody later.

Cuccinelli told reporters Tuesday that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement screened detainees for risks such as age, pregnancy or underlying health conditions.

ICE says 77 detainees have tested positive at detention centers around the country. Activists have pushed for significantly more releases given the potential danger to people held in close quarters.

TIRANA, Albania — Following two weeks of almost total lockdown, Albania will allow its residents who have remained abroad to come back on flights from a local airline.

Transport Minister Belinda Balluku says starting Saturday Air Albania airline would start to bring back home Albanians around Europe.

Foreign citizens who have remained in the country also may use it to fly away.

The minister said the newcomers should first agree that upon landing they will be under quarantine for 14 days accommodated in hotels they pay themselves.

PARIS — The French foreign minister summoned China's ambassador to France to express his "clear disapproval" of recent comments over how France is dealing with the coronavirus crisis.

In a statement Tuesday, Jean-Yves Le Drian said some public remarks from Chinese officials were not in line with the relation of "trust and friendship" between French President Emmanuel Macron and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

A long statement in French was released Sunday on the website of China's embassy to France in an apparent response to criticism from Western media, experts and politicians over China's handling of the virus outbreak.

The statement, presented as written by an unnamed Chinese diplomat in Paris, notably stated that caregivers in French nursing homes have "collectively deserted, letting their residents dying from starvation and disease."

It also criticized the firing of the captain of the U.S. coronavirus-infected aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt.

ANKARA, Turkey — Turkey's health minister has reported 107 COVID-19 fatalities in the past 24 hours, bringing the total death toll to 1,404.

Fahrettin Koca also told reporters that the number of infections in the country has increased by 4,062, pushing the total number of confirmed cases to 65,111.

At least 4,799 patients have recovered, he said.

Koca said the infection rate in Turkey is slowing down and the country could reach a peak in the coming weeks. But he insisted physical distancing efforts should be maintained.

"I believe we will reach the peak in one or two weeks unless there is a new wave," Koca said.

ROME — Police have searched Italy's biggest nursing home, where 143 people have reportedly died in the past month, as multiple criminal investigations kick into gear over allegations of negligence and homicide in elderly facilities in the coronavirus pandemic.

RAI state television said financial police seized clinical files and other documents from the 1,000-bed Pio Albergho Trivulzio facility in Milan.

Prosecutors launched an investigation following complaints from staff that management prohibited doctors and nurses from wearing protective masks for fear of alarming residents. The facility has insisted it followed all security protocols and says it is cooperating with the investigation.

The region of Lombardy has launched an independent commission to investigate nursing home deaths — most of them uncounted in official tolls because they were never tested for COVID-19.

The National Institutes of Health also has started a survey on nursing home deaths.

ATLANTA — Between 10% and 20% of U.S. coronavirus cases are health care workers, though they tended to be hospitalized at lower rates than other patients, health officials reported Tuesday.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported the first national data on how the pandemic is hitting doctors, nurses and other health care professionals. Medical staff have also been hit hard in other countries: Media reports said about 10% of cases in Italy and Spain were health care workers.

The data is important new information but not necessarily surprising, said Dr. Anne Schuchat, who is running the U.S. agency's response to the outbreak.

Compared with U.S. cases overall, larger proportions of diagnosed health care workers were women, were white, and were young or middle-aged adults. That's consistent with the demographics of who works in health care, researchers said.

PARIS — The COVID-19 death toll in France has risen to 15,729 as the spreading of the coronavirus in the country appears to be stabilizing.

National health agency chief Jerome Salomon says France registered 762 deaths over the past 24 hours in hospitals and nursing homes.

The number of people admitted to a hospital every day is slowing down and the number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care units slightly dropped for the sixth straight day, he says.

More than 6,700 patients are still in critical care.

France also passed 100,000 people testing positive for the virus since the outbreak began,

one day after French President Emmanuel Macron announced the lockdown in the country will be extended until May 11.

WHO Has 'Very Good' Relations With the U.S., Director-General Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/14/2020 1:13 AM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus discussed the U.N. agency's relations with the U.S. government. President Donald Trump has suggested he may "hold" funding for the WHO. Tedros spoke Monday at a briefing in Geneva.
[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

Spain, Austria ease curbs but WHO warns coronavirus 'certainly' has not peaked (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 12:04 PM, Paola Luelmo and Estelle Shirbon, 5304K, Neutral]

Spain and Austria allowed partial returns to work on Tuesday but Britain, France and India extended coronavirus lockdowns to try to rein in a pandemic which the World Health Organization warned had not yet peaked.

Nearly 2 million people globally have been infected and more than 119,200 have died in the most serious pandemic in a century, according to a Reuters tally. The epicentre has moved from China, where the virus first emerged in December, to the United States, which now has the highest death toll at 23,568.

World leaders, in considering easing curbs, have to balance risks to health and the economy, as the lockdowns strangle supply lines, especially in China, and bring economic activity to a virtual halt.

The world economy is expected to shrink by 3% this year, the International Monetary Fund said, marking the steepest downturn since the Great Depression.

The World Health Organization said the number of new cases was easing in some parts of Europe, including Italy and Spain, but outbreaks were growing in Britain and Turkey.

"The overall world outbreak, 90 percent of cases are coming from Europe and the United States of America. So we are certainly not seeing the peak yet," WHO spokeswoman Margaret Harris told a briefing in Geneva.

But world stocks gained after Chinese trade data came in better than expected and as some countries partly lifted restrictions.

Some Spanish businesses, including construction and manufacturing, were allowed to restart. Shops, bars and public spaces are to stay closed until at least April 26.

Spain was flattening the curve on the graph, representing the rate of growth of the outbreak, Health Minister Salvador Illa said on Tuesday. The overnight death toll from the coronavirus rose to 567 on Tuesday from 517 a day earlier, but the country reported its lowest increase in new cases since March 18. Total deaths climbed to 18,056.

Some workers expressed concern that the relaxation of restrictions could trigger a new

surge. But for Roberto Aguayo, a 50-year-old Barcelona construction worker, the restart came just in time.

"We really needed it, just when we were going to run out of food we returned to work," he told Reuters.

Italy, which has the world's second highest death toll of 20,465, maintained some tight restrictions on movement. Denmark, one of the first European countries to shut down, will reopen day care centres and schools for children in first to fifth grade on April 15.

Thousands of shops across Austria reopened on Tuesday, but the government said it was "not out of the woods".

Austria acted early to close schools, bars, theatres, restaurants, non-essential shops and other gathering places about four weeks ago. It has told the public to stay home.

Austria has reported 384 deaths in total, fewer than some larger European countries have been suffering each day. Hospitalisations have stabilised.

TRUMP 'CALLS THE SHOTS'

Britain, where the government has come under criticism for its slow approach to testing and for not getting protective equipment to the frontlines, has the fifth-highest death toll globally.

The death toll in British hospitals rose to 12,107 on Monday and Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab has said there would be no easing of lockdown measures when they come up for review this week. The Times newspaper said on Tuesday he would extend them until at least May 7.

French President Emmanuel Macron on Monday extended a virtual lockdown to May 11.

India, the world's second-most populous country after China, extended its nationwide lockdown until May 3 as the number of coronavirus cases crossed 10,000. Neighbours Pakistan and Nepal also extended their curbs.

Russia might need to call in the army to help tackle the crisis, President Vladimir Putin said on Monday. Moscow warned that the capital may run out of hospital beds in coming weeks.

China's northeastern border province of Heilongjiang saw 79 new cases of imported coronavirus cases on Monday, all Chinese citizens travelling back from Russia, state media said.

As of Tuesday, China had reported 82,249 coronavirus cases and 3,341 deaths. There were no deaths in the past 24 hours.

U.S. President Donald Trump, who had predicted a return to work after Easter, defended his response to the coronavirus.

He said he did not intend to fire the leading U.S. health expert, who said that earlier

intervention could have saved more lives.

Ten U.S. governors on the east and west coasts banded together on Monday in two regional pacts to coordinate gradual economic reopenings as the coronavirus crisis finally appeared to be ebbing.

At a contentious briefing with reporters, Trump said he had the ultimate authority to re-open the economy.

"The president of the United States calls the shots," Trump said.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said he would not abide by any order Trump might give to reopen his state in an unsafe manner during the coronavirus outbreak.

Health ministers from the Group of 20 major economies will speak by video conference on Sunday to address the outbreak's impact.

'Mixed picture' in Europe, COVID-19 vaccine at least 12 months off: WHO (Reuters)
[Reuters](#) [4/14/2020 10:03 AM, Stephanie Nebehay, 5304K, Neutral]

The number of new cases of COVID-19 is easing in some parts of Europe, including Italy and Spain, but outbreaks are still growing in Britain and Turkey, the World Health Organization (WHO) said on Tuesday.

"The overall world outbreak, 90 percent of cases are coming from Europe and the United States of America. So we are certainly not seeing the peak yet," WHO spokeswoman Dr. Margaret Harris told a briefing in Geneva.

The WHO will issue guidance to member states later in the day listing six steps that they need to ensure they have in place before starting to ease any restrictions, she said.

"The most important one is, is your transmission controlled?"

The United States has the largest epidemic currently and has been a "fantastic partner" in addition to being the largest donor to the WHO, Harris said.

"There will always be criticisms of organisations, it's important to listen criticism especially constructive criticism," she said. "And our work will go on regardless of any kind of issues."

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO director-general, voiced confidence on Monday that the United States would continue funding his U.N. agency, despite President Donald Trump's criticism of the WHO's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Russia has become China's largest source of imported cases, with a total of 409 infections originating in the northern neighbour.

"China in fact is now really focusing on looking at – apart from making sure that there are not new local cases – but their biggest threat is imported cases," Harris said.

On vaccines, Harris said: "We really shouldn't be expecting to see the vaccine at least for 12 months or longer."

UN chief: world faces misinformation epidemic about virus (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 4:20 PM, Edith M. Lederer, Neutral]

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned Tuesday that the world is facing "a dangerous epidemic of misinformation" about COVID-19 and announced a U.N. campaign to flood the internet with facts and science to counter what he called "a poison" that is putting lives at risk.

The U.N. chief decried what he described as a global "misinfo-demic" that is spreading harmful health advice, "snake-oil solutions," falsehoods, and wild conspiracy theories.

Guterres urged social media organizations to do more to counter the misinformation and to "root out hate and harmful assertions about COVID-19."

"Hatred is going viral, stigmatizing and vilifying people and groups," he said in a video statement. "Mutual respect and upholding human rights must be our compass in navigating this crisis."

The U.N. chief said people around the world "are scared" and want to know what to do and where to turn for advice, and they need science.

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric stressed the importance of accurate information,

He said the United Nations "will be in touch with various social media companies," adding that quite a few of them are actively trying to root out disinformation and suspending accounts of people pushing out information "that is plain wrong and dangerous."

Dujarric said the U.N. recognizes the delicate balance between free speech and misinformation, saying "that's a balancing act that is played out every day around the world even in the most free democracies."

"The secretary-general is not going to be the one to decide," Dujarric said.

"What we are doing is we will push out scientifically based information, information that will help us as a global community fight the virus," he said. "Social media companies, news organizations are making those decisions all the time, but I think it is important that we all do what we can to fight the spread of dangerous misinformation on fighting the virus."

The secretary-general saluted "journalists and others fact-checking the mountain of misleading stories and social media posts."

He called for trust in science and in institutions "grounded in responsive, responsible, evidence-based governance and leadership."

"Together, let's reject the lies and nonsense out there," Guterres said. "With common cause

for common sense and facts, we can defeat COVID-19 – and build a healthier, more equitable, just and resilient world.”

Now joining the fight against coronavirus: The world’s armed rebels, drug cartels and gangs (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 8:00 AM, Kevin Sieff, Susannah George and Kareem Fahim, 12625K, Neutral]

In Afghanistan, the Taliban has dispatched health teams to far-flung provinces to confront the coronavirus. In Mexico, drug cartels are offering aid packages to those feeling its economic impact. In Brazil and El Salvador, gangs enforce curfews to prevent its spread.

As governments around the world have responded to the coronavirus, so too have armed insurgents and terrorist groups and drug cartels and gangs, a parallel underworld of public health policy and strategic messaging.

It is hardly the first time such groups have attempted to fill the role of government. But few crises in modern times have tested the limits of the world’s nation-states as the coronavirus has, providing an opening for armed groups to step in where presidents, police forces and parliaments have failed.

Some groups have attempted to weave governments’ failures to control the virus into their own propaganda narratives. In Somalia, al-Qaeda-linked al-Shabab fighters say the pandemic was spread “by the crusader forces who have invaded the country.” The Islamic State has told followers to prepare to exploit their enemies while they are overwhelmed by outbreaks. In Yemen, Houthi rebels have accused Saudi Arabia of airdropping masks infected with covid-19.

In eastern Afghanistan, where the Afghan government and the Taliban have clashed for nearly two decades, the rivalry over which group has a more effective health policy is now on full display.

Esmatullah Asim, a provincial council member from Wardak province, watched the arrival of Taliban forces in medical gear this month and was impressed. Asim said the government quarantines only those who show symptoms at the border, but the Taliban quarantines every person who has returned recently from Iran.

“The Taliban quarantine is much better than the government,” he said. The group also raises awareness about the virus in the territory it controls, he said. “They stop the vehicles, telling the passengers how to prevent the spread of the virus.”

Even the U.S. State Department conveyed kudos.

“We join the Afghan Ministry of Public Health in welcoming the Taliban’s efforts to raise awareness against #COVID19 and their offer of safe passage to health workers & international organizations working to prevent the spread of the virus,” the department wrote in a tweet.

Analysts who study the organizational structure of armed groups are now cataloguing

dozens of instances of rebels and bandits making forays into public health policy.

"In some cases, the government just isn't coming to help, so this is a chance for nonstate armed groups to appear to be the responsible, accountable actor," said Sarah Parkinson, an assistant professor of political science and international studies at Johns Hopkins University. "In other cases, it's concern for their own members. And in others, it's an attempt to use a piece of evidence in their own propaganda war."

Some governments have acknowledged that armed groups could exploit their weaknesses after the virus fades, seizing on the aftermath of economic dislocation.

The mayor of the Italian city of Palermo, Leoluca Orlando, warned this month that "a den of Mafia jackals" is poised "to exploit the desperation of the new poor from coronavirus." Other Italian officials have suggested that the mafia could provide its own loans or cash handouts to undermine the government.

In Mexico, at least two drug cartels have begun providing aid packages to residents in places partially controlled by armed groups. In Michoacán, a video emerged last week of the Los Viagras cartel handing out plastic bags of food to hundreds of people. In Tamaulipas, a Mexican state that borders South Texas, photos circulated of boxes full of sugar, oil and other staples distributed in large piles. On the top of each box was plastered the name of the donor: "Gulf Cartel," they said, "in support of Ciudad Victoria," the state capital.

Falko Ernst, an analyst with the International Crisis Group in Mexico, said there was an "obvious tension" in the effort.

"These groups are trying to be seen as catering materially and providing a notion of security in places where they are also directly preying on the population through extortion and kidnapping and violence," he said. "But in a lot of places, these groups are the least bad solution for populations that don't have anywhere else to turn."

In Brazil's favelas, the messages come through WhatsApp.

"Whoever is caught on the street will learn how to respect the measure," one gang warned a Rio de Janeiro slum. "We want the best for the population. If the government is unable to manage, organized crime resolves."

Last month, as the Salvadoran government was enforcing one of Latin America's earliest and most stringent lockdowns, leaders of MS-13 decided that they would institute their own curfew. It was a rare overlap of policy between the gang and the government, which have fought each other for years.

But it also reflected a reality in much of El Salvador: The police have limited access in neighborhoods under criminal control, and in those places, only a gang-enforced curfew would be observed. MS-13 explained its reasoning to the San Salvador newspaper El Faro: The policy was about protecting its own members, who probably wouldn't have access to medical treatment if they were infected.

"If there are no respirators left and one of us is gravely ill, all tattooed, and an old woman appears who is in serious condition, they are going to disconnect the gang member and they are going to let him die," one member said.

A similar overlap in policy has occurred in Afghanistan, where the Taliban has dispatched teams that distribute gloves, soap and masks in areas under its control.

But while the insurgents and the government agree on the need to combat the virus, they continue to fight each other.

"We can't completely stop our attacks," Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid said. He blamed the government for "compelling" them.

Advocacy groups have encouraged more coordination between the Taliban and the Afghan government to tackle the coronavirus. Human Rights Watch proposed videoconferences with "representatives from the Public Health Ministry, the Taliban's health commission, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan and key international humanitarian agencies."

In many countries, police have been redeployed from rural to urban areas, giving criminal groups more room to operate with impunity — and to enforce their own health policy as the pandemic spreads.

In some cases, "criminal groups will play the role of enforcer with full agreement and even at the request of the state," wrote Vanda Felbab-Brown of the Brookings Institution. "Such deals in which governments outsource the rule of urban and rural peripheries to criminal groups long preceded covid-19."

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the militant group that dominates Syria's northern Idlib province, has used the virus to burnish its credentials as a legitimate governing body, issuing orders restricting gatherings and distributing health information to the public.

No cases have been reported in the province. Public health officials and aid workers say the spread of the virus in the crowded refugee camps of Idlib, among a population with little access to health care, would be calamitous.

"The large number of our people gathered in a small geographic space, and the monumental population density in the camps, forecasts disastrous results if the epidemic spreads," said Ayman Jibis, the health minister for the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-created Salvation Government.

China's mask diplomacy a hit in virus-plagued Eastern Europe (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 2:46 AM, Dusan Stojanovic, Neutral]

When China's first shipment of coronavirus medical aid landed in Belgrade, the president of Serbia was there to kiss the Chinese flag. In Hungary, officials have played down assistance from the European Union and praised Beijing's help. In the Czech Republic, its president says only China was there during the virus spread.

While China struggles elsewhere to polish its image tarnished by its initial handling of the

coronavirus outbreak, Beijing has no problem maintaining its hard-won influence in Eastern Europe, where it battles for clout with the EU as well as with Russia in countries like Serbia.

China was criticized by many in the West for its early mishandling of the health crisis due to politically motivated foot-dragging while the virus raced through a major province and its capital, Wuhan. Now it is seeking to change perceptions through "mask diplomacy" — a combination of soft power policy, political messaging and aid that is designed to portray Beijing as a generous and efficient ally.

China for years has been increasing its political and economic influence in southeastern Europe through its Belt and Road global investment projects. Its image-polishing after the outbreak found fertile ground in places like Serbia and Hungary, whose populist leaders nurture close ties with Beijing or Moscow.

The aid shipments also drew praise in Italy, Spain, the Netherlands and Slovakia, although some Chinese shipments of coronavirus testing kits and face masks turned out to be faulty or defective.

"We must be aware there is a geopolitical component, including a struggle for influence, through spinning and the politics of generosity," EU's top foreign policy official Josep Borrell recently wrote in a blog, referring to China. "Armed with facts, we need to defend Europe against its detractors."

Chinese officials have repeatedly rejected claims that Beijing is seeking political gains by providing medical aid to other countries, saying the allegations result from deep-rooted misperceptions of China's goals in the West.

While the EU's 27 nations were busy battling the virus amid a lack of equipment and protective gear, shipments from China were praised even when they were paid for.

In Serbia, a candidate for EU membership, officials and state-controlled media have played down the millions of euros in grants and loans from Brussels and praised Chinese deliveries, donations and cash purchases. Opposition groups have demanded that the aid from China be disclosed and stacked up against the EU's apparently much larger assistance, but those calls have been ignored.

The pro-China narrative included billboards supporting Chinese President Xi Jinping, whom Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic routinely describes as his "brother."

"European solidarity does not exist. Only China can help," Vucic said last month while announcing a nationwide state of emergency that gave him expanded powers in the health crisis.

Still, a suggestion by Serbia's prime minister that a monument be erected honoring the country's friendship with China during the outbreak drew a negative response from some pro-Western Serbs.

"Are we to build monuments for those who have triggered the global pandemic spread, including Serbia, and lied about it in the process?" one commentator asked.

Both Serbia and Hungary have been important gateways to Europe for China through its infrastructure and investment projects.

China's investments in Serbia include an estimated \$6 billion in loans for building highways, railroads and power plants as well as contracts for the introduction of a 5-G network and facial recognition surveillance equipment. U.S. officials have warned of Beijing's "debt trap" diplomacy that could cost them their sovereignty if they fail to service the loans.

Hungary's authoritarian government has repeatedly praised China and other Asian countries, thanking them for supplying masks, breathing machines and other equipment needed in the pandemic.

At the same time, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban and other ministers have downplayed assistance from fellow EU members and the bloc and have belittled those criticizing the extraordinary powers given to Hungary's leadership during the state of emergency declared due to the pandemic.

"All of Europe, including western Europe, is always extraordinarily critical and often ready to educate and lecture about the essence of democracy, (but) everyone is standing in line in China for the products needed for health protection," Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said last week in Parliament. "So, it's possible that after the end of the coronavirus, European policies regarding Eastern relations may have to be slightly reassessed."

A group of experts monitoring China's presence in southeastern Europe warned in a report this month that "China has been increasingly active in political, economic and societal domains" in the region.

Czech President Milos Zeman, known for his pro-Russian and pro-Chinese views, said in a televised address March 19 that "China was the only country that helped us have the (protective) gear delivered."

China expert Martin Hala countered by criticizing what he called a "huge propaganda campaign that accompanies the so-called aid" from Beijing. He told Czech public television that it was not aid but "a normal commercial delivery."

Why girls in poor countries will suffer the most from worldwide closing of schools during covid-19 (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 7:00 AM, Valerie Strauss, 12625K, Negative]

The closing of schools around the world is sure to hurt most students in some way, but it is girls from marginalized countries whose education will be affected the most, experts say.

With some 1.5 billion students affected by school closures around the world, according to a U.N. agency, more than 111 million of them are girls who live in the world's least developed countries, where education is already a struggle for them because of family and societal pressures.

And it is they who are more at risk than boys of never returning to school, according to

officials at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, or UNESCO.

"We are only beginning to understand the economic impacts of covid-19, but they are expected to be widespread and devastating, particularly for women and girls," Stefania Giannini, UNESCO's assistant director general for education, and Anne-Birgitte Albrechtsen, chief executive for Plan International, a development and humanitarian organization, wrote in a paper.

"In the Global South, where limited social protection measures are in place, economic hardships caused by the crisis will have spill-over effects as families consider the financial and opportunity costs of educating their daughters," they wrote. "While many girls will continue with their education once the school gates reopen, others will never return to school."

A new report by the nonprofit international organization called the Malala Fund analyzed data from the 2014-2015 Ebola epidemic in several African countries and concluded that as many as 10 million secondary school-age girls who were in school before the coronavirus pandemic began this year will not return.

"We find that marginalised girls are more at risk than boys of dropping out of school altogether following school closures and that women and girls are more vulnerable to the worst effects of the current pandemic," said the report, titled "Girls' Education and covid-19" (which you can see here or below).

As an example, at the height of the Ebola epidemic, more than 10,000 schools, affecting nearly 5 million children, were closed in the African countries of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. When schools reopened more than six months later, in 2015, students had lost an approximate 1,848 hours of education, ranging from 33 weeks in Guinea to 39 weeks in Sierra Leone, the fund said.

"Prior to the outbreak in Sierra Leone, girls' education already lagged behind that of boys, with girls acquiring just 1.8 years of schooling on average in comparison to the four-year average for boys," the report said. "Likewise, girls in Guinea completed only 0.9 years of schooling as compared to the 2.7-year average for boys.

"This gendered difference in educational attainment is a recurring theme in countries where girls face the greatest challenges," it said. "Consequently, the simple loss of even six months of education as a result of COVID-19 will have a proportionally greater impact on girls in low- and lower-middle-income countries; in some countries, they could lose 50% of their total years of education."

Both Giannini and Albrechtsen, as well as the Malala Fund report, said that after schools reopened many girls became the chief source of income for their families and could not attend school if they had re-enrolled.

Giannini and Albrechtsen wrote that during Africa's Ebola crisis, girls not only saw their education interrupted but also, some studies found, "that the closure of schools increased girls vulnerability to physical and sexual abuse both by their peers and by older men, as

girls were often are at home alone and unsupervised.”

“Transactional sex was also widely reported as vulnerable girls and their families struggled to cover basic needs,” they said. “As family breadwinners perished from Ebola and livelihoods were destroyed, many families chose to marry their daughters off, falsely hoping this would offer them protection.”

Girls living in refugee camps will be hardest hit, with refugee girls at secondary school-age only half as likely to enroll in schools as their peers, they wrote.

USS Theodore Roosevelt sailor dies from coronavirus (Politico)

Politico [4/14/2020 10:00 AM, Bryan Bender, Neutral]

A sailor assigned to the virus-stricken aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt who was admitted to the intensive care unit last week died of coronavirus-related complications on Monday, our colleague Lara Seligman reports.

The news marked the first virus-related death among the crew of the Roosevelt, which was forced to dock in Guam last month after an outbreak onboard. It was also the first death of an active-duty service member from the virus. A member of the New Jersey National Guard died from the infection on March 30.

Four additional sailors from the ship were admitted to the hospital over the weekend, according to Navy spokesperson Cmdr. Clay Doss. They are all in stable condition; none is in the ICU and none require a ventilator, he said.

Fears of the virus, which has now affected three carrier crews, also forced the Navy to take the step on Monday of keeping the USS Harry S. Truman, which has been operating in the Arabian and Mediterranean Seas, at sea longer than planned as it crosses the Atlantic on the way back to Norfolk, Va.

“The ship is entering a period in which it needs to be ready to respond and deploy at any time,” Vice Adm. Andrew Lewis, commander U.S. 2nd Fleet, said in a statement. “Normally we can do that pierside, but in the face of COVID-19, we need to protect our most valuable asset, our people, by keeping the ship out to sea.”

The decision means the Truman and other ships in the carrier strike group, which set sail in December, will not be reunited with their families on schedule. “We recognize that these are unique circumstances and the responsible thing to do is to ensure we are able to answer our nation’s call while ensuring the health and safety of our sailors,” Rear Adm. Andrew Loiselle, commander of Carrier Strike Group 8, said in the statement.

Coronavirus Pandemic Turns Locals Against Miners (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 2:28 PM, Alistair MacDonald and Daniela Blandon Ramirez, Negative]

Locals from a town in northern Colombia last month blockaded a mine operated by one of the world’s biggest miners, Glencore PLC, burning tires and delivering a simple message: Don’t bring the new coronavirus here.

Covid-19 is swamping hospitals around the world, shutting down entire economies amid measures to slow its spread. It is also heightening local mistrust of some foreign corporations working in far-off lands, adding to a number of new pressures that the pandemic has created for globalized industries.

In recent weeks, some miners have been hit by protests around the world. Residents and activists accuse foreign companies of risking the safety of local communities in the pursuit of profit during the pandemic.

"Mining's problems are an example of the enhanced localism" occurring as a result of the pandemic, said Michael O'Sullivan, an investment strategist who has written about globalization. "Globalization, a sense of an integrated world, has been shattered by coronavirus," he said.

The mining industry has been a bellwether for globalization. It is dominated by large multinationals that dig up commodities around the world and then sell them globally. Despite that international market, miners often have to work close to local communities.

That can be a source of friction if residents don't feel they benefit from the mining activity nearby. Fresh concerns about the potential for miners to bring in the new coronavirus have heightened the problem.

The Colombian town of La Jagua de Ibirico is located next to coal mines run by Glencore and Alabama-based Drummond Ltd. Colombia, like other countries, has shut down lots of other businesses to help prevent the pandemic's spread.

Miners there have been allowed to keep digging. Last month, in protest, locals blocked access to Glencore's operation for two days, so that "those who were inside the mine could not leave and those who arrived on duty could not get in," said Luis Fernando Ramírez, an official of the local union at the Glencore mine.

The community has long complained that the mines employ too many foreigners. Amid the pandemic, they have accused the company of endangering the town with infection.

Glencore said the mine was temporarily closed after growing community tensions made it difficult to ensure its safe operation and the security of locals. A spokesman said Glencore is a big contributor to local causes. The company has introduced precautionary measures across its mines in response to the pandemic, Glencore said, including enhanced hygiene, cleaning measures and social distancing.

Drummond has temporarily reduced its mining operations to safeguard its employees and address the concerns of local communities, a spokeswoman said.

Canada-based First Quantum Minerals Ltd. was forced to close a large copper mine by the government in Panama, days after a public backlash against plans to continue to mine amid the pandemic. On Twitter, locals near the company's mine in Punta Rincón accused First Quantum of putting money before their workers' health.

Carlos González, a former worker at the mine who lives nearby, said the company has

never been particularly popular in the area. "Coronavirus has worsened the situation because they have put their economic interests above the health of their workers," he said.

First Quantum didn't respond to requests for comment.

Those who have campaigned against foreign mines are employing the virus in their fight. Last month, the mayor of the Chilean city of Andacollo called a press conference to link Canadian miner Teck Resources Ltd. with cases of coronavirus in the area. The mayor, a longtime critic of Teck, demanded the company close its copper mine during the outbreak.

A spokesman for Teck said there had been no confirmed cases of Covid-19 at the site, and the company has implemented precautions against infection.

The attacks on the mining industry echo broader attacks on foreigners inspired by the pandemic. A U.S. State Department official said American embassies have received reports of a rise in anti-foreigner sentiment since the beginning of the global outbreak.

Miners, for their part, have been ramping up donations to local communities and offering supplies and help to combat coronavirus. Glencore has donated \$25 million to help fight the virus, for instance, through donations to local health authorities. BHP Group Ltd, the world's largest miner, has pledged \$32 million to local health services, among other causes, in the Australian communities near to their mines.

When Joey Angnatok heard that coronavirus had hit Canada, he thought of the giant Voisey's Bay mine run by Brazil's Vale SA, about 20 miles from his town in the remote region of Labrador.

"It hit home, the potential of the outside world to harm this one," Mr. Angnatok, a fisherman, said of his town of Nain, home mainly to native Inuit.

The community expressed concerns about the potential for the nickel mine's workforce to spread coronavirus into the area. The mine employs some 500 workers, about half of which are flown in from outside the community, according to Vale's website.

In response, Vale halted operations. Vale said it is "working together with the communities and authorities to ensure our operations do not act as a catalyst to inadvertently introduce the virus in these communities," a spokesman said.

The closure has been a double-edged sword for the community, however, because it underscored the economic importance of the mine for the region.

"That mine is the reality for us, and there is still stuff to be taken out of the ground," Mr. Angnatok said.

Search for a COVID-19 vaccine heats up in China, U.S. (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 3:26 PM, Lauran Neergaad, Neutral]

Three potential COVID-19 vaccines are making fast progress in early-stage testing in volunteers in China and the U.S., but it's still a long road to prove if they'll really work.

China's CanSino Biologics is beginning the second phase of testing its vaccine candidate, China's Ministry of Science and Technology said Tuesday.

In the U.S., a shot made by the National Institutes of Health and Moderna Inc. isn't far behind. The first person to receive that experimental vaccine last month returned to a Seattle clinic Tuesday for a second dose.

NIH infectious disease chief Dr. Anthony Fauci told The Associated Press there are "no red flags" so far and he hoped the next, larger phase of testing could begin around June.

A third candidate, from Inovio Pharmaceuticals, began giving experimental shots for first-step safety testing last week in the U.S. and hopes to expand its studies to China.

Initial tests focus on safety, and researchers in both countries are trying out different doses of different types of shots.

But moving into the second phase is a critical step that allows vaccines to be tested in many more people to look for signs that they protect against infection.

Last week, CanSino filed a report showing it aimed to enroll 500 people in this next study, comparing two doses of the vaccine to dummy shots.

Looking ahead, Fauci said if the new coronavirus continues to circulate widely enough over the summer and fall, it might be possible to finish larger studies slightly sooner than the 12 to 18 months he'd originally predicted — maybe toward "mid to late winter of next season."

"Please let me say this caveat: That is assuming that it's effective. See, that's the big 'if,'" Fauci stressed. "It's got to be effective and it's got to be safe."

During a news conference in China, authorities also cautioned that the studies must be done properly.

"Although we are in an emergency, we cannot lower the standards of safety and effectiveness in the reviews of vaccines," said Wang Junzhi, a Chinese biopharmaceutical expert. "The public is paying huge attention."

The World Health Organization this week counted more than five dozen other vaccine candidates in earlier stages of development being pursued around the world. Many research groups are teaming up to speed the work; in an announcement Tuesday, vaccine giants Sanofi and GSK became the latest to partner on a candidate.

On the WHO's list are a wide variety of ways to make vaccines – so if one approach doesn't pan out, hopefully another one will.

CanSino's vaccine is based on a genetically engineered shot it created to guard against Ebola. The leading U.S. candidates use a different approach, made from copies of a piece of the coronavirus' genetic code.

What are antibody tests and what do they mean for the coronavirus pandemic? (CNN) **CNN [4/14/2020 1:13 AM, Mallory Simon and Gina Yu, 5551K, Neutral]**

As the world watches and wonders when coronavirus pandemic stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures might end, some hope antibody tests might help provide a solution.

Antibody tests – also known as serology tests – aren't meant to diagnose active infection with the coronavirus. Rather, they check for proteins in the immune system, known as antibodies, through a blood sample. Their presence means a person was exposed to the virus and developed antibodies against it, which may mean that person has at least some immunity – although experts are not sure how strong the immunity may be or even how long it will last.

In contrast, diagnostic testing, so far, has mostly used a laboratory technique known as a polymerase chain reaction test or a PCR test. These tests can diagnose active infections through a sample – usually from a nose swab – that is then tested for viral genetic material.

Here are five questions and answers about Covid-19 and antibody testing.

Are novel coronavirus antibody tests available?

"Within a period of a week or so, we're going to have a rather large number of [antibody] tests that are available," Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy & Infectious Diseases, told CNN on Friday.

But that doesn't mean they're ready now.

The US Food and Drug Administration has not approved any antibody tests for the coronavirus, but one test – made by Cellex Inc. – has been granted emergency use authorization. Several other companies have also created their own versions under a new FDA's policy implemented last month that makes it easier for companies to manufacture and distribute antibody tests.

Since the FDA issued the policy, more than 70 developers have come forward with antibody tests, the agency said on April 7.

Under the new policy, tests can be used and distributed once the manufacturer has informed the FDA that the test has been validated, but the companies cannot make the claim that the agency has validated the tests.

The FDA has cautioned that these serology tests "should not be used as the sole basis to diagnose or exclude [coronavirus] infection or to inform infection status" and has asked manufacturers to report possible concerns over the test.

Are antibody tests accurate?

Without FDA approval, these tests don't undergo the rigorous process usually required to prove accuracy, and this has raised concerns.

Scott Becker, CEO of the Association of Public Health Laboratories, has called many of the tests "crappy." Becker's association represents 125 state, county and municipal public health labs in the United States. Those labs, along with private labs, would be responsible for running the tests.

But Becker said his labs won't use the tests that are on the market because they're concerned about inaccurate results that might mean people mistakenly believe they're immune to coronavirus and can return to work or stop social distancing.

"It could be quite dangerous," Becker said.

Becker said he shared his concerns about the quality of antibody tests with Dr. Brett Giroir, assistant secretary at the US Department of Health and Human Services, and FDA Commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn. He believes that unless the FDA steps in, there could be incorrect results or false senses of security.

Giroir said checking these tests for accuracy will be a priority, but acknowledged not all of the available tests will be of sound quality.

"There is a very consolidated effort between the FDA, CDC, NIH to validate some of the [antibody] tests that are on the market right now ... And we have reason to believe that not all of them are going to perform well," he said at a White House press briefing last week.

"We're going to be very careful to make sure that when we tell you you're likely immune from the disease ... that test really said that."

Wouldn't you know if you had been exposed to the coronavirus?

Besides indicating some level of immunity, the presence of Covid-19 antibodies could help identify those who have been infected but never realized they had the disease. Early research shows a large number of people may have had mild symptoms or no symptoms at all – and this group might be spreading the coronavirus more than previously thought.

"There may be many people out there, and I suspect there are a fair amount, that have been infected, were asymptomatic and didn't know it," Fauci recently said on NBC News' Today Show in response to why antibody tests are important.

The National Institutes of Health announced Friday it is recruiting up to 10,000 volunteers to take part in a study on how many Americans have been infected with Covid-19 and are not aware of it.

"These crucial data will help us measure the impact of our public health efforts now and guide our COVID-19 response moving forward," Fauci said in a statement.

Knowing exactly who has antibodies can also help with Covid-19 treatment. Clinical trials using convalescent plasma – a process that takes the antibodies from someone who has recovered from Covid-19 and injects them into a person who is sick – are currently underway.

"How can you possibly know who to get [antibodies] from if they haven't been tested? If you're talking about trying to scale [convalescent plasma] up as a real therapy, you're going to have to do mass testing to figure out who might be a donor," Dr. Celine Gounder, a professor of medicine and infectious diseases at NYU School of Medicine, told CNN.

How long will immunity against the coronavirus last?

Those with Covid-19 antibodies might have immunity against the disease – but it's unclear how strong the immune response might be or for how long.

"If we look at MERS coronavirus, we would see people who would have an antibody response for maybe 10 months, maybe a year," Dr. Maria van Kerkhove, the World Health Organization technical lead for the Covid-19 response, told CNN. "Even there, we didn't know if that conferred protection. So for this particular virus [Covid-19], the answer is we don't know yet, but those studies are being done."

"The immunity afforded by Covid-19 can be thought of as providing bridging protection until we have an effective vaccine available," said Dr. William Schaffner, an infectious disease specialist at Vanderbilt, in an email to CNN.

"Even then, the vaccine may have to be given annually," Schaffner said, pointing out that without concrete data, it's all just speculation.

The answer may also depend on the characteristics of the virus, which we still don't know, said Dr. Bala Hota, a professor of infectious diseases and the associate medical officer for Rush University Medical Center in Chicago.

"Some of the factors are how much variation we can expect to see in the genetic profile of infecting strains of the novel coronavirus ... Since the virus is so new, we don't have the data yet," he said in an email to CNN.

How could antibody tests help end social distancing?

Determining who has some level of immunity through antibody testing could help people feel safer about returning to work.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, whose state has more reported coronavirus cases than any other, is looking to antibody tests for "restarting life" in a city that has been brought to a halt by the virus.

New York has developed its own antibody testing regimen – approved by its department of health for use within the state – and is working with the FDA to bring it to scale, he said last week on social media.

"We cannot restart life as we knew it without testing," Cuomo tweeted.

Former FDA Commissioner Dr. Scott Gottlieb helped devise an action plan on how to reopen the country – and antibody testing plays a crucial role.

The initiative suggests the tests will have "important implications" for people's ability to return to work, especially in health care settings – but it also points out the many unknowns about these tests, including some pretty big ones: What does a positive test actually mean in terms of someone's protection level? And just how accurate are they?

As those issues are addressed and testing capacity expands, the "performance of these tests improve" making it easier for the federal and state governments to establish criteria for testing and to prioritize who gets them, according to the plan. Antibody testing could also provide important data for modeling and predicting future Covid-19 outcomes.

Fauci said at a briefing that antibody tests can reveal how widespread the coronavirus is in the US: "And by the time we have to face what's going to happen with this going back to normality, we will have in place the capability of identifying, isolating, contact tracing so that it never gets out of hand."

COVID-19: Drug Remdesivir Shows Promise, But Do We Know Enough? (Yahoo News/The Quint)

Yahoo News/The Quint [4/14/2020 1:00 AM, Staff, 4742K, Neutral]

The scientific community is united by a common goal today; to search for viable treatment options for COVID-19, the disease that has taken over 1,00,000 lives globally.

While trials and experiments are ongoing, a particular drug has occupied much of the world's attention. Remdesivir, an experimental anti-viral drug that was developed by 'Gilead Sciences' to work against Ebola, has shown promise in fighting the novel coronavirus. In the press briefing by the health ministry on Monday, 13 April, Director-General of the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) also said that the country is awaiting results from the World Health Organisation's 'solidarity' trial to know the medicine's efficacy and decide how to take this forward.

So what do we know about the drug so far and is it too soon to be optimistic? FIT explains.

The Evidence

In an early analysis conducted by researchers on 53 COVID-19 patients who needed respiratory support, it was found that a 'compassionate' use of remdesivir resulted in 'clinical improvement' in almost 68 percent of the cases.

For the study published in the New England Journal of Medicine, the hospitalised patients received up to a 10-day course of remdesivir, consisting of 200 mg administered intravenously on day 1, followed by 100 mg daily for the remaining 9 days of treatment from January 25 to March 7. Of the 53 patients included in this analysis, 40 (75%) received the full 10-day course of the drug, 10 (19%) received 5 to 9 days of treatment, and 3 (6%) fewer than 5 days of treatment.

Study lead author Jonathan Grein, director of hospital epidemiology at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles was quoted in BloombergQuint as saying, "We cannot draw definitive conclusions from these data, but the observations from this group of hospitalised patients who received remdesivir are hopeful."

Almost seven clinical trials are underway to better understand the extent to which the medicine can help. China has initiated two studies in early February for patients with moderate and severe symptoms of the disease. Two studies are being conducted by Gilead in areas with a high prevalence of COVID-19 in the United States, Asia and Europe. A randomised global trial, enrolling around 800 people, has also been initiated by the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease on February 21.

Another large scale global study that will be assessing remdesivir is the World Health Organisation's 'Solidarity' trial, along with the Inserm DisCoVeRy trial that recently began in Europe.

While the findings from larger experiments are awaited, what can we make out of our current knowledge of the drug? Experts from the field answer.

'Promising on Paper, but Can't Be Certain'

Dr. Naga Suresh Veerapu, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Life Sciences at Shiv Nadar University, told FIT that it is too early to call on the effectiveness of remdesivir against SARS-CoV-2 (the official name of the novel coronavirus).

The aforementioned study is funded by Gilead Sciences, the company that developed the investigational medicine and is supplying it for these trials. In an open letter dated 10 April, CEO Daniel O'Day wrote, "Remdesivir is an investigational treatment and has not been approved for use anywhere in the world. In the broader efforts to determine whether it is a safe and effective treatment, we have some way to go."

FIT spoke to Dr Shahid Jameel, a well known Virologist & CEO of Wellcome Trust DBT India Alliance, who explained the way this compound seems to work on other RNA viruses. "It is a nucleotide analogue, which means that it can replace one of the alphabets in the growing RNA chain of the virus. When that happens, the chain terminates."

Dr. Shahid Jameel: "Randomized controlled trial is the gold standard of testing drugs and medicines. But there is no control group in this study. So the trouble is that we don't know for sure if the patients improved because of the drug or because of other maintenance therapy which they were getting. How many of those who did get better after the drug, would have gotten discharged without it too? We have no answer."

"In the limited setting of this small trial, the drug did show positive results. We have to realise that in pandemic situations when people are dying, it may not always be possible to conduct the control trials. Who would we put in a control group? That's an ethical dilemma. But larger trials should definitely be looked at. The drug may not be advisable for people who have mild disease and can be taken care of by supportive therapy. This will all have to be substantiated in bigger studies," he adds.

FIT also spoke to Dr. Om Shrivastav, Director, Infectious Diseases, Jaslok hospital and Research Centre, who said that even though it is a little premature to comment on it, the drug looks promising.

Dr. Om Shrivastav: "On paper, it looks very promising. We will know more only when we start using it. We'll require more concrete evidence, which will then have to be verified in the scientific community."

He points out, however, that a drug that works on people of one country may not necessarily work universally. "We should be hopeful. But there are other drugs that have worked well in some countries and not in India. It is a complex situation."

He adds that other antivirals could also be tested against the disease as our understanding about it evolves. Antiretroviral drugs for HIV, for instance, have had one large trial which did not show any survival benefits. But the lopinavir/ritonavir combination that has been focused on in these studies, is not the newest among these drugs. Hydroxychloroquine (HCQ) may also be a viable option and could provide multiple benefits, but again, more concrete evidence is needed to be certain, he says.

While most results of the ongoing trials on remdesivir are expected by May, O'Day writes in the open letter that 'the timelines are determined by epidemiology and the numerous challenges that come with studying a treatment for a newly emerged disease'.

"As with so much in this pandemic, this is uncharted territory for many of us involved in the process," he says.

What it's like to suffer from the coronavirus's weirdest symptom (Washington Post)

Washington Post [4/14/2020 7:00 AM, Maura Judkis, 12625K, Neutral]

On the first day of spring, Grace Lawlor woke up, brushed her teeth and realized she couldn't taste her toothpaste. Then she took a shower, and realized she couldn't smell her shampoo. It struck her as odd, but nothing to be too worried about; she felt otherwise fine.

"My roommate and I were almost laughing about it," says Lawlor, 25, who lives in Boston. "Like, what the heck is this? It was the craziest thing."

The roommate didn't believe her, so she decided to prove it by putting hot sauce on her tongue.

"It was as if I was drinking milk," she says. "I could literally bite into an onion like it was an apple. And there was just nothing there. It was just absolutely bizarre."

In a consultation with Dr. Google, she learned that a sudden loss of taste and smell can be a sign of the coronavirus. She went to a doctor, but was told she couldn't be tested because, at the time, that clinic was only testing essential workers. Her doctor told her to assume she was positive for covid-19, so she went to home to quarantine. A few days later, one of her roommates was stricken with the same symptoms.

They settled in for a joyless 10 days of putting food in their mouths and then swallowing it — "eating" would be the wrong word for it, because eating is a pleasure. This was mechanical. Lawlor bothered with it less and less.

"There was no point," she says. "Even if I had a craving for something and I had that item

right in front of me, there was no satisfying it because we couldn't taste it."

A similarly disorienting scenario was happening elsewhere in Boston, where Jenny Dwork had come from New York to her mother's house to work remotely for her job overseeing e-commerce for a shoe company. Dwork felt a little under the weather on March 24 — tired, some mild cold symptoms — but was otherwise fine. Until she made herself a shake and realized she could feel "the sensation of the cold, but couldn't actually taste the ingredients." Knowing it might be a sign of covid-19, she went to a drive-through testing center, but was turned away because she had no other symptoms.

Friends encouraged Dwork to try some other strong flavors, like sriracha, and later, at a virtual happy hour, the dares escalated.

"I'm staying at my mom's," she explains, "and there's just like, 30 years' worth of weird alcohol here in her pantry." Dwork had a shot of raspberry vodka "that was probably from my high school days." Then some Southern Comfort. She felt the alcohol burn on her throat but tasted nothing. The next day Dwork felt symptoms indicating another ailment: She had a hangover.

For a pandemic illness that can be ghastly and unpredictable, the weirdest symptom is quite common. A study of European covid-19 patients found that 85.6 percent and 88 percent of patients "reported olfactory and gustatory dysfunctions, respectively." In an Iranian study, 76 percent of covid-19 patients who reported a loss of smell said it had a sudden onset — as if scent could be switched on and off, like a lightbulb.

The technical term for a loss of smell sense is anosmia. Congestion is the most common culprit, but some viruses can interfere with our olfactory processing. With covid-19, researchers are still trying to understand exactly how it happens. Some think that the virus can target the nervous system through the olfactory bulb, the nerves in our nose that help us smell. They're also paying attention to the olfactory epithelium, the skin surrounding those neurons, which have cells similar to the ones the virus targets in the lungs.

Because neurons regenerate, in "roughly seven days, most people have had some start to recovery," says James Denny, executive vice president and CEO of the American Academy of Otolaryngology–Head and Neck Surgery. Researchers say long-term loss is possible, but rare.

The short-term implications are more urgent: Loss of smell or taste could be an indication that someone may be a virus carrier even if they don't have a cough, fever or other typical symptoms. Rep. Joe Cunningham (D-S.C.) reported that he tested positive for covid-19 with only smell- and taste-related symptoms. Rudy Guber, the Utah Jazz player who was the first in the NBA to test positive, says he lost his senses, too. Other celebrities, including former "Bachelor" star Colton Underwood, "Lost" actor Daniel Dae Kim and Broadway star Aaron Tveit have reported similar symptoms. One quarter of people who reported the symptom said it was the only one they experienced.

Which puts the Smell and Taste Victims in the deeply strange position of watching the news in horror, hearing tales of patients dying in hospitals and knowing the same virus was in them, too — with effects that are somehow far milder, yet freaky.

"It scared the hell out of me," says Vallery Lomas, a 34-year-old champion baker, who feared she would never get her senses back. "I could smell nothing for probably five days."

That's an occupational hazard for Lomas, because she was presumed positive for covid-19 in the midst of writing a cookbook. Smell and taste are closely related, and culinary professionals rely on their senses to fine-tune recipes. Lomas had to ask her publisher for an extension, and, instead of smelling the warm hug of a freshly baked cake, she spent a week sniffing a bottle of gross-smelling cough syrup, hoping a whiff would return.

Her sense of smell is back, but it's not 100 percent. "I started to freak out this morning," she says, when she was testing a recipe and noticed a lack of detail in her perception. "Even though I could taste those flavors, I still can't really smell and really taste to the level of knowing, is this too sweet? Does this need more cinnamon? Is this other flavor overpowering? Is it balanced? I have no idea."

Because smell and taste are intertwined, some people who think they have lost both senses may have only lost their sense of smell. "What happens with loss of the sense of smell is you lose flavor," but not taste, says Jo Shapiro, associate professor of otolaryngology at Harvard Medical School. (Yep, there's a difference: Taste is the basic modalities of sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami, but flavor is more precise. Plug your nose and try a strawberry and a cherry gummy bear: You'll be able to tell that both are sweet, but you won't be able to distinguish between the flavors.)

Shapiro knows from personal experience. She was presumed to have contracted covid-19 — she was denied a test because it was early in the pandemic and she had not been abroad — when she traveled to a conference. She experienced the full range of symptoms (fever, chills, fatigue, cough) and realized one morning, after her husband made her breakfast, that she could no longer smell anything.

"I said, 'I hate to criticize your cooking, but I feel like you've dumped an entire container of salt on these eggs,'" Shapiro says. He hadn't: The salt her husband had put on the eggs was the only component of the dish she could taste. The lightbulb went on: "I was like, oh, my God, I have lost my sense of smell." Given Shapiro's specialty, "It was kind of ironic," she says. She's still waiting for it to come back.

Other patients can also lose their sense of taste entirely, like onion-eater Lawlor, who could taste nothing at all. Thomas Finger is a professor of cellular and structural biology specializing in taste at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. Based on accounts he's collected from around the world, "The very peculiar thing about the covid taste loss is that it may preferentially affect sweet," he says, meaning for some people, that's the first taste to go — but it remains unknown why tastes would not be impacted equally.

The research continues — not just in the medical community, but in households where likely covid-19 sufferers, blessed with cases that do not require hospitalization, have been conducting their own experiments.

"I read somewhere that honey and cinnamon was something to try," says Mandy Hardy, 42,

who lives in Brooklyn and lost both of her senses last week. "I'm putting that in my tea and it's not working. Nothing's working," she says. Every day, she takes a deep hit from her Vicks VapoInhaler in the hope that it will jump-start her nose. (She now says her smell sense is about 50 percent back-to-normal.)

Sue Kinnamon, a professor of otolaryngology also at Colorado-Anschutz, says people who are afflicted can try "smell training" — exposing themselves to strong scents like mustard, something they are probably doing anyway — though she cautions there is no evidence that it is effective in bringing back a covid-based loss of smell.

Kevin Knocke, 33, recently took up cooking as a hobby. When the pandemic struck, he stocked his Manhattan pantry with choice ingredients in anticipation of a long shelter-in-place. He imagined comforting himself with homemade pizza and takeout meals from his favorite New York restaurants. "I was so looking forward to it," he says. "It was going to be so much fun."

Then he lost his senses of smell and taste. He felt okay otherwise. And the anosmia actually had its advantages.

"I ended up cleaning all my kid's poop for the next two weeks and changing diapers," he says. "I was an inch away from it, could not smell a thing. And this kid can produce a stench."

Those who lose their sense of smell or taste need not resign themselves to a lifetime of joyless eating. The AAO-HNS found that the average length of time patients experience those symptoms was seven days, with 85 percent of patients regaining their senses within 10 days.

When that first whiff returns — and with it, some semblance of flavor — it's off to the pantry for a true bacchanal of all the foods that anosmic sufferers had been missing.

"I just kept thinking, I'm really going to appreciate every single thing that I eat and not just shovel stuff into my face," says Dwork, who began to regain her senses with a cup of morning coffee. Hardy longs for pizza. Knocke delayed his birthday celebration until he could taste takeout once more.

As for Lomas, she's putting the finishing touches on her cookbook, tentatively titled "Life is What You Bake It."

"It's about making the best out of tough circumstances," she says, and she's had a few more of those in the past month. Some of the intro texts for her recipes "now include discussion of pandemic survival."

ISIS

[Switzerland] Swiss prosecutors indict alleged IS member arrested in 2017 (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 7:55 AM, Staff, Neutral]

An Iraqi citizen suspected of being a "high-ranking" member of the Islamic State group has

been indicted for allegedly violating a Swiss ban on extremist groups and accused of plotting attacks in Switzerland and Lebanon, federal prosecutors said Tuesday..

The Swiss attorney general's office said the suspect allegedly served as a recruiter, trafficker and "cash-provider" for IS. It did not name him, but said he has been in custody since his arrest in May 2017.

The man is accused of attempting to incite a fellow IS member the month before to carry out a suicide attack in Lebanon that "was prevented in time," the attorney general's office said.

He also allegedly received instructions to carry out an attack in Switzerland, sent financial support to the Islamic State group, and "instructed an IS member living in Syria to set up IS sleeper cells," the attorney general's office said. An attack in Switzerland was never imminent, the office said.

The indictment charges him with violating the ban on extremist groups, membership in IS as a criminal enterprise, and producing and stockpiling images of violent acts.

Prosecutors further accused the indicted man of providing false information about his financial situation more than a dozen times, enabling him to receive social assistance benefits in Switzerland "to which he was not entitled," the office said.

Switzerland largely avoided the wave of deadly terror attacks that targeted cities in Europe and the Middle East in the last decade. Federal police have broadened their authority to monitor communications and potential suspects for possible threats.

Near East & North Africa

Israeli spy agency deprioritizes Iran as national security threat during coronavirus pandemic (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [4/14/2020 11:23 AM, Caitlin Yilek, Neutral]

Iran has been so hard hit by the coronavirus crisis that Israel's spy agency does not currently see the country as an immediate national security threat.

Sources knowledgeable about Mossad's operations told the New York Times that the spy agency has shifted its focus from the threat Iran poses to the country to combating the health emergency.

The coronavirus spread to the top levels of government in Iran, with at least seven officials becoming infected in February. Iran has more than 74,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus and 4,600 deaths as of Tuesday morning, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

Meanwhile, Mossad has been working to acquire medical supplies from abroad for the Israeli health system. Since March, Yossi Cohen, the director of Mossad, has been leading a control center to handle the distribution of medical supplies across the country.

In the last month, the spy agency acquired 100,000 coronavirus testing kits, 1.5 million

surgical masks, tens of thousands of N95 masks, and other protective equipment from abroad, as well as technology that has allowed Israeli laboratories to conduct coronavirus tests.

It's unclear where the imported medical supplies have come from. Non-Israeli media reports have said some of the items have come from Arab nations that have no official diplomatic relations with Israel.

Gulf's migrant workers left stranded and struggling by coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 9:54 AM, Alexander Cornwell, 5304K, Negative]

Charity workers are scouring the United Arab Emirates for empty buildings and Bahrain is repurposing closed schools to rehouse low income labourers from overcrowded accommodation, a hotspot for the coronavirus outbreak in the Gulf.

The challenge is not limited to the region's congested labour camps, where one room with bunk beds can sleep about a dozen workers, the virus has also spread in densely populated commercial districts where many expatriates share housing to save on rent. Many have lost jobs and are struggling.

Indian engineer Mohamed Aslam shares a three-bedroom apartment in the UAE capital Abu Dhabi with 14 other people. Health authorities put the building under quarantine after some residents tested positive for the virus.

"The charities are covering the food: dinner, lunch, breakfast," he told Reuters. "Praise be to God, because of charity we are surviving."

Aslam is among millions of foreign workers, many from Asia, who form the backbone of Gulf economies and work in the construction, hospitality, retail, transport and services sectors, many of which have been disrupted by the outbreak.

Most of the six Gulf Arab states have taken measures to curb the spread of infection, initially linked to travel, by suspending passenger flights, closing most public venues and imposing curfews. But the number of cases has steadily risen to surpass 16,500 with 111 deaths.

CONTAINMENT

Most Gulf states have said they face a challenge with migrant workers. Some, including the UAE's Dubai emirate, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait, have locked down areas with a large population of low wage workers. All have stepped up testing.

In Saudi Arabia, a video widely circulated on social media showed at least 15 foreign workers being ushered out of one room with bunk beds to be tested for the virus. A Saudi official confirmed the authenticity of the video.

Gulf governments said they are sterilising labour camps as part of disinfection drives. Bahrain said it would use schools to separate workers. Two charity groups in the UAE said

they were looking for empty buildings where workers could isolate.

"Many people are infected and are staying with other people," Krishna Kumar, president of UAE-based Kerala Social Centre said. "We are trying to isolate them."

Three doctors in the UAE, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said overcrowding is one of the biggest factors for the surge in cases. "We have seen clustered outbreaks in the labour camps," one of them said.

Authorities in the UAE, which has the second largest number of coronavirus cases after much larger neighbour Saudi Arabia, did not respond to requests for comment.

Several Gulf Arab states have allowed outbound flights for expatriates who have lost jobs or been put on leave, but some countries say they are not prepared to take them back.

DESTITUTE

In the UAE, diplomats and four charities said they were delivering thousands of meals, medicine and other essentials each day to people who had become destitute.

Indian national Abdulla, who declined to give his last name, said he had not worked at his Abu Dhabi retail job for two weeks and was relying on charity. A Ugandan office assistant living in a labour camp in Dubai's Jebel Ali, who declined to be named, said he had not been paid in weeks.

The UAE has said it would review labour ties with states refusing to repatriate citizens after the ambassadors of India and Pakistan said their countries were not yet ready to do so.

"We're aware of all of those who have been laid off and their plight," Sayed Zulfiqar Bukhari, special assistant to Pakistan's prime minister, told Reuters in Islamabad.

"We're just waiting to create the right mechanism so that we don't overburden the system of taking people in here," he said, adding airlines needed to be equipped for safety.

Bangladesh Expatriate Welfare and Overseas Employment Minister Imran Ahmed said Dhaka was working to alleviate citizens' hardships, including sending money to foreign missions "so that migrants in trouble can be taken care of."

A Philippines official said citizens overseas can qualify for a government stipend of \$200.

Valerie, a Filipina receptionist in Dubai who shares a one-room studio with five others, had her wages cut and is digging into savings to support her parents and six siblings back home.

"I'm worried about my family if I lose my job," she said, adding that she worries about going out to buy groceries. "It's scary. We don't know if we will bring back the virus with us."

Armed men seize, release tanker off Iran by Strait of Hormuz (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 4:20 PM, Jon Gambrell, Neutral]

Armed men boarded a Hong Kong-flagged tanker ship Tuesday off the coast of Iran near the crucial Strait of Hormuz, holding the ship for a short time before releasing it amid heightened tensions between Tehran and the U.S., authorities said.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the seizure, though suspicion fell on Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard. Iranian officials and state media did not immediately acknowledge the incident and the U.S. Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet did not respond to a request for comment.

The incident comes after a private maritime intelligence firm warned of suspicious incidents in recent days near the strait, through which a fifth of all oil is traded. Oil tankers previously have been a target during the tensions.

The incident happened near Iran's Ras al-Kuh coast. The United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations organization said in an alert that the vessel "had been boarded by armed men while at anchor."

"All vessels in the vicinity are to stay vigilant and to report any incidents," the warning said, urging ships to "exercise caution."

The U.K. organization later said the ship had been released and was underway under its captain's control, without elaborating.

Dryad Global, the private maritime intelligence firm that issued the first warnings about suspicious incidents, identified the ship as the Hong Kong-flagged SC Taipei bound for Saudi Arabia. It said the 22 crew members aboard were Chinese. It did not say how it knew the information.

The SC Taipei's satellite tracking beacon showed it off the coast of Iran in the general vicinity of the warning, according to data from the website MarineTraffic.com.

The ship's owners could not be immediately reached, though a United Nations database listed a mail-forwarding address for the owners associated with Shanghai-based Aoxing Ship Management. In March, the U.S. State Department sanctioned Aoxing Ship Management for "knowingly engaging in a significant transaction for the purchase, acquisition, sale, transport or marketing of petrochemical products from Iran" despite American sanctions.

That area of Iran is near the country's restive Sistan and Baluchistan province, where Islamic militant attacks have happened in the past. However, they are not known to have previously attacked shipping. The ship's tracking data suggested the armed men took the vessel to Bandar Jask, which the Guard did last year when it took custody of crew members from a Norwegian-owned oil tanker hit by an explosion the U.S. blamed on an Iranian mine.

The quick release of the ship suggests Iran realized only after the fact it had seized a Chinese vessel, rather than a Western one as in previous incidents. Iran has increasingly relied on China amid U.S. sanctions over its nuclear program.

"At a time when China still buys Iranian oil, and Iran has few international friends, such a move would be highly irregular and would not further Iran's interests," Dryad Global said.

Even as both face the same invisible enemy in the coronavirus pandemic, Iran and the United States remain locked in retaliatory pressure campaigns that now view the outbreak as just the latest battleground.

Online video and Iranian media reports suggest Iran has deployed Fajr-5 missile batteries on beaches along the Strait of Hormuz.

Dryad Global previously reported maritime incidents in and around the strait. On March 27, two boats with a raised ladder approached a U.S.-flagged container ship, while Revolutionary Guard vessels approached a ship on April 2, the firm said.

"The detention of a vessel in the Strait of Hormuz would fit comfortably within previous Iranian intent and capability ... and would provide an opportune 'opening salvo' in an Iranian attempt to release the pressures the country currently faces," Dryad said Tuesday night.

Ship boarded by armed men in Gulf of Oman is released: UKMTO (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:27 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Armed men boarded a vessel at anchor in the Gulf of Oman on Tuesday but the ship was later released, the United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations (UKMTO) said.

"Vessel and crew are safe," it said in an updated advisory, urging all vessels in the vicinity to remain vigilant.

UKMTO had earlier said the vessel had been at anchor around three nautical miles (nm) off Ras Al Kuh.

Maritime security firm Dryad Global separately tweeted that a Hong Kong-flagged vessel had been released. It earlier said the ship had been at anchor waiting to approach Jubail in Saudi Arabia.

"At 12:48 UTC the vessel was shown to be underway towards the Iranian coastline. At 14:28UTC the vessel was shown to be stationary at a position 4nm off Mogh-e Qanbareh-ye Kuh Mobarak," Dryad's report said.

It said the vessel was "highly likely to be the vessel of concern," but added that it was "unclear whether the vessel is in distress or is being assisted by Iran in some way."

[Egypt] Egyptian policeman killed in gun battle with suspected militants: state TV (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 3:15 PM, Staff, Negative]

An Egyptian policeman was killed on Tuesday in an exchange of gunfire with suspected militants near the centre of the capital Cairo, state television said.

Two private television stations broadcast what they called footage of the shooting, which Reuters was not immediately able to verify. The channels and two security sources, who

spoke on condition of anonymity, said that the gunmen were killed.

"Initial investigations show that the suspects were planning to carry out terrorist acts," said one of the security sources.

Explosives and weapons were found with the suspects, the security source added.

The exchange took place in the al-Amiyira district, the stations said, asking residents to stay indoors. The Interior Ministry could not be reached for comment, and no more information was immediately available.

[Iran] Iran death toll from coronavirus outbreak reaches 4,683: health ministry spokesman (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 6:10 AM, Staff, Negative]

Iran's death toll from the new coronavirus outbreak in the country has reached 4683, Health Ministry spokesman Kianush Jahanpur said in a statement on state TV.

Ninety-eight people have died in the past 24 hours, he said.

The Islamic Republic is the Middle Eastern country hardest hit by the new coronavirus and currently has 74,877 infected people, according to Jahanpur.

[Iraq] Stigma Hampers Iraqi Efforts to Fight the Coronavirus (New York Times)

New York Times [4/14/2020 1:00 AM, Alissa J. Rubin, 23673K, Negative]

The doctor paused before banging on the front gate, gesturing to his companions who were wearing full hazmat suits, masks, goggles and gloves to stand back so they would not be the first thing the home's occupants saw.

"This is very sensitive, very difficult for our society," said Dr. Wissam Cona, who works with the provincial Health Department in the city of Najaf in southern Iraq. He now spends his days checking on families recently returned from Iran, which has suffered one of the world's most severe outbreaks of the coronavirus.

He said that the father of the family at this home had begged him not to come with a retinue of health workers, saying, "Please don't park in front of our house. I feel ashamed in front of the neighbors. This is so difficult for my reputation."

For Iraq, one of the biggest obstacles for public health officials fighting the coronavirus is the stigma associated with illness and quarantine. It runs so deep that people avoid being tested, prevent family members who want tests from having them and delay seeking medical help until they are catastrophically ill.

The aversion to quarantine and the reluctance to admit illness may help explain why the number of confirmed cases in Iraq is relatively low, several Iraqi doctors said. A country of more than 38 million people, Iraq had recorded only 1,352 confirmed Covid-19 cases as of Monday.

By contrast, in neighboring Iran, with roughly twice Iraq's population, the official count

exceeds 71,000. Neighboring Saudi Arabia, which has a smaller population than Iraq's, has more than three times as many confirmed cases.

"It is true we have cases that are hidden, and that is because people don't want to come forward and they are afraid of the quarantine and isolation," said Dr. Hazim al-Jumaili, a deputy health minister who is guiding the country's response to the coronavirus.

The stigma attached to illness and quarantine in Iraq and some other Middle Eastern countries largely reflects cultural and religious beliefs. But it also involves an ingrained distrust of the government, historical experience and the fear that given the ragged state of Iraq's health care system, going to the hospital could be fatal.

A recent video that was widely shared showed women patients in quarantine in a Basra hospital lying near each other without masks, coughing and calling for help as one of them died.

"Some believe the virus means that God is displeased with them, or maybe it is a punishment for a sin so they don't want others to see that they are sick," said Dr. Emad Abdul Razzak, a consultant psychiatrist at Iraq's Health Ministry.

"For many people it is a shame for a female to say she has this illness or any illness, even cancer or mental illness, and many people have no trust in the health system," he said.

So strong are the stigma and the aura of sinfulness surrounding the virus that families of those who have died of other causes oppose their loved ones' bodies being in the same morgue or even graveyard as those who have died of the virus.

In contrast to many Western countries, where celebrities have acknowledged having the disease, and even neighboring Iran, where senior political figures announced they were ill with the virus, there is only one instance in Iraq of a politician or prominent figure admitting to being infected.

Some of the fear surrounding the disease stems from the Muslim rituals surrounding death, said Sherine Hamdy, a professor of medical anthropology at the University of California at Irvine who has worked extensively in Middle Eastern communities.

"You don't want to be forced into quarantine, you don't want to be forced into the hospital because those social, family bonds are very strong," she said. "You want to die within the family.

"The worst thing in the world isn't to die, but it's to die away from your family and your community and to have no control over what happens to your body."

The Islamic tradition requires swift burial, preferably within 24 hours of death. The longer the delay, the more people fear for the soul of the deceased.

Adding to the problems is the tradition of washing the bodies of people who have just died, which the authorities fear could spread the virus.

"The coronavirus and pandemics overall cause disruptions of social and religious practices, and it's not easy to tell people that the coronavirus is stronger than God," said Omar Dewachi, a professor of medical anthropology at Rutgers University, who was born and brought up in Iraq.

Quarantining those who are infected imposes a double humiliation in many Iraqi communities. First, it assures that everyone in the neighborhood will learn about the illness. Second, if the victim is an adult male, it signifies that he is no longer able to protect his wife, his children or in the case of an elder brother, his younger siblings, and so has fallen short of fulfilling his role in the family.

More traditional families sometimes deny their female relatives a coronavirus test for fear that if she tests positive she will be removed from the fortress of her family and possibly be sexually compromised.

"In this society, it is not OK for a female to be apart from the family," said Dr. Mona al-Khafaji, a radiologist in private practice in Baghdad.

She mentioned the case of a 32-year-old female patient with fibrosis, which heightens her vulnerability to the coronavirus, who was having trouble breathing. Dr. al-Khafaji recommended the woman go for a Covid-19 test, but her father and brothers said no, and refused to budge even when her condition worsened.

Iraq is not the only Middle Eastern country struggling with the stigma surrounding the virus.

Egyptians' aversion to quarantines date to at least the early 20th century, when cholera and tuberculosis took turns ravaging the country. Some who were quarantined did not survive.

Similar fears have emerged in Afghanistan, where people have attacked health workers and crawled out of hospital windows to escape quarantines. One day last month, nearly 40 patients attacked health care workers at a hospital in Herat Province and escaped quarantine there.

Lately, in an effort to overcome the stigma and put together an accurate picture of the scope of the epidemic, the Iraqi Health Ministry has resorted to random testing. But this program has brought a new set of troubles.

For one thing, some healthy people could be falsely stigmatized. And to display its resolve, the government has assigned armed national security personnel to accompany health workers. Given Iraq's violent past, the presence of security forces is so unnerving it makes some people hide in their homes.

"It is so difficult in this culture because everything we do is a problem," said Dr. Mohammed Waheeb, a senior pulmonologist at Baghdad Medical City. "If we send an ambulance to pick up the patient, then people are upset because the neighbors will see it."

"The same happens or worse if we send the national security," he added. "Then people feel it is like under Saddam," he said, referring to Iraq's former strongman president, Saddam Hussein.

The Health Ministry says the use of security personnel is the only way to surmount the difficulties of persuading people to submit to quarantine. Doctors, however, say the security details are needlessly off-putting, at least when health teams are merely out collecting samples.

The second day of random testing in Sadr City, a sprawling, impoverished neighborhood in eastern Baghdad, illustrated the recurring problems. In this part of the capital, houses are patched heaps of corrugated metal and brick, with garbage strewn on streets that are often unpaved.

An old woman, wearing a long black abaya, opened her corrugated metal gate a crack and squinted into the brilliant noonday sun to see who had knocked. Looking down the street she saw more than 40 people — in surgical gowns and masks or full hazmat suits, accompanied by two or three television cameras, community police officers, young militia members from the organization of the nationalist cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and a few local sheikhs.

She slammed the gate closed.

People in Sadr City are skeptical of the Health Ministry, said Dr. Bassim Aboud, who oversees the area for the ministry, as he knocked futilely at the woman's gate.

"If people think I am with the government, they will shut the door," he said. "But if they see me as a doctor, they come to me for help. "

[Israel] Israeli PM and rival look to finalize emergency unity deal (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 9:24 AM, Aron Heller, Neutral]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his chief rival met Tuesday in an effort to finalize an agreement on an emergency government that would tackle the coronavirus threat and prevent another costly and divisive election.

The meeting between Netanyahu and former military chief Benny Gantz followed an overnight session in which the two asked for, and received, a deadline extension from President Reuven Rivlin to try to complete the talks.

Both Netanyahu and Gantz reported "significant progress" in their negotiations. Rivlin, whose duties include overseeing coalition negotiations, said he was convinced they were close and gave them two more days to wrap up a deal, till midnight Wednesday.

The two sides later released a statement saying the talks would resume Wednesday evening, after the Passover holiday.

Should they fail, the clock will start ticking toward the dissolution of parliament and a possible, yet still seemingly improbable, fourth election in just over a year.

Last month's election, just like the previous two, ended with no clear winner. But with a slight majority of lawmakers, Gantz got the first shot at building a coalition and appeared

poised to move forward with legislation that would have disqualified the indicted Netanyahu from serving as prime minister in the future. Gantz repeatedly vowed not to sit in government with Netanyahu because of the criminal corruption charges against the prime minister.

But with the virus crisis worsening, and his own shaky alliance fraying, Gantz made an about-face late last month and accepted an offer from Netanyahu to pursue a joint government to deal with the pandemic. The move drew heavy criticism from Gantz's supporters and caused his Blue and White alliance to crumble, leaving him with a faction of only about half its original size.

Israel has reported over 11,800 cases and at least 117 deaths from the outbreak, which has paralyzed the economy, shuttered Israelis in their homes and driven unemployment to record highs.

Netanyahu and Gantz appeared close to a rotation deal in which each would serve terms as prime minister. But last week negotiations stalled, reportedly over a demand by Netanyahu to have more influence over judicial appointments.

Netanyahu is awaiting trial on charges of bribery, breach of trust and fraud. He has denied any wrongdoing and portrays himself as a victim of a media and judicial witch hunt.

In a nationally televised address late Monday before his initial deadline ran out, Gantz called on Netanyahu to close the deal.

"This is our moment of truth. It's either an emergency national government or, heaven forbid, expensive and unnecessary fourth elections during a crisis," he said. "History will not forgive either of us if we run away."

Netanyahu tweeted back: "Benny, I'm waiting for you at the prime minister's residence in Jerusalem," which set off the last-minute talks.

After three nasty campaigns, plenty of distrust and bad blood remains. Despite his calls for unity, Netanyahu may actually be angling for another election to capitalize on what has generally been regarded as his capable handling of the coronavirus crisis. Despite the heavy cost, Israel appears to be weathering the crisis better than many countries, and Netanyahu has projected himself as the responsible elder statesman to navigate the country through the storm.

A poll published late Monday on Channel 12 TV showed Netanyahu's Likud surging in support and easily securing him re-election.

The longtime Israeli leader, who currently enjoys the backing of 59 lawmakers, could also try to lure a pair of defectors to deliver him a majority in the 120-seat Knesset and thus avert elections.

With the country led by a caretaker government and hobbled by legislative paralysis since the first election was called in late 2018, a fourth vote would extend the political crisis amid

a global pandemic. It's unclear how an election could take place with present-day stay-at-home orders.

[Israel] Israel's Netanyahu, Gantz say near unity deal to end political deadlock (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:23 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and political rival Benny Gantz were nearing a deal on Tuesday to form a national emergency government to battle the coronavirus crisis and end the country's unprecedented political deadlock.

Gantz's 28-day mandate to put together a ruling coalition after last month's inconclusive election was due to expire at midnight, but President Reuven Rivlin, who is overseeing the coalition talks, extended it for two days.

Rivlin did so, his office said, "on the understanding that they are very close to reaching an agreement."

Gantz and Netanyahu met overnight in an effort to settle their differences, after which the sides said they had made "significant progress". A second meeting on Tuesday ended with a joint statement saying the negotiating teams would resume talks on Wednesday evening, hours before the new deadline.

The impasse, after national elections in April and September 2019 and again in March, raised the prospect of a fourth ballot, complicating any plans for economic recovery once the coronavirus outbreak eases.

During the past year of stalemate, Israel has been run by a caretaker government under the leadership of Netanyahu, who is under criminal indictment on corruption charges which he denies.

Without a deal between the right-wing Netanyahu and centre-left Gantz, it will be up to parliament to pick a candidate who would then have 14 days to form a government. Failure to do so would automatically trigger a snap election.

Israeli media reports said the deal being formulated would see Netanyahu, in power consecutively for the past 11 years, serving as prime minister for another 18 months after which Gantz, a former armed forces chief, would take over.

"Netanyahu, this is our moment of truth. It's either a national emergency government or, God forbid, a fourth election which would be expensive and, in this crisis period, gratuitous," Gantz said on Monday in broadcast remarks.

The enormity of the coronavirus crisis, Gantz said, had led him to break his campaign promise not to sit in a government led by a prime minister facing criminal charges.

Israel has reported almost 12,000 COVID-19 cases and 117 deaths. Restrictions to stem coronavirus transmission have confined most Israelis to their homes, forcing many businesses to close and sending unemployment soaring to more than 25%.

Netanyahu said on Monday his cabinet could formulate an "exit strategy" as soon as this weekend, though he cautioned restrictions on the economy and education would be relaxed gradually and that there would be no full return to routine before a coronavirus vaccine is discovered.

[Israel] Steepest Deflation Awaits Israel With Rate Already Stuck at Zero (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [4/14/2020 11:35 AM, Ivan Levingston, Neutral]

The economic wreckage of the coronavirus pandemic in Israel may include a bout of deflation, according to the International Monetary Fund.

Israel, which hasn't experienced a sustained period of price declines since 2016, may see a drop of 1.9% in consumer costs this year, the steepest among all forecasts published Tuesday in the IMF's updated economic outlook. With the key interest rate at 0.1% after a recent cut, the outlook sets out the challenges likely to face Israel once it's able to move past the worst of the outbreak.

"If there continues to be negative inflation, it could worsen the crisis and make it harder to exit," said Rafi Gozlan, chief economist for Israel Brokerage and Investments Ltd. in Tel Aviv. The central bank could pump more credit to households in such a scenario, but fiscal tools would also be needed to spur demand since rates are already so low, Gozlan said.

Israel struggled with moribund inflation long before the outbreak shuttered the economy, and central bankers are now warning that plummeting demand will further drag down consumer prices. Unemployment has surged during the pandemic – from below 4% to more than 25% – and hundreds of thousands could still remain jobless at year's end. Israel's stimulus effort has so far ranged from sovereign bond purchases by the central bank to a fiscal package aimed at helping businesses and employees contend with the fallout.

In March, prices didn't rise in Israel from a year earlier for the first time since inflation was last below zero almost three years ago. The Bank of Israel's latest research staff forecast is for consumer prices to drop 0.8% this year before rising 0.9% in 2021 – still below the 1% to 3% target range.

[Israel] Israeli police use drones to check in on virus patients (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 3:23 PM, Joseph Krauss, Neutral]

The drone glides up toward a high-rise until it reaches an apartment window where a woman waves from inside, proving to police that she is self-isolating after testing positive for the coronavirus.

Israeli police are deploying drones as part of efforts to stem the outbreak, allowing officers to keep a safe distance from infected people. Israel has also approved the use of phone-spying technology that was previously used against Palestinian militants.

Israel and other countries have rapidly come to see such methods as crucial tools to prevent the spread of the virus, which has infected nearly 2 million people worldwide, killed more than 120,000 and prompted economically devastating lockdowns.

But the increasing use of such technology against civilians has raised privacy concerns and difficult questions about how far authorities can or should go to curb the pandemic.

The drone used outside the apartment complex in the Tel Aviv area was deployed by police checking in on patients who have been ordered to self-isolate.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld says police are using drones across the country to "find and confirm that people with the coronavirus are in isolation" in accordance with Health Ministry regulations.

"Units on the ground are using drones in high-story buildings and making visual confirmation," he said.

The virus causes mild to moderate flu-like symptoms in most patients, who recover within a few weeks. But it is highly contagious and can cause severe illness or death, particularly in older people or those with underlying health problems.

Israel has reported more than 11,800 cases and at least 117 deaths. Like many other countries, it has closed down schools and businesses and imposed strict stay-at-home orders. Those who test positive for the new coronavirus are required to isolate themselves, and anyone flouting regulations face fines or even arrest.

Police have used drones to enforce lockdowns in other countries, including Italy, France, Spain and China. They have been used to enforce social distancing in New York City and New Jersey. India has also used drones to monitor its lockdown.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates, police have used drones to order people to stay inside. In Dubai, which is part of the UAE, they have been used to spray disinfectant on streets.

In Saudi Arabia, drones have reportedly been used in some public places to check people's temperatures.

Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, an expert on technology and privacy laws at the Israel Democracy Institute, says it would be a violation of constitutional rights if the police used drones to look into private homes. Israeli security forces are also barred from using facial recognition technology, except to surveil Palestinians in the occupied territories.

She's alarmed by the speed at which authorities and technology companies have embraced new surveillance tactics in response to the pandemic. She says her "biggest fear" is that such technologies are here to stay.

"First of all, they are here to stay because the corona is here to stay," at least for another year, though it may come and go, she said. "After the corona is gone, we're going to get used to the fact we're using those technologies."

[Libya] Libya Broadens Military Offensive, Dismissing Talks With Haftar (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 5:02 AM, Samer Al-Atrush, Neutral]

Libya's United Nations-backed government is accelerating its campaign to reclaim territory lost to Khalifa Haftar after it seized key towns on Monday, the interior minister said, dismissing negotiations with the rival commander to end the civil war amid fears the coronavirus was taking hold in the country.

"We plan to take back all the areas that were under the Government of National Accord," Fathi Bashagha, security chief for the government in Tripoli, said in an interview hours after his forces announced the capture of areas west of the capital that Haftar had taken a year ago.

Bashagha called on foreign backers to reconsider their support for the eastern-based strongman, who in April last year launched an offensive to capture the capital, setting off a regional proxy war that now pits Turkey against the United Arab Emirates and Egypt.

From his stronghold, Haftar had extended his grip over territory in the country's south before moving on Tripoli. His forces control the OPEC member's oil fields, and the commander allowed loyalists to shut down production in January as he came under pressure to agree to a diplomatic deal to end the war.

"There can be no complete military victory in Libya, but there's no political solution with Haftar," Bashagha said. "We call on all countries supporting this failed dictatorial policy to reconsider."

The UN envoy to Libya, Stephanie Williams, warned over the weekend that the escalation in fighting was imposing further strains on the country's already decimated health infrastructure, after one of Tripoli's largest hospitals shut following three days of shelling. The country has seen successive conflicts since the 2011 NATO-backed ouster of Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

The rival sides agreed a provisional truce in February after world leaders met in Berlin to pledge an end to foreign intervention in the North African state. Instead there's been further fighting in a war that over recent months has become increasingly complex.

Turkey dispatched drones, naval frigates and Syrian fighters in support of the Tripoli-based government of Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj to counter U.A.E military aid for Haftar, who is allied with the eastern-based parliament and backed by Russian and Sudanese mercenaries. The fighting has mostly centered around the southern suburbs of Tripoli, a city of two million people that's seen regular shelling.

Bashagha accused Haftar's Libyan National Army of exploiting the pandemic, which has preoccupied world powers and placed a peace deal in Libya even further down on their list of priorities. Libya has reported 26 coronavirus infections so far.

[Libya] Haftar forces pound Libya capital after losing towns (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/14/2020 3:43 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

The forces of Libyan military strongman Khalifa Haftar rained rockets on the capital Tripoli early Tuesday after being ousted by government loyalists from a string of towns to its west.

Salvo after salvo of rockets caused loud explosions throughout the night, AFP correspondents reported.

Several homes were hit around Mitiga airbase in the eastern suburbs, the capital's sole if intermittently functioning airport.

There was no immediate word on any casualties.

The UN-recognised Government of National Unity, which has been battling an offensive against the capital for just over a year, accused Haftar's forces of taking revenge against Tripoli's civilian population following their losses on Monday.

"The criminal militia and mercenaries have taken out their anger on residential neighbourhoods of Tripoli to avenge their defeat, firing dozens of rockets and missiles on the capital indiscriminately," spokesman Mohamad Gnounou said.

On Monday, the unity government recaptured the coastal cities of Sorman and Sabratha and several inland towns.

Sorman and Sabratha lie respectively 60 and 70 kilometres (40 and 45 miles) west of Tripoli, around half-way to the Tunisian border, and their loss is a major blow to Haftar's forces.

Libya has suffered almost a decade of conflict since longtime dictator Moamer Kadhafi was toppled and killed in a 2011 uprising backed by several Western powers.

The UN says hundreds of people have been killed and more than 200,000 displaced since Haftar launched his battle for Tripoli which quickly ground to a bloody stalemate.

[Saudi Arabia] Saudi Arabia Races to Contain Epidemic in Islam's Holiest City (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 1:47 AM, Vivian Nereim, 6400K, Neutral]

Saudi authorities are racing to contain an outbreak of coronavirus in the Islamic holy city of Mecca, where crowded slums and labor camps have accelerated the spread even with much of the country under a 24-hour curfew.

The total number of coronavirus cases reported in Mecca, home to 2 million people, reached 1,050 on Monday compared to 1,422 in the capital of Riyadh, a city more than three times the size. Mecca's large number of undocumented immigrants and cramped housing for migrant workers have made it more difficult to slow the infection rate.

In late March, after five Mecca-based employees of Saudi Binladin Group, one of the kingdom's biggest construction companies tested positive, authorities locked down housing for 8,000 laborers and suspended work on the expansion of the grand mosque, Islam's holiest site, according to a document seen by Bloomberg. Some workers were placed in hotel quarantine, the document showed. The company did not respond to a request for comment. It was unclear if the camp remained in lockdown.

Shielding Mecca from a pandemic that's overwhelmed countries like Italy and the United States is crucial for Saudi Arabia. That's partly because of the city's significance to the world's Muslims, but also because the royal family grounds its rule in guardianship of the birthplace of Islam. Millions of Muslim pilgrims visit Mecca each year; King Salman's official title is "custodian of the two holy mosques."

The government is conscious that the virus sweeping Mecca would "call into question its responsibility in the protection of those spaces, which is part of the legitimacy of the country itself," said Yasmine Farouk, a visiting fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "This is sensitive."

Role of foreigners

Overall, Saudi Arabia has reported one of the lowest rates of infection in the region, with around 5,000 cases in a population of over 30 million. Mecca was one of the first Saudi cities to be placed under a full-day curfew, and authorities took unprecedented precautions, suspending religious tourism in February and closing mosques across the country in March.

The outbreak underlines a nationwide issue of soaring cases among foreign residents. Foreigners make up about a third of the Saudi population but account for 70% to 80% of new cases recently, according to the health ministry – a rate that's sparked debate about their role in society.

Some Saudis have attacked foreigners, accusing them of price-gouging, fear-mongering and deliberately spreading infection. Others say that the solution lies in better living conditions for the blue collar foreigners who underpin daily life, driving garbage trucks and cleaning streets. Saudi novelist Mohammed Alwan recently wrote on Twitter that he hopes authorities will create "humane requirements for workers' housing" after the pandemic.

Health minister Tawfiq Al-Rabiah acknowledged the problem in a televised address on Monday, saying a government committee had been formed to deal with the issue.

The government has also promised free coronavirus treatment for foreign residents, including undocumented immigrants.

[Syria] As rebel-held Syria fears virus, just one machine is there to test (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 10:32 AM, Khalil Ashawi, 5304K, Neutral]

A single machine at Mohamad Shahim Makki's medical centre in Idlib province, part of Syria's last rebel stronghold, is the only alarm that will sound when the coronavirus strikes a population of millions of the world's most vulnerable people.

Makki's Epidemiological Surveillance Laboratory has the only device in areas outside of Syrian government control equipped to run a polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test to detect the virus.

As of a few days ago, just 120 tests had been carried out on just 300 samples.

While all have been negative so far, doctors and relief agencies fear that crowded camps for displaced people, and medical facilities ravaged by years of war, would make any contagion rapid and lethal.

Samples have begun to come into the lab faster, with 5,000 received in the last two days, though it is not yet clear how many of them can be processed or how quickly.

The machine "is not sufficient to serve all these people, so there is pressure on the device. And since it is the only one, strict criteria are being used to select samples," said Makki.

Northwest Syria is the last part of the country still held by fighters trying to overthrow president Bashar al-Assad. It is home to more than 3 million people, most of whom fled other parts of Syria in a civil war that began nine years ago.

"If corona spreads in the northwest it will be a catastrophe. The number of deaths will be very big and infections will be huge, in the hundreds of thousands," Ahmad al-Dbis of the U.S.-based medical charity UOSSM, which operates in opposition territory, told Reuters last month.

Plans to equip other centres with PCR test devices have been slowed by their high cost and the training needed to run them.

"In the liberated areas we have major weaknesses in the health sector because of the war and because of the systematic targeting of hospitals and health centres," said Makki.

The government, backed by Russia and Iran, launched a push earlier this year to capture Idlib, sending hundreds of thousands of residents fleeing, many of them people who were already displaced.

In recent days thousands of Syrians have begun to leave camps near the Turkish border, some wary of the virus reaching tightly packed quarters, choosing instead to return to Idlib after a ceasefire struck last month that has restored calm.

In the rest of Syria, Damascus has reported 25 coronavirus cases and two deaths in government-held areas. It has shut businesses, halted flights, and imposed a curfew to curb the spread of the virus.

[Tunisia] Tunisia Tackles Virus Impact (Bloomberg)

[Bloomberg](#) [4/14/2020 2:16 AM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral] Video [HERE](#)

Tunisia Minister of Finance Nizar Yaiche discusses the country's economy amid the coronavirus outbreak, the loan from the IMF and the possibility of issuing an international bond. He speaks exclusively on "Bloomberg Daybreak: Middle East."

Europe and Eurasia

EU to Propose 'Ambitious' Budget in Response to Virus (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 3:42 AM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral] Video: [HERE](#)

The European Union is set to propose an "ambitious" new budget that will play a "central role" in helping the region recover from the coronavirus pandemic, European Commission Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis says in an interview on "Bloomberg Markets: European Open."

EU to limit export control of virus protection gear to just masks (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 3:39 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The European Commission plans to narrow controls on the export of coronavirus protective equipment to just a single product – masks – as well as exempt the countries of the western Balkans from the restrictions.

The EU executive, which oversees trade policy for the 27 EU member states, set out a draft regulation on Tuesday to apply for 30 days from April 26. The adjustments were designed to meet the EU's global commitments in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic.

The bloc's current restrictions apply to protective spectacles and visors, face shields, protective garments, gloves, as well as mouth and nose masks.

These products can only be exported to a non-EU country with an authorization granted by individual EU countries. The restrictions were due to run from March 15 to April 25.

The restrictions came in after a number of countries, including France and Germany, introduced their own export controls, angering fellow members such as Italy that were most in need of such equipment. The EU-wide controls on exports outside the European Union have largely restored flows of protective equipment within the bloc.

Some EU countries have nevertheless maintained export bans on certain medicines.

The EFTA nations – Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland – as well as various overseas countries and territories were subsequently exempted from the controls.

The European Commission said this exemption would now extend to the western Balkan countries – Albania, Bosnia, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo.

EU countries should also authorize exports of masks in the form of emergency humanitarian aid, it said.

The controls would only in future apply for masks as these were the only category of protective equipment for which export authorization was deemed necessary to secure an adequate supply for Europeans.

The Commission said its new law would oblige EU countries to consult with it when assessing whether to issue an export authorization. The Commission would issue an opinion within 48 hours.

EU countries will be required to report to the Commission on authorizations granted with a view to coordinating efforts to match supply and demand in the European Union.

[France] Four U.S. sailors assigned to French aircraft carrier hit by coronavirus outbreak now in quarantine (CNN)

CNN [4/14/2020 5:35 PM, Ryan Browne, Neutral]

Four US military personnel that were assigned to a French aircraft carrier that experienced an outbreak of the coronavirus have been placed into quarantine in France, two US defense officials tell CNN.

The officials said it is unclear whether the sailors have been tested for the virus but said that they appear to be "in good health" and "are being treated well" by the French military.

France's Ministry for the Armed Forces said in a statement Sunday that the nuclear powered aircraft carrier Charles de Gaulle, which has 50 confirmed coronavirus cases on board, arrived in its home port of Toulon on Sunday afternoon and has begun to quarantine personnel who are to be confined to military bases for 14 days.

The presence of US personnel aboard the aircraft carrier has not been previously reported. It is common for US personnel to serve on allied ships in order to bolster interoperability between allied militaries.

The US Navy did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The Charles de Gaulle frequently operates alongside US military forces and played a key role during the air strike campaign against ISIS.

While the carrier has 50 coronavirus cases aboard, the French Armed Forces ministry said last week that it had only tested 66 of the ship's approximately 2,000 personnel.

Coronavirus outbreaks at sea have also proven a challenge for the US Navy, with the nuclear aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt being sidelined by the pandemic.

On Monday the Navy announced that one sailor who tested positive for the virus had died.

The Navy did not disclose the name of the sailor, who was admitted to the intensive care unit of a US Navy hospital on Thursday. CNN previously reported a sailor from the Roosevelt who tested positive for the virus March 30 was found unresponsive and placed in the intensive care unit during a daily medical check.

The US Navy said Tuesday that 589 members of the ship's roughly 4,800 crew have tested positive for the coronavirus with 93% of the ship's complement having been tested.

More than 4,000 sailors have been moved ashore to Guam where they have been placed into quarantine and isolation.

Four sailors from the ship are currently being treated in a hospital for coronavirus symptoms with one of those sailors having been placed in the Intensive Care Unit "for increased observation due to shortness of breath," according to the Navy.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley told reporters Tuesday that while

the aircraft carrier had been "sidelined" by the pandemic there were no other cases of coronavirus among US warships at sea.

[Germany] Germany: Merkel's Party Will Have to Wait for New Leader (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 9:03 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The leader of German Chancellor Angela Merkel's party suggested Tuesday that her successor, who likely also will run for the nation's top job in an election next year, probably won't be chosen before December.

Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer succeeded Merkel as leader of the center-right Christian Democratic Union in late 2018. She struggled to impose her authority before announcing in February that she wouldn't run for chancellor in the 2021 election and would relinquish the party leadership.

A special convention was meant to be held in late April for about 1,000 delegates to choose the new CDU leader. But that was canceled as Germany banned large gatherings because of the coronavirus crisis, and no new date was named.

The CDU already was due to hold a regular convention in early December. Kramp-Karrenbauer told news agency dpa that the further a special meeting gets pushed back, "the smaller the demand is for a convention that would happen only a few weeks before the regular one."

One of the contenders to replace her, Friedrich Merz, also said it was unclear whether it would be possible to hold a convention before December.

Gatherings of more than two people in public are currently banned in Germany, and it isn't yet clear when and how restrictions will be loosened. Kramp-Karrenbauer said the party hopes developments will allow it to hold the regular convention in Stuttgart in December as planned.

There are three main contenders for the CDU leadership: Merz, a conservative former leader of its parliamentary group; Armin Laschet, the more liberal governor of North Rhine-Westphalia state; and Norbert Roettgen, who chairs parliament's foreign affairs committee.

The CDU's poll ratings have been bolstered by government's management of the coronavirus epidemic. But Merkel, 65, has vowed not to seek a fifth term as chancellor.

[Germany] Merkel's party likely to delay leadership vote until Dec: CDU chief (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:55 AM, Madeline Chambers, 5304K, Neutral]

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's conservative Christian Democrats (CDU) will likely delay the election of a new leader until December due to the coronavirus, current leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer was quoted as saying on Tuesday.

The new leader will be in pole position to run as chancellor in the next federal election as Merkel has said she will not seek a fifth term at the head of Europe's biggest economy.

The party had already cancelled a special congress in April to pick a leader and Kramp-Karrenbauer was quoted by dpa news agency as saying it looked increasingly likely that the decision would not take place until a regular conference in December.

"My impression is that the nearer we get to the summer break with a possible special party conference, the less the need for a conference that will take place just a few weeks before the normal one," Kramp-Karrenbauer told dpa.

So far, the top contenders to lead the party are former Merkel rival Friedrich Merz, popular on the right of the party, and Armin Laschet, the premier of Germany's most populous state. Foreign policy expert Norbert Roettgen is an outsider.

Kramp-Karrenbauer said preparations for the December conference were going ahead.

"We hope of course the situation will develop in such a way that we can have the regular party conference in December in Stuttgart," she told dpa.

Although the new CDU leader would be a favourite to run as chancellor in the next election, due by Oct. 2021, Bavaria's conservative Christian Social Union (CSU) has to agree and may even prefer its own leader, Markus Soeder, to be the candidate.

Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's protege, said in February she would step aside after a scandal over a regional branch of the CDU breaking a post-war taboo and voting with the far-right to elect a state leader from a third party.

[Germany] German tech startups plead for European approach to corona tracing app (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:25 PM, Douglas Busvine, Neutral]

Europe should not cede its sovereignty to Silicon Valley when it comes to using technology to help trace those at risk of coronavirus infection, the German developers of a smartphone app said on Tuesday.

Apple and Google said last week that they would collaborate on technology to track electronic 'handshakes' between devices that come into close proximity as a way to follow the risk of infection.

While any steps to improve the technology are welcome, maintaining control over data in ecosystems that already run 99% of the world's smartphone isn't, said Julian Teicke, a leader of Germany's Healthy Together gesund-zusammen.de/en startup initiative.

"We do not think it is the best solution that Google and Apple own the server on which all the contacts plus the medical status of citizens around the world are uploaded," Teicke, founder and chief executive of insurance tech firm Wefox Group, told Reuters.

"What we need is an independent party that allows governments some kind of control over what happens with this medical and contact data."

The rare collaboration between the two Silicon Valley giants comes as attempts are being

made to repurpose Bluetooth wireless technology to support smartphone apps that could measure whether individuals have been in close enough contact to transmit coronavirus.

Such apps could help enable a shift away from economically disruptive lockdowns and towards issuing more targeted warnings to those at risk to see a doctor or self-isolate.

Doing so in a way that meets the European Union's strict privacy laws poses great challenges and debate is raging over the merits of the 'decentralized' approach backed by Apple and Google, and the centralised modes favoured by many governments in which data is hosted on dedicated servers.

Apple and Google reiterated on Monday that they will not be storing any data online. Instead, their servers would relay scrambled messages between smartphones and only the phones themselves could unscramble them. The companies added that they plan to allow health authorities to control the relay servers if desired.

One centralized platform in development – the German-led Pan-European Privacy-Preserving Proximity Tracing – would support national contact tracing apps that could 'talk' to each other across borders.

Healthy Together is racing to complete work on a PEPP-PT compliant app that it hopes would be downloaded by 50 million Germans. The alliance is in touch with Chancellor Angela Merkel's government but no decision has been made on which would become the 'official' national app, Teicke said.

He welcomed plans by Apple and Google to release standardized plug-ins in May to enable interoperability between iOS and Android devices, even if this would come late for those apps seeking to make an earlier start.

Teicke was more concerned, however, about the two U.S. companies' move to subsequently build Bluetooth contact-tracing into their core operating systems. "Data needs to be sent to a neutral place – not to Apple and Google," he said.

[Italy] Italy's daily coronavirus death toll climbs by 602 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 12:27 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Deaths from the COVID-19 epidemic in Italy rose by 602 on Tuesday, up from 566 the day before, posting a second consecutive daily increase, but new infections slowed to 2,972 from 3,153, seeing the smallest daily tally since March 13.

The total death toll since the outbreak came to light on Feb. 21 rose to 21,067, the Civil Protection Agency said, the second highest in the world after that of the United States.

The number of officially confirmed cases climbed to 162,488, the third highest global tally behind those of the United States and Spain.

The euro zone's third largest economy is in tatters after more than a month of a nationwide lockdown to try to curb the contagion, with most businesses closed except those considered essential to the country's supply chain.

The International Monetary Fund forecast on Tuesday that Italian gross domestic product would shrink 9.1% this year.

That compared with a projected 7.5% drop for the euro zone as a whole and would be the steepest contraction of any large European country.

Italy, which has been the euro zone's most sluggish economy since the start of monetary union, was already teetering on the brink of recession before the coronavirus hit, with GDP falling 0.3% in the last quarter of 2019 from the previous three months.

The Civil Protection Agency said there were 3,186 people in intensive care on Tuesday against 3,260 on Monday — an 11th consecutive daily decline.

Of those originally infected, 37,130 were declared recovered against 35,435 a day earlier.

[Malta] Malta calls for EU aid to avert Libya humanitarian crisis (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 8:20 AM, Chris Scicluna, 5304K, Neutral]

Malta is calling for a 100 million euro (\$110 million) European Union aid package to avert a humanitarian disaster among people fleeing Libya, where rising violence is worsening the impact of the coronavirus crisis.

Malta's Foreign Minister Evarist Bartolo has written to the EU's external relations representative Josep Borrell warning that the situation is becoming unsustainable, days after the Mediterranean island closed its ports to migrant boats.

"Migrant detention camps are overflowing, and according to a number of credible reports, thousands of migrants are either escaping from, or being allowed to leave these camps," he said in a televised address on Tuesday.

"In this horrific context, there are all the ingredients for a major humanitarian disaster waiting to happen, as desperate people look to the Mediterranean Sea as their only escape."

Both Italy and Malta, the two EU countries at the frontline of the migrant crisis from North Africa, closed off their ports to new arrivals last week saying the coronavirus pandemic made it impossible to deal with them safely.

However, there has been concern that unrest in Libya, combined with the dire conditions in its detention centres, could push many refugees to attempt the dangerous sea voyage.

The most recent figures from UNHCR, the United Nations refugee agency, show Italy has seen 3,229 arrivals this year, while 1,135 have arrived in Malta.

Bartolo said Malta was calling for an EU package of at least 100 million euros in food, aid, medical supplies and equipment.

"Alleviating or at least minimising the difficult circumstances that migrants are living in will

be an incentive for them to stay, rather than risk their lives in the Mediterranean Sea at a time of crisis, and with very limited rescue options," he said.

[Russia] Russia's coronavirus cases surpass 20,000 in record daily rise (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 3:30 AM, Gleb Stolyarov, Negative]

Russia on Tuesday reported 2,774 new cases of the coronavirus, a record daily rise, bringing its overall nationwide tally to 21,102, the country's coronavirus response centre said.

It said 170 people in Russia diagnosed with the virus have now died, an overnight rise of 22.

[Russia] Trump told Putin U.S. is ready to send Russia equipment for coronavirus fight – Ifax cites Lavrov (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:51 AM, Staff, Neutral]

President Donald Trump told his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin that the United States is ready to send equipment to Russia to fight coronavirus, the Interfax news agency cited Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying on Tuesday.

Lavrov said that Russia would consider sending more equipment to the United States, a move it made late last month, if requested to do so, the Tass news agency reported.

[Russia] Moscow warns it faces coronavirus hospital bed shortage within weeks (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 11:41 AM, Polina Ivanova and Tom Balmforth, 5304K, Negative]

Authorities in Moscow have warned that the Russian capital may run out of hospital beds to treat a rising influx of coronavirus patients in the next two to three weeks despite frantic efforts to get more beds in place.

Moscow, Russia's worst-hit region, has rushed to reconfigure hospitals to treat patients of the new virus and made thousands of new beds available.

But officials said those efforts looked insufficient and that they had to ramp up capacity further.

"...The operational headquarters predicts that despite the inclusion of an increasing number of state, federal and commercial clinics, a shortage of beds in redeveloped hospitals is possible in the next two to three weeks," the Moscow city health department said.

It would reconfigure 24 more hospitals given the precarious situation and planned to have a total of 21,000 beds available within the next 10 days, it said in the same statement, which was issued late on Monday.

New confirmed infections in the Russian capital shot up by 1,489 overnight, a record, bringing its total number of registered cases to 13,002.

The tally of nationwide cases, including Moscow, stands at 21,102. Authorities say 170

people have died so far.

Sergei Savostyanov, a Moscow lawmaker who sits on the local parliament's healthcare commission, told Reuters last week that hospital capacity would be close to breaking point if new cases rose by more than 1,500 in the capital every day.

"Judging by documents on the healthcare budget I am familiar with and sittings I attend, I think that if 1,500-2,000 people get infected (on a daily basis), we will reach a very serious threshold, which may be critical for the city," he said.

'CLOSE TO CATASTROPHIC'

Moscow Deputy Mayor Anastasia Rakova said on Friday that the number of seriously sick patients requiring hospitalisation was rising quickly, creating what she said was a "dramatic" burden on the city's healthcare system.

On Saturday, one coronavirus patient, Georgiy Federov, described the situation in the hospital where he was taken as "close to catastrophic."

"The admissions room was packed with sick people, and most had identical symptoms... Ambulances were arriving every five to seven minutes," he wrote on social media, adding that he had refused to be held in hospital.

"Medical staff and doctors are really working as if it was wartime. It's some sort of crazy conveyer belt of sick people ... Everyone is placed in wards together. Clearly, bed spaces are already filled to the brim."

Sergei Sobyenin, Moscow's mayor, said on Monday that the city had enlisted around 4,500 university and college medical students to help hospital staff treat the inflow of patients.

[Russia] Russia will not ask EU for sanctions relief over coronavirus: TASS cites foreign minister (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 6:22 AM, Maxim Rodionov, 5304K, Neutral]

Russia is not intending to ask the European Union to lift sanctions due to the coronavirus outbreak, the TASS news agency cited Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov as saying on Tuesday.

The EU imposed sanctions on Russia's banking, financial and energy sectors over Moscow's annexation of Crimea in 2014.

[Slovakia] Slovak government to expand help to firms hurt by coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 12:47 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The Slovak government wants to expand aid to firms hurt by the coronavirus outbreak, introducing a short-time work or "Kurzarbeit" scheme to compensate workers' pay at companies that have suspended operations or whose revenue has dropped, Labour Minister Milan Krajniak said on Tuesday.

The state will pay up to 80% of wages of employees, but not more than 880 euros (\$964.92)

per month, to companies affected by the crisis.

Finance Minister Eduard Heger said the measures would raise monthly budget costs by 200 million euros.

Krajniak said companies will have a choice between the Kurzarbeit or a plan that would compensate companies with falling revenue up to full salary, but be capped at 540 euros per employee per month.

"We estimate that the Kurzarbeit scheme will be more advantageous for 255,000 employees and their employers and the scheme linked to falling revenues for 180,000 employees," said Krajniak.

In late March, the government approved an aid package for companies forced to shut because of the spread of the coronavirus as well as for self-employed people and small businesses affected by falling revenue.

Business and employers' associations have criticised the government for being slow to help big companies with more than 250 employees.

Those include car plants which form the backbone of the Slovak manufacturing industry. Three out of four car makers in Slovakia have suspended operations because of low demand and problems with a supply chain; only Kia Motors reopened on April 6.

The Slovak government will unveil a plan next week to gradually ease restrictions aimed at slowing the spread of the novel coronavirus, Prime Minister Igor Matovic announced at a separate news conference on Tuesday.

Slovakia aims to protect the 70% of the economy that is still running from effects of the coronavirus outbreak, and the reopening of retail will be cautious, he said.

The International Monetary Fund forecasts the Slovak economy will contract by 6.2% this year.

Slovakia has reported 835 cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, and two deaths.

[Spain] Spain seizes virus tests bound for returning Siemens Gamesa workers – union (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 7:06 AM, Isla Binnie, 5304K, Neutral]

Spanish authorities have requisitioned 2,000 antibody tests procured by wind turbine maker Siemens Gamesa and intended to check whether employees have been infected with the coronavirus, a labour union spokeswoman said on Tuesday.

Siemens Gamesa began testing some staff last week and had agreed to extend this to the whole workforce, but told employees on Saturday it would not be able comply with its original timetable.

"The company told us that the provider that was going to provide the tests at the optimum time did not have them, because the government requisitioned them," said Clara Fernandez, spokeswoman for labour union CCOO.

Spanish workers observed strict health protocols to begin returning to factories on Monday after a two-week clampdown, imposed to contain the spread of one of the world's worst national outbreaks of the virus.

A Siemens Gamesa spokeswoman declined to comment and a government spokeswoman did not respond to a request for comment.

Reuters was not immediately able to ascertain the identity of the provider.

The Spanish government has previously used its powers under a state of emergency to requisition masks and medical supplies from private companies.

Governments have touted coronavirus antibody tests as a way to determine if people have developed immunity through exposure to the virus, potentially allowing them to return to work and ease output-crushing lockdowns without helping the virus to spread.

Spain reported its slowest overnight rate of increases in new cases in almost a month on Tuesday but its overall death toll remained the third-highest in the world at 18,056.

"We understand the health emergency we are in," Fernandez said. "Will they do the tests? Yes. When? When they have them."

[Spain] Spain denies requisitioning coronavirus tests bound for workers (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 1:29 PM, Isla Binnie, Neutral]

Spain's health minister denied on Tuesday that authorities had requisitioned 2,000 antibody tests which a workers union said Siemens Gamesa (SGREN.MC) had expected to receive to check whether its staff have been infected with the coronavirus.

The Spanish government has previously used its powers under a state of emergency imposed during the coronavirus pandemic to requisition masks and medical supplies from private companies.

Spanish workers are observing strict protocols to return to factories after a two-week clampdown to contain the spread of one of the worst national coronavirus outbreaks.

Asked during a news briefing whether authorities had taken tests bound for wind turbine manufacturer Siemens Gamesa, Health Minister Salvador Illa said the Spanish government had "not requisitioned material from any company."

The Health Ministry took control of private healthcare resources when Madrid declared a state of emergency on March 14, and it said on Tuesday that companies must declare which tests they have at their disposal and what they plan to do with them.

Siemens Gamesa, which declined to comment, began testing some staff last week and had

agreed to extend this to the whole workforce, but told employees who started returning to work on Monday that it would not be able to meet its original timetable.

"The company told us that the provider that was going to provide the tests at the optimum time did not have them, because the government requisitioned them," Clara Fernandez, spokeswoman for labor union CCOO, said.

Illa said Tuesday's order aimed to "ensure that all resources, clearly belonging to the public health system but also those of the private health system, are put at the service of one diagnostic strategy." without providing any further explanation on the Siemens Gamesa case.

Fernandez said CCOO did not know the identity of the provider of the tests she said were bound for Siemens Gamesa.

Governments have touted antibody tests as a way to determine if people have developed immunity through exposure to the coronavirus, potentially allowing them to return to work and ease output-crushing lockdowns.

Spain reported its slowest overnight rate of increases in new cases in almost a month on Tuesday but its overall death toll remained the third-highest in the world at 18,056.

"We understand the health emergency we are in," Fernandez said. "Will they do the tests? Yes. When? When they have them."

[Turkey] Turkish parliament passes bill to free thousands from prison amid coronavirus (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 7:47 AM, Ali Kucukgocmen, 5304K, Neutral]

Turkey's parliament on Tuesday passed a law that will allow the release of tens of thousands of prisoners to ease overcrowding in jails and protect detainees from the coronavirus, but which critics slam for excluding those jailed on terrorism charges.

President Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party and nationalist MHP allies supported the bill, which was accepted with 279 votes for and 51 votes against, deputy parliament speaker Sureyya Sadi Bilgic said.

The law will open the way for the temporary release of around 45,000 prisoners to stem the spread of the coronavirus. Those eligible will be released under judicial control until the end of May and the Justice Ministry will be able to extend the period three times by a maximum of two months each time, according to the law.

A similar number would be released permanently under a separate part of the legislation aimed at reducing prison overcrowding.

Justice Minister Abdulhamit Gul said on Monday there were 17 confirmed cases of COVID-19 among prisoners, including three deaths, and 79 prison personnel had also tested positive.

The law has been criticised by opposition parties and activists for excluding those jailed on terrorism charges, which include journalists and politicians swept up in a crackdown following a coup attempt in 2016.

Opposition members say the release of criminals including thieves, racketeers and those involved in bribery could lead to a rise in crime.

Violations of Turkey's intelligence law are not eligible for earlier release, which opposition members said aimed to exclude journalists imprisoned earlier this year for reporting the death of Turkish intelligence members in Libya's conflict.

Turkey has arrested thousands of academics, lawyers, journalists, civil servants and members of the military it says were supporters of U.S.-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, who it blames for the coup attempt. Gulen denies any involvement.

Many Kurdish activists and politicians the state says have links to the banned Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) are also in jail.

"UNFAIR TRIALS"

Amnesty International welcomed the steps to reduce overcrowding in prisons but said the law failed to cover others who should be considered for release.

"Those convicted in unfair trials under Turkey's overly broad anti-terrorism laws are also now condemned to face the prospect of infection from this deadly disease," Amnesty campaigner Milena Buyum said.

"Turkey's government must do the right thing and immediately release those who are imprisoned solely for expressing their peaceful views," she said.

Critics of Turkey's judiciary say court rulings are influenced by politicians. Erdogan and his AK Party say the judges make decisions independently.

Under the crackdown since 2016, the number of prisoners has risen to nearly 300,000 - the second-largest prison population in Europe and the most overcrowded prison system as of January 2019, according to data from the Council of Europe.

Around 50,000 people convicted or jailed pending trial on terrorism charges, including members of the PKK and Gulen's network, are excluded from the new law, according to an opposition parliamentarian.

Turan Aydogan, parliamentarian from the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), said the law should have been designed to protect freedom of thought.

"You lock up whoever criticises," he said, addressing AKP and MHP members in parliament. Another CHP member said all 210 amendments to the law proposed by opposition parties were rejected.

[Ukraine] Ukrainian officials: Fires out near Chernobyl nuclear plant (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 1:54 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Ukrainian emergency officials said Tuesday they have extinguished forest fires in the radiation-contaminated area near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, but acknowledged that grass was still smoldering in some areas.

Hundreds of firefighters backed by aircraft have been battling several forest fires around Chernobyl for the past 10 days. They contained the initial blazes, but new fires raged closer to the decommissioned plant.

Emergencies Service chief Mykola Chechetkin reported to President Volodymyr Zelenskiy that rains helped firefighters put out the flames, but acknowledged that it would take a few more days to extinguish smoldering grass.

Chechetkin said emergency workers have prevented the fire from engulfing radioactive waste depots and other facilities in Chernobyl.

The 2,600-square-kilometer (1,000-square-mile) Chernobyl Exclusion Zone was established after the 1986 disaster at the plant that sent a cloud of radioactive fallout over much of Europe. The zone is largely unpopulated, although about 200 people have remained despite orders to leave.

Ukraine's emergencies service said radiation levels in the capital, Kyiv, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) south of the plant, were within norms after the forest fires.

President Zelenskiy urged Ukrainians not to panic.

"We all remember the lessons of April 26, 1986," he said in an online statement Tuesday. "No one is hiding the truth from you. Right now the truth is that the situation there is under control."

On Monday, activists warned that the blazes were getting dangerously close to waste storage facilities.

Yaroslav Yemelyanenko, a member of the public council under the state agency in charge of the closed zone around the plant, said one fire was raging within 2 kilometers (about 1.2 miles) from one of the radioactive waste depots.

Last week, officials said they tracked down a person suspected of triggering the blaze by setting dry grass on fire in the area. The 27-year-old man said he burned grass "for fun" and then failed to extinguish the fire when the wind caused it to spread quickly.

On Monday, police said that another local resident burned waste and accidentally set dry grass ablaze, triggering another devastating forest fire. They said he failed to report the fire to the authorities.

Blazes in the area have been a regular occurrence. They often start when residents set dry grass on fire in the early spring — a widespread practice in Ukraine, Russia and some other ex-Soviet nations that often leads to devastating forest fires.

[United Kingdom] Coronavirus: Britain enters 4th week of lockdown amid financial services expectations 'deteriorating' (Yahoo News)

Yahoo News [4/14/2020 3:12 AM, Lianna Brinded, 10942K, Neutral]

New survey data shows the outlook for the UK's key financial services industry is "deteriorating," as Britain enters its fourth week of lockdown with no set end in sight.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) said on Tuesday that financial firms expect demand, profitability and employment to decline sharply in the coming months.

"The bulk of the survey took place before social distancing measures were ramped up, but there were already signs of the COVID-19 pandemic leaving its mark," said Rain Newton-Smith, CBI chief economist.

"Expectations for business volumes and headcount weakened, non-performing loans rose sharply, and financial firms are planning heavy cuts to investment in the year ahead."

The survey findings underline the heavy economic cost of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought economies around the world to virtual standstill. The UK is entering its fourth week of lockdown, with all non-essential businesses shut and the bulk of the population staying home.

According to a report in *The Times*, UK chancellor Rishi Sunak told colleagues GDP could shrink by up to 30% this quarter because of the coronavirus lockdown. Sunak is pushing for restrictions on everyday life to be eased as a result, according to the newspaper.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab on Monday signalled the lockdown would continue without saying when an end could come.

"We still have a long way to go," Raab said on Monday, as he deputised for UK prime minister Boris Johnson who is recovering from COVID-19.

"We're still not past the peak of this virus. We don't expect to make any changes to the measures currently in place at that point, and we won't until we're confident as we realistically can be that any such changes can be safely made."

The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned lifting restrictions too early "could lead to a deadly resurgence" of the novel coronavirus.

The Department of Health on Monday 13 April said the official UK death toll rose by 717 in a day to 11,329. This only takes into account those who have died in a hospital but is still the fifth highest death toll globally.

"Amidst this sobering death toll, there are also some positive signs from the data that we are starting to win this struggle," Raab said.

The government put in place "unprecedented" financial measures worth 15% of GDP to help combat the economic downturn caused by the pandemic. However, businesses are increasingly at risk of going bust and jobs are already being lost across the country.

Banks are playing a key role in handing loans to small businesses but there has been criticism of the slow pace at which lenders are offering state support.

"Financial services are already playing an essential role in helping companies with their cashflow, through channelling funds from the government's support schemes," Newton-Smith said. "But like other businesses, they've also been struck by staff shortages and changes to how they operate.

"As a result, alleviating capacity pressures and streamlining how firms access government support through our financial institutions is vital. With the peak of the economic impact to come, equipping the sector to deliver for business is crucial in supporting the growth recovery beyond the pandemic."

Last week, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research (NIESR) said that the UK's GDP could shrink by 15% to 25% in the second quarter of 2020 if the coronavirus lockdown persists until June.

[United Kingdom] Tobacco giant BAT slides on report of U.S. criminal investigation (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 6:01 AM, Siddharth Cavale and Anurag Maan, 5304K, Neutral] British American Tobacco (BAT) (BATS.L) is the subject of a U.S. criminal investigation over suspected sanctions-busting, The Times reported on Tuesday, sending the company's shares down more than 5%.

The world's second-biggest tobacco group on Tuesday said it was cooperating with the U.S. Department of Justice (DoJ) and Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) without elaborating and declined to say whether the case was a criminal investigation.

"As the investigations are ongoing, it would be inappropriate for us to provide further comment at this time," company spokeswoman Anna Vickerstaff said in an email.

Neither the DoJ nor OFAC responded immediately to Reuters' requests for comment.

BAT, which makes Lucky Strike and Dunhill cigarettes, last month disclosed in its annual report that it was aware of the investigation by the DoJ and OFAC, a financial intelligence and enforcement agency under the U.S. Treasury department. It did not provide detail on the nature of the investigation.

Shares in the company fell 5.5% to 28.54 pounds in early trading, erasing gains made last week.

BAT's annual report for 2019 said the group has operations in a number of nations that are subject to various sanctions, including Iran and Cuba, and that operations in these countries expose the company to the risk of "significant financial costs."

With respect to the U.S. investigation, the company said in its annual filing that "the potential for fines, penalties or other consequences cannot currently be assessed but may be material."

Britain's Serious Fraud Office (SFO) is conducting a separate ongoing investigation into BAT, relating to "suspicions of corruption in the conduct of business by group companies and associated persons."

Jefferies analyst Owen Bennett said on Tuesday that the U.S. investigation could be linked to the SFO inquiry but that it "likely sounds worse than it is."

"If we are right, and it (the U.S. probe) does relate to the same accusations (as in SFO probe), the fact this has been ongoing in some form since 2017 with no apparent conclusion, we would not worry too much about it for now," Bennett wrote.

East Asia and Pacific

Virtual summit: SE Asia leaders meet by video on pandemic (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 3:49 AM, Hau Dinh and Jim Gomez, Neutral]

Forced apart by the coronavirus pandemic, Southeast Asian leaders linked up by video Tuesday to plot a strategy to overcome a crisis that has threatened their economies and kept millions of people in their homes under lockdowns.

The heads of state of the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations were to hold further talks later Tuesday, also through video conferencing, with their counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea who are expected to express their support in helping ASEAN fight the coronavirus. Vietnam, ASEAN's leader this year, has postponed an in-person gathering tentatively to June.

"It is in these grim hours that the solidarity of the ASEAN community shines like a beacon in the dark," Vietnamese Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc said in an opening speech.

Containment efforts have placed the pandemic "actually under control," he said, warning against complacency, with a number of member countries, including Indonesia and the Philippines, fearing spikes in infections after large-scale testing is conducted.

Founded in 1967 in the Cold War era, ASEAN — a diverse bloc representing more than 640 million people — has held annual summits of its leaders and top diplomats with ceremonies steeped in tradition, protocol and photo-ops. Derided as a talk shop by critics, the bloc is known largely for photographs of its leaders locking arms at annual meetings in a show of unity despite often-thorny differences.

Diplomats say that unity is now crucial as the region battles the COVID-19 disease. All of ASEAN's member states have been hit by infections, with the total number of confirmed cases reaching more than 20,400, including over 840 deaths, despite massive lockdowns, travel restrictions and home quarantines.

"The COVID-19 crisis is a crisis like no other in the past, not just in its potential calamitous scale but in the hope to contain and stop it by unstinting cooperation and fullest trust between all countries," said the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs. "If any of us fails, the rest will follow."

The World Health Organization called on Southeast Asian countries last month to aggressively ramp up efforts to combat the viral outbreak as infections spread. Several visiting participants of a large religious gathering in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in late February reportedly tested positive for the virus after attending the event.

But Vietnamese Foreign Minister Pham Binh Minh said ASEAN had responded to the outbreak quickly, with his country, as the bloc's current leader, calling for the need for region-wide action in mid-February, followed by a series of ministerial meetings and consultations with China, the United States and the WHO.

"Countries in our region have all suffered severe consequences from COVID-19," he said. "We have made every effort to combat this pandemic."

Tuesday's summit was to include discussions on a regional stockpile of medical equipment for emergencies and establishing a regional fund for combating the pandemic.

With travel restrictions and lockdowns across the region, many industries have been hit hard, including the tourism and retail sectors, and growth targets have been revised downward. The overall economic impact of the pandemic on the region will "likely be broad and deep," according to an ASEAN assessment.

Hard-hit China, where the virus was first detected in December, is one of the largest trading partners and sources of tourists for Southeast Asia.

Chinese Premier Li Keqiang was expected to join the video summit along with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.

ASEAN holds about 1,500 meetings a year, but around 230 have been postponed to later this year due to the pandemic, including lower-level meetings with China on a proposed nonaggression pact in the disputed South China Sea.

The territorial disputes, which involve China and five other claimants, including ASEAN members Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and Brunei, are not part of the formal summit agenda. But the disputes have cast a shadow on the summit after a Vietnamese fishing boat with eight men on board was hit by a Chinese coast guard ship and sank near the Paracel islands. All the fishermen were rescued.

The other ASEAN members are Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand.

Indonesia Overtakes Japan as Virus Upends Aviation Pecking Order (Bloomberg)

[Bloomberg](#) [4/14/2020 1:56 AM, Harry Suhartono, 6400K, Neutral]

Indonesia has overtaken Japan to become the world's third-biggest aviation market as airlines continue to slash passenger capacity because of the coronavirus, according to OAG Aviation Worldwide.

The country's scheduled capacity is now 2.1 million seats, down 7.8% from last week, but

just ahead of Japan's after a drop of nearly 15% there. Chinese capacity rose 7.2% to 8.7 million seats, making it the biggest market. The U.S. has fallen nearly 27% to 8.2 million this week, data from OAG show.

A resilient domestic market has helped shield Indonesia to a degree, though capacity is still down 33% from the Jan. 20 week and virus containment efforts are being stepped up amid warnings that infections could climb to 95,000 by the end of next month from about 4,500 now. President Joko Widodo last week banned government employees from traveling during Ramadan and urged the public to avoid taking trips at what is typically a peak travel time in the world's fourth-most populous nation.

"Domestic markets have fared much better than international sectors," OAG analyst John Grant wrote in his weekly blog, noting that domestic capacity accounts for 85% of all seats globally. China helped drive a 1% weekly recovery in Northeast Asia with 600,000 additional domestic seats, according to OAG.

"Increasing demand and the seasonal May holidays are expected to see further recovery in this particular market," Grant said. The "Big Three" of Air China Ltd., China Southern Airlines Co. and China Eastern Airlines Corp. all reported increases in week-on-week capacity, he said.

Many regional markets are operating at less than 15% of historic capacity. On Jan. 20, 790 airlines planned to operate scheduled services compared with 590 this week, a drop of 25%, Grant said. Some carriers that usually would operate over 1 million seats a week at this time of year aren't flying at all, such as Ryanair Holdings Plc, EasyJet Plc, AirAsia BHD and Turkish Airlines, he added.

"The middle to end of May appears the latest thinking in terms of bringing back some capacity but the situation remains extremely fluid," Grant said. "Next week's data will take us below the 30 million weekly seats mark from which point we look forward to seeing capacity growth return."

OAG previously forecast that cuts could bottom nearer 40 million seats.

[China] World Watches China's Economy for Signs of Life After Lockdown (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 7:00 AM, Staff, Neutral]

With the coronavirus outbreak in China seemingly under control, everyone is watching the world's second-largest economy for signs of life after lockdown.

Companies are getting back to work, more and more people are out shopping, there was a record expansion in bank lending in March, and exports and imports weren't as bad as expected, according to data on Tuesday. However, it's too early to uncork the champagne yet, with data due Friday expected to show that the economy had a historic contraction in the first quarter.

China's government enforced a strict lockdown of Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province, from Jan. 23 to April 8. Whether the economy is out of the woods and can drive global

growth like it did after the global financial crisis remains to be seen. And even if the domestic economy looks to be improving in April, the real hit to foreign demand hasn't really materialized yet.

"Exports did better than people thought as most exporters only saw orders cancelled since the middle of the month," said Zhou Xue, an economist at Mizuho Securities Asia Ltd. in Hong Kong. "The expected plunge in exports was not fully reflected in the data and the second quarter could be much worse."

Some Asian nations or regions have done better in containing the virus outbreak than the U.S. or Europe have, and China's exports to those nations were stronger. Shipments to South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan rose, while those to Japan only fell 1.4%. But much of that trade is of electronic components for goods which are exported elsewhere, so the shutdowns, job losses and social distancing in other parts of the world will likely affect that in the future.

Trade with Europe and the U.S. was hit much harder, with exports to the European Union down more than 24%, and those to the U.S. falling almost 21% from a year ago. With companies there canceling export orders from early March, the declines will be even worse in April, according to Iris Pang, an economist at ING NV in Hong Kong.

The Virus Is About to Hit Banana Supplies Next (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 5:00 PM, Andreo Calonzo, Neutral]

Get your potassium while you can.

The coronavirus pandemic may limit supplies of bananas in Asia. Growers in the Philippines, the world's second-biggest exporter, said overseas shipments may drop by nearly 40% this year as lockdowns and social distancing measures curb output and transport.

The country's exports of the fruit are expected to plunge to about 2.5 million tons this year from 4 million last year, said Stephen Antig, executive director of the Pilipino Banana Growers and Exporters Association. Producers, including Unifrutti Tropical Philippines Inc., have halted some operations, he said.

"Bananas have to be harvested every day," said Alberto Bacani, president of Unifrutti Philippines. "By the time we come back, a lot of that fruit will be spoiled and will have to be thrown away."

The Philippines accounted for an estimated 20% of global banana shipments in 2019 and about 90% of total export volumes in Asia, with its two major markets being China and Japan, according to a 2020 report from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Ecuador is the largest exporter.

The country's main island of Luzon has been under a lockdown since mid-March that will last through the end of April and provinces in the southern Philippines, where banana plantations and packing houses are concentrated, have also imposed quarantine measures. Exports of the fruit will continue to be impacted after restrictions are lifted, according to

Antig, as social distancing measures are expected to remain in place that limit the number of workers.

The coronavirus outbreak has snarled food production and shipments globally as quarantines, sick workers, export bans and panic buying result in some empty grocery store shelves, despite mostly ample supplies.

Bacani said Japan banana imports may be impacted because many farms that export the fruit to the East Asian country are under quarantine. "In the next two weeks, you will see a drastic reduction in the banana volume in Japan," he said, while adding that other exporters like Ecuador may fill in the gap.

Yuko Yamada, a spokeswoman for the Japan Banana Importers' Association said the country depends heavily on imports from the Philippines but she wasn't aware of shortages or price increases, or any notices from Philippine exporters that shipments will be reduced.

Meng Wei, an official with China Fruits Marketing Association, said the group hasn't noticed any change in Philippine banana imports but noted that domestic production of the fruit and imports from Myanmar have increased.

[China] China Tightens Russia Border to Stem Surge of Coronavirus Cases (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 2:07 PM, Thomas Grove, Neutral]

China raced to contain a new outbreak of coronavirus in communities along its northern border with Russia, just days after Beijing had all but declared victory over the disease where it emerged, in the city of Wuhan.

With more than half of China's new infections since the start of April coming from abroad, China has in recent days sealed off parts of its border with Russia and established a field hospital at the once-bustling border city of Suifenhe.

Newly imported infections threaten to trigger a second wave of contagion in China—highlighting the risk countries face when easing restrictions after initial strides against the new coronavirus proved effective.

The jump in infections also added to the uncertainty about the state of the pandemic in Russia, a country that has reported a relatively low infection rate.

China's new infections had recently fallen to zero, according to official data, which show that half of the 658 coronavirus cases coming from abroad since the start of April were Chinese nationals who had entered from Russia into China's Heilongjiang province, where Suifenhe is located. They had made their way from Moscow, starting on March 27, passing through the eastern port city of Vladivostok on their way back to China, the Heilongjiang Health Commission said.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin, who has imposed a lockdown in the Russian capital, said last week that dozens of Chinese citizens had been deported for breaking quarantine regulations, state news agency RIA reported. Officials didn't say if the new cases in China

were among those who had been deported.

Tourism and business between Russia and China have grown in recent years as Moscow and Beijing have grown closer amid rising tensions with the U.S. Cooperation has extended to military ties and Russia-China trade has exceeded \$100 billion in recent years, according to Russian government data.

"The Chinese citizens in Russia, they are drivers, students, businessmen who usually stay to themselves as a community in Russia," said Alexander Gabuev, senior fellow at the Carnegie Moscow Center.

"It is unclear how they got it, but the Chinese have reason to be afraid of another wave of infections coming from abroad," he said.

An increase in cases in the first week of April forced China to close all its land crossings with Russia, the Chinese Embassy in Moscow said on April 9. The field hospital built to handle new infections was meant to take in asymptomatic patients who could spread the disease to others, and is equipped with a negative pressure lab and equipment to diagnose incoming fresh cases.

Suifenhe has erected 330 checkpoints around the city and all residential compounds there have been put back under lockdown, with residents able to leave their homes once every three days for groceries.

To prevent new infections, the provincial government has also offered rewards for citizens who report illegal efforts to cross the border with Russia.

Flights into China from Russia have also provided a bath for new infections. On April 5, an Air China flight from Moscow to Beijing included 35 passengers infected with the coronavirus, Chinese health officials said. Some 60 new cases were registered by Chinese authorities as the result of an April 10 flight from Moscow to Shanghai by Russia's flagship carrier, Aeroflot, according to the Shanghai Municipal Health Commission. Passengers from both flights were quarantined.

Russia has reported more than 21,000 cases of the new coronavirus and 170 deaths, a lower rate than for much of Europe. Moscow authorities have imposed tight restrictions to keep the virus from spreading.

Russian authorities have attributed the country's low infection rate to Moscow's decision to close its border with China in January, shortly after the outbreak in Wuhan and before any cases were registered in Russia.

Many Russians doubt over the accuracy of the data on infections. In a poll earlier this month by the Moscow-based Higher School of Economics, around half of Russians surveyed believed authorities have underplayed infection numbers.

"The numbers from Russia are likely not accurate because of lack of widespread testing," Mr. Gabuev said. "The real figures are likely much larger."

[China] China moves to block new virus flare-up on Russian border (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 4:01 AM, Ken Moritsugu, Neutral]

China is facing a new coronavirus flare-up along its remote northern border with Russia, far from the epicenter of Wuhan, where it has all but declared victory in the battle against the pandemic.

The frontier has been sealed and emergency medical units rushed to the area to prevent travelers from bringing the virus back from overseas. The virus originated in China, which is now striving to keep it virus out while the U.S. and other countries struggle to bring their own epidemics under control.

The long, porous border of sprawling Heilongjiang province and neighboring Inner Mongolia has much less travel than major cities like Beijing and Shanghai. But it is a popular alternative route into the country. Many Chinese live and work in Russia, where China has major investments encouraged by warm ties between Beijing and Moscow.

By Monday night, a field hospital was operating in the city of Suifenhe along the Russian border, equipped with a negative pressure lab to diagnose new cases. Staffed by 22 experts from the National Institute for Viral Disease Control and Prevention under the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, it will conduct nucleic acid tests and other forms of research to aid in virus control and prevention, allowing the city to test up to 1,000 cases per day, according to the CDC.

Suifenhe, a city of just under 70,000 that is frozen-in for much of the year, has at least 243 imported COVID-19 cases out of nearly 1,000 confirmed and suspected cases. More than 100 people in the area have tested positive for the virus but showed no symptoms. Recent arrivals from Russia account for nearly half of China's imported cases.

"We are facing a truly grave situation in the northeast as represented by Suifenhe," National Health Commission expert Wang Bin said Monday at a news conference. "Up to now our medical resources in the area have just not been sufficient."

The CDC said the field hospital has been supplied with negative pressure tents, nucleic acid extractors, virus detection kits, throat swab sampling tubes and thermal cyclers used to enhance segments of DNA via the polymerase chain reaction.

Roughly 1,300 kilometers (800 miles) northeast of Beijing, Suifenhe's markets selling warm clothing, cell phones and daily items usually do a thriving business with Russian visitors starved for choice on their side of the border. That trade has gone quiet in recent weeks, dimming prospects for a sparsely populated region whose residents have been migrating to major cities seeking jobs and better living standards.

Russia requires 14-day quarantines for all travelers arriving in Primorsky Krai and its regional capital Pogradichny, across the border. It has closed hotels to visitors and is requiring travelers to have a pass showing they are not carrying the virus. Russia closed its land border to travelers from China in January.

On the Chinese side, quarantines have been extended to a full month for people arriving by air in Suifenhe and in Heilongjiang's capital, Harbin. All land border crossings were halted

last week.

"The Chinese consulate again strongly reminds Chinese citizens not to summarily make trips to the border region," the Chinese consulate in the nearby Russian city of Vladivostok said in a notice posted Monday.

As Wuhan and other regions get back to business, Chinese authorities say they will remain vigilant against a second wave of infections, particularly from those arriving from outside the country.

New cases of local infection in China have fallen to near zero after more than two months of strict travel bans and social distancing measures. Of 89 cases reported on Tuesday, all but three were detected in people arriving from abroad. It wasn't immediately clear if any came from Russia.

No new deaths were reported in the country on Tuesday, suggesting the outbreak is running its course. Last week, authorities lifted a 76-day quarantine in Wuhan, where the virus was first detected late last year, an indication that the worst may have passed.

China had recorded 82,249 cases and 3,341 deaths as of Tuesday, while 1,077 people suspected of having the virus or testing positive without showing symptoms were under isolation and monitoring.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death. The vast majority of people recover.

[China] China rolls out software surveillance for the COVID-19 pandemic, alarming human rights advocates (ABC News)

ABC News [4/14/2020 6:30 AM, Ali Dukakis, Neutral]

Wuhan, China, where the first reported cases of novel coronavirus emerged ten weeks ago, reopened its borders last week. There's just one catch: A government surveillance app is required to enter and exit the region.

The Chinese government has begun to track some of its citizens through software that analyzes their personal data to sort individuals into color-coded categories – red, yellow or green – corresponding to their health status and level of risk for COVID-19.

The app has helped the government relax lockdown measures across the country in an attempt to reopen their economy, but concerns are rising about whether this temporary measure will become a permanent fixture. And the move has alarmed leading international human rights advocates, who fear that the government is merely using the ongoing public health crisis as a "convenient justification" to expand monitoring of its population.

"This is viewed as scary stuff from a human rights perspective," Sophie Richardson, China director at Human Rights Watch, told ABC News. "[It is] yet another way to gather information about people to potentially use it against them in ways which there's no legal

basis."

Individuals throughout the country, including several ABC News reporters based in China, were required to register for a QR code through WeChat, a mobile messaging app, or AliPay, a mobile wallet.

Users are first prompted to enter personal information, including their Chinese ID number, phone number, residential address, their place of work and where, when and how one entered the region, as well as the address of where they're staying locally, and the purpose of their trip.

Next, a series of health-related questions: Do you currently have any symptoms for COVID-19? Have you been in close contact with a COVID-19 carrier?

Based on their responses, the app generates a color code. QR scans are required upon entry or exit from certain regions, as well as to enter some apartment buildings, workplaces, transit systems and other public destinations.

An individual with 'green' health status – at the lowest risk for carrying the deadly virus – are afforded the least amount of restrictions in their movement. 'Yellow' or 'Red'? Not so fast.

[China] McDonald's China apologizes for banning black people from a store (CNN)

CNN [4/14/2020 11:56 AM, Jordan Valinsky, Neutral]

McDonald's is in damage control mode after a restaurant in China displayed a sign banning black people from the premises.

The sign, which recently circulated on social media, said the McDonald's location in Guangzhou has "been informed that from now on black people are not allowed to enter the restaurant."

The sign is "not representative of our inclusive values," McDonald's said in a statement. The sign was removed and the location was temporarily closed down. CNN has not yet been able to authenticate the video.

The industrial city has been steeped in racial tensions between Africans and locals. Recent warnings from Chinese officials about the rising number of imported coronavirus cases have stoked anti-foreigner sentiment. Africans in the southern Chinese city have been evicted from their homes by landlords and turned away from hotels, despite many claiming to have no recent travel history or known contact with Covid-19 patients.

McDonald's (MCD) said it will use the closure to "further educate managers and employees on our values, which includes serving all members of the communities in which we operate."

Guangzhou has long had the largest African community in China. Because many Africans in the city have short-term business visas, they travel into China several times a year, making it difficult to calculate the size of the African population the city. But in 2017, approximately 320,000 Africans entered or left China through Guangzhou, according to Xinhua.

This isn't the first time McDonald's garnered controversy overseas. Last November, it pulled an ad in Portugal that used the words "Sundae Bloody Sundae" to promote a Halloween dessert. Bloody Sunday is the name for the day in 1972 on which British soldiers shot unarmed protesters in Derry, Northern Ireland, during the Troubles -- resulting in 14 deaths.

The coronavirus has been detrimental McDonald's business this year. Last week, it reported that sales at restaurants open at least a year plunged more than 22% in March, led by a nearly 35% decline in its internationally operated markets.

[Hong Kong] Special Report: Hong Kong judges battle Beijing over rule of law as pandemic chills protests (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 7:05 AM, Greg Torode and James Pomfret, 5304K, Neutral]

The independence of Hong Kong's judicial system is under assault from the Communist Party leadership in Beijing, senior judges in the city told Reuters, posing the gravest threat to the rule of law since Britain handed its former colony back to Chinese sovereignty in 1997.

Even as the novel coronavirus has brought the protests in Hong Kong to a near standstill, the struggle rages on over the future of China's freest city. Three of Hong Kong's most senior judges told Reuters that the independent judiciary, the cornerstone of the city's broad freedoms, is in a fight for its survival.

Beijing's effort to hobble the judiciary is multi-pronged, according to more than two dozen interviews with judges, leading lawyers and diplomats in Hong Kong. The state-controlled press on the mainland has warned Hong Kong judges not to "absolve" protesters arrested during last year's demonstrations.

Judges and lawyers say there are signs Beijing is trying to limit the authority of Hong Kong courts to rule on core constitutional matters. And people close to the city's top judge, Geoffrey Ma, say he has to contend with Communist Party officials pushing Beijing's view that the rule of law ultimately must be a tool to preserve one-party rule.

That tension flared into view last September when Ma spoke at the International Bar Association conference in Seoul about the rule of law, including the extensive human rights protections built into Hong Kong's legal system. Judges must not be influenced by "extraneous factors such as politics," Hong Kong's chief justice said.

As Ma finished, said three witnesses, a representative from AllBright Law Offices, a leading mainland Chinese legal firm that co-sponsored the lunch event, rushed to the podium to object to what he said was a "political" speech by the chief justice. Amid gasps and snorts of derision, the man was escorted from the microphone, the witnesses said. AllBright did not respond to questions.

Some in the city's legal establishment are now bracing for the possibility that China will begin to meddle in the appointment of new judges, following objections by some pro-Beijing lawmakers in Hong Kong to two recent appointments on the top court. With the search currently underway for at least one new justice for the top court, the three judges who spoke

to Reuters said they feared vacancies could create an opening for Beijing.

Any intervention in the selection process, said one of the justices, would likely spark resignations on the bench.

"We're worried that they are losing patience, and will find ways of tightening the screws," the judge said, referring to the Beijing leadership.

"We know from our interactions with senior mainland judges that they just don't get Hong Kong at all," said the justice, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "They always want to know why Hong Kong is so confused and chaotic, and not 'patriotic.'"

A spokesman for Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said the central government in Beijing had "time and again made it clear" that it would continue to fully implement the "one country, two systems" principle guiding Hong Kong's autonomous relationship with its Chinese sovereign. Beijing, he added, was committed to the Basic Law, the city's mini-constitution that protects its rights and freedoms.

The Chinese authorities did not respond to questions from Reuters.

MASS PROTESTS

Deepening concern over Beijing's meddling in the affairs of Hong Kong fueled the mass protests that erupted last year. The unrest was set off by a perceived assault on the judicial system: The city's government proposed a bill that would have allowed for the extradition of defendants to mainland China, where the courts are tightly controlled by the Communist Party.

The government ultimately withdrew the bill as the protests mushroomed, but by then opposition to the legislation had escalated into a broad movement for greater democracy.

The demonstrators have occasionally focused their anger on the courts, which are handling the cases of thousands of protesters who face criminal charges. Late last year, some demonstrators lobbed petrol bombs outside the entrance to the Court of Final Appeal and the High Court building.

A Reuters poll in March showed that even with the protests dying down amid the pandemic, support for the demands of pro-democracy protesters has grown. Backing for universal suffrage in Hong Kong, for instance, rose to 68% from 60% in December. Support for the protests remained strong, at 58% compared with 59% previously.

Beijing denies intervening in the running of Hong Kong. It has blamed "Western forces" for spurring unrest in the city. Still, many residents fear that the "one country, two systems" formula, agreed when the city was handed over to China by Britain in 1997, is being further eroded.

Responding to questions from Reuters, a judiciary spokeswoman said Ma "would not offer any comment."

The judiciary is now at the heart of the battle over Hong Kong's autonomy. These conflicts are playing out largely behind the scenes in the rarefied atmosphere of the city's judicial corridors.

With their horse-hair wigs and ceremonial robes, Hong Kong's judges symbolize one of the core promises of the handover: the right to a fair trial and equality under the law, all administered by an independent judiciary.

Such rights, a British legacy, do not exist on the mainland. Yet they are written into the Basic Law, Hong Kong's mini-constitution.

Those rights have long been touted, frequently by the Hong Kong government, as the bedrock beneath one of the world's most important financial cities. Significantly, they include the right of Hong Kong's chief justice to appoint foreign judges.

But the Basic Law contains a caveat: Ultimately, the rulings of Hong Kong's top court, the Court of Final Appeal, can be re-interpreted by the standing committee of the National People's Congress, China's parliament.

Beijing last used that power in late 2016 to effectively bar several pro-democracy lawmakers from taking office. The three judges who spoke to Reuters said they feared China would begin to wield this power more frequently, potentially undermining the city's courts.

In November, a Hong Kong court overturned a government emergency ban on protesters wearing masks to obscure their faces. The next day, state news agency Xinhua quoted a spokesman for a body attached to the standing committee saying that Hong Kong courts had no power to rule on the constitutionality of the city's laws.

The announcement was swiftly condemned by local lawyers, and local and foreign academics. The Hong Kong government partially won an appeal last week against the November decision.

THE MESSAGE TO HONG KONG

China's state-controlled media weighed in as protests intensified last year. The Global Times, a tabloid published by the Communist Party's People's Daily, wrote in a November commentary: "The rule of law can save Hong Kong, but the premise is that the rioters must be punished." It added: "Just like the rioters, the judges and lawyers who absolve rioters of their crimes will be despised."

Writing in a Communist Party journal last year, Chinese leader Xi Jinping explained his view on the rule of law. The "socialist rule of law must adhere to the party's leadership," he wrote in the journal, *Qiushi*, which means "Seeking Truth." China, Xi said, "must not copy" other countries, nor follow Western-style "judicial independence."

China's leaders have made their expectations of Hong Kong clear. Last year in Beijing, Vice Premier Han Zheng publicly told the city's chief executive, Carrie Lam, that stopping the violence was the "common responsibility" of her government, the legislature and the

judiciary.

In so saying, Han blurred the lines of Hong Kong's separation of powers — a check on the state that doesn't exist on the mainland.

And this month, a top Chinese official in Hong Kong wrote about the need for "strengthening" the city's legal system to "safeguard" China's national security.

Under their oath of office, Hong Kong's judges must steer clear of the political fray. Following Han's remarks, though, one justice used his ruling on a matter related to the protests and freedom of the press to stress the doctrine of separate powers.

"As an aside," Justice Russell Coleman wrote two days after Han's remarks, "I do not think any judicial officer in Hong Kong requires anyone, whether from in Hong Kong or beyond, to tell him or her how to perform his or her role as part of the independent judiciary."

The judiciary said Coleman had no comment.

"The rule of law and an independent judiciary are constitutionally protected by the Basic Law," Lam's spokesman said.

Some in Hong Kong believe Beijing will struggle to bring the city's judicial system to heel.

"The roots of the common law run deep in Hong Kong and will not be easily uprooted, so I think China can only ultimately take a gradual approach, despite the rhetoric," said Simon Young, a barrister and professor at the University of Hong Kong's law school. "Those values are entrenched through the system."

Young was encouraged by what he said were the robust public defenses of the city's judicial system being mounted by Hong Kong's top judge, Ma, as well as Coleman and others.

A retired senior judge, speaking on condition of anonymity, said while the mainland is clearly trying to pressure Hong Kong's judiciary, it doesn't amount to an existential threat to the rule of law. The test, the former judge said, would be if the legal system succumbed to these pressures. "I have not seen that."

'SPEAKING UP FOR THE RULE OF LAW'

Ma, 64, became chief justice of the Court of Final Appeal in 2010 after a long career as a barrister and a High Court judge. Amid the drama that's shaken his city in the past year, he has forcefully defended judicial independence.

Concluding his speech in Seoul last year, Ma told the audience: "Speaking up for the rule of law as it is properly understood is very much a part of what a lawyer should be doing. Look within yourselves and ask whether you are prepared to stand up and be counted."

At a public appearance in January in Hong Kong, Ma again addressed judicial independence. He repeatedly told reporters he could not discuss the political or even the

legal questions raised by the statements of the leadership in Beijing.

But he did note: "The powers of the courts, by the way, are stated in the Basic Law. Hong Kong is to have independent judicial power, and those words mean exactly what they say."

Ma went further. "Judges don't look at the litigant's background nor his political stance," he said. "Destroying the rule of law is when the court thinks not everyone is equal before the law, and that some are more equal than others."

Several friends and former colleagues of Ma say he is showing signs of strain from the job, including having to continually defend the integrity of the courts.

This was evident, they say, when Ma appeared at the January event, a start-of-the-year gathering of judges, leading lawyers and senior government officials and diplomats.

Ma confirmed that it would be his last time opening the annual event and that he would be retiring in January next year, when he turns 65, forgoing his option of an extension.

By then he would have served more than a decade as chief justice. Ma is only the second person to serve in the position since the 1997 handover.

His successor will be Justice Andrew Cheung, who sits on the Court of Final Appeal and whose appointment was announced in March.

The judiciary said Cheung had no comment for this article.

Some people close to Ma say that while he hasn't been pushed to leave, the constant battle to safeguard the judiciary has worn on him. His job includes dealing with visiting mainland judges and briefings from locally based Chinese officials, which can be tough going, these people say.

While they apparently know better than to meddle in individual cases, say the people close to Ma, the Chinese judges and officials constantly seek to push Beijing's "patriotic" agenda by stressing the importance of the judiciary in defending China's sovereignty and national security.

"I know he tires of the apparatchiks whose Communist Party mantra has no room for even starting to grasp the separation of powers that exists in Hong Kong, or the real meaning or value of judicial independence," said one person who knows the chief justice. "Sometimes he stops engaging ... and simply tries to talk football."

APPOINTING NEW JUDGES

Ma is looking forward to a rest, and having time to indulge in his lifelong passions for cinema, cricket and England's Manchester United football team, say those who know him.

Hong Kong born and British educated, Ma mixes easily in international legal circles as he recruits judicial talent from abroad, foreign envoys and judges say. His ability to continue to attract leading foreign judges to serve on Hong Kong courts is a source of pride for him.

The Court of Final Appeal currently has 23 judges, of whom 15 are foreigners. Many are from the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia. All serve as non-permanent members on the court, which means they are called on periodically to sit on cases. Their presence stems from an arrangement established at the handover that has become an entrenched part of the city's judicial system.

All cases reaching Hong Kong's highest court, the Court of Final Appeal, including key constitutional and human rights matters, are generally adjudicated by a panel of five judges. This includes the chief justice, three permanent judges and one non-permanent judge.

Ma is now leading the hunt for at least one new member on the highest court in his statutory role as head of a committee that handles judicial appointments.

The selection body, known as the Judicial Officers Recommendation Commission, comprises judges, senior lawyers and prominent community figures as well as a government representative, the secretary for justice. They are barred by law from talking about their work. Any key documentation they use is hand-delivered across the city.

"The question is whether outside forces will try to meddle" when decisions need approval, said a person with direct knowledge of the panel's secret deliberations, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "I have to have faith the system will work, but it hangs by only a convention."

The appointments must be approved by city Chief Executive Carrie Lam and the legislature. Traditionally, they have been approved with little fuss. But some of the commission's last significant appointments encountered rare scrutiny in 2018, when some pro-Beijing lawmakers questioned the candidacies in the legislature, as well as the selection process itself.

Brenda Hale, then president of the British Supreme Court, and Beverley McLachlin, former Chief Justice of Canada, were the first women to be appointed to Hong Kong's highest court. Pro-Beijing legislators questioned whether they were too socially liberal for Hong Kong, based on their past rulings.

The judiciary said Hale and McLachlin had no comment.

The appointments were eventually approved, but the message had been sent - Ma and his successors could expect future fights over appointments, particularly of foreign judges. "That was a shot across the bows," said one of the three senior judges who spoke to Reuters. "We all heard it."

Another of the justices told Reuters he is concerned that a generational shift underway on the bench could leave it starved of judges strong enough to withstand meddling in the years ahead.

"Pressures will build on the new judicial leaders," the judge said. "Some of us doubt that they will be able to withstand those pressures as previous generations have done. We just have to hope they can," the judge said. "The rule of law will depend on it."

[Japan] Japan Needs to Telework. Its Paper-Pushing Offices Make That Hard. (New York Times)

New York Times [4/14/2020 5:00 AM, Ben Dooley and Makiko Inoue, 23673K, Neutral] Officially, Shuhei Aoyama has been teleworking for a month. But that doesn't mean he can avoid going to the office.

Several times a week, Mr. Aoyama makes a half-hour commute across Tokyo for a task seemingly more suited to the age of the samurai than of the supercomputer: stamping his official corporate seal on business contracts and government paperwork.

The stamps, known as hanko or inkan, are used in place of signatures on the stream of documents that fill Japan's workplaces, including the hotel network that employs Mr. Aoyama. They have become a symbol of a hidebound office culture that makes it difficult or impossible for many Japanese to work from home even as the country's leaders say working remotely is essential to keeping Japan's coronavirus epidemic from spiraling out of control.

While the world may see Japan as a futuristic land of humanoid robots and intelligent toilets, inside its offices, managers maintain a fierce devotion to paper files, fax machines, business card exchanges and face-to-face meetings.

Essential documents are not digitized, and computer systems are obsolete and tied to offices. Middle managers in Japan's team-oriented workplaces are hesitant to allow employees to work from home, with some fearful that they will slack off or even drink on the job. And the workers who do have the option of teleworking fear harm to their careers.

Forced to balance the needs of the office and the risks to their own health, employees like Mr. Aoyama, 26, say they are losing patience with the country's work traditions. "It's not so much our company's culture as it is Japanese culture that's causing the problems," he said.

In other countries where people are staying home to limit the spread of the virus, many white-collar workers have made a fairly routine shift to Zoom videoconferences and electronic document signing. But in Japan, the world's third-largest economy, the sudden need for social distancing has caught companies off guard.

"Many organizations that were not ready, not prepared, are being forced to do telework, which is causing lots of trouble," said Kunihiko Higa, a telework expert at the Tokyo Institute of Technology.

"Many internal rules require face-to-face meetings," Mr. Higa added. "They think they can't manage workers who are not there."

The Japanese government, too, can be an obstacle, even as it pushes working from home: Companies applying for telework subsidies have reported needing to print out 100 or more pages of documents and deliver them in person.

Before the pandemic, the government was pressing companies and local government offices to move their essential functions online. In a country plagued by natural disasters like earthquakes and typhoons, organizations have long paid lip service to the importance of

telework for ensuring the continuity of business and governmental duties.

In the run-up to the Tokyo Olympics, which were scheduled to begin in July but have been postponed, the government pushed workplaces to allow employees to work from home, hoping to free up the city's notoriously crowded public transportation network for a flood of spectators.

Many companies pledged to get on board. A survey in late February by Keidanren, Japan's national business association, found that nearly 70 percent of its members had instituted or were planning telework policies.

But even as the government has now declared a state of emergency in major cities and is urging people to reduce human-to-human contact by at least 70 percent, few companies seem to have been able, or willing, to put their plans into action.

A survey last month by the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism found that fewer than 13 percent of workers nationwide were able to work from home. Over 70 percent reported difficulties with telework.

The numbers are better in Tokyo. A survey conducted at the end of March by the city's Chamber of Commerce and Industry found that 26 percent of companies had instituted teleworking. On Monday, two days after Prime Minister Shinzo Abe asked businesses to cut commuting to meet social distancing goals, commuter traffic in the capital was down significantly, and business districts were quiet.

Other cities and rural areas are unlikely to see such a dramatic shift. A study in late March by Tokyo-based Persol Research and Consulting found that in Nagoya, Japan's fourth-largest city and one of the first places to be hit hard by the coronavirus, just 9 percent of permanent employees were telecommuting.

"Japanese companies, a lot of them, are set up on the premise that you're all going to be in the same place," said Rochelle Kopp, a consultant who specializes in Japanese business practices. "Even if you have a laptop, you can't always take it home. There are a lot of software and hardware issues."

"The inability to work from home is really hampering Japan's ability to deal with Covid-19," she said, referring to the disease caused by the coronavirus.

For several weeks before Japan declared the state of emergency, it avoided recommending the kind of stringent measures used by other nations to limit people's movement. Many observers have attributed that reluctance to the damage it would inflict on Japan's already-limping economy — damage that could be compounded if companies had to severely curtail operations because they could not easily shift to telework.

For the many workers in Japan who believe they face a false choice between their jobs and their well-being, few things have exemplified the dilemma more than the distinctive red imprint of the venerable hanko.

"Why do we have to put each other at risk just for something trivial like a hanko?" Yoshitaka

Hibi, a professor of Japanese literature at Nagoya University, wrote in a Twitter post that was liked more than 28,000 times.

"This is our chance. For the love of god, someone please destroy this custom," he added.

The practice of using stamps to seal official documents came to Japan from China nearly 2,000 years ago, but did not become a part of everyday bureaucracy until the late 19th century.

Today, the walls of discount shops in Japan are lined with row after row of black self-inking stamps, known as shachihata, inscribed with common surnames. Chain stores design and carve individualized stamps on demand.

Japanese typically have at least two seals: a custom-made one that is registered with the government and used for formal documents, and another that is used in more informal situations. People often keep one at the entrance of their home for deliveries, another in the desk at their office and a third secreted away in their house for using on bank documents.

Corporations have their own individualized seals, often kept under lock and key, and produced only for use on important paperwork, such as contracts.

In traditional workplaces, as documents flow from desk to desk, even employees with only tangential relationships to the work described in them are expected to add their stamp, indicating that they have read and approved the contents.

Even the most technologically savvy companies have not been able to completely shake the habit. Line, the company that developed Japan's most popular chat app, has largely eliminated the use of hanko in its office, designing an application that allows users to seal documents with a digital stamp.

But its employees, said a spokeswoman, Satsuki Motojima, still cannot avoid an occasional trip to the office to add their seal to documents required by the government or other companies.

Takao Tokui, the chairman of the All Japan Seal Industry Association, argued that hanko were an important part of the country's "social infrastructure," crucial to people who are less tech savvy, including the elderly and people in rural areas.

Still, change could come quickly, said Mr. Hibi, the literature professor at Nagoya University. Shortly after his tweet, the school said it would no longer require students to receive a hanko from professors to approve their classes.

"As it turns out," he said, "all it took was for someone to say something."

[Philippines] Philippines ramps up coronavirus testing to find thousands of unknown infections (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 3:08 AM, Karen Lema and Neil Jerome Morales, Neutral]

The Philippines introduced a more aggressive testing programme for the coronavirus on

Tuesday to locate as many as 15,000 unknown infections, despite having implemented some of Asia's strictest and earliest lockdown measures.

Authorities have targeted several phases of ramped-up testing, starting on Tuesday with 8,000 people working at or admitted to Manila hospitals that were treating patients of COVID-19, a disease that has so far infected 4,932 people locally and killed 315.

Though the Philippines has Southeast Asia's highest number of coronavirus infections and 37% of its known fatalities, the government believes its swift move to close borders and put half its population under home quarantine may have averted a far greater toll and a healthcare disaster.

The former military chief in charge of the national coronavirus task force said on Tuesday modelling suggested 75% of infections – or 15,000 people – had yet to be detected, so a big testing push in the capital could be decisive.

"Our strategy is Metro Manila first because this is the epicentre," Carlito Galvez said on radio. "When we test Manila, we can win this battle against COVID."

The government has been criticised for being too slow with testing but has quickly gained ground since the start of April due to increases in test kits and laboratory capacity. President Rodrigo Duterte on Monday approved the procurement of an additional 900,000 kits, on top of 100,000 now in use.

The number of people tested stood at 33,814 as of April 12, a tenfold increase from March 29, although still far short of the 110,000 in Vietnam, which has 265 coronavirus cases and no reported deaths.

Indonesia is more precarious, according to health experts, who warn of more than 1.6 million infections in a best-case scenario, and intensive care units being overwhelmed, even if stronger containment measures are introduced.

Testing and restrictions in Indonesia are limited, and its 399 coronavirus deaths are the highest in Asia outside of China.

Citing expert projections, Philippine Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles on Tuesday said the local lockdown, which started five days after confirmation of the first domestic transmission on March 7, may have prevented between 1.9 and 8.3 million coronavirus infections. The government has stressed that it is not mass testing, but using a targeted, risk-based approach, starting with the most vulnerable and aiming for 8,000 tests daily.

It wants to test more in areas with known outbreaks, or people showing symptoms, then isolate them at new treatment centres being prepared in stadiums and conference centres until their recovery.

"This is where the quarantine facilities will come in handy, so we can unclog the already overheating health system," said task force spokesman Restituto Padilla. "We can maximise available test kits and flatten the curve."

[South Korea] A Nation Holds Elections in the Pandemic. 'Covid-19: Relax and Come Vote!' (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 10:50 AM, Timothy W. Martin and Andrew Jeong, Neutral] Days before Wednesday's national legislative election, candidate Ko Min-Jung stood in the bed of a campaign truck slowly trawling alleys and side streets for voters.

In any other election, she and hundreds of others on the ballot would be freely addressing crowds and glad-handing supporters. Instead, Ms. Ko was ferried past darkened buildings and closed storefronts, delivering her message over a microphone wrapped in a pink polka dot slipcover.

"I can't see your faces, but I can see your hearts and minds," said Ms. Ko, wearing white gloves and a face mask bearing the inscription of the left-leaning Democratic Party of Korea.

South Korea is holding the world's first national vote in a country deeply hit by the coronavirus pandemic. All 300 National Assembly seats are up for grabs, attracting dozens of political parties. President Moon Jae-in's ruling Democratic Party, which uses the slogan "Winning the Covid-19 War," currently holds the most seats, though not a majority.

The campaigns are an experiment in social outreach in the era of social distancing. South Korea politics look a lot different when voters are instructed to literally stay out of reach.

Ms. Ko's truck, while broadcasting a cover of the classic Korean song "Don't Worry," stopped every few minutes seeking an audience. The candidate beamed when someone popped their head out of an apartment window or when a person cracked a door open. Ms. Ko's campaign workers chased potential voters on the street to hand them campaign cards.

"Can you hear me OK?" she asked a construction worker walking at some distance. He gave a thumbs-up.

Song Young-gil, who is running for re-election, wears a clear plastic shield that covers from forehead to chin and attaches to his eyeglasses. It makes it easier for voters to recognize him than a face mask, he said, but "it's safe."

South Korea's politicians lean primarily on meet-and-greet events at traditional marketplaces and busy intersections. Political advertising is heavily restricted, and legislative candidates are allowed only two weeks to campaign.

Elections in South Korea have never been delayed, even during the Korean War, the government said, a point of national pride. Mr. Moon, whose popularity has surged after his nation's successful coronavirus response, has little political incentive to wait. The number of new Covid-19 cases in South Korea has peaked but not stopped. Social-distancing measures are supposed to end Sunday.

South Korea reported 10,564 coronavirus cases as of Tuesday, a number now growing by only several dozen patients a day. Some 222 people have died. For weeks, the nation had the second-highest infection total after China. It slowed contagions through aggressive testing, tech-heavy contact tracing and with citizens largely following government

recommendations to stay home.

Wednesday's election takes place at 14,330 polling stations. The National Election Commission detailed extra precautions in an online video, "Covid-19: Relax and come vote!" Workers in hazmat suits and face masks are shown spraying disinfectant over the ballot box, in restrooms and on handrails.

Among the new rules: Voters must wait 3 feet apart at tape-marked spots. They also get their temperatures taken, a squirt of hand sanitizer and plastic gloves before walking inside polling places.

The virus sidelined fingerprint scanners used to identify voters in past elections. Instead, voters will sign their name with a stylus on a digital pad or in a physical handbook. They must present government photo IDs, then tug down their masks so officials can see their faces.

Early voting, conducted on Friday and Saturday, yielded a record turnout, nearly 27% of the country's roughly 44 million voters. Park Su-young, a 33-year-old barista, wore a black face mask to her central Seoul polling station. She felt mostly safe, she said, although some older voters skipped the hand sanitizer. She had trouble hearing instructions from masked-up staff.

"There was room for some improvement," Ms. Park said.

The country's public-health director has urged candidates to stay 6 feet away from others during appearances and to avoid fist bumps. "Greet voters with your eyes," the official said.

Ahn Sol-ji, a 30-year-old musical actress in Seoul, said the low-key election delivered an unexpected civic boost. "This forces me to pay attention more to what these candidates actually are saying," she said.

Trying to grab eyeballs online and offline, Oh Jun-seok, a left-leaning fringe party candidate, parodied a popular South Korean rapper, "Mommy Son," wearing the singer's distinctive pink ski mask.

"Progressive politics will never die!" Mr. Oh rapped, waving his arms. The singer's agency complained, and Mr. Oh has since apologized and taken down the video and posters.

Youn Kun-young's original campaign headquarters in western Seoul got shut down after the building was identified as the site of the city's largest virus outbreak at the time. Mr. Youn, a Democratic Party candidate, then moved the operation across the street from a hospital treating coronavirus patients.

Thae Yong-ho, running for the conservative United Future Party, hopes to be the first former North Korean regime official elected to South Korea's parliament. He defected four years ago and draws what passes as sizable campaign crowds.

Mr. Thae tells the 1,000 or so voters he meets every day to abide by social distancing rules. Many people, especially older voters, insist on talking with him up close. The candidate

wears a bulletproof vest and always brings a bottle of hand sanitizer.

"I can't refuse now. I have to welcome them," Mr. Thae said. "That is my dilemma."

Hwang In-kew, a minor conservative party candidate, draws more cautious groups. "Out of 200 people," he said, "maybe just one handshake."

[South Korea] South Korea forges ahead with election – with masks, thermometers and lots of hand sanitizer (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [4/14/2020 9:05 AM, Victoria Kim, Neutral]

At a time when most governments are urging citizens to stay at home, one country is calling on them to come out in force this week — to the polls.

South Korea is going ahead with its hotly contested parliamentary elections Wednesday, even as nations around the world, from Britain to Bolivia, have postponed races out of coronavirus concerns and a primary in Wisconsin raised myriad concerns about safety and disenfranchisement.

With nearly four out of five South Koreans saying they intend to cast a ballot and early voting already logging record turnout, the country may offer an early look at how to hold a general election in the midst of a pandemic.

Election officials have assured citizens that they are taking every precaution to keep voters safe. All voters are being required to wear masks, and polling stations are being thoroughly sanitized. Poll workers wearing gloves, masks and protective face shields will take each voter's temperature, squirt his or her hands with sanitizer and then distribute a pair of disposable plastic gloves.

Anyone with a fever or other coronavirus-related symptoms will be routed to a separate voting booth, which will be disinfected after each use.

After much debate, the government also announced measures to allow those under mandatory 14-day quarantine — people who have traveled abroad or come into contact with a known COVID-19 patient — to leave their homes during a one hour, 40-minute window Wednesday evening to cast their ballots. Only those without symptoms will be permitted to do so, and they're required to walk or drive themselves to the polls rather than take public transit.

Some coronavirus patients under quarantine also had the option of voting by mail, which South Korea typically only allows in limited cases.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic, more than a quarter of eligible voters turned out for early voting over the weekend in an election widely viewed as a referendum on the presidency of Moon Jae-in. Moon, a liberal, was voted into office in 2017 after his predecessor was impeached in a corruption scandal that triggered a large-scale protest movement that filled the streets of Seoul.

Before the pandemic, the elections were shaping up to be dominated by South Korea's

lackluster economy and Moon's stalled policy of engagement with North Korea, which has been at an impasse since talks between the U.S. and North Korea fell apart.

But the virus changed everything.

Even though Moon made an early blunder, prematurely saying out of concern for the economy that the outbreak would be over soon, politicians in South Korea have largely stayed out of the way of the disease-control professionals who took charge of the epidemic response.

Systems and laws put in place after the country's bungled handling of a 2015 outbreak of the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome kicked in, and after a surge in late February, daily coronavirus infections slowed to fewer than 30 new cases this week. The country's success in controlling the outbreak and flattening the curve of new infections has received acclaim and attention from around the world.

That's translated into the highest approval ratings for Moon — 57% — since 2018, according to Gallup Korea.

Moon said Monday that the election could serve as an example to other countries still struggling to curb the epidemic. "If we can maintain the results of our disease-prevention efforts while holding nationwide elections, we can give the world the hope that it's possible to return to normal social systems and daily activities," he said.

Running for seats in South Korea's 300-seat parliament are a high-profile former North Korean diplomat who defected to the South, young feminists who've formed their own party on a platform against misogyny and sexism, and two former prime ministers going head to head in a district in central Seoul.

On street corners in recent weeks, campaigners courted voters wearing jackets, hats and matching face masks in each political party's color.

At competing rallies in the race between the two former premiers, enthusiasm for the candidates appeared to trump any social distancing concerns as citizens mobbed candidates for photos and handshakes.

The opposition has largely supported the government's anti-virus efforts but has faulted Moon for not swiftly banning travel from China and accused him of taking advantage of South Korea's coronavirus-related economic stimulus to buy votes. Hwang Kyo-ahn of the conservative main opposition United Future Party did not mention the coronavirus once in a 15-minute speech belted over loudspeakers, focusing instead on economic woes and taxation.

"If he mentions it, he's just helping the incumbents. I'm on this side [of the political spectrum], but a good job is a good job," said Lee Wan-jae, a 67-year-old taxi driver watching Hwang's speech, who said he always voted with the conservatives. "With the coronavirus, it's not the administration but the public health officials who are doing good work. They're trying to free-ride on that."

[Taiwan] Taiwan reports no new coronavirus cases for first time in a month (Reuters)
Reuters [4/14/2020 3:47 AM, Ben Blanchard and Yimou Lee, 5304K, Neutral]

Taiwan on Tuesday reported no new cases of the coronavirus for the first time in more than a month, in the latest sign that the island's early and effective prevention methods have paid off.

Taiwan has won plaudits from health experts for how it has fought the virus, including starting as early as Dec. 31 checks on passengers arriving from China's Wuhan city, where the first cases were reported late last year.

Taiwan has reported 393 cases to date, and six deaths. A total of 338 were so-called imported cases, where people were suspected of getting infected overseas before entering Taiwan, with the rest cases of local transmissions.

"Of course, we hope it has passed," Health Minister Chen Shih-chung told a news conference, referring to the virus on the island. "But we still need to be on our guard. Of course we feel happy at no new cases today."

Chen said the last time Taiwan reported no new cases was March 9, after which numbers spiked for a time with people coming back to the island from places now reeling from the virus in Europe and the United States.

The number of people discharged after they were diagnosed with the coronavirus has reached 124, Taiwan's government added.

However, restrictions remain in place, such as compulsory 14-day quarantines for all arrivals onto the island, and the number of international flights has fallen dramatically.

Taiwan has not gone into total lockdown because of the virus and life has continued relatively normally, though the government has promoted social distancing and mandated the wearing of face masks on public transport.

[Taiwan] For first time in a month, Taiwan reports no new cases of coronavirus (Yahoo News)

Yahoo News [4/14/2020 4:02 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Taiwan on Tuesday reported no new cases of the coronavirus for the first time in more than a month, in the latest sign that the island's early and effective prevention methods have paid off. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Vanuatu] Pacific clean-up after homes 'blown to smithereens' by superstorm (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/14/2020 2:29 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Tens of thousands of people remain homeless in Vanuatu a week after Tropical Cyclone Harold pummelled the impoverished Pacific nation, smashing houses and destroying crops, aid workers said Tuesday.

The cyclone careened through the South Pacific last week, peaking as a Category Five superstorm that gouged a trail of destruction across the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Fiji and

Tonga.

With aid efforts hampered by coronavirus-related travel restrictions, World Vision said up to 35 percent of Vanuatu's 300,000 population were in temporary shelters after losing their homes.

"Shelter at this time remains absolutely the most pressing issue," World Vision's Vanuatu director Kendra Gates Derousseau told AFP.

She said in some areas the destruction was worse than the last Category Five system to hit the country, Cyclone Pam in 2015, which flattened the capital Port Vila and wiped out almost two-thirds of the country's economic capacity.

"After Pam, people were able to pick up the pieces pretty quickly, put a tarp on the roof and replant the garden," she said.

"What we're seeing from Harold is that houses have been blown to smithereens, there's nothing to pick up."

She said there was extensive damage on the islands of Pentecost, Ambae and Santo, where Vanuatu's second-largest town, Luganville, took a direct hit.

The death toll in Vanuatu stands at three, although Gates Derousseau said that could rise as information filtered in from hard-hit remote areas.

In the Solomons, 27 people died when they were washed from the deck of an inter-island ferry, while the Red Cross said there was one fatality in Fiji.

No deaths were recorded in Tonga, where at least three tourist resorts and more than 400 homes were badly damaged.

Mark Lowcock, the UN head of humanitarian affairs and emergency relief, pledged US\$2.5 million towards drinking water, food, shelter and healthcare in Vanuatu.

"The government and first responders in Vanuatu did an excellent job of making people safe ahead of the storm hitting and meeting immediate needs after it hit," he said in a statement.

"As the extent of the destruction becomes clear, this UN funding will ensure aid supplies are maintained and reach the people who need it."

The coronavirus pandemic has complicated disaster relief efforts, with Vanuatu reluctant to open its international borders as it seeks to remain one of the few countries without any confirmed cases of the virus.

Gates Derousseau said this meant aid distribution to some areas of Vanuatu had been slow, but the government could not afford to risk importing the disease.

"From the outside, it looks frustrating," she said.

"There's no choice though, a COVID-19 outbreak on top of the cyclone would be unfathomable."

Australia and New Zealand have airlifted disaster relief supplies to Vanuatu, and Gates Derousseau said China had also sent a plane loaded with COVID-19-related medical supplies.

She said all internationally sourced supplies went through strict quarantine measures before entering the country.

South and Central Asia

With 411 ceasefire violations being reported in March alone, India issues demarche to Pakistan (Yahoo News/Oneindia)

Yahoo News/Oneindia [4/14/2020 3:01 AM, Vicky Nanjpa, 4742K, Negative]

India has issued two demarches to Pakistan over the ceasefire violations. India lodged the protest after a woman and two minors were killed in unprovoked firing by Pakistan in Jammu and Kashmir.

New Delhi has described this act as a deliberate one to target its nationals. A second demarche was issued after the Pakistan maritime security forces fired at Indian fishermen off the Gujarat coast in which one person was injured.

The Ministry of External Affairs called Pakistan's Deputy High Commissioner Syed Haider and lodged a protest. In normal course, the Pakistan officer would have been summoned, but owing to the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, the call had to be made, officials tell OneIndia.

India condemned the violation in Jammu and Kashmir in the strongest possible terms.

The act was described as a deliberate one aimed at targeting its nationals. India has also asked Pakistan to probe such incidents and said that its forces should refrain from such acts. These are heinous crimes against our nationals, India also said.

India has said that Pakistan violated the ceasefire 1,144 times between January and March. The highest number of violations (411) was recorded in March. India has said that the ceasefire violations are to provide cover fire to terrorists and help them infiltrate.

The Indian Intelligence had recently drawn up a report in which it said scores of launchpads had been activated along the Line of Control. Around 200 terrorists were waiting along the border to infiltrate into the Valley, the report also said.

[India] Modi Extends India Lockdown as Coronavirus Fight Intensifies (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [4/14/2020 5:22 AM, Bibhudatta Pradhan and Anurag Joshi, Neutral]

Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended a nationwide lockdown through May 3 as India steps up its fight to contain the spread of the coronavirus among its 1.3 billion people.

The government will evaluate every town, district and state until April 20 for adherence with the lockdown, Modi said in a televised address on Tuesday, hours before a 21-day lockdown imposed last month was set to end. Areas that are less likely to turn into a hotspot may be allowed to open up certain essential activities from April 20.

"We will have to keep a close and strict watch on the places which run the risk of becoming hotspots," Modi said in his fourth national address since infections began ticking up sharply in mid-March. "The creation of new hotspots will further challenge our hard work and penance. Hence, let us extend the strictness and austerity in the fight against corona for the upcoming one week."

The decision to extend the restrictions comes as the number of those infected by the virus has climbed despite most people staying at home over the past three weeks. Still, Modi said compared with some other countries India is in a "well-managed" position and the path of social distancing adopted in the world's second-most populous nation is correct.

India has so far reported 10,541 infections and 358 deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. That compares with more than half a million cases and nearly 24,000 deaths in the U.S.

"Sustained lockdown with periodic relaxation extending over two months is necessary to break the chain of transmission, reduce surge in infection and prevent resurgence of the pandemic," said Rajmohan Panda, additional professor at the Public Health Foundation of India. "With the extension, the country will get time to focus on containment of hotspots and strengthen district-wise surveillance efforts."

Modi said that while from an economic point of view the measure looks costly right now, the aim to save lives was paramount. He said one of his top priorities is to reduce the difficulties being faced by those who earn a daily wage: The lockdown prompted tens of thousands of migrant workers to flee from cities to villages after they lost work, prompting fears of starvation.

The central and state governments are also working together to minimize the problems being faced by farmers as they harvest the winter crop, Modi said.

"Be compassionate toward the people who work with you in your business or industry," Modi said. "Do not deprive them of their livelihood."

Asia's third-largest economy was on track to grow 5%, its weakest expansion in more than a decade in the fiscal year that ended in March. Now it's looking at a further downturn.

"The economic impact looks set to be worse than we had expected earlier," said Rahul Bajoria and Shreya Sodhani, economists at Barclays Bank Plc. "Despite being characterized as essential sectors, the negative impact of the shutdown measures on the mining, agriculture, manufacturing and utility sectors appears higher than we had expected."

Regions showing improvement in containing the virus spread up to April 20 may see some relaxation for essential activities, but that will also come with conditions, Modi said, noting

the government will issue detailed guidelines on Wednesday.

India may be losing close to 400 billion rupees (\$5.2 billion) daily due to the lockdown with an estimated loss amounting to as much as 8 trillion rupees during the past 21 days, Sangita Reddy, president of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry, said in a statement, adding close to 40 million jobs are at risk during the April to September period.

"The prime minister's directions on graded opening will help start some production activity to ensure that as soon as lockdown opens, there are no shortages faced," said Reddy.

India on Tuesday also extended the ban on all domestic and international scheduled flights as well as cancellation of passenger trains through May 3. As part of its lockdown and social distancing push India has asked people to stay indoors.

Over the last month it has gradually widened its testing norms even though the country's testing rates are still some of the lowest in the world. It has also diverted existing medical infrastructure to fight the spread of the virus.

[India] India extends world's biggest lockdown, ignites protest by migrant workers (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 10:51 AM, Sanjeev Miglani and Rupam Jain, 5304K, Neutral]

India extended a lockdown on its 1.3 billion people until at least May 3 on Tuesday and Prime Minister Narendra Modi said economic sacrifices were needed to save lives as the number of coronavirus cases exceeded 10,000.

A few hours after Modi spoke, police baton-charged protesting migrant workers in Mumbai.

Sharp downward revisions to economic growth forecasts in the wake of the pandemic point towards surging unemployment, but Modi urged Indians to maintain the discipline shown in the first three weeks of the lockdown.

"That means until May 3, each and every one of us will have to remain in the lockdown," Modi said in a televised address to the nation.

"From an economic only point of view, it undoubtedly looks costly right now; but measured against the lives of Indian citizens, there is no comparison itself."

Later in Mumbai, thousands of jobless migrant workers gathered at a railway station, demanding to be allowed to travel to their homes in the countryside.

"Since trains and buses are not operational, they were making noise. To disperse them, police were forced to lathi (baton) charge," said a senior police official.

Hundreds of thousands fled the big cities for their homes in the hinterland when Modi announced the lockdown last month, many walking great distances with their families on empty highways.

Pakistan, with a population of 205 million, also prolonged its lockdown, due to end on Wednesday, by two weeks. Nepal extended a lockdown of its 30 million people until April 27. Nepal has 16 cases of the virus and no deaths but worries about a spillover from India.

Modi announced the extension as latest government data showed the number of people infected with coronavirus in India had reached 10,363, with 339 deaths.

TESTING

Although the numbers are small compared with some Western nations, health experts fear that is because of India's low levels of testing and that actual infection levels could be far higher.

Lacking testing kits and protective gear for medical workers, India has only tested 137 per million of its population, compared with 15,935 per million in Italy, and 8,138 in the United States.

Health experts have warned that widespread contagion could be disastrous in a country where millions live in dense slums and the health care system is overstretched.

According to the government, India has about one doctor per 1,500 citizens. The World Health Organization recommends one doctor per 1,000. In rural areas, where two-thirds of Indians live, the ratio is one doctor to more than 10,000 people.

So far, more than three-quarters of India's cases are concentrated in about 80 of the country's more than 700 districts, including New Delhi and Mumbai.

"It is my request and prayer to all fellow citizens, that we must not let coronavirus spread to new areas at any cost," Modi said. But the shutdown of the \$2.9 trillion economy is exacting a heavy toll.

Since the lockdown began in late March, unemployment has almost doubled to around 14.5%, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, a Mumbai-based private think-tank.

The shutdown has already sparked an exodus of millions of workers from small industries like textiles and leather, and service industries like retail, tourism, construction and other sectors from cities to the villages

"I am well aware of the problems you have faced — some for food, some for movement from place to place, and others for staying away from homes and families," Modi said.

For them, he offered the hope that restrictions in parts of the country that are not coronavirus hot spots might be slightly eased next week.

Former finance minister P. Chidambaram said that while the country stood behind Modi in fighting the pandemic, he could do more for the poor.

"There is money, there is food, but the government will not release either money or food,"

he said.

Most private economists and the World Bank have revised down India's growth forecasts for the current year to between 1.5% and 2.8% because of the pandemic. Barclays Bank on Tuesday, forecast zero growth this year.

Official government figures on the spread of the coronavirus in South Asia are as follows:

- India has 10,363 confirmed cases, including 339 deaths
- Pakistan has 5,374 cases, including 93 deaths
- Bangladesh has 803 cases, including 39 deaths
- Afghanistan has 714 cases, including 23 deaths
- Sri Lanka has 219 cases, including 7 deaths
- Maldives has 20 cases and no deaths
- Nepal has 16 cases and no deaths
- Bhutan has five cases and no deaths

[India] India's Modi extends nationwide coronavirus lockdown until May 3 (CNN)

CNN [4/14/2020 4:05 AM, Manveena Suri and Helen Regan, 5551K, Neutral] Video [HERE](#)

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi has extended the country's nationwide lockdown until May 3 in a bid to contain the continued spread of the coronavirus, but said that some states which have avoided outbreaks may be allowed to resume "important activities."

Speaking in a televised address on Tuesday, Modi said it was vital that the virus is prevented from impacting parts of the country that remain unaffected.

"My request to all my countrymen is that coronavirus will not be allowed to spread across new areas at any cost," said Modi, who wore a scarf covering his mouth and nose which he removed before speaking. "We have to be very careful about hotspots. We will have to keep a close watch on the places that are expected to become hotspots."

The 21-day lockdown for India's 1.3 billion people came into force at the end of the day on March 24 and was set to expire on Tuesday, April 14.

Since the lockdown was enforced, only essential services have been operational. Those include water, electricity, health services, fire services, grocery stores and municipal services.

All regular shops, commercial establishments, factories, workshops, offices, markets and places of worship have been closed and interstate buses and metros have been suspended. Construction activity was also halted during this period.

"Until May 3, all of us will have to remain in lockdown. During this time, we have to follow the same discipline as we have been doing," Modi said.

Following Modi's address, India's Directorate General of Civil Aviation tweeted that all domestic and international scheduled flights will remain suspended until end of day on May 3. Similarly, India's Ministry of Railways tweeted that all passenger train services will also remain suspended until then.

Before the speech, several Indian states had ordered extended lockdowns until April 30, in an attempt to stop the virus from spreading. Those included Maharashtra, which has reported 2,334 cases and 160 deaths – the worst outbreak in the country.

Lockdown could be eased in some areas

While the lockdown measures will continue, Modi said that some states and districts that have shown to have avoided an outbreak "could be allowed to resume select necessary activities" but with conditions.

"Until April 20, every town, every police station, every district, every state will be evaluated on how much the lockdown is being followed. The extent to which the region has protected itself from coronavirus will be noted," Modi said. "The rules for going out will be very strict. Permission will be withdrawn immediately if lockdown rules are broken, and spread of coronavirus risked."

The Prime Minister did not offer any specifics but said "detailed guidelines" will be issued by the government on Wednesday.

A likely scenario could be exceptions for sectors such as farming, which is key to food production, the economy as well as the livelihoods of millions of agriculture workers.

"While creating the new guidelines, we have kept in mind the interests of the poor and daily wage workers," Modi said. "The harvesting of winter crops is also underway. The central government and the state governments are working together to ensure farmers face minimal problems."

Testing capabilities

India is the world's second most populous country and the fifth biggest economy, and there are fears that the country's health systems would not be able to cope with a major outbreak. On Tuesday, India surpassed 10,000 reported coronavirus cases.

The country has at least 10,363 reported cases, including 339 deaths, according to the Ministry of Health.

Modi acknowledged that India has "limited resources" but said the country was "making progress on the health infrastructure front."

"In January, we had just one lab to test, now testing is being done in more than 220 labs,"

he said.

India has long faced criticism for its low testing rates, which could belie the true extent of the virus's spread in the country and make ending the lockdown difficult.

As of April 12, India had conducted a total of 206,212 tests.

In his speech, Modi thanked citizens for adhering to the lockdown restrictions over the past three weeks.

"You have faced difficulties to save yourself and the nation," he said. "I understand the great difficulties you are facing regarding food, the lack of movement. Some had to stay away from their families. You are fulfilling duties as disciplined soldiers for the sake of the nation."

Modi also touted his administration's efforts in preventing the infection from spreading "compared to other countries."

"India didn't wait for the problem to escalate. Instead, as soon as the problem appeared, we tried to stop it by making swift decisions. I can't imagine what the situation would have been had such quick decisions not been taken."

[India] TN govt. says rapid kits from China will arrive in two days, but will they? (Yahoo News/The News Minute)

Yahoo News/The News Minute [4/14/2020 8:24 AM, Staff, 4742K, Neutral]

On Saturday evening, three days after Tamil Nadu was supposed to receive the rapid antibody test kits that it had ordered from China, the state Chief Secretary K Shanmugam, delivered shocking news. He told the media present at the Secretariat that there is a delay in receiving the kits – because the consignment meant for India got 'diverted' to the United States of America. Sources in the Tamil Nadu government now tell TNM that kits are likely to arrive in two days.

However, although the state government appears confident that the kits will reach soon, the company that Tamil Nadu has ordered these kits from has not honoured its other commitments yet.

"While orders have been placed with many companies, the primary company we have approached is called Guangzhou Wondfo Biotech. Around 1 lakh Wondfo SARS-CoV-2 antibody test kits are expected to reach soon," says a source in the government. Guangzhou Wondfo Biotech is a China based company that has been approved for providing rapid testing kits to India by India's nodal medical agency, the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). Reports suggest that these kits could cost USD 6 to 10 (approx Rs 460 to 760) each. ICMR has also ordered 5 lakh kits from Wondfo – but the firm has not delivered these kits yet.

The delay has been attributed to China changing its policy and making it mandatory for any consignment going out of the country to be endorsed by the government, Chinese FDA (Food and Drug Administration) [National Medical Products Administration]. Because of this,

there has been a domino effect across the world, and countries like the US, that have been on the waiting list for longer and have more muscle power, are being given first preference once the kits are ready to ship.

"What the Chief Secretary said in the press conference is not a problem for Tamil Nadu alone. Across India, no states have received rapid testing kits. Our Ministry of External Affairs and the Union government are following up on this matter on a daily basis and we, in turn, are contacting the Centre constantly for any updates on the matter," says the senior official.

The Tamil Nadu government is cognizant of the question over the quality of these kits, and is taking precautions as well, says the source. "When the kits arrive in Tamil Nadu, we will send them to the King Institute of Preventive Medicine and Research to validate. Kits which had arrived in Spain from China were found to be faulty, so this a precaution we will take," says the government source.

However, while the state government insists that these kits will arrive in two days, the ICMR has not committed to a definite timeline. On Tuesday, when reporters asked the Union Health Ministry and ICMR about the status of the kits, they were told that 37 lakh antibody kits 'will arrive anytime soon'.

When asked about the usage of these kits, the senior officer in Tamil Nadu says that it will not replace the Polymerase chain reaction (PCR) tests that are currently in use. "For high-risk people, we will continue with PCR tests. But for others, at the community level testing, we will use these kits which will detect antibodies to coronavirus. If they are positive then they will be taken for PCR tests. This will reduce pressure on the medical system and also the results will be much faster allowing for more tests," he says.

While the official says the state is confident about the containment measures taken, whether they have been fully successful will be known only after the lockdown is lifted. "If it is lifted on May 3, by the first week of June, the real result of the efforts taken now will be apparent."

[India] Indians stuck in Dubai airport for 3 weeks desperate to return home (Yahoo News/Oneindia)

Yahoo News/Oneindia [4/14/2020 2:02 AM, Vikash Aiypa, 4742K, Negative]

Nineteen Indians are stuck at the Dubai International Airport for the last 21 days after India announced its COVID-19 lockdown, leaving them tired, homesick and desperate to return home, according to a media report.

Most of these stranded persons were in transit when India stopped inbound flights in view of the coronavirus pandemic, the Gulf News reported.

The following few days these stranded persons made the airport benches their home.

After COVID-19 tests on March 21 — which was negative for all — they were shifted to the Dubai International Airport Hotel on March 25. Currently, all the stranded Indians are lodged at the airport hotel.

One of the stranded persons is 37-year-old Arun Singh, who missed his 4 am Emirates flight to Ahmedabad on March 22.

Singh says it is cruel irony that sleep is what he does for most of the day now. "I have been eating and sleeping and eating and sleeping ever since they put us here (airport hotel). I am comfortable but am desperate to go home," said Singh, an IT employee at a UAE bank.

Singh, unlike the other stranded Indians, has a UAE residency visa but he cannot leave the airport because of suspension of visas.

Singh does not know when he will leave for India. "Every few days I send messages to the Indian consulate officials but am yet to hear back from them," he told the Gulf News.

"Today, I came across a heartwarming news report which said that UAE has offered to repatriate Indians who are stuck in the UAE. I hope that happens soon," Singh was quoted by the daily.

Deepak Gupta, who has been stranded since March 18, said he is concerned about his pregnant wife in New Delhi.

"She needs me by her side. Soon I will complete one month at the airport, I am beginning to lose hope," said Gupta, a senior employee at a multi-national company in Gurugram.

Gupta, like many others, landed in Dubai from Europe for a connecting flight to New Delhi.

However, his plans were hit after India banned the entry of all incoming passengers from Europe.

Europe is the worst-hit continent in the coronavirus pandemic, which has killed more than 1,09,000 people worldwide.

In Europe, over 75,000 virus deaths have been reported with most fatalities in Italy, Spain, Britain and France.

[India] Has India's 'airpocalypse' put the poor more at risk from coronavirus? (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 9:17 AM, Annie Banerji and Thin Lei Win, Neutral]

From street sweepers and farmers to rural housewives, poor Indians who breathe some of the world's dirtiest air are at greater risk of dying from the new coronavirus than wealthier groups, health experts have warned.

India is home to about half of the world's 50 most polluted cities, according to Swiss firm IQAir, with emissions fuelled by industry, vehicle exhaust fumes and coal-fired power plants.

New Delhi was named in February as the capital with the dirtiest air.

Dust from building sites and smoke from burning rubbish and crop fields also contribute to

what is locally dubbed the "airpocalypse."

Environmentalists say this air pollution hits poor and socially marginalised communities most as they often live and work in or close to industrial and commercial areas.

In addition, they tend to burn wood, dung, kerosene or coal indoors to cook and heat their homes.

Long exposure to health-harming emissions can weaken immune systems, making it harder to fight off the coronavirus, which in severe cases causes shortness of breath and lung failure, said Arvind Kumar, a leading chest surgeon in New Delhi.

"The poor will be far more vulnerable because ... poverty is linked to air pollution – and air pollution is linked to higher mortality to (the novel coronavirus)," said Kumar, founder of the Lung Care Foundation.

Those suffering from malnutrition also have weak immune systems and are more prone to infections, giving them low chances of fighting COVID-19, he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

Overall, nine in 10 people on the planet breathe poor-quality air, which kills an estimated 7 million people each year, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

More than 90% of air pollution-related deaths occur in low- and middle-income countries, mainly in Asia and Africa, it found in a 2018 report.

India's toxic air claimed 1.24 million lives in 2017, according to a study published by The Lancet Planetary Health.

Kumar cited recent studies that draw links between air pollution, COVID-19 – the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus – and mortality rates, including in Italy, one of the world's hardest-hit countries with more than 20,000 deaths.

In a study published this month in the journal *Environmental Pollution*, Danish and Italian scientists said the two Italian regions with the highest death tolls – Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna – are also among the most polluted in Europe.

While other factors likely contributed to the deaths, the bodies of the victims "may have already been weakened by the accumulated exposure to air pollution," the researchers said.

Similarly, another new study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health looked at data from about 3,000 counties in the United States, covering 98% of the country's population.

It found that residents of counties with high levels of fine particulate pollution over decades were 15% more likely to die from COVID-19 than inhabitants of regions with just 1 microgram per cubic metre less of such PM2.5 pollution.

Still, it remains unclear if the virus is carried on the polluting particles or if dirty air damages

the layer of cells that cover the lungs “which makes it easier for the virus to enter”, said Mark Nieuwenhuijsen, an environmental epidemiology professor at the Barcelona Institute for Global Health.

Indians have been breathing easier since a national lockdown came into force on March 25 to combat the coronavirus outbreak, which has infected more than 10,000 and killed about 350 people.

With cars off the road and factories closed, skyscrapers usually shrouded in smog have been visible under blue skies and residents say they can spot more stars than usual.

Kumar of the Lung Care Foundation said India should take a cue and start moving faster to ditch dirty fossil fuels and adopt renewable energy.

“Instead of planning on doing something in the next 20 or 30 years, we must use this sad episode to fast-forward to a clean energy economy in a rapid way,” he added.

Health experts said that while air quality may have improved for now, conditions linked to long-term exposure to pollution like asthma and bronchitis were harder to tackle.

Respiratory problems can also be made worse by “co-morbidities” – or existing medical conditions – like hypertension and diabetes, said Ramanan Laxminarayan, director of the Washington D.C.-based Center for Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy.

“The poor are more likely to have these co-morbidities and are exposed to higher levels of air pollution because they are more likely to be involved in physical labour that requires exertion that is hazardous when air quality is low,” he said.

Tuberculosis is an example of a respiratory infection where Indians have been at risk of worse outcomes due to exposure to poor air quality, he added in emailed comments.

India is home to the world’s largest number of TB patients, according to the WHO.

Kumar said a lack of tests and information so far made it “impossible” to know whether the poor are facing more severe forms of COVID-19.

Those with symptoms are being admitted to local government facilities, where resources are usually limited and tests for lung function unlikely to happen, he said.

He urged the government to create a central database to catalogue COVID-19 patients according to the cause of death, underlying problems, history of exposure to air pollution and socio-economic background, to support better research.

[Kazakhstan] Kazakhstan summons Chinese ambassador in protest over article (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 6:48 AM, Olzhas Auyezov, 5304K, Neutral]

Kazakhstan’s foreign ministry summoned the Chinese ambassador on Tuesday to protest over an article saying the country was keen to become part of China, the ministry said.

In a statement the Kazakh ministry said the article titled "Why Kazakhstan is eager to return to China" and published on privately-owned Chinese website sohu.com "runs counter to the spirit of permanent comprehensive strategic partnership" officially declared between the two countries.

The ambassadorial summons is an unusual move since the neighbouring countries usually avoid criticising each other. The Chinese foreign ministry did not immediately reply to a request for comment.

The article retells in brief the history of Kazakhstan, noting that leaders of many Kazakh tribes had pledged allegiance to the Chinese emperor.

It also states that Kazakhstan had historically been part of China's territory and Kazakhs "do not have too many complaints" about being repeatedly invaded by China.

China is a major investor in oil- and metals-rich Kazakhstan and is one of the main markets for its exports, dominated by commodities. Kazakhstan also makes money from Chinese goods carried across its territory to Europe.

But Sino-Kazakh ties have been strained by Beijing's de-radicalisation campaign in its western Xinjiang province, where the United Nations estimates over a million Muslim Uighurs have been detained in camps.

China has denied the camps violate the rights of ethnic minorities and says they were designed to stamp out terrorism and provide vocational skills.

The Chinese policies have affected ethnic Kazakhs living in Xinjiang, but the Kazakh government has not criticised the campaign and has chosen instead to seek the release of those who had Kazakh citizenship or were seeking it.

[Kyrgyzstan] Kyrgyzstan extends coronavirus emergency (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 4:13 AM, Olga Dzyubenko, Negative]

Kyrgyzstan on Tuesday extended until April 30 the state of emergency introduced in its two major cities and several districts due to the coronavirus outbreak, President Sooronbai Jeenbekov's office said.

The Central Asian nation bordering China has confirmed 430 cases of the disease and has introduced a lockdown and a curfew in its capital, Bishkek.

[Pakistan] Pakistan Extends Coronavirus Lockdown, Some Industries to Reopen in Phases (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 8:56 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan on Tuesday announced a two-week extension to the nationwide shutdown to curb the COVID-19 spread, but said some industries would reopen in phases.

The first industry to reopen would be construction, Khan said in a televised address to the

nation.

"That lockdown, those restrictions on gatherings will continue for another two weeks," Khan said.

Pakistan, which has already completed a three week lockdown, has reported 5,716 cases with 96 deaths.

The World Bank has warned that Pakistan is expected to fall into recession in fiscal 2020/21. Khan has sought debt relief from international lenders to combat the pandemic.

[Pakistan] Pakistan clerics call for lifting of congregational prayer limits (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 1:37 PM, Syed Raza Hassan, Neutral]

Prominent clerics are demanding the lifting of restrictions on congregational prayers at mosques in Pakistan, which has recorded 5,837 coronavirus cases and 96 related deaths.

Tuesday's call in a joint statement by clerics and leaders of religious parties in the world's second largest Muslim country, said prayers were essential for Muslims and should be allowed as long as safety measures were observed.

Their demand came despite Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan saying he would meet religious scholars to discuss the restrictions on congregational prayers which were imposed last month and imposed a limit of five people gathering together.

"Restriction of three or five people at mosques is not proving practical, those who are sick, elderly should not come to mosques," Mufti Taqi Usmani, one of the top clerics in Pakistan, told a media briefing in Karachi.

The congregation restriction has provoked a backlash in Pakistan, with attacks on police for a second straight week last Friday as they attempted to halt prayers at a mosque in Karachi

A policewoman was injured and in the earlier clashes police fired shots in the air to disperse demonstrators.

Khan announced a 14-day extension of a national lockdown on Tuesday, but said the government would make selective exemptions for essential industries to curtail rising unemployment.

Health experts have warned that congregations pose the biggest threat to Pakistan's limited healthcare resources and infrastructure, which will crumble under the weight of a wide-spread outbreak of the coronavirus.

Usmani told the news briefing that carpets should be removed from mosques and floors should be wiped with disinfectants, sanitizers should be placed at the entrance of the mosques, and that people should maintain distance while offering prayers.

The clerics issued their statement despite an assurance from Khan that he would meet with religious scholars to work out a collective strategy for congregations with the advent of the

holy month of Ramadan, when mosque attendance usually spikes.

"Now, the lockdown will not be applicable on mosques, Friday and Ramadan prayers will be held at mosques," Mufti Muneeb-ur-Rehman, another cleric, told reporters on Tuesday.

Ramadan involves extra nighttime prayers for Muslims.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] Brazil's lower house approves \$15.5 billion aid package for states and municipalities (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 8:52 AM, Maria Carolina Marcello and Marcella Ayres, Neutral]
Brazil's lower house of Congress late on Monday approved a financial support package worth an estimated 80 billion reais (\$15.5 billion) for states and municipalities whose tax revenues are being hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

The bill, which still needs Senate approval, has irked the government of far-right President Jair Bolsonaro, who is likely to veto the bill despite adjustments to the text to exert more federal control over the spending, a source told Reuters.

According to the bill, the federal government will make up for the fall in states' and municipalities' tax revenues between May and October. Lower house speaker Rodrigo Maia estimated the package could be worth around 80 billion reais.

Brazil's national development bank BNDES and state-owned Caixa Economica Federal, under the bill, will also be able to refinance state and municipal debt through the end of 2020.

Economy minister Paulo Guedes on Monday criticized the plan to allow the central government to plug the shortfall in local authorities' tax revenues, saying it was like signing a "blank check."

[Brazil] Brazil govt makes 40 bln reais counter proposal to coronavirus-hit states (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:41 PM, Marcela Ayres, Neutral]
Brazil's government on Tuesday proposed the transfer of 40 billion reais (\$7.7 billion) to states and municipalities to help them through the coronavirus crisis as an alternative to an aid package approved by the lower house of Congress on Monday that is double that amount.

The counter proposal highlights the deepening divisions between the executive and legislative branches of government on how local authorities should be compensated for the fall in tax revenue and increase in spending as long as the crisis lasts.

In a press conference in Brasilia, Economy Ministry officials said the 40 billion reais would be for three months. The 80 billion reais package approved on Monday, which is still awaiting Senate approval, would be for six months.

The officials also said that 22.6 billion reais of local authority debt to the federal government will be suspended for six months, as will a further 14.8 billion reais of debt owed by quasi-national entities to state-owned lenders Caixa Economica Federal and BNDES.

Waldery Rodrigues, special secretary to the Ministry, said the total support for states and municipalities from these measures reaches 77.4 billion reais.

He noted that the lower house's bill assumed a 30% fall in local authorities' tax revenues. But the economic downturn could be more severe, resulting in a much bigger fiscal hole.

Economy Minister Paulo Guedes on Monday criticized the bill, saying it was akin to the government signing a "blank check". One source told Reuters that President Jair Bolsonaro is likely to veto it, despite adjustments to the text to exert more federal control over the spending.

According to the bill, the federal government will make up for the fall in states' and municipalities' tax revenues between May and October.

Economy Ministry officials said on Tuesday that government spending fighting the crisis has totaled 300 billion reais so far, three times this year's total planned discretionary spending, while support for local authorities stands at 127.3 billion reais.

[Brazil] Brazil heading for almost 8% of GDP deficit this year – Treasury Secretary (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 4:36 PM, Marcela Ayres, Neutral]

Brazil's government is on course to post a primary budget deficit this year of 600 billion reais (\$116 billion), almost 8% of gross domestic product, due to the emergency spending and fall in revenues triggered by the coronavirus crisis, Treasury Secretary Mansueto Almeida said on Tuesday.

Speaking to reporters in Brasilia, Almeida said the government will resume its fiscal adjustment process next year and that economic reforms will be more critical than ever, otherwise the economy will struggle to grow and it will be difficult to pay the bill for these emergency measures.

[Brazil] Brazil confirms 74 offshore oil workers with coronavirus: regulator (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 6:20 PM, Staff, Negative]

Brazilian oil regulator ANP has identified 897 suspected cases of the new coronavirus and 126 confirmed cases among oil and gas workers in the country, it told Reuters in an e-mail on Tuesday.

The regulator identified 74 of those workers who had tested positive for the coronavirus and recently visited offshore oil platforms in the country.

[Brazil] Brazil cocaine trafficker nabbed in Mozambique as gang expands (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:49 PM, Gabriel Stargardter, Neutral]

One of Brazil's top cocaine traffickers has been arrested in Mozambique, Brazilian police said, underlining the growing global footprint of the First Capital Command (PCC) gang.

Gilberto Aparecido dos Santos, aka "Fuminho," had been on the run for more than 20 years until his capture in Maputo on Monday, and was one of Brazil's "most-wanted" fugitives, Brazil's federal police said in a statement.

"The prisoner was considered the largest supplier of cocaine to a gang operating throughout Brazil, as well as being responsible for sending tonnes of the drug to several countries," the statement said.

His capture in Africa is a sign of the PCC's growing international network. Originally formed as a prison gang in Sao Paulo, the PCC has become Brazil's largest criminal organization and is increasingly moving cocaine overseas, especially to Europe and Africa.

In March, Reuters reported that Brazil has become one of the top suppliers of cocaine to Europe, transforming the country's role in the trans-Atlantic drug trade.

In its statement, Brazil's federal police said the operation to catch dos Santos also involved the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, the U.S. Department of Justice and the Mozambique police.

The federal police also accused dos Santos of allegedly financing a rescue plan for PCC boss Marcos Willians Camacho, or "Marcola," who is in a federal jail in Brasilia. The alleged plan prompted Brazilian authorities to heighten security at the jail in February, the statement said.

Local media has reported that dos Santos was Camacho's "right-hand man."

[Canada] Canada economic shutdown to last for weeks more, death toll above 800 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 3:20 PM, David Ljunggren, Neutral]

Canada's economic shutdown will last for weeks more to ensure that measures to fight the coronavirus are working, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday, while the country's death toll from the outbreak rose more than 12%.

Trudeau also told a daily briefing that he would have more to say shortly about a promised aid package for the oil and gas industry, which has been hard hit. He did not give details.

Authorities across Canada have ordered a shutdown of non-essential businesses, throwing millions of people out of work. The jobless rate is set to soar to 25% from around 6% before the crisis struck.

"Everyone is very interested to know when things are going to get back to normal, when they'll be able to go back to work ... it is going to be weeks still. We recognize that it is going to be important to get our economy going and we will have to do it in phases," Trudeau said.

"We are having ongoing discussions with the provinces ... about how we are going to reopen the economy. It's just that it's going to be a while still."

As if to underline the extent of the challenge, the province of Ontario on Tuesday extended a shutdown for another 28 days. It had been due to expire on April 23.

Public health officials said 823 people had died of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus, up from 734 on Monday. The number of positive diagnoses rose to 26,163 from 24,804.

The officials said they were particularly worried about residences for the elderly, where around half the deaths have occurred. Ontario and Quebec – the two most-populous provinces – promised extra resources.

"We're dealing with a wildfire in our long-term care homes," Ontario Premier Doug Ford told a briefing, saying 14% of all residences had recorded cases.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault said his province was short about 1,250 workers in the long-term care network.

"We are deploying more professionals from the hospitals to the residences, but we're still lacking staff. I'm asking everybody available ... to come forward," he told a briefing.

Trudeau said Ottawa was prepared to help pay the salaries of workers in long-term care facilities.

He also said authorities would have to be cautious about fully lifting the restrictions on the economy until a vaccine had been developed.

[Canada] It will be weeks before Canada can start reopening economy – PM Trudeau (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 11:41 AM, David Ljunggren, Neutral]

It will be weeks still before Canada can start reopening the economy and any such effort will be done in stages and in coordination with the 10 provinces, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Tuesday.

Trudeau also told a daily briefing that he would shortly have more to say about a promised aid package for the oil and gas industry, which has been hard hit by the coronavirus outbreak. He did not give details.

[Chile] Chile to let some prisoners out of jail, but not Pinochet-era human rights violators (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 1:37 PM, Natalia A. Ramos Miranda, Neutral]

Some Chilean criminals are set to be released from crowded jails vulnerable to coronavirus after right-wing lawmakers withdrew a controversial lawsuit that sought to also commute the sentences of those convicted of human rights abuses under dictator Augusto Pinochet.

The fast-tracked legislation, approved last week in Congress, grants more lenient terms, such as house arrest, to some 1,300 prisoners accused of petty or low-level crimes. The bill

focuses on criminals 75 years of age or older, pregnant women and those with young children.

Prisoners held for human rights violations, however, are slated to stay put, along with those in jail for more serious crimes.

A group of 14 conservative Chilean senators from the ruling Chile Vamos coalition had initially argued before the country's constitutional court it was "discrimination" to exclude from the law those convicted of crimes against humanity.

The case sparked outrage in Chile, where anger still simmers over dictatorship-era abuses.

More than 3,000 people died or disappeared in political violence during the military regime from 1973 to 1990. The secret service and the army also tortured and drove into exile thousands of dissidents and leftists.

Presidency Minister Felipe Ward said in a televised broadcast that the senators' dropping of the case had given the law the "green light."

The bill still needs final approval from the constitutional court and President Sebastian Pinera's signature to become law.

The commuted sentences are expected to greatly reduce the populations of crowded prisons where coronavirus would likely spread most quickly.

Chile has reported nearly 8,000 cases of coronavirus, among the highest tallies in the region. Health authorities say approximately 100 prisoners have contracted the virus.

Prisoners convicted of rights abuses are housed in Chile's Punta Peuco prison, a large facility north of Santiago known for spacious cells and more lenient conditions.

[Colombia] Colombian businesses face sharp drop in sales, employee cuts amid coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 4:57 PM, Nelson Bocanegra, Negative]

Nearly 95 percent of Colombian businesses surveyed by the chamber of commerce guild have seen sales drop more than 50 percent amid quarantine measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus, the guild revealed on Tuesday.

Companies' chief concerns for the coming months include falling sales, paying their employees, unemployment, an increase in coronavirus cases, non-payment by clients, availability of raw materials and an increase in taxes, according to the questionnaire.

In the survey by the Confederation of Chambers of Commerce (Confecamaras), some 12.4% of the 9,070 respondents – including businesses of different sizes – have also made workforce cuts.

Furthermore, 11.7% sent workers on early vacations, 10.9% of workers are working from home and 8.5% have had contracts temporarily suspended.

Around 17% of businesses have temporarily shut, while 12.8% have requested credit to keep operating and some 9% of businesses have closed down. Just 4.8% of businesses have adopted no measures.

Additionally, 94.2% of entrepreneurs said sales have fallen more than 50% since the quarantine took effect.

The government of President Ivan Duque declared a mandatory quarantine in March, which is set to last until April 27, to control the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected more than 2,800 people in Colombia and left at least 112 dead.

While 94% of business owners think the lockdown is necessary to contain the crisis, they said it is important for the government to prioritize decisions on taxes - whether to defer or extend payments - financing, and measures to reduce costs of labor and operations.

"Businesses need credit to maintain their operations before they decide to close," Confecamaras President Julian Dominguez said in a statement.

If current conditions prevail and measures to contain the coronavirus are prolonged indefinitely, 84.2% of the companies surveyed estimate they could survive using their own resources for between one and two months. Some 11.4% could continue to operate for between three and four months, while the remainder could last from five months to a year.

The International Monetary Fund estimates Colombia's economy will contract 2.4% this year, well under the 5.2% contraction estimated for Latin America as a whole.

The region has been hit by a global collapse in prices for key commodities amid widespread travel restrictions and quarantines meant to contain coronavirus.

[Colombia] \$5 cans of tuna: Colombia corruption thrives during coronavirus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 12:47 PM, Luis Jaime Acosta, Neutral]

Colombian authorities have detected widespread overcharging for food and medical supplies meant to help the Andean country deal with its coronavirus outbreak, Colombia's comptroller said on Tuesday.

Colombians are under obligatory nationwide quarantine until April 27. More than 2,800 people have been confirmed infected with the coronavirus so far and over 100 in Colombia have died of the COVID-19 disease caused by the virus.

The government declared a state of emergency in mid-March, which allows mayors, governors and other officials to directly procure necessary products.

"We have seen various cases of alleged overcharging in contracts for food, gurneys and biomedical equipment," comptroller Carlos Felipe Cordoba said in a phone interview.

Corruption is a hot button political issue in Colombia. Graft costs the country an estimated

\$12.9 billion a year – just over 4% of its gross domestic product – according to the General Comptroller's office.

Cordoba's office has detected nearly \$20.6 million in apparent overcharges in some 8,100 contracts signed by mayors and governors' offices, he said. The overruns account for 10% of the contracts' overall value.

In eastern Arauca province on the border with Venezuela, cans of tuna meant to be given to people from vulnerable populations were purchased for about \$5 each. They usually cost about \$1.50.

Antibacterial soap was sold in one contract at \$8.50 – nearly five times its normal price – while gurneys were priced at nearly double their regular cost – some \$2,840 – Cordoba said.

"The alarms have gone off and some officials have backpedaled on the contracts. There are people taking advantage and everyone thinks they can just bring (coronavirus) tests over from China or ventilators or medical equipment," Cordoba said.

"We must be careful."

Some mayors and governors are using grocery distribution to poor populations for political ends, procurator general Fernando Carrillo has said.

"We won't let the unscrupulous corrupt turn the hunger of the most vulnerable Colombians into a banquet," Carrillo said on Twitter last week. "It is unconscionable and inhumane for the corrupt to take advantage of the crisis."

Both the comptroller and the procurator general have recommended the government of President Ivan Duque centralize purchases and tenders to avoid corruption and price gouging.

Colombia was ranked 96 on Transparency International's country rating last year, out of 180 nations.

[Ecuador] Ecuadorian firefighter livens up lockdown with trumpet (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 2:03 AM, Alexandra Valencia, 4742K, Positive]

With Ecuador in lockdown to battle one of the worst outbreaks of the new coronavirus in Latin America, a Quito firefighter is seeking to raise spirits by serenading the capital's residents with folk tunes on his trumpet from atop his truck's crane.

"I want to bring some happiness to these sad moments that we are living through due to the quarantine," said Luis Quimbita, who joined the city's Fire Brigade six years ago.

The province of Pichincha, where Quito is located, has reported 634 cases of the virus so far. Authorities are hoping the lockdown will help the region avoid the fate of the southern Guayas province, which has reported 70% of the country's cases, overwhelming healthcare and burial services.

Before he plays his repertoire of traditional songs from the Andean country, Quimbita climbs 20 meters (66 feet) atop the crane, while carrying an Ecuadorian tricolor flag. He said at first he was afraid of the height, but later felt that the ascent was worth it when he heard residents applaud and cry out in gratitude.

"Music is about bringing happiness," said Quimbita, who began playing the trumpet at age 15.

The Fire Brigade has promoted Quimbita's efforts, posting a video of him playing on its Twitter account and writing, "All difficulties can be overcome with a melody."

[Mexico] Mexico president challenges critics to vote him out early (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 9:50 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador on Tuesday offered to bring forward a referendum on his presidency to June 2021 from 2022 as he sought to silence mounting criticism from businesses and the opposition of his record in power.

In recent days, critics of Lopez Obrador's management of the economy, his security record and handling of the coronavirus pandemic have urged voters to take advantage of a so-called recall referendum on his presidency in 2022 to vote him out.

Lopez Obrador, who won election by a landslide in 2018, proposed the referendum and initially wanted to hold it on the same day as mid-term legislative elections due in June 2021.

However, the opposition balked at that and managed to force him to move the planned vote into the spring of 2022. Now that the president's popularity has fallen sharply, critics have seized on the referendum as a means of kicking him out early.

Never shy of scrapping with his adversaries, the leftist Lopez Obrador challenged them to put their grievances to the public by moving the recall vote to when he first proposed it.

"I'm offering them to bring forward the date. That we don't wait until 2022 for the recall vote, that we take advantage of the (mid-term) elections by holding it the same day," he told reporters at a regular government news conference.

Lopez Obrador, 66, took office in December 2018 with his approval ratings as high as 80% in some polls. But his popularity has tumbled in recent months and a daily survey by polling firm Mitofsky now puts his approval rating at 46.5%.

Mexico slipped into a mild recession last year, dragged down by a slump in investment precipitated in particular by concerns about the president's readiness to allow major contracts signed under the previous government to be called into question.

And despite Lopez Obrador's pledge to reduce record levels of gang-fuelled violence plaguing the country, homicides crept up to new highs in 2019.

[Mexico] Mexico-Trump oil deal raises question: At what cost? (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 8:21 AM, Dave Graham, Neutral]

Mexico's leader has incurred a debt with U.S. President Donald Trump by accepting U.S. help to end a standoff over global oil cuts, triggering concern the American president will in return make the country pay on issues like migration and security.

President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, a leftist oil nationalist, had balked at a demand by the OPEC+ group of oil producing nations to cut output by 400,000 barrels per day.

Instead, he offered a cut of 100,000 bpd and said Trump "generously" agreed last week to help Mexico make up the rest.

Trump has angered Mexicans by insisting the country will pay for a border wall he is building to keep out illegal immigrants.

He has imposed a series of migration and trade-related demands on Lopez Obrador, and said Mexico would "reimburse" the United States for the oil cuts. He has not yet said how.

It could easily mean more demands on immigration and security, Sergio Alcocer, a former Mexican deputy foreign minister for North America, told Reuters.

"This could become a joker, a sort of blank cheque," for Trump, Alcocer said.

Under U.S. coercion, Mexico has had to spend extra money on border policing, looking after asylum seekers and security. The thought of Trump suddenly having additional leverage has sown disquiet among both supporters and adversaries of Lopez Obrador.

One Mexican official, speaking on condition of anonymity, said it could put Mexico under pressure to take a less critical view of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America, notably Venezuela.

Gabriela Cuevas, a congresswoman in Lopez Obrador's National Regeneration Movement (MORENA), said it was vital that the deal with Trump was "made transparent," given his record.

"Trump has never been good news for Mexico," she said.

But she said Lopez Obrador had done well to secure lower output cuts given that Russia and Saudi Arabia had started the oil price war, and that it had not been fair to expect Mexico to slash crude output from record lows in the first place.

By contrast, for Trump to back output cuts to help prices would likely play well in key states during an election year, including Texas, where he could also argue the Mexico portion of the deal showed goodwill toward Latinos, Alcocer said.

Details of the U.S.-Mexico agreement were vague.

Some industry insiders believe that instead of pursuing real production cuts, Trump aims to take U.S. crude off the market by storing it.

Lopez Obrador told reporters on Monday that Mexico had done "very well" out of the oil deal and that he would give more details on Wednesday.

The White House did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Trump is widely reviled south of the border, having denigrated Mexican migrants as "rapists" during his 2015-16 election campaign and pitched economic ties into uncertainty with demands for a new trade deal favoring the United States.

"If the past is prologue, nobody should be expecting Donald Trump not to use any leverage that he has against Mexico when the time comes," said Michael Camunez, a former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Commerce under President Barack Obama.

Once highly critical of Trump, Lopez Obrador has sought to avoid conflict with him since taking power 16 months ago.

Jorge Castaneda, a former Mexican foreign minister, said so far, the approach had worked.

In return for giving Trump what he wanted on immigration, for example, Washington has been more tolerant when Lopez Obrador has pressured U.S. companies. But Mexico was more and more in debt with Trump on different issues, he added.

And "the Americans always end up thinking they did more for you than you did for them," Castaneda said.

[Mexico] Exclusive: Nurses at Mexico hospital hit by coronavirus say they were told to avoid masks (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 10:43 AM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

Nurses at a public hospital hit by Mexico's worst coronavirus outbreak were told by their managers not to wear protective masks at the start of the epidemic to avoid sowing panic among patients, nurses and other medical workers said.

Two doctors and a hospital administrator have died and at least 51 staff members have been infected since the new coronavirus was detected at the IMSS General Hospital in Monclova in the northern state of Coahuila in late March, the state health department said.

The hospital became Mexico's first hot spot for the COVID-19 illness caused by the coronavirus.

At least four of the infected workers are currently hospitalized as a result of the outbreak, which has fed concerns that Mexico's underfunded healthcare system is ill prepared to cope with a major epidemic in the nation of nearly 130 million people.

At the beginning of the outbreak, managers "said that protective equipment wasn't necessary," said nurse Charly Escobedo Gonzalez who works at the Monclova hospital.

Answering questions from Reuters about the reports that hospital management told staff not

to wear masks, a senior official at Mexico's main public health service IMSS which runs the hospital said that the health workers should be believed, but he did not confirm details of the reports.

"Specifically, if they are saying that then of course we have to believe it," said the IMSS official, Raul Pena Viveros. He said there can be misunderstandings inside a hospital about where it is appropriate to wear protective equipment.

"Not all of the workers have to wear the same equipment inside the hospital. And when this type of equipment is used badly ... it runs out more quickly and they put workers who are in contact with patients at risk," he said.

Mexico has registered 4,661 people with the coronavirus and 296 deaths, a fraction of the figures in the neighboring United States, but the coronavirus arrived weeks later in the Latin American country.

The Monclova hospital became a coronavirus focal point in the third week of March, highlighting a lack of masks and even soap and bleach there, staff said.

As staff began to fall ill, hospital floor managers instructed healthcare workers not to use facemasks, which some had bought for themselves due to the lack of hospital equipment, seven workers told Reuters.

Pena Viveros said the hospital had been short of protective equipment as well as other materials to fight the coronavirus in March.

Health officials have not given a detailed explanation of why so many Monclova healthcare workers became infected.

Hospital workers are at greater risk of contracting the coronavirus if they do not wear protective equipment like facemasks and gloves. The N95 respiratory masks offer more protection from other people who are infected while more simple surgical masks help the wearer avoid spreading the virus.

Due to a lack of proper N95 masks, some staff at the hospital were also wearing inappropriate industrial-style masks that were donated to them, Pena Viveros said.

The lack of N95 masks was later resolved, said Pena Viveros, who was sent by the head of the IMSS from Mexico City to investigate the Monclova hospital and spent a week there in early April. Staff say the hospital has more protective equipment now but that they still lack gear such as masks.

Three nurses said that while some colleagues chose not to wear facemasks after being told by managers or supervisors that they were not necessary, other staff kept wearing them.

NO "PANIC"

On the night of March 22, one of the heads of the nursing staff told a group of doctors and nurses gathered in the emergency room to take off their N95 masks because they were not

necessary, according to a nurse who heard the order.

Another nurse, surnamed Hernandez Perez, was given a similar order by a deputy head of nursing a few days earlier.

"In a morning clinical class, the sub-head told us not to create panic ... that we shouldn't wear facemasks because we were going to create a psychosis," said Hernandez Perez, who did not want her full name used. She is now at home sick and has tested positive for the COVID-19 respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus. A second nurse confirmed Hernandez Perez's account.

Reuters was unable to speak to two of the nursing managers who nurses say spoke at that meeting.

After media accusations that the Monclova hospital badly lacked equipment to deal with the virus, the head of the IMSS, Zoe Robledo, announced in early April that the director of the hospital had been temporarily replaced.

Neither the suspended hospital manager, Ulises Mendoza, nor the current hospital director answered repeated requests from Reuters for comment.

One nurse, who asked that her name not be used for fear of retaliation, said that during the second half of March she was repeatedly told by superiors not to wear a facemask while working in high-risk areas such as on the ground floor of the hospital, where the emergency room is located.

As well as the 51 confirmed cases, Pena Viveros said more than 300 other workers were temporarily sent home as the hospital scrambled to contain the outbreak.

He said the hospital contracted nurses and doctors from other facilities to address the personnel shortage, nevertheless the hospital's ability to care for patients has been impeded, some staff said.

Sub-Saharan Africa

IMF Projects a Recession for Sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 8:37 AM, Olivia Kumwenda-Mtambo, Negative]

Sub-Saharan Africa's gross domestic product is expected to contract 1.6% this year, compared 3.1% growth last year, as the coronavirus pandemic wrecks the region's economies, the International Monetary Fund said on Tuesday .

Various African governments have imposed lockdowns and curfews to curb the spread of the coronavirus, but the restrictions are putting pressure on most economies — some of which were already in recession.

The IMF said in its World Economic Outlook that GDP was projected to fall sharply in South

Africa, the continent's most advanced economy. The country's GDP is projected to contract 5.8% in 2020 from growth of 0.2% in 2019.

South Africa entered a recession in the final quarter of last year as power cuts by state utility Eskom took a toll on the economy, while public finances were strained by bailouts to struggling state firms.

The country imposed some of the toughest restrictions on the continent to contain the coronavirus, including a five-week lockdown to the end of April. With production and spending curtailed, the economic outlook was set to remain grim.

The IMF also projected significant economic contractions in oil-exporting countries, with Nigeria's GDP forecast to fall 3.4% this year after growing 2.2% in 2019. Angola's economy was expected to remain in recession, contracting 1.4% in 2020.

The IMF and the World Bank — which has also projected a recession for sub-Saharan Africa in 2020 — are racing to provide emergency funds to African countries and others to combat the coronavirus and mitigate the impact of sweeping shutdowns aiming at curbing its spread.

Medical supplies airlifted to Ethiopia for distribution (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:56 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A first "solidarity flight" of medical supplies from the World Health Organization (WHO) landed in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia on Tuesday for distribution in Africa, the U.N.'s World Food Programme (WFP) said.

The 1 million masks, goggles, gloves, gowns and other protective gear for health workers, as well as ventilators for patients, will be flown on later in the day to 5 African countries — Djibouti, Sudan, Eritrea, Somalia and Tanzania.

"From those five hubs they will be dispatched in as many countries as possible," WFP spokeswoman Elisabeth Byrs told a U.N. briefing in Geneva. The supplies are enough to protect health workers while treating more than 30,000 patients across the continent, she added.

Conservationists fear African animal poaching will increase during COVID-19 pandemic (ABC News)

ABC News [4/14/2020 5:04 AM, Meredith Deliso, 2182K, Neutral]

The coronavirus pandemic has disrupted tourism the globe over, grounding travelers and shutting down nonessential businesses. For Matt Brown of the Nature Conservancy, that spells trouble for the wildlife the environmental organization works to protect.

For 15 years, the Arlington, Virginia-based nonprofit has been helping create community-owned conservancies in East and Southern Africa that provide both a safe habitat for wildlife and jobs for locals. The operation of the reserves was designed to be largely financed through tourism.

"Tourism is a great payment for an ecosystem service — when it works," Brown, regional

managing director of the Nature Conservancy's Africa program, told ABC News.

Until now, tourism was on the rise in Africa. Some 67 million tourists visited Africa in 2018, up 7% from the year before, according to the World Tourism Organization's latest international tourism report. Tourism accounts for 8.5% of Africa's GDP, generating \$194.2 billion in 2018, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council.

But in recent weeks, tourism – along with life as hundreds of millions of people know it – has ground to a halt across Africa. Since the continent's first COVID-19 case was reported in Egypt on Feb. 14, the number of cases now totals more than 14,000 in 52 countries, according to the Africa CDC. Quarantine measures such as lockdowns, curfews and border closings have been rolled out from Tunisia to South Africa. The economic fallout is far-reaching and expected to be devastating for the world's poorest continent.

For wildlife reserves that depend on tourism dollars, that money is essentially gone.

"The major impact of the pandemic is tourism has stopped in Africa," Brown said. "And that affects the revenue. That affects the impact of the rangers."

At many of the reserves the Nature Conservancy supports, more than half of the budget is covered by tourism revenues, Brown said. Variable fees such as bed-night fees and conservation fees help pay for the rangers' salaries, fuel for airplane patrols, and more.

The organization has calculated that the lack of tourism adds up to a \$3 million drop in expected revenue over the next 12 months, Brown said. And hampered security, coupled with economic distress, means that poaching is a problem.

"When people don't have any other alternative for income, our prediction – and we're seeing this in South Africa – is that poaching will go up for high-value products like rhino horn and ivory," Brown said. "We believe we have to be more vigilant than ever with our ranger patrols to help protect these critical animals at this time."

A second type of poaching – meat poaching, for local consumption – is also on the rise as a result of the economic downturn, Brown said.

"In a lot of reserves, people go in and will shoot or even use snares to capture antelope," Brown said. "It's either to sell the meat at a local bushmeat market in the capital city or it's to feed family."

Poaching had been on the decline in Africa, particularly for elephant ivory; a 2019 report in Nature Communications found that the illegal killing of African elephants fell to 4% in 2017 from a peak of 10% in 2011.

The Nature Conservancy is working to help bridge its \$3 million revenue gap so security work continues. The organization is looking to raise upward of \$2 million in donations to provide grants to reserves, many of which have also been crowdsourcing support, Brown said.

"Our goal is to make sure that we're sustaining the highest level of protection that we can in

these places," said Brown, who wants to track daily wildlife sightings over the next few months to see if there is a spike in poaching or if – preferably – the population is sustained.

Brown anticipates the fallout from the pandemic will impact tourism in Africa for up to a year, due to the global economic downturn and health concerns over COVID-19.

"A holiday to Africa is kind of a luxury expense," Brown said. "Even if [people] had planned last year to come or currently to come, they might think twice about spending that money now."

"I think the economic downturn is one of the real concerns for this industry," he said.

[Liberia] Liberian dies of COVID-19 before sentencing, denying justice (AP)

AP [4/14/2020 11:20 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A Liberian convicted of lying on his U.S. immigration forms about his ties to war criminals has died while awaiting sentencing.

Federal prosecutors said in a letter to witnesses that Jucontee Thomas Woewiyu, a former top lieutenant for Liberian warlord Charles Taylor, died Sunday in a hospital in the Philadelphia suburbs of COVID-19 complications, **The Philadelphia Inquirer** reported Tuesday.

Woewiyu was convicted in 2018 of perjury, immigration fraud and other charges stemming from answers he gave on a 2006 application for citizenship, saying he never took part in the overthrow of a government.

Prosecutors said Woewiyu was part of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia, which sparked a multifaction tribal conflict and civil war. They said his roles were as onetime defense minister, spokesman and face of Taylor's regime.

Woewiyu's attorneys said during the trial that the prosecutors had no jurisdiction to examine possible involvement in the West African nation's civil wars or to make the trial about possible war crimes. The man, who had lived in the U.S for decades, had filled out the immigration forms to the best of his ability, the attorneys said.

Victims and survivors of the war, which left more than 200,000 civilians dead, had been eager for accountability because very few of the leaders in the decadelong conflict have faced any charges for atrocities including executions, sex slavery and conscription of child soldiers.

In 2008, Charles Taylor's son was convicted in a federal court in Florida of torturing or ordering the torture of political opponents and was sentenced to 97 years in prison.

Taylor resigned as Liberia's president in 2003 and is serving a 50-year prison sentence on a conviction he aided and abetted rebels who committed atrocities in neighboring Sierra Leone.

[Malawi] Malawi joins other southern African nations in coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 5:06 AM, Frank Phiri, Neutral]

Malawi joined other southern African nations in announcing a three-week lockdown on Tuesday to curb the spread of coronavirus.

"If (we are) not careful, Malawi could lose up to 50,000 lives from COVID," President Peter Mutharika said at a news conference with Health Minister Jappie Mhango announcing the lockdown lasting from April 18 until May 9.

Mhango said all non-essential businesses and services would cease.

Most southern African countries, including South Africa, Angola and Zimbabwe, have previously announced full or partial lockdowns. On Tuesday, Namibia extended its stay-at-home order by 2-1/2 weeks.

No southern African nations have a significant number of cases yet, except South Africa which has 2,415 so far.

[Mozambique] Mozambique police dismiss jihadist threat in north after attacks (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/14/2020 3:28 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Mozambican police on Tuesday dismissed the threat of Islamist militants controlling any territory in the north of country after a spate of jihadist attacks in the gas-rich region.

Mozambique's northern region has been hit by jihadist assaults on remote villages since October 2017, but in recent weeks militants have stepped up attacks as part of a campaign for an Islamist caliphate in the region.

Militants have temporarily seized government buildings, robbed banks, blocked roads and briefly hoisted a black and white jihadist flag over towns and villages across Cabo Delgado province.

"There are no areas that can be said to be in the hands of insurgents, what exists are areas prone to incursions by criminals," National Police commander Bernadino Rafael said at press briefing in neighboring Nampula province.

"The situation prevails and we are working to restore order."

Despite the promises of President Filipe Nyusi, neither the police nor the army, recently supported by private security companies in the region, have succeeded in preventing attacks.

The conflict has already killed more than 700 people according to Doctors Without Borders (MSF). More than 200,000 people have been displaced by fighting, according to the Bishop of the Diocese of Pema, Dom Luiz Fernando Lisboa.

The police chief said the majority of the attackers were from the neighboring Tanzania,

accompanied by Mozambican youth.

Rafael said Mozambican youth were being "deceived into employment ... that does not exist."

"They are tricked into entering the way of crime," Rafael said.

Thousands of people have fled rural areas to the port city of Pemba, the capital of Cabo Delgado, seeking refuge among friends and relatives.

Cabo Delgado has been hit by jihadist attacks since 2017, but the identity of the assailants remains unclear.

Locals call the group Al-Shabaab, but it is not linked to Islamist insurgency of the same name operating for years in Somalia.

Since June, the so-called Islamic State group has claimed around 20 attacks in Cabo Delgado, saying these targeted the Mozambican army.

But analysts see no evidence of IS financial or military support to the Mozambican jihadists.

The militants are operating in area where energy majors, including Exxon-Mobil and French oil company Total, are preparing to extract gas in the Rovuma basin off Cabo Delgado's coast by 2022.

With more than \$30 billion in investment sunk into the project, Nyusi is under pressure to respond and increase military presence in the region.

[Nigeria] Six Years After #BringBackOurGirls, Freed Chibok Captives Face Fresh Danger (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [4/14/2020 7:00 AM, Joe Parkinson and Gbenga Akingbule, Neutral] Shortly before sundown, two of the young women infamously kidnapped from their high school in Chibok, Nigeria, by terrorist group Boko Haram and held for three years before being released were again running for their lives.

Rakiya and Salomi were with their families outside their village when gunshots began strafing their homes. They fled with hundreds of villagers in different directions, stumbling through thorny scrubland and then cowering in long grasses beneath acacia trees. Rakiya was carrying her 5-year-old boy, who was born in captivity. Behind them, insurgents overran the village, killing five residents and looting the grain stores. They also kidnapped 10 young women including a recent high-school graduate, Patience Ishaku, who was set to begin college in Maiduguri city.

"My only thought was to escape," said Rakiya, whose family has since relocated to a nearby village in Nigeria's northeast. "I just wanted to run and never see them again."

Six years after the Islamist militants kidnapped 276 schoolgirls from Chibok Government Secondary School for Girls on April 14, 2014, during their senior-year exams, the rising

tempo of attacks nearby are raising a grim prospect: The young women whose ordeal spurred the world-wide #BringBackOurGirls campaign could easily become victims once more.

"The girls that were freed could be kidnapped again...It will happen the way the sun rises," said Dauda Iliya, president of a Chibok residents' association. "In the military bases, they are sitting back."

The Wall Street Journal spoke to 12 of the once-captive Chibok students and has withheld their full names to protect their security. Chibok community leaders say the government has scaled back security forces and patrols, leaving the villages on the town's outskirts exposed as a resurgent Boko Haram edges closer. Boko Haram has claimed attacks on the Chibok region in recent months.

The Chibok residents' association says that since January the local government area has been attacked more than 20 times. Ten people have been killed and 17 abducted. Several villages now stand empty, evacuated in fear. In February the town's elders urged the government to take action to "prevent the community's annihilation."

Some 20 of the 103 Chibok hostages who were released in 2016 and 2017—in exchanges for five fighters and a cash ransom mediated by the Swiss government—have refused to return home after their heavily guarded American University of Nigeria campus in Yola was closed due to the coronavirus outbreak. Many students who have returned home say they can no longer sleep there, instead spending nights in the bush. More than 112 of the students who were kidnapped in 2014 remain unaccounted for after 2,192 days—still in Boko Haram custody or reportedly dead.

The women, once the world's most famous hostages, are now in their 20s and more accustomed to studying math and American literature inside air-conditioned classrooms.

The officials in charge of the girls' security are concerned. "This issue needs more attention from the government and the military," said Lionel Von Frederick Rawlins, head of security at the American University of Nigeria. "If the Nigerian army is not even defending the Chibok girls, what hope is there for all the other displaced people?"

Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari pledged in a Monday statement to mark the sixth anniversary of the Chibok kidnapping that his government hadn't forgotten the hostages. He said Nigeria would redouble efforts to rescue the girls still captive but didn't address the security of their classmates who had been released. Nigeria's military said in response to questions that it had a unit in Chibok town and was providing "adequate security for all the hot spots."

Nigeria's government has repeatedly stressed that the insurgency has been "technically defeated" and proclaimed the countryside across the battle-scarred northeast to be mostly safe.

Nigeria's army—under pressure from Boko Haram and a splinter faction allied to Islamic State named Islamic State West Africa Province—has largely retreated to its bases, defending vital infrastructure but leaving many villages and farmlands vulnerable. In a sign

of mounting insecurity, soldiers from neighboring Chad conducted offensive operations against the jihadists along Nigeria's border after a Boko Haram raid killed 92 Chadian soldiers. Chad's army said it had killed 1,000 Boko Haram fighters before it withdrew to its own territory.

Fears over the Nigerian army's capacity to protect Chibok spotlights the decadelong conflict's broader impact: Millions of people in Africa's most populous nation are condemned to a state of permanent insecurity.

More than two million people are still languishing in refugee camps across the country's northeast, too afraid to return to their homelands, where rival jihadist factions hold sway, according to aid agencies and government officials. An estimated five million civilians living in villages are relying on vigilantes or paying protection money to the terrorists to prevent attacks, Nigerian and Western security officials say.

Nigeria's northeastern capital, Maiduguri, the birthplace of the Boko Haram insurgency, has doubled in size as an estimated one million displaced people cram into sprawling and often squalid camps that spool out onto roadsides.

In some cases, the settlements can't provide shelter from the war. Some refugees, like Zeinab Dungus, a 50-year-old mother of seven, have moved from camp to camp after Boko Haram sent suicide bombers to infiltrate them. Ms. Dungus last saw her hometown of Banki, on Nigeria's border with Cameroon, eight years ago.

"I don't know if I'll ever go home to Banki again," Ms. Dungus said, at the Dolodi camp on the outskirts of Maiduguri.

The young women who are safe and secure during term-time studies at a special facility inside the Yola city campus are increasingly nervous they could be targeted in the villages around Chibok.

Earlier this year, Mwada, a former Chibok hostage, had to flee with her family after insurgents raided the village. Last year, at least five others were forced to run from their homes after villages were attacked.

One student named Naomi was running last year after she heard gunshots and shouts of Allahu akbar. "We saw the light of their vehicles...I was so scared. I felt like I was already caught."

Another student, Grace, had to run and sleep in field of maize with her family when the insurgents attacked their village in October. "Only God will protect us from this situation," she said, adding the village had been attacked twice more since her family moved.

In the recent attack before sundown, Rakiya was drying her son after his evening bath when she heard a distant popping sound that soon swelled into a torrent. Her friend Salomi, whose home was on the edge to the village, was already running into the bush.

The women, who survived airstrikes, hunger and beatings during three years in Boko Haram captivity, immediately realized it was an insurgent attack. Bullets began ricocheting

from nearby trees and five of her family members screamed and tumbled out of the house.

They had learned as hostages to scatter and seek cover at the sound of gunfire. During government airstrikes on the Boko Haram encampments where they were held, some Chibok hostages became detached from their group for days and sought to escape, only to be recaptured by the insurgents or their sympathizers in neighboring villages.

The two friends immediately sprinted in different directions. Wading through long grasses that sliced her skin, Rakiya could hear the rumble of engines and the gunmen's shouts. "I didn't think of anything. I just ran," she said.

Not far away, Salomi was also sprinting through the bush, hiking up her wax-print dress to extend her stride. She looked back and saw the village's houses and mud brick grain stores bathed in orange flame.

Rakiya kept running. In her ears rang the parting message the Boko Haram fighters had issued to the young women they released: If you return to school, you will be killed.

Shortly before dawn, she managed to find her mother and five other family members hiding under a tree. Only on the following day did she realize her friend Salomi had also run for her life.

The friends rejoiced that they had both escaped, but the celebrations were muted by news that five people had been killed and Boko Haram had taken another eight hostages. Among them was Ms. Ishaku, the 18-year-old who had just graduated from high school.

"I sympathize with her, she was a student just like us," Rakiya said. "Our fear is that we will be abducted again. We live in fear."

[South Africa] South Africa Coronavirus cases rise by 143 to 2,415 (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 9:31 AM, Tim Cocks, Neutral]

South Africa's health minister on Tuesday reported a rise in coronavirus cases of 143 over the past day, taking the total to 2,415.

Health Minister Zwelini Mkhize provided no update on the number of deaths, which a day earlier stood at 27.

[South Africa] South Africa coronavirus cases rise to 2,415, China donates equipment (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 9:34 AM, Staff, Neutral]

South Africa's health minister on Tuesday reported a rise in coronavirus cases of 143 over the past day, taking the total to 2,415.

Health Minister Zwelini Mkhize provided no update on the number of deaths, which a day earlier stood at 27. The total number of tests conducted so far was 87,022.

"We still have a long way to go," he told a news conference at Johannesburg airport. "This is not a sprint, this is a marathon."

He added that a donation of equipment from China that had just landed would help South Africa "in fighting this invisible enemy called COVID-19".

These included 10,000 N95 masks and disposable gloves, 50,000 surgical disposable masks – enough for about 6-8 weeks – as well as 2,000 medical protective gowns and goggles.

At the same news conference, foreign minister Naledi Pandor said she was aware of complaints of allegedly racist treatment of South Africans in China, and that "we believe we can accept the commitment of ... China to address these concerns".

Several African countries have demanded that China address their concerns that Africans, in particular in the southern city of Guangzhou, are being mistreated and harassed.

Cases of COVID-19 – the respiratory disease caused by the new coronavirus – in South Africa are creeping up, but not at the explosive rate that was initially feared. The rate of new infections has slowed significantly since President Cyril Ramaphosa ordered a nationwide lockdown on March 27 and extended it to the end of April.

Africa's most industrialised nation still has the most confirmed coronavirus cases on the continent, which has registered a total of 5,741 so far.

In a bid to counteract the economic fallout from the lockdown, South Africa's central bank slashed its main lending rate by another 100 basis points on Tuesday, to a record-low 4.25%, after moving forward its monetary policy committee (MPC) meeting scheduled for May.

[South Africa] South Africa won't consider IMF adjustment programme, finance minister says (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 8:16 AM, Alexander Winning, 5304K, Neutral]

South Africa will not consider International Monetary Fund funding accompanied by a structural adjustment programme as it battles to contain the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic, Finance Minister Tito Mboweni said on Tuesday.

Africa's most industrialised economy was already in recession before the coronavirus outbreak, and the shock from the pandemic is to lead to a steep contraction this year.

Addressing journalists on a conference call, Mboweni said of any possible IMF loans: "We are not looking for budget support, we would be looking for the COVID-19 specific packages that we can access, and we are talking to them about that.

"We are looking at programmes which would not be accompanied by any structural adjustment programme," he said. "We know what to do, we know what our structural reform programme is. We will not be looking into that at all."

Asking multilateral institutions, especially the IMF, for cash is deeply unpopular with a faction in the governing African National Congress and trade unions the party uses to rally

support ahead of elections.

Mboweni also said on Tuesday that the government would revise its fiscal framework to take into account the effects of COVID-19. No agreement had yet been reached on pay increases for public-sector employees due to take effect this month, he said.

A copy of the minister's speaking notes circulated by National Treasury said there were a number of elements to the government's fiscal response, including re-prioritising some expenditure towards healthcare, a clear plan to stabilise debt and shutting down South African Airways.

The airline is under a form of bankruptcy protection and depends on government bailouts for its survival.

Mboweni added the government had not yet decided whether to introduce a basic income grant but that it had to be considered.

[South Africa] Hungry S. Africans clash with police over food aid in Cape Town (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [4/14/2020 3:49 PM, Staff, Negative]

South African police on Tuesday fired rubber bullets and teargas in clashes with Cape Town township residents protesting over access to food aid during a coronavirus lockdown.

Hundreds of angry people fought running battles with the police, hurling rocks and setting up barricades on the streets with burning tyres in Mitchells Plain over undelivered food parcels.

"We have small children. We want to eat. They must also eat," said resident and mother Nazile Bobbs.

"They said we are going to get parcels, where (are) the parcels? How long are we (going to be) in the lockdown?"

South Africa is currently in the middle of a five-week lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus which has so far infected more than 2,400 people.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has promised to provide basics such as water and food supplies to the poorest South Africans.

Many people, especially those working in the informal economy, are unable to ply their trade and have lost income due to the lockdown which came into effect on March 27.

Community leader Liezl Manual said people came out of their homes "frustrated wanting to know" where the food parcels were.

"I don't think Ramaphosa is doing something," said another resident Denise Martin, adding that people would "rather die of coronavirus than to die in our homes of hunger."

Some government officials were starting to become overwhelmed by the surging needs in a country ranked among one of the world's most unequal.

"People are so desperate for aid such that even those people that would not be provided by us think they can get support from us," Busisiwe Memela-Khambula CEO of SA Social Security Agency (Sassa), a government department responsible for distributing food aid.

The department normally helps people with disability, those who failed to access their social security grants or those generally experiencing hardships, she said.

"But unfortunately now everybody is experiencing hardships," she said on local television.

[Uganda] Uganda extends coronavirus lockdown for three more weeks (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 10:41 AM, Elias Biryabarema, Neutral]

President Yoweri Museveni on Tuesday extended Uganda's initial 14-day lockdown by an extra three weeks, until May 5, as part of efforts to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus.

Uganda and Rwanda have imposed a total lockdown in their fight against COVID-19, in east Africa's most stringent response to the infection.

Other countries in the region have preferred to ban or impose restrictions and closures only on sectors with the greatest potential to spread the virus like air and other travel, schools and public gatherings.

"Given ... the challenges that remain, the government has decided to keep the stay-home decision for another 21 days," Museveni said in a speech on Tuesday, hours before the initial 14-day lockdown was due to end.

The extra days, he said, "will definitely, help us to defeat this virus decisively, or if not defeated totally, to prepare better as to how to cope with it."

Uganda has so far recorded a total of 54 coronavirus cases but no deaths. Eight patients have recovered.

Authorities are eager to stave off a major outbreak amid fears that a surge in the number of cases would quickly overwhelm a healthcare system that has traditionally been plagued by dysfunction.

Under the lockdown all businesses are shut down except those deemed most essential, such as utilities and food markets.

Movement has been virtually frozen with bans on both private and public transport vehicles while a dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed.

The tight lockdown has drawn criticism from rights group that say restrictions may have led to pregnant women losing their unborn babies as they need to obtain special permission to use private means to reach hospitals.

[Zimbabwe] Zimbabwe president threatens 20 years jail over fake lockdown statement (Reuters)

Reuters [4/14/2020 7:46 AM, MacDonald Dzirutwe, 5304K, Negative]

Zimbabwe's President Emmerson Mnangagwa on Tuesday threatened 20 years in jail to the author of a statement purporting to bear his signature that said the lockdown to contain the coronavirus outbreak had been extended.

Mnangagwa, who was speaking at his farm after touring Gweru city in central Zimbabwe, told state broadcaster ZBC the statement, which circulated on social media last week and was immediately denied by the government, was fake.

"That is absolutely nonsense, I have never made such a statement," Mnangagwa said.

"If we catch this person it must be exemplary and they must go in for at least at level 14, which is 20 years imprisonment. That, I think we need to demonstrate that we don't want false news to be circulated."

The southern African nation last month published lockdown regulations, which included jail terms of up to 20 years for people who spread falsehoods regarding the outbreak.

National police spokesman Paul Nyathi said more than 5,000 people had been arrested for venturing outside their homes without permission.

Mnangagwa said his cabinet would meet this week to decide whether to end, adjust or extend the 21-day lockdown.

The authorities have said three people have died and 17 people have been infected in the country of 15 million people. Just over 600 people had been tested by Monday night.

In the past week, Zimbabwe has deployed the army to help the police enforce the restrictions.

The Zimbabwe Lawyers for Human Rights (ZLHR) group said this had resulted in an increase in cases of residents being beaten by security forces for defying the lockdown.

Police spokesman Nyathi said police had not received any official complaints of abuse from residents.

ZLHR has approached the High Court on behalf of two Zimbabweans who said they were abused by security forces.

"This application seeks an order to protect residents from heavy-handed action by police and soldiers who are invading people's homes/yards and assaulting people ordering them to stay indoors," ZLHR said in a statement.

Zimbabwe's security forces have a history of using heavy handed tactics when enforcing the law and against opponents of the government.

In an editorial on Monday, the state-owned Herald newspaper criticised the police for

harassing journalists doing their work during the lockdown, including forcing some to delete pictures and video that captured abuses by security forces.

Nyathi said he was not aware of the incidents.

Network TV News Coverage

Danger of 'Second Waves' of Virus Are a Real Possibility (ABC World News Now)

(B) ABC World News Now [4/14/2020 9:05 AM, James Longman, 715K]

Several countries overseas are starting to move toward getting back to normal after battling the peaks of the coronavirus epidemic. There is still plenty of risk, including potential second waves of the virus. China is now scrambling to contain another outbreak on its northern border, its biggest rise in cases in six weeks. Hundreds of new infections have been reported from returning Chinese nationals in Suifenhe, a town near the Russian border that is now in lockdown. Elsewhere, Japan, initially reluctant to take drastic action, is now reporting a spike in new cases. A second state of emergency has been declared in some areas of the country. Spain is allowing workers in manufacturing and construction to return to work, aiming to revive its stalled economy, but France and Italy have announced full lockdown extensions. UK officials are concerned that the official death toll, already on track to becoming the highest in Europe, doesn't show the true picture. The government revealed that 92 senior care homes have been infected in the last 24 hours.

Europe Struggles with Coronavirus (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [4/14/2020 10:49 AM, Ben Wedeman, Matthew Chance and Clarissa Ward, 1.7M]

The Italian government is allowing book shops, stationery stores, and stores that sell children's and babies' clothes to reopen. Even with lifted restrictions, one store owner said that no one had gone into the shop by 4 PM. Residents in northern Italy, the area hit the hardest in the country by the virus, are simply ignoring the new decree altogether, choosing to remain in lockdown. Meanwhile, Russian President Vladimir Putin is backtracking on his statements made three weeks ago on state television assuring citizens that the coronavirus will not affect the country as it has in other countries. Since then, Russia has had its highest number of confirmed coronavirus cases at 2,774 per day, adding up to around 21,000 total cases. While this number is low compared to other countries, Russian officials admit that this is just the beginning of the curve and that they are nowhere near the peak. Russia has introduced much tougher control over their lockdown, introducing technological efforts to make sure they know where people are at all times. In the UK, it appears that the death toll may be much higher than previously suggested. The Office for National Statistics says that the daily death toll the government has been giving in its briefings is 52% lower than the actual number. This is attributed to the government not including nursing homes and residential homes in the number of coronavirus deaths.

Europe Moves to Reopen Schools, Economy (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [4/14/2020 9:02 AM, Vicki Barker]

International Monetary Fund officials say that it is likely to be the global economy's worst year since the Great Depression. This comes as some countries take small steps towards

normality. Denmark, among the first in Europe to lock down, is now easing up as they reopen primary schools and daycare centers on Tuesday. Italy, Austria, and the Czech Republic are now allowing some small shops to reopen, and Spain will follow next week. France, however, has extended its lockdowns until mid-May; the same is expected in the UK, where the government is being accused of underreporting the true coronavirus death toll by excluding old people dying from the virus in nursing homes.

South Korea to Hold Parliamentary Elections; North Korea Launches Missiles (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [4/14/2020 5:44 AM, Paula Hancocks]

As dozens of countries postpone or cancel elections due to the coronavirus, South Korea prepares to continue with their parliamentary elections. Photos show the strict measures in place to monitor voters' health at the polling stations for the main event on Wednesday. South Korea never announced an official lockdown, though social distancing is supposed to be in place. The country has seen a low level of infections in the past week, hovering around 50. Still, officials hired 20,000 more people than usual to make sure that health and sanitation elements can be carried out well. People are meant to stay one meter apart, have temperatures taken, sanitize hands, and put on disposable gloves before they cast their votes. More than a quarter of voters showed up for Tuesday's early voting to avoid the anticipated Wednesday crowds. Meanwhile, North Korea has launched a short-range missile test with short-range cruise missiles and air-to-surface missiles from fighter jets.

[Iraq] 23 ISIS Fighters Killed in Airstrike (FOX and Friends)

(B) FOX and Friends [4/14/2020 8:12 AM, Staff, 2.3M]

At least 23 ISIS fighters have been killed in an airstrike in Iraq. American forces helped carry out the attack, and one Iraqi soldier was also killed. It is still unclear if any Americans were hurt in the operation.

[United Kingdom] Britain's Elderly Not Counted in Official Coronavirus Statistics: Nursing Home Managers (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [4/14/2020 12:06 PM, Vicki Barker]

Controversy in Britain has risen over the plight of older people in the coronavirus pandemic. Managers of the UK's understaffed, underequipped nursing homes can't say definitively how many residents are dead or dying from COVID-19. "What we do know is [the numbers are] much larger than the official government numbers," one manager says. Nursing home staff claim that the elderly are being airbrushed out of the official coronavirus death figures because only people who die in hospitals are being counted, and many ailing old people are being sent home or back to nursing homes to die.

[North Korea] North Korea Launches More Test Missiles (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [4/14/2020 6:03 AM, Alex Jensen]

Reports say that there have been new missile tests in North Korea. In addition to air-to-ground missiles, South Korea's military suspects the North test fired several cruise missiles this morning. The same type of missiles launched in June 2017, these cruise missiles are hard to detect and potentially very accurate.

{End of Report}

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**STATE DEPARTMENT
NEWS CLIPS**

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State

By TechMIS

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TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Sunday, February 16, 2020 9:00 PM ET

Secretary of State

Pompeo touts business ties in Africa amid tension over visas, security assistance (Washington Post)

In Africa, Pompeo Oversees Multi-Million Dollar Business Deals (Washington Free Beacon)

Senegal Seeks Continued U.S. Military Presence as Trump Administration Weighs Cuts (Wall Street Journal)

US secretary of state visits Senegal to start Africa tour (AP)

Pompeo pledges 'collective' approach to African troop presence (Yahoo News/AFP)

Pompeo vows 'collective' approach to Africa troop presence (Yahoo News/France 24)

U.S. Vows to Continue Backing Fight Against Islamic Terror in Africa (Washington Free Beacon)

Mike Pompeo seeks to defund program named after envoy killed in Benghazi (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Department of State News

U.S. Passengers Prepare to Evacuate From Cruise Ship in Japan (New York Times)

44 Americans on cruise ship docked in Japan tested positive for coronavirus, U.S. health official says (Washington Post)

Coronavirus cruise ship passengers head to California military base for quarantine (Los Angeles Times)

U.S. Passengers Depart Cruise Ship Quarantined Over Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

NIH official confirms 40 Americans on cruise ship have coronavirus (Politico)

Americans in Japan to Trade One Quarantine for Another (AP)

Americans disembark from virus-hit cruise; China says new cases slow (Reuters)

Coronavirus updates: Americans begin evacuation from cruise ship quarantined in Japan (NBC News)

U.S. evacuates coronavirus cruise ship passengers (Washington Times)

At Least 40 Americans Have Tested Positive for COVID-19 on Quarantined Cruise Ship in Japan (Yahoo News/Time)

US passengers evacuated from quarantined cruise ship off Japan (Yahoo News/France 24)

American Woman Who Left Cruise Ship Tests Positive for Coronavirus (New York Times)

Malaysia Bars Westerdam Cruise Passengers From Entry (Bloomberg)

Malaysia insists virus diagnosis from cruise passenger is correct (Yahoo News/AFP)

Trump's soft touch with China's Xi worries advisers who say more is needed to combat coronavirus outbreak (Washington Post)

Coronavirus could damage global growth: IMF (Yahoo News/Free Press Journal)

Ivanka Trump lauds Saudi, UAE on women's rights reforms (AP)

U.S.-China Feud Ensnarers Obscure UN Intellectual Property Agency (Bloomberg)

Defense secretary warns of Chinese aggression: 'The smaller the country, the heavier the hand' (Washington Times)

Cold war: Top EU diplomat foresees 'a new bipolar order between the US and China' (Washington Examiner)

Trump pushed CIA to find, kill Osama bin Laden's son over higher priority targets (NBC News)

Palestinian PM: Trump's Mideast plan 'will be buried' (AP)

UN's Guterres calls for 'transformational change' on climate (Yahoo News/AFP)

[\[Iran\] Iran's Rouhani Says No Talks With U.S. While 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign Is On \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Rouhani says Iran will never yield to U.S. pressure for talks \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran: US sanctions 'create some problems'; talks possible with conditions \(USA Today\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] Rockets strike near US Embassy in Baghdad; no injuries \(AP\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] Rockets hit U.S. coalition base in Baghdad, no casualties \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] No injuries reported after rocket strike near US Embassy in Baghdad \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] Questions outnumber answers for generations of refugees as Afghan peace deal nears \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Sri Lanka\] Sri Lanka asks US to review travel ban on its army chief \(AP\)](#)

Editorials and Op-eds

[Ivanka Trump takes lead in global fight to empower women, could boost GDP \\$7 trillion \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[Huawei conundrum: Global collaboration continues to elude Chinese giant; India testing waters \(Yahoo News/Financial Express\)](#)

[\[Iran\] How Iran's Hard-Liners Got Campaign Boost From Trump \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Israel\] My nightmare encounter with Israel's socialist healthcare system \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israel's New War Plan for Iran \(And More\): Stealth F-35I Fighters and Lots of Tech \(The National Interest\)](#)

[\[China\] 'Century of Humiliation': How the Opium Wars Made China What It Is Today \(The National Interest\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] My Friend Lives Inside the War on Terror. Listen to Him. \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] In long-suffering Afghanistan, this is a peace deal worth trying \(Washington Post\)](#)

Trade

[Beyond rockets and air strikes: The Israeli-Palestinian trade war \(Yahoo News/France 24\)](#)

[\[Kenya\] U.S.-Kenya Trade Talks Seen a Risk for Africa Regional Pact \(Bloomberg\)](#)

Near East & North Africa

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia start trial oil pumping from divided zone: Kuwait minister (Reuters)

[Egypt] Briton detained in Egypt over 'pat on back' tired but happy after flying home (Yahoo News/PA Media)

[Iran] Iran's beleaguered President Rouhani rules out resigning (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Iran] Quake Hits Near Iranian Island, No Casualties (Reuters)

[Israel] Israel Says Hamas Targeted Its Soldiers in 'Honey Trap' Cyberattack (Wall Street Journal)

[Israel] Israel's Gantz vows to form government without Netanyahu (AP)

[Israel] Israel hopes Germany, other ICC members will help stave off Palestinian investigation (Reuters)

[Israel] Israel aims to unite Jerusalem with better city services. Arabs want political change. (Washington Post)

[Israel] Consumers Drive Israel's Surprisingly Fast Expansion in 2019 (Bloomberg)

[Lebanon] Crisis puts Lebanon's survival at stake, Hezbollah warns (Reuters)

[Lebanon] Lebanon Lira No Longer Fit for Airline Owned by Central Bank (Bloomberg)

[Lebanon] Lebanese national carrier to only accept US dollars (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Lebanon] Lebanon's MEA reverses move to charge in dollars (Reuters)

[Libya] Libya Arms Embargo Has Become a 'Joke,' Top UN Official Says (Bloomberg)

[Libya] U.N. says Libya arms embargo a 'joke', demands accountability (Reuters)

[Libya] Powers renew pledge to uphold Libya arms embargo (AP)

[Oman] Oman Sees Prospects of Talks Between Iran and U.S. (Bloomberg)

[Oman] Oman sees biggest Gulf clash risk in Strait of Hormuz (Reuters)

[Syria] Assad's forces make advances, further securing Aleppo region (AP)

[Syria] Russian-backed Syrian army seizes most of rebel-held Aleppo province: state media (Reuters)

[Syria] Syrian forces seize most of Aleppo province, ahead of Turkey-Russia talks (Reuters)

[Syria] Syrian government forces seize more villages in northwest (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Syria] Car bomb near Syria-Turkey border kills four civilians: Anadolu (Reuters)

[Syria] Turkey says two killed in car bomb attack near Syria border (Reuters)

[Syria] Syria govt targets property, cars to curb cash buys (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Syria] Hundreds of thousands displaced in Syria's raging war (CBS News)

[Syria] A new catastrophe looms in Syria's dead of winter (Reuters)

[Yemen] UN: Warring parties in Yemen agree on major prisoner trade (AP)

[Yemen] Saudi-led coalition airstrikes kill more than 30 Yemeni civilians, says U.N., as fighting intensifies (Washington Post)

[Yemen] Saudi Pilots Missing as Yemen Rebels Say They Downed Fighter Jet (Bloomberg)

[Yemen] Questions hang over fate of Saudi crew in Yemen jet crash (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Yemen] U.N. official says 'unjustified' killings in Yemen conflict represent 'shocking' failure to 'protect civilians' (Yahoo News/The Week)

Europe and Eurasia

Quarantine ends for Germans; Italy to fly citizens from ship (AP)

EU must develop 'appetite for power', Borrell says (Reuters)

EU in 'frank' talks with Balkan nations seeking membership (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Azerbaijan] Azeri police detain opposition leaders, block protest against election result (Reuters)

[Czech Republic] Czech Republic reports second bird flu case (Reuters)

[Denmark] Denmark arrests 27 people on suspected cocaine smuggling (AP)

[France] NATO chief dismisses Macron nuclear strategy call (Yahoo News/RFI)

[France] French health minister to run for Paris mayor to end scandal (AP)

[France] Macron picks minister to lead Paris mayor battle after sexting scandal (Reuters)

[Germany] Merkel succession contender calls her out over slow EU revamp (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Hungary] Hungary's Orban warns about climate crisis, slow EU growth (AP)

[Hungary] Hungarian PM Orban signals tax cuts, tough times for economy (Reuters)

[\[Italy\] Italy to evacuate 35 nationals from cruise ship quarantined at Japan port \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Italy\] Italy's Conte denies he is putting together a new coalition \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Italy\] As sea levels rise, Venice fights to stay above the waterline \(NBC News\)](#)

[\[North Macedonia\] North Macedonia parliament dissolved ahead of early election \(AP\)](#)

[\[North Macedonia\] North Macedonia parliament dissolves, sets poll date, after EU shuns talks \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Turkey\] Turkish author fears for her life if she returns home \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Scottish Tory leader backs PM's 'bold and imaginative' bridge to Ireland plan \(Yahoo News/PA Media\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Man dies as Storm Dennis hits UK \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

East Asia and Pacific

[China, Asia Bulk Up Economy Defenses Against Virus Ahead of G-20 \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[China\] Xi's early involvement in virus outbreak raises questions \(AP\)](#)

[\[China\] 'This is unprecedented': Xi Jinping shifts blame as Beijing boasts of coronavirus crackdown \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[China\] China Vows More Fiscal Support as Virus Roils a Slowing Economy \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[China\] Number of new coronavirus cases in China drops for third consecutive day \(Yahoo News/RFI\)](#)

[\[China\] China Standoff Cost the NBA 'Hundreds of Millions' \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Hong Kong\] Hong Kong Facing 'Tsunami-Like' Shocks, Finance Chief Says \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Hong Kong\] Hong Kong protesters rally against planned virus quarantine centers \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Japan\] Avoid crowds over virus, Japan health minister warns \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] Kim Jong Un makes first public appearance in 22 days amid virus outbreak \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Korea\] South Korea Tracks Virus Patients' Travels—and Publishes Them Online \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[South Korea\] South Korea to evacuate Koreans from cruise ship quarantined in Japan \(Reuters\)](#)

[Taiwan] Taiwan confirms first coronavirus death on island, cases at 20 (Reuters)

[Taiwan] Coronavirus death reported in Taiwan, US cruise passengers released from quarantine (ABC News)

[Thailand] Thailand raises over 100 bln baht for 5G spectrum auctions - regulator (Reuters)

South and Central Asia

[Afghanistan] Nine homeless drug users shot dead in Afghan capital — police (Reuters)

[India] India women facing sedition charges over school play get bail (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Pakistan] UN chief says Pakistan sets global example hosting refugees (AP)

[Pakistan] Parents protest as Pakistani students stuck in China under coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] It's a day for dogs as Brazil ramps up for Carnival (AP)

[Colombia] Colombia to decide on historic abortion ruling (ABC News)

[Costa Rica] Costa Rica seizes 5 tons of cocaine headed for Netherlands (AP)

[Costa Rica] Costa Rica seizes five tons of cocaine bound for Holland in largest ever drug bust (Reuters)

[Costa Rica] Costa Rica's largest ever cocaine haul found in ornamental flower shipment bound for Netherlands (Yahoo News/Sky News)

[Costa Rica] Costa Rican police find six tonnes of cocaine in biggest ever haul (Yahoo News/The Independent)

[Dominican Republic] Software glitches force Dominican Republic to suspend vote (AP)

[Dominican Republic] Electronic glitch triggers Dominican Republic vote suspension (Reuters)

[Haiti] Facing South Florida: Head Of US Southern Command On Haiti (Yahoo News/CBS-Miami)

[Jamaica] Man arrested in Jamaica for Vermont killing to be arraigned (AP)

[Mexico] Drug Shortage in Mexico Piles Woes on Cancer-Stricken Children (Wall Street Journal)

[Mexico] Cartel hitmen who murdered ICE agent to be resentenced (Washington Examiner)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Burundi] Burundi opposition picks presidential contender as U.N. warns of rights abuses (Reuters)

[Nigeria] Armed Herdsmen Kill 30 in Northern Nigeria's Kastina State (Bloomberg)

[Nigeria] Armed gangs kill 30 in northwest Nigeria (Yahoo News/RFI)

[Somalia] Young Somalis Step in Where Government Fails (New York Times)

[Somalia] Gunmen kill TV journalist in Somalia, say police (Reuters)

[South Africa] Ramaphosa Faces Uphill Battle to Trim South Africa's Wage Bill (Bloomberg)

[South Sudan] South Sudan Key Opposition Leader Machar Rejects Latest Deal (Bloomberg)

[South Sudan] S. Sudan rebels reject president's peace compromise (Yahoo News/AFP)

[Sudan] In sign of thaw, Israeli PM says flight crosses Sudan skies (AP)

[Sudan] Netanyahu says Israeli airliners have started overflying Sudan (Reuters)

[Sudan] Sudan's Ousted Leader Quizzed in Probe Into Islamist Financing (Bloomberg)

Network TV News Coverage

World Leaders Gather For Last Day of Munich Security Conference (CNN Newsroom)

American Passengers on Diamond Princess Cruise Ship To Return to U.S. (CBS News)

In Wake of Impeachment Acquittal, Trump Emboldened (CNN Newsroom)

[China] Chinese Citizens That May Have Coronavirus Not Admitted to Hospitals (CNN Newsroom)

Secretary of State

Pompeo touts business ties in Africa amid tension over visas, security assistance (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/16/2020 11:08 AM, Borso Tall and Max Bearak, 12625K, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo traveled this weekend from a security conference in Germany to Senegal, where he emphasized economic partnership, even as tensions festered over the Trump administration's recent restrictions on visas for citizens of four African countries and a potential drawdown in military assistance just as extremist attacks

have surged across West Africa's arid interior.

Pompeo's arrival on Saturday in Dakar, Senegal's seaside capital, marked the first time in more than a year and a half that an American Cabinet official had stepped foot in sub-Saharan Africa. Pompeo's predecessor, Rex Tillerson, cut short a trip in March 2018 and was fired shortly afterward. Pompeo is scheduled to travel to Angola on Sunday night and to Ethiopia on Monday.

In Senegal, Pompeo met with business leaders and announced five projects that would involve U.S. companies, including a new 100-mile-long highway.

Speaking alongside Senegal's economy minister, Pompeo said his visit's purpose was to "celebrate these great accomplishments between our two countries and, importantly, between our two private sectors."

The United States has lagged far behind China in establishing trade relationships with African countries, and China has been the continent's biggest trade partner for more than a decade. Much of China's economic relationship with Africa is driven by investments by state-owned companies that have contributed to a boom in factories, ports, power plants, railways and paved roads across the continent.

Meanwhile, U.S. engagement with many African countries has largely revolved around humanitarian aid and cooperation on security matters, including troop training, a constellation of new bases and the sale of military equipment.

Pentagon officials have briefed Congress on their intention to shrink the U.S. military presence in West Africa, where some 1,400 soldiers are stationed. Congress has urged the Pentagon to reconsider, as have European and West African leaders. France maintains the largest non-African troop presence in the region.

"I'm convinced that when our review is done, we'll have a conversation with not just Senegal but all the countries in the region," Pompeo told reporters in Dakar. "We'll talk through why we're doing it, how we're doing it, [and] we'll deliver an outcome that works for all of us."

The U.S. Commerce Department hopes to deepen trade and investment ties through a program called Prosper Africa, though Pompeo's trip to the continent is the first time a high-level official has traveled here to promote it. Coupled with the new visa restrictions and looming troop withdrawal, Pompeo's pitch for economic partnership may come with more questions than answers, analysts said.

"When the U.S. imposed, the week before last, a travel ban on Nigeria, Eritrea, Sudan and Tanzania, I think, this sort of sends a conflicting signal to American business. Certainly, the announcement that they're considering cutting the American security assistance on the continent is also puzzling," said Witney Schneidman, the senior adviser for Africa at Covington and Burling, an international law firm. "Pompeo's going to have his hands full in terms of explaining the different messages coming from Washington."

Earlier this month, the U.S. trade representative announced the beginning of talks between the United States and Kenya on a bilateral free-trade agreement, which would be the first

for a sub-Saharan African country.

Speaking in Washington, Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said shared ideals made the two countries natural partners, but he also cautioned against seeing Africa as an arena for an economic proxy war with China.

"We don't want to be forced to choose," he said. "We must begin to look at Africa as the world's biggest opportunity, and I believe that you can dare to look at it with a fresh eye."

Angola and Ethiopia, Pompeo's next stops, have deep economic ties to China. In Angola, about 70 percent of the national debt is owned by China. In Ethiopia, the sense of closeness is enough that its national airline has continued flying to China amid the coronavirus outbreak, partly out of a desire not to harm that relationship.

Pompeo "risks getting caught up in, sort of, a China-China-China dynamic and really needs to convey to African leaders that Africa is genuinely a priority for the United States," Schneidman said.

In Africa, Pompeo Oversees Multi-Million Dollar Business Deals (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [2/16/2020 10:10 AM, Adam Kredo, 118K, Positive]

A group of U.S.-based companies inked several multi-million dollar deals with Senegal on Sunday, a move meant to promote American values in the developing world.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in the first leg of a 10-day trip through Africa and the Middle East, oversaw the signing of several agreements that will see U.S. companies partner with the Senegalese government to build critical infrastructure projects.

Pompeo's stops in Africa are meant to pushback against mounting criticism that the Trump administration is backing away from the global stage and focusing inward on America domestically.

In a major foreign policy speech on Saturday in Munich, Germany, Pompeo argued that the Trump administration's criticism of historical alliances such as NATO is not part of a foreign policy that seeks to limit America's role in the world.

David Rutz breaks down the most important news about the enemies of freedom, here and around the world, in this comprehensive morning newsletter.

In Africa, Pompeo is looking to promote American business interests and push back against economic gains made by nations such as China, which has invested heavily in the developing world.

"The private sectors drive economic growth and value for the United States," Pompeo said ahead of the signing in Dakar of five new economic partnerships.

"They're important because not only will they deliver value here in Senegal, it will be good for these American global companies" and benefits workers in both countries.

Pompeo's presence as the business deals were inked appears to be part of his push to show the world America still values free enterprise and the spirit of capitalism across the developing world.

The first agreement was inked between the U.S. Bechtel Corporation and Ageroute, Senegal's road construction agency.

The deal will see the American firm build some 100 miles of highway linking Dakar to the more northern city of Saint-Louis.

The State Department says the deal will create up to 4,000 Senegalese jobs and support around 1,500 back in America.

The second deal was signed between the Philadelphia-based ABD Group and Senegal's Ministry of Economy, Planning, and International Partnerships.

The \$320 million deal will spark social infrastructure projects across Senegal, including in the education, housing, and health care sectors.

Another \$100 million electric grid project was established between the Weldy-Lamont corporation and Senelec.

American powerhouse General Electric also announced the signing of two agreements with the Senegalese government, including one to upgrade the country's power plants and increase access to gas resources.

A second agreement will be centered in the health care sector and provide Senegal with diagnostic technology.

The combined value of the deals is around \$200 million, according to U.S. officials.

Senegal Seeks Continued U.S. Military Presence as Trump Administration Weighs Cuts (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/16/20120 2:36 PM, Courtney McBride, Neutral]

As the Trump administration weighs a possible reduction of its military presence in West Africa, one of its allies in the region appealed Sunday for continued U.S. support.

But Foreign Minister Amadou Ba of Senegal, meeting with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, balanced his request with a recognition of his country's own responsibilities.

"We want them [U.S. military] to remain present, we hope that they will continue to support in the security areas, we hope they will continue to support, as in training and intelligence," Mr. Ba said at a news conference in Dakar with Mr. Pompeo at his side.

He added that the Senegalese government respects the U.S. position and takes the view "that in general, as the saying goes, you have to support yourself. Charity begins at home."

The U.S. is considering reducing its force of about 6,000 commandos, trainers and other military personnel across Africa, most devoted to efforts to combat extremist organizations on the continent. The Trump administration is reviewing its force posture as it weighs devoting more resources to Asia and Europe, and officials have said decisions are due in March.

Mr. Pompeo, a former Central Intelligence Agency director, expressed confidence that the U.S. and its partners would strike the appropriate force-structure balance in Africa.

"We've made it clear that the Department of Defense is looking at West Africa to make sure we have our force levels right," he said, adding the U.S., European partners including France and the Senegalese forces would meet their obligations to allow for the area's economic growth.

Mr. Ba, speaking through an interpreter, said that the ongoing evaluation of the U.S. Africa Command "doesn't mean that the American soldiers will leave."

Senegal is partly located in Africa's Sahel region, where West African countries backed by U.S. and French forces are fighting Islamist militants reinforced by jihadists seasoned in Syria and Iraq.

In addition to Mr. Ba, Mr. Pompeo met with Senegalese President Macky Sall. During those conversations, Mr. Ba said, talks touched on the need for a U.S. presence in the area.

"We think it is important for Africa to show, to start working itself" and must guarantee the security of citizens, Mr. Ba said, after citing Mr. Sall's proposal for African nations to develop a funding structure for security operations in the Sahel. "Unfortunately, we don't have the means."

He added, "We count on the support from the government of the U.S. and...we asked the secretary to be our advocate."

In Washington, Republican and Democratic lawmakers recently exhorted the Trump administration to reverse course on plans to withdraw troops from Africa, citing the extremist threat there.

France has about 4,500 troops in the region, and French officials have said they count on U.S. air support, logistics and other help.

Dakar was Mr. Pompeo's first stop on a three-country tour through sub-Saharan Africa—his first as secretary of state. He headed to Angola on Sunday and planned to stop in Ethiopia before traveling to Saudi Arabia and Oman.

Much of his emphasis in Africa is on economic issues, including meeting with business leaders and local entrepreneurs and working to improve the climate for American investment.

The visit also comes weeks after the Trump administration imposed travel restriction on four more African countries, Eritrea, Sudan, Tanzania and Nigeria, the latter being the

continent's most populous. African countries earlier targeted by the restrictions include Libya, Somalia and Chad.

US secretary of state visits Senegal to start Africa tour (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 3:09 PM, Staff, 1512K, Neutral]

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the Trump administration is working to determine what level of American military forces is needed in West Africa to counter the rise of extremist violence in the region.

Speaking at the end of his visit to Senegal, Pompeo said he discussed the issue of the U.S. military presence in West Africa with President Macky Sall amid reports that the Trump administration intends to reduce troops in Africa.

"We did have a lot of conversation about security issues here, about America's role in those. We've made it clear that the Department of Defense is looking at West Africa to make sure we have our force levels right," Pompeo said to reporters Sunday. "I was here as CIA director, so I know these security issues very, very well. We'll get it right, we'll get it right collectively; I'm convinced of that."

Pompeo said the U.S. will work with Senegal, other West African countries and France to counter the growing threat of extremist violence.

"We have an obligation to get security right here, in the region — it's what will permit economic growth and we're determined to do that," Pompeo said. "And I'm convinced that when our review is done, we'll have a conversation with not just Senegal, but all the countries in the region ... We'll deliver an outcome that works for all of us."

Senegal's Foreign Minister Amadou Ba confirmed that West Africa is concerned about the extremist violence that is spreading in West Africa.

"Terrorism has no border, and it is very costly," said Ba at the news conference with Pompeo. He said that Senegal and the region wants continued military support from the U.S.

"Yes, we are under threat," Ba said. "We want them (the U.S.) to remain present. We hope they will continue to support in security areas. We hope they will continue to support us in training and intelligence. This was discussed with the president of the republic."

Pompeo came to Senegal to start his tour of Africa, the first U.S. Cabinet official to visit in more than 18 months. He left Senegal Sunday to go to Angola and after that will travel to Ethiopia as the Trump administration tries to counter the growing interest of China, Russia and other global powers in Africa and its booming young population of more than 1.2 billion.

In Angola, an oil-rich country whose people remain impoverished, Pompeo will meet with President Joao Lourenco, who is making strides against corruption, including actions against close relatives of the former leader.

Then Pompeo heads to Ethiopia, Africa's second-most populous nation with more than 100

million people and the headquarters of the African Union.

Ethiopia, a key U.S. security ally in the Horn of Africa, has undergone dramatic political reforms since Nobel Peace Prize-winning Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018. The loosening of repressive measures has been exploited by some with long-held grievances, leading to sometimes violent ethnic tensions that threaten a national election later this year.

Pompeo pledges 'collective' approach to African troop presence (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 11:47 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Sunday that the United States favoured a "collective" approach with its allies when deciding on troop numbers deployed in Africa against jihadist insurgents.

"We'll get it right, we'll get it right collectively, I'm convinced of that," Pompeo told reporters in Dakar.

Pompeo said he had no specific announcement to make about any cuts in US troops deployed against jihadist groups in the Sahel region of Africa.

But he said the US would work closely with Senegalese and other forces in the region as well as its European partners, especially France.

"We have an obligation to get security right here, in the region, it's what will permit economic growth and we're determined to do that," he said.

"When our review is done we'll have a conversation with not just Senegal but all the countries in the region, we'll talk through why we're doing what we're doing and we'll deliver an outcome that works for all of us."

Senegal Foreign Minister Amadou Ba said that the United States had informed his government of its "wish to withdraw combat troops".

This, he said, would still leave an American military presence, notably in the areas of training and intelligence.

But he also insisted that Washington remained a crucial ally in the fight against jihadist violence that has plagued the Sahel.

"More than ever, Africa is faced with major challenges linked to insecurity and terrorism," Ba said.

"It needs the United States of America as a strategic ally for a definitive return to peace and stability."

Pompeo vows 'collective' approach to Africa troop presence (Yahoo News/France 24)
Yahoo News/France 24 [2/16/2020 12:23 PM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

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approach with its allies when deciding on troop numbers deployed in Africa against jihadist insurgents.

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U.S. Vows to Continue Backing Fight Against Islamic Terror in Africa (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [2/16/2020 2:00 PM, Adam Kredo, 118K, Positive]

The United States is committed to sending counter-terrorism resources to Africa to aid the continent's ongoing fight against radical Islamic forces, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Speaking Sunday alongside senior Senegalese officials during the first stop of a multi-nation visit to Africa, Pompeo said the Trump administration is currently reviewing its security plans for West Africa and will ensure nations in the region receive all the support they need in the fight against Islamic terrorist forces.

In his meetings with the Senegalese president and foreign minister, Pompeo said he "talked about Islamist terrorism, which endangers 350 million people right here in West Africa. It

threatens Americans, too, and we are counting on Senegal. It is an important ally in this fight. And I assured our friends that the U.S. will keep this fight up as well."

Pompeo's comments are being viewed as a dose of much-needed reassurance to African nations concerned about America's ongoing commitment to their safety and security.

"We did have a lot of conversation about the security situation here and America's role in those," Pompeo told reporters. "We made it clear we're looking at West Africa to make sure we have our force levels right."

Pompeo traveled to the region in his previous role as CIA director.

"We'll get it right and we'll get it right collectively," Pompeo said of the number of American forces likely to be sent to the region to assist with security.

As the lead stop on his first-ever tour of sub-Saharan Africa as secretary of state, Pompeo discussed key regional security issues, as well as private investment opportunities for American businesses.

"We have an obligation to get security right here in the region that will permit economic growth," Pompeo said.

Senegal remains a "vibrant democracy rich in culture and history," he added. "The United States is proud to have Senegal as one of our closest friends on the continent."

In addition to regional security issues, the Trump administration is seeking to let Africa know that it is not pulling back its economic investment. Pompeo announced the start of several multimillion-dollar projects and will continue to advocate for American businesses as he continues through the region.

"President Trump's 'Prosper Africa' initiative is making the kinds of deals signed this morning possible," Pompeo said.

Mike Pompeo seeks to defund program named after envoy killed in Benghazi (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [2/16/2020 2:41 PM, Martin Pengelly, 4742K, Neutral]

Mike Pompeo rose to prominence during investigations of the deadly attack on a US facility in Benghazi in September 2012. Now, as Donald Trump's secretary of state, he is pressing to defund a diplomatic initiative named for the US ambassador who died there.

Foreign Policy reported the move, contained in the 2021 state department budget proposal, to eliminate a \$5m contribution to the Stevens Initiative.

Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other Americans – Sean Smith, Glen Doherty and Tyrone Woods – died on 11 September 2012, when a crowd attacked a US outpost in Benghazi, a port city in northern Libya.

Republicans in Congress investigated aggressively, at one point subjecting Hillary Clinton,

secretary of state at the time of the attack and a presidential candidate at the time of the investigations, to an 11-hour grilling before a House committee.

Pompeo, then a Tea party-backed congressman from Kansas, played a prominent role, accusing Clinton of putting "political expediency and politics ahead of the men and women on the ground".

Clinton parried but in the 2016 election, Trump wielded Benghazi and her supposed culpability for it as a talking point at raucous campaign rallies.

After Trump's victory, Pompeo became CIA director before moving to follow Clinton as America's most senior diplomat. On Sunday he was in Dakar, Senegal, meeting President Macky Sall.

According to the state department, Stevens was the first US ambassador in 30 years to be killed in the line of duty and the sixth to be killed by militants.

According to its website, the Initiative named after him was "conceived and developed in close partnership" with his family and "inspired by the meaningful international exchange experiences ... Stevens had as a young man".

It aims to use technology to facilitate "life-changing, cross-cultural experiences" between young people across the world.

The state department has been subject to extensive cuts since Trump took power. Nonetheless a US official who spoke to Foreign Policy on condition of anonymity said cutting funding for the Stevens Initiative and other cultural programmes, for a proposed total saving of \$420.7m, ran counter to "everything [Stevens] stood for".

"Part of the reason his family made the argument in the first place they should name a programme after him is because he was very open in advocating for exchanges with other societies," the official said.

State officials told Foreign Policy and the Washington Post the cut set out in the budget proposal did not mean the initiative or similar programmes would definitely lose all funding.

Attempts to cut funding to the Stevens Initiative have been made before. Congress blocked them.

Mohamed Abdel-Kader, executive director of the Stevens Initiative, told Foreign Policy it had "enjoyed a great relationship with the state department, the work that we do has a lot of impact with the students we serve and the program has enjoyed bipartisan support from Congress".

Department of State News

U.S. Passengers Prepare to Evacuate From Cruise Ship in Japan (New York Times)

New York Times [2/16/2020 10:35 AM, Austin Ramzy and Motoko Rich, 23673K, Neutral] American passengers on Sunday frantically prepared to evacuate a cruise ship that has been quarantined for more than 10 days in the Japanese port city of Yokohama, as hundreds of people on board fell ill with the coronavirus.

As the Americans scrambled to pack their bags and prepare their own meals for a chartered flight to the United States, Japanese health officials said the number of confirmed coronavirus cases found on the ship, the Diamond Princess, had grown by 70, to 355.

"Can't get off here fast enough," Sarah Arana, 52, a medical social worker from Paso Robles, Calif., told reporters on Sunday.

The United States Embassy in Japan had recommended that American citizens stay aboard the ship during a 14-day quarantine period. But it suddenly changed course on Saturday, citing "a rapidly evolving situation" as conditions appeared to worsen.

American passengers said they were told to prepare to leave the ship at 9 p.m. local time. Their flight was scheduled to depart Haneda Airport in Tokyo at 3 a.m. on Monday. Officials said they would be taken to one of two military air bases in the United States.

But the process, taken deck by deck, went slowly. By close to 11 p.m., many were still waiting in their rooms.

Passengers on the charter were told there would be no overhead luggage space on the flight, so all carry-ons had to fit under the seats in front of them, and shipped luggage could not exceed 70 pounds. They would be flying on a converted 747 cargo plane, the officials said, which could be cold, so they were advised to shower and dress warmly for the flight. They were also advised to bring their own food.

Late in the afternoon, as buses lined up on the pier, American officials dressed in protective suits knocked on the cabin doors of American citizens to inform them that they needed to put their luggage out at 6 p.m. to prepare for the 9 p.m. transfer.

Rachel Torres, 24, who had been on her honeymoon with her husband, Tyler, also 24, said they were trying to clean their stateroom so as not to leave a mess for their cabin steward.

"We didn't sleep much last night," said Ms. Torres. In preparation for the flight, she said, the couple were "drinking as much water as we can to hydrate for the flight since we will be wearing masks on the plane."

Including the cases aboard the Diamond Princess, Japan has recorded the highest number of infections from the new coronavirus outside mainland China. Worldwide, more than 68,500 people have been infected, and at least 1,669 have died, almost all in mainland China.

When the ship was placed under quarantine, more than 3,700 passengers and crew aboard were on board, including about 400 Americans. Those found to have the virus and some particularly vulnerable passengers were taken off the ship.

The American Embassy in Tokyo said those with coronavirus infections or symptoms would not be allowed to take the chartered flight.

Once in the United States, the passengers will be required to undergo a two-week quarantine at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, Calif., or Lackland Air Force Base near San Antonio.

Those who do not take the charter will not be allowed to travel to the United States until March 4, two weeks after they would have otherwise been allowed to leave the ship on Wednesday, the embassy said.

Some remained hesitant about whether to take the charter flight. Linda Tsukamoto, 63, a retired retail manager from Marina del Rey, Calif., said she had signed up for the evacuation flight, but changed her mind at the last minute.

Ms. Tsukamoto stuck a Post-it note on her door reading, "I'm staying." Three military doctors came to her door and advised her to go. Their emphatic tone, she said, was "scary," but she is standing her ground.

"I'd rather go home first class on United Airlines than a cold, noisy military charter when the Japanese Ministry of Health releases us," she said. "I refuse to be fearful but respect the U.S. government to help others who feel more comfortable rushing home."

According to a letter from the Diamond Princess staff to passengers on Sunday, passengers who test negative for the virus and show no symptoms will be allowed to leave the ship on Feb. 19. The letter noted that passengers "may be subject to additional quarantine requirements by their country of destination when leaving Japan."

After 11 days of being isolated in their windowless cabin, John and Carol Montgomery were finally preparing to board a bus to take them to the airport, where they would then fly next to hundreds of people for about nine hours.

"It feels surreal," said Ms. Montgomery, 67, a retired administrative assistant from San Clemente, Calif.

With at least 40 Americans from the ship having tested positive for the coronavirus during the quarantine period, some will be left behind in Japan when the charter flights depart.

For some, that means family separations. John Haering, 63, who was taken to a hospital in Chiba Prefecture last week with a fever and tested positive for the virus, will have to stay while his wife, Melanie, boards the charter flight.

"She'll be in California quarantine," Mr. Haering said by telephone from his hospital bed. "And I'm staying here, obviously."

Mr. Haering said he was angry that the United States government had not acted earlier.

"If they were going to fly people out, they should have flown them out in the very beginning," he said. "That way, we wouldn't have sat there for 12 days, all of us getting sicker. I

wouldn't have been in the hospital; I would have been in the U.S. getting the treatment that I needed, and I could have been in quarantine there."

Tung Pi Lee, 79, was whisked away from the ship Wednesday night with a fever, leaving his wife on the ship. JoAnn LaRoche Lee, one of Mr. Lee's daughters, said she and her siblings did not want her mother to try to stay in Japan with their father for fear she would not be allowed to come back if she did not take the charter flight.

As for their father, said Ms. Lee, "We're just kind of trusting that the State Department will be able to facilitate my dad's return."

The United States previously evacuated about 850 people on five charter flights from Wuhan, the city in central China where the coronavirus emerged late last year.

Canada and Hong Kong also said they would charter flights for passengers on the cruise ship, though it was not immediately clear when those flights would leave. The Philippines' labor minister said on Sunday that the country was working to bring home more than 500 crew members.

The Australian government said it was sending an expert to Yokohama and would consider the best options for more than 200 of its citizens aboard the ship. The Israeli government said three of its citizens on the ship had been infected. They are the first confirmed Israeli cases.

About 330 Hong Kong residents are on the ship, including 260 Chinese citizens and 70 foreigners. Eleven of the Hong Kong passengers have been infected, the Hong Kong government said.

An 80-year-old man who took the Diamond Princess from Yokohama to Hong Kong in January tested positive for the coronavirus on Feb. 1, the first documented case on the ship.

44 Americans on cruise ship docked in Japan tested positive for coronavirus, U.S. health official says (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/16/2020 1:00 PM, Gerry Shih and Katie Mettler, 12625K, Neutral]

Hundreds of U.S. citizens who have spent nearly two weeks exposed to the coronavirus and quarantined aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked near Tokyo were evacuated Sunday evening and taken by bus to a nearby airport, where two chartered planes are scheduled to return them to the United States.

Forty-four Americans who were traveling on the Diamond Princess have been infected, Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told The Washington Post on Sunday.

About 400 Americans were on the cruise ship when it docked in Japan, and the Japanese Defense Ministry said 300 of them disembarked Sunday night, the Associated Press reported. Once they land on U.S. soil, the passengers will be quarantined and monitored for an additional 14 days at military bases in Texas and California.

The number of coronavirus diagnoses has continued to rise sharply among the 3,700 passengers and crew members originally on board. Japanese Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said early Sunday that the quarantined ship floating near Tokyo has 355 confirmed cases, or about 30 percent of the 1,219 people who have been tested so far. That represents one of the highest infection rates in the world.

"The degree of transmissibility on that cruise ship is essentially akin to being in a hot spot," Fauci, who is also a member of the White House task force for the coronavirus, told CBS.

The Diamond Princess has been quarantined since Feb. 5. Those who elected to forgo the chartered flight back to the United States are expected to leave the ship on Feb. 19, but officials have said they will not be able to find a different flight home until at least March 4.

Their motivations to stay behind varied. Some passengers have sick family members being treated for the disease known as covid-19 in Japanese hospitals. Others feared they could be exposed to the coronavirus on the confined plane or were opposed to escaping one quarantine only to enter another, according to a Reuters report.

Cheryl and Paul Molesky of Syracuse, N.Y., told the Associated Press that they were willing to risk it.

"We are glad to be going home," Cheryl Molesky told NHK TV in Japan, the Associated Press reported. "It's just a little bit disappointing that we'll have to go through quarantine again, and we will probably not be as comfortable as the Diamond Princess, possibly."

"The biggest challenge has been the uncertainty," she added.

Video footage showed several buses lined up alongside the cruise ship Sunday night as American passengers disembarked.

Canada, South Korea, Italy and Hong Kong announced Sunday they would also arrange charter flights.

Three Israelis on board have been found positive for the virus, according to the Israeli Health Ministry, but their condition is mild and they are now in a hospital in Japan. The ministry added that an expert physician has been sent to liaise with Japanese health officials.

The Diamond Princess and another cruise ship, the Westerdam in Cambodia, are posing logistical and public health challenges for governments as they try to contain the spread of covid-19 and to repatriate citizens.

Concerns mounted on Sunday that authorities in Cambodia, including U.S. Embassy officials, had allowed passengers infected by the coronavirus to disembark from the Westerdam cruise ship and depart for other cities and countries around the world after Malaysian officials confirmed that a second exam for an ill passenger returned positive.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail told reporters Sunday that an 83-

year-old American passenger on the cruise liner tested positive for the coronavirus — once on Friday and once on Saturday — after she landed in Kuala Lumpur, despite being screened earlier by Cambodian health officials.

“The results were the same. That is positive for the wife and negative for her husband,” Wan Azizah told reporters at a news conference, adding that Malaysia will now bar entry for all passengers from the cruise ship, according to Reuters.

The unexpected finding upends a basic assumption by several governments, including the United States, that the ship was virus-free and that passengers could be greeted at proximity without protective gear and allowed to travel.

The American woman, whose identity has not been disclosed, was among hundreds of relieved passengers who were let off the Westerdam on Friday and welcomed and embraced by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, who has downplayed the epidemic’s threat and described the decision to bring them onshore as an act of humanitarian goodwill. The ship had been stranded at sea for nearly two weeks and was running low on provisions after it was denied entry to Taiwan, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand and the U.S. territory of Guam.

The U.S. ambassador, W. Patrick Murphy, also brought his family on the cruise ship and posed for pictures on Saturday with American passengers. Murphy and other passengers did not appear to be wearing masks in photos shared on the embassy’s Twitter account.

Disembarkation, which was set to continue over the weekend, was halted Sunday, according to Cambodian journalists at the scene.

Holland America, the cruise operator, said in a statement Sunday that no other passengers or crew who were on the ship have reported any symptoms of the coronavirus. About 1,000 people remain on the ship, with the rest on their way home.

Grant Tarling, Holland America’s chief medical officer, said in the statement that the company was working with health experts to contact national health authorities around the world to investigate and follow up with individuals who may have come into contact with the American woman found to carry the virus.

On Saturday, Cambodia’s health minister issued a public statement urging the public to “not be overly afraid” but to take protective measures. That night, charter flights that were originally scheduled to take Westerdam passengers to Kuala Lumpur were canceled by Malaysian authorities.

As of Sunday, authorities worldwide have tallied roughly 69,000 cases of the illness and 1,669 deaths. The overwhelming majority of infections remain in mainland China, which reported 2,009 new cases on Saturday.

In Taiwan, authorities reported the first death on Sunday, a man in his 60s with diabetes and hepatitis but no recent history of overseas travel, according to the state-run Central News Agency. Officials said they were still investigating how the man contracted the virus while living in the central part of Taiwan, which has so far recorded 20 confirmed cases

across the island.

Chinese officials said Sunday that they believed measures taken across the country to control the epidemic were paying off. Several cities in the central region have declared strict "wartime measures" that allow residents to leave their homes only several times a week and upon approval from neighborhood authorities.

Guards in Hubei are required to check identification 24 hours a day at the entrance to residential compounds, and driving is banned for all nonessential purposes under new regulations released Sunday.

The number of new cases across China, including in Hubei, have been falling, said Chinese National Health Commission spokesman Mi Feng, who noted that doctors in the worst-hit province had broadened their diagnosis criteria for patients suspected of suffering from the disease and were able to treat them more quickly.

"The effects of our counter-coronavirus measures in every part of the country are already becoming apparent," Mi said.

The Westerdam was believed to have no infections on board among the 2,200 crew and passengers who were stranded at sea for weeks as countries rejected their entry following a stop in Hong Kong, where they took on hundreds of new passengers.

Health experts have warned that the coronavirus is difficult to contain precisely because symptoms are often mild and the coronavirus could replicate inside the human body and infect others for more than two weeks before showing symptoms at all.

The U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh said Cambodian officials individually screened all disembarking passengers for fever with the help of embassy staff this week, and any passenger who reported feeling ill had received lab tests, all of which returned negative. The tests were processed by a lab trusted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the U.S. Embassy said.

Coronavirus cruise ship passengers head to California military base for quarantine (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [2/16/2020 11:23 AM, Alex Wigglesworth, 1907K, Neutral]

American passengers evacuated from a cruise ship in which 355 people have been diagnosed with the new coronavirus were expected to be flown on a chartered flight to a California military base on Sunday.

The State Department chartered flights to transport U.S. citizens from the Diamond Princess, which has been docked off Yokohama since Feb. 3, to Travis Air Force Base in Solano County, officials announced Saturday.

There are about 400 U.S. citizens aboard the ship, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said, but it's not yet known whether all of them have elected to return.

The flights were expected to arrive in Japan on Sunday to pick up the passengers before

departing for California.

Some of them will stay at Travis Air Force Base, joining the 234 people already quarantined there after arriving on previous evacuation flights that landed Feb. 5 and Feb. 7, officials said.

Other passengers will continue to Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas, the CDC said in a news release.

The Diamond Princess set sail Jan. 20 and was placed under quarantine by Japanese officials on Feb. 5 after a passenger who departed the cruise ship in Hong Kong tested positive for the coronavirus.

That quarantine was set to continue through Feb. 19.

Cruise ship evacuees who arrive at both of the U.S. military bases will be required to undergo a second 14-day quarantine overseen by the CDC, officials said.

They will be screened for symptoms before leaving the ship and before boarding the flights.

No passengers showing symptoms will be permitted to board the flights, the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo said.

They'll also be screened upon arrival in the U.S. and will be housed separately from the people already undergoing quarantine at the bases, officials said.

"We understand this is frustrating and an adjustment, but these measures are consistent with the careful policies we have instituted to limit the potential spread of the disease," the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo said in a letter sent to cruise ship passengers Saturday.

No positive coronavirus results have been reported among those quarantined at Travis; one case has been reported among those quarantined at Lackland.

The virus has killed more than 1,600 people and infected more than 68,000 since it was discovered in Wuhan, China, in late December.

Travis is one of three military bases in California that the Defense Department has designated as a site to house returning coronavirus evacuees.

About 195 people were permitted to leave from there on Tuesday after finishing a 14-day quarantine, but two other people who arrived later were expected to be kept there until at least Sunday.

The move to transport the American cruise ship passengers came as the number of coronavirus cases aboard the Diamond Princess continued to grow over the weekend, with 67 new diagnoses on Saturday, and the U.S. government issued a recommendation that all American passengers and crew members leave.

"We are deeply grateful to the cruise line and government of Japan for working diligently to

contain and control the spread of the illness," the letter from the U.S. Embassy said.

"However, to fulfill our government's responsibilities to U.S. citizens under our rules and practices, as well as to reduce the burden on the Japanese healthcare system, the U.S. government recommends, out of an abundance of caution, that U.S. citizens disembark and return to the United States for further monitoring."

The 3,700 passengers and crew members aboard the Diamond Princess include two Santa Clarita residents, Carl Goldman and his wife, Jeri Seratti-Goldman.

The couple own the radio station KHTS and have been documenting their experiences in a diary on the station's website.

Many of the posts have been lighthearted, but on Saturday, Carl Goldman wrote that one of their traveling companions had been diagnosed with the COVID-19 virus.

"It's a sad day aboard the Diamond Princess," he wrote.

The woman, Jerri Jorgenson, and her husband, Mark, were confined to the cabin adjoining the Goldmans', and the two couples had unlocked a partition separating their balconies so they could move freely back and forth between the units during the quarantine, Carl Goldman wrote.

"Last night, after watching a movie, all four of us took our temperatures. Jerri had a fever," he wrote.

"In the morning, she still had a fever. As Mark and Jerri were getting ready to call the ship's hospital, Japanese health officials knocked on their door. They were dressed in hazmat suits."

He said that they handed Mark Jorgenson a letter saying that his wife had tested positive for the virus and said she had one hour to pack a small bag.

She was taken by ambulance to a hospital about four hours away in Fukushima, where her husband was not permitted to join her, Goldman wrote.

Goldman, his wife and Mark Jorgenson plan to fly back to the U.S. on one of the evacuation flights and undergo a second quarantine at one of the military bases, Goldman wrote.

"We are unclear what tomorrow will bring," he wrote.

"We are shaken and devastated that we have been removed from our friend."

Health officials say that the COVID-19 virus continues to pose a low risk to the general American public.

Just 15 cases have been diagnosed in the U.S.: eight in California, two in Illinois, and one each in Arizona, Massachusetts, Texas, Washington and Wisconsin.

All of the patients had either recently traveled to mainland China or, in two cases, had close contact with someone who did.

At least three of the cases were among people who had recently arrived on an evacuation flight from Wuhan.

U.S. Passengers Depart Cruise Ship Quarantined Over Coronavirus (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/16/2020 12:36 PM, Suryatapa Bhattacharya, Neutral]

American passengers on the coronavirus-stricken Diamond Princess cruise ship arrived at a Tokyo airport early Monday for flights home that the U.S. government arranged after a high-level political push in Washington.

Buses carried the Americans from the ship, the site of the biggest coronavirus outbreak outside China, to Haneda airport, where two charter flights organized by the State Department were to depart later Monday local time. The Defense Department said one plane would go to Travis Air Force Base near Sacramento, Calif., and the other would land at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

The Americans spent nearly two weeks in quarantine aboard the cruise ship and must serve out an additional 14-day quarantine after arriving in the U.S.

About 380 Americans and family members of Americans were on board the ship when the quarantine started Feb. 5. Some later tested positive for the novel coronavirus and were brought to hospitals across the Tokyo region.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institutes of Health infectious diseases institute, said on Sunday before the flights took off that 40 Americans from the ship had been infected.

Those who tested positive or showed symptoms weren't allowed on the evacuation flights. Some remain in hospitals across Tokyo. Japan said 150 members of its military were on board the ship helping with the departure and other issues.

The Centers for disease control and Prevention said the decision to repatriate Americans was due to the "dynamic nature of the outbreak," meaning the number of cases has been rising on the ship.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases among passengers and crew climbed to 355, Japan's health ministry said Sunday, with 70 additional people who tested positive being brought to hospitals on shore. Israel said Sunday two of its citizens were among those infected, the first Israelis to catch the novel coronavirus.

Canada said Saturday it would send a chartered plane to repatriate its citizens and would follow a protocol similar to the U.S. for screenings and further quarantine. The decision was taken "because of the extraordinary circumstances faced by passengers" and "to lighten the burden on the Japanese health-care system," according to a statement. Italy's prime minister said his country would send a plane to pick up 35 Italians on the ship.

In China, the government said there were 68,500 confirmed cases as of Saturday with 1,665 deaths. In Hubei province, the center of the outbreak, the government said Sunday it would limit vehicle travel to those who are carrying supplies, transporting patients or otherwise contributing to control of the epidemic.

The Diamond Princess had more than 3,700 passengers and crew when the quarantine started. Initially, Japan resisted testing everyone, citing logistical hurdles, and it had said it would let everyone who was feeling well leave on Feb. 19. On Saturday it reversed course and said everyone would be tested before disembarking. Those who test negative will be allowed to leave, but many are likely to have to stay beyond Feb. 19 because of the time needed to get test results.

On Saturday, staff on the ship were told they would start a new quarantine for an unspecified period after the last passenger has disembarked.

The U.S. repatriation effort followed a push by some lawmakers in Washington.

Sen. James Risch (R., Idaho) raised the issue with President Trump on Thursday and they talked about "how important it is that the people on the cruise ship get the support they need" from the U.S. government, said a spokeswoman for Sen. Risch.

On the same day, Rep. Phil Roe (R., Tenn.) sent a letter to several U.S. agencies citing "deteriorating conditions" on the ship and what he called "flawed approaches to isolation among passengers."

Arnold Hopland, a 73-year-old primary-care doctor from Tennessee who was on the cruise with his wife and cousin's family, said his children in the U.S. alerted Rep. Roe to the issues on the ship, and that he spoke by videoconference with the congressman. Rep. Roe "is a personal friend for many years," Dr. Hopland said.

Dr. Hopland said he expressed concern that the measures to prevent additional infections on board were inadequate. The ship "is not meant to be a quarantine facility. The flaws are many," he said.

He said at one point people who shared a cabin were asked to stay 6 feet apart and wear a mask. "My wife and I giggled over that," he said. "These are not practical measures."

Dr. Hopland had hoped to depart Sunday but learned at the last minute that his wife tested positive and would be brought to a hospital in Japan, so he decided to stay behind.

The two planes that arrived in Tokyo late Sunday to pick up the Americans were both cargo jets. Passengers were told that the seats were uncomfortable, there were no overhead bins for luggage and food wasn't plentiful.

Tammy Smith, a retired primary-school principal from Southern California, initially hesitated to join the repatriation flight because of the additional quarantine, but ultimately decided to pack her bags. "I just want to get to the U.S. ASAP," she said.

NIH official confirms 40 Americans on cruise ship have coronavirus (Politico)

Politico [2/16/2020 2:14 PM, Evan Semones, 2003K, Negative]

A top National Institutes of Health official said Sunday that at least 40 Americans on a quarantined cruise ship in Japan have been infected with the deadly coronavirus.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the NIH's National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, said in an interview with host Margaret Brennan on CBS' "Face the Nation" that infected Americans aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship would be treated at hospitals in Japan. Fauci gave the number as 40, though other reports indicated that the number might be higher.

The CDC confirmed on Saturday that 400 Americans were set to be evacuated from the cruise ship and flown back to the United States where, Fauci said, they would be subjected to a 14-day quarantine on military bases in California and Texas.

"The reason for that is that the degree of transmissibility on that cruise ship is essentially akin to being in a hot spot," Fauci added. "A lot of transmissibility on that cruise ship."

Fauci stated said that if passengers who have not yet shown any sign of the coronavirus start to develop symptoms while in the air, "they'll be segregated within the plane."

The flight is due to depart from Japan later on Sunday.

The Diamond Princess has been quarantined in the Japanese port city of Yokohama since Feb. 3. At least 218 passengers, as of Saturday, have reportedly tested positive for the virus.

POLITICO first reported on Thursday that lawmakers, including Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), pressured the Trump administration for an evacuation after Roe received a firsthand account from his friend, a primary care doctor who was stranded on board.

The coronavirus, officially named COVID-19, has infected nearly 70,000 people worldwide, mostly in China. The death toll stands at more than 1,600.

Americans in Japan to Trade One Quarantine for Another (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 11:11 AM, Mari Yamaguchi, Neutral]

Americans Cheryl and Paul Molesky are trading one coronavirus quarantine for another.

The couple from Syracuse, New York, are cutting short a 14-day quarantine on the Diamond Princess cruise ship in the port of Yokohama, near Tokyo, to be flown back to the United States. But they will have to spend another two-week quarantine period at a U.S. military facility to make sure they don't have the new virus that's been sweeping across Asia.

About 380 Americans are on the cruise ship. The Japanese defense ministry said around 300 of them were preparing Sunday night to leave on buses to take them to Tokyo's Haneda Airport. The U.S. State Department has arranged for charter flights to fly the Americans back to the United States. Canada, Hong Kong and Italy said they were planning

similar flights of passengers.

The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo said Washington was evacuating the Americans because the passengers and crew members on board the Diamond Princess were at a high risk of exposure to the virus.

The Americans will be flown to Travis Air Force Base in California, with some continuing to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas. After arriving in the U.S., all of the passengers will need to go through another 14 days of quarantine — meaning they will have been under quarantine for a total of nearly four weeks.

"We are glad to be going home," Cheryl Molesky told NHK TV in Japan. "It's just a little bit disappointing that we'll have to go through quarantine again, and we will probably not be as comfortable as the Diamond Princess, possibly."

"The biggest challenge has been the uncertainty," she added.

Molesky also said she was getting concerned about the rising number of patients on the ship.

"It's a little bit scary with the numbers going up of the people being taken off the ship for the (virus), so I think its time to go. I think its time to cut our losses and take off," she said.

Japan on Sunday announced another 70 infections on the Diamond Princess, raising the ship's total number of cases to 355. Overall, Japan has 413 confirmed cases of the virus, including one death.

Asked how they felt about the additional 14-day quarantine in the United States, Cheryl Molesky sighed, and her husband said, "If we have to go through that, we will go through that."

Some American passengers aboard the ship said they would pass up the opportunity to take a flight to the U.S. because of the additional quarantine. There also was concern about being on a long flight with other passengers who may be infected or in an incubation period.

Everyone will get a checkup before being allowed on the chartered flight, and those who show symptoms of sickness will not be permitted to board the plane, according to the embassy. American passengers who have already tested positive for the virus will not be among those evacuated on the flights.

One of the Americans, Matthew Smith, said in a tweet Sunday that he saw a passenger with no face mask talking at close quarters with another passenger. He said he and his wife scurried away. "If there are secondary infections onboard, this is why. ... And you wanted me to get on a bus with her?" he said.

He said the American health officials who visited their room was apparently surprised that the couple had decided to stay. They wished the couple luck, and Smith said he told them, "Thanks, but we're fine."

Americans disembark from virus-hit cruise; China says new cases slow (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 4:00 PM, Engen Tham and Stella Qiu, 5304K, Negative]

American passengers were taken off a cruise liner on Sunday to fly home after being quarantined for two weeks off Japan, while China said the rate of new coronavirus cases had slowed, calling that proof its steps to fight the outbreak were working.

An announcement on the public address system aboard the *Diamond Princess*, where 3,700 passengers and crew have been held since Feb. 3, told Americans to get ready to disembark on Sunday evening for charter flights home. Passengers wearing masks could later be seen waving through the windows of buses parked near the ship.

More than 40 infected Americans from the cruise will stay in Japan for treatment, said Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute on Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID).

"They are not going to go anywhere. They're going to be in hospitals in Japan," Fauci told the CBS News program "Face the Nation." "People who have symptoms will not be able to get on the evacuation plane. Others are going to be evacuated starting imminently to air force bases in the United States."

Canadian, Italian, South Korean and Hong Kong passengers were expected to follow soon, after their governments also announced plans to repatriate passengers.

"Leaving in a few hours. No details. Might be going to Texas or Nebraska," U.S. passenger Gay Courter told Reuters.

Seventy new coronavirus cases were confirmed on board, bringing the total on the ship to 355, by far the largest cluster of cases outside China. Fauci told the *Washington Post* there were 44 infected Americans.

Within China, authorities reported 2,009 new cases on Sunday, noting that this was down from more than 2,600 the previous day. They said this showed their efforts to halt the spread of the virus were bearing fruit.

"The effect of the coronavirus controls is appearing," Mi Feng, spokesman for the Health Commission, told reporters.

The new cases brought the total to 68,500 in mainland China, with 1,665 deaths, including 143 fatalities reported on Sunday. Outside China, more than 500 cases have been confirmed, mostly of people who traveled from Chinese cities, with five deaths.

The coronavirus is thought to have emerged at a wildlife market in China's central province of Hubei. China's response has included putting Hubei and its capital Wuhan - a city of 11 million people - on virtual lockdown.

Mi said the proportion of confirmed cases who were critically ill had fallen to 21.6% on Saturday, from 32.4% on Jan. 27. He said this showed the authorities were able to treat patients more quickly, preventing cases from becoming critical.

Mark Woolhouse, Professor of Infectious Disease Epidemiology at Britain's University of Edinburgh, said if the numbers suggested the epidemic has peaked in Hubei, "then this would be encouraging news for the rest of the world too".

But he added: "We should be cautious though; it could simply be that reporting is not keeping up with events in circumstances where the health services are under enormous pressure."

Declining numbers of reported new infections could mean the virus was being contained, but could also mean it was simply running out of susceptible new hosts in Wuhan, he said.

Restrictions were tightened further in Hubei on Sunday with vehicles, apart from essential services, banned from the roads and companies told to stay shut until further notice.

After an extended Lunar New Year holiday, China urgently needs to get back to work. But in some cities streets are still deserted.

On board the Diamond Princess, American passenger Matthew Smith posted a photo on Twitter showing buses parked on the shore to transport U.S. nationals. American officials in hazmat suits and masks had visited his room to check if he would disembark. He said he wanted to stay.

The ship, owned by Carnival Corp., has been held in the port of Yokohama and those with the disease have been taken to hospital in Japan. No one from the ship has died.

Countries that have announced plans to fly their citizens home from the ship say they will take them only if they are symptom-free, and quarantine them on arrival.

The U.S. Department of Defense has said it is preparing to receive two flights with passengers - one to land at Travis Air Force Base, California and the other at Kelly Field/Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

The evacuees would be subject to a 14-day quarantine.

Another cruise ship, Holland America's MS Westerdam, docked in Cambodia on Thursday after being rejected by ports elsewhere. An 83-year-old American passenger tested positive upon arriving in Malaysia, authorities there said. A second test requested by the cruise operator confirmed the finding.

Taiwan reported its first fatality on Sunday. The first fatality in Europe was reported on Saturday, an 80-year-old Chinese man who died at a Paris hospital.

Coronavirus updates: Americans begin evacuation from cruise ship quarantined in Japan (NBC News)

NBC News [2/16/2020 6:55 AM, Staff, 4200K, Neutral]

American passengers quarantined aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan began evacuating the vessel Sunday to be flown back to the United States.

A letter sent to them by the U.S. embassy in Tokyo Sunday said the U.S. government recommended that the 400 or so American citizens on board disembark from the cruise ship and return to the U.S.

It said the U.S. government had chartered flights that will depart Yokohama, where the ship is docked, to the United States on Sunday.

"These charter flights are the only opportunity for eligible passengers to fly to the United States until March 4, 2020, at the earliest," the letter added. "This date is 14 days after the remaining passengers are expected to depart the ship on Feb. 19."

Japanese officials said the quarantine aboard the ship is supposed to end on Feb. 19.

The embassy added that no symptomatic or infected passengers will be allowed to board the chartered flights.

Upon return to the U.S., those who choose to take the chartered flights will be quarantined at Travis Air Force Base in Fairfield, California or Lackland Air Force Base near San Antonio, Texas for 14 days.

Those who choose to stay behind on the ship would face "potential constraints that would impact return to the United States in the next two weeks," the embassy added.

On Sunday, Japan's health ministry confirmed 70 additional coronavirus cases on board the ship, bringing the total number of those infected on the Diamond Princess to 355. A total of 1,219 passengers and crew members have been tested so far.

The ship, carrying some 3,700 passengers and crew, has been quarantined in Yokohama since Feb. 3 after a passenger, who disembarked in Hong Kong, was later diagnosed with the virus.

The company that owns the cruise ship said Sunday it was cancelling all other voyages aboard Diamond Princess until April 20 due to "prolonged quarantine period and the anticipated time to prepare the ship to return to service." — Arata Yamamoto and Yuliya Talmazan

Almost 1,700 people have now died from the novel coronavirus as the number of people diagnosed with the respiratory illness rose to 68,500, officials at China's National Health Commission reported Sunday.

As of Saturday a further 142 people had died, bringing the total number of deaths to 1,665, they said, adding that there were 2,009 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 — an infection that the novel coronavirus causes — nationwide.

However, they said that more than 9,400 patients had also been cured and discharged.

Health commission spokesman Mi Feng told a news conference on Sunday that China's campaign against the virus was beginning to show results.

"The effect of the coronavirus controls is appearing," he said.

Increased medical support and preventive measures in Hubei, where coronavirus is believed to have originated, had headed off more critical cases and the proportion of critical cases among confirmed cases had fallen, Mi added.

Mild cases were also being treated more quickly, preventing them from becoming critical, he said. — Dawn Liu and Reuters

Chinese President Xi Jinping said in a speech published Saturday night by state media that he took behind-the-scenes action in the early days of the COVID-19 epidemic.

In the speech, delivered Feb. 3 but detailed for the first time Saturday, Xi said he gave instructions to officials on fighting the outbreak as early as Jan. 7.

The disclosure came after Chinese leadership was criticized for slow and muted reaction to the COVID-19 disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Officials only notified the public about its potential to spread in late January.

The coronavirus epidemic has become the biggest challenge yet facing President Xi since he became leader of China in 2012. — Associated Press and Dennis Romero

The newly appointed party chief of Wuhan, the city where the outbreak is believed to have originated, said Sunday that the city will undergo a three-day blanket screening to help curb further spread of the coronavirus.

Wang Zhonglin said the three-day action plan is in response to President Xi Jinping's command.

Wang said that without timely location and treatment of patients, officials will be "grimly responsible" for any loss of life.

"In addition, if confirmed cases are not treated in the hospital and remain home, they will cause further spread and thus work against our control measures," he added.

Wang replaced his predecessor Ma Guoqiang last week.

Wuhan has been in lockdown since Jan. 23, with no transport systems operating and millions of its residents hunkered down in their homes. — Alex Shi

The government of Hubei province, where the respiratory illness is believed to have developed, said Sunday that a ban will be imposed on vehicle traffic across the province to curb the spread of the virus.

Police cars, ambulances, vehicles carrying essential goods, or other vehicles related to public service would be exempted, it said on its official website.

It added that epidemic prevention staff will carry out regular "blanket screenings" of all

residents so as to "not leave out any household, anyone or any day."

Those who refuse to cooperate will be dealt with by law enforcement, the statement on the website said.

Companies will also not be able to resume work without first receiving permission from the government, it added. — Alex Shi and Reuters

An American woman who was aboard a cruise ship which was allowed disembark in Cambodia on Friday, has tested positive for coronavirus for second time.

The 83-year-old had been traveling on the MS Westerdam which was refused entry to several countries including Japan, Taiwan, Guam, the Philippines and Thailand, before it was eventually allowed to dock in Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

After she traveled the Malaysian capital Kuala Lumpur, she tested positive for the respiratory illness on Friday.

She was the first person on the ship, which was carrying 1,455 passengers and 802 crew, to test positive.

Cruise ship operator Holland America Inc. sought more tests and Cambodian authorities also called on Malaysia to review its test results.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Waz Azizah Wan Ismail said on Sunday a retest was carried out on the American late on Saturday night and she tested positive again.

However, her husband tested negative.

Holland America said in a statement Sunday that no other guests or crew, either on board or on their way home, have reported any symptoms of the illness.

"Guests who have already returned home will be contacted by their local health department and be provided further information," the company said. — Reuters and Cristian Santana

U.S. evacuates coronavirus cruise ship passengers (Washington Times)

Washington Times [2/16/2020 12:45 PM, Mike Glenn, 482K, Negative]

American passengers from a cruise ship docked in Japan on which about 400 cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed will be flown to a pair of military bases in the United States, Department of Defense officials confirmed Sunday.

The U.S. State Department has chartered two flights to evacuate some of the passengers aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship, currently docked in Yokohama, located about 20 miles south of Tokyo.

One of the flights will land at Travis Air Force Base in northern California while the other will be taken to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas.

The American passengers will be subjected to a mandatory 14-day quarantine period managed by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control after they arrive. Should any of the evacuees test positive or become symptomatic with the coronavirus, they will be transferred to a "suitable" off base medical facility, Department of Defense officials said.

At Least 40 Americans Have Tested Positive for COVID-19 on Quarantined Cruise Ship in Japan (Yahoo News/Time)

Yahoo News/Time [2/16/2020 3:26 PM, Sanya Mansoor, 10942K, Neutral]

At least 44 Americans who were on a now-quarantined cruise ship in Japan have tested positive for COVID-19, according to Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National Institutes of Health.

Fauci confirmed the number of Americans infected with the disease to TIME and noted that the count was still "in flux" and likely to be "more than that."

Fauci said in an interview that aired Sunday with CBS News' Face the Nation that 40 Americans who were traveling on the Diamond Princess "have gotten infected" and are "going to be in hospitals in Japan" as evacuation plans to get Americans on the vessel back home are underway.

"People who have symptoms will not be able to get on the evacuation plane," Fauci said in the Face the Nation interview.

"Others are going to be evacuated starting imminently to Air Force bases in the United States." He added that anyone who develops symptoms on the plane will be segregated on the flight.

U.S. evacuees will still be subjected to a 14-day quarantine once they are in the U.S. because "the degree of transmissibility on that cruise ship is essentially akin to being in a hot spot," Fauci explained on Face the Nation.

About 380 Americans are on the cruise ship and Japanese authorities said about 300 of them are preparing to leave, the Associated Press reported.

There are now a total of at least 355 coronavirus cases that have been diagnosed on the ship, according to the AP. The Diamond Princess has been stuck in the Yokohama harbor since Feb. 3, after the cruise company learned a passenger from Hong Kong had tested positive for the new coronavirus after disembarking last month.

Some public health experts worried that the quarantine procedures were not preventing the spread of disease within the ship and may have even posed a risk of spread. Those on board the ship have spoken about the eerie quiet on board as passengers are largely confined to their cabins.

The CDC has so far confirmed 15 COVID-19 cases in the U.S. across California, Washington, Arizona, Illinois, Massachusetts, Wisconsin and Texas.

US passengers evacuated from quarantined cruise ship off Japan (Yahoo News/France 24)

Yahoo News/France 24 [2/16/2020 12:27 PM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Americans began leaving a quarantined cruise ship off Japan on Monday to board chartered flights home as the number of new coronavirus cases diagnosed on the vessel jumped to 355.

The evacuation came as Japanese authorities stepped up warnings over the deadly outbreak, urging citizens to avoid crowds and "non-essential gatherings."

The Diamond Princess was placed in a 14-day quarantine in early February after a former passenger tested positive for the virus.

But US authorities announced Saturday they would offer Americans on board the option to leave the ship and fly home, where they will face another 14-day isolation period. Several other governments have announced plans to remove their citizens from the ship as well.

Late Sunday and into the early hours of Monday, Americans who opted to leave were brought off the ship in groups, passing through a makeshift passport control but undergoing no health checks, American passenger Sarah Arana told AFP.

They boarded buses driven by personnel in head-to-toe protective suits and were told that the more than a dozen vehicles would travel in a convoy.

"I am happy and ready to go," Arana told AFP before leaving the ship. "We need a proper quarantine, this was not it."

The US government should have intervened "much sooner, at the beginning," the 52-year-old medical social worker said.

"This was too much for Japan, and they shouldn't have had to bear the burden," she added. "The people of Japan did not deserve this. I am full of gratitude."

But other Americans on board declined the evacuation, despite being warned they will still have to wait two weeks and test negative for the virus before being allowed back to the United States.

"My health is fine. And my two-week quarantine is almost over. Why would I want to be put on a bus and a plane with other people they think may be infected when I have spent nearly two weeks isolated from those people?" tweeted Matt Smith, an American lawyer on the ship with his wife.

He described a fellow American passenger standing on her balcony chanting "USA, USA" as buses arrived to collect them.

"Of course, in contravention of the rules of quarantine, she's not wearing a face mask, and she's talking with a passenger on the adjacent balcony... And you wanted me to get on a bus with her?"

Earlier Sunday, health minister Katsunobu Kato said 1,219 people on the ship had now been tested for the virus, with 355 diagnosed with the illness.

Japan has not been able to test all those on board due to limited supplies of testing kits, facilities and manpower, which are also needed by authorities tracking the spread of the virus on land.

But the health ministry said Saturday that passengers older than 70 are being examined and those testing negative and in good health will be allowed to leave the ship from Wednesday.

Tests on younger passengers were expected to start Sunday and healthy people will be allowed to disembark after Wednesday, it said.

Other governments announced though that they too would seek to repatriate their nationals, with Hong Kong announcing plans to charter a flight for 330 city residents on the ship.

Canada announced a similar decision, while Australia and Taiwan are considering such a move, local media said.

In Japan, the number of new infections has continued to rise, with six new cases reported on Sunday, most of them in Tokyo. At least 59 cases have now been confirmed, including more than a dozen among the hundreds of Japanese nationals and their relatives repatriated from Wuhan, China, the epicentre of the outbreak.

A fifth evacuation flight left to China on Sunday night.

With the rise in local infections, Kato warned the country was "entering a new phase."

"We are seeing infection cases that we are unable to trace back their transmission routes," he told reporters.

"We want to ask the public to avoid non-urgent, non-essential gatherings. We want elderly and those with pre-existing conditions to avoid crowded places," he added.

"I think it's important that we exercise Japan's collective strength."

American Woman Who Left Cruise Ship Tests Positive for Coronavirus (New York Times)

New York Times [2/16/2020 4:09 PM, Richard C. Paddock, Sui-Lee Wee, and Roni Caryn Rabin 23673K, Negative]

An American woman who left a cruise ship in Cambodia last week and flew to Malaysia with more than a hundred other passengers has tested positive for the coronavirus, alarming health experts who fear that some exposed passengers who then traveled onward could become a new source for global transmission.

In all, 1,455 passengers and 802 crew members were aboard the Westerdam, a Holland America Line cruise ship that left Hong Kong on Feb. 1.

It was at sea for just under 14 days, the time frame that is believed to be the maximum incubation period for the highly transmissible virus.

Cambodia allowed the ship to dock after five other countries turned it away over concerns about the coronavirus.

Officials said that more than 140 other passengers from the Westerdam had flown by Saturday from Cambodia to the airport in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's capital.

All but the American woman and her husband were eventually allowed to continue to their destinations, including airports in the United States, the Netherlands and Australia.

As of Sunday, 233 passengers and 747 crew members were still on the ship docked at Sihanoukville, Cambodia, Holland America said.

The more than 1,000 other passengers departed Sihanoukville on charter flights to Phnom Penh and were in various stages of transit home, the cruise line said.

It was unclear whether Cambodia would seek to quarantine passengers who are still in the country, or whether those who had left by plane would face quarantine in their own countries when they arrived.

Many public health experts say that a 14-day quarantine period should be mandatory to contain the spread of the virus.

Dr. Eyal Leshem, director of the Center for Travel Medicine and Tropical Diseases at the Sheba Medical Center in Israel, called the disclosures "extremely concerning" and said the passengers who traveled onward from Kuala Lumpur substantially increased the risk of a pandemic.

"We may end up with three or four countries with sustained transmission of the virus," he said.

"It may be more and more difficult to make sure this outbreak is contained only within China."

Cambodia's prime minister, Hun Sen — who has argued that fears about the coronavirus are overblown and refused to evacuate Cambodian students from Wuhan, the Chinese city where it emerged — personally greeted many Westerdam passengers with flowers when they disembarked on Thursday.

He may have put his own citizens at risk as a result.

The biggest cluster of cases so far outside China, where the virus emerged, is on another cruise ship, now off Yokohama, Japan.

Hundreds of passengers from the ship docked in Cambodia, the Westerdam, have already departed for several countries.

Malaysia's deputy prime minister, Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, said at a news conference on Sunday that the American woman, who is 83, had tested positive twice for the virus.

The woman and her husband, 85, also an American citizen, were both hospitalized and in isolation.

The husband has also been tested twice for the virus, and the results were negative both times.

He has pneumonia, which is often a sign of the virus that appears before it can be identified through testing.

Japan, the Philippines, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States territory of Guam all refused to let the ship dock amid the global concern over the coronavirus, though Holland America insisted that no one on the ship was infected.

The global fight against the coronavirus is complicated by the fact that different countries may have different levels of disease surveillance and prevention measures.

While the World Health Organization provides guidance, it is up to each country to enforce these standards, including whether to quarantine people who may have been exposed or to stop them from traveling.

The Cambodian government said passengers and crew members were screened using protocols of the World Health Organization and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States before being allowed to disembark.

Their temperatures were checked, and about 20 people who had reported being sick during the trip were tested for the coronavirus, according to a statement issued Sunday by the United States Embassy in Cambodia.

The woman who tested positive for the virus did not visit the ship's medical center during the cruise to report any symptoms of illness, Holland America said in a statement on Sunday.

The woman and her husband were among 145 passengers from the ship who then flew to Malaysia.

All went through thermal scanning at the Kuala Lumpur airport, and 137 were allowed to fly on to other destinations, officials said.

The American couple and six other passengers were stopped and tested for the virus.

After the American woman initially tested positive, both Holland America and Cambodia questioned the result, calling for further testing and confirmation.

Malaysia carried out a second round of testing, which officials said on Sunday had confirmed that the woman was infected.

Malaysia's deputy prime minister said that the country would not accept any more passengers from the Westerdam, which is still docked in Sihanoukville, Cambodia.

"If there's one passenger who is confirmed, the others are potentially in trouble," said David Hui, director of the emerging infections disease center at the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

He recommended that the other passengers be quarantined in their home countries for 14 days.

The World Health Organization is working with local authorities to have samples sent to regional reference laboratories for further testing said a spokesman, Tarik Jasarevic.

President Trump tweeted his thanks to Cambodia for allowing the ship, more than 600 of whose passengers were Americans, to dock.

Many of the passengers went sightseeing in Sihanoukville after the ship docked in Cambodia, visiting beaches and restaurants and getting massages.

On Sunday, after Malaysia's announcement, the remaining passengers and crew members were restricted to the ship, and buses that had been scheduled to transport them were parked nearby.

Coordination between Malaysia and Cambodia appears to have been minimal.

In a letter to his Malaysian counterpart on Sunday, the health minister of Cambodia, Mam Bunheng, said he had learned through the news media that the first test of the American woman had been positive.

Attempts to contact Cambodian officials for comment were not immediately successful.

Holland America said in its statement on Sunday that no other passengers or crew members had reported any symptoms and that passengers who had returned home would be contacted by their local health departments.

There were no details on how that would be arranged.

"We are in close coordination with some of the leading health experts from around the world," said Dr. Grant Tarling, chief medical officer for Holland America Line.

"These experts are working with the appropriate national health authorities to investigate and follow up with individuals who may have come in contact with the guest."

The company said that before the passengers' departure, the passports of everyone on board had been reviewed to make sure that no one had traveled through mainland China in the 14 days before the cruise.

The company defended the health screening it had conducted during the cruise and on

arrival in Cambodia.

It did not respond to a question on whether it had been appropriate to let Westerdam passengers travel to many parts of the world without putting them in quarantine first.

Christina Kerby, 41, a communications director with BlueShield in California, said she was among a group of passengers who had nasal and throat swabs taken in Phnom Penh on Sunday.

Ms. Kerby was supposed to fly to Singapore on Sunday and then on to San Francisco.

"The stress has absolutely taken its toll," Ms. Kerby said by telephone.

"I certainly don't feel like myself after the roller coaster that we've been through."

Ms. Kerby said that her temperature had been taken two or three times during her stay on the ship, and that passengers were required to fill out health questionnaires detailing whether they had symptoms such as cough, fever and diarrhea.

"I can't really comment on how this was missed, but I did feel very safe and well cared for on the ship," she said, adding that she believed Holland America "Was operating appropriately given the situation."

Ms. Kerby said she had discussed the risk of going on the cruise with her family.

She boarded the ship in Hong Kong and traveled with her 75-year-old mother and her brother.

"We made the decision that it's not worth passing up the potential to have a lot of fun and see the world just out of fear," she said.

"That's why I joined, and I think the other passengers have the same feeling."

Malaysia Bars Westerdam Cruise Passengers From Entry (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 7:58 AM, Yudith Ho, 6400K, Neutral]

Malaysia said it won't allow any more passengers who had traveled on the Westerdam luxury cruise ship to enter, after an American woman who flew into the country was diagnosed with the coronavirus.

The 83-year-old woman and her husband were among 145 cruise passengers who flew from Cambodia on Feb. 14 on a Malaysia Airlines flight chartered by Holland America Line, which operates the ship. Malaysia canceled three other special flights that were supposed to bring more Westerdam passengers into Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail said Sunday.

Cambodia allowed the liner to dock in the port city of Sihanoukville on Friday after being barred by countries including Japan and Thailand over fears it harbored the coronavirus. More than 2,200 passengers and crew disembarked, as Cambodia carried out health

screenings on the passengers and cleared them to go back to their respective countries.

The American woman was found with symptoms when she landed in Kuala Lumpur. She was tested twice and results showed positive for coronavirus both times, Wan Azizah said. Her 85-year-old husband has tested negative.

Malaysia cleared 137 Westerdam passengers to leave the country using other commercial flights, while six Dutch and American citizens are awaiting their test results, the health ministry said.

Malaysia insists virus diagnosis from cruise passenger is correct (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 7:19 PM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Malaysia insisted Sunday it had correctly diagnosed coronavirus in an elderly American woman from the Westerdam cruise ship despite all passengers having been given a clean bill of health when they disembarked in Cambodia.

The vessel was at sea for two weeks and barred from Japan, Guam, the Philippines, Taiwan and Thailand over fears it might be carrying the virus which originated in China and has killed more than 1,600 people.

Cambodia — a staunch ally of Beijing — allowed the ship to dock Thursday in Sihanoukville, administering health tests before passengers disembarked in waves for homeward-bound flights.

Jubilation dimmed late Saturday, as one of the passengers was stopped by authorities in Malaysia when she was detected with a fever and was later diagnosed with the virus.

Now fears are mounting that more of the 2,200 passengers and crew who disembarked may have been infected.

Cambodia urged Kuala Lumpur on Sunday to "double-check" the diagnosis, but Malaysian deputy prime minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail said the 83-year-old American woman had already been tested twice.

"Our protocol is actually world-class... it's a positive," she told a press conference.

She said the US embassy had chartered four Malaysian Airlines planes to fly some of Westerdam's passengers to Kuala Lumpur, but later a government statement officially corrected her account, saying it was the cruise ship operators who had hired the aircraft.

After the discovery of the infected woman on the first plane carrying 143 passengers, the other flights were cancelled.

Onboard the Westerdam — where more than 200 passengers remain along with 747 crew members — the mood has turned "Sombre", said Lorraine Oliveira, who lives in Britain.

"Guests are very anxious on board since finding out someone tested positive," she told AFP. "We were (so) close to getting home and now we're back in limbo."

Cambodia's decision to allow the Westerdam to berth was lauded US President Donald Trump, who called the country "beautiful" on Twitter, while US ambassador Patrick Murphy boarded the ship to greet its American passengers.

Trump's soft touch with China's Xi worries advisers who say more is needed to combat coronavirus outbreak (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/16/2020 2:33 PM, Yasmeen Abutaleb and Josh Dawsey, 12625K, Neutral]

President Trump has lavished praise on Chinese President Xi Jinping for his handling of the growing coronavirus outbreak — a posture some in his administration are growing increasingly uncomfortable with as his advisers remain concerned about China's lack of transparency and handling of the epidemic.

Worries about rattled financial markets and their effect on the economy as well as the delicate negotiations with China over a trade deal — a key to Trump's reelection — have played a large role in influencing Trump's friendly posture toward China over the deadly coronavirus, according to several senior White House and administration officials. Trump has heralded Xi's leadership and "discipline" in responding to the outbreak.

"I had a long talk with President Xi — for the people in this room — two nights ago, and he feels very confident. He feels very confident. And he feels that, again, as I mentioned, by April or during the month of April, the heat, generally speaking, kills this kind of virus," Trump told the nation's governors last week. "So that would be a good thing. But we're in great shape in our country."

But U.S. and international health experts have for weeks expressed concerns that China has not been fully transparent about the breadth of the outbreak and that it cracked down on doctors who tried to sound the alarm in December. Officials still do not have the information they have repeatedly asked for from China, which some officials have argued warrants a tougher line from the United States.

Trump has repeatedly told advisers pushing for a harder line against China could backfire because Xi controls the government "totally" and will not work with the United States if they say anything negative about the country, said one of these senior administration officials, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private talks.

So far, the United States has only 15 confirmed cases, though officials have warned they expect to see more. On Sunday, Anthony Fauci, director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told The Washington Post that forty four Americans who were traveling on the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan have been infected.

Trump has remained uncharacteristically restrained in his public comments about the epidemic, which has infected more than 69,000 people, the vast majority of whom are in China. Trump's praise toward Xi has irked some advisers, who believe the compliments are unwarranted as the U.S. is still working to get a team of experts access to data and Chinese sites to study the virus, aid in the response and secure all the needed information.

The U.S. has been working closely with the World Health Organization and engaged in other diplomatic efforts to get its experts into China. Several U.S. experts are now in Beijing, three senior administration officials said, but officials are still working to ensure those experts get access to the data and sites they need. And the CDC still does not have the information it wants, administration officials said.

Although the United States has so far effectively contained the virus, some senior administration officials said there have been tensions within the administration over what information the president should receive, his posture toward China and what message to send to the American public. And several officials said there has been too much focus on evacuating Americans overseas — and too little on what to do if the epidemic spreads within the United States, given the continued growth of the virus.

Trump named a coronavirus task force last month that is led by Health and Human Services secretary Alex Azar and composed of top officials from the CDC, National Institutes of Health, the State Department, Department of Homeland Security and the White House. It came after a Jan. 27 meeting in Acting Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney's office, where some officials argued that the administration was not taking the threat seriously enough.

For weeks, the administration's message was that the threat to the American public remained low and the virus was not spreading within communities — but warned that could change. Some advisers recently pushed for a more balanced message because they now expect there to be wider spread in the community as more cases have been reported in countries outside China, according to three officials, and the administration has since adjusted its message to reflect that.

When it became clear late last month that the epidemic was far more serious and widespread than previously known, several major international and U.S. air carriers suspended flights to China for weeks. China has also halted work at several factories across the country as it works to contain the virus, impacting some international companies' ability to conduct business, including Hyundai.

The United States subsequently escalated its response, barring most non-U. S. citizens who recently visited China from visiting the United States and mandating federal quarantines for any Americans who had visited China's Hubei province, the epicenter of the outbreak, within the last 14 days.

The market fell as the outbreak grew. On Jan. 31, the same day several airlines suspended flights and the U.S. announced its escalated response, the Dow Jones industrial average dropped 600 points, or 2 percent. Trump grew concerned that any stronger action by his administration would hurt the economy, and has told advisers he does not want the administration to do or say anything that would further spook the markets.

He remains worried that any large-scale outbreak could hurt his reelection bid. Four senior administration officials, including Fauci, a member of the task force, insisted that U.S. actions have been driven entirely by public health considerations and a desire to contain the outbreak.

"President Trump's top priority is the health and welfare of the American people," White

House spokesman Judd Deere said in a statement. "The president has received regular updates, including from experts within the federal government on infectious diseases."

He added: "Secretary Azar is leading this whole-of-government approach in close coordination with the National Security Council, and is working around the clock to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus."

HHS officials have told Trump that the number of infections could go down in the spring when it gets warmer because most coronaviruses and upper respiratory infections — including the flu — level off as the weather warms.

The coronavirus spreading through China and in about two dozen other countries, however, has never been seen before and little is known about how it behaves or whether it will eventually mutate. The idea that it will taper off in the spring is "mainly an educated guess," according to one senior White House official. In Singapore, for instance, it is above 80 degrees and humid but there are still more than 50 cases of the virus. CDC officials are now warning the president and others in the administration that cases could grow, administration officials said.

"In fairness to the president, someone told him something that has a basis in reality. ... There is some validity in saying respiratory viruses like flu and coronavirus are seasonal," Fauci said. "The only thing is when you're dealing with a pandemic-type virus that is brand new, there's no way of knowing what's going to happen when the weather gets warm."

Some of Trump's own advisers have contradicted his friendly posture toward China in public. Larry Kudlow, the National Economic Council director, said this week the U.S. was "disappointed" in China's response and called on Beijing to be more transparent. Other officials, including Joseph Grogan, the head of the domestic policy council, has told others that China cannot be trusted at all. Peter Navarro, one of the president's top trade advisers, has repeatedly pushed for a stronger tone.

Trump's public statements about the virus and China's handling of it are a stark contrast to his response as a private citizen during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, in which he panned the Obama administration's response and called for the United States to shut its borders and not allow doctors who had been treating patients in Africa to come back to the United States for treatment.

Some officials have complained that Trump's comments about the virus emanate from his briefings with Azar, who they say has been overly controlling in the response and has told other doctors not to get too far into the details of the virus and the outbreak with Trump. Azar is disliked by many in the White House, four administration officials say.

Fauci, however, said Azar has brought medical professionals with him to nearly every briefing and insisted they be part of Oval Office meetings.

Azar "always defers to the scientists. That's the reason why whenever we're in the Situation room and the president would like some briefing, Alex always takes me and (CDC director) Bob Redfield in with him," Fauci said. "He always wants us to give the straight scientific information to the president."

Azar has also wanted to be the one to announce major updates about the administration's response to the virus, several officials said. On Thursday, he briefed the Senate Finance Committee that the CDC would use public health labs in five cities that normally test for influenza to also test for coronavirus, taking state health officials by surprise. One senior administration official said it was part of an effort to execute "radical transparency" with Congress and the public, noting that officials are doing their best to communicate clearly and effectively in a fast-moving situation.

It was not the first time state officials have been caught off guard by the administration's actions. After the administration announced late last month it would quarantine travelers who had been in the hard-hit Hubei province within the last 14 days, federal and state officials were struggling with how to carry out the travel restrictions and where to quarantine passengers because they said the order came with no advance notice and little planning.

Two administration officials said the Trump administration was also struggling with the logistics, including last-minute planning for when planes landed with patients and potential patients. "Doing the best we can," one official involved in the response said.

Some officials said the response has become smoother and better coordinated in recent weeks, with daily task-force calls.

"Our public health system's the best in the world, and it's working," Azar said Friday. "That system is what identified the 15 cases that we have."

Coronavirus could damage global growth: IMF (Yahoo News/Free Press Journal)

Yahoo News/Free Press Journal [2/16/2020 12:23 PM, Staff, 4742K, Neutral]

The coronavirus epidemic could damage global economic growth this year, the IMF head said Sunday, but a sharp and rapid economic rebound could follow.

"There may be a cut that we are still hoping would be in the 0.1-0.2 percentage space," the managing director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, told the Global Women's Forum in Dubai.

She said the full impact of the spreading disease that has already killed more than 1,600 people would depend on how quickly it was contained.

"I advise everybody not to jump to premature conclusions. There is still a great deal of uncertainty. We operate with scenarios, not yet with projections, ask me in 10 days," Georgieva said.

In its January update to the World Economic Outlook, the IMF lowered global economic growth forecast in 2020 by a 0.1 percentage point to 3.3%, following a 2.9% growth the previous year, the lowest in a decade.

Georgieva said it was "too early" to assess the full impact of the epidemic but acknowledged that it had already affected sectors such as tourism and transportation.

"It is too early to say because we don't yet quite know what is the nature of this virus. We don't know how quickly China will be able to contain it. We don't know whether it will spread to the rest of the world," she said.

If the disease is "contained rapidly, there can be a sharp drop and a very rapid rebound," in what is known as the V-shaped impact, she said.

Compared to the impact of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome in 2002, she said China's economy then made up just 8.0% of global economy.

Now, that figure is 19%. She said the trade agreement between the United States and China had reduced the disease's impact on global economy.

The world should be concerned "about sluggish growth" impacted by uncertainty, said the IMF chief.

"We are now stuck with low productivity growth, low economic growth, low interest rates and low inflation," she told the Dubai forum, also attended by US President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka and former British prime minister Theresa May.

Ivanka Trump lauds Saudi, UAE on women's rights reforms (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 11:44 AM, Aya Batrawy, Neutral]

Ivanka Trump lauded Sunday a handful of Mideast countries, including close U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, for embarking on "significant reforms" to advance women's rights, while speaking at a gathering of women entrepreneurs and regional leaders in Dubai.

The daughter of U.S. President Donald Trump was delivering the keynote address at the two-day Global Women's Forum held in an opulent resort overlooking the city's Persian Gulf coastline.

"We know that when women are free to succeed, families thrive, communities flourish and nations are stronger," Trump said.

Her comments throughout the speech drew applause, particularly when she praised Saudi Arabia.

Despite reforms there, women's rights activists and other campaigners are imprisoned and facing trial on vague charges related to national security.

The theme of the forum in Dubai was "The Power of Influence." It was an apt theme for Trump, whose loyalty and support for her father's presidency saw her and her husband, Jared Kushner, take up formal roles in the White House as his advisers.

The 38-year-old mother of three has positioned herself as an Oval Office confidante while spearheading initiatives that broadly back women's empowerment.

Her husband has become a top adviser on U.S. Mideast policy.

Once the owner of an eponymous fashion line, Ivanka Trump has wielded her proximity to the president to promote policies affecting women and deliver speeches around the world about women's economic empowerment.

She meets with world leaders as a key White House official.

Some of her efforts even have some bipartisan support in Washington, standing in sharp contrast to the level of controversy and political division surrounding her father's presidency.

In her keynote speech at the women's forum in Dubai on Sunday, Trump touted what she said was the progress of women in the United States.

"Today, American women are leading in every aspect of society. Last year, there were more women than men in the United States workforce, with women securing over 70% of new jobs," she said in her address.

Trump made no mention of legislative obstacles in the U.S. around paid family leave, which she and the U.S president support.

Currently, just a few U.S. states offer paid leave.

During her speech in Dubai, Trump congratulated Saudi Arabia for recent changes in the law that allow women to travel abroad and obtain a passport without the permission of a male relative.

The changes are part of a wide-ranging push to transform the Saudi economy, attract greater foreign investment and ease international criticism.

Trump pointed to changes in other Mideast countries, as well.

She said Bahrain had introduced legislation against discrimination in the workplace; Jordan had eliminated legal restrictions on women's ability to work at night; Morocco had expanded women's land rights; and Tunisia had introduced laws to combat domestic violence.

She noted that across the region, women on average still have only half the legal rights of men.

The Dubai ruler is wildly popular at home and is seen as a modernizing force.

He has faced some criticism abroad concerning women's rights following reports that one of his daughters tried to flee the country and was forcibly returned.

In previous years, Jordanian Princess Haya, with whom Sheikh Mohammed has two children, would have attended a forum of this kind by his side, but she too has reportedly fled the country and is seeking custody of their children in a British court.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia have worked to cultivate close ties with the Trump administration and were early supporters of the Women's Empowerment Fund, a World

Bank initiative to help female entrepreneurs that Ivanka Trump strongly backs.

During the first trip abroad of her father's presidency to Saudi Arabia, the two Gulf countries pledged \$100 million to the fund.

In her speech at Sunday's forum, Trump commended Emirati leaders for "removing barriers to women joining the workforce and developing a national strategy that recognizes that women are central to sustainable growth."

She noted that although 70% of Emirati university graduates are women, only 10% of the UAE's total national income is derived from women.

"We know that this going to grow and flourish in the years ahead," she said.

During her two-day visit to the UAE, Trump met with women entrepreneurs and discussed a U.S. government project she's leading that's aimed at helping women in developing countries.

The Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative was launched last year with backing by her father.

On Saturday, she toured Abu Dhabi's grand mosque, visited Abu Dhabi's branch of the Louvre Museum, and met privately with the country's day-to-day ruler, Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed.

U.S.-China Feud Ensnarers Obscure UN Intellectual Property Agency (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 12:00 PM, Nick Wadhams, 6400K, Neutral]

The U.S. is working to block China from taking the top post of the United Nations intellectual property agency, in the Trump administration's latest bid to convince countries of the threat posed by Beijing's increasing assertiveness and technological prowess.

The fight over who heads the World Intellectual Property Organization, described by people familiar with the strategy, has become such a priority that American diplomats around the world have been told to discuss it with counterparts whose governments will vote on the next leader in early March.

Secretary of State Michael Pompeo's team argues that it would be absurd for China -- long accused of encouraging its domestic companies to pilfer American and European know-how-- to lead an agency that helps develop cross-border policies on intellectual property. WIPO also serves as the central filing system for patent applications that affect multiple countries.

"The Chinese have stolen hundreds of millions of dollars of intellectual property from the United States of America," Pompeo told reporters on his plane to Europe on Feb. 13. "We are going to make sure that whoever runs that organization understands the importance of enforcing intellectual property rights across nations and across boundaries."

It's part of a much broader U.S. effort to push back on China's rising influence. The Trump

administration has had only limited success in its efforts to persuade allies to avoid using technology from China-based Huawei Technologies Co. in their next-generation 5G telecommunications equipment. It has also begun to shift more military forces to the Indo-Pacific region as part of what the Pentagon calls an age of "great power" competition with China and Russia.

Multilateral Agencies

Yet another issue behind the fight over leadership at WIPO is a concern in the Trump administration that the U.S. hasn't been doing enough to counter China's growing interest in taking leadership roles at multilateral institutions.

The U.S. suffered a setback last summer, when the administration threw its weight behind a candidate from the country of Georgia to lead the Rome-based Food and Agricultural Organization. One U.S. official said that the U.S. insistence on the Georgian candidate undercut support for a French contender -- and that cleared the way for a Chinese citizen to win.

"The race for WIPO leadership has become the moment the U.S. woke up to the fact China is eating our lunch in the multilateral system and that great-power competition will be fought out in many theaters, including UN agencies," said Daniel Runde, the director of the Project on Prosperity and Development at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "WIPO may seem obscure, but it's a standard-maker and holds hundreds of billions of our trade secrets in its digital vaults."

John Bolton, President Donald Trump's former national security adviser, weighed in on Twitter, saying, "The ability to protect intellectual property is gravely threatened if China becomes the next Director General of the @WIPO."

Ten candidates are running to lead WIPO, including China's Wang Binying, a deputy director of the organization who has worked there since 1992 and has a master's degree from the University of California at Berkeley.

The favored U.S. candidate is Daren Tang, the chief executive of Singapore's intellectual property office, who has a master's degree from Georgetown University in Washington.

A U.S. official, who asked not to be identified discussing the matter, said the administration believes Tang has momentum heading into voting next month. Chinese officials, overwhelmed by the fight against the coronavirus outbreak, haven't been paying as much attention to the WIPO election, according to a personal familiar with maneuvering over the post.

Guiding the American effort has been Andrew Bremberg, Trump's former Domestic Policy Council director who became the U.S. ambassador to the UN in Geneva in November after the administration left that post unfilled for three years.

If China's candidate wins out, U.S. officials fear that Beijing could exploit WIPO's rules to further examine other countries' intellectual property. Of particular concern is a mechanism by which companies submit new patents to WIPO, which then has 18 months to verify that

no other company has something similar. China could, they fear, use that window and that knowledge to steal the patent.

Chinese intellectual property theft isn't just a U.S. concern. A January report from the European Commission said that theft from China, along with other countries, is inflicting "irreparable harm" to European businesses.

'Cold War Mindset'

A Chinese embassy spokesperson didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. But officials were sharply critical of a speech Pompeo gave this month to U.S. governors in which he detailed Chinese outreach to U.S. states and the threats posed by, among other things, state pension funds investing in companies linked to the Chinese military.

"We advise certain people in the U.S. step out of their Cold War mindset and ideological stereotypes, stop discrediting China's political system, and stop undermining bilateral exchange and cooperation," Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said Friday.

China has taken steps to improve intellectual property laws and enforcement with a rapid-fire series of legal changes amid recent trade negotiations with the U.S.

But that hasn't convinced many analysts. Elizabeth Economy, director for Asia studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, said China has enough leadership posts within the UN system, having taken over four such entities while the U.S. currently heads one.

"The trend we've seen when Chinese officials become the heads of these UN organizations is that they use them to meet Chinese national interests," Economy said. "When and if China is no longer considered to be a threat to others' intellectual property, that's the right time for a Chinese person to head the organization, and I think this is not the right time."

Defense secretary warns of Chinese aggression: 'The smaller the country, the heavier the hand' (Washington Times)

Washington Times [2/16/2020 11:03 AM, Mike Glenn, 482K, Neutral]

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper stressed one-half of the United States' primary adversaries highlighted in the country's National Defense Strategy in comments this weekend at the annual Munich National Security Conference.

"I know there has been much discussion about the challenges from Russia," Mr. Esper told about 600 national security leaders gathered at the Hotel Bayerische Hof. "I want to focus on the Pentagon's top concern: the People's Republic of China."

Next year marks the 20th anniversary of China's admission into the World Trade Organization, which Mr. Esper called "a decision that fundamentally altered the course of international affairs."

The hope at the time, Mr. Esper said, was that allowing China into the WTO and similar organizations would spur them to continue on a path of economic reform and, eventually, political openness, transforming the nation into a member of the liberal world order.

But, that hasn't been the case, he said. China has used its new economic power to ramp up internal oppression at home and a more aggressive military posture internationally.

"The Communist Party and its associated organs, including the People's Liberation Army, are increasingly operating in theaters outside its borders, including Europe, and seeking advantage by any means, and at any cost," Mr. Esper told the other delegates.

The United States is not seeking conflict with China, Esper said, citing the nearly 18 tons of medical supplies recently sent there to help battle coronavirus along with nearly \$100 million in financial assistance to countries, including China, that have been affected by the virus.

"The world is too interconnected for us not to work together to solve some of our toughest problems," Mr. Esper said. "However, to be a responsible member of the international community, China must be transparent and respect the sovereignty, freedom and rights of all nations."

Through initiatives such as its "Belt and Road" program, China is exerting financial and political pressure to force what Mr. Esper called "sub-optimal security decisions" on other nations.

"The smaller the country, the heavier the hand of Beijing," Mr. Esper said.

While China's economic growth over the years has been remarkable, it was powered by theft and exploitation of free market economies and universities, Mr. Esper said.

"American and European institutions and corporations face the brunt of these malign activities and we have seen a multitude of examples where our economies and companies have suffered as a result," he said. "Huawei and 5G are today's poster child for this nefarious activity."

He warned that other nations' reliance on Chinese 5G vendors could render their systems vulnerable to espionage or other disruptions. Such a move could put international security agreements at risk.

It could "jeopardize our communication and intelligence-sharing capabilities and by extension, our alliances," Mr Esper said.

The U.S. is encouraging domestic and allied country tech companies to develop alternative 5G solutions. The Defense Department is now working with them at U.S. military bases to test the technologies, Mr. Esper said.

"We asking our friends to clearly choose a global system that supports democracy, protects human rights and safeguards our greatest asymmetric advantages - our values, our shared interests and our unmatched network of alliances and partnerships," Mr. Esper told the other security delegates.

"We feel that the choice is clear," he said.

Cold war: Top EU diplomat foresees 'a new bipolar order between the US and China' (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/16/2020 12:34 PM, Joel Gehrke, 570K, Neutral]

An intensifying competition between the United States and China will divide the world into "a new bipolar order," the European Union's top diplomat predicted.

"There will be a new bipolar order between the U.S. and China — which, of course, will not cover the entirety of international relations, but it will play an integral role," Josep Borrell, a Spanish politician who leads the EU's diplomatic corps, told the Munich Security Conference on Sunday.

That assessment contains a partial echo of American warnings that China is waging "a cold war" against the U.S. that represents a far-reaching threat to all Western democracies.

And yet, Borrell declined to call for European allies to close ranks with Washington in a worsening rivalry with Beijing.

"Europe must be vigilant here," Borrell said.

"Europe must not be caught in the middle between this bipolar order."

Those comments are likely to disappoint U.S. officials, who have been working to rally European allies to deter prospective threats from the rising Communist power.

"Our collective future may hang in the balance if we fail to make the hard choices now for the long run," Defense Secretary Mark Esper told the conference attendees in a Friday morning speech.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg struck a different note than Borrell by arguing that China's growing power and capacity to endanger American interests should only make U.S. officials value European allies even more.

"If the United States is concerned about China, the size and rise of China, then it's even more important to maintain NATO — to keep your friends and allies close," Stoltenberg, the civilian chief of the transatlantic security bloc, said in a televised interview Saturday on the sidelines of the conference.

"Because together with Europe and Canada, we represent 50 percent of the world's military might and 50% of the world's economy, so together we are strong."

U.S. officials have struggled to persuade European allies that China's telecommunications companies "are Trojan horses for Chinese intelligence," as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo put it on Friday.

European allies especially chafe at Trump's withdrawal from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and renewal of economic sanctions on Tehran, because they believe the agreement defused a nuclear crisis.

"We need cooperation with the U.S. of course, we have to respond when the U.S. takes

positions that do not correspond with our interests or our values," Borrell said.

"If your friend does something that hurts you of course, you are going to ask them to correct that measure."

Trump pushed CIA to find, kill Osama bin Laden's son over higher priority targets (NBC News)

NBC News [2/16/2020 7:06 AM, Ken Dilanian, Courtney Kube and Dan De Luce, 4200K, Neutral]

When intelligence officials briefed President Donald Trump on the most worrisome terrorist threats during the first two years of his tenure, they regularly mentioned the names of the senior terror figures the CIA was working hardest to find and kill, including the leader of al Qaeda, Ayman al-Zawahri.

Trump would ultimately greenlight successful strikes on ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and Yemeni al Qaeda chief Qasim al-Rimi — perhaps the most significant names on the CIA list of potential U.S. targets.

But he was more interested in a young and less influential figure much farther down the list, according to two people familiar with the briefings, because he recognized the name.

"He would say, 'I've never heard of any of these people. What about Hamza bin Laden?'" one former official said.

"That was the only name he knew," a Pentagon official added.

Although Osama bin Laden's youngest son was not believed to be planning attacks, the U.S. ultimately carried out an airstrike that killed him in 2018, according to current and former officials familiar with the matter. At first, officials weren't sure of his fate, but in July, NBC News was the first to report that U.S. officials believed he was dead.

An examination of the process that led to the strike against Hamza bin Laden puts a spotlight on how Trump has approached what is among the most weighty responsibilities of the U.S. president in the post 9/11 era: deciding which of America's enemies should be marked for death.

Trump's recent decision to target Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani — in the face of intelligence suggesting that Iran would seek to retaliate for the Quds Force commander's death by killing Americans — illustrates the high stakes nature of such decisions. Improvements in weaponry and in the technology for finding targets have given this president lethal options his predecessors never had, but the greater freedom of action can make the decisions tougher.

Yet Trump — who doesn't read or digest detailed intelligence assessments, according to current and former officials — says he operates on instinct. "I have a gut, and my gut tells me more sometimes than anybody else's brain can ever tell me," he said in answer to a question about the economy during a November 2018 interview.

"The president's highest priority is keeping Americans safe," said a senior administration official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "He and his administration have successfully targeted the most dangerous and deadly terrorists in the world in order to protect the American people, including Hamza bin Laden, al-Baghdadi, Qassem Soleimani, and Qasim al-Rimi. These and countless other measures that have removed dozens of high value targets exemplify this administration's resolve to defeat terrorism."

The successful strike on al-Rimi, the leader of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, was announced by the White House on Feb. 7. He and Baghdadi, the ISIS leader killed in a U.S. commando raid that Trump authorized in October 2019, were at or near the top of every intelligence priority list, officials say.

But former CIA official Douglas London, who led an agency unit targeting senior terrorists in 2018, says that what he called Trump's "obsession" with bin Laden's son "is one example of the president's preference for a 'celebrity' targeted killing versus prioritizing options that could prove better for U.S. security."

In a piece for the website JustSecurity.com, which London says was reviewed and deemed unclassified by the CIA, he wrote, "CIA had not overlooked the value in Hamza's name recognition, nor his musings posted by al Qaeda's media cell, but he was young, lacked battlefield experience, and had yet to develop a serious following."

Few if any counterterrorism experts argue that Hamza bin Laden was not a lawful target. He was urging attacks on Americans on behalf of a terror group with which the U.S. is at war, and he was seen by experts as a possible future al Qaeda leader.

But the CIA assessment at the time was that he was not next in the line of succession, and was not a top threat, according to London and other U.S. intelligence officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"Despite intelligence assessments showing the greater dangers posed by Zawahiri ... and the unlikelihood Hamza was in the immediate line of succession, the president thought differently," London wrote. "He regularly demanded updates on Hamza and insisted we accelerate our efforts to go after him."

Trump's wishes "necessarily influenced the alignment of the Intelligence Community's focus and resources," London wrote, in an unusual peek behind the scenes into the secret process of targeting terrorists.

London suggested that politics may have been a factor in Trump's decision-making.

"It was not lost on us working the issue that the president pressed hardest for results in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections," he wrote.

The Pentagon, the Department of State and various intelligence agencies had input into the process of nominating Hamza bin Laden for lethal action, according to a former senior U.S. official directly familiar with the matter.

But Hamza bin Laden was not a top priority until Trump's exhortations influenced the extent

to which the CIA devoted scarce manhunting resources to tracking him, according to London's account.

For a long time, Hamza bin Laden was an afterthought.

In the wake of 9/11 when the U.S. invaded Afghanistan, he was among bin Laden's family members who made their way to Iran, where he lived for a number of years, some of them in detention, intelligence officials say.

But in August 2015, al-Zawahri appeared in a video and introduced the younger bin Laden, calling him "a lion from the den of al Qaeda."

Bin Laden didn't appear in the video but said in an audio-only portion, "What America and its allies fear the most is that we take the battlefield from Kabul, Baghdad and Gaza to Washington, London, Paris and Tel Aviv, and to take it to all the American, Jewish and Western interests in the world."

He quickly became a fixture in al Qaeda messages, and counterterrorism officials took notice. The news media began reporting on the possibility that he was being groomed as a future terror leader. After the death of the senior bin Laden at the hands of Navy SEALs in Pakistan, and amid the rise of the Islamic State militant group or ISIS, al Qaeda was struggling for relevance.

By the time of his father's death, officials believed Hamza bin Laden had relocated to the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

Still, during the Obama administration, there was little focus on Hamza bin Laden, three former senior officials said. He did not figure in intelligence assessments about the terror threat.

"I don't remember a single meeting at which we focused on Hamza bin Laden," said Joshua Geltzer, who was the top counterterrorism official on the National Security Council until early in the Trump administration.

"He had the name but he didn't have a lot of working relationships with people, and he didn't have battlefield experience," a former senior counterterrorism official added.

In November 2017, the CIA released documents seized in the bin Laden operation, including a video of Hamza bin Laden's wedding to the daughter of 9/11 hijacker Mohamed Atta.

Trump was president by then, and the video prompted a spate of television coverage. Fox News, a favored source of information for the president, devoted significant airtime to the release of the CIA documents and the video of the younger bin Laden.

Inside the U.S. government — and among U.S. allies, according to a senior Western intelligence official — there was heightened concern that Hamza bin Laden could refresh al Qaeda's ailing brand.

But there was no evidence he was involved in attacks or even inspiring them, experts say.

"It is not clear at all that Hamza presented an actual serious threat of inspiring attacks," said Seth Jones, a counterterrorism expert at the Center for Strategic and International Studies who advises the U.S. government.

But Jones said he believes Hamza bin Laden was a justifiable target.

Nonetheless, he said, "I can't remember a case where I've seen an interrogation of a terrorist who said he was inspired by Hamza bin Laden."

In March of last year, the U.S. government announced a \$1 million reward for information helping to locate Hamza bin Laden. There was a consensus that such a step was warranted, officials said.

Still, the size of the reward was telling. It paled in comparison to the \$10 million offered for senior al Qaeda operative Saif al-Adel, or the \$25 million the U.S. had once offered for the senior bin Laden.

"Hamza bin Laden is wanted for questioning in connection with his membership in the al Qaeda organization and his public declarations threatening the security of the United States," the wanted poster said.

But by then, officials now believe, Hamza bin Laden was already dead.

Al Qaeda leader al-Zawahri and his top lieutenants are believed to be very much alive.

Palestinian PM: Trump's Mideast plan 'will be buried' (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 8:27 AM, Staff, 1512K, Negative]

The Palestinian prime minister lashed out Sunday at U.S. President Donald Trump's proposal to end the Mideast conflict, saying it would be "buried very soon."

Speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Mohammad Shtayyeh said the U.S. plan was "no more than a memo of understanding between (Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin) Netanyahu and Trump."

Shtayyeh criticized the fact that the proposal would leave a future Palestinian state fragmented and with "no sovereignty," allowing Israel to annex large parts of the West Bank. He urged other countries to reject the Trump proposal while maintaining that Palestinians "are open to serious negotiations."

Shtayyeh suggested the Palestinians would seek to increase pressure on Israel through international organizations, citing the recent release by the U.N. human rights office of a list of more than 100 companies allegedly complicit in violating Palestinian human rights by operating in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

Referring to the upcoming Israeli election, Shtayyeh said the difference between Israeli

opposition leader Benny Gantz and Netanyahu was "not more than the difference between Coca-Cola and Pepsi Cola."

UN's Guterres calls for 'transformational change' on climate (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 11:52 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Governments must deliver decisive actions and "Transformational change" to combat global warming, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Sunday, blasting a recent climate summit in Madrid.

The so-called COP25 climate talks in the Spanish capital in December were supposed to build on breakthrough promises made at the 2015 UN Climate Change Conference in Paris.

Instead, governments equivocated and observers decried their response as inadequate and unambitious.

"Our planet is burning but too many decision makers continue to fiddle," Guterres said in a speech he delivered in Islamabad.

"The only answer is decisive climate action... Gradual approaches are no longer enough."

A United Nations panel concluded late in 2018 that avoiding global climate chaos will require a major transformation of society and the world economy.

The landmark report said global CO2 emissions must drop 45 percent by 2030, and reach "net zero" by 2050, to cap temperature rise at 1.5 degrees Celsius, the safe cap set as a goal in the Paris accord.

Guterres said that at the next climate conference, the COP26 in Glasgow later this year, "governments must deliver the transformational change our world needs and that people demand, with much stronger ambition."

Guterres said rich countries should lead the way, including by ending "perverse" fossil fuel subsidies.

Following a year of deadly extreme weather and weekly protests by millions of young people, Madrid negotiators were under pressure to send a clear signal that governments were willing to intensify their efforts.

The summit was at times close to collapse as rich polluters, emerging powerhouses and climate-vulnerable nations groped for common ground in the face of competing national interests.

Guterres credited Pakistan for banning plastic bags in the capital Islamabad and for a large tree-planting programme.

Guterres is in Pakistan for a three-day visit that will include his attendance at a conference on Pakistan's hosting of Afghan refugees for 40 years.

Pakistan is one of the largest refugee-hosting nations in the world, home to an estimated 2.4 million registered and undocumented people who have fled Afghanistan, some as far back as the Soviet invasion of 1979. Many live in camps, while others have built lives for themselves in Pakistan's cities, paying rent and contributing to the economy.

Guterres said the "preferred, durable solution for the refugees has always been one-time repatriation with safety and dignity to the country of origin."

[Iran] Iran's Rouhani Says No Talks With U.S. While 'Maximum Pressure' Campaign Is On (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/16/20120 2:28 PM, Aresu Eqbali and Sune Engel Rasmussen, Neutral]

Iran will refuse to negotiate with the U.S. as long as Washington maintains its campaign of "maximum pressure"—even if President Trump is re-elected, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said Sunday.

Mr. Rouhani's defiant remarks solidify Iran's hard line in a face-off with the Trump administration that only weeks ago brought Washington and Tehran to the brink of war.

"It makes no difference who will be the next [American] administration," Mr. Rouhani said, speaking at a news conference in the Iranian capital. "Iran will never negotiate under pressure."

He demanded that the U.S. return to the 2015 nuclear deal, which President Trump quit in 2018, citing Iran's military activity in the Middle East.

The Iranian president, who has been isolated domestically amid the nuclear deal's near-collapse and the economic damage of U.S. sanctions, said he still had the support of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Mr. Rouhani said he has twice asked Mr. Khamenei if he had a better candidate for the job of Iran's president but was asked to stay.

"I told the supreme leader, 'If you think for some reason that someone else or another government can serve the country better, I'm ready to quit,'" Mr. Rouhani said.

Mr. Rouhani threatened to resign after the Iranian military mistakenly shot down a Ukrainian passenger airline in January, with his government clashing with the country's military over whether to admit responsibility.

Mr. Rouhani on Sunday, for the first time, acknowledged to have heard about possible missiles being the cause of the plane crash one day after the incident. He said he wasn't officially notified until nearly three days later.

The president spoke as Iran prepares for parliamentary elections on Friday, for which the establishment is trying to rally a large turnout to bolster itself against a rise of domestic discontent.

After the downing of the Ukrainian jetliner, Iranians took to the streets to denounce what they said were lies by their leaders. The protests followed economic-related protests weeks

earlier that rocked the nation, prompting a deadly crackdown by security forces in which hundreds of protesters were killed.

Although Mr. Rouhani criticized Iran's conservative Guardian Council for disqualifying many of his fellow moderates and reformists from running in the elections, he called for Iranians to head to the polls.

The long-brewing crisis between Tehran and Washington has escalated recently following months of harsh U.S. sanctions that have hammered Iran's economy but failed to change its military posture in the Middle East.

Tensions culminated in January with a direct military confrontation when the U.S. killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most prominent military commander and the engineer behind Iran's network of allied militias. Iran responded by firing over a dozen missiles at an Iraqi military base housing U.S. troops. No one was killed.

While Washington says Iran is the main force responsible for destabilizing the Middle East, Mr. Rouhani said peace and stability is impossible without Iran's help.

He added that if Saudi Arabia halted its aggression in Yemen, where Riyadh has been fighting Iran-backed Houthi rebels for more than five years, Iran would work with it to pursue peace in the region.

However, that comment came as two Saudi pilots were missing after Houthis shot down their jet fighter over Yemen's Jawf province on Friday.

U.S. officials accuse Iran of arming the rebels with missile and drone technology—a charge Tehran denies.

The shutdown of the Saudi plane has the potential to deepen hostilities as a cease-fire threatens to collapse. The attack on the Saudi plane triggered retaliatory airstrikes by the Saudi-led coalition Saturday, which according to the United Nations killed as many as 31 civilians.

[Iran] Rouhani says Iran will never yield to U.S. pressure for talks (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 10:45 AM, Babak Dehghanpisheh, 23673K, Neutral]

Iran will never hold talks with the United States under pressure, President Hassan Rouhani said on Sunday, adding that Tehran's help was essential in establishing security in the Middle East.

Relations between Tehran and Washington reached crisis point in 2018 after U.S. President Donald Trump abandoned a 2015 pact between Iran and world powers under which Tehran accepted curbs to its nuclear program in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Tensions spiked further following the killing of Iran's most prominent military commander Qassem Soleimani on Jan. 3 by U.S. drone attacks at Baghdad airport. In retaliation, Iran attacked U.S. targets in Iraq in January.

Trump has adopted a policy of "maximum pressure" to force Tehran to negotiate a broader deal that further curbs Iran's nuclear work, ends its missile program and its involvement in regional proxy wars.

"Iran will never negotiate under pressure ... We will never yield to America's pressure and we will not negotiate from a position of weakness," Rouhani said in a televised news conference.

Although the reimposed U.S. sanctions have crippled Iran's economy, slashing its oil exports, Tehran has repeatedly dismissed talks over any new deal, saying they are possible only if the United States returns to the pact and lifts trade curbs.

"America's 'maximum pressure' toward Iran is doomed to failure ... our enemy (the United States) is very well aware that their pressure is inefficient," Rouhani said.

Iran has been involved in decades of regional proxy wars with its key regional rival Saudi Arabia, from Syria to Iraq. European and Arab states have since scrambled to avert a full-fledged conflict between the two sides.

"Securing peace and stability in the sensitive region of Middle East and in the Persian Gulf is impossible without Iran's help," Rouhani said.

"Several countries have delivered messages to us (from Saudi Arabia) ... we don't have issues with Saudi Arabia that cannot be resolved," he said.

Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said on Saturday Riyadh had contacted Iran after the killing of Soleimani, but when Iran had responded the contact had ended. He suggested the United States had pressured Riyadh.

Zarif's comments were dismissed by his Saudi counterpart Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud who said there had been neither private messages nor direct contacts between the two countries.

[Iran] Iran: US sanctions 'create some problems'; talks possible with conditions (USA Today)

USA Today [2/16/2020 4:59 PM, John Bacon, 5611K, Negative]

The U.S. "maximum pressure" policy aimed at isolating Iran will not work, but the regime would be willing to negotiate if the Trump administration returns to the Iranian nuclear deal and drops economic sanctions, President Hassan Rouhani said Sunday.

"Of course, sanctions naturally create some problems, but they will not yield any results for the enemies," Rouhani told state media Sunday. "Maximum pressure has failed. We are in a better situation in the region now."

Rouhani said he doesn't think Trump wants a war with Iran because it would "ruin" his reelection chances.

In a rare bipartisan effort to curb Trump's powers, eight Senate Republicans aligned with

Democrats last week to support legislation that would restrict the president's ability to wage war with Iran. The measure, which goes to the House, reflected lawmakers' concerns that U.S. tensions with Iran could escalate into a full-fledged war.

"I think the Americans aren't after war since they know what harm it could do them," Rouhani said.

Talks could take place if the U.S. drops the crippling sanctions and complies with the commitments of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action negotiated by the Obama administration between Iran and global powers, Rouhani said. Trump repeatedly railed against the deal on the election trail and, as president, pulled the U.S. out.

U.S.-Iranian relations have grown steadily more tense, culminating in a U.S. drone strike that killed Iran's most powerful military leader last month. Iran responded with airstrikes blamed for brain injuries to more than 100 U.S. soldiers.

Trump has, however, repeatedly expressed interest in holding talks with Iran. The State Department did not immediately respond to USA TODAY's request for comment on Rouhani's statements.

Rouhani said Iran was forced to scale back its commitments to the nuclear deal after other parties to the agreement had to curb their involvement following the U.S. withdrawal. Thus, he said, Iran had to scale back its commitments.

Rouhani expressed little interest in the U.S. elections, saying there is no difference for Iran between the Democrats and Republicans. Tehran, he said, cares only about its national interests.

"We will never sit at the negotiating table with a weak position," Rouhani said.

[Iraq] Rockets strike near US Embassy in Baghdad; no injuries (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 9:31 AM, Qassim Abdul-Zahra, 4200K, Negative]

At least four rockets hit near the sprawling U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and a Iraqi base hosting American troops inside the Green Zone early Sunday, but caused no casualties and only minor damage, U.S. and Iraqi officials said.

The attack came just before 3:30 a.m. local time, according to Col. Myles B. Caggins III, a spokesman for the U.S. military operation in Iraq. He only said the rockets hit the base hosting U.S. and other coalition forces.

However, three Iraqi security officials said two of the rockets fell inside the U.S. Embassy compound, while another hit near the coalition base. The Iraqi officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the media.

The attack was the latest in a recent series of rocket and mortar strikes on Iraqi bases housing U.S. troops. On Thursday, a mortar shell exploded in the K1 Iraqi military airbase in Kirkuk province in northern Iraq. No casualties were reported, Iraqi security officials said.

An Iranian missile attack on Iraq's Ain al-Asad air base on Jan. 8 injured dozens of U.S. service members. It was in retaliation for the U.S. drone strike in Baghdad that killed Iran's most powerful general, Qassem Soleimani, on Jan. 3.

The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad has also been a flashpoint amid wider U.S.-Iran tensions in the region, which have played out inside Iraq in recent weeks. Iraqi supporters of an Iran-backed militia stormed the embassy compound Dec. 31, smashing the main door and setting fire to the reception area.

[Iraq] Rockets hit U.S. coalition base in Baghdad, no casualties (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 3:18 AM, John Davison, 5304K, Negative]

Rockets hit a U.S.-led military coalition's Baghdad headquarters early on Sunday but caused no casualties, a coalition spokesman said, in the latest attack to target U.S. facilities in Iraq.

Washington has blamed Iran-backed paramilitary groups for increasingly regular rocketing and shelling of bases hosting U.S. forces in Iraq and of the area around the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

An attack last month hit the U.S. Embassy compound itself, and a rocket attack on a military base in the north in December killed a U.S. civilian contractor.

There have been no claims for the attacks.

Tension between Iran and the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump has mostly played out on Iraqi soil in recent months.

The United States killed top Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi paramilitary chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a drone strike in Baghdad last month, after which the region braced for full-scale conflict. Iran launched its first direct missile attack on two bases hosting U.S. forces in response.

Sunday's attack, before dawn, was carried out with "small rockets" and caused no casualties, the coalition spokesman said in a statement on Twitter. He provided no further details.

An Iraqi military statement said three Katyusha rockets had hit the fortified Green Zone which hosts the U.S. Embassy, other foreign missions and Iraqi government buildings. It said a fourth hit a nearby logistics base for Iraqi paramilitary groups.

Iraq, caught between its two allies Washington and Tehran, also faces an unprecedented domestic crisis as months of anti-government unrest continues.

Protesters, whose numbers have reduced from the hundreds of thousands who took to the streets in October, are still demanding the overhaul of Iraq's political system and ruling elite which they say are corrupt.

Prime Minister-designate Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi said on Saturday that the formation of a

new government would take place in the coming week.

He said his appointments would consist of independent ministers free from the influence of parties, including Iran-backed Shi'ite groups, that have controlled cabinet posts and state institutions since the U.S.-led overthrow of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

[Iraq] No injuries reported after rocket strike near US Embassy in Baghdad (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/16/2020 3:25 PM, Tim Pearce, 570K, Negative]

A rocket attack near the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad and an Iraqi base where U.S. troops are stationed resulted in no casualties, according to U.S. and Iraqi officials.

Four rockets hit near the embassy and Iraqi base inside the Green Zone early Sunday morning, causing minor damage but no injuries or fatalities. The attack is the latest in a string of strikes on Iraqi military bases that are also housing U.S. servicemen.

A spokesman for U.S. military operations in Iraq confirmed that rockets had hit the Iraqi base. An Iraqi military official said that rockets had also hit inside the U.S. embassy compound, but the missiles did not result in any casualties.

On Jan. 8, Iran launched missiles at two Iraqi military bases where U.S. servicemen were posted. Neither American nor Iraqi forces suffered a loss during the attack, but dozens of U.S. servicemen reported having severe head trauma and concussions due to the strike.

Iran launched the strike against joint U.S.-Iraqi forces after President Trump ordered a drone strike that killed Iran's top general and terror leader Qassem Soleimani on Jan. 3. Soleimani planned and approved operations that have killed hundreds of U.S. soldiers in the Middle East. He led Iran's Quds Force, designated a terrorist entity by the United States in 2007, from 1998 until his death.

[Afghanistan] Questions outnumber answers for generations of refugees as Afghan peace deal nears (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 10:15 AM, Charlotte Greenfield, Neutral]

A short drive from the heavily secured five-star Islamabad hotel where international VIPs will discuss the future of Afghan refugees on Monday, 20-year old Ahmed Khan Younis lives in a makeshift settlement where the houses are made of mud.

Born in Pakistan to Afghan parents, Unis has no Pakistani citizenship and dreams of going "home" once a peace deal is signed, but he is worried about the conditions in a nation where the economic and social framework has been devastated by more than 40 years of war.

"I want to tell these leaders to bring peace to our country, so we can go," he said, adding he was worried about how he could complete his dream of studying to become an engineer.

The United States has reached agreement with the Taliban militants on a week-long reduction of violence that could lead to a U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, a senior administration official said on Friday, while cautioning that the insurgents must honour

commitments for the accord to stick.

U.S. President Donald Trump said he thought there was a "good chance" the United States would reach an agreement with the Taliban by the end of February, more than 18 years after a U.S.-led coalition ousted them from power.

The prospect of a peace pact is raising more questions than answers, refugees and humanitarian agencies say, when it comes to the future of Afghan refugees — one of the largest and most protracted displacements in modern history.

About three million Afghans live in Pakistan, with more in neighbouring Iran, many of them struggling to get full access to education, health and employment.

The U.N. refugee agency UNHCR is alarmed that at a time of increasing fatigue among global donors, rising insular policies by governments and a possible formal end to war, millions of refugees risk falling through the cracks either in their host nations or in Afghanistan.

'TIME TO WALK THE TALK'. In Khan's settlement, nestled around the campus of one of Pakistan's top universities, there is one school for more than 1,000 children, meaning fewer than a fifth attend.

The medicine has run out in the dispensary and the mud houses suffer badly when it rains.

"This is the generation that's going to build Afghanistan... it's really important not just from the refugee perspective but for the stability, peace, security perspective to invest," Indrika Ratwatte, the Asia director of UNHCR, told Reuters.

"Now I think it's time to really up the game and walk the talk."

The two-day conference, including U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the U.S. Afghanistan envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, will highlight the need for international support to reintegrate Afghan refugees and to help Pakistan and Iran, home to 90% of Afghan refugees, shoulder the load. "Tomorrow's conference I think is an opportunity for international members, including China, to commit more," Chinese Ambassador to Pakistan Yao Jing told Reuters.

"Peace can be expected in the near future."

Some refugees say they worry about being forced to go to Afghanistan if a deal is struck with the Taliban, who still control large swathes of the country, without that translating to peace and respect for human rights.

Saleema Rehman, 28, born in Pakistan, won a prized annual slot available for refugees in Pakistan's Punjab province to study medicine.

Now in her last year of gynaecology training, she faces an uncertain future, unable to practise in Pakistan once her training is complete as she is not a citizen.

She is also sceptical about the prospect of being allowed to work in Afghanistan after a peace deal, with the Taliban in some sort of power-sharing agreement.

The militants banned women from working, studying or even leaving their homes without a male relative during their 1996-2001 rule.

"We live in fear," she told Reuters. "We are the third generation, my nephew and niece are the fourth generation, in Pakistan. We never experienced any war and we don't want to go back to the area where peace is uncertain."

[Sri Lanka] Sri Lanka asks US to review travel ban on its army chief (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 7:15 AM, Bharatha Mallawarachi, 1512K, Neutral]

Sri Lanka asked the United States on Sunday to review its decision to impose a travel ban on the island nation's army chief, who has been accused of grave human rights abuses during the final stage of the country's civil war that ended 11 years ago.

Foreign Minister Dinesh Gunawardena summoned U.S. Ambassador Alaina B. Teplitz to the ministry and formally conveyed Sri Lanka's strong objections to the travel ban, which he said "unnecessarily complicates the U.S.-Sri Lanka relationship."

The U.S. government on Friday issued a travel ban on the army chief, Shavendra Silva, saying there is "credible information of his involvement" in human rights violations during the final phase of the war. The ban prohibits Silva and his family from traveling to the U.S.

Sri Lanka has denounced the ban, and on Sunday, Gunawardena reiterated that "there were no substantiated or proven allegations of human rights violations against him (Silva)," according to a foreign ministry statement.

Silva in 2009 was in charge of the 58th Division, which encircled the final stronghold of the Tamil Tiger rebels in the last stages of the civil war that killed at least 100,000 people. Human rights groups have accused the division of violating international human rights laws, including using artillery to shell a hospital, an allegation Silva has denied.

On Friday, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said in a statement that "the allegations of gross human rights violations against Shavendra Silva, documented by the United Nations and other organizations, are serious and credible."

According to a 2015 investigation by the U.N. office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, near the end of the war, Silva was tasked with capturing Sri Lanka's Putumattalan area from the Tamil Tigers. The investigation cited evidence that the hospital and a U.N. facility had been shelled.

"Witnesses alleged the use of cluster-type munitions by the Sri Lankan armed forces in their attacks on Putumattalan hospital and the United Nations hub," the investigation's report said.

After the war, Silva was promoted to major general. He was promoted again and became Sri Lanka's army commander last year amid international condemnation, but he is widely

respected among Sri Lanka's ethnic Sinhalese majority.

Pompeo urged Sri Lanka's government "to promote human rights, hold accountable individuals responsible for war crimes and human rights violations, advance security sector reform, and uphold its other commitments to pursue justice and reconciliation."

Gunawardena said Silva was appointed army commander because of his seniority and asked the U.S. to verify the authenticity of the sources of information.

Gunawardena said "it is disappointing that a foreign government should question the prerogative of a democratically elected president to call upon persons of proven expertise to hold key positions on national security related matters."

Sri Lanka declared victory over the rebels in May 2009, ending the Tamil Tigers' 26-year campaign for an independent state for minority ethnic Tamils. Both the Sri Lankan military and the rebels have been accused of wartime abuses.

The United Nations has said some 45,000 ethnic Tamil civilians may have been killed during the final months of the conflict alone.

Sri Lanka's government promised the U.N. Human Rights Council in 2015 that it would investigate the allegations against Silva and involve foreign prosecutors and judges, but has not done so.

Editorials and Op-eds

Ivanka Trump takes lead in global fight to empower women, could boost GDP \$7 trillion (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/16/2020 8:15 AM, Paul Bedard, 570K, Positive]

Ivanka Trump Sunday cemented her position as the global spokesperson for women's economic empowerment, telling a Middle East summit that efforts she and international banks have championed over the past two years could lead to a \$7 trillion boost in world GDP, \$600 billion in the region alone.

"That number represents far more than an economic boom — it represents millions of lives full of promise — mothers who could provide for their children, daughters who could be the first to graduate high school, and young women who could start businesses and become job creators. This is the future we can and must achieve together," she said at the Global Women's Forum Dubai and We-Fi MENA Regional Summit in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

"We all know that when women are free to succeed, families thrive, communities flourish, and nations are stronger," she said in comments shared with Secrets.

Over the past three years, as a senior adviser to President Trump, Ivanka Trump has emerged as the domestic jobs czar and internationally as a champion of women seeking business funding in nations where sexual discrimination is often crushing.

Along the way, she has won supporters and helped to free up funding.

In her comments, she cited the United States as an example of how a long fight for economic equality can lead to victories for women.

"A few decades ago, women could not take out a loan without a man or own a credit card in their name. They searched for jobs in the female section of employment listings and made up only 25% of managers in 1980. Today, more American women are leading in every aspect of society. Last year, there were more women than men in the U.S. workforce, with women securing over 70% of new jobs," she said.

In her efforts, Trump has seen the types of discrimination and belittling that women have faced in the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere.

She is sometimes mocked, especially by the president's critics, but she brushes off the attacks and sticks to her mission, often winning praise from world leaders who also champion women's economic empowerment.

Her giving the keynote address at the Global Women's Forum Dubai and the second annual regional summit of the Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative, or We-Fi, is the recognition for her efforts.

"Since we launched this historic initiative two years ago, with the UAE and United States as founding members, we will have mobilized \$2.6 billion, of both public and private sector financing, to invest in more than 100,000 women-owned businesses in the developing world," she said.

She also talked about her White House program, the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, that has a goal of helping 50 million women in the developing world gain economic help.

"Recently, our White House Economists found that if nations addressed the five legal barriers that W-GDP is focused on reforming — accessing institutions, building credit, owning and managing property, traveling freely, and removing employment restrictions — women's economic activity could increase annual global GDP by about \$7.7 trillion," she said.

"Imagine the lives transformed - the cities that could be built, the new schools that could open their doors, the children that could be helped — if we come together to make these reforms part of our future," Trump concluded in her speech.

Huawei conundrum: Global collaboration continues to elude Chinese giant; India testing waters (Yahoo News/Financial Express)

Yahoo News/Financial Express [2/16/2020 12:51 PM, Anurag Vishwanath, 4742K, Neutral] Huawei, the Chinese telecommunications giant with the tagline "Powering Intelligent Connectivity with Global Collaboration," finds that "global collaboration" is easier said than done.

Huawei's chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou is in detention, in Canada.

The US has backed a global bid to keep Huawei off the telecommunication networks of the West on grounds of national security.

Against all odds, Huawei has found an unlikely lifeline in the UK. On January 28, 2020, Prime Minister Boris Johnson backed Huawei's participation in UK's 5G high-speed wireless network.

Predictably, UK's decision is at odds with the US's, and threatens to derail UK-US "special relations."

What lies behind UK's decision and what are the implications for the global community?

Following what the UK has said was a "rigorous review," Huawei will be allowed to participate in the 5G network, but its role will be limited to the "non-core" network, capped at 35%. Huawei will not be allowed into the 'core' national security networks.

The UK has indicated that, in the past, Huawei was not operational in sensitive networks, nor will be in the future.

Huawei will be monitored by a security evaluation centre, the Huawei Cyber Security Evaluation Centre monitored by UK's National Cyber Security Centre set up in 2010 at Banbury, Oxfordshire—a move that has been welcomed by Huawei.

It appears that UK's decision is based on certain pragmatic considerations, including costs.

Huawei is said to have made a sustained investment in the ecosystem, rolling out the 4G network in the UK. UK's need for 5G coverage by 2025 and Huawei's expertise and lead as a leading telecommunications provider were some factors.

The exclusion of Huawei would have led to increased costs and delays.

Lack of a viable alternative provider was also another factor.

For Johnson, who has presided over UK's exit from the European Union, there is no doubt that he is banking on a favourable US-UK trade deal.

UK's decision on Huawei has come as a storm.

The Donald Trump administration has made its disappointment "very clear" to the UK. Most newspapers, including the Financial Times, carried reports of President Trump's "apoplectic" disappointment over UK's decision.

In earlier references, President Trump had called Huawei "dangerous."

Huawei is a larger, bigger issue than President Trump—it's an issue that the American establishment seems united on.

On Huawei, both sides, the Republicans and the Democrats, sail in the same boat.

Republican Lindsey Graham had tweeted: "This decision has the potential to jeopardize US-UK intelligence sharing agreements and could greatly complicate a US-UK free trade agreement," and hoped that Britain would "reconsider its decision." In an interview, Democrat Ro Khanna said sanctions against Huawei are "reasonable" given national security concerns and generous subsidies that Huawei garners.

Cable News Network chief national security correspondent Jim Sciutto said that on Huawei both Democrats and the Republicans have a "rare point of agreement."

The American establishment has long been sceptical of Huawei's participation in the next-generation 5G network with potential for espionage.

The US has been wary and critical of UK's cost-cutting, which, in their eyes, undermines the Five Eyes partnership of intelligence-sharing between the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Given the turn of events, there is an open call in the US for the review of US-UK intelligence sharing.

While several American allies such as Australia, Japan, New Zealand and Taiwan are not engaging with Huawei, many others in Europe, such as France and Germany, and India are testing waters.

A letter signed by former ministers and senior Conservatives has sought a better solution to UK's decision on Huawei going as far as to suggest ruling or phasing out 'high-risk' vendors.

Several countries are yet to clarify their stance on Huawei.

The EU has not banned Huawei, but suggested members 'limit and monitor' "high-risk" vendors.

The EU also released a "5G toolbox" — measures such as stricter screening of foreign investment, penalties for companies benefiting from state subsidies — a circular route likely to impact Huawei.

Media reports in France suggest that the biggest French operator, Orange, has selected Nokia and Ericsson.

Two other French carriers — Altice Europe's SFR and Bouygues Telecom — are yet to say who their 5G partners will be, but are likely to look at directives from France's National Agency for the Security of Information Systems.

India, caught between the largest trading partner China and democratic ally the US, has allowed Huawei to participate in 5G trials.

China, which has captured India's smartphone market, is upbeat about Huawei's technology and high-quality networks in India.

Strangely, the Chinese state has gone on a diplomatic offensive for Huawei—a private company.

In Paris, Chinese ambassador Lu Shaye has not minced words, lashing out at the "difference of treatment of companies according to their country of origin." Calling for "transparent criteria" and that "all companies equally," the embassy made a statement that "China has always given Nokia and Ericsson fair treatment in the deployment of 5G networks in China and has even allowed them to take part in the deployment of the core networks."

In the UK, Chinese ambassador Liu Xiaoming said in the BBC's The Andrew Marr Show that Huawei is a "privately-owned company, nothing to do with the Chinese government," and that Tory politicians opposed to Huawei were conducting a "witch-hunt." But not many will likely buy the argument.

In the US and elsewhere, the perspective on Huawei is coloured, no doubt, by politics, but so also by trade issues.

Huawei, despite being a private company, may have benefited from protectionism and subsidies that run contrary to the principles of free market.

That Huawei has an unfair advantage is a moot point.

There is no doubt that 5G holds the key to the future — cloud computing, artificial intelligence, space technology, evolving still and potential game — changers, are the areas where China is making rapid strides and, while still behind the US, is catching up.

This explains why voices supportive of the US buying a controlling stake in Ericsson and Nokia have emerged.

How London and Washington decide to collaborate on reducing the use of Huawei equipment or go about their intelligence-sharing agreement remains to be seen.

It is likely that UK's post-Brexit trade deal with the US is in jeopardy.

If the US does not enforce what it says, its message in Europe and amongst allies will run feeble.

The Huawei conundrum illustrates that modern-day battlefields are of a completely different order — not just limited to conventional military battlegrounds, but roll out as propaganda, media, trade and aid — where technology is the final frontier.

[Iran] How Iran's Hard-Liners Got Campaign Boost From Trump (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 12:01 AM, Golnar Motevalli, 6400K, Neutral]

As Iran's president since 2013, Hassan Rouhani has sought to be a force of moderation in the country, rolling back his predecessor's populist economic policies and confrontational approach to foreign relations. His tenure runs until mid-2021, but parliamentary elections

Feb. 21 are widely expected to mark the beginning of the end of Rouhani's brand of politics in Iran. Hard-liners and ultra conservatives are widely expected to win a majority in parliament.

1. Who controls parliament now?

While political parties exist in Iran, they're not formally represented in parliament. Instead, there are two broad political factions -- reformists and principlists -- with varying shades of orthodoxy within each group. The 290-seat parliament has been dominated by a coalition of reformists, moderates and pragmatic conservatives since the last vote in 2016, which bolstered Rouhani and his cabinet. The principlist faction is in the minority. It contains Iran's most right-wing, religious and hard-line politicians, who tend to prioritize the country's security apparatus and theocratic leadership above all else. They mostly oppose engagement with the West and tend to be deeply hostile to the U.S.

2. Why are principlists favored to win?

Rouhani staked his credibility, and that of his camp, on Iran's 2015 deal with world powers in which it agreed to limit its nuclear program in exchange for relief from sanctions that had crippled its economy. In 2018, President Donald Trump pulled the U.S. out of the deal and began imposing harsh sanctions on Iran, depriving it of the economic benefits it had expected from the accord. Moderate politicians who supported Rouhani had already lost some support after failing to deliver on promises of greater social freedoms. But the American U-turn on the nuclear deal left them even weaker while empowering hard-liners, who largely opposed the nuclear accord from the start.

3. So it's just that moderates have lost popular support?

It's not just that. In the weeks ahead of the election, Iran's 12-member Guardian Council, a powerful body of legal experts responsible for vetting candidates, has barred thousands of people from running. This includes some 75% of current lawmakers within the moderate coalition and some conservative politicians allied with Rouhani. The president and a number of leading reformers have criticized the disqualifications. Rouhani said they have effectively created a single-faction race that gives voters no choice. The council has defended its decisions and said many of those barred were guilty of corruption or "anti-state behavior." Among those barred were six of 15 women incumbents who wanted to run again. In 2016, a record 17 women secured seats, 14 of them reformists. Another factor in the election is that some reformists say they will boycott the vote in response to the state's violent crackdown on protests in November sparked by a sudden increase in the price of gasoline.

4. What powers does Iran's parliament have?

It is weak relative to other seats of power. Ultimate power in Iran rests with the supreme leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is chosen by a group of Islamic scholars and politicians. The president, who is popularly elected, nominates cabinet members and is the government's chief executive. In addition to approving all candidates for office, the Guardian Council has veto power over all legislation passed by parliament. Still, parliamentary sessions feature policy debates and critiques of the government. The body serves as a check on executive power by approving the budget, treaties and government ministers,

whom it can also impeach.

5. How would a principlist win affect Iran's economy?

Legislation for which Rouhani has been seeking parliamentary approval would likely be scrapped. That could include bills related to his efforts to bring Iran's banking sector in line with international standards in order to stave off penalties against Iran's lenders by the intergovernmental Financial Action Task Force, which combats threats to the integrity of the international financial system such as money laundering. Another piece of legislation likely to die would re-denominate Iran's currency, the rial, which plummeted in value after the U.S. reimposed sanctions. Knocking a few zeros off the exchange rate would make it easier for businesses and government to operate, and could help curb inflation. In addition, a more belligerent political establishment could encourage the U.S. to apply yet more sanctions to Iran. Many hard-liners are deeply suspicious of European countries and have advocated cutting ties entirely with the European Union and focusing on trade relations with countries such as China and Russia.

[Israel] My nightmare encounter with Israel's socialist healthcare system (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/16/2020 6:00 AM, Jeffrey Tomblin, 570K, Neutral]

On my first trip out of the country, I was eager to explore Israel and learn about its ancient history. Instead, I found myself stuck in an Israeli hospital and quickly discovered the dysfunction of socialized healthcare.

Five days into my 10-day visit to Israel in January, a vehement sickness had taken a toll on me. I was taken to a clinic in Jerusalem, where I received four hours of treatment until about three in the morning. The doctors determined that I had the flu, gave me a prescription, and were about to send me on my way. However, as I was about to check out, the doctor suddenly came back, wanting results from more tests. The results showed that I had low oxygen levels and that the most likely cause was pneumonia.

Things went downhill from there.

I was sent off in an ambulance, oxygen mask around my face, to the nearest hospital a mile away. They wheeled me into the emergency room, where I was shocked to see sick, elderly patients lining the hallways. They placed me near some supply cabinets and hooked me up to a more permanent oxygen source. Patients were screaming and moaning through the night due to their long wait times. It was the height of Israel's flu season.

I was in a daze. Just hours ago, I had been sitting at my first Shabbat dinner in the Holy Land of Israel. Now, I was forced into a completely different Israeli experience: socialized healthcare.

Their socialized healthcare system offers universal healthcare coverage through the country's national health insurance, passed in 1995. The legislation established universal coverage by providing four nonprofit healthcare plans for Israelis to choose from.

Some Israelis use both Israel's national insurance as well as private doctors provided by

Sharap — an additional private healthcare service doctors offer on top of their normal socialized healthcare duties. This extra coverage is more expensive than simply accepting Israel's socialized plans, but, unsurprisingly, paying patients receive more specialized care in a timely manner. Without Sharap, I had to rely on general care, and boy, did it disappoint.

Trapped in the crowded emergency room, I tried my best to sleep. I soon awoke Saturday morning to the news that I was going to be sent to the intensive care unit. They gave me a gown, took X-rays of my chest, and wheeled me to my own room in the unit.

Here, the staff was even thinner. My family informed me that the one doctor they spoke with the entire time I was hospitalized told them that this was normal, and that the hospital I was at averages about one-fifth the staff American hospitals provide. As a result, I spent the next three days in the intensive care unit without getting any test results back from the doctors.

Both Israel's doctor-to-patient and nurse-to-patient ratios had been in decline for years before my visit. In my case, it would sometimes take an hour for a nurse to answer my request for help, and I would rarely ever get to see or get to speak with an actual doctor.

Once we finally received my test results, they confirmed I had influenza B and pneumonia. While they had already been treating me with Tamiflu and antibiotics, others on my trip were told they could not purchase Tamiflu because of a reported shortage. The Times of Israel reported on this shortage, as Israelis found it difficult to obtain a flu shot just weeks before.

Monday, I was released from the ICU to the therapeutic department, where I finally had access to an actual bathroom with a toilet and a sink. I was placed between my two new roommates, both with their spouses accompanying them. I asked the staff if I'd get an update from a doctor about my estimated recovery time and was told that I'd get to see a doctor that night. However, I went without seeing a doctor all day.

Tuesday, we had good news. They said I would be released that day or the next. My illness had faded drastically, and my friends who accompanied me had successfully pushed the hospital staff to authorize my flight back home. My friends and I passed the time talking about news and politics, hoping for an early release that day. Sadly, night came with no word on my discharge.

Wednesday, the doctors informed me that I'd be released after they had done one more X-ray on my lungs and prescribed me some medication for my trip back to America. That afternoon, they called me downstairs to take my final X-ray, and I was soon released, on my way back to my hotel and relieved beyond belief to be headed back home.

While this visit to Israel was not what I had planned, I learned firsthand of the difficulties the nation and its people face under socialized healthcare. I appreciate the care and consideration the nurses and doctors gave to me, and I do hope to come back to Israel in the future. I just hope that next time I fall ill while traveling, I'm somewhere with a free market healthcare system.

[Israel] Israel's New War Plan for Iran (And More): Stealth F-35I Fighters and Lots of Tech (The National Interest)

The National Interest [2/16/2020 1:00 PM, Seth J. Frantzman, 10942K, Positive]
Israel rolled out a new plan this month to take advantage of Israel's technological edge, blending them with the best weapons systems like the F-35i and using it with extreme effectiveness against enemies.

The plan, named Momentum, has been in the works for a year and was rolled out in February 2020 to prepare Israel to confront Iran, Hamas, Hezbollah and other threats over the next decades.

The plan is designed to build on the Gideon five-year plan that was announced in 2015. The goal is to reduce redundancy and save costs as well as introduce new technologies. It cuts down reserve forces, while focusing on cyber, multi-layered air defense such as the Iron Dome, and bring the F-35 to Israel for the country's first squadron. Now Israel has two squadrons of the F-35 and will eventually build a third. It could eventually have 75 in total.

The F-35i, because of all of its capabilities, is a foundational part of Momentum, as it greatly increases the chances Israel would have air superiority in any conflict. "It has amazing capabilities," says International spokesperson for the IDF, Jonathan Conricus.

Momentum was supposed to be rolled out earlier, however, Israel is facing its third elections in a year in March 2020, which means some necessary issues of having a coalition government, budget and all the approvals were delayed. The endless elections were a "logjam," Israel's Israel HaYom says. Nevertheless, the need to confront an Iranian threat has forced Israel's hand and the army wants to get going with this plan.

Limited resources shouldn't be put in the way of expanding Israel's drone capabilities, and pushing advancements in armored vehicles, networked and increasingly digitized battlefields and precision weapons. Israel already spent more than \$3.3 billion in 2019 to increase its lethality with Defense Minister Naftali Bennett having already approved the Momentum plan.

In a briefing in mid-February, Conricus explained the core parts of Israel's plan. First, while the plan is set to continue for five years, its effects will be felt through 2030. It comes under the tenure of Chief of Staff Aviv Kochavi and will focus on the strategic environment, global trends, counter-terrorism and Israel's "third circle" threats, which is the term Israel uses to denote Iran. The enemy is changing from terrorist groups to what Israel calls "terror-armies." These combine aspects of terror and guerilla groups with the structure of armies.

While Israel must confront these groups with precision weapons, it must also defend against high trajectory threats, such as Iran's ballistic missiles. Israel must enhance its defensive capabilities to face things like Iran's cruise missiles as well.

Israel is planning for increased battles in urban areas that are more restrictive for hi-tech militaries. The country must also prepare for a multi-front war against Iran and Hamas and Hezbollah at the same time. To achieve victory, Israel says that it must shorten the time of such a war and achieve more on the battlefield at the same time. "Think of a triangle," says Conricus. On one node is time and another is achievement and cost. Cost and time must remain low while achievement is high. "The environment is changing, this necessitates understanding the changes and addressing them in training, equipment, doctrine,

manpower and material."The main goal for now, with technology like the Israeli-modified F-35, many of whose features remain secret, is to create a bigger gap between Israel and its enemies. This goes beyond the "qualitative military edge" Israel once sought over conventional enemies and it seeks to go past Israel's "war between the wars" which has led to managed conflicts with Gaza and Iran's entrenchment in Syria. For instance, Israel has faced 2,600 rockets fired from Gaza in the last two years while carrying out more than 1,000 airstrikes on more than 200 Iranian targets in Syria over the last several years.

How will Israel achieve all of this? It will seek to deny its enemies the ability to communicate and prevent them from re-supply so they can't use all their capabilities. New technologies used in this "multi-dimensional" war will "maximize all our advantages using all our forces, including air, land, sea, cyber and intel," Israel says. Air forces operating by themselves or navies on their own are a "relic of the past," the IDF says. It wants to use all its forces to give units in the field the best possible real-time intelligence and general staff capabilities. That will also mean a lot more precision-guided munitions and UAVs. It is "uncharted territory," the IDF says.

Jerusalem will dedicate a general to focus on the Iranian threat and the unit will have its own headquarters. There will be more use of big data and artificial intelligence, something Israel already excels at. The country will streamline armored units, retiring older tanks, and create a new infantry unit. The end result, Israel says, is that the army will be able to deliver a "swift and massive" blow against adversaries. It will defend against high trajectory rocket fire and use systems like the F-35 squadrons more effectively. The air space may be more crowded, with more drones and unmanned platforms, communicating with future armored fighting vehicles on the ground and using standoff precision missiles. " Report Advertisement

"We will evolve as our enemies evolve," the IDF says.

[China] 'Century of Humiliation': How the Opium Wars Made China What It Is Today (The National Interest)

The National Interest [2/16/2020 11:30 AM, Sebastien Roblin, 10942K, Negative]

Key Point: When the Qing sued for peace in 1842, the British could set their own terms.

In 1839, England went to war with China because it was upset that Chinese officials had shut down its drug trafficking racket and confiscated its dope.

Stating the historical record so plainly is shocking — but it's true, and the consequences of that act are still being felt today.

The Qing Dynasty, founded by Manchurian clans in 1644, expanded China's borders to their farthest reach, conquering Tibet, Taiwan and the Uighur Empire.

The Qing then turned inward and isolationist, refusing to accept Western ambassadors because they were unwilling to proclaim the Qing Dynasty as supreme above their own heads of state.

Foreigners — even on trade ships — were prohibited entry into Chinese territory.

The exception to the rule was in Canton, the southeastern region centered on modern-day Guangdong Province, which adjoins Hong Kong and Macao.

Foreigners were allowed to trade in the Thirteen Factories district in the city of Guangzhou, with payments made exclusively in silver.

The British gave the East India Company a monopoly on trade with China, and soon ships based in colonial India were vigorously exchanging silver for tea and porcelain.

Opium War: Starting in in the mid-1700s, the British began trading opium grown in India in exchange for silver from Chinese merchants.

Opium — an addictive drug that today is refined into heroin — was illegal in England, but was used in Chinese traditional medicine. However, recreational use was illegal and not widespread. That changed as the British began shipping in tons of the drug using a combination of commercial loopholes and outright smuggling to get around the ban.

Chinese officials taking their own cut abetted the practice. American ships carrying Turkish-grown opium joined in the narcotics bonanza in the early 1800s. Consumption of opium in China skyrocketed, as did profits.

The Daoguang Emperor became alarmed by the millions of drug addicts—and the flow of silver leaving China. As is often the case, the actions of a stubborn idealist brought the conflict to a head. In 1839 the newly appointed Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu instituted laws banning opium throughout China.

He arrested 1,700 dealers, and seized the crates of the drug already in Chinese harbors and even on ships at sea. He then had them all destroyed. That amounted to 2.6 million pounds of opium thrown into the ocean. Lin even wrote a poem apologizing to the sea gods for the pollution.

Angry British traders got the British government to promise compensation for the lost drugs, but the treasury couldn't afford it. War would resolve the debt.

But the first shots were fired when the Chinese objected to the British attacking one of their own merchant ships.

Chinese authorities had indicated they would allow trade to resume in non-opium goods. Lin Zexu even sent a letter to Queen Victoria pointing out that as England had a ban on the opium trade, they were justified in instituting one too.

It never reached her, but eventually did appear in the Sunday Times.

Instead, the Royal Navy established a blockade around Pearl Bay to protest the restriction of free trade ... in drugs. Two British ships carrying cotton sought to run the blockade in November 1839. When the Royal Navy fired a warning shot at the second, The Royal Saxon, the Chinese sent a squadron of war junks and fire-rafts to escort the merchant.

HMS Volage's Captain, unwilling to tolerate the Chinese "intimidation," fired a broadside at the Chinese ships. HMS Hyacinth joined in. One of the Chinese ships exploded and three more were sunk. Their return fire wounded one British sailor.

Seven months later, a full-scale expeditionary force of 44 British ships launched an invasion of Canton. The British had steam ships, heavy cannon, Congreve rockets and infantry equipped with rifles capable of accurate long range fire. Chinese state troops—"bannermen"—were still equipped with matchlocks accurate only up to 50 yards and a rate of fire of one round per minute.

Antiquated Chinese warships were swiftly destroyed by the Royal Navy. British ships sailed up the Zhujiang and Yangtze rivers, occupying Shanghai along the way and seizing tax-collection barges, strangling the Qing government's finances. Chinese armies suffered defeat after defeat.

When the Qing sued for peace in 1842, the British could set their own terms. The Treaty of Nanjing stipulated that Hong Kong would become a British territory, and that China would be forced to establish five treaty ports in which British traders could trade anything they wanted with anybody they wanted to. A later treaty forced the Chinese to formally recognize the British as equals and grant their traders favored status.

More War, More Opium: Imperialism was on the upswing by the mid-1800s. France muscled into the treaty port business as well in 1843. The British soon wanted even more concessions from China—unrestricted trade at any port, embassies in Beijing and an end to bans on selling opium in the Chinese mainland.

One tactic the British used to further their influence was registering the ships of Chinese traders they dealt with as British ships.

The pretext for the second Opium War is comical in its absurdity. In October 1856, Chinese authorities seized a former pirate ship, the Arrow, with a Chinese crew and with an expired British registration. The captain told British authorities that the Chinese police had taken down the flag of a British ship.

The British demanded the Chinese governor release the crew. When only nine of the 14 returned, the British began a bombardment of the Chinese forts around Canton and eventually blasted open the city walls.

British Liberals, under William Gladstone, were upset at the rapid escalation and protested fighting a new war for the sake of the opium trade in parliament. However, they lost seats in an election to the Tories under Lord Palmerston. He secured the support needed to prosecute the war.

China was in no position to fight back, as it was then embroiled in the devastating Taiping Rebellion, a peasant uprising led by a failed civil-service examinee claiming to be the brother of Jesus Christ. The rebels had nearly seized Beijing and still controlled much of the country.

Once again, the Royal Navy demolished its Chinese opponents, sinking 23 junks in the

opening engagement near Hong Kong and seizing Guangzhou. Over the next three years, British ships worked their way up the river, capturing several Chinese forts through a combination of naval bombardment and amphibious assault.

France joined in the war—its excuse was the execution of a French missionary who had defied the ban on foreigners in Guangxi province. Even the United States became briefly involved after a Chinese fort took pot shots at long distance at an American ship.

In the Battle of the Pearl River Forts, a U.S. Navy force of three ships and 287 sailors and marines took four forts by storm, capturing 176 cannons and fighting off a counterattack of 3,000 Chinese infantry. The United States remained officially neutral.

Russia did not join in the fighting, but used the war to pressure China into ceding a large chunk of its northeastern territory, including the present-day city of Vladivostok.

When foreign envoys drew up the next treaty in 1858 the terms, were even more crushing to the Qing Dynasty's authority. Ten more cities were designated as treaty ports, foreigners would have free access to the Yangtze river and the Chinese mainland, and Beijing would open embassies to England, France and Russia.

The Xianfeng Emperor at first agreed to the treaty, but then changed his mind, sending Mongolian general Sengge Rinchen to man the Taku Forts on the waterway leading to Beijing. The Chinese repelled a British attempt to take the forts by sea in June 1859, sinking four British ships. A year later, an overland assault by 11,000 British and 6,700 French troops succeeded.

When a British diplomatic mission came to insist on adherence to the treaty, the Chinese took the envoy hostage, and tortured many in the delegation to death. The British High Commissioner of Chinese Affairs, Lord Elgar, decided to assert dominance and sent the army into Beijing.

British and French rifles gunned down 10,000 charging Mongolian cavalymen at the Battle of Eight Mile Bridge, leaving Beijing defenseless. Emperor Xianfeng fled. In order to wound the Emperor's "pride as well as his feeling" in the words of Lord Elgar, British and French troops looted and destroyed the historic Summer Palace.

The new revised treaty imposed on China legalized both Christianity and opium, and added Tianjin—the major city close to Beijing—to the list of treaty ports. It allowed British ships to transport Chinese indentured laborers to the United States, and fined the Chinese government eight million silver dollars in indemnities.

The Western presence in China became so ubiquitous, and so widely detested, that an anti-Western popular revolt, the Boxer Rebellion, broke out in 1899. The hapless Qing Dynasty, under the stewardship of Dowager Empress Cixi, first tried to clamp down on the violence before throwing its support behind it—just in time for a multi-national military force of U.S., Russian, German, Austrian, Italian, French, Japanese and British troops to arrive and put down the rebellion.

It then spent an entire year looting Beijing, Tianjin and the surrounding countryside in

reprisal.

It's hard to over-emphasize the impact of the Opium Wars on modern China. Domestically, it's led to the ultimate collapse of the centuries-old Qing Dynasty, and with it more than two millennia of dynastic rule. It convinced China that it had to modernize and industrialize.

Today, the First Opium War is taught in Chinese schools as being the beginning of the "Century of Humiliation"—the end of that "century" coming in 1949 with the reunification of China under Mao. While Americans are routinely assured they are exceptional and the greatest country on Earth by their politicians, Chinese schools teach students that their country was humiliated by greedy and technologically superior Western imperialists.

The Opium Wars made it clear China had fallen gravely behind the West—not just militarily, but economically and politically. Every Chinese government since—even the ill-fated Qing Dynasty, which began the "Self-Strengthening Movement" after the Second Opium War—has made modernization an explicit goal, citing the need to catch up with the West.

The Japanese, observing events in China, instituted the same discourse and modernized more rapidly than China did during the Meiji Restoration.

Mainland Chinese citizens still frequently measure China in comparison to Western countries. Economic and quality of life issues are by far their main concern. But state media also holds military parity as a goal.

I once saw a news program on Chinese public television boasting about China's new aircraft carrier Liaoning—before comparing it to an American carrier. "They're saying ours is still a lot smaller," a high school student pointed out to me. "And we have only one."

Through most of Chinese history, China's main threat came from nomadic horse-riding tribes along its long northern border. Even in the Cold War, hostility with the Soviet Union made its Mongolian border a security hot spot. But the Opium Wars—and even worse, the Japanese invasion in 1937—demonstrated how China was vulnerable to naval power along its Pacific coast.

China's aggressive naval expansion in the South China Sea can be seen as the acts of a nation that has succumbed repeatedly to naval invasions—and wishes to claim dominance of its side of the Pacific in the 21st century.

The history with opium also has led China to adopt a particularly harsh anti-narcotics policy with the death penalty applicable even to mid-level traffickers. Drug-trafficking and organized crime remain a problem, however. The explosion of celebrity culture in China has also led to punitive crackdowns on those caught partaking in "decadent lifestyles," leading to prominent campaigns of public shaming.

For example, in 2014 police arrested Jaycee Chan, son of Jackie Chan, for possessing 100 grams of marijuana. His father stated he wouldn't plead for his son to avoid imprisonment.

Past history does not always determine future actions. Chinese sentiments toward the United Kingdom today are generally positive despite the Opium Wars. The escalating

military confrontation over the South China Sea is a reality of our times, but that doesn't mean China's leaders will forever be committed to a strategy of expansion and confrontation.

Nonetheless, fostering better relations requires that we understand how China's current foreign policy has its roots in past encounters with the West.

[Afghanistan] My Friend Lives Inside the War on Terror. Listen to Him. (New York Times)

New York Times [2/16/2020 8:34 AM, Alex Kingsbury, 23673K, Neutral]

Outside the headquarters of the Army's 10th Mountain Division at Fort Drum stands a monument to the unit, the one most frequently deployed in the years since the attacks of 9/11. Two wiry soldiers, frozen in bronze, help each other ascend a crag with the help of a rope. Etched around the monument is the unit's motto: "Climb to Glory."

I walked around the stone and bronze, in the frigid darkness of upstate New York, for a good 20 minutes last month, as my old friend Capt. Richard Murphy stood just out of earshot and spoke on his phone about his looming deployment to Afghanistan and about suicide.

I went to Fort Drum because I'd been thinking a lot recently about patriotism. It is, after all, an election year. Our political tribes are fighting over what counts as "real America" and, by extension, what does not. Yet in their telling of the national narrative, the right overwrites facts that tarnish the American story, while the left leaves few of them out.

Far beyond the superficial politics of patriotism is the lived experience of patriotism. For Captain Murphy, 40, that means keeping soldiers mentally healthy so they can fight overseas and stay healthy once their fight is over. He listens well because, more than most, he has seen what is both great and appalling about the United States. He knows how love of country can seize the heart, and he still grapples with moral ambiguities of military service.

The soldiers in the 10th Mountain are getting ready for another tour in Afghanistan. The war there has lasted more than 18 years. Last year, the Air Force dropped more bombs on the country than in any year since 2013. The 17-year-olds who enlisted with parental consent were not yet born at the time of the terrorist attacks that were the initial impetus for all those deployments.

As a behavioral health officer in the 1st Brigade Combat Team, Captain Murphy helps decide who ships out and who stays and gets help. Not all soldiers are mentally fit to deploy. Others who are fit are terrified. His evening phone call that kept me stomping my feet to keep warm was related to a patient, but that's all he'd tell me.

Captain Murphy sees patients during the day, and works the phones at all hours, talking to combat leaders about the readiness of the men and women in the unit. It takes a lot of listening to make the right call about what's going on in someone's mind. Just because a soldier mentions suicide doesn't always mean that soldier is serious about taking his or her own life. Some are serious about doing so but don't let it be known.

No one goes to war alone, the saying goes. Garrison life is also a community project, especially when it comes to mental health and suicide prevention. In 2018, the last year for which there is comprehensive data, 541 active duty service members died by suicide. Adjusted for demographics, the suicide rate for the military is close to the rate for the general population, where it has become the second-leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 10 and 34. (The Veterans Crisis Line is staffed 24/7: 800-273-8255, press 1. Services also are available online or by texting 838255.)

Teaching hardened mountain commanders how to listen — and what to listen for — isn't where Captain Murphy imagined his military career would lead when he enlisted. Nearly 20 years ago, when he was the editor in chief of our college newspaper, I wouldn't have predicted this path.

But people are changed by age and experience. And history.

In January 2001, Richard Murphy and I wrote an article for that paper about a visit by George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, the incoming president and vice president to our school, George Washington University. The event was to honor the military. Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld and John McCain were all there, in an auditorium just blocks from the White House. "The national security team I've put together is the best in our nation's history," Mr. Bush told the crowd.

Outside, students demonstrated against American sanctions then imposed on Iraq.

Inside, Lee Greenwood belted out "God Bless the U.S.A."

There were lots of flags. Very patriotic.

Eight months later, by then a law student, my friend sat on the roof of his apartment building in Foggy Bottom, looked across the Potomac River and watched as the Pentagon burned. He walked into an Army recruiting station a few days later.

"It just deeply affected me," he told me later. "I felt completely compelled to join and do my part."

His unit then, the 372nd Military Police Company, arrived in Kuwait in May 2003, two weeks after President Bush addressed the nation in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner on the U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln and declared an end to major combat operations.

"The War on Terror continues, yet it is not endless," Mr. Bush said. "We do not know the day of final victory, but we have seen the turning of the tide."

That changing tide had a vicious undertow.

The 372nd spent five months training and supervising Iraqi police officers in Hilla, a city of about 450,000 people beside the ruins of ancient Babylon. A history major and law student, Captain Murphy, then an Army specialist, appreciated the incongruity of trying to bring law and order to one of the birthplaces of written law.

His unit was sent to Abu Ghraib prison, a run-down complex between Baghdad and Falluja that would soon become synonymous with some of the Army's most shocking human rights abuses since Vietnam.

While soldiers and contractors tortured prisoners on Tier 1 of the facility, he was assigned to Tier 6. The tiers were a couple of hundred yards apart, but they converge in the rearview mirror of history.

In November 2004, when he was 25, we recorded a three-hour oral history of his deployment, and he was at a loss to explain what it was like to come home having been so close to one of the most public crimes of the war on terrorism. The vast majority of soldiers at Abu Ghraib served honorably, he said. "People look at me and they think that I'm lying to them," he told me, "and it's so frustrating to try to convey what really happened at Abu Ghraib, what the atmosphere was really like."

"Why did those seven military police look so gleeful in those pictures? You really become desensitized to the human condition when you're at a place like Abu Ghraib. Every night, every night you see something that you wouldn't see in an entire lifetime in the States. I saw a man eat a fluorescent light bulb ... I saw a man rub feces into his hair ... I saw prisoners cut themselves with razor blades."

A moment of moral reckoning came when Specialist Murphy had to conduct a body cavity search of a college professor who could barely walk without a cane, during his prison intake for some unknown crime.

"And here I was in my United States Army uniform and here was this very sensitive looking grandfather-type guy, and just the ... I don't know. It kind of was one of those moments where I was just taken aback and I just was affected."

All the while there were nightly mortar attacks. Rockets, too. There were ambushes at the gate and explosives on the roads.

But moral injury — the damage to the soul caused by participating in something unjust — has a wide blast radius for anyone with a conscience. The ambiguity of military operations since 9/11 are fertile ground for moral injury. Average Americans may feel guilt or shame for the conduct of the war on terrorism — the pardoning of war criminals or the indefinite jailing, without trial, of men at Guantánamo or the civilian casualties caused by drone strikes — but it can be devastating for those who are a part of it.

To keep from being desensitized, he told me, he resolved to learn all his prisoners' names and listen to all the questions they had for him during the twice-daily head counts.

"I took the time to respond to all their questions even if I didn't have an answer, and 99 percent of the time I didn't have an answer. But I would stop, I would make eye contact, and I would listen and then just respond to the best of my ability."

After 15 months in Iraq, he came home. Went back to law school. Joined R.O.T.C., then the Judge Advocate General's Corps. He started working as a military lawyer. Got on with life.

But he remained anxious and depressed. What he'd been through at the prison didn't fade. His condition worsened over the years. When his thoughts turned darker he sought help.

He said he felt ashamed and embarrassed when he walked into his supervisor's office to let him know.

"Whatever you need, Murph," Lt. Col. Anthony Febbo told him. The Army is family.

"The suicidal thoughts really freaked me out," he told me last month. "I didn't want to die, but I didn't want to feel that way anymore. I knew I needed to get help."

In 2008, Captain Murphy went to the hospital at Fort Hood, where he was stationed, and reported how he was feeling. Because of a shortage of military mental health professionals, he was referred off-post to a civilian social worker. He got therapy and started getting better.

He was open to having me write about his mental health history. "It's why I do this work now."

He became a legal adviser on numerous suicide investigations, and he wrote Fort Hood's mental health policy to reassure soldiers that seeking help wouldn't end their careers.

He was preparing for deployment in November 2009 when Maj. Nidal Hasan shot and killed 13 people and wounded another 30 people a few hundred yards from his office on base. Major Hasan had been scheduled to deploy to Afghanistan as part of a unit of mental health professionals trained to deal with combat stress.

After the shooting, a psychological evaluation found Captain Murphy fit to deploy. In Baghdad, he was billeted in one of Saddam Hussein's old palaces. "The U.S. Embassy in Baghdad has beautiful tennis courts — come out in October — I'll spank you in the land between two rivers," he emailed me on July 5, 2010. I had traveled to and from Iraq as a correspondent for a magazine but never went to see him. He always won at tennis anyway.

As an Army lawyer, he ran the theater's largest legal aid clinic for soldiers. He also headed up the foreign claims mission, ensuring that financial claims of hundreds of Iraqis whose land had been seized to build military bases were paid.

A year later, he was home again. By then, he had decided that his calling was not as a lawyer but as a listener.

"I am particularly interested in deploying as a member of a combat operational stress control detachment," he wrote in a 2013 letter applying to the Army's master's in social work program. "I have seen firsthand the need for behavioral health services at far-flung outposts and hope I can be a part of a solution to a problem in serious need of remedy."

The military has shortages of mental health professionals, a result of low pay, long hours and few opportunities to advance, a Defense Department report found recently.

Most of the patients he sees have problems that don't stem from combat. For soldiers from

tough backgrounds, Army life is sometimes their first encounter with boundaries and discipline. The military ends up re-parenting many of the young people who join. Most of the post-traumatic stress he sees comes from trauma encountered before Army life, like abuse in childhood.

Fewer than one-third of all young Americans meet the qualifications for serving in the military. Those who don't qualify lack enough formal education; they have a criminal records; they're too overweight.

Among those who do qualify, few serve. Since the attacks of 9/11, the burden of fighting wars has fallen on the slenderest sliver of the population. They deploy again and again and again.

For too many Americans, the military is a distant and indecipherable culture. As for politicians, many are happy to salute the troops when it suits them. The last president to have a child serve in combat was Dwight Eisenhower.

"As a result, the nation's most expensive and trusted institution is remote from the population that provides the people and money essential to its existence," the RAND Corporation concluded in a 2019 report. "Such an approach is inconsistent with a vibrant democracy."

These days, what passes for patriotism can feel sanitized and safe. It can even be effortless, like sharing one of those viral videos of returning soldiers surprising their kids.

The distance between the patriotism of the ballpark and the patriotism of the battlefield is widening in ways that make it harder for Americans to hold onto one another. And the distance between those American experiences is widening in ways that make it harder to hold onto one another and a shared concept of country. Nowhere is it greater than between the public and those who've lived their lives inside — and then in the shadow of — the war on terror.

Even after his 27 months in war zones, Captain Murphy's routine for deployment is never the same. With a wife and two kids, the logistics mount. With FaceTime and WhatsApp and HD video, the battlefield is closer to the living room than ever before.

On the family's kitchen counter at Fort Drum sits a paper pamphlet: "Welcome Home Dad! 10 Tips for Reconnecting with Your Children After Deployment." Make time for family. Take things slowly. Expect that things have changed. ("Bonus Tip: Reconnect with Mom, too.") That's what most soldier homecomings look like. No videos. No retweets. No publicity.

Nearly two decades after enlisting, Captain Murphy is finally headed to the war he thought he signed up for. One thing he's learned in that time is that no one climbs to glory alone.

[Afghanistan] In long-suffering Afghanistan, this is a peace deal worth trying (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/16/2020 2:33 AM, Barnett R. Rubin, 12625K, Neutral]

On Saturday, a holiday commemorating the 31st anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal from

Afghanistan, people here awaited the announcement of an agreement between the United States and the Taliban on the withdrawal of U.S. troops. Skepticism here about what comes next pales in comparison with the certainty that continued war will fail.

This agreement can start a process that is the best chance to end Afghanistan's 40-year war. It meets the core demands of the original antagonists of that war's latest stage: the withdrawal of U.S. troops for the Taliban and guarantees against harboring terrorists for the United States. Next would come negotiations between the supporters of the Afghan Islamic republic and the Taliban on conditions to end their war, even as the battle against global terrorists continues.

The agreement provides a timetable for troop withdrawal, counterterrorism guarantees, a path to a cease-fire and a process for political settlement. Implementation would also require dismantling Taliban infrastructure in neighboring Pakistan and assurances by external powers that none will use Afghanistan against others.

The United States and supporters of Afghanistan's Islamic republic fear that the Taliban may exploit a troop withdrawal to seek a military victory, while the Taliban fears that its concessions may demoralize its fighters and enable the United States to postpone troop withdrawal. The agreement overcomes mistrust by sequencing the components and stating that all are interdependent. As each measure is implemented, the parties will monitor compliance before taking the next step.

Upon announcement of the agreement, both sides will commit to a nationwide "reduction in violence" for seven days. The Taliban has made an impressive offer of significant and lasting reductions in violence nationwide that cover both Afghan and U.S.-coalition forces. The United States would reciprocate with a halt of offensive operations.

If both sides keep their word, they will sign the agreement in Doha, as the U.S. and Afghan governments jointly declare support for the process. The United States will reaffirm that it recognizes only that government as the country's legitimate sovereign.

The Taliban will explicitly promise not to allow al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The Taliban will also commit itself to continue to fight the Islamic State. An annex establishes a center where the U.S. military and the Taliban will share counterterrorist information and monitor possible violations.

In the first 135 days after signing, the United States will reduce its troops in Afghanistan to 8,600, about the force level at the end of the Obama administration. Beyond that, the agreement conditions further withdrawals on the Taliban meeting its counterterrorist commitments. The Taliban will stop attacks against U.S. forces to facilitate the withdrawal. The United States reserves the right to help defend Afghan forces.

Within 10 days, the Taliban will open negotiations with the Afghan government and others who support the Islamic republic. The first agenda item is likely to be a comprehensive cease-fire. Government supporters with whom I have spoken here in Kabul expect the Taliban to ask for an interim government including all parties in return for the cease-fire. That interim government could preside over a transition that would include revisions of the existing constitution.

A settlement would also require demobilization or integration of armed Taliban into the security forces. That is hard enough in any armed conflict, but in Afghanistan, it has the added difficulty of requiring the demobilization of fighters and dismantling of military and terrorist infrastructure on both sides of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. This requires the cooperation of Pakistan, and high-level military talks have started.

Some oppose the process, arguing that the Taliban would never implement such an agreement, that it is committed to reestablishing its Islamic Emirate and that Pakistan will never close down the Taliban safe haven. This agreement manages those risks by allowing the United States and Afghan government to test the Taliban and Pakistan without foreclosing alternatives. The United States reserves the right to modify the withdrawal timetable to assure that all sides comply.

The Taliban will demand at least the right to participate in the government and changes to align the current system more closely with its interpretation of Islamic law. That entails risks to gains in human rights, especially for women. The United States and its allies must stay engaged to assure that any such transition does not endanger the stability of the state and security forces and maintains the fundamental social gains of the past two decades. But according to Human Rights Watch, since 2016, children have accounted for nearly one-third of the (probably underestimated) 11,000 civilian casualties here every year. Which means the war to prevent another 9/11 inflicts another 9/11 on Afghan children every year it continues.

That toll fails the test of proportionality.

The United States does not need to station troops in Afghanistan to defend itself from terrorism. The attacks of 9/11 were planned in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, and Hamburg, not Afghanistan, where the leader who authorized the operation deceived his hosts about his actions. Today, such planning could take place in dozens of countries. As new powers rise, the United States needs not to expand its military footprint but establish networks of cooperation against common threats. The support for this process by China, Russia, Pakistan and Europe shows it is possible. Safeguarding gains from this process will require further diplomatic initiatives with these countries. It must also avoid confrontation with Iran, possibly the single biggest threat to this process. The administration may face choices between exiting Afghanistan responsibly and confronting the country's neighbors. As it says in the Koran, "There are signs for those of understanding."

Trade

Beyond rockets and air strikes: The Israeli-Palestinian trade war (Yahoo News/France 24)

Yahoo News/France 24 [2/16/2020 8:27 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Israel blocked Palestinians exports from leaving the territories on February 9, in another chapter of the trade war they have been fighting since September, when the Palestinian Authority banned Israeli veal from entering its territories. The battle threatens both Israeli farmers and particularly the already fragile Palestinian economy, which is highly dependent on the Hebrew state.

Beyond rockets and air strikes, Israel and the Palestinian authority have been fighting another kind of battle. A month after US president Donald Trump unveiled his controversial Middle East plan, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority (PA) has now reached a state of full-blown trade war.

On February 12, the PA led by President Mahmoud Abbas hailed "a victory for International law" as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR) office released a list of 112 companies it said are complicit in violating Palestinian human rights by operating in Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank.

This first-ever international attempt to name and shame businesses was slammed as "shameful" by Israel, where officials fear the list could be used to boycott firms. The move could add a new chapter to tensions with the Palestinian Authority.

Three days before the UNHCR report, the Israeli military ignited another battle as they announced the blocking of all West Bank agricultural goods, the Times of Israel reported. Following Defence Minister Naftali Bennet's press release on February 9, the military said it would not allow Palestinian farmers to transfer products through the Allenby Bridge, West Bank's only direct export route to the world and its sole border with neighbour Jordan.

According to the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), a unit of the Israeli ministry of defence responsible for the civil activities in the Palestinian territories, this was an immediate response to the "Palestinian boycott of veal, which has seriously harmed Israeli cattle farmers".

For as negotiations with the Hebrew state fell apart in late 2019, Palestinians had decided in September to ban all Israeli calf from entering its territories, a surprise decision that saddled Israeli farmers with huge losses.

The veal ban is only part of a political, bureaucratic and economic "disengagement" strategy conceived by Abbas' Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh. Originally an economist, Shtayyeh is trying to push for higher independence for the Palestinian territories, whose economy is completely dependent on its Israeli neighbour - especially imports, exports and basic goods.

"We are exercising our natural right to diversify our markets, encouraging direct imports in order to strengthen our economy," Palestinian Economy Minister Khaled Al-Assili said on what the local media nicknamed the "calf war".

Under pressure by Israeli farmers, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu retaliated: in early February, the Hebrew state banned all produce imports from the West Bank. The Palestinian Authority quickly struck back, banning multiple Israeli products from its territories, such as vegetables, fruits and beverages.

Deprived of their own ports and airports, Palestinians can only export products via Israel's ports, such as the Ashdod and Haifa ports, as stipulated by the 1994 Paris protocol regulating trade issues, where Palestinian products, including dates and olive oil, are then sent mainly to Europe and neighbouring Jordan.

The latest Israeli measures are "very dangerous", Palestinian Minister of Agriculture Riyad al-Atari said. "There will be negative effects, but the negative consequences will also affect the Israeli economy," he added.

Israeli and Palestinian economies are deeply intertwined, despite tensions. The latter imported \$600 million worth of Israeli produce in 2018 – 71 percent of the sector's Palestinian importations, according to the latest data. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Economy, it also exported \$88 million worth of produce to the Hebrew state – marking 68 percent of Palestinian exports.

As the 'calf war' is expected to continue, the Palestinian agriculture could be strongly impacted, with its produce prevented from reaching Israel, Jordan and World markets.

"We have asked the government to create an emergency fund to deal with this crisis and provide farmers with the means to resist," Abbas Melhem, director of the Palestinian Farmers' union, told FRANCE 24.

The Palestinian government seems to have heeded farmers' calls and announced urgent measures last week. It also intends to ask for international intervention and is considering bringing the case to international courts of justice, as well as the World Trade Organization. All in order to interrupt what they call "the economic and agricultural Israeli war".

But apart from calling for the international community to react, the PA has very limited resources. In mid-2018, the US cut \$200 million of aid after President Abbas froze their relations - a retaliation to Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital. Then Israel cut \$138 million of tax handovers to the Palestinian Authority on February 2019, further strangling its funds.

In 2018 and 2019, Palestinian territories' GDP growth has almost completely stalled around 1 percent, with an unemployment rate of 26 percent in 2018, according to the World Bank. The institution said the situation was "unbearable".

The only way out of this economic dead end would be to strengthen exports and services, the World Bank estimates - a highly unlikely situation for now, given the latest escalations in the trade war.

[Kenya] U.S.-Kenya Trade Talks Seen a Risk for Africa Regional Pact (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/16/2020 3:54 AM, David Malingha, 6400K, Neutral]

A possible U.S.-Kenya free-trade agreement could undermine an existing continent-wide commerce pact and limit Africa's power to negotiate with the U.S.

Washington announced on Feb. 7 that it intended to start trade negotiations with Kenya. President Donald Trump's administration doesn't favor renewing the Africa Growth Opportunity Act, a trade deal under which 39 sub-Saharan African countries have duty-free access to the U.S. for about 6,500 products including textiles and manufactured items.

"Kenya should not provide cracks in the armor of those who have pushed for further

collective engagement," according to Mukhisa Kituyi, secretary-general of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and Erastus Mwencha, former head of the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa. "There is strength in numbers," they said in a joint statement.

Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta said on Feb. 5 in Washington that he is still committed to regional blocs. However, he said Kenya can also be a "pacesetter" for a bilateral deal with the U.S. that would replace the multilateral arrangement due to expire in 2025.

A free-trade accord would enable products from the world's biggest economy to enter Kenya more easily and could hamper the East African nation's efforts to boost its own manufacturing and farming, Kituyi and Mwencha said. The U.S. would also pressure Kenya to show more zeal in reforming its labor laws and enforcing rules on intellectual property, they said.

Former U.S. President Bill Clinton first signed the AGOA into law in 2000, and former President Barack Obama extended it for 10 years in 2015. Kituyi and Mwencha said that whenever a phase of the AGOA program was about to expire over the past two decades, benefiting countries successfully lobbied U.S. administrations and lawmakers to extend it.

"Kenya should follow the tested route of collective negotiation," they said.

The African Continental Free Trade Area is set to be the world's biggest bloc by membership, and Kenya was among the earliest nations to ratify it. Growth of intra-Africa trade is in line with Kenya's aspiration to become a regional business hub.

"To negotiate a unilateral FTA flies in the face of this perception," Kituyi and Mwencha said.

African heads of state agreed in July 2018 that no country should negotiate a bilateral free-trade agreement with a third party once the continental bloc comes into force. In the sub-regional bloc of the East African Community, Kenya shares a common customs territory with other members, making negotiating unilateral FTAs almost impossible.

With the AGOA, the U.S. become Kenya's third-largest export market after the European Union and neighboring Uganda, accounting for about \$400 million or 10% of the country's total exports, according to Kituyi and Mwencha. President Kenyatta said his administration is ready to act to secure a deal before the AGOA expires.

Trump has scrutinized trade relationships with the European Union, the U.K. and Africa after making progress on China and securing Senate approval of his U.S.-Mexico-Canada agreement.

The U.S. has a free-trade agreement in Africa with Morocco and has been seeking a sub-Saharan country with which to develop a trade deal that could be the model for others in the region.

Kenya should "ask why others are not taking the bait," Kituyi and Mwencha said.

Near East & North Africa

Kuwait, Saudi Arabia start trial oil pumping from divided zone: Kuwait minister (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 11:12 AM, Nayera Abdallah, 5304K, Neutral]

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia will start trial oil production from the jointly-operated Wafra and Khafji oilfields on Sunday, Kuwait's oil minister said.

Khaled al-Fadhel said that trial production from the two fields in the Neutral Zone will increase gradually till it reaches its normal levels, Kuwait state news agency KUNA cited him as saying.

Fadhel said that he expects oil production from the Neutral Zone to reach 550,000 barrels per day before the end of the year.

The production from the zone is divided between both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

The minister also said Kuwait now aims to boost its oil production capacity to 4 million bpd by 2040, after revising the country's oil strategy.

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, both members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, agreed last year to end a five-year dispute over the border area known as the Neutral Zone, allowing production to resume at two jointly run fields that can pump up to 0.5% of the world's oil supply.

[Egypt] Briton detained in Egypt over 'pat on back' tired but happy after flying home (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [2/16/2020 9:09 AM, Luke Powell, 10942K, Neutral]

A British father-of-four who was detained in Egypt accused of "patting" a male airport security guard on the back says he is "very tired" but happy to be home.

Tony Camoccio, 51, arrived back on British soil on Sunday afternoon and was met by a crowd of family and friends ready to celebrate his return.

Supporters of the London businessman had feared he would be falsely accused of sexual assault after the alleged incident at Hurghada International Airport on February 8.

Mr Camoccio flew back on Sunday with his Easyjet flight EZY9862 touching down at a rainy and windy London Gatwick about 1pm.

He strolled through arrivals at the North Terminal looking relieved and was greeted with hugs from his family.

Speaking to the PA news agency as he was hugged and congratulated by half a dozen well-wishers, Mr. Camoccio said: "I am tired, very tired.

"We just want to get home. I just want to thank everybody but I've got to get back.

"I've got a really sore throat.

"But I just want to say thank you to everybody. All of my family are here."

Mr Camoccio, who has visited Egypt several times, was at the end of a holiday with his wife and a large group of friends when the incident is alleged to have happened at an airport checkpoint.

Later, Mr Camoccio was hugged by his sons in the doorway of his detached house in Sutton as he arrived home.

Speaking outside, he told the PA news agency: "I'm really happy to be back. I now just want to get in and see my family.

"It's brilliant to see my family again."

More than 5,000 people had signed an online petition by Saturday calling for him to be released.

Campaign group Detained in Dubai said on Saturday that Mr Camoccio had been released from Egyptian custody after paying about £1,000 in bail and other related costs.

Speaking for the family after his return, Mr Camoccio's sister Liz Doody said: "We are very relieved that we got him home.

"We appreciate the help from the public and yourselves (the media) and the online support was terrific.

"It really gathered momentum. And thanks very much for everything."

Detained in Dubai's chief executive Radha Stirling said: "The case has been dismissed for lack of evidence, and Tony will be flying home to the UK on the next available flight from Cairo.

"While the charges were clearly without merit, we have to emphasise that had British authorities and the international press not paid attention to this case, there is no reason to believe that Tony would be a free man today."

[Iran] Iran's beleaguered President Rouhani rules out resigning (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 10:36 AM, Amir Havasi, 10942K, Negative]

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani on Sunday ruled out resigning and vowed to see out his term, even as he admitted he had offered to step aside twice since being elected.

Speaking ahead of a general election next Friday, Rouhani also appealed to voters to turn out despite the fact that many moderate and reformist candidates were disqualified from the race.

Rumours have swirled in Iran recently that the 71-year-old, whose second and last term

ends next year, had been planning to quit, but his office denied the reports.

Rouhani's government has come under fire over the state of Iran's sanctions-hit economy and for allegedly failing to fulfil election promises.

The legitimacy of Rouhani and his government have been called into question after they were left in the dark for days after the armed forces admitted they "accidentally" shot down a Ukrainian airliner on January 8. Hardliners have attacked his administration for negotiating a nuclear deal with world powers that ultimately backfired when the United States withdrew unilaterally and reimposed harsh sanctions.

"My resignation does not make much sense... we have made promises to the people and we will continue to fulfil those promises" despite the economic situation and pressure from "the enemy," Rouhani said, referring to the US. "The idea of resigning never occurred to me."

Rouhani admitted he had offered to resign twice in the past, and that they were rejected by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

"In the first months after my election, I told the supreme leader 'If you think for some reason that someone else or another government can serve the country better, I'm ready to go'," said Rouhani.

"He vehemently rejected it," he told a news conference in Tehran.

Rouhani, a moderate conservative, said he raised the issue with the supreme leader again during his second term.

"I would not even let the government leave its responsibility an hour earlier, not a month or a week earlier," he quoted Khamenei as saying.

Rouhani's supporters suffered a setback in the lead-up to the February 21 election after more than half of the 14,444 who sought to stand were disqualified, most of them moderates and reformists.

Despite the purge, Rouhani called for a strong showing at the election.

"All elections are important to us, and I urge all people to come to the ballot box and vote... to choose the best and have a good parliament," he told Sunday's news conference.

Iran's seventh president, Rouhani won election in 2013 after promising greater social freedoms and the benefits of engagement with the West. He delivered on the second pledge in 2015, when Iran agreed to limit its nuclear activities in return for the lifting of international sanctions.

The president was re-elected in 2017 with the support of reformists.

Support from those who backed him in the past has fallen away badly amid criticism over his austerity measures.

In November, street protests broke out in Iran over a surprise petrol price hike.

They spread to dozens of urban centres and turned violent before being put down by the security forces.

Iran's economy has been battered since the US pulled out of the nuclear deal, with the World Bank estimating it shrunk by 8.7 percent in 2019.

[Iran] Quake Hits Near Iranian Island, No Casualties (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 9:49 AM, Babak Dehghanpisheh, Neutral]

A magnitude 5.8 earthquake hit near southern Iran's Qeshm island in the Gulf on Sunday, the official IRNA news agency reported, but a local official said there were no reports of casualties and only minor damage.

"So far, there has been no loss of life reported," the governor of Qeshm, Alireza Nasri, told IRNA.

"The damage to buildings has been at the level of cracks in walls."

The United States Geological Survey gave the magnitude of the quake as 5.5.

Qeshm Island lies close to the Strait of Hormuz, a vital waterway through which about a fifth of the world's oil passes.

[Israel] Israel Says Hamas Targeted Its Soldiers in 'Honey Trap' Cyberattack (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/16/2020 2:10 PM, Dov Lieber, Neutral]

The Israeli military said operatives of the Palestinian militant group Hamas targeted its soldiers in a monthslong operation that duped them into downloading spyware with the false promise of exchanging illicit photos with young women.

Dozens of Israeli soldiers downloaded the spyware, but the scheme was detected early enough to prevent important secrets from getting out and the Hamas servers hosting the operation were destroyed, the military said on Sunday.

The phishing operation, known as a honey trap, is the third such scheme since 2017 and shows how Hamas exploits social media to elicit information from enemy soldiers—and how difficult it is for Israel and others to prevent such attacks.

"The level of social engineering is much higher and more advanced and sophisticated compared to previous attempts," Israeli military spokesman Jonathan Conricus said.

Using fake profiles purporting to be young Israeli women, operatives for the Islamist militant group contacted Israeli soldiers through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram—and for the first time since such operations began—the popular messaging app Telegram, highlighting the widening scope of these cyberspying attempts.

After initiating the conversation online, the Hamas operatives promised to share illicit photographs with Israeli soldiers by offering them a link to download an app similar to Snapchat, which would allow users to send photos that would be quickly deleted from the phone, according to conversations between soldiers and Hamas operatives released by the Israeli military. When soldiers tried to open the app, it would present an error message and disappear as if it had been deleted. In reality, the malware remained on the device.

After soldiers clicked on the link to download the app, Hamas could access the phone's files, text messages, camera and GPS information, and send the information back to Hamas's servers, the Israeli military said.

Mr. Conricus said the current attack employed more-sophisticated methods than previous Hamas phishing operations to convince soldiers the fake profiles were real.

The latest operation pretended the young women were hearing impaired or mute, so they couldn't speak Hebrew. Other Hamas phishing attempts in the scheme purported to be recent immigrants and therefore made mistakes in written Hebrew. Hamas also used short recordings of female Israeli voices.

"They are learning and upping their game," Mr. Conricus said of Hamas.

In recent years, the Israeli military has prohibited soldiers in sensitive units such as military intelligence from posting anything on social media that might identify them as soldiers or give away operational intelligence. From basic training and throughout their service, all soldiers are given seminars on how to maintain security on social media.

The Israeli military said a few hundred soldiers in total were contacted by Hamas operatives, but expected the number of known soldiers who downloaded the spyware to rise.

"The resistance has a right to use whatever capabilities it has to foil [Israel's] plans," Hamas spokesman Abdul-Latif al-Qanu wrote when asked whether Hamas was behind the phishing attempt.

Israel said it had discovered this current operation a few months back, and prevented sensitive secrets from leaking. Mr. Conricus said the Israeli military allowed the group to carry on in order to learn more about Hamas's cyber operations.

Israel has fought three wars and numerous smaller skirmishes with Hamas since the group took control of the Gaza Strip in 2007 after an armed conflict.

Last May, Israeli aircraft struck Hamas's military cyber headquarters in the Gaza Strip after the building was identified as the source of an attack on Israeli civilian infrastructure, the Israeli military said.

On Sunday, Mr. Conricus said the bombing in May was a message to Hamas. "Hostile actions by Hamas in the virtual world bear repercussions in the real world," he said.

[Israel] Israel's Gantz vows to form government without Netanyahu (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 4:43 AM, Aron Heller, 1512K, Neutral]

Israeli opposition leader Benny Gantz is vowing to form a government that will include neither the indicted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu nor the predominantly Arab parties in Parliament.

In a series of TV interviews two weeks before national elections, Gantz looked to project confidence that the March 2 vote will provide the decisive outcome that eluded the two previous elections last year.

Gantz's Blue and White party is currently polling ahead of Netanyahu's Likud, although neither appears to have a clear path to a parliamentary majority required to form a coalition government.

Gantz laid out two potential paths while speaking to Channel 12 News on Saturday night.

He said he's either going to partner with a broad range of "Jewish and democratic" parties — including the ultra-nationalist party led by apparent kingmaker Avigdor Lieberman.

Or he could team up with the ruling Likud Party, but only if it gets rid of longtime leader Netanyahu, who's fending off a slew of criminal corruption charges.

"Netanyahu has ended his historic role from a political standpoint. The Likud with Bibi cannot form a government, and without Bibi there's unity," he said, referring to Netanyahu by his nickname.

Gantz, a former military chief, has been campaigning furiously in pursuit of a knockout punch as the election grows nearer.

He appears to have grown closer to Lieberman, whose nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party has bolted from Netanyahu's right-wing camp and sparked the unprecedented stalemate in Israeli politics that led to the multiple repeat elections.

Both deny they have reached any pre-election alliance, but Lieberman has all but ruled out sitting in government with his former mentor.

Lieberman has conditioned his participation in government upon the removal of the ultra-Orthodox Jewish parties that he says have wielded disproportionate power for too long and have been a consistent base for Netanyahu's bloc.

"The Netanyahu era is over," Lieberman said Saturday, expressing a newfound openness to sitting in government with left-wing parties he once shunned.

Still, the numbers don't seem to add up without at least the tacit support of the Arab parties who are anathema to Lieberman's hard-line brand of politics.

Netanyahu has based his campaign on linking Gantz to the Joint List, an umbrella group of mostly Arab parties who represent the country's 20% minority, saying he has no option of forming a government without them.

Gantz denied he will invite them into his government, saying there is too wide an ideological gap between them.

He also claims he will be strong enough to rule without their outside parliamentary support.

Joint List leader Ayman Odeh says he will act to topple any government that includes Lieberman, who has long railed against Arab lawmakers as a fifth column and as terrorist sympathizers.

Unlike the previous round, he says he will not recommend Gantz as prime minister if he continues with an approach of "racism toward Arabs."

Even with the corruption indictment against Netanyahu and the unveiling of President Donald Trump's Mideast plan, polls are predicting a similar outcome to the previous election in September, when neither Gantz nor Netanyahu could form a coalition in the time allotted to them.

Netanyahu has since fended off an internal challenge to his Likud leadership and the party has refused previous suggestions it join a unity government without him.

Gantz is banking on a surge in support this time around, after judges have already been selected to preside over Netanyahu's upcoming trial.

The public also seems weary of the prospect of yet another deadlocked result and the potential for a fourth election.

Israel's attorney general charged Netanyahu in November on three counts of bribery, fraud and breach of trust.

Under Israeli law, public officials are required to resign if charged with a crime.

That law does not apply to the prime minister, who can use his office as a bully pulpit against prosecutors.

Netanyahu has failed in efforts to secure himself parliamentary immunity, and with his trial looming Gantz has been pushing for a fresh start.

"He's about to go to trial. Just imagine that while he is sitting down to prepare for trial with a battery of lawyers about fateful issues from his personal standpoint, the military chief of staff needs to hold a very urgent meeting at night from a security standpoint," Gantz said.

Netanyahu has tried to portray himself as a master statesman for securing pro-Israel pledges from President Donald Trump, such as extending Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the West Bank Jewish settlements.

Gantz said he too would implement the American president's Mideast plan, without all of Netanyahu's baggage.

"I don't believe anything from Netanyahu. I think he says things only on a political level and doesn't mean it," he told Channel 12.

[Israel] Israel hopes Germany, other ICC members will help stave off Palestinian investigation (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 2:39 PM, Dan Williams and Stephanie van den Berg, 5304K, Neutral] Israel's prime minister on Sunday hailed what he called efforts by friendly states to stop the International Criminal Court opening an investigation into alleged war crimes against Palestinians.

The court's chief prosecutor Fatou Bensouda said in December there was enough evidence for an investigation into thousands of killings — but asked the court to rule on whether it had the jurisdiction over the Palestinian territories.

Brazil, Hungary, Austria, Germany, the Czech Republic and Australia have asked the court over the past two weeks to let them file "Amicus brief" opinions on the case, ICC records show.

Some, including Germany, said they would argue the court's jurisdiction did not extend to the Palestinian territories.

Brazil said it would argue that the Israeli-Palestinian crisis should be resolved through political dialogue, not a court ruling.

Netanyahu told his cabinet countries had responded to Israeli lobbying over the case.

"We are struggling against this (proceeding) and, at our side, I must say, are many friends around the world (which) joined the U.S. in a steadfast stand alongside Israel."

The Palestinians were accepted as an ICC member in 2015 after they signed the court's founding Rome Statute, based on their United Nations "observer state" status.

Israel and the United States, neither of them ICC members, dispute the court's jurisdiction in the absence of a sovereign Palestinian state in the West Bank, Gaza or East Jerusalem.

The Organisation for Islamic Cooperation, representing 57 Muslim states, asked to file a brief, arguing that the Palestinians have sovereignty over the Palestinian territories.

The Palestinian Bar Association, the International Commission of Jurists and other legal and human rights organization have also asked to filed briefs with the court to say it does have jurisdiction in this case.

U.S.-sponsored Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking stalled in 2014. A new U.S. peace plan, unveiled by President Donald Trump last month, envisaged Israel keeping East Jerusalem and swathes of West Bank land, and was rejected by the Palestinians.

[Israel] Israel aims to unite Jerusalem with better city services. Arabs want political change. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/16/2020 6:00 AM, Ruth Eglash, 12625K, Neutral]

It's a stormy evening, but a handful of women from this Arab neighborhood have still made the effort to arrive for their weekly Hebrew class. Their teacher, an orthodox Jew with the strings of his prayer shawl dangling at his hips, focuses on key words and phrases they will need to compile a resume.

"Name, date of birth, address," he says writing the Hebrew words on a board and correcting the women's pronunciation as they ask questions.

Personal interactions of this kind between Arabs and Jews are still rare in Jerusalem, more than five decades after the Israel military captured the eastern part of the city from Jordan. But the situation is changing, though more because of practical realities on both sides than a shared vision of coexistence.

A recent effort by Israel to improve living conditions in East Jerusalem and better integrate the Arab population reflects at least in part the strategic interest of cementing Israeli sovereignty. For Palestinians, it could be a chance to better their economic circumstances. For both, it's an uneasy acceptance that the other side is here to stay.

For decades, the Israeli-run city council largely ignored Arab communities in East Jerusalem, spending relatively less on their education system, infrastructure, sanitation and public transport, while building permits for the expanding population were difficult to obtain. At the same time, land in the area was allocated for new Jewish neighborhoods, viewed as illegal settlements by most of the world.

In turn, Palestinians, who make up just over a third of city's estimated 900,000 residents, rejected Israeli sovereignty, at times resisting violently.

Israelis call Jerusalem their "eternal, undivided capital," a position endorsed last month in President Trump's peace plan. Palestinians say East Jerusalem should be the capital of their future state. Most countries say the final status of the city should be resolved through negotiations.

In the past three years, the Israeli government has approved plans to improve conditions in East Jerusalem, designating nearly \$50 million to upgrade waste and sewage systems as well as enhancing transportation and adding more classrooms. There has also been a push for more Arab schools to adopt the Israeli curriculum, including Hebrew instruction, a move some local residents say is an effort to erase Palestinian identity. And despite resistance from some in Israel, there has also been an easing of the process for approving building permits, allowing a slight uptick in construction on the eastern side of the city.

Meanwhile, there has been an increase in East Jerusalem residents obtaining Israeli citizenship, though many Arabs still view this as giving in to occupation. Last year, about 1200 Palestinians were granted citizenship, the most ever, according to Israel's Interior Ministry. Most Palestinians living in Jerusalem hold residency cards allowing them to work in Israel and receive state benefits.

Growing up in Sur Baher, Hind Abeera, 31, studied according to the Palestinian curriculum and never had the opportunity to learn Hebrew. Now, as an adult and a mother, she needs

it.

"All our lives are in Hebrew," Abeera said. "When we take our children to the doctor or to the hospital, we are dependent on Hebrew. If I want to find any job in Jerusalem, then I need to speak it."

Miri Shalem, chief executive of the Institute for Zionist Strategies, which runs the Hebrew study program for adults said that since the first class opened in 2018, it has expanded to ten more classes for some 200 people and they can't keep up with the demand. The initiative, she said, came from a desire to see more interaction between the sides.

Jerusalem's deputy mayor Fleur Hassan-Nahoum said a recent survey of East Jerusalem families found that 50 percent wanted their children's studies to adhere to Israeli curriculum because it is more modern and would offer greater opportunities.

Since being elected in 2018, Jerusalem Mayor Moshe Lion says he has made it a priority to improve the overall quality of life in Arab East Jerusalem. His focus, he said, is on bolstering education, fixing roads and infrastructure, and enhancing sanitation.

He has also turned his attention to fighting violence and crime, particularly in East Jerusalem. In recent months, however, he has faced criticism by Arab residents who say the police have been cracking down too harshly in Palestinian neighborhoods.

"It is not a simple issue, but my job is to make sure that all residents of this city feel like residents," Lion said in a recent interview.

He said that Trump's vision for Jerusalem, uniting it under Israeli control, "removes any ambiguity about the city's status and puts us in a good place." He added, "We are now in one of those rare periods when there is peace in Jerusalem."

But some Arabs view the Israeli efforts in East Jerusalem as an attempt to erode Palestinian identity and rights to the city.

"A war is being waged on the residents of East Jerusalem," said Adnan Ghaith, the Palestinian Authority-appointed shadow governor of Jerusalem. "The Israelis are trying to impose their curriculum on the Palestinians in the hope that it will erase our memory and our history."

"They think that the old will die and the young will forget, but this is a failing policy," said Ghaith, who is currently barred by Israel from entering Jerusalem. "The Palestinian people are still steadfast in their beliefs, and one day we will bring an end to this occupation."

Efforts to better integrate the two populations have not eliminated animosity and violence between the two communities.

Last month, suspected Jewish extremists set alight a city mosque. Scrawled on the wall were the names of some Jewish settlements in the West Bank recently dismantled by Israeli authorities. Then, last week, an Arab resident of East Jerusalem rammed his car into a group of Israeli soldiers, injuring 12. Israeli authorities labeled it a terrorist attack.

Daniel Seidemann, an Israeli attorney who specializes in geopolitics of Jerusalem, said policies aimed at improving life in East Jerusalem would not erase the fundamental divisions between the two communities and that "when tensions are high, they separate completely."

Ramadan Dabash, a Palestinian civil engineer and community activist, has gone farther than most in trying to bridge that divide. In 2018, he became the first Arab to run for Jerusalem's city council. But he won little support from his own community or anyone else, drawing only 3,000 votes out of about 250,000 cast.

Still, even as he says Israeli rule is discriminatory, Dabash continues to urge that the eastern part of the city would benefit from being more fully integrated under Jerusalem's government.

"We live under two occupations, Israel and the Palestinian Authority," he said. "One kind of hell is a little better than the other kind of hell."

But Mahmoud Muna, owner of a popular bookshop in East Jerusalem, said he doubts that Israeli efforts to improve services in his part of the city would significantly change the quality of life.

"It is the political reality that needs to be changed to improve people's lives," he said, adding. "There is not integration but penetration."

[Israel] Consumers Drive Israel's Surprisingly Fast Expansion in 2019 (Bloomberg) Bloomberg [2/16/2020 7:40 AM, Ivan Levingston, 6400K, Neutral]

Robust private consumption and investment quickened Israel's economic growth last year, delivering good news for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as he pivots to pocketbook issues ahead of a crucial election.

Gross domestic product rose a seasonally adjusted, annualized 4.8% last quarter, according to the Central Bureau of Statistics, the fastest quarterly rate in two years. That pushed expansion for the year to 3.5%, narrowly topping 2018 and defying predictions that growth would moderate as an unending election cycle mired the country in political turmoil.

Netanyahu is making his stewardship of Israel's strong economy an issue in the March 2 vote, which was called after two elections last year produced deadlocks, in the hope it will give him a definitive edge over his chief rival. Fourth-quarter growth was driven by a 10% rise in private consumption and an 8.7% jump in investment. Both figures were significantly affected by a surge in quarterly car imports.

"Underlying growth in Israel has been relatively stable this year and surprises to quarterly GDP data have largely been driven either by sharp changes in inventories or fluctuations in car purchases," Goldman Sachs Group Inc. economists said in a note before the data release.

Researchers at the Bank of Israel had predicted 2019 and 2020 growth would only

approach 3%. Along with declining world trade, the central bank has also said output may be hampered by the caretaker government's inability to pass a 2020 budget.

Even without counting import taxes, growth was 3.3% in the quarter, "a strong number," according to Leader Capital Markets Ltd. economist Jonathan Katz. Public spending, where growth was among the slowest, is likely to rebound once a new budget is put in place, he said.

The data could push central bankers to continue favoring foreign-currency purchases over potential interest-rate cuts as a means of easing policy since "growth is purring along," he said.

[Lebanon] Crisis puts Lebanon's survival at stake, Hezbollah warns (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 11:56 AM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

Lebanon may not survive if its new government fails, the powerful Hezbollah warned on Sunday, urging the country's divided politicians not to obstruct the cabinet as it seeks to address an unprecedented economic and financial crisis.

Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah also said there was no point in politicians trading blame over the causes of the crisis, after former prime minister Saad al-Hariri on Friday accused his rivals of pushing the country to near-collapse.

Banks are curtailing access to deposits, the Lebanese pound has slumped, inflation has spiked and firms are shedding jobs and slashing wages in a financial crisis. Hariri resigned last year amid mass demonstrations against the ruling class.

Hezbollah, heavily armed and backed by Iran, is one of the main backers of Prime Minister Hassan Diab's cabinet which was formed last month after the failure of efforts to establish a new national unity cabinet led by Hariri.

Supporting the government was a "national duty", Nasrallah said. "This is not a party matter. If this government fails, it is not known whether a country will remain for someone to ride in on a white horse and form a new government."

Analysts have said Hezbollah's role in forming the cabinet could make it trickier for Diab to secure badly needed financial support from Western and Gulf Arab states that are alarmed by the Tehran-backed group's influence in Beirut.

Nasrallah said that while Hezbollah backed the cabinet, it was not "Hezbollah's government", adding that opponents who described the cabinet that way were making it more difficult to combat the crisis and damaging Lebanon's international ties.

Lebanon last week asked the International Monetary Fund for technical assistance on dealing with the economic crisis.

Speaking in Dubai, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said Lebanon needed urgent and deep structural reforms. "We are sending a small team to Lebanon ... "We'll do

our best to give a diagnostics recommendation on measures to take but the taking is in the hands of Lebanon," she said.

[Lebanon] Lebanon Lira No Longer Fit for Airline Owned by Central Bank (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 10:53 AM, Layan Odeh, 6400K, Neutral]

Lebanon's Middle East Airlines and other carriers operating in the country will no longer accept payments in the local currency, the latest sign of collapsing confidence in the country's decades-old peg to the dollar.

Starting on Monday, the airline 99% owned by the central bank will accept payments made by any credit card or bank check "provided that the operation is in foreign currency," according to state-run National News Agency.

The announcement triggered a response later Sunday from Lebanon's President Michel Aoun, who insisted that air tickets should be paid in local currency, as the law stipulates. He said measures will be taken against any violations of the law, according to NNA.

An MEA spokeswoman didn't wish to give an immediate comment, and said airline officials will hold a press conference on Monday about the matter.

Lebanon is grappling with its worst economic and political crisis in decades, following months of protests that forced the previous government to resign. The pound, pegged to the dollar since 1997, is losing value on the black market as shortages of foreign exchange paralyze businesses and threaten to tip Lebanon into default.

Lebanon long relied on remittances from millions of citizens living abroad to finance its current-account deficit, prop up the banking system and bolster the pound's peg. But with capital outflows on the rise, the central bank has been forced to ration dollars and local lenders have imposed limits on withdrawals and the movement of funds abroad.

Jamil El Sayyed, a parliament member, said on Twitter that the decision could be illegal. Lebanese law stipulates that any institution owned, financed or managed by the government, fully or in part, is obliged to accept the nation's currency or the official dollar rate set by the central bank.

[Lebanon] Lebanese national carrier to only accept US dollars (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 8:11 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Crisis-hit Lebanon's national carrier will only accept payments in US dollars from Monday, according to state media.

Lebanon is in the throes of an economic meltdown and a biting liquidity crunch that has seen the local currency depreciate on the parallel market and banks impose stringent controls on withdrawals and transfers abroad.

"From Monday, Middle East (Airlines) and other airline companies operating in Lebanon will only accept payments in US dollars," the official National News Agency (NNA) reported on Sunday.

In the wake of the announcement, dozens of customers crowded the MEA offices at Beirut airport -- the only one open on Sunday -- in the hopes of paying for their tickets in Lebanese pounds, images broadcast on local TV showed.

Middle East Airlines (MEA) is majority-owned by the Lebanese state and administrated by the country's central bank.

The Lebanese pound has been officially pegged at 1,507 pounds to the US dollar since 1997, and the two currencies are used interchangeably in the tiny Middle Eastern country.

But in recent months, the pound has plunged against the greenback on the parallel exchange market.

Informal currency controls imposed since late last year have sparked public outrage in the protest-hit country, where an anti-government popular movement launched on October 17 has grown increasingly angry at banking policies.

Major banks in Lebanon began tightening banking controls this month, halving the amount of dollars depositors are allowed to withdraw every month.

It will still be possible to complete certain transactions -- such as modifying reservations and paying for excess baggage -- in local currency at Beirut airport, the NNA said, adding that travellers can pay using check or card, provided the account is in foreign currency.

MEA offices had so far continued to accept payments in pounds at the official rate and Sunday's announcement was met with an angry response on social media.

"MEA: A national airline that does not accept payment in its own national currency. Logic redefined," one Twitter user wrote.

Another posted in response to the news: "Middle East (MEA) belongs to the Lebanese state, it's a flagrant violation of the law. We're not heading for collapse, we're in the middle of it."

The central bank chief said in January that he agreed with money exchange houses capping the parallel rate at 2,000, but the price of dollars at some exchanges continues to rise.

[Lebanon] Lebanon's MEA reverses move to charge in dollars (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 12:09 PM, Tom Perry and Imad Creidi, 5304K, Negative]

Lebanon's state-owned carrier Middle East Airlines (MEA) reversed a decision to accept payment only in U.S. dollars after a backlash on Sunday, Lebanese media and an MEA source said.

The decision was taken as Lebanon grapples with a foreign currency liquidity crisis that has led the Lebanese pound to lose more than a third of its value against the dollar.

News of the decision, which was first reported late on Saturday, drew dozens of people to MEA's ticket office at Beirut airport where they tried to buy tickets in Lebanese pounds before the decision was due to take effect on Monday.

Former foreign minister Gebran Bassil had earlier declared the decision illegal. Writing on Twitter, parliamentarian Fouad Makhzoumi said the move put the Lebanese under effective "house arrest" and must be canceled.

President Michel Aoun said airfares should be priced in Lebanese pounds in line with the law.

Lebanon's financial crisis came to a head last year as capital flows into the country slowed down and protests erupted against ruling politicians over decades of corruption and bad governance.

[Libya] Libya Arms Embargo Has Become a 'Joke,' Top UN Official Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/16/2020 7:55 AM, Patrick Donahue and Samer Al-Atrush, 6400K, Neutral]
A senior United Nations official called the arms embargo on Libya a "joke" as governments struggled to hold together efforts to end a civil war in the North African country.

Germany on Sunday hosted a meeting of top officials in Munich, who expressed concern about "the deplorable recent violations" of the Libyan weapons embargo, while reaffirming the conclusions of a summit in Berlin last month. The goal is to end a conflict between Fayed al-Sarraj, Libya's UN-backed prime minister, and his rival General Khalifa Haftar.

But prospects for progress are bleak, a circumstance illustrated by those who didn't attend. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who was in the German city for the Munich Security Conference, sent a more junior official. U.S. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo, who left the conference a day earlier, dispatched the deputy assistant secretary of state for the Maghreb and Egypt.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas acknowledged that the Berlin summit had failed to achieve much progress and success won't be a "simple task." Stephanie Williams, a UN deputy special envoy who attended the meeting, was more blunt.

"The arms embargo has become a joke," Williams said. "We all really need to step up here," four weeks after leaders pledged to halt weapons deliveries and work toward a cease-fire. "Libya is awash in weaponry, and now advanced weaponry," she said, citing violations "by land, sea and air."

The Libyan civil war, triggered 10 months ago by Haftar's march on Tripoli, has killed more than 2,000 people and exploded into a proxy conflict drawing regional and global powers. Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have been backing Haftar, who is also supported by Russian mercenaries, while Turkey has been sending troops and supplies to the internationally recognized government.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel sought a diplomatic victory by inviting leaders of the competing sides to Berlin on Jan. 19, but the hard-won truce fell apart almost immediately --

pushing political and economic talks ever further into the distance.

A joint military committee aiming to lock in a permanent cease-fire will meet in Geneva from Feb. 18. The German government convened the first "follow up" committee to inch forward the accord struck in Berlin and Maas was joined in the Bavarian capital by foreign ministers from Turkey, Egypt, France and Italy and the European Union's high representative.

"Despite all the areas where we haven't reached our goal, the path that we've chosen is functioning and the diplomatic engagement in the past days has been effective," Maas told reporters.

[Libya] U.N. says Libya arms embargo a 'joke', demands accountability (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 7:45 AM, John Irish and Sabine Siebold, 5304K, Negative]

An arms embargo aimed at curbing fighting in Libya has become meaningless because of violations and it is imperative that those who breach it are held to account, a senior U.N. official said on Sunday.

"The arms embargo has become a joke, we all really need to step up here," U.N. Deputy Special Representative to Libya Stephanie Williams said after a meeting of foreign ministers to follow up on a Berlin summit last month that agreed to uphold the embargo.

"It's complicated because there are violations by land, sea and air, but it needs to be monitored and there needs to be accountability," Williams told a news conference, adding that Libya was now awash with advanced weapons.

Several countries backing rival factions in Libya have repeatedly violated an arms embargo, according to the United Nations, which has previously named the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Turkey for breaching the embargo.

After the Berlin conference the violations increased and the U.N. denounced them without naming countries.

The Libyan National Army led by eastern-based commander Khalifa Haftar and forces aligned with the internationally recognised Government of National Accord in Tripoli have been fighting since April last year for control of the capital.

The UAE and Egypt support Haftar while the GNA is backed by Turkey.

A joint statement issued on Sunday by 13 countries involved in Libya, included Egypt, UAE and Turkey, said there had been a discussion on the "deplorable" arms embargo violations and "renewed determination to contribute to its thorough implementation."

There was no mention of how the embargo would be monitored, enforced or whether there would be any consequences for violating it.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said he wanted EU foreign ministers to make a decision on Monday on their role in monitoring the embargo.

"Everyone needs to know that — if they violate the embargo in future — then they violate a U.N. resolution and that this can't remain without consequences," Maas said, without elaborating.

The head of the GNA, Fayeze al-Serraj, said on Saturday that the country faces a financial crisis because of a blockade of oil terminals and oil fields by Haftar.

"The situation on the ground remains deeply troubling. The truce is holding only by a thread... the economic situation continues to deteriorate," the U.N.'s Williams said.

[Libya] Powers renew pledge to uphold Libya arms embargo (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 3:39 AM, Geir Moulson, 1512K, Neutral]

Countries with interests in Libya's civil war recommitted themselves Sunday to uphold a barely working arms embargo, four weeks after a peace summit in Berlin was followed by numerous new arms violations, officials from Germany and the U.N. said.

Germany and the U.N., which co-hosted the Jan. 19 Berlin summit, gathered foreign ministers and other officials from a dozen countries on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference to try to bolster a drive to cut off outside military support for Libya's warring parties.

The countries involved include the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, along with Italy, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates. Sunday's meeting formally launched an international follow-up committee on Libya. Italy will co-chair the next meeting, in Rome in March.

At the Berlin summit, participants agreed to respect the arms embargo, hold off on military support to Libya's warring parties and push them to reach a full cease-fire. But U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres says that agreement has been repeatedly violated by continuing arms deliveries and an escalation in fighting.

On Sunday, the participants "had a discussion on the deplorable recent violations of the arms embargo, renewed their determination to contribute to its thorough implementation and welcomed progress regarding more efficient monitoring of the embargo," the German and U.N. hosts said in a statement.

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said they spoke "very openly" about recent violations.

"Different opinions were voiced on what this is down to, but everyone agrees that the road we have taken — namely, to separate the parties to the conflict from their supporters — remains the only promising road to ending the civil war in Libya," he told reporters.

Libya has been in turmoil since 2011, when a civil war toppled longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi, who was later killed.

A weak U.N.-recognized administration that now holds the capital of Tripoli and parts of the country's west is backed by Turkey, which recently sent thousands of soldiers to Libya, and to a lesser degree Qatar and Italy as well as local militias.

On the other side is a rival government in the east that supports self-styled Gen. Khalifa Hifter, whose forces launched an offensive to capture Tripoli last April. They are backed by the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, France and Russia.

Since the Berlin summit, the rival Libyan military factions have met in Geneva in a U.N.-led effort to forge a lasting truce. A first round of talks ended without officials signing an agreement, but Maas said a second round will begin in Geneva on Tuesday.

The U.N. also expects to hold the first meeting of "an inclusive Libyan political forum" in Geneva in 10 days' time but Stephanie Williams, the deputy U.N. envoy for Libya, said that the situation on the ground is "deeply troubling."

A fragile existing truce "is holding only by a thread, with numerous — over 150 violations," she said. An oil blockade by allies of Hifter's forces is deepening Libya's economic woes.

On Wednesday, the U.N. Security Council endorsed the Berlin summit conclusions, including a 55-point road map for ending the war in Libya and condemned the recent increase in violence in the oil-rich North African country.

The European Union, which will discuss Libya in Brussels on Monday, has been arguing about possibly having naval ships enforce the U.N. arms embargo against Libya.

Maas, however, stressed the need to enforce the weapons embargo by sea, air and land, given that arms find their way to the warring parties by different routes. He said EU ships may not be needed in the Mediterranean Sea "because sea routes, air routes and land routes can be monitored from the air."

[Oman] Oman Sees Prospects of Talks Between Iran and U.S. (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 8:28 AM, Golnar Motevalli, 6400K, Neutral]

Oman is working to reduce tensions in the Persian Gulf and sees prospects of talks between arch-rivals Iran and the U.S., its foreign minister said.

"We are in touch with the U.S. and Iran," Yousef Bin Alawi, Oman's foreign minister, was cited as saying on Sunday by the state-run Oman News Agency at the Munich Security Conference. "We feel that there is a possibility of dialogue between them."

"We don't expect military confrontation in the region at the moment," Bin Alawi added.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in a press briefing in Tehran that "there is no complicated, unresolvable issue between Iran and Saudi Arabia," but as far as the U.S. is concerned, his country will "never come to the negotiating table in weakness."

Rouhani's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, told journalists at the Munich conference that Saudi Arabia showed willingness to hold talks shortly after the U.S. killed top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike, state-run Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

Tehran replied positively to Riyadh's overture, but Saudi officials didn't continue the exchange, IRNA reported, citing comments Zarif made to reporters at the conference on Saturday. Tensions in the Persian Gulf escalated after the Soleimani killing on Jan. 3. He was Iran's most senior military commander and a driving force of the country's strategy of building a network of proxy forces to counter the U.S. in the region.

Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal Bin Farhan Al Saud denied any talks and accused Iran of behaving in a way that threatens global security, the state-run Saudi Press Agency reported.

[Oman] Oman sees biggest Gulf clash risk in Strait of Hormuz (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 7:05 AM, John Irish and Sabine Siebold, 5304K, Negative]

The risk of a military confrontation is higher in the Strait of Hormuz than anywhere else in the Gulf region, Oman's foreign minister said, due in part to the growing number of military vessels from different countries that are guarding it.

The waterway between Iran and Oman - 33 km (21 miles) wide at its narrowest point - is the conduit for some 30% of all crude and other oil liquids traded by sea.

Friction between Iran and the West had led several nations to send task forces to guard shipping there, and Washington has blamed Tehran for attacks on international merchant vessels in or near the area, something Tehran denies.

"There are a lot of military ships in the Hormuz (area) and our concern is there could be a mistake," Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Yousuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah said late on Saturday at the Munich Security Conference.

That would make that area the riskiest flashpoint in the Gulf over the coming months, he added.

Iran cannot legally close the waterway unilaterally because part of it is in Omani territorial waters. However, ships that sail it pass through Iranian waters, which are under the responsibility of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Navy.

Tehran has also threatened reprisals for the Jan. 3 killing of its top military commander, Qassem Soleimani, in a U.S. drone strike, though regional analysts have said that is unlikely to involve an intervention in the Strait.

Washington, which in 2018 decided to pull out of an international nuclear deal with Iran and re-impose sanctions on it, is leading a naval mission to protect oil tankers and cargo ships that includes Britain.

France leads a separate European mission, and Japan, Russia, South Korea and China have also sent naval assets to the region.

There have been periodic confrontations between the Iranian Guards and the U.S. military in the Gulf in recent years. U.S. officials have said closing the Strait would be crossing a "red line" and America would take action to reopen it.

"The only thing for Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar is the Strait of Hormuz and if it is blocked we will all be in trouble so that's why it is important to maintain the safeguard of maritime navigation," Kuwait's foreign minister Sheikh Ahmad Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah told the same conference.

[Syria] Assad's forces make advances, further securing Aleppo region (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 2:15 PM, Albert Aji and Sarah El Deeb, 23673K, Negative]

Syrian troops have made significant advances against the last rebel held enclaves in the country's northwest, state media said on Sunday, consolidating the government's hold over the key Aleppo province.

The Syrian government advance also appeared to put the provincial capital of Aleppo out of the firing range of opposition groups for the first time in years, another sign of Syrian President Bashar Assad's growing control of the area.

The armed opposition had been driven out of Aleppo city's eastern quarters in late 2016, which they controlled for years while battling government forces who were in charge in the western part. Rebel groups had continued to harry government forces, however, from outside the city with mortar rounds.

State news agency SANA reported 30 villages and towns around the city in the western Aleppo countryside were captured on Sunday.

Rami Abdul-Rahman, the head of the Britain-based war monitor Syria Observatory for Human Rights, confirmed the report.

"This means the control of Aleppo (city), and the countryside and securing all of Aleppo," Abdul-Rahman said.

The state-run Al-Ikhbariya TV said government troops were still besieging remnants of opposition fighters in a small part of rural Aleppo.

The fighting in the Aleppo region and nearby Idlib province has unleashed a humanitarian crisis. Over 800,000 civilians out of nearly 4 million living in the enclave have been displaced, living in open fields and temporary shelters for the most part in harsh winter conditions.

The armed opposition is now squeezed into a shrinking area of nearby Idlib province, where the government is also on the offensive.

"The Syrian people are determined to liberate all Syrian territories," President Assad said according to the Syrian state news agency on Sunday.

Assad was speaking during a meeting with visiting Iranian parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani. Both Iran and Russia have heavily backed Assad in the civil war.

The Syrian leader also claimed "terrorists" in northwestern Syria were using residents as

"human shields," in an attempt to stop Syrian troops from advancing into the territory.

Syria's government considers all the opposition in the nine-year war as "terrorists" and has repeatedly leveled accusation that they take residents of areas they control as hostages. But many of the displaced in Syria's Idlib province have fled the fighting in other parts of the country, choosing to live in areas outside of government control.

Turkey has sent thousands of troops and equipment into the opposition enclave, in an attempt to stall the government advance.

Turkey, which backs the opposition, has called for an end to the Syrian government offensive. It also fears that the displaced may overwhelm its borders. Turkey is already home to more than 3.5 million Syrian refugees. The United Nations has also called for a cease-fire.

Larijani, meanwhile, reiterated his country's support for Syria in fighting terrorism. Iran has played a key role in supporting Assad's war efforts, sending financial support as well as fighters to back up Syrian military operations.

Support from Russia and Iran has enabled Assad's forces to regain control of much of the territories they had lost to armed groups who worked to topple him.

Over 400,000 people have been killed and half of Syria's population displaced since peaceful protests in 2011 turned into a civil war stoked by foreign interventions.

[Syria] Russian-backed Syrian army seizes most of rebel-held Aleppo province: state media (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 12:26 PM, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, 5304K, Negative]

Syrian state media said on Sunday government forces had seized most of rebel-held Aleppo province in another major gain by a Russian-backed offensive.

Russian warplanes mounted heavy air strikes in the area on Sunday, bombing towns including Anadan, which was later seized by Syrian government forces backed by Iranian-backed militias, activists reported.

[Syria] Syrian forces seize most of Aleppo province, ahead of Turkey-Russia talks (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 1:46 PM, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Tom Perry, Tuvan Gumrukcu, 5304K, Neutral]

Syrian government forces made significant advances on Sunday in the country's northwestern Aleppo province, seizing most of the rebel-held region, state media said, a day before a new round of talks between Turkey and Russia on the escalation in the area.

The Syrian government's recent advances in the northwestern region of the country have upset a fragile cooperation between Ankara and Moscow, which back opposing factions in the conflict but have collaborated toward a political solution to the nearly nine-year war.

Turkey, which backs rebels looking to oust Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, has been

outraged since Syrian attacks in the Idlib region killed 13 Turkish troops in two weeks. It has urged Russia to stop the attacks, warning it would use military power to drive back the Syrian forces unless they withdraw by the end of the month.

On Sunday, Russian warplanes mounted heavy air strikes in the Aleppo province, bombing towns including Anadan, which was later seized by Syrian forces supported by Iranian-backed militias, activists reported.

Rebel military sources said opposition fighters had pulled back from the area, including Anadan and the town of Haritan.

"In day one, they took an area where for eight years they could not take a single village," Rami Abdulrahman, director of the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said.

"There is very rapid advance by the (Syrian) regime in this area," Abdulrahman said. "The factions have withdrawn from most of the area," he added. The Observatory said Syrian forces had seized 13 towns and villages in the area.

The advances come after Assad's forces drove insurgents from the key M5 highway linking Aleppo to Damascus, and reopened the fastest route between Syria's two biggest cities for the first time in years, in a major strategic accomplishment for Assad.

Turkey-backed rebels have meanwhile launched an operation in Idlib to retake areas lost to Syrian government forces. Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency said on Sunday that a 100-vehicle convoy of reinforcements, including troops, tanks and military vehicles and equipment, had been deployed to Idlib.

Turkey has so far sent thousands of troops and hundreds of convoys of military equipment to reinforce its observation posts in Idlib, established under a 2018 de-escalation agreement with Russia. Images from the region showed many houses draped in Turkish flags, while footage showed residents chanting slogans as convoys passed by.

A suicide bomber with the main insurgent group in the area, the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham faction, blew himself up in an attack on Russian positions in the town of Kafr Aleppo, the Ibaa news outlet affiliated with the group reported.

As Syrian forces continued their push to retake Idlib, the last major rebel-held enclave in Syria, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Sunday he told his Russian counterpart that attacks in Idlib must stop immediately and that a lasting ceasefire has to be achieved.

"We told (Russia on Saturday) ...that the aggression in Idlib must stop and that a lasting ceasefire has to be achieved now," Cavusoglu told reporters during a briefing at the Munich Security Conference, adding that Turkish and Russian officials will discuss the issue in Moscow on Monday.

Cavusoglu also said he met with some U.S. lawmakers at the conference, and added Washington should work to improve its relations with Ankara anyway, not just due to current

tensions between Turkey and Russia.

"We told them that we expected a sincere approach from the United States in line with the spirit of our alliance," he said, days after the top U.S. envoy for Syria came to Ankara for talks on Idlib and cooperation in Syria.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan has said his military will drive back Syrian forces if they do not withdraw out of Idlib by the end of the month. On Saturday, he appeared to pull that date forward, saying Turkey would "handle it" before the end of the month if there was no pullback.

In a meeting with Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani, Assad said that "the Syrian nation was determined to liberate all Syrian land from terrorism", Syria's state news agency SANA reported.

[Syria] Syrian government forces seize more villages in northwest (Yahoo News/AFP)
Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 11:35 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

Syrian regime forces made new gains Sunday in their offensive against the last major rebel bastion in the northwest, seizing villages and towns around second city Aleppo, state media and a monitor said.

Backed by Russian air strikes, government forces have kept up the assault on the Idlib region and areas of neighbouring Aleppo and Latakia provinces since December.

On Sunday, after clashes and air strikes, regime forces "were in control of all the villages and small towns around Aleppo for the first time since 2012," the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said.

The move enabled forces of President Bashar al-Assad to push back jihadists and allied rebels from the vicinity of Aleppo and "secure the city", it added.

The Britain-based war monitor said around 30 villages and small towns were captured by Syrian government forces who "advanced rapidly in the north and west of Aleppo province after insurgents pulled back".

Syrian state television confirmed the report and said army units "have liberated all the villages and small towns west of Aleppo city".

It broadcast footage purporting to show Aleppo residents celebrating the army's advance.

An AFP correspondent near the village of Maaret al-Naasan in Idlib province saw rebels manning a tank in an olive grove and shelling positions of Syrian troops the western part of Aleppo province.

- Chipping away -

Regime forces have for weeks been making gains in northwestern Syria and chipping away at territory held by jihadists and allied rebels, focusing their latest operations on the west of

Aleppo province.

The Observatory said the drive aims to establish a "security belt" around Aleppo, which government forces fully retook from insurgents in 2016 but which is still targeted by rocket fire.

Last week regime forces seized control of the strategic M5 highway, which connects the capital Damascus to the former economic hub of Aleppo and is economically vital for the government.

On Friday they captured a key base lost to the rebels in 2012 just west of Aleppo.

The Russian-backed offensive has triggered the largest wave of displacement in Syria's civil war, with 800,000 people fleeing since December, the United Nations says.

During the same period more than 380 civilians have been killed, according to the Observatory.

Backed by Russia, Iran and the Lebanese Shiite movement Hezbollah, Assad's forces now control more than 70 percent of Syria and the president has repeatedly vowed to retake the entire country.

On Sunday, Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani was in Damascus where he held talks with Assad who, according to the presidency, insisted on the people's "determination" to "liberate all of Syria".

More than 380,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict broke out nearly nine years ago with a brutal crackdown on anti-government protests.

[Syria] Car bomb near Syria-Turkey border kills four civilians: Anadolu (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 1:27 PM, Suleiman Al-Khalidi, 5304K, Negative]

A car bomb exploded on Sunday in the Syrian town of Tel Abyad, near the Turkish border, killing four people, Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency said.

The Arab town, from which Turkish-backed forces last October pushed out the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, has seen a spate of car blasts that has killed dozens of civilians.

There was no immediate comment from the authorities.

Anadolu, citing security sources, said the attack was carried out by the YPG, which Turkey considers a terrorist group linked to Kurdish insurgents on its own soil.

[Syria] Turkey says two killed in car bomb attack near Syria border (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 5:20 PM, Suleiman Al-Khalidi and Tuvan Gumrukcu, 23673K, Negative]

A car bomb attack by the Kurdish YPG militia killed two people and wounded five on Sunday in the northeastern Syrian town of Tel Abyad, near the Turkish border, the Turkish

Defence Ministry said in a statement.

The Arab town, from which Turkish-backed forces last October pushed out the YPG militia in a major campaign spearheaded by the Turkish army, has seen a series of car blasts that have killed dozens of civilians.

"The perpetrator was captured alive along with another terrorist who came to the area with a bomb-rigged vehicle for a second attack," the ministry said.

Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency said earlier, citing security sources, that four civilians were killed in the attack.

Turkey views the YPG as a terrorist organization linked to Kurdish insurgents on its own soil. The group was not immediately available for comment.

Syrian Arab rebels accused the YPG of carrying out the blasts, which they say seek to sow fear in areas where Turkey has carved a sphere of influence with the help of Syrian Arab rebels it backs and arms.

The Arab inhabitants of the area look at Ankara as their protector and accuse the Syrian Kurdish militia of forcibly pushing out the tribal population from these border area where they claim the YPG has sought to change its demography.

The U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish militia refutes those claims and says Turkey has expansionist designs. It also defends policies that adversaries say discriminate against Arabs as redressing historic grievances as persecuted Kurds.

[Syria] Syria govt targets property, cars to curb cash buys (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 10:12 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

The government in war-devastated Syria decided Sunday that all property and car sales must be conducted through banks, in an apparent bid to revive the banking sector and fight tax evasion.

Under the directive, which came into immediate effect, buyers and sellers must use bank accounts for vehicle and property purchases, in a country largely used to transactions in cash.

"The decision targets the two important sectors in terms of money supply," economic journalist Ali al-Agha said.

Notaries and public services can no longer register property and vehicle sale contracts unless documents show "that the sum or a part of the sum has been settled" through banks, under the regulation.

The move aims to encourage electronic transactions and limit the use of banknotes, Agha said, adding it was also a way to curb tax evasion.

Syria's almost nine-year-old war has killed more than 380,000 people and ravaged its cities

and infrastructure.

The United Nations estimated in 2018 that the conflict had caused nearly \$400 billion in war-related destruction.

In other moves, the central bank last week tripled the upper limit on mortgages to 15 million Syrian pounds as well as the ceiling for renovation loans.

The executive director of the Syrian mortgage credit institution, Madine Ali, said the move would "allow a large portion" of the population to buy or renovate property.

The credit ceiling could be further revised upwards, according to marked demand, Ali said, quoted in the local media.

The Syrian pound has plunged to a historic low of more than 1,200 against the greenback on the black market, while the official rate is 434 to the dollar, down from 48 at the March 2011 start of the war.

The devaluation has driven up prices and worsened dire economic conditions that the government blames on tightening Western sanctions.

[Syria] Hundreds of thousands displaced in Syria's raging war (CBS News)

CBS News [2/16/2020 11:46 AM, Holly Williams, 10942K, Neutral]

CBS News' Holly Williams provides an update on what is being called one of the greatest humanitarian crises of the brutal nine-year Syrian war.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[Syria] A new catastrophe looms in Syria's dead of winter (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 3:52 AM, Emer McCarthy, 5304K, Negative]

The World Food Programme says more than 800,000 Syrians, mostly women and children, have fled their homes during a Russian-backed Syrian military campaign to clear the opposition in northwest Syria since December. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Yemen] UN: Warring parties in Yemen agree on major prisoner trade (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 11:35 AM, Samy Magdy, 12625K, Negative]

Yemen's warring sides have agreed to implement a long-delayed and major prisoner swap, the United Nations said on Sunday, in a sign that talks to end the disastrous war between the country's internationally recognized government and its Houthi rebels could be making progress.

It would be the "first official large-scale" exchange of its kind since the beginning of the conflict in the Arab World's poorest country, according to the U.N.

The prisoner swap deal was seen as a breakthrough during 2018 peace talks in Sweden. The Houthis and the internationally recognized government agreed then to several confidence-building measures, including a cease-fire in the strategic port city of Hodeida.

Implementation of the tentative peace plan stumbled amid ongoing military offensives and a deep-seated distrust between the two sides.

The conflict also has been a theater for the regional rivalry between Iran, which backs the Houthi rebels, and Saudi Arabia, which leads a military coalition supporting the internationally recognized Yemeni government.

The U.N. mission in Yemen said that both the rebels and Yemeni government had decided to "immediately begin with exchanging the lists for the upcoming release" of prisoners. Sunday's statement came after seven days of meetings between the two sides in Jordan's capital, Amman.

"Today the parties showed us that even with the growing challenges on the ground, the confidence they have been building can still yield positive results," the U.N. envoy Martin Griffiths said.

The U.N. mission did not disclose specific numbers for the expected prisoner exchange.

Abdul-Qader al-Murtaza, a rebel official in charge of prisoners' affairs, said in a tweet that the first phase of the deal includes the release of more than 1400 prisoners from the two sides. He said talks would continue for another two days to "prepare and revise the final lists."

The talks were co-chaired by Griffiths' office and the International Committee of the Red Cross, ICRC. Representatives from the Saudi-led coalition also attended the talks, the U.N. said.

Griffiths urged both parties to move forward with the agreed-upon prisoner exchange "with the utmost sense of urgency." He did not elaborate when they would start the exchange.

Franz Rauchenstein, the head of the ICRC in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, welcomed the step as "encouraging."

"Today, despite ongoing clashes, we saw that the parties have found common humanitarian ground that will allow many detainees to return to their loved ones," Rauchenstein said.

The war in Yemen has also spawned the world's worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical shortages. It has killed over 100,000 people, including fighters and civilians, according to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, which tracks violence reports in Yemen.

Houthi spokesman Mohammed Abdel-Salam said Saudi and Sudanese prisoners would be included in the release from his side. The Saudi-led coalition has brought into Yemen Sudanese fighters on its side.

Yemeni Foreign Minister Mohammed Abdullah al-Hadrami said he welcomed the "phased agreement" to release prisoners, in a tweet Sunday.

The breakthrough in talks came after another bout of intense fighting in different areas in

Yemen, that killed and wounded hundreds of people from both sides.

Strikes on Saturday killed more than 30 civilians in the mountainous northern Yemeni Jawf province, said the U.N. humanitarian chief for the country, calling the attack "shocking."

The Houthis accused the Saudi-led coalition of launching retaliatory airstrikes, after they shot down a coalition warplane over Jawf.

The coalition said it was investigating "possible collateral damage" from a rescue operation in the area after the downing of the European-made Tornado warplane late Friday.

The renewed clashes threatened to overshadow the hopes raised by back-channel talks in the Gulf state of Oman between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis.

The talks focus on interim agreements, such as re-opening Yemen's main international airport in Sanaa, which was shut down by the Saudi-led coalition in 2016. In a sign of progress, two United Nations flights ferrying dozens of seriously ill Yemenis abroad for treatment took off last week from the rebel-held capital, the first since the start of the air blockade.

The conflict in the Arab world's poorest country erupted in 2014, when the Iran-allied Houthis seized the capital and much of the country's north. A Saudi-led coalition, determined to restore the authority of Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Hadi's government, launched a military intervention months later.

[Yemen] Saudi-led coalition airstrikes kill more than 30 Yemeni civilians, says U.N., as fighting intensifies (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/16/2020 12:48 PM, Sudarsan Raghavan, 12625K, Negative]

A Saudi-led coalition airstrike in Yemen killed more than 30 civilians, according to U.N. officials late Saturday.

The airstrikes targeting Yemen's northern Al-Jawf province came a day after the country's rebel Houthi movement claimed it had shot down a coalition warplane in the same area. Saturday's attacks were widely seen as a retaliation for the downing of the fighter jet.

In a statement, the United Nations' top humanitarian official said preliminary reports indicate that as many as 31 civilians were killed and 12 others were injured in the strikes that targeted the Al Hayjah area of the province.

"So many people are being killed in Yemen; it's a tragedy and it's unjustifiable," said Lise Grande, the U.N.'s humanitarian coordinator for Yemen. "Under international humanitarian law, parties which resort to force are obligated to protect civilians. Five years into this conflict and belligerents are still failing to uphold this responsibility. It's shocking."

The violence was the latest sign of the war's intensification after months of relative quiet amid efforts between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis to pave a way to end the conflict. Since mid-January, fierce clashes have broken out in several areas in three provinces, forcing at least 4,700 families to flee their homes, according to the U.N.

The American-backed coalition, a grouping of Sunni Muslim countries led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, entered Yemen's civil war in March 2015 after the Houthis seized the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, forcing out the country's internationally recognized government.

While the coalition says it seeks to restore the government, the war is also widely viewed as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Shiite Iran that is aligned with the Houthis, who also follow the Zaidi branch of Shiite Islam.

The war has deepened what the United Nations describes as the world's worst humanitarian crisis, in which nearly 80 percent of Yemen's 24 million people are in need of assistance and protection. At least 10 million Yemenis are on the edge of famine, with another 7 million suffering from malnourishment, according to U.N. statistics. More than 3.6 million people have been forced to flee their homes.

Saturday's death toll included women and children, according to the Houthi-run Al Masirah television network. While the Houthis claimed to have shot down the coalition's war plane, a coalition spokesman disputed that assertion.

In a statement carried on Saudi Arabia's state news agency, Col. Turki Al-Malki said that the jet had crashed. He described the war plane as a Tornado, which is made in Britain, Italy and Germany. Malki said the plane's two-member crew ejected before it crashed, but that the rebels fired at them.

Asked to comment on Saturday's airstrikes and civilian casualties, Malki sent a Saudi press agency statement that said a search and rescue operation at the crash site of the warplane found that there may have been "collateral damage to civilians."

[Yemen] Saudi Pilots Missing as Yemen Rebels Say They Downed Fighter Jet (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 4:23 AM, Mohammed Hatem and Vivian Nereim, 6400K, Negative] Two Saudi fighter pilots were missing after Iran-backed Yemen rebels said they shot down a Saudi fighter jet, a potential escalation in their five-year war.

Saudi coalition spokesman Colonel Turki Al-Maliki said the pilots ejected before their Tornado jet crashed on Saturday in Yemen while under attack by Houthi rebels, according to the official Saudi Press Agency. The Houthis said they had shot down the warplane in northwestern Al Jawf province, where they are fighting Saudi-backed government forces, according to the rebel-owned Al-Masirah TV.

The missile that downed the fighter jet is a part of a new defense system made locally and that was its first test, Al-Masirah TV reported. The Houthis said coalition warplanes launched several strikes on the area where the plane went down, and the United Nations reported 31 civilians were killed.

The Saudi-led coalition has been battling the Houthis in an effort to reinstate ousted President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi. The war has produced the worst humanitarian crisis in

the world, with tens of thousands of people dead or injured and millions displaced, according to the UN.

Mohammed Al-Hadhrami, the foreign minister of Yemen's internationally recognized government, told Bloomberg TV that the U.S. administration's "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran has produced "good results."

"Keep the pressure on Iran and you will see peace in Yemen," he said in an interview in Munich on Friday.

Last week, the U.S. Navy seized a boat allegedly carrying Iranian weapons to the Yemen rebels, including three surface-to-air missiles and 150 antitank missiles. Iran has denied providing weapons to the Houthis, who have taken credit for attacks on neighboring Saudi Arabia.

[Yemen] Questions hang over fate of Saudi crew in Yemen jet crash (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 5:29 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

The fate of the crew of a Saudi warplane that crashed in Yemen remained uncertain Sunday after Iran-linked Huthi rebels claimed to have shot down the aircraft.

The Riyadh-led military coalition fighting the rebels said the two officers ejected from the plane before it crashed in northern Al-Jawf province Friday but that the rebels opened fire at them "in violation of international humanitarian law."

"The joint forces command of the Coalition holds the terrorist Huthi militia responsible for the lives and wellbeing of the Tornado air crew," the coalition said in a statement released by the official Saudi Press Agency late Saturday.

The statement did not specify whether the crew had survived or if they had been captured after the plane crashed in Huthi-controlled territory.

The coalition also did not elaborate on the reasons for the crash.

If Huthi involvement is confirmed, the rare downing of a coalition warplane would mark a setback for a military alliance known for its air supremacy and signal the rebels' increasingly potent arsenal.

The rebels released footage of what they called the launch of their "advanced surface-to-air missile" and the moment it purportedly struck the jet in the night sky, sending it crashing down in a ball of flames.

The crash triggered air strikes in the area where the plane went down, an apparent Saudi-led retaliation that the UN said left 31 civilians dead and 12 others wounded.

The rebels reported multiple coalition air strikes in the area, adding that women and children were among the dead and wounded, according to rebel television station Al-Masirah.

The coalition conceded the "possibility of collateral damage" during what it termed a "Search and rescue operation" at the site of the jet crash.

The coalition force has been widely criticised for the high civilian death toll from its bombing campaigns in Yemen, which has prompted some Western governments to cut arms deliveries to the countries taking part.

Lise Grande, the UN coordinator, on Saturday denounced the "terrible strikes" and said it was "shocking" that five years into the conflict combatants were still failing to abide by their legal obligation to protect civilians.

The charity group Save the Children called for an urgent and independent investigation into the killings, urging those responsible be held to account for what it said was an air raid in a residential area.

"The war shows no signs of slowing down. Yemen is a hellish place for children," its country director Xavier Joubert said in a statement.

"Those who continue to sell arms to the warring parties must realise that by supplying weapons for this war, they contribute to making atrocities like today's all too common."

The coalition intervened against the Huthis in 2015, in a conflict that has killed tens of thousands of people, most of them civilians, and sparked what the United Nations calls the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

[Yemen] U.N. official says 'unjustified' killings in Yemen conflict represent 'shocking' failure to 'protect civilians' (Yahoo News/The Week)

Yahoo News/The Week [2/16/2020 10:49 AM, Tim O'Donnell, 10942K, Negative]

Yemen's Houthi rebels said air raids conducted by the Western-backed Saudi-UAE-led military coalition killed more than 30 civilians Saturday just one day after the rebels said they shot down a Saudi jet fighter with a surface-to-air missile.

The United Nations confirmed Saturday's death toll.

The Houthis said women and children were among the dead, and the coalition acknowledged the "possibility of collateral damage" during their search-and-rescue mission for the downed plane.

The conflict which began in 2015 after the Houthis, who are backed by Iran, forced out former Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, prompting Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to support loyalist forces.

Since then, Lise Grande, the U.N.'s humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, said there's been little done to protect the Yemeni people.

"So many people are being killed in Yemen — it's a tragedy and it's unjustified," she said in light of the most recent attacks. "Under international humanitarian law parties which resort

to force are obligated to protect civilians. Five years into this conflict and belligerents are still failing to uphold this responsibility. It's shocking."

Europe and Eurasia

Quarantine ends for Germans; Italy to fly citizens from ship (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 9:06 AM, Staff, 1512K, Neutral]

More than 100 Germans evacuated from the hard-hit Chinese city of Wuhan, the epicenter of a new coronavirus outbreak, were set to end their prescribed 14-day quarantine period on Sunday.

They have been kept isolated at a military base in the southern town of Gernersheim. None of them have tested positive for the disease, German news agency dpa reported.

The viral outbreak that emerged in China in December has infected more than 69,000 people globally, killing 1,665 people in mainland China and five others elsewhere. The World Health Organization has named the illness COVID-19.

Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio, meanwhile, announced Sunday that Italy will send a plane to Japan to bring back the 35 Italians aboard the Diamond Princess, the cruise ship that has had 355 passengers and crew test positive for the new virus.

Twenty-five of those Italians are crew members on the ship, including the cruise ship's captain. Italy's ministries of defense, foreign affairs and health as well as civil protection officials were working out the logistics. No date for the flight has been announced yet.

British officials announced Sunday that more than 3,100 people in the U.K. had been tested for the virus but there have been no new positive results beyond the nine who were successfully treated and discharged.

European nations have reported 47 cases of the virus in nine countries. France on Saturday announced the first death of a virus patient in Europe and outside of Asia, an 80-year-old Chinese tourist in Paris.

Chinese authorities have placed some 60 million people under a strict lockdown, built emergency hospitals and instituted tight controls across the country to fight the spread of the virus.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has praised China's intensive measures and urged other governments to step up their own anti-virus efforts, saying "it's impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will take."

"We must use the window of opportunity we have to intensify our preparedness," he told foreign policy and security leaders at the Munich Security Conference on Saturday. "China has bought the world time. We don't know how much time."

EU must develop 'appetite for power', Borrell says (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 1:04 PM, Robin Emmott, 5304K, Negative]

European Union governments need to be willing to intervene in international crises or risk prolonging paralysis in their foreign policy, the EU's top diplomat said on Sunday.

The EU is the world's largest trading bloc but it often fails to speak with one voice on foreign policy because its policy-making requires consensus among members.

EU governments are divided on issues from Libya to Venezuela.

"Europe has to develop an appetite for power," the EU's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told the Munich Security Conference, stressing that did not only mean military power.

"We should be able to act ... not everyday making comments, expressing concern," he told leaders, lawmakers and diplomats.

With its economic power, the bloc has been able to boast of a "soft power," but its influence in the world has waned, partly because U.S. President Donald Trump's "America First" policies have undermined European priorities.

Trump's decision to pull out of the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, as well as the Paris climate accord, his recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital before a final peace settlement and his criticism of NATO are at odds with European positions.

With new leadership in Brussels, the EU has launched into a flurry of diplomacy since January, particularly on the Middle East.

The bloc was still divided on how to react to Trump's peace proposal for the Palestinians and Israel.

Efforts to revive a maritime mission off Libya to uphold a U.N. arms embargo have run into difficulties, diplomats say.

"When there is no unanimity (in the EU), the remaining majority have to act," Borrell said.

EU in 'frank' talks with Balkan nations seeking membership (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 3:54 PM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

European Council president Charles Michel on Sunday met with leaders of the six Western Balkan nations seeking to join the EU, for "frank" talks ahead of a key summit in Zagreb in May. The EU is struggling to maintain credibility in the Balkans after it broke promises to start membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia last October, leading to another postponement despite major reforms on their part.

"I look forward to a frank, intense and open discussion," Michel said before the meeting began.

While most member states were ready to open the negotiations, France has led a small group that vetoed the move, while Germany has led efforts to get the accession process back on track.

"We are going to work today and tomorrow for the next European Council (summit) to open the door to the European perspective of the Balkan countries," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Sunday.

He attended the informal talks as did EU Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic of Croatia, which currently holds the EU's rotating presidency.

Next month the European Commission is due to publish an individual report for each of the six Western Balkan candidate countries — Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Northern Macedonia and Serbia.

"It's about engaging in a political dialogue at the highest level" with the Balkan nations "and to understand their expectations, before the summit in Zagreb" on May 17, a European official said.

What is set to emerge is a more rigorous route to membership, as sought by France.

The EU Commission has already submitted a plan along those lines, but it must still receive unanimous support from the existing 27 European Union member states.

"We have revised our methodology and the methodology in its revised form should create and regain trust in all sides in this process because it's accelerating the structural reforms," von der Leyen said.

"On the other hand it's creating a credible perspective for the Western Balkans to join, over time, the EU. We want also to pave the way for Albania and North Macedonia to start the accession talks with EU if possible for before the Zagreb summit," she added.

Under the new proposals, the EU accession process would focus on "fundamental reforms" first, and create an option for membership talks to be "put on hold in certain areas... or suspended overall."

Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, attending the Brussels meeting, declared himself "very interested to see and discuss the new methodology, see if it can come out as a platform of common understanding with the member states."

Stormy conditions on Sunday made it difficult for planes flying in and out of Belgium and other European countries.

"We landed with some difficulties, so it's a kind of signal that the landing for us will not be easy," quipped Rama. He wasn't the only Balkans leader making the connection.

"We had a landing on our fourth attempt... and I made a comparison to our attempt to start the accession talks," said North Macedonia's Foreign Minister Nikola Dimitrov.

Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia are already official EU candidate nations, along with Turkey.

Bosnia and Herzegovina along with Kosovo are officially categorised as "potential candidates."

[Azerbaijan] Azeri police detain opposition leaders, block protest against election result (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 8:55 AM, Nailia Bagirova, 5304K, Negative]

Police in Azerbaijan detained three opposition party leaders and more than 100 activists on Sunday before they were due to take part in a protest against the results of last week's national election, which have been questioned by international observers.

According to the Central Election Commission (CEC), the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan (New Azerbaijan) party won 72 out of 125 seats in the single-chamber parliament last Sunday, with nearly all other seats going to small parties and independents loyal to President Ilham Aliyev.

Before Sunday's unauthorized protest was scheduled to start, police detained either at their homes or outside their party headquarters the leader of the REAL party, Ilgar Mamedly, the leader of the Musavat Party, Arif Gajily, and the head of the D18 opposition movement, Ruslan Izzetly. All three failed to win seats in last week's election.

Dozens of riot police surrounded the election commission's building, where the protest had been due to start from, and put anyone arriving to take part in the demonstration on a bus, a Reuters witness at the scene said.

Some protesters held up posters saying: "Abolish election results!" or "We demand free elections!"

Police officials declined to comment on arrests.

International monitors found widespread procedural violations in the vote count, which they said raised doubt about the honesty of the election. Aliyev had called the election nine months early to consolidate his authority and speed economic reforms.

The CEC has so far canceled the results in four election constituencies following reports about violations.

Azerbaijan has been governed by Aliyev since 2003 when he succeeded his late father Heydar.

Western nations have courted Azerbaijan because of its role as an alternative to Russia in supplying oil and gas to Europe, but various European bodies and rights groups have accused Aliyev of muzzling dissent and jailing opponents, charges Baku denies.

[Czech Republic] Czech Republic reports second bird flu case (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 2:41 PM, Jason Hovet, 5304K, Neutral]

The Czech Republic has found a second case of the bird flu virus, at a commercial poultry farm, an Agriculture Ministry spokesman said on Sunday.

The spokesman said more details of the case, in a region east of Prague, would be provided at a news conference on Monday.

The central European country reported its first case of the virus in January while cases have also appeared in other countries in the region since the start of the year.

[Denmark] Denmark arrests 27 people on suspected cocaine smuggling (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 3:20 PM, Staff, 1512K, Negative]

Danish police say they have arrested 27 people for suspected drug smuggling after finding some 100 kilograms of cocaine on a Bahamas-registered cargo vessel plying Danish waters.

Copenhagen police said Sunday in a statement that the cocaine was seized during an internationally coordinated bust on Saturday on the container ship Duncan Island while it was sailing south of the town of Gedser.

The suspects, all foreigners, are charged with serious drug crimes under Danish law and may face a sentence of up to 16 years in prison.

They include the vessel's international crew with Russian, Latvian, Ecuadorian and Filipino nationals among others and remain in custody pending further investigation.

"We're naturally very pleased that many kilos of cocaine have not hit the street. Now we are investigating further to find out who is waiting in vain for the deliveries," said Inspector Dannie Rise, the head of the special investigation unit at the Copenhagen police.

According to Danish broadcaster TV2, the vessel was en route from Helsingborg, Sweden to St. Petersburg, Russia when it was seized by authorities.

It said the cocaine is believed to have a street value of approximately 350 million Danish kroner.

[France] NATO chief dismisses Macron nuclear strategy call (Yahoo News/RFI)

Yahoo News/RFI [2/16/2020 5:26 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

The head of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation has dismissed French President Emmanuel Macron's call for a European "strategic dialogue" about the role of France in the security alliance, saying a "tried and tested" deterrent is already in place.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said that, thanks to the US and Britain's atomic weapons, Europe was already protected by a longstanding and effective nuclear umbrella.

Despite being a full member of the security alliance, France does not make its atomic weapons available to NATO. President Macron has called for dialogue among EU countries about what role the French nuclear deterrent could play.

Stoltenberg, who last year clashed with Macron over the French leader's claims that NATO was suffering "brain death" in its geopolitical thinking, gave his latest suggestion a frosty reception.

"We have to remember that we have a European nuclear deterrent today — 28 allies deliver that every day and it's not only a promise, but it's something that has been there for decades," Stoltenberg told reporters at the Munich Security Conference.

"It's tried and tested, we exercise it, and it's institutionalised, and it is the ultimate security guarantee for Europe."

France is the EU's only nuclear power after Brexit and Macron has championed the idea of European "strategic autonomy" — the ability to defend itself without relying on the US — though he insists on his commitment to NATO. Stoltenberg said France was a "highly valued ally" whose nuclear capabilities contributed to NATO's overall security.

German Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer welcomed the French suggestion while insisting it did not mean undermining US nuclear protection.

[France] French health minister to run for Paris mayor to end scandal (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 3:48 PM, Elaine Ganley, 1512K, Neutral]

France's Health Minister Agnes Buzyn was named on Sunday as a new candidate for mayor of Paris, a late entry by the country's governing party after a scramble to replace the original contender who abruptly withdrew after a leak of sex videos on social media.

The choice of Buzyn, whose profile rose with the outbreak of the new deadly virus from China, came just two days after a frantic search for a candidate began. It underscored the importance that President Emmanuel Macron's centrist party places on winning the mayor's office — and emerging from a scandal.

The presidential Elysee Palace quickly named a replacement for Buzyn as health minister, Olivier Veran, a lawmaker and a doctor, like his predecessor.

The post of mayor of Paris is currently held by Anne Hidalgo, a Socialist looking to renew her term and favored in polls in the two-round municipal elections to be held in one month.

The rapid changing of the guard in the important health ministry post came after the withdrawal of Benjamin Griveaux as candidate in the Paris mayoral race after explicit videos began circulating on social media, a leak operation claimed by a controversial Russian performance artist.

Piotr Pavlensky and his companion, meanwhile, were being questioned by police investigators on counts of invasion of privacy and diffusing without permission images of a sexual character after Griveaux filed a complaint for invasion of privacy. The prosecutor's office said Sunday that the period of interrogation was being prolonged for both until Monday.

Pavlensky claimed responsibility for the leaks, denouncing the "big hypocrisy" of Griveaux who put family at the forefront of his campaign.

Pavlensky's lawyer, Juan Branco, who had defended in the past Wikileaks figure Julien

Assange, said on TV he was forced to withdraw from the case. The prosecutor's office would not confirm the claim.

The mayorship of the French capital is a symbol of prestige, and more. For Macron's young party, The Republic on the Move, which he created to win the presidential race in 2017, a Paris victory could compensate for losses elsewhere around the country.

"I am doing this with my heart, with commitment ... I'm doing it to win," Buzyn said shortly after being named the governing party contender, reflecting a dramatic change of heart. On Friday, she said she would refuse to take Griveaux's place, citing her important work amid the COVID-19 which has sickened 12 people in France.

"Mission impossible," was the message of numerous commentators, noting the Paris-born Buzyn's late arrival in the race and the embarrassing stumbles that preceded her. Rival parties said she was "abandoning" her ministerial post amid a health crisis.

The addition of Buzyn puts three women front and center in the battle for Paris, with conservative former Justice Minister Rachida Dati polling in second place, after the current mayor.

The scandal over the sexually explicit material has led to questions over whether Pavlensky had been a front man for more sinister forces wanting to bring down Griveaux and about the role of social media in a democracy. The affair also has raised indignation across political classes in a country that respects the private lives of politicians.

[France] Macron picks minister to lead Paris mayor battle after sexting scandal (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 2:03 PM, Michel Rose, 5304K, Neutral]

French President Emmanuel Macron picked his widely respected health minister on Sunday to reinvigorate a campaign to win over Paris City Hall that fell apart when his previous candidate pulled out over a sexting scandal.

Less than a month before mayoral elections in which opinion polls expect Macron's party to fare poorly, Macron is keen to turn his fortunes around in the capital, where voters have given him good scores in the past.

His new candidate, Health Minister Agnes Buzyn, a doctor who has been leading France's response to the coronavirus, told reporters she was throwing herself into the race to win.

She will pick up the baton from Benjamin Griveaux, one of the "Macron boys" who helped propel the former investment banker into power in 2017. Griveaux, who is married, was forced to give up after sexual images he sent to a woman were published online.

Russian dissident artist Pyotr Pavlensky, who has lived in exile in France since 2017, said he published a video of a man masturbating, that he says was Griveaux, to expose the "hypocrisy." Griveaux has not disputed that he sent the messages and the video.

Pavlensky and his girlfriend, who French media said was the recipient of Griveaux's texts,

were arrested on Saturday and were held for questioning on Sunday over possible charges of privacy violation, the prosecutor's office said.

The Russian artist is best known for works of performance art including nailing his scrotum to the ground in Moscow's Red Square and setting fire to doors at the headquarters of Russia's state security agency and the Bank of France.

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

But for Macron, the episode marks a new low in his effort to give the three-and-a-half year old En Marche (On the Move) party he created from scratch a sustainable local base.

Party officials have admitted they expected a drubbing in the March 15-22 elections. "It will go badly for En Marche, because that's the election in which the political program is the least important," a senior figure in the party told Reuters.

The party has suffered from defections in parliament and has also failed to maintain discipline, with several lawmakers deciding to launch independent bids against the candidate chosen by the party's decision-making committee.

In Paris, Macron's new candidate will compete with a flamboyant mathematician, Cedric Villani, who was elected to parliament under Macron's banner in 2017 but was kicked out of the party last month after he refused to rally behind Macron's official choice.

[Germany] Merkel succession contender calls her out over slow EU revamp (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 6:28 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

A leading contender to succeed German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Sunday criticised her for taking too long to respond to a French push to strengthen the EU after Brexit.

"I would like to apologise for the German government," Armin Laschet said, casting himself as strongly pro-EU as the race to find a new leader for Merkel's centre-right CDU party heats up.

Macron has long called for an overhaul to the European Union in response to Britain's departure from the bloc, including deeper integration in financial and defence matters, and has repeatedly urged Berlin to champion the reforms with him.

"I would have liked a more engaged and faster answer to Macron, and a dialogue with him," Laschet, the premier of Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia state, said at the Munich Security Conference.

Speaking at the same gathering a day earlier, Macron said he was "impatient" at Germany's reluctance to take up his offer to jointly spearhead EU reforms.

Laschet said Merkel's government, an alliance between her conservative bloc and the

centre-left SPD, had not lived up to the promise enshrined in their 2018 coalition agreement to create a "fresh start" for Europe.

"We've not seen much of that in the past two years," Laschet said.

Looking ahead to Germany's six-month EU presidency starting in July, he said there was an opportunity for "a new momentum" on European issues.

Brexit, the migration crisis and other immediate challenges had made it difficult in recent times to focus on "big European visions", Laschet said.

"But now I think we are going to need them again."

Veteran chancellor Merkel is slated to retire from politics when her fourth term ends next year.

Her preferred successor, Defence Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, recently stepped down as CDU leader and announced she was giving up her leadership ambitions, throwing the race to the chancellery wide open.

Laschet, seen as a compromise figure between the CDU's more conservative and centrist wings, has been tipped as one of three possible contenders to become the party's new leader and chancellor candidate in the next election.

But the 58-year-old refused to confirm in Munich that he had his eye on the top job.

Asked whether he saw his future in Duesseldorf, the capital state of North Rhine-Westphalia, or Berlin, he replied: "Aachen".

The German city was the ancient centre of the empire of Charlemagne, credited with inspiring the European project.

[Hungary] Hungary's Orban warns about climate crisis, slow EU growth (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 12:44 PM, Pablo Gorondi, 10942K, Neutral]

Hungary's prime minister on Sunday declared the past decade as the most successful of Hungary's past century, but also said the country was threatened by the climate crisis, continuing population decline and "sinister menaces gathering over the European economy."

During his annual state of the nation speech made to an adoring crowd of supporters and political allies, Prime Minister Viktor Orban again lashed out at purported rivals like the leadership of the European Union, the International Monetary Fund and Hungarian-American billionaire philanthropist George Soros.

Orban, who returned to power in 2010 when Hungary was still under the effect of an international financial bailout, said his government rejected demands for more austerity and rid itself of the IMF-led loans to have a freer hand in its economic policies.

"If we'd followed their advice, then Hungary now would be lying in a hospital ward with IMF and Brussels debt tubes hanging from its every limb and the faucet of the debt would be in the hands of George Soros," Orban said.

Orban said that while Hungary's economic growth of 4.9% broadly outpaced the European average, Hungary was still closely tied to Europe's economic performance as 85% of Hungarian exports are destined to other European countries.

"So their problem is our problem, too," Orban said. "The only question is to what extent it will be our problem, too."

"The European economy, especially that of the eurozone, has simply stopped," Orban said, adding that economic growth in Europe in 2020 would be "microscopic, at most."

Regarding demographic decline, Orban said that while the government's economic incentives for married couples and large families had helped stem population decline, more measures were needed.

While the number of marriages was rising as divorces and abortions fell, "the bad news is that population decline did not stop," Orban said. "The Hungarian continues to be an endangered species."

Orban also announced policies to help the environment, including a 27% increase in forested areas, steps to ban single-use plastic packaging, and plans to offer incentives for the use of electric cars. He also said that all new buses used for urban public transportation licensed from 2022 would have to be electric.

[Hungary] Hungarian PM Orban signals tax cuts, tough times for economy (Reuters)
Reuters [2/16/2020 11:38 AM, Krisztina Than, 5304K, Neutral]

Hungary will cut taxes on labor and for small firms, Prime Minister Viktor Orban said on Sunday as he warned of tough times ahead for a domestic economy hobbled by stagnation in the euro zone.

Hungary's economy expanded 4.9% last year but on Friday the government cut its forecast for 2020 from 4% to 3.5%, which would be the slowest growth rate in four years.

"I see dangerous years ahead ... We need to take serious steps to defend what we have achieved so far," Orban said in an annual state of the nation speech that reviewed his decade in office.

"We will have to focus our efforts on preserving jobs in 2020 and also perhaps in the years after... In such times, tax cuts are needed. So, we will reduce the tax on labor and on small businesses," he added without giving details.

A nationalist who has often clashed with European Union authorities over his clampdowns on immigration, Orban has pursued a mix of go-it-alone economic policies, shifting Hungary's debt financing towards domestic borrowing while keeping the budget deficit low.

But his critics say corruption has increased, and oligarchs close to him have benefited significantly from state contracts and EU funds.

Orban, who had enjoyed consistently high popularity ratings since first being elected, said a key question was if Hungary could maintain growth against the backdrop of stagnation in the euro zone, its main export market.

He also cited "demographic decline" and the climate crisis as threats.

He said the government had approved a climate protection plan that included tighter environmental regulations for multinational firms, a sixfold increase in solar power capacity over 10 years, and the launch of a green government bond.

Think tank Eurasia Group said only an economic downturn could endanger Orban's solid base of support.

"For this reason, the government will continue to use fiscal policy to stimulate the economy while the central bank will keep interest rates low, despite rising inflation," it said in a note to clients.

Hungary's next national elections are due in 2022.

[Italy] Italy to evacuate 35 nationals from cruise ship quarantined at Japan port (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 6:15 AM, Giselda Vagnoni, 10942K, Negative]

Italy said on Sunday it would evacuate citizens from a coronavirus-stricken cruise ship being held under quarantine in the Japanese port of Yokohama, after 355 people from it were found to be infected with the virus.

"We decided yesterday to send a flight and bring those 35 Italians home," Italy's Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio said on Twitter on Sunday.

The Diamond Princess, cruise ship, owned by Carnival Corp, has been quarantined since arriving in Yokohama on Feb. 3, after a man who disembarked in Hong Kong before it travelled to Japan was diagnosed with the virus.

It had some 3,700 passengers and crew on board.

The United States and Hong Kong have said they will send flights to fetch their people from the ship.

[Italy] Italy's Conte denies he is putting together a new coalition (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 10:13 AM, Giselda Vagnoni, Neutral]

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte denied on Sunday he was looking to put together a new coalition after relations with the small Italia Viva party disintegrated.

Former prime minister Matteo Renzi, who heads Italia Viva, challenged Conte last week to put together another government if he could following a row over legal reform.

Conte saw the Italian head of state at the weekend amid speculation that he was seeking to poach senators from Renzi's party to keep his administration afloat in parliament.

His office denied widespread media reports that he was looking for other majorities and played a conciliatory tone.

"Conte is working on the government's 2023 agenda along with all the ruling parties, including Italia Viva," Conte's office said in a statement released on Sunday.

While the row between Renzi and Conte seems unlikely to trigger a political crisis any time soon, it underscores the difficulties the prime minister has in keeping a stable coalition after his first government made up of the 5-Star and the right-wing League party collapsed in August.

"Renzi's behavior poses serious problems because it make Conte unstable and the government action insufficient," said prominent PD member Goffredo Bettini on Sunday.

"This is why I recommend preparing alternative scenarios as soon as possible," Bettini added on Facebook.

[Italy] As sea levels rise, Venice fights to stay above the waterline (NBC News)

NBC News [2/16/2020 9:31 AM, Claudio Lavanga, 4200K, Neutral]

While climatologists use highly technical instruments and satellites to measure rise in global sea levels, Venetians suggest a much simpler method: just count the steps of centuries-old buildings that are now under water.

"When the palazzos on the Grand Canal were built around the 16th century, the main sea level was below the first step," Giovanni Cecconi, the president of the Venice Resilience Lab, tells NBC News. "Nowadays, the water is about 3 feet over it. Divide that by 500 years, and you'll get an average sea rise of up to half a feet per century."

The whole city, Cecconi explains, can be used as one beautiful ruler that has been measuring the changes in the average sea level across the centuries.

He took NBC News for a ride on his small motorboat across the canals on a day of exceptionally low tide, when the water temporarily recedes to reveal the city's hidden treasures claimed by the sea.

"Do you see those heads of lions?" Cecconi says, referring to a sequence of statues sculpted at the base of a palazzo.

"They are all well below the green line, the main sea level drawn up by the algae. These days they are almost always underwater, but when this building was built in the 1500s, they were well visible to guests who entered it."

In November, a 6-foot-high tide - the second highest ever recorded - pushed by 35 mph winds submerged 80 percent of Venice.

The seawater flooded shops, restaurants, residential ground floors and even the Basilica in St. Mark's Square, causing damage in excess of \$1 billion.

While scientists around the world warn about the threat posed by rising seas, Venice has had the tide literally at its doorstep since its foundation - it has been adapting to it for centuries in innovative ways that can serve as an example to other coastal cities across the globe.

"What the Venetians are teaching is that when you live close to the water, you live in a continuously changing environment, in which you need the water, but you also need the protection from the water," Cecconi explains.

"This is a continuous challenge that forces you to think and find new solutions."

Until not long ago, those solutions included raising the city at the same speed as the water by adding steps and layers to the city's banks, and to sacrifice ground floors by walling up its doors once the water got to their level.

The drastic acceleration in the rise of sea levels, and the consequent higher and more frequent high tides, mean that there is a need for new, drastic solutions.

"In the past 25 years, we noticed that the sea level has been rising four times as fast as in previous years. So, we have no choice but to try to keep the excess of seawater out of the lagoon," Cecconi says.

The way to do that is as simple in theory as it is complicated in practice: a system of barriers that rest at the bottom of the three inlets that separate the Venetian Lagoon from the Adriatic Sea, which are then raised to form a floodgate only when the sea rises above critical levels.

The project's name, MOSE, is a nod to the prophet who parted the Red Sea.

Its construction time frame is also of biblical proportion: The floodgate system has been under construction for the past 17 years and was initially meant to be completed by 2012.

A series of corruption scandals, rising costs and political controversies have delayed the project, which is yet to become fully operational.

In 2014, 35 people involved in the project were arrested on suspicion of corruption, bribery and kickbacks.

Among them were the former mayor of Venice, Giorgio Orsoni, who was placed under house arrest for illicit party financing, and the president of the Veneto region, Giancarlo Galan, who was charged with corruption.

The MOSE project at the beginning of February still looked like a massive construction site built in the middle of the lagoon made of thick, gray concrete walls emerging from the water.

There was no sign of the watertight box-shaped gates — they were resting at the bottom of the lagoon — but it was possible to walk 60 feet below the water to seabed level, and through one of the tunnels used by engineers to operate the barrier.

There, Alessandro Soru, the chief engineer at MOSE, told journalists that once finished, it would be an unprecedented engineering feat.

"This is a unique floodgate system: it will be a mile long, with 78 gates ready to rise from the bottom of the sea when needed." Soru says.

"There are other barriers in Rotterdam, London and New Orleans, but none of them are underwater when not in use."

In the meantime, a combination of rising sea levels and stronger storms have made tides higher and more frequent than ever, leaving Venice exposed to the elements like never before.

Claudio Scarpa, director of the Hotels Association in Venice, says that the fear factor caused by the dramatic images of the flood is a bigger threat to Venice than the immediate damage caused by the water.

"That exceptional high tide last November lasted a few hours, and yet people around the world think Venice was struck by a tsunami and it's still underwater," Scarpa said.

"In the month after the high tide, hotel bookings dropped by 50 percent. These days, they are still 20 percent below last year's average. And we are in the middle of Venice Carnival, one of the busiest times of the year."

Since November's high tide, many among business owners and regular Venetians demanded answers on when the floodgate system would become operational, and if it would ever see the light of day.

Others blamed the MOSE, not climate change, for the worsening of tides in recent years.

On a menu at Harry's Bar, one of the oldest and most celebrated bars in Venice, a message by Arrigo Cipriani, its owner, stated: "During the past 50 years a devilish force, a Babylonian project, planned by nonsense and inexperience, has upset the lagoon. You may have noticed that for the past 40 days we have had an unusual low tide. Just an answer to the legend of the sea level rise."

"The project often grinded to a halt because of the frequent changes of governments, which is bankrolling it," Venice Mayor Luigi Brugnaro said.

"The irony is that the devastating high tide last November brought the project to the world attention once again, and gave it a final push."

MOSE, the mayor says, will become fully operational by 2021, but it could be activated temporarily as early as June to protect the city from exceptional tides.

Brugnaro says he doesn't only want Venice to defend itself from the effects of rising sea levels, but he wants it to become an example for other coastal cities across the world on how to face climate change.

"We want Venice to house an international water agency which studies the effects of climate change, so that we apply the lessons learned here to find solutions that work elsewhere in the world."

[North Macedonia] North Macedonia parliament dissolved ahead of early election (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 2:46 PM, Konstantin Testorides, 12625K, Neutral]

North Macedonia's parliament was dissolved on Sunday, ahead of an early election.

The April 12 election is taking place eight months before the normal expiration of the parliament's four-year term.

All major political parties agreed to the early election proposed by then Prime Minister Zoran Zaev after France, supported by Denmark and the Netherlands, vetoed the opening of accession talks between the European Union and North Macedonia.

A caretaker government of technicians was installed in early January to ensure a free and fair vote.

Zaev had voiced "disappointment and outrage" over the EU decision, but France insisted its aim was to overhaul the accession process and not dispute North Macedonia's suitability. Earlier this month, the European Commission proposed an overhaul in the process of adding new members, in a bid to remove France's objections to opening talks with Albania and North Macedonia.

The commission is hoping a breakthrough on accession talks can be achieved in March. The bloc also has a major summit in the Western Balkans planned for May.

[North Macedonia] North Macedonia parliament dissolves, sets poll date, after EU shuns talks (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 3:32 PM, Kole Casule, 5304K, Neutral]

North Macedonia's parliament dissolved itself on Sunday and set April 12 for an early election, eight months ahead of the end of the current term, in what is seen as a major test for the pro-EU policies of former Prime Minister Zoran Zaev's Social Democrats.

The move, endorsed by 108 deputies in the 120-seat parliament, follows Zaev's resignation last month that came after the European Union failed to give his country a date to start talks on joining the bloc.

Zaev's cabinet was replaced by an interim government led by Interior Minister Oliver Spasovski which was tasked to ensure conditions for a free and fair vote.

"I have signed the decision (to set the date) for early elections on April 12," Talat Xhaferi, the parliamentary speaker, told deputies.

French President Emmanuel Macron in October refused to let North Macedonia start EU entry talks, despite concerns over increased Chinese and Russian meddling in the Balkans.

Skopje had expected to be granted a date to start accession talks after settling a dispute with neighboring Greece by changing the country's name to North Macedonia from Macedonia. Macron also led a group of EU leaders who ruled out opening talks with Albania.

Serbia and Montenegro also aspire to join the European Union but the enlargement process has also largely stalled amid concerns in the West about immigration and the strains of Brexit.

Bosnia and Kosovo, the other two EU hopefuls from the Balkans, are lagging far behind.

Earlier this month, EU's enlargement commissioner, Oliver Varhelyi, proposed giving EU members the power to delay or reverse the process of admitting new nations or to force them to restart entry talks in some policy areas.

North Macedonia is expected to become the 30th member of NATO early this year, once its accession has been ratified by all the member states of the U.S.-led alliance.

[Turkey] Turkish author fears for her life if she returns home (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 1:30 PM, Fulya Ozerkan, 10942K, Negative]

Exiled Turkish novelist Asli Erdogan expected to be a convicted woman by now with a life sentence hanging over her head. The award-winning author, whose books have been translated into 21 languages, spent four months in jail in 2016 as part of a probe into a newspaper's alleged links to outlawed Kurdish militants.

After her release she travelled to Germany in 2017 as soon as she received her passport back.

This week, when the long-running terror case in which she was accused came to court again, she was unexpectedly acquitted.

"To be honest, I was very surprised. Almost everyone took it for granted that I would be convicted," the writer told AFP in a phone interview Sunday.

"I still cannot believe it, but if it's not that, there will be another case," said Erdogan — who is not related to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

An Istanbul court acquitted Erdogan on Friday of membership of an armed terrorist group and disrupting the unity of the state, while charges of spreading terror propaganda were dropped.

The writer said she had risked a life sentence just because her name was on the literary advisory list of the now-closed pro-Kurdish Ozgur Gundem newspaper.

The accusations "would amount to establishing an army in order to destroy the state. What's it got to do with a newspaper?" she asked.

She might have escaped a long jail term, but the experience has taken a toll.

In Germany she has had surgery twice for muscle paralysis of the intestine, a condition which doctors say is post-traumatic.

"At the age of 52 I encountered a disease that should occur in one's 80s," she said, adding that her stint in jail also played a part.

What she most longs for is access to her library in Turkey.

"A 3,500-book library is my only property in the world. (Without it) I feel like my arms and legs are cut off."

However, she has no plans to return home because the authorities could seize upon anything she might say to charge her with further offences, with potentially fatal consequences.

"Another arrest would mean death for me... Under the current circumstances, I cannot return given a risk of detention," she said.

Since a failed putsch in Turkey in 2016, tens of thousands of people including academics and journalists have been arrested suspected of links to coup plotters.

Critics accuse the president of using the coup to silence opponents but the government argues a wholesale purge is needed to rid the network of followers blamed for the failed putsch.

For the author, the political climate is worsening even though she can no longer gauge the mood for herself as she could before.

"I used to speak with grocers or witness chats in a bus or metro. That was feeding me as a writer but this channel had been cut now. But I have the impression that silence prevails in Turkey."

She described the political system as "fascism, neo-fascism," saying ongoing cases involving jailed author Ahmet Altan and businessman and philanthropist Osman Kavala showed the situation was "well beyond dictatorship."

She added: "I don't know for sure what happens behind closed doors but such irrational cases have no other explanation. I see them as part of a strategy."

[United Kingdom] Scottish Tory leader backs PM's 'bold and imaginative' bridge to Ireland plan (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [2/16/2020 7:51 AM, Tom Eden, 10942K, Positive]

Jackson Carlaw has backed Boris Johnson's idea for a bridge between Scotland and

Ireland.

The newly-elected leader of the Scottish Conservatives said "you've got to be bold and imaginative" when asked if the Prime Minister's desire for a bridge across the Irish Sea was a good idea.

Speaking on the BBC's Politics Scotland show, Mr Carlaw argued that Mr Johnson's proposal to look into the bridge's viability was a sign that he wanted investment "across the whole of the United Kingdom, not just in some parts of it."

Mr Johnson's suggestion of a bridge between Portpatrick in Dumfries and Galloway and Larne in Co Antrim has been branded "a vanity project" by Scotland's Transport Secretary, while ministers on both sides of the Irish Sea have said it would be a waste of money.

Concerns have been raised about the cost, an estimated £20 billion, which the two devolved governments say would be better spend on other projects, as well as the sea's depth and hundreds of tonnes of dumped explosives in Beaufort's Dyke. However, Mr Carlaw defended the proposal and said: "By proposing the feasibility study with the government in Ireland of a potential bride between Ireland and Scotland, it's implicit that he wants the new investment."

"I'm not opposed to it, you've got to be bold and imaginative," he said of the bridge.

"There are bigger bridges than that elsewhere in the world, lots of people scoffed about them but I think we have to be imaginative going forward.

"I don't know whether the particular topography of the sea bed between Scotland and Ireland is going to make it possible, but I'm as encouraged by the response of the Northern Ireland government as I am discouraged by the cynicism of the Scottish Government.

"These are things we should be prepared to look at."

After it emerged Number 10 had charged officials from a number of government departments to work on the proposal, Mr Johnson's official spokesman said: "The PM set out this was an idea which he believed could have some merit so, as a result of that, you would expect the Government to be looking into it."

During the interview, Mr Carlaw also said that the Prime Minister is "perfectly relaxed" about the Scottish party potentially contradicting the UK Government's position after declaring a wide-ranging review of party policies.

It is believed that the Scottish Tories could U-turn on their opposition to free higher education in Scotland as well as considering their position on the two-child cap brought in by the Conservatives at Westminster on some welfare payments.

[United Kingdom] Man dies as Storm Dennis hits UK (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 10:47 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

A man died after falling into a river on Sunday as Storm Dennis swept across Britain with

the army drafted in to help deal with heavy flooding and high winds.

The man fell into the River Tawe, in south Wales, police said.

"A male has fallen into the river at #Ystradgynlais at approximately 10am this morning and has sadly be found deceased further along the river in the Tebanos area," Dyfed Powys Police said in a tweet.

The government weather agency earlier issued a rare red warning for the area, saying there was a risk of "significant impacts from flooding" that included a "danger to life from fast flowing water, extensive flooding to property and road closures."

A record 594 flood warnings and alerts were in place on Sunday, extending from Scotland's River Tweed to Cornwall in southwest England.

Winds of over 90 miles per hour were recorded in Aberdaron, south Wales.

Pictures circulated on social media showed the nearby River Taff bursting its banks, while rescue workers rushed to get people trapped in their homes in Powys to safety.

"The forecast is for very significant levels of rain, especially in the eastern valleys of South Wales," said Jeremy Parr, from government body Natural Resources Wales.

"Impacts could be severe overnight, and everyone should take the warnings extremely seriously," he added.

Police declared major incidents in parts of Wales and England, with landslides also reported.

"Some communities have been cut-off..., but emergency service workers are working tirelessly to put measures in place to ensure the safety of residents," South Wales Police said in a statement.

Roads and railways were badly affected by the downpours and winds, having barely recovered from a similar storm last week.

The Ministry of Defence deployed troops in West Yorkshire, northern England, which suffered badly from flooding caused by last weekend's Storm Ciara.

"Our armed forces are always ready to support local authorities and communities whenever they need it," said defence minister Ben Wallace.

British Airways and easyJet confirmed they had grounded flights, with footage posted online showing a massive Airbus A380 jet being blown about as it attempted to land.

Two bodies were pulled from rough seas off the south England coast on Saturday as the storm barrelled in.

One of the men is assumed to have been the subject of a search triggered when an LPG

tanker reported that one of its crew was unaccounted for.

Northwestern France was also affected by the storm, especially Brittany where the Finistere and Morbihan regions were placed on orange alert for rain and flooding, according to the national weather service, Meteo-France.

"Winds will be increasing throughout the day on Sunday across Germany, Denmark and southern Sweden," said AccuWeather Meteorologist Maura Kelly.

East Asia and Pacific

China, Asia Bulk Up Economy Defenses Against Virus Ahead of G-20 (Bloomberg) **Bloomberg** [2/16/2020 2:04 PM, Tony Czuczka, 6400K, Neutral]

China, Hong Kong and Singapore are pledging extra fiscal stimulus to counter the economic hit from the coronavirus, which will lead the agenda of the world's top finance officials this week.

While the International Monetary Fund is calling for coordinated global action, there's no clear picture on what that might entail. That puts the onus on governments for the time being, including Chinese authorities already squeezed by a trade war with the U.S.

China said Sunday it will enact more-efficient stimulus measures despite a widening fiscal gap, including lower corporate taxes. Hong Kong's top finance official said the city is facing "tsunami-like" shocks that may lead to a record budget deficit. Singapore is headed for its biggest budget gap in almost two decades, according to analysts.

"While large-scale rolling back of taxes and fees may increase short-term challenges, the nation must take a longer-term view and take resolute steps to implement tax and fee cuts," Chinese Finance Minister Liu Kun wrote on Sunday in Qiushi, a Communist Party magazine.

The party's Politburo has already urged China to meet its economic targets this year, signaling the potential of a large-scale stimulus as policy makers weigh their options.

With the virus shutting down commerce and hitting supply chains, Group of 20 finance ministers and central bankers gathering in Riyadh on Saturday will be discussing the surging risk to growth. HSBC Holdings Plc was the latest bank to cut its global outlook for 2020 to 2.3% from 2.5%.

While the People's Bank of China has provided liquidity and central banks in the Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia have cut interest rates, most major central banks haven't signaled any easing plans.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said last week that whatever impact coronavirus has on the U.S. economy will show up in the economic data soon, but it's too uncertain to say whether it will lead to a "material" change in the outlook.

In Hong Kong, the economic impact of the virus is worsening a recession rooted in the city's

political crisis that triggered pro-democracy protests last year.

The virus impact goes beyond retail, food and beverage and tourism-related industries, and shocks may cause unemployment to "deteriorate rapidly," Financial Secretary Paul Chan said in a blog post Sunday.

Singapore's fiscal gap may widen to 1.5% of gross domestic product in the year beginning April 1, the highest since 2001, according to the median estimate in a Bloomberg survey of economists.

'Coordinated Measures'

The city state, which is losing as many as 20,000 tourists a day to travel curbs, will get a "strong" package of budget measures this week, Minister Lawrence Wong, co-chair of the government's virus-response task force, said in an interview.

With the number of coronavirus cases in China nearing 70,000 over the weekend and deaths rising to more than 1,660, the outbreak was a topic at an international security conference in Germany.

China has "a lot of fiscal space," IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said at the meeting in Munich. "There needs to be bottom-up analysis of the impact so we can then agree on synchronized, or even better, coordinated measures to protect the world economy from a more serious shock."

[China] Xi's early involvement in virus outbreak raises questions (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 6:08 AM, Yanan Wang, 482K, Negative]

A recent speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping that has been published by state media indicates for the first time that he was leading the response to a new virus outbreak from early on in the crisis.

The publication of the Feb. 3 speech was an apparent attempt to demonstrate that the Communist Party leadership had acted decisively from the beginning, but also opens up the Chinese leader to criticism over why the public was not alerted sooner.

In the speech, Xi said he gave instructions on fighting the virus on Jan. 7 and ordered the shutdown that began on Jan. 23 of cities at the epicenter of the outbreak. His remarks were published by state media late Saturday.

"On Jan. 22, in light of the epidemic's rapid spread and the challenges of prevention and control, I made a clear request that Hubei province implement comprehensive and stringent controls over the outflow of people," Xi told a meeting of the party's standing committee, its top body.

The number of new cases in mainland China fell for a third straight day, China's National Health Commission reported Sunday. The 2,009 new cases in the previous 24-hour period brought the total to 68,500.

Commission spokesman Mi Feng said the percentage of severe cases had dropped to 7.2%

of the total from a peak of 15.9% on Jan. 27. The proportion is higher in Wuhan, the Hubei city where the outbreak started, but has fallen to 21.6%.

"The national efforts against the epidemic have shown results," Mi said at the commission's daily media briefing.

Taiwan on Sunday reported its first death from the virus, the fifth fatality outside of mainland China. The island also confirmed two new cases, raising its total to 20.

Taiwan's Central News Agency reported that the person who died was a man in his 60s living in central Taiwan. He had not traveled overseas recently and had no known contact with virus patients, CNA said, citing Minister of Health and Welfare Chen Shih-chung.

China reported 142 more deaths, almost all in Hubei, raising mainland China's death toll to 1,665. Another 9,419 people have recovered from COVID-19, a disease caused by a new coronavirus, and have been discharged from hospitals.

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe convened an experts meeting to discuss measures to contain the virus in his country, where more than a dozen cases have emerged in the past few days without any obvious link to China.

"The situation surrounding this virus is changing by the minute," Abe said.

Japanese Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said the country is "entering into a phase that is different from before," requiring new steps to stop the spread of the virus.

Hundreds of Americans on a quarantined cruise ship in Japan were awaiting charter flights home, as Japan announced another 70 infections had been confirmed on the Diamond Princess. Canada, Hong Kong and Italy said they were planning similar flights.

Japan now has 413 confirmed cases, including 355 from the cruise ship, and one death from the virus.

Xi's role was muted in the early days of the epidemic, which has grown into one of the biggest political challenges of his seven-year tenure.

The disclosure of his speech indicates top leaders knew about the outbreak's potential severity at least two weeks before such dangers were made known to the public. It was not until late January that officials said the virus can spread between humans and public alarm began to rise.

Zhang Lifan, a commentator in Beijing, said it's not clear why the speech was published now. One message could be that local authorities should take responsibility for failing to take effective measures after Xi gave instructions in early January. Alternatively, it may mean that Xi, as the top leader, is willing to take responsibility because he was aware of the situation, Zhang said.

Trust in the government's approach to outbreaks remains fractured after the SARS epidemic of 2002 and 2003, which was covered up for months.

Authorities in Hubei and Wuhan faced public fury over their initial handling of the epidemic. In apparent response, the Communist Party's top officials in Hubei and Wuhan were dismissed and replaced last week.

Hubei announced Sunday that all vehicle traffic will be banned across the province, expanding on an existing ban in Wuhan, in another step to try to stop the spread of the virus. Exceptions will be made for vehicles involved in epidemic prevention and transporting daily necessities.

The fall in new cases follows a spike of more than 15,000 announced on Thursday, when Hubei began to include those that had been diagnosed by a doctor but not yet confirmed by laboratory tests.

The roughly 380 Americans aboard the cruise ship docked at Yokohama, near Tokyo, were given the option of taking U.S.-government chartered aircraft back to the U.S., where they would face another 14-day quarantine. Those going were to begin leaving the ship Sunday night. People with symptoms were to be banned from the flights.

The Japanese defense ministry said around 300 of the Americans were preparing Sunday night to leave on buses to take them to Tokyo's Haneda Airport.

The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo said Washington was evacuating the Americans because the passengers and crew members on board the Diamond Princess were at a high risk of exposure to the virus.

About 255 Canadians and 330 Hong Kong residents are on board the ship or undergoing treatment in Japanese hospitals. There are also 35 Italians, of which 25 are crew members, including the captain.

The American evacuees will be taken to Travis Air Force Base in California, with some continuing to Lackland Air Force Base in Texas.

Malaysia said it would not allow any more passengers from another cruise ship to transit the country after an 83-year-old American woman from the MS Westerdam tested positive for the virus.

She was among 145 passengers who flew from Cambodia to Malaysia on Friday. Her husband also had symptoms but tested negative. The Westerdam was turned away from four ports around Asia before Cambodia allowed it to dock in Sihanoukville late last week.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Wan Azizah Wan Ismail said that her country would bar cruise ships that came from or transit any Chinese ports from docking.

Cambodia said earlier that all 1,455 passengers on the Holland America-operated ship had tested negative for the virus.

[China] 'This is unprecedented': Xi Jinping shifts blame as Beijing boasts of coronavirus crackdown (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/16/2020 2:47 PM, Joel Gehrke, 570K, Negative]

Chinese authorities are scrambling to protect the reputation of the Communist government as the coronavirus outbreak threatens to embarrass Beijing amid a deepening "systems conflict" with the United States.

"Nothing short of the most comprehensive, rigorous, and thorough measures have been taken," Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the Munich Security Conference on Sunday. "China's speed, scale, and efficiency all reflect the advantage of China's system."

That effort to salvage a public relations victory from the coronavirus was typical of Wang's defense of the Communist model of government, as he touted their speedy hospital construction and vast effort to quarantine and monitor the cities most afflicted by the virus before rebuking Western officials for their "subconscious" sense of superiority. His confident tone was belied hours later by the rare publication of a Feb. 3 speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping, who was quoted faulting local Communist officials for failing to handle the crisis quickly enough.

"I issued demands during a Politburo Standing Committee meeting on January 7 for work to contain the outbreak," Xi is quoted as reminding his Chinese Communist Party lieutenants. "[We must] inform the people of what the party and government is doing and what is our next step forward to strengthen the public's confidence."

Chinese officials have quarantined tens of millions of people, abruptly applying "wartime conditions" on the areas most severely affected by the outbreak. Xi's speech was published after an outburst of criticism from doctors and political dissidents in mainland China, who argue that the severity of the outbreak stems from the decision by Communist officials to punish the doctors who first warned about the outbreak.

"This is unprecedented," Wu Qiang, a political analyst in Beijing, told the South China Morning Post. "It sounds like he is defending and explaining how he has done everything in his capacity to lead epidemic prevention."

Xi has tried to maintain political discipline since the coronavirus outbreak took on emergency proportions, but his remarks acknowledge implicitly that the crisis has turned into a domestic and international public relations problem.

"We have to liaise and communicate with other countries and regions to share information about the outbreak and containment strategies to win international understanding and support," he said. "[We must] inform the people of what the party and government is doing and what is our next step forward to strengthen the public's confidence."

That mandate adds context to Wang's ebullient tone earlier Saturday morning. The top Chinese envoy denounced American criticisms of Beijing and predicted that any economic and social "difficulties will be temporary and short-lived" due to the government's countermeasures.

"The Chinese economy is well-positioned to overcome all risks and challenges," he told the

conference. "We are confident that China will emerge stronger from the epidemic as pent-up consumer demand and growth potential will be quickly unleashed."

[China] China Vows More Fiscal Support as Virus Roils a Slowing Economy (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 2:24 AM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral] Video [HERE](#)

China pledged to roll out more effective stimulus despite a widening fiscal gap as the novel coronavirus hits an already slowing economy, highlighting the challenges the epidemic is imposing as the death toll stacks up and thousands of new cases are reported each day.

The nation will further perfect and implement measures this year to reduce corporate taxes and cut unnecessary government expenses as the virus takes a toll on production, Finance Minister Liu Kun wrote on Sunday in Qiushi, the Communist Party of China's flagship magazine.

The outbreak of the virus and widening dislocation has dealt a shock to Asia's largest economy that will burden the budget in Beijing, as well as in other economies across the region. On the same day Liu's remarks were issued, Hong Kong Financial Secretary Paul Chan warned the territory may incur a record deficit next fiscal year. Later this week, Singapore will present its annual budget, with analysts predicting the biggest deficit in almost two decades.

China's government faced slowing revenue growth even before efforts to contain the virus led to the shutdown of most business. The majority of local governments expect income to grow at a slower pace this year than the provincial average in 2019, according to local budgets compiled by Bloomberg.

With production yet to regain its full pace in all but a few pockets of the economy, increased stimulus to ensure steady growth may widen the fiscal gap and make policy fine-tuning more complicated. Still, authorities are stressing the need to step up spending and ensure funds to contain the disease, regardless of heightened fiscal pressure, the finance minister wrote.

There would continue to be "targeted and phased" measures in cutting taxes and expenses to help companies, he said. Policies include reducing or exempting value-added taxes for firms providing essential goods or logistics, and more funds for provincial authorities, according to Liu.

"While large-scale rolling back of taxes and fees may increase short-term challenges, the nation must take a longer-term view and make resolute steps to implement tax and fee cuts," wrote Liu.

[China] Number of new coronavirus cases in China drops for third consecutive day (Yahoo News/RFI)

Yahoo News/RFI [2/16/2020 5:00 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

The number of new cases from China's coronavirus epidemic dropped for a third consecutive day on Sunday.

The World Health Organisation has warned it is impossible to predict how the outbreak will develop.

Global concern remains high about the spread of the virus, which first emerged in China's central Hubei province in December, with the first death outside Asia reported in France on 15 February.

The death toll jumped to 1,665 in mainland China on Sunday after 142 more people died from the virus.

More than 68,000 people have now been infected - but the number of new cases of the Covid-19 strain continued to decline.

In hardest-hit Hubei province, the number of new cases slowed for a third consecutive day.

At 139, the number of deaths was level with Saturday's toll.

The number of new cases in other parts of the country has dropped for twelve straight days.

The WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned however that it was "impossible to predict which direction this epidemic will take."

"We ask all governments, companies, and news organisations to work with us to sound the appropriate level of alarm without fanning the flames of hysteria," he said, speaking at the Munich Security Conference.

"China has bought the world time. We don't know how much time."

The UN health body has asked China for more details on how diagnoses are being made.

An international team of WHO experts will arrive in Beijing this weekend for a joint mission with their Chinese counterparts.

[China] China Standoff Cost the NBA 'Hundreds of Millions' (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal {2/16/20120 10:22 AM, Ben Cohen, Neutral}

There is now a price tag on the tweet that ravaged the NBA's business in China: hundreds of millions of dollars.

Houston Rockets general manager's Daryl Morey tweet in October supporting the protesters in Hong Kong enraged the Beijing government and resulted in an extraordinary standoff between the world's most populous country and its most popular American sports league. Chinese sponsors cut ties with the Rockets, who haven't appeared on the country's top streaming platform this season, and NBA games still haven't returned to the airwaves of state television.

It has been four months since the league's reckoning, which has been overshadowed by China's attempts to contain an outbreak of the novel coronavirus that has killed thousands of people, but the financial consequences for the NBA have only recently begun to come

into focus.

The loss "will be in the hundreds of millions," NBA commissioner Adam Silver said on Saturday, the first time he'd used such a number to estimate the cost to the league's China business. The hit amounted to "probably less than \$400 million," Silver said in response to speculation that the losses could reach \$1 billion, though he cautioned that the final number might be lower than the figure he cited.

"It's substantial," Silver said. "I don't want to run from that. We were taken off the air in China for a period of time, and it caused our many business partners in China to feel it was therefore inappropriate to have ongoing relationships with us. But I don't have any sense that there's any permanent damage to our business there."

Morey's tweet, China's backlash, the U.S. political establishment's uproar, the NBA's initially conciliatory response and its defiant refusal to buckle under Beijing's pressure were the roots of the greatest crisis the league had encountered in years.

It plunged the NBA into an unexpected battle that pitted its commitment to protecting free speech against the pursuit of riches in a lucrative market, and it played out with the Los Angeles Lakers and Brooklyn Nets on Chinese soil for two exhibition games while Beijing and Washington were engaged in a heated trade negotiation on the heels of the 70th anniversary of Communist Party rule.

After the players, teams and league executives returned to the U.S., Silver stressed that the league was committed to a future in China, describing calls for the NBA to disengage as "cartoonish characterizations of business." NBA officials were confident that if they took a diplomatic approach to the standoff, then cooler heads would prevail over time, but they couldn't be sure when.

It hasn't happened yet.

The streaming giant Tencent is showing a reduced number of games from last season, and Chinese state-run television still hasn't broadcast the NBA this season. Tencent is airing the events of All-Star weekend, however, and NBA officials had been quietly optimistic that CCTV's sports channel would bring the NBA back with the All-Star Game on Sunday, which happened to be after the Lunar New Year and the beginning of a new trade deal between Washington and Beijing.

But then the coronavirus hit China. The remarkable pressure on China to contain the virus makes the Communist Party's strategy for dealing with the NBA seem trivial by comparison. Even with millions of people living under quarantine who could be watching basketball at home, the NBA returning to CCTV is not a priority for a government under fire.

"It's almost hard for us to be having conversations about the broadcasting of games when there is a major national, if not global, health crisis happening," Silver said.

Silver said he's not pressing the issue at a time when everyday life in China is at a standstill because of the virus. When the NBA might be on television again is beyond the league's control, Silver said, and he was not sure which official in China's authoritarian government

would have the power to make such a decision.

Silver opened his customary news conference on the Saturday of All-Star weekend by addressing the recent deaths of Kobe Bryant and David Stern—and, in a sign of how much the NBA values its largest foreign market, speaking to the people of China.

"We wish you all the best in dealing with these tragic circumstances and encourage you to stay strong and hope you can find some solace through sports and the things we're doing at the NBA," Silver said.

There had been indications the league was taking steps to brace for significant losses even before Saturday's disclosure.

Last month, the NBA informed teams to expect a \$1 million drop in the projected salary cap for next season, according to a person familiar with the matter. The salary cap determines how much the league's 30 teams are permitted to spend on players, and it's based on approximately half of the NBA's annual revenues. The guidance came after the league downgraded its projections last September, before the unexpected showdown with China, from \$118 million to \$116 million. The latest decrease was down to \$115 million—which appeared to signal the league was planning for losses in the \$60 million range.

It still represents an increase from this year's salary cap of \$109 million, and the league owes much of its financial boom over the last decade to a new domestic television contract in 2014 that nearly tripled its rights fees. But the NBA has long viewed China as its most important foreign market and the engine powering its future growth, and the league signed a five-year contract extension worth \$1.5 billion last summer with Tencent, which has refused to show Rockets games since the team was effectively blacklisted in October.

But it was encouraging to the league when Yao Ming, the former Rockets star who is now the head of the Chinese Basketball Association, made the trip to New York recently for Stern's memorial service, where the 7-foot-6 man had a reserved seat in the front row of Radio City Music Hall. Yao, who refused to take the NBA's calls during the China standoff, was one of the few players who received a special mention in Silver's eulogy.

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong Facing 'Tsunami-Like' Shocks, Finance Chief Says (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 12:50 AM, Jinshan Hong, 6400K, Neutral]

Hong Kong is facing "tsunami-like" shocks, and may incur a record budget deficit in the next fiscal year as the city counts the costs of the coronavirus outbreak after months of social unrest, Financial Secretary Paul Chan said.

The impact of the epidemic on the Hong Kong economy is being felt beyond retail, food and beverage and tourism-related industries, Chan said in a blog post Sunday. The short-term economic outlook is "cautious," and shocks can cause the unemployment rate to "deteriorate rapidly," Chan said.

"In addition to launching counter-cyclical relief measures to support the economy, the government's recurrent expenditure in the past 10 years has continued to increase

significantly, and the weakening economy has significantly reduced government revenue from tax and land," Chan wrote, elaborating on the deficit.

The budget shortfall will likely continue for a period of time, he said.

Economists are revising down their forecasts for Hong Kong's economic growth in 2020, with the virus worsening the current recession which was a fallout from the city's political crisis. The government will seek approval from the territory's legislature for at least HK\$25 billion (\$3.2 billion) in fresh funding to reduce the impact of the coronavirus outbreak in the city, Chief Executive Carrie Lam said Friday.

"The current fiscal reserves of the government allows it to sustainably launch counter-cyclical measures in the near future to stabilize employment and support the economy," Chan said Sunday. "However, in order to ensure the stability of public finances, we must pay more attention to fiscal sustainability and pay within our means when considering new expenditures, especially recurrent expenditures, in the future."

[Hong Kong] Hong Kong protesters rally against planned virus quarantine centers (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 5:14 AM, Jessie Pang, 5304K, Neutral]

Hundreds of demonstrators rallied for a second day in Hong Kong on Sunday to protest against plans to turn some buildings into coronavirus quarantine centers, reviving anti-government protests in the Chinese-ruled city.

The virus has opened a new front for protesters after months of demonstrations over the perceived erosion of freedoms had largely fizzled out over the past month, as people stayed at home amid fears of a community outbreak of the virus.

About 100 people braved rain in the New Territories district of Fo Tan, where authorities plan to use a newly built residential development that was subsidized by the government as a quarantine center. Riot police stood by.

A 38-year-old mother of two said she had waited eight years for her home in the Chun Yeung estate and was expecting to get her keys by the end of this month.

"There's no consultation and we don't know how long they'll use Chun Yeung estate. That's why we are so mad," she the woman.

Father-of-two Koby, 36, also expressed frustration at not being told for how long the public housing might be used for quarantine.

"I've waited eight years. I have two children studying in kindergarten and have already transferred them to the school in Fo Tan," he said.

Protesters gathered in other districts on Sunday.

With Hong Kong property prices among the most expensive in the world, owning a home is a distant dream for many, and frustration over housing has triggered protests in the past.

Many Hong Kong people, already angry about what they see as meddling by Beijing in the former British colony's affairs - which it denies - have criticized the government's handling of the virus scare, piling pressure on embattled city leader Carrie Lam.

On Friday, the government sought to appease families that have been allocated a flat in the Fo Tan estate by pledging a special subsidy.

Three weeks ago, protesters set alight the lobby of a newly built residential building in another district in the New Territories, that authorities had planned to use as a quarantine facility. The government dropped the plan.

Hong Kong has had 57 confirmed cases of the coronavirus. One person has died of it in the city.

Some Hong Kong people have called on the city government to seal the border with the mainland to block the virus but Lam has ruled that out.

[Japan] Avoid crowds over virus, Japan health minister warns (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 8:47 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Japan's health minister on Sunday urged the public to avoid crowds and "non-essential gatherings", including notoriously packed commuter trains, to prevent the new coronavirus from spreading in the country.

Katsunobu Kato warned the nation was "entering a new phase" in the outbreak of the virus, which has infected nearly 60 people in Japan so far.

"We want to ask the public to avoid non-urgent, non-essential gatherings. We want elderly and those with pre-existing conditions to avoid crowded places," Kato said after a meeting of a panel of experts.

"I think it's important that we exercise Japan's collective strength. We wish to ask the Japanese people for their cooperation and it will take everyone being united to tackle this infectious disease," he told a press conference.

Kato said cases with no clear transmission chains and involving people who have not travelled to China, where the outbreak began, meant Japan was entering a new stage.

The government will draft fresh guidelines for doctors about when to suspect possible coronavirus infections and for ordinary citizens to know when to seek medical care.

Japan has been pushing Tokyo residents to try telecommuting or avoid rush hour commutes to ease traffic congestion during the summer Tokyo Olympic Games.

Kato said the government will reiterate its calls on people to try those measures to ease spread of the virus.

The comments come after a spate of new infections were confirmed over the weekend,

raising the total number of cases inside Japan to 59.

Those numbers exclude hundreds of cases aboard a cruise ship, as well as a quarantine officer who tested people on the boat.

Most infected individuals seem to experience mild conditions similar to the common cold and may not realise that they have the disease, risking possibly spreading it to others, said Takaji Wakita, chief of the National Institute of Infectious Diseases who headed the expert panel.

"It is expected that domestic infections will continue," Wakita said, adding that Japan was at an early stage of the spread.

[North Korea] Kim Jong Un makes first public appearance in 22 days amid virus outbreak (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 12:07 PM, Cynthia Kim, 5304K, Neutral]

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un made his first public appearance in 22 days amid an outbreak of coronavirus, state media reported on Saturday, to visit a national mausoleum and mark the anniversary of the late leader Kim Jong Il's birth.

Kim Jong Un paid tribute to the statue of former leader Kim at Pyongyang's Kumsusan Palace of the Sun, his first public appearance since he attended Lunar New Year celebrations on Jan. 25, state media Korean Central News Agency said.

North Korea has not confirmed any cases of the new coronavirus, but state media said the government was extending to 30 days the quarantine period for people showing symptoms, and all government institutions and foreigners living in the country were expected to comply "unconditionally."

Late leader Kim's birthday, Feb. 16, is a national holiday celebrated as the Day of the Shining Star.

Accompanying Kim to the mausoleum were high ranking party officials including Choe Ryong Hae, president of the Presidium of the Supreme People's Assembly and Pak Pong Ju, vice chairman of the State Affairs Commission.

[South Korea] South Korea Tracks Virus Patients' Travels—and Publishes Them Online (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/16/2020 8:43 AM, Eun-Young Jeong, Neutral]

As the Covid-19 virus began to spread last month, South Koreans didn't have to wonder if they may have crossed paths with one of the country's confirmed cases.

Patient No. 12 had booked seats E13 and E14 for a 5:30 p.m. showing of the South Korean film, "The Man Standing Next." Before grabbing a 12:40 p.m. train, patient No. 17 dined at a soft-tofu restaurant in Seoul. Patient No. 21 drove her car to attend a weekday evening church service.

The reports, a digital diary of the individual's life a few days before contracting the

coronavirus, are made public on a Ministry of Health and Welfare website. Travel details of all 29 confirmed cases are noted in bullet points.

The online travel logs are made possible by one of the most ambitious tracking apparatuses in Asia. Health authorities can sift through credit-card records, CCTV footage, mobile-phone location services, public-transport cards and immigration records to pin down the travel histories of those infected or at risk.

Along with other preventive measures such as entry bans and quarantines, the tracking system has been used to limit the spread of the virus from China, the source of the outbreak. As of Saturday, South Korea has 29 confirmed Covid-19 cases, a modest total compared with China's other neighbors but still the sixth-largest number after China, Singapore, Hong Kong, Thailand and Japan. While at least nine out of its cases were locally transmitted, no patients have required intensive-care treatment.

Other Asian governments have deployed tracking methods and shared the whereabouts of infected individuals, though their information is often cribbed together from face-to-face interviews. China, home to the majority of the more than 66,000 Covid-19 cases, monitors individuals with data provided by telecom firms, the railway bureau and airlines. Hong Kong monitors families quarantined at home with electronic wristbands. Taiwan tracks people who are under home quarantine using their mobile-phone signals.

But South Korea's tactics stand out for the amount of detail authorities disclose to the public, an approach other countries have yet to adopt as they try to strike a balance between civil liberties and public-health demands.

As part of the coronavirus-prevention policy, travelers arriving in South Korea from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau must provide their mobile number if they want to enter. They must also download a government mobile application to report their health status every day. If they fail to report their status two days in a row, the government will call them and eventually try to track their whereabouts.

Those who become infected aren't named on the Ministry of Health and Welfare website, and they are notified that their personal information has been collected and recent whereabouts publicized. But patients can't opt out or refuse inquiries.

South Korea's methods would likely face a backlash, if not infringe on privacy laws, in many Western countries, experts say, particularly as the verdict on their usefulness isn't out yet.

"We really don't know a lot yet about the level of transmissibility of Covid-19," said Linda Selvey, a public-health professor focusing on infectious diseases at the University of Queensland in Australia. "Such considerations are important when considering whether or not to release such a high level of details about a case."

Use of "big data" can aid early detection and outbreak responses, said Abdi Mahamud, a senior World Health Organization official coordinating a Covid-19 response team in the western Pacific region. "However, this is an emerging field and caution needs to be taken on the interpretation of this kind of information," Mr. Mahamud said.

Other health experts say digital technologies are becoming a more efficient—and accurate—way to monitor quarantined patients, rather than through the laborious task of home visits or telephone calls. “Using 21st century means of trying to track cases is an exciting addition to public health,” said William Schaffner, an infectious-disease expert at Vanderbilt University.

The reason why South Korean authorities have such latitude today—and the public’s support—results from a national reckoning spurred by a slow-footed response five years ago to an outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome, or MERS, an illness also caused by a coronavirus. The government failed to provide transparency at the early stages of the outbreak when little was known about the virus, according to a Ministry of Health and Welfare white paper published after the crisis.

The roughly two-month outbreak in 2015 left 186 people infected, 38 of whom died. It took weeks for the government to release critical information, like the names and locations of hospitals where infections had occurred. The government’s indecision led to uncertainty about how, and where, MERS was spreading.

The “index” case—patient zero—visited three different health facilities before being diagnosed with MERS. One of the individuals who contracted the virus from “patient zero” sickened more than 80 others.

Nearly seven in 10 South Koreans distrusted the South Korean government’s management of MERS, according to a 2015 poll by Realmeter, a Seoul-based research firm.

The public outcry sparked legislative changes even before authorities declared the MERS outbreak was over. South Korea revised its infectious-disease control and prevention law, handing public-health officials greater authority to shut down facilities and gain access to personal information for those infected or considered to be at risk.

It also strengthened fines for those who didn’t comply and established a 24-hour emergency center that monitors infectious diseases.

“There are institutional mechanisms now in place to identify movements of these people and publicize them,” said Jun Byung-yool, a former head of South Korea’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, who had left before the MERS crisis.

As the Covid-19 threat began to emerge in January, South Korea’s new epidemiological infrastructure kicked into action. Hospitals now take individuals’ temperatures at the entrance. They have set up separate screening centers for at-risk patients and have more special wards in place for treating patients with infectious diseases. Doctors now can check patient databases to see if a patient has visited another medical facility or traveled abroad recently.

More than 55% of South Koreans approved of the approach taken by President Moon Jae-in’s administration, according to Realmeter. Mr. Moon has seen his approval ratings rise nearly 5 percentage points in recent weeks.

South Korea’s infectious-disease response could further tighten. Earlier this month, South

Korean lawmakers proposed a revision to the infectious-disease law that would increase the penalty for those who break quarantine rules from 3 million won, or about \$2,540, to 20 million won.

[South Korea] South Korea to evacuate Koreans from cruise ship quarantined in Japan (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 4:16 AM, Cynthia Kim and Minwoo Park, 5304K, Negative]

South Korea said on Sunday it would evacuate Koreans from a coronavirus-stricken cruise ship being held under quarantine in the Japanese port of Yokohama, after 355 people from it were found to be infected with the virus.

"The government plans to bring those Koreans home if they are tested negative from screenings by the Japanese authorities and are willing to return," Minister of Health and Welfare Park Neung-hoo told a briefing.

The Diamond Princess, cruise ship, owned by Carnival Corp, has been quarantined since arriving in Yokohama on Feb. 3, after a man who disembarked in Hong Kong before it traveled to Japan was diagnosed with the virus.

The United States and Hong Kong have said they will send flights to fetch their people from the ship.

[Taiwan] Taiwan confirms first coronavirus death on island, cases at 20 (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 1:32 PM, Yimou Lee, 5304K, Negative]

A taxi driver has died from the coronavirus in Taiwan, marking the first such death on the island and the fifth fatality outside mainland China from an epidemic that has curbed travel and disrupted global supply chains.

Health Minister Chen Shih-chung said during a news conference on Sunday that the deceased person was a 61-year-old man who had diabetes and hepatitis B. Taiwan has to date accumulated 20 confirmed cases.

The deceased person had not traveled abroad recently and was a taxi driver whose clients were mainly from Hong Kong, Macau and mainland China, the minister said.

One of his family members was also confirmed to have the virus.

The pair constituted Taiwan's first local transmission cases, the minister said, adding that authorities were trying to find out as soon as possible the source of contraction.

"So far, we are not able to gather his contact history, so we are actively making investigations, hoping to find out the source of the contraction," Chen said.

The island will on Monday start testing all patients who show symptoms associated with coronavirus and had traveled abroad recently, the health ministry said.

The coronavirus, thought to have emerged at a wildlife market in the central Chinese province of Hubei, has killed 1,665 people in China with latest figures showing 68,500 cases

of the illness.

Taiwan has banned entry to Chinese visitors and foreigners with a recent history of travel to China and suspended most flights to its giant neighbor.

Many schools have also extended their Lunar New Year holiday to late February to curb the spread of the virus.

In a response to panic buying of masks on the island, the government scrambled to build several mask production lines and Premier Su Tseng-chang has vowed to more than double its daily mask production to 10 million by early March.

[Taiwan] Coronavirus death reported in Taiwan, US cruise passengers released from quarantine (ABC News)

ABC News [2/16/2020 10:15 AM, Ivan Pereira, 2182K, Neutral]

Another coronavirus-related death was reported outside of China this weekend.

An unidentified man in his 60s was first admitted to a hospital on Feb. 3 after he developed a cough a week earlier, Taiwan's Ministry of Health and Welfare said in a statement. He died from the virus on Saturday, and his remains will be reserved for further medical testing, according to the statement.

This death is the fourth reported coronavirus fatality to take place outside mainland China. France reported a coronavirus fatality Sunday and the World Health Organization (WHO) said Japan and the Philippines both recorded deaths. As of Sunday morning, China has 1,524 reported coronavirus fatalities and nearly 67,000 cases, the WHO said.

Health officials and businesses around the globe continued to contain the virus and treat any patient who may have contracted the disease. The first group of the 400 U.S. passengers aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship, which has been docked at the port of Yokohama in Japan for quarantine since Feb. 3, were allowed to leave the boat Sunday morning.

They were bused to the airport, tested for any symptoms and, if cleared, will be flown to Travis Air Force Base in California and Lackland Air Force Base in Texas for a 14-day quarantine, U.S. officials said. The U.S. will provide those passengers free, chartered flights back to America until March 4, and symptomatic passengers will remain in care in Japan, the embassy said.

At least 285 people onboard the Diamond Princess tested positive for the virus as of Sunday morning, and the boat's owners, Princess Cruises, said it will cancel all trips until April 20 because of the quarantine period.

"We are preparing Diamond Princess to return to service April 29, 2020 for the start of Japan's annual Golden Week celebrations," the company said in a statement released Saturday night.

There are 15 reported cases in the U.S. as of Sunday morning, according to the WHO.

Chicago officials announced Saturday night that two patients who contracted the virus were released from home isolation after eight days.

One of those two, an unidentified woman in her 60s, had visited Wuhan, China, the epicenter of the outbreak, and transmitted the disease to her husband, according to health officials. They both tested negative for the virus, following their treatment and isolation, according to Dr. Terry Mason, the chief operating officer for the Chicago Department of Public Health.

"They have been through a lot. We thank them, and everyone else involved, for their cooperation throughout the process," he said in a statement.

[Thailand] Thailand raises over 100 bln baht for 5G spectrum auctions - regulator (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 3:20 AM, Patpicha Tanakasempipat, 10942K, Positive]

Thailand's telecoms regulator raised more than 100 billion baht (\$3.21 billion) in 5G spectrum auctions on Sunday, as operators snapped up 48 licenses ahead of an expected commercial rollout later this year.

Thailand's top three mobile operators, Advanced Info Service Pcl, True Corporation Pcl and Total Access Communication Pcl were all bidding on Sunday, along with two state-run firms, CAT Telecom and TOT.

Because of the bidding format, the winners for each license were not announced.

The amount raised included 51.46 billion baht for three licenses on the 700-megahertz (MHz) spectrum band, 37.16 billion baht for 19 licenses on the 2600-MHz band, and 11.57 billion baht for 26 licenses on the 26-GHz band.

South and Central Asia

[Afghanistan] Nine homeless drug users shot dead in Afghan capital — police (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 4:52 AM, Abdul Qadir Sediqi, 5304K, Negative]

Gunmen shot dead nine homeless drug users in the Afghan capital, officials said on Sunday, shining a light on chronic drug abuse in the world's biggest producer of opium but a rare incident of apparently coordinated violence against addicts.

The motive for the Saturday night attack by the unidentified gunmen in Kabul was not known and police said they were investigating.

The men had been sleeping in an open area and a forensic examination had shown they were drug users.

"The shooting took place at the side of the Qrough mountain," a spokesman for Kabul police, Ferdaus Faramarz, told Reuters.

There are an estimated 2.5 million drug users in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Public Health

says, with most thought to addicted to heroin made from opium poppies grown in Afghanistan.

Drug users are homeless, with half that number in Kabul, at times straining relations with residents of some communities.

"It's a social crisis," said Dr. Shokoor Haidari, deputy of the ministry's counter drugs department.

The ministry can only treat 40,000 people a year but far more seek help, said Haidari.

Lack of social services, unemployment and easy access to drugs have fueled drug abuse in Afghanistan, Haidari said.

Harsh winter weather killed at least 50 homeless drug users in the past two months, the Ministry of Public Health said.

Afghanistan has been the world's biggest producer of opium for years despite some \$8.9 billion spent since 2002 by the U.S. government to stop production and trafficking in narcotics.

With compelling economic incentives and politically protected networks — from cultivators to producers and distributors — deeply entrenched, officials say there is little they can do to stop it.

The Interior Ministry this month announced the arrest of five top police officials, including the head of Kabul's counter-narcotics force, for suspected involvement in drug trafficking.

[India] India women facing sedition charges over school play get bail (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 6:22 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

Two women held for two weeks by Indian police on sedition charges over a school play which allegedly criticised a contentious citizenship law have been granted bail, officials said Sunday.

Teacher Fareeda Begum, 50, and parent Nazbunnisa, 36, were arrested on January 30 for helping the children stage the play at Shaheen Public School in Karnataka state.

The play depicted a worried family talking about how they feared the government would ask millions of Muslims to prove their nationality or be expelled from India.

They were detained under a British colonial-era law after a member of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's party claimed the children insulted the Hindu-nationalist leader in the play.

India has been gripped by widespread street demonstrations against the law that grants citizenship to religious groups from three neighbouring countries, but excludes Muslims.

Nearly 30 people died in the months-long protests, including two in Karnataka, which is

ruled by Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party.

The women were denied bail multiple times before a court set them free late Saturday on a personal bond of \$1,400 each.

"The accused have been released on bail but we will continue with our investigations," an officer told AFP.

Officers visited the school at least five times to quiz children about the play and gather evidence against the accused.

Critics accuse the police of misusing the law amid a public outcry and several protests after videos showing officers interrogating the children -- aged between nine and 11 years -- went viral on social media.

The citizenship law, combined with a mooted national register of citizens, has stoked fears that India's 200 million Muslims will be marginalised.

The British-era sedition law enacted in 1860 carries a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Prosecutions are rare but it has frequently been used against critics of the government of the day.

Activists say authorities use it to stifle dissent.

[Pakistan] UN chief says Pakistan sets global example hosting refugees (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 12:32 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The U.N. Secretary General called Pakistan "a reliable and generous partner" for hosting millions of Afghan refugees on Sunday, pointing out that the South Asian country has had to do so with little support from the international community.

Antonio Guterres arrived earlier in the day on a four day visit to Islamabad, where he will address an international conference on what are decades of refugees fleeing conflict in neighboring Afghanistan.

"Pakistan is today the world's second largest host of refugees," the U.N. chief said.

"Despite its own challenges Pakistan has sheltered and protected Afghan refugees with limited support from international community," he added.

Guterres called on other countries to support Pakistan and show similar leadership in handling refugee flows in South Asia and around the world.

Speaking in Islamabad, the secretary general also expressed his "deep concern" over the situation in Kashmir. Control of the Himalayan province is split between India and Pakistan. Both countries claim it in its entirety, and they have fought two of their three wars over the territory.

Guterres stressed the urgency to “de-escalate both militarily and verbally” tensions across the highly militarized frontier between Indian- and Pakistani-controlled Kashmir.

Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi said he highlighted his government’s concerns over New Delhi’s actions in Indian-controlled Kashmir and its decision to strip the region of its semi-autonomous status.

“The policy of diplomacy and dialogue remains the only tools and guarantee for peace and stability,” said Guterres.

[Pakistan] Parents protest as Pakistani students stuck in China under coronavirus lockdown (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 12:02 PM, Syed Raza Hassan and Charlotte Greenfield, 10942K, Negative]

Around a hundred people called on Pakistan’s government to “bring back our children” from the locked down Chinese province of Hubei in a demonstration on Sunday in Karachi.

Pakistan’s government has so far ruled out evacuating the more than 1,000 Pakistani students in the province, home to the city of Wuhan, at the center of the coronavirus outbreak.

State Health Minister Zafar Mirza said on Twitter on Friday that he and other ministers would hold a meeting for parents in Islamabad on Wednesday and that his government was working with Chinese authorities to ensure students were taken care of.

But many students and their families have expressed growing frustration as the death toll in China mounts, pointing to other countries, including neighboring India and Bangladesh, evacuating their citizens.

“For God’s sake, we request from the government representatives please bring back our children, please listen to a mother’s grievance,” one protester, who declined to give her name, told media while bursting into tears.

The protesters chanted “bring back our children” and held up banners with the same message.

Earlier in the week dozens of families in Lahore held a similar protest outside the Chinese consulate.

A spokesman for Mirza did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for further comment.

He said on Twitter six Pakistani students in China confirmed to have had the virus had fully recovered and one was still receiving treatment.

Nonetheless, students in touch with Reuters from China over the past days said they wanted to leave.

Mir Hassan, a student whose father died of a heart ailment this month while he was stuck in Wuhan, said he had been told by Pakistani officials he would not be evacuated despite wanting to return home to his grieving mother.

"She is also begging me to come back home. Unfortunately, I haven't any idea when I will go back home and see my mom," he told Reuters.

Sahil Hassan, a PhD student in Wuhan, said he was finding it hard to receive scholarship payments, leaving them unable to afford food and bottled water from their university's food delivery service while in lock down.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Brazil] It's a day for dogs as Brazil ramps up for Carnival (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 12:45 PM, Staff, 10942K, Positive]

Brazil is ramping up toward the world's most famous Carnival celebrations and already the dogs have had their day.

Dozens of costumed dogs joined their owners in a traditional pre-Carnival parade Sunday along Avenida Atlantica bordering Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana beach.

"At first it seemed very strange, they were agitated, but now they enjoy a lot. It's an opportunity for them to play with other friends", said Claudia Idelfonso, who arrived with Bianca, a schauzer, and Luna, a mutt wearing what looked like a Hawaiian lei.

Lucia Coutinho's 12-year-old Maltese, Bebel, came dressed in a mask and a Batman cape.

A dog dressed like a prisoner appeared to be lost, while on another corner, dogs dressed as a sailor, a nurse and a bee advanced in single file.

It wasn't clear if the owners or pets had more fun.

"I don't know if she enjoys it, but she barks a lot," Coutinho said.

The parade is one of many leading up to the formal start of Carnival on Feb. 21.

[Colombia] Colombia to decide on historic abortion ruling (ABC News)

ABC News [2/16/2020 7:06 AM, Ella Torres, 2182K, Neutral]

Fourteen years after Colombia's landmark decision to legalize abortions in some cases, the country is once more bracing itself for a historic vote.

The Colombian Constitutional Court has until Feb. 19th to decide whether it will legalize abortion for pregnancies up to 12 weeks. The current law allows for abortion in only three instances: if the mother's life is at risk, if a fetus is malformed or if the pregnancy is a result of rape.

This is the "first real opportunity to actually advance reproductive rights," according to Paula Avila-Guillen, the director of Latin America Initiatives for the Women's Equality Center.

"I think they have the opportunity to actually make history," Avila-Guillen told ABC News.

The decision is hanging on two female justices who have not yet made clear how they will vote, according to Avila-Guillen. She said that out of the nine justices, four men are in favor, and two men, as well as one woman, are against.

The country's current abortion law is among the more lenient in Latin America.

The Center for Reproductive Rights classifies Colombia's abortion law as legal if it is "to preserve health." Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Peru also fall under that category.

Six Latin American countries have total abortion bans: the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua and Suriname.

By law, all institutions providing health services in Colombia -- whether public, private, secular or religious -- are required to perform an abortion if a woman proves that she meets one of the three exceptions.

Even so, advocates say the reality is that it's not regulated and hospitals often deny women the service.

Out of the estimated 400,400 abortions performed in the country each year, only 322 are legal procedures performed in health facilities, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a research organization on sexual and reproductive rights.

Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF), or Doctors Without Borders, found that of the 428 women and girls who requested an abortion through MSF in 2017 and 2018, 88% reported that they faced at least one obstacle while trying to access the service.

MSF noted that while the data does not represent the country as a whole, "it does provide a snapshot of the situation."

There are two main abortion providing groups in Colombia: Orientame and ProFamilia, both of which have multiple facilities across the country.

Dr. Juan Vargas, a gynecologist of 25 years at ProFamilia, told ABC News that in 2019 the clinic performed some 22,000 abortions. He said that most of the women who seek abortion from a ProFamilia clinic do so for health reasons. Rape accounts for 1%, while fetal malformation makes up about 3%, according to Vargas.

He noted that rape survivors need to prove in some way they have been raped. It is most often done through a police report or complaint, he said; however, many victims of rape often do not report their assault.

Vargas said between 90 to 95% of women who seek an abortion are granted one at ProFamilia. Abortions that are not performed at one of the facilities are done in hospitals, where proper access is a major issue, according to Avila-Guillen.

"Safe abortions continue to be a problem," she said. "Access has never really materialized."

Unsafe abortions are one of the five leading causes of maternal mortality worldwide, according to MSF. The other four are postpartum hemorrhage, sepsis, birth complications and hypertensive disorders.

"Of all these, unsafe abortion is the only one that is completely avoidable," MSF reports.

Avila-Guillen said such a consequence makes the upcoming vote all the more important.

"This will be significant and a huge legacy for this court and these two women judges, which it's in their hands to recognize women's rights and women's autonomy and women's equality," she said.

Though Avila-Guillen did not have statistics on how the public in Colombia feels about abortion, she said like many places around the world, the country is in the midst of a "battle."

"We just elected our first female mayor who is married to a congresswoman, and I think that just shows you how Colombia is moving toward a more progressive society," Avila-Guillen said.

Yet on the other hand, she noted, Colombia has not been spared a push of a right-wing agenda and there are some in the country who still vehemently oppose abortion rights.

She noted that the Colombian Constitutional Court is only considering the change in law after author Natalia Bernal Cano, who wrote a book titled "The right to information about the risks of induced abortion," brought forth a case to ban abortion entirely. In her book, Cano argues that she is providing "the right to information about the risks to women's mental and physical health from the voluntary interruption of pregnancy."

The court has since used her case to consider *ultra petita*, or beyond what is sought.

"They have requested a lot of technical information from providers, from lawyers, from public health experts, from criminal attorneys, so that is a good sign," Avila-Guillen said. "Whatever decision they make, it's going to be informed and based on facts."

[Costa Rica] Costa Rica seizes 5 tons of cocaine headed for Netherlands (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 12:39 PM, Staff, 2182K, Negative]

Costa Rican officials say they have seized more than 5 tons of cocaine, the largest such haul in the Central American country's history.

The Public Security Ministry said the 5,048 kilograms (11,128 pounds) of cocaine were found Saturday evening in a shipping container at the Caribbean port of Moin. The container, supposedly holding ornamental plants, destined for Rotterdam in the Netherlands.

Costa Rican officials last year reporting seizing 45.7 tons of cocaine, but the largest

individual seizures never topped 2 tons.

Police said that as of Sunday, the only person detained in connection with the new seizure was a 46-year-old Costa Rican who had driven the shipment to the port.

[Costa Rica] Costa Rica seizes five tons of cocaine bound for Holland in largest ever drug bust (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 1:18 PM, Alvaro Murillo, 10942K, Negative]

Police in Costa Rica seized more than 5 tons of cocaine bound for the Dutch port of Rotterdam in the country's largest ever drugs bust, officials said.

The authorities on Saturday found the cocaine in Costa Rica's Caribbean port of Limon, stashed inside a shipping container of decorative canopy plants bound for the Netherlands.

The anti-narcotics police discovered the drugs in 202 small bags and said the cocaine was produced in South America, though did not specify where.

The drugs had an estimated street value of about 126 million euro (\$136 million) in Holland, Costa Rica's Security Minister Michael Soto said late on Saturday.

"It's a historic seizure," Soto said in a statement. "It is a blow to the regional criminal structures."

A Costa Rican man, who drove the shipment from north of the country to Limon port, was detained, authorities said.

[Costa Rica] Costa Rica's largest ever cocaine haul found in ornamental flower shipment bound for Netherlands (Yahoo News/Sky News)

Yahoo News/Sky News [2/16/2020 12:41 PM, Alix Culbertson, 10942K, Neutral]

Costa Rica's largest ever haul of cocaine has been seized from a shipment of ornamental flowers bound for the Netherlands.

About 5.8 tonnes of the drug was found in 202 briefcases hidden inside a container at a port in Limon.

Police said they found 5,048 packages of cocaine weighing 1kg (2.2lbs) each.

A ship was due to set sail to Rotterdam on Saturday when the drugs control police detected some suspicious containers.

They sent them to be scanned and detected the packages of cocaine hidden inside the ornamental plant shipment.

Security forces then seized the cocaine and transferred it to a drugs stockroom at San Jose airport.

Police arrested a Costa Rican lorry driver, 46, who had delivered the containers to the port and said he has no criminal record.

Because of its location and shipping network, Costa Rica has a major problem with drug trafficking which dates back to the mid-1980s.

As the US has tightened its borders and its anti-drug operations, drug trafficking has worsened in Costa Rica.

The country is often used as a pit-stop for drug traffickers and a refuelling stop for shipments coming from Colombia and Panama.

[Costa Rica] Costa Rican police find six tonnes of cocaine in biggest ever haul (Yahoo News/The Independent)

Yahoo News/The Independent [2/16/2020 10:15 AM, Rory Sullivan, 10942K, Positive]

Police in Costa Rica have found almost 6 tonnes of cocaine in a shipping container, leading to the country's biggest ever drug seizure.

The drugs, which weighed 5,800kg, were discovered on Friday evening in Limón in a container of flowers due to be sent to Rotterdam, Holland, according to the Costan Rican national newspaper La Nación.

In a press conference on Saturday afternoon, interior minister Michael Soto Rojas confirmed it was the largest ever drug seizure in Costa Rica. The interior minister estimated that the haul has a European market value of €126m. More than 5,000 packets of cocaine were found inside 202 suitcases.

A 46-year-old Costa Rican man with no previous criminal convictions has been arrested in connection to the drug haul.

According to the minister, there was a drugs seizure of almost three tonnes in Costa Rica a decade ago.

[Dominican Republic] Software glitches force Dominican Republic to suspend vote (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 1:50 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Problems with electronic voting systems forced the Dominican Republic to suspend municipal elections across the country on Sunday.

The president of the Central Electoral Board, Julio Cesar Castaños Guzmán, said the voting was halted after about three hours because of problems at about 50 percent of the polling places that used electronic ballot machines.

Such machines were used in 17 of the Caribbean country's 158 municipalities and the capital -generally the most populous areas.

Opposition parties complained that some of their candidates were not appearing on the electronic ballots.

Electoral authorities said they would investigate the cause of the problems and try to

determine if it was intentional.

Electoral officials said they would meet with political party leaders in the coming days to set a new date for elections.

The electoral observation mission of the Organization of American States said it was told about the problems Saturday night, but it was impossible to resolve them before voting started.

It pledged to continue supporting the electoral process.

[Dominican Republic] Electronic glitch triggers Dominican Republic vote suspension (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 3:08 PM, Ezequiel Abiu Lopez, 5304K, Negative]

Dominican Republic's nationwide municipal elections were suspended only four hours after voting began on Sunday due to a glitch in the electronic voting system, officials said.

More than 7.4 million voters were due to vote to elect 3,849 positions in 158 municipalities across the Caribbean nation.

The failure of the system is likely to raise concerns ahead of the May 17 presidential elections.

Julio Cesar Castanos, president of Dominican Republic's electoral body, said nearly half of the electronic devices did not work properly and many virtual ballot papers did not load, leaving citizens unable to cast their votes.

"We are going to initiate a thorough investigation of what happened and why those ballot papers did not load correctly," Castanos said in a press conference.

The electronic system was used in 18 of the 158 municipalities and focused on cities and regions with high population density, accounting for 62.4% of the electorate.

Castanos said that the failures only occurred in the 18 municipalities that used electronic voting.

Eduardo Frei, president of the observer commission from the Organization of American States, recommended an exhaustive audit to determine the failure and called for a dialogue of all political sectors to find a solution and hold new elections.

Luis Abinader, leader of the opposition Modern Revolutionary Party, said the suspension of the vote was "outrageous and unjustified."

Several opposition parties, such as the People's Force, of former President Leonel Fernández, objected to the use of electronic voting due to fears software could be manipulated.

[Haiti] Facing South Florida: Head Of US Southern Command On Haiti (Yahoo News/CBS-Miami)

Yahoo News/CBS-Miami [2/16/2020 12:00 PM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

The head of the US Southern Command, Admiral Craig Faller, sat down with CBS4's Jim DeFede to discuss Haiti.

[Jamaica] Man arrested in Jamaica for Vermont killing to be arraigned (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 8:56 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

A man arrested in Jamaica in the 2018 killing of his girlfriend in South Burlington has been transported to Vermont and will be arraigned on Tuesday, police said.

Leroy Headley, 38, was found and arrested by Jamaican authorities on Feb. 5 in Negril, Jamaica, officials said. He was transported to Vermont on Saturday and was being held without bail at the Chittenden Regional Correctional Facility, South Burlington police said.

Headley is facing a charge of second-degree murder in the May 3, 2018, shooting death of his partner and mother of his children, Anako "Annette" Lumumba. He is originally from Jamaica, authorities said. He had a second warrant for his arrest for sexual assault, alleging that he engaged in a sexual act with a child under the age of 16, police said.

It was not immediately known if Headley is being represented by an attorney.

[Mexico] Drug Shortage in Mexico Piles Woes on Cancer-Stricken Children (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/16/2020 10:00 AM, Robbie Whelan and Santiago Perez, Neutral]

As a shortage of lifesaving drugs to treat his 5-year-old daughter's leukemia intensified, Israel Rivas decided it was time to take drastic measures. Last month, he and dozens of desperate parents in similar situations blocked the main entrance to the domestic terminal of Mexico City's airport.

"If there are no medications and your child is fighting for her life, what does a parent not do?" said Mr. Rivas, who was prevented by airport security from carrying out his goal of lying down on the runway.

Mexico is running low on lifesaving cancer medications, the unintended consequence of an ambitious effort by the administration of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to revamp the country's public health system, crack down on waste and theft in the government's annual \$5 billion in drug purchases, and challenge entrenched monopolies in the domestic pharmaceutical industry.

In recent weeks, families of patients enduring shortages of medicines have protested in front of public hospitals and the health ministry, creating widespread sympathy and a public-relations problem for the otherwise popular president.

The shortages highlight the challenge Mr. López Obrador faces as his administration overhauls agencies to root out corruption: In dismantling Mexico's networks of graft, his administration risks tearing down systems that, while imperfect, work and replacing them with solutions that don't.

The president "feels he needs to eliminate a lot of the programs and policies of past presidents, even the ones that are working," said Sergio Negrete, a business professor at Iteeso, a Jesuit university in Guadalajara. "And he doesn't remotely grasp the costs of his decisions and cannot consider that his plans might go wrong."

Fernando Gael Reyes, 4, lost more than 80% of his vision over the past year because of retinal cancer, said his father, Luis Fernando Reyes, who gave up his job running a T-shirt printing business to care for his son full-time. The hospital ran out of the white-blood-cell booster filgrastim, a key component to Fernando Gael's chemotherapy, causing him to miss treatment sessions and allowing tumors in his eyes to rapidly grow.

"If it wasn't for the shortages, my son wouldn't be blind now," Mr. Reyes said.

The shortages are mostly affecting the country's public health system, one of the world's largest. More than 95% of Mexico's 125 million inhabitants rely on it, estimates Juana Ramírez, head of Fundación Guerreros, a nonprofit that provides support to patients fighting cancer. Around 56% of Mexican children and teenagers who develop cancer are cured, below the 80% rate of developed countries.

The public health system has long been plagued by high prices and periodic shortages, the results of rampant corruption, a lack of competition in drug distribution and regulations that discourage the production of cheaper generic drugs, said Alejandra Palacios, head of Mexico's antitrust agency, known by its Spanish initials as Cofece.

Last year, 30% of Cofece's investigations dealt with the pharmaceutical industry's alleged anticompetitive practices, which led Mexican households to overpay for medicine by about \$135 million a year, Ms. Palacios said in an interview.

For months, the López Obrador administration has placed much of the blame for the shortages on PiSA Pharmaceuticals, a Guadalajara-based firm that runs mixing laboratories for cancer medicines, including methotrexate, which inhibits the spread of tumors.

In February of last year, after three children died at a public hospital after taking methotrexate, federal health regulators ordered a sanitary review of PiSA's facilities, ordering a temporary closure of its methotrexate mixing lab.

But since PiSA is the only major distributor of the drug in Mexico, public hospitals immediately reported shortages of the drug. The government had to make an emergency bulk purchase of methotrexate from France to ensure supply.

"This is the problem: These companies controlled all of the sales of medicines and this one company in particular, PiSA, had a monopoly of the medicines for childhood cancer," Mr. López Obrador said at a press conference the day after the parents' protest at the airport.

PiSA blames the shortages on Mr. López Obrador's decision last year to do away with a nationwide health insurance system for the poor that is roughly the equivalent of Medicaid, according to a person familiar with the company.

The government has replaced it with a national Institute of Health and Well-Being and centralized drug purchases under the administrative arm of the Finance Ministry, although not all the changes are in place yet.

Under the previous system, Mexico's Social Security Institute annually purchased drugs in seven rounds. Under the new system, there are fewer funds and only two rounds of purchasing a year, making it harder to ensure the supply of key medicines at any given time, say public-health experts.

Consolidating purchases and allowing public hospitals to buy imported medicines should eventually lead to less graft and lower prices for drugs, said Ms. Palacios, the antitrust regulator.

"The problem is that with this government, the diagnosis is often correct, the ideas are often good, but the implementation is often terrible," she said.

Industry experts expect the shortages could last for several months while a functional purchasing system is fully put in place.

The government has responded to allegations it has mishandled the rollout of its new drug-purchasing system by blaming hospitals and doctors, saying they are colluding with pharmaceutical companies. The antitrust regulator has previously investigated alleged collusive practices in the industry but hasn't prosecuted any pharmaceutical companies.

The president said his government's anticorruption watchdog would open an investigation into Mexico City's Children's Hospital, which provides treatment to hundreds of children with pediatric cancer. The hospital chief, who has denied wrongdoing, declined to comment.

Physicians' groups have reacted with outrage to the government's blaming doctors and hospitals for the shortages. Dr. Marta Zapata, head of a national association of doctors who treat childhood blood cancers, said many factors were to blame for the shortages, including a global scarcity of important drugs like the chemotherapy medicine vincristine and the quick dismantling of the federal health insurance program for the poor.

She said it was "highly offensive" for the government to blame doctors for lacking the resources to treat patients.

"We give the shirt off our backs for these kids," Ms. Zapata said. When details of the new public health regimen were released in January, "we thought that they would have a plan on how to address cancer, and the reality is that there isn't one...As far as we know, they didn't have a plan B for how to ensure sufficient supply of medicine."

[Mexico] Cartel hitmen who murdered ICE agent to be resentenced (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/16/2020 3:08 PM, Carly Ortiz-Lytle, 570K, Negative]

A D.C. federal appeals court vacated two convictions of Los Zetas cartel assassins who murdered an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent in 2011.

Jose Emanuel "Zafado" Garcia Sota and Jesus Ivan "Loco" Quezada Pina were convicted of four counts in 2017, including for the murder of Special Agent Jaime Zapata, from Brownsville, Texas.

The men have been remanded to a lower court and will face limited re-sentencing for the murder and attempted murder of a federal officer.

The pair is currently serving life in prison for the killing.

The ruling from the United States Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit came on Jan. 21.

The parents of Zapata filed a \$25 million dollar wrongful death claim against the U.S. government in December.

"I feel that I owe my son justice, and I still haven't gotten it," said Mary Zapata, his mother.

The lawsuit alleges that the weapons used against Zapata originated in Texas.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives said in a statement the agency "has always said that this investigation has no connection whatsoever to Fast and Furious," which was a botched government-run gun-running operation.

ICE agents Victor Avila and Zapata were driving through San Luis Potosí, Mexico, when two SUVs ran them off of the road. In the ensuing struggle, Zapata was killed, and Avila was injured.

Five other defendants were sentenced to prison after pleading guilty to federal charges.

At the time of the initial conviction, Acting ICE Director Thomas Hoffman said, "I applaud today's verdict and hope that it provides some measure of solace to the victims and their families."

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Burundi] Burundi opposition picks presidential contender as U.N. warns of rights abuses (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 12:48 PM, Nick Macfie, 5304K, Negative]

Burundi's opposition CNL on Sunday picked the current chairman of the National Assembly as its candidate in the presidential election in May which the United Nations says is likely to be marred by violence.

A former rebel leader, Agathon Rwasa, 56, fought in Burundi's civil war, as did current President Pierre Nkurunziza, who will not seek re-election in the May poll.

Like the president, he also comes from the northern Burundi province of Ngozi and the same ethnic group, the Hutu.

Burundi is one of the poorest countries in the world and lost donor funding in 2015 after political violence that followed the elections.

The tiny East African nation is struggling to come to terms with a violent past, characterized by colonial occupation, civil war and decades of intermittent massacres.

The population is divided between the Tutsi and Hutu ethnic groups.

Some 300,000 people were killed in the civil war which ended in 2005.

Rwasa denounced what he said were plans by the ruling party to rig the election.

"As we are approaching elections, it's surprising to hear that there are people thinking about rigging elections... Burundians will not let them do it," he told delegates of his party after his appointment was announced.

In January the ruling party, the CNDD-FDD, chose as its candidate its secretary general, Evariste Ndayishimiye, a retired army general who also heads the department of military affairs in the president's office and has served as minister of the interior and security.

The government could not be reached for comment on the accusations of plans to rig the vote.

The United Nations has warned that human rights abuses might increase again ahead of the elections.

Since 2015, when Nkurunziza ran for a third, disputed term in office, hundreds of Burundians have been killed in clashes with security forces.

The UN also denounced serious human rights violations, including killings, disappearances, torture and gang rape of alleged political opponents, perpetrated by the police, security forces and the ruling party's youth league, the Imbonerakure.

The government condemned and denied the accusations.

[Nigeria] Armed Herdsmen Kill 30 in Northern Nigeria's Kastina State (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/16/2020 9:50 AM, Tope Alake, 6400K, Negative]

At least 30 people were killed and several others injured on Friday in attacks by herdsmen in Nigeria's northwestern Kastina state, the police said.

In Tsauwa village, about 21 people were burned to death and some houses razed, while nine were shot in Dankar, the state's Commissioner of Police Sanusi Buba said by phone Sunday. A suspect was arrested on Saturday and an investigation is under way, he said.

The villagers had an earlier disagreement with herdsmen, who made a reprisal attack, according to the commissioner.

"No one in the country has a right to take laws into his hands by the way of self-help or

revenge," President Muhammadu Buhari said in an emailed statement. "There is no place for violence in a decent society."

Attacks in northern states of Nigeria have led to a spate of kidnappings and raids, forcing people from their homes. The region has also been the epicenter for Islamist militants attacks, which pose a major security challenge for the West African nation's government.

[Nigeria] Armed gangs kill 30 in northwest Nigeria (Yahoo News/RFI)

Yahoo News/RFI [2/16/2020 5:46 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

Armed gangs have killed 30 people in raids on two villages in an area of northwest Nigeria plagued by cattle rustlers and kidnappers, police said on Sunday.

Dozens of gunmen on motorcycles attacked the villages of Tsauwa and Dankar in Katsina state on Friday, shooting residents and burning homes.

"The bandits killed 21 people in Tsauwa and another nine in nearby Dankar," Katsina police spokesman Gambo Isah said.

"Most of those killed were old people and children who couldn't escape."

Police and soldiers deployed in the area after the attack and arrested one suspect, Isah said.

The attackers burnt homes, livestock and food supplies before fleeing, said Tukur Mu'azu, traditional chief of Batsari, a district the straddles the two attacked villages.

He gave the same death toll as the police for what he described as an "unprovoked attack".

"I have never seen such destruction in my life," the local leader said as he attended the burial of the victims.

Rural communities in Katsina state, the home region of President Muhammadu Buhari, have frequently been targeted by gangs of cattle thieves and kidnappers abducting people for ransom.

The gangs launch attacks from their bases in a vast forest straddling Katsina and several neighbouring states.

Residents in the affected areas have clubbed together to fill the security void by forming self-defence groups, but these vigilante outfits have often served to fuel the violence.

An armed gang last week burnt to death 21 people, including 16 members of a single family, in a reprisal raid in neighbouring Kaduna state to avenge a vigilante attack on their hideout.

[Somalia] Young Somalis Step in Where Government Fails (New York Times)

New York Times [2/16/2020 2:29 PM, Abdi Latif Dahir, 23673K, Negative]

She had just finished battling the floods, and then the bomb went off.

For a month of 10-hour days, Dr. Amina Abdulkadir Isack, 27, tended to anemic mothers, children with malaria and pregnant women as a volunteer in central Somalia, where record floods had left thousands of people in dire need of help the government could scarcely provide.

But only days after coming home, on a hot Mogadishu morning in late December, terrorists detonated an explosives-laden truck in a busy intersection, killing 82 people and injuring nearly 150, including university students studying to become health specialists and doctors like her.

Dr. Isack sprang right back into action, helping a youth-led crisis response team of volunteers who tracked the victims, called their families, collected donations and performed many services the government was too overwhelmed to manage on its own.

"The youth are the ones who build nations," Dr. Isack said. "We have to rely on ourselves."

Much like the floods before it, the attack in Mogadishu, the deadliest in Somalia in more than two years, underscored the feeble emergency response in a nation that is no stranger to natural and man-made disasters. The Somali government struggles to provide basic public services like health care and education, let alone a comprehensive response to emergencies.

Yet in the face of the country's mounting challenges — from a changing climate to the indiscriminate violence of terrorism — young Somalis are increasingly getting organized and bootstrapping their way out of crises, rather than waiting on help from their government or its foreign backers.

Government officials say they do respond to the country's emergencies, including establishing a national committee to aid the victims of the Dec. 28 attack. Turkey and Qatar airlifted dozens of the badly injured. But many youth activists in Somalia say that the response from the authorities is often tardy or inadequate, making it all the more essential for citizens like themselves to jump in and help fill the gaps.

Somalia has experienced one degree or another of chaos for almost three decades, bedeviled first by clan infighting and then by violent extremism. But through it all, Somalis have found ways to not only establish thriving businesses, but also take on core state services like building roads and providing health care and education.

This independent spirit was amplified after militants with the Shabab, a terrorist group affiliated with Al Qaeda, surrendered control of Mogadishu in 2011, effectively leaving the capital in the hands of an internationally-backed but weak government that has often been unable to secure the capital, much less the country.

Since then, young Somalis, including members of the diaspora who have returned home, have taken a leading role in the stabilization and rebuilding process. They have worked on rehabilitating child soldiers, reviving domestic tourism, responding to humanitarian crises, organizing multiple book fairs and even selling Somali camels to customers worldwide using bitcoin.

When a truck bombing in Mogadishu in 2017 killed 587 people and injured 316 others, hundreds of volunteers marshaled to identify victims, launched social media campaigns to appeal for global attention and collected tens of thousands of dollars to assist the operations of Mogadishu's only free ambulance service, Aamin Ambulance.

Organizers of the response said they collected \$3.5 million in donations; the government later contributed \$1 million.

The year "2017 was a turning point for us," Dr. Isack said. "Everyone knew someone who was impacted. It showed us we could do something to save lives."

Despite their efforts, civilians can only do so much when attacks happen. And instead of learning from previous tragedies, the authorities remain disorganized and unprepared for the next one, said Saida Hassan, a Somali-American who previously worked with the ministry of education.

After the big attack on Dec. 28, Ms. Hassan said she attended a government crisis meeting in which officials squabbled and didn't have a plan of action.

"I kept thinking 'There are people dying every second we keep talking,'" she said. After leaving the meeting "so heartbroken," Ms. Hassan helped form the Gurmud Ex-control rescue initiative — the volunteer group that Dr. Isack joined.

"It's frustrating," Ms. Hassan said. "It often feels like we are crawling when we cannot only walk, but also run if we want."

Somalia's government has made some strides toward developing the economy, reforming state institutions and improving security. Yet the country's progress has been undermined by rampant corruption, the government's tight resources and limited presence across the country, as well as a political stalemate between the central government and federal member states.

For young people trying to build the nation's future, the prospects for change sometimes look bleak.

Sami Gabas is the founder of Saamionline, an online retailer that serves thousands of Somalis across the country. While the authorities in the various regions are quick to demand taxes, Mr. Gabas said, they barely understand the difficulties of setting up and running a start-up, let alone offer help or incentives.

"We just don't want to do business," he said. "We want to create and innovate and help move the country forward."

For those who defy all the odds, insecurity remains a serious impediment. The Shabab remains strong and continues to carry out deadly attacks against civilians and the government. Beyond that, activists and business people continue to be killed in mysterious circumstances.

Mohamed Sheik Ali was a serial entrepreneur who opened a number of businesses, including Mogadishu's first post-war flower store and dry-cleaning service. He also ran a mentoring program for local entrepreneurs, and participated in events and shows that helped turn their ideas into successful businesses.

Six years after he launched his first business in Mogadishu, unknown assailants fatally shot Mr. Ali in August 2018. He was 31.

In a country with a young population and high unemployment rates, his philosophy was all about self-reliance, his sister Sagal Sheikh-Ali said in an interview. When engaging with young people like himself, he used to tell them, "If you have an idea and a passion, just go ahead and do it," she recalled.

Following his death, his sister said she felt angry and didn't want to stay in Mogadishu. But afterward, she felt that it was her "duty" to step into his shoes and keep the businesses going.

"If I leave, then I guess he died for nothing," she said. "But if I stay, then it meant something. His name will always continue. His legacy will continue. His drive and passion will continue in others."

Still, the frequent attacks and at times tepid response from the authorities leave many feeling numb and discouraged, Ms. Hassan said. She said some of her friends have derided her for constantly wanting to act, when even the authorities seem resigned.

The attacks from the Shabab have become so normal that she and her friends try to guess when the next one will happen. Barely an hour after the interview, a suicide car bomb killed three people and injured 11 others near an intersection close to the Parliament building in Mogadishu.

"I don't think we should wait for the government," Ms. Hassan said. "It's become our reality and we know these attacks are coming. I just want us to be prepared so that we can save ourselves."

For volunteers like Dr. Isack, there is no option but to rush to the scene of the next disaster. In January, the Somali Medical Association recognized her efforts in saving lives during the floods.

"I myself could face harm tomorrow," Dr. Isack said. "So I am providing support to my people while I can."

[Somalia] Gunmen kill TV journalist in Somalia, say police (Reuters)

Reuters [2/16/2020 3:30 PM, Abdi Sheikh and Feisal Omar, Negative]

Gunmen killed a TV and radio journalist in Somalia's Afgooye district on Sunday, police said.

Abdiwali Ali Hassan, 25, was shot several times and died on his way to hospital, Captain Abdikadir Osman, Afgooye's police commander, told Reuters.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the killing in the district which is 25km outside the capital Mogadishu.

The Somali Journalists Syndicate condemned the murder and called for a quick investigation.

"We call on the Somali Federal government and local authorities to ... bring the killers to justice," said the syndicate's secretary general, Abdalle Ahmed Mumin.

[South Africa] Ramaphosa Faces Uphill Battle to Trim South Africa's Wage Bill (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 2:00 AM, Prinesha Naidoo, 6400K, Neutral]

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa's ambitions of trimming the state's wage bill to get the nation's shaky finances under control have run into opposition from the outset.

In his Feb. 13 state-of-the-nation address, Ramaphosa warned that the government's current debt levels are heading toward unsustainable levels and Finance Minister Tito Mboweni will unveil details of plans to cut costs in his Feb. 26 budget speech. The government is engaging with unions on how it could contain labor costs, which equate to 35.4% of national spending, he said.

The state has proposed cutting 30,000 jobs and freezing pay for three years, according to Sizwe Pamla, a spokesman for the Congress of South African Trade Unions, the nation's biggest labor group and a member of the country's ruling coalition. Such measures aren't washing with unions that represent more than three-quarters of state workers.

"Just because we're talking doesn't mean we're on the same page," Pamla said.

"Government has a right to engage with its employees, but government doesn't have the right to its own slaves."

The National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union said proposals to cut wages haven't entered the bargaining council where such issues are negotiated, and a prevailing three-year wage agreement that expires next year is "sacrosanct and not open for review."

Any attempt to predetermine the outcome of a new pay deal would be improper and show that the government doesn't take its workers' concerns seriously, said Lufuno Mulaudzi, president of the Public Servants Association.

"We are not going to accept anything that will lead to wage cuts and if the minister makes pronouncements in that regard, he'll be in for a big fight," Mulaudzi said. "We'll make sure that we take our members to the streets of the country to make sure that services to the people are disrupted."

While the Treasury has also already announced 50 billion rand (\$3.4 billion) in spending cuts by 2022 to plug a widening budget gap, it needs to find another 150 billion rand of savings to meet its goal of achieving a primary balance by 2023. Payroll costs are an obvious target because they've grown faster than any other spending category other than

interest costs since 2007.

Cosatu and other unions have called for the government to bolster state coffers by recouping billions of rand that were looted during former President Jacob Zuma's tenure, and reducing perks for cabinet ministers, lawmakers and senior officials.

"No one will be holding their breath that the wage bill will actually come down," said Chris Veegh, chief investment officer at 10X Investments. "The government has poor form in this regard and tends to cave in under pressure."

[South Sudan] South Sudan Key Opposition Leader Machar Rejects Latest Deal (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/16/2020 9:51 AM, Samuel Gebre and Okech Francis, 6400K, Negative]

A day after South Sudan's leaders including President Salva Kiir agreed to return the country to a system of 10 states and three administrations, a key opposition member has rejected the latest proposals.

Riek Machar, rebel leader and former vice president, said the deal "cannot be accepted," calling for the creation of three administrative areas to be reconsidered as it may open "another Pandora's box," according to a statement yesterday. Previous proposals called for South Sudan to have 32 states.

Leaders initially set a Feb. 22 deadline for agreement on the formation of a unified administration, which is seen as key to rebuilding the East African nation's oil industry and shattered economy after a five-year civil war. Previous attempts to form a unity government have failed.

"After Kiir stared down some of his hardliners yesterday to make the compromise, now Machar is relenting to his by rejecting it," said Alan Boswell, a researcher on South Sudan with the Brussels-based International Crisis Group. "However, he will receive little backing for trying to further renegotiate the issue. The pressure will now fall squarely on Machar to soon return to Juba," the capital city, he said.

Antonio Guterres, the United Nations Secretary General, strongly urged the leaders to respect their people and to end confrontation, speaking in Addis Ababa last week.

South Sudan has been mired since late 2013 in a conflict that's claimed almost 400,000 lives, forced 4 million people to leave their homes and caused an economic crisis. Setting the number of states within the country and the boundaries between them should effectively establish the distribution of power across the newest nation in the world.

[South Sudan] S. Sudan rebels reject president's peace compromise (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/16/2020 3:41 AM, Staff, 10942K, Negative]

South Sudan rebels rejected on Sunday a peace offer by President Salva Kiir to return to a system of 10 states, paving the way for a unity government.

The rejection by rebel chief Riek Machar dashes hopes of breaking a deadlock and ending

a six-year conflict that has left at least 380,000 people dead and millions in dire poverty.

Kiir and Machar -- who lives in exile -- are under increasing international pressure to resolve their differences by a February 22 deadline.

Kiir on Saturday said the country would now be divided among the original 10 states -- a key opposition demand -- plus three "administrative areas" of Pibor, Ruweng and Abyei.

But rebel leader Riek Machar said Sunday he objected to the three administrative areas.

It "cannot be referred to as reverting to 10 states (and) as such cannot be accepted," Machar wrote in a statement.

"We therefore call upon President Kiir to reconsider this idea of creating administrative areas," he added.

Machar warned the three areas risked causing further problems, calling the issue a "Pandora's box".

The number of states is contentious because the borders will determine the divisions of power in the country.

When it gained independence from Sudan in 2011, South Sudan had 10 states, as set out in its constitution.

Kiir increased that in 2015 to 28, then 32 -- and has now reduced them back to 10, plus the three areas.

He issued an order late Saturday relieving all governors of the 32 states of their posts.

He has said the final matter of states would be debated once the unity government forms.

Of the three areas, the most contentious is thought to be oil-rich Ruweng, in the north.

Oil provides almost all of the government's revenue in South Sudan, making it one of the world's most oil dependent nations.

Ruweng has been one of the most heavily fought over areas in the civil war and is claimed by both the Dinka people of Kiir and the Nuer of Machar.

[Sudan] In sign of thaw, Israeli PM says flight crosses Sudan skies (AP)

AP [2/16/2020 2:30 PM, Ilan Ben Zion, Neutral]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Sunday that an Israeli aircraft made a historic first flight over Sudan just two weeks after he met with the Arab state's leader in Uganda.

The Israeli premier met with the head of Sudan's transitional government, Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, in a major step toward improving ties with an Arab state that has long been

hostile to Israel.

Netanyahu touted his meeting with the Sudanese leader as yet another foreign relations accomplishment ahead of March 2's parliamentary elections, Israel's third in a year.

Israel and Sudan are "discussing rapid normalization," Netanyahu said Sunday, adding that "the first Israeli airplane passed yesterday over the skies of Sudan." He was speaking at the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations in Jerusalem.

An Israeli government official said the plane was "a private Israeli executive jet," not a flight with Israel's national carrier El Al. The official spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak to the press.

Flight data from the Flight Aware website showed a private business jet crossing Sudanese airspace on a flight from Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo, to Tel Aviv on Thursday night, landing in Israel at 4:25 a.m. local time on Friday morning.

It remained unclear whether Netanyahu was referring to the same flight.

Sudan, a longtime member of the Arab League, has joined other member states in rejecting the Trump administration's Mideast plan that Palestinians have said is heavily biased toward Israel.

To rebuild Sudan's economy, the new administration in Khartoum also seeks an end to American sanctions as a U.S.-listed state sponsor of terror.

Longtime Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir was ousted in a 2019 military coup amid pro-democracy protests.

Burhan heads the transitional council ruling the country now.

Netanyahu's meeting with Burhan was kept secret until after the fact due to sensitivities of the Sudanese leader meeting with the prime minister of Israel.

Netanyahu has played up the development of covert ties with Arab states as a foreign policy coup during his administration, even as his bid for a fourth consecutive term in office is overshadowed by his indictment.

He was formally charged last month on several counts of corruption.

[Sudan] Netanyahu says Israeli airliners have started overflying Sudan (Reuters)
[Reuters](#) [2/16/2020 2:21 PM, Staff, 5304K, Neutral]

Israeli commercial planes have started overflying Sudan, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday, casting the new air corridor as the result of a breakthrough meeting with the African Muslim country's de-facto leader this month.

Khartoum said on Feb. 5 it had given Israeli planes initial approval to fly over its territory, two days after Sudan's military head of state, Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, met Netanyahu in

Uganda.

"Now we're discussing rapid normalization. The first Israeli airplane passed yesterday over the skies of Sudan," Netanyahu said in a speech to U.S. Jewish leaders, saying the route cut some three hours off flights from Israel to South America.

Sudan, mindful of pro-Palestinian sensitivities, has stopped short of saying it is normalizing ties with Israel.

Israel previously considered Sudan a security threat because it suspected Iran used Sudan as a conduit for overland smuggling of munitions to the Gaza Strip. In 2009, regional sources said, Israeli aircraft bombed an arms convoy in Sudan.

The corridor described by Netanyahu would also take planes over Egypt, which made peace with Israel in 1979, and Chad, which in 2018 restored long-severed relations with Israel.

Normalizing relations with Sudan, where Arab states gathered in 1967 to issue what became known as the "Three No's" - no recognition of Israel, no peace with Israel and no negotiations with Israel - would allow Netanyahu to burnish his diplomatic credentials a month before Israel's March 2 election.

Since their meeting, the air corridor is the most prominent development that has been discussed publicly by both sides.

Israeli commentators have speculated that the new contacts with Khartoum could allow for the repatriation of illegal Sudanese migrants in Israel, and that Israel could in turn lobby the United States to improve Sudan's standing in Washington.

[Sudan] Sudan's Ousted Leader Quizzed in Probe Into Islamist Financing (Bloomberg)

[Bloomberg](#) [2/16/2020 8:04 AM, Mohammed Alamin, 6400K, Negative]

Ousted Sudanese leader Omar al-Bashir is being questioned in connection with alleged crimes by his former government, including money laundering and financing international Islamist groups, the General Attorney said.

Bashir, who was sentenced to two years in a rehabilitation facility in December for illicit possession of foreign currencies, appeared in front of the General Prosecutor on Sunday, according to a statement.

It's the latest legal development for the 76-year-old former president, who was overthrown by the army in April after mass protests and is wanted by the International Criminal Court on accusations of war crimes in the western region of Darfur.

Sudan's transitional government last week indicated he may face the ICC on those charges as part of a deal with rebels, though it wasn't immediately clear if he would be surrendered to the Hague or stand trial in another way.

Network TV News Coverage

World Leaders Gather For Last Day of Munich Security Conference (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [2/16/2020 5:20 AM, Staff]

Diplomats and world leaders are tackling issues of international security on the final day of the Munich Security Conference. One topic garnering major attention is the war in Afghanistan. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper says a plan by the United States and the Taliban to scale back the violence has a "moving date." Also in Munich is House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Pelosi spoke today at the conference. CNN correspondent Nic Robertson said that Pelosi was quite aligned with Mark Esper and some of the other government officials from the Department of Justice and the Department of State and even the presidential advisor briefing journalists about the concerns about China's Huawei's 5G technology, the United States concerns and determination to protect its national security by not aligning with countries who are going to use Huawei's equipment. Pelosi and the congressional delegation said they have been engaged in similar discussions with European partners and they say these European partners are going to do some deep and hard thinking about the Huawei 5G issue. There seems to be alignment between the Democrats and what President Trump's officials here are pushing and telling European partners that 5G equipment made by Huawei is damaging for these countries.

American Passengers on Diamond Princess Cruise Ship To Return to U.S. (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [2/16/2020 12:01 PM, Staff]

Some but not all Americans about the Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan are disembarking now, trading one quarantine for another. Some Americans are being flown to Travis Air Force Base in California. Others will go to Lackland in Texas. A few declined the investigation were warned that they will have to test negative before heading back to the U.S. The Diamond Princess has been quarantined in Yokohama for 10 days now, but for the nearly 400 Americans onboard, that ends today. Confirmed coronavirus cases on the ship hit 355.

In Wake of Impeachment Acquittal, Trump Emboldened (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [2/16/2020 4:15 AM, Staff]

In the wake of his acquittal from the Senate impeachment trial, President Trump has grown more emboldened. Trump has been unapologetic about the behavior that even some Republicans in the Senate who acquitted him in the trial said was problematic and even improper. The President has continued to insist that his conduct was perfect, and he has continued to strike out at his enemies, both real and perceived. The President has exacted revenge against some of the administration officials who testified about his behavior in the impeachment proceedings. Lieutenant Colonel Alex Vindman, who was serving on the National Security Council, was sent back to his previous job at the Army, and the U.S. Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland was dismissed from his post. The President has grown increasingly suspicious of those around him. He seems to be looking for loyalists who have his back and suspicious about those who could be leaking information. He has brought back Hope Hicks, his long-time White House Communications director into the fold, and he has also put his long-time body man Johnny McEntee in charge of a key office, the Presidential Personnel Office. McEntee will be in charge of selecting personnel who will work in the White House and across the President's administration.

[China] Chinese Citizens That May Have Coronavirus Not Admitted to Hospitals (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [2/16/2020 5:32 AM, Staff]

Some of the American passengers will disembark from the Diamond Princess cruise to embark on a long, no-frills flight back to the U.S. aboard a converted cargo jet. When they land, they will be quarantined another 14 days to make sure that they do not have the coronavirus that has spread on the cruise ship. Over 68,000 cases and counting have been confirmed of the virus around the world. At the epicenter of the outbreak in Wuhan, it has been more than three weeks since the lockdown. In that time, two hospitals have been built and stadiums and exhibition halls have been turned into mass treatment centers. Residents suffering with symptoms of the coronavirus are everywhere. Hospitals are full and some residents have been told to go home and contact their local neighborhood committee. China's Vice Premier has called for all who need to be admitted to be admitted, without missing one. He said getting a bed in a hospital should not be contingent on having a positive test for the virus. However, on Chinese social media, cases of just that are prevalence. CNN spoke to several individuals who have family members who are sick but have not been allowed to be admitted into the hospital. After faxing them the information regarding these patients, the Wuhan Health Commission says they have arranged treatment for all the families that CNN spoke with as well as four other families.

{End of Report}

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Prepared for the U.S. Department of State

By TechMIS

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DATE: Monday, February 10, 2020 9:00 PM ET

Department of State News

[Cruise-ship infections surge as thousands remain quarantined \(Washington Post\)](#)

[Wuhan Evacuees Hunker Down for Weeks in Quarantine \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[New Virus Has Infected More Than 40,600 People Globally \(AP\)](#)

[Cruise ship docked in New Jersey to set sail today after family of 4 tests negative in coronavirus scare \(CNN\)](#)

[U.S. hospitals begin preparing for the coronavirus \(Axios\)](#)

[Palestinian leader to address UN on Trump plan, but no vote \(AP\)](#)

[Schumer asks inspectors general to investigate whistleblower retaliation after Vindman firing \(Politico\)](#)

[Schumer wants to protect whistleblowers amid Trump payback \(AP\)](#)

[Schumer calls on 74 inspectors general to investigate witness retaliation after Vindman ouster \(CNN\)](#)

[Hostile Spies Target U.S. With Cyber, Encryption, Big Data, Report Finds \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[More than 100 U.S. troops diagnosed with brain injuries from Iran attack – officials \(Reuters\)](#)

Total of U.S. troops wounded in Iranian missile strikes tops 100 (USA Today)

NATO's image worsens sharply in France, United States, study shows (Reuters)

US speeds cases of translators, others blocked by travel ban (AP)

Trump Wins Suit Over Records of Meetings With World Leaders (Bloomberg)

To avoid bothering Trump, hearing on global threats delayed (MSNBC)

Trump's Pentagon budget bolsters nuclear weapons, weapons research (Reuters)

Justice Department anti-human trafficking grants prompt whistleblower complaint (Reuters)

[Iran] New Secretive Iranian Nuclear Sites Spark Concern in Congress (Washington Free Beacon)

[Syria] Turkish Troop Losses Mount After Clash With Assad Forces (Wall Street Journal)

[Syria] Turkey Strikes Scores of Pro-Assad Targets After Troops Killed (Bloomberg)

[Syria] Turkey says it has retaliated after deadly Syrian shelling (AP)

[Syria] Turkish forces strike back after five soldiers killed in Syria (Reuters)

[Syria] Turkey-Syria fighting escalates war's new chapter (Reuters)

[China] Four Members of China's Military Indicted Over Massive Equifax Breach (Wall Street Journal)

[China] U.S. Charges Four Chinese Military Members Over Equifax Hack (Bloomberg)

[China] US says Chinese military stole masses of Americans' data (AP)

[China] U.S. charges four Chinese military hackers in 2017 Equifax breach (Reuters)

[China] Trump praises 'powerful' death penalty for drug dealers in China (Washington Examiner)

[North Korea] Trump tells advisers he doesn't want another summit with North Korea's Kim before the election (CNN)

[India] India readying \$2.6 billion U.S. naval helicopter deal ahead of Trump trip (Reuters)

Editorials and Op-eds

What Is Mike Pompeo Doing With Europe's Last Dictator? (Yahoo News/The Daily Beast)

Trump post-impeachment proves House Democrats must keep investigating his White House (NBC News)

[Op-Ed: Annexations in Israel and India would threaten the very idea of international law \(Los Angeles Times\)](#)

[The Failure of Europe's Feeble Muscle Flexing \(New York Times\)](#)

[Elites favor federations like the European Union. Non-elites revolt. \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[Iran\] The U.S. Is Vulnerable to an Iranian Cyberattack. Here's How. \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Why Trump's Plan Is Proving a Hard Sell in Israel \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Germany\] A Local German Scandal Is Now a National Crisis \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Ireland\] Sinn Fein surged in Ireland's election. Here's why that's so controversial \(CNN\)](#)

[\[Russia\] New U.S. ambassador off to a strong start in Moscow \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[Ukraine\] Zelensky wants to break oligarchs' grip on Ukraine. But at least one was once a pal. \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Tougher Sentencing Won't Stop Terrorism \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Boris Johnson Wants to Be a Free Trade Grandmaster \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[China\] Lessons That Go Beyond the Coronavirus Outbreak \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[China\] This Whistleblower Really Was a Hero \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[China\] Chinese Doctor Arrested For Alerting World About Coronavirus Dies A Hero \(The Federalist\)](#)

[\[China\] Xinjiang's Hui Muslims Were Swept Into Camps Alongside Uighurs \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

[\[Japan\] When Coronavirus Takes Over a Ship It's Too Late to Batten Hatches \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] Two more American heroes die in Afghanistan as failed US occupation continues \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

Near East & North Africa

[United States to extend waiver for Iraq to import Iranian energy: Iraqi officials \(Reuters\)](#)

[Yemen talks about prisoner exchange underway in Jordan \(AP\)](#)

[\[Egypt\] Egypt Moves Toward Toughening Up Draconian Anti-Terror Law \(AP\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Slain commander Soleimani sought stability: Iranian president \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iran\] France Condemns New Iranian Ballistic Missile, Space Launcher \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[Iraq] U.S. Forces Start to Withdraw From 15 Bases in Iraq: Sky News (Bloomberg)

[Iraq] U.S. Denies Report of Troops Leaving Iraqi Bases (Bloomberg)

[Iraq] Militant group targets supply convoy south of Baghdad: military statement (Reuters)

[Israel] Israeli opposition co-leader: PM makes Trump plan a 'stunt' (AP)

[Israel] Data of All 6.5 Million Israeli Voters Is Leaked (New York Times)

[Israel] Israel accused of torturing Palestinians after fatal attack (AP)

[Israel] Israeli court sentences radical Islamic cleric to 28 months (AP)

[Syria] Nearly 700,000 Syrians displaced by government offensive since early December: U.N. (Reuters)

[Syria] Eight killed in truck blast in Syria's Afrin: Turkish defense ministry (Reuters)

[Yemen] Killing of Terrorist Leader in Yemen Is Latest Blow to Qaeda Affiliate (New York Times)

Europe and Eurasia

British coronavirus 'superspreader' may have infected at least 11 people in three countries (Washington Post)

The Latest: EU says new virus poses serious danger (AP)

Travel disrupted and schools shut as hurricane-force winds pound northern Europe (Yahoo News/PA Media)

[Azerbaijan] Azeri Snap Elections Condemned by Monitors for Vote 'Violations' (Bloomberg)

[Azerbaijan] Azerbaijan election marred by violations, say international observers (Reuters)

[Germany] Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's Anointed Successor, Won't Run for Chancellor (New York Times)

[Germany] Merkel Takes Reins in Finding Heir After Fallen Protege Quits (Bloomberg)

[Germany] Germany: Merkel's party in crisis as heir apparent quits (AP)

[Germany] Merkel protegee gives up chancellery ambitions after far-right scandal (Reuters)

[Greece] Greece to speed up creation of migrant holding centers to ease tension (Reuters)

[Ireland] Irish election produces an earthquake as Sinn Fein tops poll (AP)

[Italy] Italy's Hopes for Closer China Ties Hit by Virus Flight Ban Rift (Bloomberg)

[Malta] Pope Trip to Malta in May to Spotlight Migrants' Plight (Reuters)

[Russia] Russia quarantines Chinese diplomat as coronavirus precaution – Interfax (Reuters)

[Russia] Russia extends house arrest of U.S. investor Calvey until May 13 (Reuters)

[Russia] Russia: Youth group members found guilty of plotting attacks (AP)

[Spain] Spanish government to ban glorification of Franco dictatorship (Reuters)

[Ukraine] Ukraine Is Pressing Iran for Black Boxes on Downed Plane (Bloomberg)

[Ukraine] Ukraine minister sees no preparations for new Russia talks, has low expectations (Reuters)

[United Kingdom] U.K. Declares Coronavirus 'Imminent Threat' as Europe Scrambles (New York Times)

[United Kingdom] UK calls virus 'serious' health threat; will detain people (AP)

[United Kingdom] Britain declares coronavirus a serious and imminent threat to public health (Reuters)

[United Kingdom] Brexit Bulletin: EU Talks Tough (Bloomberg)

[United Kingdom] U.K.'s Gove Warns Industry to Brace for Strict Border Controls (Bloomberg)

[United Kingdom] UK man convicted of plot to attack London tourist sites (AP)

East Asia and Pacific

A Job Overseas, but Stranded by Coronavirus Travel Bans (New York Times)

[Australia] Solar Is Beating Out Coal in Australia, Pushing Down Emissions (Bloomberg)

[Australia] Australia plans new bank stress tests to assess climate change impact - sources (Reuters)

[China] 'Let's Not Shake Hands': Xi Jinping Tours Beijing Amid Coronavirus Crisis (New York Times)

[China] Mask-clad Xi Jinping emerges from conspicuous absence to visit coronavirus 'front line' (Washington Post)

[China] President Xi Inspects Coronavirus Hospital in Beijing After Conspicuous Absence (Wall Street Journal)

[China] China's Businesses Struggle to Resume Work (Wall Street Journal)

[China] Airbnb Freezes Beijing Check-Ins Until March to Curb Coronavirus (Bloomberg)

[China] China says 27 foreigners in the country have been infected with coronavirus, 2 dead (Reuters)

[China] Wuhan coronavirus death toll tops 900 as China cautiously returns to work (CNN)

[China] Working from home, temperature checks and quarantines: How China's companies are trying to get back to business (CNN)

[China] China's massive security state is being used to crack down on the Wuhan virus (CNN)

[China] Pangolins Are Suspected as a Potential Coronavirus Host (New York Times)

[Indonesia] Factbox: Indonesia's parliament debates sweeping new tax bill (Reuters)

[Japan] Coronavirus Cases on Cruise Ship Climb to 135 (Wall Street Journal)

[Japan] 23 Americans aboard cruise ship in Japan contract novel coronavirus, as global death toll rises to 910 (ABC News)

[Japan] The number of coronavirus cases on ship in Japan nearly doubles as passengers report going 'stir crazy' under quarantine (Yahoo News/Business Insider)

[North Korea] North Korea Deepens Isolation Amid Virus Threat (Wall Street Journal)

[North Korea] North Korea enhanced nuclear, missile programs in 2019 in breach of sanctions - U.N. report (Reuters)

[Singapore] Singapore Braces as Coronavirus Cases Emerge in Financial Centre (Bloomberg)

[South Korea] Former North Korean diplomat to run in South Korea's April general election: Yonhap (Reuters)

[Taiwan] Taiwan to bar entry of many Hong Kong, Macau residents to halt virus (Reuters)

South and Central Asia

[India] Outcry over reports of mass assault at New Delhi women's college (CNN)

[India] India Top Court to Hear Case Against Delhi Protesters Feb. 17 (Bloomberg)

[Kazakhstan] Kazakhstan to send two planes to China to evacuate its citizens (Reuters)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[\[Canada\] Military Wants Huawei Banned from 5G in Canada: Report \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Colombia\] Colombia puts military on alert after guerrilla threat \(Yahoo News/AFP\)](#)

[\[Colombia\] Colombia aims to eradicate 130,000 hectares of coca in 2020 \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Ecuador\] Bribery trial begins against ex-Ecuador leader Rafael Correa \(AP\)](#)

[\[El Salvador\] El Salvador standoff deepens over loan for security forces \(AP\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] In the heart of Mexico's violence, disillusion grows \(AP\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] 'Under Siege': desperate Mexico region uses guns, children to fend off cartels \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Fishing boats shot at activists protecting rare Mexican porpoise, group says \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Smugglers sneaking single adults over border after years of ferrying families \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[UN warns of 'major shock' as Africa locust outbreak spreads \(AP\)](#)

[Smart drones to be tested in battle against East Africa locust swarms \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Benin\] Gunmen on motorcycles attack police post in northern Benin \(AP\)](#)

[\[Mali\] More than 450 civilians killed in central Mali last year \(AP\)](#)

[\[Mali\] Mali's president seeks dialogue with jihadist insurgents \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mozambique\] Mozambique drops court appeals to extradite ex-minister from South Africa \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Nigeria\] Ecowas Sets up Committee to Look into Nigeria Border Closure \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Nigeria\] West African countries to investigate Nigeria border closure \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Nigeria\] Suspected Boko Haram Fighters Kill at Least 30 in Nigeria \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Africa\] Girl's drowning sparks water riot in thirsty South African township \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Sudan\] South Sudan's leader wins dubious 'spoiler of peace' award \(AP\)](#)

[\[Uganda\] Uganda sprays locust swarms to protect coffee crop, livestock \(Reuters\)](#)

Network TV News Coverage

[Coronavirus Has Killed More People Than SARS Outbreak in 2003 \(CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto\)](#)

[Schumer Calls for Investigation Into Witness Retaliation \(CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto\)](#)

[\[China\] Chinese Ambassador on Efforts to Contain Coronavirus \(ABC World News Now\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] Trump Reportedly Doesn't Want Third Summit With Kim Jong Un Before Election \(CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] Pentagon Identifies Two Soldiers Killed in Afghanistan \(CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto\)](#)

Department of State News

Cruise-ship infections surge as thousands remain quarantined (Washington Post)

[Washington Post](#) [2/10/2020 6:42 PM, Simon Denyer and Adam Taylor, Neutral]

China tentatively returned to work Monday after an extended Lunar New Year shutdown precipitated by the coronavirus outbreak, but with deaths from the epidemic continuing to rise, much of the country remained at a standstill, and many were working from home. Meanwhile, an additional 65 people on board a quarantined cruise ship have tested positive for the virus.

Here's what we know:

- An additional 65 people on board the Diamond Princess have tested positive for the new coronavirus, Japan's Health Ministry says, bringing to 135 the number of people who are known to have been infected. Pressure is mounting to test everyone on the ship.
- China reports 908 deaths and about 40,000 cases of coronavirus. On Sunday alone, 97 people died, the highest daily death toll since the outbreak began. Almost 6,500 of the affected patients were in critical condition, authorities said Monday.
- Britain announced new measures allowing the mandatory quarantine of those infected after the coronavirus outbreak was designated a "serious and imminent" threat to British health. Four more cases were confirmed in Britain, doubling its total number to eight.
- New Chinese research says the virus can be transmitted by saliva, urine and stool, as well as the usual viral route of respiratory droplets. It generally takes three days from the time of infection for symptoms to manifest, and 15 percent of the infected contract severe pneumonia.

Wuhan Evacuees Hunker Down for Weeks in Quarantine (Wall Street Journal)

[Wall Street Journal](#) [2/10/2020 3:58 PM, Elizabeth Findell and Brianna Abbott, Neutral]

Tennessee resident David Mayes was in China visiting his girlfriend in Wuhan when officials locked down the city on Jan. 23, aiming to stop a rapidly spreading coronavirus that has killed hundreds there.

Overnight, the city turned into a ghost town, Mr. Mayes said. Eight-lane highways were empty. Businesses were shuttered. But some Americans have made it out, on flights chartered by the U.S. State Department from an otherwise-closed airport.

Mr. Mayes, a 59-year-old pilot, waited at the airport for 15 hours Tuesday as passengers were screened for fever. When they departed, he found out he was headed for a two-week quarantine on Marine Corps Air Station Miramar, a base near San Diego where he was stationed as a Navy lieutenant commander three decades ago.

"I was coming home, almost, after 27 years," he said.

After landing and undergoing a health check, however, officials summoned Mr. Mayes. His persistent cough could be a symptom of coronavirus, they said. He was rushed to a nearby hospital, where he spent four days in isolation, watching Netflix and waiting for test results to tell him whether he has the virus.

Sunday, his test results came back negative, Mr. Mayes said. He was headed back to the base for the rest of the quarantine period, where he said he was excited to walk around and see the other evacuees.

The virus has sickened some 40,000 people, with nearly 30,000 cases just in Hubei province, where Wuhan is located, and killed more than 900. Twelve in the U.S. have been confirmed to have the novel coronavirus, all of them recent travelers to China or their immediate family members.

China's shutdown of Wuhan, a city larger than New York, was unprecedented. So has been the evacuation and quarantine of hundreds of Americans over the past week, who now face mandatory 14-day stays in military hotels.

"It has been over 60 years since we issued a federal quarantine like this. The last one was during the smallpox era," said Jennifer McQuiston, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention deputy director of high consequence pathogens and pathology, speaking from San Antonio after a plane of evacuees landed there Friday afternoon.

At least five military bases in California, Colorado, Texas and Nebraska have prepared to receive passengers evacuated from Wuhan. Evacuees are housed in on-base hotels, separated from the rest of the base by fencing and U.S. Marshals, Dr. McQuiston said. Those quarantined pass their time watching television, playing games or working remotely. Their temperatures are monitored throughout the day and anyone showing symptoms, like Mr. Mayes, is whisked quickly to a local hospital.

U.S. citizens are expected to cover the costs of the operation. Prospective passengers were told that the flight alone would total about \$1,000 and that other fees might apply.

A CDC spokeswoman didn't respond to messages asking how many of the evacuees from the U.S. flights from Wuhan had been taken to hospitals with possible symptoms. None of the evacuees have been publicly declared to have the virus.

Jin Geun Lim, 23, became stranded in Wuhan on a trip from Connecticut to meet his in-laws. Late for his second semester at the University of Bridgeport, he was making plans to find work in China when he found out on Feb. 3 that he could leave on a chartered evacuation flight, he said. The drive to the airport was the first time he had left the family's two-bedroom apartment in 15 days.

Mr. Lim, however, had to leave his wife, who doesn't yet have her green card. Stuck in Wuhan, she had to drop her last semester of graduate school in California and find a temporary design job in China. Mr. Lim's mother-in-law was crying as he left them at the airport, he said. On the flight, a woman collapsed and was taken to a hospital as the rest of the group was quarantined at Travis Air Force Base, near Vacaville, Calif.

San Francisco area residents Dennis Lin Chen and his wife, Jiang Zhu, had been in Wuhan only hours, visiting her parents for the Lunar New Year, when the city locked down, Mr. Chen said. They were almost placed on different evacuation flights because passengers were divided alphabetically by surname. Some families ended up separated, he said.

Two passengers were taken off the flight in northern California with fevers before it continued on to San Diego, Mr. Chen said. Back in China, Ms. Zhu's family is healthy, but the couple has friends who are sick and know one person who has died. The emotions of leaving others behind are difficult, he said. But the couple feels safe back on U.S. soil.

"A lot of people in China died because they didn't get medical treatment," he said. "Even if I get the virus [here], I'll get treatment."

Amid rising criticism, Chinese President Xi Jinping has mobilized the country's vast state machinery to fight the outbreak, quarantining entire cities, throwing up hospitals in days and deploying military doctors and Communist Party members to the front lines.

Since several major airlines suspended flights to or from mainland China, U.S. health authorities aren't expecting many commercial flights from China but are on the lookout for passengers on flights from other countries who have been there. As of Friday, 12 passengers from commercial flights who had recently traveled to Hubei province, had been subject to a federal quarantine, isolated at home or in hotels, private housing or federal facilities.

U.S. citizens and permanent residents who have recently traveled to mainland China have been asked to stay at home for up to 14 days, check their temperatures twice a day, limit social contact and check in with their local health departments.

Others who beat the new restrictions are choosing to self-quarantine at home.

George Love, 21, who flew from Beijing on Feb. 2 to his home in Ohio, said he received only a small card that told him to watch for symptoms when he arrived. Nevertheless, Mr. Love said he is opting to stay home, where he lives with his mother. He is taking online college courses and has left only once to go to a convenience store.

Matt Milasius, 27, a Chicago-area native who lives and works in Shenzhen, near Hong Kong, decided to fly back to the U.S. on Feb. 3 as coronavirus cases in Shenzhen started to

spike. On an app, he could watch nearby cases of the virus pop up, he said.

Mr. Milasius is choosing self-quarantine before he visits friends, he said. For him, that means 14 days alone in a windowless Airbnb in San Francisco. He has been surviving on once-daily pickups of fast food and acknowledged struggling with the isolation. He joked about putting up photos of pretty fields to keep his spirits up and said his family calls frequently to check on his mental state.

"In my free time I make electronic music, so this is a good time to do that," Mr. Milasius said. "But I think when it's over I'm going to throw my computer at the wall and go stare at the sun."

New Virus Has Infected More Than 40,600 People Globally (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 3:23 AM, Staff, 23673K, Negative]

A viral outbreak that began in China has infected more than 40,600 people globally.

The latest figures reported by global health authorities as of Monday in Beijing:

— China: 908 deaths among 40,171 confirmed cases on the mainland. In addition, Hong Kong has had 36 cases, including one death. Macao has had 10 cases. Most of the illnesses and deaths have been in central Hubei province, where illnesses from the new type of coronavirus were first detected in December.

— Japan: 162

— Singapore: 43

— Thailand: 32

— South Korea: 27

— Malaysia: 18

— Taiwan: 16

— Australia: 14

— Germany: 14

— Vietnam: 14

— United States: 12. Separately, one U.S. citizen died in China

— France: 11

— United Arab Emirates: 7

— Canada: 6

- Philippines: 3 cases, including 1 death
- United Kingdom: 3
- India: 3
- Italy: 3
- Russia: 2
- Spain: 2
- Belgium: 1
- Nepal: 1
- Sri Lanka: 1
- Sweden: 1
- Cambodia: 1
- Finland: 1

Cruise ship docked in New Jersey to set sail today after family of 4 tests negative in coronavirus scare (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 8:02 AM, Madeline Holcombe, 5551K, Negative]

A cruise ship in Bayonne, New Jersey will finally set sail Monday after a coronavirus scare kept it docked – and its passengers waiting – for days.

The Anthem of the Seas, a Royal Caribbean cruise ship, was supposed to leave for a Caribbean voyage Saturday night, but was delayed after passengers aboard the ship when it returned Friday became ill.

The four passengers evaluated for coronavirus all tested negative and were discharged from the hospital, according to a statement from New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy.

The ship will now leave Monday and will reroute from the Bahamas to Bermuda. Royal Caribbean offered Anthem of the Seas guests half off of a future cruise.

The World Health Organization and the United States have declared the outbreak of the virus with an epicenter in Hubei Province, China a public health emergency.

New Jersey has no confirmed cases of the virus, Murphy said, and risk to residents remain low.

23 passengers cleared

The Anthem of the Seas returned from a trip to the Caribbean Friday and docked in Bayonne, New Jersey.

The Centers for Disease Control began assessing passengers after two members of a family of four became ill on the ship, a CDC official said.

The family had a history of travel to mainland China, but not to Hubei Province.

Twenty-three passengers on the returning voyage who recently traveled to China were evaluated and cleared at the port, but the four family members were sent to an area hospital and tested for novel coronavirus.

They all tested negative, Murphy said. The CDC allowed the family to be discharged from the hospital.

Thousands of passengers in quarantine

Travelers aboard the Anthem of the Seas join thousands of other cruise ship passengers affected by attempts to contain the virus that now has more than 40,000 confirmed cases worldwide.

More than 7,300 people are quarantined on two cruise ships docked in Hong Kong and Japan over concerns they were inadvertently exposed to the coronavirus by infected passengers.

At least 135 people from all over the world have tested positive for coronavirus on the cruise ship docked in Japan.

Two US-based cruise lines are forbidding people with Chinese, Hong Kong or Macau passports from boarding because of the outbreak.

U.S. hospitals begin preparing for the coronavirus (Axios)

Axios [2/10/2020 7:04 AM, Caitlin Owens, 526K, Neutral]

Even though the risk to Americans remains low, hospitals across the U.S. are making sure they're ready for the coronavirus, STAT reports.

Why it matters: If the virus does spread within the U.S., hospitals being caught flat-footed would be a travesty.

Details: Hospitals across the country are checking their emergency preparedness plans and meeting almost every day. They're making sure they have the staffing and supplies they'd need, reviewing inventories and educating staff on emergency protocols.

But as the New York Times notes, there's some concern about the fact that China supplies the U.S. with many vital medical supplies and medications.

What they're saying: "As we project outward with the potential for this to be a much longer

situation, one of the things that we're actively working on is projecting the long-term needs for our health care system," Nancy Messonnier, director of Center for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases, told reporters on Wednesday.

Palestinian leader to address UN on Trump plan, but no vote (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 6:29 PM, Edith M. Lederer, Neutral]

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will reiterate his rejection of the Trump administration's Mideast plan in an address to the U.N. Security Council Tuesday, but members will not be voting on a draft resolution opposing the U.S. proposal.

President Donald Trump unveiled the U.S. initiative for ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Jan. 28.

Senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat denied reports that the draft resolution was pulled because of a lack of support, saying in a statement that the "rumor" the Palestinians withdrew the resolution is "not true and totally baseless."

He said the draft resolution, which initially said the U.S. plan undermined the Palestinian peoples' aspirations for independence, is still being discussed and will be put to a vote once those discussions conclude with "a formula that represents our positions."

The original draft resolution, co-sponsored by Tunisia and Indonesia and backed by the Palestinians, also said the U.S. plan violates international law and Security Council demands for a two-state solution based on borders before the 1967 Mideast war.

The resolution had been expected to be put to a vote on Tuesday when Abbas addressed the council. But diplomats said many of its provisions were not acceptable to European members of the council, who support a two-state solution based on pre-1967 borders, and other council members.

After lengthy negotiations through the weekend, and the circulation of a drastically amended text by the United States, the Palestinians decided against putting any draft in "blue" — a final form for a vote, the diplomats said, speaking on condition of anonymity because the discussions were private.

Erekat said since the resolution hasn't been put in "blue," it cannot be said that it was pulled.

The U.S. plan envisions a disjointed Palestinian state that turns over key parts of the West Bank to Israel, siding with Israel on key contentious issues including borders and the status of Jerusalem and Jewish settlements.

The Palestinians seek all of the West Bank and east Jerusalem — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for an independent state and the removal of many of the more than 700,000 Israeli settlers from these areas.

But under terms of the "peace vision" that Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared

Kushner worked on for nearly three years, all Israeli settlers would remain in place, and Israel would retain sovereignty over all of its settlements as well as the strategic Jordan Valley.

Schumer asks inspectors general to investigate whistleblower retaliation after Vindman firing (Politico)

Politico [2/10/2020 5:30 AM, Marianne Levine, 2003K, Neutral]

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer is asking that every agency inspector general investigate retaliation against whistleblowers who report presidential misconduct, after the firing of Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman from the National Security Council.

Schumer's letters to 74 inspectors general, which will be sent Monday, comes after Vindman, a star witness in the House impeachment inquiry into President Donald Trump, was removed from his position at the White House on Friday, along with his twin, Lt. Col. Yevgeny Vindman, an ethics lawyer at the NSC. Both brothers are active-duty Army officers and were reassigned to the Pentagon.

Gordon Sondland, ambassador to the European Union and another key witness, was also recalled from his post.

In a letter to Acting Inspector General Glenn Fine at the Defense Department, Schumer described the NSC firings as "part of a dangerous, growing pattern of retaliation against those who report wrongdoing only to find themselves targeted by the President and subject to his wrath and vindictiveness."

In addition to asking Fine to investigate all acts of retaliation against those who reported presidential misconduct, Schumer also requested that the acting inspector general report the last time that personnel at the Defense Department were informed of their rights as whistleblowers. He also asked that Fine assure Congress in writing that the Pentagon's general counsel would not allow retaliation against "anyone who has, or in the future makes, protected disclosures of presidential misconduct to Congress or Inspectors General."

Alexander Vindman's firing came two days after the Senate acquitted the president on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress, after Trump withheld military aid to Ukraine and requested during a telephone call that the country's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, investigate his political rivals.

Vindman, a Purple Heart recipient, told House investigators in October that Trump's request undermined national security. He also considered the call with Zelensky inappropriate and flagged it for a top White House lawyer. Since his testimony, Vindman has come under repeated attacks from the president's allies. Some Republicans, however, have come to his defense, citing his military service to the country.

Trump also attacked Vindman on Saturday, saying he was "very insubordinate, reported contents of my 'perfect' calls incorrectly, & ... was given a horrendous report by his superior, the man he reported to."

David Pressman, one of Vindman's lawyers, said the lieutenant colonel's removal was

nothing more than political retribution from the president.

Schumer wrote in his letter: "Without the courage of whistleblowers and the role of Inspectors General, the American people may never have known how the President abused his power in the Ukraine scandal. It is incumbent on you that whistleblowers ... are protected for doing what we hope and expect those who serve our country will do when called: tell the truth."

Schumer wants to protect whistleblowers amid Trump payback (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 5:30 AM, Lisa Mascaro, 1512K, Neutral]

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer is calling on the nation's 74 inspectors general to protect government whistleblowers amid President Donald Trump's ouster of key government officials in the impeachment probe.

In a letter Monday to the Defense Department inspector general, Schumer said Army Lt. Col. Alex Vindman has been "viciously attacked" by the Republican president after "bravely stepping forward to tell the truth."

Vindman, a White House national security council official when he testified before the House impeachment inquiry, was removed Friday and reassigned.

Vindman's twin brother, Lt. Col. Yevgeny Vindman, also was asked to leave his job as a White House lawyer.

Also out Friday was Gordon Sondland, who had been Trump's ambassador to the European Union. Sondland was among 17 people who provided public and private testimony in the impeachment proceedings.

The firings, alongside efforts to name the still anonymous government whistleblower whose complaint about Trump's call with Ukraine sparked the impeachment probe, demand attention, Schumer said.

Similar letters are being sent to all 74 IGs calling on them to take immediate steps to investigate any "instances of retaliation against anyone who has made, or in the future makes, protected disclosures of presidential misconduct to Congress or Inspectors General."

Federal employees have rights, including under the whistleblower law, that ensure they are protected through the inspector general offices and are able to provide information to Congress, as part of the legislative branch's oversight role.

The White House has stood by the dismissals.

Schumer calls on 74 inspectors general to investigate witness retaliation after Vindman ouster (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 11:41 AM, Zachary Cohen and Paul LeBlanc, 5551K, Neutral]

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer sent a letter on Monday to all 74 federal government Inspectors General requesting investigations into "any and all instances of

retaliation" against witnesses who have made "protected disclosures of presidential misconduct."

The letter comes days after President Donald Trump fired two key impeachment witnesses, Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman, the top Ukraine expert at the national security council, and US Ambassador to the European Union Gordon Sondland. An adviser to Trump told CNN the firings of the major impeachment witnesses was meant to send a message that siding against the President will not be tolerated.

"Flushing out the pipes," the adviser told CNN. "It was necessary."

Acting Department of Defense Inspector General Glenn Fine was among the IGs who were contacted by Schumer.

Schumer writes in his letter to Fine that although Vindman "lived up to his oath to protect and defend our Constitution by bravely stepping forward to tell the truth, he has been viciously attacked by the President and forced to endure threats to his and his family's safety."

"These attacks are part of a dangerous, growing pattern of retaliation against those who report wrongdoing only to find themselves targeted by the President and subject to his wrath and vindictiveness," he said.

The New York Democrat asks Fine to inform his office and the public of the date "when personnel at your agency or department were last notified of their legal rights to make protected disclosures anonymously" along with a request for written certification "from your agency or department's general counsel that he or she has not and will not permit retaliation or reprisals against anyone who has, or in the future makes, protected disclosures of presidential misconduct."

Amid uncertain futures, other witnesses in the impeachment investigation have already left the administration or distanced themselves from the White House by moving into roles at different agencies as Trump.

Still, Vindman is expected to return to the Pentagon, though it's still unclear what his assignment will be until he's expected to attend war college this summer.

"We welcome back all of our service members, wherever they serve, to any assignment they are given," Defense Secretary Mark Esper had said Friday when asked about Vindman's expected ouster.

Drawing on Trump's Ukraine conduct, Schumer said in concluding his letter to Fine that "without the courage of whistleblowers and the role of Inspectors General, the American people may never have known how the President abused his power in the Ukraine scandal."

"It is incumbent on you that whistleblowers like LTC Vindman – and others who put their lives on the line to protect our freedoms – are protected for doing what we hope and expect those who serve our country will do when called: tell the truth."

Hostile Spies Target U.S. With Cyber, Encryption, Big Data, Report Finds (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 4:45 PM, Warren P. Strobel, Negative]

Intelligence threats against the U.S. are becoming more complex, diverse and harmful as adversaries turn to innovative hybrid techniques combining traditional spying, economic espionage and cyber operations to steal U.S. secrets, according to a government report released Monday.

The report, outlining a national counterintelligence strategy, said the availability of technologies such as advanced encryption and big-data analytics has made it easier for foreign intelligence services, as well as so-called hacktivists and international criminal groups, to conduct espionage.

"The ever-changing technology landscape is likely to accelerate these trends, threatening the security and economic well-being of the American people and eroding the United States' economic, military, and technological advantage around the globe," the report said.

The document was issued by the National Counterintelligence and Security Center, a unit of the Director of National Intelligence's office that is charged with setting counter-spying policy across the U.S. government and coordinating with industry and academia.

William Evanina, the center's director, said the past year has seen gains in information-sharing between security agencies and private companies as well as research institutions on threats but no letup in foreign entities trying to steal secrets or influence U.S. public opinion.

"The amount of foreign intelligence activity against us is so numerous," Mr. Evanina said, that at times it seems like background "noise."

The report comes amid numerous recent developments regarding alleged espionage by foreign intelligence services, groups such as WikiLeaks and U.S. government employees.

In New York, a former Central Intelligence Agency employee is on trial for allegedly disclosing a trove of spy agency hacking tools, which were posted by WikiLeaks. He has pleaded not guilty.

U.S. officials have expressed security concerns over a British decision to allow the Chinese telecom giant Huawei Technologies Co. to build part of the U.K.'s 5G network. And there have been incidents in which Chinese nationals have been caught breaching physical security barriers at U.S. military bases, officials say.

The 11-page strategy document establishes five priorities for protecting U.S. security and economic secrets. The priorities are protecting critical infrastructure; reducing threats to U.S. supply chains; countering threats to the American economy such as intellectual-property theft; defending U.S. democracy against foreign influence; and countering cyber operations by foreign intelligence services.

Regarding election security, Mr. Evanina said it was unlikely Russia or other foreign powers will try to meddle in the 2020 election using the same tactics they did in 2016. "It's almost

like you have to be prepared for everything," he said.

Mr. Evanina said he worried that outside parties would try to exploit incidents like what happened in the Iowa caucuses, in which a faulty election app delayed reporting of results and fueled conspiracy theories. "How could an adversary take what happened in Iowa and pour gasoline on it?" he asked.

President Trump said in a foreword to the report that the "nation faces an expanding array of foreign intelligence threats by adversaries who are using increasingly sophisticated methods to harm the United States."

Mr. Trump, who has questioned evidence of Moscow's meddling in the 2016 U.S. elections, said that "Russia remains a significant intelligence threat to United States interests—employing aggressive acts to instigate and exacerbate tensions and instability in the United States, including interfering with the security of our elections."

More than 100 U.S. troops diagnosed with brain injuries from Iran attack – officials (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 11:58 AM, Idrees Ali and Phil Stewart, Negative]

The U.S. military is preparing to report a more than 50% jump in cases of traumatic brain injury stemming from Iran's missile attack on a base in Iraq last month, U.S. officials told Reuters on Monday.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of an announcement, said there were over 100 cases of TBI, up from the 64 previously reported last month.

The Pentagon declined to comment, but in the past had said to expect an increase in numbers in the weeks after the attack because symptoms can take time to manifest and troops can sometimes take longer to report them.

No U.S. troops were killed or faced immediate bodily injury when Iran fired missiles at the Ain al-Asad base in Iraq in retaliation for the U.S. killing of Revolutionary Guard General Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike at the Baghdad airport on Jan. 3.

The missile attacks capped a spiral of violence that had started in late December. Both sides have refrained from further military escalation, but the mounting number of U.S. casualties could increase pressure on the Trump administration to respond, perhaps non-militarily.

Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last month that the service members suffering from traumatic brain injuries had been diagnosed with mild cases. He added the diagnosis could change as time went on.

Symptoms of concussive injuries include headaches, dizziness, sensitivity to light and nausea.

Pentagon officials have repeatedly said there has been no effort to minimize or delay information on concussive injuries. But the disclosures following Tehran's attack has

renewed questions over the U.S. military's policy regarding how it internally reports suspected brain injuries and whether they are treated publicly with the same urgency as loss of limb or life.

U.S. President Donald Trump appeared to play down the brain injuries last month, saying he "heard that they had headaches and a couple of other things" following the attack, prompting criticism from lawmakers and a U.S. veterans group.

Various health and medical groups for years have been trying to raise awareness about the seriousness of brain injuries, including concussions.

Since 2000, about 408,000 service members have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injury, according to Pentagon data.

Total of U.S. troops wounded in Iranian missile strikes tops 100 (USA Today)

USA Today [2/10/2020 5:43 PM, Tom Vanden Brook, Neutral]

More than 100 U.S. troops have been diagnosed with mild traumatic brain injury from last month's Iranian missile attack on a base in Iraq, the Pentagon announced Monday.

The number of troops wounded by the explosions at the Ain al-Assad base has risen dramatically since the Jan. 8 ballistic missile attacks. Initial reports, cited by President Donald Trump, indicated there were no casualties from the missile strike, which was launched in response to the U.S. drone strike that killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

A week later, the Pentagon acknowledged 11 troops were being treated for traumatic brain injury. By Jan. 31, the number had risen to 64. As of Monday, 109 troops have been diagnosed with mild traumatic brain injury, and 76 of them have returned to duty.

"The Defense Department is steadfast in its efforts to deliver programs and services intended to lead to the best possible outcomes for our service members," said Alyssa Farah, Pentagon press secretary.

The number could change if more troops come forward with symptoms, according to a Pentagon statement.

Reuters was first to report that more than 100 troops had been diagnosed with brain injuries.

Ain al-Assad is located about 100 miles west of Baghdad and housed about 1,500 U.S. and coalition troops at the time of the attack.

The symptoms of traumatic brain injury are not always readily evident. Headaches, dizziness, memory loss and fatigue may manifest themselves days or weeks after the event. Explosions generate changes in air pressure that can damage the brain, and the closer troops are to a blast, the more vulnerable they are.

Trump was criticized by veterans' organizations for downplaying the significance of

traumatic brain injury.

U.S. commanders knew about the Iranian missile launches in advance and had scattered troops to bunkers. The initial assessment of the attack, in which 11 ballistic missiles struck the base, showed damage to some structures and equipment but no life-threatening casualties.

The lack of U.S. fatalities and the apparent absence of casualties calmed tensions between the U.S. and Iran.

NATO's image worsens sharply in France, United States, study shows (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 6:45 AM, Robin Emmott, 5304K, Neutral]

NATO's public image in the United States and France worsened sharply last year, according to a Pew Research Center study, after U.S. President Donald Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron questioned the value of the Western alliance.

Positive views of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which relies on the commitment of its allies to collective defense, fell to 52% in the United States last year, from 64% in 2018, the study released on Monday said.

In France, where Macron said last year the alliance was experiencing "brain death" because of a perceived failure to help resolve world conflicts, support fell to 49%, from 60% in 2017 and 71% in 2009. A figure for 2018 was not available.

NATO diplomats have long feared that Trump's portrayal of NATO as an alliance in crisis might erode U.S. public support.

NATO, founded in 1949 to contain a military threat from the Soviet Union, relies on U.S. military superiority to face down a host of threats on Europe's borders, including a resurgent, nuclear-armed Russia and militant attacks.

While Macron's comments stunned other NATO leaders on the eve of a December summit in Britain, Trump has harangued allies since taking office in 2017 over perceived under-spending on defense.

Trump threatened to pull America out of the alliance in 2018 and last year called low-spending allies "delinquent."

The Pew study noted that several countries "have soured on the alliance," including Germany, where support for NATO fell to 57% in 2019, from 63% in 2018.

Macron has defended his remarks as a useful wake-up call for allies, who he said were too focused on defense spending and other internal issues, rather than relations with Russia, NATO-member Turkey in Syria and the Middle East.

In Britain where NATO is taking on greater symbolic importance following the country's decision to leave the European Union, favorable views of NATO improved to 65% of Britons last year from 62% in 2017.

Overall, the study said 53% of people in 16 NATO members had a positive opinion of NATO, with less than a third expressing a negative view.

The alliance is seen most favorably in Poland and least liked in Turkey.

US speeds cases of translators, others blocked by travel ban (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 12:43 PM, Gene Johnson, Neutral]

President Donald Trump's administration has agreed to speed up the cases of some former interpreters for the U.S. military in Iraq and hundreds of other refugees whose efforts to move to the United States have been in limbo since he announced his travel bans three years ago.

The news was contained in a settlement filed in federal court in Seattle on Monday. It concerned more than 300 refugees who were on the verge of being permitted to come to America in 2017 when their applications were halted as part of Trump's efforts to restrict travel from several mostly Muslim nations.

Some of those affected are close relatives of refugees who are already in the U.S., while others are from 11 countries, including Egypt, Iran and Somalia, that Trump singled out, citing security reasons.

"The government tried to keep refugee families apart under the pretense of national security," said Lisa Nowlin, an attorney with the American Civil Liberties Union of Washington, which sued along with several other organizations. "This settlement aims to undo the harmful effects of the illegal and misguided ban on refugees."

The restrictions on refugees from the 11 countries and on relatives of those already in the U.S. — known as "follow-to-join" refugees — were companion measures to Trump's broader travel bans on those seeking visas to enter the U.S., which the Supreme Court eventually allowed.

U.S. District Judge James Robart in Seattle — the same judge who blocked Trump's initial, broader travel ban in early 2017 — blocked the companion refugee restrictions late that year in consolidated lawsuits that were brought by the ACLU, Jewish Family Services, International Refugee Assistance Project and other organizations. They alleged that the refugee bans were discriminatory and arbitrary and that they violated due process rights.

By the time Robart agreed to block the bans, hundreds of refugees had their cases upended, leaving them in administrative limbo. For many, background checks, medical clearances or other required documentation had expired by the time the bans were revoked. That meant they had to begin the process over again.

The plaintiffs included former interpreters for the U.S. military in Iraq, who sued under pseudonyms because they could face threats if their identities became public. Others were refugees who had petitioned to have their spouses and children join them in the U.S. from camps in Kenya, Uganda and elsewhere.

One plaintiff, Allen Vaught, a war veteran from Dallas, said the refugee ban "derailed efforts to get my last surviving Iraqi translator, who served bravely alongside U.S. military forces for many years, to the United States."

Under the settlement, the refugees won't automatically be admitted to the U.S., but the government agreed to move their cases to the front of the line for processing.

"What the administration did really messed up their cases," said Mariko Hirose, litigation director of the New York-based International Refugee Assistance Project. "This settlement is aimed at making sure that people who were affected by the ban are able to get their cases adjudicated and hopefully come to the U.S. very quickly."

The 11 countries were Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, Mali, North Korea, Somalia, Sudan, the Republic of South Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

Trump Wins Suit Over Records of Meetings With World Leaders (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 6:15 PM, Erik Larson, Neutral]

President Donald Trump won dismissal of a lawsuit filed by a watchdog group that accused him and his staff of violating federal law by failing to keep proper records of his interactions with foreign leaders including Russian President Vladimir Putin.

U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson in Washington dismissed the suit on Monday, saying she lacks authority "to oversee the President's day-to-day compliance with the statutory provisions in this case."

The suit, filed in May 2019 by Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington and the National Security Archive, accused Trump of violating the Presidential Records Act on several occasions, including by confiscating an interpreter's notes of a meeting with Putin in July 2017.

The complaint also alleged possible violations when Trump met with Putin in Helsinki in July 2018, when the president's interpreter left a meeting "with pages of notes" that were reportedly never shared with anyone. The plaintiffs also claim Trump left policy makers in the dark by attending a crucial nuclear summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in Hanoi, Vietnam, without appearing to take any notes for the historical record.

The plaintiffs even note Trump's habit of "ripping up papers when he was done with them," the judge wrote in a summary of the claims in the case.

In her decision, Berman Jackson held that earlier rulings by the federal appeals court in Washington, stemming from a similar allegation against former President George H.W. Bush, blocked lawsuits over suspected violations of the records law. Courts can only be used to ascertain what types of documents a president intends to preserve, according to the ruling.

"There is no factual allegation in the complaint that anyone in the White House has actually 'classified' a record of a meeting with a foreign leader as a presidential record," the judge said.

CREW and the National Security Archive previously sued Trump for allegedly allowing White House personnel to communicate through a messaging application "that automatically deleted messages as soon as they are read," according to Monday's ruling. The federal appeals court in Washington ultimately ruled it didn't have the power to get involved.

CREW didn't immediately return a messages seeking comment.

To avoid bothering Trump, hearing on global threats delayed (MSNBC)

MSNBC [2/10/2020 11:20 AM, Steve Benen, Neutral]

House Intelligence Chairman Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) recently invited U.S. intelligence agency leaders to appear before his panel on Feb. 12, the day after tomorrow, for an annual discussion of global threats. Politico reported on Friday afternoon, however, that the hearing has been delayed – for reasons that are worth paying attention to.

U.S. intelligence community leaders will not testify publicly or privately before House lawmakers next week about global threats, as negotiations on the timing and format of the annual hearing continue, according to people on both sides of the talks.

The Worldwide Threats hearing that takes place in the House and Senate has become an awkward source of tension after POLITICO first reported that intelligence officials pushed for the hearing that features both public and classified sessions to be moved entirely behind closed-doors over fears their bosses might provoke President Donald Trump's ire.

Some background is probably in order. As we recently discussed, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) is responsible for producing an annual report on global security threats, which is soon followed by a congressional hearing in which top security officials brief lawmakers on the report's findings. In theory, it need not be especially political or partisan.

But in practice, it's a different story. A year ago, then-Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats was joined by FBI Director Chris Wray and CIA Director Gina Haspel for a Senate hearing in which they completely contradicted the president's position on a wide range of key issues, including Iran, North Korea, Russia, border security, and climate change. It quickly became clear that when it came to global threats, Trump and his national security team had very little in common.

As regular readers may recall, that's when things got a little weird.

The president's initial reaction was to mock U.S. intelligence professionals, calling them "passive," "naïve," and in need of additional schooling. Trump kept the offensive going, suggesting he lacked confidence in the information he received from Haspel and Coats.

Soon after, the president reversed course and boasted that everyone on his team actually agrees with him, and the whole mess was the media's fault.

A year later, it's time for the annual Worldwide Threat Assessment to be released again,

along with another accompanying Capitol Hill hearing. Except, intelligence officials are worried about a replay of last year's presidential tantrum, so they want to make the 2020 hearing an entirely closed-door event – not to protect secrets, but by some accounts to ensure agency chiefs aren't "seen on-camera ... disagreeing with the president on big issues."

The absurdity of the circumstances is striking. If the congressional intelligence committees hold public hearings on global threat assessments, the president's national security team will tell lawmakers the truth. But in the process, they'll also contradict Trump's strange and baseless beliefs, which will infuriate the president.

The solution, then, isn't to have a president who's comfortable with reality. The solution intelligence officials prefer is to make it more difficult to have hearings that would likely trigger the president.

On MSNBC last month, Andrea Mitchell confirmed the reporting, adding, "This is a signal moment." Evidently, that moment is ongoing.

Trump's Pentagon budget bolsters nuclear weapons, weapons research (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 2:04 PM, Mike Stone, Neutral]

U.S. President Donald Trump's \$740.5 billion defense budget request sent to Congress on Monday includes more money for nuclear weapons and a big boost to research and development spending to prepare for future warfare.

The defense spending request contains the Pentagon's largest research and development budget in 70 years, a senior defense official said, as the military aims to build next generation capabilities to counter the growing strength of China and Russia.

Within the Pentagon's competing priorities, the request for nuclear weapons modernization funds rose 18% compared to last year or \$29 billion extra dollars, a second senior defense official said. Fully modernizing the U.S. nuclear triad will cost more than a trillion dollars over 30 years, according here to the Congressional Budget Office.

The funding will go to better nuclear command and control as well as delivery platforms like the Columbia Class nuclear submarine made by Huntington Ingalls Industries and General Dynamics and the certification to carry nuclear bombs aboard the stealthy F-35 jet fighter made by Lockheed Martin Co.

The Pentagon's budget request includes \$69 billion to fund ongoing wars and other Pentagon needs. Earmarking funds in this way helps the Defense Department avoid budget caps passed by Congress.

The U.S. Navy budget decreased by 1%, or \$1.9 billion, to \$207 billion and the Air Force had a slightly higher budget as the Trump administration increased the number of orders for KC-46 refueling tankers to 15, from 12. The Boeing Co program has been troubled by cost overruns and problems with the construction process.

Trump's proposal calls for 79 F-35 jets, one more than requested last year. But Congress

last year increased the F-35 purchase number to 98 from 78 in the budget they passed.

The U.S. Missile Defense Agency (MDA), charged with the mission to develop, test and field a ballistic missile defense system, is examining an additional layer of homeland defenses. Their budget of \$9.1 billion includes funds to develop a prototype THAAD interceptor missile for defending the lower 48 states.

The MDA budget would also help fund the expansion of the Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD) system, a network of radars, anti-ballistic missiles and other equipment designed to protect the United States from intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Justice Department anti-human trafficking grants prompt whistleblower complaint (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 1:07 PM, Sarah N. Lynch, Neutral]

A U.S. Justice Department anti-human trafficking grant program is facing internal complaints, after two nonprofits were denied funding in favor of two less established groups whose applications were not recommended by career DOJ officials.

The awarding of more than \$1 million total to the two groups, Hookers for Jesus in Nevada and the Lincoln Tubman Foundation in South Carolina, has triggered a whistleblower complaint filed by the Justice Department's employee union to the department's Inspector General.

An internal department memo seen by Reuters shows that as of September 12, two long-established nonprofits – the Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Palm Beach and Chicanos Por La Causa of Phoenix – were originally on the list of recommended grant winners after receiving high marks from outside contractors hired to review applications. The annual grants help nonprofits and local governments aid human trafficking victims.

Later that month, those two organizations were replaced as recommended recipients by Hookers for Jesus and the Lincoln Tubman Foundation, which both received lower rankings from the outside reviewers. The reason, a September 23 memo says, was an effort to “distribute funding across as many states as possible.”

The change was ultimately approved by Katharine Sullivan, head of the Office of Justice Programs, OJP, which awards the grants. Sullivan defended the process as proper. “Our funding decisions are based on a merit-based review system,” she said.

In December, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees local 2830 filed a complaint in which it asked the inspector general to investigate whether politics factored in the two grant awards. An inspector general's office spokeswoman declined comment.

In a statement, union president Marilyn Moses said the grants call into question the department's mission to serve the public. “Our employees take their ... responsibility to the taxpayer very seriously,” she said.

This is the second time recently the union has challenged the grants review process.

Chicanos Por La Causa has opposed the Trump administration's immigration policies. The head of Catholic Charities in Palm Beach has participated in past Democratic National Committees as a delegate or standing committee member. Both groups said they filed strong applications and intended to continue competing for grants.

Each, Reuters found, was ranked as a Tier 1 applicant, the highest level, after scrutiny by outside reviewers. Hookers for Jesus and the Lincoln Tubman Foundation were ranked in Tier 2, one level lower.

To help select grant recipients, the Justice Department contracts with outside experts called "peer reviewers" who evaluate and score applicants. The reviewers' identities were not listed next to their comments, so Reuters couldn't contact them.

Career department officials then receive a blind copy of the average weighted scores and divide them into tiers, with the top scores being closer to 100. They review the applications, scores and reviewers' comments to help inform their recommendations, which get the final sign-off from OJP leadership. DOJ staffers recommended the two Tier 1 groups.

The subsequent decision to bypass two higher-scoring groups in favor of those with lower scores deviates from past practices, said several Department of Justice veterans.

"Tier 1 generally is your default. They all get funded unless there is some kind of legitimate reason not to fund them," said Jean Bruggeman, a former DOJ Office for the Victims of Crime fellow who is now executive director of the Freedom Network USA, a coalition aiding trafficking victims.

Hookers for Jesus, which received \$530,190 over three years, is run by a born-again Christian trafficking survivor who has lobbied against decriminalizing prostitution, a policy position aligning with many in the Republican Party.

Hookers for Jesus operates a safe house for female adult trafficking victims that, in 2010 and in 2018, maintained a policy of requiring guests to participate in religious activities, internal program manuals obtained by Reuters through public records requests show.

The safe house's manuals had rules that included a ban on reading "secular magazines with articles, pictures, etc. that portray worldly views/advice on living, sex, clothing, makeup tips." Other rules limited everything from who victims could call to banning them from bringing their purses with them on weekly shopping trips. Rule-breakers could be penalized by being assigned chores such as washing windows.

Hookers for Jesus founder Annie Lobert denied that her organization requires safe house residents to attend services at her church. "We are not going to discriminate toward anyone," she said. "But," she added, "we are Christian. And there is an understanding before they come in here that we are Christian."

If the policies described in the 2018 manuals continue after the federal grant money is dispersed, they would likely violate anti-discrimination laws that prohibit using federal funding to engage in explicitly religious activities, some lawyers said.

"The fact the federal government is funding this is problematic," said Dallas Hammer, an attorney specializing in discrimination law. "The decision-makers here could be walking the federal government right into a clear violation of the First Amendment," which protects freedom of religion.

Sullivan, the OJP's principal deputy assistant attorney general, said the policies described to her by Reuters from the manuals are "inappropriate." She added: "This might be something that may be appropriate for our civil rights department to look at. Those are not facts or things that we would know ahead of time."

In its grant application, Hookers for Jesus did not discuss its religious focus in detail, and the department did not have access to its program manuals before the award was announced.

But Sullivan disputed the notion that Tier 2 scores are significantly inferior and said the department was justified in awarding the two grants because there were no other Tier 1-scored applications in Nevada or South Carolina for that grant category.

Geography is among factors that can be considered, but experts said it typically comes into play when deciding between two groups rated at the same level.

In 2019, OJP offices collectively awarded more than \$100 million in grants to help human trafficking victims, with much of the funding to be paid out over three years. Of that, \$53 million went to 77 groups, including Hookers for Jesus and the Lincoln Tubman Foundation, that provide direct services to trafficking victims.

The Lincoln Tubman Foundation, awarded \$549,345 over three years, was launched by the daughter of a prominent local Republican who supported President Donald Trump as a delegate at the 2016 convention and is close to South Carolina Republican Senator Tim Scott.

Its founder Brooke Burris told Reuters that services for adult trafficking victims in the Charleston area are severely lacking. She said the foundation will fund her Tri-County Human Trafficking Task Force project to offer more direct services and train law enforcement to better spot victims.

"We have almost no resources," she said, noting that South Carolina's state laws did not outlaw human trafficking until 2012.

The need for more awareness was apparent during a recent training session her task force hosted with law enforcement: Few officers raised their hands when a former FBI agent asked if they had ever dealt with human trafficking.

In September, South Carolina's Sen. Scott wrote a letter calling on OJP to do a "prompt review" of the application. A Scott spokesman said such letters are standard for grant requests and that he "didn't endorse" the project.

OJP's Sullivan said the grant review process was the same for all recipients and a letter

from a senator "would not influence a funding decision."

Reviewers cited the Lincoln Tubman Foundation's lack of experience. The task force is still in its "infancy" with "little to no experience," they wrote.

"I knew those were some of our weakest points," Burris said. Formed in 2018, the foundation is headquartered in a mansion owned by her parents, but she said she is looking for new office space. Meantime, she said she has been fielding calls at all hours to help adult trafficking victims find hotels.

This is not the first time Hookers for Jesus has received federal grant money. In 2017, Nevada announced it was giving Lobert's group nearly \$300,000 through the federal Victims of Crime Act. In her grant application at the time, Lobert said church participation was voluntary.

The funding was not renewed in 2018 after the state obtained Hookers for Jesus program manuals saying it was "mandatory" for guests of the group's shelter, Destiny House, to attend services and volunteer at a specific church. Its staff training manual said homosexuality is immoral and abusing drugs for pleasure is "witchcraft." Reuters obtained the manuals through a public records request.

One Nevada grant reviewer in 2018 questioned whether Hookers for Jesus treated victims like "prisoners," while another observed the program seemed too controlling and expressed concern it forced victims to attend Bible study, the grant review documents show.

"We felt their policies were not victim-focused or evidence based," said Kelsey McCann-Navarro, whose office in Nevada's Division of Child and Family Services decided not to renew the funding.

Lobert denied having policies requiring religious participation. She declined to provide Reuters a copy of her updated manuals. She added that she did not recall that the 2018 versions denounced homosexuality. "That is probably something we don't have anymore," she said.

Reviewers evaluating its 2019 federal application said Hookers for Jesus staff had little experience handling forms of human trafficking involving minors, men and foreign nationals.

In an interview, Lobert questioned the expertise of the reviewers. "I really caution when someone says they are an expert," she said. Unless they run a safe house or have survived trafficking themselves, "they don't have true expertise."

[Iran] New Secretive Iranian Nuclear Sites Spark Concern in Congress (Washington Free Beacon)

Washington Free Beacon [2/10/2020 1:20 PM, Adam Kredo, Neutral]

Iran is not "complying at all" with the landmark nuclear deal and continues to prevent international nuclear inspectors from accessing key sites suspected of housing the regime's sensitive atomic weapons program, according to the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Sen. Jim Risch (R., Idaho) told the Washington Free Beacon in a wide-ranging interview on the Islamic Republic's continued nuclear subterfuge that he is worried by new reports from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that there are "possible undeclared Iranian nuclear sites" that remain active in Iran.

Risch, who is also a member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, recently met with IAEA head Rafael Grossi to gather more information on Iran's efforts to block access to inspectors and hide undeclared work on the weapons front.

"I don't think they're complying at all" with the nuclear restrictions enshrined in the accord, Risch told the Free Beacon, adding it is now clear Iran intends to continue violating caps on the amount of enriched uranium it can keep in the country.

"They have specifically said they're going to enrich beyond what the agreement said," Risch noted. "And they said they don't care what anybody does about it. You can't say they've been in compliance by any stretch."

Recent reports indicate that particles of uranium, the key component in a nuclear weapon, were found at secretive Iranian sites. Risch said he would not contradict any recent reporting but could not go into specifics for classification reasons. Thus far, Iran has rebuffed IAEA petitions to obtain more information about these undeclared sites.

Tehran's very public breach of the nuclear accord warrants the full imposition of United Nations sanctions that were lifted under the terms of the deal, Risch said.

Under a provision known as "snapback," the United States and European countries can reimpose all sanctions on Iran that were waived when the deal was implemented in 2015. In light of Iran's moves in late 2019 to exceed caps on uranium and heavy water, a nuclear byproduct that could provide an alternate pathway to a bomb, many have argued that snapback is necessary.

"There's no question about that, and the Europeans know snapback is warranted," Risch said, expressing frustration with efforts by multiple European allies to stand in the way of snapback.

"As always with the Europeans, they drag their feet, they're tolerant when they shouldn't be tolerant. I tell them over and over again, I don't understand this. Why, why, oh why are you guys so tolerant of this? Why are you so dedicated to wanting to deal with the Iranians instead of doing what needs to be done?" Risch asked.

Leading European nations have sought to keep their business interests in Iran alive, despite the Trump administration's wishes. This has resulted in the creation of an alternative financial system that helps Iran conduct international transactions apart from the American monetary system, thereby skirting sanctions.

Iran does not "respect a gentle nudge, they don't respect the weakness, they don't respect people who are trying to do the right thing. They are recalcitrant in every respect," Risch said.

In meetings with European officials, Risch has raised the Iran issue, he said.

"I'm always disappointed in the Europeans' tolerance of what the Iranians do," he said. "Every time I meet with the Europeans, different ones, I raise that, which by the way is frequently. They just simply aren't getting it. They promised us before we entered into the agreement that they would demand snapback if Iran did not comply. They're clearly not complying."

However, the United States will continue to issue new and more biting sanctions as long as Iran continues its pursuit of enriched uranium and other nuclear materials.

Risch also expressed optimism that the IAEA, despite the challenges it faces, will continue to provide a window into Iran's nuclear undertakings.

"My sense is that the IAEA is not turning its back on doing what their mission is, as far as Iran is concerned," he said. "They're not turning their back on that even though the Iranians are doing what they always do, and that is stiff-arm everybody who tries to do anything. They know that. They realize it."

[Syria] Turkish Troop Losses Mount After Clash With Assad Forces (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 3:51 PM, David Gauthier-Villars and Nazih Osseiran, Neutral]

Five Turkish soldiers were killed during a clash with Syrian government forces in northwestern Syria, raising the country's troop losses to 13 over the past week and testing Turkey's resolve to support rebels in an area that President Bashar al-Assad has vowed to reclaim.

Turkish authorities said its soldiers were killed by Syrian army shelling on Monday in Idlib province, where Ankara has stationed troops at 12 observation posts. Turkish officials said the Turkish military had retaliated and sent cross-border convoys to beef up its military presence in Idlib.

Twelve Syrian army troops were killed in the fighting, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a U.K.-based war monitor.

"Our glorious army will continue to do whatever is necessary," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said.

Syrian state media didn't report any government statements on the clash.

Last week, Turkey said five of its soldiers and three of its military personnel had been killed, also in Idlib, in a similar clash with Syrian troops.

The series of attacks and reprisals could shake Turkey's fragile alliance with the Assad regime's main backer, Russia. Turkish officials have expressed hopes that the Kremlin would use its influence on President Assad to persuade him to stop a monthslong military

offensive aimed at reconquering Idlib, one of the last strongholds held by rebels. Government troops have reclaimed about a third of the province in the past five months.

But Russian officials have complained that Turkey has failed to meet its commitment to disarm a powerful extremist group known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which evolved from the al Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front and controls part of the province.

Turkey has distanced itself from the extremist group, but it can ill afford to sever links with other rebel groups at a time when it is relying on some of them to control portions of Syrian territory along its border.

On Monday, Russian media quoted Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov saying that Moscow remained concerned about the situation in Idlib.

In a message of condolence to the families of the Turkish soldiers killed on Monday, the U.S. Embassy in Ankara said Washington, which has deep strategic divergences with Turkey over Syria, stood by Turkey's side in Idlib.

"We stand by our NATO ally Turkey, and will continue to oppose normalization of the Assad regime into the international community," the Embassy said in a tweet.

The offensive has caused humanitarian chaos in the province and raised fear in Ankara that a deeper advance of Assad troops would send millions of civilians streaming across the border to Turkey. Turkey already hosts nearly four million of Syrian refugees, and the government is trying to send many of them back.

Nearly 700,000 people have been displaced in northwest Syria since the beginning of December, according to United Nations relief workers. "This could easily prove to be the largest number of people displaced in a single period since the Syrian crisis began almost nine years ago," said U.N. regional spokesman David Swanson.

Monday's clash took place near the town of Taftanaz, located 15 miles from the border with Turkey and where Ankara was in the process of amassing reinforcements.

Last week, Assad troops gained control of the nearby town of Saraqib, an important waypoint on the strategic M5 highway connecting Aleppo to Damascus.

Abed al Malak Kassim, a civilian who fled Saraqib to be closer to the Turkish border, described a humanitarian disaster, with families forced to sleep outside in freezing cold. This week, he sought to help displaced people like himself by giving them an old, worn-out tent.

"They were grateful because they had been living in a sheep pen before," he said by telephone.

[Syria] Turkey Strikes Scores of Pro-Assad Targets After Troops Killed (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 12:42 PM, Selcan Hacaoglu and Firat Kozok, 6400K, Negative]
Turkey said it carried out sweeping retaliation for a deadly attack on its troops in Syria,

hitting 115 targets with strikes that officials estimated may have killed scores of pro-Assad troops.

Three Syrian tanks, two artillery units and a military helicopter were attacked, the Turkish Defense Ministry said in a statement. The response came after artillery fire from forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad killed five Turkish soldiers and wounded others in Syria's northwestern province of Idlib earlier on Monday. It's impossible to independently confirm casualties in Syria's complex civil war.

The surge in fighting poured fuel on the countries' deepening confrontation shortly after Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, had ordered a massive deployment to impel a Syrian withdrawal from areas close to Turkish positions. At least 12 Turkish soldiers have now been killed in Idlib this month.

Turkey stationed troops in the province under a 2017 deal with Russia and Iran to curtail fighting there and prevent a new exodus of refugees from heading toward its border. However, Syrian forces -- reinforced by Russian warplanes -- have been battering Idlib to try and take control of strategic highways as well as vanquish onetime al-Qaeda affiliates and Turkey-backed fighters in the country's last major rebel stronghold.

Erdogan last week threatened to break the siege of some Turkish outposts by Assad's forces if they don't withdraw by the end of February. It was unclear whether Monday's casualties will force him to act sooner.

"A heinous attack occurred today in Idlib, where our military serves, pursuant to our rights under international law, to end the violence and mitigate the humanitarian crisis," said Erdogan's communications director, Fahrettin Altun.

Turkish stocks and bonds plunged following reports of the Turkish fatalities. The benchmark Borsa Istanbul 100 Index fell as much as 3.3% to a one-month low, extending its biggest decline since October. The yield on 10-year government bonds surged 43 basis points to 11.1%. The lira was relatively unscathed after authorities on Sunday made it more difficult for foreign investors to bet against the currency.

Turkey had sent hundreds of tanks, armored personnel carriers and commandos to Idlib over the weekend, the state-run Anadolu Agency reported Monday.

"Our main goal is to prevent a refugee exodus and humanitarian drama," Defense Minister Hulusi Akar was cited as saying Sunday by the Hurriyet newspaper. "We're trying to reach a cease-fire and stop the bloodshed."

If the violation of the Sochi and Astana agreements -- struck by Turkey, Russia and Iran to curtail fighting in northern Syria -- "continued, then we have plans B and C," Akar said. "We keep telling them not to force us" to implement those plans.

Turkish officials held talks with a Russian delegation in Ankara Monday after failing to reach an agreement on Idlib on Saturday, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said. Erdogan and Russia's Vladimir Putin may meet if no deal can be reached, he said.

At the talks, Turkey reminded Russia of its responsibilities as a guarantor of the Sochi agreement and the need to fulfill them, Erdogan's spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said.

The fighting in Idlib marks the lowest point for tensions between Moscow and Ankara since the 2015 downing of a Russian warplane by Turkish fighter jets. It comes as Putin and Erdogan jostle for dominance in the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, while operating within the rough boundaries of their difficult alliance.

Turkey, which already shelters the largest number of Syrian refugees, fears another 1 million to 2 million people may flee toward its border if Idlib falls.

James Jeffrey, the U.S. envoy for Syria engagement and the special envoy to the global coalition to defeat Islamic State, is traveling to Ankara for talks with senior Turkish officials on the Assad regime's offensive in Idlib and other Syria-related issues, the State Department said.

[Syria] Turkey says it has retaliated after deadly Syrian shelling (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 1:14 PM, Suzan Fraser and Bassem Mroue, Neutral]

Turkey said it retaliated Monday after "intense" shelling by Syrian forces killed five of its soldiers and wounded five others in Syria's northern Idlib province, a marked escalation a week after a similarly deadly clash between the two sides.

The exchange of fire came as a Russian delegation held a second round of talks in the Turkish capital of Ankara to discuss the fighting in Syria's Idlib province, which has uprooted more than a half-million people in the past two months. No immediate statement was issued at the end of the talks.

The fighting in Idlib led to the collapse of a fragile cease-fire brokered by Turkey and Russia in 2018. Turkey supports the Syrian rebels, while Russia heavily backs the Syrian government's campaign to retake the area, which is the last rebel stronghold in Syria.

A U.N. official said the number of people displaced by the violence since Dec. 1 reached nearly 700,000, up from 600,000.

"That's more than 100,000 people in just over a week," said U.N. regional spokesman David Swanson.

"This could well prove to be the largest number of people displaced in a single period since the Syrian crisis began almost nine years ago," Swanson said, reiterating the call for an immediate truce.

The fighting has led Turkey to send hundreds of military vehicles and troops into Idlib province in the past week, bringing both countries' forces into direct confrontation, which has been rare in the Syrian conflict.

Eight Turkish military and civilian personnel and 13 Syrian soldiers were killed in a clash in the province last week. Turkey has warned Syria to retreat to the cease-fire lines that were agreed in 2018.

The Turkish Defense Ministry said its five troops that were killed and those who were wounded were reinforcements that had been sent to Idlib.

"Our fire support vehicles immediately fired on the targets with intensity and the necessary response was given," the ministry said. The statement did not say where the attack took place but news reports said it was at Taftanaz, where Turkish troops were allegedly trying to set up a base.

A later statement said the retaliation was in line with Turkey's rules of engagement and its right to self-defense.

At least 115 Syrian positions were targeted in the retaliatory strikes, the ministry said, adding that more than 100 Syrian forces were "neutralized." In addition, three tanks and two artillery positions were destroyed, while a helicopter was hit, the ministry said. The claim could not independently be verified.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition monitoring group, gave a higher casualty toll, reporting that six Turkish soldiers were killed and seven were wounded in the Syrian government shelling at the Taftanaz air base. It added that four Syrian rebels were also killed in the shelling.

Most of the displaced are living in open-air shelters and temporary homes in freezing weather conditions near the Turkish border. Half of the displaced are believed to be children.

Omer Celik, the spokesman for Turkey's ruling-party, said it was out of the question for the Turkish troops to vacate the observation posts in Idlib, adding that Turkey would continue to respond to "systematic" Syrian government attacks

Celik also said Turkish troops would continue trying to ensure that Syrian government forces withdraw to previous positions.

"The Turkish will carry out the necessary work to ensure that the (Syrian) regime retreat from the line it has violated with the aggression," Celik said.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Turkish and Russian delegations exchanged proposals over the situation in Idlib at a first meeting Saturday in Ankara.

The Russian team returned to Ankara on Monday from a visit to Jordan and held talks with Ibrahim Kalin, a top aide to President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

During the meeting, Kalin "emphasized the need for the attacks against Turkish soldiers and the observation to be stopped," according to a statement from his office, carried by state-run Anadolu Agency.

Syria's military has vowed to continue its campaign.

An early morning airstrike on the village of Ibbin in a rebel-held region of Aleppo province

near Idlib killed nine people, including six children, according to activists from the Observatory and the Step news agency, an activist collective. At least 10 people were wounded.

The Syrian government's campaign appears to be aimed at securing a strategic highway in rebel-controlled territory for now, rather than seizing the entire province and its densely populated capital, Idlib.

The government-controlled Syrian Central Military Media released a map of the area of fighting showing that Syrian troops only have 15 kilometers (9 miles) left from seizing full control of the strategic highway, known as the M5. The highway links the national capital of Damascus with the country's north, which has for years been divided between government and opposition forces.

Meanwhile, a car bomb in a Syrian town controlled by Turkey-backed opposition fighters killed at least four people and wounded 15, the Anadolu Agency reported.

The attack was the latest in a series of explosions in Turkish-controlled regions that have killed and wounded scores of people. Turkey has blamed the Syrian Kurdish militia, known as the People's Protection Units.

The bomb went off on a main street in the town of Afrin, which Turkey took control of following a military incursion in 2018, Anadolu reported. It said some of the wounded were in serious condition, adding that the death toll was likely to rise.

The Turkish offensive has aimed at pushing Kurdish fighters away from the border. Those Kurdish fighters had been key U.S. allies in the fight against the Islamic State group. Turkey considers the Syrian Kurdish fighters terrorists linked to a Kurdish insurgency within Turkey.

[Syria] Turkish forces strike back after five soldiers killed in Syria (Reuters)
Reuters [2/10/2020 7:38 AM, Tuvan Gumrukcu, and Suleiman Al-Khalidi, Neutral]
Turkish forces struck dozens of Syrian government targets in northwestern Syria on Monday after five Turkish soldiers were killed in an attack on a military base in Idlib province, the Turkish defense ministry said.

The base at the town of Taftanaz was attacked a week after eight Turkish military personnel were killed by Syrian shelling in Idlib following Turkey's deployment of thousands of troops to stem a Syrian government offensive in the rebel-held region.

Hitting back after Monday's attack, in which five Turkish soldiers were also wounded, Turkish forces fired on 115 Syrian government targets and destroyed 101 of them, including three tanks, two mortar positions and one helicopter, the defense ministry said in a later statement.

The incidents are among the most serious confrontations between Turkish and Syrian troops in nearly nine years of conflict in Syria, and Turkey has said it will drive back Syrian forces if they do not pull back by the end of this month.

"Their attacks against our posts have made an operation necessary," Omer Celik, spokesman for President Tayyip Erdogan's AK Party, told reporters in Ankara.

The rapid advance by Syrian government forces in Idlib, the last major enclave of insurgents opposed to President Bashar al-Assad, has driven nearly 700,000 people from their homes toward the closed-off Turkish border.

Turkey, which already hosts 3.6 million Syrian refugees, says it cannot absorb any more and is ready for military action to halt the Syrian government advances.

It has poured 5,000 troops and convoys of military vehicles across the border, carrying tanks, armored personnel carriers and radar equipment to bolster its existing military positions.

A Turkey-backed Syrian rebel commander said the insurgents had also launched a military operation near the town of Saraqeb, south of Taftanaz, with Turkish artillery support.

As the conflict escalated in Idlib, Turkish and Russian officials met in Ankara for talks.

Turkey and Russia are on opposing sides in the fighting in Idlib although they collaborate for a political solution to the conflict in Syria, and Moscow's military intervention in 2015 helped swing the war decisively in Assad's favor.

The Turkish presidency said a visiting Russian delegation was told the attacks against Turkish troops were "unacceptable", must be stopped immediately and would not remain "unanswered".

Russia and the Syrian government say they are fighting terrorists in Idlib, which is largely controlled by jihadist fighters.

"This is a war of attrition between Moscow and Ankara in which they are testing limits," said Galip Dalay, a visiting scholar at Oxford University.

While there was a risk that the crisis could escalate further, Dalay said it could be managed with agreement between Ankara and Moscow on a buffer zone on the Syrian side of the border with Turkey, where displaced people could shelter.

But the challenge of meeting the needs of the wave of uprooted people is growing daily.

"Since 1 December some 689,000 women, children and men have been displaced from their homes in northwest Syria," said David Swanson, a U.N. humanitarian spokesman. "That's more than 100,000 people in just over a week."

Swanson said the latest upheaval compounded an already dire humanitarian situation in Idlib, where 400,000 people were displaced between April and August last year by earlier fighting, many of them multiple times.

[Syria] Turkey-Syria fighting escalates war's new chapter (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 11:04 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Artillery strikes between Turkish and Syrian government troops have killed at least five Turkish soldiers, with casualties among the Syrians not immediately known. The open fighting between the two militaries comes after attempts by Russia to mediate appear to have failed. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[China] Four Members of China's Military Indicted Over Massive Equifax Breach (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 6:53 PM, Aruna Viswanatha, Dustin Volz and Kate O'Keeffe, Neutral]

Four members of China's military have been indicted by the U.S. government on charges of hacking into Equifax Inc. and plundering sensitive data on nearly 150 million Americans as part of a massive heist that officials said also stole trade secrets from the credit-reporting agency.

In an escalation of U.S. efforts to counter China's alleged attempts to use cyber theft and other means of technology acquisition to become the world's dominant economic power, a federal grand jury in Atlanta returned a nine-count indictment made public Monday against the four Chinese nationals working for the People's Liberation Army. They are accused of conspiring to steal reams of data as part of a sophisticated hacking operation that exploited a major vulnerability in the software used by Equifax's online dispute portal.

The charges for the 2017 breach came as the U.S. and China remain locked in negotiations over trade after recently hammering out the first phase of an agreement. In brief remarks on Monday, Attorney General William Barr sought to distinguish the alleged Equifax theft from accepted intelligence gathering that governments conduct.

"This was a deliberate and sweeping intrusion into the private information of the American people," Mr. Barr said. "We collect information only for legitimate national security purposes; we don't indiscriminately violate the privacy of ordinary citizens," he said. China has historically denied involvement in hacks on U.S. businesses. The Chinese Embassy in Washington didn't respond to a request for comment.

The indictment is the latest from U.S. authorities to blame China for a compromise of a massive tranche of personal data. Officials have previously blamed China for a hack of more than 20 million files on government employees and their associates at the Office of Personnel Management and a theft of tens of millions of records from the health-insurance provider Anthem Inc. Mr. Barr also mentioned China's alleged hacks on managed service providers—a campaign known as Cloud Hopper—that a Journal investigation in December revealed was far larger than previously known.

Investigators also believe China was responsible for the hack of hundreds of millions of records from hotel company Marriott International Inc. and are working to prepare an indictment related to that breach as well, according to people familiar with the matter.

In May 2014 the U.S. indicted five Chinese military officers, publicly accusing employees of a foreign power with cybercrimes against American firms for the first time.

Beijing has repeatedly denied conducting such activities and has rejected previous U.S. cybercrime prosecutions, calling them attempts to vilify China and warning that the accusations could harm relations between the two countries.

But in recent years, U.S. hacking charges against China—as well as Russia, Iran and North Korea—have grown increasingly common.

U.S. intelligence officials have warned that such large data sets like those allegedly pilfered by China can have significant counterintelligence value and can be collated with one another to create detailed dossiers on, for example, U.S. diplomats or spies working undercover.

“For years, we have witnessed China’s voracious appetite for the personal data of Americans, including the theft of personnel records from the Office of Personnel Management, the intrusion into Marriott hotels and Anthem health insurance company, and now the wholesale theft of credit and other information from Equifax,” Mr. Barr said. Mr. Barr’s mention of Marriott appeared to be the first public U.S. acknowledgment that China is believed responsible for that breach, which was disclosed in November 2018.

Officials said they didn’t know what the hackers did with the Equifax information, but said they expected Chinese intelligence could use the massive data trove—considered to be one of the largest hacks on record—to develop artificial-intelligence capabilities.

“If you get PII of people, personally identifiable information, you can do a lot with that. That can be monetized, it can be used...for targeting packages for U.S. government officials,” FBI Deputy Director David Bowdich said, adding that the agency hadn’t yet seen such activity in the Equifax case.

The breach into Equifax, publicly disclosed in September 2017, prompted prolonged public outrage and led to a series of hearings in Congress where the company came under bipartisan scrutiny, and resulted in the resignation of then-chief executive, Richard Smith.

Though China’s alleged involvement had been previously reported in the media, the indictment lays out details of the operation in which hackers allegedly maintained persistent access to Equifax’s systems for weeks, stole login credentials and ultimately ran about 9,000 queries for data, which were masked through encrypted channels, before being detected and booted out.

But the indictment doesn’t provide much detail on a new claim that emerged Monday: That the Equifax act also constituted economic espionage. According to the indictment, the stolen trade secrets included information on how Equifax compiled personal data from a variety of sources “at significant effort and expense” and the use of a “proprietary database scheme” to store that information. It doesn’t state how or if that technology is being used to benefit the Chinese state.

The Trump administration has previously accused China of violating a 2015 bilateral pact to not engage in cyber theft of trade secrets. But experts who track Chinese nation-state hacking said the Equifax indictment seemed to lack strong evidence to support the claim of trade-secret theft and that the compromise of the database may have been incidental to the

goal of siphoning another massive trove of data on Americans from a U.S. business.

Equifax has struggled with concerns about Chinese espionage for several years, including worries dating back to 2015 that a former employee had stolen information that could help China develop its national credit-reporting system, the Journal reported.

Last year Equifax agreed to a \$700 million settlement with the Federal Trade Commission in an effort to compensate victims.

"There was a very close collaboration with the authorities," Equifax Chief Executive Mark Begor said. "This is obviously a pretty complex situation, particularly when you've got a military arm of a foreign state like China doing these kind of attacks on a company like Equifax."

The data that was stolen included Social Security and driver's license numbers, addresses, birthdays and other information. The breach began in May 2017 at the latest and continued through July 2017. The indictment alleges that the defendants used 34 servers located in nearly 20 countries to infiltrate the company's network.

Mr. Barr and other senior Justice Department officials sought to link the cyberattack to what they called China's overarching goals to supplant the U.S. through a range of underhanded and illegal acts as the world's leader in advanced technology, a struggle viewed as having significant national-security implications.

The four defendants— Wu Zhiyong, Wang Qian, Xu Ke and Liu Lei —are allegedly members of the People's Liberation Army's 54th Research Institute, according to the indictment, and are believed to be residing in China, outside the reach of U.S. law enforcement. Officials acknowledged they were unlikely to face prosecution in an American courtroom.

At the news conference, prosecutors took the unusual step of displaying a Wanted poster translated into Chinese and also included the Chinese characters of the defendants' names in the indictment.

Following PLA overhauls beginning in 2015, the 54th Research Institute was moved under the aegis of the PLA's Strategic Support Force's Network Systems Department, or China's counterpart to U.S. Cyber Command, said Elsa Kania, a technology and national-security expert at Washington's nonpartisan Center for a New American Security.

The 54th Research Institute, which has traditionally focused on supporting electronic warfare and intelligence as opposed to engaging in cyber espionage operations, wouldn't at first glance appear to be the most likely suspect in such a breach, said Ms. Kania. But the indictment indicates "its missions may be evolving."

Lawmakers in both parties applauded the indictment but warned that the Chinese cyber threat to U.S. interests remained substantial.

"Warning lights are still flashing red," Sen. Ben Sasse (R., Neb.), a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said. "The Chinese Communist Party will leave no stone unturned

in its effort to steal and exploit American data.”

Sen. Mark Warner, the top Democrat on the intelligence panel, added that Equifax still bore responsibility as well. “The indictment does not detract from the myriad of vulnerabilities and process deficiencies that we saw in Equifax’s systems and response to the hack.”

[China] U.S. Charges Four Chinese Military Members Over Equifax Hack (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 1:58 PM, Alyza Sebenius and Chris Strohm, Neutral]

The Department of Justice announced charges Monday against four members of China's People's Liberation Army for the 2017 hack of Equifax Inc., a breach that exposed the personal information of about 145 million Americans.

The announcement by Attorney General William Barr follows an indictment in Atlanta accusing the Chinese military personnel of conspiring with each other to hack into Equifax's network and stealing sensitive data on nearly half of all U.S. citizens.

“This was a deliberate and sweeping intrusion into the private information of the American people,” Barr said in a statement. “Today, we hold PLA hackers accountable for their criminal actions, and we remind the Chinese government that we have the capability to remove the internet’s cloak of anonymity and find the hackers that nation repeatedly deploys against us.”

Wu Zhiyong, Wang Qian, Xu Ke and Liu Lei, who were members of the PLA's 54th Research Institute, were charged with three counts of conspiracy to commit computer fraud, conspiracy to commit economic espionage and conspiracy to commit wire fraud, authorities said.

They were also charged with two counts of unauthorized access and intentional damage to a protected computer, one count of economic espionage and three counts of wire fraud, according to the Justice Department.

The Chinese Embassy didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

In an interview with Bloomberg News, Equifax Chief Executive Officer Mark Begor said that “having China indicted for this really changes the stakes for all of us.”

“It definitely raises the bar for all of us on what we need to do to defend the sensitive data that we have,” he said. “We’re in the middle of a very significant technology and security investment because we’re convinced that these attacks are going to continue. And they’re going to be more difficult to defend, and we want to make sure we’re positioned so that this doesn’t happen again to Equifax.”

The defendants allegedly exploited a vulnerability in the Apache Struts Web Framework software used by Equifax's online dispute portal. They used the access to obtain login credentials that could be used to further navigate Equifax's network and spent weeks running queries to identify the company's database structure and searching for personal information, according to the Justice Department.

The hackers ultimately stored the information in temporary output files, compressed and divided the files and downloaded and exfiltrated the data to computers outside the U.S., according to the Justice Department.

"In total, the attackers ran approximately 9,000 queries on Equifax's system, obtaining names, birth dates and social security numbers for nearly half of all American citizens," according to a statement from the Justice Department.

The hackers took steps to evade detection, too, routing traffic through about 34 servers in nearly 20 countries to mask their origin and using encrypted communication channels within Equifax's network to blend in with normal network activity, authorities said.

"Chinese spying is over the top increasingly dangerous," said Jim Lewis, a senior vice president and director of the Technology Policy Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington. "The PLA has more personal data on Americans than anyone else."

It's the second time in a week that Barr has raised criticism of China's behavior on technology issues. Last week he gave a speech warning of the threats he said are posed by Chinese technology, focusing on Huawei Technologies Co.'s 5G networks, and saying the U.S. should consider investing in competitors Nokia Oyj and Ericsson AB.

"Unfortunately, the Equifax hack fits a disturbing and unacceptable pattern of state-sponsored computer intrusions and thefts by China and its citizens that have targeted personally identifiable information, trade secrets, and other confidential information," he said.

Equifax announced in September 2017 that hackers accessed data including Social Security numbers, driver's license numbers and addresses.

Hackers gained access to the Equifax network in May 2017 and attacked the company for 76 days, according to a House Oversight Committee report. Equifax noticed "red flags" in late July, and then in early August contacted the Federal Bureau of Investigation, outside counsel and cybersecurity firm Mandiant. The company waited until that September to inform the public of the breach.

The breach attracted scrutiny from lawmakers in Washington and criticism from consumers and banks, igniting a debate about the role credit bureaus play in lending.

[China] US says Chinese military stole masses of Americans' data (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 7:30 PM, Eric Tucker and Michael Balsamo, Negative]

Four members of the Chinese military have been charged with breaking into the computer networks of the Equifax credit reporting agency and stealing the personal information of tens of millions of Americans, the Justice Department said Monday, blaming Beijing for one of the largest hacks in history to target consumer data.

The hackers in the 2017 breach stole the personal information of roughly 145 million Americans, collecting names, addresses, Social Security and driver's license numbers and

other data stored in the company's databases. The intrusion damaged the company's reputation and underscored China's increasingly aggressive and sophisticated intelligence-gathering methods.

"The scale of the theft was staggering," Attorney General William Barr said Monday in announcing the indictment. "This theft not only caused significant financial damage to Equifax, but invaded the privacy of many millions of Americans, and imposed substantial costs and burdens on them as they have had to take measures to protect against identity theft."

The case is the latest U.S. accusation against Chinese hackers suspected of breaching networks of American corporations, including steel manufacturers, a hotel chain and a health insurer. It comes as the Trump administration has warned against what it sees as the growing political and economic influence of China, and efforts by Beijing to collect data for financial and intelligence purposes and to steal research and innovation.

The indictment arrives at a delicate time in relations between Washington and Beijing. Even as President Donald Trump points to a preliminary trade pact with China as evidence of his ability to work with the Communist government, other members of his administration have been warning against cybersecurity and surveillance risks posed by China, especially as the tech giant Huawei seeks to become part of new, high-speed 5G wireless networks across the globe.

Experts and U.S. officials say the Equifax theft is consistent with the Chinese government's interest in accumulating as much information about Americans as possible.

The data can be used by China to target U.S. government officials and ordinary citizens, including possible spies, and to find weaknesses and vulnerabilities that can be exploited — such as for purposes of blackmail. The FBI has not seen that happen yet in this case, said Deputy Director David Bowdich, though he said it "doesn't mean it will or will not happen in the future."

"We have to be able to recognize that as a counterintelligence issue, not a cyber issue," said Bill Evanina, the U.S. government's top counterintelligence official.

The four accused hackers are suspected members of the People's Liberation Army, an arm of the Chinese military that was blamed in 2014 for a series of intrusions into American corporations.

Prosecutors say they exploited a software vulnerability to gain access to Equifax's computers, obtaining log-in credentials that they used to navigate databases and review records. They also took steps to cover their tracks, the indictment says, wiping log files on a daily basis and routing traffic through dozens of servers in nearly 20 countries.

Besides stealing personal information, the hackers also made off with some of the company's sensitive trade secrets, including database designs, law enforcement officials said.

Equifax, headquartered in Atlanta, maintains a massive repository of consumer information

that it sells to businesses looking to verify identities or assess creditworthiness. All told, the indictment says, the company holds information on hundreds of millions of people in America and abroad.

The accused hackers are based in China and none is in custody. But U.S. officials nonetheless hope criminal charges can be a deterrent to foreign hackers and a warning to other countries that American law enforcement has the capability to pinpoint individual culprits. Even so, while China and the U.S. committed in 2015 to halt acts of cyber espionage against each other, the Equifax intrusion and others like it make clear that Beijing has continued its operations.

A spokesperson for the Chinese Embassy in Washington did not return an email seeking comment Monday.

The case resembles a 2014 indictment by the Obama administration Justice Department that accused five members of the PLA of hacking into American corporations to steal trade secrets. U.S. authorities also suspect China in the massive 2015 breach of the federal Office of Personnel Management and of intrusions into the Marriott hotel chain and health insurer Anthem.

Such hacks "seem to deliberately cast a wide net" so that Chinese intelligence analysts can get deep insight into the lives of many Americans, said Ben Buchanan, a Georgetown University scholar and author of the upcoming book "The Hacker and the State."

"This could be especially useful for counterintelligence purposes, like tracking American spies posted to Beijing," Buchanan said.

Barr, who at an event last week warned of Beijing's aspirations of economic dominance, said Monday that the U.S. has for years "witnessed China's voracious appetite for the personal data of Americans."

"This kind of attack on American industry is of a piece with other Chinese illegal acquisitions of sensitive personal data," Barr said.

The criminal charges, which include conspiracy to commit computer fraud and conspiracy to commit economic espionage, were filed in federal court in Atlanta, where the company is based.

Equifax last year reached a \$700 million settlement over the data breach, with the bulk of the funds intended for consumers affected by it.

Equifax officials told the Government Accountability Office the company made many mistakes, including having an outdated list of computer systems administrators. The company didn't notice the intruders targeting its databases for more than six weeks. Hackers exploited a known security vulnerability that Equifax hadn't fixed.

While company stock has recovered, Equifax's reputation has not fully. The company was dragged in front of Congress no less than four times to publicly explain what happened.

The company is about to start paying out claims on its \$700 million settlement, of which more claimants have opted in to getting a cash settlement than accept credit counseling. So many claims have been made for the cash, that the lawyers suing Equifax and the Federal Trade Commission have warned claimants that the chances of getting the full cash value of the settlement was unlikely.

[China] U.S. charges four Chinese military hackers in 2017 Equifax breach (Reuters)
Reuters [2/10/2020 5:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The United States has charged four Chinese military hackers in the 2017 breach of the Equifax credit reporting agency that affected nearly 150 million American citizens, Attorney General William Barr said Monday.

"This was a deliberate and sweeping intrusion into the private information of the American people," Barr said in announcing the indictments of four members of the Chinese Liberation Army in connection with one of the largest data breaches in U.S. history. The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The announcement is the latest in an aggressive campaign by American authorities to root out Chinese espionage operations in the United States. Since turning the spotlight on China in 2018, the U.S. has snared a growing group of Chinese government officials, business people, and academics pursuing American secrets.

Roughly 147 million people had information, including Social Security numbers, birth dates and driver's license data, compromised by the Equifax breach.

The hackers spent weeks in the Equifax system, breaking into computer networks, stealing company secrets and personal data. The hackers routed traffic through approximately 34 servers located in nearly 20 countries to obfuscate their true location.

Equifax CEO Mark Begor said the company was grateful for the Justice Department investigation.

"It is reassuring that our federal law enforcement agencies treat cybercrime – especially state-sponsored crime – with the seriousness it deserves," he said in a statement.

U.S. officials have said Chinese hackers were behind a massive breach at the Office of Personnel Management, which came to light in 2015 and involved the compromise of sensitive personal data submitted by applicants for U.S. government security clearances.

That breach exposed the names, Social Security numbers and addresses of more than 22 million current and former U.S. federal employees and contractors, as well as 5.6 million fingerprints.

Chinese hackers are similarly suspected of being behind a massive breach at hotel group Marriott International Inc.

Senator Ben Sasse, a Republican member of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,

urged tougher action to counter Chinese hacking.

"The Chinese Communist Party will leave no stone unturned in its effort to steal and exploit American data. These indictments are good news, but we've got to do more to protect Americans' data from Chinese Communist Party influence operations," he said in a statement.

The Equifax data breach, because it was so large and involved so much sensitive financial information on so many Americans, had far-reaching implications for Equifax and the consumer credit industry.

The company agreed to pay up to \$700 million to settle claims it broke the law during the data breach and to repay harmed consumers.

The scandal sent the company into turmoil, leading to the exit of its then-CEO, Richard Smith, and multiple congressional hearings as the company's slowness to disclose the breach and security practices were challenged by lawmakers.

Policymakers and consumer groups have questioned how private companies could amass so much personal data, sparking efforts to bolster consumers' ability to control their information. Both the Senate Banking and House of Representatives Financial Services Committees are considering legislation that would require companies to better protect consumer data.

[China] Trump praises 'powerful' death penalty for drug dealers in China (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/10/2020 3:59 PM, Anthony Leonardi, Neutral]

President Trump praised China for giving the death penalty to drug dealers.

Answering a question about fentanyl crossing the U.S.-Mexico border during a White House event on Monday, Trump invoked conversations he had with Chinese President Xi Jinping and his country's crackdown on dealers of the powerful synthetic opioid.

"I met with President Xi on the trade deal, and I said, 'You have to stop fentanyl coming into our country,'" Trump said, likely referring to a discussion that took place before China agreed to reclassify fentanyl as a "controlled substance." This agreement in late 2018 meant that people selling fentanyl to the United States "will be subject to China's maximum penalty under the law," according to the White House.

"Criminal in China for drugs, by the way, means that's serious. They're getting a maximum penalty," Trump said on Monday. "And you know what the maximum penalty is in China for that. And it goes very quickly."

Late last year, a Chinese court convicted and sentenced a man to death for trafficking fentanyl to the U.S., stemming from a joint investigation with American law enforcement.

The president also said on Monday that states with severe penalties on drug offenses had "very little drug problems," but also noted, "I don't know that our country is ready" for the

death penalty for convicted drug dealers who face steep fines and lengthy prison sentences.

"But if you look throughout the world, the countries with a powerful death penalty ... with a fair but quick trial, they have very little, if any, drug problem. That includes China," he said.

The comments are reminiscent of Trump's past recollections of his conversations with Xi.

"You have 1.4 billion people. What do you mean you have no drug problem?" Trump said he asked of the foreign leader in remarks last year. "No, we don't have a drug problem ... Death penalty. We give death penalty to people that sell drugs. End of problem." Trump then mocked the U.S.'s approach to drugs, saying, "What do we do? We set up blue-ribbon committees."

[North Korea] Trump tells advisers he doesn't want another summit with North Korea's Kim before the election (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 9:30 AM, Kylie Atwood and Vivian Salama, 5551K, Neutral]

President Donald Trump has told top foreign policy advisers that he does not want another summit with Kim Jong Un before the presidential election in November, according to two sources familiar with the discussions.

Trump's last meeting with the North Korean dictator took place almost exactly a year ago, and both leaders walked away empty-handed. Since then diplomacy – aimed at achieving the denuclearization of North Korea – has floundered, and as Trump focuses on his re-election campaign his appetite to engage on the issue has waned, according to the sources.

Trump expressed his frustration late last year after the first working-level talks between the two countries for 8 months fell apart in October, sources explained. US negotiators believed they were making progress during the talks in Stockholm until the North Koreans claimed they broke down because the US had come "empty handed."

One official familiar with the administration's efforts with North Korea bluntly described the negotiations as "dead." The US government has completely stopped issuing special circumstance permits for travel to North Korea, this person added.

The two leaders have enjoyed a turbulent relationship since Trump has been in office. Prior to their historic first summit in 2017 Trump and Kim had traded threats and insults with the American President dubbing the North Korean leader a "little rocket man." But after meeting Kim in Singapore, the two seemed to strike up an unlikely friendship culminating in the President telling a rally in 2018 that they "fell in love."

A notable thaw

But there's been a notable thaw in recent months as North Korea resumed missile tests and a senior member of the North Korean government described Trump as a "dotard" in December after the President once again dubbed Kim 'Rocket Man' at the NATO summit in London even as he stated the two had "a good relationship."

And observers point to the fact the President has given Kim a pass in recent months after Pyongyang launched a series of missile tests, pointing to a halt in nuclear tests as evidence that his diplomatic efforts were working. However, his former national security adviser John Bolton publicly stated that the ballistic missile tests were a violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions – and Trump publicly disagreed.

Last month Trump sent a birthday message to Kim but his public comments on North Korea have been noticeably muted in recent weeks and the President hasn't tweeted about Kim.

On New Year's Eve, Trump reiterated that the leaders had a "good relationship," but also acknowledged that they may have divergent agendas.

"Look, he likes me; I like him. We get along. He's representing his country. I'm representing my country. We have to do what we have to do," Trump told reporters at Mar-A-Lago when he was asked about the Christmas gift promised by the North Koreans. That gift – which the administration expected to be a missile launch of some sort – never came.

Those working on Trump's reelection campaign do not believe North Korea is an issue crucial to the President winning a return to office.

It was also noticeable that Trump did not mention the country in his State of the Union speech this week.

Last year he used the address to announce the second US-North Korea summit and in 2018 Trump invited a North Korean defector as one of his guests.

An administration official said there is little appetite within the President's inner circle to pursue a deal with North Korea before the election, saying any potential benefits to be gained from reopening talks are greatly outweighed by the risks. It's also clear the North Koreans are not interested in restarting negotiations unless the President preemptively eases sanctions which is unlikely to happen, the administration official added.

In a New Year's address, Kim said his country will "never" denuclearize if the US does not retreat from what North Korea regards as Washington's "hostile policy" towards Pyongyang.

Last month, a top adviser to Kim said North Korea has no intention of engaging in talks this year.

In a statement published in English by North Korean state media, Kim Kye Gwan said Pyongyang believed it has been "deceived by the US" and said the US has wasted the last eighteen months, in which little progress has been made on denuclearization.

"We have been deceived by the US, being caught in the dialogue with it for over one year and a half, and that was the lost time for us," the adviser said.

The National Security Council and the State Department did not reply to a request for comment.

Admin officials continue to push for negotiations

Despite Trump's disinterest, other administration officials continue to publicly tout a ready-for-negotiations posture.

"My hope is that North Korea will come back to the table," national security adviser Robert O'Brien said at an event in Washington on Wednesday.

When asked if he expects talks to begin before the election, O'Brien denied any connection between the political calendar and the Trump administration's policy on North Korea.

"As far as when it happens," O'Brien said. "What President Trump has shown both with the peace plan and otherwise is that there is an utter disregard on his part for US domestic politics when it comes to what is doing what is right for the American people. He will be doing what is right for the American people whether it is popular, unpopular, risky, not risky, right up until the day of the election."

O'Brien did not specifically address the President's current disinterest in a Trump-Kim summit, or seek to indicate that the President was eager for another face-to-face meeting.

Steve Biegun, the US Special Representative to North Korea, has remained committed to working-level talks and will maintain the portfolio even now that he is also the deputy secretary of state. But North Koreans have not been receptive in recent months.

"Biegun is constantly trying to reignite talks," according to one person familiar with the administration's efforts. However, the official noted that Biegun has been unsuccessful on his recent trips to the region.

It is unclear if lower-level diplomats working on the Trump administration's North Korea policy have been explicitly told that the President is no longer eager for another summit. Yet officials working on the portfolio understand that Trump does not want to have another face-to-face with Kim Jong Un unless there is a deal to be closed during that summit, a source familiar with the efforts explained.

As diplomacy stands still, North Korea has slowed down its missile tests, but remains focused on its nuclear program. North Korea is "building new missiles, new capabilities, new weapons as fast as anybody on the planet," General John Hyten, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said last month.

Members of Congress, including many Republicans, have grown increasingly concerned over the administration's failure to share details on their approach to North Korea policy, according to two Congressional staffers. Repeated requests by members of Congress to receive briefings, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the President's meetings with Kim, were ignored, prompting concern over a lack of oversight by Congress, these people said.

Diplomats from the region also feel they have been left in the dark. They have been asking the Trump administration for an update on the next steps the US intends to take, but the administration have not given them a firm answer, two diplomats from the region explained.

[India] India readying \$2.6 billion U.S. naval helicopter deal ahead of Trump trip (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 10:00 AM, Sanjeev Miglani, Neutral]

India is set to give final approval to a \$2.6 billion deal for military helicopters from U.S. defense firm Lockheed Martin (LMT.N) ahead of a proposed visit by U.S. President Donald Trump this month, defense and industry sources said.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is trying to pull out all the stops for Trump's trip in a bid to reaffirm strategic ties between the two countries, which have been buffeted by sharp differences over trade, to counter China.

India's defense purchases from the United States have reached \$17 billion since 2007 as it has pivoted away from traditional supplier Russia, looking to modernize its military and narrow the gap with China.

Modi's cabinet committee on security is expected to clear the purchase of 24 MH-60R Seahawk helicopters for the Indian navy in the next two weeks, a defense official and an industry source briefed on the matter separately told Reuters.

"It's a government-to-government deal, it is close," said the industry source.

To cut short lengthy negotiations between Lockheed and the Indian government, the helicopters that will be deployed on India's warships will be bought through the U.S. foreign military sales route, under which the two governments will agree details of the deal.

Trump is expected in India around Feb 24 on his first official visit to the country, although no formal announcement has yet been made.

Both countries are separately working on a limited trade agreement ahead of the trip, after earlier imposing tit-for-tat tariffs on each other's imports.

Trump has called India the "tariff king of the world" but the Modi government has been trying to address some of his concerns.

Trade officials have pointed to large-scale U.S. arms purchases, from surveillance planes to Apache and Chinook helicopters, as proof of India's willingness to tighten strategic ties.

The multirole helicopters will be equipped with Hellfire missiles and are meant to help the Indian navy track submarines in the Indian Ocean, where China is expanding its presence.

Many of India's warships are without any helicopters because of years of underfunding, and the navy had sought their acquisition as a top priority.

The government outlined only a modest rise in its 2020/21 defense spending to \$73.65 billion in the budget on Feb. 1, of which a part will go toward making a down payment on the helicopter purchase, a defense official said.

"We expect a positive announcement soon on the helicopters," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity because of service rules. "There are limited resources, but there is

an allocation.”

The U.S. State Department approved the sale of the choppers to India last year along with radars, torpedoes and 10 AGM-114 Hellfire missiles.

The clearance came after the Trump administration rolled out a new “Buy American” plan in 2018 that had relaxed restrictions on sales, saying it would bolster the American defense industry and create jobs at home.

The United States has also offered India the armed version of Guardian drones that were originally authorized for sale as unarmed for surveillance purposes, the first such approval for a country outside the NATO alliance.

India plans to buy 30 of these unmanned aircraft for surveillance of the Indian Ocean, at a cost estimated to be about \$2.5 billion, from General Atomics.

However, the defense official said the deal is unlikely immediately because of lack of funds.

Editorials and Op-eds

What Is Mike Pompeo Doing With Europe’s Last Dictator? (Yahoo News/The Daily Beast)

Yahoo News/The Daily Beast [2/10/2020 9:12 AM, Betsy Swan, Neutral]

Belarus is often called Europe’s last dictatorship, and its president, Alexander Lukashenko, heads an authoritarian government that’s highly reliant on Russia. He also kicked out the U.S. ambassador more than 10 years ago. In other words, it’s just about the last place you might expect to see a U.S. Secretary of State. And yet, there Mike Pompeo was earlier this month. The question is, **why?**

The Kremlin sees Belarus, just to the north of Ukraine and on Russia’s western border, as firmly in its sphere of influence, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has angled to tighten the two states’ already-tight bonds—sowing fears that he aims to claim it as part of Russia itself.

For much of the country’s short history, its relationship with the U.S. has been quite bad. The U.S. sanctioned Belarus in 2006 after an election that the State Department called “neither free nor fair.” And in 2008, the country expelled the U.S. ambassador and capped the number of diplomats allowed there at five.

Then Putin invaded Ukraine. And a delicate diplomatic dance began—one that continued over **two** American administrations, headed by presidents with extremely different attitudes towards Putin. (The Belarusian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not respond to a request for comment for this story.)

According to multiple current and former U.S. officials, Lukashenko responded to Russia’s annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by signaling to the U.S. that he wanted closer ties. Michael Carpenter, who worked on Eurasia policy as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense during the Obama administration, told The Daily Beast that Lukashenko sent the

message loud and clear when the two of them had a two-hour meeting in March 2016.

"We spent almost half of it talking about Ukraine," Carpenter said. "It was just very apparent to me at the time that this was a huge preoccupation for him, that he was very worried about the implications of what that meant for his own country."

In the years since then, the Belarussians have kept signaling to the U.S. that they want a warmer relationship. And Americans have signaled back. One senior State Department official said Wess Mitchell—assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs from 2017 to 2019—made clear to the Belarussians that things could change. The official said Mitchell's involvement was like a hinge: If Belarus was serious, he communicated, then the U.S. was serious too. During the Trump administration, a battery of senior officials went to Minsk to meet with officials there, including Mitchell, Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs David Hale, and then-National Security Advisor John Bolton.

For years, per one former U.S. official, the U.S. government had seen Belarus as a lost cause.

"We took for granted that Belarus was going to be frozen in time as a Soviet theme park," the former official said—adding that the last several years proved that assumption wrong.

The appearance in Minsk by Bolton—a very open Russia hawk—was especially notable.

"From my view, Bolton was there precisely to address concerns about Russian aggression," said Jonathan Katz, who oversaw U.S. assistance to Belarus at USAID under the Obama administration.

In 2017 and 2018, there were substantial quiet conversations between U.S. and Belarussian officials, according to two congressional aides familiar with the Trump administration's policy toward the former Soviet republic. They signaled they feared for their own viability as a nation in the face of potential Russian incursions, per the aides. In 2017, Lukashenko invited American officials to observe major Russian military exercises held there—a move that impressed the Hill. And in January 2019, the Belarussians lifted a cap on how many American diplomats can work in the country. One State official said they expect the number of diplomats there to double by 2021.

And over the last year, per the Hill aides, Belarussian officials have reached out to Congress about efforts to warm the relationship.

The efforts culminated in a historic visit to Belarus earlier this month by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The State officials said Belarus's state oil company signed a framework agreement with a North Dakota oil trading firm to buy up to 18 million barrels of U.S. oil in 2020. The deal didn't include details and may not come to fruition. But it sent a signal to the Kremlin: Belarus doesn't want Russia to be its one-stop-shop for energy.

The Kremlin's response, per the two senior State officials, was predictable: an onslaught of disinformation about the trip and its significance ("Netizens Implicate Mike Pompeo in Fresh Anti-Belarus 'Extortion Scheme' Before Historic Minsk Trip," blared one headline on the Kremlin-controlled Sputnik News).

Moscow's apparent irritation wasn't surprising. While President Donald Trump and Putin are famously chummy, the Trump administration's policies have often been borderline hostile towards the Kremlin. The Belarus overtures, meanwhile, are of a piece with the administration's national security strategy, which calls for focusing on competition with great powers including Russia and China. The former U.S. official said the Belarus outreach isn't an outlier. Throughout Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and the Balkans, the U.S. is pushing back on Russian influence in similar ways, the official said.

"It's not lost on the leaders in Minsk that they potentially in the very near term face a similar type of situation to that Ukraine has faced," Katz said, "and I think this is changing the calculation even of an aged authoritarian who's been in power several decades."

Trump post-impeachment proves House Democrats must keep investigating his White House (NBC News)

NBC News [2/10/2020 4:37 AM, Kurt Bardella, 4200K, Neutral]

If House Democrats are unsure how to move forward post-impeachment, President Donald Trump's unhinged performances last week at the National Prayer Breakfast and in the East Room of the White House should provide some clarity.

Trump unleashed a stream-of-consciousness tirade Thursday, using inflammatory words like "scum," "sleazebags" and "crooked" to describe his perceived enemies.

This was Trump uncensored and uninhibited, seemingly liberated from the confines of impeachment and determined to exact revenge on his public list of enemies.

It was a demonstration of remarkable pettiness but also a warning that if he is left unchecked, there are few boundaries he won't cross to avenge his perceived slights.

It's easy to understand why some Democrats may feel reluctant to resume vigorous oversight of Trump and his administration.

Since the impeachment proceedings began last fall, congressional investigative committees have been running a marathon at a sprinter's pace.

They are understandably tired, burned out and, given the actions of the Republican-controlled Senate, cynical.

Will anything they do going forward make any difference? Some may be worried that resuming congressional investigations could affect the Democrats' efforts to defeat Trump in November.

Many facts surrounding impeachment remain unclear.

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jerry Nadler, D-N.Y., has said the House "will likely" subpoena former national security adviser John Bolton for the testimony he refused to provide voluntarily during the impeachment inquiry.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was subpoenaed by the House back in October, but he ignored the deadline to produce documents related to Trump's bullying tactics in Ukraine.

Acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney claimed that "absolute immunity" prevented him from complying with a subpoena the House issued in November.

It's not just testimony and documents related to impeachment that warrant congressional scrutiny.

New documents have exposed the "unprecedented — and largely hidden — business relationship" between Trump's businesses and the Secret Service.

We still don't have an accurate understanding of the events that almost brought our country to the brink of war with Iran just one month ago.

The Supreme Court is set to hear arguments on March 31 related to the House's efforts to subpoena Trump's tax returns.

Even though we know the president and his men will not comply with congressional subpoenas, they should still be issued.

If they are ignored, those officials should be held in contempt.

If they still refuse to acquiesce, they should be taken to court.

As we've seen with the fight over Trump's tax returns, the judicial process takes time.

It's unlikely any new cases will be resolved by the November election.

It's because these cases take time that House Democrats need to start right now.

These efforts to fight for transparency and accountability will be the only thing we have left to preserve our democratic institutions.

We must start working through that process now, before it's too late to make much of a difference.

Republicans are almost certain to argue that if Democrats pursue vigorous oversight of the president, they'll be using their congressional power to re-litigate impeachment and unduly influence the 2020 elections.

Republicans used the House Select Committee on Benghazi to attack Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton, even issuing an oversight report in June 2016, mere months before Election Day. Trump and his accomplices are betting that Democrats don't have the stomach to keep fighting.

They think they can effectively send Democrats into retreat mode.

If that were to happen, I fear, the damage done to our institutions will be even more grave -

and it will certainly last longer.

Post-impeachment, Trump has been the poster child for why our country needs an urgent check on his dictatorial impulses.

Doing his best "Saturday Night Massacre" impression Friday, Trump seemed to retaliate against two key witnesses from the House impeachment inquiry: recalling Gordon Sondland, the U.S. ambassador to the European Union, and removing Army Lt. Col. Alexander Vindman from his White House job (as well as Vindman's brother).

There are reports that Trump is also thinking about punishing the intelligence community's inspector general, Michael Atkinson, for the great transgression of doing his job and transmitting a whistleblower's report to Congress. As someone who worked at the House Oversight Committee, I understand the impulse to embrace a "do no harm" mentality as we head into election season. However, the American people delivered Democrats a sweeping mandate in the 2018 midterms to be a check on the Trump presidency.

These recent displays of power from Trump reveal a president who is doing literally whatever he wants. And he recognizes that Republicans in Congress are unable or unwilling to stop him. Therefore, the most meaningful thing House Democrats can do post-impeachment is to reignite their oversight fight and keep pushing to maintain vital checks and balances between the executive and legislative branches.

Op-Ed: Annexations in Israel and India would threaten the very idea of international law (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [2/10/2020 3:00 AM, David N. Myers, 1907K, Neutral]

Here we go again. We've moved on to a new chapter in the playbook used by the global club of illiberal democrats. It started with the inflammatory rhetoric against those deemed undesirables, be they immigrants, members of minority groups or just political enemies. Then it was transformed into policy, as Donald Trump made clear when he announced his infamous Muslim ban just a few days after assuming office in 2017.

Trump's friends in the world saw fit to translate their own exclusionary words into exclusionary policy. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel took this step in July 2018 when his government passed the Nation-State Law in the Knesset, effectively enshrining in law the supremacy of Jews over Arabs in Israel. In December 2019, Narendra Modi of India pushed through the Citizenship Amendment Act, granting a path for citizenship to migrants who had fled religious persecution in other countries, but not for Muslims, against whom Modi's BJP party routinely discriminates.

Those two legislative acts are not mere hot air. They are of a piece with more dramatic acts of territorial realignment — basically, land grabs in defiance of international law. For example, a few months before the Citizenship Amendment Act, Modi rescinded the long-standing autonomous status of the disputed region of Kashmir, with its majority Muslim population. Netanyahu, for his part, drew on the Nation-State Law to grant priority to Jewish settlements in the West Bank and deprive the Palestinian population of rights and services.

Now along comes Trump with his proposed Mideast peace plan that invites Israel to annex

all Israeli settlements in the West Bank, as well as substantial parts of the Jordan Valley. Netanyahu has held off for the moment on charging ahead with annexation. But his intentions are clear. He has repeatedly declared his desire to annex all settlements, and if re-elected on March 2 in round three of the Israeli elections, he will proceed (unless he's convicted on bribery and fraud charges before that vote).

What is so brazen about these steps in India and Israel, aside from violating the two countries' self-declared democratic and pluralist origins, is their total disregard for international law.

In the case of Kashmir, there is a long line of United Nations Security Council resolutions and letters, from 1948 to 2019, calling on both India and Pakistan to refrain from altering the territorial status of the region. In the case of the West Bank, there is a long-standing international consensus that Israel's occupation stands in violation of the 49th clause of the 4th Geneva Convention from 1949, which explicitly states: "The occupying power shall not deport or transfer parts of its own population into the territories it occupies."

Yet Israel has repeatedly transferred or permitted the movement of its civilian population to the occupied West Bank over the past half-century. Now it is on the brink of providing final validation with annexation.

The boldness of this act should not be lost. The foreign policy chief of the European Union, Josep Borrell, spoke in uncommonly candid language a few days ago when he stated that the Trump plan broke with "internationally agreed parameters" in its dismissal of the two-state solution — and more particularly, that "steps towards annexation, if implemented, could not pass unchallenged."

Actually, the roots of this neglect of international law with respect to the West Bank can be traced back to 1967. In September of that year, the legal advisor to the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Theodor Meron, was asked to deliver an opinion on the status of the newly conquered territory. Meron, who would go on to a career as a distinguished international jurist, declared that the prohibition on settling civilians in the 4th Geneva Convention was "categorical and not conditional upon the motives for the transfer or its objectives."

The government of Prime Minister Levi Eshkol — and all subsequent Israeli governments — rejected this opinion. By contrast, the overwhelming majority of the international community supported Meron's view.

Now, as most of the world looks on with dismay, the Trump administration has decided to overturn decades of U.S. foreign policy — and the preponderance of international legal opinion — to encourage and condone the actions of the Netanyahu regime. He has done the same with Modi, who has moved toward de facto annexation of Kashmir. And, of course, Trump has repeatedly praised and embraced Russian President Vladimir Putin, whose forces illegally invaded Crimea in 2014.

It is easy to treat each of these cases in isolation, but in fact they are part of a larger scheme fomented by the world's current crop of illiberal leaders to undo the foundations of international law. For them, the enemy of their form of chauvinistic ethno-nationalism is the international legal order.

Recent acts in India and Israel threaten the very idea of international law as a constraint against a nation unilaterally seizing territory from its adversaries. What is left of international law — not to mention, of decency and justice — if this principle is allowed to wither?

The Failure of Europe's Feeble Muscle Flexing (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 5:00 AM, Anna Sauerbrey, 23673K, Neutral]

If you don't happen to be a foreign policy wonk, you've probably never heard of Instex, the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges. The company, set up by Germany, France and Britain in January 2019, was supposed to enable trade between Europe and Iran in defiance of United States sanctions. Now, a year later, the first transaction is just about to be processed, according to the German Foreign Office.

All this may sound technical, and, well, wonky. I can already see you wondering: Should I really make the effort to keep reading this column? But it really is worth taking a closer look at Instex and its foibles. Because this instrument — weedy and wonky though it may be — is a prime example of the futility of Europe's struggle for strategic autonomy from the United States.

If anybody in Berlin needed a reminder of how dangerously impotent Europe is in the face of President Trump's erratic foreign policy, Jan. 3 should have done the trick. On that day, the Iranian general Qassim Suleimani was assassinated by an American drone strike in Iraq; the fallout pushed the United States and Iran to the brink of war, and once again reduced European leaders to pleading for caution from the sidelines of world politics.

Ever since Mr. Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in May 2018, European countries have struggled to come up with an appropriate response. The J.C.P.O.A. — also known as the Iran nuclear deal — is an agreement between Iran, the United States, France, Germany, Britain, China, Russia and the European Union. When it signed the deal in 2015, Iran agreed to halt the development of nuclear weapons in return for the end of economic sanctions. Mr. Trump quit the deal three years later, despite reassurances by the International Atomic Energy Agency that Iran did comply with its terms. Soon afterward, the United States reinstated and extended American sanctions on Iran, including so-called secondary sanctions — sanctions that not only prohibit American companies and citizens from trading with Iran, but also affect foreign entities and individuals who do so.

The withdrawal was a major shift in American policy. Instead of the deal's carrots-and-sticks approach — an approach made in close partnership with Europe — the Trump administration switched to a "maximum pressure" strategy, designed to choke Iran economically. The secondary sanctions also made clear that from the American perspective, Europe was on the wrong side of history and needed to be treated as part of the problem.

To the European signatories of the deal, this shift posed a major strategic problem. Since Mr. Trump announced the American withdrawal, Iran has progressively ramped up its nuclear program; the E.U., including Germany, has pledged to uphold its commitment to trading with Iran in order to retain some leverage over the country. But Europe has had a

hard time living up to this promise.

The enormous impact of America's secondary sanctions comes not just from the market power of the United States, but also from the power of the dollar and America's capacity to legally or factually control financial transaction systems. "On some level, almost every company has some sort of connection with the U.S.," said David Jalilvand, a foreign policy expert who runs Orient Matters, a Berlin-based political and economic consultancy specializing in the Middle East. "Even if a company doesn't operate on the U.S. market, either its bank does, or one of its insurance companies or one of the reinsurance companies backing their insurance companies." As a consequence, even companies that do not operate on the American market are affected.

One key, then, to Europe obtaining "strategic autonomy" in international relations, is obtaining a capacity for independent financial transactions. Which brings us back to Instex.

Instex — stay with me here! — is part of a barter system that is intended to avoid payments being exchanged directly between European and Iranian companies when they do business with one another, in order to avoid setting off American sanctions. Under this barter system, money doesn't have to "cross" the invisible line between Europe and Iran: Instex and its Iranian counterpart record the value of shipments from Europe to Iran, and vice versa, and organize the exchange of the appropriate amount of funds among exporters and importers on the same side of the line.

Sound complicated? It is. And while it works on paper, it's proved extremely hard to realize in the real world. Policymakers in Berlin admit freely today under the condition of anonymity that they had underestimated the technical difficulties.

Instex was first announced by the European Union's high representative for foreign affairs in September 2018. It was first intended to be set up as an E.U.-institution; then, as a result of legal and political concerns, it transformed into a private company created by only three member states — France, Britain and Germany — to be hosted in Paris and headed by a German. But finding the right personnel to staff Instex proved difficult. The staff had to be composed of people with expertise in both diplomacy and banking, and people willing to take a personal risk, since the United States had threatened to bar both the company and anyone associated with it from the American financial system — which could even extend to having private bank accounts shut down.

After a lengthy slog, in January 2019, the three countries announced that Instex had come into existence. At a meeting of the E.U.'s foreign ministers in Bucharest, Romania, that month, the German foreign minister, Heiko Maas, even tried, boldly, to flex some muscle: "We're making clear that we didn't just talk about keeping the nuclear deal with Iran alive, but now we're creating a possibility to conduct business transactions," he said. A year later, with Instex poised to process its first transaction, Europe's great moment of defying the United States approach to Iran seems to have finally arrived.

But has it really?

When compared to Mr. Maas's strong rhetoric in Bucharest, the sound emanating from German foreign policy circles today is rather mealy-mouthed. The first transaction is said to

be a "test case." German officials have declined to name the exact amount, but say it is "less than a million" euros. They like to stress that everything about it is entirely legal and in accordance with the American sanctions regime: The first trade deal operated through Instex is a shipment of medical goods produced by a German company.

Still, the exporting company's name has been treated like a state secret — as are the names of the banks involved, for fear they might become the targets of American wrath. Also, there have been no Iranian imports to the E.U. in return, as laid out in the original concept of the barter system. The amount due for the shipment has been provided by Instex itself.

Get through all that? Here's the tl;dr version: Under constant American diplomatic pressure and threats, Instex has gone from being promoted as the linchpin of an independent European foreign policy to a company sending less than a million euros' worth of humanitarian aid to Iran in half-secret. The once-defiant posture — Europe proudly standing up to a bully — is long gone.

This was roughly the situation when Mr. Trump ordered a death sentence for Mr. Suleimani in January, causing the world, and not least Europeans, to hold their breath for several weeks in fear of a hot war in the Middle East. On the surface, the crisis did not influence Europe's strategy of management and control. France, Britain and Germany have triggered the nuclear deal's dispute resolution mechanism; Germany hopes to intensify regional dialogue, leveraging mounting concerns with Donald Trump's maximum-pressure strategy.

But while on the surface, Europe seems to press on with business as usual, the tectonic plates of trans-Atlantic relations are shifting. For Europe, a direct neighbor of the Middle East, the stakes of Mr. Trump's risky Iran strategy are extremely high; in January, Europeans learned that the American president would put the Continent's security interests at risk without batting an eye. This, as well as the bitter lessons learned from the Instex experiment, illustrate once again how hard it is to run an independent foreign policy in a dollar world in which the United States is weaponizing trade. European policymakers have been left with both a sense of urgency and a feeling of utter impotence. Not a comfortable pairing.

At present, it looks like German foreign policymakers are willing to live with it, for lack of better options and for fear of retaliation if they step out of line. They are sustained by a vague hope that Iran's nuclear program can be contained until the American presidential election. If Donald Trump is re-elected on Nov. 3, however, a tipping point may be reached: The danger of sticking with the United States will outweigh the danger of letting go. Alternate partners have already offered themselves: Both China and Russia have long worked on diminishing their dependency on the dollar and on financial transaction channels dominated by the United States. They have followed Europe's Instex initiative with great interest, offering to join in. So far, Germany has declined the offer.

Elites favor federations like the European Union. Non-elites revolt. (Washington Post)
Washington Post [2/10/2020 6:00 AM, Jason Parker, 12625K, Neutral]

As years of Brexit drama end with the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union, it is worth reflecting on the populist-nationalist upsurge there and elsewhere that has

rocked the international establishment over the past decade.

From rural England to Catalonia to the Arab Spring to the Rust Belt, diverse polities have come together to challenge established practices and norms of governance in ways not seen in generations.

Over half a century ago, the world saw similar upheavals in the waves of Asian, African, Middle Eastern and Caribbean decolonization that quadrupled the membership of the United Nations within a generation after 1945.

Most of the new members were the "single-unit" nation-states we know today — Senegal, Kenya, India and others that inherited most or all of their borders from imperial maps.

In a largely forgotten part of the story, what historian Michael Collins calls the "Federal moment" in postwar global history saw nearly a dozen federated entities proposed or attempted between 1945 and 1970.

These experiments grouped together colonial units into larger, multiethnic federations.

Most — the West Indies Federation, the Central African Federation and Malaysia, for example — were vehicles for decolonization.

Others, such as the United Arab Republic and the "Beta version" of the European Union, were the initiative of already independent states.

For their numerous champions in the global North and South, federations were the wave of the future.

In less grandiose terms, they were seen as the surest path to postcolonial state and economic viability, especially for smaller, poorer and more isolated places whose prospects after decolonization seemed dire.

In almost all cases, their demise resulted from a version of the populist-nationalist surge familiar to us today: local, identity-driven popular resistance to distant, cosmopolitan-elite political projects.

The disconnect can be fatal to such top-down designs.

Departing European officials saw in the federal model a way to preserve metropolitan influence after decolonization, by leaving in place economic, security and cultural links both between former colonies and with the former metropole.

Anti-colonial nationalists fighting for independence saw federation as a means to construct stable polities and viable economies capable of overcoming the poverty and underdevelopment bequeathed by colonial rule.

Federation would create a cooperative apparatus for the state-directed planning seen as necessary to jump-start the "modernization" of postcolonial economies.

Some nationalists perceived symbolic as well as practical benefits.

In the late French empire, actors such as Aimé Césaire, a writer from Martinique, and Léopold Senghor, the first president of Senegal, envisioned a radical remaking of "liberté, égalité, fraternité." This enlarged and redefined French-speaking polity would live under one of several proposed federated models, reorganizing citizenship and governance and keeping its former colonies connected to France.

For others, such as Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana or Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, the symbolism was world-historical.

They viewed federal experiments as having the power to erase the lines that the imperial era had artificially drawn across the Pan-African and Pan-Arab "nations," as the cooperative fusion of former colonies would demonstrate their solidarity in independence.

The Cold War superpowers, for their part, remained wary of any federation scheme that might produce a setback in the bipolar clash, but they were vaguely supportive of most such designs.

So it seemed, federations promised something for almost everyone.

Their promise proved short-lived, with most collapsing sooner or later, peacefully or bloodily.

What they had in common was that in virtually all cases, insularity and identity trumped solidarity and cooperation, as local non-elites rebelled against the elites who favored federations.

The West Indies Federation was launched in 1958 as the vehicle for decolonization of most of the British Caribbean.

It was meant to achieve full sovereignty within a decade: 10 islands under one flag.

Crosscutting rivalries complicated internal relations from the start.

During the Jamaican referendum of September 1961, a popular majority of islanders voted to leave the union — voting, in effect, that they were Jamaicans first and "West Indians" second.

Despite the entreaties of leaders like Trinidad's Eric Williams, who captured the zeitgeist among many elites when he declared "the entire world will federate or die!" popular opinion stubbornly resisted.

Trinidad soon followed Jamaica out, and the West Indies Federation dissolved into smaller independent nations.

The Malaysia of today is not the one intended by its British and Asian sponsors during the federal moment.

That map added Singapore along with Borneo's Sarawak and Sabah to "Greater Malaysia," in hopes of ensuring a stable politico-ethnic balance among Malays, Chinese and Indians and forming the basis for a viable shared economy.

Tensions that dated back to the wartime Japanese occupation and the postwar Malayan Emergency fueled division rather than solidarity.

Explosions of street violence, primarily between Malays and Chinese fearing for their communal futures under the federation constitution, destabilized and doomed the union.

In the end, Singapore departed for an uncertain future alone only two years after joining the expanded federation.

The story echoed in most of the other attempted unions of the federal moment in Africa and the Middle East.

The exception to this failure of the federations was the early version of the European Union.

The E.U.'s durability stemmed in part from its slower, piecemeal process of integration, reversing the sequence of the other 1950s federations.

Rather than prioritizing political integration as a means to economic cooperation, the then-European Economic Community first reorganized trade and economic arrangements long before attempting any meaningful political fusion — an understandable approach, given the herculean task of rebuilding the European economy after the war.

Brexit suggests that the E.U. has fallen victim to the same divisions that undermined earlier federations.

Non-elite popular resistance to such projects finds expression in populist-nationalist identity politics.

The mid-century experiments in federation might seem far removed from Britain in the age of Brexit, but their underlying dynamics have much in common.

They point to the ongoing challenges of citizenship, representation, identity, accountable governance — and crucially, to the flaws of projects that lack sufficient buy-in from non-elite members of a shared polity.

Accommodating all parties within a sustainable federal structure, one capable of sharing governance and protecting pluralism and equality, is a daunting challenge in the best of circumstances.

Finding our way to doing so in the present day will require creative reimagining and attention to what the federations' rise and fall foretold about many of the conflicts shaking and shaping our own time.

[Iran] The U.S. Is Vulnerable to an Iranian Cyberattack. Here's How. (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 6:30 AM, Staff, Neutral]

U.S. tensions with Iran have escalated after the assassination of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and experts are worried about retaliatory cyberattacks. Cybersecurity expert John Hultquist and WSJ's Dustin Volz discuss what new tactics hackers have at their disposal and whether the U.S. is prepared to defend itself. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Israel] Why Trump's Plan Is Proving a Hard Sell in Israel (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 4:46 AM, Zev Chafets, 6400K, Neutral]

When Benjamin Netanyahu stood on the podium next to Donald Trump and proclaimed the Deal of the Century to be comparable to the 1948 Declaration of Independence, the Israeli prime minister knew there would be strong opposition from the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the Arab League, the European Union and other supporters of the Palestinian cause. He didn't think there would be opposition back home.

Netanyahu knew Trump had his back; and so, he believed, did the Israeli public. Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White party, was on board with the plan, along with a plurality of his center-left party supporters. Add Bibi's right wing, orthodox bloc to Gantz's secular, upper middle class liberals and you get a nearly wall-to-wall consensus.

Or so Bibi thought. But this consensus is more fragile than he anticipated.

Most Israelis favor the plan that requires Palestinians to recognize Israel as the Jewish state, drop the dream of millions of fourth generation refugees flooding the country, accept a demilitarized state with shrunken borders, give Israel control over all Jerusalem and accept annexation of the Jordan Valley and West Bank settlements. Even so, it turns out that this is a more complicated sell domestically than Bibi imagined.

The West Bank settlers, an integral part of his Likud bloc, want annexation to begin immediately. In Washington, Netanyahu promised that it would. But on Sunday, U.S. Ambassador David Freedman made clear that things are on hold at least until the March 2 elections. The U.S. wants time to draw a clear map, to allow the Palestinians to make a counter offer and, not least, for Israel to create a functioning coalition government capable of signing the deal.

The incensed settler leaders will not abandon Bibi — they have nowhere else to go — but they could become an opposition faction within the Likud bloc with the power to stymie a Palestinian state, even the most diminished.

Gantz, too, will face internal opposition from a never-Bibi faction whose condition for entering a unity government is that Likud drops Netanyahu. In the best of all worlds, Bibi would step down, but Bibi doesn't live in that world.

Gantz might be tempted to say yes to a Bibi-led coalition following the March 2 elections, but there are powerful voices working against it. One belongs to former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. He has come out against the Trump plan and is holding a joint appearance with Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas in New York on Tuesday, the day Abbas appears in

the U.S. Security Council.

Olmert is not a member of Blue and White, but he is influential with the anti-Bibi wing. He says that the Trump plan is unrealistic, but there is the sense his objection is mostly personal. Back in 2009, when Olmert was indicted on corruption charges, Bibi proclaimed him unfit to continue in office. Olmert resigned and eventually went to prison. Bibi succeeded him as prime minister and has never looked back.

Now Netanyahu is the one under indictment for corruption. Olmert, as prime minister, would have been deliriously happy to get a deal like the one Trump is offering. Now he will be just as happy to undercut Bibi's big achievement.

The plan's biggest obstacle is Avigdor Lieberman, once Netanyahu's gofer and now his nemesis. It was Lieberman's party that brought down the ruling coalition in 2019 and then stalemated two subsequent elections. Recent polls show that Lieberman could do it again next month.

Lieberman, who hates Netanyahu even more than Olmert does, has no problem with the terms of the Trump deal, but he would prefer to implement them and reap the rewards as a senior minister in Prime Minister Gantz's government. Having Bibi watch this, nose pressed against the glass, would be sweet indeed.

But, if the polls hold (and they haven't been changing since the last election) Gantz plus Lieberman (and the small Labor Party) won't have enough raised hands to form a government.

The passive parliamentary support of the Arab joint list Knesset faction could enable a Gantz-Lieberman-Labor coalition over the top. But in the last election campaign, Lieberman called the joint list a traitorous "fifth column" and it is unlikely he will change his mind before the election. Gantz himself has pledged not to accept support from the list.

Such is the dangerously self-defeating pettiness of Israeli politics. The deal of a lifetime has come around for Israel — and it is very possible that there will be no government that can accept it. If the Trump plan fails, it won't because of opposition in Ramallah, Gaza or the U.N. Security Council. It will be because Israel's mainstream political leaders are incapable of overcoming their partisan differences, animosities and personal ambitions for what they all recognize as the good of their country.

[Germany] A Local German Scandal Is Now a National Crisis (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 6:51 AM, Andreas Kluth, Neutral]

Just over a year ago, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer seemed up-and-coming in German politics.

She had succeeded Angela Merkel as boss of their center-right party, the Christian Democratic Union.

She even looked like Merkel's heiress apparent as German chancellor.

All that came to a screeching halt on Feb. 10, when Kramp-Karrenbauer said she would resign as party leader, thereby becoming the most notable political victim yet of a far-right party, the Alternative for Germany.

Modern Germany isn't Weimar; the AfD isn't the Nazi party; and German democracy isn't in danger of failing. Nonetheless, this rupture is historical.

It rips wide open the race to become the next German chancellor.

It also exposes the helpless failure of the CDU and all of the other centrist parties, at least so far, to find plausible democratic answers to the increasingly devious challenge from the far right.

The origins of this turmoil lie in a region that's not used to being in the limelight.

Thuringia, in what used to be East Germany, has a state parliament that in its makeup resembles legislatures in the Weimar Republic.

Two extremist parties, on the far left and the far right, together hold a majority, thus assuring gridlock.

By contrast, all the centrist parties that have run national politics since 1949, including the CDU, have in Thuringia been reduced to playing the role either of bystanders or spoilers.

Or, as now, idiots, as they walked into a trap the AfD laid for them.

That was possible because both the AfD and the center-right parties, the CDU and the Free Democrats, had the same stated goal: Prevent a candidate of the Left, the successor of the communist party that used to run East Germany, from being elected state premier of Thuringia.

For two rounds of balloting, that candidate denied the Left an absolute majority.

In the third round, when a mere plurality sufficed, the AfD secretly switched its support from its own nominee to a new entrant from the Free Democrats, Thomas Kemmerich.

Either they didn't, or they were fine with it.

So both center-right parties voted for Kemmerich, who with the additional support of the AfD came out the winner.

Kemmerich should have realized that the victory was tainted and refused to take the oath.

Protests broke out across Germany and almost the whole political class disavowed him.

He and his family now have body guards protecting them.

Outsiders may wonder what exactly was so scandalous about all this, and what it even had to do with Kramp-Karrenbauer.

The duly elected representatives of the Thuringian electorate, in free and secret voting, chose a premier, just as the state constitution stipulated.

The problem was that the CDU, led by Kramp-Karrenbauer, had given instructions to its local associations throughout Germany to never, ever to co-operate in any form with the AfD, which it considers un-democratic and racist.

In the regions that used to be West Germany, most Christian Democrats support this stance, viewing themselves as a bulwark toward the extreme right.

Christian Democrats in the former East Germany are less sure.

They tend to see the AfD less as pariahs than as the far end of the mainstream — politically incorrect, maybe, but certainly not "fascist."

This rift among the conservative Christian Democrats also runs through the FDP, which is usually described as "liberal" in the European, pro-business sense.

Rhetorically, both have condemned the AfD since it was founded in 2013, and especially since it entered the national parliament in 2017 and kept drifting right.

At the same time, the CDU and FDP both realize that political fragmentation makes it ever harder to form majorities, or prevent them, without factoring in the AfD somehow.

A similar type of dilemma in fact has accelerated the decline of the center-left Social Democrats during the past two decades.

What the AfD is for the CDU on the right, the Left, which still fantasizes about Marx and romanticizes the East German dictatorship, has been to the SPD: an extremist rival, but also a tempting ticket to power.

In national politics, the SPD and the Left haven't co-operated yet; in regional government, as in Thuringia, they do so regularly nowadays.

Kramp-Karrenbauer swam into this maelstrom already weakened.

For the past year, she's been sinking in the polls.

Even becoming defense minister in Merkel's cabinet hasn't helped.

Nor has she established her authority within the CDU. When the Thuringian Christian Democrats defied her directions regarding the AfD so openly, she became untenable.

She'll now keep running the party as a caretaker until it figures out how to choose a successor.

Options included Armin Laschet, premier of North Rhine-Westphalia, which is home to the CDU's largest regional association; Jens Spahn, the ambitious health minister; and

Friedrich Merz, a veteran of CDU politics in the 1990s who is considered the most conservative.

In this race for chancellor, which won't officially open until 2021, another conservative increasingly looks the strongest: Markus Soeder.

He's premier of Bavaria and leader of the CSU, the CDU's "sister party." By tradition, the CDU and CSU, though independent, field one common candidate for chancellor in national politics.

Soeder's been having a good Thuringian crisis, as it were.

When the news broke, he was in front of a microphone at once, ruling out any such "Cooperation" between the CSU and the AfD, ever.

The big difference was that everybody not only believed him but also believed that he has the power within the CSU to honor that pledge.

It's too early to make educated guesses about 2021.

One thing that's changed in recent days is what Germans will be talking about.

A year ago, the question of how to deal with the AfD was one topic, but not the main one.

Germany's mainstream politicians still haven't found a good answer.

[Ireland] Sinn Fein surged in Ireland's election. Here's why that's so controversial (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 7:49 AM, Nic Robertson, 5551K, Neutral]

Political outsiders Sinn Fein stole the show in Ireland's general election over the weekend.

The votes are still being counted but this left-wing, Irish nationalist party has pulled off a major political upset, breaking a century of dominance by establishment heavyweight parties (Fine Gael and Fianna Fail) and changing the political landscape of Ireland likely forever.

Here's what you need to know.

Does it mean Sinn Fein will be in power?

Sinn Fein won the most first-preference votes in Ireland's complex single-transferable-vote electoral system, but as they only fielded 42 candidates for 160 seats in the Dail (parliament), they are unlikely to be the largest party and therefore may not get to pick a new government or be invited to join one.

Why is Sinn Fein so controversial?

Sinn Fein appeared to have pulled off a major rebranding, seemingly burying their past as a

party long accused of aligning with terrorism and violence.

Sinn Fein, although they repeatedly denied it, were the political wing of the IRA (the Irish Republican Army), who fought a bloody three-decade military campaign to throw the British out of Northern Ireland and unite the island of Ireland.

What were "The Troubles?"

The violence was known in an oddly understated way as "The Troubles," yet more than 3,500 people died and many more had their lives irrevocably changed.

The IRA was at the forefront of the conflict – killing, bombing, shooting and intimidating their way to influence. They had grown out of a demand for equality in Northern Ireland's deeply bigoted society that often gave advantages to Protestants over Catholics.

As one of Sinn Fein's early politicians said – they would rise through the Armalite [gun] and the ballot paper.

How has Sinn Fein rebranded itself and is it really a different party?

The moment Northern Ireland's Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998, Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams pivoted south of the border rather than take a plum job in the north. He has always denied he was an IRA commander and saw that the political path to his years-long struggle for a united Ireland ran through Dublin. He has shaped the party accordingly, bringing in younger, less tainted politicians and leaders.

Two years ago, Adams stepped back as party president and did not run in this election after serving as a TD (or member of parliament) in Dublin for almost a decade.

The party surged through its grassroots activism around issues that captured voters' attention – housing, homelessness and healthcare – and their demands for change matured alongside a generation that never witnessed their violent roots. Even so, one their first elected TDs this weekend was a former IRA member, whose supporters sang rebel songs at the count center to celebrate his success.

Are Sinn Fein's gains likely to have an impact on Brexit talks?

Absolutely. Sinn Fein are now the only Irish party with major political influence both north and south of the Irish border, the European Union's new land border with the United Kingdom. Such is the seismic shift in Irish politics that Sinn Fein's demand for a united Ireland will be heard louder.

This will drive up growing Unionist fears in Northern Ireland, so whether he likes it or not, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Brexit considerations will have to deal with this reality. Perhaps more directly, an Irish government with ardently pro-united Ireland Sinn Fein inside of it, or even in strong opposition to it, could stiffen the EU's resolve on negotiations and therefore limit potential concessions to the British.

[Russia] New U.S. ambassador off to a strong start in Moscow (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/10/2020 11:53 AM, Tom Rogan, Positive]

Presenting his credentials to Russian President Vladimir Putin, John Sullivan last week officially began his new role as ambassador to Russia.

The Boston, Massachusetts, native is focused on bolstering counterterrorism and counterproliferation cooperation, advancing dialogue in other areas, and warning Russia against aggressive interference in the 2020 U.S. elections.

It's a big portfolio to be sure. But Sullivan comes to Moscow with at least one advantage.

In his previous post as deputy secretary of state, Sullivan led efforts to bolster counterterrorism cooperation. While Russian reciprocity lags, the United States's help preventing recent attacks on Russian soil has not gone unnoticed. Putin thanked President Trump late last year after the U.S. shared intelligence that prevented a New Year's Eve attack in Saint Petersburg. That followed the importance of U.S. intelligence in helping Russia prevent an earlier St. Petersburg terror attack in December 2017. As he pushes for reciprocity, Sullivan has real credibility.

More complicated will be the negotiation of a new counterproliferation treaty and Russia's agreement to force Bashar Assad into concessions in Syria. Sullivan will also inevitably attract Russian ire over the continuation of U.S. sanctions imposed following Putin's 2016 election interference campaign and his 2014 invasion of Ukraine. Contrary to the views of Emmanuel Macron, French president and fake leader of the liberal world order, Western sanctions cannot be removed unless and until Putin withdraws from the Crimean Peninsula and stops attacking Western interests.

But all things considered, Sullivan has made a good start.

He met with and protested the treatment of American Paul Whelan, whom Russia has detained for more than a year now. And Sullivan has even earned some positive media attention by showing off his shared affection for hockey, a sport widely viewed with almost religious fervor in Russia. Finally, the ambassador won praise last week from a senior government official, Alexei Kudrin.

All the same, this is Russia. As such, Russian state media cannot resist but throw some jabs at Sullivan. In a video report on Sullivan's credential ceremony, the Western-focused Russia Insight channel sought to present the new ambassador as an eccentric. Another news report at a hockey event deliberately presented Sullivan as a small man. Here, we see the slightly less unpleasant sidekick to the Russian Federal Security Service's harassment of U.S. diplomats in Russia. These Americans often return home to find furniture moved around and nasty gifts left for them.

Still, as I say, this is a good start. While Russia is likely to remain a preeminent U.S. adversary as long as Putin remains in power, that should not preclude us from pragmatic diplomacy. And that's exactly what Sullivan seems to be doing.

[Ukraine] Zelensky wants to break oligarchs' grip on Ukraine. But at least one was once a pal. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/10/2020 6:00 AM, Robyn Dixon, David L. Stern and Natalie Gryvnyak, 12625K, Negative]

When a dozen plainclothes intelligence agents raided the headquarters of Ukrainian television network 1+1 on Feb. 5, searching offices and carting away computers, they could barely move amid the crush of journalists filming them.

The official reason was to search for a leaked recording.

On it, the nation's 35-year-old prime minister, Oleksiy Honcharuk, insults President Volodymyr Zelensky over his "very primitive" understanding of economics.

Embarrassing secret recordings of officials have a way of surfacing in Ukraine.

It's all part of the ruthless competition between rival law enforcement agencies, political officials and billionaire oligarchs — all vying for dominance.

The raid set off other tremors as analysts struggled to figure out what it meant.

One interpretation was that Zelensky, a former TV comedian, was cracking down on Ihor Kolomoisky, an influential mogul who controls 1+1 and has close ties to the president.

Or was it just another dust-up in Ukraine's power struggles between elected officials and powerful oligarchs?

This much is clear: Zelensky's pledge to end corruption has been thrust to center stage.

There's no way to do that without breaking the grip powerful oligarchs have on Ukraine.

The country's endemic corruption was the running narrative through President Trump's impeachment trial in the Senate.

Zelensky's clean-government promise will define his political future.

If he fails to rein in the oligarchs and rampant judicial corruption, his reforms will sputter and Ukraine will lose its best chance in decades to escape Russia's influence and emerge as a pro-Europe Western-leaning democracy, analysts say.

The nation's economy is dominated by a small group of squabbling billionaire oligarchs — who also control almost all major media.

They have the power to damage, even ruin, a political leader who attempts to unravel their influence.

Business titans routinely bribe judges to protect their interests.

Anti-corruption activists and Western financial analysts fear that Zelensky is shaping up to be like his predecessors, with promised reforms stalling.

Timothy Ash, a Ukraine specialist from Bluebay Asset Management, says it appears Zelensky will not move to rein in favored oligarchs.

Judicial reform efforts were being frustrated and disreputable judges remained, he added.

In his days as a TV comedian, Zelensky sold his comedy series "Servant of the People" — in which he played Ukraine's president — to Kolomoisky's 1+1. Kolomoisky has interests in metals, the media, energy and airlines, and he is one of Ukraine's most powerful men.

Zelensky named his political party, Servant of the People, after his show, and it won a majority in Ukraine's parliament.

That bloc is strongly influenced by Kolomoisky and tends to vote for parliamentary bills that benefit him.

The last president to take on Kolomoisky — Petro Poroshenko, who sacked the oligarch as governor of Dnipropetrovsk in 2016 — lost the election to Zelensky, who had strong support from Kolomoisky's 1+1. Associates of Trump's lawyer, Rudolph W. Giuliani, reached out to Kolomoisky when Giuliani sought a meeting with Zelensky after the comedian was elected in April.

Those associates, Lev Parnas and Igor Fruman, approached Kolomoisky for help in Israel, but he spurned them.

Months later Kolomoisky was in contact with them via text, according to a cache of messages released last month.

Zelensky immediately hired Kolomoisky's lawyer, Andriy Bohdan, as his presidential chief of staff, a move that alarmed anti-corruption activists.

Reports have surfaced of an FBI investigation into Kolomoisky for alleged financial crimes, including money laundering.

The magnate said last May that any probe would flop because he had committed no crimes.

Bearded, gray-haired and at times foul-mouthed, Kolomoisky is a brilliant chess-player, according to those who know him.

When he meets someone, Kolomoisky immediately sums up their perceived weaknesses and vulnerabilities, according to associates.

Kolomoisky initially agreed to be interviewed for this article but later did not respond to messages.

"What we are learning across the board really is that Zelensky is very much shaped by popular opinion and is not that willing to put his head above the parapet and rock the boat for reform," said Ash, a London-based emerging markets analyst specializing in Ukraine.

"It's a shame, really," he added, "as much of this popular opinion is shaped by Ukrainian media captured by oligarchic interests, which are intent on keeping the status quo where the state remains captured by certain oligarchs." Zelensky had the best conditions of any Ukrainian leader since independence to really transform the country in a positive way.

Orysia Lutsevych, a Ukraine analyst at the London-based think tank Chatham House, said that although Zelensky was close to Kolomoisky, it was too early to say whether the president would be able to rein in the country's powerful oligarchs writ large.

"Kolomoisky's perception now is that it's his time, regardless of what Zelensky thinks," she said.

Kolomoisky also has a reputation as a formidable and frightening enemy.

Former central banker Valeria Gontareva made an enemy of him in 2016, when the bank nationalized Privatbank — Kolomoisky's bank and Ukraine's biggest — after \$5.5 billion in deposits disappeared, risking a national economic crisis.

Masked men with Kalashnikovs delivered a coffin with her blood-soaked effigy to the entrance of the central bank in 2017.

Fearing for her life, she quit her job four years before her contract expired and fled to London.

Gontareva accuses him of death threats and harassment, which he has denied.

On Sept. 5, Gontareva's son's car was burned in Ukraine.

On Sept. 10, men with masks and machine guns searched her Kyiv apartment.

Two days later, her home outside Kyiv was burned to the ground. (In August, she was struck by a car in London, but she remains uncertain as to whether that incident was linked.)

In September, a secret tape surfaced in which officials planned an intimidation campaign against her.

The director of the State Bureau of Investigations, Roman Truba, discussed the use of "psycho-tactics" against her with a colleague, mentioning a man nicknamed BAY. Truba later said the tape had been doctored.

Gontareva believes BAY refers to the presidential chief of staff and Kolomoisky's former lawyer, "Bohdan, Andriy Yosipovich." Bohdan did not respond to a request for comment.

"For me it was absolutely clear that it was orchestrated by Kolomoisky," Gontareva said.

Kolomoisky has taken legal action to get back his bank or be compensated.

In April, the Kyiv District Administrative Court ruled the nationalization of Privatbank to be

illegal.

The International Monetary Fund sees the case as a litmus test on Zelensky's presidency.

If Kolomoisky did regain the bank, "the message would be that nothing has changed, and oligarchs still run the show [and] the rule of law means nothing in Ukraine. I think there would be no foreign direct investment into Ukraine, which means subpar growth would continue, as it has for the past 30 years," Ash said.

A bill under consideration would prevent any nationalized bank from being re-privatized, and it reportedly contains a provision for compensation.

Judges at the influential administrative court, which ruled in Kolomoisky's favor on Privatbank, have been accused by anti-corruption authorities of graft and illegal rulings.

Anti-corruption campaigner Alexandra Ustinova called it "Ukraine's most odious court" and said oligarchs such as Kolomoisky use it to "solve problems."

Secret tapes emerged last year in which the court's judges discussed in advance how cases must be decided.

Gontareva hopes that at 42, Zelensky decides he does not want to be the puppet of an oligarch.

"Let's hope that he's quite smart, even though he was a comedian," she said.

"Right now, he's president, and let's hope his mind would move to the right direction."

[United Kingdom] Tougher Sentencing Won't Stop Terrorism (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [2/10/2020 4:10 AM, Raffaello Pantucci, 312K, Negative]

In the wake of Britain's third terrorist incident in two months—a stabbing carried out by a recently released terrorist offender in the South London neighborhood of Streatham—the U.K. government is reaching for the most obvious legislation at hand to prevent such attacks and seeking to extend the detention of convicted terrorist offenders.

Drafting policy in the wake of a terrorist attack is always fraught with danger. With emotions high, people will grasp at whatever flaw in the system seems obvious at that moment—police surveillance, parole leniency, sentencing laws—and use that as the basis for new policies. Yet the consequences of such knee-jerk reactions can be far-reaching, and undoing the damage later can be complicated. Most worryingly, quick fixes tend to overlook the real reasons behind the problem. While some of the government's proposed responses—such as increasing investment in probation—deserve to be applauded, the push to simply extend detention won't address the issue at hand.

It is helpful to start by looking at the three recent cases in detail. The first took place Nov. 29, 2019, when a released terrorist offender used knives and a fake suicide vest to attack a rehabilitation conference he was attending, murdering two people before being shot by

police on London Bridge. On Jan. 9, a convicted terrorist prisoner in the HMP Whitemoor prison in Cambridgeshire led an attack using bladed weapons and fake suicide vests against prison wardens. And on Feb. 2, a recently released terrorist offender was shot down as he sought to pursue an attack on shoppers in Streatham using a knife and a fake suicide vest. Given these incidents happened within the span of a few months and appear similar on the surface, they have been treated as a trend. Yet a close examination reveals many differences.

All three cases involved individuals who had been convicted of terrorism offenses and had served or were serving time for them. But when they launched their attacks, they were at very different stages of their sentences—in HMP Whitemoor, the convicted terrorist offender still had years to go (and now will doubtless have many more), while the London Bridge and Streatham attackers had been released on license. The London Bridge attacker had been out of prison for about one year and had, during that time, participated in a deradicalization program. He had stopped in the months prior to the attack; the full story of what took place in the intervening months has not yet emerged.

In contrast, the Streatham attacker never engaged in any deradicalization programs while in prison and on release appears to have quite quickly decided to carry out an attack. Evidence of his determination was clear after his initial arrest on May 17, 2018, following an investigation into his online activity. Not only did police find voluminous amounts of extremist material that he had shared with his family and friends, but they also found notebooks full of expressions of his desire to be a martyr and bomb-making plans.

Following his arrest, he was interviewed 19 times, during which time he largely responded “no comment” to all of the questions posed. During his sentencing hearing on Dec. 17, 2018, the judge commented on his level of fanaticism, something also emphasized by the head of the U.K. counterterrorism command when he commented on him post-sentencing.

The three cases are therefore quite distinct: The HMP Whitemoor case involves an individual who is facing a long incarceration, the London Bridge attack concerns a man who started to engage with a deradicalization program and then stopped, and the Streatham attacker seemed very firmly set on a course toward committing a violent crime. A failure in deradicalization programs was only potentially an issue in the London Bridge attack. The attacker seemed to be on a positive path once out of prison but then veered off course for reasons that are still not clear.

Of the three, a longer prison sentence would be most clearly relevant in the Streatham case, though it is unclear that the additional year in prison he would have had to serve if he'd completed his full sentence would have been enough to deter him from carrying out an attack. He had not shown any evidence of abandoning his ideas and was of such concern to security services that they had maintained intense surveillance on him after his release. It is hard to imagine that another year in prison would have done much to deradicalize him.

For the attacker in HMP Whitemoor, an already heavy sentence will now likely double. Longer sentencing may not have much effect (except to increase his eagerness to attack more guards). In fact, reporting on the case suggests that he has been radicalizing other prisoners, leading ad hoc sharia courts, and causing problems for prison guards.

And beyond these three cases, it is important to remember that there is a large number of terrorist offenders in prisons, many of whom are due to be released soon. These are the ones who might be affected by the government's rushed policies. Yet no evidence has been produced that they are all in the same bracket as either the Streatham or London Bridge attacker. History actually shows that recidivism among convicted terrorist offenders in the U.K. is quite rare.

According to my research, since 2013, out of approximately 40 known plots, there have been just six plots involving people who had previously been charged with or convicted of terrorism offenses. Two plots involved people who had been charged for prior extremist activity: a group from 2014 that wanted to stab a poppy seller during Remembrance Day and a group known as the Three Musketeers that was arrested in 2016 plotting a knife and bomb attack. One of the three had been previously arrested alongside the London Bridge attacker, while the other two were part of a failed 2011 attempt to travel to a terrorist training camp in Pakistan.

According to Home Office figures, during the year ending June 2019, 53 prisoners held for terrorism-related offenses were released. Most, as far as authorities know, have not reoffended. It is therefore clear that not every terrorist offender who is released from prison will behave like the Streatham attacker.

A more salient similarity among the three cases is the attackers' relative youth at the moment of first being arrested. The London Bridge attacker's house was first raided when he was 17 years old, the Streatham attacker was arrested for the offense for which he was jailed at 17, and the HMP Whitemoor attacker was picked up for involvement in a terrorist plot when he was 18.

While this is not a new phenomenon—two of the 2005 London bombers were 18 and 19 years old—there has recently been an increase in very young people becoming involved in active terrorist plotting. One of the cases of concern in the press at the moment is of an anonymous boy who was arrested at the age of 14 for being involved in an Islamic State-linked plot to attack security officials in Australia and is due for release soon.

This growing cohort of young offenders suggests that the process of radicalization is taking place at a very young age, when people are more susceptible to negative influences. In other contexts, young people who are drawn into violent or criminal activity are dealt with through criminal sanctions and engagement in rehabilitation programs, given that the young tend to be more susceptible to influencing. If such young people are being radicalized, the government needs to reconsider how it is handling such cases. Long prison sentences are undoubtedly justified in some cases, but the youth of the offender might mean that, in other cases, a more intensive rehabilitation program might help place them on a better path.

Finally, there is the question of copycat attacks. It is clear that the three attacks were in part inspired by each other—the attackers all chose to use the same methodology of knives and fake suicide vests, which is a relatively new innovation on the U.K. terrorist scene. In the wake of five terrorist attacks in 2017, Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Neil Basu commented how the first attack using a car against tourists on Westminster Bridge and knives on police in front of Parliament had to some degree inspired the others. As he put it, the March 2017 Westminster Bridge attacker "gave fellow violent extremists the

understanding that the U.K. was not such a hostile place to launch attacks and that by using this simple methodology you could succeed.”

The dilemma law enforcement officials face is how to stop attacks from inspiring other attacks. The question is likely around coverage of incidents, rather than anything to do with the incidents themselves. The vogue for knife attacks started in 2013 after two radicalized individuals murdered an off-duty soldier by running him down and then trying to decapitate him on a street in South London.

Covered in the victim's blood, they then declaimed their radical message to bystanders' smartphones and the world, filling news broadcasts for weeks afterward and showing other terrorists how easily successful attacks could go viral and grab the world's attention. The answers will not be found in prisons; to effectively break these chains of attacks, governments and journalists need to think carefully about how terrorist incidents are covered and reported.

The questions of the effectiveness of deradicalization programs, occasional recidivism, very young offenders, and the inspirational effect of attacks will not be answered by a simple extension of sentencing. While there may well be cases where offenders should be imprisoned for longer, it is not a solution that is applicable to all. And it is counterproductive to publicize certain cases in the press when it is clear from history that the majority of individuals who have served sentences for terrorism offenses have not returned to terrorist activity. Having their names and faces splashed in the press is unlikely to help with their rehabilitation and might leave them feeling ostracized and motivate them to return to terrorism.

Judicial and policy decisions must be objective and delivered without emotion. If a government chooses to pass new legislation on terrorism at a moment when the country is reeling from attacks, it is unlikely to make sensible and dispassionate judgments. There may well be gaps in legislation, but the British government must be careful to ensure that any new legislation addresses real problems, rather than simply pandering to the public's fears.

[United Kingdom] Boris Johnson Wants to Be a Free Trade Grandmaster (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 2:30 AM, Therese Raphael, 6400K, Neutral]

It's an odd paradox of Brexit that having won its trade freedom, the U.K. may find it harder to pursue free trade. The former was an oft-cited objective of Brexit, but the latter has been made a central pillar of Boris Johnson's desire to create a "Global Britain."

More than four decades have passed since Britain last negotiated a trade deal, but it now plans to hold up to five sets of trade talks simultaneously. The guiding philosophy, Prime Minister Johnson said last week, is an abiding belief in the value of free trade, which Britain plans to use its negotiations to promote.

Free trade agreements are Johnson's most pressing foreign policy objective. But they don't come easily. Negotiating a single deal takes sustained political will from both sides, a deep bench of expert negotiators, a coherent strategy, detailed consultation with various stakeholders, time (usually several years or more) — and luck.

While negotiating tandem deals isn't unknown, it's even more complicated. "South Korea and Chile ran talks with the U.S. and European Union simultaneously; one negotiator involved described it to me as a nightmare," recounts David Henig, director of the U.K. Trade Policy Project and a former British trade official. The complexities reflect the resources required to run tandem negotiations, but also the need to keep track of which discussion lines have moved with which party and to keep things simple for regulators. It can't help when two of the parties are trade elephants like the EU and the U.S., who themselves are at odds with each other over a host of trade issues.

Johnson wants free trade deals with the EU and the Americans, to be concluded before the end of this year; but he's also negotiating deals with Japan, Australia and New Zealand. He referred to the plan (in what may be his first known instance of understatement) as "the great multidimensional game of chess."

That game was launched last week and now his pieces are fanning out across the board, or boards, at breakneck pace. On Monday, Johnson set out his objectives for the EU talks, asking for a comprehensive deal but rejecting the demand that Britain adopt a host of European rules and regulations.

In this particular game, however, the U.K. has started off by sacrificing its Queen. The price of trade freedom was leaving a largely friction-free European single market of 450 million people. Negotiations with the EU are about damage limitation as new barriers go up, not removing obstacles to trade.

Despite all the brouhaha around Brexit, the main focus last week was on non-EU deals. Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab traveled to Asia to kick off talks with Australia and Japan. On Thursday International Trade Secretary Liz Truss published the government's goals in seeking deals with the four non-EU "like-minded partners." The government also launched a public consultation on the U.K.'s new global tariff schedule, which would apply to countries where there's no free-trade deal in place.

The U.K. has been rapidly lawyering up. The trade ministry's team overseeing all negotiations has expanded from 119 staff in 2016 to more than 700 trade lawyers and experts in 2019; it outnumbers even its U.S. equivalent. This trade army may not be battle hardened, but if Britain makes a mess of it, it won't be for lack of muscle. Clear political direction is another matter.

What can Britain hope to achieve? Getting a deal with Japan would be positive for Johnson and might reassure some carmakers that companies such as Nissan Motor Co Ltd. will stick around in the U.K. But it's hard to see how any agreement would compensate for the damage Brexit inflicts on the U.K.-Japanese partnership by ending Britain's role for Japanese companies as a gateway to Europe.

Agreements with Australia and New Zealand also fall into the category of "nice to have." Australia, however, already rejected a British proposal for visa-free work travel between the two countries; they are worried about a brain drain and getting low-skilled workers in exchange. Welsh lamb farmers, meanwhile, are keeping a wary eye on any New Zealand deal.

The real prize is agreement with the Americans. This is not primarily a matter of economics. The upside to the British economy from such a deal would be modest — adding about 0.2% of GDP in the long-term — but it would be a hugely symbolic achievement for Johnson.

While some hope the U.S. talks will put pressure on the EU to make concessions, that seems like a long shot; and one that carries risks. If a U.S. deal gets bogged down, any pressure on the EU side is gone. Worse, if the Americans press demands that are politically toxic — anything around the National Health Service, food standards or animal welfare, for example — Johnson may find public patience wears thin.

It's not clear that a quick U.S. deal can go much beyond tokenism. "I really struggle to come up with too many forms of market access that you could potentially offer the U.S. that would hurt the EU more than it would hurt the U.K. not having a good deal [with the EU]," says Dmitry Grozoubinski, a former Australian trade negotiator and founder of Geneva-based consultancy ExplainTrade.

Donald Trump, a big Brexit supporter, has promised a "massive" trade deal, one reason Johnson may not want to wait. U.S. and U.K. delegations have been meeting for more than two years and leaked notes from some of the early sessions in July 2017 showed a willingness on the U.S. side to find common ground, and a realism about what's achievable.

"Trade is not always a happy area; this is," U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said during one bilateral meeting. But it was also clear that the U.S. wants the U.K. onside in its disputes with Europe over issues from services and Geographic Indicators (names for food and drink that matches where they're made, such as Parmesan cheese) to agricultural chemical regulations and data.

That will get awkward eventually: The EU and the U.S. both like to hug trade partners close. Britain's outgoing U.S. ambassador Kim Darroch told the Guardian last month that he expects the Americans to push aggressively to open up Britain's agriculture and health care sectors to U.S. exporters. He thinks the U.K. probably won't get much in return.

"A U.S.-U.K. trade deal is likely at some point, but it will not be easy, and it is unlikely to make up for what has been lost with the EU," Simon Lester, a trade expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, says. "The Trump administration has mostly gone in the direction of protectionism rather than free trade. They may be willing to liberalize a little bit with the U.K., but so far they have not been willing to do too much in other negotiations."

All of this will be closely watched back in Parliament — another board in the multidimensional chess game. Johnson has a fresh electoral mandate and a large majority, but he can't take that for granted.

Richard Tice, chairman of the now redundant Brexit Party, has urged the government to be even bolder in its EU negotiations. "We must not wait for the EU to be ready to talk in March. Instead, we should shock them, while they are fearful and weakened," he wrote in a newspaper column. The idea is absurd to anyone who's been involved in a trade negotiation, but Nigel Farage's party, and plenty of Conservatives, plan to hold Johnson's feet to the fire so he doesn't backslide.

And this may also be about a future blame game. For all the fanfare, Johnson's trade crusades probably won't yield great victories; and the public may lose faith in the effort. As Emmanuel Macron has found in France, it doesn't take much for a honeymoon to end.

[China] Lessons That Go Beyond the Coronavirus Outbreak (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 11:29 AM, Aaron E. Carroll, 23673K, Neutral]

News of coronavirus infections is causing many people to panic.

It's unclear how widespread or deadly this illness is going to be, but for once, instead of telling you not to worry, I'm going to suggest riding that wave. Channel that fear into useful action — and find the lessons that go beyond this outbreak.

There are absolutely things we can do to protect people from infection by this novel respiratory virus, which has caused hundreds of deaths in Wuhan, China, and has spread to other countries. Some involve a societal response, but others are very simple.

Most important, wash your hands. Wash them often. Wash them for at least 20 seconds with soap and water. Wash them especially well if you're about to eat. Wash them after you've blown your nose, coughed or sneezed. Make it routine that all members of the household wash their hands when they get home.

I'm a pediatrician, and I know it can be hard to do this yourself, let alone get others to do it. So make it a game. Offer incentives. There's almost nothing that you, or your family, can do that will protect you more from infections.

Here are five steps: (1) wet your hands, (2) lather them, and then (3) scrub them for at least 20 seconds. No one ever looks at a clock, so try singing the "Happy Birthday" song twice, from start to finish. If you're trying to get kids to do this, come up with a funny hand-washing song to the same tune. A colleague of mine recommends singing the alphabet.

I know that 20 seconds seems like a long time. While we don't have huge randomized controlled trials to prove this is the optimal amount, research does exist to say that shorter times aren't as good at removing germs, and much longer times can actually damage the skin and can be counterproductive.

Then (4) rinse, and (5) dry. It's not that hard. If you can't wash your hands, then hand sanitizer with at least 60 percent alcohol will work in a pinch, but it's not as good.

Don't touch your face in general, especially with unwashed hands. Don't shake hands with people who are sick. If you're sick, stay away from other people.

Clean the objects and surfaces that you touch a lot. Clean them well with cleaning sprays or wipes that will kill germs.

What's not recommended for everyone? Face masks. If you're sick, they may help prevent you from spreading the virus, but they don't do as much to help keep healthy people from getting sick.

Two likeliest scenarios for an uncontained outbreak

This is not the first coronavirus to cause worldwide concern. The 2002 outbreak known as SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) and the 2012 outbreak of MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) both originated from this same type of virus.

This new version, "2019-novel Coronavirus" or 2019-nCoV, is at the moment thought to be more infectious than those two, but less likely to cause death. There are more than 40,000 cases (almost all in China), with more than 900 deaths linked to it. Many more cases are probably unreported, of course.

The best-case scenario for this outbreak would be containment. If China can pull this off, and other countries can keep those who are infected to a minimum, it's possible that we could prevent widespread infection and eradicate 2019-nCoV in humans. This is what we accomplished with SARS, so it's possible.

But as international travel becomes easier, eradication becomes harder. Should we be unable to contain the disease, and this coronavirus sticks around, it's still not necessarily cause for panic.

It would be the fifth coronavirus that's endemic in humans. (SARS and MERS did not become endemic.)

A recent article by Sharon Begley in STAT News laid out the two most likely scenarios for an uncontained outbreak. The first is that 2019-nCoV winds up being like the other four endemic coronaviruses, which cause less serious coldlike illnesses. Should this happen, we'll worry for a few years as we track the rate of infections and make sure that it's not more severe than we think. But eventually we won't worry about it any more than we worry about which virus is causing our latest cold. More than a third of people infected with the other coronaviruses don't even notice they are ill.

This doesn't mean that some people don't become sicker — with pneumonia, for example — after contracting these coronaviruses. They do. But the rates of bad outcomes aren't usually high enough to make the news.

The other, more worrisome, outcome would be that 2019-nCoV becomes a more significant seasonal virus, like influenza. That would be bad. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the flu has already caused up to 310,000 hospitalizations this year and 10,000 to 25,000 deaths.

Where to put the worry

Time will tell if the new coronavirus ends up being less or more dangerous than the flu; we don't fully know yet how bad it is. Usually, the diseases that stick around tend to become less lethal. Only live hosts can continue to make more viruses. Influenza is also pretty devious in how it mutates its surface molecules from year to year to evade immune system detection. If 2019-nCoV is not able to do that, people's immunity to it could gradually improve.

But therein lies the paradox. The outcome that has public health officials really concerned is that 2019-nCoV will turn into something like a disease that we have a tough time making you worry about right now.

Every year physicians and public health officials try to get you to immunize yourselves against the flu, and far too many of you don't. We beg you to practice proper precautions and hygiene — and, still, tens of thousands of people die, and too few worry enough.

Governments and employers could help by making it easier for sick people to stay home from work. Many Americans without paid sick leave go to work despite feeling ill, and many of those work at restaurants, schools and hospitals, where disease is easily spread.

The most significant defense the United States has to prevent pandemics is a solid public health infrastructure. The public has to trust it. The system also needs to be properly prepared and have the resources to handle a widespread infection. (The system is currently stretched thin and underfunded.) It's critical to make sure there are enough medical supplies available, as well as necessities like food, to get a community through an outbreak.

Should you be worried about getting infected with viruses? Sure. Have you gotten a flu shot yet?

Channel your fears into productive behaviors. That's how you'll significantly reduce your risk from being infected with 2019-nCoV. It'll also help you from being infected with the flu. It'll even help protect you from getting a cold. Wins all around.

[China] This Whistleblower Really Was a Hero (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 2:13 PM, James Freeman, Neutral]

Some people have the physical courage to put themselves at risk of injury or death to help others. And then there is the moral courage of a person who insists on speaking the truth. Dr. Li Wenliang, who passed away on Friday at age 33, possessed both kinds of courage in abundance. And even in death, he is now forcing the dictator of China to conduct an emergency public-relations campaign in the face of a growing demand for free speech.

The Journal's Chao Deng and Josh Chin reported from Wuhan on Friday:

A Chinese doctor who became a folk hero after he was taken in by authorities for warning about the dangers of a deadly new virus now spreading around the world died Friday after becoming infected with it.

Li Wenliang, a 33-year-old ophthalmologist based in Wuhan, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, had captivated the country and triggered an extraordinary outpouring of emotion as he ailed.

Now Jonathan Cheng and Erin Mendell report in the Journal on Beijing's attempt at damage control:

Chinese President Xi Jinping paid his first public visit to the front lines of the coronavirus

outbreak, stopping at a Beijing hospital treating infected patients and at a local disease-control office after weeks of remaining largely out of public view.

The dictator wants to appear to care, within reason. Mr. Cheng and Ms. Mendell describe a report from state-run media:

The report didn't mention whether Mr. Xi, who was pictured wearing a white lab coat and a surgical mask, met with any patients in person, though state media captured Mr. Xi telling a crowd of well-wishers that there would be no handshakes, given the circumstances.

The dictator also made a vague acknowledgment that some unnamed medical workers had "sacrificed their lives," but many Chinese are demanding more from the government.

On Saturday Guo Rui reported in the South China Morning Post:

A group of Chinese academics have published an open letter urging the government to protect free speech and apologise for the death of Li Wenliang, the doctor who lost his life to the coronavirus just weeks after being reprimanded by the police for trying to warn people about it.

Tang Yiming, the head of the school of Chinese classics at Central China Normal University in Wuhan – the city at the centre of the outbreak – said he and his fellow signatories spent a day discussing the content of the letter...

"If the words of Dr Li had not been treated as rumours, if every citizen was allowed to practise their right to voice the truth, we would not be in such a mess, we would not have a national catastrophe with an international impact."

Ms. Guo adds:

Zhang Qianfan, a law professor from Peking University in Beijing, called for the government to establish February 6 as "Freedom of Speech Day" and abolish the provisions within the penal law that seek to stifle it.

"We cannot let Li Wenliang die in vain," he said. "His death shouldn't frighten us, but encourage us to speak out."

The Journal's Mr. Cheng reported on Friday:

On Chinese social media Friday, commenters posted tributes to Dr. Li, circulating a quote from an interview he had given just days before his death: "I believe a healthy society should not just have one voice."

Tan Dawn Wei reports for Singapore's Straits Times:

The outpouring of grief and anger online has overwhelmed censors battling to repress the most scathing voices and damaging comments.

Hashtags like "we want freedom of speech", which started trending on Chinese

microblogging site Weibo shortly after Dr Li's death, have since been scrubbed clean.

But another trend has emerged, featuring selfies of people wearing a face mask with the words, "bu neng, bu mingbai" (can't, don't understand) written on it.

The words refer to a declaration that Dr Li was forced to sign by the Wuhan police, in which he was asked if he could comply with the local authorities and stop spreading "rumours", to which Dr Li wrote, "can".

He was also asked if he understood that he would face the full force of the law if he continued his "illegal activities", to which he wrote, "I understand".

The death of Dr Li, whose wife is now expecting their second child, has forced the regime to suddenly embrace the man it sought to punish for his honesty. According to the Straits Times:

"I think the situation now is that the central government understands that it is losing control of public opinion and in order to get that back, Beijing will make Dr Li a martyr," said Mr Adam Ni, a China researcher at Macquarie University in Sydney and co-editor of China-focused newsletter China Neican...

A leaked "public sentiment" report submitted to the central authorities by a private company, Womin Technology, outlined seven recommendations that would tamp down online anger, including affirming Dr Li's deed, and "arranging for accountability".

Since public anger surfaced over what was seen as the Wuhan authorities' cover-up of the outbreak, the central government has responded by punishing hundreds of party cadres for their poor management of the crisis, including some who let villagers gather to play mahjong.

Linda Lew reports in the South China Morning Post:

The mother of Li Wenliang, the doctor who was silenced after blowing the whistle early on about the coronavirus and later died from it, paid tribute to him on Saturday while demanding redress for his treatment by Wuhan police...

She described her son as someone who was kind to both family and colleagues. In setting the schedule for his department, Li would offer to take shifts for colleagues if they needed time off.

"He sometimes took on two night shifts a week, when others usually did it once a week," she said.

"He was very considerate. The same to us, he often asked us if we had enough tea or if we were taking our medications on time."

Rest in peace, Dr. Li.

[China] Chinese Doctor Arrested For Alerting World About Coronavirus Dies A Hero (The Federalist)

The Federalist [2/10/2020 6:43 AM, Helen Raleigh, Neutral]

If you have never heard of Dr. Li Wenliang, his story is worth knowing. To an extent, we all owe him our gratitude, because Li was one of the only eight Wuhan whistleblowers who warned the public about the coronavirus outbreak.

Chinese authorities were aware of the pneumonia-like cases in Wuhan since as early as December 1. Instead of warning the public to take proper precautions against the virus, they withheld this information, and suppressed the news.

On Dec. 30, 2019, Dr. Li, a respectable ophthalmologist in a hospital in Wuhan, the epicenter of the coronavirus, shared disturbing news to his medical school alumni group: several individuals who had contact with the Hua Nan Seafood Market were diagnosed with SARS-like cases and quarantined in the hospital where he worked. Li warned his friends and colleagues to start taking extra precautions. It turned out that seven other medical professionals also blew the whistle on social media about the coronavirus in Wuhan.

Chinese authorities, eventually unable to cover up the outbreak any longer, were forced to alert the World Health Organization about the novel virus on Dec. 31, 2019. The question of how much longer the Chinese government would have waited to alert the WHO if not for the eight whistleblowers courageously sharing the news remains unknown.

Still, WHO praised the Chinese government for its "transparency," yet Wuhan police started rounding up Li and the other doctors on New Year's Day for "fabricating, disseminating and spreading rumors." Each was forced to sign a pre-written, fabricated confession admitting their "wrongdoings" and promising to never do it again.

After his release, Li immediately resumed his work at the hospital. He ended up contracting the coronavirus after treating an infected patient, whom he didn't know was infected at the time. Li was hospitalized on Jan. 12.

Strangely, his initial test results for coronavirus were all negative. He wasn't tested positive for coronavirus until Feb. 1. Still, Li had been quarantined, along with numerous other doctors, nurses, and patients, at the Wuhan Central Hospital since mid-January.

The coronavirus spread in China like wildfire. The death toll and the number of infections is doubling nearly every five days. As of now, the virus has claimed more than 600 lives and sickened more than 30,000 people in China, according to China's released data. However, many suspect the real numbers are much higher than what Beijing is willing to share.

The Chinese government has the ability to construct the most intrusive surveillance system to date to keep an eye on its 1.4 billion citizens, but is struggling to provide Chinese people basic necessities, such as sufficient masks and coronavirus test kits.

Li has become a folk hero in China. China's netizens widely praised him for his courage to speak the truth and hint at growing dissatisfaction with the Chinese government. Even China's Supreme Court, which has been at the forefront in cracking down on "rumors that damage national image," curated a post on its WeChat page that pushed back on Wuhan

police's harsh treatment of the eight whistleblowers: "If the public listened to this 'rumor' at that time, and adopted measures such as wearing a mask, strict disinfection, and avoiding going to the wildlife market based on panic about SARS, this may have been a better way to prevent and control the new pneumonia ... Rumors are stopped by transparency."

However, don't take court's words too seriously. Some say it's part of the Chinese central government's strategy to direct people's anger on local governments, diverting eyes from Beijing, the main culprit of the disastrous outbreak. In the same post, the court emphasized that although the warnings regarding the coronavirus were an exception, other "rumors" are still a punishable criminal act.

China has been a one-party state since 1949, and its current leader, Xi Jinping, named himself president-for-life in 2017. Xi is a perfect example in demonstrating that dictatorship only survives through control, fear, and lies. Speaking the truth in China is a heroic act, because such action always comes with a great deal of sacrifice.

Sadly, we learned over the weekend that Li paid the ultimate price for being a truth-teller. He passed away on the morning of February 6, local time. He was only 34 years old. Some sources suggest Li's death was foul play, because while he was hospitalized since January 12, he was only tested positive for the coronavirus on Feb. 1. The slow diagnosis meant Li might not receive proper and adequate treatment. While this claim has yet to be verified, it is easy to see how little trust the Chinese people have in their government.

Li's passing sent shockwaves throughout China. People are angry that Chinese censors won't even allow them to commemorate this brave soul by using the hashtag #LiWenliang on social media. Chinese people now have to resort to other ways to express their condolences to Li and his family, along with their anger towards the Chinese government.

One post states, "How sad it is that one person couldn't save 1.4 billion people and 1.4 billion people couldn't save one person." Another post simply said three words: "a national humiliation," referring to how Li was reprimanded by the Wuhan police. To this day, the Wuhan police have yet to utter an apology for their actions, nor have they recanted their original charges against the eight whistleblowers.

As if Li's passing at his young age isn't tragic enough, multiple Chinese sources have reported that his wife, who was pregnant with the couple's second child, passed away in the hours following. Although this news has not been verified, it's disheartening to see. I can only pray that it is not true. Today is one of those days when the unanswerable question has to be asked: Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do villains always seem to get away?

Prior to his passing, Li said in an interview that "A healthy society should not only have one voice." Will his parting message inspire more Chinese to speak truth and to stand up to tyranny? We shall see.

Joseph Campbell once said, "a hero is someone who gives his or her life to something bigger than oneself." Dr. Li Wenliang was a respected doctor, a good son, a loving husband, and caring father of two children, one five-years-old and one unborn. Li was a hero. Rest in peace.

[China] Xinjiang's Hui Muslims Were Swept Into Camps Alongside Uighurs (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [2/10/2020 10:29 AM, Gene A. Bunin, Neutral]

Once a young migrant in Beijing, Ma Like ditched China's capital in 2010 to head to the other end of the country, joining the many others who had decided to try their hand in Xinjiang's Kashgar, a city that had just been designated as a special economic zone. There, Ma, a native of the neighboring northwestern province of Gansu, started a company, became a member of the Kashgar-Gansu Commercial Association, and opened his own backpackers youth hostel. In July 2016, the hostel and its owner were featured in national media.

"By making friends with them [the backpackers]," the then 37-year-old told the state-run Xinhua news agency, "I can learn about a life I am not able to experience myself."

By early 2017, that life had taken a drastic turn, as Ma became a subject of international and less cheerful stories. Arrested and charged for "propagating extremism"—an alleged result of 3-year-old Weibo reposts criticizing local government policies—the entrepreneur became an early victim of the mass repressions and incarcerations that have fundamentally changed the sociopolitical terrain in Xinjiang. His Weibo account, inactive since Jan. 12, 2017, remains so, with about a third of his last 2,000 posts and reposts, starting from September 2016, either removed (more than 300) or voluntarily deleted (more than 400). Also gone is the hostel itself—satellite photos make clear that the building was demolished in the spring of last year.

Ma is just one of potentially millions of people to have been detained as part of the vast and ongoing government repressions in the region. However, while the majority of the detainees have undoubtedly been Uighurs, members of Xinjiang's main Muslim ethnic group, Ma's case stands out, as he is Hui—another traditionally Muslim group that, at over 10 million, is one of China's largest. Often referred to as the "Chinese Muslims," the Hui as an ethnic group cover a broad spectrum of individuals believed to be the progeny of millennium-old mixed marriages between the Chinese and the Turks, Arabs, and Persians. While largely based in inner China, where they are known for their eye-catching mosques and ubiquitous hand-pulled noodle restaurants, the Hui also number over a million in Xinjiang, forming a significant portion of the region's (largely Turkic) ethnic minority population.

However, in contrast to their Turkic neighbors—such as the Uighurs, Kazakhs, and Kyrgyz—the Hui have, while maintaining their identity as Muslims, been traditionally much closer to the country's majority ethnic Han, in language, culture, and often even appearance. This fact, together with the very low number of reported Hui victims, has led to a belief that the group has mostly avoided the recent repressions, with scholars both from Xinjiang and from outside at times echoing this opinion. And while a number of reports suggest increasingly tight controls on the Hui and their expression of Islam in inner China, the lack of convincing evidence has nevertheless made it easy to conclude that—when it comes to Xinjiang—cases like Ma Like's are more likely the exception than the rule.

A growing number of eyewitness accounts and testimonies, at times backed up by supplementary evidence, now suggest the opposite.

As has often been the case, some of the earliest indications of arrests and disappearances

have stemmed from overseas students and recent graduates, who were born in the region but later went abroad to study and, in some cases, stayed to work. Just a few months after Ma Like's disappearance, a young Hui couple who graduated from the International Islamic University of Islamabad and ran a restaurant in the city, Ma Xuexian and Ma Yuanlan (Ma being a very common Hui family name), made a trip from Pakistan to China and promptly vanished. Wang Yali, a Hui woman who graduated with an education major from the same university and worked at a Pakistani branch of Citibank, went back to China a year later and disappeared as well, with her husband confirming her detention. (According to a friend, Ma Xuexian and Wang Yali both resurfaced online in the spring of 2019, presumably after having been released.) In late 2017, Zhou Yueming, a Hui student from the United States, returned to China and was incarcerated for several months for using a VPN to, among other things, access her Gmail. A few months after that, a Hui student from Europe underwent something similar because of the WhatsApp client installed on his phone.

Other accounts have come to light in a more haphazard manner. In 2018, the Atajurt Kazakh Human Rights organization in Almaty—a group that has documented thousands of (mostly Kazakh) victims—also uploaded video appeals for Ma Zhengxiu, an ethnic Hui man allegedly detained for watching religious content on the internet, and Ma Zhongbao, a Hui philanthropist around age 80 allegedly detained for having built a mosque. At around the same time, a wanted poster for Mou Guojian, a Hui man who had allegedly escaped detention, was shared by a source in Xinjiang. Reporting from inner China, NPR ran a story in September 2019 mentioning two Hui with Xinjiang residence who were reportedly sent to detention facilities in Xinjiang for having performed the hajj.

Reports from individuals on social media and from religious freedom activist outlets have further suggested that the Hui are being interned en masse and being subjected to much of the same mistreatment as reported for the other ethnic groups. In one account, attributed to a Kazakh ex-detainee and relayed by the Kazakhstan-based musician Akikat Kaliolla, a Hui man is described as having died after being forced to spend 78 hours in a tiger chair. In a particularly gruesome story published in June 2018 by the Christian organization China Aid, the Hui are listed alongside the Uighurs and Kazakhs as populating Xinjiang's pretrial detention centers, by now notorious for their mistreatment. *Bitter Winter*, a religious liberty magazine with sources on the ground in Xinjiang, has published a number of reports on the Hui specifically, with one of the most recent talking of a village of just over 60 (primarily Hui) households in the region's northern Tacheng prefecture. According to the reporter, 43 of the residents have been detained, which—if using a sample of over 400 households from a regional poverty-alleviation report to estimate an average household as having three or four members—would suggest a detention rate of 17 to 24 percent (comparable to what has been noted for certain Uighur areas).

For Bai Huzhou—another International Islamic University of Islamabad graduate and a native of Xinjiang's Changji Hui Autonomous Prefecture, who asked that his name be changed in this article for his protection—detention was a fate avoided only thanks to extensive preparation, and perhaps even then only barely. Employed at a Chinese corporation in Pakistan, Bai was obliged to return to China in 2018 in order to obtain a new work visa. Already well aware of the situation in Xinjiang, he started his preparations in 2017—by pretending to lose his Chinese passport and obtaining a new one that didn't have so many Pakistan visas, as Pakistan is one of the 26 "sensitive countries" that people in Xinjiang could be detained for having visited. Warned by his parents not to return to

Xinjiang, Bai then managed to remotely move his hukou (household registration) to Shaanxi province's city of Xi'an, thereby avoiding the need to return to Changji for the visa procedures. Flying from Pakistan to Xi'an via Beijing in September 2018, he was nevertheless stopped at the capital airport—his passport, still linked to Xinjiang, wouldn't scan properly.

"An airport employee picked up a walkie-talkie and said: 'A 56 person is here,'" he recalls. "That had become a code, I think. They didn't say 'a Xinjiang person'—they said 'a 56 person.'" Fifty-six is the number of officially recognized ethnic groups in China, and ethnic minority groups are often associated with Xinjiang.

Bai was then taken to a large office with a reception area and several interrogation rooms, staffed by five or six police officers who he said, from their accent, were clearly from Xinjiang and who, as he could tell, were busy tracking incoming international arrivals. After checking all of his luggage, they went through his phone—which Bai had also cleaned of all religious materials and foreign social media apps—and then proceeded to take him through a questionnaire. Presenting himself as an apolitical corporate worker with a transfer to Xi'an to catch, Bai was eventually able to convince the officer to let him pass. His parents would then come to Xi'an to meet him, at which point he would hear of the detentions and the mosque destructions affecting the Hui in his hometown.

"I only know what my parents told me," Bai lamented. "If I had been in Xinjiang, I probably could have helped you understand the situation a lot better."

To encounter those who have been to Xinjiang and have experienced the mass incarcerations firsthand, one only need to look to Kazakhstan, where the return of several thousand Chinese citizens from Xinjiang, the vast majority Kazakh, has brought with it dozens—if not hundreds—of new eyewitnesses. Many mention a significant Hui presence in their detention facilities in northern Xinjiang.

"You can't say that there was a lot of them, since there aren't so many Hui in Kunes [my county of origin] to begin with," recounted Tursunay Ziyawudun, a rare Uighur ex-detainee who spent almost a year in one of the county's detention camps. "But they were really stubborn. We, the Uighurs and Kazakhs—we were scared [into submission]. But they insisted that they would still remain Muslim [even after all this]."

A Kazakh ex-detainee who spent over a year in camps in Tacheng City and requested anonymity for his safety estimated the number of Hui interned with him as being in the hundreds. He does not agree with Ziyawudun's assessment of the Hui as stubborn, but he does corroborate her on a different point: segregation. According to both, the Hui were generally kept in different cells, while the Uighurs and Kazakhs were often held together.

At the same time, a number of accounts suggest that mixing could and did take place. As part of an oral histories project reported by the Believer magazine, the ex-detainee OrynbeK Koksebek talks of how two cellmates—a Kazakh and a Hui—helped him recover from a fever, the latter detained for organizing an Islamic funeral for his mother. Within the same project, the ex-detainee Zharqynbek Otan recounts looking around the camp at his "Muslim brothers ... Kazakh, Uighur, and Dungan [Hui] brothers" and seeing the policies as an "attempt to divide and destroy" their identity.

According to Nurlan Kokteubai, who spent seven months in a camp in Chapchal County, many Hui were interned there as well. When asked if there was any difference in treatment or detention based on ethnicity, he said that there wasn't.

"There was no difference in treatment. It didn't matter if you were Uighur, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Hui ... All the same. If you had gone to a mosque before, you were there."

Some of the accounts contain very rough numerical estimates. Though unavoidably anecdotal and extremely local, they nevertheless show that the perceived interned Hui population was usually on the same order of magnitude as the local Hui population in general.

And yet, the fundamental question remains: If the Hui really have been subjected to mass internment, then why aren't we hearing more about it given their significant presence in Xinjiang? The Kazakhs, who have a similar population, have put forth over 2,000 names of individuals made victims by the recent policies. The Uighur diaspora has also reported several thousand. Even the Kyrgyz, whose official population in Xinjiang is only around 200,000, have managed to report close to 200. But with the Hui, the reported number of interred residents hardly reaches double digits.

The likely explanation lies in the fundamental nature of victim-oriented reporting for Xinjiang—i.e., that it generally comes from friends and relatives outside of China. While the ethnic Kazakh and Kyrgyz both have states that neighbor Xinjiang, and while the Uighurs have no state but a well-dispersed and influential diaspora, the Hui have neither, leaving the (very sporadic) reporting largely to foreign journalists, activist organizations, and other ethnic groups, as evidenced above.

This is not, however, to say that no sizable diaspora with links to Xinjiang exists. In Central Asia, where the Hui are generally referred to as the "Dungan," over a 100,000 reside on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Split roughly in two between the two countries, they are the descendants of those who fled China in the late 19th century to escape Qing Dynasty persecution. And while it would be a stretch to say that they have maintained extremely close ties with China, a significant number of business relations do exist and, in some cases, are even bolstered by familial ones, believed to have been made possible by certain historical periods of liberalization (such as the fall of the Soviet Union and China's opening up). In spite of this, there is virtually nothing being said about the repression of the Hui by these communities.

Husei Daurov, the head of the Kazakhstan Dungan Association, which has close business partnerships with China and publishes the Silk Road Today—a newspaper that, among other things, seems to echo the Chinese state media rhetoric on Xinjiang—does not shy away from discussing the issues or admitting that the recent policies in Xinjiang have been "strict." When asked if people he knows have been affected (Daurov travels to Xinjiang monthly), he spoke of a 70-year-old friend and the friend's son, a businessman, who both spent a year in camp for having previously gone on an unsanctioned hajj. Recalling a meeting with them following their release, however, he presented an image completely different from the standard accounts—one where the detainees were obliged to study for 6 hours a day but had an 80 RMB (\$11) daily allowance for food (a standard meal in Xinjiang

only costs 10 to 20 RMB) and immediate hospital assistance, even for a cold. The son learned a new vocational trade, he said, and the 70-year-old father learned some Chinese.

"He told me that they [the camp staff] treated them with the utmost respect and 'wouldn't let a speck of dust touch their clothes,'" Daurov cited his friend as saying, believing the words to be genuine as the conversation was not monitored.

According to Daurov, the silence of the Hui diaspora may be explained by the fact that the numbers of Hui interned are just not that high, with those taken essentially being arrested for "dual citizenship reasons" (an explanation previously given by the Kazakhstan authorities when explaining the detentions of Kazakhstan citizens in Xinjiang, and later undermined by leaked internal documents). No local Hui have come to him with complaints, he said.

Abubakir Wointse, the head of another Kazakhstan Dungan Association that operates out of Almaty's Friendship House and regularly sends students to study in Lanzhou, Gansu province, also said that no one from the local Hui community has come to him with Xinjiang-related issues.

Still, there are other possible reasons for the silence. One representative of the Hui community in Kyrgyzstan, speaking on condition of anonymity, outlined three major groups of Hui in Central Asia vis-à-vis the events in Xinjiang: those, often the community leaders, who have close business ties to China and choose to remain apolitical so as not to jeopardize them; those who see the events as religious persecution but only speak about it in their private circles to avoid pressure from the local authorities; and those, only a few dozen, who are Chinese citizens and are afraid to return to China, with their priorities set on obtaining local citizenship. According to this source, it is the lack of the "Hui elders' approval of political discussions" that has stopped those with friends and relatives in detention from speaking about it or talking action.

"The issue isn't being raised because of the close business ties and the absolute apoliticality of the Hui," the representative summed it up by saying. "But the facts are there, and more than just a few."

[Japan] When Coronavirus Takes Over a Ship It's Too Late to Batten Hatches (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 6:49 AM, K Oanh Ha, 6400K, Neutral]

For 3,700 passengers quarantined on a cruise liner off Japan, it began as a carefree voyage. For the new coronavirus, it was an opportunity to run rampant.

As the number of confirmed cases aboard the Diamond Princess nearly doubled to more than 130, health authorities evacuated infected travelers. The rest hunkered in their cabins, waiting to find out whether they'd come down with an illness that has killed more than 900 people in China and beyond. Operator Carnival Corp. stepped up efforts to disinfect the liner.

Keeping the coronavirus from spreading on land is hard enough. At sea, with thousands of passengers in close quarters on a ship with self-contained systems, it's a whole different

challenge. Every interaction with another passenger or crew member becomes a possible source of transmission. And the virus has many places to hide.

"If you're going on a big cruise ship with 3,000 people, you've increased your chances of picking up the virus," said Peter Andrew White, a professor of microbiology at University of New South Wales Sydney who has studied maritime norovirus outbreaks. "The cruise industry will need a new regimen on how to deal with this."

The most pressing challenge is to separate the growing number of infected passengers aboard the Diamond Princess in Yokohama harbor from the apparently healthy. Japanese authorities have been taking those who are ill to hospitals onshore.

Ship Cleaning

With most passengers confined to their cabins, sanitizing the liner is more complicated. Authorities have approved Princess Cruises' proposed methods for cleaning staterooms and providing fresh linens when guests are allowed outside for fresh air, the line's President Jan Swartz said in a Feb. 8 YouTube video.

Cruise ship sanitation is of such importance that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a Vessel Sanitation Program governing all boats carrying more than 13 passengers. There's a 291-page operations manual to keep ships clean and prevent gastrointestinal illnesses.

The industry has learned from repeated outbreaks of norovirus, putting in place protocols to deal with the highly contagious gastrointestinal illness. Measures including hand sanitation stations placed throughout ships have probably kept the coronavirus from spreading even more, White said.

Onboard the Diamond Princess, Kent Frasure of Oregon said his wife tested positive for the coronavirus and remained in their room for another five to six hours until she was transported to a hospital north of Tokyo on Feb. 6. His test came back negative, and he has remained in the same room, which hasn't been cleaned since Feb. 3.

"I wish they would at least give me Clorox wipes or something," Frasure said.

Norovirus Outbreaks

Normally, after a norovirus outbreak, passengers would all disembark and the ship would be sanitized top to bottom, said Jean-Paul Rodrigue, a professor of transit geography at Hofstra University in New York.

"They would empty the ship and wipe the whole thing down and clean the entire ship," said Rodrigue, who's written about maritime pandemics. "Some even do fumigation."

Passengers on the Diamond Princess are being quarantined for 14 days to try to prevent the further spread of the virus, so emptying the ship isn't an option. Onboard, ways to lower the risk of transmission include extra cleaning and delivering meals individually to cabins, Rodrigue said.

In Hong Kong, 3,600 passengers on Sunday were allowed to leave another liner, the World Dream. The ship had been quarantined since Feb. 5 after Hong Kong authorities found passengers on an earlier trip had tested positive for coronavirus.

After the quarantine announcement, operator Dream Cruises Management Ltd. put in place new sanitation procedures and screened the temperature of all guests and crew members coming aboard. Passengers reported that the cleaning crew was mopping down decks more frequently and studiously cleaning railings and doors.

Norovirus appears to be tougher to wipe out than the coronavirus, which the CDC says is thought to spread from person to person through droplets from coughs or sneezes, similar to influenza and other respiratory pathogens. Normal cleaning procedures with Lysol disinfectant or bleach should be sufficient to kill it, Rodrigue said.

The gastrointestinal infection is more contagious, with those infected shedding "billions of norovirus particles while only a few virus particles can make other people sick," according to the CDC.

New Procedures

Still, the coronavirus may require the industry to put in place new procedures for similar outbreaks requiring quarantines of an entire boat – a rarely used measure. Fleets might also look into using new materials, such as plastics that are less conducive to germs. Since the most effective protection against the virus is frequent hand-washing, experts said, ships might also need to look into whether their systems can accommodate extra water and sanitation stations.

"A cruise ship is an enclosed self-sufficient system, down to its water system, so any change will need to be looked at," said Rodrigue. "This virus is something that's entirely something new. It will require new strategies and methods."

Each new case of coronavirus on the Diamond Princess potentially extends the 14-day quarantine for some passengers, Michael Ryan, executive director of the World Health Organization's Health Emergencies Programme, said in a media briefing Feb. 7.

Frasure said the government and cruise operator haven't said anything to passengers about the possibility of a longer quarantine. The guests had initially been told the quarantine would end Feb. 19, before more passengers were found to be infected.

"That's what I'm most concerned about – that new cases will extend our quarantine," said Frasure. "It's on all of our minds."

[Afghanistan] Two more American heroes die in Afghanistan as failed US occupation continues (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/10/2020 4:42 PM, Daniel DePetris, Neutral]

Saturday brought yet another tragedy in Afghanistan. Another fatal attack on American troops in a 19-year war that continues with no light at the end of the tunnel.

The shooting in Afghanistan's eastern Nangarhar province lasted mere minutes when an individual wearing an Afghan army uniform opened fire on a squad of U.S. special operations troops. The military is still investigating whether the assailant was actually a member of the Afghan security forces or a Taliban infiltrator, but the result is still the same: two slain American heroes by the names of Sgt. Javier Jaguar Gutierrez and Sgt. Antonio Rey Rodriguez, the latter serving his 10th deployment in 11 years.

Their deaths increase total U.S. fatalities in Afghanistan this year to six.

All of this violence comes at a time when U.S. special envoy and former Ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad is hard at work in Doha, Qatar, talking to the Taliban on achieving some kind of reduction in violence before the signing of a U.S.-Taliban agreement. The Taliban have been holding out for a far shorter reduction and are outright opposed to the nationwide ceasefire the Afghan government is demanding. As is fairly typical during peace negotiations, the fighting on the ground hasn't stopped. In the countryside, the pace is only getting more intense as the combatants jockey for position and leverage at the negotiating table.

What's happening in Doha is almost beside the point. It's not that the talks, which have been going on for over a year, are not important; it's that whatever U.S. and Taliban officials agree to won't end the war between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

Assuming Washington and the Taliban even come to a consensus on a document, the conflict will continue to churn as the Afghans squabble among themselves over power-sharing, the role of Islam in society, the extent of Taliban prisoner releases, and the makeup of ministries. Throughout those negotiations, thousands of U.S. troops will likely still be in the firing zone as some sort of insurance policy. And for what?

We are sick and tired of logging on to our computers in the morning and seeing tragic yet fundamentally avoidable headlines about U.S. troops dying in Afghanistan.

The fact these tragedies continue over 18 years after the first bombs were dropped would be perfect fodder for the Onion. Unfortunately, it's no joke. That we turn on our televisions and see lawmakers recycling the eye-rolling "we need to fight the terrorists over there, so we don't have to fight them here" slogan is like a graphic, real-life nightmare.

Afghanistan is a hamster wheel going around in loops, and the United States is the hamster running toward the piece of cheese. We will never reach it. The U.S. needs to get off the wheel before another drop of American blood is shed.

Near East & North Africa

United States to extend waiver for Iraq to import Iranian energy: Iraqi officials (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 7:56 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The United States has agreed to extend a waiver for Iraq to import Iranian energy supplies, including gas, two Iraqi government officials said on Monday.

Washington has repeatedly extended the exemption for Baghdad to use crucial Iranian energy supplies for its power grid, for periods of 90 or 120 days. One of the officials said this latest extension would last 120 days.

The extension was agreed because Iraq had shown it was taking steps toward becoming more self-reliant for its energy needs, one of the officials said, and less dependent on Iran, whose energy sector is under harsh U.S. sanctions.

"The waiver will be renewed because Iraq has undertaken important steps in investing in Iraqi gas," one of the officials said. He said the recent Iraqi government approval of contracts to develop gas fields in the country's east was a key factor.

"This is considered good as far as the U.S. is concerned," the official said.

A spokesman for the electricity ministry said consultations were ongoing over the extension, and its potential time frame.

The U.S. State Department last extended the waiver allowing Iraq to import gas and electricity from Iran in October for a period of 120 days, meaning it is up for extension again this week.

Washington has insisted that oil-rich Iraq, OPEC's second-largest producer, move toward energy self-sufficiency as a condition for its exemption for importing Iranian energy.

Yemen talks about prisoner exchange underway in Jordan (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 3:47 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Yemen's warring sides quietly began U.N.-backed talks about a prisoner swap on Monday, according to the United Nations.

U.N. deputy spokesman Farhan Haq said a third round of negotiations aimed at implementing an ambitious Yemeni prisoner exchange was underway in the Jordanian capital of Amman.

Although heavy clashes continue on the ground, the resumption of talks signals modest headway in diplomatic efforts to resolve a war that has killed over 100,000 people and pushed millions to the brink of famine.

The prisoner swap deal was seen as a breakthrough during 2018 peace talks in Sweden, where Yemen's Shiite Houthi rebels and the internationally recognized government agreed to several such confidence-building measures, including a cease-fire in the strategic port city of Hodeida.

Ongoing military offensives and deep-seated distrust have dogged implementation of the tentative peace plan. But more recently, hopes for a settlement have been stirred by back-channel talks in the Gulf state of Oman between Saudi Arabia, which supports the government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, and the rebels.

The talks focus on interim agreements, such as re-opening Yemen's main international airport in Sanaa, which was shut down by the Saudi-led coalition in 2016. In a sign of progress, two United Nations flights ferrying dozens of seriously ill Yemenis abroad for treatment took off last week from the rebel-held capital, the first since the start of the air blockade.

The conflict in the Arab world's poorest country erupted in 2014, when the Iran-allied Houthis seized the capital and much of the country's north. A Saudi-led coalition, determined to restore Hadi's government, launched a military intervention months later. Yemen's worsening humanitarian catastrophe has added a sense of international urgency to political negotiations.

[Egypt] Egypt Moves Toward Toughening Up Draconian Anti-Terror Law (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 9:26 AM, Samy Magdy, Neutral]

Egypt's legislature on Monday gave its initial approval for toughening up already draconian anti-terrorism laws, with amendments that include life sentences and capital punishment for funding terrorism, the state-run news agency said.

The sweeping anti-terrorism law was enacted in August 2015. It established an extremely broad definition of terrorism, describing it in one article as any act that disturbs public order with force. Some charges, such as leading or organizing a terrorist group, carry the death penalty.

The law and the amendments are widely seen as part of an unprecedented crackdown on dissent waged by President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi since coming to power in 2013.

The original anti-terrorism law also included provisions to protect Egyptian security forces from prosecution, establish stiffer prison sentences for terror-related offences, as well as heavy fines for those who publish "false news" and a special judicial circuit for terrorism cases.

Journalists who do not toe the government line could be punished under the law.

The new amendments expand the definition for the crime of funding terrorist acts. These would now include providing a place for training one terrorist or more; giving them weapons or documents in any way or form; offering support and financing in order to help terrorists travel, even if the provider does not have a direct link to the terrorist crime.

The amendments are being sent to Egypt's State Council for its review. A final parliamentary vote will likely then send it to President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi to ratify.

The amendments also tack on life sentences and the death penalty for a range of crimes related to funding terrorist attacks or terrorist-designated groups, said Bahaa Abu Shakq, head of the Parliament's constitutional and legislative affairs committee.

The law already gives heavy prison sentences for crimes that include promoting or encouraging any "terrorist offense." These can extend to damaging state institutions or infrastructure, such as military or government buildings, power and gas lines, and

archaeological sites.

The original 2015 law prompted concern from Egyptian lawyers, rights groups, and even some politicians and senior judges.

Egypt has been fighting for years an insurgency centered in the northern part of Sinai Peninsula and led by a local affiliate of the Islamic State group. Militant attacks have targeted the Egyptian military there and spilled out into the Nile Valley as well.

The IS affiliate on Monday claimed an attack on a military checkpoint in the town of Sheikh Zuweid in northern Sinai that killed seven troops and wounded 10 more. A statement from the group's media arm Amaq said that the previous day's attack was carried out by four suicide bombers.

The Egyptian military said its forces killed at least 10 militants while repelling the assault.

[Iran] Slain commander Soleimani sought stability: Iranian president (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 8:32 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian military commander killed in a U.S. drone strike on Jan. 3 in Baghdad, had sought to bring stability to the Middle East, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said on Monday.

"Commander Soleimani was a man who was pursuing stability and calm in the region," Rouhani said in a speech broadcast live on state television. "If commander Soleimani wanted to kill American generals it would have been very, very easy for him, in Afghanistan, Iraq and any other place. He never did that."

Rouhani, citing the missile strike Iran carried out against a U.S. base in Iraq in retaliation for Soleimani's death, said the Islamic Republic's ballistic missile program was not intended for attacks on neighboring countries – which include arch regional adversary Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies.

"Our missiles are against terrorism, our missiles are against crimes. We have never built and stored missiles for aggression. We reassure all our neighbors and the people in the region that our desire is peaceful co-existence."

The United States and Iran came close to full-blown conflict last month after the Iranian general's killing and Iran's retaliation, but stepped back from the brink and no notable incidents have occurred since then.

U.S. President Donald Trump's administration said Soleimani, the commander of elite Iranian forces based abroad, was targeted for plotting future attacks on U.S. interests and that he had helped coordinated strikes on American forces in Iraq in the past through militia proxies.

[Iran] France Condemns New Iranian Ballistic Missile, Space Launcher (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 11:21 AM, Ania Nussbaum, Neutral]

France condemned efforts by Iran to build a new ballistic missile with a range of more than

500 kilometers, further complicating efforts to keep Tehran operating within the framework of a faltering nuclear accord.

"The development of Iran's ballistic missile program undermines regional stability and affects the security of Europe," the French foreign affairs ministry said on Monday. "France calls on Iran to fully comply with its international obligations in this regard."

Iran already breached aspects of the 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, such as exceeding levels of enriched uranium and no longer adhering to limits of centrifuges – a response to the U.S. abandoning the accord in 2018. The European Union last month initiated formal proceedings to resolve the dispute that could lead to a re-imposition of sanctions by the United Nations.

France also said Iran on Feb. 9 fired off a "space launcher" with ballistic missile technology. "Iran cannot carry out activities, including launches, related to ballistic missiles capable of delivering nuclear weapons," according to the statement.

[Iraq] U.S. Forces Start to Withdraw From 15 Bases in Iraq: Sky News (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 4:42 AM, Farah Elbahrawy, 6400K, Neutral]

American forces have started withdrawing from 15 bases in Iraq, Sky News Arabia reported, citing its reporter.

France, Germany and Australia submitted a request to the joint special operations command to set up a timetable for withdrawing their own forces from the country, the TV network reported, citing the parliament's defense committee.

[Iraq] U.S. Denies Report of Troops Leaving Iraqi Bases (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 9:14 AM, Verity Ratcliffe, Neutral]

The U.S. Central Command denied reports about the withdrawal of U.S. troops from military bases in Iraq.

"Reports that the U.S. has pulled out of 15 bases in Iraq are not correct," Centcom media relations officer Major Beth Riordan said in a statement. There has been "no change in U.S. force disposition in Iraq," she said.

Abu Dhabi-based Sky News Arabia earlier reported that the U.S. is pulling out from 15 bases in Iraq and that France, Germany and Australia had submitted a similar request.

[Iraq] Militant group targets supply convoy south of Baghdad: military statement (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 2:30 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Militants on Monday targeted a convoy carrying food supplies south of Baghdad using an explosive device, the Iraqi military said in a statement, leading to only material losses.

Lebanese pro-Iranian TV channel al-Mayadeen reported that the explosion targeted a convoy carrying military equipment to a base hosting U.S. forces south of the capital. The channel said there was damage to one vehicle but no casualties.

The report comes amid heightened tension between Iran-backed paramilitary groups and the United States in Iraq. Washington killed top Iranian commander Qassem Soleimani in a drone strike last month and Tehran fired missiles at two bases hosting U.S. forces in retaliation days later.

[Israel] Israeli opposition co-leader: PM makes Trump plan a 'stunt' (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 12:14 PM, Aron Heller, Neutral]

A leading Israeli opposition figure said Monday that embattled Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has turned a U.S. initiative for ending conflict with the Palestinians into a campaign "stunt" by pushing for the immediate annexation of West Bank settlements.

Co-leader of the Blue and White party Yair Lapid insisted he was against unilateral steps endangering what he described as President Donald Trump's promising Mideast plan. He expressed hope that the Palestinians would come around to negotiating based upon the U.S. blueprint.

Lapid is slated to become Israel's next foreign minister if his party prevails in the March 2 election and fellow party leader Benny Gantz wins the premiership.

"Nobody expects Israel or the Palestinians to take the plan face value the way it is and just make sure it happens. Everybody understands this is a framework, a very detailed one," he told an audience of foreign correspondents in Jerusalem, before zoning in on Netanyahu.

Lapid went on to condemn what he said was the prime minister's planned "unilateral steps" to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

"This is something that came out from the prime minister's office right after the plan was presented. Probably, it seems, for campaign reasons. And this is something you don't do. This is too serious to become a stunt in the campaign," he added.

The Trump plan is widely viewed as being favorable to Israel since it would allow it to eventually extend sovereignty over all of its West Bank settlements along with the strategic Jordan Valley.

The Palestinians have angrily rejected the U.S. plan since it would provide the Palestinians with limited autonomy in several chunks of territory with a capital on the outskirts of Jerusalem, and only if they meet stringent conditions.

Netanyahu has sought to sell the plan, and his close relationship to Trump, as a testament to his master statesmanship ahead of the country's third elections in less than a year. He's also seeking to galvanize his hard-line base by annexing territory ahead of the election. The proposed move could establish facts on the ground that would be difficult to reverse, and make the prospect of a contiguous Palestinian state all but impossible.

But he's been forced to walk that pledge back under criticism from the typically like-minded Trump administration that has chided Israel's zest for annexation.

U.S. Ambassador to Israel David Friedman reiterated that concern, saying Sunday that

such a move was "subject to the completion of a mapping process by a joint Israeli-American committee," and warning that rushing it undermines the plan.

"The president put out a plan for the next hundred years, not the next 30 days," he said, alluding to the upcoming election.

Visiting the Jordan Valley on Monday for a tree planting ceremony, Netanyahu insisted he'd be patient and only impose Israeli law on any territory there "in agreement with the Americans."

The Palestinians seek the West Bank, Gaza Strip and east Jerusalem — areas captured by Israel in the 1967 Mideast war — for an independent state. The U.S. is eager to keep the option of statehood on the table.

Lapid, whose centrist party is seeking to unseat Netanyahu, would not detail how his vision differed from Netanyahu's beyond saying he would favor direct negotiation with the Palestinians rather than imposing a framework upon them.

"We are against anything that is unilateral," he said.

At the same time, he called on Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to drop his intransigence, realize that time is not working in his favor and take a serious look at the plan as a basis for talks.

"Our approach to the Palestinians is to tell them that always saying 'no' isn't a policy," he said. "If instead of always automatically responding with violence and threats, they will take the time to delve deeply into the Trump plan they will see that it contains many opportunities for the Palestinian people."

With Gantz at the helm, Blue and White is polling ahead of Netanyahu's Likud three weeks before the election. Both sides are looking for a final surge to put them over the top after two deadlocked elections that did not produce a clear winner.

Lapid said Likud was a viable option to partner with but that his party would not join forces with Netanyahu, who has been indicted on three separate corruption charges.

Beyond the moral message, Lapid said Netanyahu was incapable of implementing the Trump plan or tackling any other major challenge given his pending corruption trial and the stagnation that comes with his lengthy rule.

"What is happening to him is the same thing that happens to every leader who holds on to power for too long — the unholy trinity: Corruption, loss of empathy, no new ideas," Lapid said.

[Israel] Data of All 6.5 Million Israeli Voters Is Leaked (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 10:07 AM, Daniel Victor, Sheera Frenkel and Isabel Kershner, Negative]

Israel's Privacy Protection Authority said it was looking into what it called a "grave" security

lapse by the maker of an app promoted by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his Likud party that led to the exposure of personal data of all 6.5 million eligible voters in Israel, including full names and identity card numbers.

The flawed website for the app, called Elector, failed to secure personal details in the voter registry, which also included the address and gender of each voter, even those who did not use it, and in some cases phone numbers as well, the Haaretz newspaper first reported on Sunday, raising concerns about identity theft and foreign interference.

The maker of Elector did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment, but in a statement issued to the Israeli news media, it sought to play down the potential consequences, describing the leak as a "one-off incident that was immediately dealt with" and saying it had since bolstered the site's security.

The data required essentially no hacking skills to access, and it was unknown how many people had downloaded the registry.

Mr. Netanyahu had encouraged supporters to download the app, which offers news and information related to the March 2 election, the third in less than a year after the first two failed to provide an outright winner and efforts to form a coalition came up short.

In a statement issued in response to the reports on Sunday, the Privacy Protection Authority, a unit of the Justice Ministry, said that responsibility for complying with Israeli privacy law involving use of the voter registry "lies with the parties themselves."

It stopped short of announcing a full-fledged investigation, however, and said it could not give further details at this stage.

Ran Bar-Zik, a developer for Verizon Media who wrote the story the Haaretz published on Sunday, was alerted to the breach over the weekend.

In an interview on Monday, he said he had received a tipoff about the Elector website breach on Friday night. The message was sent in English to Cybercyber, a Hebrew podcast that he hosts with two colleagues. As evidence, the tipster included Mr. Bar-Zik's own details and those of his wife and son.

Explaining the ease with which the voter information could be accessed, Mr. Bar-Zik wrote in a blog post that visitors to the app's website could right-click to "view source," an action that reveals the code behind a web page.

The code revealed the user names and passwords of site administrators, and using those credentials would allow anyone to log in and download the voter information.

Mr. Bar-Zik said he chose the Likud administrator and "Jackpot! Everything was in front of me!"

"When we talk about hacking, we imagine people in hoodies doing technical stuff," Mr. Bar-Zik said. But in the Elector case, he added, no hacking technique was necessary.

One Israeli website said it had been able to access the personal information of, among others, Mr. Netanyahu; his wife, Sara; the chief of staff for the Israeli military, Aviv Kochavi; and Nadav Argaman, the head of Shin Bet, Israel's domestic security agency.

The leak was believed to be the largest disclosure of Israeli voter information since 2006, when an employee of the Interior Ministry stole the population registry and then published it.

The exposure of the database of Israeli voters could have significant consequences. Databases listing personal information of private citizens can be exploited for a number of purposes, including by criminals looking to make money through identity theft, or by foreign state-backed hackers looking to spy on Israeli voters ahead of a critical election.

"This is a treasure for foreign countries with geostrategic interests in Israel," Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, head of the Media Reform Project at the Israel Democracy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank in Jerusalem, told Channel 12 news.

Massive voter databases are one more reason that cybersecurity officials across the world have warned that new technology is best kept out of the hands of election officials and political parties.

Most recommend that new technology, including voting machines and apps used by political parties, be tested for months, or even years before it is deployed to the general public.

Cybersecurity experts specializing in election technology have begun holding specialized sessions at the world's largest annual conference for hackers, DefCon. During the sessions they hack into voting machines and other technology used during elections around the world in an effort to lay their vulnerabilities bare.

Last week, an app introduced by the Iowa Democratic Party to help tally votes during the Iowa caucus failed on the day of the vote, throwing the first-in-the-nation contest into chaos.

The app, which had been privately developed for the party and had not been tested by independent cybersecurity experts, had been kept a secret by the party until the weeks leading up to the vote.

When it was eventually unveiled, many had trouble downloading and using it. Cybersecurity experts quickly found the app was riddled with bugs and potential vulnerabilities.

[Israel] Israel accused of torturing Palestinians after fatal attack (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 3:05 AM, Mohammed Daraghmeh and Joseph Krauss, 1907K, Negative]

One of the men was hospitalized with kidney failure and 11 broken ribs. Another was nearly unrecognizable to his wife when he was wheeled into a courtroom. A third was stitched up after being attacked by a security dog.

Then the three Palestinians were returned to their Israeli interrogators. They had been swept up in a sprawling manhunt launched after a roadside bomb killed a 17-year-old Israeli girl and wounded her father and brother as they hiked down to a spring last August in the occupied West Bank.

The attack raised fears of a sophisticated militant cell that might strike again, and Israeli interrogators appear to have treated it as a ticking time-bomb scenario.

Lawyers and family members of the three main suspects say they were tortured to the point of being hospitalized. Several other Palestinians swept up by Israel's Shin Bet internal security agency say they were threatened, beaten, forced into painful stress positions and denied sleep.

The allegations against Israel are the most serious to come to light in years, and rights groups say they point to a loosening of constraints after the Israeli Supreme Court outlawed most forms of torture in a landmark 1999 ruling.

The law allows interrogators to defend the use of force when there is fear of an imminent attack. Rights groups say interrogators routinely exploit the loophole, knowing they will face few consequences, if any.

The Public Committee Against Torture in Israel says more than 1,200 complaints against the Shin Bet have been filed since 2001, without a single case going to trial. Only one criminal investigation has been launched, over a 2017 case involving alleged rape, and it is still open.

The allegations come at a sensitive time following the release of President Donald Trump's Mideast initiative, which heavily favors Israel. The Palestinians have rejected the plan, and sporadic clashes have erupted across the West Bank in recent days.

The Western-backed Palestinian Authority, which has also been accused of torturing prisoners, has responded to the plan by threatening to end its longtime security coordination with Israel. The torture allegations could add to the pressure on it to follow through.

The Shin Bet launched a massive manhunt after the Aug. 23 bombing killed 17-year-old Rina Shnerb. Such bombings have been rare in recent years.

Authorities blamed the attack on the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, or PFLP, a leftist political party that has an armed wing. In the following weeks, security forces arrested dozens of its members — suspected militants as well as politicians and student leaders.

The Shin Bet identified 44-year-old Samer Arbeed as the bombmaker. It said Qassem Barghouti, 22, took part in the bombing and other attacks, and that Walid Hanatsheh, 51, was a senior commander in the group's armed wing.

The Shin Bet said the interrogations helped foil attacks planned for the "near future" and led authorities to weapons caches.

The agency declined to address specific allegations of torture, saying only that "interrogations are conducted in accordance with the law and are aimed at protecting the State of Israel and its citizens from terror attacks."

In September, days after his arrest, Arbeed was taken to a hospital in critical condition.

Sahar Francis, the head of the Palestinian Addameer rights group and a lawyer for the suspects, said Arbeed's interrogators beat him for 36 hours, leaving him with kidney failure and 11 broken ribs. He was released from the hospital after three weeks and returned to Shin Bet custody.

The Shin Bet said at the time that Arbeed "did not feel well" during interrogation and was taken to a hospital, without elaborating. Israeli media said the Justice Ministry was investigating. The ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

Francis said Barghouti and Hanatsheh were also severely beaten.

Hanatsheh's wife, Bayan, said she hardly recognized him when she saw him 60 days after his arrest.

"He was brought into court in a wheelchair," she said. "He looked very old, his beard was plucked from several places and his eyes were deep inside his head. He was not himself," she said.

Francis shared photos of Hanatsheh she said were taken 10 days after his interrogation. They appeared to show large red bruises on his legs, feet and shoulders.

Barghouti was bitten in his genitals by a security dog when authorities raided his home near the West Bank city of Ramallah, Francis said.

"When he was brought back from the hospital for interrogation, the interrogators hit him on his wounds," she said.

Rachel Stroumsa, the executive director of the Public Committee Against Torture in Israel, said the allegations are "very credible" and line up with other testimony her group has gathered.

Addameer says several other suspects were subjected to less severe forms of abuse that the human rights community widely views as torture. It said a total of around 50 Palestinians were subjected to some form of torture in the wake of the bombing.

George Abu Ghazaleh, 29, was arrested at his home on Nov. 11 and taken away in his pajamas and slippers. He said that for weeks he was isolated in a filthy cell, beaten and screamed at.

He said he was held for several hours at a time with his arms and legs cuffed to a chair in the so-called Shabach position — a practice outlawed by the Supreme Court.

He was released after 40 days without being charged.

"This kind of experience never leaves you," he said. He describes feeling distracted much of the time and says he wakes up at night to the slightest sound outside his window.

The Palestinian Authority, which governs parts of the West Bank, and the Islamic militant group Hamas, which rules Gaza, have also been accused of torturing political prisoners. Rights groups say torture is endemic in other countries in the region, such as Syria and Egypt.

In December, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu commended the Shin Bet, the army and police for apprehending the "reprehensible terrorists who murdered Rina Shnerb."

"The long arm of Israel reaches all those who seek our lives, and it will continue to do so," he said.

[Israel] Israeli court sentences radical Islamic cleric to 28 months (AP)

[AP](#) [2/10/2020 5:24 AM, Staff, Negative]

An Israeli court on Monday sentenced a radical Islamic cleric to 28 months in prison for "inciting to terror" in a series of speeches he made after a deadly attack in 2017 on Israeli police at a contested Jerusalem holy site.

Raed Salah, head of the outlawed northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, was convicted in November on incitement charges for exhorting others to follow the example of the gunmen who killed the two Israeli policemen in that attack.

The attack, carried out by two Arab citizens of Israel at the Jerusalem shrine known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary and to Jews as the Temple Mount, triggered a flare-up of deadly violence between Israeli forces and Palestinians.

The cleric has denounced the charges against him as false and said following his sentencing that all the proceedings in the case were "far from the truth."

Salah has had repeated run-ins with Israeli authorities.

He completed a nine-month prison sentence in 2017 for "incitement to violence" and "incitement to racism."

Israeli Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan tweeted that Salah's sentencing "illustrates that terror supporters and inciters belong in prison for a long time and not in the Knesset," Israel's parliament.

He appeared to be referring to a Supreme Court ruling Sunday that struck down a move to disqualify an Arab Israeli lawmaker accused of expressing support for terrorism.

The lawmaker, Heba Yazbak of the pro-Palestinian Balad party, denied the allegations.

Salah's organization, the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in Israel, counts an estimated 20,000 members.

It has gained popularity by running a network of charities, kindergartens, health clinics and social services — a model established elsewhere in the Middle East and beyond by the Muslim Brotherhood group, which is outlawed in several Arab countries.

Israel outlawed the northern branch of the Islamic Movement in 2015, accusing it of inciting Arabs to violence.

Israel's Arab citizens, who make up about 20% of the population, have citizenship but suffer widespread discrimination in jobs, housing and social services.

They have close ties to the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, and largely identify with the Palestinian cause.

[Syria] Nearly 700,000 Syrians displaced by government offensive since early December: U.N. (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 10:13 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Nearly 700,000 civilians have been displaced by a renewed Russian-backed Syrian government offensive against the rebel-held northwest since early December, including nearly 100,000 in the last week alone, the United Nations said on Monday.

David Swanson, a spokesman for the U.N. Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, said the situation was increasingly dire near the border with Turkey where over 400,000 people had already taken shelter from earlier anti-rebel offensives last year before the latest campaign.

[Syria] Eight killed in truck blast in Syria's Afrin: Turkish defense ministry (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 6:22 AM, Daren Butler, 5304K, Negative]

A bomb detonated on a truck containing diesel-filled barrels and killed eight civilians and wounded seven more, including children, in northwestern Syria's Idlib region on Monday, the Turkish Defense Ministry said.

The ministry said on its Twitter account that the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which Turkey designates as a terrorist group, was responsible for the attack in the city of Afrin, a region under the control of Turkey-backed rebels.

[Yemen] Killing of Terrorist Leader in Yemen Is Latest Blow to Qaeda Affiliate (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 5:00 AM, Eric Schmitt, 23673K, Neutral]

For more than a decade, Al Qaeda's affiliate in Yemen has been one of the most dangerous terrorist organizations on the planet.

The group spent years inventing explosives that are difficult to detect, including trying to disguise bombs in devices like cellphones.

It has tried at least three times to blow up American airliners, without success.

The White House's announcement last week that the United States had killed the group's leader, Qassim al-Rimi — confirming what The New York Times first reported several days earlier — was the latest in a string of setbacks over the past few years that have damaged the group's ability to orchestrate or carry out operations against the West, American and European counterterrorism specialists say.

A flurry of American drone strikes in Yemen in recent years has now killed two successive leaders of the group as well as Ibrahim Hassan al-Asiri, the affiliate's notorious bomb maker.

Clashes with rival Islamic State and Houthi rebel fighters in Yemen have also weakened the group, whose full name is Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula.

Its once formidable jihadi news media presence has been far surpassed by the Islamic State's.

"AQAP doesn't seem like the beast it once was," Edmund Fitton-Brown, a former British ambassador to Yemen who is now a top United Nations counterterrorism official, told a think-tank audience in Washington last week.

As the Yemen branch reels from these body blows, other Qaeda affiliates around the world are elbowing their way to prominence.

The Shabab, an East African terrorist group affiliated with Al Qaeda, has ramped up attacks in Somalia in recent years, drawing increasing fire from American missile strikes.

The group last month assaulted a Kenyan military base housing United States troops, killing three Americans.

American counterterrorism officials have voiced increased alarm about a Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Hurras al-Din, that they say is plotting attacks against the West by exploiting the chaotic security situation in the country's northwest and the protection inadvertently afforded by Russian air defenses shielding Syrian government forces allied with Moscow.

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has dogged President Trump since his first days in office in 2017, when the president authorized an ill-fated raid on Mr. al-Rimi's hide-out in Yemen that left dead one member of the Navy's elite SEAL Team 6, Chief Petty Officer William Owens.

Even though the group has been weakened, intelligence and counterterrorism officials warn that the organization remains dangerous.

The group claimed last week in an audio recording by Mr. al-Rimi — made before his death — that it had directed a Saudi military officer to carry out the shooting at a United States military base in Florida in December that killed three sailors and wounded eight people.

The group offered no evidence that it had trained the gunman, Second Lt. Mohammed Saeed Alshamrani, but it produced a copy of his will as well as correspondence that indicated that he had been in contact with Al Qaeda.

Experts said those elements made the claim plausible.

At a news conference last month, the F.B.I. deputy director, David Bowdich, said that while Lieutenant Alshamrani did not appear to be motivated by one specific terrorist group, his

social media comments echoed those of Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical Yemeni-American cleric and senior leader of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula who was killed in a drone strike in 2011. "AQAP remains a significant, lingering concern, in part because the group was so fixated on aviation as a target, and the kind of bomb-making expertise that the group developed was unlikely to have been contained to just a few select individuals," said Nicholas J. Rasmussen, a former director of the National Counterterrorism Center.

"That kind of knowledge and expertise is of course shareable and transferable — not just within AQAP but beyond to other Al Qaeda-affiliated terrorist groups and other like-minded terrorists," said Mr. Rasmussen, who is now the acting executive director of the McCain Institute for International Leadership, a think tank.

Bill Roggio, the editor of The Long War Journal, a website run by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies that tracks military strikes against militant groups, noted that AQAP had been counted out before only to rebound through resilience, patience and a commitment to its cause.

Still, the Yemen affiliate has suffered several major blows in recent years.

Nasser al-Wuhayshi — the first emir of AQAP, who was widely considered to be a likely successor to Ayman al-Zawahri, the overall leader of Al Qaeda — was killed in an American drone strike in 2015. Four years later, Mr. Trump announced that Mr. al-Asiri, the bomb maker, had died in a drone strike in Yemen in 2017.

It was Mr. al-Asiri who sewed a bomb into the underpants of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, who tried to detonate the device on an American airliner approaching Detroit on Christmas Day in 2009.

The bomb fizzled harmlessly, and Mr. Abdulmutallab was arrested and imprisoned.

Mr. al-Asiri also designed explosive devices disguised as printer cartridges intended to blow up cargo planes over the United States in 2010, and another device meant to bring down a passenger plane in 2012.

Then last week, Mr. Trump confirmed in a statement that Mr. al-Rimi had been killed.

The statement offered few details, but The Times reported that the C.I.A. carried out the airstrike in late January using remotely piloted drones after months of tracking him.

The White House statement noted that Mr. al-Rimi's death degraded not just Al Qaeda's activities in Yemen but "the global Al Qaeda movement." Mr. al-Rimi played an important senior coordinating role with other Qaeda affiliates, avoiding the need to consult on every matter with Mr. Zawahri from his hide-out, most likely along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border.

Analysts say several hardened jihadists are among those to succeed Mr. al-Rimi as the group's next leader.

A measure of the United States' success against AQAP is evident in the number of

American military drone strikes in Yemen, which dropped to eight last year from a peak of 125 in 2017, according to statistics compiled by Mr. Roggio's organization.

The strikes resulted in fewer high-priority targets and drove many surviving leaders underground, officials said.

"While the group did indeed make inroads with certain Sunni tribes, the past several years have been focused more on survival and less on growth and plotting external attacks," Mr. Clarke said.

Without the high-level terrorist attacks against the West that the organization had become known for and that its brand was partly built around, its image suffered, and the group seemed to have become more insular, analysts said.

"It has been decimated by drone strikes, infiltrated by spies, fragmented by infighting and handicapped by a near total shutdown of its communications networks," said Elisabeth Kendall, a Yemen scholar at the University of Oxford who visited the country in October.

"But a die-hard core will always remain. The more Yemen continues to unravel with the recent re-escalation of hostilities, the easier AQAP will find it to survive and prosper again."

Europe and Eurasia

British coronavirus 'superspreader' may have infected at least 11 people in three countries (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/10/2020 2:08 PM, Karla Adam, Negative]

The story of a traveling British businessman who appears to have passed the coronavirus to Britons in at least three countries has prompted concerns over a "superspreader," who could play an outsize role in transmitting the infection.

A British national, who has not been named, may have unwittingly spread the virus to at least 11 people in the course of his travels from Singapore to France to Switzerland to England, according to public health authorities and accounts in the British media. Infected Britons in England, France and Spain likely caught the virus from him.

The businessman, one of the first British nationals to test positive for the virus, works for the gas analysis company Servomex, according to the Guardian. He traveled to Singapore for work Jan. 20 and departed Jan. 22, the paper reported. He is thought to have contracted the virus while he was there.

As of Monday, China reported 908 deaths and about 40,000 cases of the coronavirus, as the epidemic continues to worsen. Eight cases have been confirmed in Britain.

The coronavirus can spread quickly between humans, usually through close person-to-person contact and respiratory droplets. Authorities in the U.K. and beyond are scrambling to trace the businessman's tracks from the time when he caught the virus to when he tested positive in Britain several days later. From Singapore, he reportedly stopped at a French ski resort, boarded a flight, dropped by a pub in his hometown and may have gone to a medical

clinic. Authorities are getting in touch with those who may have come into close contact with him.

Researchers say that the incubation period for the virus can last from about three to 24 days.

After leaving Singapore, the businessman visited a chalet in Les Contamines-Montjoie, a ski resort in the French Alps. According to the French Health Ministry, five British citizens, including a 9-year-old, also stayed at the chalet and tested positive for the virus. The Guardian reported that French authorities shut two schools the 9-year-old visited. Six other British nationals have been hospitalized for observation.

On Sunday, French health officials announced two new cases linked to the ski resort. "We learned that there were two other cases linked to this cluster, two adults — one who was diagnosed in the United Kingdom and the other who was diagnosed in Mallorca — linked to a stay in the apartment in Les Contamines-Montjoie," Jerome Salomon, a senior health official, said in a televised statement, Reuters reported.

On Monday, British officials announced that four more people in Britain tested positive for coronavirus. Chris Whitty, chief medical officer for England, said that the "new cases are all known contacts of a previously confirmed U.K. case, and the virus was passed on in France."

After spending time at the chalet in the Alps, the businessman traveled to Geneva, where he caught a flight to London's Gatwick Airport on Jan. 28. Nearly 200 people were on board the plane.

EasyJet, a discount airline, said that 183 passengers and six crew members were on the flight, and that health authorities have contacted the passengers who were seated near the man in question.

"[A]lthough the risk to others on board the flight is very low, crew who operated the flight have been advised to monitor their health for a 14 day period since the flight in line with Public Health England advice," the airline said in a statement. "The original flight was 13 days ago and none are displaying any symptoms."

The businessman is reportedly from Hove, a town that neighbors Brighton. Together the two places are known as "Brighton and Hove."

On Monday, the BBC reported that a doctor's clinic in Brighton had been temporarily closed after one of its staff members tested positive for the virus.

As of Monday afternoon, authorities in Britain had carried out 1,114 tests for the virus. Eight came back positive.

Adam Kucharski, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said that it was "reassuring from a control point of view that these cases are linked." In the U.K. at the moment, he said, "we are not seeing five, 10 cases appearing that we've got no idea where they have come from."

On average, he said, those who are infected might pass it along to two people. Because coronavirus is spread via droplets that do not travel far, it would not be unusual for someone infected traveling by plane not to pass it to many — or any — other passengers.

The Latest: EU says new virus poses serious danger (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 7:02 AM, Staff, 1512K, Neutral]

6 p.m. The European Union commissioner for crisis management says the new virus that emerged in China creates a "worrisome" situation that will be discussed during a special meeting of health ministers from the 27-member bloc.

Speaking Monday in Brussels, Janez Lenarcic said the virus is spreading with great speed and poses a "serious danger for public health."

He added that the meeting of health ministers will take place Thursday and will help coordinate the actions of member states.

The EU commission allocated 10 million euros last month to research the virus. Lenarcic said the EU will continue to offer China assistance in fighting the outbreak.

Lenarcic said more than 500 EU citizens have been repatriated to the continent since the outbreak started. China on Monday said 908 people have died of the virus on the mainland and over 40,170 have been infected. More than 440 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China, including two deaths in Hong Kong and the Philippines.

5 p.m. Britain has declared the new virus from China a "serious and imminent threat to public health" and announced new measures to combat the spread of the disease.

The Department of Health and Social Care on Monday said it would forcibly detain infected people if necessary. It also named two British hospitals as isolation facilities for those affected by the disease.

It said the measures would help delay or prevent further transmission of the virus.

The changes come after a British man who caught the virus in Singapore in January appeared to be linked to at least seven other confirmed cases in Europe.

Five Britons, including a 9-year-old boy, contracted the virus in the French Alpine ski town of Contamines-Montjoie after staying in the same chalet as the British man.

French medical authorities tested 45 children and their families Sunday from the area and temporarily closed three schools where the boy spent time.

4:30 p.m. A group of Japanese passengers on board a quarantined cruise ship have asked the country's health ministry to improve conditions on the vessel.

The group said elderly people and others with disabilities and chronic diseases are not getting enough support because of all the attention given to anti-virus measures.

"Our living environment on board has rapidly deteriorated and we need the issues addressed quickly," the group said Monday in a statement released through Japanese media.

They asked officials to speed up the delivery of refills of their prescription medicine, dispatch more medical staff, and improve their living conditions, including more frequent room cleaning.

"We are increasingly getting worried, as information released to the passengers is insufficient," they said.

Japan's health ministry said Monday an additional 65 cases were found aboard the cruise ship, quarantined in Yokohama, south of Tokyo, raising the total to 135.

Health Minister Katsunobu Kato said the Japanese government is considering testing all 3,711 passengers and crew on the Diamond Princess.

Travel disrupted and schools shut as hurricane-force winds pound northern Europe (Yahoo News/PA Media)

Yahoo News/PA Media [2/10/2020 2:49 AM, Staff, 10942K, Neutral]

Hurricane-force winds and heavy rain have battered northern Europe as the continent felt the impact of Storm Ciara.

The weather brought travel disruption to a number of countries, with Lufthansa in Germany saying flight cancellations and delays would run until at least Tuesday morning. The airline planned to keep operating long-haul flights at its main Frankfurt hub.

Eurowings, a budget subsidiary of Lufthansa, cancelled most flights for the duration of the storm.

Brussels Airport also saw delays or cancellations.

Two huge ports on either side of the English Channel, Dover in England and Calais in France, shut down operations amid high waves.

The fierce winds knocked out electricity in northern France. Paris authorities sent out a warning to residents and tourists alike to stay indoors for their own safety. Parks and cemeteries in the city of Lille and nearby towns shut down amid the strong winds and open-air markets closed early.

Luxembourg and the German city of Cologne announced that all school children could stay home on Monday to avoid travelling under dangerous conditions.

In Germany, where the storm was known as Sabine, national railway operator Deutsche Bahn cancelled long-distance trains to destinations most at risk, including Emden and Norddeich in the north-western corner, the northern city of Kiel and the North Sea island of Sylt.

"We have learned from previous storms that it's better not to have trains travel into critical regions in the first place," said Deutsche Bahn spokesman Achim Stauss. "What we want to avoid is trains getting stuck between stations."

Teams of railway employees fanned out with chainsaws to remove any fallen trees blocking the tracks.

Utility companies in the country have been scrambling to restore power to some 50,000 homes in northern Bavaria.

In Denmark, flights were cancelled out of Copenhagen. Danish authorities warned motorists not to cross large bridges, including the Great Belt Bridge that links eastern and western parts of Denmark.

[Azerbaijan] Azeri Snap Elections Condemned by Monitors for Vote 'Violations' (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 8:59 AM, Zulfugar Agayev, Neutral]

Azerbaijan's first snap parliamentary elections, in which the ruling YAP party retained its majority, "lacked genuine competition and choice," international monitors said Monday in a joint statement.

"Widespread violations of counting procedures raised serious concerns about the results of the voting," said Frank Schwabe, delegation head from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

With almost all votes counted, the YAP, which gained 69 seats at 2015 elections, won 70 seats this time, according to the Central Electoral Commission's website. Only one opposition lawmaker, from the Republican Alternative, or Real, party, was elected. Smaller pro-government parties and candidates listed as "independents" who also support the authorities won the rest of the seats. Turnout was 47.8%.

President Ilham Aliyev dissolved the 125-seat parliament in December and called the early vote after the ruling party said the legislature was "incompatible" with reforms that he'd started in the oil-rich Caspian Sea nation. Aliyev, 59, replaced his prime minister and two deputy premiers, all aged over 70, in October, saying it was time to make way for a "younger generation."

He also dismissed 81-year-old Ramiz Mehdiyev as his chief of staff. Mehdiyev had held the post since Aliyev assumed power in 2003 and had also served under the president's late father, Heydar, who ruled for a decade from 1993.

The international observers returned to Azerbaijan for the vote after refusing to attend in 2015 because of government restrictions. The campaign was affected by "restrictive legislation" on freedom of speech and assembly, and most candidates "did not present alternative programs or views to those of the ruling party," according to their statement.

"I regret very much that what could have been improvements did not lead to a competitive

environment enabling truly democratic elections," said Artur Gerasymov, leader of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's observer mission.

The main opposition Popular Front of Azerbaijan Party boycotted the vote, citing lack of freedoms and environment for a free and fair campaign. The opposition Musavat and Real parties complained of irregularities including ballot stuffing and multiple voting in favor of pro-government candidates, adding that turnout was much lower than reported.

[Azerbaijan] Azerbaijan election marred by violations, say international observers (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 6:20 AM, Margarita Antidze, 5304K, Neutral]

A weekend parliamentary election in Azerbaijan was marred by numerous procedural violations, raising serious doubts about how free or fair it was, international observers said on Monday.

Partial results from Sunday's snap parliamentary election showed Azerbaijan's ruling party was leading in the vote, which President Ilham Aliyev called to consolidate power and speed economic reforms.

International observers questioned the election's integrity.

"While the authorities stated to the International Election Observation Mission that there is a political will to organize elections in a free and fair atmosphere, many IEOM interlocutors have expressed serious concerns regarding respect of fundamental rights and freedoms," they said in a statement.

"Significant procedural violations during counting and the tabulation raised concerns (about) whether the results were established honestly."

Monitors said that what they called restrictive legislation and the general political environment had prevented genuine competition.

"On election day, voting was assessed negatively in 7% of polling stations observed, a statistically high figure which is indicative of serious procedural shortcomings," they said in the same statement.

Some observers reported cases of ballot box stuffing.

[Germany] Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, Merkel's Anointed Successor, Won't Run for Chancellor (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 9:55 AM, Katrin Bennhold, Neutral]

Amid furor over her party's flirtation with the far right in eastern Germany, Chancellor Angela Merkel's handpicked successor, Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, said on Monday that she would no longer seek the country's top position, adding to the political uncertainty in Europe's most important democracy.

The announcement reinforced a profound sense of malaise and political limbo in Germany at a time when neighboring capitals are impatiently looking to Berlin for leadership in a post-

Brexit Europe.

It has also raised uncomfortable questions over the direction Ms. Merkel's Christian Democratic Union — still Germany's biggest party but shrinking fast — will take after she leaves power next year.

Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer's announcement came after five days of political turmoil, in which the party's local chapter in the eastern state of Thuringia voted for the same candidate as the far-right Alternative for Germany.

The vote defied Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer, who as party leader had given clear instructions not to collaborate with the Alternative for Germany at any level. It not only exposed the temptation in some ultraconservative circles of the party to join forces with the far right, but highlighted her lack of authority among her own grass roots.

"The AfD stands against everything that we in the C.D.U. stand for," Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer said in a news conference announcing her decision not to seek the top office, using acronyms for Alternative for Germany and her own Christian Democratic Union. "Any form of rapprochement with the AfD weakens the C.D.U."

Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer, who will remain defense minister, was chosen as leader of Ms. Merkel's conservative party in December 2018 and had been widely expected to succeed her as chancellor.

Her victory at the time, over two more conservative men, had been seen as an endorsement of Ms. Merkel's liberal legacy — and a mandate to preserve it.

But it was a narrow victory, and in the 14 months since, Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer has not only failed to win over the skeptics in her party but also lost the trust of erstwhile fans and seen her popularity in opinion polls erode.

She said Monday that she would remain party leader until a replacement — and candidate for chancellor — can be chosen at a party congress in December.

Several potential candidates are waiting in the wings, chief among them Friedrich Merz, who narrowly lost to Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer in 2018 but is popular with the Christian Democrats' conservative wing. Mr. Merz said this month that he would step down from his job in finance to "serve the country" more fully.

Another potential contender is Armin Laschet, the centrist leader of North-Rhine Westphalia, Germany's most populous state. A former junior minister of integration and a staunch defender of Ms. Merkel's refugee policy, Mr. Laschet is seen as the candidate of continuity and someone who would find it easy to cooperate with the Greens, a possible coalition partner. He did not throw his hat in the ring at the previous party conference, but has indicated that he would be "available."

Two outside candidates are Jens Spahn, the health secretary, who is conservative but also younger and gay; and Markus Söder, the charismatic leader of the Bavarian sister party of the Christian Democrats.

The crisis in Thuringia has given particular symbolic importance to the resignation of Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer, who has categorically rejected working with Alternative for Germany.

In June, she accused the party of creating the "intellectual climate" in which a far-right extremist shot and killed Walter Lübcke, a regional government official, in what was the first far-right political assassination in Germany since World War II.

Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer has said that anyone who toys with the idea of working with the AfD "should close their eyes and imagine Walter Lübcke."

But in the more conservative wing of the Christian Democrats, her resignation was welcomed. Hans-Georg Maassen, a former chief of the intelligence service, celebrated her move. "The right decision," he wrote on Twitter. "The C.D.U. now needs a chief who solves problems and isn't part of the problems."

Alternative for Germany was quick to hail Ms. Kramp-Karrenbauer's resignation as a victory. Alexander Gauland, a senior party leader, welcomed the announcement as a sign that there was no longer a consensus inside the Christian Democrats on isolating the AfD.

"It is completely nonsensical and delusional not to want to work with the AfD in the long term," Mr. Gauland said. "Her party grass roots have long understood this."

[Germany] Merkel Takes Reins in Finding Heir After Fallen Protege Quits (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 10:58 AM, Arne Delfs and Patrick Donahue, 6400K, Neutral]
Angela Merkel inserted herself into the selection of her Christian Democratic party's next chancellor candidate after her former protege unexpectedly threw in the towel, leaving the race to lead Europe's largest economy wide open.

The long-time German leader said she will "cooperate very well" with Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, who stepped down as party chief on Monday after a series of gaffes capped by her inability to reel in a rogue state chapter. With the party divided and rudderless, Merkel made clear that she intended to play a direct role in choosing her potential successor.

"I acknowledged this decision today with the greatest amount of respect, but I want to say that I regret it," Merkel told reporters in Berlin. "I can well imagine that this was not an easy decision for Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, and I thank her that she's prepared to accompany the process for choosing a candidate for the chancellorship as party chairwoman."

Kramp-Karrenbauer, widely known by her initials AKK, was hand-picked by Merkel to safeguard her legacy. The former state leader from Saarland held off a challenger from a more conservative faction within the CDU who wanted more support for business and less emphasis on the environment and social issues.

While those demands are likely to return, Merkel is in position to steer the process toward more centrist candidates as the leadership race heats up before she plans to step down

next year at the latest.

AKK was unable to stamp her authority on the party since taking charge of the CDU in December 2018 and was humiliated last week when a local chapter in eastern Germany defied her orders and threw its lot in with the far-right Alternative for Germany.

Hanging over the process is the dilemma of how the CDU should handle the return of far-right politics in the former communist east. Many voters there have turned to the AfD because they feel left behind during years of economic growth and resent Berlin's perceived largess toward refugees. The party's official stance is that there can be no cooperation with the AfD at any level, but local officials have been questioning whether that remains practical.

AKK's downfall was ultimately triggered when the CDU in Thuringia voted alongside the AfD to elect a state premier last week. Local leader Mike Mohring has been forced to back track, but other CDU officials in the east have signaled sympathy for his maneuver as he tries to maintain support for the party.

The CDU's flirtation with the AfD is "very worrisome," said Norbert Walter-Borjans, the co-leader of the Social Democrats, Merkel's junior coalition partner, which is also searching for a candidate to lead its next national election campaign.

AKK told party colleagues at a meeting in Berlin that one reason for her decision is the unclear relationship between parts of the CDU and the far-right AfD and the anti-capitalist Left party. At a press conference in Berlin, she underscored her stand that the CDU needs to be strictly opposed to any cooperation with the two fringe parties.

Leadership Contest

The outgoing CDU leader said that she believes her successor should also be the candidate for chancellor in 2021. She plans to organize the selection process by the summer and then step down once a decision has been made. The new direction should be sealed at a party convention in December.

"We must be stronger, stronger than today," Kramp-Karrenbauer said in a brief press conference in Berlin. "By refraining from running for chancellor, I can be much more free in shaping the process," she said, adding that her decision would not impact the stability of the coalition.

AKK's departure was welcomed by the party's right. Olav Gutting, a lawmaker who has been critical of Merkel's moderate course, said mistakes had "piled up" under AKK and her departure spares the CDU a "destructive test."

"Regardless of personal sympathy, one has to see that the base had growing doubts about AKK's capabilities for the chancellorship," Gutting told Bloomberg News. He declined to speculate on her successor, which he expected to be in place in the second half of the year.

Merkel asked AKK, who is her defense minister, to stay on in her position in the cabinet, an official said. She took the cabinet post in July when it was vacated by Ursula von der Leyen,

who had been appointed as European Commission president.

Ill-at-ease, isolated, and struggling for relevance, the CDU leader failed to unite the party behind her. She made a series of gaffes that irritated insiders and made her widely unpopular with voters. Officials at CDU headquarters in Berlin had become increasingly worried that their leader won't be a viable candidate.

Thuringia was her final debacle. Even as she sought to clear up the mess, she was unable to convince local officials to support new elections in the region as a way to clear the slate in a five-hour meeting that lasted until early Friday.

Her retreat opens the way for others to press forward to lead Germany's strongest party. Potential contenders are deputy chairman Armin Laschet, a well connected state leader from North Rhine-Westphalia; up-and-coming Health Minister Jens Spahn; former Merkel nemesis Friedrich Merz; and Markus Soeder, the leader of the Bavarian CSU sister party.

With Merkel pulling the strings, the process could favor Laschet, who is more centrist than the other top contenders.

[Germany] Germany: Merkel's party in crisis as heir apparent quits (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 9:57 AM, Frank Jordans, 1512K, Negative]

German Chancellor Angela Merkel's heir apparent unexpectedly threw in the towel Monday, plunging her conservative party into an even deeper crisis as it struggles to agree on its future political direction after losing votes to the far right.

Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer told leading members of the Christian Democratic Union, or CDU, that she won't be seeking the chancellorship in next year's general election, upending Merkel's plans to hand her the reins after more than 15 years in power.

The announcement follows days of in-fighting within the party over its handling last week of the election of a governor in the state of Thuringia. Regional party lawmakers there voted with the far-right Alternative for Germany party, or AfD, to oust the left-wing incumbent, defying appeals from Kramp-Karrenbauer and further undermining her leadership.

The vote in Thuringia broke what is widely regarded as a taboo in post-war German politics around cooperating with extremist parties.

"The AfD stands against everything we as the CDU represent," Kramp-Karrenbauer told reporters Monday in Berlin. "Any convergence with AfD weakens the CDU."

She likewise ruled out any cooperation with the Left party of former Thuringia governor Bodo Ramelow, who headed the former East German state from 2014 until last week. She will remain as Germany's defense minister.

Merkel has said she will not run for a fifth term in Germany's next general election, which is now scheduled for fall 2021. But any shift to the right in Merkel's party could trigger a breakup of her federal coalition with the center-left Social Democrats and increase the chances of an early national election.

"If it's up to me, it won't have any effect on the stability of the grand coalition," Kramp-Karrenbauer said after announcing her planned withdrawal.

But leading figures in Merkel's party expressed concerns about fallout from the announcement.

Peter Altmaier, Germany's economy minister and a close Merkel ally, said the Christian Democrats were in "an unusually serious situation."

Recent polls had Merkel's conservative block at about 28% support nationally, followed by the left-leaning Greens at about 22%. The Social Democrats are struggling with only about 14% support, about the same as the far-right Alternative for Germany.

Among the names currently being bandied around as future CDU party leaders are Health Minister Jens Spahn and Friedrich Merz, who were beaten to the leadership by Kramp-Karrenbauer in 2018. Armin Laschet, the governor of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany's most populous state, is also being mentioned as a possible contender.

While Spahn and Laschet are considered centrists, Merz has tried to appeal to the conservative wing of the party that has flirted with the far-right Alternative for Germany. A lawyer once tipped to lead the party in the early 2000s, Merz was sidelined by Merkel before she became chancellor in 2005.

Bavarian governor Markus Soeder, the leader of the Christian Social Union, the Bavarian-only sister party to Merkel's CDU, is also the focus of some speculation.

Merkel's spokesman Steffen Seibert told reporters in Berlin that she stood by her decision not to run for a fifth term in 2021, despite the latest development.

The Alternative for Germany welcomed Kramp-Karrenbauer's resignation, as did Germany's former domestic intelligence head, Hans-Georg Maassen, a vocal figure on the right of Merkel's party since his ouster as Germany's spy chief in 2018.

Alternative for Germany has established itself as a powerful far-right force since its founding in 2013, taking double-digit shares of the vote in regional and national elections. Its success has complicated Germany's political tradition of governing with multi-party coalitions, as most of its rivals have ruled out working with Alternative for Germany.

The far-right party has successfully wielded populist tactics, emphasizing national self-interest and immigration controls while tolerating anti-Semitism and historical revisionism among its members.

Alternative for Germany's leader in the state of Thuringia, Bjoern Hoecke, has in the past marched alongside far-right extremists and called for a "180-turn" in the way the country commemorates its Nazi past.

Kramp-Karrenbauer insisted that any Christian Democrats who believe their party can find

common ground with AfD should ask themselves "whether they can remain members of the CDU."

[Germany] Merkel protegee gives up chancellery ambitions after far-right scandal (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 3:44 PM, Andreas Rinke, Neutral]

The woman who had been expected to become Germany's next chancellor said on Monday she would not run for the top job, succumbing to a scandal involving the far-right and blowing wide open the race to succeed Angela Merkel.

Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer is a protegee of the chancellor and leader of their conservative Christian Democrats (CDU), but has faced growing doubts over her suitability to replace Merkel, who has led Germany for 15 years but plans to stand down at the federal election due in autumn 2021.

Last week, Kramp-Karrenbauer's inability to impose discipline on the CDU in the eastern state of Thuringia dealt a further blow to her credibility, eroded by a series of gaffes.

The regional CDU branch defied her by backing a local leader helped into office by the anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD), shattering a postwar consensus among established parties on shunning the far-right.

"I will not run for chancellor," Kramp-Karrenbauer, 57, told a news conference in Berlin, adding she had made her decision "with the intention of strengthening the CDU."

"In my view, this has no impact on the stability of the grand coalition," she said, referring to the national coalition between Merkel's conservatives and the Social Democrats (SPD).

Finance Minister Olaf Scholz, the SPD's most senior minister, told ARD television: "The coalition will do its work." He added that it was not the first time in this parliament parties had switched leaders.

Kramp-Karrenbauer's decision leaves a question mark over Germany's future direction as its economy, the world's fourth largest, flirts with recession and as the European Union struggles to define itself after Britain's exit.

Merkel has loomed large on the global stage since 2005, helping to steer the EU through the euro zone crisis and opening Germany's doors to migrants fleeing wars in the Middle East in 2015 – a move that still divides the bloc and her country.

Bild, Germany's best-selling newspaper laid the blame for Kramp-Karrenbauer's failure at Merkel's door, saying the party would struggle to reinvent itself while she was chancellor.

"Angela Merkel wanted a fake successor who couldn't outshine her," it wrote.

Merkel did not seek re-election to the party chair in 2018, allowing Kramp-Karrenbauer to take the party helm with a view to boosting her profile prior to running for the chancellery. But doubts about her leadership credentials persisted.

"The separation of chancellorship and party chair, the open question around who will become the candidate for chancellor weakens the CDU at a time ... (when) Germany needs a strong CDU," Kramp-Karrenbauer told Monday's news conference.

Kramp-Karrenbauer's ratings plummeted last year after a number of public gaffes, including poking fun at transgender people in a light-hearted carnival speech.

She said she would remain party chair until another chancellor candidate has been found and will stay on as defense minister.

But erstwhile rivals for the party leadership – Friedrich Merz and Jens Spahn – have been circling, while Armin Laschet, premier of Germany's largest state and a Merkel ally, did not rule out running.

Merz has quit asset manager Blackrock to focus more on politics and Spahn, now health minister, has cut a dynamic figure during the coronavirus crisis, jetting to Paris and London to coordinate the European and G7 response.

"Now's the right time to provide impetus via economic and financial policy measures," Merz said on Monday in a tweet.

Being out of political office has let Merz speak his mind, keeping him in the news. A Forsa poll found 27% of the public thought him the best candidate, followed by Laschet on 18%.

Spahn and Markus Soeder, leader of the CDU's Bavarian sister party, the CSU, both said they respected Kramp-Karrenbauer's decision and said the cohesion of their conservative alliance was essential.

Laschet, who as premier of North Rhine-Westfalia, a state of 17 million people, has executive experience that other candidates lack, was more forthcoming than in the past.

Asked as he left a news conference if he was trying to avoid being asked about the chancellorship, he replied tersely: "I'm not afraid of anything."

Alexander Gauland, honorary chairman of the far-right AfD, said the CDU's efforts under Kramp-Karrenbauer to ostracize his party had failed.

[Greece] Greece to speed up creation of migrant holding centers to ease tension (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 10:00 AM, Lefteris Papadimas, 5304K, Neutral]

Greece plans to accelerate the creation of detention centers on its outlying islands in the Aegean Sea after a backlash against overcrowded camps by some migrants and nearby residents.

Authorities said on Monday they would proceed with the purchase of land on the islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, and press ahead with plans to create holding facilities on state-owned land on Kos and Leros.

Thousands of migrants are waiting on the islands for their asylum applications to be processed, most of them in overcrowded camps known as reception centers.

Migrants on Lesbos protested last week against poor living conditions and residents of the island took to the streets demanding the reception facilities close.

"The government has decided to close today's anarchic facilities and create controlled, closed facilities," government spokesman Stelios Petsas said in a statement.

Hundreds of thousands of people crossed into Europe from Turkey via Greece in 2015 and 2016 before a deal brokered by the European Union limited the flow.

There has been a resurgence in arrivals since around September 2019.

Last year, more than 74,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Greece, according to the United Nations refugees agency UNHCR. Most of them arrived on Lesbos, Chios and Samos after crossing from Turkey and about 40,000 are now in effect trapped on the islands.

AID GROUPS SAY ACTION NEEDED. Aid groups have described living conditions in some of the island camps as appalling.

"We need 20,000 people to be transferred from the islands to the mainland in the next weeks and months to come," Philippe Leclerc, UNCHR's head in Greece, told journalists after a meeting with Greek Migration Minister Notis Mitarachi.

Greece's conservative New Democracy government, elected last July, has taken a tougher stance toward migration than Syriza, the leftist party that led the previous government.

The government has introduced new regulations which it says will simplify the asylum process and launched a tender for a floating fence in the Aegean which it hopes will deter migrants arriving from Turkey on rafts.

The new detention centers would house new arrivals until their asylum processes were underway, as well as others showing "delinquent behavior" or not entitled to asylum, Petsas said.

Entering and leaving the facilities would be strictly regulated and they would be closed at night, he added.

[Ireland] Irish election produces an earthquake as Sinn Fein tops poll (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 11:38 AM, Jill Lawless and Nicolae Dumitrache, 1512K, Neutral]

Ireland braced for weeks of political uncertainty Monday after an earth-shaking election that saw the Irish Republican Army-linked party Sinn Fein — long shunned by its bigger rivals — take the largest share of votes.

In a surge that upended Ireland's traditional two-party system, the left-wing nationalist party

beat both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, the centrist parties that have governed Ireland since it won independence from Britain a century ago.

The vote in Saturday's election essentially split three ways, complicating the negotiations on forming a government that lie ahead.

Sinn Fein, received 24.5% of the first-preference votes, besting the two long-dominant parties. Fianna Fail received 22.2% of the votes. Fine Gael, the party of incumbent Prime Minister Leo Varadkar, got 20.9%.

"I think it's a mess, to be honest with you," said Pat O'Toole, a public sector worker in Dublin. "I think we're going to be in a situation again where we are not going to be able to form a stable government in this country. I really don't know what's going to happen."

Sinn Fein's left-wing proposals for tackling Ireland's housing crisis and creaking healthcare system proved a powerful draw for young voters in a country that is still dealing with aftershocks of the 2008 global financial crisis, which hammered its debt-driven "Celtic Tiger" economy.

Vote counting resumed Monday to fill all the seats in the 160-seat Dail, the lower house of Ireland's parliament. Ireland uses a proportional-representation system in which voters rank candidates from first to last, with the lower preferences of elected or defeated candidates redistributed among their rivals.

With more than two-thirds of the seats in parliament filled, Sinn Fein had taken 37, Fianna Fail 25 and Fine Gael 23. No party is likely to reach the 80 seats needed for a majority, making some form of coalition inevitable. But forming a stable alliance looks tough.

Both Fianna Fail and Fine Gael said before the election that they would not go into a coalition with Sinn Fein because of its links to past violence.

Varadkar said Fine Gael's stance was unchanged.

"I say what I mean and I mean what I say," he said Monday.

But as the scale of Sinn Fein's surge became clear, Fianna Fail leader Micheal Martin said: "I'm a democrat."

"I listen to the people. I respect the decision of the people," he told Irish broadcaster RTE.

Talks among the parties are likely to take weeks, though some hope a new government can be formed by St. Patrick's Day on March 17, when the Irish prime minister traditionally visits the White House.

Sinn Fein leader Mary Lou McDonald suggested her party could try to form a government with the support of independents and smaller parties such as the Social Democrats and Labour.

"We want to talk to anyone who is interested in delivering a program for government, that is

about getting to grips with the housing crisis and solving it, getting to grips with the crisis in health and giving families and workers a break and giving a new lease of life to government," she said.

The IRA was responsible for murders, bombings and other violence for decades during decades of violence known as the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland. More than 3,500 people were killed in conflict between forces that sought to reunify Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland and those who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the U.K.

Supporters of Sinn Fein point out that it has been more than 20 years since Northern Ireland's 1998 peace agreement and 15 years since the IRA announced the end of its violent campaign. Sinn Fein already sits in government in Northern Ireland as part of a power-sharing arrangement created by the peace process.

Eoin O'Malley, associate professor of political science at Dublin City University, said the party's past meant little to younger voters without memories of living through the Troubles.

He said Sinn Fein had offered the clearest message on social problems in Ireland, which include a growing homelessness crisis, house prices that have risen faster than incomes and a public health system that hasn't kept up with demand.

"It's a direct analogue to the left-wing populism that you see in Greece and in Spain," O'Malley said. "In many ways, Sinn Fein are offering relatively simple solutions to pretty complex problems. Mary Lou McDonald said she was going to form 'a people's government' as if all the other governments that have been formed in Ireland had no connection with the ordinary people. It is classic populism."

Fine Gael's third-place showing likely spells the end of the premiership of Varadkar, who has been Taoiseach, or prime minister, since 2017.

Ireland's youngest and first openly gay prime minister, Varadkar led Ireland during Britain's lengthy divorce negotiations with the European Union. The outcome of those talks was crucial to Ireland, the only EU country to share a land border with the U.K.

Many Irish voters think Varadkar and his party handled Brexit well, securing guarantees that people and goods will continue to flow freely between Ireland and the north. But Brexit featured little in an election campaign dominated by domestic problems.

Still, Sinn Fein's triumph could have implications for Ireland and the U.K. The party's struggle for a united Ireland was on the back burner during the election, but the party is calling for a referendum on reunification within five years.

That is not something an Irish government can deliver without the support of Britain and Northern Ireland — highly unlikely in the short term. But Brexit looks likely to nudge Northern Ireland's economy closer to that of its southern neighbor, and could increase pressure for a vote on unification.

In London, Prime Minister Boris Johnson's spokesman, James Slack, said the U.K. was "following the results of the Irish election carefully."

He insisted that "the close relationship between the U.K. and Ireland will continue regardless of the election result."

[Italy] Italy's Hopes for Closer China Ties Hit by Virus Flight Ban Rift (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 8:29 AM, John Follain and Dandan Li, 6400K, Neutral]

An Italian ban on flights to and from China has ruffled diplomatic ties with Beijing, less than a year after Rome had positioned itself for a privileged and lucrative relationship by signing up to the Chinese Belt and Road infrastructure project.

Italy on Jan. 31 suspended flights to and from China, Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan in a bid to prevent the spread of the deadly coronavirus. The ban, due to last until April 28, was the first by a European Union member. The Czech government later followed suit.

China's government is pushing back globally against virus-based travel restrictions, including efforts to convince Italy to rescind its ban.

Vice Foreign Minister Qin Gang met with Italy's ambassador on Feb. 6 to protest the halt to flights, and the Foreign Ministry later said in a statement that China is "strongly dissatisfied with the overreaction and restrictions of the Italian side."

At a Monday meeting of Premier Giuseppe Conte's ministers, the Italian government pledged to stick to its policy of "maximum precaution with the priority of safeguarding the health of all citizens," Conte's office said in a statement.

"Diplomatic relations are relevant and economic issues are fundamental, but the right to health is even more important," Health Minister Roberto Speranza told newspaper Corriere della Sera on Sunday.

The suspension may be lifted if the situation improves, according to an Italian official who asked not to be named discussing a confidential issue.

The diplomatic tiff marks a change from the optimism in Rome after Chinese President Xi Jinping recruited Conte's first government to the Belt and Road plan in March. The resulting Italian-Chinese memorandum of understanding sparked concerns in the U.S. and the European Union over Beijing's push for economic influence in the region.

The Belt and Road memorandum covered works for Italian firms including energy giant Eni SpA and lender Intesa Sanpaolo SpA, and there's also an agreement between the ports of Trieste and Genoa and China Communications Construction Co. Few actual projects have resulted from the memorandum, the Italian official said, adding that part of the reason was slowing growth in China.

Italy's President Sergio Mattarella has sought to mend fences with Beijing. In an open letter to Xi on Feb. 2, Mattarella said China can count on Italy's help to tackle the virus. Mattarella on Thursday will host China's ambassador for a concert at the presidential palace.

[Malta] Pope Trip to Malta in May to Spotlight Migrants' Plight (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 5:29 AM, Philip Pullella, Neutral]

Pope Francis will make the first trip by a pontiff in 10 years to the tiny Mediterranean island nation of Malta in May, where he is expected to defend the rights of migrants trying to reach Europe.

The Vatican said on Monday the pope will visit the country, which lies between Sicily and North Africa, on May 31. Malta has been at the center of several disputes with Italy and other European nations over which one should take migrants rescued in the Mediterranean by ships from non-governmental organizations.

Like Italy, it has sometimes closed its ports to humanitarian ships that have rescued migrants, saying they should be shared among EU nations.

The pope, who has made defense of migrants a major part of his papacy and has often called the Mediterranean a cemetery, has criticized the closing of ports.

Politically, the island is still reeling from the killing of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in a car bombing in 2017.

Francis may pay tribute to her, according to a Vatican source.

Malta is important in the history of Christianity because a ship carrying St. Paul to Rome was shipwrecked there in about the year 60 AD while he was being taken to Rome. Francis's trip to Malta is also seen as a tribute to its archbishop Charles Scicluna, who is the Vatican's most experienced sexual abuse investigator.

Scicluna's investigations have led to the defrocking of some of the Church's most notorious paedophiles in Mexico, Chile and other countries.

Scicluna has also been in the front line in the defense of migrants, sometimes criticizing government policies.

In 2017 he visited the Phoenix, one of the NGO-run rescue ships plying the waters of the southern Mediterranean to save migrants from drowning.

Former pope Benedict XVI visited Malta in 2010 and Pope John Paul II went there in 1990 and 2001. The trip will be Francis's first outside Italy this year.

He is expected to visit Indonesia, East Timor and Papua New Guinea in September, according to diplomatic sources.

[Russia] Russia quarantines Chinese diplomat as coronavirus precaution – Interfax (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 8:50 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Russian authorities have quarantined a Chinese diplomat as a safety precaution against the coronavirus outbreak, the Interfax news agency reported on Monday.

Consul General Cui Shaochun arrived in the Urals city of Yekaterinburg on Thursday to take

up his new post but was told to stay at home for two weeks, Russian foreign ministry official Alexander Kharlov was quoted as saying.

The Chinese consulate in Yekaterinburg did not answer calls on Monday.

Russia has reported two cases of the coronavirus and has isolated hundreds of Russian and Chinese nationals who recently arrived from China to screen them for the virus.

Nearly 150 people who were evacuated from the epicentre of the outbreak, the Chinese city of Wuhan, have been placed in a fenced-off recreation facility in Siberia near the location where one of the infected people is receiving treatment.

More than 100 Chinese citizens are quarantined in a sanatorium in Yekaterinburg or in a dormitory in a nearby town.

The overall death toll from the epidemic has passed 900, with all but two of the deaths in mainland China.

[Russia] Russia extends house arrest of U.S. investor Calvey until May 13 (Reuters)
Reuters [2/10/2020 9:54 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A Moscow court decided on Monday to extend until May 13 the house arrest of U.S. investor Michael Calvey, an executive at private equity group Baring Vostok who faces charges of embezzlement, an official at the firm said.

Calvey and other executives at the group were detained in February 2019. They have denied wrongdoing and said the charges against them are being used to pressure them in a business dispute over control of Vostochny Bank.

The case against Baring Vostok has rattled Russia's business community and prompted several prominent officials and businessmen to voice concerns about the treatment of the executives.

The court also ruled on Monday to lift a freeze on 2.5 billion roubles (\$39 million) worth of shares in Vostochny Bank that were frozen as part of the case, the Baring Vostok representative said.

The shares are held by Evison Holdings, a subsidiary of Baring Vostok, the representative said.

Calvey's French colleague Phillipe Delpal also saw his house arrest extended until May 13 on Monday.

[Russia] Russia: Youth group members found guilty of plotting attacks (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 11:15 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A Russian military court convicted seven members of a left-wing youth group of terrorism charges Monday and sentenced them to prison terms ranging from six to 18 years, in a case that human rights groups called fabricated.

A three-judge panel of the court in Penza in western Russia found the members of the group Set (Network) guilty of membership in a terrorist organization and the illegal trafficking of weapons. Defense lawyers said they would appeal the verdict.

Some of the defendants initially pleaded guilty to some charges but later said they had given false confessions under torture by electric shock.

Russian investigators had initially accused the group members of preparing to carry out attacks during Russia's March 2018 presidential election and when Russia hosted the World Cup soccer championship later that year, but they failed to document those early claims during the trial.

The prosecution charged that they illegally bought weapons and explosives and conducted training drills as part of a plot to overthrow the government.

Human rights activists and Russian opposition members have accused the Federal Security Service (FSB), the main KGB successor agency, of fabricating the case.

Alexei Navalny, Russia's leading opposition figure, denounced the court's verdict as "horrible" and said "the testimony about a fictitious terrorist organization has been extracted under torture."

Asked Monday about the case, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russian President Vladimir Putin had ordered a review to determine if the investigation that led to the criminal charges was done in compliance with the law. Peskov wouldn't comment on the court's verdict.

[Spain] Spanish government to ban glorification of Franco dictatorship (Reuters)
Reuters [2/10/2020 9:18 AM, Staff, Neutral]

The Spanish government plans to make it illegal to glorify the regime of former dictator General Francisco Franco as part of a reform of the country's criminal code, the Socialist Party said on Monday.

Franco, who ruled Spain from 1939 until his death in 1975, ordered the execution or imprisonment of tens of thousands of his enemies, while as many as 500,000 people died in the preceding civil war. His nationalist legacy still divides Spain and looms large over its political system.

"In a democracy you don't pay tribute to dictators or tyrants," parliamentary spokeswoman Adriana Lastra said.

She did not spell out what would constitute "glorification."

The government also aims to exhume the bodies of Franco's victims buried in mass graves and remove any Francoist symbols still on display in public places, Lastra said. In recent years, many street names commemorating Franco and his allies have been changed and public statues removed.

Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, whose left-wing coalition government came to power in January, made addressing the legacy of the dictatorship a pillar of his electoral campaign.

In October, his caretaker government removed the former dictator's remains from an imposing state mausoleum where he was buried in 1975 and transferred them to a small private cemetery, provoking mixed reactions from across the political spectrum.

The far-right Vox party, which strongly opposed Franco's exhumation, dismissed the proposed legal reform as a pretext for shutting down free speech.

"With the excuse of 'glorifying Francoism' they will shut down the media, foundations, associations and they will make political parties illegal as they see fit," a twitter account associated to the party said following Lastra's comments.

[Ukraine] Ukraine Is Pressing Iran for Black Boxes on Downed Plane (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [2/10/2020 12:37 PM, John Follain, Neutral]

Ukraine is pressing Iran to send the so-called black box recorders from the Boeing Co. plane that crashed after taking off from Tehran last month, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko said.

"The black box and cooperation with Tehran was the very difficult issue from the beginning and we will try to keep the message" focused on recovering the data, Prystaiko told the Foreign Press Association in Rome on Monday.

Iran is under international pressure to provide more information on the circumstances that led to the shooting down of Ukrainian International Flight 752. The flight-data and cockpit voice recorders may provide clues to what happened when the 3-year-old Boeing 737-800 abruptly plunged to the ground two minutes after takeoff from Tehran, killing all 176 aboard. It occurred days after the killing by the U.S. of Iran's top general, Qassem Soleimani.

Iran has "no plans for now" to send the black box from the plane to Ukraine or any other country, the state-run Islamic Republic News Agency reported Jan. 19.

Prystaiko said that now "we have to plan in the longer run how to get the black boxes and how to get the investigation going; we are coordinating with five nations."

The issue is not "because some soldier was trigger-happy and over reacted, we want to know the chain of command, who gave the order, to be brought to justice," Prystaiko said.

[Ukraine] Ukraine minister sees no preparations for new Russia talks, has low expectations (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 2:04 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Ukraine's foreign minister said on Monday he saw no preparations taking place for a promised summit over the armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, adding that he had little hope it would make any progress even if it goes ahead.

The leaders of Russia, Ukraine, France and Germany met in Paris in December to discuss

the long-running Ukraine crisis and agreed to get together again within four months to keep the dialogue open.

"I am confident that when leaders say they will meet in April then they will ... what I don't see though is the preparation," Foreign Minister Vadym Prystaiko told reporters during a visit to Italy.

"Before the December meeting ... (preparations) started half a year beforehand. Now we have two months to go and I have not seen anything prepared. Maybe it will be a much faster process than last time and maybe we will make much more progress. I am sorry, but I doubt it."

The conflict in eastern Ukraine that broke out in 2014 has killed more than 13,000 people, left a large swathe of Ukraine de facto controlled by Moscow-backed separatists and aggravated the deepest east-west rift since the Cold War.

The December summit did not produce the sort of breakthrough some had hoped for, such as an agreement on expanding a ceasefire zone, but it did lead to a prisoner exchange deal.

Prystaiko welcomed the subsequent large-scale prisoner swap that took place at the end of last year, but noted that more people had died in continued fighting in January 2020 than in the same month a year earlier.

"We haven't managed to achieve a ceasefire ... But even if we have just an exchange of prisoners, that is a good step for Ukrainians," he said.

[United Kingdom] U.K. Declares Coronavirus 'Imminent Threat' as Europe Scrambles (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 8:40 AM, Megan Specia and Constant Méheut, 23673K, Neutral]

Britain's health department declared the new coronavirus an "imminent threat" to public health and announced a series of measures to combat the spread of the virus, a sign of the seriousness with which local health authorities are treating the fears of the epidemic.

Four more people linked to a cluster of transmissions at a ski resort in France tested positive for the coronavirus, bringing the total number of cases in Britain to eight, the health department announced Monday.

The newly introduced measures — which apply only in England — are among the first in Europe to allow health authorities to keep individuals in quarantine if public health professionals believe they may be at risk of spreading the virus.

The new coronavirus has sickened more than 40,500 people, mostly in China, and at least 910 people have died since the virus first emerged in Wuhan, a city of 11 million people in the central part of the country late last year. Since that time, the virus has also spread to at least 24 countries, triggering fears of a global pandemic.

The Department of Health and Social Care emphasized that the risk of contracting the coronavirus in Britain remained "moderate," even as the government empowered the health authorities to forcibly quarantine people. It also designated a hospital, near Liverpool, and a conference center, northwest of London, as isolation facilities for those placed under quarantine.

"I will do everything in my power to keep people in this country safe," Matt Hancock, Britain's health secretary, said in a statement. "We are taking every possible step to control the outbreak of coronavirus."

He added that it meant health care providers would be "supported with additional legal powers to keep people safe across the country," noting transmission of the coronavirus would "constitute a serious threat."

The new measures were announced a day after a repatriation flight from Hubei Province — Wuhan is the largest city in the area — carrying about 200 citizens from Britain and elsewhere landed at an air force base in central England. Those on the flight were taken to the Kents Hill Park conference center, about 50 miles northwest of London, for 14 days of quarantine.

By Monday morning, eight people in England had tested positive for the new coronavirus, according to a statement from Professor Chris Whitty, the Department of Health's Chief Medical Officer for England, doubling the known cases in the country.

"The new cases are all known contacts of a previously confirmed U.K. case, and the virus was passed on in France," Professor Whitty said in a statement. "Experts at Public Health England continue to work hard tracing patient contacts from the U.K. cases. They successfully identified these individuals and ensured the appropriate support was provided."

The new cases in Britain are linked to cases in France and Spain, according to the French health authorities. They all trace back to a group of British citizens staying in a chalet in the village of Les Contamines-Montjoie, near Switzerland, late last month.

A British man is believed to have contracted the coronavirus while attending a conference in Singapore, before flying back on Jan. 24 to Geneva, and from there going to the village, where he shared lodgings with a group of fellow Britons.

At least five other Britons who stayed in the chalet and are still in France have tested positive for the coronavirus, said Agnès Buzyn, France's health minister. They are among at least 11 people in France who have tested positive for the disease.

A 9-year-old boy was among the British people who contracted the virus in the ski village. According to a spokeswoman for the region, the child is a permanent resident of the village, where he lives with his father, who also contracted the virus, and two siblings. His mother is currently in Britain.

He attended a local school in Les Contamines-Montjoie and took French lessons in two nearby schools in Saint-Gervais and Thonon-Les-Bains. As a precaution, the three schools have all been closed for the week and fellow students are being tested.

Six other British people staying in the chalet have all tested negative for the virus, according to the head of France's national health agency, Jérôme Salomon.

The French health authorities said they were still in the process of determining exactly how many people were staying in the chalet and who may have come into contact with those carrying the coronavirus.

Ms. Buzyn, the health minister, visited the ski resort on Sunday.

"It is important to reassure the people of this village," she said. "We have to tell them that there is no risk when you meet people on the street, it's not the same as being in contact with an infected person."

"It's about close, sustained, face-to-face or physical contact," she added.

A crisis unit has been opened in Les Contamines-Montjoie, where testing is underway to determine if there are further cases of the coronavirus.

On Sunday night, Mr. Salomon, the head of the national health agency, announced that results from 21 samples had all tested negative and that 25 others were still being analyzed.

"It's already very good news," he said.

Etienne Jacquet, the mayor of Les Contamines-Montjoie, said in a phone interview that students who might have been in contact with the infected child underwent tests as a priority on Sunday. He said the precautionary measures made the village, in his opinion, the "most secure city in France" when it came to the coronavirus.

"In Les Contamines-Montjoie life goes on normally," Mr. Jacquet said. "For the moment there is absolutely no crisis."

[United Kingdom] UK calls virus 'serious' health threat; will detain people (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 3:42 AM, Danica Kirka, 10942K, Neutral]

Britain has declared the new coronavirus that emerged from China a "serious and imminent threat to public health" and announced new measures Monday to combat the spread of the disease.

The U.K. Department of Health and Social Care said people with the virus can now be forcibly quarantined and will not be free to leave. It named two British hospitals as isolation facilities for those affected by the disease and designated the Chinese city of Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province where the virus first emerged as a "infected area."

"The incidence or transmission of novel coronavirus constitutes a serious and imminent threat to public health, and the measures outlined in these regulations are considered as an effective means of delaying or preventing further transmission of the virus," the agency said in a statement.

It added that the changes were designed to ensure the health and safety of medical workers who came into contact with infected patients.

The change comes after a British man who caught the virus at a business conference in Singapore in January appears to be linked to at least seven other confirmed cases in Europe.

Five British citizens, including a 9-year-old boy, contracted the virus in the French Alpine ski town of Contamines-Montjoie after staying in the same chalet as the British man. French medical authorities tested scores of children and their families Sunday from the area for the new virus and temporarily closed three schools where the boy had spent time.

China on Monday said 908 people had died of the virus on the mainland and over 40,170 had been infected. More than 360 cases have been confirmed outside mainland China, including two deaths in Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Britain has only four of Europe's 39 confirmed virus cases but it is a key travel hub between Asia and Europe. British authorities sought to reassure the public on Monday.

"Our infection control procedures are world-leading and the NHS (National Health Service) is well prepared to deal with novel coronavirus," the agency said. "This measure will rightly make it easier for health professionals to help keep people safe across the country."

[United Kingdom] Britain declares coronavirus a serious and imminent threat to public health (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 2:29 AM, Guy Faulconbridge, 5304K, Negative]

Britain on Monday declared the new coronavirus a serious and imminent threat to public health, giving the government additional powers to isolate those suspected of being infected.

Britain has recorded four cases of coronavirus so far while British nationals who have been flown back from Wuhan, the Chinese city where the epidemic broke out, are being quarantined for 14 days.

The virus has killed more than 900 people, all but two in mainland China, and has spread to at least 27 countries and territories.

Britain's health ministry said new measures were aimed at delaying or preventing further transmission of the coronavirus.

"We are strengthening our regulations so we can keep individuals in supported isolation for their own safety and if public health professionals consider they may be at risk of spreading the virus to other members of the public," a health ministry spokesman said.

Arrowe Park Hospital, near Liverpool in northern England, and Kents Hill Park, in Milton Keynes, have been designated as isolation facilities.

[United Kingdom] Brexit Bulletin: EU Talks Tough (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 11:37 AM, Ian Wishart, Neutral]

The U.K. should be subject to strict conditions on unfair competition, fishing and human rights after the 11-month post-Brexit transition period expires, according to a draft European Union negotiating mandate drawn up by member states and seen by Bloomberg News.

Controversially, the governments also want to force the U.K. to continue to abide by EU rules in areas such as state aid—even if the bloc changes them in the future. The plans are tougher than those set out last week by the European Commission and risk inflaming tensions with Downing Street ahead of contentious talks about the bloc's post-Brexit relationship with the U.K.

"We are not prepared to conclude a deal at any price," Michel Barnier, the EU's chief negotiator, told reporters in Luxembourg on Monday. "We will defend the interests of the EU." The bloc's negotiating mandate could be revised again before the EU-27 are scheduled to sign it off in Brussels on Feb. 25.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has already rejected several of the other side's demands, saying he wants to break free from the EU's rule book after Brexit. His government plans to negotiate multiple free trade agreements at the same time as discussing future ties with Europe.

The scale of that task was driven home by White House economic adviser Larry Kudlow, who said in an interview that the U.K. and U.S. are in the "preliminary stages of preliminary talks" for a trade deal. "We are all interested in doing something. But there's no structure to it yet," he added.

The logistics industry should prepare for strict border controls between Britain and the EU after Brexit, cabinet minister Michael Gove said. Industry representatives heard him say that U.K.-EU trade won't get preferential treatment after the 11-month post-Brexit transition period expires on Dec. 31, Bloomberg's Joe Mayes reports.

Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon vowed to maintain pressure on the U.K. for another referendum on independence. "The prime minister ultimately cannot deny democracy," she told Bloomberg Television. "You cannot stand in the way of the right of the people of any country to choose their own future."

Sinn Fein's historic performance in the Irish election thrust the left-wing nationalists into the coalition picture and was dubbed a "revolution" by party leader Mary Lou McDonald. The Sinn Fein surge left prime ministerial frontrunner Micheal Martin with a dilemma over whether to bring the party into government.

Ireland's shift to populism is very different to the forces that have shaken neighboring Britain recently, writes Bloomberg Opinion's Lionel Laurent.

U.K. economic growth is likely to move back towards its quarterly trend rate of 0.4% as the effects of lower uncertainty, a more stable global backdrop and fiscal stimulus bolster demand, though risks remain that could see the eventual figure come in lower, according to Dan Hanson, senior U.K. economist at Bloomberg Economics.

A generation of Britons priced out of the U.K. housing market face the prospect of renting homes into their old age, according to new analysis published Monday.

[United Kingdom] U.K.'s Gove Warns Industry to Brace for Strict Border Controls (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 9:00 AM, Joe Mayes, Neutral]

U.K. Cabinet Minister Michael Gove warned the logistics industry to prepare for strict border controls between Britain and the European Union after Brexit, raising concern that trade will be disrupted.

Speaking to representatives of lobby groups including the Freight Transport Association and British International Freight Association in London on Monday, Gove said that U.K.-EU trade won't get preferential treatment after the 11-month post-Brexit transition period expires on Dec. 31, according to three people present at the meeting.

The government's tough stance could mean extra costs and delays for companies importing goods into the U.K. from Europe. Carmakers and aerospace companies, which rely on just-in-time delivery of parts, could be particularly vulnerable to any hold-ups, while health inspections of animal and plant products coming into the U.K. could also roil the food industry.

"It is now becoming clear that the very real threat of disruption to food trade is present," said Shane Brennan, chief executive of the Cold Chain Federation, which represents businesses operating frozen and chilled storage distribution vehicles. "A dawning realization has to spread quickly through industry and government agencies about how much has to be done to be ready."

The government's refusal to offer preferential treatment to EU trade marks a departure from its previous position. In the event of a no-deal Brexit, the U.K. had planned to offer a grace period to traders which would have allowed EU imports to continue as usual.

Gove told the lobbyists such a program won't be available this time, according to the people, who asked not to be identified because the meeting was private. The cabinet office didn't immediately comment.

The U.K. wants to negotiate a trade agreement with the EU by the end of the year. Even if that deal removes tariffs on goods, businesses will still have to cope with non-tariff barriers that automatically flow from Britain leaving the bloc's single market and customs union.

Gove also told the meeting there would be light-touch administration of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in both directions, a politically sensitive issue. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has previously said there will be no checks on such trade.

[United Kingdom] UK man convicted of plot to attack London tourist sites (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 1:16 PM, Staff, Neutral]

A former Uber driver was convicted Monday of plotting a vehicle and weapons attack on London tourist sites, just over a year after he was cleared of attacking police with a sword outside Buckingham Palace.

Jurors at London's Woolwich Crown Court found Mohiussunnath Chowdhury guilty of preparing terrorist acts and other terrorism charges.

Prosecutors said 28-year-old Chowdhury planned a van, gun or knife attack on targets including Madame Tussauds wax museum, London's gay pride parade and an open-top sightseeing bus.

Prosecutor Duncan Atkinson said during the trial that Chowdhury desired to "unleash death and suffering" on non-Muslims after absorbing sermons from extremist preachers including al-Qaida's Anwar Al-Awlaki.

He confided his plans to undercover police officers posing as fellow extremists. He was arrested in July.

Chowdhury, who lived in Luton, north of London, had been on police radar for some time. In 2017, he was charged with preparing an act of terrorism after slashing police officers outside Buckingham Palace with a sword. He was acquitted in December 2018 after claiming at a trial that he was trying to provoke the officers to shoot him dead.

Prosecutors said Chowdhury later bragged about deceiving the jury at his first trial.

Chowdhury is scheduled to be sentenced on March 13. His sister, Sneha Chowdhury, was convicted of failing to disclose information about acts of terrorism and will also be sentenced later.

East Asia and Pacific

A Job Overseas, but Stranded by Coronavirus Travel Bans (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 10:16 AM, Tiffany May, 23673K, Negative]

Jade Doringo arrived at Manila's international airport more than five hours ahead of her scheduled departure to Hong Kong, where she worked as a software engineer. But instead of getting on her flight, she was asked to surrender her boarding pass.

That morning, on Feb. 2, President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines had announced a temporary travel ban that barred flights arriving from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macau. At the airport, officials told Ms. Doringo that the ban also applied to Filipino travelers going in the opposite direction.

As the new coronavirus has spread around the world, several countries have issued restrictions on travelers arriving from mainland China. The Philippines, which has reported one death from the virus, is unusual in imposing rules that prevent its citizens from traveling also to Hong Kong and Macau, semiautonomous Chinese territories.

Ms. Doringo is among hundreds of Filipinos whose lives have been upended as they find themselves unable to return to their jobs in the two cities. "Imagine the confusion we felt at that time, not knowing everything," she said in a phone interview last week.

Ms. Doringo had been sitting at the gate, watching as the crew waited for approval to board the flight and listening as airline employees repeated an announcement about the new travel ban. At 4 p.m., all Filipino passport holders were asked to go to immigration. Around her, domestic workers called their employers in Hong Kong, their voices rising in panic.

Then her suitcase got lost. But there was little else she could do besides huddle together with the other grounded passengers. Most of them had not eaten since that morning. Rather than splurging at the airport's restaurants, they snacked and skipped dinner.

At 11 p.m., Ms. Doringo left the terminal empty-handed.

She had moved to Hong Kong two years ago with dreams of creating a better life for her family. The job in Hong Kong paid a better salary than what she would have earned back home, and soon after starting she was able to buy a plot of land in her rural province. She began setting aside money every month to build a house for her family.

She missed them constantly, particularly during the chaos of the past seven months when Hong Kong was rocked by antigovernment demonstrations. Her homesickness only intensified in late January as the coronavirus spread.

"Protests, disease, the loneliness of living alone — all of this triggers the longing of going back home," she wrote in an Instagram post on Jan. 25 before she returned to the Philippines for a nine-day vacation. "To your real home."

That trip started out in Manila, where she took her siblings, their spouses and their children to eat lechón, a spit-roasted suckling pig, at a mall.

Later, she returned to her hometown in the countryside and rode on a motorized tricycle with her father to a small creek near where she planned to build a house for them. Her mother cooked her nilagang baka, a steaming beef broth. She cried, feeling relieved to be under their roof.

"I get to eat in Hong Kong, but it's different when you get to share the meals with your family," she said.

When it came time for her to return to Hong Kong, her brother bought a box of masks for her and her parents nagged her to be careful. She ended up spending all day at the airport after her flight was canceled, then stayed at her brother's home in Manila. Her lost luggage showed up two days later.

Her supervisor had given her permission to work remotely, but she was worried about being absent for too long.

"As overseas Filipino workers, none of us can afford to lose our jobs," she said.

Ms. Doringo still is not sure when she will be able to return to Hong Kong. But she has stocked up on masks, rubbing alcohol and snacks so that when she does, she will not have to venture outdoors.

"I am afraid to get sick. We all are, but it's our decision to take the risk," she said. "We know the consequences of going abroad."

[Australia] Solar Is Beating Out Coal in Australia, Pushing Down Emissions (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 2:00 AM, Rob Verdonck, 6400K, Neutral]

Record-high renewables growth is transforming Australia's electricity landscape, pushing out coal plants and lowering prices and emissions.

Solar and wind output during the fourth quarter within the five jurisdictions that make up the National Electricity Market increased 39% from a year earlier, the Australian Energy Market Operator said Monday in its quarterly report. That helped cut power-generation emissions 5% to the lowest in data going back to 2001 and slashed wholesale prices by almost a fifth.

"Record variable renewable energy generation growth in 2019 is expected to continue into 2020, as the large amount of new capacity currently being accredited is likely to reach full generation by mid-2020," AEMO said in the report. "During December 2019 (and into January 2020), extreme heat, generator and transmission line outages, and bushfires tested the NEM power system and led to price volatility."

Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government has faced increased criticism over its lack of a coherent climate policy following the devastating bushfires that swept across the country this summer. Over the weekend it confirmed its staunch support of the coal industry in the face of a growing backlash against the fuel by giving financial backing to a study into a new plant.

In Western Australia, which is not part of the national market, a 47% year-on-year increase in wind generation in the quarter outpaced growth in coal and rooftop solar, according to the report.

[Australia] Australia plans new bank stress tests to assess climate change impact - sources (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 3:04 PM, Swati Pandey, Neutral]

Australian regulators plan to introduce mandatory stress tests soon that will look at the impact of climate change on banks, insurers and the A\$3 trillion (\$2 trillion) pension fund industry, sources with direct knowledge of the matter said.

The tests, to be based on measures being developed in England, have been in the works for some time but their introduction has been hastened after a devastating bushfire season, one of the sources said.

Economists expect recent bushfires to drag on gross domestic product growth by 0.1-0.4 percentage points through March 2020, with agriculture, retail, tourism and construction the hardest hit.

As part of the stress test, banks will be required to run risk assessments for their loan books and business models under various climate scenarios, the people said, declining to be identified as they were not authorised to speak to media.

The Australian Prudential Regulatory Authority (APRA) said that the development of a climate-change stress test was a key measure as it boosts scrutiny of how financial institutions manage their climate risks.

"We intend to release a letter to the industry outlining the next phase of our regulatory response to climate risk in a few weeks," an APRA spokesman told Reuters on Monday.

Australian banks have already started taking steps to combat the effects of climate change on their business models.

Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA.AX), the nation's No.1 lender, and Westpac (WBC.AX) are performing climate change scenario analyses on their portfolios.

ANZ has said its focus area for the coming financial year would include climate-related risk governance and stress testing of selected portfolios. The banks have also pledged to reduce exposure to high carbon sectors such as coal.

It is not clear if banks will be required to publicly disclose results of the stress tests mandated by APRA.

In December, the Bank of England (BoE) said Britain's top banks and insurers should be tested together for the first time in 2021 to quantify the potential financial damage from climate change.

The BoE chairs an international group of regulators that is developing a global climate stress test. It is expected Australia's test will be based on this.

[China] 'Let's Not Shake Hands': Xi Jinping Tours Beijing Amid Coronavirus Crisis (New York Times)

New York Times [2/10/2020 9:30 AM, Steven Lee Myers, 23673K, Neutral]

When he stepped inside the municipal office five miles north of the Forbidden City, China's most powerful leader in decades pulled up the sleeve of his black overcoat and held out his wrist. A woman in a mask and surgical gloves then checked to see if he had a fever.

It was Xi Jinping's first public appearance since meeting the Cambodian prime minister last week, and one of only a handful since the epidemic exploded into a crisis last month. It showed him on what state media declared the "front line" of China's efforts to combat the coronavirus epidemic — even if the actual center of the outbreak lies 600 miles south in the city of Wuhan.

Mr. Xi's appearance kicked off an unusual, unannounced blitz around Beijing on the day the city was supposed to return to work after a prolonged holiday break but did not.

He visited a neighborhood community center, a hospital and a center for disease control in Chaoyang, one of the capital's largest districts. And for the first time, he also spoke directly — via video conferencing — to those most directly fighting the outbreak: medical workers in Wuhan who stood in rapt formation on the other end of the line.

Mr. Xi, wearing a powder blue surgical mask, declared Wuhan "a city of heroes," according to a commentator on CCTV's flagship nightly news program. He also called the outbreak a "people's war."

"We must have confidence that we will win," he said in one of the video calls.

The Chinese leader's retreat from center stage has raised speculation about his role and the internal dynamics of the Communist Party leadership at a time it is facing its gravest public health challenge since the SARS epidemic 17 years ago.

Mr. Xi's tour on Monday appeared intended to put such questions to rest.

State television portrayed his meetings as a demonstration of his central role in directing the government's response. It also seemed designed as a display of empathy for ordinary people whose lives have been upturned by the outbreak and the government-imposed measures to stop it.

The temperature checks that Mr. Xi had to endure — at the community center and again at the hospital — have become a recurring experience for millions of Chinese entering practically any public space, from the subway to shopping centers. Anyone with signs of a fever can be denied entry and sent home or, in worse cases, sent directly to hospitals for testing and possible quarantine.

Wu Qiang, an independent political analyst in Beijing, said that the worsening epidemic had created "pressure from the public and inside the party" for Mr. Xi to show that he was, as often reported, "personally directing" the government's response. He said it also reflected the political concerns about the outbreak's effects on China's most important cities.

"It has become a matter of political security," Mr. Wu said. "Political security does not mean in the sense of popular resistance but rather that the epidemic may spread to Beijing and Shanghai, endangering the political operations of the so-called capital areas."

Mr. Xi rarely mingles with the public. In a video released on Monday on the website of Beijing's municipal government, he appeared on a sidewalk outside the municipal office in the Anhuai neighborhood in Beijing, where he looked up and waved at people gathered at apartment windows to watch the spectacle unfolding below.

He also chatted briefly with a handful of residents, including two carrying grocery bags. Everyone, per orders issued by the government, wore masks.

"Let's not shake hands in this special time," Mr. Xi said, prompting laughter from those around him. Then he asked, "How much do the vegetables cost?"

Mr. Xi was accompanied during his appearances by senior officials, including the Communist Party secretary general for Beijing, Cai Qi, and the city's mayor, Chen Jining.

Mr. Xi also visited Ditan Hospital, located nearby the municipal office. He donned a white doctor's coat, though television reports did not show him meeting with any patients.

According to the government's latest count, there have been 337 confirmed coronavirus cases in Beijing and two deaths, the most recent on Feb. 7.

Mr. Xi has yet to visit Wuhan. That task fell to Premier Li Keqiang, the country's No. 2 official, and Vice Premier Sun Chunlan, who has led the response there in recent days. But at the hospital and later at the disease control office in Chaoyang, Mr. Xi greeted workers and officials there via video links.

They included a government meeting in Wuhan conducted by Ms. Sun, now the senior official on the ground in Hubei, as well as calls with doctors and nurses in several hospitals, including one built in a matter of days after the city of 11 million was locked down.

"Here, on behalf of the Central Party Committee," Mr. Xi told them, "I extend my high respect and heartfelt thanks to you and to the medical workers in the fight against the epidemic throughout the country."

[China] Mask-clad Xi Jinping emerges from conspicuous absence to visit coronavirus 'front line' (Washington Post)

Washington Post [2/10/2020 11:41 AM, Rick Noack, Neutral]

Chinese President Xi Jinping made a public appearance Monday, donning a face mask and having his temperature taken at a "front-line" coronavirus facility in the Chaoyang district of Beijing.

Photos and videos of the visit — carried by state-run news agencies and television stations — did not deviate from the usual patten of publicity appearances by Xi and other Chinese Communist Party officials. But Xi's appearance Monday capped a remarkably unengaged period for the Chinese leader at a critical time, during which he conspicuously avoided public attention.

Over the last 12 days, Xi briefly met with Cambodia's autocratic leader, Hun Sen, but otherwise stayed away from the cameras, even as his country faced its most pressing public health crisis since the 2002 SARS outbreak.

Xi left it to other Communist Party officials to calm concerns over the novel coronavirus or to celebrate tireless medical workers. It was Premier Li Keqiang who instead headed to the coronavirus epicenter Wuhan to meet with officials and workers there.

In their carefully scrutinized broadcasts and releases, state-run media outlets sought to portray Xi as the man running the crisis response from behind the scenes.

But his relative absence did not go unnoticed.

Some suspected it was forced, with baseless rumors circulating that Xi had been overthrown or suffered a stroke.

Others argued it was a strategic decision. By avoiding public attention, Xi may have sought to duck responsibility for Beijing's response to the crisis and to distance himself from the mistakes of the regional Communist Party's leadership in Wuhan.

"Someone has to take responsibility for the ongoing spread of the coronavirus, and he may not want to be that person," Bruce Dickson, a China expert and chairman of the political science department at George Washington University, said in an interview last week.

But keeping a low profile may no longer be a viable option for Xi, as his absence has fueled speculation and as public scrutiny has increasingly turned away from local cadres' failings and toward more systemic complaints over the ruling Communist Party in Beijing.

Under Xi's leadership, the party has worked to expand a system that, according to its critics, rewards loyalty and sanctions the bearers of bad news. As a result, it encourages local officials to turn a blind eye to problems that are not considered an immediate priority for the Communist Party, some of its critics say.

Frustration with that approach rose to a new level last week, following the death of Wuhan doctor Li Wenliang, who succumbed to the coronavirus. Li was among the first to raise alarm over the new virus in late December — at a time when officials may still have been able to contain its spread.

Instead of alerting their colleagues in Beijing, Wuhan authorities detained and silenced Li.

His death triggered a short-lived Chinese online campaign last week under the hashtag #WeWantFreedomOfSpeech, directed against what many viewed as an attempt by officials to cover up the crisis through mid-January and suppress warnings.

Censors deleted many of the online complaints, but officials announced an investigation into Li's death.

It was unclear whether Xi's appearance Monday was connected to the proliferation of signs of frustration among some Chinese citizens, but the president's message was clear: Trust the Communist Party with confronting the outbreak.

According to state television, Xi acknowledged that the situation remains serious. But he added that the Chinese leadership would take further measures to contain the spread of the virus and prevent mass layoffs as a result of the economic fallout.

China, he said, would prevail over the virus.

[China] President Xi Inspects Coronavirus Hospital in Beijing After Conspicuous Absence (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 1:43 PM, Jonathan Cheng and Erin Mendell, Neutral]
Chinese President Xi Jinping paid his first public visit to the front lines of the coronavirus outbreak, stopping at a Beijing hospital treating infected patients and at a local disease-control office after weeks of remaining largely out of public view.

Mr. Xi on Monday visited the office of a neighborhood community center in Beijing's Chaoyang district, where he had his temperature taken by a local staff member, received a briefing on disease-prevention work and waved at families cooped up in their apartments,

footage released by state media showed.

Later, he visited Beijing Ditan Hospital, where coronavirus patients in the Chinese capital are being treated. There, Mr. Xi shared a video chat with Wuhan hospitals and heard reports from officials in Hubei province, state broadcaster China Central Television reported.

The report didn't mention whether Mr. Xi, who was pictured wearing a white lab coat and a surgical mask, met with any patients in person, though state media captured Mr. Xi telling a crowd of well-wishers that there would be no handshakes, given the circumstances.

At Chaoyang district's Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Mr. Xi learned about how the district, on the eastern edge of central Beijing, was coping with the outbreak, CCTV reported.

Mr. Xi in his remarks acknowledged that some medical workers had "sacrificed their lives," an apparent indirect reference to a young Wuhan doctor, Li Wenliang, whose death last week triggered an emotional response across the country, much of it frustration directed at officials. Dr. Li had been taken in and interrogated by authorities in early January after warning about the dangers of the deadly new virus, before he contracted it himself.

The inspection visit comes after weeks in which the virus spread across the country, with other officials appearing at the epicenter in Wuhan to meet with medical workers and patients.

Mr. Xi's absence has been conspicuous in recent weeks as his deputy, Premier Li Keqiang, traveled there in January. Mr. Li was also made the head of a new Communist Party "leading group" to tackle the outbreak.

Sun Chunlan, a vice premier and a member of the Communist Party's Politburo who oversees public-health policy, has visited Wuhan at least four times since late January.

Mr. Xi appears to have remained mainly in Beijing, staying largely out of view except on a few occasions—for instance, to meet with World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus and with Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen.

The number of confirmed infections from the virus known as 2019-nCoV rose to 40,554 globally in 24 countries as of Monday, with 910 deaths. All but 319 cases and one death were in China. Confirmed cases in the U.S. remained at 12 as of Monday, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Mr. Xi's coronavirus inspection on Monday came as China's National Health Commission reported a single-day high of 97 deaths in mainland China on Sunday from the coronavirus.

It also confirmed 3,062 more cases of infection, while adding that 632 people were released from hospitals, putting the total of discharged patients at 3,281.

The WHO's Dr. Tedros raised concerns separately on Twitter late Sunday in Geneva about the spread of infection from people who hadn't traveled to mainland China.

"The detection of a small number of cases may indicate more widespread transmission in other countries; in short, we may only be seeing the tip of the iceberg," Dr. Tedros wrote.

A preliminary report by a team including Zhong Nanshan, one of China's most highly regarded epidemiology experts and the leader of a National Health Commission task force on the outbreak, on Sunday said the incubation period for the coronavirus could be as long as 24 days in some cases, though it found that the median time between transmission and the onset of symptoms was three days.

The study, an unpublished manuscript that hasn't been peer reviewed, was uploaded to the medical website medRxiv on Sunday. Though Dr. Zhong said in an email to The Wall Street Journal that the draft was still being edited, and the incubation-period information may not be included, the preliminary study triggered concern on China's social media that the outbreak could spread more easily, and last longer, than previously expected. Lead author Guan Weijie told domestic Chinese media that the 24-day incubation period was found only in individual cases.

The study, conducted by Dr. Zhong's team at the Guangzhou Institute of Respiratory Disease, was based on 1,099 patients from 552 hospitals across the country. An earlier study, based on 425 patients and published in the New England Journal of Medicine, found a median incubation period of about five days, with the longest being seven days.

Even so, many governments have coalesced around 14 days for the quarantine of many patients and suspected patients, given research pointing to a maximum two-week incubation period.

An advance team of experts from the World Health Organization arrived in Beijing on Monday to help with the government's battle against the epidemic.

The team is meeting with Chinese officials "to lay the groundwork" for a larger international team of experts, Dr. Tedros said. He asked Mr. Xi in a meeting two weeks ago to allow an international team of experts to come to China to help with epidemic response and a public-health investigation.

China's National Health Commission said it would later welcome a larger team of WHO experts, including some from the U.S. Dr. Tedros said the WHO is aiming to send about 10 international experts "as soon as possible," adding that he hopes they have free rein.

In Beijing, the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's top legislative body, will add a revision of China's Wild Animal Protection Law onto its agenda this year, the state-run Xinhua News Agency reported on Monday, in an apparent move to address complaints that the consumption of wild animals had helped the coronavirus spread to humans.

In coastal Zhejiang province, just south of Shanghai, officials on Sunday called on some districts to lift restrictions on people's movements.

Wuhan and surrounding Hubei province, an area of nearly 60 million people at the center of

the crisis, have been quarantined. Across China, several local governments, including some far from the center of the crisis, have restricted people's movement.

In Sichuan province, officials said they are monitoring a fresh outbreak of H5N6 avian influenza, which has killed nearly 2,000 birds, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs said. Though avian influenza doesn't spread easily to humans, it is likely to add to the country's economic strain as consumer inflation, largely driven by food prices amid an earlier outbreak of swine fever and the coronavirus, reaches the highest levels in more than eight years. This month, authorities reported a recurrence of H5N1 avian flu in Hunan province.

In Chongqing, a city of 34 million people with hundreds of confirmed cases of the virus and which borders Sichuan province, one in 10 infections has been diagnosed in people working in the food industry, making eating out and gathering for meals risky, Xia Pei, a city health official said on Sunday, Xinhua reported.

Hong Kong authorities traced several cases among the roughly three dozen confirmed in the city to a hot-pot meal shared among 18 relatives, one of whom spread it to at least nine others, authorities said. Six new cases were confirmed on Monday, taking the city's total to 42 cases, one of whom has died.

Dozens of residents in a residential complex were evacuated and taken to quarantine centers after two cases were found in apartments 10 floors apart on the same line in one building. While it isn't fully understood how current coronavirus is transmitted, the move was a precaution, said Yuen Kwok-yung, chair professor of infectious diseases at the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Medicine, at a media briefing early Tuesday.

During the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome in 2003, which killed almost 300 people in Hong Kong, hundreds of residents in one residential building got infected because the virus was transmitted through sewage drains.

In Japan, 65 new cases of the virus were identified aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Yokohama, bringing the total to 135, the country's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare said on Monday. The ship alone has more confirmed cases than anywhere outside mainland China, according to the WHO.

[China] China's Businesses Struggle to Resume Work (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 10:57 AM, Stu Woo and James T. Areddy, Neutral]

Business was slow to restart in China on Monday, even after some local governments stopped calling for people to stay away from the workplace during a coronavirus outbreak that has killed more than 900 people in the country and dented economic growth.

Workers remained stranded, unable to reach their factories. Office towers stayed dark as companies asked employees to work from home. In the few open stores in deserted malls, bored clerks played smartphone games.

"None of the workers are able to come back for work," said Luo Xiaoying, who owns a motorcycle-muffler factory in southern China's Guangdong province. "Our production has

been suspended for almost a month now, and we don't know how long this will last."

The quarantine of nearly 60 million people in Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province, the center of the epidemic, means that workers who visited family there over the recent Lunar New Year holiday can't get back to their jobs. Even districts in cities hundreds of miles away such as Hangzhou, home to online retail giant Alibaba Group Holding Ltd., have confined residents to their homes to try to stop the spread of the virus.

On top of that, many companies continued to encourage people to continue working from home, even after Shanghai and Beijing officially ended their stay-away-from-the-workplace policy at midnight Sunday.

These conditions have created a ghost-town ambience across China, where closed and short-staffed businesses have hammered the economy. S&P Global Ratings said Friday that it had lowered its estimate for China's 2020 gross domestic product growth to 5% from 5.7%.

Accounting for nearly 30% of China's gross domestic product is the manufacturing sector. Many factories closed for the Lunar New Year holiday in late January and were set to reopen Monday, only to find a lack of workers and disrupted supply chains.

Ms. Luo's muffler plant is in a Guangdong district where local authorities require manufacturers to meet stringent safety requirements to resume work. To reopen, factories must guarantee that workers are coronavirus-free, which potentially means quarantining them for 14 days, and must provide them with protective gear such as masks, goggles and gloves that are hard to buy amid a nationwide shortage. Other areas in China have similar restrictions.

Even when her employees return, Ms. Luo is uncertain whether they can build or sell anything. Her suppliers and clients are also shut. "The whole supply chain is paralyzed," she said. She estimates she could reopen in April and resume full operations in May. "That means no income for almost half a year," she said.

Some bigger companies are reopening more quickly. Ford Motor Co. said it had resumed production at its plants in China on Monday, while General Motors Co. said it would resume production at its plants on Feb. 15.

Some Apple Inc. suppliers are likely to face further delays in restarting mass production, people familiar with the matter said. A challenge for them has been securing factory workers, due to nationwide travel restrictions and policies in certain cities restricting the entry of people from regions where the virus outbreak is severe, the people said.

Suppliers must also take measures to ensure the virus won't spread within their factories. Some suppliers are required by local governments to prepare enough masks, thermometers and disinfectants for workers, and secure space for quarantines in case workers get sick. Apple didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Ms. Luo said her landlord had given her a grace period to pay rent, and her workers had been understanding about going unpaid during the shutdown.

Chinese officials have said the outbreak would increase soured loans. Officials at China's Banking and Insurance Regulatory Commission said last week that it would slash taxes and urged banks to offer leniency on mortgage and credit-card payments.

In Shanghai on Monday, where highway traffic remained sparse but still picked up noticeably from recent days, the municipal government said that 70% of manufacturing companies had resumed business.

But a visit to the city's Songjiang factory district—home to sites of 3M Co., Dow Inc., Foxconn Technology Group, Honda Motor Co., Quanta Computer Inc., Toto Ltd. and Tsingtao Brewery Co. —suggested many factories were barely operational.

On many double-wide factory-access roads, it was easier to hear the sounds of birds chirping in Monday's springlike weather rather than of semi-trucks rumbling or factories clanging. Most local restaurants were closed. The workers who did arrive at Songjiang's train station had their temperatures taken at screening areas.

They also received slips of paper that reminded them to wash their hands after using the toilet and instructed visitors to report if they have had a fever, cough, or shortness of breath, "especially if you have been in Hubei or in contact with patients from Hubei."

In Hangzhou, a city of 10 million where some residents can go outside to buy supplies only every few days, Alibaba's office employees have worked from home, though the company's couriers have remained on the streets across the country to deliver orders.

In Beijing, ride-hailing company Didi Chuxing Technology Co. and smartphone maker Xiaomi Corp. are encouraging employees to work from home until next week. Most employees of search-engine Baidu Inc. are working from home, and those who need to go into the office must get approval.

The capital city's subways, which are usually standing room only, were mostly empty on Monday. So was China World, a usually packed Beijing office complex and shopping mall. Li Guifang said he often sells more than 100 cups of juice a day at his Original Fresh storefront by an office-tower entrance, but by noon Monday he had sold only two cups—to two journalists.

He thought business would pick up later this week. "I watch short videos on my phone to kill time," Mr. Li said.

[China] Airbnb Freezes Beijing Check-Ins Until March to Curb Coronavirus (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 2:04 AM, Staff, 6400K, Neutral]

Airbnb Inc. is suspending check-ins at all of its Beijing listings until March to comply with local regulations intended to curb the coronavirus outbreak that's spreading across China.

The San Francisco-based company said in a statement that it will offer refunds to all those affected or that cancel their bookings. This is in adherence to municipal policy, Airbnb said,

though the Beijing government's press office didn't answer calls from Bloomberg News seeking comment.

Local rival Xiaozhu will match Airbnb's actions, shutting down all rentals in Beijing for February and issuing full refunds for existing bookings while also waiving landlord commission fees, it said in a statement. It's not yet clear whether others in the home-sharing industry, including Trip.com Group Ltd.-backed Tujia, are following suit. In its mobile app, Trip.com said "some" apartment bookings in Beijing have been suspended and recommended users turn to hotels instead.

"In light of the novel coronavirus outbreak and guidance from local authorities for the short-term rental industry during this public health emergency, bookings of all listings in Beijing with check-in from 7 February 2020 to 29 February 2020 have been suspended," Airbnb said in its statement. The company "appreciates that disease control efforts are causing overall travel disruptions that also affect our community of guests and hosts."

Health authorities in China and around the world are trying to gauge whether the world's largest known quarantine effort has been effective in containing the pneumonia-causing virus in central Hubei province, a landlocked region of 60 million people. Infections are rising elsewhere in the country and Beijing is one of its most popular tourist destinations. As of Sunday, Beijing's health authorities have confirmed 337 cases, including two deaths.

[China] China says 27 foreigners in the country have been infected with coronavirus, 2 dead (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 2:53 AM, Gabriel Crossley, 5304K, Negative]

China's Foreign Ministry said that 27 foreigners in the country have been confirmed infected with the new coronavirus as of Monday morning, and two had died.

An American died on Feb. 6 and a Japanese died on Feb. 8, ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told a daily news briefing in Beijing.

Three of the cases have been discharged, he added.

[China] Wuhan coronavirus death toll tops 900 as China cautiously returns to work (CNN)

CNN [2/9/2020 10:30 PM, James Griffiths, 5551K, Negative]

Millions of people across China are heading back to work after the Lunar New Year break turned into an extended quarantine due to the Wuhan coronavirus.

Many will be working from their homes, however, with strict quarantine guidelines in place in many cities and most businesses urging people to work remotely if possible to reduce the chances of transmission.

Some semblance of normality may have returned, but the outbreak shows no signs of slowing, with the number of confirmed cases now at over 40,000 worldwide and the death toll at 910.

That means the coronavirus has officially killed more people than the SARS pandemic of

2003, previously one of the worst medical crises in recent Chinese history.

A total of 3,281 patients infected with the coronavirus have since been discharged from hospital as of Sunday, Chinese health authorities said.

The vast majority of the deaths have been in mainland China, leaving the country in something of a bizarre situation where some areas of it will be returning to something approaching business as usual, even as other regions face increasingly draconian restrictions on their movement and behavior in a desperate attempt to contain the virus.

A team of doctors and researchers from the World Health Organization left for China on Sunday to assist with the outbreak, led by Bruce Aylward, who the organization's Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus described as a "veteran of past public health emergencies." Aylward led the WHO's response to Ebola, as well as initiatives for immunization, communicable diseases control and polio eradication.

Even as the epicenter of the outbreak remains in Hubei, the province of which Wuhan is the capital and accounts for almost 30,000 of the total confirmed cases, the epidemic has spread worldwide, affecting more than two dozen countries.

The largest outbreak outside of mainland China is on board the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in the Japanese city of Yokohama. On Monday, an additional 65 cases were confirmed aboard, bringing the total number of cases on the ship to 135 -- nearly doubling the previous total of 70 confirmed cases Sunday.

Japan has 160 total cases, including those aboard the cruise ship. Beyond Japan, Singapore has reported 40 cases, Hong Kong has 38 infections and one death, Thailand has confirmed 32 cases, and South Korea 27.

Cruise ship lockdown

Cruise liners have emerged as a major battleground in the attempt to halt the spread of the virus.

As well as the ship in Yokohama, two vessels in the US and Hong Kong had also been under quarantine, with passengers and crew tested for the virus.

Royal Caribbean's Anthem of the Seas cruise ship, which has been docked in Bayonne, New Jersey, since returning on Friday, will be able to set sail Monday, however, after four passengers who were taken to hospital for further evaluation showed no signs of the virus.

All 3,600 people on board the World Dream ship in Hong Kong will also be able to disembark Monday, after five days under quarantine. Health authorities said that everyone on board had tested negative.

Passengers on board the Princess Cruises liner in Yokohama have not been so lucky. So far at least 135 passengers tested positive for the coronavirus, amid signs of a full blown outbreak on board, one of the largest outside of mainland China. Information from Princess Cruises and a CNN tally put the number of infected Americans on the ship at 24.

Those cruise passengers have been under strict quarantine for over a week now, confined to their cabins as medical personnel conduct tests on the 3,700 people on board.

Princess Cruises said it will offer a full refund to all passengers on board. The company's president, Jan Swartz, thanked passengers for their "perseverance and understanding."

"All monies paid to Princess Cruises including your cruise fare, round trip Princess Air, pre- or post-Cruise Plus hotels, transfers, prepaid shore excursions, gratuities and other items, and taxes, fees and port expenses will be refunded to the original form of payment," Swartz wrote.

Swartz said the company will "refund reasonable independent expenses," along with air travel, transfers or pre/post-cruise hotels. Each guest also will receive a 100% future cruise credit equal to the fare passengers paid for the quarantined voyage, Swartz wrote. That credit has to be applied by February 28, 2021.

"It is our sincere hope that the refund and credit will help ease at least a small bit of the stress you may be feeling right now," Swartz wrote in a letter to passengers.

Citizen journalist missing

There was outrage in China on Friday as news emerged of the death of Li Wenliang. A doctor in Wuhan, Li had attempted to warn friends of a new virus spreading, but was detained by police in the city for "rumormongering." He was later hailed as a whistleblower by both the public and state media, but was soon hospitalized with the virus.

Following Li's death, Chinese authorities struggled to control the narrative, especially as the censors appeared to be trying to massage the timing of the announcement, deleting posts announcing his passing. Hundreds of thousands of posted demands for free speech online, in a rare challenge to the authorities, who deleted posts left and right.

History appeared to be repeating itself over the weekend, as it emerged that citizen journalist Chen Qiushi had been missing for several days. Chen, who had been carrying out critical reporting from inside of Wuhan, went missing on Thursday evening, just as hundreds of thousands of people in China began demanding freedom of speech online.

Friends and family later found out from the police that he had been forced into quarantine. By Sunday, Chen's disappearance had started to gain traction on Weibo, China's Twitter-like platform, with many pleading for his release.

"Hope the government can treat Chen Qiushi in a fair and just way," one user wrote on Sunday morning. "We can no longer afford a second Li Wenliang!"

Tight censorship and control of the narrative in the early days of the outbreak has been blamed for aiding the spread of the virus from Wuhan to the rest of the country. Officials in the city downplayed the severity of the virus in public even as evidence was available that it was spreading from person-to-person.

Draconian controls

While some Chinese cities will be attempting to get back to normal – or at least to business, with staff working from home – others are introducing yet more stringent controls.

In a joint statement Saturday, China's National Health Commission, Supreme Court and Ministry of Public Security announced seven "medical-related crimes" that would be severely punished during the epidemic.

They include attacking medical personnel, refusing medical checks and damaging or destroying property at medical facilities.

According to the statement, anyone who violates new virus control regulations will be quickly prosecuted and could face arrest, jail or even the death penalty.

Many cities and provinces have introduced mandatory self-quarantine policies for anyone returning from elsewhere in the country. Transport in and out of Hubei also remains severely disrupted.

As the virus continues to spread, Wuhan announced Saturday its second rapidly constructed new hospital was ready to welcome patients.

Built from scratch to hold victims of the coronavirus, the Leishenshan hospital can hold up to 1,500 patients and will have 32 wards, Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said.

CCTV said that the first team of medical staff arrived at the hospital on Saturday.

The National Health Commission also announced at a news conference on Saturday that it had chosen a temporary official name for the virus -- Novel Coronavirus Pneumonia, or NCP.

[China] Working from home, temperature checks and quarantines: How China's companies are trying to get back to business (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 10:03 AM, Michelle Toh, 5551K, Neutral]

China is slowly getting back to work on Monday after the deadly coronavirus outbreak forced many parts of the country to extend the Lunar New Year holiday by more than a week. But it's still far from business as usual in the world's second-largest economy.

Officials have issued varied guidance on what companies should be doing as the public holiday comes to an end for much of China and millions return to their place of work. Many districts are asking companies to check the temperature of workers who come to the office. Other instructions are more specific, including one from a district in Shenzhen that asks businesses with lots of migrant workers to set up quarantine areas for employees returning from "infected zones." That's created a patchwork approach to working during the public health crisis.

The coronavirus has killed more than 900 people and infected at least 40,000, mostly in mainland China. The majority of the cases are in the central Chinese province of Hubei,

where life remains mostly at a standstill.

Elsewhere in China, though, some big companies are trying to return to work — albeit with serious precautions. Others remain shut down.

Huawei, the country's top smartphone maker, on Monday reopened its Shenzhen headquarters where it employs about 40,000 people, according to a person familiar with the matter. The person said its decision was in line with local guidelines that authorized businesses to reopen.

But Huawei employees returned to a dramatically different environment than the one they left in January. When they clock in each morning, workers must now provide details about their body temperature and whereabouts for the last two weeks, the person said. There will also be temperature checks at office buildings and parking lots, while face masks and hand sanitizers are being dispensed all over campus.

Tencent and Alibaba workers stay home

Tencent (TCEHY), which is also based in Shenzhen, said its staff in mainland China were working from home on Monday, and will continue to do so for at least the next two weeks. The company's office in Hong Kong, where there are at least 38 confirmed cases, is tentatively set to reopen next week.

"The health and safety of our employees is of the utmost importance to us," a company spokesperson told CNN Business. "Accordingly, Tencent will continue to monitor the situation closely and will revise these arrangements as necessary."

Many others took a similar approach. Microsoft's (MSFT) team in mainland China will stay home for at least another week while its Hong Kong office continues to operate as usual, a spokesperson said.

Chinese ride-hailing provider Didi and Audi's China team are also extending their remote working practices through Friday. And e-commerce giant Alibaba (BABA) has asked employees to work from home for another week, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Drone-maker DJI is asking employees to work from home until further notice, according to a person familiar with the matter.

Other companies are allowing their workers to return to the office, but under strict conditions.

Baidu (BIDU), China's top search engine provider, said that it was "gradually" reopening its offices on Monday. But employees who come in "must meet quarantine conditions, and they can only return to work in the campus after approval," the company said in an internal memo seen by CNN Business.

Dane Anderson, vice president and regional manager of Asia Pacific at Forrester Research, said the confusion among companies about how to manage the outbreak was predictable,

given a lack of preparation.

Toyota and GM factories remain shut

"Most organizations focus their business continuity plans on losses, such as the loss of facilities, technology or people, but not on impact-based scenarios such as the current novel coronavirus," he told CNN Business. "Unfortunately, most organizations will be learning on the go, which will lead to more confusion along the way."

Automakers have also been wrestling with when to allow employees to work again.

Toyota (TM), for example, had been weighing whether to reopen its China plants Monday, but recently extended those closures another week. Volkswagen (VLKAF), which said last week that it expected to resume some vehicle production Monday, did not respond to a request for comment.

General Motors (GM) said Monday it would resume production in China from February 15, staggering the restart over a two-week period based on factors such as employee safety, supply chain readiness and product inventory needs.

The Chinese government may soon provide some more clarity for businesses. China's State Council said Monday that it plans to hold a press conference Tuesday to discuss how China is helping companies resume production.

[China] China's massive security state is being used to crack down on the Wuhan virus (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 2:39 AM, James Griffiths and Nectar Gan, 5551K, Neutral]

The camera hovers just above the elderly woman's head, as she looks up, her face becomes confused and worried.

"Yes auntie, this is the drone speaking to you," a voice booms out. "You shouldn't walk about without wearing a mask."

The woman hurries off, occasionally looking over her shoulder as the drone continues to shout instructions: "You'd better go back home and don't forget to wash your hands."

This is China under quarantine in 2020. In another video promoted by state media, a police drone orders men sitting at an outdoor mahjong table to "stop playing and leave the site as soon as possible."

"Don't look at the drone," it says, as a small child glances up curiously. "Ask your father to leave immediately."

As Chinese authorities struggle to contain the deadly Wuhan coronavirus, they are turning to a sophisticated authoritarian playbook honed over decades of crackdowns on dissidents and undesirables to enforce quarantines and lockdowns across the country.

This has been accompanied by a shift in the narrative around the virus. It has moved from a

story of an entire country pulling together in a time of crisis to a darker tale of bad actors undermining efforts to keep people safe and spreading the virus through their own irresponsibility.

Critics argue that this also serves to obfuscate myriad failures by the state as a whole, instead putting the blame on individual citizens and the occasional bad apple of an official. A pertinent example of this alleged tactic was the swift dispatch of anti-corruption officials to Wuhan after the death of whistleblower doctor Li Wenliang, whose death created huge anger and outrage online.

'Severe punishment'

Speaking at a meeting of top officials Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping called for "greater legislative, law enforcement, judicial and law observance efforts to strengthen the capacity to carry out law-based infection prevention and control."

Laws around epidemic control "must be strictly enforced," Xi said, as police around the country began cracking down on people accused of concealing their travel history to get around stringent quarantine measures.

In the northwestern province of Qinghai, police said one man is being investigated for "endangering public safety" after he was accused of "deliberately concealing" a recent journey to Wuhan, the city at the epicenter of the outbreak.

"What's particularly abominable is that (the man) also concealed his son's return with him from Wuhan. His son has also been out and about multiple times and in close contact with crowds," police said, adding that both had since been placed under quarantine.

Similar cases have been reported in at least four other provinces, and last week China's top prosecutor issued a notice warning that anyone deemed to have deliberately transmitted the coronavirus, or who refuses to accept quarantine or treatment, will be "severely punished."

Authorities in the northeastern province of Heilongjiang went even further. According to the state-backed Beijing News, they put out an announcement warning that the highest sentence for endangering public safety by intentionally transmitting the coronavirus "is the death penalty."

The central government followed suit Saturday, announcing that a raft of medical crimes would carry severe punishment, including potential execution.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has maintained that both the government and the country's citizens are united in their determination to fight the outbreak. "We mobilized the whole country, laid out an overall plan, responded swiftly, and adopted the most comprehensive, strictest measures to start a people's war on preventing and controlling the outbreak," he told US President Donald Trump in a phone call Friday, Xinhua reported.

As the virus spreads from China to a growing list of countries and regions, the World Health Organization has declared the outbreak a global public health emergency.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said on February 4 that "since the onset of the outbreak, China has taken unprecedentedly strict prevention and control measures, many of which far exceed WHO recommendations and (the International Health Regulations) requirements."

China's Foreign Ministry directed CNN's request for comment on the effectiveness of the strict measures to contain the outbreak to the National Health Commission. CNN has reached out to the commission for comment.

Surveillance state

Police in China are far better equipped for a crackdown in 2020 than they would have been in previous years, thanks to a vast surveillance panopticon that the state has built up nationwide, but previously not used to tackle something of this scale.

The most extreme example of this 21st century surveillance state is in the far western region of Xinjiang, where ubiquitous CCTV cameras and police checkpoints have been used to tightly control the movement and behavior of members of the Uyghur ethnic minority, hundreds of thousands of whom have been placed in "reeducation camps."

Chinese companies have made millions building advanced facial recognition and AI-driven surveillance technology for police forces and local governments across the country. While the use of these tools nationwide is not as extreme as in Xinjiang, its rollout has been rapid, boosted by positive stories in state media about how AI cameras have been used to catch offenders or crack down on jaywalkers and other petty criminals.

Facial recognition, in particular, has become a normal part of many people's lives, used in subways, office buildings, schools and even safari parks to check season-ticket holders.

In a 2018 report on Xinjiang, Human Rights Watch warned that China was building a "digital totalitarian state," where draconian technologies used in the far west were quietly becoming the norm nationwide. The current crisis is providing insight into just how potentially close such a situation is to being realized, as the government turns to new technology to track potential virus carriers.

Speaking to state broadcaster CCTV, Li Lanjuan, a top official with the National Health Commission, explained how "in the era of big data, the movements of each person can be clearly understood."

She gave the example of a man in Zhejiang in eastern China who reported symptoms but said he had not had any contact with anyone from Wuhan. "Then we checked the data and found that he had been in contact with three people from the epidemic area," Li said.

Much of the data being used in this effort is from surveillance cameras or hoovered up from people's devices, and likely most of the people being tracked had no idea this was possible. State media coverage, however, largely echoes Li's passive tone – that the government has access to such information is seen as a natural occurrence in this modern "era of big data," not the result of a potentially pervasive, invasive surveillance state.

Writing in the state-backed Global Times last month, technology analyst Chen Jing said that "in the past, it was unimaginable to track the movement of people on a large scale, and it required a lot of resources."

"Nowadays, with the popularization of smart phones, various types of apps are increasingly infiltrating into daily life," he said. "People's activities create imprints in the electronic world, making big data tracking both technically possible (and) one of the most important developments of future technology."

Analog control

As well as high tech surveillance, China's leaders have also turned to more traditional methods, initiating a mass mobilization – a term with echoes of the Mao Zedong era – to tackle the virus.

Speaking to police officials last week, Zhao Kezhi, head of the Ministry of Public Security, said that governments and Communist Party committees at all levels must give "top priority to the maintenance of political security" and "resolutely prevent" the outbreak from damaging "social stability."

The fight against the virus was a "war," Zhao said, adding that in a "wartime period ... the role of grassroots Party organizations and Party members" should be increased and the "Party's flag should be flown high on the front lines."

Party organizations at the local level have been tasked with setting up a "grid management" system – a long-tested program for sweeping local surveillance and control – to monitor, track down and report on coronavirus cases, according to an emergency notice jointly issued last week by the Ministry of Civil Affairs and the National Health Commission.

In the grid system, neighborhood committees will search for suspected cases door-to-door on a daily basis and report all information to the central authorities, the notice said.

The Party's central leadership dispatched a "steering group" to Wuhan on Saturday, which ordered authorities to "round up everyone who needs to be rounded up" in effort to quarantine anyone infected or suspected to be infected with the virus, according to state media. The phrase has previously been used by Chinese government officials to describe the process of selecting members of the Uygur minority group to be sent to sprawling internment camps in Xinjiang.

Increasingly panicked by news reports of the virus' spread and emboldened by calls for resolute action, many people have been taking matters into their own hands. There have been numerous unverified reports of people believed or confirmed to have the virus being forcibly confined in their apartments, while residents of Hubei and Wuhan have spoken of being discriminated against, refused access to buses or hotels.

While health authorities have urged people not to discriminate, they have also approvingly cited "grassroots" efforts to control the virus, including villages barricading themselves off and instituting checkpoints.

Censors clamp down

Following revelations of how officials in Wuhan had downplayed news of the virus in the weeks after it was first detected, there was a brief relaxation of control of the media and discussion of the virus online.

That toleration for dissent and the repeated embarrassing stories unearthed by Chinese media in Wuhan once they were given free rein has now ended. In a meeting of top officials last Monday, Xi emphasized the importance of "public opinion guidance" and utilizing propaganda to "tell the story of China's fight against the epidemic and show the Chinese people's spirit of unity and togetherness."

Since then, there have been numerous reports of Chinese and foreign journalists facing restrictions on reporting, and state media has begun emphasizing positive stories about the virus. Meanwhile, people have reported having their accounts on the messaging app WeChat blocked for sharing news about the virus, essentially cutting them off from China's largest social network.

The Cyberspace Administration of China, the country's top internet censor, said this week that it had summoned tech company representatives for a meeting "for failing to handle illicit content published by users."

The CAC called for internet watchdogs and content providers to "foster a good online atmosphere amid the country's efforts to contain the epidemic."

The death of Li Wenliang, the whistleblower doctor, has challenged this more than anything, with censors working overtime to contain the outrage and stop it transforming into anything wider.

Li's fate, however, exemplifies how individuals are increasingly being asked to sacrifice everything in the name of maintaining societal stability -- and that of the Party.

[China] Pangolins Are Suspected as a Potential Coronavirus Host (New York Times) New York Times [2/10/2020 3:12 PM, James Gorman, Neutral]

In the search for the animal source or sources of the coronavirus epidemic in China, the latest candidate is the pangolin, an endangered, scaly, ant-eating mammal that is imported in huge numbers to Chinese markets for food and medicine.

The market in pangolins is so large that they are said to be the most trafficked mammals on the planet. All four Asian species are critically endangered, and it is far from clear whether being identified as a viral host would be good or bad for pangolins. It could decrease the trade in the animals, or cause a backlash.

It is also far from clear whether the pangolin is the animal that passed the new virus to humans. Bats are still thought to be the original host of the virus. If pangolins are involved in disease transmission, they would act as an intermediate host. The science so far is suggestive rather than conclusive, and because of the intense interest in the virus, some claims have been made public before the traditional scientific review process.

As a result, some researchers who specialize in studying diseases that spill over from animals to humans have expressed frustration about conducting discussions about scientific claims without the life breath of science: publicly available data and accounts of how the research was done that have been vetted by other scientists.

While scientists wait for details on genetic studies, there is a gaping hole in the more mundane, but equally important, detective work involved in tracking the path of a disease. To be certain of what happened with the new virus, researchers need to know exactly which animals were present in the market in Wuhan which may have been instrumental in the spread of the disease.

The virus was found in people associated with the market, and in the market environment — on surfaces, for instance, or in cages. However, some of the early cases, including what might have been the first reported case, were in people who were not associated with the market. Jon Epstein, vice president for science and outreach at EcoHealth Alliance in New York, said this means the first jump from animals to humans may not have occurred in the marketplace. People may have contracted the disease from animals at another location or earlier, as yet unknown cases may have contracted the disease at the market and passed it on to other people.

Further complicating matters, animals at the Wuhan market seem to have been quickly disposed of, although reports from China were that samples from those animals tested negative for the virus.

“That’s the black box we have, what animals were there, what animals involved,” said Dr. Epstein.

In previous coronavirus outbreaks, SARS in China in 2003 and MERS in Saudi Arabia in 2012, interviews with people who had contact with animal hosts were essential to finding the source, Dr. Epstein said.

Palm civets turned out to be an intermediate host of SARS and camels an intermediate host of MERS. In both outbreaks, researchers eventually found that the origin of the virus was in bats, where the virus could live without sickening the animals. From bats, the viruses seem to have jumped to intermediate hosts and then to people.

An earlier indication that pangolins could be a possible source of human coronavirus infection appeared in a report that predates the epidemic. Chinese researchers published a report in October that documented that pangolins can host a variety of coronaviruses. They released the genetic sequences from their analysis to public databases where they could be analyzed.

Then, on Friday, the Xinhua News Agency reported that researchers at South China Agricultural University had found a virus in pangolins that had a 99 percent match to the novel coronavirus that has now sickened 40,000 people and killed more than 900. That would be the closest match so far.

The news report did not say the finding was conclusive, but that the result means “pangolins

may be an intermediate host of the virus." Scientists in the field are eagerly awaiting publication of the findings, and until then, they are impossible to evaluate.

In addition, a post on the website Virological, suggested that a coronavirus from bats could have recombined with one from pangolins to form the new virus.

Joseph Petrosino, at Baylor College of Medicine, said Matthew Wong, a bio-informatician in his lab, posted an analysis he had done. Dr. Petrosino said he expected the work to be posted on bioRxiv shortly and that he and his colleagues have submitted it to a peer-reviewed journal.

In essence, he said, data mining of genomic data posted in the last 12 months — most importantly the October report on pangolins — indicated that a portion of a coronavirus in pangolins was nearly identical to one in the new virus. That portion involves the way that the virus invades human cells. Therefore, they propose, the bat virus and pangolin virus may have combined, perhaps in pangolins in the wild, perhaps in another animal.

Dr. Petrosino said he's eager for the peer review process, but the intensity of attention to the new virus made public discussion somewhat inevitable. The website Virological, he said, is like "Twitter for geeks," not a place where news is usually made. His lab's research was first reported in the Daily Maverick, a South African news site.

What might have been early hints of hypotheses or preliminary findings in another context now attract global attention. CITES, the international organization that lists endangered species, tweeted that #Pangolins may have spread #coronavirus to humans."

That drew a response from Hume Field, science and policy adviser for EcoHealth Alliance in Australia, who worked on both SARS and MERS. He responded

"I appreciate CITES genuine concern for pangolins and the devastating illegal trade, but to seek to further their cause by propagating this unsubstantiated news release only adds to confusion and rumor."

Public databases enable any lab, anywhere, to investigate and analyze genetic sequences published for bat and pangolin coronaviruses, and hypothesize what may have happened.

Benjamin Neumann, chairman of the biology department at Texas A&M University, is one of the scientists who have been looking at the sequences in his lab and talking to other scientists examining them. "Similar analyses are taking place in labs around the world right now," he said.

But, he said, "While the pangolin-associated viruses appear to be related to the novel coronavirus that is infecting people, it is not yet the smoking gun that tells us how 2019-nCoV originated." That's what the virus causing the epidemic is called.

He pointed out that the pangolins could have been infected by the same virus that sickens humans, but be just another victim rather than the source.

Determining the transmission of a virus from an animal to a human requires much more

information, Dr. Epstein said.

He said, "The smoking gun here is finding people who were healthy before they were handling pangolins, or any other animal. They handled the animal, they got sick after they handled the animal, and the same virus that made them sick was present in the animal they handled."

Coincidentally, this Saturday, Feb. 15, is World Pangolin Day.

[Indonesia] Factbox: Indonesia's parliament debates sweeping new tax bill (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 2:12 AM, Gayatri Suroyo, 5304K, Neutral]

Indonesia's parliament will soon begin debating a sweeping new bill that proposes corporate tax cuts and seeks to make internet giants pay more taxes, as part of a wider plan to simplify laws and boost investments in Southeast Asia's biggest economy.

President Joko Widodo, whose coalition controls nearly three quarters of seats in parliament, has asked lawmakers to finish debate and pass the bill within 100 days.

Here are details of the government's proposal, based on a presentation by Finance Minister Sri Mulyani Indrawati over the weekend:

- To cut corporate tax to 22% in 2021 and 20% in 2023 from 25% now. The phased introduction will allow "breathing space" for the government to replace up to \$6.3 billion of estimated lost revenue per year

- Publicly listed companies meeting certain criteria to get an additional 3 percentage point cut below the general rate

- Internet firms with a significant economic presence, regardless of where they are based, to be considered as resident taxpayers and will be subject to local rules, including paying 10% value-added tax (VAT). Minister Indrawati cited Spotify and Netflix as examples of companies that might be in this category. Both companies did not respond to request for comment

- Removing tax on dividends as long as they are reinvested

- Removing tax on some income from foreign businesses, including dividends obtained offshore, as long as they are reinvested

- Lowering the 20% withholding tax on interest paid by a taxpayer to a foreign tax resident (the new rate will be decided in a separate regulation)

- Foreign nationals to pay taxes only on income generated in Indonesia, instead of currently on world-wide income

- Reducing penalties on late or missed tax payments to the market rate plus 5 percentage points from a maximum of 48% of the amount that should have been paid

-To widen refundable payments under VAT

-Central government to be given the power to overrule regional tax rates

-To include under the new bill all current tax incentives, such as details on tax holidays and allowances, to ensure a stronger legal basis

[Japan] Coronavirus Cases on Cruise Ship Climb to 135 (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 9:41 AM, Suryatapa Bhattacharya and Miho Inada, Negative]

The number of novel coronavirus cases on the Diamond Princess cruise ship nearly doubled to 135, posing dilemmas for Japan as it weighs testing all of the more than 3,500 people on board.

The outbreak on the ship, docked in Yokohama south of Tokyo, has emerged as one of the most difficult virus challenges outside of China, with passengers on board increasingly anxious as the news each day gets worse.

Officials have attributed the outbreak to a passenger who got off the cruise in Hong Kong and was later diagnosed with the virus. But it isn't known how so many people got infected and whether there could be another source of infection.

Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare said Monday an additional 65 people tested positive and would be treated at hospitals on shore, bringing the total number of passengers and crew affected to 135. Earlier the ship's captain had said the number of additional patients was 66.

The ship initially had more than 3,700 passengers and crew. The government early on decided the logistical challenges of testing all of them were too high, although it has tested all 764 Japanese citizens and relatives who were airlifted out of Wuhan, the center of the disease's spread in China. As of Monday, Japan had tested 439 people on the Diamond Princess, focusing on those who had symptoms such as a fever or close contact with an infected person.

Testing everyone "would have eliminated a lot of anxiety. It would've eliminated the question mark," said passenger Kimberly Vincent, a 73-year-old American who lives in Australia. "Some people have been taken to hospitals because of stress, some with heart attacks."

Japan's health minister, Katsunobu Kato, said Monday his ministry was weighing whether to test the remaining passengers and crew before they leave the ship. He said the government has had to reserve some testing kits in case of an outbreak elsewhere in the country.

"We're checking details if we can do it or not," Mr. Kato said. But he warned that testing might delay the end of the ship's quarantine because passengers would have to wait on board until their results were available.

Passengers have been told they would be able to leave the ship on Feb. 19, following World Health Organization guidelines calling for two weeks of quarantine.

Testing for the virus involves taking a sample from the throat and nose. Each test can cost up to several hundred dollars, said Koki Kaku, a professor and infectious disease specialist at the National Defense Medical College Research Institute outside Tokyo. "Rather than talking about testing people without symptoms, we should stress ways to prevent cases from getting serious," Dr. Kaku said.

Passengers were given thermometers on Friday to monitor their body temperature and were asked to alert the crew if it registered above 37.5 degrees Celsius (99.5 degrees Fahrenheit).

So far, no one in Japan has died of the virus. Apart from the cruise ship, the government has identified 26 people in Japan with the virus, and none is in serious condition.

Kent Frasure, 42, from Forest Grove, Ore., said he understood why authorities were focusing tests on those who may be ill. "They probably don't want to deal with the logistical nightmare of offloading passengers that are not sick. Where would we go?" he said. Mr. Frasure's wife, Rebecca, tested positive and was brought to an isolation room at a Tokyo hospital, while he tested negative and remains on the ship. Mrs. Frasure isn't showing any of the symptoms typically associated with the virus, such as coughing and fever.

There are 410 designated hospitals in Japan with nearly 2,000 beds that can handle the precautions needed for people with the novel coronavirus, according to the health ministry.

[Japan] 23 Americans aboard cruise ship in Japan contract novel coronavirus, as global death toll rises to 910 (ABC News)

ABC News [2/10/2020 7:09 AM, Morgan Winsor, 2182K, Negative]

U.S. citizen Rebecca Frasure has been in the isolation ward of a Tokyo hospital since Friday.

Frasure and her husband were supposed to be enjoying themselves on a cruise around Asia, but she's now among the 135 people aboard the Diamond Princess who have tested positive for the novel coronavirus.

"I haven't seen the outside of my room since I got here," Frasure told ABC News in a telephone interview from her hospital room on Monday. "Just never think that something like this is going to happen when you're just on vacation, living life. So, yeah, it was pretty shocking."

The cruise ship has been quarantined at sea in the Japanese port of Yokohama since arriving there on Feb. 3, according to Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare. All those infected with the newly identified virus have been brought ashore for treatment, while the other passengers – including Frasure's husband – remain confined to their rooms on board until the quarantine period ends.

"He's holding up fine. You know, it's difficult to be separated in this way," Frasure said of her husband. "We're just kind of taking it in stride and FaceTiming and such as we can."

Princess Cruises, which operates the ship, announced Sunday that it is offering a full refund to all 2,666 guests on board. More than 400 passengers are from the United States, and at least 23 of them have been infected with the disease, according to a Princess Cruises spokesperson.

The new coronavirus causes symptoms similar to pneumonia ranging from mild, such as a slight cough, to more severe, including fever and difficulty breathing, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. There is no vaccine yet for the virus, nor any known effective therapeutics.

Frasure, who lives with her husband in Forest Grove, Oregon, said she feels "fine" apart from a slightly stuffy nose. She said the most severe symptoms she experienced from the virus were a mild fever and cough, both of which have since resolved.

"It doesn't even feel like a cold," she told ABC News. "To be perfectly honest, I wouldn't have known that there was anything wrong with me if they hadn't tested me."

"I don't think that there's any reason to spread panic," she added. "I think that people just need to be aware and, you know, practice good hygiene."

Panic has begun to set in elsewhere, as the death toll from the new coronavirus continues to rise. By Monday, China's National Health Commission said it had received 40,171 reports of confirmed cases on the Chinese mainland and 908 deaths. An additional 64 infections have been confirmed in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, and one death has been recorded in Hong Kong.

At least 307 additional people in 24 other countries have contracted the novel coronavirus, according to the World Health Organization. Only one patient has died outside of China – a 44-year-old man in the Philippines – bringing the global death toll to 910, which exceeds the number of people killed in the 2002-2003 SARS outbreak.

The WHO has declared the outbreak a global health emergency.

The epicenter is in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where the first cases of the new coronavirus were detected back in December. A 60-year-old American man who tested positive for the disease died at a Wuhan hospital last week, a U.S. Embassy spokesperson told ABC News. He's the first U.S. citizen to die after being diagnosed with newly discovered virus.

A number of Americans have been evacuated from China in recent weeks, and the U.S. Department of State has identified dozens more who have requested help in evacuating from the Chinese province of Hubei, which includes Wuhan,

In the United States, 12 confirmed coronavirus cases have been reported in Arizona, California, Illinois, Massachusetts, Washington and Wisconsin. The CDC has shipped newly approved coronavirus tests to labs across the country so states can begin their own diagnostic testing instead of shipping all samples to the agency's headquarters in Atlanta.

The outbreak has caused several major U.S. airlines to suspend all flights to China, and

American companies and government agencies have evacuated staff from the country. The U.S. Department of State issued a Level 4 travel advisory for China on Jan. 30, warning people to avoid all travel to the country.

New York residents Milena Basso and Guy Cerullo are among the thousands of people aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship quarantined in Japan. The couple, who are on their honeymoon, said they're trying to remain in good spirits but the increasing number of infected passengers is concerning.

"It's just slowly creeping up," Basso told ABC News in a telephone interview Monday. "It's making us think, like us being on here, we're just prone to this scenario to happen. That's what's really worrying us."

Like all other passengers on board, the newlyweds are confined to their room. They are provided with three meals a day, free internet and access to counseling services.

Passengers are also allowed access to the ship's upper deck during scheduled break times while wearing masks and gloves, but Basso and Cerullo said they don't want to risk it. The couple have even stopped allowing crew members into their room to clean up.

"I'd rather go mentally crazy than catch the virus," Basso told ABC News. "It'll be worth it in the end for us to just get home, to be healthy and clean, and that's it."

[Japan] The number of coronavirus cases on ship in Japan nearly doubles as passengers report going 'stir crazy' under quarantine (Yahoo News/Business Insider)
Yahoo News/Business Insider [2/10/2020 2:29 AM, Rosie Perper, 10942K, Negative]
The number of confirmed coronavirus cases aboard the Diamond Princess cruise ship currently quarantined near Tokyo has risen to 130.

Japanese and Chinese sources confirmed on Monday that 60 new cases of the coronavirus were discovered, a major jump from the 70 cases previously confirmed. The ship was placed on a two-week quarantine upon arrival in Yokohama on February 3.

Japan's TBS News first reported on the new cases, citing Japan's health ministry. Communist Party-linked People's Daily also confirmed the news on Twitter.

There are about 3,700 passengers and crew aboard the ship operated by Princess Cruises.

According to The New York Times, the ship now hosts the highest concentration of coronavirus cases outside of China.

Passengers on the ship have described feeling "stir crazy" as they wait out the quarantine in isolation.

A passenger who asked to be identified only as Shannon told Business Insider's Sarah Al-Arshani that information about what is happening on board has been scarce.

"I feel completely lost at sea," she said. "It's my first and possibly last cruise."

On February 6, Princess Cruises announced that the quarantine would end on February 19 "unless there are any other unforeseen developments." It is unclear whether the quarantine will be extended due to the influx of new cases.

Princess Cruises also confirmed that several internationals on board had contracted the virus, including guests from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Japan, the UK, and the US.

The cruise company said on Sunday that it would offer a full refund to all passengers aboard the quarantined ship.

"Because of the extraordinary circumstances onboard Diamond Princess, Princess Cruises will refund the full cruise fare for all guests including air travel, hotel, ground transportation, pre-paid shore excursions, gratuities and other items. In addition, guests will not be charged for any onboard incidental charges during the additional time onboard."

Another cruise ship, The World Dream, also quarantined passengers over coronavirus fears. The ship allowed passengers to disembark in Hong Kong on Sunday after crew members tested negative for the virus.

The coronavirus outbreak has killed more than 900 people and infected more than 40,000 people internationally as of Monday.

[North Korea] North Korea Deepens Isolation Amid Virus Threat (Wall Street Journal)
Wall Street Journal [2/10/2020 11:18 AM, Timothy W. Martin, Negative]

The challenge to contain the coronavirus looks particularly daunting in North Korea, one of the world's poorest and most isolated countries.

North Korea was among the first countries last month to block the entry of foreign tourists, who come mostly from neighboring China, the source of the outbreak. It has since cut off trade with China, its main economic benefactor and ally, and limited diplomatic travel, according to North Korean state media and diplomats. The country hasn't reported any cases of the deadly coronavirus.

But Pyongyang needs to wall itself off because its health-care system lacks the resources to diagnose and treat patients, experts say. The prospect of outside help is also impeded by United Nations sanctions and the question of whether the secretive Kim Jong Un regime would even accept foreign aid.

North Korea's main state newspaper called thwarting the coronavirus a matter of "national survival."

"This is really an existential threat for North Korea," said Rodger Baker, a senior vice president at geopolitical consulting firm Stratfor. "Their health system is not structured to be able to contain something like the coronavirus."

By cutting itself off from the outside, the Kim regime also chokes off vital cross-border trade and tourism. Along the Chinese border, all train rides have been canceled and trucks have

stopped crossing, said Kang Chol Hwan, a North Korean defector who regularly communicates with people in both countries.

North Korea derived about 92% of its total trade from China in 2019, according to the Seoul-based Korea International Trade Association. South Korea, after sanctions were enforced, isn't a significant trade partner with its northern neighbor. But on Friday South Korea's ruling party, which advocates a pro-engagement policy, urged lawmakers to consider sending medical supplies to their northern neighbors.

North Korea has established "anti-epidemic posts" around the country and boosted domestic production of face masks and drugs—including development of a new antiviral treatment—that strive to "completely keep the virus from spreading," Pyongyang's state-run media said Friday.

"North Korea has completely isolated itself," said Mr. Kang, who is now director at the North Korea Strategy Center, a human-rights advocacy group based in Seoul.

Although the World Health Organization says Pyongyang hasn't reported any cases, the bordering Chinese provinces of Jilin and Liaoning have a combined 183 incidents, according to WHO figures as of Sunday. China, where most of the infections and deaths have occurred, reported 97 deaths in the mainland on Sunday, bringing the total number killed there to 908 people. China's cabinet-level National Health Commission on Sunday confirmed 3,062 new cases of infection, bringing the total to 40,171.

The WHO is working with all its member states, including North Korea, to combat the coronavirus, Edwin Ceniza Salvador, the organization's representative to North Korea, said. The WHO is providing the North's health workers with protective equipment, such as gowns and goggles, and laboratory-testing supplies. North Korea is "taking measures to protect [the] health of its people," he said.

North Korea is on near-lockdown. The country's vice foreign minister canceled a trip to Germany for a security conference, according to South Korean media. Pyongyang-based foreign diplomats have been notified they cannot leave their compounds for 14 days, say people familiar with the situation.

Inside North Korea, the regime's ability to face an outbreak is limited by its outdated health-care system, already worsened by the U.N. sanctions that have impeded foreign aid and the replenishment of supplies, experts say.

Treating coronavirus requires expensive supplies like ventilators, IV fluids and medication that can stabilize blood pressure, said Kee B. Park, a lecturer at Harvard Medical School, who has visited North Korea's health-care facilities. "If there is a massive outbreak overwhelming the hospitals, they will run out of supplies very quickly," Dr. Park said.

A health scare would further challenge Mr. Kim, who already faces domestic pressure over his country's stagnant economy. In a Jan. 1 policy announcement, the North Korean leader urged citizens to tighten their belts and prepare for a protracted showdown with the U.S. Mr. Kim said he no longer felt bound to a moratorium on long-range weapons tests established in the months before his 2018 Singapore summit with President Trump on denuclearization.

The U.S. and North Korea haven't held working-level talks since October. Mr. Trump didn't mention North Korea during his State of the Union address on Feb. 5.

Mr. Kim, during his recent policy speech, threatened to unveil a new strategic weapon in the near future but provided no specifics. Pyongyang has kept a low profile in recent weeks. It hasn't conducted a weapon or rocket-engine test in nearly two months. State-media have toned down attacks on the Trump administration.

Some close North Korean watchers had predicted that Pyongyang could unveil a new intercontinental ballistic missile at a military parade this month, pegged to national holidays celebrating the military's founding and the birth of Mr. Kim's father, Kim Jong Il.

But the coronavirus threat may keep Pyongyang distracted for the foreseeable future, security experts said.

"A campaign of provocation and antagonism requires resources, time and attention, and those things are focused on something else for now," said Gordon Flake, a Korea specialist at the Perth USAsia Centre in Australia.

During the SARS crisis in 2002 and 2003, North Korea was forced to allow in outside relief agencies to help combat the deadly virus, causing deep embarrassment for then-leader Kim Jong Il, said Hoo Chiew Ping, a Korea expert at the National University of Malaysia.

"Now the regime is trying to portray an image of confidence," Ms. Ping said. "This is an issue that Kim Jong Un needs to manage quite carefully."

[North Korea] North Korea enhanced nuclear, missile programs in 2019 in breach of sanctions - U.N. report (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 1:34 PM, Michelle Nichols, Neutral]

North Korea continued to enhance its nuclear and ballistic missile programs last year in breach of United Nations sanctions, according to a confidential U.N. report seen by Reuters on Monday.

The country also illicitly imported refined petroleum and exported some \$370 million worth of coal with the help of Chinese barges, the report added.

The 67-page report to the U.N. Security Council North Korea sanctions committee, which is due to be made public next month, comes as the United States tries to revive stalled denuclearization talks with North Korea.

"In 2019, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) did not halt its illicit nuclear and ballistic missile programs, which it continued to enhance, in violation of Security Council resolutions," the independent U.N. sanctions monitors wrote.

"Despite its extensive indigenous capability it uses illicit external procurement for some components and technology."

North Korea has been subjected to U.N. sanctions since 2006. They have been strengthened by the 15-member Security Council over the years in a bid to cut off funding for Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

The sanctions monitors said that in a fresh bid to evade sanctions, North Korea had started to export millions of tonnes of commodities - banned since 2017 - using barges.

"According to a Member State, the DPRK exported 3.7 million metric tons of coal between January and August 2019, with an estimated value of \$370 million," the report said.

"According to the Member State, most DPRK coal exports, an estimated 2.8 million metric tons, were conducted via ship-to-ship transfers from DPRK-flagged vessels to Chinese local barges."

The unidentified member state told the monitors that barges had delivered coal directly to three ports in China's Hangzhou Bay and also to facilities along the Yangtze river.

The U.N. monitors also said a member state reported that North Korea had exported at least one million tonnes of sand from river dredging, worth at least \$22 million, to Chinese ports.

Pyongyang ally China has repeatedly said it is implementing U.N. sanctions.

The sanctions monitors reported that North Korea continued to illicitly import refined petroleum through ship-to-ship transfers at sea and direct deliveries.

Since 2017, North Korea's annual imports of refined petroleum have been capped by the U.N. Security Council at 500,000 barrels. The monitors said the United States reported that between Jan. 1 and Oct. 31 last year, Pyongyang imported refined petroleum that exceeded the cap "many times over."

While U.N. sanctions are not meant to harm North Korean civilians, the U.N. report said: "There can be little doubt that U.N. sanctions have had unintended effects on the humanitarian situation and aid operations, although access to data and evidence is limited and there is no reliable methodology that disambiguates UN sanctions from other factors."

Russia and China have raised concerns that sanctions were harming North Korean civilians, and have expressed hope that easing some restrictions could help break the deadlock in nuclear talks between Washington and Pyongyang.

But the United States, France and Britain said now is not the time to consider lifting sanctions.

North Korea has said it is no longer bound by a commitment to halt nuclear and missile testing, blaming the United States for failing to meet an end-2019 deadline to show more flexibility in nuclear talks and in "brutal and inhumane" sanctions.

The U.N. report said North Korea conducted 13 missile tests last year, launching at least 25 missiles, including new types of short range and submarine-launched ballistic missiles.

"It continued to develop infrastructure and capacity for its missile program," the monitors said.

The sanctions monitors also concluded that North Korea continued to carry out cyber attacks against financial institutions and cryptocurrency exchanges globally.

"These attacks have resulted in monetary losses and have provided illicit revenue for the DPRK in violation of financial sanctions," the report said.

"These attacks are low-risk, high-reward, difficult to detect, and their increasing sophistication can frustrate attribution."

[Singapore] Singapore Braces as Coronavirus Cases Emerge in Financial Centre (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 2:23 AM, Chanyorn Chanjaroen, Faris Mokhtar and Krystal Chia, 6400K, Neutral]

Singapore's coronavirus outbreak has spread to its financial center, with some staff at major companies being told to work from home for at least the next few days and temperature screening checkpoints set up at the front doors of several towers.

A worker at an unnamed firm in Marina Bay Financial Centre Tower 1 has been confirmed as being infected with the virus over the weekend, according to a circular to tenants by the building's manager Raffles Quay Asset Management Pte. Another case at nearby Clifford Centre, in the heart of the central business district, is an employee of United Industrial Corp, according to an advisory to tenants in the building where UIC is located.

The affected premises in both buildings have been disinfected and all tenants informed, the property managers said in the notices dated Feb. 9.

Singapore last week raised its disease response level to the same grade used during the SARS epidemic, as it braced for what Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said was a "major test for our nation."

There are 43 confirmed cases of coronavirus in Singapore -- the largest number of infections outside China, excluding a quarantined cruise ship in Japan. Of the total, 22 cases are locally transmitted infections, according to the city-state's health ministry. Six people have fully recovered from the infection and discharged from hospital, while six are in critical condition.

The city-state has cautioned residents to avoid shaking hands in a bid to contain the spread of the virus. Panic buying had sparked a run on toilet paper, rice and instant noodles in stores, echoing scenes of long lines and bare shelves seen last week in Hong Kong and mainland China. Government officials warned against hoarding supplies, while the Monetary Authority of Singapore told banks to be prepared for an increased demand in cash withdrawals.

Standard Chartered Plc is the anchor tenant at Tower 1, leasing the lion's share of the 33-

story building that has 620,000 square feet. The U.K. bank declined to comment whether the virus case comes from among its employees.

"We have a well-established business continuity plan and implemented a comprehensive set of precautionary measures such as temperature screening, mandatory employee and visitor declarations, and increased the frequency of sanitization at our branches and office premises," the bank said in an emailed reply to queries from Bloomberg.

DBS Group Holdings Ltd, Southeast Asia's largest bank with headquarters in the nearby MBFC Tower 3, has activated business continuity plans with employees working from home and from other locations, on top of other measures that include temperature screening on all its office buildings, the bank said in an emailed reply to questions from Bloomberg News.

Rio Tinto Group, Australia's top iron-ore miner that's also located in Tower 3, said that it has instructed employees to work from home from Monday through to Wednesday "as a precaution." Its Singapore office is one of its key hubs outside of Australia.

United Overseas Bank Ltd. said it has activated its business continuity plans, having staff working from split sites, from home and on split shifts. Singapore's third-largest bank also postponed all large-scale public gatherings including customer events.

[South Korea] Former North Korean diplomat to run in South Korea's April general election: Yonhap (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 8:18 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Thae Yong Ho, North Korea's former deputy ambassador to Britain who defected to the South, is expected to run in an April general election as a member of the main opposition party, Yonhap New Agency reported on Monday citing a party official.

The official, Kim Hyong-o, head of the conservative Liberty Korea Party's election candidate selection panel, told reporters that the party planned to find Thae a constituency where he could play a good role, adding somewhere in Seoul would be appropriate.

"(Thae) is someone who risked his life for freedom. As a person who understands the sorrow of the 10 million separated families and as one of the 25 million North Koreans, he is the one who could show present a vision for peace and publicize South Korea's related position," Kim added.

The general election for the country's national assembly is scheduled on April 15.

[Taiwan] Taiwan to bar entry of many Hong Kong, Macau residents to halt virus (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 1:26 AM, Ben Blanchard and Meg Shen, 5304K, Negative]

Taiwan expanded its restrictions on visitors from Hong Kong and Macau on Monday to freeze the entry of many residents from the two Chinese-run cities to help control the spread of the new coronavirus.

Taiwan has been gradually stepping up its controls on visitors from both Hong Kong and Macau as well as mainland China. It has already stopped mainland Chinese who live in

China from coming and suspended new visa issuance for Hong Kong and Macau residents.

The new rule for Hong Kong and Macau residents will exclude people on business trips or those being transferred by multinational companies, and children and spouses of Taiwanese who have Taiwan resident permits, the Mainland Affairs Council said.

Hong Kong and Macau students studying in Taiwan are also not allowed back onto the island, it added.

Those from Hong Kong and Macau who are allowed into Taiwan will have to quarantine themselves at home for 14 days, the council said.

Taiwan has only reported 18 cases of the virus, compared with more than 40,000 in China.

South and Central Asia

[India] Outcry over reports of mass assault at New Delhi women's college (CNN)

CNN [2/10/2020 9:58 AM, Esha Mitra, Swati Gupta and Samantha Beech, Neutral]

Reports that large crowds of men sexually harassed and abused students at a women's college in the Indian capital New Delhi last week has sparked an outcry and protests there.

The men barged onto the Gargi College campus in South Delhi last Thursday, on the final day of a school festival, allegedly molesting and sexually assaulting the female students en masse, according to a statement issued by the General Body of Students.

The student group said that "thousands" of men jumped the gates of the university, descended onto the campus and damaged property, while police and non-teaching staff stood by and did nothing.

"Men stood in gangs and ogled at women, groped them, tried to feel them up, pushed them, and touched them throughout the concert," the statement read.

"People formed human chains to move from one area to another. After the concert was over, the men followed women, catcalled them, and forced them to reveal their names and Instagram IDs."

New Delhi police said it had filed an official complaint against unidentified people for trespassing, as well as assaulting and harassing women, at a Delhi college last week.

"We are in touch with the principal of the college and are looking at CCTV footage as well," police spokesperson Anil Mittal said.

The Deputy Commissioner of South Delhi Police Atul Thakur said that police were investigating claims that officers did not take action during the alleged assaults.

"We have started our own formal inquiry and it is being led by a senior police official," Thakur added.

Many of the allegations of harassment and abuse were reported to the Gargi Students' Union through an online form. The Union said the three-day festival, known as "Reverie '20," started peacefully, before taking a "horrendous" turn on the third day.

"It became absolutely impossible to move in that crowd," the union said in a statement.

The union claimed bouncers and police "looked incompetent and indifferent" as hundreds of people barged through the gates.

Gargi College has condemned the "outrageous incidents" that took place during Reverie, saying that it was committed to the security of students and would set up a "high-level fact finding committee" to meet with the complainants and eyewitnesses.

"The institution will file a report of complaints to the police at the earliest so perpetrators can be brought to justice," principal Promila Kumar said in a statement. "We will set up a security protocol to ensure such incidents never take place again."

Protesters gathered outside the school on Monday, some holding signs calling for Kumar to resign.

The General Body of Students has called for a mass strike at the school until a meeting is secured with the principal and teachers responsible for their safety and security. It is also calling on students to sign a petition "to assure us a safe and secure Reverie 2021 with a proper plan of action put in front of us."

The Chairperson of the Delhi Commission for Women, Swati Maliwal, visited the college on Monday to meet with students and the administration.

"In Gargi College, the miscreants busted the walls and molested the college girls. Despite such a serious matter, the police and college administration present on the spot have not taken any action yet!" Maliwal tweeted, adding that the perpetrators "must be arrested immediately!"

[India] India Top Court to Hear Case Against Delhi Protesters Feb. 17 (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 2:43 AM, Upmanyu Trivedi, 6400K, Neutral]

India's Supreme Court has agreed to hear petitions seeking the removal of demonstrators from a main thoroughfare in the capital New Delhi, where they've staged a 58-day sit-in to protest against the government's religion-based citizenship law.

The petitioners say the protest, which is blocking a road, is causing civic inconvenience and traffic problems.

"You cannot block public road indefinitely. If everybody protests everywhere, what will happen?" Justice Sanjay K. Kaul said during the hearing on Monday, although the two-judge bench did not give any order today. Protests can happen in designated areas, Kaul observed.

Tensions have been high in New Delhi with at least three shooting attacks near the

prominent protest site against the new law which seeks to grant citizenship to undocumented immigrants of all faiths from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan except Muslims. Thousands, especially students, have hit the streets since Parliament approved the law in December.

The court has sought submissions from the Delhi Police, state government and the federal government on the issue that will be heard again on Feb. 17.

[Kazakhstan] Kazakhstan to send two planes to China to evacuate its citizens (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 12:58 AM, Olzhas Auyezov, 5304K, Neutral]

Kazakhstan will send two planes to China on Feb. 10 and Feb. 12 to evacuate its citizens amid a coronavirus outbreak, the Central Asian nation's foreign ministry said on Monday.

Out of 719 Kazakhs remaining in China, 391 have asked to be repatriated, it said in a statement. The flights will also take 47 Chinese citizens to Beijing.

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Canada] Military Wants Huawei Banned from 5G in Canada: Report (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 7:57 AM, Stephen Wicary, 6400K, Neutral]

Canada's military wants Justin Trudeau to ban Huawei Technologies Co. from the nation's fifth-generation wireless networks, according to the Globe and Mail.

Senior military officials including Canada's top soldier have told the government they believe allowing the Chinese company a role in 5G would threaten national security, the newspaper reported Monday, citing an unnamed official familiar with the matter.

Donald Trump has been pushing allies to shut the Shenzhen-based tech giant out, citing concerns its gear could be vulnerable to Chinese spies. American officials have warned the U.S. might be forced to hold back secret intelligence from Canada if the prime minister gives Huawei a role, despite the company's repeated denials it poses a security risk.

Canada is the only member of the so-called Five Eyes network of intelligence-sharing nations that has yet to decide what to do with Huawei. Australia and New Zealand followed the U.S. lead in banning it, but U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government opted for a mixed approach in a Jan. 28 decision that disappointed the White House.

Looming large over Trudeau's decision is the case of Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's chief financial officer. Her arrest in Vancouver at the end of 2018 on a U.S. extradition request plunged the northern nation's relations with China into their darkest period in a half century. Beijing locked up two Canadians and halted key agricultural imports in the months that followed.

The rift with China contributed to a 16% plunge in exports to the Asian powerhouse last year, the largest drop in data going back to 1997.

Trudeau's public safety minister said last month the government is studying the U.K. decision. An outright ban could compel companies like BCE Inc. and Telus Corp. to rip out existing Huawei equipment to accommodate a new supplier, the Globe and Mail reported.

[Colombia] Colombia puts military on alert after guerrilla threat (Yahoo News/AFP)

Yahoo News/AFP [2/10/2020 4:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Colombia has put its armed forces on maximum alert following the announcement of a nationwide three-day "armed strike" by left-wing guerrillas, the government said on Monday.

ELN commander Uriel announced on social media the "72-hour armed strike in the national territory" from Friday.

The ELN is the last recognized guerrilla movement still fighting authorities in Colombia and can count on around 2,300 fighters.

"All the country's units are on maximum alert to deal with any requirement to protect the population," said Defense Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo.

He said the armed forces would "respond with the adequate and legitimate firmness, and with all the rigor, in the face of these terrorists' threats."

The ELN has announced armed strikes before but never on a nationwide level.

The group warned citizens against using roads during the strike, adding that "staying in their homes will avoid unfortunate consequences."

The ELN is the last remaining armed guerrilla group operating in Colombia since the FARC laid down weapons in 2016 and formed a political party after signing a peace deal with the government of then-president Juan Manuel Santos.

Yet Colombia remains wracked by a multi-faceted armed conflict involving left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, drug-traffickers and security forces.

Over the last 50 years, eight million people have either been killed, disappeared or displaced due to the ongoing conflict.

[Colombia] Colombia aims to eradicate 130,000 hectares of coca in 2020 (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 11:41 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Colombia hopes this year to eradicate 130,000 hectares (321,237 acres) of coca, the base ingredient in cocaine, Defense Minister Carlos Holmes Trujillo said on Monday.

A wide variety of tools will be made available to remove the coca plants, the minister said, including the possible re-introduction of aerial spraying of the herbicide glyphosate.

The country has come under constant pressure from the United States, the principal destination for cocaine, to reduce coca cultivation within its borders since the end of 2017, when the area taken up by coca plantations hit 209,000 hectares.

The coca crop in 2017 had the capacity to produce 921 tonnes of cocaine, according to the U.S. government.

"Regarding the eradication target, we set a goal of 130,000 hectares, taking into account all the available tools," Trujillo told journalists.

The goal for coca eradication in 2020 is 30% higher than the previous year, when the Andean country managed to destroy a little more than 100,000 hectares of coca using manual removal techniques.

Colombia suspended aerial fumigation of glyphosate in 2015, after the World Health Organization said the herbicide was harmful to the environment and health, potentially causing cancer.

President Ivan Duque's government is working to meet various health and environmental requirements demanded by the Constitutional Court so it can restart aerial fumigation, possibly in the first half of this year.

Drug trafficking has long-fed Colombia's internal armed conflicts. Leftist rebel group the National Liberation Army (ELN), dissidents from the former Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerrillas - who demobilized under a 2016 peace deal - and criminal groups all make money from the trade, according to security sources.

[Ecuador] Bribery trial begins against ex-Ecuador leader Rafael Correa (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 12:06 PM, Gonzalo Solano, Neutral]

Former Ecuadorean President Rafael Correa and 20 other high-ranking politicians and business leaders went on trial Monday, with prosecutors accusing them of orchestrating a multimillion-dollar bribery operation.

Chief Prosecutor Diana Salazar opened the proceeding at the National Court of Justice, describing a scheme in which Correa's PAIS Alliance political party took cash in exchange for lucrative public works contracts.

"A criminal structure comprised of various public officials with strategic roles was created," she said. "Those roles facilitated accepting money from businessmen or their representatives in exchange for infrastructure works."

The case could have wide implications for Correa, who held the presidency between 2007 to 2017 and won the loyalty of millions of poor Ecuadoreans with generous health and social programs. He is currently in self-imposed exile in Belgium and rejects the charges against him.

"This is all a big farce," he said in a video posted last month on Twitter.

The former president still harbors political aspirations, though he cannot run again for president, and his role in any future local or congressional elections could be hindered by

the outcome of the trial. The bribery scheme is alleged to have taken place from 2012 to 2016.

[El Salvador] El Salvador standoff deepens over loan for security forces (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 2:25 AM, Marcos Aleman, 1907K, Neutral]

Hundreds of supporters of Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele heeded his call to converge on the country's parliament Sunday after lawmakers refused to gather to vote on a \$109 million loan to better equip the country's security forces, sharply increasing tensions between the leader and the opposition-controlled legislature.

Top commanders of the country's police and military have expressed allegiance to the president during the standoff, while positioning heavily armed security forces around and inside the legislative building.

Bukele gave an emotional speech to his supporters, who had threatened to remove opposition lawmakers from the legislature by force. But he said that after praying amid soldiers and police, he decided to ask for patience from his supporters and set a deadline of one week for lawmakers to approve the bill.

"If we wanted to press the button, we would press the button" and remove lawmakers from the legislature, he told supporters outside the building. "But I asked God and God told me: patience, patience, patience. On February 28 (2021) all these scoundrels are heading out the door outside."

El Salvador holds municipal and legislative elections on Feb. 21 of next year.

Opposition legislators say they want more details on the spending plan before being called to a vote.

The opposition FMLN party accused Bukele of intimidation and acting like "a dictatorship" for trying to force approval of the loan.

Bukele's administration says it would use the funds to purchase a helicopter, police cars, uniforms, night vision goggles and other equipment, including a video surveillance system in a country plagued by gangs and high crime. It also says that Cabinet members have explained the plans, and that they are willing to give more details to legislators.

Bukele took office in June with broad popular support. Voters saw the businessman as an outsider who could modernize the country and upset the status quo.

Addressing his supporters, Bukele said polls suggest his New Ideas party would win a majority in the new legislature in 2021's voting, so there is no need for them to break into it by force now.

"If these scoundrels do not approve (the loan for), the Territorial Control Plan, we will summon them here on Sunday," setting a week deadline.

Citing El Salvador's constitution, Bukele's government had called an extraordinary meeting

of the legislative assembly to debate approval of the loan but lawmakers rejected the call, saying it was inadmissible.

In response, Bukele invoked article 87 of the charter that recognizes the people's right to insurrection, "for the sole purpose of restoring the constitutional order," and summoned his supporters to the legislature.

The government deployed the police and the military, and since Saturday they have cordoned off the area around the legislative building. The Armed Forces and National Civil Police issued pronouncements stating their loyalty to Bukele.

Meanwhile, the right-wing Nationalist Republican Alliance, which has said it will not vote for the bill, asked the Organization of American States to activate mechanisms to prevent the breakdown of the constitutional order in El Salvador and "act to immediately suspend the self-coup process under way."

The leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front, or FMLN, issued a statement demanding the president "stop his threats which are typical of a dictatorship."

The legislative assembly is made up of 84 deputies with 37 from the Nationalist Republican Alliance and 23 from the FMLN, giving them a majority in the body.

[Mexico] In the heart of Mexico's violence, disillusion grows (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 11:38 AM, Astrid Galvan, Neutral]

Alejandra Uvilla fled her home city of Apatzingan because of overwhelming violence, moving 65 miles (105 km) north to bustling, mountain-nestled Uruapan in the avocado belt of Michoacan state. Three years later, the bloodshed is even worse here.

Cartels are battling for territory and reports of grisly killings are common, such as the gun massacre last week of three young boys, a teenager and five others who were playing video games at an arcade in what had been a relatively quiet neighborhood.

"You constantly hear that there are a lot of dead here in Uruapan," said Uvilla, a 20-year-old stay-at-home mom, adding that she doesn't know what to do anymore other than be extra cautious with her 1-year-old son. "And you don't live at ease, because now when you go out, you do so with fear."

The names of cartels have changed over the years in Uruapan as groups and alliances wax and wane, but the killings continue. Similar stories are playing out in many towns and cities across the country, leaving millions of Mexicans fearful, frustrated and discouraged amid record homicide levels, de facto cartel control over entire communities and no apparent end in sight to nearly a decade and a half of drug conflict.

Mexico recorded 35,588 homicides last year, the most since comparable records began to be kept in the 1990s, though the rate of increase was far lower than in previous years. Since then-President Felipe Calderón ramped up a militarized anti-drug offensive beginning in 2006, annual killings have more than tripled in the country.

Current President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who took office in December 2019, has in the past referred to his security strategy as "hugs not bullets" and emphasizes addressing root causes of violence such as poverty, youth unemployment and corruption, in contrast to his predecessors.

Not everyone agrees.

"If we keep doing the same thing we can't expect different results," university professor Emiliano Maciel Ávila said while walking in Uruapan's main square. "I don't think this hugging and kissing thing is working. I think we have to combat them."

Only a handful of National Guard members were seen in Uruapan on Wednesday, the rainy day when the murdered boys were buried

By the next day, the sun shone brightly, and double the number of guardsmen and -women stood at that entryway, checking cars and trucks. More police, both federal and state, were seen driving through town, circling Uruapan's central square.

But not many believe that will make much of a difference.

"We don't expect anything from authorities anymore. People are very disenchanting," said the Rev. Sergio Arroyo, who presided over the funeral for the arcade victims.

López Obrador reformulated Mexico's security forces into a new National Guard that deployed last year with some 70,000 troops nationwide. But as before, police and troops often find themselves outgunned by the cartels. Moreover, the Guard has also been tasked with immigration enforcement following intense pressure from Washington, raising questions about whether that would distract from its security responsibilities.

Arroyo said locals would have to take it upon themselves to turn things around in the city of some 340,000 people, whose colonial-style downtown is a few blocks from the verdant Cupatitzio National Park that abounds with springs and small waterfalls. He suggested peace marches, committees of community and faith leaders and pressure on the government to take action.

"Prayer without action won't do anything," Arroyo said.

The detonator of Mexico's drug war, which has left an estimated 150,000 dead so far, is often traced to Uruapan, where in September 2006 masked gunmen burst into a bar and tossed five severed heads onto the dance floor.

Recent events made clear that Uruapan, where murders rose 61% from 2018 to 2019 according to government figures, remains a hot spot of violence. The Jalisco New Generation cartel and Los Viagra gang are waging a turf war, and other groups and factions also may come into play.

The day before the arcade shooting, the bodies of 11 people were found in clandestine graves on a hill where luxury apartments are being built. A day earlier, gunmen attacked a municipal police patrol, killing an officer and wounding two. The attack may have been in

retaliation for the earlier arrest of a Los Viagras leader who's been implicated in 19 killings.

So in a city where stores all around the city display giant Valentine's Day teddy bears for sale, bloodshed is common.

Uruapan residents say they avoid leaving the house at night and don't let children play outside. Two of the boys who were killed in the arcade didn't have permission when they sneaked out to play, relatives said.

The boys, all from the same neighborhood, were gunned down in broad daylight in the small, bright blue arcade, which was adorned with candles and remained closed after the funeral.

The motive behind the attack has not been clarified, and many residents of the neighborhood where it happened were loath to speculate. But some around town said they suspect gangs may have been extorting the arcade's owner — a major issue in this city, according to residents.

Over time, so many criminal bands have fought with and within each other that it's impossible to know who's behind what, many say.

"You don't know who's good, who's bad, who's doing what to pacify," said Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera, a global fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars and George Mason University professor who has written extensively on violence and organized crime in Mexico.

Correa-Cabrera's family had to flee Michoacan after her father was extorted and threatened by the once-dominant Zetas cartel.

"We don't have the police to respond to the needs of the country, and the National Guard was very recently created without a very clear plan for how, where, they were going to fight violence," she said.

Michoacan Gov. Silvano Aureoles Conejo last week promised a new security strategy in Uruapan, though he said he could not give details.

"But we are not going to bow down," Aureoles said. "We're not going to let them take away our residents' liberty."

Carlos Manzo, a lifelong Uruapan resident and social activist, believes his city could one day be the prosperous tourist attraction it was when he was growing up. The food, culture, history and natural wonders that once drew European and American travelers remain, he said, but it's up to the people to improve the quality of life.

"We have to stop being afraid. Fear is going to kill us," Manzo said. "When you no longer have options for happiness, well then you're done."

[Mexico] 'Under Siege': desperate Mexico region uses guns, children to fend off cartels (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 9:50 AM, Alexandre Meneghini, Negative]

When the 56-year-old mother-in-law of David Sanchez Luna was tortured and killed after venturing out of her small Mexican community encircled by drug cartels, he let his seven- and ten-year-old daughters receive military-style weapons training.

Unable to send their children to school and too afraid to step out of their enclave of 16 mountain villages in the violence-plagued southwestern Guerrero state, residents say they have been left with little choice.

"They do this to prepare themselves to defend the family, their siblings and defend the village," said Sanchez Luna, a corn farmer in a rugged region which five years ago formed a self-defense "community police" militia to protect itself.

The move by the villagers to offer arms training to school-age children shocked the nation and made global headlines last month after local media broadcast images of children as young as 6-years-old toting guns and showing off military maneuvers.

While elders in the mainly indigenous community near the city of Chilapa privately concede young kids would not be used to fight cartel gunmen, they say their gambit to get the help of far-away officials in Mexico City is borne of desperation.

Ten musicians from the area were ambushed and killed last month by suspected Los Ardillos cartel members after stepping out of the territory guarded by their self-defense militia, known as CRAC-PF. Their bodies were burnt, officials said.

The attack followed a spate of murders in recent year, including a beheading, that rattled the 6,500 residents whose lush land sits amid fertile poppy-growing farmland that feed Guerrero's heroin trade and supply routes to the United States.

The grisly murders and siege-like conditions facing residents go to the heart of cartel power and state failure in modern Mexico, where runaway violence tears at society's fabric.

"This is a public cry for help by a community that's been cornered," said Falko Ernst, an International Crisis Group (ICG) analyst. "They've been trying to get assistance by federal and state government, unsuccessfully, so they're trying to escalate the language to try to negotiate and get help."

President Manuel Andres Lopez Obrador said those who arm children "should be ashamed of themselves" and denounced the use of children to grab attention.

Lopez Obrador's government has struggled to get a grip on gangs and violence, with a record 34,582 murders last year.

Residents remain deeply suspicious of regional authorities and the smattering of local policemen in their villages, who they accuse of being the eyes and ears of the Los Ardillos.

Parents say their children are forced to stop formal education once they reach about 12

years of age, as the middle schools are in territory controlled by the cartel.

Abuner Martinez, 16, stopped attending school a year ago after his father was kidnapped outside CRAC-PF territory, tortured, and then beheaded.

"I got scared at that moment. I didn't want to go to school," said Martinez, who now wields a shotgun as he guards a checkpoint.

The Los Ardillos want to extort the farmers and force them to grow opium for the cartel, said Sanchez Luna's brother, Bernardino, who founded the CRAC-PF.

"We find ourselves under siege," he said.

CRAC-PF repelled a major attack by Los Ardillos in January 2019, but residents live in fear of the siren, a community alarm system, going off again.

Farmers tend their corn fields with shotguns slung on their backs, while armed CRAC-PF militiamen keep guard and patrol their territory round the clock.

David Sanchez Luna's wife, Alberta, sobbed as she described receiving her mother's body riddled with torture marks.

"It's terrible what's happening to us," she said, wiping away tears.

[Mexico] Fishing boats shot at activists protecting rare Mexican porpoise, group says (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 5:56 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Fishing skiffs chased and shot at a vessel carrying environmental activists monitoring a near-extinct porpoise species in a protected zone of Mexico's Gulf of California at the weekend, conservation group Sea Shepherd said.

There are thought to be only between six and 20 of the vaquita porpoises left. Poachers have been flouting an international ban on entering the species' last sanctuary off the coast of Mexico.

The small, stub-nosed porpoise could become the first species subject to maximum protection under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) to become extinct, raising questions about the effectiveness of the convention.

The attack on Sea Shepherd activists on Saturday morning happened in what the group described as a "critical zone" where several vaquita porpoises were recently sighted. It said at least two bullets landed in the ocean alongside the vessel. There were no injuries.

"This just shows how aggressive the poachers are here," said Sea Shepherd captain Jacqueline Le Duc in a statement, adding that the area was protected by federal law and recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Officials from Mexico's police, navy and environmental prosecutor were on board the vessel, Sea Shepherd said. Mexico's environment ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The main threat to the vaquita porpoise are gillnets, set up by poachers in an effort to catch totoaba, an endangered species of marine fish sought by Chinese buyers on the black market for its prized swim bladders.

Mexico is suffering record levels of violence, often linked to organized crime. Environmental activists are routinely threatened, harmed or even killed as a result of their work.

[Mexico] Smugglers sneaking single adults over border after years of ferrying families (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [2/10/2020 7:00 AM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K, Neutral]

A Department of Homeland Security office that tracks criminal activity across borders believes smuggling organizations in Central America and Mexico are pivoting back to moving single adults over the southern border instead of children and families.

"This whole ecosystem of smuggling activity is shifting back into the traditional methods," said Derek Benner, acting director of Homeland Security Investigations within DHS, in an interview with the Washington Examiner.

"I've just been noticing from our operational tempo and reporting every morning that we're starting to see more of this activity."

For decades, Border Patrol had largely arrested single adult men from Mexico.

Tens of thousands of unaccompanied children from Central America arrived at the southern border, double the previous year's number of children.

Over the next few years, the population that surrendered at the border to federal agents or were caught sneaking over contained an abnormally high number of families.

The smugglers had switched from single adults to bringing in adults with kids.

People wanting to leave widespread poverty and crime in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras for the United States began organizing locally in small groups that grew to be hundreds and, in one case, 10,000 people.

They used this "caravan" method to move safely together to the U.S. border and avoid having to pay smugglers up to \$10,000 each to get to the U.S. "That really obviated the need for any of the traditional services that a smuggling organization would provide: stash houses along the way; transportation; paying the plaza bosses to cross their territory; paying an organization to put you in a compartment in a truck or a car to get across the border; a stash house on the U.S. side; a transportation network on the U.S. side," said Benner.

So as people organized caravans, smugglers came up with new services they could offer

people.

Smugglers responded to the caravans of families with offers to single adults who did not have children or were traveling with children they were not related to.

"They might advise people like, 'Hey, if you need to, if you want to go to the border and get released, you need to create a family of unrelated people, and we'll sell you the documents, and we'll advise you on what to do,'" said Benner.

Organizations sold fake and stolen identification documents that would portray them as related family members.

Families can only be held by U.S. officials 20 days before they legally must be released.

By 2019, half of the 851,508 people apprehended for illegally crossing the southern border arrived with a family member, a record high.

DHS responded with several initiatives, such as requiring people seeking asylum at border crossings to wait in Mexico for their day in court and curtailing the "catch and release" policy that had allowed hundreds of thousands of families who illegally crossed the border last year to be released into the country.

"The hardening of the border has an effect on the ability of smuggling cartels to exploit it and to sell their services. So you know, in this case, technology, the wall, more Border Patrol agents, more CBP officers, more law enforcement at the border changes tactics," said Benner.

"That's no longer a viable sales method anymore, so it becomes, 'What do we pivot to?'"

Benner described several incidents on both sides of the southern border last week in which carloads of individuals were detected by law enforcement and fled.

Smugglers have long-used stash houses, or homes where dozens to 100 people are held until being moved to their final destination, as well as tractor trailers, which can hold and transport people after they have made it across the border without being detected.

Now, DHS is focused on going after the means by which smugglers, mere employees of these mega-organizations, will use to send profits back south of the border.

"It's an illicit, illegal business enterprise whose sole purpose across the board is to generate illicit proceeds and make money," said Benner.

"When we look at identifying the networks, it's not just to pursue criminal charges against the people involved. Equal importance is dedicated to, 'How do we dismantle that illicit proceeds network?'"

Benner said because a countless number of people are involved in the trafficking and smuggling of people and goods, it is impossible to estimate the value of the industry beyond "billions," and as long as money can be made, the industry will evolve as it is again.

Sub-Saharan Africa

UN warns of 'major shock' as Africa locust outbreak spreads (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 12:38 PM, Cara Anna, Neutral]

Uganda scrambled to respond to the arrival of the biggest locust outbreak that parts of East Africa have seen in decades, while the United Nations warned Monday that "we simply cannot afford another major shock" to an already vulnerable region.

An emergency government meeting hours after the locusts were spotted inside Uganda on Sunday decided to deploy military forces to help with ground-based pesticide spraying, while two planes for aerial spraying will arrive as soon as possible, a statement said. Aerial spraying is considered the only effective control.

The swarms of billions of locusts have been destroying crops in Kenya, which hasn't seen such an outbreak in 70 years, as well as Somalia and Ethiopia, which haven't seen this in a quarter-century. The insects have exploited favorable wet conditions after unusually heavy rains, and experts say climate change is expected to bring more of the same.

U.N. officials warn that immediate action is needed before more rainfall in the weeks ahead brings fresh vegetation to feed new generations of locusts. If left unchecked, their numbers could grow up to 500 times before drier weather arrives, they say.

"There is the risk of a catastrophe," U.N. humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock told a briefing in New York on Monday, warning that a region where 12 million people already face severe food insecurity can't afford another jolt.

Without enough aerial spraying to stop the swarms, the locust outbreak could turn into a plague, "and when you have a plague, it takes years to control," Dominique Burgeon, emergency and resilience director with the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, told The Associated Press last week.

The outbreak also is moving toward South Sudan, where another several million people face hunger as the country struggles to emerge from civil war.

The U.N. has asked for \$76 million in immediate aid. So far just under \$20 million is in hand, officials said. The United States said Monday it has released \$800,000 and the European Union has released 1 million euros.

"The response today is not gonna work, unless there's a big scale-up," Lowcock said.

The locusts are eating the vegetation that supports vibrant herder communities in the region, and Kenyan Ambassador Lazarus Amayo warned of the "inherent risk of communal conflict over pastures."

The outbreak is so severe it might even disrupt the planting of crops in the coming weeks, he said, adding that the locusts "do wanton damage."

Smart drones to be tested in battle against East Africa locust swarms (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 11:45 AM, Nita Bhalla, Neutral]

The United Nations is to test drones equipped with mapping sensors and atomizers to spray pesticides in parts of east Africa battling an invasion of desert locusts that are ravaging crops and exacerbating a hunger crisis.

Hundreds of millions of the voracious insects have swept across Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya in what the U.N. has called the worst outbreak in a quarter of a century, with Uganda, Eritrea and Djibouti also affected.

Authorities in those countries are already carrying out aerial spraying of pesticides, but experts say the scale of the infestation is beyond local capacity as desert locusts can travel up to 150 km (95 miles) in a day.

They threaten to increase food shortages in a region where up to 25 million people are reeling from three consecutive years of droughts and floods, say aid agencies.

Keith Cressman, senior locust forecasting officer at the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), said specially developed prototypes would be tested that can detect swarms via special sensors and adapt their speed and height accordingly.

"Nobody's ever done this with desert locusts before. So we have no proven methodology for using drones for spraying on locusts," said Cressman.

"There are already small atomizer sprayers made for drones. But with locusts, we just don't know how high and how fast to fly."

The swarms – one reportedly measuring 40 km by 60 km – have already devoured tens of thousands of hectares of crops, such as maize, sorghum and teff, and ravaged pasture for livestock.

By June, the fast-breeding locusts could grow by 500 times and move into South Sudan.

The impact on the region's food supply could be enormous - a locust swarm of a square kilometre is able to eat the same amount of food in one day as 35,000 people, says the FAO.

Climate scientists say global warming may be behind the current infestations, which have also hit parts of Iran, India and Pakistan.

Warmer seas have resulted in a rise in the frequency of cyclones in the Indian Ocean. This caused heavy downpours along the Arabian peninsula, creating ideal conditions for locust breeding in the deserts of Oman, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.

Researchers are increasingly looking to technology to help provide early warning signs and control locust outbreaks amid fears climate change could bring more cyclones.

Officials in Kenya say drones could play an important role given the limited number of aircraft.

"Every county wants an aircraft, but we have only have five at the moment and they can only be in one location at one time," said David Mwangi, head of plant protection at Kenya's ministry of agriculture.

"We have not used drones before, but I think it's worth testing them as they could help."

Existing drone models are restricted in terms of the volumes they can carry and the distances they can cover due to their size and limited battery life, say entomologists and plant protection researchers.

Another challenge for drone use in such emergencies is the lack of regulation. Many east African countries are still in the early stages of drafting laws, prohibiting usage unless in exceptional circumstances and with strict approvals.

That makes it harder to deploy larger drones, which have petrol-powered engines capable of carrying tanks of up to 1,500 litres and travelling distances of up to 500 km, and often require special approval.

Drones can also be used in the aftermath of an infestation.

"The other use case for drones is in post disaster mapping," said Kush Gadhia from Astral Aerial Solutions, a Kenyan firm that seeks to use drones to address development challenges.

"Governments need to know the extent of the damage afterwards. Combining larger satellite maps with smaller drone maps – which provide higher resolution images – will give more accurate assessments on the extent crop loss and health."

[Benin] Gunmen on motorcycles attack police post in northern Benin (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 6:08 AM, Virgile Ahissou, 1512K, Negative]

Men armed with rifles and machetes attacked a police station in Benin near the border with troubled Burkina Faso, raising fears that Islamic extremist violence could be encroaching even further south, officials said.

One policeman was killed and another wounded in the attack in the village of Mekrou-Djimdjim at dawn on Sunday and the gunmen then set fire to the building, according to a statement by a police spokesman.

The attack took place near one of the wildlife areas known as W National Park straddling the borders of northern Benin, Burkina Faso and Niger.

In the Pendjari National Park further west, two French tourists were kidnapped last May and their guide was killed.

Observers have expressed growing fears that Islamic extremist groups could be extending their reach further south.

Islamic militants grabbed hold of the major towns in northern Mali in 2012, only to be

dispersed by a French-led military intervention the following year.

Since 2015, neighboring Burkina Faso has been beset by jihadist attacks and now there are concerns about the northern regions of Benin, Togo, Ghana and Ivory Coast becoming the next front.

[Mali] More than 450 civilians killed in central Mali last year (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 9:23 AM, Krista Larson, Negative]

Islamic militants and ethnic-based militias killed more than 450 civilians in central Mali last year, making it the deadliest year in the region since the country's crisis began in 2012, Human Rights Watch said in a new report Monday.

Militants have even begun pulling men off of public transport based on their ethnicity and killing them, the group said, underscoring how Islamic extremists have inflamed tensions between communities that long lived in relative peace.

Islamic extremist groups have been recruiting men from the Peuhl ethnic group to their cause, while in turn the armed Dogon militias that have arisen are accused of supporting Mali's military crackdown on jihadists.

Of the 456 civilian deaths documented by Human Rights Watch, 116 were directly blamed on the Islamic extremists.

The remaining 340 killings were acts of communal violence carried out by ethnic-based militias, and the report said the true toll is unknown.

"Armed groups are killing, maiming, and terrorizing communities throughout central Mali with no apparent fear of being held to account," said Corinne Dufka, West Africa director at Human Rights Watch.

"The human toll in shattered lives is mounting as the deadly cycles of violence and revenge continue."

Witnesses told investigators that in one instance last year jihadists had stopped two public transport vehicles that were bringing people back from a nearby market.

Armed militants then dragged off 11 men who all belonged to the Dogon ethnic group at the checkpoint not far from Sevare.

Seven bodies were later found with bullets to the heads; the four others were never found, security forces told Human Rights Watch.

A French-led military operation ousted jihadists from power in northern Mali in 2013, though they dispersed and regrouped.

By 2015, many had infiltrated much further south and began recruiting members of the Peuhl ethnic group.

While Malian courts convicted some 45 people last year in connection with some of the smaller attacks, "magistrates had yet to question powerful militia leaders implicated in the worst atrocities," Human Rights Watch said.

[Mali] Mali's president seeks dialogue with jihadist insurgents (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 4:00 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Mali's President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita on Monday said the authorities were now prepared to talk with jihadist groups in the hope of ending an insurgency that has made swathes of the country ungovernable and stoked ethnic violence.

The army has suffered increasing losses in recent months at the hands of Islamist fighters, who have also stepped up attacks on soldiers and civilians in neighboring countries in the Sahel region, particularly Burkina Faso.

Escalating bloodshed in Mali's central and northern regions has prompted a rethink in Bamako, Keita told French media.

"Why not try to contact those who we know are pulling the strings," he said in a recording of the interview published by Radio France Internationale.

"The number of dead in the Sahel is becoming exponential. It's time for certain avenues to be explored."

Keita did not say what was being done to talk to Islamist groups.

But he said former president Dioncounda Traore, his high representative to central Mali, "has the task of listening to everyone".

French forces intervened in 2013 to drive back jihadists who had seized northern Mali the previous year, but the militants have regrouped, capitalizing on intercommunal conflicts to recruit and to extend their reach into central Mali.

The International Crisis Group, a conflict prevention body, said last year that seeking dialogue with jihadists may encounter some opposition within Mali and abroad from those who fear it could legitimize the groups and their ideas.

The government has already said it will recruit 10,000 more soldiers to counter the jihadist threat, and France is sending 600 soldiers to add to the 4,500 it already has tackling armed groups in the Sahel or with a 14,000-strong U.N. peacekeeping mission in the region.

But the United Nations' top humanitarian official in Mali, Ute Kollias, said last week that extra troops would not solve the crisis and urged political engagement.

Last year, at least 456 civilians were killed and hundreds more wounded in central Mali alone in what was the deadliest year for Malians since the start of the unrest, Human Rights Watch said in a report on Monday.

[Mozambique] Mozambique drops court appeals to extradite ex-minister from South Africa (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 10:29 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Mozambique on Monday withdrew appeals against a South African court decision not to extradite its former finance minister, Manuel Chang, wanted in relation to a \$2 billion debt scandal that plunged his country's economy into crisis.

Chang, who denies wrongdoing, was arrested in South Africa in December at the request of the United States while Mozambique also requested his extradition, sparking a legal battle over where he should be sent.

The Mozambique Attorney General's Office said in a statement that it would withdraw its appeals at both South Africa's Constitutional Court and Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA) to allow South African Justice Minister Ronald Lamola, who now has the final call, time to re-examine the case.

The Constitutional Court is the highest court in the country, dealing exclusively with constitutional matters, while the SCA is the highest court when it comes to other cases.

Last year, South Africa's then justice minister, Michael Masutha, said Chang should be surrendered to Mozambique. But a South African High Court ruled in November that the decision should be set aside and reviewed by the minister's successor, Lamola.

The U.S. charges relate to loans obtained from Credit Suisse and Russia's VTB bank, guaranteed by the Mozambican government but in some cases not disclosed, that Chang signed off on during his 2005-2015 term as finance minister.

Their disclosure in 2016 prompted foreign donors including the International Monetary Fund to cut off support for Mozambique, triggering a currency collapse and debt default.

Mozambique has not yet formally charged Chang with a crime, prompting civil society organizations to argue that he should be sent to the United States.

[Nigeria] Ecowas Sets up Committee to Look into Nigeria Border Closure (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [2/10/2020 3:18 AM, Tope Alake, 6400K, Neutral]

The Economic Community of West African States have formed a committee to study and make a full report on the closure of Nigerian land borders.

The decision was reached Sunday at an extraordinary meeting of the heads of government of West African nations on the sidelines of the 33rd AU summit in Ethiopia, Nigeria's presidency spokesman, Garba Shehu said in emailed statement.

The committee, headed by President Roch Marc Christian Kabore of Burkina Faso will examine all the countries affected by the closed boundaries and submit its report to the body for further decisions.

"The President of Burkina Faso is charged with undertaking a full study of the situation,

make a report and then we take it from there" the statement cited Nigeria's Foreign Minister, Geoffrey Onyeama as saying.

No timeline is given for the submission of the report.

In August last year, Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari ordered the partial closure of the country's boundary with Benin to curb smuggling of rice, a staple. In October, his administration further restricted the trade of all goods across the land borders to curb smuggling from Benin and Niger into the continent's most-populous nation.

[Nigeria] West African countries to investigate Nigeria border closure (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 5:53 AM, Felix Onuah, 5304K, Negative]

West African countries have agreed to conduct an investigation into the impact of Nigeria's decision last year to close off its land borders to trade, Nigeria's presidency said on Monday.

Nigeria has banned the import and export of all goods through its land borders since last August as part of what it describes as a campaign to tackle smuggling.

Its smaller neighbors, many of whom rely on trade with Africa's biggest economy, have complained that this has caused severe hardship.

Heads of state from the Economic Community of West African States agreed Sunday night to set up a committee "to study and make a full report on Nigeria's land border closure with her neighbors," said a statement from a spokesman for Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari.

There is no timeline for when the report is due, but it is meant to be completed "as soon as possible," Nigerian Foreign Minister Geoffrey Onyeama said, according to the statement.

Since taking office in 2015, Buhari has introduced policies aimed at curbing imports and smuggling, to boost local manufacturing.

Buhari has also been trying to boost revenues after a 2016 recession slashed income.

The move to shut the borders followed a decision in July to sign Nigeria up to an African Continental Free Trade Area, a project to create a \$3.4 trillion economic bloc.

[Nigeria] Suspected Boko Haram Fighters Kill at Least 30 in Nigeria (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 3:50 PM, Staff, Neutral]

At least 30 people have been killed in Nigeria's northeastern Borno region after suspected Boko Haram Islamists set ablaze several trucks carrying passengers on Sunday night, eyewitnesses and residents told Reuters.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility, but the Boko Haram group and rival Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) splinter group have often carried out attacks in the area.

The passengers were stranded on Sunday evening along a military check point due to the

curfew imposed by the military in the town of Auno before the attack happened at around 2100 GMT, resident Bunu Ali who witnessed the attack said.

Auno is a town 24 km (15 miles) from Maiduguri, the state capital. Eyewitness said the insurgents attacked on motorbikes shooting sporadically. They set at least 18 vehicles ablaze and abducted several people, another eyewitness said.

Nigerian Army Commander said the casualty figure was much smaller because the military had recovered 10 bodies on Monday. The commander said the military closed the road at 1500 GMT to curb insurgency.

President Muhammadu Buhari on Monday condemned the attack, adding that he was receiving more military hardware and intelligence to counter the current security challenges, a statement from the presidential office said.

Borno state is the epicenter of the Boko Haram and ISWA insurgency. The conflict has lasted a decade, during which time the militants have killed thousands and millions have fled from their homes in the region.

[South Africa] Girl's drowning sparks water riot in thirsty South African township (Reuters)

Reuters [2/10/2020 3:30 AM, Mfuneko Toyana, 10942K, Negative]

Eight-year-old Musa and her older sister Moleboheng trudged down the ravine with buckets and drum bottles to fetch water from a filthy stream because they were thirsty and tired of waiting for trucks meant to deliver emergency water that never showed up.

But Musa never returned, her mother Phindile Mbele recalled, choking back tears. The little girl drowned in the stream, which is thick with sewage, mud and algae, probably pulled down by a strong underwater current.

"We rushed down there. She was still under the water ... Two boys from the neighbourhood went in and one carried her out," Mbele said. "The house is empty without her. She was such a sweet, quiet child."

Musa's death last month further enflamed the mood among residents of Mandela Park township on the edge of Qwaqwa in South Africa, turning intermittent protests over water shortages into a full-blown, week-long riot.

Protesters torched shops, overturned government vehicles and hurled bricks and bottles at riot police who responded with rubber bullets.

South Africans have protested for years over unreliable supplies of water and power, but chronic mismanagement has been compounded by the effects of last year's drought, the worst in a century, which has been linked to climate change.

"It rains here all the time but they say there's drought. Then how did that little girl drown because that stream was full?" said Malgas "Skinny" John, 39, who used rocks and burning tyres during the January riot to barricade the road leading into Qwaqwa in a face-off with

police.

"We have to strike and burn things, only then do we get water," said the unemployed father of two, as he queued with neighbours to fill his container from a water truck.

"We'll do it again, we'll keep burning things if we have to," John added.

Officials fear riots like the one seen at Qwaqwa could be a sign of worsening climate-linked instability to come, as dams and water pipes deteriorate further and the urban population continues to mushroom.

South Africa's water minister Lindiwe Sisulu has promised 3 billion rand (\$203 million) to end the shortages in Qwaqwa. Its municipality owes half a billion rand for water, out of a national unpaid bill of nearly 9 billion rand.

But even Sisulu's own department has a 3.5 billion rand shortfall in maintenance funds, which it says risks a "detrimental impact on the national economy", especially if water supplies to the thirsty power utility Eskom and liquid fuel maker Sasol are disrupted.

"We've been drinking this brown, filthy water since 2016," said little Musa's mother Mbele.

"Nothing will change. I know, soon, I will have to go the same stream where my daughter died to get water."

\$1 = 14.7818 rand

[South Sudan] South Sudan's leader wins dubious 'spoiler of peace' award (AP)

AP [2/10/2020 10:39 AM, Rodney Muhumuza, Negative]

South Sudan President Salva Kiir on Monday was named the top "spoiler of peace" in a new award that seeks to shame him and others into taking serious steps to end bloody conflict in the world's youngest country.

Kiir and rival leader Riek Machar are under growing pressure to form a coalition government this month, the significant next step in a fragile peace deal signed in 2018 to end a five-year civil war that killed nearly 400,000 people.

The deadline has been extended twice and the international community is signaling impatience. The upcoming deadline is Feb. 22.

"It is for me totally unacceptable that we are still again close to the deadline of a new period that was declared, that there is no agreement on a number of issues," U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said over the weekend. "Respect your people."

Now a Uganda-based group, Atrocities Watch Africa, is citing Kiir and others for their roles in the conflict that also has displaced at least 2 million people. Many fled to Uganda.

The "spoiler of peace" award citation accuses Kiir of being unwilling to compromise on major issues needed to form the coalition government. It also asserts that under his

command and control, government-backed fighters killed thousands of people and committed atrocities such as looting and razing villages.

Ateny Wek Ateny, a spokesman for South Sudan's presidency, described the award as "nonsense."

Dismas Nkunda, a Ugandan activist who established the awards, said he hopes that "with these awards the individuals, businesses and other institutions that are derailing the peace process in South Sudan will not continue as usual now that we know them."

Other winners of the awards announced in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, included the Ugandan government, South Sudan's military, an oil consortium and other political and military figures in South Sudan.

The Ugandan government, which has backed Kiir in his efforts to prevent rebels from taking power, is accused of facilitating arms transfers to South Sudan in contravention of a European Union arms embargo. Uganda, which denies any wrongdoing, insists it sent troops and equipment at the request of Kiir's administration as rebels threatened to enter the capital, Juba.

The civil war erupted in South Sudan in late 2013, when a rift between Kiir and his deputy, Machar, escalated into fighting often along ethnic lines. Both men have been accused of violating multiple ceasefires.

The regional bloc mediating South Sudan's peace process, IGAD, said in a communique over the weekend that further extension of the deadline to form a coalition government "is neither desirable nor feasible." It said Kiir asked for time to consult and report back on Saturday.

A key issue that remains is the number of states South Sudan should have, with IGAD calling it an internal matter for which a "solution should come only from the South Sudanese people."

[Uganda] Uganda sprays locust swarms to protect coffee crop, livestock (Reuters)
Reuters [2/10/2020 8:02 AM, Elias Biryabarema, 5304K, Neutral]

Uganda has started to spray swarms of desert locusts that invaded over the weekend, posing a major threat to livestock and key crops such as coffee, a government official said on Monday.

The plague of locusts has already caused extensive damage to pastures and crops and threatened food security in several countries in the east and Horn of Africa, including Somalia, Ethiopia and Kenya.

A single swarm of the insects can measure 40 kilometres wide by 60 kilometres long, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.

"We are using motorised sprayers, a drone and manual sprayers," Stephen Byantwale, commissioner for crop protection at the ministry of agriculture told Reuters.

"They (locusts) are spreading like wildfire, so they are a real, major threat."

The FAO warned in a report on Monday that locusts were continuing to breed in the Horn of Africa, which would lead to more insects in Ethiopia, Somalia and Kenya, with new swarms forming in March and April.

"There is an unprecedented threat to food security and livelihoods in the region," the U.N. agency said.

The swarms entered Uganda in the northeastern region of Karamoja on Sunday.

Byantwale said if their movement was unchallenged, they were expected to move further south, threatening fields of crops that include coffee, rice, corn and others.

Coffee is one of Uganda's major exports and a key source of foreign exchange.

The country is Africa's biggest exporter of the beans.

Byantwale said the foliage-devouring swarms were also a major threat to Kidepo National Park, found in northeast Uganda and one of the biggest in the country where visitors can see giraffes, zebras and buffalos. Tourism is also a key hard currency earner.

Network TV News Coverage

Coronavirus Has Killed More People Than SARS Outbreak in 2003 (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [2/10/2020 10:18 AM, Staff, 660K]
135 passengers on board a quarantined cruise ship off the coast of Japan are now confirmed to have the coronavirus, at least 24 of those people Americans. The global death toll from the virus is also rising as the number surpasses the SARS outbreak in 2003. So far there are 40,711 worldwide infections and 910 deaths, most of which have been in China, where the outbreak started. There are a total of 12 U.S. cases: ten have been Wuhan visitors, and two were in close contact with carriers and caught the virus from them. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, says that the virus is relatively under control in the U.S., but that could quickly change. "Unless China gets their really, rather difficult situation under control, and not cede other countries, then it is going to be difficult to continue to keep cases out of the country." Fauci says that the coronavirus has a "much, much greater capability of spreading widely, so it is much easier to transmit" than the SARS outbreak. Though the virus is spreading much more quickly, the mortality rate is 2% compared to SARS's 9-10%. The heightened spread might be happening, in part, because of the rise in air travel. In 2003, the number of global passengers was 691 million; now, that number has doubled to 1.4 billion. Fauci says that this has caused travel restrictions, but "once you get a diffuse outbreak throughout the world, you're not going to be able to control it by travel restrictions." Fauci says that the U.S. needs to be ready for "mitigation" if the infection number jumps.

Schumer Calls for Investigation Into Witness Retaliation (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [2/10/2020 9:28 AM, Staff, 660K]
Monday morning, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that he wants the Defense Department's Acting Inspector General to investigate witness retaliation by President Donald Trump. This follows Trump's firing of two key impeachment witnesses, Lieutenant Colonel Alexander Vindman and ambassador to the EU Gordon Sondland. Reports say that Vindman and Sondland had planned to exit on their own before the abrupt firings. Republicans advised Trump to let them leave quietly on their own, but he dismissed that advice. While Sondland was a political appointee, Vindman was a nonpartisan career official who will now be working in the Defense Department. J.W. Verrett, a former member of the transition team for Trump, says that there is "no question" that Trump will attempt to ask foreign powers for help in elections again. "He will be impeached again, I just don't know for what, and it will be legitimate," he added.

[China] Chinese Ambassador on Efforts to Contain Coronavirus (ABC World News Now)

(B) ABC World News Now [2/10/2020 5:12 AM, Staff, 506K]
There are over 37,000 confirmed cases of China's coronavirus around the world and more than 811 deaths so far. China's ambassador to the U.S. Cui Tiankai explains that since this is a new virus, very little is known about how to stop the spread. "People are still learning to discover more about the virus and how it affects people and the channels of infections and trying their best to stop it," he says. Though Beijing has not officially accepted the U.S.'s offers to send CDC experts, Tiankai says, "We welcome the American experts to participate in our efforts, and we are coordinating with the World Health Organization, because a lot of things are done under the auspices of the World Health Organization." He adds that he expects Americans to arrive in China "very soon." U.S. Senator Tom Cotton has suggested that the coronavirus came from China's biological warfare program. Tiankai says that there are many unknown factors about the virus, "but it's very harmful, it's very dangerous to stir up suspicions, rumors, and spread them among the people" because it will create panic and support racial discrimination. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo gave a speech to U.S. governors that included harsh criticisms against the Chinese Communist Party. Pompeo said that their government is "targeting states, cities, schools, academic institutions, to try to figure out how to exploit them." Pompeo talked specifically about the concentration camps in Xinjiang that are holding Muslim minorities. Tianaki denies this claim, saying that the camp is to "combat terrorism."

[North Korea] Trump Reportedly Doesn't Want Third Summit With Kim Jong Un Before Election (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [2/10/2020 9:52 AM, Kylie Atwood, 660K]

According to reports, a possible third summit between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un is likely not going to happen before the U.S. election. The leaders met last summer in June when Trump became the first sitting American president to step into North Korean territory. Since then, their relationship has cooled and negotiations have frozen. Trump has reportedly told top foreign policy advisors at the end of last year that he does not want another summit with Kim ahead of the November elections. Working-level negotiations happened in October and essentially fell apart with the North Koreans

accusing the U.S. of not being prepared for negotiations. Neither party has come back to the negotiating table since then, nor has Trump mentioned North Korea as often. When reporters asked about North Korea last year, Trump said he was focused on the U.S. while Kim was focused on North Korea and leading their respective countries.

[Afghanistan] Pentagon Identifies Two Soldiers Killed in Afghanistan (CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto)

(B) CNN Newsroom With Poppy Harlow and Jim Sciutto [2/10/2020 9:54 AM, Barbara Starr, 660K]

The Pentagon has identified two U.S. soldiers killed during an attack in Afghanistan. They were Sergeant First Class Javier Gutierrez and Sergeant First Class Antonio Rodriguez. They were killed Saturday at a joint U.S.-Afghan base in the eastern part of the country. Six other service members were also wounded in the attack. Reports say that the troops were leaving the meeting with local officials when a man in an Afghan security uniform opened fire with a machine gun. The Pentagon has not yet discussed what they believe could be a possible motive for the attack, and it is not clear whether the person responsible was actually a member of the Afghan security forces or had stolen the uniform. It is unclear whether the suspect was targeting the American service members as the investigation into the incident continues. The Trump administration is looking to bring down the number of troops stationed in Afghanistan from 13,000 to just over 8,000 as violence escalates in the region. 22 Americans lost their lives in the country last year, the highest number of fatalities since 2014.

{End of Report}

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Subject: State Department News Clips (10-7-20 - 9 PM ET)
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STATE DEPARTMENT NEWS CLIPS

Prepared for the U.S. Department of State
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Mobile User Copy

TO: State Department & Staff
DATE: Wednesday, October 7, 2020 9:00 PM ET

Secretary of State

Pompeo: U.S. will be 'a good partner for security' if China attacks Taiwan (Washington Examiner)

EAM Jaishankar, Japanese counterpart hold bilateral meeting in Tokyo (Yahoo News/ANI)

Tokyo to New Delhi: Jaishankar and Pompeo to Meet Again Later This Month as China Threat Looms Large (Yahoo News/News18)

U.S. senators urge sanctions on Turkey over Russian missile system (Reuters)

Department of State News

Trump enters Oval Office for first time since returning to White House (Reuters)

Trump returns to Oval Office, breaking isolation after his hospitalization for coronavirus (CNN)

Trump's resistance to face masks, even while he is infected with coronavirus, sets him apart from other world leaders (Washington Post)

France, U.S. and Russia to meet on Nagorno-Karabakh amid fears of regional war (Reuters)

'It breaks my heart': Uighurs wrongfully held at Guantánamo plead to be with families (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

U.S. accused of violating international labor laws, forced-labor protections in new complaint (Washington Post)

Trump admin tightens H-1B visa restrictions for foreign workers (USA Today)

Climate-menaced nations say survival depends on stronger 2020 action (Reuters)

2020 Had Warmest September on Record (New York Times)

[September was world's hottest on record, EU climate change service says \(Reuters\)](#)

[Last month was hottest September ever \(CNN\)](#)

[Nitrous Oxide Is Leaking Into the Atmosphere at a Dangerous Pace \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[EBRD governors sign off on green investment pivot \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Qatar\] Qatar makes formal request for F-35 jets – sources \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Syria\] After blast in northwest Syria town, U.S. says rise in attacks troubling \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Syria\] U.S. strongly condemns deadly terrorist attack in Syria's Al Bab: State Department \(Yahoo News/ANI\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Why the Russians may know more about Trump's health and COVID diagnosis than the American public \(USA Today\)](#)

[\[Cambodia\] U.S. 'Disappointed' By Razed Naval Facility at Cambodia Base \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Cambodia\] U.S. expresses concern over China link to Cambodian base \(AP\)](#)

[\[China\] Esper cites China as motivation to boost funding to Navy \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[\[China\] Kissinger Warns U.S. and China Must Set Limits to Avoid a Blowup \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] U.S. to go down to 2,500 troops in Afghanistan by early 2021 – Trump adviser \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mali\] U.S. to Maintain Halt to Mali Military Aid Until After Election \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Mali\] U.S. maintains suspension of military assistance to Mali, says envoy \(Reuters\)](#)

Editorials and Op-eds

[America Is Addicted to Economic Sanctions \(The National Interest\)](#)

[Trump's Trade Policy Failed, But U.S. Economic Policy Didn't \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[We're suing the Pentagon to find out where U.S. troops are deployed \(Washington Post\)](#)

[Not personal enough: Why climate change is not yet a top priority \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[France\] Macron Wants to Start an Islamic Revolution \(Foreign Policy Magazine\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Putin, Long the Sower of Instability, Is Now Surrounded by It \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Russia\] The U.S. Navy Wants to Make Sure It Can Take on Russia in the Arctic \(The National Interest\)](#)

[\[Russia\] How Russia Today Skirts High-Tech Blockade to Reach U.S. Readers \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Johnson's Biggest Threat May Be Just Next Door \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[New Zealand\] Swarmed by Maskless Crowds, Jacinda Ardern Is Set for Landslide Win \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Taiwan\] How to Avoid War Over Taiwan \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Afghanistan\] 19 years later, time to leave Afghanistan rather than sink deeper into an unwinnable war \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

Coronavirus News

[Coronavirus Has Thrown Around 100 Million People Into Extreme Poverty, World Bank Estimates \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[Up to 150 million could join extreme poor, World Bank says \(AP\)](#)

[Europe's Covid-19 Testing Programs Creak as Demand Surges \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[Europe Struggles to Curb Virus With Records in Spain, France \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[EU buys more Remdesivir to treat 3,400 patients amid shortages \(Reuters\)](#)

[China under pressure to cancel debt to coronavirus-hit poor countries: Report \(Yahoo News/PTI\)](#)

Trade

[Race to WTO Leadership Is Down to the Final Two Candidates \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[UK's Johnson, Ukraine's Zelenskyy to sign partnership agreement \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Ireland optimistic on Brexit trade deal, fishing still a big obstacle \(Reuters\)](#)

ISIS

[Islamic State 'Beatles' Jailers Are Charged in Abuse of Murdered Hostages \(New York Times\)](#)

[Two ISIS militants charged in deaths of James Foley and other American hostages in Syria \(Washington Post\)](#)

[ISIS members known as 'The Beatles' charged with killing American citizens \(Washington Post\)](#)

[Islamic State 'Beatles' Fighters Brought to U.S. to Face Charges \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[U.S. Moves to Prosecute Islamic State Militants Linked to Beheadings \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[U.S. charged British IS members in deaths of American hostages \(AP\)](#)

[FBI, DOJ press conference on 'matter of national security' expected to be about ISIS 'Beatles' headed to U.S. \(FOX News\)](#)

[British ISIS suspects known as the Beatles charged for the deaths of 2 American journalists, 2 aid workers \(USA Today\)](#)

[2 ISIS fighters charged for killing U.S. and British hostages \(Axios\)](#)

[Hacker who helped Islamic State to remain in U.S. prison \(AP\)](#)

Near East & North Africa

[Senior Saudi Royal Turns Up Heat on 'Failed' Palestinian Leaders \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[Saudi Arabia must focus on own interests, national security while serving Palestinian cause: Prince Bandar \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Egypt\] Egypt frees journalist detained while covering Luxor unrest \(AP\)](#)

[\[Iran\] With 239 deaths, Iran hits its highest daily COVID-19 toll \(AP\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran Boosts Export of Illicit Oil, Watchdog Says \(Washington Free Beacon\)](#)

[\[Israel\] Israeli PM's wife may have violated lockdown with haircut \(AP\)](#)

[\[Jordan\] Jordan's King Abdullah appoints palace aide Bisher al Khasawneh PM \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Kuwait\] Kuwaiti National Guard figure picked as next crown prince \(AP\)](#)

[\[Kuwait\] Kuwait names Sheikh Meshal as new crown prince – KUNA \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Lebanon\] Lebanese president to hold consultations on new PM next week \(AP\)](#)

[\[Lebanon\] France to hold aid conference for Lebanon in November: minister \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Libya\] Cash shortage adds to weary Eastern Libyans' woes \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Libya\] Officials: Nigerian migrant burned alive in Libya's Tripoli \(AP\)](#)

[\[Libya\] Libya says it detains men suspected of burning Nigerian to death \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Tunisia\] Tunisia considers curfew to slow second wave of pandemic \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Yemen\] Yemeni officials say clashes continue in Hodeida, 52 killed \(AP\)](#)

Europe and Eurasia

[France, Russia Call Azerbaijan, Armenia to Talks to End Fighting \(Bloomberg\)](#)

['How long will it last?' Nagorno-Karabakh fighting rages on \(AP\)](#)

[Azerbaijan ready return to talks with Armenia when military conflict ends – TASS citing Aliyev \(Reuters\)](#)

[Iran's Rouhani slams sending fighters to Nagorno-Karabakh \(AP\)](#)

[Greece recalls its ambassador to Azerbaijan \(AP\)](#)

[Putin to keep talking to Azerbaijan's president about Nagorno-Karabakh: Kremlin \(Reuters\)](#)

[France says pushing for Nagorno-Karabakh talks in coming days \(Reuters\)](#)

[Poland Escalates Nord Stream Spat With \\$7.6 Billion Gazprom Fine \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[Polish watchdog fines Gazprom \\$7.6 billion over Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline \(Reuters\)](#)

[Russia's \\$11 Billion Gas Project Teeters After Fine From Poland \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[EU official touts extra billions for Western Balkans \(AP\)](#)

[Russia says Northern Cyprus's plans to open Varosha beach unacceptable \(Reuters\)](#)

[Berlin Trial Opens for Man Charged With Murder on Behalf of Russia \(New York Times\)](#)

[Russian on trial accused of state-ordered Berlin execution \(AP\)](#)

[\[Belarus\] Belarusian opposition politician Tsikhanouskaya wanted by Russia: interior ministry database \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Belarus\] Four more EU states recall envoys to Belarus: Lithuania \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Denmark\] Danes summon Iran's envoy over reports of illegal divorces \(AP\)](#)

[\[France\] Macron Says 'More' Covid-19 Restrictions to Be Detailed Thursday \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Greece\] Golden Dawn Found Guilty of Running Criminal Organization in Greece \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Greece\] Greek Neo-Nazi Party Golden Dawn Convicted as Criminal Organization \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Greece\] Greek court rules Golden Dawn party criminal organization \(AP\)](#)

[\[Greece\] Leaders of Greece's neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn found guilty of running criminal organization \(CNN\)](#)

[\[Poland\] Battle Over Mink Fur Almost Brings Down the Polish Government \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russia reports successful test launch of hypersonic missile \(AP\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russia touts test launch of hypersonic missile on Putin's birthday \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] On Putin's birthday, Russia tests new hypersonic weapon \(Washington Times\)](#)

[\[Russia\] France and Germany to propose sanctions on Russia after Navalny poisoning \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[Russia\] In hardening stance, France, Germany push for EU sanctions on Russians over Navalny \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russian envoy hits back at calls for Navalny investigation \(AP\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russia not producing chemical weapons, Kremlin says after OPCW findings on Navalny \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Russia opens criminal investigation over pollution off Far East \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Ukraine\] Ukraine sees record daily high of 4,753 new coronavirus cases: security council \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Ukraine\] Ukraine plan to tackle hackers sparks privacy fears \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Four men on trial over death of 39 Vietnamese migrants in UK truck container \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[United Kingdom\] Two UK prisoners convicted of trying to murder jailer after terrorism probe \(Reuters\)](#)

East Asia and Pacific

[China Snatched the 'Hong Kong 12' Off a Speedboat, Giving Protest Movement New Life \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[Australia\] Australia says tax cuts to come into effect in December \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[China\] Huawei Blocked From Sponsoring Security Event in NATO's Slovakia \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[China\] Little-Known Investment Firm Centricus Circles TikTok With Long-Shot Bid \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[China\] China's 2060 carbon neutral goal bill could hit over \\$5 trillion \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Myanmar\] Myanmar releases voter app criticised for Rohingya label, despite EU objection \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[New Zealand\] New Zealand Stamps Out the Virus. For a Second Time. \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] North Korean Defector Who Vanished in Rome Is Now in South Korea \(Wall Street Journal\)](#)

[\[North Korea\] Lawmakers: North Korean ex-envoy to Italy defected to South \(AP\)](#)

[\[Philippines\] U.N. to step up rights work in Philippines after drug war killings \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Korea\] South Korea proposes compromise abortion law after landmark court ruling \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[South Korea\] Indonesian busts out of South Korean quarantine facility \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Thailand\] Thailand reels over corporal punishment of kindergarten pupils \(Yahoo News/The Telegraph\)](#)

[\[Vietnam\] Vietnam Detains Activist Trang for Anti-Government Materials \(Bloomberg\)](#)

South and Central Asia

[\[Bangladesh\] U.N. to Bangladesh: do more to end child marriage \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[India\] PM Modi enters 20th year as democratically elected head of government \(Yahoo News/ANI\)](#)

[\[India\] Green finance recovery mechanisms needed to meet infrastructure gap in Southeast Asia: ADB \(Yahoo News/ANI\)](#)

[\[Kyrgyzstan\] Russia, China call for calm in Kyrgyzstan \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[Kyrgyzstan\] Kyrgyzstan opposition divided amid political chaos \(AP\)](#)

[\[Pakistan\] Pakistan to keep top suspect in Daniel Pearl murder in jail \(AP\)](#)

[\[Sri Lanka\] Sri Lanka widens curfew as virus surges \(AP\)](#)

[\[Sri Lanka\] Proposed Sri Lankan charter change raises rights concerns \(AP\)](#)

Western Hemisphere Affairs

[Rights group denounces Central America anti-LGBT violence, raps U.S. for denying asylum \(Reuters\)](#)

[Wealthy Argentines Flee Taxes, Politics to Settle in Uruguay \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[Brazil\] Brazil nears 5 million COVID-19 cases, epidemiologist fears second wave \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Brazil\] Amazon mining overlaps 20% of indigenous land, worsening deforestation: report \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Canada\] Canada's Supreme Court to consider whether Native Americans in U.S. have rights north of the border \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Hurricane Delta Makes Landfall in Mexico \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Hurricane Delta hits Cancún, but resort city appears to have escaped major damage \(Washington Post\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Hurricane Delta makes landfall in Mexico, forecast to hit U.S. Gulf Coast on Friday \(USA Today\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Mexico's peso faces volatility spikes ahead of U.S. election \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Cocaine-laden plane crashes in Mexico after airborne pursuit \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Mexico's ex-security chief pleads not guilty to drug charges \(AP\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Ex-Mexico security chief linked to El Chapo pleads not guilty to U.S. drug charges \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Peru\] Hard-hit Peru's costly bet on cheap COVID-19 antibody tests \(AP\)](#)

[\[Peru\] Peru bet on cheap COVID antibody tests; it didn't go well \(AP\)](#)

[\[Venezuela\] Venezuela, Once an Oil Giant, Reaches the End of an Era \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Venezuela\] EU rules out sending observers for Venezuela's Dec. 6 vote \(Reuters\)](#)

Sub-Saharan Africa

[\[Burkina Faso\] Gunmen kill 25 displaced people in Burkina Faso, U.N. says \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Côte d'Ivoire\] Eighteen Burkinabe nationals die in Ivory Coast bus crash \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Kenya\] 2 Men Found Guilty of Aiding 2013 Kenya Mall Attack \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[Kenya\] Kenya court convicts two for helping deadly jihadist attack on shopping mall \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Kenya\] Kenyan court finds two men guilty over Westgate shopping mall attack \(CNN\)](#)

[\[Mali\] Families await freed hostages' return in Mali's capital \(AP\)](#)

[\[South Sudan\] UN 'outraged' by attack on food aid convoy in South Sudan \(AP\)](#)

[\[Tanzania\] Tanzania opposition leader says facing repression as elections near \(Reuters\)](#)

Network TV News Coverage

[ISIS Terrorists 'the Beatles' Charged With Deaths of Four Americans \(CBS News\)](#)

[Two ISIS Members Will Appear in U.S. Court for Deaths of Americans \(CBS News\)](#)

[DoJ Announces Indictments of Two High-Profile ISIS Fighters \(CNN Newsroom\)](#)

[Supreme Court Takes Up Religious Freedom Case Again Seven Years Later \(FOX News\)](#)

[\[Mexico\] Tourists Take Shelter in Cancun as Hurricane Delta Hits \(CBS News\)](#)

Secretary of State

Pompeo: U.S. will be 'a good partner for security' if China attacks Taiwan (Washington Examiner)

[Washington Examiner](#) [10/7/2020 6:00 AM, Joel Gehrke, Neutral]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pledged that the United States is "a good partner" to prevent China from taking over Taiwan by force.

"Our military has been very active in the region, ensuring that we have a presence so that we can ensure that there is, in fact, a capacity for a free and open Indo-Pacific," Pompeo told the Nikkei Asian Review while traveling in Japan. "These are the kind of things one

does. Whether it's Taiwan or the challenge presented to Japan, the United States will be a good partner for security in every dimension."

That comment came in response to a direct question about whether the U.S. military would intervene "if China unilaterally attacks Taiwan," according to a transcript of the interview. Pompeo avoided a direct response at first but warmed to a deterrent theme.

"We've only come to recognize that appeasement's not the answer," he said. "If one bends the knee each time the Chinese Communist Party takes action around the world, one will find themselves having to bend the knee with great frequency."

Chinese communist authorities have claimed sovereignty over Taiwan since 1949, but the mainland regime has never governed the island, which is the last bastion of the government overthrown in the communist revolution. China's violations of Taiwan's airspace have skyrocketed over the last year, necessitating more than 4,100 responses by the Taiwanese air force this year, according to newly released data from Taipei. Last year, there were roughly 1,800.

"We hope the United States considers the unique operational environment and geographical features of the Taiwan Strait and Taiwan proper and provides us with weapons and equipment that meet our operational requirements so that we can better manage the battlefield and increase the cost of the enemy to invade Taiwan and thus achieve deterrence," Taiwanese deputy defense minister Chang Guan-chung said during the U.S.-Taiwan Defense Industry Conference this week.

Senior U.S. lawmakers regard Taiwan as a "dominant strategic position" off the coast of China, from which Beijing could launch military operations that threaten U.S. allies and bases in the region. And Taipei is embracing the role of the front line for democracies in the Indo-Pacific region.

"Countries in this region are collectively confronted by the challenges of maintaining regional peace, stability, and prosperity," Chang said. "Taiwan and the United States share the same set of values and the same beliefs for regional peace and stability."

Pompeo emphasized that the U.S. wants to avoid a conflict over the status of Taiwan.

"We are doing everything we can to reduce the tension there," he said in the interview. "We look to bring peace, not conflict. The shame of it is the Chinese Communist Party. ... This is Chinese bullying. This is the Chinese using coercive power. This isn't how great nations operate."

EAM Jaishankar, Japanese counterpart hold bilateral meeting in Tokyo (Yahoo News/ANI)

[Yahoo News/ANI](#) [10/7/2020 1:39 AM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar on Wednesday held a bilateral meeting with Japanese Foreign minister Toshimitsu Motegi in Tokyo.

Jaishankar and Motegi also met on Tuesday during Quad foreign ministerial meet (India,

United States, Australia and Japan) here.

During yesterday's meeting, foreign ministers of the Quad member countries called for a coordinated response to the challenges including financial problems emanating from the pandemic; need to share best practices to combat COVID-19; increasing the resilience of supply chains; and enhancing access to affordable vaccines, medicines, and medical equipment, according to the Ministry of External Affairs.

Earlier in the day, Jaishankar also met his Australian counterpart, Marise Payne, on the sidelines of the Quad foreign ministerial meet and discussed expanding cooperation between New Delhi and Canberra in global affairs and regional issues.

Jaishankar held a meeting with US State Secretary, Mike Pompeo as well. The Indian minister said that India and the United States will work together for "stability and prosperity" in the India-Pacific.

Tokyo to New Delhi: Jaishankar and Pompeo to Meet Again Later This Month as China Threat Looms Large (Yahoo News/News18)

[Yahoo News/News18](#) [10/7/2020 12:12 PM, Staff, Neutral]

After a bilateral meeting in Tokyo between External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, the two are set to meet again in New Delhi later this month. The two will meet in the last week of October as Pompeo travels to New Delhi for the 2+2 dialogue.

Two meetings in a span of 20 days and Pompeo travelling half way across the globe both times during a pandemic for an in-person engagement gives a sense of urgency of discussion, especially with regards to at least one issue.

China has emerged as a fulcrum between India and US under the current circumstances. While India has been dealing with the Line of Actual Control (LAC) friction for the last five months, China has been made an election issue by US President Donald Trump after the ongoing trade war leading to a full-blown diplomatic tussle during the coronavirus pandemic.

The Indo-Pacific strategy, too, is quite clearly evolving between the Quad countries keeping China at the centre of it all. If there was any doubt left, that was put to rest by a senior US State Department official who briefed the media after the ministerial meeting of the Quad in Tokyo. "There's no avoiding the fact that it is China and its actions in the region that make the Quad actually matter and function this time around," said the official.

On the sidelines of the Quad engagement was when Jaishankar also held a bilateral meeting with Pompeo in Tokyo. While the Indian press release just made a mention of the meeting having taken place amidst other engagements, the US State Department put out a separate press statement. It said that the two "asserted the need to work together to advance peace, prosperity, and security in the Indo-Pacific and around the globe".

Since the Trump administration took over, trade issues between India and US have dominated the engagement between the two sides. Trump's tirade against India over what he believed were unfair tariffs took over the discourse. Issues related to sanctions on Iran

and reducing oil imports to zero from Tehran, terrorism emanating from Pakistan, waiver on CAATSA sanctions on Russia and defence equipment purchases as well as the Afghan peace process figured in discussions over the last few years. However, China's aggression this time is likely to be the dominant theme.

The US has been alluding to the LAC situation as well in various briefings to press the point about the dangers the Chinese Communist Party's moves pose in the region. The US State Department official also said, "I mean, if you look at the conflict in the Himalayas between China and India, something that has been in the past handled according to unspoken or unwritten rules in the past to prevent these things from getting out of control, and then you look at what happened here recently, where you've got actually people beating each other to death – no. We – it's not – I mean, if you look at the single thing that's driving all this, it's a sudden turn toward gross aggression by the Chinese government in its entire periphery."

Pompeo's India visit will come just a week ahead of the US presidential election on November 3. The fact that despite the pandemic the Americans have chosen not to have a virtual engagement and travel for the 2+2 dialogue is also a reflection of perhaps their curiosity to access the situation more closely. A senior US official recently told News18.com that they are keeping a close watch on the situation as both sides make contesting claims. So, even though it appears that the anti-China narrative suits the US right now, they still want to make their own assessment sitting across the table in New Delhi.

U.S. senators urge sanctions on Turkey over Russian missile system (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 4:26 PM, Patricia Zengerle, Neutral]

A Republican and a Democratic U.S. senator called on Wednesday for President Donald Trump's administration to impose sanctions on Turkey over its purchase of Russia's S-400 anti-aircraft system, after a report that Turkey may be planning a comprehensive test.

Republican James Lankford and Democrat Chris Van Hollen wrote to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo asking about the report and saying that Washington's failure to act more decisively about the S-400 purchase had "emboldened" Turkey's government.

Turkey bought a batch of the missile systems from Russia last year, leading to its suspension by Washington from the U.S. F-35 stealth fighter jet program. The United States has said Turkey risks U.S. sanctions if it deploys the Russian-made S-400s, but has not yet imposed them.

The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the letter.

Bloomberg reported on Tuesday that Turkey was planning to conduct a comprehensive test of the S-400 missile-defense system, citing people familiar with the matter.

Department of State News

Trump enters Oval Office for first time since returning to White House (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 3:52 PM, Alexandra Alper and Jeff Mason, Neutral]

U.S. President Donald Trump on Wednesday entered the White House Oval Office for the

first time since returning earlier this week from a military hospital where he was being treated for COVID-19, a White House spokesman said.

"Was just briefed on Hurricane Delta, and spoke with @GovAbbott of Texas and @LouisianaGov John Bel Edwards," Trump said in a tweet a short while later.

Trump returns to Oval Office, breaking isolation after his hospitalization for coronavirus (CNN)

CNN [10/7/2020 4:48 PM, Kevin Liptak, Neutral]

President Donald Trump returned to the Oval Office on Wednesday, breaking isolation after his hospitalization for coronavirus and as an ongoing outbreak rips through his staff.

The White House said he was being briefed on a looming hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico and stimulus talks, though Trump himself scrapped talks on additional aid a day earlier.

Unsatisfied with the temporary office space erected for him in the White House residence, where he was isolating after returning from three days in the hospital, Trump had been itching to return to the Oval Office since Tuesday but aides convinced him to stay put.

Few seemed to believe, however, that Trump would last much longer isolating in his private quarters.

In a new memo released midday Wednesday, Trump's doctor relayed the President saying "I feel great!" and reported he had been symptom-free for 24 hours. But the memo declined again to provide critical information such as when Trump last tested negative, what his lung scans show and whether he is still on the steroid dexamethasone or any other medications that could be masking his symptoms.

Trump's "schedule right now is fluid, we're looking at his prognosis," chief of staff Mark Meadows told reporters earlier at the White House. "If he decides to go to the Oval, we've got safety protocols there."

Indeed, preparations had been made for Trump's eventual return to the Oval Office, including positioning a so-called "isolation cart" stocked with yellow medical gowns, respirator masks and plastic goggles required for visitors just outside the office doors near where Trump's assistants sit.

When he did return, Trump avoided other areas of the Wing Wing, entering the Oval Office directly from outside. Meadows and social media adviser Dan Scavino joined him there dressed in the protective gear. It wasn't clear who else he might have encountered along the way.

Trump made phone calls and spoke with aides mostly from his third-floor quarters on Tuesday but did tape a video from downstairs where offices were set up for him next to the medical suite. The video hadn't been released by Wednesday morning, nor had the White House distributed any photos of the President after his return from Walter Reed hospital.

All except Trump's senior-most aides are mostly in the dark about his health status beyond what his doctor released publicly. While he seemed short of breath at times on Monday

night, people said he seemed somewhat better on Tuesday, though few actually saw him in person.

In his memo on Wednesday, White House physician Dr. Sean Conley wrote Trump "has not needed nor received any supplemental oxygen since initial hospitalization" and said he has been "fever-free for more than 4 days," but did not say whether Trump was currently receiving any medications which could lower a fever.

Trump's labs, he said, "demonstrated detectable levels of SARS-CoV-2 IgG antibodies from labs drawn Monday."

Regeneron, the company that makes the experimental antibody treatment given to Trump on Friday, said the test likely showed evidence of the treatment, not Trump's own immune response.

Over the weekend, Trump's physician said days seven to 10 after Trump's diagnosis could be the most critical, a window that seemed to open on Wednesday. The White House continued to refuse to disclose when Trump last tested negative for coronavirus, throwing into doubt the extensive testing regimen they had long pointed to as their main protection against the virus.

It also wasn't clear which drugs the President continues to take. He was due to receive his final dose of remdesivir on Tuesday night at the White House but it wasn't known if he remains on a steroid, which some inside the building have openly speculated could be altering his mood.

Any aide who comes near Trump is required to don protective garb, according to a person familiar with the matter. It has given the White House residence the feeling of a sci-fi movie, one person said, as aides, staff and Secret Service personnel who need to come near Trump suit up to protect themselves.

Trump had raised on Tuesday the possibility of working from the Oval Office instead of the rooms that have been arranged for him on the lower level of the executive mansion, saying he feels ready to go back. Aides convinced him to remain isolated at least for a day. The hallways and offices in the West Wing have taken on a very different feel from when he left for the hospital on Friday. The President's staff has largely moved to working from home because so many of them have tested positive for coronavirus.

More than 15 members of Trump's staff or inner-circle have tested positive in recent days, including his wife, senior adviser, press secretary, campaign manager, former counselor, personal assistant, four press aides, three Republican senators and a member of the military who directly serves the President.

Stephen Miller, Trump's immigration adviser and speechwriter, said he tested positive Tuesday and was entering isolation. He is one of several people who had helped Trump prepare for last week's presidential debate who have now tested positive, including former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie.

It was unclear when the White House or the President would release the video remarks he taped on Tuesday, whose themes were similar to those in the video Trump recorded Monday night, a person familiar with the taping told CNN.

The atmosphere inside the White House was described by one official as "chaotic," largely because many people were working remotely and the President was calling the shots.

Trump's resistance to face masks, even while he is infected with coronavirus, sets him apart from other world leaders (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 8:30 AM, Rick Noack, Neutral]

Among world leaders, President Trump is increasingly isolated on the issue of face masks.

After he cast doubt for months on masks' efficacy in slowing the spread of the novel coronavirus, his resistance to White House precautions even after contracting the virus seemed to forestall the possibility of an about-face.

While many world leaders have supported the use of face masks and have chosen to wear them during public appearances — despite, in some cases, earlier reluctance of their own — Trump has delivered mixed, sometimes contradictory guidance, and has often appeared without a mask, donning one in public for the first time in July.

When Trump returned to the White House Monday night, after three days as a coronavirus patient at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, he peeled off his mask to salute Marine One and walked into the building maskless, a move that baffled doctors and raised concerns for the safety of White House employees.

The virus would be "under control" within weeks if everyone in the country wore face coverings, Robert Redfield, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said in July. But Trump has rarely hewed to that message. During the presidential debate last week, he said "masks are okay," but suggested that Democratic nominee Joe Biden was wearing them too often.

Trump's approach, which often contradicts the findings of researchers and advice of experts, stands in contrast to those of leaders who have been more successful at curbing the spread of the coronavirus in their countries.

Here is how other world leaders have handled face masks.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in

Five days after Trump's Feb. 27 assurance that the coronavirus would "disappear ... like a miracle," South Korean President Moon Jae-in donned a face mask for an apologetic address to his cabinet and the nation.

"I feel very sorry for causing inconveniences to the public by failing to supply masks sufficiently and quickly," Moon said, the Korea Herald reported.

He declared a "war" against the coronavirus, putting all government agencies on alert.

His quick recalibration paid off in the next month's elections, in which the governing party secured a decisive victory. Moon had cast his ballot wearing a face mask, which he continued to wear.

South Korea has seen a small fraction of the coronavirus cases and virus-related deaths recorded in the United States.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte

Italy's prime minister was among the first world leaders this year to wear a face mask in public on a regular basis, after the country, Europe initial epicenter, went into lockdown in March.

Conte's government enforced a mask mandate with hefty fines and faced relatively little pushback.

In surveys, his popularity rose. By early May, 59 percent of respondents to a poll by the Ixè Institute said that they trusted Conte.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel

Angela Merkel, Germany's chancellor, may present an even more careful image than Conte's, although she was later to adopt public mask usage.

Last Friday, footage showed her backing away from a mask-clad Conte, after he appeared to stand too close for comfort at a summit.

"Since German reunification — no, in fact, since the Second World War, there has been no challenge that has required more solidarity from us," Merkel said of the coronavirus in an address in March, setting the tone for her response.

By April, she and other officials urged Germans to wear masks, especially in crowded indoor spaces or on public transportation, where masks have since been mandated.

But for months, Merkel herself was rarely seen wearing one. In June, in response to a question from a reporter, she said she wore them when social distancing was impossible, as suggested by guidelines.

Public sightings of Merkel wearing a mask have increased, amid reports that she has grown worried about the possibility of a surge in new cases as winter approaches.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern

When a new cluster of coronavirus cases emerged in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, in August, after the country had gone more than 100 days without recording a single case of local transmission, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern acted swiftly, making masks mandatory on public transportation.

She posted a video of herself making a mask. "I'm going to pull out my glitter gun later," she said.

On Instagram, she applauded New Zealanders for "trying to smile with their eyes."

But after she was seen taking maskless selfies with supporters, Ardern faced criticism, in the run-up to an Oct. 17 election

"I wear my mask in Auckland. And I work hard to try and keep my social distance," she said in response. "In that particular photo I did make a mistake, I should have stepped further forward."

Her apology appeared to capture a common sentiment.

"We don't have masks ingrained in our culture. And I think people have not got used to them at any point," New Zealand epidemiologist Michael Baker told the BBC.

The country has seen few cases, having twice squashed the curve, and coronavirus-related restrictions there have for the most part once again been lifted.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson

Compared with elsewhere in Europe, Britain was late to embrace a form of face mask mandate. Face covering were made mandatory on public transportation in England in June.

Reporters described compliance with the new rules as "patchy."

Perhaps, some analysts argued, enthusiasm for the measure would have been stronger if members of the government had stuck to their own parameters. Days before the mask mandate was announced, Johnson's top adviser, Dominic Cummings, was accused of flouting stay-at-home measures.

He refused to resign, and Johnson stood by him, in the face of public outrage in some corners.

Throughout much of the summer, face masks remained a somewhat rare sight among top U.K. officials.

Johnson — who tested positive for the virus in March and said he only narrowly survived — was first seen wearing a mask in public in July, according to the Guardian, the same day he announced that they could become mandatory inside English shops because they have a "real value in confined spaces." His tone in communicating the seriousness of the pandemic did shift after he contracted the illness.

In the following months, as cases remained relatively low in the country, Johnson and other top U.K. officials largely fell back into their maskless ways.

But as the number of new cases surged in recent weeks, Johnson appeared to have

reconsidered. When he left 10 Downing Street last week to face questions from Parliament, he had a mask on.

France, U.S. and Russia to meet on Nagorno-Karabakh amid fears of regional war (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 1:52 PM, Nailia Bagirova, Nvard Hovhannisyan and John Irish, Neutral] France, the United States and Russia will step up efforts to end fighting between Azeri and ethnic Armenian forces in the South Caucasus by holding talks in Geneva on Thursday, as fears of a regional war grow.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Russian, French and U.S. representatives would also meet in Moscow on Monday to look at ways to persuade the warring sides to negotiate a ceasefire.

"We want everyone to understand that it's in their interest to immediately stop hostilities without conditions and that we start a negotiation," he told the French parliament's foreign affairs committee.

Le Drian did not make clear whether any Armenian and Azeri representatives would attend but Azerbaijan said its foreign minister, Jeyhun Bayramov, would visit Geneva on Thursday.

The Armenian foreign ministry said Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan would visit Moscow on Monday but gave no details. It ruled out a meeting with Bayramov.

The warring sides have so far ignored ceasefire calls by Paris, Washington and Moscow, which have mediated for nearly three decades in the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, a mountain enclave which under international law belongs to Azerbaijan but is populated and governed by ethnic Armenians.

The Azeri and Armenian leaders have also been at odds over their conditions for halting fighting that began on Sept. 27.

More than 360 people have been killed, including 320 military personnel and 19 civilians in Nagorno-Karabakh, and 28 Azeri civilians. They are the deadliest clashes since a 1991-94 war over Nagorno-Karabakh that killed about 30,000.

Azerbaijan says Azeri cities outside the conflict zone have also been attacked. This has taken fighting closer to territory from which pipelines carry Azeri gas and oil to Europe, and prompted British oil company BP to look at tightening security at its facilities in Azerbaijan.

"We must be attentive that the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan does not become a regional war," Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in televised remarks.

Iran, which borders both Armenia and Azerbaijan, has been talking to both the former Soviet republics as concern mounts that Turkey, a close ally of Azerbaijan, and Russia, which has a defence pact with Armenia, could be sucked into the conflict.

France, the United States and Russia are co-chairs of the Organization for Security and Co-

operation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group that mediates over Nagorno-Karabakh.

Turkey has accused the group of neglecting the conflict and said it should not be involved in mediation.

Le Drian hit back at Turkey, reiterating accusations – denied by Ankara – that it is involved militarily and saying this fuelled the "internationalisation" of the conflict.

Azeri President Ilham Aliyev has said his country will hold talks with Armenia only after the acute phase of military conflict ends, and wants Turkey involved in mediation.

He also wants Armenia to set a timetable for a withdrawal from Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding Azeri territories.

Armenia's ceasefire conditions are Turkey "discontinuing its engagement" and "the withdrawal of mercenaries and terrorists or their elimination," Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan's press service quoted him as telling Time magazine.

In comments to Sky News, Pashinyan said Turkey and Azerbaijan were pursuing a policy of genocide and "reinstating the Turkish empire." Both have dismissed such accusations in the past.

Some 1.5 million Armenians were killed under Ottoman rule between 1915 and 1923. Turkey accepts that many Armenians living in the empire were killed in clashes with Ottoman forces during World War One, but contests the figures and denies the killings were systematically orchestrated and constitute a genocide.

'It breaks my heart': Uighurs wrongfully held at Guantánamo plead to be with families (Yahoo News/The Guardian)

Yahoo News/The Guardian [10/7/2020 6:00 AM, Leyland Cecco, Neutral]

They were captured by bounty hunters, shipped across the world by American soldiers and held for years in Guantánamo Bay.

Salahidin Abdulahad, Khalil Mamut and Ayoub Mohammed were eventually cleared by US courts and released. Their time in the notorious prison, however, continues to haunt them.

More than a decade after the three Uighur men were released to Bermuda and Albania, they are unable to join their families, who have since moved to Canada.

Although a string of US court rulings found that the men had no links to terrorism, the government of Justin Trudeau argues that they were once militant separatists – and still pose a threat to national security.

"I want to do everything for my family. My kids know they have a daddy, but they can't live with him or see him," said Abdulahad. "Knowing that makes me feel so guilty."

The men, now in the 40s, have suffered more than most can imagine, said Toronto-based lawyer Prasanna Balasundaram, who has taken on their cases. "Living away from their

families is having a profound mental toll on them. I meet with their spouses, I meet with their children, and it's clear the weight everyone bears."

Growing up as Muslims in China, the men say they experienced constant surveillance. Their families were punished by the state for minor infractions. (Mohamed and Abdulahad both have relatives who are currently being held held in China's infamous "re-education" camps.)

Fearing that there was little future for them in China, the three men fled the country in 2001, traveling first to Pakistan and then Afghanistan, where they settled in a small community of Uighurs in a village outside of Jalalabad.

Just a few months later, the US invaded Afghanistan. The village was bombed by coalition forces, and its inhabitants fled into the mountains.

After crossing back into Pakistan, they were betrayed by villagers, who sold the men to the US military for a bounty payout – \$5,000 per head.

They were taken to an American military base in Kandahar, and eventually transferred to the US base in Guantánamo Bay, where Mohamed was held for four years and Abdulahad and Mamut for seven.

They spent days under intense interrogation by both US and Chinese officials.

Like many captives swept up in the American dragnet, the men were eventually exonerated, guilty of nothing more than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In 2005, a military tribunal determined Mohammed was not an enemy combatant. Three years later, a Washington circuit court came to a similar conclusion with Abdulahad and Mamut.

The men's lawyers argued that they would be at risk if they were returned to China.

The Obama administration – determined to close Guantánamo, but unwilling to take its former inmates – eventually shipped the men to Bermuda and Albania, as part of a complicated set of diplomatic deals to offload detainees from the war on terror.

In Bermuda, Abdulahad and Mamut learned English, and found construction work; Mohammed earned a business degree in Albania.

Eventually, through mutual friends and online Uighur communities, the men met their future wives, who travelled Bermuda and Albania to start families.

But all three women found the move disorientating. By 2013, Abdulahad's wife Zulpiye Yaqub had depression. Hoping to be closer to other Uighurs, she applied for asylum in Canada and was granted refugee status.

Khalil's wife Aminiguli Mamut left Bermuda after their first child became ill and was sent to Toronto for treatment. They were granted refugee protection in 2015 and permanent residence in 2017.

Melike Aierken, who is married to Ayoub, was already a Canadian citizen when the two met online. After an unsuccessful attempt at building a life in Albania, she moved with the couple's two children back to Canada, sponsoring Ayoub to join her in 2014.

Unable to travel, the men have watched their families grow up from a distance. Their wives and children make occasional trips to see them in Bermuda and Albania, but the visits are costly and never feel long enough.

"It's very hard for my kids to leave because they're crying and they want to stay with me. It breaks my heart when they finally leave," Abdulahad said through a translator.

The Canadian government maintains there are "reasonable grounds" to believe that while in Afghanistan the three men trained the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a separatist group that China has designated as a terrorist organization — and pressured other countries to do as well, including the United States.

Balasundaram said the allegations of militant training were "completely unfounded", adding that the Canadian government's evidence for refusal rests on interviews of the men by American officials that were "ultimately discredited".

Human rights groups have criticized Canada for turning the men away at a time when Trudeau has expressed support for persecuted Uighurs.

"The anguish and the anguish and injustice that has befallen [these] individuals and families is frankly unconscionable," Alex Neve, secretary general at Amnesty International Canada, told a recent parliamentary committee. "Canada could solve th[is] situation in a few days or weeks.

On 21 August, Mohammed received another finding of inadmissibility — a result that his legal team said left he and wife Melike in "despair and frustration" and leaves him with few options.

Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada refused to comment specifically on the cases, only saying that "the applications of Mr Abdulahad, Mr Mamut and Mr Mohammed are still in process and no final decision has been made".

But as the process drags on, the three men have grown more pragmatic, pleading just for the chance to visit their families. Abdulahad's wife, Zulipiye Yahefu, is pregnant with the couple's fourth child.

"I've asked the Canadian government just to give me one month, so I can be with my wife when she delivers our baby," he said. "Then I can go back."

Mamut, who works long hours in construction and uses each break to check in with his wife, says he feels a profound guilt because of his situation.

"I can't be with her and the kids. She's become a single mother: she has to do everything alone. I feel so guilty," he said. "But I don't believe these dark days will continue forever."

U.S. accused of violating international labor laws, forced-labor protections in new complaint (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 8:54 AM, Eli Rosenberg, 13480K, Neutral]

Leaders representing a large number of U.S. trade unions filed a complaint with the United Nations' labor agency Wednesday, arguing that the country under President Trump has violated international labor standards during the coronavirus pandemic.

The complaint was filed by the Service Employees International Union and the AFL-CIO at the Geneva headquarters of the International Labour Organization, a more than 100-year-old institution run by the U.N. that works to uphold human rights on work-related issues like safety and collective bargaining.

The complaint details numerous ways U.S. labor law and enforcement are failing workers, and spotlights their further weakening under Trump.

And it charges the United States with violating workers' rights in terms not typically associated with well-off countries, at one point saying the bind many essential workers have been placed in during the pandemic — forced to risk infection or lose their jobs and potentially unemployment benefits — amounts to a system of forced labor.

The complaint is another sign of the frustration over the treatment of workers under the Trump administration, and it places the United States in the realm of potential wrongdoing typically occupied by less-developed and less-democratic countries.

"Covid has laid bare what we already knew," Richard Trumka, the president of the AFL-CIO said in an interview. "It has demonstrated that not only is the U.S. violating workers' rights, but those violations are resulting in people dying. It became so outrageous that we wanted to file a complaint."

The Labor Department and Occupational Safety and Health Administration did not respond to a request for comment. The National Labor Relations Board declined to comment.

The complaint points to two main avenues of failure for U.S. labor law and policy: the country's antiquated labor laws, such as the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which leaves farmers, gig workers, contractors and other classes of workers without protection; and the softening of workers' protections by the Trump administration that has continued into the pandemic.

Some of the complaint's harshest words were reserved for the Trump administration's orders declaring industries such as meatpacking essential, compelling them to stay open even amid potential novel coronavirus outbreaks, while federal agencies, including OSHA, declined to issue enforceable safety regulations.

"These executive orders gave a green light for employers to force workers to report for work and risk their lives or lose their jobs," said the complaint, signed by Trumka and SEIU President Mary Kay Henry. "This is tantamount to forced labor."

The complaint highlighted the racial implications of these orders too, arguing one executive order was inherently discriminatory because the vast majority of meatpacking workers who

contracted the coronavirus were Black or Hispanic.

The complaint also took aim at other ways Trump's labor agencies rolled back protections for workers.

During the pandemic's early weeks, the NLRB, which oversees union elections, suspended them, giving companies more time to maneuver against them, the complaint charged.

The NLRB also issued a memo in March that the union presidents said signaled employers could avoid bargaining about proposed layoffs because of the pandemic. And in two cases in August, the NLRB said companies were in the clear for dismissing workers who expressed concern about safety issues during the pandemic, even though workers have protections from the National Labor Relations Act from being fired in many cases for raising safety concerns at work.

"Each of these decisions disarms workers and their unions in the face of management actions to violate their collective bargaining rights in the Covid-19 crisis," the complaint said. "Since these memoranda also serve as instructions to NLRB regional authorities on how to handle similar cases, they have a cascading effect that will undermine workers' rights in weeks and months ahead as the pandemic continues to ravage American workplaces."

It also put a spotlight on OSHA, charged with upholding worker safety regulations, noting that the agency failed to issue a safety standard businesses would be required to adhere to for coronavirus safety.

"The complaint is stunning in its level of detail and the number of examples," said Joseph A. McCartin, a U.S. labor expert at Georgetown University. "What becomes clear is that the U.S. is far from an example for how to protect workers and is actually showing itself to be well behind the curve."

McCartin said the type of complaint was not very typical of prosperous, democratic countries. Countries that had complaints investigated by the U.N. labor body in 2019 include Burundi, China, Myanmar, Pakistan and France.

Though the ILO does not have any enforcement power, a finding against the United States after an investigation could have serious ramifications for the country's reputation, McCartin said.

"It would strengthen politically the argument that our laws are inadequate," McCartin said. "It could help to bring some political pressure to bear on those agencies if in the eyes of the world and this duly designated committee that the U.S. is found to be failing to ensure basic human rights."

The United States participates in the ILO but has not signed on to all of its conventions.

"The committee's finding that the U.S. is in violation of these essential international standards would make it a lot more difficult for the U.S. to hold other countries accountable," said Lance Compa, a labor law expert who helped draft the complaint. "To the extent that the committee finds that the U.S. has violated international standards, it makes it a lot more

difficult for the U.S. to, for example, hold China accountable for labor rights violations. Or Russia, or India, or Brazil.”

Henry, SEIU’s president, said that state of labor protections in the United States was “unconscionable.”

“I’ve never seen a U.S. government intentionally put the lives of Black and Brown workers at risk and be so unwilling to acknowledge what every state and the best employers were saying about what we needed as a response,” she said.

Trump admin tightens H-1B visa restrictions for foreign workers (USA Today)

USA Today [10/7/2020 7:59 AM, Kim Hjelmgaard, 5823K, Neutral]

The Trump administration changed its rules for highly skilled foreign workers who want to live and work in the United States as part of the so-called H-1B visa program, the Departments of Labor and Homeland Security announced Tuesday.

The changes, which the Trump administration has characterized as part of its goal to protect American workers, mean employers will need to commit to higher salaries for those they want to hire and visa applicants will have to have a "specialty occupation" that more narrowly fits their formal qualifications. Visa lengths could also shorten.

"We have entered an era in which economic security is an integral part of homeland security," Acting Department of Homeland Secretary Chad Wolf said in a statement. "We must do everything we can within the bounds of the law to make sure the American worker is put first."

The policy changes have been discussed since 2017 and will be effective within 60 days. Current immigration law allows for about 85,000 H-1B visas each year, according to U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services.

The Wall Street Journal reported that Ken Cuccinelli, the No. 2 ranking official at the Department of Homeland Secretary, told reporters on a conference call that he expects about one-third of H-1B visa applications would be rejected under the new set of rules.

The Journal additionally reported that the overhaul to the H-1B visa program could disproportionately affect technology workers. Under the new rule, for example, someone who applies for a job as a software developer wouldn't be awarded an H-1B visa if that person has a degree in engineering or some other non-computer-programming field.

The action comes less than a week after the Trump administration slashed the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the U.S. to a new low next year. The changes permit no more than 15,000 people fleeing war, violence and persecution across the globe to make a new home in America. The U.S. State Department announced the cap.

Climate-menaced nations say survival depends on stronger 2020 action (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 1:32 PM, Megan Rowling, Neutral]

Developing countries at risk from wilder weather and rising seas on Wednesday urged all governments to meet a deadline to deliver stronger national climate action plans to the

United Nations by the end of 2020, stressing that their survival depended on it.

About 195 nations committed under the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change to submit updated plans this year, with a view to boosting so-far inadequate pledges to curb planet-heating emissions and adapt to the impacts of warming.

But the health and economic crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have thrown climate diplomacy off track and forced a delay of this year's U.N. climate summit until November 2021.

Nonetheless, the effects of the pandemic should not be a reason for countries to shy away from submitting more ambitious national plans to fight climate change, said Ethiopian President Sahle-Work Zewde.

"Both challenges – climate change and COVID-19 – could be addressed in a green recovery," she told an online event launching a campaign to press for those plans by the end of the year.

"Besides, delayed response is going to be expensive and irreversible," she added in video comments.

Zewde and a few other leaders of 48 countries in the "Climate Vulnerable Forum" (CVF), including Cambodia and Nepal, said they were working to submit their own updated plans this year, despite contributing little to planetary heating.

The Marshall Islands, Rwanda and Vietnam have already done so.

Patricia Espinosa, the U.N. climate chief, reiterated a call for all countries to stick to the 2020 deadline.

Doing so was "vital" because there was no time to lose in boosting efforts to limit global warming to the tightest Paris pact goal of 1.5 degrees Celsius, she told the event.

The world has already heated up by just over 1C from preindustrial times and is set for warming of close to 3C, even if emissions-cutting pledges made so far are delivered.

"The luxury of time was squandered long ago – we are now minutes to midnight," Espinosa said.

But she added that momentum was picking up, with about a dozen updated plans already submitted and many other countries indicating they would do so this year.

The United Nations and Britain, host of the delayed COP26 climate summit, are organising a virtual event on Dec. 12 to mark the five years since the Paris Agreement was sealed, giving leaders a platform to showcase their stepped-up plans.

Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, whose country currently chairs the CVF, pointed to the efforts – and investment – made by its member countries to cut emissions and adapt to climate change within their borders.

In Bangladesh, for example, scientists have developed crops that are resistant to salt, floods and droughts, as well as floating agriculture technology, while Costa Rica produces 100% renewable electricity for most of the year, she said.

Ethiopia planted more than 5 billion tree seedlings during this year's rainy season, on a path to 20 billion by 2022.

But "robust international partnership" remains indispensable for vulnerable countries to minimise "the profound loss and damage" wrought by climate change impacts such as worsening floods, storms and higher seas, Hasina added.

The CVF member states, representing more than 1 billion people across Africa, Asia and Latin America, expect G20 countries – which account for more than three-quarters of global emissions – to come up with "clear and definite" plans to effectively cut those emissions, she said.

She also urged rich nations to keep a promise to raise at least \$100 billion a year from 2020 to help poorer countries develop cleanly and adapt to a warming planet.

David Waskow, of the World Resources Institute, said action on climate change was urgent but "what will count the most at the end of the day is the degree of ambition," especially from big-emitting countries such as China.

Espinosa said that if countries submitted action plans after the 2020 deadline, they would not be included in a key February report synthesising progress towards the Paris goals of keeping warming to "well below" 2C and ideally to 1.5C.

The next formal submission date for stronger plans, under the Paris deal, is five years away, she added – "at which point, our window of opportunity (to meet the goals) may be closed."

2020 Had Warmest September on Record (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 2:00 AM, Veronica Penney, 28290K, Neutral]

Worldwide, last month was the warmest September on record, topping a record set just a year before, European scientists announced Wednesday.

It was also the hottest September on record for Europe. Northern Siberia, Western Australia, the Middle East and parts of South America similarly recorded above-average temperatures.

The announcement, by the Copernicus Climate Change Service, an intergovernmental agency supported by the European Union, capped nine months of devastating wildfires and followed the most active Atlantic hurricane season since 2005.

It also came as Arctic sea ice plunged to its second-lowest levels on record, driven by record temperatures in late June. Many experts predict that by 2050, Arctic sea ice could melt completely during the summer.

According to Copernicus, last month was 0.63 degrees Celsius warmer than average and topped the average for September 2019 by 0.05 degrees Celsius. The agency's satellite observations date to 1979, and averages are calculated using data spanning 1981 through 2010.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration also publishes monthly assessments of global temperature data, which are generally issued about a week after the Copernicus measurements.

The two organizations calculate averages differently, but the results are generally similar. NOAA relies on surface temperature measurements from land stations, ships and buoys. Copernicus relies heavily on computer modeling.

"Even though the details of the report are different, they all come to the same conclusion that the global temperatures are increasing," said Ahira Sánchez-Lugo, a physical scientist for NOAA's National Centers for Environmental Information.

According to NOAA's predictions, this year is 99.9 percent certain to be one of the top five hottest years on record. Whether that prediction holds true will partly rely on the impact of La Niña, which NOAA scientists declared last month.

La Niña is the opposite phase of the climate pattern that also brings El Niño and affects weather across the globe. Its strongest influence is usually felt in winter. And while the precise effects are unpredictable, La Niña can result in warmer and drier conditions across the Southern United States and cooler conditions in southeastern Alaska, the Northern Plains and Western and Central Canada.

September was world's hottest on record, EU climate change service says (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 7:57 AM, Matthew Green and Kate Abnett, 5304K, Neutral]

Last month was the world's hottest September on record, with unusually high temperatures recorded off Siberia, in the Middle East, and in parts of South America and Australia, the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service said on Wednesday.

Extending a long-term warming trend caused by emissions of heat-trapping gases, high temperatures this year have played a major role in disasters from fires in California and the Arctic to floods in Asia, scientists say.

"As we go into an even warmer world, certain extremes are likely to happen more often and be more intense," Copernicus senior scientist Freja Vamborg told Reuters, pointing to heat waves and periods of intense rain as examples of this.

Globally, September was 0.05 degrees Celsius warmer than the same month in 2019 and 0.08C warmer than in 2016, previously the warmest and second warmest Septembers on record, the Copernicus data showed.

Over the final three months of 2020, climate events such as the La Niña phenomenon and projected low levels of autumn Arctic sea ice will influence whether the year as a whole will

become the warmest on record, the Copernicus service said.

The last five calendar years were the world's warmest on record. Average global temperatures have already climbed to roughly 1 degree Celsius above pre-industrial times.

Countries agreed under the 2015 Paris climate accord to attempt to cap warming at 1.5 degrees Celsius, which scientists say would avoid the most catastrophic impacts of climate change.

But even though large emitters, including China and the European Union, have pledged to slash their emissions in the coming decades, overall, current policies would see temperatures rise far beyond the 1.5 degree level.

"That is the key point. The earth has warmed a lot, and it will carry on warming if greenhouse gas emissions continue at the rate they are at the moment," Vamborg said.

Last month was hottest September ever (CNN)

CNN [10/7/2020 11:15 AM, Rob Picheta, 7975K, Neutral]

Searing heat in Europe, Australia, the Middle East and several other pockets of the world made last month the hottest September ever, the EU's Copernicus Climate Change Service has announced.

The Earth's average temperature was 0.05 degrees Celsius (0.09 degrees Fahrenheit) warmer than the previous record, which was set last September.

Of the nine completed months this year, three have now broken the global record for average temperature by Copernicus' measures – marking a dangerous and undeniable trend toward temperature levels that international groups have warned would be devastating to the Earth.

The new September record was driven by exceptionally hot weather that touched nearly every continent.

Europe alone saw its warmest ever September, with record-breaking heat in the middle of the month in France and unseasonably hot weather near the Black Sea. The Middle East sweltered, too, with temperature records set in Turkey, Israel and Jordan.

Paraguay and southern Brazil joined them at the end of the month, and Australia recorded its second-hottest September. In Siberia, where wildfires throughout the year have caused carbon dioxide emissions to spike, the mercury remained unusually high.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles County, daytime values reached a record peak of 49 degrees Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit) – just weeks after Death Valley recorded what may be the hottest temperature in the world in more than a century.

Over all, temperatures clocked in at 0.63 degrees Celsius warmer than the average for September over the past 40 years.

That means the month was nearly 1.3 degrees hotter than pre-industrial levels.

Global temperatures must be kept from rising by more than 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels to avoid major impacts on the climate, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has concluded.

But the astonishing temperatures recorded only partially describe the dangers of global warming, a phenomenon that continued to affect the lives of millions last month.

The record high in LA County came as parts of California were blanketed by apocalyptic skies, the result of devastating wildfires across the state. That trend has continued into October. California recorded its first "gigafire" in modern history on Monday, after the expansive August Complex fire scorched more than a million acres.

And thousands of miles away in Siberia, a part of the world usually covered in snow for much of the year, the uncontrollable fires continued to spew carbon emissions into the atmosphere.

Scientists at Copernicus estimated last month that CO2 emissions from fires in the Arctic Circle have increased by more than a third compared with 2019, with 244 megatonnes of carbon produced from January 1 to August 31, 2020. By comparison, 181 megatonnes of carbon were produced for the whole of 2019.

Nitrous Oxide Is Leaking Into the Atmosphere at a Dangerous Pace (Bloomberg) **Bloomberg** [10/7/2020 11:00 AM, Laura Millan Lombrana, Neutral]

The colossal amount of nitrogen used as fertilizer in agriculture is leading to an increase in emissions of nitrous oxide, a lesser-known greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change and the depletion of the ozone layer.

Nitrous oxide emissions are increasing at a rate of about 2% per decade, and in 2018 the gas's concentration in the atmosphere was about 22% above pre-industrial levels, according to a study published today in *Nature*, the first to do a thorough accounting of atmospheric nitrous oxide. The paper was five years in the making, and involved 48 research institutions from around the world.

"Now that we have started to draw pathways to net zero emissions, we must understand all greenhouse gases," said Pep Canadell, co-author and executive director of the Global Carbon Project. "It has taken us a very long time to understand how nitrous oxide emissions work, but we have learnt that emissions from natural sources haven't changed, while human emissions have increased a lot."

Nitrous oxide, or N₂O, is the third-most abundant greenhouse gas after carbon dioxide and methane. The gas has about 300 times more warming power than carbon dioxide over the course of a century, and stays in the atmosphere warming the planet for 116 years. Unlike other gases that destroy the ozone layer, which protects Earth from ultraviolet radiation, its emissions haven't been banned.

Another paper published in *Nature* in March showed that the Earth's ozone shield has

almost totally recovered due to the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which banned a class of harmful chemicals known as chlorofluorocarbons. But the remaining ozone hole over the Antarctic is highly volatile and depends on weather conditions. After it shrunk dramatically in 2019, it's grown to its largest size in 15 years, Europe's Copernicus Atmosphere Monitoring Service said on Tuesday.

N₂O is released into the atmosphere mainly through the fertilizers that make crops and pastures grow faster and greener. Every year, more than 220 million metric tons of nitrogen are spread on croplands as fertilizer and on pasturelands as manure produced by livestock. Agriculture is responsible for around 70% of human emissions of the gas, researchers found.

Developing nations that are highly dependent on agriculture in East and South Asia, Africa, and South America are the main contributors to the increase in nitrous oxide emissions over the last two decades, the researchers found. "The main problem we have in many parts of the world is that food production is subsidized by the state through agriculture subsidies that make fertilizers cheaper," Canadell said. "If we cut fertilizer subsidies a little, farmers and corporations would start to be more careful about the amount of nitrogen they use."

Farmers forced to pay market prices for fertilizers in countries that have eliminated or reduced subsidies have almost immediately cut nitrogen use, Canadell said. Other research shows that excess nitrogen in the soil can lead to slightly lower crop output.

Still, developing nations are often reluctant to change agricultural policies. "These are countries that might not have food security," Canadell said. "The last thing they want to talk about is changing something as essential as the production of food."

The U.S. has emitted roughly the same amount of N₂O each year for the last two decades, but an increase in agricultural production during that time suggests a more efficient use of nitrogen fertilizers there. Emissions from Europe have declined as the region has implemented policies to cut emissions, increase land productivity, and reduce water pollution, but there are doubts about how much further they can fall.

Significant curbs from high-emitting countries would go a long way toward slowing the accumulation of nitrous oxide in the atmosphere. But eventually, new technologies will be needed to capture emissions that can't be eliminated through efficiency measures.

"There's no doubt we'll need solutions because there will always be some leaking," Canadell said. "But before we get there, there are opportunities in Brazil, China and other emerging economies where there is an important acceleration in emissions."

EBRD governors sign off on green investment pivot (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 12:05 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Governors of European Bank for Reconstruction and Development pledged to shift more than 50% of the lender's investments towards green projects by 2025, gave Iraq the nod to join and formally postponed plans to expand into sub-Saharan Africa

EBRD governors, currently congregating virtually for the bank's annual meeting, signed off

on the lender's strategy for the next five years. They are also due to elect a new president on Thursday, with sources saying France's Odile Renaud-Basso is set to become the next president.

The sign-off confirms the lender's pivot towards on projects that will help shift countries to a low-carbon economy while governors also agreed as expected to a request from Iraq to become a shareholder of the bank.

The new strategy confirmed policymakers would revisit expanding into Sub-Saharan Africa, which was originally expected to begin this year, to 2022 and focus on its existing countries of operation for now.

"The COVID pandemic has hit all our countries of operations hard," EBRD governor for Spain Nadia Calvino said in a recorded video message at the opening of the meeting.

"Our priority now is on crisis response, on recovery, and on building back better to accelerate transition."

The EBRD was set up in 1991 to invest in the ex-communist economies of eastern Europe. It now operates in 38 economies, chiefly in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and central Asia.

Meanwhile French Treasury head Renaud-Basso was on track to take on the top job at the bank, according to sources, after Italy's former economy minister, Pier Carlo Padoan, had pulled out of the race for president.

Padoan and Renaud-Basso were seen as the front runners for the position, with Polish Finance Minister Tadeusz Kosciński also in the race.

The EBRD confirmed that the vote was now between Renaud-Basso and Kosciński.

Renaud-Basso is set to succeed Britain's Suma Chakrabarti, who finished his second four-year term earlier in the year. If confirmed, she would become the fourth French president of the EBRD.

To be elected, a candidate has to receive the votes of a majority of governors, representing a majority of the total voting power of members.

[Qatar] Qatar makes formal request for F-35 jets – sources (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 3:18 PM, Mike Stone, Neutral]

Qatar has submitted a formal request to the United States to buy stealthy F-35 fighter jets, three people familiar with the deal said, in a deal that if pursued could strain U.S. ties with Saudi Arabia and Israel.

The request for the Lockheed Martin Co jets was submitted by the Persian Gulf state in recent weeks, the people said.

A U.S. State Department spokesman said, "As a matter of policy, the United States does

not confirm or comment on proposed defense sales or transfers until they are formally notified to Congress.”

The Qatari embassy in Washington, D.C. did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Keen to counter Iran in the region, the U.S. helps to arm allies including Qatar, host to the largest U.S. military facility in the Middle East, and home to 8,000 U.S. service members and Department of Defense civilian employees.

The request follows an August deal between the U.S. and the United Arab Emirates in which Washington agreed to consider giving the Gulf state approval to buy F-35s in a side deal to a U.S.-brokered agreement called the Abraham Accord to normalize diplomatic ties with Israel.

Israel has signaled stiff opposition to a UAE sale and would likely be just as resistant to one with Qatar, fearing it could undercut its military advantage in the Middle East.

In Washington, a fourth person familiar with the matter said concern about Qatar's links to Hamas have frequently surfaced over arms sales to the Gulf state. But in the case of an advanced warplane like the F-35, it could be a deal breaker.

One of the people said Qatar's letter of request for the jets, the first formal step in the legal process of foreign military sale, was not directly linked to its adoption of the Abraham Accord. Nor has Qatar shown any sign it will normalize ties with Israel.

U.S. and Qatar have close ties. In September Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Qatar Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani met in Washington as the U.S. hopes to move forward with naming Qatar as a major non-NATO ally.

Despite being U.S. allies, both the potential Qatari and UAE F-35 deals must satisfy a decades-old agreement with Israel that states any U.S. weapons sold to the region must not impair Israel's "qualitative military edge," guaranteeing U.S. weapons furnished to Israel are "superior in capability" to those sold to its neighbors.

Saudi Arabia, Washington's most powerful and closest partner among the Gulf Arab states, is also likely to oppose the United States supplying F-35s to Qatar. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt remain locked in a three-year standoff with Qatar that the Trump administration has tried to end, so far without success.

A formal letter of request typically contains specifications that would be used to furnish pricing data to a customer, but currently the F-35A, a fifth generation stealthy fighter jet, costs around \$80 million.

Any F-35 sale could take years to negotiate and deliver, giving a new U.S. presidential administration ample time to halt the deals. Any sale would also need congressional approval.

Poland, the most recent F-35 customer, purchased 32 of the jets, but will not receive its first delivery until 2024.

[Syria] After blast in northwest Syria town, U.S. says rise in attacks troubling (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 8:30 AM, Susan Heavey, 5304K, Negative]

The United States on Wednesday said it was troubled by a recent rise in attacks in Syria, a day after a blast in the northwest town of al-Bab killed at least 11 people.

"The United States strongly condemns the terrorist attack near a crowded traffic circle in al-Bab yesterday," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said in a statement, adding that other reports indicated more than 20 people were killed. "We are deeply troubled by the rise in such terrorist attacks in recent months."

[Syria] U.S. strongly condemns deadly terrorist attack in Syria's Al Bab: State Department (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [10/7/2020 12:12 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The United States is deeply concerned over the rising number of terrorist attacks in Syria and strongly condemns this week's deadly car bombing in the Syrian town of Al-Bab, State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The United States strongly condemns the terrorist attack near a crowded traffic circle in al-Bab yesterday, which according to initial reports killed more than 20 innocent people and injured scores more," Ortagus said. "We are deeply troubled by the rise in such terrorist attacks in recent months, and we again remind all parties that violence impedes the hope for a lasting political resolution to the conflict in Syria as called for by UNSCR 2254."

On Tuesday, the state-run SANA news agency reported that dozens of civilians were killed and wounded in the blast, which occurred on the territory controlled by Turkish-backed armed groups.

[Russia] Why the Russians may know more about Trump's health and COVID diagnosis than the American public (USA Today)

USA Today [10/7/2020 9:47 AM, Deirdre Shesgreen, 5823K, Neutral]

When President Donald Trump's doctors delivered an update on their patient's COVID status Monday, the American public and scores of reporters were not the only ones hanging on every word.

Russia, China and other foreign adversaries were listening too. And they have almost certainly deployed every tool in their spy kits – from human sources to eavesdropping – to determine how sick the president is and what it means for America's national security posture, according to former intelligence officials and other experts.

"They are looking and watching," said Carol "Rollie" Flynn, a 30-year CIA veteran who is now president of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a nonpartisan think tank.

White House physician Sean Conley has come under fire for refusing to answer key

questions about the president's infection, including what Trump's lung scans show and when he first tested positive for COVID-19.

Trump's advisers, meanwhile, have sought to downplay his infection and portray the commander-in-chief as fully focused on his job.

"We have a government that is steady at the tiller," Robert O'Brien, Trump's national security adviser, said Sunday on CBS' Face the Nation. "He's firmly in command."

But while the American public is relying on Conley and other White House officials to disclose the latest information about Trump's health, the Kremlin may be listening in on private conversations between the president and his outside advisers, as well as conversations among his family members and even his doctors. And with several top Trump staffers working from home after contracting COVID-19 or being exposed to the virus, the White House's communications may be particularly vulnerable, Flynn said.

"I would hope that ... the operational security of his doctors is good, and they're not chatting about his diagnosis on the telephones," Flynn said. "But if they are, it's very likely the Russian may know more than we do."

Steven L. Hall, a retired senior CIA leader who oversaw agency operations in former Soviet Union countries, said there is "no doubt" Russian intelligence services have information about Trump's condition.

"There is no doubt they are working to get more. Oh, and the White House is a counterintelligence nightmare," Hall tweeted Saturday when Trump was being treated at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center.

The Trump administration has been criticized in the past for lax security practices, including the president's habit of speaking with friends and outside advisers via unsecured cell phone lines. In one highly publicized incident, Trump's former ambassador to the EU spoke with Trump via cell phone while at a restaurant in Kiev, where others could overhear the conversation.

"It's highly likely that (foreign) intelligence services know who the president's friends are that he talks to and are using all means at their disposal to listen in to that," said Peter Feaver, who served on the National Security Council during the George W. Bush administration.

But he said the Kremlin and other foreign governments are also poring through the mountains of open source material on Trump's condition, including the viral video clip of Trump seemingly out of breath after he climbed the White House steps on Monday after leaving the hospital.

"I'm sure they were watching the video of the president on the portico and analyzing it frame by frame," said Feaver, now a professor at Duke University. He said Trump's illness is also a problem for American national security officials, who he fears are distracted by the president's health status.

"This cuts to the very heart of them doing their job," he said. "I think there is a high

likelihood that the system is distracted and is not functioning at a high level."

Those concerns were heightened Tuesday, when the Pentagon confirmed that most of the nation's top military leaders are quarantining after coming in contact with a senior officer who has COVID-19. Among those in self-isolation: Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Air Force Gen. John Hyten, along with service chiefs from the Army, Navy and Air Force.

Feaver and others said the U.S. government's continuity plans are sound, and the military is particularly well prepared to handle disruptions.

"I think we can have high confidence that the chain of command is unbroken and while it is stress-tested by these conditions, it's nowhere close to being broken," Feaver said.

But he is concerned about the president's focus and the ability of his national security team to keep tabs on global hotspots while the White House is engulfed with this crisis. In addition to Trump and the first lady, about a half dozen other White House aides have tested positive for COVID-19, along with three Republican senators.

"We keep hearing about individuals who are testing positive, and hopefully they're going to all fully recover," John Brennan, the former CIA director and Trump critic, told NPR in an interview Monday. "But who else is going to come down with this virus that has responsibilities in the government?"

Amid the disarray, Brennan said, Russia and China may be looking at ways to ratchet their regional aggression and hoping the U.S. is too consumed with Trump's health to respond.

Feaver agreed that the trajectory of events is disconcerting.

"That doesn't mean we're about to be attacked," Feaver said. "But it's likely that we're not making optimal moves across the geopolitical chessboard," he said.

[Cambodia] U.S. 'Disappointed' By Razed Naval Facility at Cambodia Base (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 7:55 AM, Philip Heijmans, 6400K, Neutral]

The U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh said on Wednesday it was "disappointed" Cambodia had razed an American-built military facility that symbolized friendship between the countries.

Located within the Ream Naval Base along Cambodia's southwestern coast, the U.S.-funded maritime security facility was reported to have been demolished last month, raising concerns it was done to facilitate hosting Chinese soldiers and military assets.

"Such a military presence would negatively impact the U.S.-Cambodia bilateral relationship and be disruptive and destabilizing to the Indo-Pacific region," an embassy spokesperson wrote in an emailed statement.

Last year, the Wall Street Journal reported citing unnamed U.S. officials that China had

signed a secret agreement allowing its armed forces to exclusively use parts of the base, a charge the Chinese military denies.

Cambodia's main government spokesman, Phay Siphon, said by phone the facility had not been demolished, but relocated to an area close by. He reiterated a statement made earlier in the day by Prime Minister Hun Sen that China would not have exclusive access to the base even though it was footing the bill for its upgrade.

"I think that they have a right to worry on that issue," Phay Siphon said of the U.S. concerns. "But Cambodia is very open and I'm very confident that everyone could use the base. It's not exclusive to anyone."

[Cambodia] U.S. expresses concern over China link to Cambodian base (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 8:48 AM, Sopheng Cheang, Neutral]

The United States expressed disappointment Wednesday that Cambodia is tearing down a U.S.-funded building used for a maritime security program, and voiced concern that the action may be linked to the possible use of a Cambodian naval base by China's military.

"Such a military presence would negatively impact the U.S.-Cambodia bilateral relationship and be disruptive and destabilizing to the Indo-Pacific region," the U.S. State Department said in a statement distributed Wednesday by the U.S. Embassy in Phnom Penh.

Controversy over the Ream Naval Base on the Gulf of Thailand erupted more than a year ago, when *The Wall Street Journal* reported that an early draft of a reputed agreement seen by U.S. officials would allow China 30-year use of the base, where it would be able to post military personnel, store weapons and berth warships.

The State Department said the U.S. hopes Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen will accept Washington's offer of a dialogue to discuss how the United States "can support infrastructure at Ream that would benefit an independent Cambodia and all nations supportive of a free and open Indo-Pacific."

Washington and Beijing are contending for influence in Southeast Asia. China is Cambodia's closest political ally and main source of economic support, through aid and investment. Relations between Cambodia and the United States are rocky because of Washington's criticisms of Hun Sen's government for being undemocratic.

Concerns about China's intentions for the area were heightened by a deal that gave a Chinese company control over a large part of the coastline, and construction of an airport on its land that appeared to be designed to accommodate military as well as civilian aircraft.

Hun Sen in June last year responded that China has not been given exclusive rights to use the base, while also saying that warships from all nations, including the United States, are welcome to dock there. He pointed out that Cambodia's Constitution does not allow foreign military bases to be established on its soil.

However, the issue was resurrected last week with new reports in Western media about satellite photos showing the demolished facility.

Cambodia on Tuesday issued a statement saying that the demolition of the 7-year-old Tactical Command Headquarters at the Ream base and its relocation in a new building elsewhere was a planned upgrade because the existing facility was too small and lacked docking facilities, with limited capacity for training and other activities. It said the new facility would involve no change in function or relationships with foreign partners.

Hun Sen on Wednesday addressed the controversy again. Speaking at a ceremony opening an amusement park, he denied that Cambodia was allowing China to establish a base on its territory. He said that to clarify the issue, he has ordered the state television to rebroadcast, with English subtitles, his speech last year denying that China was being allowed to set up a base.

He also said he had ordered the Foreign Ministry to send an official diplomatic note to all foreign embassies in Cambodia to let them know his government's position.

[China] Esper cites China as motivation to boost funding to Navy (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [10/7/2020 7:00 AM, Abraham Mahshie, 394K, Neutral]

Defense Secretary Mark Esper blew Naval growth projections out of the water Tuesday when he announced a goal of more than 500 manned and unmanned ships by 2045.

Citing China's military growth as a motivating factor, the defense secretary discussed the recent report Battle Force 2045. The plan would also help the Navy reach a congressionally mandated goal of 355 "traditional," manned ships by 2035, matching a Chinese benchmark.

"Beijing wants to achieve parity with the United States Navy, if not exceed our capabilities," Esper said, repeating a common refrain about Chinese hostilities in the South China Sea.

"This aggression would only grow worse. Should the Chinese Communist Party achieve its stated modernization goals and build a military that can fully implement its nefarious plans," he said. "We cannot let that happen."

Esper, speaking at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said China was a motivating factor for the urgent call. The secretary recently also visited California shipbuilding facilities and spent a week in the Indo-Pacific region visiting allies to drum up support for containing China.

"Battle Force 2045 calls for a more balanced Navy of over 500 manned and unmanned ships," he said. "We will reach 355 traditional battle force ships prior to 2035, the time at which the [People's Republic of China] aims to fully modernize its military."

Esper describes the future fleet as one that embraces new technologies, including "artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, ubiquitous sensors, and long-range precision weapons."

He did not discuss the untold billions of dollars the lofty goal is expected to cost. He did say it cannot be done if Congress cuts the defense budget and delays program implementation

by only passing continuing resolutions.

Spurring months of controversy that the Navy could only reach the 355 goal with unmanned ships, Esper insisted that number would be reached with manned ships. In the face of Chinese "carrier killer" ballistic missiles, many commentators have wondered aloud if large platforms like supercarriers would be phased out.

Not so, said Esper.

"Nuclear-powered carriers will remain our most visible deterrent with the ability to project power and execute sea control missions across the globe," he said.

Esper said the Department of Defense is working on modernizing the air wing to operate at extended ranges, and the Navy will increase its fleet of attack subs.

"If we do nothing else, the Navy must begin building three Virginia class submarines a year, as soon as possible," he said, calling for a fleet of 70 to 80 attack subs.

Esper described a fleet of eight to 11 nuclear-powered supercarriers and more options for lighter carriers, such as the USS America, which carries more than a dozen F-35Bs.

The defense secretary said America's shipyards are the Navy's "Achilles' heel." He noted that when he became defense secretary just over a year ago, the Navy was suffering from maintenance and readiness challenges.

China is known to have a fast-growing shipbuilding capacity that would challenge America to keep up in a time of conflict.

"We cannot build and sustain our proposed fleet without the ability to service and repair a greater number of vessels in a more timely fashion," Esper said.

Nonetheless, Esper denied that the changes and the required actions were specifically geared toward countering China's capabilities.

"You don't build a force around a single scenario," the defense secretary said. "That said, we know the challenges that are before us."

[China] Kissinger Warns U.S. and China Must Set Limits to Avoid a Blowup (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 4:30 PM, David Wainer, Neutral]

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger said the U.S. and China must establish rules of engagement for their increasingly tense competition or risk recreating the uncertainty that characterized global politics leading up to World War I.

"Our leaders and their leaders have to discuss the limits beyond which they will not push threats," Kissinger, 97, said Wednesday in a virtual discussion hosted by the Economic Club of New York. "And then they have to find a way of conducting such a policy over an extended period of time."

"You can say this is totally impossible," he added. "And if it's totally impossible, we will slide into a situation similar to World War I."

Kissinger, who brokered the U.S. rapprochement with China for President Richard Nixon, said the goal then was to create a balance against the Soviet Union. He has said he's grown increasingly alarmed over a new Cold War developing between China and the U.S., which he attributed to technological advances that have vastly changed the geopolitical landscape.

The U.S. needs "a new way of thinking" that understands the world is too complex for one country to "achieve such a unilateral superiority in both strategy and economics that nobody will be in a position to threaten us," he said in the distinctive German accent that he's called a trademark.

His warnings came as President Donald Trump's administration reverses – and even disowns – the opening to China that is the widely praised legacy of Kissinger, who was also Nixon's national security advisor and whose role in prosecuting the Vietnam War has brought him condemnation as well.

Speaking at the Richard Nixon presidential library in July, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo cast China's leaders as tyrants bent on global hegemony, painting a dark portrait of the country's direction as tensions soar between the world's two biggest economies.

"If we bend the knee now, our children's children may be at the mercy of the Chinese Communist Party, whose actions are the primary challenge today in the free world," Pompeo said. "The free world must triumph over this new tyranny."

[Afghanistan] U.S. to go down to 2,500 troops in Afghanistan by early 2021 – Trump adviser (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 5:06 PM, David Brunnstrom and Phil Stewart, Neutral]

The United States will go down to 2,500 troops in Afghanistan early next year, U.S. national security adviser Robert O'Brien said on Wednesday, offering greater detail about the pace and scope of the drawdown from America's longest war.

"When President Trump took office, there were over 10,000 American troops in Afghanistan. As of today there are under 5,000 and that will go to 2,500 by early next year," O'Brien said, speaking at an event at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

[Mali] U.S. to Maintain Halt to Mali Military Aid Until After Election (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 9:52 AM, Katarina Hoije, Neutral]

The U.S. government's suspension of military aid to Mali will remain in place until the West African nation has held elections, the American envoy to the Sahel region said.

Cooperation with international partners in Mali, including the French-counter terrorism force Barkhane and the United Nations peacekeeping mission in the region, will continue, J. Peter Pham told reporters on a conference call Wednesday.

The U.S. suspended all cooperation with Mali's military after the overthrow of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita by army officers on Aug. 18. The nation's junta last month appointed a retired army officer as transitional president to lead the nation until elections take place in 18 months.

Separately, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said Wednesday he will travel to Mali "soon" to meet the new leaders and discuss the transition process.

[Mali] U.S. maintains suspension of military assistance to Mali, says envoy (Reuters)
Reuters [10/7/2020 11:49 AM, Staff, Neutral]

United States military assistance to the government of Mali will remain suspended despite the formation of a transitional government following the Aug. 18 military coup, J. Peter Pham, U.S. Special Envoy to the Sahel, said on Wednesday.

Pham, who recently visited Mali and met the new leaders of the transition, told a news conference the interim government marked progress towards conducting free and fair elections.

"But until such time as those are held, and a constitutional government is restored, we are obliged under U.S. law to restrict our military assistance," Pham said.

The policy means Mali will be without U.S. military support, which includes training of troops, for the next 18 months, after which the interim authorities have pledged to hold an election.

The United States halted military support on Aug. 21 following the ouster of President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita.

Mali's international partners and neighbours are worried the coup, the second in less than a decade, could fuel further political instability and derail a joint fight against insurgents who have gained a foothold in the country.

Hopes of a smooth transition were dampened on Tuesday when an opposition coalition that led large-scale protests before the coup said it would not endorse the new government, claiming it had been sidelined in talks.

The United States has maintained its support during this period to other international partners in Mali such as France, who are battling militants there linked to al Qaeda and Islamic State.

Pham said security assistance to international partners such as the G5 Sahel nations, the French Barkhane operation and European Takuba task force, or cooperation with the United Nations mission to Mali, remains in place.

"The restrictions are specific. They are security assistance to the regime that takes over from an elected government. It doesn't involve humanitarian and development assistance which consist of the bulk of our assistance for Mali," he said.

Editorials and Op-eds

America Is Addicted to Economic Sanctions (The National Interest)

The National Interest [10/7/2020 9:30 AM, Ferial Ara Saeed, Neutral]

Washington needs a sobriety program to kick its growing addiction to economic sanctions. The number of trade and financial penalties the government has imposed on foreign bad actors has exploded over the past decade. In the absence of any public debate over these decisions, no one asks the question that should concern every American: are economic sanctions actually achieving U.S. foreign policy goals, or simply hurting the U.S. economy?

Unfortunately, even if that question were put to policymakers, they could not answer it. They are not required to assess the economic impact of sanctions on the United States, and they do not articulate clear political goals for the sanctions they propose, provide any measurement of whether they have achieved those goals, or lift sanctions that fail the test.

Americans would probably be surprised to learn that no government agency represents U.S. economic interests when sanctions policy is made. Policymakers know that trade and financial penalties have domestic costs but are not required to give them more than superficial consideration. Accordingly, the State Department and other agencies conduct "outreach" to large, well-connected companies, a group that is hardly representative of all U.S. economic stakeholders. It takes visible domestic damage to get the government's attention, like when aluminum prices spiked after a Russian firm was targeted. Since costs to the home front are not a primary concern, there is no government-wide review of policy achievements, so sanctions are rarely lifted and can continue injuring U.S. interests for decades. This approach offers zero incentive to consider alternatives to sanctions and contributes to their overuse.

Indifference to the burden sanctions impose on the nation in the aggregate is not irrational. The United States has a large, high-performing, \$20 trillion economy. As a Congressional Budget Office study concluded two decades ago, the costs to American businesses and workers adversely affected by sanctions "appear great to them," but are not great to the nation as a whole.

But what if there is a disproportionate and adverse impact on certain groups and parts of the country due to industrial and demographic differences? Should the government apprehend the damage and forestall or ameliorate it—or even forgo sanctions for alternative policy tools?

America's experience with globalization is instructive. Despite the enormous benefits to the U.S. economy of lowering the costs of doing business across borders, the loss of manufacturing jobs had a domino effect, hollowing out once-thriving communities and unleashing an epidemic of income inequality that is getting worse. The government's failure to anticipate the damage to displaced workers and declining industries and help them adjust was one of the most consequential policy failures of the twentieth century because it fed the polarization tearing at the nation today. Globalization, of course, has a far greater impact on the economy than sanctions. But if present trends continue and discipline is not imposed, the economic and even political costs to the country of ever-expanding sanctions could be very damaging.

Looking at the U.S. economy in the aggregate may miss disparities in how costs of sanctions are born that should be weighted as economic sanctions become a policy tool of first resort. Trade is important to the economies of most states, but it contributes a larger share of state income for some, including Michigan, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, and South Carolina. Regionally, the South and the Midwest also have a greater number of counties that rely on export income. This reality shapes the perspective of these states and counties toward sanctions.

Take the trade embargo against Cuba. The political requirement to keep Cuba inside the penalty box until it becomes "stable, prosperous and free" has for decades been tied to a vocal constituency in Florida with influence over the state's pivotal twenty-nine electoral votes. But what about the estimated \$2 billion in potential U.S. exports if the embargo were lifted? Trade-dependent states like Louisiana, whose exports totaled \$63 billion last year, see commerce with Cuba as an engine of economic growth. So do the small and medium-sized firms responsible for those exports. The U.S. Trade Representative even has a compelling statistic: every \$1 billion in new U.S. exports supports 6,000 additional jobs at home that pay higher wages. Why do those jobs, profits and state revenues take a back seat to sustaining a failed, sixty-year-old embargo?

Walling off markets to Americans does not only affect large, resilient companies. About 98 percent of U.S. exporters are small and medium-sized firms. While only one percent of small businesses export, they account for about a third of total U.S. exports by value. These smaller firms can be disproportionately impacted by sanctions that disrupt global supply chains. Why does that matter? Because small businesses are job generators, accounting for half of private-sector employment and creating two-thirds of all new jobs in recent decades. They also generate a larger share of income in small communities. If they fold, it's not just jobs and income that are lost, the social fabric of these communities can unravel. When three-fourths of the world's purchasing power is outside the United States, foreclosing opportunities to American firms, large or small, and the jobs they create, should not be undertaken lightly.

The risk of unintended consequences over the long-term is also high. Like any government intrusion into private enterprise, economic sanctions distort markets. Over time, what are the implications for the U.S. economy? When companies are subject to heavy penalties for non-compliance, are hedging behaviors emerging that could undermine U.S. economic welfare? America has, moreover, entered an era of superpower competition with a state-capitalist China. Beijing seeks to dominate global markets with its heavily subsidized companies. Unilateral sanctions, in particular, forfeit U.S. firms' potential market share to their Chinese and other foreign competitors. Importantly, a large global commercial footprint expands China's overseas presence and its ability to shape international institutions to suit its interests.

Fundamentally, the belief in economic sanctions as an effective tool of foreign policy rests on the faith that the U.S. economy is strong and delivering for Americans at home. That mindset has to guide the sanctions policy process in order to protect the public from unnecessary sacrifice and unintended consequences.

The solution is for the government to appoint a coordinator, with a seat at the table and a

vote, to oversee a cost-benefit analysis of all proposed trade and financial penalties. The economic side of this analysis would focus on the impact at the state and local level (or on regional clusters), on businesses large and small, jobs, and industry sectors. The foreign policy side, as others have argued, should clearly articulate the political goal a sanction is supposed to achieve, how it could achieve that goal, and chances of success. Sanctions that fail to produce the desired result within a reasonable timeframe should be lifted. This cost-benefit analysis should be documented in an unclassified report to Congress every six months. A separate annual report should cover foreign hedging behaviors and other unintended consequences.

Sanctions, of course, are not the exclusive purview of the executive branch. Congress imposes its fair share, too. Embedding these requirements into the executive branch's policy process, however, could compel a similar process in Congress. Nothing says political pressure, after all, like an unclassified report that reveals to the public the damage lawmakers may be doing when they fail to consider the costs to Americans of the sanctions they legislate.

Changing attitudes and practices in Washington will be an uphill battle. The seminal study on sanctions in 1997 estimated that they reduced U.S. exports by up to \$19 billion, representing 200,000 jobs in the higher-wage export sector—numbers that are probably much higher today. Yet, a quarter-century later, the government has built a sprawling, multi-agency apparatus to develop sanctions. Alongside it has grown a lucrative industry of consultants who specialize in advising companies on compliance.

None of this is to say that economic sanctions have no role in foreign policy. Sparingly and judiciously used, they are an effective tool to respond to or contain developments adverse to U.S. interests and can pressure changes in behavior that threatens U.S. national security.

But it is irresponsible to wall off overseas markets to Americans without vetting the costs and consequences as well as the anticipated and actual foreign policy benefits. The government should not be writing-off potential sources of economic growth, especially now, as the nation confronts devastating levels of unemployment and financial distress from the pandemic along with disruptive technological changes that will put entire industries out of business.

These hard realities only magnify the shortcomings of Washington's current approach to sanctions policy, which fails to consider and accommodate the economic interests of Americans. In order to govern with competence in these uncertain times, that has to change.

Trump's Trade Policy Failed, But U.S. Economic Policy Didn't (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 6:00 AM, Karl W. Smith, 6400K, Neutral]

The exploding U.S. trade deficit highlights the extent to which President Donald Trump's avowed trade policy is a failure. Yet it also stands as proof that, the president notwithstanding, U.S. economic policy is a success.

First, about that failure: It's a mistake to see these deficit figures by themselves as a rebuke

of Trump's trade policy, which has focused on reducing the bilateral trade deficit with China. The strategy seemed to be bearing some fruit until that progress (if that is the correct term) was wiped out by the pandemic.

As my Bloomberg Opinion colleague Noah Smith points out, that's a little odd by historical standards. Typically, recessions and global crises reduce trade and bring down trade deficits. What happened this time? There is a two-part answer.

First, the pandemic struck America's major European trading partners before it came to the U.S. That meant the demand for U.S. exports collapsed even as U.S. consumers were happily buying foreign goods. When the virus did strike the U.S., imports fell sharply then leveled off after Congress passed the CARES Act in March, while exports continued to fall.

The effect of the CARES Act was so sweeping that U.S. personal income actually rose for the first several months of the pandemic. The initial shock hit consumers hard, but by May retail sales (excluding food services) had nearly regained all of the lost ground from March and April, and by June they were running above the long-term trend.

This bears repeating: U.S. retail spending has been running at record highs since June, well above expected figures. (These figures exclude restaurants and bars, which were specifically shut down.) Retail sales excluding food services grew as much between February 2020 and August 2020 as they did between May 2018 and February 2020. That's nearly two years of growth compressed into about half a year.

That, in turn, means that U.S. demand for foreign imports has grown as well. The total value of U.S. imports still isn't back to pre-pandemic levels, in part because the price of oil has fallen. The U.S. produces about as much oil as it consumes, but because the U.S. refinery complex is the most sophisticated in the world, America winds up importing low-quality crude oil from the rest of the world and exporting high-quality crude oil.

On the other side of the ledger, because demand from the rest of the world is weak, U.S. exports continued to fall through May, and since August have recovered more slowly than imports. The net result is that the trade deficit is the highest it has been since 2006 — that is to say, since before the decline in U.S. housing prices undercut the consumption boom of the mid-2000s.

It's not necessarily wrong to see the surging trade deficit as evidence against the wisdom of Trump's trade policies, which have done significantly more harm than good. A more constructive view, however, is to view it as a testament to policy competence. Not only was there aggressive monetary policy from the U.S. Federal Reserve, which lowered interest rates and provided capital to banks and businesses, but there was strong fiscal policy with the CARES Act.

A broader economic recovery will require even more fiscal stimulus, in the form of a second pandemic relief bill, which seemed possible if not likely until Trump called off talks with Congress on Tuesday. After November, perhaps, negotiators on both sides will see things in a different light — or maybe there will be different negotiators altogether.

We're suing the Pentagon to find out where U.S. troops are deployed (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 11:12 AM, Kate Brannen and Ryan Goodman, Neutral] President Trump has repeatedly said he's terminating "the era of endless wars" and bringing troops home. But is that at all true? And if troops are returning home as quickly as Trump has claimed, is he being upfront about what's going on in the countries they leave behind?

The Defense Department has claimed any reduction of U.S. forces abroad will be guided by conditions on the ground. In early September, the Pentagon announced new drawdowns of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq, the military said the number of U.S. troops would fall from 5,200 to 3,000. In Afghanistan, the number is supposed to fall to 4,500 by November. In June, the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan was reportedly at 8,600.

These drawdowns are occurring right before the presidential election. And like Trump's unrealistic vaccine promise and his missing health-care plan, it requires scrutiny from the news media and the American public to understand whether Trump is actually delivering, and whether these troop movements are responsive to what's happening on the ground or are politically motivated to help Trump secure a second term.

But the Trump administration stopped releasing data on troop deployments in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria starting in December 2017, which makes it extremely difficult to see whether they're really withdrawing troops as the president said they would. Before then, under both Republican and Democratic administrations, the Defense Department made publicly available the number of U.S. civilian and military personnel serving in these countries in quarterly manpower reports.

To restart the release of this information, we filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request in April, but the Pentagon failed to respond. So we sued the U.S. government Wednesday to release this data, as well as information that shows why these records were kept hidden from the American public. The Project on Government Oversight will be filing a complaint as well in the coming days.

As our lawsuit states, "This data served as a critical source of specific and consistent official information about the U.S. military presence in key combat zones. Transparency on troop levels has been essential for public oversight and accountability concerning the progress of military operations in the Middle East and South Asia."

To understand what's going on in these war zones, Americans need access to this vital information. Is Trump keeping his pledge? As U.S. military personnel are drawn down, are the number of U.S. contractors going up? What correlations exist between the number of U.S. troops and violence in these places? These are the types of questions that journalists and policy experts will be investigating, but to do that, they need access to basic data about how many U.S. troops have been deployed over the past few years and how many remain deployed today.

What's more, the quarterly Defense Department reports provided predictability and reliability instead of allowing officials to choose whether, when and how to make the information available. The announcements for reduced U.S. troop levels in Iraq and Afghanistan came

with just eight weeks left until the election. Without the regular data to compare, these declarations simply can't be trusted. In the meantime, U.S. forces in Syria appear to be zigzagging out and then back into the country. Who can tell what's happening there? Americans deserve to know.

The Pentagon may argue that there is a usefulness to this secrecy, especially in places such as Afghanistan, where the United States was negotiating with the Taliban on a "peace deal." But that deal was signed in February, initiating a countdown clock for a complete U.S. withdrawal from the country within 14 months. Diplomatic secrecy is no longer a plausible reason for failing to share this information with the public, if it ever was. The administration has not turned the information spigot off completely, either, but it's recently turned instead to potentially highly misleading releases of information. The Pentagon now says it will sometimes tell the public only how many troops are "permanently assigned for duty at these locations" — a newfangled accounting practice that neither allows for true comparisons with past troop commitments nor insight into where American troops are being put in harm's way. It also gives a false impression of a lower level of troop commitments, a political boon to Trump.

In a Fox News interview in August, Trump touted that he had accomplished a campaign promise by "bringing many of the troops home and most of the troops home."

American voters don't have the information required to evaluate Trump's self-proclaimed record and the decisions he's made over where and when to risk U.S. soldiers' lives. The number of U.S. troops deployed over recent years and in today's war zones is a key part of that assessment.

It shouldn't require a lawsuit to have this kind of information given to the American public.

Not personal enough: Why climate change is not yet a top priority (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 1:57 PM, Laurie Goering, Neutral]

Spurring ambitious-enough action to stem climate change will require persuading most people that its impacts – from deadlier weather to surging migration – are a direct and imminent threat to themselves, according to a British defence official.

Global warming "is not inconvenient if you're not affected by it at all," said Richard Nugee, head of climate change and sustainability strategy at the Ministry of Defence, during an online event run by London-based think-tank Chatham House this week.

The lack of a sense of personal threat is one reason why "climate change always seems to be number two" on Britain's list of public concerns, behind other shifting priorities like Brexit – Britain's departure from Europe – and COVID-19, he said.

"The urgent always overtakes the important. And everything apart from climate change seems to be the urgent," he added. But with the window to cut climate-heating emissions and tame climate risks closing fast, more and more people are likely to be hit soon by anything from worsening floods and storms to economic losses, climate security experts warned.

A broad inability to grasp that threat – particularly in many so far less-affected richer nations that generate most of the emissions driving global warming – is a major barrier to climate action, they said.

“A lot of it is a failure of imagination, on one hand of how bad it is going to be – you can’t believe we’re actually ruining this planet – and a failure of imagination in creating new systems,” said Alexander Verbeek, founder of the Netherlands-based Institute for Planetary Security.

The coronavirus pandemic has given more people a sense of how quickly a personally painful crisis can emerge, said Mami Mizutori, the U.N. Secretary-General’s special representative for disaster risk reduction.

What COVID-19 should be making clear is that “prevention saves lives,” she added.

Similarly, the pandemic has shown a need to take a broader look at potential risks, including how they may interact, and put strategies in place to deal with them – from flexible financing to clearer communications – before crises arrive.

“COVID has taught us if you don’t have a plan, it’s a plan for failure,” Mizutori told the online event.

Alice Hill, who led work on climate change threats for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security during former President Barack Obama’s administration, said one under-appreciated threat was how far warming could undermine basic planning assumptions.

From infrastructure design to fighting wildfires, producing energy and farming, planetary heating will “affect every system on which humans rely,” she warned.

“The core systems supporting global stability (and) U.S. economic and military strength rest on assumptions the climate is stable,” Hill told a separate online panel run by the University of Chicago’s Pearson Institute.

She pointed to a report last year that found 300 million people around the world could be hit by annual flooding by 2050 as a result of sea level rise – more than three times previous estimates.

Many U.S. flood maps have been updated to reflect that greater vulnerability, as part of a privately led effort, she said, but “maps don’t exist for other threats we will face.”

She also warned that governments, including her own, need to plan not just for one crisis but for “compound, concurrent and consecutive disasters” as threats – such as hurricanes and pandemics – converge.

Failure to prepare, leading to growing losses, “could undermine social cohesion within nations and among nations,” she said, warning that would likely cause “unprecedented migration.”

Verbeek said most countries had experience preparing for low-probability but high-impact

risks, such as the spectre of nuclear conflict during the Cold War.

But planning for global warming has proved far more difficult, he said, even though nuclear war was “much less likely to happen than climate change impacts.”

Although warming “will affect everyone on this planet ... we have hardly started to prepare,” he said, urging planners to “imagine the unimaginable,” such as a world 4 degrees Celsius hotter than preindustrial times.

Most nations pledged in the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change to hold warming to “well below” 2C, with an aim of 1.5C. Scientists have since said achieving the lower limit is crucial to curb the most dangerous impacts of heating.

But planet-warming emissions continue to rise, with current carbon-cutting plans putting the world on track for just under 3C of warming if they are achieved.

Shifting that will likely require everything from taxing emissions to provide an economic incentive to reduce them, to more political leaders making clear the climate risks to their own people, the security experts said.

“Climate change is already here. We made a huge mistake talking about (fighting) climate change for the sake of our children and grandchildren,” said former British environment secretary John Gummer, who now chairs the country’s Committee on Climate Change.

“We’re actually fighting climate change for us, now,” he emphasised.

[France] Macron Wants to Start an Islamic Revolution (Foreign Policy Magazine)

Foreign Policy Magazine [10/7/2020 9:16 AM, Karina Piser, Neutral]

On Friday, French President Emmanuel Macron unveiled his plan to tackle what he termed Islamist separatism, with the dual objectives of healing social divisions and fighting violent extremism. He is not the first French president to promise a new French Islam; successive governments have done so since the 1980s. But Macron, who took office in 2017 following two years of bloody terror attacks in France and is now heading into a 2022 election campaign, wants to succeed where his predecessors have failed.

In a country that holds a strict vision of secularism, or *laïcité*, at the heart of its national identity, and where controversies over Islam are a fixture of daily life—from interminable controversies over the hijab to a recent fixation on alleged polygamy—top-down attempts to manage religion are a tough sell. Critics say Macron’s proposed law, which French parliament will begin debating in December, will alienate some of France’s estimated 6 million Muslims; others point to thorny legal issues that will complicate its implementation.

Macron’s plan focuses on limiting foreign influence and investing in a new generation of French imams, with a certification process based in France. Because *laïcité* bars the state from interfering with religious affairs, France has relied on what’s known as “consular Islam” to manage Muslim institutions. Algeria finances the Grand Mosque of Paris, for example, which distributes funds to affiliated mosques across the country. Turkey, Algeria, and Morocco have exported imams to France; in 2015, then-President François Hollande signed

a deal with the Moroccan monarchy to train French imams at a center in Rabat. Turkey, in particular, has invested in religious and cultural organizations across France, particularly under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

These foreign entanglements have created a crisis of both representation and legitimacy. France's Islamic institutions do not reflect its diverse Muslim communities, which make up nearly 9 percent of the population. And Macron's government argues that external influence has opened the doors to radical ideas that have led to repeated terror attacks. The president's vision, then, is largely ideological: His project, he said, would foster an "Islam of the Enlightenment" that is "compatible with the values of the Republic"—without exactly defining what that would entail.

Although Macron stressed that his focus was on "radical Islamism," not the faith in general, he went on to call Islam "a religion that is in crisis all over the world," angering some French Muslims. "The governments change, but the obsessions remain," read a statement signed by 100 Muslim academics, activists, and others in the left-leaning news site Médiapart. "More than the necessity to fight terrorism as a criminal phenomenon, President Macron is today participating, with his speech, in constructing a Muslim problem, targeting all believers and their faith."

"Macron was supposed to talk about separatisms, plural, but he only focused on Islam," said Rim-Sarah Alouane, a PhD candidate focusing on religious freedom and civil liberties in France and North Africa. The very idea of "separatist behavior," she added, risks to "open up a Pandora's box of bigotry," particularly in a society that is often divided over what constitutes a display of radicalism. "My question is, where do we draw the line?" Alouane asked. "If a Muslim woman wears a hijab, is it a form of separatism? For some, it is."

But Tareq Oubrou, the Grand Imam of Bordeaux, whom the president has consulted in recent years, disagreed that Macron used stigmatizing rhetoric. "He avoided any amalgam between radical Islamism and the Muslim population," Oubrou said, though noted that the notion of radicalism is "not very well defined" and can be difficult to distinguish from "orthodox practices of the religion."

The centerpiece of Macron's proposal is to certify and train imams in France. The proposed measures also included offering Arabic instruction in public schools, tightening control on private religious education, limiting home schooling, and cracking down on speech or activities that contradict so-called Republican values such as gender-segregated hours at municipal swimming pools. Taken together, Macron's ideas raised eyebrows. "It's a comprehensive institutional framework to control and regulate Islam, with a clear repressive drive," said Marwan Muhammad, a prominent Muslim activist and the former president of an anti-discrimination group called the Collective Against Islamophobia in France.

Alouane echoed that sentiment. "The vast majority of Muslims here live their lives and pay their taxes, and where is their say in this? It's very funny for a country that isn't supposed to interfere with religion to find so many different ways to control it."

The speech, she added, seemed like an attempt to distract the public. "Macron was letting us know he wants the presidential election to be about security, immigration, and Islam, when it should be about the economy, the dismantlement of public services, and the poor

management of the COVID-19 crisis." Indeed, France saw a record number of Covid-19 cases last week, and this week imposed new lockdown measures across the country.

Beyond the rhetorical implications of Macron's plan, much of what he envisions will be difficult to implement, precisely because of the secular values he repeatedly defended throughout his speech. The 1905 Separation of Church and State law that underpins *laïcité* explicitly bars the state from interfering with private religious affairs.

"That's the paradox: to defend secularism with a plan based on the state's intervention in religion," said Olivier Roy, a scholar of religion and a professor at the European University Institute in Florence. "That's why, for so many years, nothing has been done."

Because the state itself can't certify imams, for example, Macron would likely empower the French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM)—created by then-Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy in 2003—to do so.

But empowering the CFCM would go against Macron's stated objective of creating a French Islam in the place of a foreign-influenced one. Only a third of French Muslims have even heard of the CFCM, according to a 2016 survey; those who have criticize its opaque leadership structure and close ties to foreign powers. "The CFCM was a forced institution that created a foreign Islam in France—a Turkish-Maghrebi Islam," Oubrou said last year. For Muhammad, the problem runs deeper: "The main criticism isn't that the CFCM represents foreign countries, it's that they've failed French Muslims altogether," notably in failing to criticize laws and policies that he says discriminate against Islam.

"The state can't create the 'good' Islam, so the CFCM will have to do it," Roy explained. "The CFCM will be perceived as an extension of the state—even more than it has always been."

"What's absent from this project," he added, "is the basic Muslim citizen, who goes to mosque, and we're not giving them the choice—we're not letting them choose their own imam. We don't impose a certain rabbi on Jews, or a certain pastor on Christians."

On top of the credibility issue comes an implementation problem: The state cannot force Muslims to exclusively attend sermons by "certified" imams. "That would be anti-constitutional, and it'd be shut down immediately at the European Court of Human Rights," said Roy.

Although Macron's entire plan focuses on Islam exclusively, any eventual legislation would need to apply to all religions; the 1905 law stipulates that all religions have equal footing before the law.

"The law needs to address all forms of separatism, and be rational and universal, not against one community," Oubrou said, even if, in application, "its primary focus is on radical Islamism."

But if French Muslims find that, in practice, the law is used to disproportionately target Muslims, that could also lead to court battles. When it comes to monitoring private religious education, for example, any scrutiny applied to Muslim schools—on gender segregation,

respect of the national curriculum, or hate speech—would have to apply to Catholic and Jewish schools, too, in order to be consistent with the text and spirit of the 1905 law.

That Macron's law would restrict all religions, and not just Islam, hasn't been lost on his political rivals. In a communiqué released after his speech, the far-right National Rally called it "regrettable that in the name of the fight against radical Islamism, the French will be obligated to curb their freedoms, notably those of parents," referring to the measures on home schooling and private religious instruction. The center-right Republicans, praising some of the plan, argued it didn't go far enough, and called for a crackdown on immigration. The left, in contrast, attacked Macron's focus on Islam as the only form of "separatism" plaguing French society.

The political reactions to Macron's plans are another example that his touted radical centrism—marked by a habit of making divergent promises "en même temps," or at the same time—has failed to expand his electoral reach.

"For 20 years, presidents have tried to take votes from the Front National," said Roy, referring to the far-right party that in 2018 changed its name to the National Rally. "And it's been 20 years that they've failed." In the past few months, Macron has doubled down on security and identity issues, hoping to attract right-leaning voters ahead of the 2022 vote, where he is expected to face far-right leader Marine Le Pen. (The two are neck-to-neck in a recent survey).

"The problem is, Macron's attempts at centrism are rejected by all sides," Roy said.

That dynamic was on display in Macron's nod to France's own role in contemporary divisions—an olive branch to progressives. (In turn, Macron's past recognitions of France's colonial legacy, first on the campaign trail in 2017, and repeatedly throughout his presidency, have generated outcry from the right). "We have built this separatism ourselves, it's in our communities and their ghettoization," he said on Friday, highlighting enduring tensions around France's colonial past. "We have built concentrations of poverty and problems," and "created areas where the promises of the Republic have not been fulfilled."

Few dispute the massive disparities in wealth and opportunity that plague French immigrant communities—and nowhere are they more present than in the banlieues, the suburbs of major cities, where unemployment is often double the national average, and social services are sparse. But in attempting to win over progressives, Macron unintentionally drew attention to what many on the left say is a primary failing of his presidency: social policy. Early on, Macron earned the moniker "president of the rich" thanks to his pro-business agenda and decision to scrap a wealth tax. For the banlieues in particular, he has done little to reduce residential segregation or improve economic prospects.

"Words don't cost much, as Macron has consistently given up on the banlieues," Muhammad said. "He never acknowledged police violence" and "constantly opted for corporate interests, at the expense of social initiatives, whether it be education, health and housing plans. His policies contradict his words."

But Macron is far more concerned with attracting voters on the right than on the left in the lead-up to 2022. In a Cabinet reshuffle in July, he appointed a conservative, tough-on-crime

interior minister; in recent months his government has continued to denounce rising insecurity, even as crime rates remain stable, or even in decline, across the country.

Macron also gave his speech against the backdrop of the ongoing trial over the 2015 attack at Charlie Hebdo, a satirical magazine where extremists opened fire in retaliation for cartoonists' depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. And it followed an attack late last month, when a young Pakistani migrant stabbed passersby near the magazine's offices, purportedly for the same reason.

Although Macron sees his Islam of the Enlightenment, divorced from foreign influence, as a bulwark against Islamic extremism, France's recent experiences with terrorism challenge that assumption. The perpetrators of the vast majority of attacks weren't foreign infiltrators but French nationals, and more often had a history of petty crime than religious zealotry. Many would-be terrorists are radicalized online or outside of religious settings; experts have consistently pointed to a home-grown violent Salafism that shutting France's borders to foreign imams will do little to solve. "Often the most radical imams are born in France," Oubrou said, describing a phenomenon of "self-proclaimed imams who, in perfect French, diffuse fanatical ideas."

Roy, who has long argued that social policy—not theological battles—are needed to fight extremism, argued that Macron's plan stems from a fundamental misunderstanding of religion.

"We're acting as if religion is a passive receptacle, and all we have to do is change the preacher to change the religion, and to change the believer," he said. "But that's not how it works."

[Russia] Putin, Long the Sower of Instability, Is Now Surrounded by It (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 3:11 PM, Anton Troianovski, Neutral]

In Russia's self-proclaimed sphere of influence, Russia is losing its influence.

Concurrent crises in Belarus, Central Asia and the Caucasus region have blindsided the Kremlin, leaving it scrambling to shore up Russian interests in former Soviet republics and undermining President Vladimir V. Putin's image as a master tactician on the world stage.

"There is nothing good about these conflicts for Moscow," Konstantin Zatulin, a senior Russian lawmaker and Putin ally who specializes in relations with what Russians call their "near abroad."

Mr. Putin has spent years building up Russia as a global power, with a hand in hot spots from Latin America to the Middle East, and even meddling in presidential elections in the United States. But after working for years to destabilize the West, he suddenly finds himself surrounded by instability; once seen as sure-handed in foreign affairs, he seems to have lost his touch.

In Belarus, Mr. Putin responded to a street uprising in August by propping up the country's unpopular autocrat, President Aleksandr G. Lukashenko, turning public opinion against

Russia in what had previously been Europe's most Russia-friendly country.

In Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, protesters this week appeared on the verge of toppling President Sooronbai Jeenbekov, less than two weeks after Mr. Putin pledged to him in a rare in-person meeting that "we will do everything to support you as the head of state."

And in the Caucasus, the long-simmering conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh erupted last week into the worst fighting since the 1990s, threatening to undo the balancing act that had allowed Russia to cultivate diverse links to the region.

"Russia was doing all it could to maintain ties both with Azerbaijan and Armenia," Mr. Zatulin said. "Every day of conflict in Karabakh is, effectively, helping zero out Russia's authority."

The spate of new challenges to Russian influence strikes at the heart of Mr. Putin's yearslong effort to cast himself as the leader who restored the great-power status that the nation lost with the collapse of the Soviet Union. Even as the Kremlin denied Russian interference in the 2016 American presidential election, Russian state television gleefully reported on the American allegations of that interference as a sign that Moscow was being reckoned with again on the world stage.

Now, rather than react decisively to emergencies close to home, Mr. Putin sounds ambivalent about Russia's role.

"We hope the conflict will end very soon," he said of Nagorno-Karabakh, in a television interview broadcast Wednesday. Minutes later, referring to Kyrgyzstan, he said, "We hope that everything will be peaceful."

The confluence of crises in Russia's own neighborhood is such that some pro-Kremlin commentators are already accusing the West of an organized campaign to sow discord in the post-Soviet regions.

More balanced analysts, however, have singled out one constant factor in the growing unrest. Both Russia and its neighbors, they say, have been destabilized by the coronavirus pandemic, which has exposed distrust in institutions and in out-of-touch leaders across the region.

It helped undo the fragile truce between Azerbaijan and Armenia, and in Belarus and in Kyrgyzstan, the disease set the stage for public uprisings by exposing the ruling elite as disconnected from people's suffering.

Mr. Lukashenko angered Belarusians by playing down the danger of the virus, joking that vodka would cure it; in Kyrgyzstan, critics blamed officials for using coronavirus aid money to enrich themselves.

Within Russia, the economic hardship caused by the pandemic has helped deepen public anger against Mr. Putin. In the Far Eastern city of Khabarovsk, for example, thousands of protesters angry over the arrest of a popular governor spilled into the streets last Saturday

for the 13th week in a row.

Some analysts say that public discontent within Russia means that Mr. Putin needs to turn more of his focus to domestic issues such as economy hardship, pollution and poor health care, rather than delving into global geopolitics. But developments in recent weeks have given Mr. Putin more reason to focus on the latter.

"For Putin, practically his entire mission and his vision of Russian greatness and success revolve around his foreign-policy agenda," said Tatiana Stanovaya, a nonresident scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center, a research organization focused on politics and policy. The new series of crises, she went on, "will very much distract Putin from domestic problems."

The centrality of the former Soviet lands to Mr. Putin's foreign policy was evident in the Kremlin's list of world leaders who called Mr. Putin to wish him a happy birthday on Wednesday, when he turned 68. Of the 12 who called, only three leaders — those of Israel, India and Cuba — head countries outside the former Soviet Union.

In Armenia, which hosts a Russian military base, some hope for a more forceful stance by Russia in the conflict, which has already killed at least 250 people, according to official reports. But Russia's ability to influence events in the Caucasus now appears limited, despite its past role as a mediator in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Turkey, Azerbaijan's most important ally, has taken on a more assertive regional stance.

"Turkey, indeed, in this current situation probably should be considered as a balance to unilateral Russian interference," said Farid Shafiyev, chairman of the Center of Analysis of International Relations in the Azerbaijani capital, Baku. In the Caucasus, he added, "the Russian role is probably diminishing."

Across the former Soviet Union, Russian remains the lingua franca, and the proliferation of mostly uncensored internet access across the region means that protests in one country can easily inspire a disenchanted populace in another.

Some protesters in Belarus carried signs supporting the demonstrations in Khabarovsk, over 4,000 miles away. And ahead of Kyrgyzstan's parliamentary elections last Sunday, government critics were keeping an eye on Belarus, where it was a blatantly falsified election in August that sparked the uprising against Mr. Lukashenko.

"In Kyrgyzstan it was often said that we will copy the Belarusians," said Aybek Sultangaziyev, director of a news agency in Kyrgyzstan, K-News. "In fact, we surpassed the Belarusians in effectiveness and precision."

Mr. Sultangaziyev said that if his country's uprising succeeds, the new leadership will seek to maintain close ties with Moscow. In Armenia, too, the government of Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan retained its alliance with Russia after the prime minister came to power in a popular uprising in 2018.

"We have never been pro-Western or pro-Eastern," said Ruben Rubinyan, head of the foreign affairs committee in the Armenian Parliament. "Russia has been and is an ally of Armenia, a very important ally."

But, for Moscow, recent events in Belarus offer a cautionary tale that illustrates the fragility of Russia's standing among its neighbors — carrying echoes of Ukraine's more violent departure from Russia's orbit in 2014. Some Belarusians who had been well disposed toward Mr. Putin turned against him after he propped up Mr. Lukashenko in the face of the protests.

Mr. Zatulin, the Russian lawmaker, said officials "at the highest levels of the Russian Federation" believed that Mr. Lukashenko would need to step down "sooner or later." But Mr. Lukashenko had argued to Russian officials, Mr. Zatulin said, that his stepping down in the face of street protests could set a dangerous precedent for what might happen to Mr. Putin himself.

"By unconditionally supporting Lukashenko, we are creating an enormous problem for ourselves in the future with the majority or a significant part of the Belarusian population," Mr. Zatulin said. "We are creating a problem for ourselves with the other Belarusian politicians and public figures, who are increasingly forced to seek sympathy in the West. Russia wants that least of all."

[Russia] The U.S. Navy Wants to Make Sure It Can Take on Russia in the Arctic (The National Interest)

The National Interest [10/7/2020 8:30 AM, Caleb Larson, Neutral]

The United States Marine Corps new Pacific strategy has gotten a lot of attention recently. The Corps is going lighter and leaner, divesting all their tanks, as well as a number of artillery and mortar battalions in favor of other platforms that are more capable in a maritime environment.

The Corps even activated their newest base on Guam in the western Pacific, which is the first new one in nearly seventy years. But, it is not just the Marine Corps that is preparing for a high-end fight in the future—the United States Navy is also prepping for a fight, with an eye on the Arctic.

Earlier last month, the Navy concluded Exercise Black Widow 2020. The exercise took place in the North Atlantic, and included U.S. Navy submarines, surface ships, and aircraft. The Navy explained what exactly their Sailors were up to, stating that "our Fleet warfighters employ, hone, and evaluate tactics, techniques, and procedures to enhance our readiness for real world operations, with specific focus on advancing our theater undersea warfare advantage in a multi-domain environment."

There was also a specific focus on peer-peer rivals. "This exercise will allow us to develop new doctrine and innovative tactics that address the capabilities of our near-peer competitors across the range of missions we expect to encounter in major combat operations." Though not mentioned by name, the competitor in question could very well be Russia.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies, a leading research institute, recently released a report on the state of the Russian military. Though exhaustive, a few of the important takeaways are the state of the Russian Navy, with a particular focus on Russia's

submarine forces.

The Russian Navy is a shell of its former Soviet days. Its surface ships are growing long in the tooth, better equipped for littoral missions rather than blue-water operations. It boasts a single, aged aircraft carrier that is currently undergoing refitting. But, the Russian Navy can still rely on mostly modern submarines—and in particular new weapon systems onboard those submarines.

One of the systems the report draws attention to is Russia's 3M14 Kalibr cruise missile, recently tested during Russia's Kavkaz military exercises. Though hard to independently verify, Russia claims that some versions of the missile have a range of 4,500 kilometers, or about 2,800 miles. If true, that would put virtually the entire contiguous United States within range of a Russian Kalibr-armed submarine near the eastern seaboard.

The same goes for submarines near the Arctic. From the Beaufort Sea, a marginal sea that Alaska and Canada share, a Kalibr missile launch would put the entire west coast, as well as most of the Midwest and central United States within range. Critical infrastructure like dams, nuclear power plants, electric grids—even the seat of American power itself, Washington D.C. would be under threat, and alter the course of a future conflict.

Thanks to geography, the safety of the American homeland was virtually guaranteed in conflicts past. That is no longer so. And while the Russian Navy overall doesn't amount to much, Russia's submarine force capabilities are worth noting in particular.

But the Navy gave a hint at what they're preparing to do about it—by furthering the “art of theater undersea warfare in a multi-domain environment in response to the rise of great power competition. Our submarines, surface ships, ASW capable aircraft, and other undersea capabilities work together in a dynamic environment to prepare our teams for challenging operations against near-peer competitors.”

[Russia] How Russia Today Skirts High-Tech Blockade to Reach U.S. Readers (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 9:41 AM, Keach Hagey, Emily Glazer and Rob Barry, Neutral]

On any given day over the past two years, visitors to the home page of RealClearPolitics were likely to see its famous average of political polls, a roundup of news and center-right commentary—and, near the bottom, a link or two to stories from RT.com.

The provenance of the RT headlines was obscured. Readers didn't immediately know they were clicking on headlines from a Russian state-backed publication that American intelligence officials considered the Kremlin's “principal international propaganda outlet.” The news organization, once known as Russia Today, was a central player in Russia's efforts to disrupt the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

The U.S. intelligence community's assessment of the Russian efforts created a backlash against social-media companies, which were accused of providing platforms for a misinformation campaign aimed at influencing voters. Facebook Inc., Twitter Inc. and others have since implemented changes to limit the reach of state-run media.

Yet RT continues to draw a large American audience, helped unwittingly by some of America's most prominent conservative websites. The reason: Those news outlets agreed to join a distribution network that allows other members' content to be displayed on their home pages.

The company responsible for RT's presence on RealClearPolitics is Mixi.Media. Since its launch in 2018, Mixi has assembled a network of right-leaning publishers, including National Review, The Daily Caller and Newsmax, as well as mainstream sites like RealClearPolitics. Also in Mixi's fold are RT and another Russian state-backed outlet, Sputnik.

The inclusion of state-run media has allowed Russia's propaganda machine to spread its message across the online news landscape in the U.S. while escaping the attention that came to Facebook and Twitter. While the links that Mixi places on its partners' websites often appear under headings such as "From Our Partners," the source isn't always clear until after the headline has been clicked. That is by design.

"If [readers] see RT, they are going to freak out," said Alex Baron, Mixi's founder.

Mixi has other ties to Russia, though it isn't clear if they have anything to do with RT's presence on the network. Mr. Baron is an associate of Russian private-equity magnate Victor Remsha and there are some technical connections between Mixi and properties owned by Mr. Remsha.

In interviews with The Wall Street Journal, Mr. Baron has said Mixi doesn't have any ties with Mr. Remsha's firms and he doesn't agree with RT's politics. The 33-year-old, who runs Mixi as a side venture to his day job as a tech director at AccuWeather, said he pursued a partnership with the outlet because he thought it would help Mixi grow.

What is clear is the partnership has been fruitful for both. Mixi is the largest source of RT's "referral traffic" in the U.S., delivering 19% of visitors coming from other websites in July, not including social media, according to web analytics firm SimilarWeb. Mixi is delivering more U.S. traffic to RT than YouTube, Reddit and Drudge Report and, at one point this year, Twitter. July was the last month before some of Mixi's partners began to drop out of or pull back from the network after being contacted by the Journal for this article.

"This is an information laundering system where you can put RT or Sputnik or whatever inside a panel of legitimate outlets in the U.S., and people don't realize what they are coming onto," said Clint Watts, a former special agent at the Federal Bureau of Investigation and senior fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute studying social-media influence. "The attribution is so obscure that you don't know who the hell it is."

Social-media companies have been tightening their policies on misinformation and propaganda since 2017. Google's YouTube added labels to state-run media, including RT, in 2018. Facebook took similar action this June. In August, Twitter started labeling RT and other state-run media and stopped including their content on various recommendation systems, effectively making those tweets harder to find.

From the start of 2018 through July, RT's social-media traffic in the U.S. has dropped 22%,

while its overall U.S. traffic has declined 14%, according to SimilarWeb. RT.com had about four million visits in the U.S. in July, according to SimilarWeb.

Anna Belkina, RT's deputy editor in chief, has denounced as "blatantly discriminatory" social-media companies' moves to label RT and other state media. RT has denied working on behalf of the Kremlin.

Some publishers hosting Mixi's traffic exchange on their websites say they weren't aware RT was part of Mixi's network. Following the Journal's inquiries about Mixi and RT's inclusion in its network, two of those publishers, The Blaze and 247WallSt, said they removed the Mixi-run section from their sites.

Mixi's Mr. Baron said an additional three—including Newser, NOQ Report and his employer, AccuWeather—also removed Mixi after the Journal's inquiries. AccuWeather declined to comment on Mr. Baron's involvement in Mixi.

Mixi's system works like this: When readers click on a Mixi headline, they first land on a "transit" page on Mixi's own website. That page will feature another link to the original headline along with headlines from various publishers that Mixi aggregates. Users sometimes click on multiple links on the transit page, boosting traffic for the entire network. Publishers don't pay to be part of Mixi's network. Mixi makes money from ads on the transit page.

Taboola, a much larger content-recommendation company, also has RT in its network, but Mixi drives a lot more traffic to RT, according to SimilarWeb.

Mr. Baron began working for Mr. Remsha, the Russian private-equity magnate, in 2014 at WhoTrades, a New York-based online brokerage firm. The next year, he moved to another of Mr. Remsha's U.S.-based holdings, a content-recommendation network called Ideal Media Inc. that functioned much like Mixi.

Ideal lost money and required additional investment. Around 2017, it was purchased by MGID, another company backed by Mr. Remsha, according to Mr. Baron and other people familiar with the matter. Mr. Baron was fired in March 2018 and accused by Ideal of stealing money, contracts and equipment, according to court documents from litigation that ensued.

Lawyers for Mr. Baron, who denied the allegations and said Ideal owed him the money, described Mr. Remsha in court documents as "a Russian oligarch billionaire with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin ." Michael Korsunsky, the chief executive officer of MGID's North American business, called Mr. Baron's court filing "the best science fiction of my life." In June, a judge ruled in favor of Ideal. Mr. Baron said he plans to appeal.

Soon after his firing, Mr. Baron began building Mixi.

Despite Mr. Baron's sour exit from Ideal, Mixi maintained various technological links to Mr. Remsha's firms. At various points since 2018, Mixi shared at least two IP addresses with a news aggregator called smi2, according to a Journal review of data from internet forensics firm Farsight Security Inc. smi2 is partly owned by Mr. Remsha's investment conglomerate, Finam. Sharing IP addresses—codes that help computers find each other on the internet—

suggests websites have overlapping hosting infrastructure, according to Farsight.

Mr. Baron initially told the Journal that Mixi didn't have any links to Mr. Remsha's firms. After the Journal sent examples of code on Mixi's site that had been communicating with the servers of Mr. Remsha's Finam and smi2, Mr. Baron said Mixi removed the code. He said his hosting infrastructure doesn't overlap with Finam's and he doesn't know why the IP addresses would overlap.

Mr. Remsha said he wasn't aware of any ongoing technical connections between Mixi and smi2. He said he isn't involved in Russian politics, and that he doesn't believe Mr. Baron is involved in politics either. He added he was "not so much involved in the process" of the lawsuit against Mr. Baron, although he was aware of it "at a high level."

To launch Mixi, Mr. Baron tried to rebuild a network with many of the same partners as Ideal's. Several mainstream media outlets didn't participate. MarketWatch experimented for a few months in 2019 but declined to continue, people familiar with the partnership said. MarketWatch and the Journal are both owned by News Corp.

Mr. Baron said he knows RT is the most controversial of his roughly three dozen partners, but that he pursued the publication for years because it is such a big force on the internet.

He said he is beginning to regret its place in the network in light of how other partners have responded. "I kind of wish I never went into business with RT," he said.

RealClearPolitics, ZeroHedge and Newsmax, three of the top 10 recipients of Mixi's traffic, have had RT stories appear recently in their content-recommendation sections operated by Mixi.

RealClearPolitics Publisher Tom Bevan said his tech team uses many services like Mixi to boost traffic and that he wasn't aware of RT's inclusion. Mr. Bevan said RealClearPolitics itself has never linked to a single article from RT.

"We do not have editorial control over all the content in third-party advertising widgets and routinely attempt to block inappropriate advertising content," he said.

The site asked Mixi to stop featuring RT headlines in its recommendation section after the Journal contacted RealClearPolitics, Mr. Baron said.

A ZeroHedge spokesman said it doesn't track content promoted by Mixi or the traffic it provides because it is among "countless" recommendation partnerships the site uses. Newser didn't respond to requests for comment.

Newsmax CEO Christopher Ruddy said he had "no idea" that Mixi was putting RT stories on his site.

Following the Journal's inquiry, 247WallSt, a financial news and opinion publisher, said it was taking the Mixi section off its site because it was initially unaware that Russia-backed publishers or right-leaning sites like ZeroHedge were among its partners, editor in chief Douglas McIntyre said.

"I was very upfront about RT with everyone," Mr. Baron said, adding that the network delivers more traffic for partners who don't limit what publications Mixi can promote.

[United Kingdom] Johnson's Biggest Threat May Be Just Next Door (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 6:01 AM, Rosalind Mathieson, 6400K, Neutral]

There's an old saying in politics that the more effusive the public statements of support, the more the opposite is true behind the scenes.

U.K. Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak has been at pains to endorse Prime Minister Boris Johnson, even as the two seemingly disagree on whether Sunak's signature "eat out to help out" pandemic program simply spread coronavirus faster.

But this week's annual Conservative Party meeting has hardly been a unified affair. Instead, as Kitty Donaldson, Alex Morales and Tim Ross report, lawmakers are frustrated by Johnson's leadership — so much so they increasingly see Sunak as a potential replacement.

It's quite the turnaround for a leader just 10 months after he steered the party to its biggest parliamentary majority since the 1980s.

The U.K. has suffered the highest death toll from Covid-19 in Europe as Johnson first downplayed its risks and then made some abrupt policy u-turns. The economy has been devastated, and Johnson is arguing with Brussels over the terms of Brexit with time running out to finalize the divorce.

Johnson himself fell seriously ill with the virus, and some lawmakers feel he's lost his mojo, including his famous oratory skills.

While a senior government official describes talk of a breakdown in party discipline as "rubbish," even Johnson supporters say things are bad.

Meanwhile, Sunak is entertaining small groups of Conservative MPs for cozy breakfasts in his rooms right next door to Johnson's Downing Street headquarters.

Those meetings may pay off if the disquiet with Johnson morphs into a leadership challenge. As one attendee and admirer says, Sunak "walks the walk of a prime minister."

[New Zealand] Swarmed by Maskless Crowds, Jacinda Ardern Is Set for Landslide Win (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 11:00 AM, Matthew Brockett, Neutral]

On an Oct. 1 campaign visit to Nelson, a small city at the top of New Zealand's South Island, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was mobbed by supporters as she walked through the streets. Cries of "We love you, Jacinda!" were common as she moved through the maskless throng, mostly women and children clamoring for selfies. The prime minister declined to shake hands, but she happily bumped elbows.

Ardern's greatest strength as a politician is her authenticity and ability to relate to others. It

has served her well during her first term, when the nation has faced some of its darkest moments—a terrorist attack by a white supremacist that left 51 dead, a volcanic eruption that killed 21, and most recently the Covid-19 pandemic. National elections are being held on Oct. 17, and polls predict a resounding victory for Ardern's left-leaning Labour Party, despite a slumping economy and Ardern's failure to deliver on key pledges such as fixing a housing crisis and lifting children out of poverty. There's even a chance Labour could win an outright majority, which no party in New Zealand has done since the 1990s.

The opposition National Party is wooing voters with tax cuts and attacking Ardern for not making good on her promises. But so far, it hasn't dented the prime minister's popularity.

Ardern, 40, gained fame outside New Zealand as the world's then-youngest female head of government, at 37, and as the first world leader to bring her baby to the UN General Assembly. Her rise to political stardom was rapid. As a member of parliament, she was thrust into the Labour Party's top job just two months before the last election, in 2017. The party was at risk of a crushing defeat, so leader Andrew Little stepped down and handed Ardern the reins. In what became known as "Jacinda-mania," she ignited the campaign and led Labour to an upset victory over National with the backing of two smaller parties.

Ardern's talent for connecting with others is grounded in her humility, says James Shaw, co-leader of the Green Party, which supports her administration. "She didn't want the job—Andrew Little had to twist her arm," says Shaw. "If you look at some of these other world leaders, it's all about them. For her, it's all about everybody else."

The daughter of a police officer, Ardern grew up in provincial New Zealand, including a small, run-down forestry town where she witnessed child poverty firsthand. She credits this with sparking an interest in politics. Brought up Mormon, she left the church in her early 20s because its views on gay rights clashed with hers. She has described herself as "socially liberal" and in a recent political debate admitted to smoking cannabis in her youth.

In 2018, Ardern became just the second elected world leader to give birth in office, after Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto. Her partner, Clarke Gayford, juggled his career as host of a TV fishing show to be a stay-at-home father to their daughter, Neve.

Since then, Ardern's steady, empathetic handling of crises has distinguished her as more than a trailblazer. On March 15 last year, a gunman went on a rampage at two mosques in the South Island city of Christchurch, killing 51 worshippers and livestreaming the atrocity on social media. It was the worst mass shooting in New Zealand's modern history. Ardern immediately reformed gun laws, banning the weapons used in the attack. An image of her wearing a hijab in solidarity with those affected helped tamp down outrage toward New Zealand that was brewing in Muslim nations.

When the coronavirus struck in February and March, Ardern responded by imposing one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, effectively closing down the economy even as the country had notched barely 200 cases. This was bold. But at daily press conferences, she calmly explained the reasoning behind it and other government decisions and urged New Zealanders—the "team of five million"—to observe the rules and "be kind." She would often follow up at night with Facebook Live posts from home, wearing a casual sweater and looking directly into her phone as she reiterated key messages. It was a master class in

communication, and it worked: The public broadly supported the restrictions, and the pandemic was kept at bay.

It helped that New Zealand has natural advantages in the fight against Covid-19, as a small island nation at the bottom of the world. A second outbreak in its largest city, Auckland—seized on by U.S. President Donald Trump as a “big surge”—was quickly brought under control with a regional lockdown. To date, the nation has tallied just over 1,500 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and only 25 deaths.

New Zealand’s daily life is mostly back to normal, with no pandemic restrictions. Now, as voters look at the carnage the virus is still causing elsewhere, Ardern’s success against Covid-19 is shielding her from criticism, says Lara Greaves, who teaches New Zealand politics at the University of Auckland. “She’s been an excellent leader through crisis, has displayed great communication and the right amount of empathy,” Greaves says. “If it weren’t for Covid, the election would definitely be a lot more about her policy failings.”

Ardern came to power promising to address growing inequalities and close the gap between rich and poor. But her governing coalition ditched plans for a capital gains tax over concerns it was too politically risky, and a program to build tens of thousands of affordable homes fell well short of goals. House prices have continued to rise as demand outstrips supply, climbing 10% in the past two years alone. Government policies to cut greenhouse gas emissions and clean up rivers were criticized by environmental groups as too weak. Perhaps most galling for Ardern, her administration has made little progress on reducing child poverty.

“It’s all very well to have grand plans, but there’s no point if you can’t actually put it into practice,” National Party leader Judith Collins, 61, said in a recent interview. “I would be someone people can rely on. And that’s the difference. I won’t say I can do something if I can’t do it.”

Speaking to Bloomberg Businessweek on the sidelines of her Oct. 1 campaign event, Ardern defended her administration, saying it has laid the foundations for change. “Ruth Bader Ginsburg said that change, real change, comes a step at a time,” she said, paraphrasing the recently deceased U.S. Supreme Court justice.

As the pandemic keeps its borders closed, decimating a tourism industry that was once its biggest foreign exchange earner, New Zealand faces immense challenges. But in guiding her country so competently through a string of unprecedented crises, Ardern has won voters’ trust.

“She’s a mother and she’s led the country through disaster after disaster,” said Bronwyn Eriksson, the owner of a bakery in Nelson who offered Ardern a pastry during her walkabout there. “She’s such a bright light. Why wouldn’t we want her for another term?”

[Taiwan] How to Avoid War Over Taiwan (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 8:00 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Donald Trump’s administration has fired shot after shot in its cold war against China, and the risks of a hot war over Taiwan appear to be rising. To prevent a catastrophic conflict, the

U.S. would be wise to avoid clumsy, self-defeating provocation and devote a lot more effort to calm, quiet deterrence.

The next few months could be especially dangerous. Both countries have ramped up their naval maneuvers in the Taiwan Strait this year, even as communication between their militaries has dwindled dangerously. Each sees the other as engaging in provocative behavior: China conducting threatening military maneuvers and ominously dropping references to "peaceful" reunification; the U.S. upgrading diplomatic ties with Taiwan and selling it more sophisticated weapons. China, which has recently picked fights with India and Australia while tightening its grip on Hong Kong, seems increasingly unrestrained in its ambitions. Influential voices are pressing the U.S. to shed its traditional ambiguity and issue a binding commitment to defend Taiwan.

Vital U.S. interests are undoubtedly at stake. As things stand, America's Asian allies expect the U.S. to come to Taiwan's aid; failure to do so would destroy U.S. credibility and push countries such as the Philippines, South Korea and Japan either to seek an accommodation with China or to develop their own nuclear deterrents. Strategically, gaining control of Taiwan would allow China to project power into the western Pacific — pushing the U.S. farther away from its shores, imperiling Japan's energy supplies and bolstering Beijing's pursuit of regional hegemony. Not least, Taiwan is a thriving democracy and a key node in global technology supply chains.

The question is how best to forestall a Chinese attack. The task is more difficult than it's been in decades. China has spent tens of billions of dollars in recent years on missiles, aircraft and amphibious forces designed to overwhelm Taiwan's defenses swiftly. It has also been developing ship-killing missiles, anti-satellite weapons and cyber capabilities designed to ward off the U.S. Navy. War games reportedly show the U.S. suffering grievous losses in any such conflict. Chinese strategists know this. They might easily be inclined to overconfidence, emboldening hardliners to act.

China must also reckon with the Trump administration's broad-based campaign to challenge it on trade, technology, regional politics and any other grievance that happens to cross the president's mind. Some of these maneuvers do arise from legitimate concerns. But the administration's actions have typically been erratic, clumsily executed, ineffective and costly to the U.S. economy. Generally tailored to impress a domestic audience rather than to change Chinese behavior, they could almost have been designed principally to shock and humiliate Beijing — that is, to provoke without a purpose. This puts pressure on China's leaders to show they will not be cowed over Taiwan or anything else.

The administration argues, correctly, that its efforts thus far to strengthen ties with Taiwan remain within the boundaries of its traditional one-China policy. This recognizes the government in Beijing as China's sole legal government but takes no position on Taiwanese sovereignty. It's vital that this understanding should continue, even as the U.S. pursues closer economic, technological, military and diplomatic links with the island. Respect for the status quo on sovereignty does not preclude, for instance, a new bilateral trade deal, as proposed by a group of U.S. senators. But the White House should resist any attempts by Taiwanese leaders to push the limits and should reject more extreme suggestions from boosters in the U.S.

While the idea of committing openly to the island's defense isn't crazy, it might also create more problems than it solves. China would see it as a breach of current policy. Some Taiwanese leaders might feel freer to act rashly. Most important, unless the U.S. clearly has the means to prevail in such a conflict, it would draw a red line lacking in credibility.

A better way is to deter China through capabilities and alliances, while avoiding provocation for its own sake. To that end, the U.S. should be rapidly developing new operational concepts and investing in weapons systems — including long-range anti-ship missiles, surface and undersea drones, artificial intelligence, and resilient battlefield networks — to counter China's asymmetrical advantages. The idea of making the island a "porcupine" by selling it weapons such as sea mines, drones and coastal missile defenses — rather than more tanks and F-16s — is sound. Taiwanese leaders should also focus on upgrading their reserve forces to repel any Chinese invasion.

The U.S. can signal resolve quietly, without an explicit defense pledge. Rebuilding relations with its traditional allies in Asia is crucial. A good start would be to refrain from berating them on trade and quibbling about how much they pay to house U.S. troops. The roles those countries would play in any Sino-U.S. conflict need to be discussed, so China knows the U.S. doesn't stand alone. Washington also needs to explore a broader range of security cooperation with non-traditional partners in the region such as Vietnam.

Finally, the U.S. should be coordinating more broadly with European allies and other nations outside the region — restoring friendships that, again, Trump has sundered so recklessly. Guided by the U.S., the world needs to make it plain to Beijing that an unprovoked attack on Taiwan would have lasting and profound economic consequences. China has gained enormously from peaceful interaction with other countries — more so, perhaps, than any other country in history. Chinese leaders say they'll pay any price to reunify their nation. Gently but firmly, the world should make clear just how high that price could be.

[Afghanistan] 19 years later, time to leave Afghanistan rather than sink deeper into an unwinnable war (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [10/7/2020 2:22 PM, Daniel Davis, Neutral]

There are now U.S. troops fighting in Afghanistan who weren't even born when the war started after Sept. 11. Half of Afghanistan's current population was born after the U.S. invasion in October 2001. The Afghan people have been subjected to non-stop conflict since the 1979 Soviet invasion. And Wednesday marks the official beginning of the 20th year of perpetual combat for U.S. troops.

Even the most enthusiastic interventionists must now recognize that the war is militarily unwinnable. The hopes of a peace agreement between the Taliban and Afghan government should not delay the end of American involvement in the war and our full withdrawal. Anything less confirms Washington's unwillingness to recognize two decades of failure and condemns yet more American troops to pointlessly sacrifice their lives and limbs.

The United States and the Taliban signed an agreement last February that was supposed to open the door to the exchange of Taliban and Afghan prisoners, followed in early March by the beginning of direct negotiations. On March 11, former U.S. Ambassador Zalmay

Khalilzad said he hoped "this issue will be resolved within 100 days."

Yet, the first face-to-face negotiations between the two parties didn't occur until mid-September, and, as of this writing, there has been no substantive progress made — but violence remains at alarming levels. The issues that have to be resolved are incredibly complex and far-reaching. Among the initial objectives are negotiating a ceasefire, or at least a reduction of violence, and power-sharing agreements between the two sides.

This doesn't even address the far thornier questions of whether or how to hold Taliban members and commanders accountable for potential war crimes over the decades. There are deep divisions in the society as to how far the government should go in punishing the Taliban before reconciling with them. However, it is not at all clear whether the Taliban will ever agree to any peace that puts their members in jail, or whether the Afghan people will agree to a peace that doesn't.

Moreover, the Taliban have the unequivocal military advantage in the war. They control more territory now than at any time since 2001 and have little motivation to make the significant compromises that both sides would need to make in order to bring peace to Afghanistan. The Afghan government, meanwhile, is under heavy pressure from its population to protect the hard-fought rights of women and children, who fear the government may agree to a peace that doesn't guarantee their freedoms.

These and many other emotionally charged issues all have to be agreed to before there can finally be peace between the two sides. The odds are high that, at best, these negotiations will drag on for years. Consider that conflicting parties in Libya have been unsuccessfully trying to negotiate the end of their civil strife since at least early 2015. And after six years of civil war in Yemen, the parties remain far from an agreement despite significant international support.

Pinning our hopes for a negotiated end to the war by next May (as the Pentagon seems to want) before withdrawing our troops is not wise policy. October marks the beginning of the 20th consecutive year of America's endless war in Afghanistan. The U.S. should have ended the war a decade ago. What we must avoid is having these same conversations again five years (or even one year) from now.

No doubt, there will still be interventionists in Washington lobbying for more time, more troops, and more patience, claiming we can still win. However, short of an unprecedented and unacceptable level of U.S.-backed violence, military victory is not even possible in the Afghan war because the conflict is political in nature. To allow U.S. troops in the country to drift for some unknown number of years into the future would be the height of irresponsibility, both to the nation and to the men and women in uniform who we place in harm's way.

The U.S. will continue to keep our people safe with our potent ability to identify and strike any direct threat to our country, no matter where in the world it originates — and without the need of one boot on the ground in Afghanistan. The 19th anniversary of this war should be the last anniversary with U.S. troops in the country. Washington should end the war now and withdraw all our troops because it is the most appropriate and responsible course of action our government can take.

Coronavirus News

Coronavirus Has Thrown Around 100 Million People Into Extreme Poverty, World Bank Estimates (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 12:00 PM, Josh Zumbrun, Neutral]

The coronavirus pandemic has thrown between 88 million and 114 million people into extreme poverty, according to the World Bank's biennial estimates of global poverty.

The reversal is by far the largest increase in extreme poverty going back to 1990 when the data begin, and marks an end to a streak of more than two decades of declines in the number of the extremely impoverished, which the World Bank defines as living on less than \$1.90 a day, or about \$700 a year.

The World Bank now estimates a total of between 703 million and 729 million people are in extreme poverty, and that the number could rise further in 2021.

Before the pandemic, the number of people in extreme poverty was estimated at 615 million for 2020.

"This is the worst setback that we've witnessed in a generation," said Carolina Sánchez-Páramo, global director of the World Bank's Poverty and Equity Global Practice.

Even during the global financial crisis of a decade ago, when most of the world was similarly mired in recession, the number of people in extreme poverty continued to decline because the major emerging markets of India and China continued to grow.

But the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic are proving more widespread and severe, and they are pulling new demographic groups into extreme poverty. Before the pandemic, those living in extreme poverty tended to be rural, undereducated, young and working in agriculture. But the pandemic is pushing poverty upon people in congested urban areas, with higher levels of education, and who work in industries such as informal services, construction and manufacturing.

"The new poor are more urban, better educated and less likely to work in agriculture than those living in extreme poverty before Covid-19," the World Bank said in its report.

The surge in poverty is likely to dash the hopes of the Sustainable Development Goals, promoted by the United Nations, to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030. Before the pandemic, that goal had been viewed as aggressive, but perhaps achievable.

"The convergence of the Covid-19 pandemic with the pressures of conflict and climate change will put the goal of ending poverty by 2030 beyond reach without swift, significant and substantial policy action," the World Bank said.

The institution's estimates are more dire than those in a similar report from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation released last month, estimating the pandemic had driven 37 million people into extreme poverty.

Samuel Freije-Rodriguez, lead economist in the World Bank's Poverty and Equity Global Practice, said the two estimates are based on different methodologies, and that the World Bank relies on its own detailed economic forecasts.

Both the Gates Foundation and the World Bank focus on the \$1.90-a-day measure of extreme poverty. The figure is comparable, adjusted for inflation, to the \$1-a-day threshold that became popular in the 1990s as the marker of extreme poverty. In 1990, more than 1.9 billion people lived below the extreme poverty threshold, a rate of 36%.

In 2020, that rate has risen as high as 9.4%, according to the World Bank, from a 7.9% estimate before the pandemic.

The past 30 years have been a period of almost uninterrupted improvement in living standards for many of the world's poorest. In 1990, nearly 1 billion people in East Asia alone, primarily China, lived in extreme poverty as did another half billion people in South Asia, primarily India.

The rise of China's and India's economies lifted hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. Latin America has also seen the number of people in poverty fall by more than half.

Before the pandemic, the most severe setback had occurred in 1998, when the Asian financial crisis threw tens of millions of people, primarily in Asia, into extreme poverty. That setback proved brief, with the figures completely rebounding by 1999.

The majority of the world's extreme poor live in sub-Saharan Africa, which has made less progress against extreme poverty than other regions of the world over the past 30 years. Before the pandemic, 440 million of the continent's population was in extreme poverty, a rate of nearly 40%. That is projected to rise by as much as 480 million, or a rate of 42% this year, due to the effects of the pandemic.

Up to 150 million could join extreme poor, World Bank says (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 12:55 PM, Cara Anna, Negative]

Up to 150 million people could slip into extreme poverty, living on less than \$1.90 a day, by late next year depending on how badly economies shrink during the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Bank said Wednesday in an outlook grimmer than before.

Middle income-countries are expected to have 82% of the new extreme poor, including India, Nigeria and Indonesia. Many of the new extreme poor will be more educated urban residents, meaning cities will see an increase in the kind of poverty traditionally rooted in rural areas.

Most of the new extreme poor, more than 110 million even by the World Bank's baseline estimate, will be in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa.

The pandemic has abruptly halted years of progress against global extreme poverty, expected to rise this year for the first time in over two decades. It also threatens to worsen global inequality and make it "harder for countries to return to inclusive growth," World Bank president David Malpass said.

Global economic growth is expected to fall by 5.2% this year, more than in the past eight decades.

Almost a quarter of the world's population lives below \$3.20 a day, a massive number of people vulnerable to the kind of economic shocks that this year have come in waves. Unemployment is rising, and those who scraped together savings have watched them disappear. Families are eating less. Many children, who account for half of the world's poor, miss out on distance learning.

"Many of the new poor are likely to be engaged in informal services, construction and manufacturing — the sectors in which economic activity is most affected by lockdowns and other mobility restrictions," the report says, citing phone surveys in countries around the world.

Recovery, experts say, could take a decade — a shattering blow to people who had pulled themselves from poverty and saw a better life ahead.

Developing countries are seeking more assistance from the World Bank, other financial institutions and richer governments to free up resources to fight the pandemic. They want an extension of the debt moratorium by Group of 20 nations beyond the end of this year, and they call for outright debt cancellation. They also want the issue of special drawing rights by the International Monetary Fund, but Washington has opposed it.

"If the global response fails the world's poor and vulnerable people now, the losses they have experienced to date may be dwarfed by what lies ahead," the report says. "We must not fail."

The extreme poor are disadvantaged even before birth, the report warns: "Their mothers are less likely to receive adequate nutrition and antenatal care; at birth, their very existence is often not officially registered." Escaping such poverty becomes a huge challenge.

But in Africa, some countries had made "impressive strides" against poverty and several had some of the world's fastest-growing economies before the pandemic. Now Africa's 54 countries say they need \$100 billion per year over the next three years to fight COVID-19 and its economic and social effects.

Roughly a third of the newly extreme poor are expected to be in sub-Saharan Africa, between 26 million and 40 million. South Asia, however, will see the largest share, between 49 million and 57 million.

The addition of up to 150 million extremely poor people threatens to rupture governments' already fraying safety nets. The World Bank estimates between 88 million and 115 million people could slip into extreme poverty this year, with another 23 million to 35 million in 2021.

And climate change could drive another 100 million people into poverty by 2030, the report says, with sub-Saharan Africa seeing some of the "most destructive impacts" of global warming.

The report “offers no simple answers to these major challenges currently confronting the world, because there are not any,” the World Bank authors write. “The world can rise to the occasion — or succumb.”

Europe’s Covid-19 Testing Programs Creak as Demand Surges (Wall Street Journal) Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 7:58 AM, Max Colchester, Neutral]

Some European governments are struggling to manage large-scale Covid-19 testing programs as cases rise across the continent, calling into question a central element of their strategies to tackle the virus as winter approaches.

Since the coronavirus first hit the continent earlier this year, governments have rapidly increased the availability of Covid-19 tests, with the aim of monitoring the disease’s spread, quickly suppressing local outbreaks and holding off wide-scale lockdowns.

Some of these testing systems are creaking. Countries including the U.K., France, Spain and the Netherlands have struggled to quickly turn around tests amid a surge in demand as schools reopened and people returned from summer vacation. The problem is likely to increase as the weather worsens in coming months and people develop flu and common colds, creating a mass of people with Covid-like symptoms.

European data also show that in many countries there aren’t sufficient tests being performed to contain the virus—often because laboratories can’t cope. In the U.K., Roche Holding AG said this week that problems at its national distribution center had led to delays in supplies of chemicals used in Covid-19 and other diagnostic tests.

To track Covid-19, governments “want to be doing as much testing as possible, but as we enter the flu season that will be unrealistic,” says Thomas Hale, a professor in global public policy at the Blavatnik School of Government.

The most recent data for the more accurate PCR tests showed 14 out of 31 European countries reported that the rate of tests coming back positive was above 3%, according to the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. A higher percentage of positive results suggests other cases remain undiagnosed in the population and more tests are needed to locate and isolate infected individuals to halt the virus’s spread, the agency said.

By this measure, France (9.22%), Spain (10.18%) and the Netherlands (8.36%) are struggling—while Italy (1.76%), Germany (1.10%) and the U.K. (1.39%) are posting rates below the 3% threshold.

Recent data from the U.S.—though not strictly comparable because other types of tests are included—suggest some 4%-5% of tests are positive. The number being carried out in the U.S. would rank it somewhere between Germany—now testing 1,307 out of every 100,000 people a week—and the U.K., which is testing 2,715 of every 100,000 people. But testing varies widely from state to state.

There is another widespread concern: Tests aren’t being turned around fast enough. “If you lose some fraction of the cases each day, then you are simply not going to be able to follow

through the test-and-trace procedure," said Daniel Lawson, a lecturer in statistical science at the University of Bristol. "That will increase the infection rate."

Germany's effort has been boosted by a large existing diagnostic industry, with over 250 registered laboratories able to perform coronavirus tests. In February, testing capacity skyrocketed when the government pledged to pay for the costs of testing in private labs.

France's testing capacity has surged since the country emerged from lockdown. Laboratories are processing more than one million coronavirus tests each week, compared with around 200,000 in May. But in recent weeks a big jump in case numbers has strained France's laboratory capacity. In the Paris area, only 57% of Covid-19 test results were available within three days for the week ending Sept. 21, the most recent data available. Around 12% of results took more than a week.

Long lines have formed outside testing centers. In response, authorities have instructed laboratories to give priority to testing of people with symptoms, health-care workers and the close contacts of people who have already tested positive

In Spain and Italy, people are tested if they are symptomatic, if they have been in close contact with an infected person, or through widespread screening of people considered at greater risk of exposure, such as health-care workers. In most cases, a doctor's prescription is required. Test results typically take between 24 and 48 hours in both countries.

In Madrid, which is currently experiencing one of Europe's biggest outbreaks, testing bottlenecks with weeklong delays have been reported.

Italy—which like Germany is reporting fewer cases per capita than its neighbors—also tests people who have traveled in areas with a high rate of infection. For instance, anyone who has recently been to Spain, Greece, Croatia or specific French regions—areas deemed at higher risk—is required to take a rapid nasal-swab test immediately before or after arrival in Italy. Such tests, known as antigen tests, can deliver results within 45 minutes, and don't require a doctor's prescription. Tests are typically carried out in drive-through clinics or in testing centers outside hospitals.

The results for PCR tests, which are more accurate than antigen tests, take longer, typically between 24 and 48 hours. Tests are usually carried out in drive-through clinics. Unless the test is being done for screening purposes, a doctor's prescription is required.

Around 64.2% of people who tested positive in Italy recently were detected through contact tracing or screening, not because they developed symptoms.

In the U.K., which conducts more tests than other European nations and has tested one in eight of its citizens since the end of May, the testing system was overwhelmed last month following a jump in demand by people who weren't showing symptoms. Just over a third of British community tests were processed in under 24 hours, well below the government's target, after several laboratories recorded backlogs.

On the whole, testing systems across Europe are broadly robust and have yet to be saturated, said Eeva Broberg, an expert in virology at the ECDC.

The cold weather will make that task harder. The ECDC estimates that seasonal influenza alone causes anywhere from four million to 50 million symptomatic cases each year in Europe, most of them concentrated between November and April. The European Commission recently warned "it may be necessary for countries to readjust their testing strategies for symptomatic cases."

Several governments are investing in tests that can give quick results for both Covid-19 and other respiratory diseases. The U.K. hopes to nearly double testing capacity to 500,000 people a day by the end of October. It is opening several new laboratories and using more automation to make the testing process faster. Britain is already giving priority to where it directs its tests with half of all capacity going to hospitals and care homes. The rest is directed into the wider community, with focus on areas with large-scale outbreaks.

During a normal flu season in England, some 360,000 people daily show symptoms, such as a dry cough or a high temperature, that are similar to those of Covid-19, according to the Academy of Medical Sciences. That could eat up the bulk of the tests that the government is planning to make available.

Europe Struggles to Curb Virus With Records in Spain, France (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 2:34 PM, Rudy Ruitenberg, Neutral]

France and Spain posted record increases in coronavirus cases, underscoring growing alarm in the region as it loses control of the pandemic.

New infections in France increased by 18,746, health authorities reported on Wednesday. The seven-day rolling average of new infections, which smooths out daily variations, rose to 12,853, its highest level yet.

That was more than triple the number of new cases in Spain, which had a record 5,075 in the past 24 hours, according to Health Ministry data published Wednesday. Including adjustments for older cases, the total number of infections rose by 10,491 to a total of 835,901 since the start of the pandemic.

Politicians at the national level are leaning on local authorities to take the lead in limiting late-night activity in cities and towns, as they fear the economic impact of more wide-ranging measures.

France's surge came as restrictions return, with President Emmanuel Macron's government ordering bars in Paris to close for a two-week period. Statistics agency Insee warned on Wednesday that prolonged curbs could lead to another contraction in France's economy, after it downgraded the country's growth forecast to zero from 1%.

More than 36% of intensive care beds in the Paris region are taken by Covid-19 patients, and that could reach 50% within two weeks unless the new measures have the desired effect, Aurelien Rousseau, head of the regional health agency, said in an interview with BFM TV on Monday.

The number of Covid-19 patients in intensive care in Paris hospitals has tripled since the

start of September, similar to the situation in the Marseille region.

Like Paris, Berlin is fighting against a surge in infections and will close bars at 11 p.m., starting on Saturday.

The German capital has the worst outbreak among the country's 16 states, with 40.5 cases per 100,000 people over the last seven days, according to the country's public health authority. The city's residents would be restricted from domestic travel if the figure rises above 50 – some districts already exceed this threshold.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government and state leaders reaffirmed the rules during a conference call on Wednesday.

Across the border from Europe's largest economy, the Czech Republic posted a record 4,457 new cases on Tuesday, and the country's 14-day cumulative number of cases per capita is now the highest in the EU, surpassing Spain.

The government will announce "more significant" measures to stem the outbreak at the end of the week, Health Minister Roman Prymula said Wednesday, reaffirming a pledge not to impose another full-scale nationwide lockdown.

The virus's resurgence in Italy – where numbers have been more contained than in some neighboring countries – twice prevented parliamentary votes earlier this week on new measures to combat the pandemic, as a number of lawmakers were in quarantine.

A cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte extended emergency powers to counter the pandemic to Jan. 31. The government again made wearing face masks outdoors compulsory nationwide.

EU buys more Remdesivir to treat 3,400 patients amid shortages (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 9:14 AM, Francesco Guarascio, 5304K, Neutral]

The European Commission said on Wednesday it had agreed with U.S. company Gilead to buy additional doses to treat about 3,400 patients of its COVID-19 drug Remdesivir, amid shortages of the medication in Europe.

The move comes as the bloc is under pressure to expand its limited stocks of the antiviral drug as COVID-19 cases and hospitalisations rise on the continent.

Several European countries have said they were experiencing shortages of the drug, whose global stock has been secured almost entirely by the United States

A spokesman for the EU executive said Brussels agreed with Gilead last Friday to supply nearly 20,300 additional doses "which help almost 3,400 patients" at a cost of 7 million euros (\$8.24 million).

That is in addition to 30,000 courses of treatment it bought at the end of July and that were meant to cover Europe's needs in the months of August and September, when infections were at their lowest in Europe.

The additional supply could be enough to meet immediate needs for a week or two.

Spain, the country with the highest number of infections in Europe, had nearly 10,700 people hospitalised for COVID-19 as of Tuesday. In France, nearly 800 COVID-19 patients were in need of intensive care only in the last week of September.

Remdesivir is usually administered in Europe to severely ill patients. This week it has been given also to U.S. President Donald Trump after he tested positive for the virus.

Remdesivir and steroid dexamethasone are to date the only authorised drugs to treat COVID-19 in Europe.

NEW SUPPLY SOUGHT

The EU and Britain, with a combined population of 500 million, are negotiating a new contract with Gilead for the supply of additional doses of the antiviral medicine, the EU spokesman said.

European officials said an agreement could be reached shortly.

Gilead Chief Commercial Officer Johanna Mercier said on Tuesday the company expected by next week to be in a position to fulfil orders coming through Europe.

The additional doses acquired last week were being delivered to countries which needed it the most, the EU spokesman said, citing The Netherlands, Czech Republic, Greece, Austria, Denmark and Slovenia.

In the Netherlands, physicians were giving priority in administering the drug to the most ill patients, the Dutch health inspectorate said. Hospitals there were also redistributing Remdesivir where it was most needed within the country.

China under pressure to cancel debt to coronavirus-hit poor countries: Report (Yahoo News/PTI)

Yahoo News/PTI [10/7/2020 8:06 AM, K. J. M. Varma, 4021K, Neutral]

China, the world's largest creditor, is increasingly coming under pressure to cancel its huge debt to coronavirus-hit poor countries under the Group of 20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI), according to a media report.

World Bank President David Malpass on Monday called on China to cancel debt to coronavirus-hit poor countries, blaming Beijing's well capitalised official lenders of not fully participating in the DSSI.

"An added factor in the current wave of debt is the rapid growth of new official lenders, especially several of China's well-capitalised creditors," Malpass said, addressing an online event hosted by the Frankfurt School of Finance and Management.

"They've expanded their portfolios dramatically and are not fully participating in the debt

rescheduling processes that were developed to soften previous waves of debt," Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post quoted him as saying.

The finance ministers of G20 agreed for a "time-bound suspension of debt service payments" to the 77 poorest countries in the world during online spring meetings of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank on April 15 in view of the grim situation faced by these countries due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Under this DSSI, a payment of an estimated USD 12 billion due to be paid between May 1 and the end of 2020 has been rescheduled.

According to a write up in China's state-run CGTN, over 100 low- and middle-income countries will still have to pay a total of USD 130 billion in debt service in 2020.

In addition, 43 countries have received about USD five billion from the DSSI to fund social, health and economic measures to respond to the pandemic.

China is the biggest bilateral lender for most emerging economies especially lending to hundreds of projects under its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Of the amount due from poor nations taking part in the G20 debt plan between May and December this year, 70 per cent or USD 7.17 billion, was to China. That amount is expected to rise to USD 10.51 billion or 74 per cent of the total, next year if the DSSI is extended, the Post report said on Wednesday.

China faced criticism especially from the G7 countries for classifying large state-owned, government-controlled financial institutions as commercial lenders and not as official bilateral creditors.

Those critics include Malpass, who said China Development Bank (CDB) needed to take part as an official bilateral lender for the DSSI to be effective, the report said.

China has argued that since CDB lends at commercial instead of concessional terms, the bank should be treated as a commercial lender. CDB's lending to DSSI-eligible countries is heavily concentrated in Angola and Pakistan.

China said that since the G20's debt freeze agreement was adopted in April, it had received more than 20 requests and reached agreements with more than 10 borrowers by the end of July, without specifying the recipients.

For its part, China has pushed for the World Bank to be included in the DSSI, a move that has so far been resisted by other World Bank/IMF members.

In June this year, Beijing held an online China-Africa Summit on Solidarity against COVID-19 in which the debt situation was discussed, as 40 of the 77 developing countries are located in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to estimates, China's debt to African countries amounted to USD 150 billion as of 2018. Reports say China holds about a third of Africa's sovereign debt as China has

extended finance to a number of African countries amid concerns about a debt trap and even loss of sovereignty, especially after Sri Lanka handed over its Hambantota port to a state-run Chinese firm in 2017 for a 99 years' lease as a debt swap amounting to USD 1.2 billion.

The Post quoted Mark Bohlund, senior analyst at REDD Intelligence as saying there was no movement on the DSSI extension and CDB inclusion "largely due to China not wanting to be bullied around on the global stage."

Bohlund said China did not want to be "forced into effectively footing much of the bill for the DSSI extension without any concessions from the G7 nations in other areas."

In May this year, the New York Times reported that China is flooded with debt relief requests from several countries including Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka and a number of African nations, asking to restructure, delay repayments or forgive tens of billions of dollars of loans coming due this year.

"China faces difficult choices. If it restructures or forgives these loans, that could strain its financial system and infuriate the Chinese people, who are suffering under their own slowdown. But if China demands repayment when many countries are already angry with Beijing over its handling of the pandemic, its quest for global clout could be at risk," it said.

Trade

Race to WTO Leadership Is Down to the Final Two Candidates (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 2:10 PM, Bryce Baschuk, Neutral]

World Trade Organization members selected two final candidates – Nigeria's Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala and South Korea's Yoo Myung-hee – to advance to the final round in the race to lead the Geneva-based trade body, according to people familiar with the matter.

By advancing two women to the final round of the selection process, the WTO will likely have the first female director general in its 25-year history.

Okonjo-Iweala served two stints as Nigeria's finance minister and one term as foreign affairs minister. She has experience working at international governance bodies as a former managing director of the World Bank and as a chairman at the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunization.

Yoo is South Korea's trade minister. During her 25-year career in government, she has helped expand her country's trade network through bilateral accords with the U.S., China and the U.K.

WTO General Council Chairman David Walker plans to formally announce the results to the institution's delegates on Thursday morning in Geneva.

"They're both very well qualified, it's going to be a fight," said William Reinsch, a trade official in the Clinton administration and senior adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. The top challenge will be "restoring the organization to full strength

and viability, and restoring its reputation. "You need members to have confidence that the WTO is capable of solving problems. I think right now that confidence is eroded."

The United Kingdom's Liam Fox, Kenya's Amina Chawahir Mohamed Jibril, and Saudi Arabia's Mohammad Maziad Al-Tuwaijri did not secure enough support in the second round of consultations, according to people familiar with the matter.

The third and final phase of the consultation process will begin later this month and run until Nov. 6, after which the WTO will endeavor to name a consensus winner of the race.

Clouding the outlook for the selection process is the U.S. presidential election Nov. 3. The WTO makes decisions on a consensus basis, and a lack of American support for any of the finalists could mean delays in picking the new director-general.

"I don't see how you could conclude that either candidate would be unacceptable, from a U.S. point of view," said Reinsch. "Lighthizer was asked for criteria for the selection and I think he mentioned three: committed to reform, no whiff of anti-Americanism, and taking on countries that flout the rules. I think they certainly meet his criteria," he said, referring to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer.

If WTO members are unable to select a leader by consensus, a vote requiring a qualified majority could be held as a last resort, which would be an unprecedented development for the organization.

The campaign to lead the WTO during the most turbulent period of its 25-year existence is playing out against the backdrop of the pandemic, a worldwide recession, the U.S.-China battle for trade supremacy and the American election. President Donald Trump has blasted the WTO as the worst trade deal in U.S. history and pledges to overhaul it to better suit the country's interests.

The vacancy for the top WTO job arose when Brazil's Roberto Azevedo decided to step down at the end of August, a year before his term was due to end.

WTO members view the race as an opportunity to reshape the organization, whose mission of economic integration is under threat from protectionist policies around the globe. Without reform, it risks being sidelined during the biggest economic crisis in a century.

UK's Johnson, Ukraine's Zelenskiy to sign partnership agreement (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 5:34 PM, Staff, Neutral]

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson meets Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy on Thursday to sign a partnership agreement that includes a free trade deal covering goods, services, and tariffs and quotas.

Since leaving the European Union earlier this year, Britain is seeking bilateral agreements with other countries, underlining Johnson's resolve to go it alone once a transition arrangement with the bloc concludes at the end of this year.

Britain threw its support behind Ukraine after Russia seized Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in

2014 and backed separatists in a war that has killed thousands of people, in action that brought Western sanctions against Moscow.

"The UK is Ukraine's most fervent supporter ... we are utterly committed to upholding the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Johnson said in a statement.

"The Strategic Partnership Agreement we are signing today signals the next chapter in our relationship. It's a chapter that will bring increased security and prosperity for both the people of the UK and Ukraine."

The agreement includes a comprehensive preferential free trade agreement covering goods, services, and tariffs and quotas, the government said, adding that it rolled over and built upon the EU-Ukraine Agreement.

On Wednesday, Ukraine said it would sign a memorandum with Britain to secure 1.25 billion pounds to build new military vessels for the Ukrainian Navy.

Zelenskiy is on a two-day visit to Britain, where he was given a tour of the Prince of Wales aircraft carrier in Portsmouth.

[United Kingdom] Ireland optimistic on Brexit trade deal, fishing still a big obstacle (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 7:57 AM, Conor Humphries and Padraic Halpin, 5304K, Neutral] Ireland's Foreign Minister said he believed a trade deal can be done between Britain and the European Union, citing growing optimism, but warned that fishing rights remained a big obstacle that London should not underestimate.

Britain formally left the EU in January and is seeking to negotiate a new free trade accord by the end of 2020, when a transition period expires. Two diplomatic sources told Reuters on Tuesday that the two sides were moving closer to a deal.

"I think there is some more optimism now than there was a few weeks ago," Simon Coveney, who played a major role in the talks that led to the initial divorce agreement, told an Irish parliamentary committee on Wednesday.

A recent phone call between European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson "was helpful in terms of reinforcing the message that a deal can be done and I would reinforce that message again here today," he said.

While the prospects of a deal looked much brighter after last week's negotiating round, there was no breakthrough on the three most contentious issues — fair competition guarantees, fishing and ways to settle disputes in the future.

Coveney warned that it was hard to see the parameters of agreement on fisheries "for now" as the current British position "creates a very difficult negotiation and a landing zone that is quite hard to envisage.

"This is a big obstacle and I don't think the British government should underestimate the

strength of feeling on fishing of many of the Atlantic member states," he said.

"I think the negotiators have a really difficult job here."

ISIS

Islamic State 'Beatles' Jailers Are Charged in Abuse of Murdered Hostages (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 12:55 PM, Adam Goldman and Charlie Savage, Neutral]

Two notorious Islamic State detainees from Britain were being brought to the United States on Wednesday to face federal charges over accusations that they jailed and tortured Western hostages, some of whom were beheaded, Justice Department officials said.

The transfer is a milestone in the saga of the two men, El Shafee Elsheikh, 32, and Alexandra Kotey, 36, who are half of an ISIS cell of four Britons called "the Beatles" — a nickname bestowed by their victims because of their accents — and known for their extreme brutality.

The American government has linked the group to the kidnapping and abuse of more than two dozen hostages, some of whom were ultimately beheaded for propaganda videos, including the journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff.

The British extremists repeatedly beat the hostages they kept imprisoned in Raqqa, Syria, formerly the Islamic State's self-declared capital, according to prosecutors. They subjected their hostages to abuses including waterboarding, mock executions, painful stress positions, food deprivation, beatings with sticks lasting 20 minutes or longer, chokeholds causing blackouts and electric shocks. They also forced their hostages to fight each other and to witness murders, court papers said.

At a news conference on Wednesday, Justice Department officials and the F.B.I. director, Christopher A. Wray, announced the men had been indicted on multiple charges, including hostage-taking resulting in death and conspiracy to commit murder outside the United States. If convicted, the men could spend the rest of their lives in prison. They were expected to make an initial appearance on Wednesday in federal court in Alexandria, Va.

"These charges are the product of many years of hard work in pursuit of justice for our citizens slain by ISIS," Attorney General William P. Barr said in a statement. "Although we cannot bring them back, we can and will seek justice for them, their families, and for all Americans."

Both of the detainees were captured by an American-backed Kurdish militia in Syria in early 2018. In October 2019, the American military took custody of them amid the upheaval of Turkey's attacks on the militia, and they had been held in Iraq since then.

Their arrival and the initiation of a civilian trial is a victory for the families of the hostages who were killed. The families had pushed for the men to be prosecuted in federal court instead of being sent to the military prison at Guantánamo Bay, where military commissions have proved dysfunctional in cases in which defendants contest the charges rather than

plead guilty.

The two men have given numerous interviews while imprisoned, at first striking a largely unrepentant tone and dodging questions about their culpability in the killing of the hostages. But as time passed, the men seemed more apologetic and admitted holding Westerners hostage in later interviews.

Another member of the cell — Mohammed Emwazi, better known as Jihadi John — was killed in an airstrike in 2015 in Syria. Mr. Emwazi was believed to have killed Mr. Foley and Mr. Sotloff, both Americans, as well as Peter Kassig, an aid worker.

A fourth man, Aine Davis, is imprisoned in Turkey on terrorism charges. The extradition of Mr. Davis to the United States seems unlikely as the American-Turkish relationship deteriorates.

The families of Mr. Foley and Mr. Sotloff as well as those of Kayla Mueller and Peter Kassig, two Americans who were also killed in Syria, said they welcomed the news the two men were being brought to the United States to be prosecuted.

"James, Peter, Kayla and Steven were kidnapped, tortured, beaten, starved and murdered by members of the Islamic State in Syria," the families said in a statement. "Now our families can pursue accountability for these crimes against our children in a U.S. court."

The families added they were particularly grateful to Mr. Barr for his decision to waive the death penalty against the two men and thanked Ali H. Soufan, a former F.B.I. agent who quietly helped them.

Any trial would most likely involve former hostages, especially from Italy, France, Spain and Denmark, possibly testifying and recounting the horrors they experienced while imprisoned by the Islamic State in Syria.

The two men helped supervise detention facilities where hostages were held, coordinated ransom negotiations for their release and engaged in a prolonged pattern of physical and psychological violence against their prisoners, charging documents said. For example, on April 25, 2014, prosecutors said, the men forced prisoners from Europe to witness the murder of a Syrian man by Mr. Emwazi as part of a hostage negotiation process.

"Emwazi executed the Syrian prisoner by shooting him in the back of the head and then numerous times in the torso as and when he fell into a grave," the charging documents said. "Kotey instructed the hostages to kneel at the side of the grave and witness the execution while holding handmade signs pleading for their release. Elsheikh videotaped the execution of the Syrian hostage."

It added: "After the execution, Kotey, Elsheikh, and Emwazi returned the European hostages to the prison with Elsheikh telling one hostage, 'You're next.'"

All four men had lived in West London. Mr. Kotey, born in London, is of Ghanaian and Greek Cypriot background, while Mr. Elsheikh's family fled Sudan in the 1990s. Both men have been designated foreign terrorists by the United States. The United Kingdom has

stripped them of their British passports.

The Trump administration wanted to bring the two detainees to the United States for a trial in civilian court, as the families of their victims urged, but their transfer was delayed by a need for evidence in British hands that prosecutors viewed as essential to prove their case.

A lawsuit in Britain brought by the mother of one of the defendants tied up that government's ability to share the evidence because the attorney general at the time, Jeff Sessions, refused to preclude seeking the death penalty, as normally happens in such cases since Britain has abolished it.

In August, however, Mr. Barr sought to resolve the impasse by reversing the policy and telling Britain that the United States would not seek to execute the two men. The British courts swiftly permitted the government to share the evidence — clearing the way for their transfer to American soil for the case to commence.

Prosecuting foreign terrorists in civilian court, once common under the Obama administration, has become rare under the Trump administration. Mr. Sessions had attacked that approach while he was still a Republican senator from Alabama, portraying it as soft on terrorism and declaring that such suspects should be held as military combatants and tried at Guantánamo Bay.

But the military commissions trial system at Guantánamo has proved dysfunctional, and there were additional legal problems raised by the prospect of holding members of ISIS — as opposed to Al Qaeda — there without trial.

Britain also did not want to share evidence for use at Guantánamo, and the victims' family members pressed instead for prosecutions in civilian court, to avoid the risk that some would see the men as human-rights martyrs and because civilian courts have proved to be far more effective in practice.

Senator Jeanne Shaheen, Democrat of New Hampshire, who worked closely with the Foley family and pushed to have the two detainees brought to trial in civilian court rather than a military commission, hailed the charges as "a giant step towards justice."

"The families of the Americans murdered by ISIS finally have their day in court on the horizon," she said in a statement. "Through a thorough trial with all evidence presented, the United States has an opportunity to deliver real justice and honor the memories of James, Peter, Steven and Kayla."

Two ISIS militants charged in deaths of James Foley and other American hostages in Syria (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 1:37 PM, Rachel Weiner and Ellen Nakashima, Neutral]

Six years after the Islamic State beheaded American journalists and aid workers on camera, two men have been charged in U.S. federal court for involvement in those deaths.

The case against Alexandra Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh in Alexandria, Va., is the first use of the American justice system to seek to hold Islamic State fighters accountable for the

murder of U.S. citizens.

"Although we cannot bring them back, we can and will seek justice for them, their families, and for all Americans," Attorney General William P. Barr said in a statement.

He and other law enforcement officials described the charges as a warning to both U.S. citizens who join terrorist groups and foreign fighters who harm Americans that they cannot escape prosecution.

"If you have American blood in your veins or American blood on your hands, you will face American justice," said assistant attorney general for national security John Demers at a news conference Wednesday.

Elsheikh and Kotey were flown Wednesday to the United States from Iraq, where they had been held by the U.S. military for the past year.

Kotey was born in London; Elsheikh moved there from Sudan with his family as a child. Both became radicalized in Britain, and prosecutors noted they were arrested on Sept. 11, 2001, after taking part in a demonstration cheering the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

In 2012, both traveled to Syria to join Islamist militant groups. By that fall, according to prosecutors, they were torturing hostages for the Islamic State. Prisoners say they were waterboarded, beaten, subjected to electric shocks and made to fight each other, among other torments.

In interviews with The Washington Post and other news outlets, Elsheikh and Kotey admitted joining the Islamic State and taking information from hostages for ransom negotiations. They said they engaged with Americans James Foley, Kayla Mueller, Steven Sotloff, Peter Kassig and other Western prisoners who were subsequently killed. But they claimed to have no involvement in or advance knowledge of those executions.

The indictment says they were directly involved in torture and killings. According to prosecutors, when another man, Mohammed Emwazi, executed a Syrian prisoner, Elsheikh videotaped the slaying in front of a group of European hostages while Kotey instructed them to kneel and hold handmade signs pleading for release. After bringing the group back to an Islamic State-run prison in Syria, according to prosecutors, Elsheikh told one hostage, "You're next."

The indictment also says the two worked closely with Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, a top strategist and chief spokesperson for the Islamic State until his death in 2016.

Emwazi, who wielded the knife in infamous Islamic State videos, was killed in a drone strike in 2015. Like Kotey and Elsheikh, Emwazi — better known as "Jihadi John" — was raised in West London. Together with a fourth Londoner, Aine Davis, the group became known by their captives as "the Beatles" because of their British accents.

Kotey and Elsheikh were captured in Syria by U.S.-backed Kurdish forces in 2018; Davis is imprisoned in Turkey. The U.S. military took custody of the two defendants from its Kurdish

allies after Turkey invaded northern Syria.

The men will be prosecuted in federal court in Alexandria and are charged with hostage-taking resulting in death, conspiracy to murder U.S. citizens outside the United States, conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization and related conspiracy charges. If convicted, they could face up to life in prison.

The defendants and their families fought for a prosecution in Britain rather than the United States, where criminal punishment is harsher. But Britain stripped Kotey and Elsheikh of their British citizenship and expressed reservations about a prosecution there. A court in London last month cleared the way for British authorities to provide evidence to U.S. law enforcement after Barr agreed not to seek the death penalty in exchange.

Demers said the British evidence allowed prosecutors to tell "the fullest story we could about what these defendants did." Asked whether the decision to rule out a death sentence was made to appease the British, officials said they were considering the wishes of the victims' families.

In a statement Wednesday by a foundation created in Foley's honor, the families thanked British and U.S. authorities for their work. "James, Peter, Kayla and Steven were kidnapped, tortured, beaten, starved, and murdered by members of the Islamic State in Syria," they said. "Now our families can pursue accountability for these crimes against our children in a U.S. court."

The bodies of the slain hostages have never been found; the circumstances of Mueller's death remain unclear. Their families said in an editorial this year that they hope a prosecution will reveal "the full truth" of what happened to their children.

Nicholas Lewin, a former federal prosecutor in Manhattan who successfully tried a number of senior al-Qaeda figures, said the indictment reflects a playbook used successfully in the years after 9/11: identify overseas operatives, bring them to the United States, and charge them with, among other things, conspiracy to kill Americans and material support. "This was the al-Qaeda prosecution game plan," he said, "and now we're using it against ISIS."

ISIS members known as 'The Beatles' charged with killing American citizens (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 12:07 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh have been charged in U.S. federal court for their involvement in the deaths of several American hostages taken by ISIS. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

Islamic State 'Beatles' Fighters Brought to U.S. to Face Charges (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 2:13 PM, Aruna Viswanatha, Neutral]

Two British Islamic State militants accused in the torture and killing of Western hostages were brought to the U.S. to face criminal charges in Virginia, U.S. authorities said Wednesday, after more than two years of legal limbo that followed their capture in Syria.

The men, El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey, who had allegedly supervised Islamic

State detention facilities that held hostages, were scheduled to make their initial appearances in court in Alexandria, Va., on Wednesday afternoon. The Justice Department told the British government in August it wouldn't pursue the death penalty against them, paving the way for U.K. authorities to provide additional evidence for their prosecution in the U.S.

The two men are accused of being part of a brutal cell that murdered U.S. citizens including journalist James Foley and humanitarian aid worker Kayla Mueller in Syria in 2014 and early 2015. The hostages had referred to the guards as the "Beatles" based on their British backgrounds.

The men, who were captured by Kurdish fighters in Syria in 2018 and have been in U.S. military custody in Iraq since last year, "engaged in a prolonged pattern of physical and psychological violence against the hostages," the indictment said. They face eight criminal counts including hostage-taking resulting in death, conspiring to murder Americans outside the U.S., and conspiring to provide material support to terrorists, according to the indictment dated Tuesday and unsealed Wednesday.

The men are also accused of engaging in a conspiracy that led to the beheading of journalist Steven Sotloff and aid worker Peter Kassig.

"If you have American blood in your veins or American blood on your hands, you will face American justice," Assistant Attorney General John Demers, who runs the Justice Department's national security division, said in remarks that recounted the lives of the killed Americans.

Mr. Sotloff had traveled to the region to "give a voice to the people who didn't have one," Mr. Demers said, citing a friend of Mr. Sotloff's. Ms. Mueller had so inspired the members of the military who conducted the operation that led to the death of Islamic State's leader last year that they had named their mission "Task Force 8-14," in reference to her birthday on August 14, Mr. Demers said.

The families of the four Americans said they welcomed the decision to forgo the death penalty and prosecute the men. "Now our families can pursue accountability for these crimes against our children in a U.S. court," they said.

A British court had earlier blocked authorities from sharing key evidence in the case against Islamic State fighters because the Trump administration hadn't provided assurances about not pursuing the death penalty. Britain abolished capital punishment for all crimes in 1998 and typically seeks assurances the death penalty won't be used when assisting foreign governments with prosecutions.

In an August letter to his U.K. counterpart, Attorney General William Barr said the men would be transferred to Iraq for prosecution in the Iraqi justice system unless British authorities provided assistance by Oct. 15.

Between 2012 and 2015, the indictment alleges, Messrs. Kotey and Elsheikh were part of a conspiracy that committed murders and forced others to witness them, forced hostages to fight each other, engaged in beatings with punches and sticks that lasted up to 20 minutes,

waterboarded some hostages and denied bathroom access, in addition to other punishments.

The imprisonment of the two men in the U.S. would be different, and would include sanitary conditions and three meals a day, said the U.S. attorney in the Eastern District of Virginia, Zach Terwilliger, whose office is prosecuting the case. "All things denied to James, Kayla, Steven and Peter," Mr. Terwilliger said.

Mr. Elsheikh left London in 2012, entered Syria across the Turkish border, and purchased an AK-47 assault rifle once he arrived, the indictment said. In 2014, he sent a voice message to a family member explaining: "there's many heads, this is just a couple that I took a photo of."

Another member of the group, Mohamed Emwazi, known as "Jihadi John," was killed in a 2015 drone strike.

The hostages, captured in 2012 and 2013, were held in a prison in Sheikh Najjar, Syria, which the hostages referred to as the "dungeon," the indictment said. The families of those taken hostage received emails in the following months and years seeking at various times 100 million euros (\$118 million), the release all Muslim prisoners in the U.S., and other demands.

U.S. Moves to Prosecute Islamic State Militants Linked to Beheadings (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 11:55 AM, Chris Strohm, Neutral]

Two Islamic State militants linked to the beheadings of American and British hostages are in FBI custody and will appear later Wednesday in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, for prosecution, the Justice Department said.

The U.S. alleges that El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexanda Kotey, who have been in American military custody at an undisclosed location, were members of the Islamic State of Iraq and part of a terrorist cell known as "the Beatles" that kidnapped and murdered journalists and aid workers from the U.S. and U.K. Now stateless, their nickname reflects their past British citizenship and distinctive British accents on graphic videos of their killings.

"The entire United States government remains committed to bringing to justice anyone who harms our citizens," FBI Director Christopher Wray said Wednesday at a news conference in Washington.

"Today, we're demonstrating that resolve by bringing to our shores two men who left Britain to become ISIS terrorists," Wray said. "Now they will face justice in an American court of law for their crimes against American citizens."

According to a Justice Department indictment, the two operatives are alleged to have been part of a conspiracy to kidnap and murder U.S. journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff, as well as humanitarian aid workers Kayla Jean Mueller and Peter Kassig.

The U.S. secured evidence from the U.K. for their prosecution after Attorney General William Barr agreed he wouldn't seek the death penalty for them.

If convicted, each defendant faces a maximum penalty of life in prison, the Justice Department said.

U.S. charged British IS members in deaths of American hostages (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 4:45 PM, Eric Tucker and Matthew Barakat, 2164K, Neutral]

Two Islamic State militants from Britain were brought to the United States on Wednesday to face charges in a gruesome campaign of torture, beheadings and other acts of violence against four Americans and others captured and held hostage in Syria, the Justice Department said.

El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey are two of four men who were called "the Beatles" by the hostages because of the captors' British accents. The two men were expected to make their first appearance Wednesday afternoon in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, where a federal grand jury issued an eight-count indictment that accuses them of being "leading participants in a brutal hostage-taking scheme" that resulted in the deaths of Western hostages, including American journalist James Foley.

The charges are a milestone in a yearslong effort by U.S. authorities to bring to justice members of the group known for beheadings and barbaric treatment of aid workers, journalists and other hostages in Syria. Startling for their unflinching depictions of cruelty and violence, recordings of the murders were released online in the form of propaganda for a group that at its peak controlled vast swaths of Syria and Iraq.

The case underscores the Justice Department's commitment to prosecuting in American civilian court militants captured overseas, said Assistant Attorney General John Demers, who vowed that other extremists "will be pursued to the ends of the earth." The defendants' arrival in the U.S. sets the stage for arguably the most sensational terrorism trial since the 2014 criminal case against the suspected ringleader of a deadly attack on a U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya.

"If you have American blood in your veins or American blood on your hands, you will face American justice," said Demers, the department's top national security official.

The men are charged in connection with the deaths of four American hostages — Foley, journalist Steven Sotloff and aid workers Peter Kassig and Kayla Mueller — as well as British and Japanese nationals who were also held captive.

The pair face charges of hostage-taking resulting in death and other terrorism-related counts. Because of a recent concession by the Justice Department, prosecutors will not be seeking the death penalty.

The indictment describes Kotey and Elsheikh, both of whom prosecutors say radicalized in London and left for Syria in 2012, as "leading participants in a brutal hostage-taking scheme" that targeted American and European citizens and that involved murders, mock executions, shocks with electric tasers, physical restraints and other brutal acts.

Prosecutors say the men worked closely with a chief spokesman for IS who reported to the

group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who was killed in a U.S. military operation last year. They were joined in the "Beatles" by Mohamed Emwazi, who was killed in a 2015 drone strike and was also known as "Jihadi John" after appearing and speaking in the videos of multiple executions, including Foley's. A fourth member, Aine Lesley Davis, is serving a prison sentence in Turkey.

The indictment accuses Kotey and Elsheikh of participating in Foley's 2012 kidnapping and of supervising detention facilities for hostages, "in addition to engaging in a long pattern of physical and psychological violence."

It also alleges that they coordinated ransom negotiations over email with hostage families. In interviews while in detention, the two men admitted they helped collect email addresses from Mueller that could be used to send out ransom demands. Mueller was killed in 2015 after 18 months in IS captivity. The indictment says Mueller's family received an email demanding a cash payment of 5 million euros for Mueller's release.

In July 2014, according to the indictment, Elsheikh described to a family member his participation in an IS attack on the Syrian Army. He sent the family member photos of decapitated heads and said in a voice message, "There's many heads, this is just a couple that I took a photo of."

The indictment describes the execution of a Syrian prisoner in 2014 that the two forced their Western hostages to watch. Kotey instructed the hostages to kneel while watching the execution and holding signs pleading for their release. Emwazi shot the prisoner in the back of the head while Elsheikh videotaped the execution. Elsheikh told one of the hostages, "you're next," prosecutors say.

The 24-page indictment accuses Kotey and Elsheikh of conspiring to murder the hostages and of helping cause their deaths by detaining them. It does not spell out any specific roles for them in the executions. But G. Zachary Terwilliger, the U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, whose office will prosecute the case, said under U.S. law Elsheikh and Kotey can "be held liable for the foreseeable acts of their co-conspirators."

Relatives of the four slain Americans praised the Justice Department for transferring the men to the U.S. for trial, calling it "the first step in the pursuit of justice for the alleged horrific human rights crimes against these four young Americans."

"We are hopeful that the U.S. government will finally be able to send the important message that if you harm Americans, you will never escape justice. And when you are caught, you will face the full power of American law," their statement said.

Elsheikh and Kotey have been held since October 2019 in American military custody after being captured in Syria one year earlier by the U.S.-based Syrian Democratic Forces while trying to escape Syria for Turkey. The Justice Department has long wanted to put them on trial, but those efforts were complicated by wrangling over whether Britain, which does not have the death penalty, would share evidence that could be used in a death penalty prosecution.

Attorney General William Barr broke the diplomatic standoff this year when he promised the

men would not face the death penalty. That prompted British authorities to share evidence that U.S. prosecutors deemed crucial for obtaining convictions.

FBI, DOJ press conference on 'matter of national security' expected to be about ISIS 'Beatles' headed to U.S. (FOX News)

FOX News [10/7/2020 8:43 AM, Ronn Blitzer, Neutral]

The Justice Department (DOJ) and FBI will hold a press conference Wednesday morning that they said will deal with a "national security" matter.

According to administration sources, the press conference will be about the British ISIS terrorists known as "The Beatles." The two notorious British Islamic State (ISIS) terrorists, who allegedly had a hand in the torture and beheadings of U.S. hostages in Syria, will be coming to the United States in the coming weeks to face trial.

Alexanda Kotev and El Shafee Elsheikh are in U.S. military custody in Iraq. They were captured by a Kurdish-led militia in early 2018 but brought to Iraq last October.

The men have been accused of taking part in the kidnappings of international hostages, including journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and U.S. aid workers Kayla Mueller and Peter Kassig. Kotev and Elsheikh have admitted their involvement in the kidnapping, sexual assault and death of Mueller in 2015.

The press conference also comes amid great speculation in the work of the DOJ, including Connecticut U.S. Attorney John Durham's probe of the Russia investigation's origins and the president's open frustration with FBI Director Chris Wray. Fox News has learned from a source close to Wray that the director has no plans to step down today or any time soon.

Attorney General Bill Barr, who self-quarantined for several days amid a coronavirus outbreak that has affected officials including President Trump, is not expected to be present for the press conference. Those announced to be participating are Wray, Assistant Attorney General John C. Demers of the National Security Division, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia G. Zachary Terwilliger and Acting Assistant Director in Charge of the FBI Washington Field Office James A. Dawson.

British ISIS suspects known as the Beatles charged for the deaths of 2 American journalists, 2 aid workers (USA Today)

USA Today [10/7/2020 1:30 PM, Kristine Phillips and Kevin Johnson, Neutral]

Two British ISIS militants known as the Beatles are facing terrorism charges for the deaths of several hostages, including four Americans, the Justice Department announced Wednesday.

Officials said Alexandra Amon Kotev and El Shafee Elsheikh, whom captives had referred to as the Beatles because of their British accents, and two other co-conspirators were involved in the kidnapping, torturing and killing of American, European and Japanese hostages from 2012 to 2016. The two are now in FBI custody in the United States and are set to appear Wednesday in federal court in Alexandria, Va., just outside of Washington, D.C.

The two men grew up in the United Kingdom, where they became radicalized, authorities

said. They left London in 2012 and traveled to Syria to join ISIS.

"Today's announcement is a reminder of the threat that we continue to face from radical Islamic terrorists," Assistant Attorney General for National Security John Demers said. "These terrorists despise the freedoms and way of life we cherish as Americans and are hell-bent to impose their ideologies on a world that continues to reject them."

The other co-conspirators were Mohammed Emwazi, also known as Jihadi John, who was killed during an air strike in 2015, and an unnamed British citizen who is incarcerated in Turkey.

Among the American victims were print and video journalist James Foley, who was covering the war in Syria when he was captured; Steven Sotloff, a journalist who covered the Middle East and was reporting on the refugee crisis in Syria; Peter Kassig, a humanitarian aid worker; and Kayla Mueller, also a humanitarian worker.

ISIS's media center released videos in 2014 showing the beheadings of Foley, Sotloff and Kassig.

Mueller was sexually abused by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the former ISIS leader who was killed during a U.S.-led raid in Syria in 2019. Authorities said Mueller's family received an email from ISIS fighters in 2015 confirming her death.

Kotey and Elsheikh, who were captured in 2018, had admitted to their roles in ransom negotiations for the hostages but denied allegations that they tortured and murdered the captives. Kotey admitted extracting "proof of life" information and email address from European hostages so ISIS could contact family members with ransom demands. Elsheikh said he was a liaison between the prisoners and the ISIS officials who handled the negotiations.

According to an indictment unsealed Wednesday, Kotey, Elsheikh and Emwazi supervised detention facilities where the captives were held and were involved in torturing the victims. Zachary Terwilliger, U.S. attorney in the Eastern District of Virginia, said Kotey and Elsheikh coordinated ransom negotiations.

They also allegedly forced European hostages to witness the execution of a Syrian prisoner. Kotey told the captives to kneel at the side of the grave as they held signs pleading for their release, authorities said. Emwazi shot the prisoner, while Elsheikh videotaped the death.

Elsheikh then told one of the European hostages, "You're next," according to the indictment.

Kotey and Elsheikh were charged with hostage taking resulting in death and other conspiracy charges. They face life imprisonment if convicted.

"The families of the victims have suffered the painful loss of their loved ones at the hands of brutal killers," FBI Director Christopher Wray said. "While their pain may never subside, today, with the announcement of this indictment, we're beginning to bring them the justice they deserve."

The Justice Department decided not to pursue the death penalty against the men because it needed evidence held by the United Kingdom to prosecute Kotey and Elsheikh, Attorney General William Barr said in a letter to Britain's Home Secretary Priti Patel in August.

Britain has traditionally sought assurances that the death penalty would not be sought as a condition of cooperation in cases involving other governments.

2 ISIS fighters charged for killing U.S. and British hostages (Axios)

Axios [10/7/2020 11:47 AM, Orion Rummler, Neutral]

Two ISIS fighters believed to be responsible for the 2014 execution of American journalist James Foley and other U.S. and British hostages face eight felony offenses in an indictment unveiled by the Justice Department on Wednesday, including conspiracy to murder U.S. citizens outside of the country.

The defendants are being flown to the U.S. and are expected to make their first appearance in Alexandria, Virginia, on Wednesday, Zach Terwilliger, the United States attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, said on Wednesday.

Alexanda Kotey and El Shafee Elsheikh, two of four British militants in an ISIS cell also known as "The Beatles," face a maximum sentence of life in prison for each felony count.

They are charged with: Conspiracy committee hostage taking resulting in death, hostage taking resulting in death — one count per hostage — conspiracy to murder U.S. citizens outside of the country, conspiracy to provide material support to terrorists in the form of murder and hostage taking, and providing support to a terror organization.

Kotey and Elsheikh both grew up in the U.K., where they were radicalized before joining a hostage-taking scheme that allegedly took American, European and Asian citizens from approximately 2012 to 2015, Terwilliger said, citing the DOJ's indictment.

American citizens, and others allegedly taken by the ISIS cell, were reportedly subjected to mock executions, shocks by electric taser and beatings, and they were forced to witness murder, Terwilliger said, including beheadings that were released on the internet. One U.S. citizen, Kayla Mueller, was allegedly sexually assaulted while taken hostage, he said.

The Justice Department is not pursuing the death penalty, officials said at Wednesday's press conference.

"James, Peter, Kayla and Steven were kidnapped, tortured, beaten, starved, and murdered by members of the Islamic State in Syria. Now our families can pursue accountability for these crimes against our children in a U.S. court," the families of Foley, Peter Kassig, Mueller and Steven Sotloff said in a press release through the James W. Foley Legacy Foundation.

Hacker who helped Islamic State to remain in U.S. prison (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 9:17 AM, Staff, Neutral]

A computer hacker who gave the Islamic State group personal data of more than 1,300 U.S.

government and military personnel will remain in a federal prison after a judge rejected his request for compassionate release.

Ardit Ferizi, 24, is serving a 20-year sentence. The native of Kosovo is the first person convicted in the U.S. of both computer hacking and terrorism charges. He is currently held at a federal prison in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, and is scheduled for release in 2032 if he gets credit for good behavior.

Ferizi asked a federal judge in Alexandria to release him from prison. In a handwritten motion from prison, he said his asthma and obesity place him at greater risk of contracting COVID-19. He also said special restrictions at the prison require him to check in with staff every two hours, increasing his contact with guards and his risk of contracting the virus.

Prosecutors opposed his release, and U.S. District Judge Leonie Brinkema rejected Ferizi's request at a hearing Tuesday, citing concerns that he might resume hacking if released, among other issues.

Near East & North Africa

Senior Saudi Royal Turns Up Heat on 'Failed' Palestinian Leaders (Bloomberg)

[Bloomberg](#) [10/7/2020 2:00 PM, Vivian Nereim, Neutral]

A senior Saudi prince accused the Palestinian leadership of squandering decades of opportunities to make peace with Israel, a once-unthinkable tongue-lashing that dramatizes how strained relations have become as the kingdom softens its traditional hostility toward the majority-Jewish state.

Prince Bandar bin Sultan also accused the Palestinians of cozying up to two of Saudi Arabia's present-day foes – Iran and Turkey.

The prince, a former ambassador to the U.S., called the Palestinian leaders "failures" during a televised interview spread over three evenings on Saudi channel Al-Arabiya TV. He also criticized them for accusing Gulf countries of betrayal after the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain agreed to establish ties with Israel last month.

"The ingratitude or lack of loyalty that we've seen" won't lessen the kingdom's support for the Palestinian people, the prince said in the last segment broadcast on Wednesday. But as for their leaders, "it's difficult for you to trust them or think you can do something to serve Palestine with them around."

The interview made Prince Bandar the most prominent Saudi figure to so strongly criticize the Palestinian leadership, though such rhetoric has grown increasingly common in the kingdom. Last month, Saudi newspaper columnists praised the regional deals with Israel, a notable departure from decades of demonizing the country. A shared distrust of Iran is a foundation of those pacts.

Saudi Arabia isn't likely to establish its own ties with Israel imminently, but as nationalist sentiment rises, some Saudis say they no longer feel an affinity for the "Palestinian cause," a touchstone in the Arab world for decades.

"All what we've kept hearing about is the Palestinian cause, support the Palestinian cause, and nothing ever happened," said Fahad Abdulrahman, a 41-year-old businessman. "On the contrary, this issue has caused economic and political damage to us."

There has been no official Palestinian reaction. Saeb Erekat, the secretary-general of the Palestine Liberation Organization, said he'd reserve comment until all three segments have been aired.

Saudi Arabia has historically been a chief champion and benefactor of the Palestinian cause. In 2002, it authored a regional peace initiative that called for the establishment of a Palestinian state within boundaries the Palestinian leadership sought. Normalization of Arab states' ties with Israel should come as part of a resolution of that conflict, and not an antecedent, according to the blueprint.

Yet over the past decade, the Palestinians have watched their cause get shunted to the sidelines as the region descended into the upheaval of the Arab Spring and the bloody conflicts in places like Syria, Libya and Yemen that followed. The centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Middle East strife was further diminished by Gulf Arab states' fear of Iran's growing influence and nuclear ambitions.

In the meantime, more than a quarter-century of on-again, off-again negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians went nowhere. Most recently, the Palestinians have rejected the Trump administration's Middle East peace plan, which favors Israel's demands, as a bad-faith proposal.

During the interview, Prince Bandar shared tales of his efforts to help resolve the conflict, describing what he viewed as numerous lost chances for breakthroughs. He also accused Palestinian leaders of turning away from their traditional allies and shifting closer to Saudi Arabia's regional rivals.

Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, in the West Bank city of Ramallah, dismissed the notion that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas could make Turkey, Qatar and Iran his main allies. Doing so, Shikaki reasoned, would go against Abbas's commitment to a two-state solution reached with the help of American and European partners.

"He can't go all the way with the Turks and the Qataris, and definitely he can't touch Iran at all. And at the same time he can't keep his allies, he's lost them," Shikaki said. "What they have done is indeed a vote of no confidence in him."

Saudi Arabia must focus on own interests, national security while serving Palestinian cause: Prince Bandar (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 5:06 PM, Marwa Rashad, Neutral]

Saudi Arabia's former intelligence chief and ambassador to the United States, Prince Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz, said the kingdom must focus on its own interests and security while supporting the Palestinian cause.

In the final episode of a three-part interview with Saudi-owned Al Arabiya television aired on Wednesday, Prince Bandar once again criticised Palestinian leaders.

"We are at a stage in which rather than being concerned with how to face the Israeli challenges in order to serve the Palestinian cause, we have to pay attention to our national security and interests," he said.

Prince Bandar previously in the interview criticised the Palestinian leadership for their "transgression" and "reprehensible discourse," in opposing the decision of some Gulf states to normalise ties with Israel.

The United Arab Emirates agreed a historic deal to normalise relations with Israel in August, and the Gulf state of Bahrain, a close Saudi ally, followed suit in September. Palestinian leaders regarded the deal as "betrayal."

Palestinians fear the moves will weaken a long-standing pan-Arab position – known as the Arab Peace Initiative – that calls for Israeli withdrawal from occupied territory and acceptance of Palestinian statehood in return for normal relations with Arab states.

The deals are seen as a strategic realignment of Middle East countries against Iran. Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam, has not directly commented on the normalisation deals, but has said it remains committed to peace on the basis of the Arab Peace Initiative.

Prince Bandar said Palestinian leaders had high regard for "new players into the picture" such as Iran and Turkey, than Riyadh and other Gulf countries.

"Turkey occupies Libya and wants to liberate Jerusalem by withdrawing its ambassador from Abu Dhabi. Iran wants to liberate Jerusalem through the Houthis in Yemen or through Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria," he said.

He spoke at length about the decades-long support of successive Saudi kings and other Gulf countries to the Palestinian cause, adding that the denial of these efforts from Palestinian leaders will not affect the attachment to the cause.

"Things are clear and we are at our limit with those guys," he said.

[Egypt] Egypt frees journalist detained while covering Luxor unrest (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 5:38 AM, Samy Magdy, Neutral]

Egyptian authorities have released a local journalist detained over the weekend in the southern city of Luxor where she was covering the alleged killing of a man during a police raid, her lawyer said Wednesday.

Basma Mostafa walked free late Tuesday from a police station in Cairo, a day after prosecutors ordered her release pending an investigation into accusations that she disseminated false news through social media, said rights lawyer Karim Abdel-Rady, who is also Mostafa's husband.

The 30-year-old mother of two was in Luxor on Saturday morning to cover unrest in the

village of el-Awamiya, following the death of a man allegedly at the hands of police last week, according to Amnesty International.

Mostafa's employer, the al-Manassa news website, lost contact with her. She appeared on Sunday at the headquarters of Egypt's state security prosecution in the capital, Cairo, where prosecutors interrogated her and ordered her to remain in custody for 15 days, according to Abdel-Rady.

Public Prosecutor Hamada el-Sawy ordered her release on Monday pending investigation into accusations of using social media to "disseminate fake news aiming at disturbing public security and peace." Mostafa denied the accusations, saying that she was doing her work as a journalist.

Also Wednesday, prosecutors said they had ordered the arrest of the Luxor man, Eiwis el-Rawy, along with several relatives, for interrogation on terror-related charges. They were subsequently notified that el-Rawy had died resisting arrest by police sent to his home.

The prosecutors' statement also said el-Rawy's father had denied reports that an officer slapped him and that his son then came to his defense, only to have the officer beat him to death.

The statement was the first official comment from authorities on the man's death, which had stirred up controversy over the past week.

Mostafa had also recently reported on the death of a young man while in police detention in Cairo in September, and an alleged 2014 gang rape of a 17-year-old girl that surfaced recently and shocked the conservative Egyptian society.

Several media watchdogs decried Mostafa's detention as the latest in a widening government crackdown on dissent and media.

In recent years, Egypt has imprisoned dozens of reporters and occasionally expelled some foreign journalists. It remains among the world's worst jailers of journalists, along with Turkey and China, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

More than 60 journalists are behind bars in Egypt's overcrowded prisons, according to the International Press Institute. Ravi R. Prasad, the institute's director of advocacy, said Mostafa's detention was an "extremely outrageous and a crude attempt to not only silence her but also her husband," a respected human rights lawyer.

Since the beginning of September, authorities in Egypt have arrested five journalists, including Mostafa, said Mahmoud Kamel, a board member of Egypt's Journalists' Union.

[Iran] With 239 deaths, Iran hits its highest daily COVID-19 toll (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 7:24 AM, Nasser Karimi, 2164K, Negative]

Iranian state TV said the country has hit its highest number of daily deaths from the coronavirus, with 239 new fatalities reported on Wednesday.

The report quoted the spokesperson of the country's health ministry, Sima Sadat Lari, as saying that the 239 died since Tuesday. Iran has in the past had 235 daily deaths.

The latest death toll brought the total number of fatalities to 27,658. The ministry spokesperson said healthcare professionals recorded 4,019 new confirmed cases since Tuesday, bringing the total number of confirmed cases in Iran to 483,844.

Lari said 4,274 patients are in critical conditions and that 397,109 have recovered so far. The Islamic Republic has been struggling with both the region's largest outbreak and the highest number of fatalities in the Middle East.

Authorities have blamed the high death toll on rampant disregard of health measures by people, especially those traveling between cities and large gatherings at ceremonies, though they have closed many public places such as cafes and gyms.

Health officials said some 50% of the fatalities have been recorded in the capital, Tehran, with a population of 10 million.

Iran also suffered the region's first major outbreak, with top politicians, health officials and religious leaders in its Shiite theocracy stricken with the virus. It has since struggled to contain the spread of the virus across this nation of 80 million people, initially beating it back only to see a spike in cases again, beginning in June.

The first coronavirus cases and deaths were reported in Iran on the same day in February — the Mideast's first outbreak of the virus — yet it only saw its highest single-day spike in reported cases in June. The highest daily death toll was reported in July.

In February, authorities for days denied the virus had reached the country, allowing the virus time to spread as the nation marked the 41st anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution with mass demonstrations and then held a parliamentary election in which authorities desperately sought to boost turnout.

[Iran] Iran Boosts Export of Illicit Oil, Watchdog Says (Washington Free Beacon)
Washington Free Beacon [10/7/2020 2:40 PM, Adam Kredo, Neutral]

Iran significantly increased its illicit export of heavily sanctioned crude oil, busting through tough U.S. sanctions meant to halt the regime's access to hard currency, according to a watchdog group.

Iranian oil exports peaked at 1.2 million barrels per day in September, a significant increase from the 70,000 barrels per day it was exporting in April, according to United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), an advocacy group tracking Tehran's efforts to bust U.S. sanctions on its crude oil trade.

New satellite images show the National Iranian Tanker Company, the regime's heavily sanctioned oil fleet, engaged in ship-to-ship transfers of crude in the middle of the Persian Gulf. By offloading supplies in the ocean, Iran can obscure the origin of its crude oil and avoid detection by international observers, according to UANI, which released photographic evidence detailing Iran's actions on Wednesday.

Oil is a key source of income for the Iranian regime, which has seen its access to hard currency dry up under the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. The Washington Free Beacon first reported in August about a significant uptick in the number of Iranian "ghost ships" navigating across the region. This, too, is part of Iran's efforts to hide ships from the international community and continue raking in profits from the sale of crude oil.

"This month should serve as a warning to the U.S. Administration: Iran is clearly capable of continuing to export in large quantities despite tightening sanctions enforcement," UANI said in a report on its findings.

UANI discovered from satellite imagery that more than one-third of Iran's oil exports were conducted via ship-to-ship transfers around the country's coastline. At least 20 foreign vessels participated in these transfers with Iran, in direct violation of U.S. sanctions.

In early September, for instance, UANI tracked an Iranian tanker's interaction with a Gabon-flagged ship. The countries allegedly exchanged crude supplies, prompting UANI to lodge a formal complaint with the Gabonese maritime authority. This resulted in Gabon removing its flag from the ship in question.

Other transfers have taken place with vessels showing flags from Saint Kitts and Nevis and Panama.

Venezuela "is also continuing to prove a significant and openly defiant destination for Iranian exports," according to UANI. At least two million barrels of Iranian crude reached Venezuela in mid-September, underscoring the increasingly close relationship between Tehran and dictator Nicolas Maduro.

[Israel] Israeli PM's wife may have violated lockdown with haircut (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 4:57 AM, Joseph Krauss, 2164K, Neutral]

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's wife may have violated the country's coronavirus lockdown by inviting a hairdresser into the official residence last week to prepare her for a public service video advocating the wearing of masks.

The incident, first reported by the Yediot Ahronot daily, was the latest in a string of lockdown violations by Israeli leaders and public figures — drawing widespread criticism that they are undermining public trust in the government.

Yediot reported that Sara Netanyahu had a hairdresser visit on the eve of the festive Sukkot holiday. Hair salons and barber shops are closed as part of a nationwide lockdown imposed last month, and people have been ordered to remain within 1,000 meters (yards) of home except for essential activities.

The Netanyahus have long been criticized for enjoying a lavish lifestyle out of the reach of most Israelis. In past cases, Sara Netanyahu was fined thousands of dollars for using public money for her own extravagant tastes and for allegedly abusive behavior toward her personal staff.

An official statement released in response to the news report said Sara Netanyahu was strictly abiding by all the coronavirus regulations, including sheltering at home and enforcing the wearing of masks at the official residence.

As a public figure making an informational video, she believed she was entitled to employ the services of the hairstylist, the statement said. It added that they both wore masks and gloves during the appointment and that she asked the stylist to refrain from making conversation.

The newspaper said that while the prime minister is entitled to such services as a public servant, his wife is not. An ordinary Israeli would pay a 500-shekel (\$150) fine for violating the restriction.

The prime minister has been the target of mass demonstrations in recent months, with protesters calling on him to step down while he is on trial for corruption and criticizing his response to the coronavirus.

Israelis have also expressed anger about a number of recent instances in which senior officials and their family members violated lockdown orders. Netanyahu and the figurehead president, Reuven Rivlin, have both acknowledged improperly hosting relatives during the Passover holiday last spring.

A Cabinet minister from Netanyahu's Likud Party, Gila Gamliel, sparked uproar this week when it was discovered that she improperly traveled to the northern city of Tiberias for the Yom Kippur holy day last week and contracted the coronavirus. Israeli media have said she also lied to contact tracing investigators about her whereabouts.

In June 2019, a court ordered Sara Netanyahu to pay a fine of more than \$15,000 for misusing state funds after she was accused of misusing some \$100,000 in state money on lavish meals. In 2016, a court ruled that she had mistreated a housecleaner and awarded the man \$42,000 in damages. Other employees have also accused her of abuse.

The Netanyahus have rejected all the allegations against them. Both say they have been the target of a "witch hunt" by hostile media and law enforcement.

[Jordan] Jordan's King Abdullah appoints palace aide Bisher al Khasawneh PM (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 2:55 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Jordan's King Abdullah appointed veteran diplomat and palace aide Bisher al Khasawneh as the new prime minister only days after accepting the resignation of Omar al-Razzaz, the royal palace said.

The monarch earlier dissolved parliament at the end of its four-year term in a move that under constitutional rules meant the government had to resign within a week.

[Kuwait] Kuwaiti National Guard figure picked as next crown prince (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 11:14 AM, Isabel Debre, Neutral]

Kuwait's deputy chief of the National Guard, who spent years in the oil-rich country's security services, was nominated as crown prince on Wednesday, the Kuwaiti state news agency reported, a cautious selection at a turbulent time for Kuwait's politics and the wider region.

The nomination makes Sheikh Meshal Al Ahmed Al Jaber Al Sabah the possible heir apparent to the new emir, 83-year-old Sheikh Nawaf Al Ahmad Al Sabah, who was propelled to power following the death of his half-brother.

Although Sheikh Nawaf had a full year to choose a successor, he picked Sheikh Meshal in a record-breaking eight days, ending frenzied speculation that has gripped Kuwaiti social media.

Before Sheikh Meshal can be officially named crown prince, lawmakers must approve the choice during their final session on Thursday, ahead of the formation of a new government — a rare vote for the region's Arab monarchies in which the question of succession is typically decided behind palace doors.

Following the session, Kuwait's parliament will dissolve itself ahead of elections tentatively set for late November.

At age 80, the low-profile Sheikh Meshal, another half-brother of the late Sheikh Sabah Al Ahmad Al Sabah, strengthens the royal family's traditional ranks and is widely seen as a conventional and safe choice. While his health status remains unclear, he recently underwent a kidney transplant, according to a Washington Institute for Near-East Policy article from May 2018.

Given his career building up the interior ministry for over a decade, very little is known about his policy preferences. Unlike other top contenders for the post, he has steered clear of the country's tumultuous politics and the royal family's public feuds over corruption allegations.

Bader al-Saif, an assistant professor of history at Kuwait University, described the British-educated minister as a rare senior member of the royal family and political old guard who remains untainted by the country's corruption scandals.

"He's an insider and an outsider at the same time," said al-Saif, noting that the country's National Guard remains a respected institution above the political fray. "The unchecked corruption requires introducing a name that is fresh, and has no associations."

Even so, Sheikh Meshal is no newcomer to Kuwaiti government. He was a close confidant of Sheikh Sabah throughout his tenure, accompanying him on official diplomatic visits as well as to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, where the emir received medical treatment after surgery and later died.

His selection delays any generational change in Kuwait, reinforcing the contrast with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, now in effect led by ambitious young princes. Under the late Sheikh Sabah, who commanded great respect as a seasoned diplomat in a region divided along political and sectarian lines, Kuwait managed to pursue independent foreign

policies despite the pressures of more belligerent regional heavyweights.

"Change will happen in an orderly, gradual way," said al-Saif. "This is the Kuwaiti way."

The choice of Sheikh Meshal is also a sign that Kuwait will look inward in the years ahead. A worsening coronavirus outbreak, escalating tensions between the parliament and Cabinet and plunging oil prices have sharpened attention on Kuwait's domestic grievances. Parliamentary gridlock has blocked the passage of a public debt law needed to raise \$65 billion and mitigate the country's looming liquidity crisis, and calls are growing for political reform.

Also Wednesday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan arrived in Kuwait City, becoming the the latest political figure to pay his respects to Sheikh Sabah, following visits from Saudi, Emirati, Qatari and other Arab officials. Erdogan's meeting with the new ruling emir further underscores the late Sheikh Sabah's ability to navigate between regional political rivalries, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pitted against Iran and Qatar.

Erdogan later headed to Qatar, where he met with its ruling emir. Turkey has backed the tiny Gulf state in the face of a years-long blockade by its neighbors over its support for Islamists. Ankara and Doha are also on the same side in Libya's spiraling proxy war, backing the U.N.-supported government in Tripoli.

[Kuwait] Kuwait names Sheikh Meshal as new crown prince – KUNA (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 4:50 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Kuwait's new ruler Emir Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah on Wednesday named Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah as crown prince of the U.S.-allied OPEC member state, state news agency KUNA said, citing a statement from his office.

Sheikh Meshal is deputy chief of the National Guard and a brother of the late emir who died last Tuesday.

The Gulf Arab state's parliament must approve the choice.

[Lebanon] Lebanese president to hold consultations on new PM next week (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 4:25 AM, Bassem Mroue, Neutral]

Lebanon's President Michel Aoun has called for binding consultations with members of parliament next week to name a new prime minister, his office said Wednesday.

The announcement comes two weeks after the latest prime minister-designate resigned amid a political impasse over the formation of a new government. Mustafa Adib's resignation on Sept. 26, dealt a blow to French President Emmanuel Macron's efforts to break a dangerous stalemate in this crisis-hit Mideast country. The consultations are set for Oct. 15.

Adib's resignation nearly a month after he was appointed to the job came at a time when Lebanon is going through a severe economic and financial crisis, made worse by the spread of the coronavirus, and desperately needs international assistance. The crisis has

been amplified by the devastating explosion in Beirut's port in August that killed 194 people, wounded about 6,500 and caused billions of dollars in damage.

After Adib's resignation, Macron accused Lebanon's political class of "collective betrayal" and choosing "to favor their partisan and individual interests to the general detriment of the country."

Lebanon's two main Shiite parties — the militant Hezbollah and its ally Amal led by parliamentary Speaker Nabih Berri — had insisted on retaining the finance ministry in the new government and on naming all the Shiite Cabinet ministers. Adib, Lebanon's ambassador to Germany, rejected those conditions and stepped down.

Macron has been pressing Lebanese politicians to form a Cabinet made up of non-partisan specialists that can work on urgent reforms to extract Lebanon from the financial crisis. Macron has traveled twice to Beirut since the Beirut port explosion and has made it a personal mission to try to repair the damaged country, raising resentment from some who see it as a neo-colonial foray.

Outgoing Prime Minister Hassan Diab resigned six days after the Beirut blast on Aug. 4, when nearly 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrates, a highly explosive chemical used in fertilizers, exploded at Beirut's port. The material had been stored at the facility for six years.

What ignited the nitrates remains unknown. More than two dozen people, mostly port and customs officials, have been detained so far. The judge in charge of the investigation has questioned top security officials, former Cabinet ministers and port employees.

It was not clear if Lebanon's political groups have agreed on the future premier but former Prime Minister Najib Mikati has reportedly put forward a proposal for a 20-member Cabinet consisting of 14 experts and six politicians.

The international community has said it will not help Lebanon financially before wide reforms in the tiny country are implemented to fight widespread corruption and mismanagement.

[Lebanon] France to hold aid conference for Lebanon in November: minister (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 9:47 AM, Staff, Neutral]

France will hold a humanitarian aid conference for Lebanon in November, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on Wednesday.

The conference was initially planned for the end of October.

Le Drian also told the French National Assembly that the Lebanon international contact group would meet in the coming days to reiterate the need for the formation of a government.

[Libya] Cash shortage adds to weary Eastern Libyans' woes (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:34 AM, Ayman al-Warfali, Neutral]

When Jamal al-Fallah tried to withdraw money from his bank in Benghazi, he was told no cash was available, the result of financial problems in eastern Libya aggravating a cash shortage that has hit the whole country.

With debts of tens of billions of dollars, and local banks suffering, according to the parallel central bank set up by authorities in Benghazi, eastern Libya faces a looming crisis.

Waiting outside Wahda bank with a few other people, Fallah said he had only turned up because it had recently said there would be money available.

"When we go to the bank they say there's no liquidity," said Fallah, adding that he manages to pay his daily bills by borrowing cash from the owner of a supermarket.

He did not receive any cash until a week later – his first receipt of his salary in months – and within an hour had paid most of it to his landlord, he said later by phone.

Once one of the richest countries in Africa thanks to oil exports, Libya has crumbled since its 2011 uprising, divided between rival governments in east and west, including institutions such as the central bank.

As the war between the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) in the west and Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) in the east has intensified in recent years, the economic problems have also grown.

The tough living conditions – including power cuts and fuel shortages – have prompted protests in both western and eastern Libya in recent weeks, adding to the political pressures faced by both sides in the conflict.

A blockade of oil exports by the LNA since January was lifted last month and revenue is gradually starting to flow back into the country, but it cost Libya more than \$10 billion in lost income.

Oil receipts are paid into the Tripoli-based Central Bank of Libya, which then pays salaries of most state employees across front lines including in areas held by the LNA.

The eastern central bank has financed Haftar's war effort. It has raised money by selling treasury bonds to local banks which the central bank's head of liquidity Ramzi Alagha said could exceed 40 billion dinars (\$29 billion) so far.

It has also been importing dinars printed in Russia.

Tripoli cut off the breakaway eastern central bank from most clearing operations in 2014, adding to the problems facing commercial banks as two parallel financial systems emerged.

Some people in the east try to change to bank rivals to ensure continued access to salary payments.

People often use cheques instead of cash, but these sometimes bounce as banks try to

control their own cashflows. One man who tried to buy land worth 30,000 dinars was told by the bank he would have to make three separate payments over a longer time instead of paying it all at once.

Cheques in dollars can also be exchanged in eastern Libya for different values depending on which bank has issued them.

"We got to the point where banks are unable to provide funds, and this reflects on the prices of goods where there are shortages," said Asam al-Abairish, head of the payments department at the eastern central bank.

Both the western and eastern central banks are now subject to an international audit under the United Nations-led political process to resolve the conflict, with the eventual aim of reunifying Libya's institutions.

[Libya] Officials: Nigerian migrant burned alive in Libya's Tripoli (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 1:28 PM, Samy Magdy, Negative]

A migrant worker was burned to death in the Libyan capital, U.N. and government officials said Wednesday, the latest in abuses that migrants and refugees face in the conflict-stricken country.

The Interior Ministry of the U.N.-supported government said three Libyans on Tuesday stormed a factory in the Tripoli neighborhood of Tajoura, where African migrants were working. The Libyans detained one of the workers, a Nigerian, poured gasoline on him and set him on fire, the ministry said in a statement. No motive for the shocking crime was given.

Three other migrants suffered burns and were being treated in a nearby hospital, the ministry said. The alleged perpetrators, all in their 30s, were arrested and referred to prosecutors for investigation, it said.

"The young man was burned alive, in yet again another senseless crime against migrants in the country," tweeted Federico Soda, the chief in Libya for the International Organization for Migration.

The migrant's death underscores the perils that migrants face in Libya, which has emerged as a major transit point for African and Arab migrants fleeing war and poverty to Europe amid years-long chaos following the 2011 uprising that toppled and killed longtime dictator Moammar Gadhafi.

In 2017, CNN aired a video of a slave auction in Libya where migrant Africans were "sold like goats," causing global outrage, and led the U.N. Security Council to hold an emergency meeting to condemn "heinous abuses of human rights."

In May, the family of a slain Libyan human trafficker attacked a group of migrants in the desert town of Mizdah, shooting and killing at least 30 migrants, mostly from Bangladesh, according to the U.N. migration agency.

In July, Libyan authorities shot dead three Sudanese migrants in the western coastal town

of Khoms. The migrants were reportedly trying to escape after they were intercepted by the Libyan coast guard in the Mediterranean Sea and returned to shore.

So far in 2020, the U.N. migration agency has reported around 200 deaths of migrants in Libya and at least 275 missing in the Mediterranean Sea. Around 9,500 were returned to Libya this year, compared to 9,225 in 2019. The bodies of 11 migrants washed up on Libyan shores between Sep. 28 and Oct. 5, it said Tuesday.

Migrants typically pass through Libya on their way to Europe, departing from Tripoli's rocky coastline in inflatable dinghies.

The Libyan coast guard, trained by the European Union to keep migrants from reaching European shores, intercepts boats at sea and returns them to Libya.

Rights groups say those efforts have left migrants at the mercy of brutal armed groups or confined in squalid and overcrowded detention centers that lack adequate food and water.

The EU agreed earlier this year to end an anti-migrant smuggler operation involving only surveillance aircraft and instead deploy military ships to concentrate on upholding a widely flouted U.N. arms embargo that's considered key to winding down Libya's relentless war.

[Libya] Libya says it detains men suspected of burning Nigerian to death (Reuters)
Reuters [10/7/2020 11:15 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Three Libyans killed a Nigerian man by setting him on fire in Tripoli, the interior ministry said on Wednesday, in what a U.N. agency described as "another senseless crime against migrants in the country".

The Tripoli-based interior ministry said in a statement it had arrested the three suspects in the case, adding that they had used petrol to set the victim on fire at a factory.

Federico Soda, Libya country chief for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), a U.N. migration agency, said those responsible must be held accountable.

There are half a million migrants in Libya according to IOM, some of them having worked in the oil producing country before it descended into chaos and warfare, others attempting to travel through it to Europe.

The IOM and the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR have both repeatedly said that Libya should not be classified as a safe port for migrants.

Thousands have attempted the perilous sea crossing to Europe this year, with hundreds drowned in ship wrecks.

In July, three migrants from Sudan were shot dead by Libyan authorities while trying to flee detention after they were disembarked in Khums.

In May, some 30 mostly Bangladeshi migrants were shot dead in a southern desert town

after being abducted by a local gang, Bangladesh and the Libyan interior ministry said at the time.

[Tunisia] Tunisia considers curfew to slow second wave of pandemic (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 12:55 PM, Tarek Amara, Neutral]

Tunisia was expected on Wednesday to announce a curfew in the capital after the governors of four provinces that make up greater Tunis called for action to halt a surge in coronavirus infections.

"The decision has come too late but it will help us break the rise in cases," said Imed Souissi, a fruit seller.

The governors proposed measures that would include a curfew between 8:00 pm and 5:00 am and a suspension of Friday prayers in mosques. A government decision was expected later on Wednesday, with the curfew likely to take effect from Thursday.

Tunisia entirely shut down its economy in March and closed its borders, limiting the spread of coronavirus to a few hundred confirmed cases. But it has now racked up more than 20,000 cases over the past month, with only 200 intensive care beds designated for COVID-19 available in the whole country.

Elyes Fakhfakh, who stepped down as prime minister last month after denying allegations of a business conflict of interest, has announced he has tested positive, as has the leader of a major party, Abir Moussi.

Many Tunisians say the authorities should have done more to prepare with the time secured by the economic hardship of the lockdown.

"The Tunisian political class lost its opportunity to be ready for a second wave. What did they do to prepare over the past months? Nothing. They were just focused on their usual disputes," said Chaker ben Hussein, a baker in the Iben Khaldoun district of the capital.

Even before the pandemic, Tunisia was grappling to reverse a decade of sluggish growth, high unemployment, declining public services and concerning levels of sovereign debt.

The economy contracted by 21% in the second quarter as unemployment rose by 3 points to 18%, with expectations it will exceed 20% by the end of the year. The government has said the crisis has cost it 6 billion dinars (\$2.2 billion) so far.

A political crisis has rumbled since an election last year, with the fragmented parliament taking months to produce a government in January that lasted just eight months.

The new government, also seen as fragile, has said another lockdown is impossible. The new prime minister, Hichem Mechichi, sacked the culture minister within weeks of taking office for rejecting government coronavirus restrictions for public events.

[Yemen] Yemeni officials say clashes continue in Hodeida, 52 killed (AP)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 1:34 PM, Ahmed Al-Haj, Neutral]

Fierce clashes in Yemen's strategic port city of Hodeida between government forces and Houthi rebels continued for the fifth straight day Wednesday, leaving 52 people dead, including civilians, Yemeni officials said.

The fighting has raged in the district of Hays and town of Durayhimi, just south of the strategic Hodeida port, which handles about 70% of Yemen's commercial and humanitarian imports, the officials said.

The clashes marked the heaviest bout of violence in months between forces of President Abed-Rabu Mansour Hadi's government and the Iranian-backed Houthis in the contested city, they said.

Around 70 people, including over two dozen civilians, were also wounded, they said.

The officials, who are from both sides, said the Houthi rebels have attempted to break a siege on Durayhimi, laid by government-allied force known as the Giants Bridges for over two years.

The U.N. mission to Yemen on Monday voiced alarm over the recent escalation of violence in Hodeida. It urged the warring sides to "immediately stop the fighting and return to the joint mechanisms established over the last two years so as not to put the population at further risk and jeopardize the delivery of humanitarian assistance."

In 2018, heavy fighting erupted in Hodeida after government forces backed by the Saudi-led coalition moved in to wrest control of the strategic city from the Houthis.

After month of clashes, the warring sides signed a U.N.-brokered agreement in December that year that included a cease-fire in the port city and an exchange of more than 15,000 prisoners. The deal, seen as an important first step toward ending the conflict, was never fully implemented.

In oil-rich Marib province, officials said Wednesday that government forces reclaimed areas from the Houthis south of the province. The rebels have for months sought to take control of the province to strengthen their position in ongoing U.N.-mediated peace talks. Government forces also managed to push rebels out of areas in neighboring Jawf province, they said.

At least 28 people from both sides were killed and over 47 were wounded in Marib and Jawf in the past 24 hours, they said.

The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to brief the media.

The Saudi-led coalition launched airstrikes on the Houthi reinforcement in Jawf, leaving several rebels dead and military equipment damaged, according to Abdu Abdullah Magli, a spokesman for the Yemeni Armed Forces.

The conflict in Yemen began with the 2014 takeover of the capital Sanaa by the Iranian-backed Houthis. A Saudi-led coalition allied with the government has been fighting the

Houthis since March 2015.

The war in Yemen has spawned the world's worst humanitarian crisis, leaving millions suffering from food and medical shortages. It has killed over 112,000 people, including fighters and civilians, according to a database project that tracks violence.

Europe and Eurasia

France, Russia Call Azerbaijan, Armenia to Talks to End Fighting (Bloomberg) Bloomberg [10/7/2020 1:06 PM, Rudy Rutenberg and Sara Khojyan, Neutral]

France and Russia are to press Azerbaijan and Armenia to halt the worst fighting in decades over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh, as Iran warned the warring sides not to let the conflict spill across its border.

Talks will take place in Geneva on Thursday and in Moscow on Oct. 12 to try to restore a cease-fire, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told lawmakers in Paris Wednesday.

Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov will attend the talks in Geneva, his office said Wednesday. Armenia said Foreign Minister Zohrab Mnatsakanyan will meet with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Moscow on Monday but won't go to Geneva. Russia's Foreign Ministry confirmed the visit, the state-run Tass news service reported.

Azerbaijan "started the conflict, for a relatively small territorial gain," and it's in everyone's interest to restore a cease-fire and have negotiations without preconditions, Le Drian told the National Assembly's foreign affairs committee. The "new element" in the crisis is Turkey's involvement that "risks feeding the internationalization of the conflict, which we don't want," he said.

The diplomatic moves came as intense fighting continued for an 11th day between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces, with each side accusing the other of firing on civilian populations. They have so far ignored cease-fire appeals from the U.S., France and Russia, which act as the so-called Minsk Group of mediators that have tried for decades without success to resolve the conflict.

Armenia's Mnatsakanyan won't meet Azerbaijan's Bayramov in Geneva because it's unacceptable to hold talks "while military actions are carried out against Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia," said Anna Naghdalyan, spokeswoman for the Armenian Foreign Ministry.

Armenians took control of Nagorno-Karabakh and seven surrounding districts of Azerbaijan in a 1990s war amid the collapse of the Soviet Union. While a Russia-brokered cease-fire in 1994 halted the fighting that killed 30,000 and displaced 1 million people, the two sides never signed a peace accord.

Russian President Vladimir Putin "briefly" discussed the conflict with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Ilham Aliyev, in a phone call Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters in a conference call. It's the first disclosure of talks between the two leaders since the fighting erupted Sept 27.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan also spoke to Putin, their fifth phone talk in the same period.

Iran issued a "strong protest" to both Azerbaijan and Armenia over the "violation of territorial integrity" and damage to property from rockets and shelling that have landed on its side of the border, Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said.

Backed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Aliyev has vowed to continue this military campaign until Armenian forces leave the territory that's internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan. Armenia says it's defending Nagorno-Karabakh's right to self-determination after its Armenian majority declared independence.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani warned against allowing the conflict "to bring to our borders the very terrorists we have been fighting and eliminating in Syria for years," following reports Turkey is allowing Syrian militants to pass through its territory en route to Azerbaijan. "This is unacceptable and we've clearly informed our neighbors about that," he said.

Turkey and Azerbaijan deny that Syrian militants are involved in the fighting. Russian Foreign Intelligence Service Director Sergei Naryshkin, warned Tuesday that the conflict was drawing in extremists "like a magnet" and posed a potential threat to Russia's security from "terrorist organizations."

'How long will it last?' Nagorno-Karabakh fighting rages on (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 7:59 AM, Avet Demourian, 2164K, Negative]

The intense shelling in the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh is taking its toll on the civilian population as fighting between Armenian and Azerbaijani forces showed no signs of abating Wednesday, with one resident hunkered down in a shelter overnight exclaiming "How can one stand it? How long will it last?"

Clashes between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in the region since Sept. 27 have killed hundreds in the worst escalation of hostilities since 1994 when a truce ended a war that raged for several years. Nagorno-Karabakh lies inside Azerbaijan but has been under the control of ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia for more than a quarter-century.

Stepanakert, the territory's capital, has been under intense attacks in recent days. Footage by The Associated Press showed flashes of explosions that could be seen from the city center on Tuesday night.

Local residents have been gathering in shelters to escape the violence, distraught over continued strikes on the city.

"Bombing ... buildings and houses are destroyed. We are so afraid of it. How can one stand it? How long will it last?" Sida, one fearful resident who stayed in a shelter on Tuesday night, told The Associated Press without providing her full name.

Armenian Defense Ministry spokesman Artsrun Ovannisian said Wednesday that

Stepanakert was being targeted once again by Azerbaijan along with other settlements. Nagorno-Karabakh officials said that non-military facilities in Stepanakert have been hit with missiles and drones.

Russian state RIA Novosti news agency reported Wednesday that some of the overnight shelling has hit people's houses, causing significant damage.

Azerbaijan has rejected claims of targeting civilian infrastructure in Stepanakert. Hikmet Hajiyev, aide to Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, said in an interview earlier this week that Azerbaijani forces only targeted military objects in and around Stepanakert, acknowledging, however, that "some collateral damage" was possible.

The fighting in the region — involving heavy artillery, warplanes and drones — has continued despite numerous international calls for a cease-fire. Both sides have accused each other of expanding the hostilities beyond Nagorno-Karabakh and of targeting civilians.

The EU expressed concern Wednesday about the flare-up of violence.

"We have seen extremely worrying reports of attacks on populated areas which is taking a deadly toll on civilians. We strongly urge the sides to fully observe their international obligations to protect civilian populations," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told members of the European Parliament.

Borrell told the lawmakers that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has no observers on the ground and so the EU can't rely on much of the information being spread about the way the conflict is developing.

"What we observe is an increasing amount of disinformation which is aimed at mobilizing domestic audiences in both countries and could be used to pull regional actors into the conflict," he said. "Media reports need therefore to be examined with great precaution."

Borrell said that he had discussed the conflict with the foreign ministers of both countries, and with those of Russia and Turkey, the main regional players closest to the conflict. Turkey has publicly backed Azerbaijan in the conflict and said it was ready to provide military assistance, should Azerbaijan request it.

Russia is Armenia's main ally and sponsor and has a military base there. It also co-chairs the Minsk Group under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, set up to mediate the conflict. Moscow has repeatedly called for a cease-fire and peace talks.

"It is important that regional actors refrain from any activity or rhetoric that could inflame things even further," Borrell said.

He also found Azerbaijan's determination to continue the fight until Armenia's withdrawal from the region worrisome.

"Yesterday the Turkish (foreign) minister was in Baku, and I was really concerned when I see that he was expressing the full support for Azerbaijan. My last talk with the Azerbaijan

minister was also very much worrisome because he was clearly saying that the fight will continue until Armenia will accept a concrete schedule for withdrawing from Nagorno-Karabakh which is a precondition for talks. Things are getting worse," Borrell said.

Azerbaijan ready return to talks with Armenia when military conflict ends – TASS citing Aliyev (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 7:50 AM, Margarita Antidze, 5304K, Neutral]

Azeri President Ilham Aliyev said on Wednesday that his country would return to talks with Armenia after the acute phase of military conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh region ends, Russian news agency TASS cited him as saying.

Aliyev, who spoke to Russian President Putin by phone, said in an interview with Russian state television that Turkey had the right to participate in mediation.

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan told Time magazine that Armenia would agree to a ceasefire only if Turkey discontinued its engagement and mercenaries were withdrawn.

Iran's Rouhani slams sending fighters to Nagorno-Karabakh (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 5:22 AM, Nasser Karimi, Neutral]

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani on Wednesday warned that his country will not tolerate the presence of foreign fighters — "terrorists that Iran has fought for years" — near its northern border, where a conflict is raging between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Rouhani did not elaborate but Armenia accuses Ankara of sending Turkish-backed Syrian fighters to the self-proclaimed Republic of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan. In Syria's civil war, Iran, an ally of Syrian President Bashar Assad, is on the opposite side of Ankara, which supports Syrian opposition fighters.

Heavy fighting between Azerbaijani and Armenian forces in the Nagorno-Karabakh region since Sept. 27 has killed scores of both servicemen and civilians. Nagorno-Karabakh lies inside Azerbaijan but has been under the control of ethnic Armenian forces backed by Armenia since 1994, when a truce ended a war that raged for several years and killed an estimated 30,000 people on both sides.

The fighting, involving heavy artillery, warplanes and drones has continued despite numerous international calls for a cease-fire.

"Iran will not allow anyone, on some pretext, to bring terrorists that Iran has fought for years to our border," Rouhani told a Cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

"It is not acceptable, and we have clearly told this to officials of neighboring nations," he said, according to the presidential website. Rouhani did not elaborate.

The remarks were Rouhani's first on the issue of foreign fighters sent to the volatile region. Armenia alleges that Turkey, a key supporter of Azerbaijan, is sending mercenaries from Syria to the region — a charge that Ankara denies. The Britain-based monitoring group that tracks Syria's civil war — known as the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights — has reported that as many as 850 Syrian fighters have arrived in Azerbaijan.

Rouhani also warned that the conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia may escalate into a "regional war," which would "not be in the interest of any country." He referred to Azerbaijan as a brother nation and called Armenia a neighbor and urged for peace.

"We have very good relations with both nations," Rouhani said. "The war should come to the end. We hope stability returns to the region."

He stressed that the security of Iran's border area is "very important" and that in talks with officials from both Azerbaijan and Armenia, Iran has insisted on restoring security.

Iran has occasionally complained that stray mortar shells from the Nagorno-Karabakh fighting have struck Iranian border villages and towns. There have been no Iranian fatalities so far, though a six-year old child was reported wounded and some buildings were damaged.

On Monday, Iran's foreign ministry said it's working on a peace plan to end the fighting between Armenia and Azerbaijan and warned against the conflict spilling across Iran's border — "a very serious red line for the Islamic Republic that should not be crossed."

Iran shares nearly 760 kilometers (470 miles) of its border with Azerbaijan and about 35 kilometers (22 miles) with Armenia, with traditionally good relations with both neighbors, though public opinion in the predominantly Shiite Iran mainly supports Azerbaijan.

Greece recalls its ambassador to Azerbaijan (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 9:10 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Greece's Foreign Ministry says it is recalling its ambassador to Azerbaijan following what it says are "completely unfounded and insulting allegations" by the Azerbaijani government that it is tolerating the preparation of terrorist acts.

In a statement Wednesday, the ministry said the Greek ambassador had been recalled to Athens for consultations. It said the Azerbaijani government had claimed Greece was tolerating the preparation of terrorist acts, attempts to recruit terrorist fighters and cyberattacks against Azerbaijan due to the latter's conflict with Armenia over the separatist region of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The ministry said it had filed a protest over the issue on Tuesday with the Azerbaijani ambassador in Greece.

Earlier this month, the Azerbaijani Ministry of Foreign Affairs cited media reports and other information that it said indicated that "thousands of ethnic Armenians" from several countries, including Greece, were heading to Nagorno-Karabakh.

Putin to keep talking to Azerbaijan's president about Nagorno-Karabakh: Kremlin (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 6:23 AM, Dmitry Antonov and Maria Kiselyova, 5304K, Neutral]

Russian President Vladimir Putin will continue his dialogue with Azeri President Ilham Aliyev about the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict after the two leaders spoke briefly by phone on

Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

Speaking to reporters on a conference call, Peskov said Aliyev had called Putin to congratulate him on his 68th birthday and that the two men had used the opportunity to discuss the conflict.

Putin and Aliyev had not spoken since fighting between ethnic Armenian and Azeri forces erupted on Sept. 27.

France says pushing for Nagorno-Karabakh talks in coming days (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:13 AM, John Irish, Neutral]

France's foreign minister said on Wednesday that talks would be held in Geneva on Thursday and Moscow on Monday to try to convince warring sides in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to agree to negotiate a ceasefire.

Jean-Yves Le Drian told parliament's foreign affairs committee that France, Russia and the United States would hold those talks to start a dialogue that needed to take place without preconditions.

Poland Escalates Nord Stream Spat With \$7.6 Billion Gazprom Fine (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 8:17 AM, Marek Strzelecki, 6400K, Neutral]

The Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline faces a new threat after Poland's antitrust watchdog slapped a record \$7.6 billion fine on Russia's Gazprom PJSC, opening another front in the bitter political battle over the project.

The fine adds to pressure against the pipeline – nearly complete – that will feed gas from Russia under the Baltic Sea into Germany. Poland and the U.S. have long objected to the link, arguing it will deepen Europe's dependence on energy supplies from Russia. Germany has taken a more commercial view, leaving Poland frustrated by the European Union's approach.

The regulator said the 9.5 billion-euro (\$11 billion) pipeline will impede competition and "violates the interests of consumers." It gave Gazprom and its partners 30 days to terminate financing agreements to "restore" competition. The fine amounts to 10% of the revenues of Russia's primary gas export company, the maximum allowed penalty. Gazprom said it will appeal.

"The decision creates an additional uncertainty," said Christian Egenhofer, senior research fellow at Centre for European Policy Studies. "It is another factor that undermines the project and its economics."

Gazprom's shares dropped as much as 2.5% in Moscow to its lowest since March. The Nord Stream 2 link was already hanging by a thread, the victim of sanctions imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump last year and pressure on Germany to retaliate against Russia's poisoning of opposition leader Alexey Navalny.

After the Swiss company AllSeas Group SA pulled its vessel off the project to avoid U.S. sanctions, Gazprom said it would complete the work on its own. It isn't clear the Russian

company has the technical capacity to do so. Less than 160 kilometers of the total 2,460 kilometers remained to be laid at the start of this year.

EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager reacted with surprise to Poland's decision, telling reporters in Brussels "it's not something where we've had a close cooperation with the Polish national competition authority." She declined to discuss details but noted it's very rare that EU antitrust fines hit the maximum level.

Poland's Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said last month that his government is stepping up pressure on Germany to halt the project following the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny. Today's move may be partly an effort to push Germany and the EU into supporting further sanctions.

"Poland is expanding its anti-Russian policy and trying to show the rest of the European Union that Berlin can't boss it around," said Andrey Klimov, deputy chairman of the International Affairs Committee in the upper house of Russia's parliament. "We have ways to respond against Poland, different ways," he added, without elaborating.

While the Nord Stream 2 link is outside Polish territorial waters, the government in Warsaw has leverage over Gazprom through its control of separate pipelines, notably the Yamal link carrying gas from giant fields in Siberia. Poland is the only transit country for Yamal gas, feeding about 30 billion cubic meters a year into Germany.

"The construction of Nord Stream 2 is a clear violation of market regulations," Tomasz Chrostny, the head of the UOKiK regulator, said in Warsaw on Wednesday. "This project would not have been created without Gazprom partners from the EU. They should reconsider if they want to be a part of a project that breaches the bloc market rules."

Gas prices for consumers must be "the result of fair competition, and once Nord Stream 2 is operational, it's likely that gas prices will increase and there's risk of interruption of supplies."

Gazprom said it will appeal because it "did not violate the antitrust regulations of the Republic of Poland." That would push any fine back until a court ruled on it, which according to Uniper may take five years. Gazprom views the size of the fine as an indication that Poland "wants by any means to undermine implementation of Nord Stream 2 project."

"The decision by the Polish regulator seems to be aimed at creating some toxicity around Nord Stream 2 rather than blocking the project," said Igor Yushkov, an analyst at the National Energy Security Fund and an expert at Financial University in Moscow.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has come under increasing pressure to ditch the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, with members of her own party have questioned the project. Cancellation would mean unwinding years of government strategy to turn Germany into a lucrative gas hub. It would also unravel the plans of corporate giants like BASF SE, for which supplies from the link are crucial.

Poland, a staunch U.S. ally in eastern Europe, has welcomed U.S. sanctions against Gazprom. Polish government officials discussed the pipeline when U.S. Secretary of State

Mike Pompeo visited Warsaw in August.

The move is bound to put another wedge between the EU and Poland, which is already in an unprecedented standoff with the bloc. Poland's judiciary overhaul has triggered censure from the EU and probes into whether the country of 38 million is adhering to the bloc's democratic standards.

EU regulators have sought to keep competition authorities and courts free of political influence. The EU has repeatedly accused Poland of undermining judicial independence.

"This decision seems simply an act of vengeance which reflects Poland's long-standing opposition to Nord Stream 2," said Katja Yafimava, senior research fellow at The Oxford Institute for Energy Studies. "I expect this decision to be duly appealed. If the Polish court were to reject the appeal. It is inconceivable for CJEU to reject the appeal and to uphold the Polish decision which has no legal legs to stand on."

While Gazprom owns the Baltic Sea pipeline project, half of its 9.5 billion-euro (\$11.2 billion) cost is being financed by Engie, Royal Dutch Shell Plc, Germany's Uniper SE, Wintershall AG and Austria's OMV AG.

The Russian company's partners in the gas pipeline were also fined 234 million zloty by UOKiK.

Polish watchdog fines Gazprom \$7.6 billion over Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:03 AM, Agnieszka Barteczko and Oksana Kobzeva, 5304K, Neutral] Poland has fined Russia's Gazprom more than 29 billion zlotys (\$7.6 billion) for building the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline without Warsaw's approval, its watchdog said on Wednesday, prompting the company to say it will appeal.

The project has stoked concern about Moscow's dominance of European energy supplies and attracted U.S. sanctions, although rival sales of Azeri gas and U.S. liquefied natural gas (LNG) may squeeze Russia's market share in Europe.

Poland's UOKiK anti-monopoly watchdog said it had also imposed a total fine of 234 million zloty spread across five other companies involved in financing the \$11 billion project to double Russia's gas export capacity via the Baltic Sea.

Nord Stream 2 is led by Gazprom, with half of the funding provided by Germany's Uniper and BASF's Wintershall unit, Anglo-Dutch company Shell, Austria's OMV and Engie.

OMV and Engie face the biggest fines of 88 million zlotys and 55.5 million zlotys respectively. Engie declined immediate comment and OMV has yet to respond to requests for comment.

Following the watchdog's decision, the companies are obliged to terminate the agreements for financing Nord Stream 2, UOKiK said.

Gazprom said it has not violated Polish anti-monopoly regulations and will appeal against the fine.

"The UOKiK ruling breaches the principles of legality, proportionality and just trial, while the unprecedented size of the fine is a testament to the desire to oppose the Nord Stream 2 project's implementation by any means," Gazprom said.

Uniper also disagreed with the decision and said it was considering an appeal. It said a final ruling could take up to four to five years and any fines would only be payable then.

YEARS OF SCRUTINY

The UOKiK has examined the project for years. In August it fined Gazprom 213 million zlotys over a lack of cooperation regarding the project.

"The launch of NS2 will threaten the continuity of natural gas supplies to Poland. An increase in the price of the product is also highly likely, with the said increase being borne by Polish consumers," said Tomasz Chrostny, president of the UOKiK.

"Completion of this investment project increases economic dependence on Russian gas — not only in the case of Poland, but also of other European states," Chrostny said.

Most of the gas consumed in Poland is from Gazprom, but Warsaw has reduced its reliance through LNG purchases, mostly from Qatar and the United States.

Construction of the 1,230-kilometre Nord Stream 2 pipeline is complete barring a final stretch of roughly 120 km in Danish waters.

Work stopped in December after pipe-laying company Swiss-Dutch Allseas suspended operations because of U.S. sanctions targeting companies providing vessels.

The alleged poisoning of Alexei Navalny, a prominent Kremlin critic, has led Western politicians to intensify demands to block the halt the project permanently.

Dmitry Marinchenko, an analyst with Fitch, told Reuters a permanent stoppage was a risk.

"Europe has yet to work out its opinion on whether implementing the project in the current environment — after what had happened to Alexei Navalny — is the right thing to do," he said.

Russia's \$11 Billion Gas Project Teeters After Fine From Poland (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 12:37 PM, Reed Landberg and Vanessa Dezem, Neutral]

Russia's controversial effort to build a natural gas pipeline to Germany plunged into a deeper freeze with Poland's decision to impose a \$7.6 billion fine on its sponsor.

The move by the consumer protection regulator in Warsaw raises another hurdle holding up the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, which was weeks away from completion when U.S. sanctions stopped work last year. President Donald Trump and his Polish counterpart are concerned

the link would deepen Europe's reliance on Russia for energy supplies.

Poland's intervention on Wednesday threatens to add years of litigation to the logistical hurdles the project is suffering. While the court move doesn't have an immediate impact on the work, it cranks up the geopolitical tension and raises the risk it may never get finished.

"This is a purely political move that aims to frighten everyone off from this project," said Fyodor Lukyanov, head of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, which advises the Kremlin. "It's a signal that even if it does get finished, there will be various unpleasantness not only from the U.S. but its allies too."

The 9.5 billion-euro (\$11.2 billion) Nord Stream 2 link will run 2,460 kilometers under the Baltic Sea to Germany, where it will feed gas from Siberia into the continental European grid. All except 160 kilometers of the link were laid down when Trump imposed sanctions late last year.

The U.S. sanctions effectively halted work on the link on Dec. 20, forcing the Swiss company AllSeas Group Ltd. to withdraw the main vessel laying sections of pipe on the seabed. Other contractors and ports also stopped offering services to Gazprom to avoid being caught up in the dispute. Only a few ships in the world can do the job, and it's unclear whether Gazprom has one in its fleet with the capabilities. The company hasn't detailed any progress this year.

Poland's move doesn't affect the physical ability of Gazprom to lay pipe, but it does upend the political atmosphere permitting the project to continue.

Even though the pipeline is outside Polish territorial waters, the government in Warsaw has leverage over Gazprom through its stake in separate links, notably one carrying gas from giant fields in Siberia. Poland is the only transit country for Yamal gas, feeding about 30 billion cubic meters a year into Germany. EU rules in theory allow Polish authorities to ask other nations in the region to help them extract fines on their behalf.

Gazprom plans to appeal along with some of its financial backers – Engie SA, Royal Dutch Shell Plc, Germany's Uniper SE, Wintershall AG and Austria's OMV AG. That hits pause on any fines needing to be paid but potentially wrapping the project in years of litigation. For now it's a matter for the Polish courts – that's where the appeal will happen – but there may be a chance it could eventually end up in European Union's top court.

EU Competition Commissioner Margrethe Vestager reacted with surprise to Poland's decision, telling reporters in Brussels the scale of the fine was rare. EU rules in theory allow Polish authorities to ask other nations in the region to help them extract fines on their behalf.

"It is inconceivable for the CJEU to reject the appeal and to uphold the Polish decision which has no legal legs to stand on," said Katja Yafimava, senior research fellow at the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies.

The move is bound to put another wedge between the EU and Poland, which is already in an unprecedented standoff with the bloc. Poland's judiciary overhaul has triggered censure

from the EU and probes into whether the country of 38 million is adhering to the bloc's democratic standards.

Political opposition to Nord Stream 2 deepened after the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny. German Chancellor Angela Merkel is under pressure from members of her own party to scrap the pipeline. To date, she has allowed it as a commercial enterprise. Trump has threatened to expand sanctions if the link goes ahead, making it a major source of friction in Europe's relations with the U.S.

Officials in Berlin sidestepped the issue on Wednesday. They've been keen to avoid attracting Trump's anger during a vitriolic election campaign in the U.S. Merkel has shown no rush to respond to the latest political escalation and it's unlikely a decision would be made just before a U.S. election.

For Germany, cancellation would mean unwinding years of government strategy to build a lucrative gas trading hub. It would also unravel the plans of corporate giants like BASF SE, for which supplies from the link are crucial.

Polish government officials discussed the pipeline when U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Warsaw in August. They object to deepening trade links with Russia while Vladimir Putin pursues policies that unsettle the region, ranging from seizing Crimea to meddling in elections.

"Poland is expanding its anti-Russian policy and trying to show the rest of the EU that Berlin can't boss it around," said Andrey Klimov, deputy chairman of the International Affairs Committee in the upper house of Russia's parliament.

EU official touts extra billions for Western Balkans (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 12:29 PM, Staff, Neutral]

The European Union's enlargement commissioner said Wednesday that the bloc is seeking to secure another 20 billion euros (\$24 billion) of investment to help the Western Balkans catch up economically with the rest of Europe.

While in Skopje on the first leg of his Balkan tour, Oliver Varhelyi said the funds the EU plans to raise with its international financial partners would help the region recover from the financial fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The EU has already approved a 9 billion-euro package from its budget for the Western Balkans, which include North Macedonia.

Varhelyi said countries in the region must improve their basic digital infrastructure, and make their energy systems more reliable and greener.

He said one initial move would be to phase out coal from regional power production.

"This could be a game changer and only by replacing coal with gas, the emissions would be reduced by 60%," Varhelyi said.

The commissioner also urged North Macedonia's government to step up its reform drive — a crucial precondition for the country's stated aim of eventually joining the EU. The bloc wants to see further progress on issues relating to the rule of law, corruption and reforming the judiciary.

"We need to see quick and effective work on the ground," Varhelyi said. "We need results."

North Macedonia and neighboring Albania received the green light this year to start accession talks with the 27-nation bloc.

Western Balkan countries are at different stages of EU membership: Serbia and Montenegro have already started negotiating some chapters of the final deal, while Albania and North Macedonia were given the green light to open them earlier this year. Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina have signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement, the first step in the path.

In his next stop in Albania, Varhelyi urged the country to continue progress of the fundamental reforms of European value: strengthening the rule of law and improving public administration.

"Albania's continued progress would be key for the outcome of the discussions in the Council," he said.

Varhelyi said the first inter-government conferences with both countries, which would officially mark the beginning of the membership talks, could be convened by the end of this year.

Speaking in the Albanian parliament, Varhelyi said that the EU considered the Western Balkans "to be a potential of becoming an investment hub."

"We are convinced that the future of the whole region lies in the European Union and it is in our strategic interest to bring you closer to the EU," Varhelyi said.

Russia says Northern Cyprus's plans to open Varosha beach unacceptable (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:37 AM, Tom Balmforth, 5304K, Negative]

Russia's Foreign Ministry said on Wednesday it was seriously concerned by Northern Cyprus's plans to open Varosha beach, calling the decision to do so unacceptable.

Northern Cyprus said on Tuesday it will reopen the beach area of an abandoned resort in no-man's land, a move condemned by Greek Cypriots.

Varosha has been off limits along ceasefire lines to all but the Turkish military since 1974 and has stood as a bargaining chip in the decades-long dispute between Greek and Turkish Cypriots.

Berlin Trial Opens for Man Charged With Murder on Behalf of Russia (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 9:10 AM, Melissa Eddy, Neutral]

The trial opened on Wednesday for a Russian man accused of murdering a former Chechen field commander in a Berlin park last year, allegedly at the behest of the Russian state.

The killing, which occurred in August 2019 in a park just over a mile away from Chancellor Angela Merkel's office, occurred amid increasingly bold provocations from Russia. German investigators blame Moscow for a 2015 cyberattack on Parliament and for a disinformation campaign on German-language Russian news media targeting Berlin's policy on refugees the following year.

This August, the Russian opposition leader Aleksei A. Navalny arrived in Berlin for treatment after being poisoned with what German experts found to be a military-grade chemical substance. These events have led to a hardening of Germany's traditionally open stance toward Moscow.

In the indictment over the Berlin murder, federal prosecutors charged that the "state agencies of the central government of the Russian Federation ordered the accused to liquidate" the victim, a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent who was said to be an opponent of the Russian state.

Germany's federal prosecutors have identified the accused Russian man, who followed the trial through a Russian interpreter, as Vadim N. Krasikov, 55, although his lawyer read a statement from the defendant naming him as Vadim A. Sokolov, 50. The latter name matches the information in a passport found on him when he was arrested on Aug. 23, but German investigators have said they believe the name is an alias.

"I will refer to you as 'the defendant,'" Judge Olaf Arnoldi said as the trial opened, acknowledging the confusion over the man's identity.

Moscow has denied any link between the killing and "official Russia." But Germans officials say that the Russian authorities have refused to cooperate in the investigation, despite several formal requests.

A guilty verdict for Mr. Sokolov would mean a sentence of life in prison. But it could have even larger implications for German-Russian relations, as Ms. Merkel's government would be under increased pressure to react, given the brazenness of the killing and the opportunity to send a clear message to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia. A ruling is not expected until next year.

The trial opened one day after the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed the findings of experts in Germany that the substance used to poison Mr. Navalny had "similar structural characteristics" to the Novichok family of highly potent nerve agents.

The German government said in a statement on Tuesday that the European Union and the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons would discuss their next steps in the coming days.

Weeks after the murder, Ms. Merkel's government expelled two Russian diplomats, and Moscow retaliated with a tit-for-tat move.

Since then, no further action has been taken, but Ms. Merkel's tone has grown harsher. In May, she stood before the German Parliament and called Russia out.

"There is a strategy from Russia that we must take into account — we cannot simply ignore it: the strategy of hybrid warfare, which includes cyberwarfare and distortion of the facts," she told lawmakers. "This is not just somehow a random product, but it is definitely a strategy that is being applied."

It is a far cry from the more pro-Russian stance shaped by her junior coalition partners in government, the Social Democrats.

"Of course, we retain the right to take action against Russia," Ms. Merkel told Parliament.

The killing on Aug. 23, 2019, shocked Berlin.

The victim, Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a former Chechen separatist commander, had been living in Germany since December 2016, when he applied for asylum after arriving.

Russia considered him an enemy of the state and a terrorist, accusing him of membership in the Caucasus Emirate, the most active militant group in Russia, according to the indictment. He had fought the Russians in Chechnya from 2000 to 2004, when separatists in the predominantly Muslim region were seeking independence.

He was on his way to a mosque for prayers in central Berlin when a man riding a bicycle approached him from behind and shot him.

The victim fell to ground, and the gunman fired two more shots to his head with a Glock 26 pistol that was equipped with a silencer.

The gunman then fled the park toward the nearby Spree River, where he threw the bike and other objects into the water and quickly changed his clothes, prosecutors said. Two teenagers spotted him and called the police.

The police then arrested the defendant as he attempted to rent an electric scooter.

The officers found 3,720 euros in cash (nearly \$4,000) and a newly issued non-biometric Russian passport without a memory chip. That document identified the arrested man as Vadim Andreevich Sokolov, the name the defendant insists is his true identity.

Russian on trial accused of state-ordered Berlin execution (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 4:55 AM, David Rising, 29K, Negative]

A Russian accused of killing a Georgian man in broad daylight in downtown Berlin on Moscow's orders went on trial for murder Wednesday, in a case that has contributed to growing frictions between Germany and Russia.

Prosecutor Ronald Georg said the defendant Vadim Krasikov, using the alias Vadim Solokov, traveled to the German capital last August on the orders of the Russian government to kill a Georgian citizen of Chechen ethnicity who fought Russian troops in Chechnya.

"State agencies of the central government of the Russian Federation gave the defendant the contract to liquidate the Georgian citizen with Chechen roots," Georg told the court, reading the indictment.

"The defendant took the contract, either for an unknown sum of money or because he shared the motive of those who gave the contract to liquidate the (victim) as a political enemy in revenge for his role in the second Chechen war and participation in other armed conflict against the Russian Federation."

No pleas are entered in the German trial system, and the defendant made only a short statement as the trial began under tight security and coronavirus precautions, saying that he had been misidentified.

"I am Vadim Adreyevich Sokolov, not Vadim Nikolayevich Krasikov," he said through his attorney Robert Unger. "Such a person is not known to me."

After the Aug. 23, 2019 killing, Germany expelled two Russian diplomats last December over the case, prompting Russia to oust two German diplomats in retaliation.

If the allegations against the 55-year-old suspect are proved in court, the case has the potential to exacerbate tensions between Moscow and Berlin, which have also been fueled by allegations of Russian involvement in the 2015 hacking of the German parliament and the theft of documents from Chancellor Angela Merkel's own office, as well as the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Navalny fell ill on a flight in Russia on Aug 20, landing in a Siberian hospital. Two days later, he was transferred on Merkel's personal invitation to Berlin's Charite hospital, where doctors concluded he had been poisoned by a Soviet-era nerve agent.

Moscow has dismissed accusations of involvement in the Navalny case and denied ties in the parliamentary hacking, even though Merkel herself said there was "hard evidence" of the latter.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov called the allegations of Russian involvement in the Berlin killing "absolutely groundless."

After Merkel confronted Putin about the killing at a meeting in Paris in December, the Russian leader called the victim, Zelimkhan "Tornike" Khangoshvili, a "bandit" and a "murderer," accusing him of killing scores of people during fighting in the Caucasus.

The growing acrimony between the two countries comes at a delicate time, as Germany and Russia work towards the completion of a joint pipeline project to bring Russian gas directly to Germany under the Baltic, and work to try and salvage a nuclear deal with Iran that has been unraveling since President Donald Trump pulled the United States out of it

unilaterally in 2018.

Khangoshvili was a Georgian citizen of Chechen ethnicity who fought Russian troops in Chechnya. He had also volunteered to fight for a Georgian unit against the Russians in South Ossetia in 2008, but peace was negotiated before he took part. He had previously survived multiple assassination attempts and continued to receive threats after fleeing in 2016 to Germany, where he had been granted asylum.

Prosecutors allege the killer approached Khangoshvili from behind on a bicycle in the small Kleiner Tiergarten park, shooting him twice in the torso with a silencer-fitted handgun. After Khangoshvili fell to the ground, the suspect fired two fatal shots into his head.

Witnesses saw the suspect disposing of the bike, weapon and a wig in the Spree River as he fled the scene and alerted police, who quickly identified and arrested him.

In their indictment, prosecutors allege there is ample evidence indicating official Russian involvement in the crime.

German investigators used facial recognition to match the suspect to a photograph Russia had sent partner agencies in 2014 as it sought help finding Vadim Krasikov in connection with a killing in Moscow. That request was canceled on July 7, 2015, and a person with the identity of Vadim Sokolov first appears on Sept. 3, 2015, with a Russian passport.

On July 18, 2019, Vadim S. obtained a new passport from an official office in the Russian city of Bryansk, which he used to apply for a French visa at the general consulate in Moscow, prosecutors said.

Russian authorities confirmed the suspect's passport, found on him at the time of his arrest, was valid, prosecutors said.

He was granted the visa and flew on Aug. 17, 2019, from Moscow to Paris. In his visa application, prosecutors said the suspect claimed to work for a St. Petersburg firm known as Zao Rust.

Investigators found that Zao Rust had only one employee in 2018 and on April 10, 2019, was listed as being in "reorganization." The company's fax number was one used by two firms that are operated by the Russian Defense Ministry, prosecutors said.

He left Paris on Aug. 20 and flew to Warsaw where he had a hotel booked until Aug. 25. Upon arrival, he extended his room to Aug. 26, but left at 8 a.m. on Aug. 22 and never returned, prosecutors said.

It is not clear, they said, what he did between his departure from the hotel and the killing in Berlin at 11:55 a.m. on Aug. 23.

The trial is scheduled through Jan. 27.

[Belarus] Belarusian opposition politician Tsikhanouskaya wanted by Russia: interior ministry database (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:08 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Belarusian opposition politician Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya is listed as wanted by Russia in connection with a crime, according to a database of Russia's interior ministry.

It was unclear when Tsikhanouskaya's name was added to the database, but Russian media outlets first reported it on Wednesday.

Tsikhanouskaya fled to neighbouring Lithuania shortly after a disputed Aug. 9 election and has since met with European political leaders and called for President Alexander Lukashenko to leave power.

[Belarus] Four more EU states recall envoys to Belarus: Lithuania (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 11:13 AM, Andrius Sytas, Neutral]

Four more EU nations, including Germany, are recalling their ambassadors to Belarus in solidarity with Lithuania and Poland, the Lithuanian foreign ministry said on Wednesday, amid continued tensions with Minsk over its crackdown on protesters following a disputed presidential election.

Belarus has accused its neighbours Poland and Lithuania of meddling in its affairs by hosting exiled opposition leaders and refusing to recognise Alexander Lukashenko's victory in the Aug. 9 poll. His critics say the vote was rigged, which he denies.

Belarus recalled its own ambassadors from Poland and Lithuania last Friday for consultations and asked the two states to scale back the number of staff at their embassies in Minsk.

Lithuania and Poland refused to comply and then recalled their ambassadors to Minsk for consultations in the hope of reducing regional tensions.

Germany, the Czech Republic, Estonia and Latvia are now recalling their envoys to Minsk for consultations, a Lithuanian foreign ministry spokeswoman told Reuters.

Germany did not respond immediately to a request for comment, while a Czech foreign ministry spokeswoman said: "We are considering a reaction in solidarity with Poland and Lithuania."

Estonia's Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu described Belarus's pressure on Poland and Lithuania as "unfounded and unfortunate".

"In protest against the steps taken by Belarus, we have decided to invite our ambassador from Belarus to Tallinn for consultations," he said in a statement on Wednesday.

The three Baltic republics – Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia – were the first European Union countries to sanction Lukashenko and other Belarusian officials for alleged election fraud and violence against protesters.

With Belarus rocked by almost daily protests since the election and Western sanctions imposed on him and other top officials, Lukashenko has turned to Russia for financial and diplomatic support to maintain his 26-year grip on power.

[Denmark] Danes summon Iran's envoy over reports of illegal divorces (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 7:30 AM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

Denmark on Wednesday summoned the Iranian ambassador over reports the diplomatic mission had allegedly pressured Iranian women living in the Scandinavian country to accept divorce terms drawn up by local imams.

The summons follows recent reports in Danish media about Muslim women being forced to accept divorce deals made by imams in Denmark. A contract made by one imam said that a woman, among other things, had to accept that if she remarried, she would lose the custody of her children.

"I take the rumors extremely seriously that the Iranian Embassy, unsolicited, had contacted women living here to pressure them to have their Danish divorce papers religiously validated," said Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod.

"That is also why we react as quickly and as clearly as we do," he added in the statement.

Kofod added that the Scandinavian country will "in no way accept if an embassy is involved in cases that are contrary to Danish law — and contrary to our basic democratic values in Denmark."

"The kind of religious control that we have heard about in the media does not belong in Denmark," he said.

[France] Macron Says 'More' Covid-19 Restrictions to Be Detailed Thursday (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 3:16 PM, Gaspard Sebag, Neutral]

Emmanuel Macron said more restrictions will be announced this week aimed at stemming the spread of the coronavirus in France.

The French president said the country's health minister will make announcements Thursday about targeted restrictions that would focus on places where the virus is circulating faster among elderly people and where hospitals are the fullest.

"There must be more restrictions such as the ones put in place" in the region of Marseille, where bars and restaurants were shut, Macron said in a TF1 interview Wednesday. In Paris, while restaurants can still open, bars have been shuttered.

France on Wednesday reported 18,746 new infections, pushing the seven-day rolling average of new infections to its highest level yet.

Macron added in the TV interview that the government's overall strategy is to asks French citizens to act responsibly.

"People must continue to abide by the rules," Macron said. "When there are slightly stronger restrictions, it's to help our medical staff which is under great pressure."

[Greece] Golden Dawn Found Guilty of Running Criminal Organization in Greece (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 9:03 AM, Niki Kitsantonis and Iliana Magra, Neutral]

In a landmark verdict in Greece's highest-profile political trial in decades, an Athens court on Wednesday found the neo-fascist party Golden Dawn guilty of running a criminal organization as it rose to prominence during the country's financial crisis, systematically targeting migrants and left-wing critics.

The ruling came more than five years after the trial began in a makeshift courtroom in Greece's largest high-security prison near Athens, and as at the beginning of the trial, none of the party officials were in the courtroom where the verdict was announced.

But thousands of Greek citizens had gathered outside the court on Wednesday, waving banners reading, "They are not innocent," "Nazis out" and "Life terms to the murderers," as some 2,000 police officers patrolled the area and helicopters and drones circled above.

The three-judge criminal court tied the party to a string of attacks including the fatal stabbing in 2013 of a left-wing rapper, Pavlos Fyssas. The party member who stabbed Mr. Fyssas, Giorgos Roupakias, was found guilty of murder on Wednesday.

Another five Golden Dawn supporters or members were found guilty of attempted murder over assaults on three Egyptian fishermen in 2012, while four were found guilty of causing bodily harm over assaults on members of Greece's Communist Party trade union in 2013.

"Today is an important day for democracy," the country's president, Katerina Sakellaropoulou, said. "Today's decision is a confirmation of the fact that democracy and its institutions are always capable of fending off any attempt to undermine them."

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the ruling brought an end to "a traumatic cycle in the country's public life."

"After the ballot box, the Nazi entity was also condemned in court," he said, referring to Golden Dawn's failure to re-enter Greece's Parliament last year. "Democracy won today."

Formed in the 1980s by a former Greek army commando, the Golden Dawn party was catapulted from obscurity to become Greece's third largest political party at the peak of the country's financial crisis in 2012, tapping into public discontent against austerity and a growing influx of immigrants.

During its time in Greek Parliament from 2012 to 2019, the party maintained public support by casting itself as patriotic and fighting the system from within, but it retained links with neo-fascist parties in other European countries and the United States.

A spate of violent attacks in 2013, culminating in the fatal stabbing of Mr. Fyssas, precipitated the party's unraveling.

A few days after the killing, police arrested the entire party leadership as a judicial investigation began into suspicions that Golden Dawn had conducted criminal activities under its military-style leadership.

The trial eventually began in April 2015 with a 3,000-page case file, 69 defendants — one has since died — and 120 witnesses for the prosecution. Although Golden Dawn's legislators avoided appearing in court whenever possible, the proceedings took their toll on the party's appeal. Once at the forefront of Greek politics, Golden Dawn failed to win re-election to Greek Parliament last year.

But despite the party's fall, the threat of neo-Nazism in Greece has not receded. Former members of Parliament including Ilias Kasidiaris, Golden Dawn's one-time spokesman, have formed their own parties espousing similar views. And less extreme right-wing parties have also sprung up in the party's wake, including the nationalist Greek Solution.

Golden Dawn, for its part, has systematically denied any direct link to the attacks and has described the trial and charges brought against the party's leadership as "politically motivated" and a "conspiracy." "All supporters await an acquittal tomorrow, a decision that will trigger an even more vociferous nationalist campaign to reclaim our country," the party said in a statement released on the eve of the trial.

The human rights group Amnesty International said in a statement on Monday that a guilty verdict would boost efforts to crack down on hate crimes.

"The accusations against the leaders and members of Golden Dawn, including the murder of Pavlos Fyssas, expose a fissure that exists not just within Greece but across Europe and beyond," said Nils Muiznieks, Europe director at Amnesty. "The impact of this verdict, in what is an emblematic trial of an extreme far-right party with an aggressive anti-migrant and anti-human rights stance, will be felt far beyond Greece's borders."

When the news of the guilty verdict was announced, the thousands outside the court erupted in cheers that echoed out from the avenue and the surrounding balconies overlooking the court.

The Greek Police said two people were detained after scuffles broke out between protesters and police officers shortly before the verdict was issued. A group of around 600 people broke off from the crowd of about 20,000 people, and lobbed some 150 firebombs and stones at officers, a police statement said, adding that 10 police vehicles were vandalized by protesters trying to gain access to the court building. The police used tear gas and a water cannon to disperse the crowd, the statement said.

Speaking before the decision, Elena Karvouni, 68, who was among those gathered, said that it was important for her to be at the court, despite the pandemic. Some wore masks and gloves and some were attempting to maintain social distance in the crowd.

"As a mother and as a citizen of this country that has fought with blood against fascism, it wasn't possible that I wouldn't be here," she said.

Elena Kritikou, 50, said that the throngs of young people crowding Alexandras Avenue in Athens and the area outside the court made her feel exhilarated.

"I feel like there is hope for a better tomorrow," she said.

While waiting for the verdict, people chanted antifascist slogans — "Pavlos lives, crush the Nazis," and "No acquittal for the Nazis" — while the Italian resistance song "Bella Ciao" played in the background.

"It is my duty to be here," said Giannis, a 19-year-old computing student who did not want to give his last name. "I didn't know Pavlos Fyssas personally but someone else could have also been in his place, it could have been me."

"We don't tolerate groups like Golden Dawn — it needs to be condemned," he added.

[Greece] Greek Neo-Nazi Party Golden Dawn Convicted as Criminal Organization (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 2:02 PM, Apostolis Fotiadis, Neutral]

A Greek court ruled that the country's neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party is a criminal organization, and found a number of party members guilty of murder and other felonies—a major blow against one of Europe's most extreme political movements.

Families of Golden Dawn's victims in the courtroom, and thousands of demonstrators outside, applauded as the judges handed down guilty verdicts against the party. The trial, which has lasted more than five years, is likely to accelerate the decline of the extreme-right movement that became Greece's third-biggest political party during the country's debt crisis.

"This has been the most politically important trial in modern Greek history, and the largest trial of a neo-Nazi party since the war in Europe," said Kostis Papaioannou, a former senior official for human rights at the Ministry of Justice. But for years, he said, "the authorities had been very slow to react to far-right terrorism, including the police, the judiciary and the political system."

"Golden Dawn has been, for many of its sympathizers, among the most successful examples of how a radical, violent group can infiltrate the political mainstream," Mr. Papaioannou said.

Following the verdict, scuffles broke out between some demonstrators and police outside the court, with police trying to disperse the crowd using tear gas and water canons. A number of protesters regrouped later outside the Greek parliament.

Formerly a marginal group known for violent attacks on immigrants and leftists, Golden Dawn rose in popularity after 2010, when Greece's international creditors imposed drastic austerity on the country, accelerating an economic depression that pushed unemployment as high as 27%.

The party, previously too small to win seats in parliament, won 7% of the vote in 2012 elections and rose to over 10% support in opinion polls, illustrating how popular anger with

Europe's political mainstream was creating opportunities for radical groups across the continent.

Greek authorities launched a large-scale investigation against Golden Dawn after a series of violent incidents in late 2013, including the murder of an antifascist rap artist, Pavlos Fyssas. Golden Dawn's leader Nikos Michaloliakos and several members of Parliament were indicted and detained. Despite this, Golden Dawn remained the third-strongest party in national elections in 2015. But its support waned as Greece began to recover from its debt crisis. In national elections in 2019 the party failed to reach the 3% threshold for entering parliament.

Evidence shown during the trial helped to undermine the party's popularity, including hundreds of photographs and videos that demonstrated the leadership's attachment to Nazi symbols and ideology, including leaders giving the Nazi salute and wearing Nazi paraphernalia and tattoos. The party has denied any link to neo-Nazism.

During the trial Mr. Michaloliakos, a Holocaust denier who founded the neo-Nazi movement in the early 1980s, and other prominent members claimed to be victims of political persecution.

The court on Wednesday sentenced 68 party members, including its entire leadership, for various crimes including murder, attempted murder, violent assault and possession of illegal weapons. Several party activists were convicted in connection with the murder of Mr. Fyssas.

Since its electoral defeat last year, infighting and defections have further weakened Golden Dawn. "By now the party doesn't register in opinion polls, but there are far-right clusters that retain some of its previous political potential," said Ilias Tsaousakis a political scientist and pollster.

"Golden Dawn differed from traditional far-right parties in Greece and Europe due its radical neo-Nazi orientation. By now it has already been replaced by other, less-extreme formations in parliament. But if social conditions allow, we could again see a similar party rising in Greece," Mr. Tsaousakis said.

[Greece] Greek court rules Golden Dawn party criminal organization (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 9:11 AM, Derek Gatopoulos and Elena Becatoros, Neutral]

A Greek court ruled on Wednesday that the far-right Golden Dawn party was operating as a criminal organization, delivering landmark guilty verdicts following a politically charged five-year trial against dozens of defendants.

The court ruled that seven of the 18 former lawmakers, including Nikos Michaloliakos, the head of the party which had become Greece's third largest during the country's financial crisis, were guilty of leading a criminal organization. The others were found guilty of participating in a criminal organization.

As news of the guilty verdicts broke, cheers and celebrations erupted among the crowd of at least 20,000 people gathered in an anti-fascist rally outside the Athens courthouse. A small

group threw Molotovs and stones, with police responding with tear gas and water cannon.

The marathon trial had been assessing four cases rolled into one: the 2013 fatal stabbing of Greek rap singer Pavlos Fyssas, physical attacks on Egyptian fishermen in 2012 and on left-wing activists in 2013, and whether Golden Dawn was operating as a criminal organization.

The 68 defendants included the 18 former lawmakers from the party that was founded in the 1980s as a neo-Nazi organization and rose in prominence during the country's decade-long financial crisis.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said the verdict "ends a traumatic cycle" in the country's public life.

"Its political dimension has, fortunately, been judged by the victory of democracy, which expelled the Nazi formation from Parliament (in elections)," he said. "Now, the independent judiciary is giving its own answer."

The three-member panel of judges also found Giorgos Roupakias guilty of the murder of Fyssas, prompting applause inside the courtroom and among the crowd outside. Roupakias had been accused of being a party supporter who delivered the fatal stab wounds to Fyssas. Another 15 defendants — none of them former lawmakers — were convicted as accomplices.

Leaving the courthouse, Fyssas' mother Magda Fyssa, who had attended nearly every court session over the last five years, raised her arms and shouted: "Pavlos did it. My son!"

All five people accused of attempted murder against the fishermen were also found guilty, while the four accused of attempted murder in the attacks against left-wing activists were found guilty of the lesser charge of causing bodily harm.

Only 11 of the 68 defendants were present, with the rest represented by their lawyers. None of the former Golden Dawn lawmakers were in court.

"The ruling demonstrates that they were just a gang of knife-wielding thugs who took their orders from the top," said Thanassis Kambayiannis, one of the lawyers representing the fishermen.

After the verdicts, defense lawyers began summations ahead of sentencing, a process that could last several days. Those convicted of leading a criminal organization face up to 15 years in prison, while the others face up to 10 years. Roupakias faces a life sentence.

"Today marks a huge victory for justice and respect for Greece and the entire world," Eva Cosse, Greece researcher at Human Rights Watch, told The Associated Press. "It sends a strong message that hate crimes are not and should not be tolerated in a democratic society."

Security was tight at the courthouse, with around 2,000 police, drones and a police helicopter deployed.

The crowd at the anti-fascist rally waved banners with slogans including "Fyssas lives, crush the Nazis," and chanted "The people demand the Nazis in jail." More than 5,000 people held a similar rally in the northern city of Thessaloniki.

Outside the courthouse, protester George Kounanis, who works as an employment equality campaigner for LGBT workers, said he was relieved by the verdict.

"We have lived under the threat they posed for years. They have beaten, threatened and verbally abused same sex couples. They hate everything that is not Greek and macho," he said. "But we never cowed and never stopped speaking out against them. So it does feel like a vindication. A lot of people supported them, so we cannot be complacent."

Politicians from across the political spectrum, from the governing conservative New Democracy party to Greece's Communist Party and the former governing left-wing Syriza party, also attended.

At the crux of the case was whether the string of violent attacks could be linked to Golden Dawn's leadership. During the trial, the prosecutor recommended the acquittal of many of the party members for lack of evidence.

Golden Dawn denies any direct link to the attacks and described the trial and charges against the party's leadership as an "unprecedented conspiracy" aimed at curbing its rise in popularity.

[Greece] Leaders of Greece's neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn found guilty of running criminal organization (CNN)

[CNN](#) [10/7/2020 10:55 AM, Elinda Labrapoulou, 7975K, Negative]

The leaders of Greece's neo-Nazi group Golden Dawn were found guilty Wednesday of forming and running a criminal organization under the cloak of a political party, in a landmark decision hailed as a victory for democracy and human rights.

Following a marathon trial lasting five-and-a-half years, an Athens court deemed that crimes by Golden Dawn members including murder, attempted murder, assault and possession of weapons were not the actions of individuals operating on their own initiative. Instead they were directly planned and ordered by a party leadership that employed violence to eradicate perceived enemies.

Eighteen former party lawmakers, including leader Nikos Michaloliakos, a Holocaust denier who founded Golden Dawn in the 1980s as a neo-Nazi organization, were among those found guilty on Wednesday. Individual sentences are to be announced in the coming days.

There was a strong police presence around the court on Wednesday as left-wing parties, trade unions, and anti-fascist and human rights groups staged rallies to coincide with the verdict.

Protesters and riot police then clashed after the ruling. Police said a peaceful crowd of at least 20,000 people dispersed, but minutes after the verdict was announced, a smaller

group of around 600 people attacked officers with stones and Molotov cocktails.

Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis tweeted that it was a "truly historic day for Greece, democracy and the rule of law."

"After the Greek people voted the neo-Nazi party of Golden Dawn out of Parliament in the last election, today the Greek justice system convicted its leadership of operating as a criminal organization," he added.

The Golden Dawn leaders have denied the charges from the start, claiming they are victims of political persecution.

Dozens of others – party members and alleged associate – have been convicted on charges that range from murder to perjury. Most of these are linked to violent attacks between 2012 and 2013. They include the fatal stabbing of popular anti-fascist hip hop singer Pavlos Fyssas and attacks on immigrants and left-wing activists.

The decision concludes over 450 days in court and hundreds of testimonies and hours of data collected from the cellphones and laptops of those arrested. These include photos of Golden Dawn recruits at training camps posing with assault weapons and giving Nazi-type salutes.

"There is clear and unequivocal message in this landmark case, that hate crimes will no longer be tolerated, [the decision] can also have a significant impact on preventing racist violence in future," Nils Muiznieks, head of Amnesty International Europe, said ahead of the verdict.

Thanassis Kambiannis, a lawyer from the prosecution team, has described the trial as "the largest court hearing of Nazis since Nuremberg."

The trial started in April 2015, with close to 70 members of Golden Dawn charged under the so-called "mafia clause."

Among those present were victims of racist violence, some displaying knife scars, waving banners with the words: "They are not Innocent. Nazis in jail."

Rich in symbolism, the verdict offers a moment of catharsis in a country still healing from the wounds of its recent economic and political past, turmoil that pushed voters to extremes.

The verdict is "a strong institutional embankment against violence. It shows that democracy disposes instruments and institutions which can punish organized totalitarian, anti-democratic practices and criminal actions," said Lamprini Rori, a lecturer in politics at the UK's University of Exeter.

The rise of Golden Dawn

Golden Dawn began in the 1980s as the brainchild of Nikos Michaloliakos, who had been handpicked by one of Greece's former dictators to lead a far-right youth party after the fall of the country's seven-year military regime, and the restoration of democracy, in 1974.

Investigative journalist Dimitris Psarras, who has written extensively about Golden Dawn, has said that the party was from the very first day founded to "promote Nazi ideology," and "never stopped believing in racism and anti-Semitism."

Golden Dawn's phenomenal ascent in recent years was directly linked to the Greek financial crisis that began in 2010. A fringe group with just 0.3% of the vote in 2009, Golden Dawn skyrocketed to a 7% share in the 2012 election, which came after two belt-tightening bailouts in two years from the country's creditors – the European Union, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

The turmoil offered little hope for a country feeling increasingly betrayed by its political leaders, its European peers, and international institutions.

With an economy comparable to that of America's Great Depression and youth unemployment hovering at 50%, Golden Dawn exploited the resulting anger, despair and lack of rule of law to infiltrate the country's mainstream politics.

It entered the 300-seat parliament with 18 MPs, on its way to becoming Greece's third largest political force. It was the first time since World War Two that an overtly Nazi group had gained such prominence in a European country.

To embed its foothold, Golden Dawn focused on 'the common man,' engaging with communities and occupying the space the struggling state was unable to fill. With more people dependent on food coupons, the party created food distribution networks, and later blood banks – but these, like everything else the party offered, were strictly for 'Greeks only.'

The fervently anti-migrant party openly used venomous rhetoric against foreigners, with leadership figures saying they were "looking for ways to clean the stench."

Golden Dawn's words and actions became more openly extreme as its popularity grew. Reports of street violence – primarily against migrants, but also political opponents and members of the LGBTQ community – became frequent. Torchlit rallies grew, with supporters raising their arms in fascist salutes.

Europe's far-right parties were quick to distance themselves. Instead the Golden Dawn brand, with a logo closely resembling the swastika and almost identical slogans to those once used by the Hitler Youth, became increasingly attractive to ultra-right wingers from around the world who flocked to Greece to learn from the party's methods.

Among them was Andrew Anglin, editor of The Daily Stormer, one of the biggest neo-Nazi websites in the US, who attended Golden Dawn meetings.

The beginning of the end

The murder of 34-year-old anti-fascist rapper Pavlos Fyssas, who was stabbed by a self-professed Golden Dawn sympathizer in Athens in September 2013, led to widespread shock among the Greek public.

A swift crackdown followed, with the party's leader and lawmakers arrested and placed in pre-trial detention. They denied any direct links to Fyssas' murder and other attacks, and claimed to be the victims of political persecution.

Throughout the trial, prosecutors argued that Golden Dawn operated as a paramilitary group, with the party leadership instigating violence.

Despite the arrests, Golden Dawn's popularity continued to rise, but its electoral base shifted from urban areas to other parts of the country, including islands struggling to cope with a large influx of migrants and refugees.

The trial began in spring 2015, a few months after national elections that brought to power Greece's first hard left government and saw Golden Dawn come in third as the country unraveled into a political dystopia.

The year that followed, more than 1 million migrants and refugees reached Europe's shores through Greece, sparking the biggest refugee crisis in EU history.

A cautionary tale

Seven years on from Fyssas' death, Golden Dawn stands deflated and fragmented. The victory of the center-right party New Democracy in the 2019 elections, the first since Greece's exit from its bailout regime a year earlier, signaled a clean break with years of firebrand populism and a return to mainstream politics. For the first time since entering parliament, Golden Dawn failed to win a seat.

But worrying signs persist. As prosecution lawyer Thanassis Kambagiannis explains, "Greece's constitution does not allow the outlawing of political parties. This does not exist in the country's legal system. And there is no law to stop the founding of any new party."

The breakaway party Greeks for the Homeland, led by Ilias Kassidiaris – a prominent Golden Dawn figure who once famously slapped a female leftist politician during a live TV program – is gaining ground on an anti-migrant ticket, according to recent polling. That is despite Kassidiaris being among those tried, and now convicted.

Violence against immigrants and refugees linked to extreme-right groups has been reported on a number of occasions since the trial started, primarily on islands that host large migrant camps.

To prevent extremism from resurfacing, Rori says, the issues that foster extremism must be tackled. "If the government's capacity in managing immigration proves low this can eventually foster electoral demand for anti-immigrant party choices."

[Poland] Battle Over Mink Fur Almost Brings Down the Polish Government (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 12:12 PM, Marc Santora, Neutral]

When the European Union condemned Poland's government for demonizing gays and

lesbians, the country's governing coalition defiantly stood together. When state media was accused of spreading hate speech that fueled violence, the governing parties brushed off concerns. And when protests erupted against efforts to control the judicial system, they pressed ahead regardless.

Then came the minks.

Proposed legislation that would ban the farming of minks, semiaquatic mammals prized for their fur, and put in place a range of protections for other animals, opened deep divisions in the coalition that almost brought down the government.

It took the intervention of Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the head of the dominant Law and Justice Party, to quell the uprising for now by taking on a formal role that allowed him to act as a buffer between opposing factions.

The bill, which gained momentum after a documentary aired on Polish television showing minks living in deplorable conditions on one farm, has widespread public support and the leaders of the country's foremost opposition party support the legislation.

But the conservative governing coalition is divided over the issue, waging increasingly furious internal battles at a time when the nation is consumed with the coronavirus. All that has raised questions about the long-term viability of the government.

In the face of those concerns, Mr. Kaczynski, the most powerful politician in Poland and the architect of the government's agenda, stepped in Tuesday to be sworn in as deputy prime minister after five years of ruling from behind the scenes.

Apart from separating feuding coalition partners, one of his main tasks will be trying to grow public support for the Law and Justice Party, whose candidate for president, Andrzej Duda, only managed a narrow election victory in July.

It will be a difficult challenge since Mr. Kaczynski has been the driving force behind efforts by his party to marginalize the L.G.B.T. community, a campaign that has turned off many young voters. And his government has spent years at war with the European Union, despite broad support in Poland for membership in the bloc, especially among the generation born after the end of communist rule in 1989.

The government also has a dismal record on environmental issues — from logging in the country's ancient forests to failing to curb a reliance on coal.

But in championing animal rights, Mr. Kaczynski sees an opportunity.

"This is a pivotal moment for the party," said Wojciech Przybylski, the editor in chief of *Visegrad Insight*, a policy journal focused on Central Europe. Mr. Kaczynski, he said, knows he needs to expand his political base to include younger, more moderate voters by sending "a message of concern about nature and animals."

The issue also seems personal for Mr. Kaczynski, who has long been known for his affection for animals. When his beloved cat, Alik, died, it was national news. The 71-year-

old, who shuns nearly all requests for interviews outside of supportive media outlets, even went on TikTok to post a video promoting the #StopFurChallenge.

Since coming to power in 2015, Mr. Kaczynski has rarely been challenged. But observers say the division within the coalition over the law reflects a much more profound split between factions that want to take control over the country's conservative movement.

While Mr. Kaczynski's Law and Justice Party has long been the dominant force in the United Right coalition, it depends on the support of two junior conservative partners to stay in power: the Agreement and United Poland parties.

United Poland is led by the country's powerful justice minister, Zbigniew Ziobro, who has made no secret of his desire to become the leader of the country's conservative movement. Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki sees himself as the heir apparent. Mr. Kaczynski's emergence as deputy prime minister was partly aimed at keeping the two men apart.

Mr. Morawiecki quickly aligned himself with Mr. Kaczynski on the animal issue, posting his own video on TikTok supporting a ban on fur. Mr. Ziobro opposes the legislation and, until Mr. Kaczynski's intervention, his party was threatening to withdraw from the coalition over it, a move that would have erased the government's parliamentary majority.

Mr. Ziobro's opposition to the ban on mink farming reflects the industry's deep roots in Poland. The country is home to the largest mink farms left in Europe and the third largest in the world. The bill, which is still being debated, calls for the fur farms to be closed in a year.

The law would also end the use of wild animals in circuses, restrict the tethering of dogs on chains — a common practice in the countryside — and restrict the ritual slaughter of animals for meat.

The bill has been loudly condemned by politicians from the far right, which has made greater inroads into politics during the five years of rule by the Law and Justice Party.

Mr. Kaczynski has often used more extreme factions to push certain messages, and build his party's power base. The far right was critical in directing public outrage at migrants, helping the Law and Justice Party rise to power in 2015. More recently, as the party cast "LGBT ideology" as a threat to the nation, ultraconservatives have been driving the messaging.

Now Mr. Kaczynski risks losing some of that support.

Rev. Tadeusz Rydzyk, a conservative cleric who has strong connections to Law and Order and controls a vast media empire, used his Radio Maryja station to attack the legislation.

"They feel pity now over these little furs," Father Rydzyk said recently, adding that the government should be focused on things like further limiting abortion rights. "Let's not animalize man and humanize animals."

The bill is also opposed by the meat industry, which says its export business to markets with halal and kosher requirements would be badly hit.

Jacek Zarzycki, president of the Polish Association of Beef Cattle Breeders and Producers, said that if the bill were passed, his members could lose 30 percent of their income.

"We cannot afford that; we will lose the best export markets for Polish beef, which is the export star of Polish agriculture," he told TVN24.

But it is the minks that have drawn the most attention. And it has turned Szczepan Wojcik, who along with his four brothers controls the vast majority of the mink farms in the country, into a national figure.

"I'm the most attacked person in Poland," he said in an interview at one of his farms some 60 miles outside of Warsaw.

He sees the attacks as part of a broader cultural war in Poland.

"The people who started the debate in Poland about animal rights, banning the use of animals by man, for example, for furs, are exactly the same people who promote LGBT, same-sex marriage, abortion, euthanasia and so on," he said.

While he has supported Law and Justice in the past, he said his thinking was now more in line with the more conservative groups led by Mr. Ziobro and Father Rydzyk.

Recent polls indicate overwhelming support for the ban, however.

Much of that is a result of the documentary co-produced by the animal rights organization Open Cages, showing gruesome footage of minks attacking each other, gnawing off limbs of other caged animals and even feasting on their remains.

"Poles don't want fur farms," said Bogna Witkowska, one of the group's leaders.

Mr. Wojcik said the footage in the documentary was manipulated, adding that it was in his interest to keep animals well cared for since the condition of their fur determined their value.

In an average year, 6.5 million minks are slaughtered in Poland, putting it just behind China and Denmark in terms of fur production.

Walking past rows of cages filled with minks scheduled to be slaughtered in a few weeks, he said he saw nothing wrong with his trade.

"People should take care of animals, but in the end it's the animals who should serve people, not the other way round," he said.

[Russia] Russia reports successful test launch of hypersonic missile (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 9:33 AM, Staff, 2164K, Neutral]

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday hailed the successful test launch of a new Zircon hypersonic cruise missile as a "big event" for the country.

Speaking to Putin via a video call, Russian General Staff chief Valery Gerasimov said the test launch took place Tuesday from the Admiral Groshkov frigate located in the White Sea, in the north of Russia.

The missile successfully hit a target in the Barents Sea, he added.

"Equipping our Armed Forces — the army and the navy — with the latest, truly unparalleled weapon systems will certainly ensure the defense capability of our country in the long term," said Putin, who was celebrating his 68th birthday Wednesday.

In 2019, Putin had said the Zircon would be capable of flying at nine times the speed of sound and have a range of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles).

[Russia] Russia touts test launch of hypersonic missile on Putin's birthday (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 1:23 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia has test launched its Tsirkon hypersonic cruise missile and successfully hit a target in the Barents Sea, a senior commander told Vladimir Putin on the Russian leader's 68th birthday on Wednesday.

Speaking to Putin by video link, Valery Gerasimov, chief of the army's general staff, said the test strike on Tuesday was carried out from the Admiral Gorshkov vessel which was located in the White Sea in northern Russia.

Putin, who has pledged to beef up Russia's military presence in the Arctic, talked up hypersonic missiles and a new generation of Russian weapons in a March 2018 speech. He praised the test launch on Wednesday.

"This is a big event not only for the life of the armed forces, but also for all of Russia, for the whole country," Putin told Gerasimov.

The Tsirkon test comes amid tensions over arms control between Russia and the United States. New START, the last major nuclear arms pact in place between the two countries, is due to expire in February.

Gerasimov said the missile hit its target at a distance of 450 kilometres (280 miles) in four and a half minutes after reaching hypersonic speeds of more than Mach 8.

He added that tests would continue and that Russian surface vessels and submarines would be armed with the missile when those tests are completed.

Russia reportedly test-launched the missile successfully from a military vessel for the first time in January.

[Russia] On Putin's birthday, Russia tests new hypersonic weapon (Washington Times)

Washington Times [10/7/2020 5:22 AM, Ben Wolfgang, Neutral]

The Russian military on Wednesday delivered a birthday present to President Vladimir Putin, testing a cutting-edge hypersonic cruise missile that the Kremlin claims can travel at

nine times the speed of sound and hit targets more than 600 miles away.

Russian Chief of the General Staff Gen. Valery Gerasimov said the test of the Zircon missile system was conducted on the Admiral Groshkov frigate in the White Sea. The hypersonic weapon hit its target in the Barents Sea, Russian military officials said.

Dramatic footage posted to social media Wednesday seems to show the weapon being launched from a Russian vessel.

"Equipping our armed forces — the army and the navy — with the latest, truly unparalleled weapon systems will certainly ensure the defense capability of our country in the long term," Mr. Putin said.

Hypersonic weapons, which can travel at five times the speed of sound or faster, are a top priority for the Russian military and for Mr. Putin personally. Russia, China and the U.S. all are racing to lead the world in hypersonic technology, and each nation also is investing in defense systems capable of defeating the lightning-fast weapons.

Wednesday's launch also comes at a tense moment between Washington and Moscow. Representatives from the two old Cold War foes met in Finland this week to negotiate a replacement or extension of New START, the last arms treaty between Washington and Moscow, which expires in February.

[Russia] France and Germany to propose sanctions on Russia after Navalny poisoning (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 3:43 PM, Loveday Morris and Isabelle Khurshudyan, Neutral] France and Germany will propose sanctions on individuals they deem responsible for the poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, their governments said Wednesday, reiterating that they suspect a Kremlin involvement.

Proposals forwarded to European Union partners will also target an entity involved in the Novichok program, a joint statement from the French and German foreign ministries said. Navalny has been recovering in Berlin after falling ill from the nerve agent in Russia on Aug. 20, spending weeks in a coma.

The statement did not give further specifics on the possible targets for sanctions.

Moscow has dismissed claims of its involvement as "baseless" and has declined to investigate the incident, citing a lack of evidence.

"A murder attempt has been made on Russian soil, against a Russian opposition figure, using a military-grade nerve agent developed by Russia," the statement from France and Germany said.

"No credible explanation has been provided by Russia so far," it continued. "In this context, we consider that there is no other plausible explanation for Mr. Navalny's poisoning than a Russian involvement and responsibility."

On Tuesday, the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) confirmed findings of German, French and Swedish laboratories that Navalny had been poisoned by a nerve agent in the same family as Novichok, a chemical weapon developed by the Soviet Union.

Traces in Navalny's blood and urine "have similar structural characteristics" as the toxic chemicals in the Novichok family, the OPCW said.

Novichok was also used in the poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter two years ago in Salisbury, Britain. After Western intelligence linked that attack to Russian state security agents, the European Union sanctioned two Russian military intelligence chiefs and the two men Britain suspected of being responsible for carrying out the poisoning. The Trump administration imposed sanctions on a wide range of exports.

In his first media interviews, Navalny has directly blamed Russian President Vladimir Putin for the attack. "I assert that Putin was behind the crime," he told the German magazine Der Spiegel. "I have no other explanation for what happened.

Proposing individual sanctions indicates that the Nord Stream 2 pipeline may be spared. The project, which will bring Russian gas to Germany under the Baltic Sea, has faced increasing scrutiny amid worsening relations between Berlin and Moscow.

Just last month, German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas told the Bild am Sonntag newspaper, "I hope the Russians won't force us to change our position regarding Nord Stream 2."

But Navalny himself advocated for individual sanctions targeting oligarchs and other members of Putin's inner circle rather than punitive economic measures that could hurt everyday Russians.

"The most important thing is to impose entry bans on profiteers of the regime and freeze their assets," Navalny told the German daily Bild. "They embezzle money, steal billions and at the weekend they fly to Berlin or London, buy expensive apartments and sit in cafés."

In the interview, Navalny singled out Valery Gergiev, chief conductor of the Munich Philharmonic who supported Putin in the last election, and former German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, who now works for Russian energy firms.

Berlin has also accused Russia of being behind the brazen daylight assassination of Zelimkhan Khangoshvili, a Georgian citizen of Chechen descent, in a Berlin park last year. He had previously fought with Chechen rebels against Russia. The 55-year-old Russian accused of carrying out the murder, named by prosecutors as Vadim K., went on trial in Berlin on Wednesday. "Our findings show this was a contract murder by Russian state authorities," prosecutor Ronald Georg told reporters.

[Russia] In hardening stance, France, Germany push for EU sanctions on Russians over Navalny Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 12:44 PM, John Irish and Robin Emmott, Neutral]

France and Germany said on Wednesday they would propose European Union sanctions

against Russian individuals after receiving no credible answers from Moscow over the poisoning of Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny with a nerve agent.

Several Western governments have said Russia, which has denied accusations by Navalny that it was involved in the poisoning, must help in investigations or face consequences.

The decision and speed with which Europe's two main powers agreed to push ahead with sanctions suggests a hardening of the bloc's diplomacy towards Moscow.

It is in stark contrast to 2018 when it took almost a year for members to agree on sanctions against Russian individuals following a nerve agent attack on a Russian spy in Britain.

"No credible explanation has been provided by Russia so far. In this context, we consider that there is no other plausible explanation for Mr Navalny's poisoning than a Russian involvement and responsibility," Foreign Ministers Jean-Yves Le Drian and Heiko Maas said in a joint statement.

Diplomats had earlier told Reuters the two countries would propose sanctions on Russian GRU military intelligence officials when the EU's 27 foreign ministers meet on Oct. 12.

"Drawing the necessary conclusions from these facts, France and Germany will share with European partners proposals for additional sanctions," the two ministers said.

"Proposals will target individuals deemed responsible for this crime and breach of international norms, based on their official function, as well as an entity involved in the Novichok programme."

Blood samples taken from Navalny confirmed the presence of a nerve agent from the banned Novichok family, the global chemical weapons watchdog said on Tuesday.

EU foreign ministers are expected to give their political support on Monday, but the sanctions are not expected to be approved immediately as legal texts must be prepared and cleared by experts from the 27 EU states.

Le Drian told a parliamentary committee in Paris on Wednesday: "We say with Germany that clarification by Russia is indispensable and if it doesn't clarify then we will need to draw conclusions among Europeans. We are in sync with Germany."

He said Paris was not closing the door to dialogue with Moscow.

[Russia] Russian envoy hits back at calls for Navalny investigation (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 7:22 AM, Mike Corder, 2164K, Neutral]

Germany's foreign minister warned Wednesday of possible "targeted and disruptive sanctions" if Russia does not provide answers about the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny with a Soviet-era nerve agent, while a Russian diplomat pushed back at international calls for clarity, saying his country "doesn't owe anything to anybody."

German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas was speaking a day after Germany said that tests

conducted at labs designated by the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons confirmed that Navalny was the victim of a Novichok nerve agent.

Navalny, anti-corruption investigator who is Russian President Vladimir Putin's most visible foe, was flown to Germany two days after falling ill on Aug. 20 during a domestic flight in Russia. German officials said last month that labs found traces of a Novichok agent in the Russian politician's system. Navalny is now recovering in Germany.

Maas called the attack "a serious breach of international law" and said Germany will coordinate a response with its European allies and at the OPCW in the coming days.

"It is clear that if the events are not cleared up and the necessary information is not provided, then targeted and disruptive sanctions against those responsible on the Russian side will be unavoidable and Russia would do well not to let this happen," Maas said in Berlin.

He said Germany needs to have talks with the European Union "in coming days" about possible sanctions targeting individuals linked to chemical weapon development.

Navalny said last week that only Putin could have been behind the attack against him. The Kremlin called that claim "absolutely groundless and unacceptable."

A group of 44 OPCW member nations including Germany, the U.K., the United States and France delivered a statement at the organization's Executive Council meeting Tuesday calling on Russia "to investigate and to disclose in a swift and transparent manner the circumstances of this chemical weapons attack" and share the findings with the OPCW before its next full meeting of member states, scheduled to start on Nov. 30.

Russia's envoy to the OPCW, Ambassador Alexander Shulgin told the meeting that "Russia does not owe anything to anybody. Neither to Germany nor to other countries that categorically and groundlessly accuse Russia of poisoning Alexei Navalny. We do not need to explain ourselves to them and we are not going to."

However, Moscow has asked the OPCW to consider sending technical experts to Russia to "cooperate with Russian experts on the matter," Shulgin said. The organization has said it is willing to help, but needs clarification of Moscow's request before sending experts.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that Russia "genuinely wishes to shed light on all the circumstances, reasons and the essence" of what happened to Navalny and that Moscow invited OPCW experts to the country "specifically so that they can see something here."

Moscow is yet to receive detailed information from the OPCW about its findings, Peskov added. "We only know only the main outlines that were published, but there is no specifics there."

The Russian Foreign Ministry on Tuesday night also bristled at the OPCW's findings, calling them part of a "conspiracy scenario."

The ministry said Russia will lay out its version of events at this week's meeting of the OPCW's Executive Council and "present the chronology of backstage manipulation by the main actors in this play."

[Russia] Russia not producing chemical weapons, Kremlin says after OPCW findings on Navalny (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 7:02 AM, Gabrielle Tétrault-Farber and Dmitry Antonov, 5304K, Neutral] The Kremlin said on Wednesday that Russia was not developing any chemical weapons and was fully complying with its obligations under an international arms control treaty that outlaws their production.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov was speaking after the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) said blood samples from Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny contained a nerve agent from the banned Novichok family.

The watchdog's findings confirm results released by Germany, where Navalny was treated after falling suddenly ill on a flight in Siberia in August.

Peskov said Russia had yet to receive any official information from the organisation about Navalny's case. Russia has denied any involvement.

[Russia] Russia opens criminal investigation over pollution off Far East (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 12:56 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia on Wednesday opened a criminal investigation to establish the cause of unexplained toxic pollution off its far eastern coast that has killed sea creatures and led to their carcasses being washed ashore.

Greenpeace warned last week of an ecological disaster in waters off the Kamchatka region, a volcanic peninsula on the Pacific. Conservation group WWF has said the pollution was very likely caused by a highly toxic soluble substance.

Scientists told regional authorities on Tuesday that nearly all marine life on the seabed of the Avacha Bay – located on the Kamchatka peninsula's southern coast – had been killed, with only a small number of large fish, shrimp and crab surviving.

The Investigative Committee, a Russian equivalent of the U.S. FBI, said dead marine life had washed up on the shore from Sept. 1 to Oct. 3, and that the water had been found to contain oil components including phenol and had changed colour.

It did not name any suspects in its investigation.

Aerial footage of the area circulated online showed the water had turned yellowish in some places.

The law enforcement agency said the pollutant closely resembled industrial oil or a similar substance. It said it was examining all possible sources of the pollution, including a nearby facility used to store pesticides.

It said it was investigating suspected violations in the handling of environmentally hazardous substances and the pollution of the marine environment.

Dmitry Kobytkin, the minister of natural resources and the environment, said on Wednesday that those responsible would be punished.

"There cannot be any compromises here, as with the situation in Norilsk," he said, referring to a major fuel spill in the Russian Arctic in May. "Citizens' environmental well-being and the preservation of ecosystems come first."

Kobytkin initially said water and land samples showed no evidence of elevated levels of oil or oil products and that the pollution did not appear to be manmade in origin.

[Ukraine] Ukraine sees record daily high of 4,753 new coronavirus cases: security council (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 2:09 AM, Natalia Zinets, 5304K, Negative]

Ukraine registered a record 4,753 COVID-19 cases in the past 24 hours, the national security council said on Wednesday, up from a previous record of 4,661 new cases reported on October 3.

The council said a total of 239,337 cases had been registered in Ukraine as of Oct. 7, with 4,597 deaths, including 77 in the past 24 hours.

The daily tally of coronavirus infections spiked in late September and early October above 4,000, prompting the government to extend lockdown measures until the end of October.

[Ukraine] Ukraine plan to tackle hackers sparks privacy fears (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 5:58 AM, Umberto Bacchi, Neutral]

From crashing supermarket tills to messing with radiation readouts, Ukraine is hoping to tackle an ever-growing list of cyber attacks with a new law that rights experts warn could give authorities excessive powers to pry into the lives of citizens.

Last month, a group of lawmakers led by members of the ruling party proposed a set of laws that would, among other things, boost police search powers and require internet firms to store and provide access to large amounts of user data.

"If these draft laws are passed, then the state may have much easier access (to) the personal data of persons and ... their communications," said Maksym Dvorovyi, a lawyer at the Digital Security Lab, a Ukrainian digital rights group.

Since 2014, hackers have knocked out Ukraine's power supplies, frozen supermarket tills, affected radiation monitoring at the stricken Chernobyl nuclear power plant, and forced the authorities to prop up the hryvnia currency after banks' IT systems crashed.

In 2019, a virus was downloaded in a tax accounting programme and spread to wreak havoc around the globe, while only last month hackers forced the national police to temporarily shut down its website.

Reports of online scams and attacks against Ukraine's government ministries and information portals can run into the thousands every month, according to a report released by the U.S. State Department in August.

And the number of incidents has increased during the coronavirus pandemic, with many daily activities moving online, Denis Monastyrsky, a lawmaker with the ruling Servant of the People party, said in emailed comments.

From March to May, authorities recorded about 15,000 cyber incidents and 88,000 "suspicious events", he said, adding that internet fraud, phishing – when users are tricked into disclosing their passwords – and fake online news were also on the up.

"The main purpose of these draft laws is to increase the capacity of law enforcement agencies in the fight against cybercrime," said Monastyrsky, who initiated the reform and heads a parliamentary committee on law enforcement.

With Ukraine regarded by some cyber-security experts as a guinea pig for Russian state-sponsored hacks, despite Kremlin denials, even rights groups and members of the opposition concur that the country's cyber laws need updating.

The proposed changes seek to bring legislation in line with the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime, for example, by regulating for the first time the use of electronic evidence in criminal proceedings.

Dvorovyi at the Digital Security Lab said this would be a positive step for the country's courts.

Now courts often have to use cumbersome legal manoeuvres to handle electronic information during a case, such as asking lawyers to load a webpage on their laptop and show it to the courtroom for it to be admitted as evidence, he explained.

The new law lists webpages, as well as digital documents, photos, videos, virtual assets and other electronic information as evidence that is admissible in court and can be presented in their original form or as a copy.

This would also allow for cryptocurrencies obtained as the result of criminal activity to be confiscated – something that is not currently possible, added Monastyrsky, the lawmaker.

While the proposed amendments would do little to prevent attacks, which would require strengthening cybersecurity infrastructure, they might help investigating them and bringing those responsible to justice, said Dvorovyi.

Yet, privacy campaigners and tech experts have raised concerns that some of the proposed amendments might go too far.

One provision would allow detectives and prosecutors to access information stored on laptops, smartphones and other devices if they see fit during a search, with no need for a specific warrant.

But this lack of oversight could be problematic in a country long regarded as riddled with corruption, said Kira Rudyk, head of the opposition party, Golos.

She noted that personal databases are easily sold online in Ukraine and even wiretaps – which require a warrant – are often abused.

“With corruption being an issue, there is less guarantee that personal data is collected, processed and stored in a lawful manner,” said Rudyk, former COO of the Ukrainian division of Amazon-owned home-security company Ring.

“Simplifying the procedure for information access will only exacerbate the issue and lead to massive and disproportionate interference in the private lives of Ukrainians.”

Another measure would oblige internet providers to store everyone’s web traffic information for 12 months and grant investigating authorities access to it, in some cases with no need for a court order, said Oksana Pokalchuk, head of Amnesty International Ukraine.

Dvorovyí, the digital rights lawyer, said this risks exposing users’ data to leaks and hacks, and adds an unfair burden on internet companies.

“It may demand the installation of extremely large servers on which such information will need to be stored,” said Dvorovyí.

Such provisions are not unique.

In Britain, the Investigatory Powers Act – called the “Snoopers’ Charter” by critics – which came into force in 2017, can also compel companies to store internet history data for a year and grant access to the security services and police.

The law, which detractors argue gives authorities some of the most extensive snooping capabilities in the West, has been the object of numerous legal challenges from rights groups.

Ukraine’s proposed reform has also come under fire from the Ukrainian Internet Association, representing more than 200 companies, which said the law would increase costs for consumers and harm small businesses with fewer financial resources.

Privacy campaigners have urged a rethink of the bills, which still have to be discussed and voted on by the relevant committees before going to parliament.

“Ukrainian legislation concerning cyber-security needs to be modernised,” said Pokalchuk of Amnesty.

“But we also call on Ukrainian authorities to take into consideration ... international obligations in the field of human rights.”

Monastyrsky, the lawmaker, said most of the criticism was unfounded as the proposals comply with international treaties and Ukraine’s constitution.

"In the mass media, there is only general criticism in the context of alleged violations of human rights, pressure on business. It is not true," he said.

[United Kingdom] Four men on trial over death of 39 Vietnamese migrants in UK truck container (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 11:46 AM, Michael Holden, 5304K, Neutral]

Two members of an alleged people-smuggling gang stood trial on Wednesday accused of being responsible for the deaths of 39 Vietnamese men, women and boys found suffocated in a stifling, airtight shipping container near London last year.

The victims, nine of whom were teenagers and two aged just 15, were discovered last October in a container at the back of a truck on an industrial estate in Grays, about 20 miles (32 km) east of the British capital — a shocking incident which shone a light on global people smuggling.

Prosecutor William Emlyn Jones said the dead had been sealed inside a refrigeration unit, which was not turned on, in pitch black for at least 12 hours as the temperature rose to an unbearable 38.5 Celsius (101.3 F).

"What it must have been like inside that lorry does not bear thinking about," he said. "In short, they suffocated. There were no survivors."

He said an unsent text message on the phone of one dead woman, Pham Thi Ngoc Oanh, 28, read: "Maybe going to die in the container, can't breathe any more, dear."

An Irish haulage boss, Ronan Hughes, 41, and Maurice Robinson, 26, from Northern Ireland, the driver of the truck, have already pleaded guilty to manslaughter. On Wednesday, four other men accused of being part of the people-smuggling ring went on trial at London's Old Bailey court.

British-Romanian dual national Gheorghe Nica, 43, and Eamonn Harrison, 23, from Northern Ireland, deny manslaughter, while Harrison, Christopher Kennedy, 24, and Valentin Calota, 37, deny conspiracy to assist unlawful immigration.

Nica admitted that offence earlier on Wednesday, but denies any involvement in the fatal incident.

The Vietnamese migrants' journey began in northern Europe on Oct. 22 when the container was driven by Harrison to the Belgian port of Zeebrugge where it was loaded onto a cargo ship for England, Emlyn Jones said.

Shortly after midnight on Oct. 23 at the English port of Purfleet, it was picked up by Robinson. He stopped almost immediately after being sent a message by his boss which said: "Give them air quickly, but don't let them out."

"What he found must haunt him still," Emlyn Jones told the court. "For the 39 men and women inside, that trailer had become their tomb."

HUGE SUMS

The prosecutor said there were huge sums to be made from people smuggling, with people paying upwards of 10,000 pounds to cross the English Channel in the back of a truck.

He said the gang had successfully brought in truckloads of migrants previously, with Nica organising their dispersal and Calota one of their drivers. In May 2018, Harrison was stopped at Coquelles in northern France with 18 Vietnamese nationals hidden in his truck. He was given a fine, but never paid it.

On this occasion, however, Emlyn Jones said something "went dreadfully wrong." Truck driver Kennedy, who was not involved in the fatal trip, texted a friend on the morning the bodies were found, saying: "Must have been too many and run out of air."

Most of the 39 victims – 28 men, eight women and three boys aged between 15 and 44 – were from Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces in north-central Vietnam, where poor job prospects and other factors spur migration.

Last month, a court in Vietnam sentenced four Vietnamese people to between 2-1/2 and 7-1/2 years in prison for their role in the deaths. Police said the defendants had arranged for one of the women to travel illegally to France and then to Britain for \$22,000.

The trial at London's Central Court is expected to last about six weeks.

[United Kingdom] Two UK prisoners convicted of trying to murder jailer after terrorism probe (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 2:42 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Two inmates of a British jail who tried to murder a prison officer while wearing makeshift suicide-bomb belts have been convicted after an investigation by anti-terrorist police.

Armed with improvised weapons, they lured the officer to a cupboard and pushed him to the floor before seriously injuring him.

"This was a calculated and horrific attack by two prisoners who had one aim - to try and murder prison staff," said police Commander Richard Smith, head of London's Counter Terrorism Command.

Police said the two men had been wearing imitation suicide belts they had made from wires and plastic cartons. Their attack was foiled by other prison officers who rapidly filled the area and secured them in cells.

Detectives later recovered writings by both men, which supported extremist Islamic ideology.

Brusthom Ziamani, 25, and Baz Macaulay Hockton, 26, were convicted at the Old Bailey court on Wednesday of attempted murder. Ziamani was also convicted of actual bodily harm and common assault of a nurse and another officer who both came to the victim's assistance at the Whitemoor maximum security prison in eastern England in January.

They will be sentenced on Thursday.

East Asia and Pacific

China Snatched the 'Hong Kong 12' Off a Speedboat, Giving Protest Movement New Life (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 7:12 AM, Wenxin Fan and John Lyons, Neutral]

A small group of dissidents climbed into a speedboat and set off from a tiny Hong Kong fishing village just after 7 a.m. on Aug. 23, in a daring attempt to rush 400 miles across major global shipping lanes to safety in Taiwan.

All but one of the 12 people on the boat faced charges related to Hong Kong's protests, ranging from the widely applied accusation of rioting to far more serious weapons offenses, including charges of making explosives.

They didn't get far. They were intercepted by China's coast guard at around 9 a.m.—just 26 miles outside Hong Kong's territorial waters—according to the city's police.

The group, which has been held incommunicado in a jail on the mainland since then, has become known as the "Hong Kong 12." Their situation is fueling fears in Hong Kong about the stark differences between the city's British-styled courts and the mainland's opaque legal system. These fears underpinned last year's protests as well as opposition to a new national security law that was imposed on the city this summer by Beijing.

Their families say they didn't learn until five days after their capture that they were being held in a detention facility in the Chinese city of Shenzhen, just over the border from Hong Kong. Ignoring calls for their return to Hong Kong, Chinese authorities last week made their arrest official and are preparing for prosecution on the mainland.

The case has helped breathe some life into a protest movement crippled by the coronavirus outbreak and the new national security law. A smattering of protesters took to the streets on Oct. 1, China's National Day, and risked arrest to chant for their release. Over the weekend, others climbed a mountain overlooking Hong Kong and beamed "SAVE 12" in lights to the city below. The U.S. State Department has weighed in as well, calling on China to make sure they receive fair treatment and trials.

"People in Hong Kong are worried that they'll be tortured and kept in incommunicado detention indefinitely," said Eddie Chu, a pro-democracy politician. "It's a test case."

The people who attempted to flee to Taiwan range in age from 17 to 33 and come from a diverse range of backgrounds—one is a cat-loving surveyor and another is a college student who performed in stage dramas. Most have been charged by China with illegal border crossing, which carries a one-year sentence. Two are accused of organizing the trip and could be imprisoned for much longer.

Families of the detained people have complained that the group should be returned to Hong Kong immediately. But China has shown no sign that it is considering backing down and the

atmosphere is politically charged.

"Law-breakers have to be punished," China's Liaison Office in Hong Kong said on Sept. 29.

Since last year, a growing number of Hong Kongers have fled to Taiwan, an island democracy whose president has promised to provide support for protesters seeking sanctuary. Most have traveled by plane, though other groups are believed to have made the harrowing trip across the water.

Mainland authorities say the "Hong Kong 12" set out from Po Toi O, a weekend destination tucked against a steep hill in a remote cove on Hong Kong's rural northeastern coast.

There were no experienced mariners aboard the speedboat. Hong Kong police said they paid smugglers for the boat before attempting their escape.

The risk of capture was high. China's military has conducted exercises around Hong Kong, including holding practice runs for catching seaborne fugitives on the day the new national security law was imposed, according to a vivid video posted on a social media account of the People's Liberation Army's garrison in Hong Kong.

Flight-tracking data from flightaware.com shows a Hong Kong government surveillance-and-rescue plane equipped to detect smugglers circled over their departure area and route for hours that morning. Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam wouldn't comment on the plane at a briefing Tuesday after a local publication suggested it may have helped in the arrests, but she said the city's police force wasn't involved in the operation.

The group reached the limits of the city's maritime jurisdiction in less than 30 minutes, Hong Kong police said, citing radar data and findings by mainland authorities. An hour and a half later, they were intercepted by China's coast guard within the mainland's jurisdiction.

Mr. Chu, the pro-democracy politician, hired a boat in late September to retrace part of the journey in the hope that he might discover a fishing boat that saw the arrest or any other clues on what happened. Setting out in the same low tides and slow winds that prevailed the morning of the escape, he had a choppy journey even though he traveled at a slower speed.

"At one point my boatman said to me, less than 30 minutes was very fast and dangerous for someone new to boats," Mr. Chu said.

Parents of the fugitives say their children gave scant hints of their plans. A week before Li Tsz-yin boarded the boat, he asked to take a picture with his mother, Chan Lok-yin. It struck her as unusual because he was shy and only took photos with her when she suggested it.

The photo was taken with an instant camera and is framed with a Star Wars theme. Mr. Li, in round glasses, looks stiffly into the camera while his mom rests her chin on his shoulder with a smile. She carries it in her wallet.

A 29-year-old surveyor and trained medic, Mr. Li regularly joined last year's demonstrations and provided aid to protesters injured in clashes with police. He was arrested for rioting. In

May, prosecutors added a charge of assaulting a police officer.

"He said he could spend as many as six years in prison," his mother said. "He said he had no confidence in the judges."

Another passenger on the boat, Wong Wai-yin, a 30-year-old mechanical engineer, worked at one of Hong Kong's ports and lived in the city's rural outskirts with his wife and mother. The family had never paid much attention to politics, but Mr. Wong's mother, who asked not to be named, said they were galvanized in support of the demonstrations by images of police using force that they viewed as excessive.

In January, dozens of police raided the Wongs' home and surrounding fields and discovered a hidden stash of homemade explosives. The raid came amid a string of homemade bomb incidents that appeared to suggest a violent evolution in tactics employed by the most radical protesters. After the raid, police arrested Mr. Wong, his wife, his mother and their domestic helper. His mother declined to comment on the explosives charges.

When Mr. Wong didn't come home the day of the escape attempt, his mother feared he had committed suicide. He had long suffered from depression and both his father and uncle had died by suicide, Mrs. Wong said. He had tucked a letter laying out his will and an apology to his family for any stress he had caused into a book for learning the computer coding language Python.

After learning of his arrest, Mrs. Wong lined up a Beijing-based human rights lawyer to defend her son. As the lawyer traveled by high-speed train from central China to visit the jailed protester, plainclothes security agents tailed him and tried to convince him to drop the case, she said. When he arrived at the detention facility in Shenzhen, he was told his services wouldn't be needed—two lawyers had already been appointed—and Mrs. Wong's son didn't want additional help.

It is a story she doesn't buy.

"I don't believe my son would not want my help," Mrs. Wong said in a recent interview. "How would he pick a lawyer if he isn't allowed on the phone?"

The lawyer hired by Mr. Wong's mother, human rights advocate Ren Quanniu, declined to comment.

Li Ka-ki, the father of the arrested surveyor and medic, is also waiting for news.

"So far they've told us nothing," the senior Mr. Li said. "The lawyers they appointed for my son have never contacted us. They wouldn't even tell us the lawyers' names."

[Australia] Australia says tax cuts to come into effect in December (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 2:00 AM, Colin Packham, 5304K, Neutral]

Australia's Treasurer Josh Frydenberg said on Wednesday that the tax cuts forming the centrepiece of the country's annual budget will not come into effect until December.

Frydenberg on Tuesday announced A\$17.8 billion in personal tax cuts and A\$5.2 billion in new programmes to boost employment in a plan aimed at helping the coronavirus-ravaged economy by creating one million new jobs over the next four years. The bulk of the tax cuts are retrospective from July 1.

Although the legislation is on course to pass this week, Frydenberg said the stimulus would not be seen in the incomes of Australians until December.

"The advice to us ... is that people will receive the money at the end of the year," Frydenberg told reporters in Canberra.

The timetable stokes concerns about Australia's A\$2 trillion economy being left without sufficient support. The government's wage subsidy payments will be reduced in coming months and stop in March 2021.

"Our main concern is that the move from public to private spending will be lumpy," ANZ Bank said in a research note.

Australia's economy shrank 7% in the three months that ended in June, the most since records began in 1959, while the unemployment rate hit a 22-year high of 7.5% in July as businesses and borders closed to deal with the coronavirus.

Australia pledged to reduce the heavy fiscal support once the unemployment rate falls "comfortably below 6%", which Frydenberg said on Wednesday would likely begin in 2024.

[China] Huawei Blocked From Sponsoring Security Event in NATO's Slovakia (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 5:40 AM, Radoslav Tomek, Neutral]

Huawei Technologies was barred from sponsoring a defense summit in NATO member Slovakia after the country's president briefly canceled a speech over concerns the Chinese telecommunication company posed a security risk.

President Zuzana Caputova's refusal to speak at the conference hosted by the Bratislava-based Globsec think tank is a victory for the U.S., which has been exhorting its allies to block Chinese companies from technology projects, including nuclear plants and 5G networks.

Caputova canceled a speech she was due to give on Wednesday at the event, according to her spokesman, Martin Strizinec. Globsec then ended the sponsorship with Huawei, however, and she reverted to the original plan.

"The president sees speaking at a conference with such a company among sponsors as a bad signal," Strizinec said by email. "For her, it isn't only an issue of security, but also of principles and values."

A spokeswoman for Huawei's Slovak unit declined to immediately comment when reached by phone.

The decision follows a tour of Europe by U.S. State Secretary Mike Pompeo, who pressed Washington's allies to shun Russian and Chinese companies' efforts to take part in technological projects.

In August, Slovenia signed a declaration on 5G security, agreeing to guard its networks in a way that could block Huawei from taking part. Fellow North Atlantic Treaty Organization members Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Latvia and Estonia signed similar statements with the U.S. last year to block access to companies that might be subject to foreign state interference.

Globsec has withdrawn from the sponsorship pact with Huawei, the Bratislava-based think tank said on its website, adding that neither Huawei nor any other partner has any influence over the content of the conference or research.

[China] Little-Known Investment Firm Centricus Circles TikTok With Long-Shot Bid (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 11:01 AM, Kirsten Grind, Bradley Hope and Georgia Wells, Neutral]

A low-profile investment firm is trying to entice the head of TikTok's parent company with a long-shot alternative bid, as the popular video-sharing app remains caught in a standoff between the U.S. and China.

London-based Centricus Asset Management Ltd. has revised an offer several times in recent weeks based on feedback from Zhang Yiming, CEO of TikTok parent ByteDance Ltd., and his advisers, according to people familiar with the discussions, a copy of the bid, and other documents pertaining to the offer viewed by The Wall Street Journal.

The bid's architects are positioning it as a backup to a deal already on the table led by Oracle Corp., which China's ByteDance struck to appease the U.S. government and which was preliminarily approved by President Trump last month. The U.S. has called the app a national security concern.

Mr. Trump has said that he wants TikTok's U.S. operations owned by Americans. Centricus says in its bid it will create a new holding company in a jurisdiction that is acceptable to the U.S. and China.

People close to Centricus say they see the firm's odds of success as low. Centricus executives believe that if the Chinese government ultimately blocks the Oracle ORCL +2.63% deal, their bid could be seen as a potential middle path, one that preserves value for the existing investors and satisfies U.S. concerns that TikTok's data not be in Chinese hands, while also preventing an American takeover of one of China's most successful tech companies. Centricus also said in its bid that it is open to the participation of existing investors and American companies.

Some senior officials in both the U.S. and China are believed to be opposed to the existing Oracle deal, and there is no guarantee it will ultimately be approved by either Washington or Beijing.

Centricus, which helped set up SoftBank Group Corp.'s \$100 billion Vision Fund, says in the bid it has lined up international investors and American companies to purchase the stake in ByteDance and to help oversee the app's operations in the U.S. and abroad.

The Centricus bid is "structured to allow the participation of other financial investors and technology partners, and so might incorporate any of the other options ByteDance is considering today," a spokesman said in a statement. "We are patient and understand this will be a process that ByteDance will undertake as it evaluates the various options."

A ByteDance spokesman said that the company has received a number of unsolicited inquiries related to TikTok. "We are not and have not been in any discussions with Centricus regarding TikTok," he said. "Any claims to the contrary are frankly not credible." The company declined to make Mr. Zhang available for comment.

The Journal has reviewed correspondence showing Mr. Zhang has communicated about the bid with Centricus advisers in China. The Journal has also reviewed formal bid documents, which were sent over WeChat to Mr. Zhang.

Centricus hired China-connected advisers and a Beijing-based partner of the law firm King & Wood Mallesons to represent their bid in discussions with Mr. Zhang and one of his lieutenants, according to the people familiar with the bid and other documents. A partner for King & Wood said the matter is "private and confidential."

The backchannel discussions highlight the lingering uncertainty around TikTok, the subject of a global sweepstake kicked off by Mr. Trump's insistence that it be sold to a U.S. company to address his fear that the Chinese government could gain access to TikTok's user data. TikTok has said it wouldn't hand over any data. TikTok held talks over the past two months with some of the world's biggest tech and investment firms about deals that would keep it from being shut out of the U.S. market.

Some people close to the talks believe it is possible there won't be a resolution on either side before the U.S. presidential election on Nov. 3. The outcome of that election could also reset the discussions. Democratic nominee Joe Biden hasn't made clear his position on TikTok.

How China responds to the Oracle deal remains a wild card, but local media has been sharply critical of the idea of ceding such a prized asset to American control.

The hit video-sharing app has been downloaded 2 billion times globally in less than two years, and has roughly 50 million daily users in the U.S.

When Bloomberg reported on the Centricus bid in late August, TikTok publicly brushed it off. Since then, Centricus has revised its bid into two offers: The main one is for the entirety of TikTok, at a valuation of \$50 billion, with the Centricus investors paying \$25 billion for a 50% ownership stake, documents show.

The other is for TikTok's operations in the U.S., Canada, India, Australia and New Zealand, valued at \$20 billion with Centricus investors also taking a 50% stake, the documents show.

The numbers were a starting point for discussions over either bid, a person familiar with the bid said.

Triller, TikTok's much smaller U.S. rival, is expected to play a role in both Centricus proposals, people familiar with the matter say—although it isn't formally mentioned in the bid viewed by the Journal.

The idea to make a play for TikTok came in August from one of Triller's owners, the former movie-studio executive Ryan Kavanaugh, those people said. Centricus knows Triller because it has looked at investing in the app over the last year, these people say.

Bobby Sarnevesht, a co-owner of Triller, said in a statement that he believes the bid "meets both the U.S. and Chinese government criteria while maximizing value for the ByteDance shareholders."

Centricus, founded in 2016, is a London-based investment and advisory firm run by former Deutsche Bank executives, with about \$30 billion in assets under management.

The company has relationships with investors across the world, including several sovereign-wealth funds, but it is unclear who is backing its TikTok bid.

Centricus, leveraging its connections in China, went directly to Mr. Zhang at ByteDance with its then-\$20 billion bid at the end of August, according to the people familiar with the negotiations. That move bypassed the more formal process that Oracle and Microsoft were pursuing in the U.S.

[China] China's 2060 carbon neutral goal bill could hit over \$5 trillion (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 12:06 PM, Jessica Jaganathan, Neutral]

China's goal of reaching carbon neutrality by 2060 would require investments of more than \$5 trillion, which would include renewable power generation capacity as well as carbon capture technology, consultancy Wood Mackenzie said on Thursday.

President Xi Jinping said at the United Nations General Assembly in September that China would achieve carbon neutrality before 2060, the first time the world's biggest emitter of carbon dioxide has committed to ending its net contribution to climate change.

If delivered, the pledge would bring about the biggest reduction in projected global warming of any climate commitment made to date, according to research consortium Climate Action Tracker.

For China to reach its goal, Woodmac estimated that solar, wind and storage capacities will have to increase 11 times to 5,040 gigawatts (GW) by 2050 compared with 2020 levels.

Coal-fired power capacity will have to halve while gas has to end at the same level as in 2019, the consultancy said.

"The most challenging part of the shift is not the investment or magnitude of renewable capacity additions but the social transition that comes with it," said Prakash Sharma,

Woodmac's Asia Pacific head of markets and transitions.

"Halving coal capacity will result in loss of coal mining jobs, affecting provinces that depend on its revenues and employment generation."

As a result, he said the Chinese government would be likely to retrofit coal-fired power plants with carbon capture and storage (CCS) technology to retain coal mining activity in key provinces.

A major hurdle to China's carbon-neutral goal is the lack of scalable low-carbon alternatives in the transport and industrial sectors, Woodmac said. The consultancy said China's carbon emissions from these two sectors last year reached 5.7 billion tonnes, roughly as large as the total emissions in the United States and United Kingdom combined.

These industries will require government subsidies or carbon pricing to decarbonise, Woodmac said.

"Given China's large heavy industry and machinery sector, it is crucial that China masters the use of CCS ... to offset the remaining emissions. Without it, China's pledge to become carbon-neutral is nearly impossible," Sharma said.

[Myanmar] Myanmar releases voter app criticised for Rohingya label, despite EU objection (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 6:40 AM, Staff, 5304K, Negative]

Myanmar's election commission has released a smartphone app criticised over its use of a derogatory label for Rohingya Muslims despite entreaties by its European Union funders to remove controversial data.

The mVoter2020 app, aimed at improving voter awareness, labels at least two candidates from the Rohingya ethnic group as "Bengali," a term that implies they are immigrants from Bangladesh and is rejected by many Rohingya.

After campaign group Justice for Myanmar said last week the app risked inflaming nationalism, a website shared by the election commission directing people to download it went offline and a mobile version was not available.

But the mobile app has been available to download since Saturday with candidates' race and religion data listed, and that of their parents, and a web version is also accessible.

Pierre Michel, public diplomacy adviser to the EU's Myanmar mission, said the EU had "strongly advocated for the removal of all controversial data that could lead to discrimination and exclusion," declining to comment further.

The Union Election Commission (UEC) did not answer telephone calls seeking comment.

The app was developed by the election commission, with support from STEP Democracy, an EU-funded project implemented in Myanmar by the Sweden-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA), and the U.S.-based Asia

Foundation.

Donors have sought to distance themselves from the app, saying the UEC is solely responsible for its content and removing social media posts detailing their involvement.

A Rohingya candidate listed as "Bengali" on the app was disqualified from running on Friday after the UEC said it had found his parents were not citizens, though it was not clear if the decision was connected to the app.

Marcus Brand, the country director of International IDEA, said the organisation regretted "that any candidates have been targeted, harassed or attacked over their ethnicity or religious affiliation" but said the declaration of ethnicity and religion was an integral part of Myanmar's electoral process.

He said he had been informed the candidate disqualification was "not related to the app or the current controversy."

The Asia Foundation did not respond to requests for comment.

[New Zealand] New Zealand Stamps Out the Virus. For a Second Time. (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 9:17 AM, Livia Albeck-Ripka, 28290K, Neutral]

The first time New Zealand thought it had eliminated the coronavirus from its isolated shores, a mysterious outbreak in its largest city shattered any sense of victory over a tenacious foe.

Now, after a second round of strict lockdown, the country believes — if a bit more tentatively this time — that it has effectively stamped out the virus once again.

On Wednesday, New Zealand moved to lift the last of its restrictions in Auckland after 10 days with no new cases linked to a cluster that first surfaced in August. The government will now allow unrestricted gatherings, and trips on public transit without social distancing or masks, in the city of 1.6 million people.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, who is facing re-election next week, called the reopening a validation of the country's "go hard, go early" response. The strategy is aimed at eradicating the virus with a swift science-based policy, one that trades weeks of lockdown and sacrifice for an emergence to full economic activity.

"Our team of five million, a little more battle-weary this time, did what national teams do so often. We put our heads down, and we got on with it," Ms. Ardern told reporters in Christchurch on Monday as she announced that the restrictions would be loosened, referring to the total number of people in New Zealand.

"You only had to look around the world to see the alternative to our approach here in New Zealand," she said, adding that there was a 95 percent probability that the country had eliminated local transmission of the virus.

Experts cautioned that New Zealand's small population and isolation meant it was uniquely positioned to manage the disease. But its success presents a stark contrast to many other parts of the world as deaths from the pandemic have surpassed one million.

India is being devastated by the virus after proceeding with its economic reopening even as a second wave washed over the country. In the United States and Brazil, leaders have continued to play down the pandemic's dangers even as they themselves have been infected.

The word "elimination" in relation to the virus, said Michael Baker, an epidemiologist at the University of Otago, "might stick in the throat for some politicians, because it seems too tough, but as we found in New Zealand, it's a goal you aim for, and you accept you might have outbreaks."

Professor Baker helped devise the country's elimination strategy. He said that despite early fears that severe lockdowns would irreparably damage the economy, New Zealand's approach had proved that the best economic response was a strong public health response, including a blitz of testing, contact tracing and quarantining.

Much of the rest of the Western world, Professor Baker added, has "adopted the approach of complacent exceptionalism — that they wouldn't get the virus, or it wouldn't be as severe as they thought, and the pandemic has proved them wrong."

In Auckland, where gatherings had been restricted to 100 people and masks had been mandated on public transport, the rules were eased at 11:59 p.m. on Wednesday. People are no longer required to wear masks in public, but must continue to sign in at and keep records of locations they visit, maintain good hygiene practices and, if unwell, remain at home and get tested for the virus. The national border remains closed to almost all travelers except New Zealand citizens and permanent residents.

While residents said they were relieved, they did not expect an immediate return to normal life.

"People have stayed in their suburbs and supported their local restaurants, so where in the past I was in a really good spot, now not so much," said Yael Shochat, who has run Ima Cuisine, a restaurant in downtown Auckland, for almost two decades.

"But the most important thing is we have eliminated the virus again, and that makes people confident to come out," Ms. Shochat said. "I'm hoping that as Christmas comes, people will really want to go out and party — it's been a horrible year."

Others said they had been frustrated at restrictions that seemed too stringent, preventing them from applying for visas or doing work considered nonessential by the government. And some who acknowledged that the measures were necessary said they felt that not enough had been done to assist them.

"I can't get any help from the government," said Sherrie Edwards, 51, who after losing her job as an importer in recent months said she feared that she might have to sell her home to make ends meet. Ms. Edwards said she was feeling "quite depressed."

While the economic pain has been acute for many, New Zealand has kept the number of cases and deaths from the coronavirus low. The country has had 1,505 confirmed cases and 25 deaths in total, and as of Wednesday, just three new cases of the virus had been recorded, all of them people still in quarantine after arriving from overseas.

The numbers have worked in Ms. Ardern's favor, placing her ahead in the polls before the country's elections on Oct. 17.

"I was always leaning toward Labor, but this has well and truly solidified it for me," said Christopher Carroll, a 31-year-old primary school teacher in Auckland, referring to the party Ms. Ardern leads. "I feel like we're in a better situation than in other parts of the world, where this thing is going on and on."

Two months ago, however, many in the country wondered whether that success would continue.

The Auckland cluster, the country's largest, involved 179 cases. At the same time in neighboring Australia, its second-largest city, Melbourne, was in the grip of a severe second wave from which it is only now emerging. And though disease detectives struggled to pin down the origins of the Auckland outbreak, the country was ultimately able to quash it through a citywide lockdown that began the day after the first cases emerged.

New Zealand is not alone in successfully pursuing an elimination strategy, with Taiwan among those following the model. And other places, including Hong Kong and Vietnam, have stamped out second or third waves. But experts said this approach would not necessarily work everywhere.

"They've never had a major outbreak where the number of cases have overwhelmed their public health capacity," Adam Kamradt-Scott, an associate professor of global health at the University of Sydney, said of New Zealand.

He added that even though the country's size, isolation and disaster preparedness gave it distinct advantages, an elimination strategy may not be viable in the absence of a vaccine.

Michael Plank, a mathematics and statistics professor at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, said that until that time, it would be wise for New Zealanders to continue wearing masks — even if the virus appeared to have been defeated.

"We need to be really careful not to let our guard down," Professor Plank said. "We think we've got a high chance now that we've eliminated community transmission of the virus. But that doesn't mean it won't come back."

[North Korea] North Korean Defector Who Vanished in Rome Is Now in South Korea (Wall Street Journal)

Wall Street Journal [10/7/2020 12:25 PM, Andrew Jeong, Neutral]

A senior North Korean diplomat who vanished from public view while serving as Pyongyang's acting ambassador to Italy in 2018 has been secretly living in South Korea for

over a year, according to South Korean lawmakers briefed by the country's spy agency.

The whereabouts of the envoy, Jo Song Gil, who the Journal has reported fled with the help of a clandestine group dedicated to toppling Kim Jong Un's North Korean dictatorship, had been a mystery until the legislators confirmed his presence in South Korea late Tuesday local time.

Mr. Jo, one of the most senior North Korean officials to defect in recent years, and his wife at one point hid in an undisclosed Western country after his escape, according to people familiar with the matter. He arrived in South Korea in July of 2019, the South Korean lawmakers said.

The legislators, a group of ranking members on the South Korean National Assembly's intelligence committee, said they wouldn't discuss details of Mr. Jo's journey to South Korea or disclose where in the country he is living out of concern for his safety, according to lawmaker Ha Tae-keung.

Mr. Ha said the group decided to publicly confirm Mr. Jo's presence in South Korea after a local TV station on Tuesday said he was in the country. Lawmaker Jeon Hae-cheol, the chairman of the committee, told reporters that Mr. Jo had repeatedly expressed an intent to come to the South, but declined to say more. South Korea's foreign ministry and spy service declined to comment.

The former North Korean diplomat could be a valuable source of intelligence for the South and its allies, including the U.S., because of his likely ability to shed light on the ways Pyongyang employs its diplomats and others in efforts to evade sanctions and raise cash abroad for the regime.

North Korean diplomats posted to Europe have a long history of helping the Kim regime secure cash through illicit methods, according to a 2018 memoir by Thae Yong Ho, another senior North Korean diplomat who defected to the South four years ago.

Members of Pyongyang's foreign service were caught smuggling cigarettes, to help pay the maintenance costs of North Korean embassies, Mr. Thae said. In 1999, North Korean officials in Stockholm demanded Israeli officials to give them \$1 billion in cash. Pyongyang officials offered to stop selling weapons to the Middle East if Israel accepted. It refused.

More recently in 2017, French authorities failed to catch a North Korean spy who had been using bank accounts in their country. The spy used his status as a staff of an international organization in Europe to help secure visas for other North Korean officials suspected of funneling illicit cash for the regime, according to a United Nations report.

Mr. Jo's presence in the South also threatens to chill already-frayed relations between the two Koreas, especially if he decides to become an outspoken critic of the North and its leader.

North Korea demolished an inter-Korean liaison office near the demilitarized zone that separates North and South in June, citing Seoul's failure to clamp down on antiregime North Korea escapees in the South.

News of Mr. Jo's defection comes just weeks after North Korea's navy killed a South Korean civil servant. North Korea's Mr. Kim said he was very sorry for the killing, in a rare, swift apology.

Mr. Thae is now a conservative South Korean lawmaker and an outspoken critic of Pyongyang's nuclear-weapons development and human-rights abuses.

"I've known him for 20 years," Mr. Thae said Wednesday, describing his relationship with Mr. Jo. "In North Korea, if a diplomat escapes and quietly lives in a third country, he's considered an escapee. If the diplomat goes to South Korea, he's branded a traitor."

The families and friends of those considered traitors can face political imprisonment or worse, Mr. Thae said. Mr. Thae said he was concerned about Mr. Jo's daughter, who he said got separated from her parents during their escape and was taken back to North Korea.

North Korea has lashed out at defectors and, in some cases, tried to kill high-profile escapees who have criticized or leaked intelligence about the ruling Kim family.

In 1997, North Korean agents shot and killed an in-law of the Kim family in front of his South Korean apartment, while multiple assassination attempts against other escapees have been foiled by South Korean authorities, according to South Korean officials and defectors.

"It depends on what acting ambassador Jo decides to do," said Go Myong-hyun, a research fellow at the Asan Policy Institute, a Seoul-based think tank. "If he becomes a public critic against the North, it'll complicate relations. If he stays quiet, this incident will probably be forgotten."

Mr. Jo has a calm and composed character, said Mr. Thae, who was also one of Mr. Jo's bosses when the two both served at the Pyongyang foreign ministry's Europe department. Mr. Thae told reporters that Mr. Jo was seen as an Italy and France expert. His father and father-in-law were both senior career diplomats. "He's from a very upper-class family in North Korea," Mr. Thae said.

An unknown number of North Korean elites have quietly defected to South Korea like Mr. Jo, defectors and North Korea experts say. Seoul officials have almost without exception respected their goal of staying off the radar of Pyongyang, which is sensitive about the defection of elites because they may encourage other upper-class North Koreans to follow their lead.

Though some like Mr. Thae choose to come out publicly, many live in private, due to fear of endangering relatives still in North Korea, or a wish to avoid media attention. More than 33,000 North Koreans have resettled in the South.

[North Korea] Lawmakers: North Korean ex-envoy to Italy defected to South (AP)
AP [10/7/2020 2:45 AM, Kyung-Jin Kim, Neutral]

A senior North Korea diplomat who vanished in Italy in late 2018 lives in South Korea under

government protection, lawmakers said Wednesday.

If confirmed, Jo Song Gil, North Korea's former acting ambassador to Italy, would be the highest-level North Korean official to defect to rival South Korea since the 1997 arrival of Hwang Jang-yop, a senior ruling Workers' Party official who once tutored leader Kim Jong Un's father, late leader Kim Jong Il.

South Korea's spy agency had earlier told lawmakers that Jo left his official residence in Rome with his wife in November 2018 and was under protection at an unspecified location outside the European country.

Lawmaker Ha Tae-keung, a member of the intelligence committee in the National Assembly, wrote on Facebook that Jo arrived in South Korea in July 2019 and is under the protection of the South Korean government.

Ha said he was confirming Jo's arrival on behalf of the committee to prevent a media frenzy, after a South Korean TV station reported about his defection on Tuesday evening. Ha said the committee decided not to provide further details about Jo for his safety.

Jeon Hae-cheol, the committee's chairman, told reporters later Wednesday that Jo came to South Korea voluntarily after expressing wishes to resettle here several times. Jeon said Jo didn't want his arrival to be publicized because of worries about relatives in North Korea, according to Jeon's office.

Neither lawmaker said how they obtained the information. It's likely that they were briefed about Jo by the National Intelligence Service, the country's main spy agency, as committee members routinely meet NIS officers for discussions on North Korea.

The NIS said it was checking reports about Jo's arrival. South Korea's foreign and unification ministries said they couldn't confirm the reports.

Before Jo, Thae Yong Ho, a former minister at the North Korean Embassy in London, was the most senior North Korean diplomat to defect to South Korea. He came to Seoul in 2016 and was elected to the National Assembly this year. Thae said he decided to defect because he didn't want his children to live "miserable" lives in North Korea and he was disappointed with Kim Jong Un.

Thae issued a statement urging media outlets to refrain from exposing too much about Jo, citing worries about a possible reprisal against his daughter in North Korea.

The reason for Jo's departure from his Rome residence isn't known. North Korea's state media haven't mentioned his possible defection.

About 33,000 North Koreans have fled to South Korea since the late 1990s to avoid political suppression and poverty in the North.

[Philippines] U.N. to step up rights work in Philippines after drug war killings (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 9:12 AM, Stephanie Nebehay, Neutral]

The Philippines pledged on Wednesday to cooperate with the United Nations on human rights issues after U.N. investigators documented tens of thousands of killings in the so-called war on drugs whose perpetrators were treated with "near impunity."

Under a resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council on Wednesday the U.N. will provide technical assistance to help the government of President Rodrigo Duterte ensure unlawful killings and other violations are properly investigated and prosecuted.

Philippines ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva Evan Garcia said the government had "identified projects for the joint programme in the areas of strengthening investigative and accountability mechanisms, the establishment of compliance monitoring systems for the national police and engagement with civil society."

The resolution cited similar areas in which the United Nations could provide technical assistance.

But activists said it fell short of their appeals to establish an international investigative mechanism.

"The human rights situation in the Philippines warrants more than just 'technical assistance' from the U.N.. A full international investigation to effectively address the pervasive impunity in the country is urgently needed," said Rachel Chhoa-Howard, Philippines researcher at Amnesty International.

A landmark United Nations report in June said tens of thousands of people in the Philippines may have been killed in the war on drugs since mid-2016 amid "near impunity" for police and incitement to violence by top officials.

Duterte's spokesman Harry Roque has said what he called "rehashed claims" of impunity in the report were unfounded.

The text of the resolution presented on Wednesday by Iceland on behalf of countries including the Philippines keeps the issue on the agenda for two years.

"We are hopeful that this first step will lead to concrete results on the ground," Harald Aspelund, Iceland's ambassador to the U.N. in Geneva, told the Council.

Laila Matar of Human Rights Watch denounced the "collective failure" of states to launch an international investigation.

"At the same time, it is quite clear that Duterte and the state forces behind the brutal campaign are not off the hook and will face continued examination," she said in a statement.

[South Korea] South Korea proposes compromise abortion law after landmark court ruling (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 6:02 AM, Sangmi Cha, Neutral]

South Korea on Wednesday proposed allowing abortion up until the fourteenth week of pregnancy as part of a new law designed to comply with a landmark ruling by the constitutional court that struck down a decades-long ban.

South Korea criminalised abortion in 1953 when its leaders wanted to boost the population, but exceptions to the law were introduced in 1973, including when the pregnancy was caused by a sexual crime.

However, the Constitutional Court overturned the ban in April last year, saying it unconstitutionally curbed women's rights and ordering the government to come up with a new law.

Under the new proposal, abortion would be banned after 14 weeks except in the case of a sex crime, or if the health of the mother is at risk, or if the fetus shows signs of severe birth defects, in which case abortion would be allowed up to 24 weeks, the Justice Ministry said in a statement.

It also allowed the use of the drug mifepristone for performing abortions.

The proposal drew criticism from both sides of the debate, with women's rights groups arguing that the law is still focused on punishing women.

Instead, any law should focus on how to safely provide the procedure, the Joint Action for Reproductive Justice in Seoul said in a statement.

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Korea issued a statement opposing the justice ministry decision, saying that children should be protected "from the very moment of conception."

Ahead of the court's ruling, opinion polls showed around three-quarters of South Koreans supported dropping the ban.

South Korea has a fertility rate of 1.1 births per woman, the lowest of 198 countries and falling far behind the global average of 2.4, according to the 2020 United Nations Population Fund report.

[South Korea] Indonesian busts out of South Korean quarantine facility (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 1:41 AM, Sangmi Cha, Negative]

An Indonesian seaman bust out of a South Korean quarantine facility by breaking through a wall a day before he was due to complete a mandatory two weeks in isolation, a health official said on Wednesday.

"The person had tested negative for coronavirus and showed no symptoms during the isolation period," health ministry spokesman Son Young-rae told reporters.

Authorities suspected the man, who had entered the country on a ship crew visa, intended to illegally stay in South Korea, as there had been several similar incidents involving Vietnamese nationals in recent month, officials said.

Every person arriving in South Korea from overseas is required to undergo two weeks of isolation to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus regardless of whether they have COVID-19 symptoms.

In March, the country's health ministry warned it would deport foreigners and South Korean citizens could face jail for violating self-quarantine rules after a surge in imported coronavirus cases.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency (KDCA) reported 114 new infections on Tuesday midnight, bringing the national tally to 24,353 cases, with 425 deaths.

[Thailand] Thailand reels over corporal punishment of kindergarten pupils (Yahoo News/The Telegraph)

Yahoo News/The Telegraph [10/7/2020 1:17 AM, Nicola Smith, 11261K, Negative]

Thailand has been gripped by a scandal over the corporal punishment of kindergarten pupils that has seen the mass indictment of teaching staff at a private school after the parents of 30 children filed complaints about physical abuse.

Six more teachers and caregivers at the Sarasas Witaed Ratchaphruek school near the capital Bangkok turned themselves in on Tuesday to face criminal charges, bringing the total of accused employees to 13.

The controversy comes in the middle of nationwide pro-democracy protests where school students have rallied against draconian classroom laws and the promotion of military-style discipline that dictates even the length of their hair.

High school pupils demanding educational reforms, who have organised themselves under the tongue-in-cheek name of "Bad Students," have staged several protests against schools and the education ministry, demanding more rights in the classroom and greater accountability for teachers.

Corporal punishment is not unusual in Thai schools, despite a recent order by the education ministry banning the use of physical discipline, but the details and scale of the alleged abuse at the Sarasas institution, alongside televised emotional confrontations between teachers and parents have shocked the public.

Ronnarong Kawpech, a lawyer representing 30 families, said his clients filed charges of physical abuse, illegal detention and child abuse against the staff members, and separate complaints against both the school and the involved employees seeking \$160,200 in compensation for each abused child.

Disturbing videos of the reported abuse have emerged on social media, escalating the scandal.

The problem first came to light when a parent raised concerns with a staff member about a son who was behaving strangely and refused to go to school.

The staff member revealed a video from a closed-circuit TV camera inside the classroom that showed a female caregiver physically abusing the child while other staff turned a blind eye.

The incident prompted other parents to review footage, where repeated physical violence was reportedly uncovered.

In one of the most shocking examples, a student is thrown to the floor and then a female caregiver covers his head with a black garbage bag as he tries to run away, AP reported. Another clip shows a caregiver repeatedly push a pupil against a wall while he is trying to leave the classroom.

Last week, Piboon Yongkamol, the president of the privately run chain of 49 Sarasas schools, accused the parents of just wanting money and appeared to show little remorse, reported Khaosod news.

"They just want to win," he told Thairath TV. "Please give the school an opportunity to address it. We come in peace and I would like to apologise to the parents."

[Vietnam] Vietnam Detains Activist Trang for Anti-Government Materials (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 6:13 AM, Mai Ngoc Chau, 6400K, Neutral]

Vietnamese blogger and democracy activist Pham Thi Doan Trang, 42, was detained on charges of creating, storing and spreading anti-government documents, the Ministry of Public Security said on its website.

The arrest came a few hours after the annual human rights dialog between the United States and Vietnam, Phil Robertson, deputy Asia Director of Human Rights Watch, said in an email statement. The charge against Trang falls under article 117 of the penal code, which provides penalties of up to 20 years in prison, he said.

Her blog, Doan Trang, touches on politically sensitive topics, including the relationship between Vietnam and China and tensions over territorial maritime claims, Robertson said. Police detained Trang in May 2016 as she was traveling to meet with President Barack Obama, who had invited her to a gathering of activists with him during his visit to Hanoi, according to Robertson.

South and Central Asia

[Bangladesh] U.N. to Bangladesh: do more to end child marriage (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 12:59 PM, Naimul Karim, Neutral]

Bangladesh must do more to tackle child marriage if it is to meet its own goal of eliminating the crime by 2041, according to a United Nations report released on Wednesday.

"This human rights violation...(is)robbing children of their childhoods," said Veera Mendonca, a spokeswoman for the U.N.'s children agency.

"We must invest now to secure girls' rights to life and education, and reduce their exposure

to violence and exploitation," she said during the launch of the report.

Bangladesh has 38 million girls who wed before they were 18, according to the U.N., equivalent to almost half the nation's female population.

While the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh has dropped to 51% from more than 90% in 1970, the country still has the highest rate of underage marriage in South Asia and ranks among the 10 worst offenders in the world.

The legal minimum age of marriage in Bangladesh is 18 for women and 21 for men.

More than 190 U.N. member states, including Bangladesh, committed to eliminating child marriage when they adopted the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.

Schools in Bangladesh have been closed since March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed about 5,400 people in the country. Campaigners say the prolonged closure and widespread economic hardship threaten to worsen the situation.

"As children and families cope with school closures, loss of income and increased pressure in the home, there are heightened risks of child marriage," said the report.

"Even during normal times married girls are over four times more likely to be out of school than unmarried girls," it added.

The Bangladesh government, which launched a National Plan of Action in 2018 to eliminate the crime, says the impact of its crackdown on underage marriage will not be felt for years.

Measures taken include the opening of youth clubs, better access to education for girls and campaigns to spread awareness.

"It will take some time to truly see the impact of these policies. It took us a while to start implementing them. I am hopeful of making better progress," said Abul Hossain of Bangladesh's women and children's ministry.

[India] PM Modi enters 20th year as democratically elected head of government (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [10/7/2020 1:51 AM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

Crossing another milestone, Prime Minister Narendra Modi entered 20th consecutive year as the democratically elected head of a government, without a break, on Wednesday.

The journey of the Prime Minister in public office began on October 7, 2001, as the Chief Minister of Gujarat. This was followed by three terms as the Gujarat CM in 2002, 2007 and 2012, respectively.

During the third term as the Gujarat CM, however, Modi fought the 2014 general elections. His popularity, which was going through the roof both inside and outside the State, led to the BJP declaring him as its prime ministerial candidate in 2013.

He had been projected as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) candidate for the PM post.

Defeating the Congress-led government which held sway at the Centre, CM Modi left Gujarat to take over the reins at the Centre. Since then, he has solidified his position with the NDA coalition retaining its position in the Centre with an even bigger margin in the 2019 general elections.

"If the first term was fulfilling the needs of people then since 2019, PM Modi has set his sights on fulfilling the aspirations of 130 crore Indians. Jammu and Kashmir has finally been fully integrated in India and Article 370 is history. The Ram Mandir is now a reality with construction starting for a grand Ram Temple at the birth place of Prabhu Ram. Our farmers have finally been freed from artificially imposed chains on them and far-reaching, historic agriculture reforms are now a reality. A host of other reforms such as Labour Reforms, Coal Reforms, allowing private enterprise in the space sector, FDI reforms across the board and tax reforms have put in place a foundation for sustained years of economic growth," an article shared on the official website of PM Modi on the day read.

Meanwhile, the Prime Minister's journey to the head of an elected government started in 2001 in the backdrop of relief work for the devastating Bhuj earthquake.

The following years saw him rolling out several pro-people policies and actively reaching out to the people directly, leading to the formation of his image as a leader of the masses.

Further, upon becoming the Prime Minister, he continued the pro-people approach, which was further reflected in the various schemes such as Jan Dhan Yojana, the Mudra Yojana, the Jan Suraksha Yojana, the Ujjwala Yojana, the Saubhagya Yojana, Ayushman Bharat, the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana, the PM-Kisan Yojana, among others.

Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic phase too the pro-poor schemes continued, under which arrangements were made to provide foodgrains, jobs, financial help to migrant workers, farmers, among others during the lockdown phase.

As PM Modi enters the 20th consecutive year in public office, the mantra of 'development for all' continues to steer India ahead towards the goal of making an "Atmanirbhar Bharat."

[India] Green finance recovery mechanisms needed to meet infrastructure gap in Southeast Asia: ADB (Yahoo News/ANI)

Yahoo News/ANI [10/7/2020 1:41 AM, Staff, 4021K, Neutral]

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has urged policymakers in Southeast Asia to use green and innovative financing approaches to help catalyse the estimated 3.1 trillion dollar investments required for climate-adjusted infrastructure in the region by 2030.

These investments from both public and private sources will be critical to the region's economic recovery from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, it said in a new book titled 'Green Finance Strategies for Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery in Southeast Asia.'

The book was launched on Wednesday on sidelines of 7th Annual OECD Forum on Green Finance and Investment.

It explores innovative, environmentally sustainable and climate-resilient financing instruments like green and transitions bonds for COVID-19 recovery, blue credits for oceans financing and green securitisation while also providing examples of ADB-supported green initiatives.

"A green recovery for southeast Asia is needed to encourage long-term, sustainable job creation in a region with more than 650 million people," said ADB Vice President Ahmed M Saeed.

"It will boost equitable growth, protect the environment and help governments meet the Paris climate agreement targets. This timely book shows how green finance can spur growth in the region and overcome the challenges of climate change and a global pandemic."

Green finance refers to all financing instruments, investments and mechanisms that contribute to climate and environmental sustainability goals. It aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, boost climate resilience and improve environmental protection like air and water quality, ecosystems and biodiversity.

With a growing green finance market in developing Asia, ADB committed 6.5 billion dollars in climate finance from its own resources in 2019.

ADB aims to reach a cumulative 80 billion dollars from 2019 to 2030 in climate financing under its Strategy 2030 with a commitment to make 75 per cent of all ADB projects climate relevant by 2030.

[Kyrgyzstan] Russia, China call for calm in Kyrgyzstan (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 10:40 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Russia and China called on protesters in Kyrgyzstan Oct. 7 to return to a democratic process as rival opposition factions made grabs for power. [Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Kyrgyzstan] Kyrgyzstan opposition divided amid political chaos (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 3:00 PM, Daria Litvinova, Neutral]

Opposition parties in Kyrgyzstan failed to form a new government Wednesday as different groups argued over who would be the new prime minister after three days of political chaos in the Central Asian country.

Mass protests erupted in the capital of Bishkek on Monday following a weekend parliamentary election that appeared to show parties connected to the ruling elite winning. Opposition supporters seized several government buildings, looting some offices, and the Central Election Commission responded by nullifying the results of Sunday's balloting.

Members of some opposition parties said they would oust President Sooronbai Jeenbekov and form a new government. Lawmakers on Tuesday night announced the resignation of

Prime Minister Kubatbek Boronov and nominated former lawmaker Sadyr Zhaparov to replace him.

They also selected a candidate for parliament speaker, who later clarified that Zhaparov's candidacy is to be approved by parliament after he presents his proposals for a new cabinet as well as his policies.

Local media said the lawmakers didn't have a quorum and used proxy votes of other parliament members to approve new appointments. It wasn't immediately clear if any of the changes were legal under the constitution in Kyrgyzstan, where popular uprisings since 2005 have chased two presidents from power.

Several opposition parties rejected Zhaparov's candidacy, and another candidate emerged on Wednesday — Tilek Toktogaziyev, a young entrepreneur. Toktogaziyev was put forward by a coordination council formed by opposition politicians and activists, media reports said.

Kyrgyz media reported that Zhaparov called himself "a legitimate prime minister" appointed "by the parliament's majority" at a news conference and said he was "already working, coordinating the situation."

At the same time, the Russian state news agency RIA Novosti cited the press service of the Kyrgyz government as saying that Boronov will remain acting prime minister until Jeenbekov accepts his resignation.

Jeenbekov hasn't confirmed Boronov's resignation so far, and the government's website still lists him as prime minister.

Crowds gathered in central Bishkek on Wednesday, protesting Zhaparov's nomination and demanding Jeenbekov's impeachment. Zhaparov's supporters rallied in front of the government headquarters.

Lawmakers convened again in the evening to discuss the situation, according to media reports.

In a statement, Jeenbekov urged all political forces to "get back to (acting) within the law," but he didn't comment on attempts to appoint a new prime minister.

In another statement later Wednesday, Jeenbekov said he was committed to resolving the political crisis and was in talks with "various political forces," but none of them suggested a "unified platform for negotiations."

He also noted that "the process of dismissals and appointments to different top (government) posts" needs to be "made legitimate."

"The parliament should submit appropriate resolutions ... for me to sign (into) presidential decrees," his statement said. "It's been three days since the country submerged into this political crisis because of some political forces' actions ... I fully understand your demands to resolve this situation."

The unrest in Kyrgyzstan followed the announcement of election returns favoring two parties — one said to be closely aligned with Jeenbekov and another linked to a former top customs official — amid reports of vote-buying and other ballot fraud. Police dispersed Monday's protests with water cannons, tear gas and flash grenades, and health officials said one person died in the clashes, and about 700 were injured.

The country of 6.5 million, one of the poorest to emerge from the former Soviet Union, is strategically located on the border with China and once was home to a U.S. air base that was used for refueling and logistics for the war in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan also hosts a Russian air base and maintains close ties with Moscow.

[Pakistan] Pakistan to keep top suspect in Daniel Pearl murder in jail (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 4:02 AM, Munir Ahmed, Neutral]

A British-born Pakistani man who has been on death row over the 2002 killing of American journalist Daniel Pearl will remain in jail for another three months despite his acquittal by a lower court earlier this year, according to a government order on Wednesday.

The development was announced by prosecutors during a brief hearing of the high-profile case at Pakistan's Supreme Court, which was to decide whether the key suspect in Pearl's slaying, Ahmed Omar Saeed Sheikh, should stay in jail following his acquittal.

The court convened on an appeal by Pearl's family, seeking to keep Sheikh on death row over the beheading of the Wall Street Journal reporter.

According to Faisal Siddiqi, the lawyer representing Pearl's family, government prosecutor Fiaz Shah told the judges he needed more time for paperwork in connection with the case. The judges then adjourned the hearing till Oct. 21.

Siddiqi, who had expected the court to rule against Sheikh's acquittal on Wednesday, said he still hopes such a decision would come before the expiration of the suspect's new, 90-day detention.

Sheikh's defense lawyer, Mahmood Shaikh, told The Associated Press he had expected his client to walk free on Wednesday. "My client cannot be kept in jail for an indefinite period," Shaikh said.

The lawyer said he has already challenged Wednesday's three-month extension in Sheikh's detention in Sindh province and that his motion would be taken up by a local court there on Oct. 19.

Under Pakistan's flawed legal system, the appeals process against Sheikh's acquittal could take years. The government has opposed Sheikh's release, despite his acquittal in April, saying it would endanger the public.

Sheikh had been convicted of helping lure Pearl to a meeting in the southern Pakistani port city of Karachi where he was kidnapped. Pearl had been investigating the link between Pakistani militants and Richard C. Reid, dubbed the "Shoe Bomber" after trying to blow up a flight from Paris to Miami with explosives hidden in his shoes.

The lower court's April ruling acquitted Sheikh and three other accomplices, who had been sentenced to life in prison for their role in the plot. The lower court found Sheikh guilty of a single lesser charge of abduction, which he is also appealing.

The acquittal had stunned the U.S. government, Pearl's family and journalism advocacy groups. In 2002, when Pakistan police were still searching for Pearl, a video received by U.S. diplomats showed his beheading.

Pearl's family says it received assurances from the U.S. State Department that it was closely following Sheikh's acquittal and subsequent appeals.

Pearl, 38, of Encino, California, was abducted Jan. 23, 2002. In Sheikh's original trial, emails between Sheikh and Pearl presented in court showed Sheikh gained Pearl's confidence sharing their experiences as both waited for the birth of their first child. Pearl's wife Marianne Pearl gave birth to a son, Adam, in May 2002.

Evidence entered into court accused Sheikh of luring Pearl to his death, giving the American journalist a false sense of security as he promised to introduce him to a cleric with militant links.

[Sri Lanka] Sri Lanka widens curfew as virus surges (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 4:30 AM, Bharatha Mallawarachi, Negative]

Authorities in Sri Lanka on Wednesday widened a curfew and warned of legal action against those evading treatment for COVID-19 after reporting a growing cluster centered around a garment factory in the capital's suburbs.

The number of confirmed cases has risen to 830 while more than 1,500 people have been asked to quarantine at their homes, health authorities said.

The Indian Ocean island nation had just reported its first community infection in two months on Sunday. The majority of the infected people are co-workers of the first patient, who is from densely populated Western province, which includes the capital, Colombo.

Hundreds of people — both factory workers and residents — waited in lines Tuesday at makeshift medical centers to be tested for the coronavirus in the small town of Minuwangoda, about 50 kilometers (30 miles) north of Colombo, where the factory is located.

Some who had tested positive were refusing to go to state-run treatment centers even after the government provided them with transport, Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi said.

Wanniarachchi warned in a statement that legal action will be taken under quarantine regulations against those who evade treatment. Violators of the law could face a fine and imprisonment of up to three months.

Separately, the health ministry ordered a halt to public gatherings such as exhibitions, parties, conferences, indoor and outdoor events, carnivals, musical shows and processions.

Police also widened the curfew in suburbs of Colombo where many of the patients live. Previously, the government had closed schools, universities and imposed restrictions on public transport.

Chief epidemiologist Dr. Sudath Samaraweera said the new cluster poses a greater risk of spreading the virus in society compared to Sri Lanka's previous clusters.

The government had long touted that it had prevented community spread of the virus because all previously known cases were connected to 31 clusters and only two remained active.

Samaraweera said the risk is high with the new cluster because employees at the factory worked close together and also went home every day and mingled with others in society. "Therefore, if people do not support us, we will find it difficult to control this," Samaraweera said.

Local media reported that police and health workers were visiting the homes of factory workers on leave and were testing them as well.

The country has reported 3,733 cases, including 13 deaths. Of the total patients, 3,266 have recovered.

[Sri Lanka] Proposed Sri Lankan charter change raises rights concerns (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 1:22 AM, Krishan Francis, 2164K, Neutral]

A proposed amendment to Sri Lanka's Constitution that would consolidate power in the president's hands has raised concerns about the independence of the country's institutions and the impact on ethnic minorities who fear their rights could be undermined by a nationalistic Sinhala Buddhist parliamentary majority.

If passed, the amendment will bring Parliament under the control of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa, who will have the power to dissolve the legislature, appoint top judges, have full immunity against any prosecution and make decisions critical for minorities, without checks.

The constitution now allows presidential decisions to be questioned in court, gives the prime minister the power to appoint Cabinet ministers, grants independent commissions power to appoint officials to key institutions and bars dual citizens from holding political office.

Rajapaksa renounced his dual U.S citizenship when he ran for president last year. The proposal allowing dual citizens to hold political office would further strengthen the Rajapaksa family's grip on political power by enabling another sibling who is a dual U.S. citizen to be appointed to Parliament.

Rajapaksa's older brother, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa, is now prime minister. Another older brother and three nephews are also lawmakers — three of them ministers.

Rajapaksa was elected last November promising to be the guardian of the majority Buddhist-Sinhalese. His mandate was endorsed in August elections in which his party

gained control of nearly two-thirds of the country's 225-member Parliament.

His government is most likely to obtain the needed two-thirds support to pass the proposed amendment. However, several petitions have been filed in the Supreme Court seeking an order that the amendment also be subject to a public referendum.

The constitution says certain provisions must be approved by a referendum.

"The government is heading toward dictatorial governance by weakening checks and balances in the system," said lawyer and independent political columnist Subramaniam Jothilingam.

The amendment would allow Rajapaksa to head any number of ministries, appoint and fire ministers and select the police chief and members of the elections, public service, bribery and human rights commissions at his discretion.

Jehan Perera from the independent National Peace Council think tank said public institutions may become politicized and serve the interests of the majority Buddhist-Sinhalese community if they come under the authority of one person.

Rajapaksa's election slogan of "one country, one law" is widely seen as a policy of centralized governance that rejects power sharing with the provinces, a long-standing demand of minority Tamils. Rajapaksa has rejected a Tamil demand for autonomy.

Sri Lanka's Tamil community, concentrated mostly in the north and east, consider themselves a distinct nation, entitled to rule a traditional homeland. Tamil rebels fought a nearly three-decade separatist war accusing Sinhalese-controlled governments of systemic marginalization.

Government forces crushed the rebels in 2009, ending a war that claimed at least 100,000 lives.

Earlier this year, Rajapaksa withdrew Sri Lanka from a U.N. Human Rights Council resolution in which it had agreed to investigate allegations of wartime abuses by both government forces and Tamil rebels.

M.A. Sumanthiran, an ethnic Tamil lawmaker, said the weakening of Parliament would result in minority communities losing their voices.

"There will be power changing hands from the legislature to the executive. In the legislature all sections of the polity have a say, however small they may be," he said. "Even if presidents win election with votes from minority groups, past experience has shown that they will only look after the interests of the majority community, from whom they received most of their votes."

Many minority Tamils and Muslims say they are worried about the government's proposed actions.

On Sept. 29, the government announced it will ban cattle slaughter, a decision analysts say

was politically motivated to please the majority Sinhala Buddhist constituency. Buddhists as well as minority Hindus avoid beef for religious and cultural reasons.

Many believe the decision was a direct affront to the Muslim community, which owns most of the slaughterhouses and beef stalls.

Fazal Samsudeen, an Islamic preacher, said he fears government interference in religious laws, such as Islamic courts and banking, in the name of establishing a unified national law.

Many majority Sinhalese find minority religious laws disconcerting because they help preserve the groups' separate identities, and support their incorporation into a common national law, Perera said.

Jothilingam warned that a rise in nationalism could lead to conflicts with other countries, such as the United States and India, which have long called for power sharing with Tamil-majority provinces.

"The government is becoming a prisoner of ultra-nationalists. When you try to satisfy them, they will keep increasing their demands and someday the government won't be able to fulfill them without making enemies of powerful countries," he said.

"A small country can't survive if it is isolated by the world community."

Western Hemisphere Affairs

Rights group denounces Central America anti-LGBT violence, raps U.S. for denying asylum (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:42 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Human Rights Watch criticized Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala for failing to stop violence against LGBT people in a new report published on Wednesday, which also denounced the United States for denying these LGBT asylum seekers safe haven.

"LGBT people in the Northern Triangle face high levels of violence that their own governments appear unable or unwilling to address," Neela Ghoshal, senior LGBT rights researcher at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement with the report.

The governments of the three Central American nations did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

"For some LGBT people in the region, seeking asylum in the United States is the only hope of safety, but the Trump administration has blocked them at every turn."

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has tightened its asylum laws. Since March, the country has closed its borders to asylum seekers and other immigrants as part of its effort to slow the spread of coronavirus.

The report, entitled "'Every Day I Live in Fear': Violence and Discrimination against LGBT People in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, and Obstacles to Asylum in the United

States," was based on interviews with 116 lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people from the three countries.

The U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Wealthy Argentines Flee Taxes, Politics to Settle in Uruguay (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [10/7/2020 7:00 AM, Ken Parks, 6400K, Neutral]

Catalina Jack, a 37-year-old Argentine economist with two masters degrees, unceremoniously pulled up stakes in Buenos Aires three months ago and boarded a fast ferry to Uruguay. She got a job with a software firm and now looks out on the world from a home she rents near the beach resort of Punta del Este.

Her brother and his family had settled nearby a few weeks before. Two dozen friends have made the move or are doing so.

"I'd have preferred to continue working in Argentina," she said. "Today, I don't think there is a place for me there. The ones leaving are those who pay the most taxes, are the most productive and best educated."

After Luis Lacalle Pou was elected president of Uruguay last November, the first non-leftist in 15 years, he announced plans to attract skilled immigrants and investment to energize his aging, well-off developing nation of 3.5 million. What he didn't know was how profoundly Covid-19 and economic crisis would overtake Argentina or how Uruguay's exceptional public health system would give it one of the world's best pandemic performances. The country's death toll is only in the dozens.

The result is a brain and wealth flow from neighboring Argentina. Carlos Enciso, Uruguay's ambassador, told Radio Montecarlo that 100 Argentines a week are applying at its Buenos Aires consulate for Uruguayan residency. The head of Argentina's tax authority, Mercedes Marco del Pont, told Telam news agency that in 2020 nearly half of the 504 Argentines who've taken up tax residency abroad – a move made by the wealthy – have chosen Uruguay.

Interior Ministry data show about 13,000 Argentines arrived to stay between April and September.

To some extent, the flow is building on an established pattern. Argentine money and summer tourists have poured into Punta del Este for generations, transforming it into Uruguay's top beach resort with high rise buildings and trendy boutiques and restaurants.

Although strict anti-money laundering rules mean Uruguay isn't as welcoming a destination for Argentine money as in the past, central bank data show non-resident deposits in local banks swelled by \$528 million in the year since primary elections in Argentina signaled the populist left was set to take power. Most of those deposits are thought to belong to Argentines.

The new departures are driven by increasing taxes and proposals for more, growing political

division, deepening poverty and ongoing spikes in the virus. Argentina is suffering 41% inflation, ever-tightening currency controls, a collapse in GDP and bonds pointing to a high probability of default just weeks after the country exited the last one. More than 20,000 Argentines are dead from Covid-19.

Uruguay's Lacalle Pou, who says he'd like to see 100,000 to 200,000 immigrants, has slashed the physical presence and investment requirements to obtain tax residency. Starting in July, foreigners who live at least 60 days a year in Uruguay and buy real estate worth more than \$388,000 qualify. Newcomers can also obtain residency by investing more than \$1.7 million in a business that creates at least 15 full-time jobs. His ruling coalition in congress also doubled the tax holiday for new residents to 10 years.

Uruguay, with a low fertility rate, growing elderly population and one of the highest incomes per capita in the region, has sometimes been called the Switzerland of Latin America. It's socially liberal compared with its neighbors, with abortion, marijuana and gay marriage legal, making it a haven for certain groups of Argentines.

Vendors of wealthy goods and services are seeing the results.

Sales at Mercedes-Benz and Maserati dealer Alfalider in Punta del Este have soared more than three-fold this year to 70 vehicles, sales manager German Rodriguez said. About a quarter of the 510 students enrolled at the elite International College in Punta del Este are from Argentina, up from 20% in 2019, the school's marketing and communications director Pedro Marquez said.

Gletir Corredor de Bolsa, which manages almost \$1 billion in mostly Argentine money, has added 200 new clients since the beginning of the year, director Diego de Achaval said. Deep distrust in the Argentine government and an "excessive tax burden" are driving friends and clients to Uruguay, he said from his office in Montevideo.

Federico Araujo, a director at Montevideo-based Nobilis Corredor de Bolsa SA, thinks Argentines could revitalize a stagnant wealth management industry.

"An Argentine client has an average ticket potentially three to four times that of a Uruguayan," said Araujo, whose firm manages \$1.2 billion and has opened a dozen new accounts this year.

Legal firm Andersen has gone from three to seven staff members handling residency paperwork and entry permits, managing director Federico Fischer said.

"Most of the people who are moving here are in their prime working years of 40 to 55," he said. "What you see are people with an inclination to be active and invest."

Jack, the economist who arrived in June, says one of the most appealing aspects of her new home is its lack of political division.

"Something that is fascinating here is that you have a society determined to advance together, independent of the political party one belongs to," she said. "Everyone is

committed to rowing in the same direction. I haven't seen that in Argentina. You are either on one side or the other."

[Brazil] Brazil nears 5 million COVID-19 cases, epidemiologist fears second wave (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 3:40 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Brazil approached the mark of 5 million confirmed COVID-19 cases on Wednesday as it approached 150,000 deaths in the second most deadly coronavirus outbreak outside the United States.

Though the number of cases has come down from a peak in July, public health experts warn that Brazil is ignoring social distancing precautions and faces the danger of a second wave by returning to normal everyday life too quickly.

The Health Ministry reported on Tuesday 41,906 new cases, raising the total to 4,969,141, and 819 death, bringing the toll to 147,494 dead.

The rolling daily average for last week was 658 deaths a day, down from 1,073 deaths per day in the last week of July. Average new cases were 26,140 day, almost half the rate of late July.

Federal University of Rio de Janeiro epidemiologist Roberto Medronho cautioned that the numbers could be much higher if testing for COVID-19 was more widespread.

"Soon we will reach 150,000 deaths, a frightening number," he told Reuters. "We are seeing the authorities easing social distancing more and more despite the number of cases."

Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has played down the gravity of the virus, even though he was infected and had to isolate for two weeks. Bolsonaro has opposed lockdowns and encourage Brazilians to get back to their normal lives so the economy can recover from what is expected to be its deepest annual slump on record.

As winter ends and tropical temperatures rise, Brazilians are gathering on crowded beaches and in bars and restaurants without taking precautions, he warned.

"I fear we'll have a second wave like in Europe, which is a big concern for public health officials," he said.

[Brazil] Amazon mining overlaps 20% of indigenous land, worsening deforestation: report (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 11:34 AM, Oliver Griffin, Neutral]

Mining concessions and illegal mining operations overlap more than a fifth of indigenous land in the Amazon, causing higher deforestation rates, said a report published on Wednesday.

Some 1.5 million indigenous people live in the Amazon, where mining activities affect some 445,000 square kilometers of their lands, said a report from the World Resources Institute

(WRI) and the Amazon Network of Georeferenced Socio-Environmental Information (RAISG).

Data was not available for indigenous lands in French Guiana and Suriname, the report said.

Though inactive mining concessions account for most of these intersections, around a third of indigenous land is overlapped by active concessions and illegal mining operations, increasing deforestation, the report added.

"Indigenous lands with mining showed a higher rate of forest loss in the 15-year period from 2000 to 2015 than indigenous lands that are not directly affected by mining," Peter Veit, director of WRI's land and resources initiative, said in a press conference.

Indigenous lands affected by mining in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru saw a rate of deforestation at least three times higher than in unaffected areas, while in Colombia and Venezuela the rate was one to two times higher, the report said.

The situation has been exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic, as rising gold prices and withdrawal of military and law enforcement has permitted illegal mining operations to expand.

"Under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic it has only gotten worse," said Michael McGarrell, a representative for the Amerindian People's Association in Guyana.

McGarrell stressed indigenous communities were not against mining if done responsibly, citing traditional artisanal mining practices.

"We are not opposed to development," McGarrell said. "Responsible mining will benefit the environment, and all of us."

[Canada] Canada's Supreme Court to consider whether Native Americans in U.S. have rights north of the border (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 6:00 AM, Amanda Coletta, Neutral]

It was a frosty October morning when Richard Desautel aimed his Mauser 98 bolt-action rifle at a cow elk in the Arrow Lakes area of British Columbia, shot the animal dead and phoned wildlife conservation officers to report what he'd done.

That call, made a decade ago this month, set into motion a plan that was years in the making. Authorities charged Desautel, a U.S. citizen and member of the Lakes Tribe of the Colville Confederated Tribes in Washington state, with hunting without a license and hunting big game while not a resident of British Columbia.

It was what Desautel wanted. It gave him the opportunity to argue that he was exercising his right under Canada's constitution to hunt for ceremonial purposes on the traditional land of his ancestors, the Sinixt, an Indigenous group that Canada declared extinct more than 60 years ago.

Now he'll argue his case before Canada's Supreme Court, in a proceeding that could have sweeping implications for Indigenous groups on both sides of the border. A victory could give more Native Americans in the United States the right to use their tribes' traditional lands in Canada.

The main question before the justices is whether rights afforded to "aboriginal peoples of Canada" by the Constitution Act can extend to groups that don't live in Canada. But for Desautel, who traveled to Ottawa for the hearing Thursday, it's about something larger.

"For the Sinixt people, this case — and it sounds almost corny to say — is about their very identity," said Mark Underhill, Desautel's lawyer. "Everything is at stake for them."

The lower courts considered centuries of history.

Desautel, 68, says he is a descendant of the Sinixt, an Indigenous group that hunted and fished in traditional lands that extended north and south of the 49th parallel before and after contact with Europeans in 1811.

British Columbia Provincial Court Judge Lisa Mrozinski wrote in a 2017 ruling that a "constellation of factors" eventually led the Sinixt to "more or less" live full-time in the southern part of their territory, which became part of the United States in 1846 when the Oregon Boundary Treaty established that section of the U.S.-Canada border.

Many of the Sinixt, who had become known as the Lakes Tribe, took up residence in the Colville Indian Reservation in Washington state, where Desautel lives. By the 1930s, they had stopped traveling north to hunt. The Sinixt in Canada were moved in 1902 to a reserve set up along the west side of the Upper Arrow Lake for the Arrow Lakes Band.

After the last member of the Arrow Lakes Band died, Canada in 1956 declared it "extinct" under the country's Indian Act.

Their descendants, including Desautel, contend that their very existence proves the opposite.

Crown prosecutors argued that Desautel doesn't hold a constitutionally protected right to hunt in Canada because he doesn't belong to one of the groups that make up the "aboriginal peoples of Canada" — and that granting him such a right would be incompatible with Canadian sovereignty.

The Crown also said Desautel failed to prove that the Sinixt people's tradition of hunting before contact was carried out by its modern-day successor group — a test for establishing a right under Canadian law. Prosecutors argued that they voluntarily drifted from their northern territory and traditional practices there.

Mrozinski disagreed and acquitted Desautel. Even if members of the Lakes Tribe moved south, she wrote, there's no evidence that they gave up their claim to the rest of their traditional territory or that their move was entirely voluntary.

"Whether or not the Sinixt, or Lakes Tribe as they are known, utilized their traditional

territory north of the 49th parallel after the 1930s," she wrote, "I am left with no doubt that the land was not forgotten, that the traditions were not forgotten and that the connection to the land is ever present in the minds of the members of the Lakes Tribe."

British Columbia's Supreme Court and its Court of Appeal dismissed the Crown's appeals.

"Imposing a requirement that Indigenous peoples may only hold Aboriginal rights in Canada if they occupy the same geographical territory in which their ancestors exercised those rights," Court of Appeal Justice Daphne Smith wrote in the 2019 ruling, "ignores the Aboriginal perspective, the realities of colonization and does little towards achieving the ultimate goal of reconciliation."

The Crown appealed to the Supreme Court, arguing that the case is of national importance. Its ruling could have far-reaching ramifications.

In legal filings, prosecutors warned of "legal and practical difficulties" that could arise from a decision in Desautel's favor, including the possibility that other Indigenous groups in the United States with traditional territory divided by the border could be entitled to constitutional rights in Canada. The government would then have a duty to consult with them on projects impacting their traditional lands, such as pipelines.

Several such groups applied for and have been granted intervener status — comparable to *amicus curiae*, or "friend of the court," standing in the U.S. courts — in the appeal to the Supreme Court. The Peskotomuhkati Nation, which has communities in New Brunswick and Maine, said in legal filings that it's "dishonorable" to hold that U.S.-based Indigenous groups do not have rights in Canada.

"If you read the factum for the government, there's a fear of what we call the floodgates of law," said John Borrows, a professor of Indigenous law at the University of Victoria. "That if you allowed this example . . . then that unlocks the door to dominoes."

Many of the major rulings that have established Indigenous rights have arisen from defenses to criminal or regulatory charges. Borrows said it would be "much better to have this done through negotiation or some other dispute resolution process that [is] more systematic."

Shelly Boyd, a member of the Lakes Tribe who says she is descended from the Sinixt, remembers what it was like as a young girl to learn that Canada considered her "extinct."

"I thought, 'That doesn't make sense. That's what happens to dinosaurs. That's what happens to animals,'" Boyd said. "The reality is that we weren't thought of as human. . . . You're not just treated as if you're less than. You're actually, in this case, declared less than, declared nothing."

Desautel says a ruling in his favor would affirm that his decade-long battle was "a journey well spent."

"The court decision is something that's in the judicial system that has to be taken care of," he said. "As for me, being here in my traditional territory, the burial ground of my ancestors,

walking the path of my ancestors ...

"You can't take that away from me."

[Mexico] Hurricane Delta Makes Landfall in Mexico (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 3:43 PM, Kirk Semple, Neutral]

Hurricane Delta made landfall in southeastern Mexico near the tip of the Yucatán Peninsula early Wednesday, knocking out power, felling trees and causing scattered flooding in cities and towns along the Caribbean Coast. But regional and federal officials said they had received no reports of deaths.

The storm hit near the port town of Puerto Morelos, just south of Mexico's tourism epicenter, Cancún, around 6:30 a.m. Eastern time, with maximum winds estimated at about 110 miles per hour, according to the United States National Hurricane Center. By early afternoon, the center of the storm had crossed the peninsula and moved into the Gulf of Mexico, north of the Dzilam de Bravo State Reserve.

The hurricane had been downgraded overnight from a Category 4, making landfall as a Category 2. But forecasters predicted that the storm would once again gather strength as it barreled across the southern and central Gulf of Mexico on Wednesday and Thursday before approaching the Gulf Coast of the United States on Friday.

At 2 p.m. Eastern time, Delta was moving northwest at about 17 miles per hour with maximum sustained winds of about 100 miles per hour and higher gusts, the National Hurricane Center said.

The governors of Alabama and Louisiana declared states of emergency on Tuesday, and several coastal areas began mandatory evacuations on Wednesday.

College football officials said Wednesday morning that Saturday's game between Louisiana State University and the University of Missouri would be moved from Baton Rouge, La., to Columbia, Mo. The Southeastern Conference, whose membership includes both schools as well as 12 other universities, also left open the possibility that the storm would affect other athletic events in the coming days.

In Mexico, Luis Alberto Ortega Vázquez, a top official with the national civil protection agency, said Wednesday morning that there had been no immediate accounts of deaths owing to the storm but said that the authorities had received reports of fallen trees and damage to the Yucatán Peninsula's electrical grids.

Though the hurricane's impacts in Mexico were apparently not as severe as anticipated when it reached Category 4 status on Tuesday night, the storm will almost certainly set back the Yucatán Peninsula's efforts to revive its tourism industry, which has been severely affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

"What we have to do is get back our feet quickly," Carlos Orvañanos Rea, spokesman for the government of the state of Quintana Roo, said on Wednesday in an interview with the FOROtv cable news channel. "We are on a path of economic reactivation."

Visitors to the region were breathing a sigh of relief on Wednesday as the hurricane delivered a lesser punch than many had feared.

Luis González, 35, a publicist for musicians, was holed up in a hotel in the coastal city of Playa del Carmen, south of Puerto Morelos, as the storm lashed the region Wednesday morning. He had been visiting the beach town of Tulum and had planned to fly back to Mexico City on Tuesday night, but learned late Tuesday afternoon that the flight had been canceled.

He knew one of the owners of a hotel in Playa del Carmen “where people shelter in hurricanes,” he said, so he made a beeline there. He and other guests were given rooms in the rear of the hotel, away from the water, and provided with a dinner buffet and a box lunch for the morning.

Mr. González likened the hurricane to a normal, intense storm with periods marked by “continuous gusts of wind with rain.”

Preparations for the storm’s arrival began earlier in the week as the hurricane drew a bead on Mexico, with activity growing feverish on Tuesday as residents across the Yucatán Peninsula stocked up on days-worth of groceries, hardware materials and gasoline, and pulled boats from the water and moved them inland. Government officials ordered nonessential businesses to close as emergency crews helped evacuate inhabitants from low-lying coastal areas and islands and relocate them inland.

Scores of hotels along the Caribbean Coast — including in popular tourism destinations like Cancún, Playa del Carmen and Tulum — moved their guests to shelters.

“The most important thing is to take care of everyone’s life so that we don’t lose anybody,” said Carlos Joaquín, the governor of the state of Quintana Roo, which borders the Caribbean coast of the peninsula.

On Wednesday morning, Mr. Ortega Vázquez, the federal civil protection official, said that more than 39,000 people, including residents and tourists, had been evacuated from hotels and homes in the states of Quintana Roo and Yucatán, with many seeking refuge in scores of temporary storm shelters.

While the exact track of the storm remains uncertain, there is a risk of dangerous storm surge, wind and rainfall along the coast from Louisiana to the western portions of the Florida Panhandle beginning Thursday night or Friday.

Dennis Feltgen, a meteorologist and spokesman for the U.S. National Hurricane Center, said the conditions would be ideal for the storm to strengthen back to a Category 4 as it passed through the southern Gulf of Mexico and approached the United States as a “major hurricane.”

It has been a brutal year for hurricanes on the U.S. Gulf Coast, which was heavily battered by Laura in September. That hurricane caused more than two dozen deaths and extensive property damage.

Delta is the sixth named storm to put Louisiana in its potential path; while the state largely avoided wide-scale destruction from Cristobal, Marco, Sally and Beta, each storm brought to the area a fresh round of evacuations and fear.

The process started anew this week. Orange Beach, a city in Alabama, offered sand bags to residents on Tuesday, while residents again anxiously prepared for evacuations and watched ominous weather forecasts.

About four to eight inches of rain are expected in some areas of the central Gulf Coast, with up to 12 inches in some areas, along with flash flooding, the Hurricane Center said.

"Folks there should make sure they have their hurricane plan in place, have their supplies and monitor the updates to the forecasts," Mr. Feltgen said. "I know there's a lot of hurricane weariness out there with Laura and Sally so fresh on everybody's minds, but here we go again."

The Hurricane Center recommended that people monitor forecasts frequently, as storms can quickly slow down, grow stronger or shift track, he said.

This hurricane season has been one of the most active on record, experts said.

Last month, meteorologists ran out of names after a storm named Wilfred formed in the Atlantic. Subtropical storm Alpha, the first of the 24 letters of the Greek alphabet, quickly formed thereafter, becoming the 22nd named storm since May.

Forecasters have resorted to the Greek alphabet only once before, in 2005, when meteorologists used six Greek names in a season that had 28 storms, Mr. Feltgen said.

[Mexico] Hurricane Delta hits Cancún, but resort city appears to have escaped major damage (Washington Post)

Washington Post [10/7/2020 12:13 PM, Kevin Sieff and Gabriela Martinez, Neutral]

Hurricane Delta hit Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula just south of Cancún Wednesday morning as a Category 2 storm, pounding the city's famous strip of beachside hotels with powerful winds as it appeared to move north toward Louisiana.

The storm had weakened in the hours before striking Cancún, Latin America's most popular tourist destination. There were no immediate reports of casualties in the city or in neighboring Cozumel. Local officials reported fallen trees and electrical poles. Videos posted on social media showed damage to building facades.

Meteorologists expected the storm to strengthen once again as it progresses toward the southern Gulf of Mexico by Wednesday afternoon.

About 39,000 people in Cancún were evacuated ahead of the storm's landfall. Many of them were American, European and Mexican tourists. They were taken to 167 inland shelters. Delta had been forecast to arrive as a Category 4 or 5 storm, but weakened overnight.

Carlos Joaquín, the governor of the state of Quintana Roo, where Cancún is located, warned Wednesday morning that the danger hadn't passed.

"There are no reports of serious accidents or people who have lost their lives, which is great news," he told reporters in a news conference. "But we're still in the middle of the hurricane."

Other officials were cautiously optimistic that the city had dodged what once appeared to be an ominous storm.

"Fortunately, the impact was not as serious as we once expected," said María Lezama Espinosa, Cancún's mayor.

Antonio Riberoll, the head of the city's civil protection unit, said his team planned to do a more thorough inspection of damage around 11 or 12 local time. He said the storm appears to have been "benevolent."

"We do not have serious damage," he said. "We had more wind than water, so there are few floods. We have a lot of trees down, yes, and also advertisements. Some roofs were blown away, but there is no great destruction."

[Mexico] Hurricane Delta makes landfall in Mexico, forecast to hit U.S. Gulf Coast on Friday (USA Today)

USA Today [10/7/2020 11:16 AM, Doyle Rice, 5823K, Negative]

Hurricane Delta hit Mexico on Wednesday morning as an extremely dangerous Category 2 storm, coming ashore near Puerto Morelos along the northeastern coast of the Yucatan Peninsula.

The center of Delta made landfall around 6:30 a.m. EDT, with top winds of 110 mph, a strong Category 2 hurricane, the National Hurricane Center said.

As of 6:45 a.m., EDT, the storm was located about 20 miles south of Cancun. "Life-threatening storm surge and dangerous winds are expected within portions of the northern Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico during the next few hours," the hurricane center said.

After battering the Yucatan on Wednesday, Delta is forecast to emerge into the Gulf of Mexico on Wednesday night and Thursday and restrengthen into a Category 3 major hurricane, forecasters said.

It's expected to hit the U.S. Gulf Coast on Friday: "There is an increasing likelihood of life-threatening storm surge and dangerous hurricane-force winds, especially along the coasts of Louisiana and Mississippi, beginning on Friday," the hurricane center warned.

Storm surge and hurricane watches have been issued for portions of the northern Gulf Coast on Wednesday.

In addition, Delta could bring 4 to 8 inches of rain, with isolated maximum amounts of 12

inches, to the central Gulf Coast through parts of the Lower Mississippi Valley. Heavy rainfall could result in flash, urban, and small stream flooding and minor river flooding, according to the hurricane center.

Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards said Delta was expected to make landfall there Friday night or Saturday morning and the entire state is in the storm's possible path. State and local officials in coastal areas were shoring up levees, sandbagging and taking other protections measures, he said.

Louisiana is still recovering from Hurricane Laura, which ravaged the southwestern region as it roared ashore as a Category 4 storm in August. More than 6,600 Laura evacuees remain in hotels around the state, mainly in New Orleans, because their homes are too heavily damaged to return.

Edwards also declared a state of emergency Tuesday and said he plans to ask President Donald Trump for a pre-landfall disaster declaration Wednesday.

Delta would be the 10th named storm to hit the U.S. in a single season, an all-time record. This year has tied 1916 for nine tropical systems that made landfall in the U.S., AccuWeather said.

Four of the landfalls so far in 2020 have been from hurricanes, including Hanna, Isaias, Laura and Sally, the Weather Channel said. Delta would be the fifth hurricane landfall of the year.

[Mexico] Mexico's peso faces volatility spikes ahead of U.S. election (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 4:55 PM, Abraham Gonzalez, Neutral]

Mexico's peso is facing the highest volatility in five months, experts say, as markets grow nervous about the upcoming U.S. presidential elections and possible economic policy outcomes.

So far this year, the currency of Latin America's second-largest economy has fallen more than 13%, trading at about 21.5 pesos per U.S. dollar.

Mexico has grappled with the fallout of the coronavirus pandemic and its currency is highly sensitive to both political and economic developments of its closest trading partner.

"Volatility will remain high until the end of November, said Christian Lawrence, a strategist at Rabobank. "Of course it will come from the United States." Lawrence said the exchange rate could even touch 23 pesos per U.S. dollar.

Implied volatility for peso-dollar derivatives maturing in one month, roughly the time remaining until November 3 election, stands at 19.55%, the highest since mid-May, Refinitiv Eikon data shows.

Meanwhile, the number of instruments like futures and options that trade on an expected appreciation of the peso fell by 55% until September 29, the last available, Refinitiv Eikon data, citing the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME), shows.

A Reuters poll found market participants expect the exchange rate to weaken to 22.08 pesos per U.S. dollar by November, implying a 3.3% depreciation from its current level.

Recent political turmoil has added to uncertainty.

Mexico's peso lost 1.5% on Tuesday, mostly after U.S. President Donald Trump's announced the White House's sudden exit from fiscal stimulus talks with Democrats in Congress.

It has since recovered the losses.

Presidential elections have previously driven up peso volatility.

The currency lost 10% in the 12 months before the 2016 presidential election and another 20% in the two months after Trump won, dropping to 22 pesos per U.S. dollar, Refinitiv Eikon data shows.

Other emerging market currencies face a similar fate.

"In the middle of a campaign where surprises and unpredictable events have been the constant, it's difficult to expect gains in the short term in emerging markets," said Andres Jaime, a foreign exchange strategist at Barclays.

[Mexico] Cocaine-laden plane crashes in Mexico after airborne pursuit (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 3:46 PM, Liz Diaz and Noe Torres, Neutral]

A light aircraft carrying almost half a tonne of cocaine crashed in central Mexico after a high-speed airborne chase with authorities, and two people aboard died, the defense ministry said on Wednesday.

Mexican military helicopters intercepted the plane in Mexican airspace and pursued it for hundreds of miles until it ran out of fuel and crashed in Botija, Queretero on Monday, the ministry said in a statement.

The plane was loaded with about 400 kilograms (880 pounds) of cocaine, the ministry said.

In recent months a number of business jets have crashed or been abandoned in Central America and southern Mexico in an apparent uptick in aerial smuggling.

Monday's crash came less than two weeks after a business jet reported stolen in Mexico crashed in a Guatemalan jungle near a hidden airstrip, leaving two men dead near an onboard stash of drugs and weapons. It had made a mysterious trip to Venezuela.

[Mexico] Mexico's ex-security chief pleads not guilty to drug charges (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 3:49 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Former top Mexican security official Genaro Garcia Luna pleaded not guilty on Wednesday to drug trafficking charges, including a new one of engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise that could add 20 years to his sentence if convicted.

In a hearing by video, to which reporters had access by phone, U.S. District Judge Brian Cogan read all charges to Garcia Luna. The new charge, added in July, involves violations of trafficking 5,000 kilos of cocaine in 2008; 23,000 kilos in 2007 and 19,000 kilos that same year. The judge mentioned three other cocaine deals in 2002 and 2003.

Garcia served as Mexico's Secretary of Public Security from 2006 to 2012. He is accused of accepting tens of millions of dollars in bribes — often stuffed in briefcases full of cash — to shield the Sinaloa cartel from law enforcement.

In January, the former Mexican official pleaded not guilty to charges of cocaine trafficking conspiracy and a false statement.

On Wednesday, Cogan set Dec. 7 as the next hearing on the case. Prosecutors have said Garcia Luna's trial could last from two to three months.

Garcia Luna lived in Miami before his arrest in 2019 in Texas.

[Mexico] Ex-Mexico security chief linked to El Chapo pleads not guilty to U.S. drug charges (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 5:30 PM, Jonathan Stempel, Neutral]

A former Mexican government official who oversaw public security in his country pleaded not guilty to new U.S. charges over his alleged role in a multimillion-dollar bribery scheme, to protect the Sinaloa drug cartel once run by drug lord Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman.

Genaro Garcia Luna entered his plea on Wednesday to engaging in a continuing criminal enterprise at a hearing before U.S. District Judge Brian Cogan in the federal court in Brooklyn, a spokesman for Acting U.S. Attorney Seth DuCharme said.

The charge was added in an indictment in July, after Garcia Luna had pleaded not guilty on Jan. 3 to charges including drug trafficking conspiracy and making false statements.

Two former subordinate law enforcement officers, Luis Cardenas Palomino and Ramon Pequeno Garcia, were also charged in the new indictment, despite being at large.

Garcia Luna had been living in Florida prior to his December 2019 arrest in Dallas.

He was detained following his initial plea, when prosecutors called him an "unacceptable" flight risk.

Guzman is appealing his February 2019 conviction and sentence of life in prison without parole for smuggling tons of drugs to the United States in a colorful, decades-long career.

He is incarcerated at ADX Florence, a maximum-security facility in Colorado known as the nation's most secure "Supermax" prison. Cogan oversaw Guzman's trial.

Garcia Luna led Mexico's Federal Investigation Agency from 2001 to 2005, was secretary of public security from 2006 to 2012, and was once considered a leader in Mexico's efforts to

combat drug trafficking.

But prosecutors said the Sinaloa cartel bribed Garcia Luna throughout his time in government to ensure safe passage for its drugs, obtain information about rival cartels, and learn about Mexican probes into its activities.

The cartel delivered bribes to Garcia Luna in briefcases at least twice, prosecutors said.

[Peru] Hard-hit Peru's costly bet on cheap COVID-19 antibody tests (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 10:08 AM, Christine Armario, Neutral]

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the harried health officials of Peru faced a quandary. They knew molecular tests for COVID-19 were the best option to detect the virus – yet they didn't have the labs, the supplies, or the technicians to make them work.

But there was a cheaper alternative – antibody tests, mostly from China, that were flooding the market at a fraction of the price and could deliver a positive or negative result within minutes of a simple fingerstick.

In March, President Martin Vizcarra took the airwaves to announce he'd signed off on a massive purchase of 1.6 million tests – almost all of them for antibodies.

Now, interviews with experts, public purchase orders, import records, government resolutions, patients, and COVID-19 health reports show that the country's bet on rapid antibody tests went dangerously off course.

Unlike almost every other nation, Peru is relying heavily on rapid antibody blood tests to diagnose active cases – a purpose for which they are not designed. The tests cannot detect early COVID-19 infections, making it hard to quickly identify and isolate the sick. Epidemiologists interviewed by The Associated Press say their misuse is producing a sizable number of false positives and negatives, helping fuel one of the world's worst COVID-19 outbreaks.

What's more, a number of the antibody tests purchased for use in Peru have since been rejected by the United States after independent analysis found they did not meet standards for accurately detecting COVID-19.

Today the South American nation has the highest per capita COVID-19 mortality rate of any country across the globe, according to John Hopkins University – and physicians there believe the country's faulty testing approach is one reason why.

"This was a multi-systemic failure," said Dr. Víctor Zamora, Peru's former minister of health. "We should have stopped the rapid tests by now."

As COVID-19 cases popped up across the globe, low- and middle-income nations found themselves in a dilemma.

The World Health Organization was calling on authorities to ramp up testing to prevent the virus from spreading out of control. One particular test – a polymerase chain reaction exam

– was deemed the best option. Using a specimen collected from deep in the nose, the test is developed on specialized machines that can detect the genetic material of the virus within days of infection.

If COVID-19 cases are caught early, the sick can be isolated, their contacts traced, and the chain of contagion severed.

Within weeks of the initial outbreak in China, genome sequences for the virus were made available and specialists in Asia and Europe got to work creating their own tests. But in parts of the world like Africa and Latin America, there was no such option. They would have to wait for the tests to become available – and when they did, the incredible demand meant most weren't able to secure the number they required.

"The collapse of global cooperation and a failure of international solidarity have shoved Africa out of the diagnostics market," Dr. John Nkengasong, director of the Africa CDC, wrote in Nature magazine in April as the hunt was underway.

Nations that got an early jump start in preparing or had a relatively robust health care system already in place fared best. Two weeks after Colombia identified its first case, the country had 22 private and public laboratories signed up to do PCR testing. Peru, by contrast, relied on just one laboratory capable of 200 tests a day.

For years, Peru has invested a smaller part of its GDP on public health than others in the region. As COVID-19 approached, glaring deficiencies in Peru became evident. There were just 100 ICU beds available for COVID-19 patients, said Dr. Víctor Zamora, who was appointed to lead Peru's Ministry of Health in March. Corruption scandals had left numerous hospital construction projects on pause. Peru also faced a significant shortage of doctors, forcing the state to embark on a massive hiring campaign.

Even now, months later, Peru's needs are vastly under met. To date, the country has less than 2,000 ICU beds, compared to over 6,000 in the state of Florida, which has 10 million fewer inhabitants, according to official data.

High levels of poverty and people who depend on daily wages from informal work complicated the government's efforts to impose a strict quarantine, further challenging Peru's ability to respond effectively to the virus.

When Zamora arrived, he said the government had already decided molecular tests weren't a viable option. The nation didn't have the infrastructure needed to run the tests but also acted too slowly in trying to obtain what little was available on the market.

"Peru didn't buy in time," he said. "Everyone in Latin America bought before us – even Cuba."

Antibody tests – which detect proteins created by the immune system in response to a virus – had numerous drawbacks. They had not been widely tested and their accuracy was in question. If taken too early, most people with the virus test negative. That could lead those infected to think they do not have COVID-19. False positives can be equally perilous, leading people to incorrectly believe they are immune.

Antibody tests didn't require high-skill training or even a lab; municipal workers with no medical education could be taught how to administer them.

"For the time we were in, it was the right decision," Zamora said. "We didn't know what we know about the virus today."

Ernesto Canayo, a 44-year-old father and city cleaner in Peru's capital, initially brushed off the fever and headache that wouldn't go away.

A member of the indigenous Shipibo-Conibo community, he lived in a shack on a hill about 10 blocks from the presidential palace and parliament. The one-room home he shared with his fiancée and 2-year-old son is held together by pieces of wood and plastic tarps.

In early April, at his urging, his family left to stay with relatives outside Lima, believing they'd be better able to avoid the virus. The symptoms started not long after. Over the phone, he told his sister he felt pain in his chest. He went to work, where he was given a rapid test.

"Nothing came up," he told her.

Worried about losing his job, he continued working, traveling on public transportation, and even joining in members of his community in draining out their shared toilets. The Cantagallo neighborhood – rooster's crow, in English – does not have regular water or electricity. Since 2013, officials have pledged improvements. Two city mayors who promised housing have been implicated in Latin America's largest graft probe.

Weeks later, Canayo was still feeling bad and getting worse. Ministry of Health officials arrived at Cantagallo in early May, armed with 120 rapid tests.

Half of those tested came back positive – but not Canayo.

"How can they say I don't have it?" he asked his sister later. "I feel all the symptoms."

Throughout Cantagallo, the test caused confusion and alarm. People who seemingly had no symptoms were coming back positive, while others convinced they had COVID-19 tested negative. Those who were positive were told to quarantine, while those who were negative were told they did not have the virus.

"The tests lied," said Harry Pinedo, an artist and teacher in Cantagallo who said he had numerous symptoms but tested negative. "They deceived us."

Evelyn Reyes, Canayo's fiancée, said he told her maybe he was just feeling the effects of the weather. A cold breeze snuck into their unprotected shack at night. He'd barely ever gotten sick; two negative COVID-19 tests cast doubt.

"He told me, 'I'm fine,'" she said. "'I'm going to recover from this.'"

Antibody tests are designed to be used as serological surveys to provide public health authorities an indication of how widespread the virus is in a community. Some physicians

believe they can also be a useful tool if a patient with severe COVID-19 has repeatedly tested negative on a molecular test but has the symptoms. In that case, the virus may no longer be in their airways, but antibodies could be detected.

In Peru, by contrast, the test is frequently being used to make a diagnosis.

"We are not using them in the appropriate way," said Dr. Rubén Espinoza, former director of Peru's medical regulation agency. "The results of rapid tests are mentioned as if they were diagnostic ones – which only confuses people."

Peru's central government purchased nearly six million antibody tests of four different brands in the initial months of the pandemic, according to public records. At least one, imported from China made by Core Technology Co., does not have approval by China's medical regulatory agency. It is unclear whether the company sought Chinese regulatory approval; not having it is not necessarily an indicator of quality. The tests can be sold within the European Union because there is no regulatory body to evaluate them before they are placed on the market.

Another, by South Korean company SD Biosensor, has been subject to scrutiny in the U.S.

The group's Standard Q antibody test was barred for use by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The agency does not detail why tests are pulled from distribution; it can be for failing to provide sufficient data or if found not to meet the agency's standards, among other reasons. An independent analysis of the test sponsored by the National Cancer Institute found that it had only a 76.7% total chance of correctly identifying a positive case.

Peru's government contends the Standard Q test it purchased is different, because it uses one test strip instead of two, though an FDA spokeswoman said that both are "very similar."

The state of Rhode Island purchased 20,000 SD Biosensor antibody tests in April but ended up returning them and getting a refund after the FDA barred their use.

The SD Biosensor test – some 5 million of which have been imported to Peru, according to import records compiled by one of the nation's leading diagnostic companies and shared with The Associated Press – is still being used there. Authorities used it both in the Cantagallo indigenous community and at least one food market in August.

SD Biosensor and Core Technology did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

Dr. Víctor Suárez, subdirector of Peru's National Institute of Health, said qualitative studies were performed on all the central government's purchased tests, and that any that did not meet the country's requirements were sent back. But those tests account for only about half of all rapid antibody tests that have been conducted in Peru. Millions more have been imported from dozens of other brands, many of which are FDA barred.

Suárez said the government's regulatory agency has done sample surveys of non-state purchases and issued alerts to remove many as a result. Public alerts have been issued for about a dozen tests but not all that have been called into question.

He said that despite the questions raised about individual brands, overall they have helped Peru in identifying more cases than it would have otherwise.

"We've done the best we could to identify the most cases possible," he said. "Whether it's through molecular tests or rapid ones."

Ten of the roughly 80 different brands of antibody tests imported are prohibited in the U.S., the records show. A number were bought from relatively small, new companies that were awarded hefty contracts. One company that contracted with the Peruvian government until recently advertised itself as a cosmetics brand.

Emergency declaration regulations have made it easier to obtain contracts and fewer safeguards to protect against corruption are in place, several physicians and people who work in the pharmaceutical industry said.

"They brought in tests from just any company," said Victor Chu, head of Diagnostica Peruana, one of the older pharmaceutical companies in the country. "Anyone can buy the brand they want, the quantity they want, with hardly any control."

The FDA – which countries like Peru routinely turn to for guidance – was initially lax on what antibody tests were allowed on the market.

The agency had been criticized for acting too slowly in making molecular tests available. When antibody exams entered the picture, it opted to move fast. U.S. regulators allowed the blood tests to hit the market without first providing proof that they worked. They were only required to notify the FDA of their plans and provide disclaimers.

By May, the FDA announced it was rescinding that policy as part of a crackdown on the quality of products introduced on an emergency basis.

"We, unfortunately, see unscrupulous actors marketing fraudulent kits and using the pandemic as an opportunity to take advantage of Americans," FDA Deputy Commissioner Anan Shah said.

But Americans weren't the only ones who were sold on faulty products.

In Spain, England, India, and elsewhere, regulators have turned back rapid antibody test purchased and found to yield too many false positives or negatives, or both.

Less developed countries without a strong system to validate the veracity of tests were slower to remove them, and some are still authorized for use today.

"Clearly this is a mistake that the FDA, that the U.S. made, that is having a significant negative ripple effect in other countries," said Peter Pitts, a former FDA associate commissioner. "Every country that relied on the FDA needs to admit that they made a mistake – that they were inappropriately convinced that these tests were accurate."

He added: "Bad data only helps the virus spread faster. Bad data costs lives."

Peru isn't the only country that has imported potentially faulty tests. In Ecuador, Chile, Mexico, and elsewhere in Latin America, lists of authorized antibody tests still include some of those on the FDA's banned list. Their governments did not respond to requests for comment.

The specific brand of antibody test being used is critical, advised the Infectious Diseases Society of America, a professional organization of medical specialists. Lateral flow assays – like the blood prick test most commonly used in Peru – are notably inconsistent. Even for surveillance purposes, the society warned it is vital to have tests with a 99.5% or higher specificity, the ability to correctly identify negative cases.

Independent studies sponsored by the National Cancer Institute found some of the tests now removed from the U.S. market but still in use in other countries like Peru had low rates of correctly identifying a positive or negative case.

"Many people who are sick think they are negative, and they're not," Chu said. "The government puts labels on food, warning about the quantity of fat. Why not do the same for rapid tests, when this is a matter of life or death?"

The society also urged medical professionals to use antibody tests three or four weeks after the onset of symptoms to avoid incorrect results. In Peru, by contrast, the tests are often being used within days or just a week after symptoms.

"I would not make the conclusion they are all bad," said Dr. Angela Caliendo, a board member of the society. "I would make the conclusion that some perform strikingly better than others. And if you are going to use – look very closely at the performance statistics."

In Cantagallo, the nearly 250 families who live packed in small huts grew even sicker after the state's first round of COVID-19 testing.

When government workers returned 10 days later, they detected far more cases; of 656 people given an antibody exam, 476 came back positive, or nearly 73%. People who had tested negative like Canayo hadn't properly isolated themselves. A long-standing skepticism of hospitals meant the sickest refused to seek help. A people of close-knit ties, they were also reluctant to leave those who tested positive alone.

Instead, families kept their sick nearby, trying to help them recover with natural remedies like inhaling the vapors of boiled eucalyptus leaves.

"Everyone was sick," said Pineda, the artist. "Everyone had COVID."

Images from a day of mass testing in May show technicians used a test by Chinese company Coretests. Relatively little information can be gleaned from its website or in published independent studies. The test is not on the FDA's barred list, but is not approved either. It is not approved for use by China's own medical regulatory agency.

Canayo, meanwhile, continued to grow worse. He had all the classic COVID-19 symptoms, including loss of his sense of taste. His fiancée said he took Tylenol but likely needed oxygen, which the community did not have.

The day before Mother's Day, Rossi Canayo, 40, called to check up on her brother. Though she couldn't see him, she could tell from the sound of his voice that he was ill and agitated.

Neighbors came to check on him but his fiancée and sister were nowhere near, trapped in towns far away amidst the nation's strict lockdown.

"He was alone," she said.

Across Peru, many families were grappling with similarly confusing results.

Janina Huallpa, a phlebotomist for a children's cancer clinic, came down with a fever in May. She'd been out working in the early months of the pandemic -- going to bus stops, supermarkets, and other crowded areas searching for blood donors who could help save lives.

A rapid test administered at work came back negative. Dubious, she went to a public hospital, where another antibody test also delivered a negative result.

"They told me maybe it was an infection," she said.

Over the next three weeks, she got progressively worse, struggling to walk and breathe. Again, she went to the hospital and again she tested negative and was sent home. Doctors told her she didn't have the virus.

Worried and anxious, the mother of two went back to the hospital days later when she didn't improve. This time, doctors did a chest X-ray and found pneumonia. A fourth rapid test came back negative, but doctors nonetheless decided to send her to a larger hospital in Lima, where she got a molecular test.

The test came back positive and she spent 10 days on a ventilator.

When she woke up, doctors told her that eight other people who entered the ICU on the same day she did had all died of COVID-19.

"If one of those tests had been positive, I would have gotten adequate treatment," Huallpa said. "How many people are dying because of this?"

To date, Peru has diagnosed over 800,000 people with COVID-19; 77% of those cases have been diagnosed through rapid antibody tests. Overall, it has conducted over 8 million blood tests – and just 780,000 nasal swab molecular ones.

In the world's hardest-hit region, it is the country with the third highest number of cases, nearly on par with Colombia, which has almost 20 million more residents.

More than 32,000 people have died, but health officials admit 23,585 more with COVID-19 symptoms may have perished before getting a positive test. Even by the lowest statistic, Peru has about as many deaths as France, which has a population twice as large.

Some physicians are reluctant to chastise the country's heavy reliance on antibody testing. They contend that, when used correctly, the tests can be a helpful tool, particularly for nations like Peru that do not have wide molecular testing capability. In addition, several said doctors should be making a diagnosis based on symptoms, not a test – and that multiple factors including years of underinvestment in health care are ultimately to blame.

The nation has made advances in expanding molecular testing; there are now 46 public and private labs capable of processing the exams. In addition, Peru recently began using a molecular test created by doctors within the country that can deliver results within two hours.

"Rapid tests have their place and their moment for use," said Pilar Mazzetti, Peru's minister of health. "No test can detect the virus 100% of the time."

Even though Peru can now do 12,000 molecular tests a day – still far fewer than many other countries in Latin America – it continues to diagnose primarily through antibody tests. Physicians said that widespread misperceptions about the significance of a positive or negative result on an antibody test are leading to grave mistakes.

"The use of rapid tests hasn't changed, which is unacceptable to me," said Dr. Ernesto Gozzer, a professor at the Cayetano Heredia University in Peru.

At a wide range of jobs– from photo shoots to food markets – employers require a negative antibody test in order to return to work. The tests – which can cost \$30 each – have become popular. Yet a positive result isn't necessarily a sign of an active infection. Rather, it can indicate that someone had previously had the virus.

Likewise, a negative result offers no assurance that someone doesn't have the virus.

Molecular tests run at about \$110 each in Lima, or nearly half the monthly minimum wage, making them out of reach for many Peruvians who can't pay out of pocket and might only be offered a serological test at a local clinic.

Construction supervisor Marco Mayo saw firsthand the haphazard results the tests can generate. He used two different tests sold under two different brands -- one on his left index finger and the other on his middle finger. One finger came back positive, the other negative.

He was not allowed to return to work while the results remained unclear.

"I lost a month of my life because of this," he said.

Other bad results have been far more consequential.

Katy Retamozo, president of the Peruvian Association of ICU nurses, said she has seen patients that tested negative on rapid antibody exams return days later with advanced COVID-19 pneumonia. The delay in properly identifying cases, she believes, could be a factor in the nation's especially high level of mortality.

"That made them delay getting to the hospital," she said.

At 5 a.m. on Mother's Day, Rossi Canayo's cell phone rang. On the other end, a voice relayed the news: Her brother was dead.

Word of Ernesto's death struck fear in Cantagallo. Suddenly, the virus many had dismissed as a distant threat was in their midst. And if an otherwise healthy adult who tested negative could die a week later, all of them were vulnerable.

For his sister, his death has stirred up questions and anguish. She wonders what would have happened if a test had quickly diagnosed his illness. And she also questions why the city he worked for used an antibody test on a worker who was out in the streets, with symptoms.

"They abandoned him," she said.

[Peru] Peru bet on cheap COVID antibody tests; it didn't go well (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 2:51 PM, Christine Armario, Neutral]

In the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, the harried health officials of Peru faced a quandary. They knew molecular tests for COVID-19 were the best option to detect the virus – yet they didn't have the labs, the supplies, or the technicians to make them work.

But there was a cheaper alternative – antibody tests, mostly from China, that were flooding the market at a fraction of the price and could deliver a positive or negative result within minutes of a simple fingerstick.

In March, President Martin Vizcarra took the airwaves to announce he'd signed off on a massive purchase of 1.6 million tests – almost all of them for antibodies.

Now, interviews with experts, public purchase orders, import records, government resolutions, patients, and COVID-19 health reports show that the country's bet on rapid antibody tests went dangerously off course.

Unlike almost every other nation, Peru is relying heavily on rapid antibody blood tests to diagnose active cases – a purpose for which they are not designed. The tests cannot detect early COVID-19 infections, making it hard to quickly identify and isolate the sick.

Epidemiologists interviewed by The Associated Press say their misuse is producing a sizable number of false positives and negatives, helping fuel one of the world's worst COVID-19 outbreaks.

What's more, a number of the antibody tests purchased for use in Peru have since been rejected by the United States after independent analysis found they did not meet standards for accurately detecting COVID-19.

Today the South American nation has the highest per capita COVID-19 mortality rate of any country across the globe, according to John Hopkins University – and physicians there believe the country's faulty testing approach is one reason why.

"This was a multi-systemic failure," said Dr. Víctor Zamora, Peru's former minister of health.

"We should have stopped the rapid tests by now."

As COVID-19 cases popped up across the globe, low- and middle-income nations found themselves in a dilemma.

The World Health Organization was calling on authorities to ramp up testing to prevent the virus from spreading out of control. One particular test – a polymerase chain reaction exam – was deemed the best option. Using a specimen collected from deep in the nose, the test is developed on specialized machines that can detect the genetic material of the virus within days of infection.

If COVID-19 cases are caught early, the sick can be isolated, their contacts traced, and the chain of contagion severed.

Within weeks of the initial outbreak in China, genome sequences for the virus were made available and specialists in Asia and Europe got to work creating their own tests. But in parts of the world like Africa and Latin America, there was no such option. They would have to wait for the tests to become available – and when they did, the incredible demand meant most weren't able to secure the number they required.

"The collapse of global cooperation and a failure of international solidarity have shoved Africa out of the diagnostics market," Dr. John Nkengasong, director of the Africa CDC, wrote in Nature magazine in April as the hunt was underway.

Nations that got an early jump start in preparing or had a relatively robust health care system already in place fared best. Two weeks after Colombia identified its first case, the country had 22 private and public laboratories signed up to do PCR testing. Peru, by contrast, relied on just one laboratory capable of 200 tests a day.

For years, Peru has invested a smaller part of its GDP on public health than others in the region. As COVID-19 approached, glaring deficiencies in Peru became evident. There were just 100 ICU beds available for COVID-19 patients, said Dr. Víctor Zamora, who was appointed to lead Peru's Ministry of Health in March. Corruption scandals had left numerous hospital construction projects on pause. Peru also faced a significant shortage of doctors, forcing the state to embark on a massive hiring campaign.

Even now, months later, Peru's needs are vastly under met. To date, the country has less than 2,000 ICU beds, compared to over 6,000 in the state of Florida, which has 10 million fewer inhabitants, according to official data.

High levels of poverty and people who depend on daily wages from informal work complicated the government's efforts to impose a strict quarantine, further challenging Peru's ability to respond effectively to the virus.

When Zamora arrived, he said the government had already decided molecular tests weren't a viable option. The nation didn't have the infrastructure needed to run the tests but also acted too slowly in trying to obtain what little was available on the market.

"Peru didn't buy in time," he said. "Everyone in Latin America bought before us – even

Cuba.”

Antibody tests – which detect proteins created by the immune system in response to a virus – had numerous drawbacks. They had not been widely tested and their accuracy was in question. If taken too early, most people with the virus test negative. That could lead those infected to think they do not have COVID-19. False positives can be equally perilous, leading people to incorrectly believe they are immune.

Antibody tests didn't require high-skill training or even a lab; municipal workers with no medical education could be taught how to administer them.

“For the time we were in, it was the right decision,” Zamora said. “We didn't know what we know about the virus today.”

[Venezuela] Venezuela, Once an Oil Giant, Reaches the End of an Era (New York Times)

New York Times [10/7/2020 8:19 AM, Sheyla Urdaneta, Anatoly Kurmanaev and Isayen Herrera, Neutral]

For the first time in a century, there are no rigs searching for oil in Venezuela.

Wells that once tapped the world's largest crude reserves are abandoned or left to flare toxic gases that cast an orange glow over depressed oil towns.

Refineries that once processed oil for export are rusting hulks, leaking crude that blackens shorelines and coats the water in an oily sheen.

Fuel shortages have brought the country to a standstill. At gas stations, lines go on for miles.

Venezuela's colossal oil sector, which shaped the country and the international energy market for a century, has come to a near halt, with production reduced to a trickle by years of gross mismanagement and American sanctions. The collapse is leaving behind a destroyed economy and a devastated environment, and, many analysts say, bringing to an end the era of Venezuela as an energy powerhouse.

“Venezuela's days as a petrostate are gone,” said Risa Grais-Targow, an analyst at Eurasia Group, a political risk consultancy.

The country that a decade ago was the largest producer in Latin America, earning about \$90 billion a year from oil exports, is expected to net about \$2.3 billion by this year's end — less than the aggregate amount that Venezuelan migrants who fled the country's economic devastation will send back home to support their families, according to Pilar Navarro, a Caracas-based economist.

Production is the lowest in nearly a century after sanctions forced most oil companies to stop drilling for or buying Venezuelan oil — and even that trickle could dry up soon, analysts warn.

"Without drilling, without services companies and without money, it's very difficult to maintain even the current levels of production," said David Voght, head of IPD Latin America, an oil consulting firm. "If the political situation in the country doesn't change, you could go to zero."

The decline has diminished beyond recognition a country that just a decade ago rivaled the United States for regional influence. It is also unraveling a national culture defined by oil, a source of cash that once seemed endless; it financed monumental public works and pervasive graft, generous scholarships and flashy shopping trips to Miami.

Crippling gasoline shortages have led to an outbreak of dozens of daily protests across most Venezuelan states in recent weeks.

In the capital, Caracas, periodic fuel shipments from Iran, paid for with the country's remaining gold reserves, provide a semblance of normality for a few weeks at a time. But in the countryside, residents have defied the pandemic lockdown to block roads and clash with police amid their desperate demands for the modicum of fuel they need to survive.

Across Venezuela's oil towns, the sticky black crude that once provided jobs and social mobility is poisoning residents' livelihoods.

In Cabimas, a town on the shores of Lake Maracaibo that was once a center of production for the region's prolific oil fields, crude seeping from abandoned underwater wells and pipelines coats the crabs that former oil workers haul from the lake with blackened hands.

When it rains, oil that has oozed into the sewage system comes up through manholes and drains, coursing with rainwater through the streets, smearing houses and filling the town with its gaseous stench.

Cabimas's desolation marks a swift downfall for a town that just a decade ago was one of the richest in Venezuela.

During the boom years, PDVSA, the state-owned oil company, showered the residents of oil towns such as Cabimas with benefits including free food, summer camps and Christmas toys. It built hospitals and schools.

Now, the bankrupt company's tens of thousands of workers have been reduced to dismantling oil facilities for scrap metal and selling their distinctive coveralls, emblazoned with the company logo, to make ends meet.

"We used to be kings because we lived on the shores of PDVSA," said Alexander Rodriguez, a Cabimas fisherman, whose two boat motors have been spiked by an oil spill. "Now we're cursed."

PDVSA's social club, where locals used to gather to drink whiskey, play tennis and watch movies, is in ruins, and, like so much in town, smeared in oily, black residue.

"There are no jobs, no gasoline, but the oil is spilling everywhere," said Francisco Barrios, a baker.

The end of oil's central role in Venezuela's economy is a traumatic reversal for a nation that in many ways defined a petrostate.

After major reserves were tapped near Lake Maracaibo in 1914, oil workers from the United States poured into the country. They helped build many Venezuelan cities, and instilled in the country a love of baseball, whiskey and big gas-guzzling cars, differentiating it forever from its South American neighbors.

As a driving force in the founding of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries in 1960, Venezuela helped Arab nations take control of their oil wealth, shaping the global energy market and the geopolitical order for decades to come.

Even in those heady days, Venezuela's prominent oil minister, Juan Pablo Pérez Alfonzo, warned there were pitfalls to sudden oil wealth: It could lead to excessive debt and the destruction of traditional industries.

"It is the devil's excrement," Mr. Perez Alfonzo famously declared. "We are drowning in the devil's excrement."

In the years that followed, despite abundant oil revenues, Venezuela faced a roller coaster of recurring debt and financial crises. The wealth also did nothing to diminish corruption or inequality, and when a former paratrooper, Hugo Chávez, appeared on the national stage in the 1990s promising a revolution that would put Venezuela's oil to work for its poor majority, he captivated the nation.

Soon after he was elected president in 1998, Mr. Chávez commandeered the country's respected state oil company for his radical development program. He fired nearly 20,000 oil professionals, nationalized foreign-owned oil assets and allowed allies to plunder the oil revenues.

The troubled industry went into a free fall last year, when the United States accused Mr. Chavez's successor and protégé, President Nicolás Maduro, of election fraud and enacted severe economic sanctions to force him from power.

Soon, Venezuela's oil partners, bankers and customers broke ties, and output plunged at a pace that has outstripped Iraq's downturn during both Gulf Wars and Iran's after its Islamic Revolution.

The sanctions forced the last American oil companies in the country to stop drilling. They may leave the country entirely in December, if the Trump administration ends their exemptions from sanctions.

Mr. Maduro's Russian and Chinese partners have not filled the breach, downsizing production and cutting the oil trade, according to workers at the ventures.

Venezuela's opposition, which last year with Western backing challenged Mr. Maduro for the country's leadership, claims it can rebuild the oil industry once in power by ending American sanctions and offering investors attractive terms.

But analysts say Venezuelan oil industry is unlikely to attract the level of investment needed for a full recovery. In an era of stagnating global demand, weak prices and growing environmental concerns, the country's extra heavy oil is particularly polluting and expensive to process.

To compensate for the loss of revenue, Mr. Maduro has turned to illicit gold mining and drug trade to stay in power, according to the United States government.

Mr. Maduro's retreat from oil has left the shrinking Venezuelan economy comparable to that of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a country that has been plagued by civil strife since independence. But the transition has allowed Mr. Maduro to keep the loyalty of the military and weather the punishing American sanctions, said Ms. Grais-Targow, the analyst.

The costs of this economic contraction have been borne by the Venezuelan people, she said.

More than five million Venezuelans, or one in six residents, have fled the country since 2015, creating one of the world's greatest refugee crises, according to the United Nations. The country now has the highest poverty rate in Latin America, overtaking Haiti this year, according to a recent study by Venezuela's three leading universities.

Near Venezuela's massive coastal refineries, residents forage for firewood and trawl their fishing nets on foot to find food. Their fishing boats are beached without gasoline, and their kitchens have long run out of cooking gas.

"If we haven't reached the rock bottom yet, we're centimeters from it," said José Giron, who used to ferry tourists in the beach town of Tucacas, near Venezuela's three largest refineries.

PDVSA has kept minimal production going by sacrificing basic maintenance of equipment, at a growing environmental cost. The country's Caribbean coast, a great source of national pride with its turquoise water and white-sand beaches, has been damaged by at least four large oil spills this year — an unprecedented number, according to Venezuelan biologists.

Gasoline shortages and the pandemic have already emptied Tucacas's beaches of tourists. Now, the fish that many here rely on for survival are being decimated by the oil.

"These spills are the ultimate affront to the people," said Luis Vargas, who used to sell seafood cocktails to tourists.

The great, creeping oil stains are also ravaging Cabimas, in the country's west, where residents fish the polluted lake on inflated inner tubes and scour decaying oil facilities for a little gasoline. Three people died last month when a scuffle over a leaking gasoline pipeline led to an explosion.

For generations, Cabimas residents said they were the proud champions of Venezuela's oil. They now, too, call it "the devil's excrement."

[Venezuela] EU rules out sending observers for Venezuela's Dec. 6 vote (Reuters)
Reuters [10/7/2020 7:15 AM, Robin Emmott, Neutral]

The European Union said on Wednesday it will not send observers to Venezuela's parliamentary elections in December, warning that President Nicolas Maduro's decision to call them at short notice had worsened the political crisis in the country.

Like the United States, the EU wants new presidential elections to reverse Venezuela's spiral into authoritarian rule and economic collapse. They see the parliamentary vote as a way for Maduro to seize control of the opposition-held assembly.

"As the elections are not going to be postponed, the European Union cannot even consider sending an election observer mission," EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell told the European Parliament.

Maduro invited the EU to monitor the Dec. 6 election of candidates for the National Assembly last month - too late to organise an EU mission, which would typically involve sending a team months ahead of time to assess whether campaigning is free and fair, and other conditions.

Members of Venezuela's opposition have also called for a delay so that international observers can attend, fearing that the result could otherwise be rigged in Maduro's favour.

The current assembly head, Juan Guaido, is recognised by the EU as Venezuela's legitimate head-of-state, though Maduro retains control of the government and military.

Maduro has said he is bound by Venezuela's constitution to hold the vote on Dec. 6.

"This only serves to worsen the political situation in Venezuela," Borrell told EU lawmakers during a debate on the crisis in the South American nation.

The United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva has extended the mandate of investigators who have documented executions, disappearances and torture in Venezuela that they say may amount to crimes against humanity.

German Ambassador Michael Freiherr von Ungern-Sternberg told the Council on Tuesday that the only solution to the crisis was "a political, peaceful democratic one through credible transparent, free and fair legislative and presidential elections excluding any use of force."

Sub-Saharan Africa

[Burkina Faso] Gunmen kill 25 displaced people in Burkina Faso, U.N. says (Reuters)
Reuters [10/7/2020 12:07 PM, Staff, Neutral]

Armed assailants have killed 25 displaced people in northern Burkina Faso as their convoy tried to make its way home, the United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, said on Wednesday.

The gunmen, who carried out the attack near the town of Pissila in the Center-North region on the night of Oct. 4, separated the men from the group and shot them. The women and

children were let go, UNHCR said in a statement based on survivors' testimony.

"The attack on the (internally displaced people) occurred as they were returning to their homes from Pissila, hoping for an improved security situation there," the U.N. said.

Long an island of calm in a restive region, Burkina Faso has descended into violent chaos since 2018 as Islamist groups sowed ethnic discord and carried out multiple attacks.

This year alone, hundreds of people have been killed in dozens of attacks on civilians. Over 1 million people are displaced, more than one in every 20 inhabitants, the UN says.

[Côte d'Ivoire] Eighteen Burkinabe nationals die in Ivory Coast bus crash (Reuters)
Reuters [10/7/2020 1:46 PM, Thiam Ndaiga, Negative]

Eighteen Burkinabe nationals died when a bus they were travelling in crashed near the town of Bouake in central Ivory Coast on Wednesday morning, Burkina Faso's government said.

"It was a bus that overturned during a failed overtaking," said Rémi Dandjinou, Burkina Faso's minister of communication.

[Kenya] 2 Men Found Guilty of Aiding 2013 Kenya Mall Attack (New York Times)
New York Times [10/7/2020 7:49 AM, Abdi Latif Dahir, 28290K, Neutral]

A court in Kenya on Wednesday found two men guilty for their role in an assault on an upscale mall in the capital, Nairobi, that killed 67 people in 2013, the first convictions in one of the deadliest terror attacks in the country's history.

The men — Mohamed Ahmed Abdi and Hussein Hassan Mustafah — were found guilty of charges including conspiracy to commit terrorism and aiding the Qaeda-linked Shabab terrorist group. A third man, Liban Abdullah Omar, was acquitted of all charges. A fourth, Adan Dheq, was released last year because of a lack of evidence.

The ruling comes seven years after the attack on the Westgate mall, in which Shabab gunmen killed 67 people from 13 countries, wounding 175 others.

Chief Magistrate Francis Andayi of the Milimani law courts in Nairobi delivered the judgment, which had been delayed multiple times. A court translator gave the verdict, which took four hours to read, in Somali to the accused, who are all ethnic Somalis.

"Their defenses and denials that they had any links that were associated with the act that were committed by the attackers is without substance and I dismiss it," the chief magistrate said. "They were acting in concert with the attackers."

The Westgate mall was a symbol of Kenya's growing middle class, a place where affluent couples and families shopped, dined and caught the latest Hollywood and Bollywood movies.

But it became a scene of terror on a Saturday afternoon in 2013 when it was stormed by militants who fired indiscriminately at the crowds inside and detonated grenades, sending terrified people fleeing for the exits. The mall's shiny floors were smeared with blood and

scattered with lifeless bodies. Witnesses later said that the assailants had picked out non-Muslims for killing.

During a four-day siege to clear out the militants, the Kenyan authorities were criticized for an inefficient and disjointed response, with the police and military forces deployed in the mall even firing at each other. Soldiers were caught on camera stealing goods from shops in the ruined mall. Security officers also fired a rocket, leading to the collapse of entire floors in the five-story building, including the rooftop parking lot.

Kenyan and Western officials have said that four gunmen from Somalia were involved in the attack, and that all were killed during the siege. But an independent report by the New York Police Department suggested that some of the gunmen might have escaped during the siege.

The two convicted on Wednesday were found by the court to have provided support to the gunmen who carried out the attack. Those activities included communicating with the assailants, knowingly supporting the commission of a terrorist act and possessing materials connected to a terrorism offense. They are scheduled to be sentenced on Oct. 22 and face decades in prison.

The Shabab said that the attack was a reprisal for Kenya's deployment of troops in Somalia in 2011 as part of the United Nations-backed African Union peacekeeping mission.

The assault established the Shabab as a lethal enemy capable of carrying out attacks across Kenya on both civilian and military targets. In 2015, the group killed 148 people, a majority of them students, at a university in northeastern Kenya. That was the country's deadliest terror attack since Qaeda-linked militants bombed the United States Embassy in Nairobi in 1998, killing more than 200 people.

In 2019, 21 people were killed after the Shabab targeted a luxury hotel and office complex in Nairobi. In January, Shabab fighters killed three Americans and destroyed a surveillance plane when they stormed a Kenyan military post where U.S. troops were based.

On Tuesday, local news media reported that at least eight people had been wounded after attackers suspected of belonging to the Shabab targeted a bus in a town in northeastern Kenya near the border with Somalia.

The Shabab have also continued to wreak havoc in Somalia, bombing foreign military bases, killing civilians and striking hotels and restaurants. In December, the group was accused of detonating an explosives-laden truck in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, that killed 82 people, including university students. Last month, another truck bombing linked to the group in southern Somalia killed three Somali military officers and wounded three others, including an American service member.

For many Kenyans, the siege on Westgate and the subsequent attacks on Kenyan soil highlight how the Shabab remains a potent threat, willing to advance its ambitions at whatever cost, said Murithi Mutiga, project director for the Horn of Africa at the nonprofit International Crisis Group.

But while “today’s verdict will offer a measure of solace to the victims,” Mr. Mutiga said, many people in Kenya were still hoping for “a more permanent end to the threat of militancy.”

[Kenya] Kenya court convicts two for helping deadly jihadist attack on shopping mall (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 10:22 AM, Humphrey Malalo and George Obulutsa, 5304K, Neutral] A Kenyan court convicted two men on Wednesday for helping al Qaeda-linked gunmen storm Nairobi’s Westgate shopping mall and kill at least 67 people in a 2013 assault that proved Somali militants could strike at the heart of the capital.

The attack on the upscale mall — a favourite with the country’s growing middle class and foreign workers — came two years after the East African nation sent troops into Somalia following a series of kidnappings and raids on Kenyan soil.

A third defendant, also charged under a national terrorism prevention act, was acquitted in the trial, the only prosecution Kenya mounted over the assault by Somali al Shabaab militants.

Four gunmen died during the attack in one of the most secure areas of the Kenyan capital, and it has never been proven that there were any others who escaped.

The three defendants — all ethnic Somalis, two of whom are Kenyan citizens — were accused of assisting the attackers.

“The prosecution has proved its case against the accused on charges of conspiracy of committing a terrorism act and supporting a terrorist group,” Chief Magistrate Francis Andayi said as he read the verdict.

HARROWING TESTIMONY

During his judgment, Andayi referred to harrowing testimony from witnesses: bodies slumped behind the wheels of cars whose windscreens were shattered with bullets, their engines still running, a man attending a children’s cookery event who was shot several times before he crawled under a car and passed out.

Andayi said the prosecution’s case hinged on evidence of phone communication in the months before the attack between the accused and the gunmen.

The two convicted men will be sentenced on Oct. 22. Andayi was one of four different magistrates who presided over the case over seven years; there was no jury.

The authorities’ disastrous response to the Westgate attack deeply damaged Kenya’s reputation.

Soldiers and police fired at each other during a chaotic four days and footage emerged of soldiers looting the complex amid bodies sprawled on the bloodstained floor.

The trial provided little comfort for the loved ones of victims because it shed very little light on what happened during the bloody standoff.

Years later, questions such as whether the attackers' forensic remains were ever correctly identified remain unanswered. No one from the security forces has ever been held responsible for the pillaging of the mall.

QUESTIONS LINGER

"For as long as the authorities remain reluctant or unwilling to investigate the conduct of the security forces, questions will persist as to whether justice has indeed been served in this case regardless of how the judges decide," Otsieno Namwaya of Human Rights Watch said.

Al Shabaab has continued to mount major attacks in Kenya, including a 2015 assault on Garissa University that left 166 people dead and a 2019 attack on a Nairobi hotel and office complex that killed 21 people. The 2019 attack was the first led by a Kenyan gunman who was not an ethnic Somali, a result of al Shabaab's intensive efforts to recruit more foreigners.

East Africa has long been plagued by Islamist militancy. Twin attacks by al Qaeda on the U.S. embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998 killed 224 people. Some of those responsible later found refuge with al Shabaab in Somalia.

[Kenya] Kenyan court finds two men guilty over Westgate shopping mall attack (CNN)

CNN [10/7/2020 10:51 AM, Bethlehem Feleke, Neutral]

A court in Kenya convicted two men on Wednesday for their involvement in the deadly 2013 Westgate shopping mall attack in Nairobi that left dozens of people dead.

The men were convicted of conspiracy to commit a terrorist attack and possession of an article connected with a terrorism offense, according to a verdict read by Nairobi Chief Magistrate Francis Andayi.

CNN affiliate CitizenTV named the two guilty men as Mohammed Ahmed Abdi and Hussein Hassan Mustafa.

A third man was acquitted of all charges due to a lack of sufficient evidence supporting the prosecutor's case that he had advance knowledge of the attack while a fourth man was acquitted in January 2019 due to insufficient evidence to prove he falsified his identity.

"The prosecution has proved its case against the accused on charges of conspiracy of committing a terrorism act and supporting a terrorist group," Andayi said as he read the verdict.

At least 67 people were killed in the bloody siege in September 2013 at the upscale mall.

Kenyans and foreigners died in assaults scattered across the mall complex – it remains the deadliest terror attack in Kenya since the 1998 US embassy bombing in Nairobi.

Survivors told CNN at the time that the gunmen singled out shoppers, asking them if they were Muslim.

Charles Mugo, and his two young daughters found themselves with about 40 other shoppers in the mall parking garage after a trip to the grocery store, when the gunmen stormed in with AK-47 rifles.

Mugo told CNN he came face-to-face with one of the terrorists, a lanky, 6-foot man, wearing a black scarf-like cloth on his head and magazines of ammunition around his waist.

"Just like Rambo does in the movies," Mugo recalled.

Kenyan advocates have said that the trial provided little comfort for the loved ones of victims because it shed scant light on what happened during the attack itself.

The three men put on trial "are not in any way the masterminds. Not even the attackers. It's believed that the attackers escaped, and masterminds are still unknown. These three must have been fringe players, if at all," said Otsieno Namwaya, senior Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch.

[Mali] Families await freed hostages' return in Mali's capital (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 10:59 AM, Baba Ahmed, 2164K, Neutral]

Relatives and supporters on Wednesday anxiously awaited the return of a prominent Malian politician and a French aid worker released by Islamic extremists, after families were notified of their release.

Family members of Soumaila Cisse and Sophie Petronin still were awaiting details of a reunion in the capital, Bamako, nearly 24 hours after first hearing word of their freedom. The reason for the delay was not immediately known, though French government spokesperson Gabriel Attal told reporters it was an "extremely sensitive" situation.

Petronin's nephew told France's BFM-TV he had received no new information since Tuesday evening but remained upbeat: "We're not worried, we're calm. The latest news was that the embassy was preparing her arrival, but we don't know the timing."

Cisse was seized earlier this year, and Petronin in 2016.

News of their release came just days after the Malian government freed nearly 200 jailed jihadists and flew them to the northern town of Tessalit, fueling speculation of a prisoner exchange.

Even as relatives and supporters cheered news of their release, concerns began mounting about the long-term impact of such a deal.

Laith Alkhouri, an intelligence specialist who researches extremism in West Africa, said the reported prisoner exchange could prove costly in Mali, where jihadists already launch frequent attacks on soldiers and U.N. peacekeepers.

"The likelihood is that these very jihadists will ultimately engage in militant activities," Alkhouri said. "It will look good for the hostages to be released, but in the end the release of dozens and dozens of jihadists back into the battleground will negatively impact the security structure."

There was no immediate confirmation on whether a ransom was paid. Extremist groups in the Sahel have long funded their organizations through kidnappings. A total of nine Western hostages seized from Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso are believed to remain in the hands of various jihadist groups.

The al-Qaida-linked JNIM group, believed to have held Petronin and Cisse, is led by Iyad Ag Ghali, a Tuareg rebel leader once considered a key mediator in the negotiations to free European hostages held for ransom.

JNIM was officially formed in 2017 when four extremist groups joined forces: al-Qaida's North Africa branch, Al Mourabitoun, Ansar Dine and the Macina Liberation Front.

JNIM-linked militants are believed to be holding at least seven of the remaining foreign hostages: Italians Pierluigi Maccalli and Nicola Ciacco, Australian doctor Ken Elliott, Colombian nun Gloria Cecilia Narváez Argoti, South African national Christo Bothma, Swiss national Beatrice Stockly and Romanian citizen Julian Ghergut.

The other two, American Jeffery Woodke and German Jorg Lange, are believed to be held by extremists linked to the rival Islamic State group.

Petronin was seized in December 2016. She appeared 18 months later in a video released on Telegram by JNIM alongside the Colombian nun.

In March, extremists ambushed Cisse's vehicle while he and his entourage were campaigning in northern Mali. The three-time presidential candidate was later re-elected to his parliament seat while in captivity.

The only proof that he was still alive was a handwritten letter delivered in August. Negotiations for his release had appeared to stall after a military coup overthrew democratically elected President Ibrahim Boubacar Keita, who beat Cisse in the 2013 and 2018 elections.

While a transitional civilian government has been chosen, new elections are being organized with a 2022 deadline, providing a possible new political avenue for Cisse.

"We are here today to wait for our president (Cisse), the hope of the new Mali, Soumaila Cisse," said Ousmane Doumbia in Bamako. "All us here, we want Soumaila Cisse to come. We are sure he is alive."

[South Sudan] UN 'outraged' by attack on food aid convoy in South Sudan (AP)

AP [10/7/2020 6:45 AM, Staff, 29K, Neutral]

The U.N. World Food Program says it is "outraged" by an attack on a convoy carrying food

aid in South Sudan that left one crew member missing and three with gunshot wounds.

A statement says the attack occurred Monday as the WFP convoy of boats was carrying food aid to Melut and Malakal in the north to assist hundreds of thousands of people displaced by recent flooding.

The missing crew member is presumed dead, the WFP statement says. It does not give details about the attackers. Country director Matthew Hollingworth called on South Sudanese authorities to hold those responsible for "this unspeakable violence."

South Sudan remains one of the world's most dangerous places for humanitarian workers and one of the most precarious nations. Two years after the end of a civil war that killed nearly 400,000 people, roughly half the population is hungry.

The U.N. has warned that South Sudan is one of a handful of countries facing potential famine.

The U.N. and other aid organizations have repeatedly called on South Sudanese authorities to make it safer and easier to move around the country. Deadly intercommunal violence continues, and a peace deal signed two years ago faces delays in implementation.

[Tanzania] Tanzania opposition leader says facing repression as elections near (Reuters)

Reuters [10/7/2020 11:19 AM, Staff, Neutral]

Three weeks before elections, the Tanzanian government is getting scared and will do all in its power to stop the opposition, according to Tundu Lissu, a presidential hopeful whose convoy was teargassed by police last week.

"It is getting harder. It is getting hotter. We expected this," Lissu, from the main opposition Chadema party, told Reuters on Wednesday.

Chadema says its party offices in Arusha in northern Tanzania were firebombed. Meanwhile, dozens of opposition parliamentary candidates were disqualified from running in the elections for president and members of parliament on Oct. 28.

"The regime is getting scared and therefore they are pulling out all the stops, using all instruments of power in their capacity to fight my campaign," said Lissu.

Government spokesman Hassan Abbasi said that elections are under the purview of the National Electoral Commission when Reuters contacted him for comment.

Some iteration of Tanzania's CCM party has held power since independence in 1961, and President John Magufuli is widely expected to win a second term, tightening his grip on East Africa's third-largest economy.

However, CCM's percentage of the presidential vote has slightly declined over the past two elections.

Last month U.S. ambassador to Tanzania Donald Wright tweeted his concerns about “politically motivated violence and the overall increase in tensions as we get closer to Tanzania’s elections.”

International watchdogs like Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders have warned that repression of the opposition, activist groups, and the media has increased.

The government has previously denied clamping down on dissent.

Lissu returned in July after three years in exile following an unsolved 2017 assassination attempt. He was shot 16 times but survived.

Police said they teargassed Lissu’s campaign convoy after unidentified people threw stones at them. They also said they had arrested opposition activists in one case, after Chadema offices were firebombed.

Last Friday, the ethics committee of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) suspended Lissu from campaigning for a week for using incendiary language.

The NEC has also upheld the disqualification of 39 parliamentary candidates who were initially disqualified and reinstated 67 others.

The opposition says the disqualifications are an attempt to boost the ruling party, an accusation the commission rejects.

“Why should the commission disqualify you if you meet all the criteria? It is not true,” said Emmanuel Kawishe, the commission’s legal services director.

Magufuli – nicknamed “The Bulldozer” – won the presidency in 2015, promising to fight corruption and build infrastructure.

Pictures of his wife being treated in a public hospital shortly after he was elected instead of being flown abroad for treatment helped boost his popularity.

But he has also clamped down on dissent. His government banned public rallies in 2016, and at least 10 Tanzanian media outlets have been banned for periods ranging from one week to indefinitely between January 2016 and July 2020, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

That means the opposition has effectively been muzzled for several years, although now they are able to campaign, said Nicodemus Minde, a researcher on Tanzania at Nairobi’s United States International University.

The media is wary of covering the campaign however, said political analyst Aikande Kwayu, as the Media Services Act of 2016 and the Electronic and Postal Communications Regulations are vague and are used to punish the media.

“This has made the media cautious in covering the campaign and scared to portray the ruling party in a negative light,” she said.

Network TV News Coverage

ISIS Terrorists 'the Beatles' Charged With Deaths of Four Americans (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [10/7/2020 12:01 PM, Staff]

The U.S. Justice Department has charged two British men in a terror case. El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey allegedly joined an ISIS group that beheaded Americans and other Westerners in 2014 and 2015. Assistant Attorney General John Demers said, "Kotey and Elsheikh were members of the notoriously brutal ISIS hostage-taking cell that became known as 'the Beatles', a name their captives gave to them because of their British accents." They are charged in connection with the deaths of four Americans.

Two ISIS Members Will Appear in U.S. Court for Deaths of Americans (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [10/7/2020 10:02 AM, Elaine Cobbe]

Two long-sought ISIS suspects are on their way to the U.S. The two men are believed to be part of an ISIS foursome known as "the Beatles" because of their British accents. A law enforcement source confirms that they are in transit to the U.S. and are scheduled to appear in federal court in Alexandria, Virginia, on Wednesday afternoon. El Shafee Elsheikh and Alexandra Kotey were captured in Syria in 2018. The State Department has accused them of beheading some two dozen hostages, including American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and American aid worker Peter Kassig.

DoJ Announces Indictments of Two High-Profile ISIS Fighters (CNN Newsroom)

(B) CNN Newsroom [10/7/2020 11:41 AM, Jessica Schneider, 1M]

The Justice Department has announced charges against two ISIS fighters accused of kidnapping and murdering four Americans. Prosecutors say these two, part of an ISIS execution cell, are due in court Wednesday afternoon. The two men have been detained in Iraq since their capture in 2018, but they will appeal in federal court in Virginia to face multiple charges, all related to the brutal beatings and beheadings of at least four Americans. The victims are journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff and American aid workers Pete Kassig and Kayla Mueller. Their families have been appealing to the U.S. government for years to bring the two captured fighters to the United States to face justice. Today, the FBI director appeared alongside the top official in the national security division of the Department of Justice, General John Demers, to announce that those fighters will be in the U.S. to face justice. Demers said in their announcement, "You will face American justice in an American courtroom and the prospect of many years in an American prison. Either way, you will never live in peace. You will be pursued to the ends of the earth. No matter how long it takes, we will never forget. We will never quit." The two ISIS fighters were part of a cell that was led by a man known as Jihadi John, who was killed by a U.S. drone strike in 2015. The two captured men were extradited to the U.S. under an agreement with the British government that the Department of Justice will not seek the death penalty.

Supreme Court Takes Up Religious Freedom Case Again Seven Years Later (FOX News)

(B) FOX News [10/7/2020 9:07 AM, Staff]

The Supreme Court is back to the controversial issue of religious freedom in a case about three Muslim men. Seven years ago, the three men who were born overseas but live legally in the United States were asked by the FBI to become informants for the government in

terrorism-related investigations. The men claim they refused to do so because of religious beliefs and they didn't want to spy on their community. So, they say the FBI retaliated by putting them on the nationwide no-fly list.

[Mexico] Tourists Take Shelter in Cancun as Hurricane Delta Hits (CBS News)

(B) CBS News [10/7/2020 11:03 AM, Staff]

Tourists have hunkered down in Cancun as Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula feels the wrath of Hurricane Delta. "Our hotel's done a good job of making sure we were provided for and we're going to be safe here in this place," one tourist said, "so we don't have any concerns at all." The storm made landfall a few hours ago with top sustained winds of 110 miles an hour. Meteorologist David Parkinson says it's going to take aim at the Gulf Coast next. Parkinson says the storm will be a "category four, 130-135 mile an hour winds as it makes an eventual northward push towards Louisiana."

{End of Report}

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