

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
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Washington, D.C. 20536



U.S. Immigration
and Customs
Enforcement

April 25, 2021

Hart Wood
American Oversight
1030 15th St. NW, B255
Washington, DC 20005
Hart.wood@americanoversight.org

RE: **AMERICAN OVERSIGHT v. U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY-
1:21-cv-01171-TNM**
ICE FOIA Case Number 2021-ICLI-00064
Third Release

Dear Mr. Hart:

This letter is the third interim response to your client's Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), dated July 16, 2021. Your FOIA request seeking records related to all final talking points prepared for Secretary Nielsen regarding the MPP and issues related to it, such as plans for lodging asylum seekers in Tijuana, plans for transporting migrants to and from Tijuana, expansion of the protocol to additional ports of entry, etc.

ICE has considered your request under the FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552.

A total of 541 pages of records were reviewed for this interim production. These 541 pages of records were located pursuant to a search of the Director's Office. After review of these documents, ICE has determined that 28 pages were deemed non-responsive and 172 pages were duplicative. The responsive 341 pages of records are attached and have been marked 2021-ICLI-00064 319 to 2021-ICLI-00064 659.

ICE has applied FOIA Exemptions (b)(5), (b)(6), and (b)(7)(C) to portions of the pages produced as described below.

FOIA Exemption 5 protects inter-agency or intra-agency deliberative process privilege, attorney work-product privilege, or attorney-client privilege information. Exemption 5 protects the integrity of the decision-making processes within the agency by exempting from mandatory disclosure opinions, conclusions, and recommendations included within inter-agency or intra-agency

memoranda or letters. The release of this internal information would discourage the expression of candid opinions and inhibit the free and frank exchange of information among agency personnel.

FOIA Exemption 6 exempts from disclosure information in personnel or medical files and similar files the release of which would cause a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. This requires a balancing of the public's right to disclosure against the individual's right to privacy. The privacy interests of the individuals in the records you have requested outweigh any minimal public interest in disclosure of the information. Any private interest you may have in that information does not factor into the aforementioned balancing test.

FOIA Exemption 7(C) protects records or information compiled for law enforcement purposes when production of such could reasonably be expected to constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. This exemption takes particular note of the strong interests of individuals, whether they are suspects, witnesses, or investigators, in not being unwarrantably associated with alleged criminal activity. That interest extends to persons who are not only the subjects of the investigation, but those who may have their privacy invaded by having their identities and information about them revealed in connection with an investigation. Based upon the traditional recognition of strong privacy interests in law enforcement records, categorical withholding of information that identifies third parties in law enforcement records is ordinarily appropriate.

If you have any questions about this letter, please contact Assistant United States Attorney Sean Michael Tepe at sean.tepe@usdoj.gov.

Sincerely,

KORRINA L
STEWART

Digitally signed by
KORRINA L STEWART
Date: 2022.04.25 14:52:55
-04'00'

Korrina Stewart
ICE Litigation Supervisor

Enclosure(s): 341 page(s)

cc: Sean Michael Tepe
Assistant United States Attorney
sean.tepe@usdoj.gov

(b)(6); (b)(7)(C)

Assistant Director (A)

ICE Office of Public Affairs | Department of Homeland Security

202-732-(b)(6) (desk) | 202-731-(b)(6) (mobile)

From: (b)(6); (b)(7)(C) @who.eop.gov>

Sent: Tuesday, October 08, 2019 2:31 PM

To: (b)(6); (b)(7)(C) @ice.dhs.gov>

Subject: TPs for tomorrow

This is what DHS has asked to be implemented into the remarks:

(b)(5)

(b)(6); (b)(7)(C)

Special Assistant to the President

Director of Government Communications

O: 202.456-(b)(6); (b)(7)(C) C: 202.881-(b)(6); (b)(7)(C) | E: (b)(6); (b)(7)(C) @who.eop.gov

From: DHS Daily
Sent: Fri, 27 Mar 2020 05:53:10 -0400
To: (b)(6); @techmis.com
Subject: DHS Morning Briefing (3-27-20)
Attachments: DHS Morning Briefing (3-27-20).pdf



DHS MORNING BRIEFING

Prepared for the Office of Public Affairs (OPA)

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

By TechMIS

www.TechMIS.com

[Mobile User Copy](#)

TO: Homeland Security Secretary & Staff

DATE: Friday, March 27, 2020 6:00 AM ET

Top News

[The U.S. Now Leads the World in Confirmed Coronavirus Cases \(New York Times\)](#)

[US has more known cases of coronavirus than any other country \(CNN\)](#)

[US overtakes China with 82,000 coronavirus cases, the most in the world \(Washington Examiner\)](#)

[Senate Passes \\$2 Trillion Economic Aid Deal as Coronavirus Deaths Top 1,000 \(US News & World Report\)](#)

[Coronavirus bill includes \\$350 million for migration, refugee assistance \(FOX News\)](#)

[Pandemic Disrupting U.S. Immigration Process At Every Level \(NPR\)](#)

[Amid Coronavirus Concerns, Pentagon To Send Troops To U.S. Borders With Mexico, Canada \(NPR\)](#)

DOJ postpones 'Remain in Mexico' hearings in response to coronavirus threat (FOX News)

Three migrant children in US government custody test positive for coronavirus (CNN)

Coronavirus: 3 migrant children in US custody in New York test positive (USA Today)

First Migrant Children In US Custody Test Positive For Coronavirus (Daily Caller)

Federal agencies would get money for telework, equipment — and cleaning the office (Washington Post)

Unemployment claims soared to 3.3 million last week, most in history (CNN)

Trump administration suspends emergency oil purchase after Congress denies funding (Washington Examiner)

House leaders seek to expedite emergency aid package amid uncertainty about GOP lawmaker delaying measure (Washington Post)

Pelosi forecasts House OK of Senate's \$2.2T virus aid plan (Houston Chronicle)

Hospitals on soccer fields, in state park cabins and converted convention centers (Washington Post)

US to free some prisoners amid coronavirus threat (Breitbart)

Releases, infections, fear: U.S. coronavirus crisis in jails and prisons looms (ABC News)

Pompeo defends efforts to bring Americans home amid pandemic (Politico)

HHS implements anti-price gouging order amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

Coronavirus Pandemic Reaching Critical Tipping Point in America, Analysis Shows (US News & World Report)

Prepare For Outbreaks Like New York's In Other States, Warns Anthony Fauci (NPR)

Pandemic deaths could top 1.8 mn even with tough response: study (Breitbart)

White House officials push back on calls to activate DPA for critical medical supplies (Politico)

Cases explode in Michigan but states outside of the hotspots can't get supplies (CNN)

Feds have 1.5 million expired N95 masks in storage despite CDC clearing them for use on COVID-19: report (The Hill)

After Considering \$1 Billion Price Tag for Ventilators, White House Has Second Thoughts (New York Times)

[NY] 'The Other Option Is Death': New York Starts Sharing of Ventilators (New York Times)

[NY] Nurses treating coronavirus say they are reusing masks, back to work before 14-day quarantine (USA Today)

[NY] For the first time since 9/11, NYC has set up makeshift morgues. This time, it's in anticipation of coronavirus deaths (CNN)

[NY] Trump keeps touting an unproven coronavirus treatment. It's now being tested on thousands in New York. (Washington Post)

[LA] New Orleans on Louisiana's front line in coronavirus war, as disaster has state monitoring nursing homes (CNN)

[MI] Hundreds of thousands of masks missing from federal shipments to Michigan (The Hill)

[IN] Fort Wayne Jail Releases 25 Inmates Early Amid Pandemic (US News & World Report)

[Canada] Trump Expected to Send U.S. Troops to Canada Border to Support Operations Amid Coronavirus Crisis (US News & World Report)

[Canada] Trudeau Pushes Back on U.S. Notion to Use Military Near Border (Bloomberg)

[Canada] Trudeau calls for keeping US-Canada border demilitarized (The Hill)

[Canada] Canada asks US not to put troops at border during coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

[Canada] Canada Urges US Not to Put Troops at Border During Pandemic (US News & World Report)

[Canada] Canada attacks Trump plan to deploy troops at border as unnecessary and damaging (Reuters)

[Mexico] US-Mexico border closure brings local economy to a halt (Public Radio International)

[Mexico] Tijuana's oldest migrant shelter closes to new arrivals to protect against coronavirus (San Diego Union Tribune)

[Mexico] VIDEO: Mexican Border State Mayor Bans U.S. Citizens over Coronavirus (Breitbart)

[Mexico] Coronavirus stalls asylum system and exacerbates conditions of migrants waiting in Mexico (San Diego Union Tribune)

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Amid pandemic, medically vulnerable people remain trapped in ICE jails (The Hill)

ICE resists calls to release immigrants as desperation mounts over coronavirus (CBS News)

ICE deportation planes begin to ship stranded U.S. citizens home (Reuters)

Trump Admin Can't Bar Sanctuary Cities From Receiving Law Enforcement Funding From Stimulus (Daily Caller)

Immigration chief on thin ice for adopting Obama's stance during crisis (Politico)

[NJ] Judge orders release of 10 immigration detainees from N.J. jails (Politico)

[NJ] ICE detainees in facilities with coronavirus cases ordered released by judge (ABC News)

[NJ] New Jersey jails must release at least 10 'at risk' ICE detainees over coronavirus concerns: judge (FOX News)

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Legal immigrants at risk of losing status during coronavirus pandemic (The Hill)

Travel industry hails REAL ID extension, says may need to be longer (The Hill)

U.S. delays enforcing tougher ID requirements until October 2021 (Reuters)

Americans will get an extra year to obtain their Real ID (San Diego Union Tribune)

[CA] California DMV is scaling back over coronavirus. Some employees say it's not enough (Los Angeles Times)

Customs and Border Protection

[AZ] Protesters block lanes at Mexico border, demand coronavirus screening (The Hill)

[AZ] Mexican protesters block Arizona border traffic, demand coronavirus screenings on travelers from US (FOX News)

[AZ] Incomplete Tunnel Found Under Arizona Border Wall (Breitbart)

[AZ] Deported Two-Time Sex Offender Arrested in Arizona near Border (Breitbart)

[Canada] U.S. to return Canada-bound asylum seekers stopped at border to home nations (Reuters)

Federal Emergency Management Agency

[NJ] New Jersey reports nearly 2,500 new coronavirus cases in one day (The Hill)

[NJ] Trump Approves New Jersey Disaster Declaration — Ninth State So Far Where Coronavirus Is A 'Major Disaster' (Daily Caller)

[MD] Trump grants major disaster declaration for state of Maryland (The Hill)

[MD] Hogan: Maryland receives federal disaster designation (AP)

[TN] Tennessee Gets \$476K Grant for Tornado Victim Mental Health (AP)

[IL] President Trump approves federal disaster declaration for Illinois (Chicago Tribune)

Secret Service

[NY] Duo Nabbed Using Fake \$100 Bills In Northern Westchester, Police Say (Daily Voice)

[VA] Suffolk PD need help identifying woman wanted for counterfeit fraud (Wavy)

[KY] Counterfeit 100s being passed in Pendleton County (Falmouth Outlook)

[KY] Secret Service helps sheriff's department find kidnapped twins (News Democrat Leader)

[TN] Evelyn Boswell's grandmother charged with aggravated burglary, shoplifting (WBIR TV - Knoxville)

[MN] Counterfeit cash reported by business owners in Waseca (KEYC Television)

Coast Guard

[FL] Two Costa Ships Begin Disembarking Sick Crew Members in Miami (Bloomberg)

[FL] Costa cruise ships anchor near Miami looking for 'life-critical' care (The Hill)

[FL] 2 Costa cruise ships heading toward Florida with dozens of sick crew members on board (FOX News)

[FL] Miami accepts 13 sick cruise ship crew members (Breitbart)

[FL] Sick Cruise Ship Crew Taken to Miami Hospitals (Boise State Public Radio)

CISA/Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity Experts Say Hacking Risk Is High for Mobile Voting (Bloomberg)

Experts see over 600 percent spike in malicious emails during coronavirus crisis (The Hill)

COVID-19 Phishing Attacks Have Increased, Says CrowdStrike CEO (Bloomberg)

Google sees 350 percent increase in phishing websites during COVID-19 pandemic, report reveals (FOX News)

Terrorism Investigations

[NJ] A grocery store threw out \$35,000 in food that a woman intentionally coughed on, sparking coronavirus fears, police said (CNN)

[MO] Suspect killed by FBI during investigation into plot to bomb medical facility (The Hill)

[MO] FBI learned of coronavirus-inspired bomb plotter through radicalized US Army soldier (ABC News)

[MO] Missouri man plotting coronavirus hospital bombing killed in shooting, FBI says (FOX News)

[MO] Man Who Attempted To Bomb Missouri Hospital That Was Treating Coronavirus Killed In Shootout, FBI Says (Daily Caller)

National Security News

Pentagon orders US troops worldwide to hold in place to halt spread of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)

Navy brings aircraft carrier into port, will test thousands of sailors for coronavirus (Washington Post)

Navy ships seek to stop missile, drone and surface attacks -- all at once (FOX News)

Marine Corps readiness outweighs coronavirus hesitance as first Pentagon case reported (Washington Examiner)

World leaders vow to coordinate response to pandemic (San Francisco Chronicle)

[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro on narcoterrorism charges, offers \$15 million reward for his capture (Washington Post)

[Venezuela] U.S. charges Venezuelan president for drug trafficking (CBS News)

[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro, a political foe, for 'narco-terrorism' (Reuters)

[Venezuela] Experts: Venezuela Is 'Worst Case Scenario' for Coronavirus Spread (US News & World Report)

[South Africa] South Africa braces for coronavirus lockdown (Breitbart)

[Syria] U.S. Forces In Syria Tackle A More Complex — And Possibly Dangerous — Mission (NPR)

[\[Iraq\] Rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone, US-led coalition leaves base \(Breitbart\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] U.S.-led forces depart Iraqi military base near Mosul in drawdown \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] As planned, US-led coalition pulling out of 2nd Iraqi base \(Washington Times\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] Trump Admin Sanctions Vast Iranian Terror Network in Iraq \(Free Beacon\)](#)

[\[Iraq\] Iran-Backed Iraqi Terrorists Claim 'U.S. Plot to Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic' \(Breitbart\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Iran says has 'no knowledge' of missing ex-FBI agent \(Breitbart\)](#)

[\[Iran\] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iranian individuals, companies -Treasury \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[Iran\] Hezbollah Joins Iranian Terrorists in Jihad Against Chinese Coronavirus \(Breitbart\)](#)

[\[Russia\] Moscow Starts Shutting Down as Kremlin Says No Epidemic Here \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[China\] To Slow Virus, China Bars Entry by Almost All Foreigners \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[China\] China closes border to foreign travelers \(Politico\)](#)

[\[China\] China to Suspend Foreigners' Entry Starting Saturday \(Bloomberg\)](#)

[\[China\] China Temporarily Closes Its Borders To Foreign Nationals \(Aspen Public Radio\)](#)

[\[China\] China bars foreigners, citing fears of imported virus cases \(Washington Times\)](#)

[\[China\] China's Xi offers Trump help in fighting coronavirus as U.S. faces wave of new patients \(Reuters\)](#)

[\[China\] Chinese Distributed Faulty Coronavirus Test Kits Throughout Europe, Reports Indicate \(Free Beacon\)](#)

[\[China\] U.S. Officials Push for Expelling Suspected Chinese Spies at Media Outlets \(New York Times\)](#)

[\[China\] Senior administration officials agree to limit Huawei's access to chips: report \(The Hill\)](#)

[\[China\] U.S. prepares crackdown on Huawei's global chip supply - sources \(Reuters\)](#)

Presidential Tweets

Editorial Note: The DHS Daily Briefing is a collection of news articles related to Department's mission. The inclusion of particular stories is not intended to reflect their

importance, nor is it intended to endorse the political viewpoints or affiliations included in news coverage.

Top News

The U.S. Now Leads the World in Confirmed Coronavirus Cases (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 6:27 PM, Donald G. McNeil Jr, 23673K]

Scientists warned that the United States someday would become the country hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic. That moment arrived on Thursday.

In the United States, at least 81,321 people are known to have been infected with the coronavirus, including more than 1,000 deaths — more cases than China, Italy or any other country has seen, according to data gathered by The New York Times.

The Times is engaged in a comprehensive effort to track the details of every confirmed case in the United States, collecting information from federal, state and local officials.

With 330 million residents, the United States is the world's third most populous nation, meaning it provides a vast pool of people who can potentially get Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus.

And it is a sprawling, cacophonous democracy, where states set their own policies and President Trump has sent mixed messages about the scale of the danger and how to fight it, ensuring there was no coherent, unified response to a grave public health threat.

A series of missteps and lost opportunities dogged the nation's response.

Among them: a failure to take the pandemic seriously even as it engulfed China, a deeply flawed effort to provide broad testing for the virus that left the country blind to the extent of the crisis, and a dire shortage of masks and protective gear to protect doctors and nurses on the front lines, as well as ventilators to keep the critically ill alive.

"This could have been stopped by implementing testing and surveillance much earlier — for example, when the first imported cases were identified," said Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at Columbia University in New York.

"If these are the cases we've confirmed, how many cases are we still missing?" she added.

China's leaders, stung by the SARS epidemic in 2003 and several bird flu scares since then, were slow to respond to the outbreak that began in the city of Wuhan, as local officials suppressed news of the outbreak.

But China's autocratic government acted with ferocious intensity after the belated start, eventually shutting down swaths of the country. Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan quickly began preparing for the worst.

The United States instead remained preoccupied with business as usual. Impeachment. Harvey Weinstein. Brexit and the Oscars.

Only a few virologists recognized the threat for what it was. The virus was not influenza, but it had the hallmarks of the 1918 Spanish flu: relatively low lethality, but relentlessly transmissible.

Cellphone videos leaking out of China showed what was happening as it spread in Wuhan: dead bodies on hospital floors, doctors crying in frustration, rows of unattended coffins outside the crematories.

What the cameras missed — in part because Beijing made Western journalists' lives difficult by withholding visas and imposing quarantines — was the slow, relentless way China's public health system was hunting down the virus, case by case, cluster by cluster, city by city.

For now, at least, China has contained the coronavirus with draconian measures. But the pathogen had embarked on a Grand Tour of most countries on Earth, with devastating epidemics in Iran, Italy, France. More videos emerged of prostrate victims, exhausted nurses and lines of coffins.

The United States, which should have been ready, was not. This country has an unsurpassed medical system supported by trillions of dollars from insurers, Medicare and Medicaid. Armies of doctors transplant hearts and cure cancer.

The public health system, limping along on local tax receipts, kills mosquitoes and traces the contacts of people with sexually transmitted diseases. It has been outmatched by the pandemic.

There was no Pentagon ready to fight the war on this pandemic, no wartime draft law. There was eventually a White House Coronavirus Task Force, but it has been led by politicians, not medical experts.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is one of the great disease-detective agencies in the world, and its doctors have contributed mightily in skirmishes against Ebola, Zika and any number of other health threats.

But the agency retreated into silence, its director, Dr. Robert Redfield, almost invisible — humbled by a fiasco in the failure to produce basic diagnostic testing.

Now at least 160 million Americans have been ordered to stay home in states from California to New York. Schools are closed, often along with bars, restaurants and many other businesses. Hospitals are coping with soaring numbers of patients in New York City, even as supplies of essential protective gear and equipment dwindle.

Other hospitals, other communities fear what may be coming.

"We are the new global epicenter of the disease," said Dr. Sara Keller, an infectious disease specialist at Johns Hopkins Medicine.

"Now, all we can do is to slow the transmission as much as possible by hunkering down in

our houses while, as a country, we ramp up production of personal protective equipment, materials needed for testing, and ventilators.”

The world will be a different place when the pandemic is over. India may surpass the United States as the country with the most deaths. Like the United States, it, too, is a vast, democracy with deep internal divisions. But its population, 1.3 billion, is far larger, and its people are crowded even more tightly into megacities.

China could still stumble into a new round of contagion as its economy restarts, and be forced to do it all again.

In the meantime, with the virus loose in the streets while millions of Americans huddle indoors, when will it be safe to come out and go back to work?

“The virus will tell us,” said Dr. William Schaffner, a preventive medicine specialist at Vanderbilt University Medical School.

When a baseline of daily testing is established across the country, a drop in the percentage of positive tests will signal that the virus has found as many hosts as it can for the moment, and is beginning to recede.

When hospital admissions have hit a clear peak and begun to plateau, “we can feel optimistic,” Dr. Schaffner said. “And when they begin to drop, we can begin to smile.”

That moment may arrive this summer. But as soon as the first of Americans begin venturing cautiously out, we will have to start planning for the second wave.

US has more known cases of coronavirus than any other country (CNN)

CNN [3/27/2020 4:25 AM, Nicole Chavez, Holly Yan and Madeline Holcombe, 5551K]

The United States now has the highest number of known cases of coronavirus in the world with more than 82,000, according to CNN’s tally of cases reported by health officials.

The US cases piled up Thursday, surpassing China and Italy. The per capita rate of cases varies because of the countries’ vast differences in population.

As of Thursday evening, the United States had at least 82,100 cases while China was reporting 81,782. There have been more than 510,000 cases reported worldwide. The countries’ numbers are changing constantly and both the totals and the rank order of countries could change at any time.

The grim milestone comes just as US officials said there was a new high for fatalities reported in a single day.

At least 246 new deaths were reported Thursday, bringing the total number of deaths nationwide to at least 1,195.

The spike of cases has hospitals around the country scrambling to keep up with the demand for care.

In New York, where more than half of the US cases have been reported, exhausted hospital workers are turning to increasingly desperate measures to combat the virus.

New York Bellevue Hospital Center created a makeshift morgue using tents and refrigerated trucks. At Elmhurst Hospital Center in Queens, 13 patients died from coronavirus within 24 hours.

A registered nurse described what she has experienced inside a Long Island hospital and the toll that caring for coronavirus patients is taking on health care workers.

"I haven't slept because my mind won't shut off. I cried in the bathroom on my break, as I peeled off the PPE from my sweaty self, mask indentations on my face. I cried the entire ride home," the nurse wrote in a social media post.

The nurse, whom CNN is not naming, says patients are streaming in with "non stop coughing, sweaty, fevers" and with "fear in their eyes."

"I cry for the ones who passed away. I cry because we intubated 5 patients within 10 min and im terrified. I cry for my co workers, because we know it will get worse and I already feel like that is impossible and we are already at our breaking point, I cry for the parents, children, siblings, spouses who cannot be with their loved ones who may be dying but cant have visitors because there is no visiting allowed," the nurse added.

Chicago and Detroit could be next new hot spots

Outbreaks in New York, Washington and California have captured the nation's attention for weeks -- but some health officials predict areas of Michigan and Illinois could be the next epicenters of the crisis.

Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House's coronavirus response coordinator, said health officials are concerned that counties like Wayne County, Michigan and Cook County, Illinois are showing a "more rapid increase" in cases.

Birx noted that 40% of the country has "extraordinary low rates" of coronavirus" About 19 states have fewer than 200 cases, she said.

Louisiana, which has seen coronavirus cases climb this week, is already emerging as another hot spot. New Orleans is facing critical shortages of ventilators and protective equipment, an official told CNN Thursday.

"This is going to be the disaster that defines our generation," Collin Arnold, director of the city's Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, said.

Health officials said they are monitoring six nursing homes in the state, including the 268-resident Lambeth House Retirement Community in New Orleans, where 11 deaths were reported on Tuesday.

Hospitals brace for equipment shortages

Numerous hospitals expect to run out of beds within two weeks, as cases continue to rise.

If more beds don't become available, "then we don't have resources to save the lives that we need to save," former Louisiana Secretary of Health Dr. Rebekah Gee said. "That's why these stay-at-home orders are so important."

But "we have not seen the peak of the crisis yet," Gee said.

Desperate for protective face masks, Gee said health care workers have been punching holes in plastic office report covers and running string through those holes.

"I think what's just as concerning is the fact that we need more ventilators," she said. "And that is something that the federal government needs to step in and fix."

Many have called for President Donald Trump to use the Defense Production Act to speed up the availability of critical health equipment.

This week, Trump and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) gave conflicting information about whether the act was being used.

New York will allow two patients to share a single ventilator

In an effort to address the desperate need for medical equipment, New York state has approved technology that allows two patients to share a ventilator.

As of Thursday, more than half of US coronavirus cases were in New York state, with more than 37,000, according to CNN's tally of cases reported by state health officials nationwide. Gov. Andrew Cuomo referred to the method as "splitting" and said it involves adding a second set of tubes to a ventilator.

"It's not ideal," Cuomo said on Thursday, "but we believe it's workable."

New York hospitals need about 30,000 ventilators and have enough personal protection equipment for only the next two weeks, the governor has said.

Wednesday, the state had 4,000 ventilators in hospitals and another 4,000 on the way from the federal government. New York has also purchased 7,000 ventilators and is "still shopping," the governor said.

The ventilators are the "difference between life and death for thousands of New Yorkers," New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

In San Francisco, Mayor London Breed said her city could see a surge in cases similar to that seen in New York City.

She estimated San Francisco could need as many as 1,500 more ventilators and 5,000 more hospital beds.

"If people who are out on the streets continue to congregate with one another, continue to interact with one another which increases the spread of this virus, we will not have enough beds, enough ICU units, enough ventilators to support the people that we know are going to need them," Breed said.

'Dear God, stay home, save lives'

Across the country, 21 states have issued stay-at-home orders, with some not going into effect until the end of the week.

Georgia and Florida do not have statewide rules, but Atlanta enacted its own stay-at-home order, and Miami announced a nighttime curfew.

People without symptoms are fueling the spread of coronavirus

In Chicago, Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced Thursday that bike trails, paths and green spaces will be closed after crowds were spotted on the city's lakefront.

"Congregating on our lakefront, to be blunt, is going to create a risk that is unacceptable and could lead to death," Lightfoot said. "Dear God, stay home, save lives."

The decision comes after Interim Chicago Police Superintendent Charlie Beck said police will start issuing citations Thursday to residents who do not follow rules around social distancing and staying at home.

Breaking the orders is a misdemeanor punishable by a citation with a fine of up to \$500, Beck said. If violation continues, it could result in physical arrest.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

US overtakes China with 82,000 coronavirus cases, the most in the world (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 6:08 PM, Cassidy Morrison, 570K]

The U.S. coronavirus case count surpassed that of China Thursday with 82,404 now testing positive for the disease. The U.S. now has the most cases in the world.

The pandemic tracker maintained by Johns Hopkins University reported that the number of cases in the U.S. had overtaken the 81,782 cases confirmed in China. Italy has 80,589.

Earlier Wednesday, the Chinese government announced it would shut down China's borders to most foreign arrivals, calling it an "interim measure" that will go into effect on Friday.

"In view of the rapid spread of the new coronavirus epidemic worldwide, China has decided to temporarily suspend entry of foreigners with currently valid visas and residence permits in China," the country's Foreign Ministry said.

The move is a reversal of U.S. policies enacted first in January to ban arrivals from China

and then mid-March banning arrivals from Europe and the U.K. Though the Trump administration's ban exempted non-citizen family members of American citizens, China's ban on foreigners is more stringent, making exemptions only for some diplomatic visa holders.

China's health ministry did not announce any new cases last week for the first time, but President Trump cast doubt on the government's level of transparency in his Thursday White House Press briefing.

"Number one, you don't know what the numbers are in China. China tells you numbers... you just don't know," Trump said. "I'm sure you're not able to tell what China is testing or not testing, I think that's a little hard."

Still, China's border shutdown is symptomatic of widespread worries that the coronavirus disease is not on its way out for good. In fact, top infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said Wednesday that "we need to be prepared that we'll get a cycle around the second time."

Senate Passes \$2 Trillion Economic Aid Deal as Coronavirus Deaths Top 1,000 (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 9:00 AM, Robin Foster and E.J. Mundell, HealthDay, 3020K]

The U.S. Senate voted late Wednesday to pass a \$2 trillion stimulus package to bolster the U.S. economy as the country's coronavirus death toll passed 1,000.

The unprecedented legislation will send \$1,200 checks to many Americans, create a \$367 billion loan program for small businesses and set up a \$500 billion fund for industries, cities and states, the Washington Post reported. The House was expected to pass the bill on Friday, and then send it to President Donald Trump for his signature.

The help cannot come too soon, as more than 100 million Americans -- nearly 1 in 3 -- have been ordered by their state's governors to stay home, away from work and school.

Nearly 70,000 U.S. COVID-19 cases have been confirmed, with 1,050 deaths, the Associated Press reported Thursday. New York is the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak, with more than 30,000 cases and close to 300 deaths, the wire service said.

Despite the steep rise in U.S. cases, Trump said Tuesday he would like to re-open the country by Easter, April 12, the New York Times reported.

"We can socially distance ourselves and go to work, and you'll have to work a little bit harder," Trump said. "You can clean your hands five times more than you used to. You don't have to shake hands anymore with people."

Most health experts reacted negatively to Trump's plan however.

If people are told they can head back to work, commuting by bus or subway while thousands of new infections are confirmed each day, "the virus will surge, many will fall ill

and there will be more deaths," Dr. William Schaffner, a preventive medicine expert at Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine, told the Times.

Trump's remarks also came in sharp contrast to actions other leaders have taken around the world: India ordered a 21-day shutdown of a country in which 1.3 billion people live, while Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach agreed to postpone the Summer Olympics in that country until at least the summer of 2021.

The United Kingdom has also ordered a shutdown of its country, while Prince Charles, the 71-year-old heir to the British throne, was diagnosed with coronavirus on Wednesday, CNN reported.

Grim statistics pile up in the U.S.

In the United States, a tripling in the number of coronavirus cases could make America the world's next hot spot, World Health Organization spokeswoman Margaret Harris said Tuesday, the Post reported.

"It's just going to get worse this week and worse next week," Dr. Leana Wen, a visiting professor at George Washington University, told CNN Monday night.

Things are particularly grim in New York City, where one hospital in Queens saw 13 COVID-19 deaths in the past 24 hours, the Times reported.

At Elmhurst Hospital Center, a 545-bed public hospital, doctors and nurses have only a few dozen ventilators for their patients, some of whom have died while waiting for a bed. A refrigerated truck has been stationed outside the hospital to hold the dead, the newspaper reported.

Citywide, all of the more than 1,800 intensive care beds are expected to be full by Friday, according to a Federal Emergency Management Agency briefing memo obtained by Times.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo did offer up some good news on Wednesday, saying that social distancing measures might be working. This week, the state's hospitalization estimations were down markedly, from a doubling of cases every two days to a doubling every four days.

It is "almost too good to be true," Mr. Cuomo said during a media briefing.

South sees spike in cases

But cases are just starting to spike elsewhere, particularly in the South: Louisiana, Florida and Georgia are facing alarming increases, with more than 4,700 cases and 125 deaths reported in those three states alone, CBS News reported.

New Orleans now has more cases than Los Angeles County, which is 25 times larger. In just over two weeks, the number of cases in Louisiana has skyrocketed to almost 1,800, CBS News reported.

Along with Cuomo, at least 19 other governors have announced stay-at-home orders in states including California, Illinois, Louisiana, Ohio, Oregon, Washington state and Hawaii, CNN reported.

On Monday, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an executive order that all residents coming into Florida from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut airports quarantine themselves for 14 days.

Many cases in places like Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach have been tied to travelers arriving from New York, the Times reported.

"Hopefully that [order] will be a deterrent for people if you're just trying to escape here," DeSantis said Monday.

National public health officials quickly followed suit with a recommendation of their own: Dr. Deborah Birx, who's coordinating the U.S. coronavirus response, told reporters during a media briefing Tuesday night that people leaving New York City should quarantine themselves for two weeks because of the spike in infections there.

Economic help, medical supplies coming

On Sunday, Trump also approved disaster declarations for regions hit hardest by the pandemic, activating the National Guard in three states.

The declarations will bring supplies, medical stations and naval hospital ships to New York, Washington state and California, CNN reported.

Last week, President Donald Trump signed an \$850 billion coronavirus relief package into law.

The package will provide sick leave, unemployment benefits and free coronavirus testing.

Trump has also invoked a wartime law that would allow the federal government to direct companies to produce medical supplies if needed.

As countries around the world wonder what is in store for their citizens in the coming months, one glimmer of hope has emerged: On Tuesday, China lifted travel restrictions on the Hubei province, which was hardest hit by coronavirus earlier this year. And China's National Health Commission said Thursday that its 67 new COVID-19 cases were all in recent arrivals from abroad, the AP reported.

The good news in China stood in sharp relief to what is unfolding in Italy.

On Wednesday, Italy reported more than 7,500 deaths, by far the highest of any country, the AP reported. The virus has been especially deadly for old Italians. But the country has seen a slowing in the rate of new infections for the fourth day in a row, the Times reported.

State, local officials continue shutdowns

Meanwhile, state and local officials across the country continued to order the temporary closings of bars, nightclubs and restaurants.

Last Monday, the Trump administration ramped up its coronavirus "social distancing" advisory to now discourage gatherings of 10 or more people.

In addition to advising against group gatherings of more than 10 people, Trump also discouraged eating and drinking at restaurants, bars and food courts, and any discretionary travel.

The president also said his administration is doubling down on testing for COVID-19. Stores such as Walmart, CVS and Walgreens have set aside part of their parking lots for drive-through testing.

States Race to Contain Virus

In the meantime, the public lives of Americans have come to a halt, as the coronavirus pandemic has prompted officials across the country to close, cancel or postpone any event or activity that might foster the spread of COVID-19.

A majority of states have shuttered all public schools, Broadway has gone dark, Disney World and Disneyland were closed, March Madness was canceled, and most professional sports leagues postponed their seasons.

New York, Washington state and California have been hard hit by coronavirus cases in the United States. New York has 30,811 cases, Washington state has 2,580 cases and California has 2,535.

Meanwhile, officials in Florida closed most beaches in the state on Sunday, after young spring breakers ignored social distancing guidelines and partied with abandon on the sand. That state now has 1,977 cases, with 23 deaths.

Worldwide, the case count approached 490,000 while the death toll climbed past 22,000 on Thursday, according to a running count kept by Johns Hopkins University.

Coronavirus bill includes \$350 million for migration, refugee assistance (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 1:16 PM, Adam Shaw, 8943K] Video: [HERE](#)

The \$2 trillion spending package to boost the economy in response to the coronavirus crisis includes a \$350 million pot of money for "Migration and Refugee Assistance" -- the latest item in the legislative behemoth that is angering critics.

While a number of items that Republicans objected to got trimmed in the final Senate bill, the Migrant and Refugee Assistance item actually increased by \$50 million to \$350 million. That's more than the bill put forward by House Democrats earlier this week, which included \$300 million in "Migrant and Refugee Assistance" for the State Department.

Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla, called it a "poison pill" that put "America LAST."

"Democrats: This is not the time to advance your legislative agenda," he tweeted before the bill passed the Senate late Wednesday. "This is the time to put #AmericaFirst."

The bill ultimately passed the Senate 96-0 and is expected to pass the House in a voice vote on Friday. It includes a number of measures to boost businesses and help individuals hurt by the economic downturn triggered by the coronavirus pandemic.

But it includes controversial items, such as \$25 million in funding for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

The Senate bill also provides \$75 million to each the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. That is down from the \$300 million for each that was in the House stimulus bill.

Pandemic Disrupting U.S. Immigration Process At Every Level (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 4:15 PM, Joel Rose, 4112K] Audio: [HERE](#)

Many immigrant doctors who want to help fight the coronavirus outbreak find they can't because of limits on their work visas. It's just one way the pandemic is affecting immigrant communities.

Amid Coronavirus Concerns, Pentagon To Send Troops To U.S. Borders With Mexico, Canada (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 5:14 PM, Tom Bowman and Brakhton Booker, 4112K]

Two U.S. officials tell NPR that the Pentagon is expected to send 1,500 troops to the nation's borders with Canada and Mexico to assist Customs and Border Protection operations as the coronavirus death toll tops 1,100 in the United States.

The officials said the plan is to send up to 1,000 troops to the border with Canada to assist Customs and Border Protection as concern about COVID-19 increases. Another roughly 500 troops are expected to head to the Mexican border to help CBP there, the officials said.

The troops will not perform law enforcement duties but instead help in areas such as planning and logistics, much as they did under President Trump's orders during the influx of Central American migrants.

The troop deployments come on the heels of the Trump administration's announcement last week suspending nonessential travel between U.S. and Mexico.

"The United States and Mexico have agreed to restrict nonessential travel over our shared border," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters Friday.

That suspension went into effect on Saturday, three days after Trump ordered a partial closure of the nation's northern border to help stem the spread of the deadly virus. The president tweeted on March 18 that trade with Canada "will not be affected" by the temporary border closing.

Prior to the Pentagon's announcement, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was asked

about the development during a Thursday press conference from Ottawa. He said his administration had been "in discussions" with the U.S.

"Canada and the United States have the longest, unmilitarized border in the world," Trudeau said. "And it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way."

Trudeau was also pushed on safety concerns for Quebec and Ontario. Those provinces border the state of New York which leads the U.S. in confirmed coronavirus cases and deaths. The prime minister demurred when asked if Canada would impose a ban on goods or people traveling from there.

"Part of protecting Canadians is ensuring a good supply of food, of medical supplies, of necessary equipment across our border," Trudeau said. "We will continue to look for ways to make sure we're keeping Canadians safe, while providing us with the things we need."

According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, Canada has roughly 3,800 confirmed coronavirus cases; Mexico has more than 470 confirmed cases.

Meanwhile, the U.S. has more than 80,000 confirmed cases and more than 1,100 COVID-19 related deaths.

DOJ postpones 'Remain in Mexico' hearings in response to coronavirus threat (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 5:06 PM, Adam Shaw, 8943K]

The Trump administration has postponed hearings related to the "Remain in Mexico" policy in response to the coronavirus crisis -- although it confirmed that the program itself is not being stopped.

The Department of Justice's (DOJ) Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) announced the change to procedures related to the policy, formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), earlier this week as part of the broader response by the government to the spread of the virus.

"Due to circumstances resulting from COVID-19, all Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) master calendar and merit hearings presently scheduled through April 22 will be rescheduled," the DOJ's Executive Office for Immigration Review said on its website. "Neither the MPP program nor any hearings will be canceled."

The "Remain in Mexico" policy has formed the centerpiece of the administration's efforts to combat the crisis at the southern border. It involves sending migrants back to Mexico to await their immigration hearings rather than holding them in the U.S. or releasing them into the interior.

Officials say it has been vital in bringing down numbers at the border, shrinks down the time to get cases processed, and has reduced the "pull factor" bringing migrants north. Specifically, it helps end "catch and release" by which migrants were detained and then released into the interior of the U.S. But opponents say migrants are not given due process, and they are often sent back into areas where they are at risk of kidnapping and violence.

It has been subject to court challenges and was struck down by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. But the Supreme Court has issued a stay allowing the policy to continue as litigation surrounding it continues.

The EOIR said that any migrant with a hearing date through April 22 should present themselves at a port of entry to get a new hearing notice.

"[Department of Homeland Security] and EOIR are deeply committed to ensuring that individuals 'have their day in court' while also ensuring the health and safety of aliens, our frontline officers, immigration court professionals and our citizens," the office said in a statement.

Three migrant children in US government custody test positive for coronavirus (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 6:16 PM, Priscilla Alvarez, 5551K]

Three unaccompanied migrant children in government custody have tested positive for coronavirus, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, marking the first announced positive cases among children in the agency's care.

The children are in the care of one of the agency's facilities in New York.

"ORR's medical team is working with the programs in New York and local health department to collect information and determine next steps," the agency stated. It did not say which countries the children were from or their ages.

The agency, which is charged with the care of unaccompanied children, had earlier stopped placing children in New York amid the increase in coronavirus cases. It will also stop releasing children to sponsors, such as a parent or relative, in the interim as well.

Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate care provider facilities in New York also recently tested positive for coronavirus, ORR said Thursday, as well as one staff member at a facility in Texas and one foster parent in Washington State.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement, which falls under the Department of Health and Human Services, has had to adjust to the pandemic, tweaking its procedures to prevent the spread of the virus among the approximately 3,500 children in its custody.

The number of children in government care tested for coronavirus has been increasing. As of Thursday, 18 unaccompanied migrant children have been tested for coronavirus, up from 12 on Monday.

ORR is requiring temperature checks twice a day at each facility, and people entering facilities must also have their temperature checked.

Migrant children who arrive at the US-Mexico border without a parent or guardian are taken into custody by the Department of Homeland Security and referred to US Health and Human Services. While in care, case managers work to place a child with a sponsor in the

United States. As a precautionary measure, ORR said it's prioritizing local placements for new referrals "to limit air travel when possible."

Thursday's announced cases come the same week Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency within the Department of Homeland Security, announced its first detainee in custody testing positive. The 31-year-old Mexican national, held at the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack, New Jersey, has been quarantined and is receiving care, ICE said, adding that the agency "is suspending intake at the facility until further information is available."

Immigrant advocates and some lawmakers have been calling for ICE to release detainees, warning that deadly consequences could result if the disease spreads in ICE facilities that have long faced criticism for how they handle even routine medical care.

Likewise, some immigrant-rights groups requested the expedited release of children from ORR custody in light of the coronavirus pandemic, arguing that the children "have little or no ability to practice social distancing or take other measures" to avoid contracting the virus.

ORR reiterated Thursday that the "situation remains extremely fluid and can change rapidly."

Coronavirus: 3 migrant children in US custody in New York test positive (USA Today)

USA Today [3/26/2020 9:10 PM, Monsy Alvarado, 5611K]

Three unaccompanied minor children in U.S. custody in New York have tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said Thursday.

The children, whose ages and nationalities weren't released, are in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The office is responsible for housing migrant minors.

The agency said it is doing an evaluation of the children and will not release them from New York care provider facilities.

The resettlement office's medical team "is working with the programs in New York and local health department to collect information and determine next steps," a statement from the agency said.

The statement said the office has stopped placements of unaccompanied minor children in the states of California, New York, and Washington, which have been the hardest hit by the coronavirus. With more than 30,000 cases in New York, the state has become the epicenter of the coronavirus epidemic in the United States.

"ORR is prioritizing local placements for all new referrals from DHS to limit air travel when possible," the statement said.

The agency said 18 children have been tested for COVID-19, with three presumptive cases confirmed, 11 negative results, and 4 that are still pending.

The agency said if a health care provider or public health department recommends testing for a child, that they receive the testing. Any child showing symptoms is medically isolated from other children, pending negative test results, the agency said.

Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate care provider facilities in New York recently tested positive for COVID-19, the statement said. One staff member at a facility in Texas, and one foster parent in Washington State have also tested positive.

“ORR is currently tracking down and notifying anyone that may have been exposed at these care provider facilities,” according to the statement.” The ORR medical team and affected programs are actively coordinating with state and local public health departments on appropriate public health measures.”

There are approximately 3,500 unaccompanied minor children presently in ORR care and custody.

The children are the latest in federal immigration custody to test positive for the virus which has spread quickly across the country, with more than 80,000 cases in the United States. More than 1,000 have died. The United States has more coronavirus cases than China, where the virus began.

First Migrant Children In US Custody Test Positive For Coronavirus (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 8:17 PM, Jason Hopkins, 566K]

Several unaccompanied alien children have tested positive for coronavirus, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, making them the first minors in the agency’s custody to carry the disease.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the agency within the Department of Health and Human Services that manages the care of alien minors who enter the U.S. without any adult family members, announced on Thursday that three unaccompanied alien children (UAC) in New York have tested positive for COVID-19.

“As of March 26, 2020, there have been three confirmed COVID-19 disease cases among UAC in one ORR care provider facility in New York,” read an ORR statement provided to the Daily Caller News Foundation.

“At this time, ORR is suspending releases from New York care provider facilities. ORR’s medical team is working with the programs in New York and local health department to collect information and determine next steps,” the statement continued.

As a precautionary measure, ORR will cease all placements of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) in New York, California, and Washington state — three states hit remarkably hard by coronavirus. ORR added that it is “prioritizing local placements for all new referrals from DHS to limit air travel when possible.”

A total of 18 unaccompanied children in ORR care have been tested for the coronavirus, with 11 testing negative, three testing positive, and the other four are still awaiting results. There are roughly 3,500 UAC currently in ORR care, according to the agency.

The positive cases come as several ORR staffers and others who operate around UAC have also contracted the virus.

“Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate care provider facilities in New York recently tested positive for COVID-19. One staff member at a facility in Texas, and one foster parent in Washington State have also tested positive,” the agency said, adding that it’s contacting anyone who may have been exposed at these facilities.

As of Thursday afternoon, more than 81,500 people in the U.S. have tested positive for COVID-19. Of those who have contacted the virus, at least 1,180 have died.

Federal agencies would get money for telework, equipment — and cleaning the office (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 7:19 AM, Eric Yoder, 12625K]

Numerous federal agencies would get money to buy protective equipment, sanitize their offices and accommodate increased telework by their employees under the coronavirus emergency spending bill approved by the Senate.

The funding follows concerns about inadequate protections for federal employees ranging from lack of protective masks to inadequate cleaning of work spaces, especially for those in positions whose jobs require face-to-face contact with the public.

The measure, which was approved unanimously, also provides money to cover expected overtime pay for front-line employees including food inspectors, federal prison correctional officers, airport screeners and medical personnel.

And many agencies would receive funds to beef up information technology systems burdened by the increasing number of federal employees now teleworking, according to a summary by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The Veterans Affairs Department would get money for all those purposes: \$19.6 billion to support “increased demand for health care services at VA facilities and through telehealth, including the purchase of medical equipment and supplies, testing kits, and personal protective equipment,” plus programs for homeless or at-risk veterans. Also, limits on overtime pay would be waived.

The Department of Homeland Security would get \$178 million for “personal protection equipment for personnel including gloves, garments, goggles, hand sanitizer, respirators, and surgical masks” to be distributed among its component agencies, including the Transportation Security Administration.

Money for protective equipment also would go to law enforcement agencies and the Bureau of Prisons in the Justice Department, medical care providers of the Defense Department and the Public Health Service and the Capitol Building’s Office of Attending Physician, among others.

TSA also would get \$100 million for “increased cleaning and sanitization at TSA operations

at airports and other facilities, overtime and travel costs required to maintain operations while infected employees are quarantined, and additional explosive detection materials that must be disposed of after a single use to prevent the spread of coronavirus.”

The General Services Administration, which owns and leases buildings for agencies other than the Defense Department, would get an extra \$275 million for “deep cleaning, enhanced screening, and unanticipated space and space management requirements.” Others that would get extra money for cleaning and disinfecting include parts of Interior, the VA, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Forest Service, Smithsonian and Kennedy Center.

Additional money to boost telework capabilities would go to the Justice, Interior and Veterans Affairs departments, the EPA and to Congress itself.

The bill does not specify precise amounts for each purpose by agency, instead providing sums to be used for a number of listed reasons. And unlike a bill offered by House Democratic leadership on Monday, the bill would not require that agencies allow telework by all employees eligible for it.

“This legislation includes personal protective equipment measures for federal employees at the VA, DHS, Bureau of Prisons and the National Forest System, who are especially vulnerable given their public-facing and essential roles,” Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.) said in an emailed statement. “This is an improvement over the status quo, but it’s not enough. I remain concerned that the federal government isn’t being flexible enough about expanding telework arrangements for employees who can.”

The House measure has been set aside, and the House is expected to approve the Senate bill on Friday. President Trump said he intends to sign it immediately.

“It’s encouraging that important protections for federal workers are being added into law — especially at a time when the American people are relying on essential government services more than ever before,” Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-Va.) said in an emailed statement. “However, ambiguous guidance and uneven application across agencies on common-sense steps like expanded telework has been an unforced error.”

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) said that while the provisions “are a step forward, we will keep pushing for more. In the meantime, President Trump should issue an executive order — as my colleagues and I have called for — to provide clear direction for all federal agencies to maximize telework wherever possible.”

Unemployment claims soared to 3.3 million last week, most in history (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 10:07 AM, Anneken Tpe, 5551K]

A record number of Americans filed for their first week of unemployment benefits last week, as businesses shut down to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Initial jobless claims soared to a seasonally adjusted 3.28 million in the week ended March 21, according to the Department of Labor.

That is the highest number of initial jobless claims in history, since the Department of Labor

started tracking the data in 1967. The previous high was 695,000 claims filed in the week ending October 2, 1982.

"Most historical comparisons of this scale are inadequate. The closest would be natural disasters like major hurricanes. However, as today's report shows, the coronavirus outbreak is economically akin to a major hurricane occurring in every state around the country for weeks on end," Glassdoor senior economist Daniel Zhao wrote in emailed comments.

Last week's jump marked a massive increase from a revised 282,000 claims in the prior week. Prior to the pandemic, initial claims had been hovering in the low 200,000s each week, reflecting a strong job market.

But in the last couple weeks, the coronavirus outbreak has forced many businesses to suddenly shut down as the country tries to slow the spreading virus. For many businesses that also means laying off or furloughing workers, at least temporarily.

That is the key difference between the coronavirus shock compared with past periods of economic distress: it is sudden and impacts virtually every industry and business model around.

As a result, economists are expecting millions of job losses in the coming weeks.

Heidi Shierholz, a former chief economist for the US Department of Labor who is now with the Economic Policy Institute, called the surge in unemployment claims just the tip of the iceberg.

"We estimate that by summer, 14 million workers will lost their jobs due to the coronavirus shock," she said in a tweet.

Economists now expect the US economy to fall into a recession in the second quarter, before staging a comeback later in the year after the spread of the virus slows.

Meanwhile, state labor departments across the country are have struggled to deal with the sudden influx in claims for unemployment benefits. The New York Labor Department, for example, has added server capacity and hired more than 65 additional staff to handle all the claims that are suddenly pouring in. And last week, Florida's Department of Economic Opportunity said it planned to hire 100 extra staff to help answer calls and walk people through the application process.

Speaking later on Thursday morning, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin downplayed last week's surge in unemployment claims in an interview with CNBC, calling the numbers "not relevant" because they pre-dated an economic relief bill passed by Congress on Wednesday. That bill includes support for workers, including checks from the government and expanded unemployment benefits.

He added businesses "hopefully will be able to hire back a lot of those people."

Trump administration suspends emergency oil purchase after Congress denies funding (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 10:45 AM, Josh Siegel, 570K]

The Energy Department is suspending its plan to buy low-priced oil to restock the nation's emergency Strategic Petroleum Reserve after Congress chose not to provide funding for the purchase in its emergency pandemic relief package.

The department withdrew a solicitation Thursday for buying 30 million barrels of oil from U.S. producers, which would have been the first round of purchases for a total of 77 million barrels — the full amount of open capacity in the SPR.

That doesn't mean Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette is abandoning President Trump's order to fill the oil reserve in order to help U.S. producers struggling from a historic price crash. But he needs Congress to allocate \$3 billion in funding in order to proceed, and he's calling on lawmakers to do it in future rounds of legislation responding to the coronavirus.

"Small- to medium-size American energy companies and their employees should be provided the same relief being provided to other parts of our economy, and the Secretary calls on Congress to work with the administration to fund the president's request as soon as possible," Energy Department spokeswoman Shaylyn Hynes told the Washington Examiner.

Brouillette had been confident Congress would fulfill his \$3 billion request for SPR purchases in the package approved by the Senate Wednesday night, but it was removed from the final bill after Democrats and Republicans haggled over energy and climate-related provisions.

Administration officials say restocking the SPR won't halt the price crash rocking the shale industry, but they say it makes sense on energy security grounds and would benefit taxpayers. Congress has been selling off oil from the reserve in recent years to fund unrelated priorities, but a sustained period of low prices represents a good opportunity to fill the SPR back up, the administration says.

"President Trump's directive to buy oil at a competitive price for the SPR is a common-sense move benefiting taxpayers and supporting our nation's economic and national security interest," Hynes said. "The American energy sector is a major driver of our nation's economy, and it is being significantly harmed by the impacts of COVID-19 and international market manipulation."

House leaders seek to expedite emergency aid package amid uncertainty about GOP lawmaker delaying measure (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 6:54 PM, John Wagner, Paul Kane, and Mike DeBonis, 12625K]

House leaders sought to expedite the emergency \$2 trillion relief bill aimed at mitigating the financial havoc caused by the coronavirus pandemic amid uncertainty about whether a renegade lawmaker could delay sending the measure to President Trump.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.)

agreed to approve the measure with a voice vote Friday that would not require all 430 current members of the House to travel to the Capitol, given that two lawmakers have contracted the disease and others are self-quarantining due to exposure to confirmed carriers.

The leadership also is taking meticulous steps to change the protocol for debate and voting to ensure the safety of lawmakers.

But at least one lawmaker is considering upending the plans for swift passage. Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) said Thursday that he opposed the bill, approved unanimously by the Senate on Wednesday, as it would add to the national debt. The libertarian lawmaker also is concerned that voting without a quorum present — the majority of the House chamber — would violate the Constitution. He said he has yet to decide whether to press the issue, which could delay a House vote until late Saturday or Sunday.

At the White House on Thursday, Trump acknowledged that one House member could slow the process.

“You might have one grandstander, and for that we’ll have to come back and take a little more time and it’ll pass, it’ll just take a little longer. But let’s see whether or not we have a grandstander,” Trump said.

The planned vote Friday will culminate nearly two weeks of often heated debate about how to structure a sweeping bill that is attempting to provide hospitals and the health industry the tools to arrest the escalating spread of the virus and to shore up an economy that has gone into a free fall.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that unemployment claims topped 3.3 million just last week in another blow to the economy.

The sprawling legislation would send checks to more than 150 million American households, set up enormous loan programs for businesses large and small, pump billions of dollars into unemployment insurance programs, greatly boost spending on hospitals and much more. Trump, just before 1 a.m. Thursday, joyfully tweeted about the Senate vote, part of his effort to get the legislation to his desk as fast as possible.

Massie traveled from his Kentucky home to Washington on Wednesday in anticipation of the final vote.

“What the American people should ask is not, why is one guy asking for everybody to follow the Constitution, but why can’t these other people who are getting paid \$174,000 make the same trip that the truckers are making that are bringing the food to the grocery stores?” he asked.

Pelosi said she was ready to defeat such an effort.

“I feel certain that we will have a strong bipartisan vote,” she said at a news conference Thursday morning.

She did not address the specific issue raised by Massie but said she is prepared to deal with any member who objects to moving forward with a voice vote — as he and some others have suggested they might.

At a subsequent news conference, McCarthy said he thinks a voice vote on the bill will be sufficient. “I do not think there’s a need for anything else,” he said.

He noted that there will be time for debate on the House floor and those members that come to the House can make their views known.

McCarthy described several precautions that would be taken during Friday’s debate, including wiping microphones after each speaker and ensuring that House members do not congregate closely. Members are also being encouraged to submit arguments via video so that they do not have to be in the Capitol, and in a rare step, C-SPAN has offered to air those statements to create a virtual debate.

Only lawmakers who are overseeing the debate and those directly scheduled to speak will be permitted into the House chamber during the debate, according to a memo issued by the House sergeant at arms. Elevator rides are limited to two people.

The situation is so fluid that some lawmakers do not know whether they should attend Friday’s proceedings.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) has already returned to Washington, at a moment when federal health experts have suggested anyone in the New York region self-quarantine for two weeks because the area has been the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

In a brief interview Thursday, she said she is asking for guidance about whether she can participate in the debate or just submit a video statement.

A rising star among liberal activists, Ocasio-Cortez has been considering voting against the legislation. She carried out her own internal debate Thursday through her Twitter account, both criticizing Republicans for “holding hostage” hospitals and workers in exchange for a corporate bailout — but also praising nearly \$1 trillion in funds.

A Thursday afternoon conference call hosted for House Democrats in anticipation of the vote ended in confusion, according to four people who participated and spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private call.

All four cited a conflict between the guidance offered by Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.). Both said they hoped to clear the coronavirus rescue bill Friday morning by voice vote, but they offered different messages on whether members should try to attend.

Hoyer, they said, said that if Massie or some other lawmaker forced a recorded vote, that would push deliberations to Saturday and there would be no need for any member to come to Washington on Friday unless they wanted to speak on the bill.

But Pelosi, toward the end of the call, suggested that members who could travel to

Washington should do so, in hopes of resolving any possible issue Friday.

Regardless of any Democratic opposition, Pelosi made clear that no one on her side of the aisle would go the extra step and force a roll-call vote to delay the passage of legislation that is certain to pass on a strong bipartisan vote.

She also began to spell what she wants to see in the fourth major piece of legislation dealing with coronavirus, including more help for New York and other states hit hard by the outbreak. Pelosi also wants job safety provisions in the next legislation to protect those workers who are still going to offices, manufacturing sites and hospitals, potentially endangering themselves to contracting the virus.

But McCarthy, reflecting the reservations of a GOP caucus that used to preach fiscal discipline, was cool to the idea of Congress tackling another bill in a matter of weeks.

“Let’s let this bill work,” he said, before considering next steps.

Pelosi indicated that any future effort would involve all four leaders in Congress. She intends to hunker down in Washington to work on the next steps, rather than heading back to her home in San Francisco, even though the House is not expected to be in session for weeks to come.

“I’ll be working most of it from here,” she told reporters.

Pelosi forecasts House OK of Senate’s \$2.2T virus aid plan (Houston Chronicle)

Houston Chronicle [3/26/2020 1:08 PM, Andrew Taylor and Alan Fram, AP, 167K]

The House will give final approval Friday to the massive \$2.2 trillion economic rescue bill with robust backing from both parties, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said, a vote that would cap Congress’ tumultuous effort to rush the relief to a nation battered by the coronavirus.

Pelosi spoke Thursday morning, just hours after the Senate used an overnight vote to approve the measure 96-0. With House members dispersed around the country, Pelosi and Republican leaders were planning to bless the measure by a voice vote, probably with just a sprinkling of lawmakers present in the chamber.

“It will pass with strong bipartisan support,” said Pelosi, D-Calif. President Donald Trump has implored lawmakers to finish with the package so he can sign it into law.

The package comes to the House as fresh evidence emerges that the economy is in a recession. The government reported 3.3 million new weekly unemployment claims, four times the previous record. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in a TV interview the economy “may well be in a recession.”

Pelosi praised the bill’s expansion of unemployment benefits and provisions that encourage companies hit by the pandemic to keep paying their workers, even those who are furloughed.

“We will have a victory tomorrow for America’s workers,” she said. “If somebody has a

different point of view, they can put it in the record, but we're not worried about that."

The package would give direct payments to most Americans, expand unemployment benefits and provide a \$367 billion program for small businesses to keep making payroll while workers are forced to stay home. It would steer substantial aid to larger industries, too.

The unanimous Senate vote late Wednesday came despite misgivings on both sides about whether it goes too far or not far enough and capped days of difficult negotiations as Washington confronted a national challenge unlike any it has faced.

The 880-page measure is the largest economic relief bill in U.S. history. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell appeared somber and exhausted as he announced the vote — and he released senators from Washington until April 20, though he promised to recall them if needed.

"Pray for one another, for all of our families and for our country," said McConnell, R-Ky.

"The legislation now before us now is historic because it is meant to match a historic crisis," said Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. "Our health care system is not prepared to care for the sick. Our workers are without work. Our businesses cannot do business. Our factories lie idle. The gears of the American economy have ground to a halt."

The package is intended as relief for a sinking economy and a nation facing a grim toll from an infection that's killed more than 21,000 people worldwide. The U.S. death toll has surpassed 1,000 people.

"This is a unique situation," Powell told NBC's "Today" show. "This is not a typical downturn."

The Fed chief went on: "What's happening here is people are being asked to close their businesses, to stay home from work and to not engage in certain kinds of economic activity and so they're pulling back. And at a certain point, we will get the spread of the virus under control and at that time confidence will return, businesses will open again, people will come back to work."

Underscoring the effort's sheer magnitude, the bill finances a response with a price tag that equals half the size of the entire \$4 trillion-plus annual federal budget. The \$2.2 trillion estimate is the White House's best guess.

The drive by leaders to speed the bill through the Senate on Wednesday slowed as four conservative Republican senators from states whose economies are dominated by low-wage jobs demanded changes. They said the legislation as written was so generous that workers like store clerks might opt to stay on unemployment rather than return to their jobs. They settled for a failed vote to modify the provision.

Wednesday's delays followed Democratic stalling tactics earlier in the week as Schumer held out for additional money for states and hospitals and other provisions.

The sprawling measure is the third coronavirus response bill produced by Congress and by far the largest. It builds on efforts focused on vaccines and emergency response, sick and family medical leave for workers and food aid.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said earlier he expected the measure to pass by a voice vote without lawmakers having to return to Washington. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy said Thursday his members were on board with that.

"We'll have a debate, and then we'll have a voice vote to bring it up and move it to the president's desk," McCarthy told Fox News. He said that while Democrats inserted things in the bill that didn't deal with coronavirus, "we will still get this package done for hospitals, workers, small businesses."

"Every day matters, so we want to get this done quickly," McCarthy said.

The package has a heavily negotiated \$500 billion program for guaranteed, subsidized loans to larger industries, including airlines. Hospitals would get significant help as well.

The bill would provide one-time direct payments to Americans of \$1,200 per adult making up to \$75,000 a year and \$2,400 to a married couple making up to \$150,000, with \$500 payments per child.

A huge cash infusion for hospitals expecting a flood of COVID-19 patients grew during the talks to an estimated \$130 billion. Another \$45 billion would fund additional relief through the Federal Emergency Management Agency for local response efforts and community services.

Democrats said the package would help replace the salaries of furloughed workers for four months, rather than the three months first proposed. Furloughed workers would get whatever amount a state usually provides for unemployment, plus a \$600-per-week add-on, with gig workers like Uber drivers covered for the first time.

Businesses controlled by members of Congress and top administration officials, including Trump and his immediate family members, would be ineligible for the bill's business assistance.

State and local authorities would receive up to \$150 billion in grants to fight the virus, care for their residents and provide basic services.

Republicans won inclusion of an employee retention tax credit that's estimated to provide \$50 billion to companies that retain employees on payroll and cover 50% of workers' paycheck up to \$10,000. Companies would also be able to defer payment of the 6.2% Social Security payroll tax.

Pelosi was a force behind \$400 million in grants to states to expand voting by mail and other steps that Democrats billed as making voting safer but Republican critics called political opportunism. The package also contains \$15.5 billion more for a surge in demand for food stamps as part of a massive \$330 billion title for agency operations.

Most people who contract the new coronavirus have 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, or death.

In the United States, more than 69,000 people have been sickened by the virus.

Hospitals on soccer fields, in state park cabins and converted convention centers (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 1:30 AM, Ariana Eunjung Cha, Brittney Martin, and Steven Mufson, 12625K]

Louisiana is renting cabins and trailers in state parks to isolate the ill. The county that includes Seattle is erecting a 200-bed facility on a soccer field. And New York is setting up a medical surge center inside the six-block-long Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on the west side of Manhattan — better known for hosting auto shows and Comic-Con.

As the United States enters a new stage of the pandemic wave, hospital systems are being reconfigured in radical ways to handle the growing number of sick, and over the next few weeks, hospitals appear likely to look and operate very differently than today. With the need for social distancing even among the sick, securing and configuring physical spaces large enough to handle the load has become one of the biggest challenges facing state officials and hospital administrators.

“What we’ve done is shift from all daily operations to preparing for mass numbers of people with covid-19,” Omar Lateef, chief executive of Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, said.

The mounting costs of the hospital build-out are being borne mostly by individual state treasuries and private medical centers, with some help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Army Corps of Engineers. But there is an expectation the federal government will provide some relief. The \$2 trillion aid bill Congress is rushing to pass this week contains \$100 billion for hospitals to offset expenses related to the coronavirus surge.

Part of the reason for the need for auxiliary, emergency measures is that many hospitals have closed in recent years because of financial trouble. The United States has fewer beds per capita — just 2.7 per 1,000 people — than many other countries. That compares with 6.5 per 1,000 for South Korea and France, for example, and 4.3 for China.

The U.S. has 924,100 hospital beds, most of which are occupied on a typical day, according to a 2018 survey from the American Hospital Association. But in a severe pandemic situation, such as the one the country faced during the 1918 flu pandemic, experts have estimated that 38 million people would need medical care, resulting in 9.6 million hospitalizations and 2.9 million intensive care stays.

The ongoing transformation of the American hospital system mirrors what was done in other countries that faced the pandemic first.

There was the Chinese megalopolis Wuhan, where patients were sorted by severity of

disease into different hospitals — 10 temporary ones for the mildly sick or contagious in sports stadiums and similar facilities, 39 for those with critical illness or who were 65 and older and six for critical care. In Italy's Lombardy region, the hospital system was essentially cleaved into two: one for coronavirus patients with 55 hospitals, and the remaining few hospitals reserved for those experiencing more ordinary emergencies such as strokes, accidents or childbirth.

With public health officials estimating millions of Americans — up to a fifth of the population — may need to be hospitalized, states and hospitals are taking creative approaches to housing the ill while containing the contagion.

Plans remain in flux in many areas, but health officials describe four general tiers of treatment.

The first is triage, which includes drive-through test sites and tents in parking lots. This is where most patients would have initial contact with the hospital system. They would be swabbed, and their temperatures taken. At Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, staff stop those who enter the emergency room and direct anyone with flu-like symptoms to a separate area.

"We took over a clinic space right next to the emergency department, and we made it a zone for patients with respiratory illness," Jolion McGreevy, the hospital's emergency department medical director, said. A dedicated team in protective gear treats patients escorted to that area.

The second tier is for the mildly ill or those awaiting test results. Chicago is renting thousands of hotel rooms. San Francisco is setting up RVs in the Presidio, a park in the northern part of the city.

As shown in a photo that went viral Monday, Yale University in New Haven, Conn., is setting up rows of beds in its gymnasium. Yale University spokeswoman Karen N. Peart said the space would be activated if the school's health center fills up. She said it would offer only general care such as the monitoring of vital signs and provision of food and water.

"We hope we never have to use it. But it could support those who are unable to care for themselves at home, yet are not sick enough for hospital admission," Peart said.

In Louisiana, Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser (R) said cabins in state parks will temporarily shelter the homeless or people who cannot return to their homes while awaiting coronavirus test results. A park ranger will stand watch to make sure "nobody goes in and out unassisted." State police will also guard the cabins, he said. A caterer will provide meals to be delivered to each cabin.

"By putting one person in each cabin, if it comes back negative, then they can just reuse the cabin. If it's positive, then they've got to clean that cabin good, but they can then just reuse that cabin," Nungesser said in an interview.

The third level of care consists of the existing hospital system, and administrators interviewed in recent weeks said they anticipate handling mostly severe to critical cases.

Many major medical centers in several large cities said they would continue accepting patients with ordinary emergencies ranging from heart attacks to births, but they confined coronavirus patients to separate areas so they cannot transmit the virus to other patients.

Of particular concern is finding enough room for the large number of patients expected to need mechanical ventilators to breathe.

At Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, doctors are working to increase the 97 intensive care beds to 240. Richard Wunderink, medical director for one of the ICUs, said rooms have been shifted to create a dedicated covid-19 unit that has negative airflow to prevent infectious material from contaminating other areas.

In some parts of the country, existing facilities such as M Health Fairview Bethesda Hospital, a long-term care center in St. Paul, Minn., are being remade as covid centers. Bethesda has 90 beds including 35 intensive care beds. M Health Fairview, which owns the property, said current patients were being transferred to other facilities in preparation.

In New York, the epicenter of the virus in the United States and where the ill are mounting, construction of the four temporary hospitals inside the Javits convention center began this week. Each will have 250 beds and occupy 40,000 square feet. New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) has said another 1,000 beds could be added for those who are less ill if needed.

Some states are preparing for patients who have received significantly less attention than the sick: the recovering.

Taking lessons from a surge in coronavirus patients that overwhelmed hospitals in Washington State, Colorado hospitals are setting up a system that would allow patients recovering from the illness to transfer out of hospitals to make room for the critically ill, said Julie Lonborg, spokeswoman for the Colorado Hospital Association.

Lonborg said the state had talked to states that were seven or 10 days ahead of Colorado in the outbreak and asked what they wish they had done differently: "They said part of what was stressing the system was that once patients were no longer critically ill, but still needed to be cared for, they were taking up space in the hospital that could be used by critically ill patients," she said.

With nursing homes refusing to accept patients without a negative covid-19 test, recently vacated college dorm rooms and hotels in Denver may be pressed into service, she said.

"It's a pressure relief valve on the back end," she said.

US to free some prisoners amid coronavirus threat (Breitbart)

[Breitbart](#) [3/26/2020 6:24 PM, Staff, 1973K]

US Attorney General Bill Barr said Thursday he had instructed federal prisons to free some inmates to lessen the impact of the coronavirus epidemic.

One day after the United Nations human rights chief urged countries to protect people held in overcrowded jails and other enclosed facilities, Barr said he had encouraged US prisons

to release qualified inmates.

“I’ve asked and issued a memorandum just today to the Bureau of Prisons to increase the use of home confinement, based on a number of factors... particularly for those older prisoners who have served substantial parts of their sentences,” Barr said.

He said the instruction was focused on prisoners who are not considered dangerous and who may have underlying medical conditions that make them particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus.

“We want to make sure that our institutions don’t become petri dishes” for the disease, Barr said.

His instructions apply to the some 170,000 inmates in the US federal prison system, where about a dozen cases of coronavirus have been discovered among prisoners and prison staff.

The directive will favor prisoners over 60 years old who have not been convicted of violent or sexual crimes.

Possibly 2,000 inmates could qualify.

The majority of the 2.2 million people serving prison time in the United States are in state and local institutions.

A number of state governors have come under pressure to free elderly inmates with greater risks of coronavirus infection.

The leaders of California and New Jersey are already moving with similar actions to Barr’s.

On Wednesday, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Michelle Bachelet, called for governments to ease the pressure on prison populations.

“COVID-19 has begun to strike prisons, jails and immigration detention centres, as well as residential care homes and psychiatric hospitals, and risks rampaging through such institutions’ extremely vulnerable populations,” Bachelet said in a statement.

Ethiopia announced it would free more than 4,000 prisoners and Afghanistan also plans to let go up to 10,000 detainees.

Releases, infections, fear: U.S. coronavirus crisis in jails and prisons looms (ABC News)

ABC News [3/26/2020 5:02 AM, Chris Francescani, Sasha Pezenik, Luke Barr and Claire Weinraub, 2182K]

As the COVID-19 virus continues its relentless march across the nation, the looming crisis inside America’s jails and prisons appears to be deepening, as corrections officials dig in to prevent outbreaks in the nation’s more than 6,000 prisons and jails.

So far this week, a total of 23 inmates have escaped correctional facilities in two states after at least one inmate had tested positive at each of two facilities -- and by late Wednesday a dozen remained at large, officials said.

In the past week, judges from coast to coast have ordered thousands of inmates released — both those detained before trial and convicted inmates — but calls for release have broadened to all medically-vulnerable inmates, as reports of medical and cleaning supplies shortages at correctional facilities nationwide climb as well.

In New York City -- America's current epicenter of infection -- tension is building inside some units of Rikers Island's sprawling jail complex, where a sharp spike in inmates testing positive for COVID-19 this week is driving fears that the situation will bloom into the nation's first major outbreak inside a correctional facility.

As of Wednesday, 75 New York City inmates have tested positive for COVID-19 and 37 city corrections staff members, up from 50 inmates and 30 staffers the previous day, city Department of Corrections officials said.

Outside jails, federal officials have encouraged citizens to keep at least 6 feet away from each other to better protect against the spread of the virus. Inside, however, inmates are facing crowded conditions in some city jails, including dorm-style sleeping quarters tight enough for an inmate to reach out and touch the next bed over, and in at least one instance, 29 people sharing a single toilet, according to interviews with New York City public defenders with clients behind bars, and friends and family of city inmates.

"The conditions on Rikers were horrific and inhumane before coronavirus. That is nothing new," Scott Hechinger, a public defender in Brooklyn, told ABC News.

"The difference is those conditions have now become imminently deadly. We've seen the hell of Rikers. We see human misery. We're all terrified," he said. "It's bad and it's only going to get worse. Every day that goes by is only setting us up for more pain and death."

'I've never seen anything like this'

One frustrated New York City woman whose 25-year-old boyfriend has been incarcerated at Rikers for less than a year after violating parole on an assault charge, said conditions in his unit are deteriorating. With two months left to serve and a history of asthma, her boyfriend feels like a sitting duck, she told ABC News.

"When people have been taken out who were tested positive ... they just leave the mattress there and they're like, 'well, if you want to, clean it up,' [and] basically leave it up to the inmates," said the woman, who requested anonymity because she said she fears retaliation against him in response to her complaints.

"They're crammed together in one building," she said, describing dorm conditions.

Her boyfriend "was sleeping in the bunk next to somebody who's been infected," she said. "And when they transferred him to another building, he was handcuffed to another guy who got tested positive, and half of them don't even know their result yet."

Over the weekend, eight inmates at Rikers Island were reportedly pepper-sprayed while trying to go to the jail medical clinic after an inmate they were housed with was removed from the area for displaying flu-like symptoms.

"I understand everybody's going to want to go to the clinic if they're worried," New York City Department of Correction press secretary Jason Kersten told ABC News on Wednesday. "But there needs to be procedures in place ... I know it's being investigated. We referred it to the investigation division right away." Still, he said, staffers "have to be careful about how people are moved in these facilities."

City corrections officials said they are doing all they can to contain the spread of the virus at Rikers Island and all city facilities.

"This is something none of us has ever faced," Kersten said. "The longer this goes on, the more staff is going to be out. And the harder you know, the harder it's going to be."

"This is really challenging, a crisis like this -- things start to fray," he continued. "It's really going to test everybody's strength and [the] ability to perform their jobs. So, I mean," he said, pausing. "I've never seen anything like this."

In terms of cleaning supplies, Kersten said city inmates have supplies to maintain good hygiene.

"There's plenty of soap and water," he said. "We can't give them hand sanitizer because it's very flammable. And it can also be used to distill their own alcohol. But it's unfortunate because you want to give it to them to make them feel better."

Kersten said that reports of dangerous conditions emerging from the city's jail facilities are isolated and not representative of the entire system.

"These do not paint an accurate widespread picture of what's going on on the island," he said. "We're following very specific protocols related to containing outbreaks in jails and confined areas. Unfortunately, jail is not a good place to have something like this happen, because it's a confining place, naturally. So we're doing everything we can to separate people. People are working really hard to contain this."

One inmate at the federal Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn has tested positive for the virus and remains in isolation, according to the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Elsewhere, two inmates at Manhattan's Metropolitan Corrections Center have tested positive, a federal law enforcement sources told ABC News late Wednesday.

There are about 1.3 million people in state prisons, about three-quarters of a million in local jails and about a quarter million in federal prisons, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

Additionally, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is currently detaining about 38,000. A spokesperson did not immediately respond to questions from ABC News about the agency's plans for the detainees during the pandemic or whether any detainees had yet tested positive for the coronavirus.

Some inmates released in shadow of virus

While a growing number of states have begun releasing some inmates, advocates said that more needs to be done for the vulnerable behind bars.

On Sunday, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued a consent order based on an agreement reached between the New Jersey Public Defender's Office, state Attorney General's Office, County Prosecutors Association and American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey to release about 800 inmates serving time for low-level offenses in county jails.

According to the consent order some of the inmates may be called to return to complete their sentences after the public health emergency is over.

On Tuesday, the Los Angeles County Sheriff said that about 1,700 inmates — or 10% of the county jail population — has been released so far and more could be released this week.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said late Wednesday that 200 additional city jail inmates are being released, in addition to the 75 that have already been released.

"That number will keep growing in the short term, with a particular focus on those who are really older, particularly over 70, and inmates who have pre-existing conditions," de Blasio said. "I think you'll see substantial number of the next few days."

High-risk inmates behind bars

On Monday, the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released interim guidance for corrections facilities — though the guidance does not address the issue of releasing some inmates to guard against the spread of the virus.

In separate guidelines issued earlier this month, the CDC identified those at "higher risk" for contracting the contagion: Americans 55 or older, and those with underlying health conditions.

Based on those guidelines, a large swath of the roughly 2.3 million Americans serving time behind bars appears to be at elevated risk of contracting COVID-19.

Among the higher-risk category of inmates are the aging — about 12% of all inmates are over 55, or more than 171,000 -- according to Wanda Bertram of the Prison Policy Initiative.

A large portion of the nation's prison population also suffers chronic health conditions including diabetes, high-blood pressure and heart disease. About 65% of state prisoners were smokers in 2016, and 45% of federal inmates, the last year for which data is available, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

At the federal level, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators took up the call for the care of vulnerable inmates.

"It is important that consistent with the law and taking into account public safety and health

concerns, that the most vulnerable inmates are released or transferred to home confinement, if possible,” the legislators wrote in their letter.

Two escapes, fugitives still on the loose

Fourteen inmates in Washington State escaped a correctional facility yesterday and nine female inmates, who fled a minimum-security prison in Pierre, South Dakota on Monday after being housed with an inmate that tested positive, state governor Kristi Noem said at a Tuesday press conference.

Seven of the escaped 14 in Washington were recovered by Wednesday morning, and four of the nine in South Dakota have been recaptured — but seven men and five women remained at large as of late Wednesday.

Pompeo defends efforts to bring Americans home amid pandemic (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 11:17 AM, Quint Forgey, 2003K]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Thursday defended the Trump administration’s efforts to bring home Americans from foreign countries amid criticism that his department has left U.S. citizens stranded during a global pandemic.

“There’s still a lot of work to do. We’ve got a lot of people who are trying to get back this way, and with travel shut down in many of these countries without any notice or little notice, there’s still a major undertaking,” Pompeo told conservative talk radio host Hugh Hewitt during an interview on his show.

“But the team has marshaled the resources,” Pompeo continued. “It’s an airlift back home like we’ve not seen in an awfully long time, and I’m really proud of the way our team has responded.”

Former State Department officials, as well as members of Congress, have accused Pompeo of an insufficient response to the international coronavirus outbreak, charging that the secretary and his senior leadership team acted too slowly to evacuate Americans as various travel bans complicated their movements.

Although Pompeo said the State Department had “now brought over 10,000 Americans back home from places where they were stranded through no fault of their own,” thousands more still trapped overseas have been forced to resort to dangerous or expensive methods of return travel, including risky border crossings, bribing customs officials and chartering a jet flown by a private security firm.

Still, Pompeo asserted that State officials have answered the myriad challenges posed by the coronavirus “in a way that’s in the finest tradition of American diplomacy,” adding that “our team is out there taking care of Americans [and] keeping our own teams safe.”

Pompeo earlier this month also faced scrutiny from congressional lawmakers and his own employees for not being more transparent about the coronavirus’ threat to the State Department’s workforce.

Throughout the public health crisis, Pompeo has remained closely allied with President Donald Trump in criticizing China for hinting, without evidence, that the coronavirus may have originated in the U.S. and for failing to adequately warn other nations of the deadly disease.

Pompeo's insistence on branding the coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus" — in reference to the city in China's central province of Hubei where the illness first emerged — reportedly resulted in a dispute with foreign ministers from the Group of 7 leading industrialized democracies during a video conference meeting on Wednesday.

HHS implements anti-price gouging order amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)
FOX News [3/26/2020 10:08 AM, Brooke Singman, 8943K]

The Department of Health and Human Services on Thursday implemented President Trump's executive order to prevent the hoarding of certain health and medical resources necessary to respond to the coronavirus outbreak.

HHS Secretary Alex Azar on Thursday announced a list of certain health and medical resources subject to the hoarding prevention measures, which also target price-gouging.

"Today, we designated a set of medical products that will be subject to the president's recent executive order to prevent hoarding and price-gouging," Azar said.

The order prevents accumulation in excess of reasonable demands of business, personal or home consumption, or for the purpose of resale prices in excess of current market prices.

The designated materials include N-95 filtering face masks, other "filtering face piece respirators," air purifying respirators and filters and cartridges. The order also protects chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine (the malaria drugs that are being used to help the symptoms of COVID-19); sterilization services for medical devices; and disinfecting and hand sanitizing products.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) including medical gowns, apparel, surgical gowns, Tyvek suits, PPE face masks, surgical masks and face shields are also protected under the order.

The order also covers portable ventilators, regular ventilators, anesthesia gas machines, and other breathing devices.

"HHS and FEMA will continue working closely together to monitor and address shortages of necessary medical products, and we look forward to working closely with the Department of Justice on hoarding prevention measures," Azar said Thursday. "The president will take every possible step to get American health care providers the supplies they need to stay safe and save lives."

Earlier this week, the Trump administration vowed to go after price gougers and those hoarding critical medical supplies amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Very simply, we will not allow anyone to exploit the suffering of American citizens for their

own profit," Trump said Monday.

Attorney General Bill Barr said Monday that he has seen evidence of price gouging and hoarding in recent weeks.

"Once specific materials are so designated, persons are prohibited from accumulating those items in excess of reasonable personal or business needs or for the purpose of selling them in excess of prevailing market prices," Barr said Monday.

"We're talking about people hoarding these goods and materials on an industrial scale for the purposes of manipulating the market and ultimately driving windfall profits," Barr said. "If you have a big supply of toilet paper in your house, this is not something you have to worry about. But, if you are sitting on a warehouse with masks, surgical masks, you will be hearing a knock on your door."

The order comes after states, like New York, which has become the epicenter of the country's COVID-19 outbreak, complained about price-gouging on necessary PPE like N-95 masks.

As of Thursday morning, the U.S. reported more than 69,100 positive cases of COVID-19. Late Wednesday night, the death toll in the country exceeded 1,000.

Coronavirus Pandemic Reaching Critical Tipping Point in America, Analysis Shows (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 2:38 PM, Gaby Galvin, 3020K]

A U.S. news analysis of coronavirus deaths in eight countries indicates the pandemic is approaching a crucial point in America, when an aggressive and sustained national response could save thousands – perhaps millions – of lives and protect health systems in hard-hit areas from collapse.

The analysis indicates that the death toll in the U.S. is surging and soon will likely top 300 deaths per day. Without a comprehensive response to prevent new infections and care for those who are sick, the U.S. is poised to follow the paths of other nations with rising infection rates and mounting deaths.

Plotting daily deaths over time offers a sense of which measures were most effective at bending the curve and saving lives in other countries. In China, for example, aggressive testing, isolation and quarantine efforts that began in the third week of January culminated in a pivotal moment in mid-February, the analysis shows, when the number of new deaths fell to about 100 to touch off a steep decline.

In Iran, where leaders initially downplayed the threat and saw a surge in deaths, the tide appears to have turned for the better around March 22. In Italy, the death toll reached a critical milestone the same day, topping 500 reported deaths for the first time. But in the last few days, the toll appears to be leveling out and may decline.

The brunt of the pandemic hit the U.S. later than in other countries, but deaths have been rising rapidly in recent days. There were more than 200 new deaths reported Wednesday to

push the total past 1,000 – and the analysis shows that, barring considerable intervention, the daily death toll is poised to accelerate.

Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of preventive medicine and infectious diseases at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, says the findings underscore the critical need for people to continue to stay at home and physically distance themselves from others.

"If they don't, it's likely that there will be a substantial increase in deaths from coronavirus in the United States," Schaffner says.

Deaths represent the most reliable measure of COVID-19's spread and the arc of the pandemic. Trying to track infections and hospitalizations is much more challenging due to fragmented testing and reporting across counties, states and countries. In the U.S., it can even be difficult to track deaths, as the federal government and other institutions, such as Johns Hopkins University, regularly publish different numbers.

"Deaths may be the best measure of the incidence of coronavirus," says Dr. James Curran, dean of the Emory University Rollins School of Public Health, who led the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's AIDS task force. "The reason to follow deaths and analyze them carefully is to see how we're doing at saving lives."

Yet policymakers, health officials and the public have, for the most part, focused on surging case counts in epicenters like New York City and Seattle, trying to fashion a response based on an incomplete picture of the virus' spread. The U.S. News comparison offers a window into different scenarios that may unfold depending on how aggressively the U.S. acts in the coming days.

Some parts of the country are already at a crisis point. This week, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo pleaded with the Trump administration to provide 30,000 ventilators, which he said will be crucial when a tidal wave of coronavirus cases hits the state in two to three weeks. New York's roughly 31,000 cases so far represent about 6% of those diagnosed worldwide, and the state has the highest death toll in the U.S., with more than 320 dead – though New York's population density might produce a higher infection rate and death toll than other parts of the country, experts say.

In Washington State, which was the country's first hot spot and now has one-tenth as many cases as New York, the coronavirus has killed more than 130 people, with most of the deaths in the Seattle area and many linked to a nursing home.

Louisiana appears headed for the same precipice. Three weeks ago, the state had no confirmed cases of the coronavirus. There are now about 1,800 cases in the state, and Gov. John Bel Edwards, who issued a stay-at-home order on March 22, said hospitals in the New Orleans area could be overwhelmed by April 4.

"We're already low on protective equipment," says Dr. Rebekah Gee, who until recently served as Louisiana's health secretary and now leads the LSU Health Care Services Division. "The biggest issue is personnel, because you can make masks and you can actually create field hospitals, but you can't make pulmonary critical care specialists in a week."

With the number of COVID-19 cases growing at a faster pace in some places than in others, Americans are constantly flooded with news and information, much of it conflicting and difficult to interpret, says Rocco Perla, co-founder of nonprofit The Health Initiative and an assistant professor of biostatistics at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Perla carried out the analysis with Lloyd Provost, principal statistician at Associates in Process Improvement, with help from Shannon Provost, a lecturer at the McCombs School of Business at the University of Texas in Austin, and shared it with U.S. News.

This barrage of information, on some days frightening and on others reassuring, "encourages a cycle of panic and relief" that keeps the public guessing and stokes the sense of alarm, Perla says. Most importantly, Perla and Provost say, most of the data released by health agencies in the U.S. and abroad doesn't account for random variation.

Without statistical analysis, there's no way to know whether these ups and downs in the data are random or convey "something important about whether things are getting worse or better," they say in a description of their analysis, which uses coronavirus data from Our World in Data – a nonprofit affiliated with the University of Oxford that draws on information from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control – and the World Health Organization's daily situation reports.

The data in the analysis represents the best information available, Perla says; it also reflects the dates new daily deaths were reported, not necessarily when they occurred. Viewing the data in its entirety and over time offers a clearer window into the trajectory of the outbreak, one that isn't clouded by noise and can detect meaningful differences in patterns that can inform official public guidance and decision-making.

"With all the talk of 'flattening the curve,' we think the approach we used and our analysis sheds light on early signals of when the increase in new deaths peaks and the curve begins to flatten," Perla and Provost say.

The analysis indicates a pivotal point where the death toll deviated from its expected course in various countries – whether for better or worse. Comparing the U.S. curve with those from other countries offers insight into the value of measures that can slow the pandemic's growth.

Experts who reviewed the data say China's curve reflects its draconian crackdown on the virus. On Jan. 23, with about 835 infections and 26 deaths in the country, Chinese officials quarantined Wuhan, a city of 11 million that was the center of the outbreak at the time. As cases continued climbing, authorities put more cities on lockdown and began aggressively screening and contact tracing. Sick patients were separated from their families, workers went to homes looking for illnesses and residents were paid to monitor and report on quarantine-violating neighbors.

"They put into force a truly amazing response that was brutal and oppressive, that was unprecedented in scale, that was intolerant of dissent, intolerant of the free flow of information, untransparent and rapidly scaled," says Steve Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in the

nation's capital. "And it worked."

On Feb. 17, 25 days after the country cut off Wuhan, the number of new deaths reported in China fell to 105 in the first signal that deaths would soon begin dropping, the U.S. News analysis shows – even as the number of total cases there remained high. On March 22, China reported just six new deaths.

But by then, the virus had taken hold across the world. In Italy, as China began gaining traction against the pandemic, the governing Democratic Party leader, Nicola Zingaretti downplayed the risk of the virus, encouraging people "not to change our habits."

Today, the country has about 74,000 confirmed cases and more than 7,500 coronavirus deaths, the Johns Hopkins tracker shows – though the true number of infections may be much higher, according to Angelo Borrelli, who heads Italy's Civil Protection Agency. About 9% of the country's infections have occurred among health workers.

In Italy, the death toll hit a peak on March 22, when 795 deaths were reported. New deaths fell below the expected trajectory in more recent days, according to the U.S. News analysis, indicating they may begin to decline. Many in the country have died because the health system is overwhelmed and can't care for a flood of critically ill patients needing ventilators and other respiratory support.

"It's just a measure of how ill-prepared they were for this," Morrison says.

A look at Iran offers another view of the global pandemic. Leaders in the secretive state said in February that the virus wouldn't spread in the country, but a steep upward climb in deaths began around March 9, the analysis shows. Satellite images show mass graves in Qom – the country's first coronavirus hot spot – and that week, authorities shut down popular religious shrines in Qom and Mashhad and authorized the military to intervene, The New York Times reported. Iran now has more than 29,000 cases and 2,200 deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins tracker.

Even so, while new deaths reported in Iran remained high at 123 on March 22, the analysis indicates that had the outbreak maintained its recent trajectory, that number actually would have been higher – meaning restrictive measures at the state and individual levels may be starting to blunt the uptick in deaths.

That trend still could be reversed, especially if the data are inaccurate or delayed due to reporting issues, Perla notes. But it gives the strongest indication of Iran's current coronavirus trajectory.

South Korea offers a contrast to other countries in the analysis. Its response, which involved a dedicated public health campaign of testing, contact tracing and isolation, was so successful that the country kept its death toll low and prevented a surge of cases.

The country was hit hard by another coronavirus – one that causes Middle East Respiratory Syndrome – in 2015, and already had the laws and emergency infrastructure in place to manage such an outbreak.

"We have the blueprints for the solution – we just need to follow them," says Gee from Louisiana. "We understand what worked in South Korea and in China, and if we do these things, they will work here."

A soon-to-be released analysis by the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation buttresses the U.S. News findings. The IHME research team also examined deaths globally, from the start of each country's outbreak – the date the death rate hit 0.3 per 1 million – to the moment it gained momentum.

The IHME analysis additionally delved deeper and found that each country's trajectory is driven by the pandemic's arc in different communities, some of which – such as the Lombardy and Liguria regions in Italy – experienced explosive growth, while others, such as Venice, are seeing deaths mount more slowly.

Spain is now one of the hardest hit countries in Europe, driven by a surge of deaths in Madrid, says Dr. Christopher Murray, IHME's director, who describes the situation in Madrid as "really alarming."

Madrid's death rate 14 days after the start of its epidemic is 10 times higher than Wuhan's was at that same point: "Madrid's going to be the worst by far of the European cities," Murray says.

In all, the results of both the U.S. News and IHME analyses "confirm that early, decisive action toward self-isolation, social distancing, will pay off," says Dr. Julio Frenk, the president of the University of Miami, former dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and chairman of IHME's board.

Frenk says social distancing measures can help curb the outbreak in three ways: They interrupt transmission of the virus, and ensure that even if the same number of people are infected, those infections occur over a longer period of time, preventing health systems from becoming overwhelmed – "the famous flattening of the curve," Frenk says.

Perhaps most importantly, he says, slowing the spread of the virus buys scientists time to develop better ways to screen, diagnose and treat patients.

"We need to work together, because physical distancing gives us more time for those scientific solutions to emerge and be tested and deployed," Frenk says.

With roughly a fifth of Americans under orders to stay at home, the U.S. News analysis also reinforces agreement among health experts that short-term business and school closures will not be enough to meaningfully turn the tide on the outbreak.

President Donald Trump this week signaled a desire to have the country "opened" by Easter on April 12 to curb the virus' damaging economic effects. The virus' astonishingly rapid potential for spread makes this a potentially dangerous move, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, advised "flexibility" in determining when to relax stay-at-home orders.

"On a literally day-by-day and week-by-week basis, you need to evaluate the feasibility of

what you're trying to do," Fauci said. "I think people might get the misinterpretation you're just going to lift everything up and ... that's not going to happen. It's going to be looking at the data."

In the U.S., the best approach to the virus emphasizes the voluntary measures now in place, says Dr. Clay Marsh, vice president and executive dean for health sciences at the West Virginia University Health Sciences Center. His state – which just recorded its first instance of community transmission at a nursing home – is aggressively trying to avoid a wave of cases similar to the one that now threatens to capsize New York City's health system.

If 75% of people heed those stay-at-home warnings, Marsh says, the tsunami of cases could be transformed into a steady stream of patients that health workers can manage. If 90% of people heed the order, "you don't see a surge," he says.

IHME's Murray says it won't be long before we learn whether these measures are working.

"I think we're keying up to a critical time," he says. "I think people are going to be very nervous as we wait to see whether social distancing ... is bending the curve or not."

Prepare For Outbreaks Like New York's In Other States, Warns Anthony Fauci (NPR)
NPR [3/26/2020 1:22 PM, Elena Renken, 4112K]

Over a thousand people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19, and over a third of those deaths have taken place in New York. Nearly half the confirmed cases in the United States are in New York. The state has become a coronavirus hot spot — anyone leaving New York City is being asked to self-quarantine for two weeks.

A key adviser to President Trump, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and member of the White House coronavirus task force, says other states need to prepare to take on outbreaks of this scale.

NPR's Noel King spoke with Fauci about where the U.S. is headed and what strategies may help stop the spread of the coronavirus. He weighed in on increased testing capacity in the U.S. and on President Trump's comment that he hopes to see the economy reopen by Easter. That possibility, according to Fauci, remains to be seen.

Earlier this week, an official with the World Health Organization warned that the United States could become the new epicenter of the virus — could it?

Well, clearly in the beginning, China was the epicenter. Then it moved to Europe, particularly in Italy. And now we're seeing a rather substantial outbreak in the New York City metropolitan area. Now, there are a lot of other areas in the United States. But clearly, the acceleration of cases that we're seeing in New York City is really quite disturbing.

Nearly half of all cases in the country right now are in the state of New York. What should hospitals in New York expect over the next few weeks?

What they're seeing already, and we'll expect more, is an influx of cases which they're

trying to deal with locally and with the help of the federal government, with regard to beds, ICU beds and ventilators. I am in close contact with Gov. Cuomo of New York and he's dealing with the federal government, with FEMA and other organizations to try to get to him the material and equipment that he will need.

There are other states, including Florida, that are seeing a surge in cases reminiscent of what we saw in New York maybe a week ago. Should those states be looking at New York and thinking: That's what's going to happen here and we need to be prepared for that?

Absolutely. That's the course of these types of outbreaks. So Florida has gotten hit both from internal [cases], but also from travel-related cases of people who leave New York, many of whom have second homes in Florida. So we're having a situation, as is predictable when you have outbreaks like this, that you seed different areas from hot spots.

Right now, New York is bearing a major burden of the outbreak. But when people leave New York, they go other places. And that's the reason why yesterday at the White House press conference, we made the recommendation that when individuals leave New York, that when they get to [their] destination that they essentially self-isolate for 14 days, as well as monitor their own symptoms to make sure they don't get sick. And if they do, to actually report it to a health care provider.

There's still some confusion about who should be getting tested. The president tweeted last night that testing in this country has increased significantly. He also said there is no need to test all 350 million or so Americans. So who should go and get the test?

The president is correct on both counts that there are many, many, many more tests that are out there now than there were just a few weeks ago. The other thing that the president was referring to is he wants to make sure that those people who need the tests, get the tests first. Because right now, when you haven't had enough tests to give to everyone, you need to make sure that the people who are having symptoms and need to be diagnosed are the ones who get the tests, particularly those who are in the hospital.

In South Korea, a country that has handled this virus remarkably well, they tested broadly. They tested everyone with symptoms and isolated those people and tested and isolated people they'd been in contact with. We don't have enough tests to do that. Is there a South Korea strategy for the U.S., or have we passed that point?

Well, the United States is a big country and it isn't uni-dimensional. So what we're seeing, for example, is two components of how you address an outbreak. There's containment, in which you identify as best as you can each individual person who's infected. You identify them. You isolate them. You get them out of circulation and you do contact tracing. That's what we needed to do in situations before it became a massive outbreak.

When you have a situation like we're seeing in New York, they're in what we call mitigation, because there's so many cases up there. They need to be able to take care of the people who are infected.

Today the testing situation is infinitely better than what it was a few weeks ago. We now have hundreds of thousands of tests out there. And in the next week or so, we'll be having

like a million a week. In the beginning, it was a slow start. But right now that the commercial firms have gotten involved, we really have caught up. And we will be seeing a much improved system with regard to the availability and the implementation of testing.

Italy, the U.K. and India have all moved to lockdowns where they've suspended all nonessential activities. In India, people have been told not to leave their houses for three weeks. Should every state in the U.S. be doing this right now, given that we don't have enough testing to know where the next epicenter will be?

I don't think that we should do this uniformly throughout the entire country. I mean, obviously, you'll always keep an open mind that you might have to revert to something like that. But today, there are clearly places that need to do that, and the governors are doing that. You saw what Gov. Newsom did in California, we're seeing what Gov. Cuomo has done in New York state and in New York City. And we're seeing versions of that in places like Louisiana.

So you're going to be seeing more stringent shutdowns depending upon where you are. But there are regions of the country where, rather than shut down, we should be doing the kind of containment, which is identifying, testing, contact tracing and isolating.

At White House briefings, you and Dr. Deborah Birx have talked about an interesting scenario where scientists are able to gather data about cases all across this country and then policymakers can tailor their response based on local characteristics, like "how bad is it here?" Do you have the data you need now to tell different areas of the country they should be doing different things?

We are quickly getting to the point where we will be able to get that data. But you are correct. To be honest, we don't have all that data now uniformly throughout the country to make those determinations. But that's a major, primary goal that we have right now, is to get those data, because you have to make informed decisions and your decisions are informed by the information you have.

The president said this week that he'd like to see the economy reopened, up and running by Easter. That's April 12. There seem to be real risks if states and communities come out of shutdowns too early. What are you advising right now? Should we even be considering April 12?

The president has set April 12 as an aspirational goal. He knows, and we've discussed this with him, that you have to be very flexible on that. He put that out because he wanted to give some hope to people. But he is not absolutely wed to that. And he keeps saying that although he would like that to be the date, he's open-minded and flexible to make sure that the facts and the pattern of the virus determine what we do.

We have heard hopeful statements that warmer weather might slow this virus down. Does the science bear that out?

You know, the science bears it out in part because if you look historically with viruses like influenza and some of the more common, benign coronaviruses, when the weather gets warmer, viruses don't do as well. And people tend to spend more time outdoors where the

free flow of air is always good for preventing respiratory infections. That's a pattern that's real. What we don't know is whether this is going to happen with this virus because this is a unique virus, which we had no experience [with] before. We're hoping that's the case. We hope we get a respite as we get into April, May and June.

Likely it will come around [again] next season because it's a very vigorous virus, and we're seeing it already infecting people in the Southern Hemisphere, now, as they enter into their winter. So I hope and I think we might get a respite with the weather, which would hopefully give us more time to better prepare for what might be a second round or a seasonal cycling.

Pandemic deaths could top 1.8 mn even with tough response: study (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 4:43 PM, Staff, 1973K]

The death toll from the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe could hit 1.8 million worldwide this year even with swift and stringent measures to stop it, according to a study from Britain's Imperial College published Thursday.

Researchers estimate that tens of millions of lives could be saved if governments act fast to adopt strict public health measures, including testing, quarantining and broad social distancing.

The latest report from Imperial College London, whose previous research spurred the British government to ramp up its efforts to curb the virus, comes as an AFP toll based on country data and World Health Organisation figures showed global infections topping 500,000, including more than 22,000 deaths.

The Imperial College modelling simulations are based on current data about the severity of the virus — its contagiousness and estimated mortality rate — as well as demographic and societal factors.

In a sobering projection of what could have happened with no interventions at all, the study said that if left unchecked COVID-19 could have infected almost everyone on the planet this year and killed 40 million people.

The report then looks at different levels of response, from spontaneous social distancing to the tough lock down measures currently imposed in some worst-affected countries, and projects the potential health impacts across 202 countries.

With strict containment measures imposed early enough — resulting in a rate of deaths of 0.2 per 100,000 of population per week — the modelling shows a death toll of 1.86 million people, with nearly 470 million infected this year.

If the same measures were taken later — leading to 1.6 deaths per 100,000 of population per week — the estimated toll rises sharply to 10.45 million deaths and 2.4 billion people infected.

“Our analysis highlights the challenging decisions faced by all governments in the coming weeks and months, but demonstrates the extent to which rapid, decisive and collective

action now could save millions of lives,” the authors said.

Estimates of mortality levels and healthcare demand were based on data from China and high-income countries, the report said, adding that variances in health systems could result in different patterns in low income countries.

They stressed that the modelling mapped out “possible trajectories” for the pandemic and containment strategies, based on countries that have been affected early in the pandemic.

“However, at the current time, it is not possible to predict with any certainty the exact number of cases for any given country or the precise mortality and disease burden that will result.”

The report does not take into account the social and economic costs of the containment measures, “which will be high and may be disproportionately so in lower income settings”.

It also warned that “suppression strategies will need to be maintained in some manner until vaccines or effective treatments become available to avoid the risk of later epidemics”.

White House officials push back on calls to activate DPA for critical medical supplies (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 7:27 PM, Myah Ward, 2003K]

As state leaders across the country call on the federal government to activate the Defense Production Act, White House officials continue to push back — instead insisting that companies have stepped up to provide the dire medical equipment needed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic across the U.S.

On Tuesday, the Federal Emergency Management Agency said it ultimately did not need to use the DPA to secure medical equipment, walking back on an announcement made by the head of the agency earlier that morning. But state authorities and health leaders have called for more federal intervention as they struggle to get their hands on ventilators and personal protective equipment necessary to brace for overwhelmed hospitals amid the intensifying outbreak.

The Service Employees International Union on Thursday announced that it had located 39 million N95 masks and was working with states, counties, health systems and hospitals to connect them to the supplier — an illustration of how states might benefit from a national response.

“Within 48 hours of painstakingly calling leads and potential suppliers,” the SEIU said in a statement, “the union discovered a distributor who had the 39 million masks, and has since found another supplier who says his company can produce 20 million more masks a week. The union also has found a supplier who can deliver millions of face shields.”

But Adm. Brett Giroir, a member of the White House coronavirus task force, on Thursday defended the administration’s decision to keep the DPA in its back pocket, saying the federal government had poured supplies into New York — providing the state with everything it needs, including masks and ventilators.

“The Defense Production Act, it’s very important that potential is there,” Giroir said on “Fox & Friends.” “But as the president has clearly said, industry is pouring in with offers. Everything we have asked, they have done. And they come every single day to provide more and more goods.”

The pushback also comes as more than 100 current and former national security professionals, including former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, joined the call for action this week, urging the president to use the act to ramp up production of critical medical supplies.

The letter, obtained by The Wall Street Journal, says that despite the administration’s using the DPA on a “narrow and limited basis,” health care workers continue to “sound the alarm, citing the increasingly urgent and dire need for ventilators, masks, testing supplies and other resources.”

“Some private companies have been willing and able to scale up production — and admirably so,” the letter says. “But as governors and local leaders around the country are making clear, private efforts without more extensive government support are proving far from sufficient to meet the current and anticipated needs. Beyond questions of supply, the private sector lacks the ability to process incoming requests, prioritize the most urgent needs, and coordinate with other companies absent more concerted government involvement. That is precisely what the DPA is designed to do.”

Though President Donald Trump signed an executive order last week to invoke the DPA, he has yet to make a single order, saying that “we have the act to use in case we need it, but we have so many things being made right now” by companies that are volunteering. During Monday’s White House briefing, the president offered another reason for not activating the DPA, suggesting that doing so would be socialist.

“We’re a country not based on nationalizing our business,” Trump said. “Call a person over in Venezuela. Ask them, how did nationalization of their businesses work out? Not too well.”

Trump addressed the subject during Thursday’s White House briefing, reiterating that “companies want to do this.” But the president added that he’d used the DPA on “two minor occasions,” though he didn’t provide any specifics or evidence to support the statement.

“I talk about the Defense Production Act a lot. I’ve enacted it. I have it. I can do it with a pen,” Trump told reporters. “We have actually used it on two minor occasions, and then we could withdraw it. But for the most part, the companies, we don’t need it. We say we need this, and they say don’t bother, we’re going to do it.”

Trump added: “Frankly, they don’t need somebody to walk over there with a hammer and say, do it. They are getting it done.”

During the briefing, Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, also said she was reassured after a conversation with New York leaders this week, saying there were an adequate number of ICU beds and ventilators that haven’t been used.

“There is still significant — over a thousand or two thousand ventilators that have not been utilized yet,” she said. “Please, for the reassurance of people around the world, to wake up this morning and look at people talking about creating DNR situations — do not resuscitate situations for patients — there is no situation in the United States right now that warrants that kind of discussion. You can be thinking about it in a hospital. Certainly many hospitals talk about this on a daily basis.”

She continued: “But to say that to the American people, to make the implication that when they need a hospital bed it’s not going to be there, or when they need a ventilator it’s not going to be there, we don’t have an evidence of that right now. And it’s our job to assure the American people that it’s our collective job to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Earlier Thursday, the White House trade adviser, Peter Navarro, who appears to be leading the effort on sourcing supplies for states across the country, said he was working with FEMA, the Department of Health and Human Services and the private sector to get health care professionals what “they need, and we’re just getting that done.”

“I couldn’t be prouder of the federal government and private enterprise and President Trump for bringing that effort together, because every time I call somebody — if I call 1,000 people today, 999 of them in the private sector will be more than willing to do whatever we ask,” Navarro said on Fox on Thursday morning.

Navarro had a more intense exchange later on CNN when he was asked about not activating the DPA. He said the administration was stepping up, “working very, very hard” to get equipment to hot spots like New York and other states facing an intensifying surge of coronavirus cases. Navarro also downplayed reports that people were using garbage bags for protection, suggesting that CNN was sensationalizing the crisis.

“So, there’ll be pictures of people that you’re citing or whatever with garbage bags or whatever. But that’s going to be the exception that proves the rule that we’re doing everything we can,” Navarro said.

“Let’s not sensationalize this crisis at a time when we create more anxiety or panicked behavior with people,” he added.

In an Instagram Live Q&A with NBA player Stephen Curry, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White task force, also touted the private sector’s willingness to step up when he was asked whether the federal government’s approach to the supply problems was appropriate.

“Once you get the private sector, these companies involved, they can whip out billions and billions of masks,” Fauci said. “I mean, literally at the last meeting, we had to say, OK, enough is enough. Let’s get them and flood it. Let’s get those companies to make them, and they’re willing to do it. You know, it’s very interesting, you would think that the federal government would almost have to force them to do it. You’re not seeing that. We’re seeing they’re stepping forward, wanting to do it themselves.”

But the praise stands in stark contrast to complaints from leaders across the country who say their states still don’t have the necessary supplies to battle the outbreak. Sen. Kamala

Harris (D-Calif.) on Thursday said she didn't understand why Trump, just a day after reportedly telling Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer that he would activate the DPA, had walked back on the decision.

"But unfortunately, we have someone in the White House who I don't think understands the core and essential functions of government," Harris said on MSNBC on Thursday. "I don't think he respects those core and essential functions of government to understand what he should be unlocking and, in this case, to require and to encourage and incentivize domestic production of the health resources like masks and ventilators that will save American lives. I don't understand. I don't understand it. I don't get it. I think it's an abject failure of leadership."

Cases explode in Michigan but states outside of the hotspots can't get supplies (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 6:54 PM, Lauren Fox, Jeremy Herb, Daniella Diaz, Jasmine Wright, and Ali Zaslav, 5551K]

The number of coronavirus cases in Michigan has skyrocketed to nearly 3,000 from less than 350 a week ago, but the state is still struggling to obtain supplies behind the states where the pandemic has hit the hardest.

For weeks, the scenes of coronavirus outbreaks in New York, Washington and California have captured the nation's attention as the epicenters of the crisis in the United States.

But as the pandemic takes hold elsewhere, the finite number of live-saving equipment like ventilators, face masks and personal protective equipment -- as well as the inability of the national stockpile to make up for all of the shortages -- is coming into clear view, leaving a gap between states that encountered outbreaks early and those that are seeing their numbers ramp up now.

Michigan, the site of one of the country's fastest growing outbreaks, has found itself unable to get an adequate supply of personal protective equipment, with lawmakers telling CNN that Gov. Gretchen Whitmer had placed an order only to be told by the company later the federal government had placed an order that would take priority.

When even New York, the epicenter of the coronavirus crisis in the US, says it isn't getting enough supplies, states that have seen less spread worry they will miss out as the federal government doles out the limited resources it has at its disposal.

"We are seeing numbers that look a lot like the numbers those states were seeing 10 days ago," said Rep. Dan Kildee, a Michigan Democrat. "There is real urgency that we don't want to miss the opportunity to stop this in order to slow it down."

Michigan lawmakers are also reporting the state has received just a fraction of the materials they've requested from the national stockpile. Kildee said the state's entire congressional delegation sent a letter to Vice President Mike Pence, the head of the coronavirus task force, urging the federal government to intervene.

"Confusion has arisen as both states and the federal government attempt to rapidly secure

(personal protective equipment) and testing supplies," the lawmakers wrote. "In the midst of this challenge, the federal government must ensure it communicates a clear chain of command to the states and utilize a data-driven prioritization process to address states' needs."

Detroit and Chicago are demonstrating concerning spread of coronavirus, Dr. Deborah Birx said at Thursday's White House briefing.

"We are concerned about certain counties" that have seen increased spreading of the virus, Birx said, naming Wayne County, Michigan (home to Detroit), and Cook County, Illinois (home of Chicago), as examples.

She said those locations were showing a "more rapid increase" of spread.

Pence said Wednesday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency would be playing a greater role in helping states get what they need, saying he had spoken to Whitmer, a Democrat, about Michigan's issues. "As I told Gov. Whitmer today, who's leading her state through all this with great energy, we want to partner with her, want to partner with every governor and make sure the left hand knows what the right hand is doing in terms of acquiring resources," Pence said.

But state officials and members of Congress say the federal government remains slow to help states as President Donald Trump is unwilling to fully embrace the powers of the Defense Production Act to ramp up and allocate nationwide production. There's simply not enough supply to go around right now -- and even if Trump used the DPA to allow the federal government to intervene in factory production and force companies to make more ventilators, masks and respirators, the effort could still take weeks or months to ramp up.

Trump and Pence held a conference call with governors on Thursday, where the tension over the Defense Production Act arose once again.

Washington Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee urged Trump and Pence to nationalize supply and manufacturing under the 1950 law, specifically referencing the shortage in swabs used for testing, according to two sources familiar with the call. Inslee encouraged Trump to be a "quarterback" and use the authority at his disposal.

Trump said that the federal government would not nationalize supply and manufacturing, one of the sources said, but another Trump administration official said there was new guidance from the Federal Drug Administration allowing for easier use of swabs in testing.

"I think it would be very, very helpful if the federal government could be more assertive and aggressive and more organized in helping all of us to obtain these systems," Inslee said at a Thursday press conference.

Meanwhile, states may be looking to take things into their own hands. Earlier this week in Michigan, the bipartisan delegation and Whitmer discussed whether the state could create its own supply chain to make up for shortages from the federal government. Still, there is recognition that even if it could be done, it would take weeks or months.

"We're working with manufacturers to work on their supply chains. We're getting our own manufacturers involved like Ford, GM and Chrysler," said Rep. Andy Levin, a Michigan Democrat. But he contended it was "a distant second place to having the President of the United States use the power of the Defense Production Act."

Outside of Michigan

And it is not just Michigan. Other states -- where outbreaks may be less severe than New York but where the situation is nevertheless escalating -- are growing uneasy sharing their hard fought resources, knowing it could be hard to get more later.

On Thursday, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb rejected the idea of sending PPE and ventilators to New York right now even though there are only 645 cases of coronavirus in Indiana, according to CNN Health's most recent tally.

"We're not in a position right now as much as we want to be focused outside of our borders," Holcomb, a Republican, said. "And we realize that there are hotspots in the country, Los Angeles, or New York City or Seattle, others are growing... but right now we're focused on Hoosier needs so when we get to that happy day where we can start to help the rest of the other country recover, we will."

In Pennsylvania, where cases have grown to more than 1,600, there is more evidence that the federal government has injected uncertainty.

Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, a Pennsylvania Democrat, said a hospital in her state had paid for 80,000 N95 respirator masks, only to learn that FEMA had diverted its order.

"Not only isn't the federal government helping streamline the supply chain and helping to get supplies into the supply chain, it's now disrupting it," Scanlon said in an interview. "These are unusual times and require extraordinary measures. People working very, very hard at local level -- we're running into roadblocks because we don't have interstate coordination."

Two Florida Democrats, Reps. Ted Deutch and Lois Frankel, wrote a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar warning Florida needs more swabs for testing, but that the state has received its orders in "drips and drabs" leaving much of the testing capacity unused."

In some areas, the competition for equipment is happening even at the county level. Rep. Tom Malinowski, a Democrat from New Jersey, where there are nearly 7,000 cases, said in his own district, he's seen mayors and county officials competing with each other for goods. In one county he represents, officials were able to quickly establish a drive-thru testing site that has been running efficiently and with adequate resources. Meanwhile, a FEMA drive-thru in a neighboring county has experienced a number of shortages, he said.

"It is crazy that your ability to get tested depends on how quickly your county officials acted to tap into a limited supply chain," Malinowski said.

In Massachusetts, where there are more than 1,800 cases, officials say they "continue to try

and work the supply chain hard" to increase supplies of personal protective equipment, but to date, the state has only received approximately 17% of its requests from the Strategic National Stockpile, with another shipment still to arrive.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican, said Thursday the state has submitted a request through FEMA for federal disaster assistance. "We hope to see the feds move on this quickly," he said at a press conference.

Rep. Joe Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat, said matters were made worse for the states when they received supplies from the federal government's stockpile because they weren't inventoried, and workers in his state had to spend a full day creating one so they could be sent out across the state. Kennedy called the competition on bids for supplies between the states as well as the federal government "completely detrimental to this process."

"You couldn't come up with a dumber way of doing this," Kennedy said.

Feds have 1.5 million expired N95 masks in storage despite CDC clearing them for use on COVID-19: report (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 8:52 PM, Marty Johnson, 1762K]

Nearly 1.5 million N95 respirator masks, a medical product that is crucial in hospitals fight against the coronavirus, haven't been shipped because they are past their expiration date, according to The Washington Post.

The masks are reportedly part of Customs and Border Protection's emergency stock. In a meeting Wednesday about what to do with the masks, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials decided to turn the masks over to the Transportation Security Administration, which has demanded masks of its own, according to the Post's sources.

The sources told the paper that CBP has no plans of giving the masks to hospitals or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Manufacturers of the masks have said that the masks stay effective if stored properly and that the largest problem with older masks is that the elastic bands on the mask can weaken, which prevents a proper seal from being created against a user's face.

But the CDC has released guidelines that outline how to safely use expired N95 masks.

CBP spokesman Nathan Peeters told the Post that Border Patrol agents and officers had been given a 30-day supply of protective equipment.

Health officials in hard-hit parts of the country like California and New York has repeatedly stressed to the federal government that their supplies of N95 masks have been exhausted.

On Wednesday, President Trump said that FEMA was in the process of shipping 9.4 million N95 respirators and 20 million surgical masks to hospitals around the country.

After Considering \$1 Billion Price Tag for Ventilators, White House Has Second Thoughts (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 8:10 PM, David E. Sanger, Maggie Haberman and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, 23673K]

The White House had been preparing to reveal on Wednesday a joint venture between General Motors and Ventec Life Systems that would allow for the production of as many as 80,000 desperately needed ventilators to respond to an escalating pandemic when word suddenly came down that the announcement was off.

The decision to cancel the announcement, government officials say, came after the Federal Emergency Management Agency said it needed more time to assess whether the estimated cost was prohibitive. That price tag was more than \$1 billion, with several hundred million dollars to be paid upfront to General Motors to retool a car parts plant in Kokomo, Ind., where the ventilators would be made with Ventec's technology.

Government officials said that the deal might still happen but that they are examining at least a dozen other proposals. And they contend that an initial promise that the joint venture could turn out 20,000 ventilators in short order had shrunk to 7,500, with even that number in doubt. Longtime emergency managers at FEMA are working with military officials to sort through the competing offers and federal procurement rules while under pressure to give President Trump something to announce.

By early Thursday evening, at the coronavirus task force's regular news briefing, where the president often appears, there was still nothing to disclose, and the outcome of the deliberations remained unclear.

But a General Motors spokesman said that "Project V," as the ventilator program is known, was moving very fast, and a company official said "there's no issue with retooling."

A Ventec representative agreed.

"Ventec and G.M. have been working at breakneck speed to leverage our collective expertise in ventilation and manufacturing to meet the needs of the country as quickly as possible and arm medical professionals with the number of ventilators needed to save lives," said Chris O. Brooks, Ventec's chief strategy officer.

The only thing missing was clarity from the government about how many ventilators they needed — and who would be paid to build them.

The shortage of ventilators has emerged as one of the major criticisms of the Trump administration's response to the coronavirus. The need to quickly equip hospitals across the country with tens of thousands more of the devices to treat those most seriously ill with the virus was not anticipated despite the Trump administration's own projection in a simulation last year that millions of people could be hospitalized. And even now, the effort to produce them has been confused and disorganized.

At the center of the discussion about how to ramp up the production of ventilators is Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and a senior White House aide, who has told people that he was called in two weeks ago by Vice President Mike Pence to produce more

coronavirus test kits and who has now turned his attention to ventilators.

He has been directing officials at FEMA in the effort. Two officials said the suggestion to wait on the General Motors offer came from Col. Patrick Work, who is working at FEMA. Some government officials expressed concern about the possibility of ordering too many ventilators, leaving them with an expensive surplus.

As the agency has sorted through offers, trying to weigh production ability and costs, hospitals in New York and elsewhere are reporting a desperate need for more ventilators, which are critical in treating respiratory problems in a fast-rising tide of severe coronavirus cases.

A spokeswoman for FEMA said Colonel Work presented information on each contract in such meetings but did not make any recommendations. A White House spokesman declined to comment.

The involvement of General Motors was first floated this month as the carmaker's factory floor in Kokomo was grinding to a halt and workers were being sent home — partly because the market was collapsing but also because workers would otherwise risk exposure to the coronavirus.

Last week, General Motors, Ventec Life Systems and a coalition of business executives called StopTheSpread.org issued a statement saying that Ventec would “leverage G.M.’s logistics, purchasing and manufacturing expertise to build more of their critically important ventilators,” including some portable units.

By Sunday, Mr. Trump appeared to suggest on Twitter that a deal had been completed to mass-produce the ventilators, even though it was unclear who would pay to equip the General Motors plant or how long that process would take.

“Ford, General Motors and Tesla are being given the go ahead to make ventilators and other metal products, FAST! @fema,” he wrote. “Go for it auto execs, lets see how good you are?”

Not for the first time has Mr. Trump jumped the gun.

Tesla officials had in fact met with engineers from the medical device company Medtronic in a separate negotiation, but no partnership has yet been announced. And while the chief executive of General Motors, Mary T. Barra, was enthused about the ventilator idea, Mr. Trump's own aides had not embraced the G.M.-Ventec partnership — in part because they had not seen the specifics of the proposal.

Administration officials said Thursday that they were struggling to understand just how many ventilators the new venture could make.

The initial projection, one senior administration official said, was that after three weeks of preparation it could produce an initial run of 20,000 ventilators, or about two-thirds of what Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York recently said his state alone needed to cover the influx of coronavirus patients expected in two weeks, if not sooner.

That number then shrank to 7,500 ventilators in the initial run, or maybe 5,000, an apparent recognition that auto transmissions and ventilators had very little in common. Those numbers are in flux and so are the Trump administration's because the White House cannot decide how many ventilators it wants.

Targets have changed by the hour, officials said, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, which approves the use of medical devices, and the White House try to figure out how many ventilators to request and how much they should cost.

Those issues appeared to come to a head on Wednesday afternoon, when FEMA told the White House that it was premature to make a decision.

The \$1.5 billion price tag comes to around \$18,000 a ventilator. And the overall cost, by comparison, is roughly equal to buying 18 F-35s, the Pentagon's most advanced fighter jet.

So on Wednesday, despite the president's tweet three days earlier, FEMA was still weighing competing offers in order to make a recommendation to Mr. Kushner. And it seemed clear to several officials that the agency would have to select multiple manufacturers, in part to avoid the risk that one production line runs into technical troubles, or that its workers contract the very virus the ventilators are being built to defeat.

[NY] 'The Other Option Is Death': New York Starts Sharing of Ventilators (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 5:58 PM, Brian M. Rosenthal, Jennifer Pinkowski, and Joseph Goldstein. 23673K]

A New York hospital system has begun treating two patients instead of one on some ventilators, a desperate measure that could help alleviate a shortage of the critical breathing machines and help hospitals around the country respond to the surge of coronavirus patients expected in the coming weeks.

NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, began "ventilator sharing" this week, said Dr. Laureen Hill, chief operating officer at the Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center system. Doctors have developed protocols for the maneuver and now are rapidly scaling it up while also sharing their methods with the federal and state governments and other hospitals.

Ventilator sharing has been explored in a few scientific studies and has been used twice in crisis situations — the immediate aftermath of the 2017 Las Vegas shooting and, as of several days ago, by an emergency physician, Dr. Marco Garrone, for coronavirus patients in Italy. This is believed to be the first time that it has been put forth as a longer-term strategy in the United States.

"We're doing something that hasn't really ever been done before," said Dr. Jeremy Beitler, a pulmonary disease specialist at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia. "Now is the time to do it."

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York said on Thursday that the state had approved the new

method, which is also being studied by federal officials. And this week, the Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use approval to a device called VESper, developed by the South Carolina-based Prisma Health, that adapts one ventilator for use with four patients.

The New York action reflects the intense need felt worldwide to make ventilators serve more of the sickest Covid-19 patients.

On March 14, Dr. Charlene Babcock, an emergency physician at Ascension St. John Hospital in Detroit, posted a YouTube video showing how to modify a ventilator to keep not one but four people breathing. It has already has more than 724,000 views.

Generally, when patients are mechanically ventilated, a flexible tube is placed into their windpipe, and a finely calibrated pump sends oxygen-rich air into the lungs. In the video, Dr. Babcock uses a T-tube and three adapters to split two valves into four ports, and suggests positioning the patients headfirst around the machine. Dr. Babcock and her colleague Dr. Greg Nyman had published a study of the hack in 2006 — but tested it on four lung simulators, not patients.

“Here’s my disclaimer: This is off-label use for a ventilator,” she says in the video. “If it was me, and I had four patients, and they all need intubation, and I only had one ventilator, I would simply have a shared discussion meeting with all four families and say, ‘I can pick one to live, or we can try to have all four live.’”

NewYork-Presbyterian is using ventilator sharing for only two patients at a time who need settings on the ventilator that are very similar. Dr. Beitler emphasized that each patient is still receiving the same amount of oxygen and level of care as previously. Sharing will not immediately double ventilator access, he added, because many patients will need their own.

The hospital has not yet run out of ventilators, but Dr. Beitler said it was better to try the technique now than “when you have absolutely no choice.” Notably, he believes the technique will not increase staffing needs.

Officials are desperate for ventilators because they expect the need to far outstrip their supply in the coming weeks. Even after a shipment of 4,000 of the complex machines from the federal government and other emergency efforts, the state is expecting a shortage in the thousands. “Our single greatest challenge is ventilators,” Mr. Cuomo wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. “We need 30,000 ventilators. We have 11,000.”

With about 175,000 ventilators in hospitals and the federal stockpile, other states are also braced for shortages. Coronavirus patients often need to stay on ventilators for days or weeks.

The subject of splitting ventilators is “highly controversial” among respiratory specialists, said Dr. Josh Farkas, an assistant professor of pulmonary and critical care medicine at the University of Vermont.

“While this is a technique that potentially could work for maybe a few hours, there are some significant hurdles,” said Dr. MeiLan Han, a pulmonologist at the University of Michigan

Health System and a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association.

Among the concerns are the inability to monitor the impact on each individual; the potential for cross-contamination of infectious pathogens; and the possibility that instead of one person receiving lifesaving treatment, multiple patients would get dangerously subpar therapy.

“When we ventilate a patient, there’s two things we’re trying to control: pressure and volume,” Dr. Han said. “And for this to work, every single patient would have to be OK with the same setting.” While she wasn’t speaking specifically about the NewYork-Presbyterian method, she noted that patients tend to have unique, dynamic needs.

“If you have one set of lungs that’s in pretty good shape, that one’s going to blow up beautifully,” she said. “But if you have another set of lungs that has a really dense pneumonia from Covid, that set of lungs may get nothing. There’s no way to regulate that.”

There have been three follow-up studies to Dr. Babcock’s. A 2008 study of four sheep kept the animals breathing for 12 hours. In a tiny 2009 study, two healthy, awake volunteers shared a split ventilator for 10 minutes. And a 2012 study on test lungs concluded that the findings “cannot support the use of this concept for mass-casualty respiratory failure.”

“There is no way to monitor the individual patients without some invasive monitoring or additional monitors for each patient,” said Dr. Richard Branson, a co-author of the 2012 study, a pulmonologist at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and editor in chief of the journal *Respiratory Care*.

The lack of evidence is what alarms Dr. Branson. “I think the time to try an untested treatment not previously used in humans is not in the midst of a pandemic,” he said.

But the pandemic is straining the normal rules.

One of the authors of the 2008 sheep study is Dr. Lorenzo Paladino, an associate professor at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University in Brooklyn. He and several colleagues kept four adult sheep alive on a single ventilator for 12 hours.

On Tuesday, while tending to Covid-19 patients at Kings County Hospital, he received a call inviting him to Washington to discuss his research with federal officials, he said.

On Wednesday, he met with federal officials at FEMA’s headquarters to explore the possibility of establishing protocols for how to put multiple patients on one ventilator, he said in an interview Wednesday evening.

“We spent the day writing out physician protocols on how to use this,” Dr. Paladino said. The idea, he said, was that the federal government could issue guidance to doctors and hospitals nationwide.

He acknowledged that there were risks.

“Nobody believes this is the best way to ventilate somebody — this is for the doomsday

scenario when we run out of ventilators,” Dr. Paladino said. “It’s suboptimal, but the other option is death.”

[NY] Nurses treating coronavirus say they are reusing masks, back to work before 14-day quarantine (USA Today)

USA Today [3/26/2020 11:07 AM, Frank Esposito and David Robinson, Rockland/Westchester Journal News, 5611K] Video: [HERE](#)

New York nurses on the front line of the coronavirus outbreak are afraid their safety is being sacrificed so hospitals can stretch dwindling stockpiles of protective equipment.

Central to the fear are new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines seeking to help hospitals conserve medical masks as thousands of New Yorkers are infected with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

Some nurses asserted hospital officials asked them to make a typically single-use surgical mask last week, leaving them to store it in paper bags between shifts.

Other nurses described begging for access to higher level N95 masks and watching fellow nurses get quarantined after suspected COVID-19 exposures amid shortages.

Mostly, they talked of living in constant dread of infecting themselves or loved ones with the virus that has killed more than 18,000 across the globe and confirmed cases mounted in New York, surpassing 30,000 on Wednesday.

“We’re really just beginning this, which is the scary part,” said Mary-Lynn Boyts, a nurse at Westchester Medical Center, about 30 miles north of New York City. “I feel like we’re going into a battle we’re just not prepared for.”

Even with millions of masks being distributed since last week in the greater New York City area, Gov. Andrew Cuomo warned hospitals could run out in coming weeks.

“The burn rate on this equipment is very, very high. I can’t find any more equipment. It’s not a question of money. I don’t care what you’re willing to pay,” he said at a news briefing Tuesday. Cuomo said about 2 million N95 masks could shore up supplies at the hardest-hit hospitals for anywhere from two to six weeks.

To avoid that grim fate, Cuomo has urged the federal government to take control of protective equipment production and get more supplies to New York as soon as possible.

He noted that the shortages threaten countless other communities across the country just starting to get hit by the virus.

Cuomo also praised health care workers and first responders for their bravery.

“Most of us are in our home hunkered down, worried. They’re worried and they’re going out there every day despite their fear. ... Overcoming their fear, and not for their family, they’re doing it for your family,” he said.

What nurses say about equipment shortages

Some nurses described a disconnect between Cuomo's comments at daily news briefings and what some hospitals are demanding of workers.

"They're being asked to do things that jeopardize their health and make it hard to take care of their patients," said Boyts, who gathers Westchester Medical Center nurse grievances for the New York State Nurses Association union.

"You wouldn't ask police to go into a gun battle without a gun, but we're being asked to put our lives on the line each day without the equipment that we need to do it."

Lori Glazer, a registered nurse from Ossining, also is worried by the lack of gear.

"We don't have N95 masks, we just have (surgical masks). They're protecting other people, not us," Glazer said. "It's scary going in because you never know when you're going to get sick."

At Montefiore Health's hospital in the Bronx, nurses with suspected COVID-19 exposures are being told to break the typical 14-day quarantine and return to work early, according to Karine Raymond, a Montefiore nurse and union leader.

The order apparently came as the CDC recommended loosening quarantine rules for medical workers, joining the already diminished infection control practices that nurses say put them at risk.

"They keep lowering the guidelines as we fall sicker and sicker. I'm afraid we're going to lose some of our colleagues," Raymond said.

The federal agency in late February recommended extended use and reuse of masks connected to COVID-19 related shortages, deviating from long-held infection control standards. The quarantine strategy for medical workers was last updated on March 16, records show.

It is all part of what state and federal health officials say is a dire attempt to keep hospitals afloat in the face of potentially overwhelming COVID-19 infections.

Yet amid debate over the emergency actions, nurses at Montefiore were being warned they could be fired if they didn't adhere to the hospital's new protective gear rules, according to Montefiore records reviewed by the USA TODAY Network – New York.

Eventually, Montefiore sent out a message Friday canceling the original order threatening termination and said it was "sent in error," the records show.

Michele Brailsford-Paul, a home care nurse for Montefiore, said she recently filed a complaint with federal worker safety regulators in Tarrytown about the shortages in protective equipment.

She compared the crisis to workers sickened while working at Ground Zero after the

terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

"What's at the back of my mind is 9/11 and the trouble those workers had in getting health care coverage, so I wanted to take an active role in noting the lack of protective gear," Brailsford-Paul said.

What hospitals say about nurses' equipment complaints

Montefiore officials asserted the Bronx-based health system with 15 hospitals is following CDC guidelines on COVID-19 and prepares for all types of emergencies.

"Comprehensive plans have been in place to reduce risk of potential exposure to our patients, staff and community," the officials said in a statement.

Westchester Medical Center Health Network officials disputed that nurses have limited access to N95 masks and asserted the health system with 10 hospitals across the region is following CDC guidelines.

"Like every other hospital and healthcare organization, we are managing our supply pipeline and use very carefully," the officials said in a statement.

They added the health system's workforce is "coming to work every day to help and serve their friends and neighbors. They truly are healthcare heroes."

Montefiore likewise disputes the allegations that nurses are short of protective gear.

"Protecting our staff is also of utmost importance so we can continue to provide care as this pandemic continues to worsen. We are working tirelessly with state and federal governments to secure appropriate protective gear for our providers and equipment for our patients", the Montefiore officials said in a statement.

Meanwhile, some nurses criticized the CDC guidelines for giving hospitals the green light to limit access to protective gear, regardless of the safety ramifications.

"What they're telling us to do is not based on the science of the virus; it's based on what is available for any given day," Boyts said.

CDC officials didn't immediately respond to a request to comment on the nurses' complaints in New York.

The state Department of Health would not say if it is investigating complaints from nurses about the conditions at hospitals. It noted the CDC continues to issue revised guidance regarding the use of protective gear.

"The (Health) Department takes the safety of New Yorkers very seriously and is also working to provide additional guidance to hospitals," agency spokeswoman Jill Montag said in a statement.

How one hospital adjusted protective equipment rules for COVID-19

Hospital officials, in many ways, have been tasked with finding the balance between implementing the new CDC guidelines for stretching protective equipment supplies and worker safety.

One is Dr. Erick Eiting, vice chair of operations for emergency medicine at Mount Sinai Downtown, which includes an emergency department and urgent care in New York City that handles about 97,000 patients a year.

Eiting compared the effort to implement new mask-use guidelines to the rapidly evolving outbreak response in New York.

It is all seemingly part of a daily stream of drastic actions, such as converting the Javits Center in Manhattan into a temporary hospital, aimed at helping prepare the health system to handle surging infections.

“A lot of it is there is so much anxiety about this because we’re dealing with a totally new phenomenon and trying to take the best practices we’ve built with other diseases and apply them here, but we’re also learning on the fly,” he said.

For example, the rise in potential COVID-19 patients is forcing Eiting and colleagues to devise ways for some staff in high-traffic roles to use N-95 masks more efficiently.

“We’re having to come into contact with so many different patients in such a short time. ... Does that mean keeping that mask on the whole time?” he said.

Medical workers typically had used the N95 masks for brief periods to care for the limited pool of patients with airborne infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis.

“It’s an adjustment, because anybody who’s worn one of these masks before knows just having to keep them on for a few minutes isn’t the most comfortable thing, but having to keep it on for the entire shift is something else altogether,” Eiting said.

The decisions at Mount Sinai are made by a team of doctors and nurses with infectious control expertise, Eiting said, adding the practices in place protect staff and patients.

Eiting on Monday noted Mount Sinai hasn’t faced protective equipment shortages yet. But the need to gear up more often to handle people walking into the ER with COVID-19 symptoms is running through stockpiles at a historic rate, he said.

“I think that creates an anxiety and knowing the supply chain has been disrupted adds to the uncertainty,” Eiting said. “We have a lot of work to do to make sure we continue to secure the equipment.”

[NY] For the first time since 9/11, NYC has set up makeshift morgues. This time, it’s in anticipation of coronavirus deaths (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 4:41 PM, Brynn Gingras, Mark Morales and Ray Sanchez, 5551K]
Refrigerated trailers to be used as makeshift morgues hummed outside two hospitals on

Thursday as New York City deals with the surging death count in the epicenter of the nation's coronavirus pandemic.

The last time New York took such drastic measures was after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the city medical examiner's office was tasked with identifying tens of thousands of body parts from the 2,753 people killed in the World Trade Center collapse.

The makeshift morgues signal the historic challenge posed by the national health crisis.

At least 281 people have died from Covid-19 across the city, Mayor Bill De Blasio said Thursday. There are 21,873 confirmed cases of the virus.

New York State, where 385 people have died from the virus, has more than 37,000 of the nation's more than 80,000 coronavirus cases.

The US death toll from coronavirus has topped 1,100.

At least 13 patients had died from Covid-19 over a 24-hour period this week at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens -- where the medical examiner's office stationed a refrigerated trailer, according to agency spokeswoman Aja Worthy-Davis.

Another four deaths were reported at the hospital in the last 24 hours, said Mitch Katz, president and chief executive officer of NYC Health + Hospitals, the largest municipal health system in the country.

Trailers and white tents were also set up outside New York Bellevue Hospital Center, which is adjacent to the medical examiner's building.

Davis noted the refrigerated trucks are not specifically for coronavirus cases. They're intended to help alleviate the morgue space at hospitals if needed. The trailers will be used if the hospital morgues reach capacity.

"We're in a public health crisis, and the city has declared a state of emergency," the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) said in a statement.

"As part of that declaration, agencies like OCME have enacted emergency contingency plans to help prepare for every possible outcome."

The trucks are part of a city plan to prepare for the potential surge of bodies from the coronavirus pandemic, Worthy-Davis said.

The trailers outside the two hospitals are property of the city Office of Emergency Management.

The medical examiner has another 45 large trucks at its disposal. No OCME trailers have been deployed. Those trailers were purchased recently in response to a disaster plan that called for a "significant stocking up," Davis said.

"We have a pretty large capacity compared to hospitals," said Davis, adding that the trucks plus the mobile tents increase the morgue capacity to 3,500 to 3,600 bodies.

The city has a capacity of 900 bodies in morgues in all five boroughs, along with expanded capacity at certain other locations.

OCME workers are taking precautions in handling bodies, sanitizing the outside of the body bags and the surfaces that the bodies touched, Davis said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has said it received a request from New York and other states for assistance with mortuary operations. Hawaii and North Carolina have made similar requests.

The agency is reviewing the requests, according to FEMA.

New York City also has longstanding contracts with companies to provide refrigerated trucks but that plan is not active, officials said. Those trucks would likely be stationed at various locations, including makeshift hospitals such as the one set up at the Javits Convention Center.

[NY] Trump keeps touting an unproven coronavirus treatment. It's now being tested on thousands in New York. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 3:29 PM, Christopher Rowland, Jon Swaine, and Josh Dawsey, 12625K]

New York is moving at unprecedented speed and scale in a human experiment to distribute tens of thousands of doses of anti-malarial drugs to seriously ill patients, spurred by political leaders including President Trump to try a treatment that is not proved to be effective against the coronavirus.

With no proven treatment for the coronavirus, and infections in New York topping 30,000, health experts say the Food and Drug Administration has moved with uncommon speed to authorize New York's sweeping plan to distribute the drugs through hospital networks.

Planning for such a complex initiative would ordinarily take up to nine months, those experts say. In New York, the U.S. epicenter of the covid-19 pandemic, that timeline has been compressed into three days.

While the effort has raised concerns among health experts about safety risks to patients and raising false hopes in the American public, Trump's direct intervention into complex medical issues, as well as New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's embrace of the strategy has generated popular excitement about the drugs.

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The first wave of patients will receive hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, the New York official said.

Launching such a plan, the official said, "is something that normally would have been done in six to nine months and we're doing it in three or four days."

Patient outcomes from the experiment will be gathered electronically and contribute to an "observational" trial being coordinated by the government, the official said. In an observational trial, which is considered less rigorous than a controlled trial comparing a treatment with a placebo, researchers see if a therapy is safe and effective by gathering and comparing the results in a large database.

In addition to mortality and overall recovery, the study will measure patients' overall viral load, duration on a ventilator and number of days in the hospital.

The FDA would not comment on any aspects of the massive New York experimental effort, citing its own confidentiality rules.

Ground-level hospital administrators are scrambling to set up the reporting programs so outcomes data from patients treated with the drugs can be reported back to the state and federal authorities.

"I have never seen anything like this. It is amazing how the country and everybody can pull together and come up with quick, innovative ways to try to attack it," said Onisis Stefas, chief pharmacy officer for Northwell Health, which has 22 hospitals in New York and has already been using the anti-malarial drugs to treat patients on a "compassionate-use" basis.

"Everybody's questioning it, and that's why these studies need to be done to confirm it," he said. "There aren't a lot of other options out there."

The initiative is freighted with equal parts hope and politics, which some health-care officials and states suggest are eclipsing science.

Nevada, via executive order, this week banned prescriptions of the drugs for the coronavirus until the results of rigorous clinical trials are known.

"We must deal with facts, not fiction," Nevada's chief state medical officer, Ishan Azzam,

said. Nevada is among states trying to stop runs and hoarding that have depleted supply for people who need the treatments for established uses, including lupus patients. New York's Cuomo in an executive order has also limited new prescriptions of the anti-malarial drugs to patients with previously approved FDA conditions and to coronavirus patients participating in state-sponsored experiments.

Despite some tantalizing early results, there is scant published evidence that the two anti-malarial drugs will have a benefit for coronavirus patients. More rigorous controlled clinical trials are being conducted in the United States, including in New York and Minnesota, and around the world to prove whether the drugs will work. Anthony S. Fauci, head of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has repeatedly cautioned, from the same White House lectern as Trump, that indications of benefit so far are anecdotal.

But in the absence of viable alternatives, there has been a global rush to try the drugs. Doctors and hospitals have virtually wiped out U.S. supplies by prescribing them "off label."

The low-cost generic pills have been on the market for decades for malaria, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Many experts have said they believe they are relatively safe, although hydroxychloroquine can cause dangerous heart problems and some specialists recommend electrocardiogram screening tests, especially when used in combination with azithromycin. The drugs also can cause permanent eye damage called retinopathy.

The FDA's quick action on large-scale observational trials was spurred by Trump's sudden interest in the anti-malarial drugs. As Fauci and others urged caution, Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), Trump's incoming chief of staff, contacted a family doctor in Upstate New York who claims to have used them to successfully treat hundreds of suspected covid-19 cases.

Vladimir "Zev" Zelenko, a doctor in Monroe, N.Y., said in an interview that he was contacted by Meadows after posting an unsolicited video message to Trump on Facebook in which he told the president: "Please advise the country that they should be taking this medication."

The doctor also published an open letter on Google Docs to fellow medics outlining a treatment plan of recommended doses, which was picked up by conservative media.

Zelenko said that over one call and several text messages, Meadows was "very kind and receptive," and told him his treatment plan was being evaluated at high levels. A person close to Meadows, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly discuss internal deliberations, confirmed the two had been in touch this week about the drugs, and said White House experts were evaluating the plan.

Another official said Trump saw Zelenko's treatment plan on television and flagged it in the White House.

Sean Hannity, the Fox News host and informal Trump adviser, read from Zelenko's open letter during a telephone conversation with Vice President Pence that aired on his prime-time show Monday evening. Rudolph W. Giuliani, the president's personal attorney, championed Zelenko's treatment plan on Twitter the following morning.

Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, Zelenko, 46, has shared material on Facebook

suggesting that the virus may have been deliberately developed by China as a population control device and that its threat was exaggerated by Democrats.

Zelenko acknowledged the drugs could have side effects. “They’re not candy,” he said. “However, this is an unprecedented health crisis, the world’s under attack, this is battlefield medicine.”

Supporters of using anti-malarial drugs against the coronavirus have cited several published studies using small patient groups in France, Japan and China. Some other, equally small analysis, has suggested there is no benefit.

But within a matter of days after Trump expressed his support for the drugs last week, Cuomo announced Sunday that 70,000 doses of hydroxychloroquine and up to 750,000 doses of chloroquine are in the pipeline for New York’s patients.

“There’s a good basis to believe they could work,” Cuomo said Sunday.

Although the scale and urgency of New York’s efforts are new, trying unproven drugs on patients who otherwise might die is common in American health care for cancer and many other ailments including rare diseases. The FDA has the power to grant such “compassionate-use” permission, both on an individual basis and under blanket protocols for larger populations, specialists said.

Drug manufacturer Gilead Sciences has said it is working with the FDA to develop a new, broader program of compassionate use for its experimental antiviral drug remdesivir. If successful, the broader program will allow doctors to get the drug for severely ill coronavirus patients without having to seek individual permission from the company and FDA for each patient.

“On this scale, I think it is unprecedented. I have never seen anything like this,” said Dianne Bourque, a lawyer specializing in FDA rules at the firm Mintz. “We are seeing an explosion of compassionate-use requests and I think that’s a factor of many of our clients trying desperately to find anything that works for desperately ill people right now.

“People are throwing everything at this,” she said.

The FDA is working quickly to accommodate such requests, Bourque added, including issuing compassionate-use approval over the past weekend.

The FDA is clearly reacting to pressure from Trump and the general public, who are clamoring for some sort of treatment, said Alison Bateman-House, a professor of population health at New York University and a specialist in compassionate-use programs. She said the FDA is doing the best it can to balance competing interests in a time of crisis.

“It is very dangerous to take your medical advice from someone who does not actually practice medicine,” she said of Trump’s boosterism statements about the anti-malarial drugs at the White House. Yet, she said, there is some reason to believe the treatments could have a beneficial effect, so large-scale compassionate-use trials could be appropriate.

"The FDA is caught between saying it wants good science, and good processes, and what evidence-based medicine requires," she said, "and this is what our bosses, the people and the president are telling us they want.

"Sometimes safeguarding the public health ... is not what the public wants at a given moment," Bateman-House said. "They want unfettered access."

[LA] New Orleans on Louisiana's front line in coronavirus war, as disaster has state monitoring nursing homes (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 1:37 PM, Elliott C. McLaughlin, 5551K]

As Louisiana sees its coronavirus cases climb -- and state health experts are monitoring "clusters" at six nursing homes -- New Orleans is facing critical shortages of ventilators and protective equipment, an official said Thursday.

"This is going to be the disaster that defines our generation," Collin Arnold, director of the city's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, told CNN.

Numbers, state by state

Another concern: As the state's tally of coronavirus cases stands at about 2,305, scores of them fatal, New Orleans' food banks have only about two days worth of goods left, Arnold said.

He called New Orleans "kind of the epicenter" for the state, with almost 1,700 cases in the metro area, according to state figures.

Arnold's warning comes as the Louisiana Department of Health says it is monitoring clusters -- defined as situations in which two or more cases appear connected -- at six nursing homes in the state. The department is working to contain the spread at the facilities, spokeswoman Mindy Faciane said.

One of those -- the 268-resident Lambeth House Retirement Community in New Orleans -- was reporting 11 deaths as of Tuesday, she said.

"The intensity of sadness that accompanies what our community is currently enduring is almost indescribable," Christina Fay, board director of Lambeth House, said in a statement earlier this week.

Where the numbers stand Thursday is unclear. Owing to the number of nursing homes reporting cases and the involvement of multiple health care providers, the state health department "will no longer be reporting where positive cases have been identified," Faciane said in a Wednesday email.

Test results and, likely, Mardi Gras fuel spike

Jefferson and Orleans parishes, which make up most of metro New Orleans, were two of the deadliest counties to be infected with the virus, a CNN analysis earlier this week of data collected by Johns Hopkins University showed.

They also ranked among the top seven counties nationwide -- of those reporting 100 cases or more -- in deaths per 100,000 residents.

Health officials are testing 3,000 people Thursday in Orleans Parish alone, Arnold said, and they expect to get a new supply of tests and do the same thing Friday.

Testing is a big reason for the spike in cases, Arnold said, and Mardi Gras -- during which 1.5 million people, including international visitors, converged on the city -- is "obviously probably" a variable in the spread of Covid-19 throughout the city.

Gov. John Bel Edwards has ordered state residents to stay home until April 12, and data shows movement in the city is down 73%, which Arnold applauded.

"I'm seeing that it's pretty empty, and it's encouraging that people are listening and we need them to really push through this. We know it's a very difficult thing to have to do, but it's very necessary," he told CNN.

Surrounded by states that have not implemented mandatory stay-at-home orders, Arnold believes the directives are vital, he said.

Louisiana pastor continued holding services

"We need our people to stay home," Arnold said. "Somebody saying (stay-at-home orders are unnecessary), they're not doing enough testing. That's the bottom line. It just hasn't affected them yet, but it's in their community. It is there."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told CNN he felt officials in New Orleans and Louisiana should've taken action sooner to close nonessential businesses.

"They are now shutting things down in a very vigorous way," he said in an interview late Wednesday. "It is likely that that should have been done a little bit sooner -- not blaming anyone on that, but you get caught unaware because the nature of this outbreak." 'Stay home'

Edwards spoke with similar urgency Sunday: "If we want to flatten the curve, we have to take more aggressive mitigation measures now and limit social contact now. ... We've got to take action now."

As part of his stay-at-home order, effective Monday, Edwards instituted restrictions on visiting retirement communities. He has warned that the state's hospitals could reach their capacity in days if the cases continue to increase at the current pace.

The governor has repeatedly said coronavirus cases are increasing at a frightening clip, adding, "There is no reason to believe that we won't be the next Italy."

Earlier this week, responding to Edwards' plea stating the outbreak is "beyond the capabilities" of state and local agencies, the White House granted his request for a federal

major disaster declaration, which opens the door to additional resources the state to combat the pandemic.

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell issued a stay-at-home order last week, closing businesses and banning gatherings of more than 10 people.

"If you don't have any essential function or cannot safely maintain social distancing, you need to stay home," Cantrell said Friday. "Don't look for ways for the rules to not apply for you. ... Stay home."

The city has created a special police team to enforce order and respond to reports of large gatherings. Establishments that don't comply with the order could permanently lose their business licenses, the New Orleans Police Department said in a tweet.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[MI] Hundreds of thousands of masks missing from federal shipments to Michigan (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 6:21 PM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]

Hundreds of thousands of masks went missing from federal shipments containing the equipment to Michigan as the state continues to battle the rising number of COVID-19 cases, state officials said.

State officials told The Detroit News Wednesday that they were 225,000 surgical masks short of what the federal government said it sent from the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS).

The state was supposed to receive 450,000 masks, but it obtained about half of that, a spokeswoman from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services told the news outlet.

The spokeswoman, Lynn Sutfin, told The Hill that the SNS "was aware of the missing masks as it was reported to them after we completed an inventory of Michigan's shipment."

"We received notification yesterday evening that we should receive those masks tonight," she said in a statement.

Michigan's health department said it has received 190,000 N95 respirators, about 250,000 non-sterile gloves, 70,000 surgical gowns and 86,000 face shields in two federal shipments, according to The Detroit News. The first shipment was distributed to 45 local health departments and eight health care coalitions on a population-formula basis.

Sutfin told The Detroit News that the shipments are "nowhere near enough."

Federal officials are reportedly giving out 25 percent of the stockpile to states according to population size and 25 percent to states with the greatest need, while leaving 50 percent for "strategic reserve."

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D), along with other governors, has pressured the federal government to send more medical supplies and protective gear for health care workers. The governor's office said Wednesday they were drafting a major disaster declaration request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

But Rep. Paul Mitchell (R-Mich.) told The Detroit News that the governor's office has not been specific in its requests for supplies.

"My job is not to just vaguely grocery shop," Mitchell told the news outlet.

Michigan has recorded 2,856 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, leading to 60 deaths, according to the state's health department. About 85 percent of the cases documented are in Metro Detroit's three counties.

[IN] Fort Wayne Jail Releases 25 Inmates Early Amid Pandemic (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 4:57 PM, Associated Press, 3020K]

Twenty-five jail inmates in Fort Wayne have received early releases amid the coronavirus pandemic, officials said.

The Allen County Prosecutor's Office agreed to release certain inmates with less than 30 days remaining on misdemeanor convictions to ease crowding at the Allen County Jail, WPTA-TV reported.

Allen County Sheriff's Capt. Steve Stone confirmed 25 inmates were released on Wednesday.

Allen Superior Court Executive John McGauley said the court consulted with the prosecutor's office on ways to manage the jail population during the pandemic. The prosecutor's office agreed to release low level, non-violent offenders who had less than 30 days to serve.

The court said it was unaware of any COVID-19 cases at the jail.

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, such as pneumonia, and death.

[Canada] Trump Expected to Send U.S. Troops to Canada Border to Support Operations Amid Coronavirus Crisis (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 12:36 AM, Idrees Ali and Jonathan Landay]

U.S. President Donald Trump is expected to send troops to the border with Canada to support border operations amid the growing coronavirus crisis, two U.S. government officials told Reuters.

Under the plan, the Pentagon would send less than 1,000 troops to the U.S. northern border to support U.S. Customs and Border Protection efforts and several additional hundred troops to the border with Mexico, one of the officials said.

[Canada] Trudeau Pushes Back on U.S. Notion to Use Military Near Border (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 4:21 PM, Josh Wingrove, 6400K]

The Canadian government is urging the U.S. not to dispatch troops to its northern border, as Donald Trump's administration looks to ramp up security to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said the U.S. is considering sending the military to block any illegal migrants after the countries agreed to travel restrictions aimed at halting the contagion.

"Canada and the United States have the longest, unmilitarized border in the world and it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way. We have been in discussions with the United States on this," Trudeau said Thursday.

Freeland said it would "be a problem for our bilateral relationship," but added it was not a trade issue. Last week's agreement allows goods to continue flowing through the border.

The White House and U.S. Department of Defense referred questions to the Department of Homeland Security, which issued a statement on condition of anonymity.

The statement did not specifically acknowledge that troops are under consideration, but said it's looking at every option to help slow the spread of the virus and to make sure border personnel have the resources they need.

Freeland said she had not yet spoken to Vice President Mike Pence, who leads Trump's coronavirus task force or Secretary of State Michael Pompeo about the measure.

[Canada] Trudeau calls for keeping US-Canada border demilitarized (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 3:32 PM, Justin Wise, 1762K]

Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau on Thursday called for keeping the U.S.-Canada border demilitarized amid the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, saying that it's "very much" in both countries' interests for it to remain that way.

Trudeau said at press conference that his administration has been in discussions with the United States about the possibility, confirming a Global News report that the White House was considering sending troops to the border.

"Canada and the United States have the longest unmilitarized border in the world," Trudeau said. "And it is very much in both of our interests for it remain that way."

Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland added that Canada was "strongly opposed" to the U.S. taking this step, saying that "we've made that very clear to our U.S. counterparts."

Global News, a Canadian television network, early Thursday reported that the Trump administration was considering dispatching troops along the northern border to help border guards detect irregular crossings.

Sources told the network that the deployment would likely involve fewer than 1,000 service members.

Asked whether the Trump administration was considering putting troops at the U.S. border with Canada, a senior administration official said broadly that the administration would "continue to consider additional actions" to ensure law enforcement personnel at the country's borders are properly supported to address the public health threat.

"The administration is considering every option to help slow the spread of the virus, minimize health threats entering the country, and protect Americans while ensuring essential travel for workers, movement of goods, and security of supply chains are not impeded," the senior administration official said.

The coronavirus, which originated in China in December, has since spread throughout the U.S., infecting more than 75,000 people as of Thursday afternoon, according to a Johns Hopkins University database. Canada has reported more than 3,500 confirmed cases of the virus.

President Trump said last week that the U.S. and Canada had agreed to close their border to nonessential travel as part of their efforts to slow the virus's spread. He said trade between the nations would not be affected.

[Canada] Canada asks US not to put troops at border during coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 6:45 PM, Bradford Betz, 8943K]

Canada has turned down a proposal by the United States to put troops at U.S.-Canada border during the coronavirus outbreak, arguing that such a move would be unnecessary given the low amount of illegal crossings and it would damage relations between the longtime allies.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Thursday his government has been in discussions with the White House about convincing the U.S. not to do it.

"Canada and the United States have the longest un-militarized border in the world and it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way," Trudeau said.

The Department of Homeland Security did make a formal request to the Pentagon for military forces to provide additional security along the northern border, between entry points, according to a U.S. official.

The official said the request was made a few days ago and the Defense Department has done some initial planning but there has been no final decision on whether or not to approve the request.

Another Trump administration official said they are considering additional actions to ensure "personnel at our borders have the resources and operational support needed to address the profound public health threat of uncontrolled cross-border movement during a pandemic."

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said they have told the Trump administration there is no justification for troops.

"What we have said is, 'We really do not believe at all that there would be a public health justification for you to take this action,'" Freeland said. "And we have said 'We really don't think is the right way to treat a trusted friend and military ally.'"

She stressed that they are talking about a potential decision by the U.S. and said they first learned of the proposal a few days ago. Trudeau's office has been in direct contact with the White House and Canada's defense and public safety ministers have spoken to their counterparts.

"Our understanding is that a decision has yet not been acted upon or fully taken. But having said that, decisions are taken speedily by all governments around the world including ours," Freeland said. "Canada is strongly opposed to this U.S. proposal."

Canada has more than 3,900 cases and 38 deaths as of Thursday afternoon. The United States has more than 82,400 cases – higher than in China where the outbreak began – and 1,178 deaths.

Canada relies on the U.S. for 75 percent of its exports. About 18 percent of Canada's exports go to the U.S. The two countries have already closed the border both ways to all non-essential travel.

[Canada] Canada Urges US Not to Put Troops at Border During Pandemic (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 3:53 PM, Rob Gillies, AP, 3020K]

Canada has told the Trump administration that a proposal to put troops at the U.S.-Canada border amid the pandemic is entirely unnecessary and would damage relations between the two longtime allies.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his government has been in discussions with the White House about convincing the U.S. not to do it.

"Canada and the United States have the longest un-militarized border in the world and it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way," Trudeau said.

According to a U.S. official, the Department of Homeland Security did make a formal request to the Pentagon for military forces to provide additional security along the northern border, between entry points. The official said that the request was made a few days ago and the Defense Department has done some initial planning but there has been no final decision on whether or not to approve the request.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said there was no discussion about closing the border, only about beefing up efforts to prevent any illegal crossings. It wasn't clear if by Thursday afternoon whether the department was still pursuing the request, or if approved, whether it would be filled by active duty or National

Guard troops.

Another Trump administration official said they are considering additional actions to ensure "personnel at our borders have the resources and operational support needed to address the profound public health threat of uncontrolled cross-border movement during a pandemic." The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to discuss internal discussions.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said they have told the Trump administration there is no justification for troops. Very few people cross into the border into the U.S. from Canada illegally and Canada has universal health care and widespread testing for the virus. And COVID-19 cases are surging more in the U.S. than in Canada.

"What we have said is, 'We really do not believe at all that there would be a public health justification for you to take this action,'" Freeland said. "And we have said 'We really don't think is the right way to treat a trusted friend and military ally.'"

Freeland said the specifics of what the U.S. is proposing is a question for American officials to answer and declined to say what the Trump administration is contemplating.

She said they are "very directly and very forcefully" expressing the view that "this is an entirely unnecessary step" that Canada would "view as damaging to the relationship."

Freeland stressed that they are talking about a potential decision by the U.S. and said they first learned of the proposal a few days ago. Trudeau's office has been in direct contact with the White House and Canada's defense and public safety ministers have spoken to their counterparts.

"Our understanding is that a decision has yet not been acted upon or fully taken. But having said that, decisions are taken speedily by all governments around the world including ours," Freeland said. "Canada is strongly opposed to this U.S. proposal."

Canada has more than 3,400 cases, 35 deaths and has tested over 158,000 people.

Canada relies on the U.S. for 75 percent of its exports. About 18 percent of Canada's exports go to the U.S. The two countries have already closed the border both ways to all non-essential travel.

"This is strictly showmanship on the part of the American president. It will have no practical impact. It is an attempt to impress the American public that the president is doing something," said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

Bruce Heyman, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada, said it would be a serious misuse of resources and a dangerous and inappropriate use of American troops.

"It makes no military sense. It makes no economic sense. It makes no sense at any level other than Donald Trump's political level," Heyman said.

[Canada] Canada attacks Trump plan to deploy troops at border as unnecessary and damaging (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 3:23 PM, David Ljunggren and Idrees Ali, 5304K]

Canada on Thursday attacked a U.S. proposal to deploy troops along the undefended joint border to help fight the spread of coronavirus, saying the idea was unnecessary and would damage relations.

The uncompromising comments came as a surprise, since Ottawa has enjoyed smooth relations with the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump over the past 18 months. Last week the two nations agreed to close the border to non-essential travel to ease the strain on health systems from the outbreak.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, however, made clear the Liberal government had no time for a plan to send hundreds of troops to the border to help boost security.

"Canada is strongly opposed to this U.S. proposal and we have made that opposition very, very clear ... this is an entirely unnecessary step which we would view as damaging to our relationship," Freeland told a news conference.

"The public health situation does not require such action," she said, noting Washington had yet to take a final decision.

A U.S. official said the proposed deployment would help border patrol officers enforce the ban on non-essential travel by providing communications and monitoring capabilities.

The Canada-U.S. border stretches 8,891 km (5,525 miles), touches three oceans and is a crossing point for one of the world's largest bilateral trading relationships.

"Symbolically speaking ... it's important for us to have an unmilitarised border between neighboring countries that have been friends for a very long time," said Freeland.

Ottawa feels the best way to prevent the deployment is to speak out strongly in public and private to ensure Washington gets the message, said a Canadian official who asked to remain anonymous, given the sensitivity of the situation.

There was no immediate reaction from the White House.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau earlier said Ottawa was in constant touch with U.S. authorities and would adjust border security measures if needed.

The state of New York, which shares a border with Canada, has been an epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

Tim Currier, the mayor of Massena, New York, a town of about 13,000 people that is located about 15 km (9 miles) from the border, said the deployment of troops could spark panic if it were not communicated properly.

"I'm concerned about perception. I'm concerned about how citizens look at that," he said in

a telephone interview.

Canada has confirmed 3,409 coronavirus cases and 35 deaths, medical officials said.

As part of the crackdown Canada is no longer accepting irregular migrants, instead turning them round and sending them back to the United States. Washington says it plans to send them swiftly back to their countries of origin.

Theresa Cardinal Brown, director of immigration policy with the Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Center, said the undefended U.S.-Canada border has long been a point of pride.

"I have not seen any reporting whatsoever of an increased threat posture at the U.S.-Canada border," she said. "Did we not have other stuff that troops could and should be doing?"

[Mexico] US-Mexico border closure brings local economy to a halt (Public Radio International)

Public Radio International [3/26/2020 1:45 PM, Jorge Valencia, 105K] Audio: [HERE](#)

Ida Ann Pedregó thought this spring, like many before it, would mark the busiest time of the year for her store. She owns Illusions Boutique, a party dress store in Douglas, Arizona, and she typically sees sales pick up in March, April and May ahead of the summer party season.

Not this year. As news of the novel coronavirus reached Pedregó's hometown just north of the US-Mexico border this month, Mexican shoppers — who make up the majority of her clientele — slowly stopped arriving.

"It was in the atmosphere," Pedregó said. "People started to run scared. All you could hear was, 'Do you think it's really going to be this bad?'"

The economic shock of the new coronavirus has been felt especially hard along the US-Mexico border. An order by both countries' governments last Friday has allowed through-traffic for commerce, but has barred many people who commute locally from one side of the border to the other — cutting off businesses like Pedregó's from most of their customers.

The mostly rural, US border region depends on commerce from northern Mexico. Sales taxes collected from Mexican shoppers represent at least 40% of local US government revenues near the border, according to multiple estimates, said Erik Lee, director of the North American Research Partnership, a Phoenix-based think tank. Many cross the border to visit friends and family and shop at big-box retailers including Costco and Walmart or specialty shops like Pedregó's.

That revenue is critical in communities like Douglas, Arizona, where cross-border visitors spent as much as \$95 million in 2016, according to a study conducted by the North American Research Partnership and the Crossborder Group. The new travel restrictions allow for medical or academic purposes, but block travel for sightseeing or recreation.

These measures are more dramatic than even the ones put in place after the 9/11 attacks

or after the murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Kiki Camarena in central Mexico in 1985, Lee said.

“From the US perspective, these border crossings are absolutely essential for what are still frontier-border communities,” Lee said. “That just tells you how unusual and how serious this situation is.”

Government messaging in Mexico has been mixed. As late as last Sunday, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador encouraged citizens to go out and spend money. But many mayors and governors, including Gov. Claudia Pavlovich of Arizona’s neighboring state of Sonora have implemented measures in an effort to slow the spread of the disease.

Pavlovich declared a state of emergency on Wednesday, calling on businesses to close and allow workers to stay home. She had already ordered state beaches closed for a month — including through Holy Week, one of Mexico’s busiest travel holidays. And she had made multiple pleas to state residents, telling them that reducing social contact was the best way to slow down the spread of the disease.

“Let me reiterate and underscore,” she said in a video last weekend, “unless it is urgent, do not leave your home.”

Many in northern Mexico have stayed home following government recommendations — or simply because they don’t want to get sick. Pedregó shares those concerns.

Pedregó temporarily closed the business March 21, she said. And it was a difficult decision. Her mother opened the business on G Avenue in downtown Douglas, Arizona, in 1994, and she took it over eight years later. Illusions Boutique caters mostly to shoppers traveling from the neighboring state of Sonora looking for dresses, shoes and jewelry for weddings or teenage girls’ quinceañera birthday parties. When she closed, Pedregó had to tell her only employee, who’d been with the store for nine years, that there would be no more work.

“She pretty much knew,” Pedregó said. “Right now, the most important thing is the well-being of the community.”

If she looks back at the crisis after 9/11 and the recession of 2008, it helps her remain optimistic, Pedregó said. And whenever border activity returns to normal and local schools open their doors again, so will she, she added.

“I believe we will overcome this, too,” she said. “We just have to have faith. As a community, and as a country, we will overcome this.”

[Mexico] Tijuana’s oldest migrant shelter closes to new arrivals to protect against coronavirus (San Diego Union Tribune)

San Diego Union Tribune [3/26/2020 9:58 PM, Wendy Fry, 241K]

Tijuana’s oldest migrant shelter is closing its doors to new arrivals because of concerns about the devastating impacts a coronavirus outbreak could have on its already vulnerable population.

“We really want to keep people healthy,” said Father Pat Murphy, a Scalabrini priest who runs Casa del Migrante.

“We may accept some people who have previously lived here, who need to come back because of the downturn in the economy, but we’re constantly re-evaluating as the situation develops,” he said.

Casa del Migrante is a shelter and social service center, established in Tijuana in 1987, that serves both northbound migrants and deportees from the United States.

The refuge is closing its doors to new residents just as the United States has implemented a policy that allows border officials to immediately turn back all asylum seekers and other foreigners trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally.

“I call it the Deportation Express,” said Murphy, who said he has concerns about people bringing the virus to Tijuana from San Diego. “Last week, they just started sending massive numbers of people back.”

Humanitarian advocates in Tijuana fear other shelter directors may follow the lead of the city’s most well-established migrant shelter, leaving many people with nowhere to go.

“We have to protect the group that is here,” said Murphy.

Murphy is also part of a coalition of migrant shelters that have urged the federal and local government in Baja California to take greater measures to protect its migrant population from the coronavirus.

On March 18, the Coalition for the Defense of Migrants asked authorities to expand testing, open access to Tijuana’s nearly empty federal shelter for those returned or deported from the United States and “carefully analyze the situation of deportations and returns from the United States.”

“We urge the federal government authorities to urgently create specific strategies in the event that migrants with symptoms appear inside the shelters and that this impacts their capacity,” the coalition wrote.

“In the same way, we request measures to protect their rights and avoid discrimination and xenophobia towards this transient population, we must respond urgently and with empathy to the most vulnerable population,” stated the letter, which was signed by Father Murphy and others.

Baja California state health officials have confirmed 20 cases of coronavirus as of Thursday. Secretary of Health Alonso Óscar Pérez Rico said the state has tested 226 people for the virus.

Murphy said the government should be using resources such as the federal shelter that opened in Tijuana in December with a capacity for 3,000 people.

“There’s still less than 100 people at that shelter,” said Murphy. “It’s time the government

does their job and take responsibility.”

Last week, Casa del Migrante reduced the hours when they could accept migrants and cut the number of migrants they will accept to 80, half its normal capacity.

Currently, the shelter has 50 people staying there, but many others come daily for food. The shelter also asked their volunteer cooks, who are senior citizens, not to come.

“We don’t want to kick any people out, but we can’t let people in when they’re sick.... Everything we do has been amplified and made more difficult because of the virus,” said Murphy.

The director of the Agape migrant shelter, Alberto Rivera Colón, said he does not plan to close his shelter to new arrivals, but he currently has 35 migrants isolated in a special room because they are sick.

He said the state government is not testing migrants for the coronavirus even when they have symptoms including fever, cough, body aches and headaches — symptoms associated with the coronavirus.

“The government says it is too expensive to test them,” said Rivera.

During morning press briefings, state officials have said they are reserving limited supplies of tests for people with severe symptoms.

[Mexico] VIDEO: Mexican Border State Mayor Bans U.S. Citizens over Coronavirus (Breitbart)

[Breitbart](#) [3/26/2020 3:37 PM, Ildefonso Ortiz and Brandon Darby, 1973K]

A Mexican border state mayor banned all U.S. citizens from visiting his municipality, claiming they are responsible for spreading Coronavirus (Covid-19) in the region.

Through a video shared on social media, Daniel Omar Gonzalez Garza, the mayor of Sabinas Hidalgo in Nuevo Leon, said that he would not allow U.S. citizens or individuals who work in the U.S. to travel to his town after learning that two local women are now undergoing tests.

“In a few more minutes we will not be allowing that U.S. citizens visit our municipality,” Gonzalez Garza said in the video.

A Mexican law enforcement source consulted by Breitbart Texas revealed that municipal officers are ordered to ask the immigration status of drivers with Texas license plates.

The statements by Garza come at a time when Mexico has 475 confirmed cases of Coronavirus, 1,656 being tested, and seven fatalities. In Nuevo Leon, officials confirmed 52 cases and no fatalities. Authorities closed schools and, in some municipalities, used police to clear public parks and other areas.

Sabinas Hidalgo continues to be a busy corridor for the Cartel Del Noreste faction of Los Zetas to move drugs into Texas.

[Mexico] Coronavirus stalls asylum system and exacerbates conditions of migrants waiting in Mexico (San Diego Union Tribune)

San Diego Union Tribune [3/26/2020 9:54 PM, Kate Morrissey, 241K]

Migrants waiting south of the border for their chance at asylum in the United States are facing new levels of uncertainty as court hearings get rescheduled and border officials stop processing new cases as part of the federal government's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Executive Office for Immigration Review, a Department of Justice agency responsible for immigration courts, announced earlier this week that all hearings for asylum seekers in the "Remain in Mexico" program would be postponed until after April 22. The move came after San Diego judges began canceling hearings, defying the agency's instructions to keep hearing cases under the program, officially known as Migrant Protection Protocols.

Ports of entry have stopped accepting new asylum seekers altogether, and anyone caught crossing illegally will be either immediately returned to Mexico or deported, depending on the migrant's nationality. Mexico has agreed to take in Central American migrants apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol, but not others.

As of Wednesday afternoon, Tijuana officials had received 88 people who had been caught by Border Patrol and turned back since the new policy went into effect late Friday, according to Carlos González Gutiérrez, the consul general for Mexico in San Diego. All but five of those people were Mexican, he said in a webinar on Thursday.

At the same time, the U.S.-Mexico border has closed to "nonessential travel" in an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus. U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, as well as cargo and workers in key industries can still cross north.

"This is an unprecedented response to an unprecedented situation," said Pete Flores, director of field operations for Customs and Border Protection's San Diego field office, in a press call on Monday.

Meanwhile, controversy continues to surround the ongoing operation of immigration courts around the country.

Migrant advocates, the immigration judges union, and attorneys — both those who represent immigrants and the union for those who represent the federal government — have pushed for immigration courts to close completely and allow time-sensitive matters, such as bond hearings for detainees, to happen over teleconference.

"Close all the immigration courts," the National Association for Immigration Judges said over Twitter on Wednesday. "EOIR, you are endangering all of our lives."

While many hearings have been postponed, including Remain in Mexico cases, San Diego's immigration court is one of many that are still open for filing documents and holding

hearings for people held in immigration detention centers.

Some attorneys entering detention facilities have resorted to using swimming masks to visit their clients.

At Otay Mesa Detention Center, which has its own court, judges and attorneys still have to go in and out daily along with the guards and officers who work inside, increasing the likelihood that someone will unknowingly bring in the virus.

An ICE detainee in New Jersey has reportedly already tested positive for the virus. And an immigration judge in Colorado had symptoms consistent with the virus earlier this week, while attorneys who appeared recently in immigration courts in several cities have later reported similar symptoms.

In an emailed statement late Thursday, EOIR said that it is operating “largely in line” with federal courts.

“Recognizing that cases of detained individuals may implicate unique constitutional concerns and raise particular issues of public safety, personal liberty, and due process, few federal courts have closed completely,” the statement said. “Most federal courts have continued to receive filings and to hold critical hearings for detained individuals even as they have postponed other hearings.”

While advocates had wanted the courts to close for Remain in Mexico hearings, they are also worried about the potential for COVID-19 to exacerbate difficulties for people in the program.

Migrant rights advocates have already condemned many of the Trump administration’s policies that cause large numbers of asylum seekers to spend long waits in Mexican border cities because of the likelihood that as migrants, they will be targets of kidnapping, assault or even murder.

The combination of policies now leaves migrants stranded in conditions that often do not allow for social distancing or other hygiene recommendations from public health experts.

“We have people exposed to risky conditions,” Dr. Ietza Bojorquez, an epidemiologist at Tijuana’s El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, said in Spanish in a webinar on Thursday. “How can we ask those people to keep a safe distance and wash hands if they don’t even have access to water?”

Bojorquez studied the spread of infectious diseases in a temporary shelter in Tijuana where a large migrant caravan stayed after traveling north from Honduras in the fall of 2018. She said that despite most members of the caravan being young — and healthy under normal conditions — the living situation in that camp made infectious diseases like the flu extremely likely to spread.

She criticized both the United States and Mexico’s lack of planning for access to care for stranded migrants during the pandemic. Countries need to do better to ensure migrants can get health care in these kinds of situations, she said.

Some of Tijuana's migrant shelters are closing to new arrivals in order to avoid the spread within their walls, knowing they will have limited resources to act if and when the virus reaches them. That means that asylum seekers who just reached the border have fewer options to find places to sleep out of the streets.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association has called for asylum seekers in the Remain in Mexico program to be allowed into the United States as their cases are postponed. But that is not likely given the Trump administration's stance on asylum seekers.

"It's a terrible situation," AILA's Jeremy McKinney said in a recent press call about the issue. "There are fixes that can be put in place during this temporary court shut down."

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Amid pandemic, medically vulnerable people remain trapped in ICE jails (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 1:30 PM, Dr. Catherine Jones and Dr. Paulina Rebolledo, 1762K]

Across the country, people are doing their part to "flatten the curve" in order to give hospitals and healthcare workers a fighting chance at caring for people infected with COVID-19. It will take a nationwide effort to save lives, and it will take all of us.

So why has the federal government chosen to overlook immigrant communities, especially those trapped in Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) custody?

We know the virus puts people with serious chronic medical conditions at higher risk of death. Right now, there are thousands of medically vulnerable people who remain locked up in ICE's cages. We urge our fellow Americans not to forget about them.

In our collective experience working and volunteering as independent medical evaluators of people detained in ICE jails before the pandemic, we have pored over thousands of pages of medical records documenting patients being harmed — or even killed — because of ICE's system-wide failure to provide basic medical care and disability accommodations in its facilities.

Now, ICE's inadequacy and negligence are compounded by the pandemic. Let's examine just one case.

Martín Muñoz is a diabetic man who has been detained at Adelanto Detention Center in California for over two years. According to court documents, ICE once gave Muñoz triple his regular dose of insulin, resulting in an overdose, which can be fatal. Despite ICE's admission of fault, Mr. Muñoz remains in ICE custody, where he continues to suffer from inadequate care. His diabetes has progressively worsened.

Diabetes is one of the underlying health conditions that puts individuals at high risk if exposed to COVID-19. Given ICE's track record, is Mr. Muñoz expected to count on ICE now?

For years, the federal government has overseen a system in which inadequate medical care

and patient neglect run rampant.

But it doesn't stop there.

ICE allows its contractors to repeatedly violate the civil rights of people in its custody. Deaf people are unable to communicate with medical personnel because their wrists are shackled during appointments. Those who require wheelchairs are placed in solitary confinement without their wheelchairs.

ICE has been able to operate under these procedures — which are appalling — because it has zero accountability to patients or to the larger network of doctors in the U.S. who have sworn an oath to do no harm.

That's why ICE's response to the pandemic has been predictably and woefully insufficient. Detained individuals are reporting that they don't have soap or hand sanitizer. Their only communication with the outside is relegated to shared phones that aren't cleaned between each use. Their bathrooms and dorms are shared. It's simply impossible to practice "social distancing" in detention.

The squalid conditions in ICE detention centers have given way to outbreaks of infectious diseases before, and now it's only a matter of time before a full-blown COVID-19 crisis sweeps through detention centers across the country.

Last year, civil rights groups including Disability Rights Advocates (DRA), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Center (CREEC) filed a nationwide class action lawsuit against ICE. The lawsuit, of which Mr. Muñoz is a plaintiff, outlines story after story of neglect and abuse.

This litigation seeks an overhaul of the system that allows this abuse. But in the meantime, we're working with attorneys on the case for more immediate forms of relief. There's not much time left to act.

The tragic stories of people like Mr. Muñoz suffering in ICE custody are mounting. His story is just one of thousands. ICE jails nearly 40,000 individuals today, the vast majority of which haven't even been convicted of a crime. They're trapped in what other doctors are calling a "tinderbox scenario," and the first case of someone in ICE detention testing positive COVID-19 has already been reported.

If we fail to move swiftly, and if we don't start releasing people from ICE detention, we will soon watch in horror as the disease spreads inside detention centers and claims lives that could have been protected.

As physicians on the frontline in the fight against COVID-19, we have first-hand knowledge of the dire situation in our hospitals, which are already experiencing a greater influx of patients. We know the squalid conditions in ICE detention centers, coupled with the agency's insufficient treatment of detained people, will only lead to greater spread within detention centers. This spread will compound the strain on health care workers and work against our efforts to flatten the curve.

We demand the federal government give us and our patients a fighting chance.

We must begin releasing people from ICE custody, and we must release them now.

ICE resists calls to release immigrants as desperation mounts over coronavirus (CBS News)

CBS News [3/26/2020 3:20 PM, Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 2394K]

The coronavirus pandemic has killed more than 23,000 people worldwide, including more than 1,000 in the U.S. It has paralyzed the U.S. economy and changed nearly all facets of American life.

To curb the rapid spread of the contagion, cities and states across the U.S., from Houston and New York, to California and New Jersey, have released thousands of low-level offenders from custody, as well as older inmates and those with preexisting medical conditions. Countries like the United Kingdom have moved to release hundreds of detained immigrants. The top United Nations human rights official, Michelle Bachelet, has urged governments to reduce their incarcerated populations.

But U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which controls the largest immigration detention system in the world, has so far resisted calls to significantly downsize its detention population, despite a flurry of lawsuits and positive coronavirus cases in its facilities.

On Tuesday, the agency announced the first case of COVID-19 among the more than 38,000 detainees currently in its custody. On Thursday, New Jersey officials announced a second case, saying a 52-year-old immigrant held by ICE in Newark also tested positive, which an ICE official later confirmed. Four staff members at facilities used by ICE to hold immigrants in New Jersey, Texas and Colorado have also tested positive.

Lawyers believe their clients are sitting ducks in crowded detention centers that have long been plagued by reports of poor hygiene and subpar medical care. The detained immigrants and asylum-seekers are growing increasingly desperate, feeling powerless to protect themselves from the deadly contagion.

"We are very scared," María, a 23-year-old Cuban asylum-seeker held at a for-profit prison in Jena, Louisiana, told CBS News in Spanish. "We know we can die inside here. The situation does not bode well for us. We don't have a way to protect ourselves."

On Wednesday morning, ICE officials held an "informational briefing" on COVID-19 at the facility where María has been detained for months. María said fellow immigrant women in the cell started protesting after the staff gave "evasive" answers to their concerns. After some of them tried to leave their housing area, María said staff pepper-sprayed them and locked the group of more than 70 women, even those who did not try to leave, inside for more than 30 minutes.

ICE confirmed the use of pepper spray, saying it was used on four detainees who "became confrontational." The agency also confirmed that guards at least two other detention centers in Texas and Louisiana used pepper spray against detainees who staged protests this week.

demanding their release. BuzzFeed News on Thursday also reported a fourth incident in which staff used pepper spray on Monday.

Attorneys and advocates said the immigrants wanted the staff to do more to protect them from the coronavirus. According to ICE, the detainees were "combative" and "disruptive." The agency said some in Texas were placed in solitary confinement and are facing disciplinary charges.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, a coalition of advocacy groups led by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) asked four federal courts across the country to order the release of immigrants in California, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Massachusetts who are at increased risk of severe illness from the coronavirus.

Another lawsuit on Wednesday by the Southern Poverty Law Center in federal court in California demanded that ICE take steps to safeguard the health of vulnerable immigrants, and asked the court to order their release if the agency can't do so. In its lawsuit last week seeking the release of migrant families with children in Texas and Pennsylvania, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services also cited the pandemic.

Because immigration detention is a civil matter meant to ensure immigrants show up to court hearings, ICE has broad authority to release detainees.

Despite the intensifying pressure, ICE has not revealed any policy for releasing detainees. A spokesperson said the agency has "not made any announcements regarding the detained population," but added that officials make "custody determinations every day, sometimes releasing people" for "a variety of reasons."

Instead, ICE's detainee population increased last week, even as the public health crisis deepened, according to government figures. The agency went from detaining 37,311 immigrants on March 14, to holding 38,058 people as of March 21. The number of detained asylum-seekers who established credible fear of persecution in their home countries grew by nearly 300.

"They are not protecting us"

María, the asylum-seeker in Louisiana, asked for her name to be changed because she fears reprisals for speaking out. Detainees at the ICE detention center in Jena feel like "children," María said, and are unable to implement the hygiene and social distancing measures experts say are the only ways to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

"They are not protecting us," she said, referring to staff at the facility, which is operated by the private prison company GEO Group. The corporation did not respond to a request for comment.

Having struggled with severe asthma for much of her life, María feels particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus. She's not alone.

The immigrants named as plaintiffs in the lawsuits filed in recent days are all at higher risk of getting severely ill from the coronavirus because of their age or underlying health issues.

They include an 82-year-old grandfather with "significant medical and neurological illnesses" detained in California; a 63-year-old man with prostate cancer held in Massachusetts; and a 51-year-old Guatemalan immigrant detained in Pennsylvania who was recently coughing blood and has gotten the flu four times while in detention.

ICE has said it has taken the necessary measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in its facilities, some of which experienced outbreaks of mumps, measles and flu last year. The agency said it has implemented new and existing protocols to screen new detainees, and isolate and treat those with symptoms. It has also suspended family visitations at detention centers.

In response to a lawsuit filed last week by the ACLU in Seattle, Justice Department lawyers said the argument that detention "poses an increased risk of health complications or death from COVID-19 is purely speculative." The government lawyers said immigrants at a detention center in Tacoma, Washington, have "greater access to robust medical care than the general public."

"Ordering their release ... would leave Plaintiffs without their present access to health care would arguably put Plaintiffs at greater risk of serious complications in the event that they contract COVID-19," the government said in a filing.

Eunice Cho, an ACLU attorney who specializes in detention matters, strongly disagreed.

"Everything that we know about health care in ICE facilities flies in the face of that assertion. There have been a record number of deaths alone this year, as compared to other administrations," Cho said, referring to the deaths of 10 immigrants in ICE custody registered this fiscal year.

"Medical care that is provided in ICE facilities is widely known to be substandard, so it is shocking to hear ICE claim that people are better off in detention than outside," she added.

Cho said she's also concerned that the agency has revealed little publicly about the number of detainees it has tested for the virus. As of March 4, the agency had tested four immigrants.

In New Jersey, where ICE's "patient zero" is being held, the advocacy group Make the Road has been working to release two immigrants from detention, including Yimy, a 25-year-old transgender asylum-seeker from Honduras detained at the Hudson County Correctional Facility. One of the group's attorneys, Jackie Pearce, said Yimy and other detainees are feeling "desperate."

"With COVID-19 spreading in the detention centers, this is a human rights disaster waiting to happen," Pearce told CBS News. "Our clients are stuck in cages and they are sitting ducks."

ICE deportation planes begin to ship stranded U.S. citizens home (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 1:58 PM, Staff, 5304K]

Planes used by the U.S. government to deport Central American nationals will bring back

U.S. citizens in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as coronavirus travel restrictions reduce commercial flights.

The U.S. State Department is tracking 50,000 Americans abroad it said might seek help to return to the United States, straining the department's resources as it seeks to arrange travel around the spread of the coronavirus.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), working with the State Department, repatriated 64 U.S. citizens on an ICE Air Operations plane from Honduras on the return journey from a deportation flight on Tuesday, ICE said in a statement.

"ICE will continue to work with the State Department to facilitate the safe return of U.S. citizens on future removal flight returns from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic," ICE said in a statement.

The initiative may be expanded beyond those three countries, the statement said.

Trump Admin Can't Bar Sanctuary Cities From Receiving Law Enforcement Funding From Stimulus (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 11:35 AM, Jason Hopkins, 566K]

The Senate's emergency relief package includes hundreds of millions of dollars in law enforcement grants, but language in the bill specifically forbids the Trump administration from withholding these funds from sanctuary jurisdictions.

Late Wednesday night, Senate lawmakers passed their \$2 trillion stimulus bill aimed at reviving the U.S. economy and helping Americans make it through the coronavirus pandemic. The 880-page bill would, among many things, provide billions of dollars to struggling companies, boost unemployment insurance and dole out cash to Americans.

The legislation also includes an additional \$850 million toward law enforcement grants. However, there's a catch: language in the bill is tailored to preventing the administration from withholding these funds from cities and other jurisdictions that refuse to cooperate with federal immigration authorities.

"That awards hereunder, shall not be subject to restrictions or special conditions that are the same as (or substantially similar to) those, imposed on awards under such subpart in fiscal year 2018, that forbid interference with Federal law enforcement," a section of the provision reads.

The battle between the Trump administration and sanctuary jurisdictions began in 2017, when the Justice Department moved to withhold enforcement grants from cities and states that refuse Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials from accessing their jails or notifying them when an illegal aliens is set to be released from their custody.

The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program distributes millions of dollars annually in support of local law enforcement. What the Justice Department did in 2017 was impose certain conditions on recipients to receive these funds: not restrict information sharing with immigration authorities, give notice of an alien's release date upon

request, and give immigration authorities access to their facilities.

President Donald Trump scored a major victory in February when the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the White House can legally withhold funding from sanctuary cities.

To be sure, the coronavirus bill passed out of the Senate only applies to the additional \$850,000,000 being appropriated to the Justice Department, and is not a statutory change to the Trump administration's original order.

The relief package was passed by an overwhelming vote of 96-0 in the Senate late Wednesday night, and it now heads to the Democratically controlled House. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said he expects his chamber to vote on the relief package by Friday.

Immigration chief on thin ice for adopting Obama's stance during crisis (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 2:40 PM, Daniel Lippman and Anita Kumar, 2003K]

Top Trump administration officials grew angry with Matt Albence, the acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, after he announced that immigration authorities would halt most enforcement efforts during the coronavirus outbreak, according to three people familiar with the situation.

The displeasure with Albence spread throughout Trumpworld and triggered worries about the political implications of adopting — even temporarily — an immigration stance similar to the Obama administration approach. “He’s been on thin ice for some time,” a fourth person said.

The White House, the Department of Homeland Security, in which ICE is housed, and ICE didn’t immediately respond to requests for comment. Albence did not provide a comment.

ICE last week said it would prioritize deportation for foreign nationals who have committed crimes or pose a threat to public safety, and not those at doctors’ offices and hospitals.

“ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) will focus enforcement on public safety risks and individuals subject to mandatory detention based on criminal grounds,” ICE said in a statement posted on its website. “For those individuals who do not fall into those categories, ERO will exercise discretion to delay enforcement actions until after the crisis or utilize alternatives to detention, as appropriate.”

Trump made cracking down on immigration a centerpiece of his 2016 campaign, calling for a southern border wall and deporting all 11 million immigrants in the country illegally.

The change, announced March 18, is similar to an Obama administration policy that focused on immigrants who had committed crimes. Albence made the decision unilaterally, according to two people familiar with the matter.

After Albence notified lawmakers about the change in phone calls last week and the press release was issued, he was chastised by acting deputy secretary Ken Cuccinelli who wasn’t happy with him after the surprise announcement, according to a former senior DHS official.

The day after the press release, Cuccinelli tried to walk back the statement. He tweeted a thread issuing a “clarification” of ICE’s announcement about enforcement during the pandemic.

“@ICEgov will, as it has during other times of crisis, conduct enforcement operations that protect our communities and uphold our laws. This means that @ICEgov will continue to prioritize arresting and removing criminal aliens and other aliens who pose a threat to public safety, just as it always has during President @realDonaldTrump’s administration,” he also said.

“That does not mean that no other removable aliens will in fact be removed, but during the current public health situation, removals will be done in such a way as to minimize the exposure of our agents and of the removable aliens we are encountering.”

Trump also saw news on it and was wondering what was going on, according to the former senior DHS official.

Senior DHS officials were “really ripping in terms of that happening because it wasn’t really coordinated with anyone else,” said the person. “He got in deep shit for that the next day. So they’ve been trying to un-ring that bell.”

A DHS official confirmed that DHS headquarters telegraphed frustration to Enforcement and Removal Operations — the ICE component that handles detentions and deportations — over reports regarding a pause in some enforcement operations.

[NJ] Judge orders release of 10 immigration detainees from N.J. jails (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 11:59 PM, Josh Gerstein, 2003K]

A federal judge in New York City has ordered the immediate release from detention of 10 immigrants whose attorneys said they were at increased risk of illness from coronavirus due to underlying health conditions.

The group, all held in New Jersey county jails and facing deportation proceedings in Manhattan, appears to be the largest in the nation subject to a court-ordered release since the pandemic broke out.

Acting on a petition from the Brooklyn Federal Defenders office, U.S. District Court Judge Analisa Torres said the immigrants were entitled to a temporary restraining order because of the danger to their health posed by being in county jails that many experts consider a breeding ground for the virus.

“The risk that Petitioners will face a severe, and quite possibly fatal, infection if they remain in immigration detention constitutes irreparable harm warranting a TRO,” wrote Torres, an appointee of President Barack Obama.

In her order issued Thursday evening, Torres also sharply criticized Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials for inadequate preparation for the outbreak and a lack of safeguards for the most vulnerable detainees.

“Respondents have exhibited, and continue to exhibit, deliberate indifference to Petitioners’ medical needs,” the judge wrote.

She noted that ICE claimed detainees are being screened for the virus, isolated if suspected of infection and that cleaning of facilities has been stepped up.

However, Torres called those measures “patently insufficient to protect” the detainees in the case before her and she noted that lawyers representing ICE could not provide “any information about steps taken to protect high-risk detainees.”

There are about 40,000 immigrants in ICE custody across the country. Immigrant rights activists have called for the vast majority of them to be released to minimize their risk of contracting the virus.

While ICE has not formally announced any policy to consider release of immigration detainees due to dangers from the pandemic, Torres’ order says a lawyer from the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Manhattan indicated during a phone hearing earlier Thursday that five of the ten prisoners covered by the petition were “expected” to be released Thursday regardless of the judge’s order.

It was not immediately clear why those five were due to be released or whether a broad review of immigration detainees for virus-related health risks is underway.

Spokespeople for ICE, the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the Justice Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the ruling Thursday night.

At least two other courts — the U.S. District Court in Boston and the San Francisco-based 9th Circuit — have ordered releases of individual immigration detainees in recent days due to virus concerns. But, last week, a federal judge in Seattle turned down a request for release of nine immigrants being held at a center in neighboring Tacoma.

Other cases pressing for release of detained immigrants are continuing to work their way through the courts.

[NJ] ICE detainees in facilities with coronavirus cases ordered released by judge (ABC News)

ABC News [3/26/2020 11:14 PM, Aaron Katersky, 2182K]

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement detainees must be immediately released from county jails where cases of novel coronavirus have been confirmed, a federal judge in New York ordered Thursday night.

The 10 detainees asked for their release “because of the public health crisis posed by COVID-19,” their petition said.

The men and women had been detained by federal immigration authorities and had removal proceedings pending in immigration court. They were being held at three jails in New Jersey where either detainees or staff had tested positive for coronavirus.

"Each Petitioner suffers from chronic medical conditions, and faces an imminent risk of death or serious injury in immigration detention if exposed to COVID-19," the decision said.

The jails where the detainees were being housed has each reported confirmed cases: two detainees and one correctional officer in the Hudson County Jail; one detainee at the Bergen County Jail; and a superior officer at the Essex County Jail.

"The nature of detention facilities makes exposure and spread of the virus particularly harmful," Judge Analisa Torres wrote.

"Moreover, medical doctors, including two medical experts for the Department of Homeland Security, have warned of a 'tinderbox scenario' as COVID-19 spreads to immigration detention centers and the resulting 'imminent risk to the health and safety of immigrant detainees' and the public," she added.

The decision also cited the "failure" of jail operators to say with certainty the detention facilities were in a position to allow inmates to remain 6-feet apart, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

New York has been particularly hard-hit by the virus. There have been at least 39,125 cases in the state and at least 454 deaths, according to data compiled by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

[NJ] New Jersey jails must release at least 10 'at risk' ICE detainees over coronavirus concerns: judge (FOX News)

FOX News [3/27/2020 1:01 AM, Dom Calicchio, 8943K]

At least 10 migrants deemed "at risk" were ordered freed from jails in three New Jersey counties Thursday night over coronavirus concerns.

The jails – in Hudson, Bergen and Essex counties – had each reported cases of coronavirus, either among detainees, staff members or both, ABC News reported.

U.S. Judge Analisa Torres in New York ruled that the group of detainees, which included both men and women, had requested release "because of the public health crisis posed by COVID-19," their petition said, according to ABC.

The detainees were not identified and were being detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for unspecified reasons. The migrant group was believed to be the largest in the nation to be ordered freed over concerns about the virus, Politico reported.

The three New Jersey counties lie just across the Hudson River from New York, which has the most coronavirus cases in the nation. New Jersey ranks No. 2 on the list.

"Each Petitioner suffers from chronic medical conditions, and faces an imminent risk of death or serious injury in immigration detention if exposed to COVID-19," the judge's decision said, according to the station.

Torres also addressed the conditions at the jails in her decision.

"The nature of detention facilities makes exposure and spread of the virus particularly harmful," Torres wrote.

Nationwide, the U.S. holds about 37,000 people in detention over immigration issues, according to The Associated Press.

Many of the detainees are elderly or have pre-existing medical conditions, making them vulnerable to coronavirus, and are held in conditions in which beds are just three feet apart with lack of access to protective gear such as face masks.

The Hudson County jail reported two detainees and one correctional officer with the virus, while the Bergen County jail reported one detainee had been infected and the Essex County jail reported a superior officer had been diagnosed with the illness, ABC reported.

At least two other federal courts -- in Boston and San Francisco -- have ordered individual migrants to be freed from detention in recent days over coronavirus concerns, Politico reported.

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Legal immigrants at risk of losing status during coronavirus pandemic (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 6:00 AM, Rafael Bernal, 1762K]

Thousands of people with legal status in the United States could inadvertently violate immigration law over the next few months, as the government agency that processes applications remains closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Attorneys, think tanks, activists and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) — the agency that issues work permits and naturalizations to foreign nationals — have put forward some proposals to plug holes in existing immigration law, but potentially millions remain at risk.

"Times of crisis point out the failures in the system you've got. And one of the failures in our immigration system is it's not responsive to crises. Period," said Theresa Cardinal Brown, director of immigration and cross-border policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

A main concern for immigration attorneys are foreign nationals whose work permits are about to expire, whether they plan to request an extension or leave the country.

USCIS, a largely paper-based organization, has suspended in-person service until at least April 1 to protect its staff, contractors and prospective applicants from contagion.

"The immediate and most pressing concern for our members and employees is ensuring individuals whose status is expiring have means and measures to remain lawfully," said Sharvari Dalal-Dheini, director of government relations at the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA).

In a letter Monday to Ken Cuccinelli, the USCIS senior official performing the duties of the

director, AILA demanded the agency freeze all deadlines as of Friday, threatening litigation if the agency does not comply.

Cuccinelli holds the top job at USCIS and the number two post at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), both as a senior official performing duties, as he has not been put forward by President Trump for Senate confirmation.

"You're putting people into a catch-22. You're being forced to jeopardize your health and the health of those around you to file things in a timely way, or you're violating immigration law," Dalal-Dheini said.

DHS has ample authority to suspend deadlines and prolong work authorizations, according to Ur Jaddou, former chief counsel for USCIS.

"They have tremendous authority to extend those periods of authorized stay inside the United States and the associated work authorization," said Jaddou, the director of DHS Watch, an immigration policy oversight project at progressive advocacy group America's Voice.

A USCIS spokesman said the agency "is considering a number of options" for people who are unable to leave the United States after their work permits have expired and highlighted the agency's ability to provide special consideration and expedited processing on a case-by-case basis.

Brown said USCIS could issue extensions for work permits, including for beneficiaries of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, but the Byzantine nature of the immigration system could still complicate many cases.

And Brown warned against any push to relitigate immigration reform in Congress during a time of crisis.

"Right now we need to focus on the immediate needs and what's pragmatic. I believe what we need to do for immigration right now is just maintain the status quo," she said.

Some Democrats pushed for a permanent legislative replacement for the DACA program in the House coronavirus stimulus package, but that language was not adopted in the Democratic draft legislation published Monday.

The Democratic proposal did include a provision forcing USCIS to automatically extend status or work authorization to all immigrants whose permits expired within a year of enactment.

The final version of the Senate's stimulus bill, based on a deal reached by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, does not include provisions on immigration.

"In negotiations with Republicans, Sen. Schumer pushed to include language that would have automatically extended work authorizations in light of the closures," said an aide to Schumer.

A source familiar with the negotiations said both Schumer and Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) pushed the language, but it was rejected by Majority Leader Sen. Mitch McConnell's office, with input from Republicans from the House Judiciary Committee.

The source said a Department of Homeland Security official involved in negotiations called the provision "a Graham-Durbin attempt to save DACA," referring to Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.), who in the past has supported measures to protect DACA recipients.

The Treasury Department did not comment to The Hill.

Still, whether or not stopgap measures are applied could have far-reaching consequences, not just for the applicants, but for critical sectors such as medicine, construction, tech and agriculture.

"The thing that worries me most is all the essential workers in these fields. The number of doctors serving us now who are foreign nationals is large, and nurses and pharmacists," said Jaddou.

"Think about nursing homes and nurse aides, personal aides at home helping the elderly who are at very high risk," she added.

Depending on how long USCIS remains shut down, the effects could be felt by millions of such workers.

They include more than 1 million yearly applicants for legal permanent residency, also known as a green card.

USCIS also manages work permits for immigration programs including DACA and temporary protected status (TPS), which together grant permission to work and live in the United States to about a million people.

According to the Institute of International Education, more than 1 million foreign students were enrolled in U.S. educational institutions in the 2018-2019 school year, and nearly 1 million people lived in the country on temporary work visas as of 2018, according to a report by the Migration Policy Institute.

USCIS has taken some measures to simplify filing forms online while minimizing contact between applicants, agency employees and contractors.

On Friday, for instance, USCIS announced it would admit electronic or photocopy signatures on the I-129, a form necessary for any work authorization, departing from its longstanding policy of requiring a "wet," or ink, signature.

Jaddou said "it's great" for USCIS employees that the notoriously paper-based agency made that change, but it did little for attorneys and applicants, as the wet signature still has to be collected and filed.

"It's on them because they're still requiring the wet signature to be someplace, and that

means it has to be collected," said Jaddou.

"Attorneys still have to collect wet signatures and hold them," she added.

Travel industry hails REAL ID extension, says may need to be longer (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 5:17 PM, Alex Gangitano, 1762K]

The U.S. Travel Association applauded the administration for delaying the enforcement date of REAL ID requirements, which the group said would have likely caused greater economic uncertainty, but cautioned the extension may need to be longer.

Americans will now have until Oct. 1, 2021, to get Real ID Act compliant identification, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced on Thursday, which will be needed to board commercial flights, enter federal buildings or gain access to American nuclear plants.

"We applaud the administration for recognizing the challenges enforcing REAL ID requirements on travelers would present to what we hope will be a full and speedy economic recovery. We believe implementing REAL ID enforcement prior to full recovery would severely delay or reverse the travel industry's ability to recover quickly from the coronavirus crisis," U.S. Travel CEO Roger Dow wrote in a letter to DHS acting Secretary Chad Wolf.

If REAL ID were implemented today, an estimated 67,400 travelers would be turned away at airport security checkpoints on the first day, and more than 471,800 within the first week, according to a new analysis compiled in part by U.S. Travel.

But, Dow also called for a further extension for more time for Americans to recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Over the next 18 months people will be focused on building their lives back, not going to the DMV. The economic damage of coronavirus is already massive, and as we move toward a recovery phase it would be awful if the REAL ID deadline hits and creates yet another obstacle to people traveling," U.S. Travel CEO Roger Dow said in a statement on Thursday.

The REAL ID compliance rate was only at 35 percent as of February, according to the letter.

The letter also noted that the struggling travel industry will cost the economy \$910 billion from a \$355 billion decline in direct travel spending due to the coronavirus pandemic. It also estimates that 5.9 million travel industry jobs will be lost before May.

President Trump recommended delaying the enforcement date earlier this week to ease crowding at Department of Motor Vehicle offices, telling reporters he would postpone it until October 2020.

U.S. delays enforcing tougher ID requirements until October 2021 (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 11:36 AM, David Shepardson, 5304K]

The U.S. Homeland Security Department (DHS) on Wednesday said it would delay enforcement of rules requiring Americans to get new identification cards in order to board

airplanes or enter a federal building by another 12 month.

The department said in a statement it was extending the “REAL ID” deadline until October 2021. In January, DHS said U.S. states had issued more than 95 million compliant licenses and ID cards — only one-third of 276 million total U.S. cards. Congress in 2005 approved federal standards for issuing identification cards but enforcement has been repeatedly delayed.

Americans will get an extra year to obtain their Real ID (San Diego Union Tribune)

San Diego Union Tribune [3/26/2020 12:54 PM, Patrick McGreevy, 241K]

With the COVID-19 pandemic further stifling the efforts of California and other states to issue Real ID licenses, federal officials said Thursday they will grant a one-year extension, til Oct. 1, 2021, on the deadline for people to obtain the identification cards in order to board domestic flights in the United States.

President Trump originally announced a delay Monday during a news briefing on the nation’s response to the virus. The number of confirmed cases across the U.S. now stands at nearly 70,000. The resulting public health anxiety has left many Californians reluctant or unwilling to visit local branches of the Department of Motor Vehicles for fear of being infected.

“I’m also announcing that we’re postponing the deadline with Real ID requirements,” Trump said during the White House event. “We will be announcing the new deadline very soon.”

The president seemed to acknowledge the challenge with asking people to visit their local DMV “at a time that we’re asking Americans to maintain social distancing.”

On Thursday, acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said the postponement would be for one year.

“The federal, state and local response to the spread of coronavirus here in the United States necessitates a delay in the deadline,” Wolf said in a statement, adding, “We want to remove any impediment to response and recovery efforts.”

Steven Gordon, director of the California DMV, said the announcement is welcome news because the agency has had to restrict visits to field offices for many people seeking driver’s licenses and vehicle registrations.

“The California DMV is encouraged by the President’s remarks indicating that the federal government will extend the enforcement date for REAL ID,” Gordon said in a written statement. “This would relieve the urgency for people to visit local DMV offices and bolster the state’s efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We look forward to learning more about the President’s direction and sharing that information with the public.”

Trump has been under pressure to postpone the Oct. 1 deadline from state officials across the country. The National Governors Assn., which includes Gov. Gavin Newsom, recently asked the Department of Homeland Security to extend the deadline by at least one year.

“We believe an extension will allow all of us to focus our efforts on combating the spread and severity of COVID-19,” the governors said in a March 17 letter to Wolf. “More time will also give Congress the ability to pass legislation that will update the 2005 REAL ID Act and bring it up to speed with today’s technology.”

A representative for Newsom declined to comment on the extension request.

California lawmakers had already called for a delay in the Real ID deadline based on bureaucratic problems identified before COVID-19 was labeled a global pandemic.

Assemblymen Jim Frazier (D-Fairfield) and Vince Fong (R-Bakersfield), the chair and vice-chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee, respectively, introduced a resolution asking for a delay.

“Over 7 million Californians have a Real ID and the Department of Motor Vehicles estimates that 16 million Californians will need one by October 1st of this year,” Frazier said. “That means more than twice as many people need to come into a DMV field office between now and October, than in the entire previous two years combined.”

[CA] California DMV is scaling back over coronavirus. Some employees say it’s not enough (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [3/26/2020 12:48 PM, Leila Miller and Patrick McGreevy, 1907K]

To slow the spread of COVID-19, the California Department of Motor Vehicles has dramatically restricted customer visits to its field offices, barring people who do not have appointments and warning that no new slots to appear in person are currently available. But some field office employees who spoke to The Times on condition of anonymity raised concerns that the measures don’t go far enough, leaving staff and customers vulnerable to infection while offices remain open.

The employees also say that a recent decision by the DMV to quietly waive knowledge tests that had previously been required for license renewals and those with an out of state license could potentially put the public at risk.

A memo sent to employees last Tuesday by Sonia Huestis, identified on the agency’s website as the deputy director of the customer services division, expanded the number of those eligible to forgo the in-person test. Tests may now be waived for those who are maintaining their driver’s license class or endorsement, or those who can provide proof of an equivalent out-of-state license.

Under current rules outlined in the California Driver Handbook, people who may be eligible to forgo the written test and renew their license by mail or online include those whose license expired before they turned 70, who don’t have a probationary or suspended license, and who have not violated a written promise to appear in court in the last two year.

The change also covers applicants who previously failed the knowledge test multiple times.

“They’re saying we’re being kept open because we’re an essential part of the community,” said an employee who works at a DMV office in Salinas and requested anonymity to speak

freely about the agency. “How can we be essential when we’re not protecting the public? We’re putting the public in danger by doing this.”

Last week, the employee helped process license paperwork for two customers, 75 and 77. One had previously failed the written test five times and the other had failed seven times.

Aware of the policy change, she brought the cases to her manager, asking whether she should waive tests for people who had failed so many times.

“We were told, ‘Nope, just give them their license,” the employee said. “We issued their license for another five years.”

Meanwhile, a DMV employee in the San Joaquin Valley said her office waived about a half-dozen tests last week, including those for multiple people who had been cited for driving under the influence.

“All of this is baffling to me,” said the employee, who also agreed to speak on condition of anonymity. “They want to keep their license, but maybe they shouldn’t have it. ... [The test is] only just a barrier, but that’s what it’s for.”

In a written statement, DMV spokeswoman Anita Gore said that the new policy was one of many temporary actions that the DMV has been taking to protect the health of customers and employees during the pandemic.

“Since the knowledge test is typically administered on a touchscreen in a close-quartered testing area, waiving this requirement promotes social distancing and reduces the possibility of a surface transmission of the virus,” she wrote.

Najmedin Meshkati, a professor and safety expert at USC’s Viterbi School of Engineering, said the written tests are in place for a reason.

“Those people that have some issues with [their] driver’s license need to revisit those instructions and rules and regulations,” he said. “It [the change] sends the message that there is no need to study and learn that.”

The DMV has more than 170 field offices, and some 27 million drivers have California licenses while 35 million vehicles are registered with the state. Registrations and many other tasks can be done online, through the mail, at one of the 365 kiosks statewide or in select businesses that have DMV services.

Since the agency moved to appointment-only service on March 19, the number of customers visiting field offices has dropped from approximately 95,000 per day a month ago to about 17,000 per day, Gore said, a move that has “significantly reduced the number of people in our offices at any given time and promotes social distancing recommendations.”

The DMV received some relief Thursday when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security delayed the deadline for issuing Real IDs to millions of Californians who don’t have them for one year, until Oct. 1, 2021. The postponement relieves pressure on the agency to get Californians into field offices now.

Obtaining a federally required Real ID license or card must be done in a DMV office. The DMV has been struggling to issue the licenses to millions of Californians before an Oct. 1 deadline this year, after which time the new identification would have been required to board domestic airline flights.

“The federal, state and local response to the spread of coronavirus here in the United States necessitates a delay in the deadline,” acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said in a statement.

For existing appointments, the DMV is giving priority to those who need to complete transactions that can only be accomplished at a field office, including the reinstatement of a suspended or revoked driver license, adding an endorsement to a commercial driver license, special registration transactions to reclaim an impounded vehicle and issuing identification to underserved populations, Gore said.

The scaling back of in-person operations comes as DMV employees and customers alike have expressed anxiety over the risks of working in or visiting field offices. Karen Patterson, 73, of Manhattan Beach said she received a pre-recorded voice message on Monday confirming an appointment in San Pedro next weekend where she expected to take a written test to renew her license.

Patterson had already decided she wouldn’t be going. Her driver’s license will expire on April 15, but she worried that leaving her home and going into the DMV office might put her at risk for contracting COVID-19.

“It just feels counter-intuitive to how we are supposed to be taking care of ourselves,” she said. “It seems that under the circumstances, you could take that test online rather than submit yourself to being so vulnerable to the virus.”

The DMV also has canceled all driving tests, suspended extended morning hours and Saturday service at its field offices, and requested law enforcement to exercise discretion for 60 days in their enforcement of driving with a recently expired license or vehicle registration.

Among those who will benefit from the grace period are people whose vehicle registration must be renewed in person because they have outdated insurance information, those whose registration has been expired for 90 days or more, and those with cars that have smog issues.

The San Joaquin Valley DMV employee said that the extension provides another reason to close field offices.

“There isn’t really a need for us to be there and risk our health and our families’ health and the very public we’re serving’s health if we have these extensions implemented,” she said.

California’s Real ID policy requires an office visit for a new photo, presentation of documents and a thumbprint, Gore said. With millions of Californians still without a Real ID, the DMV has decided to honor the existing appointments for the new identification cards but not to approve any new ones for the time being, Gore said.

As DMV field offices have scaled back their visits, some agency employees have voiced concern over risking their health while working in offices in close proximity to customers who may have been exposed to COVID-19. The DMV closed its Riverside call center — one of three in the state — for a cleaning Tuesday after an employee tested positive for COVID-19, but the center was reopened Wednesday, a representative said.

Following the governor's stay-at-home order, DMV employees received letters that they've been instructed to show law enforcement officials if they are stopped and asked why they are not at home. The letters state that the DMV has been identified by the governor as "a vital public entity required to continue core operations" and that the employee named in the letter is required to report to their work site on a daily basis.

"Your dedication to public service in these trying and uncertain times continues to amaze me," wrote DMV Director Steve Gordon in a March 23 memo to employees. "I hope you know how important you are to California and how much I appreciate all you do."

Gov. Gavin Newsom has also offered assurances to leaders of the Service Employees International Union, Local 1000, which represents DMV employees, that protection of state workers is a priority.

The new policy limiting visits to the DMV offices was welcomed by Local 1000 President Yvonne R. Walker.

"We feel the DMV did the right thing to limit transmission of COVID-19 and flatten the curve," Walker said, "and we fully support their efforts to do so."

Assemblyman Phil Ting (D-San Francisco) said that DMV officials need to determine whether the agency can continue to serve people at a safe distance while respecting orders from the Department of Health.

"I know the DMV is deemed an essential service. And the question is which services are the most essential and how many can be done remotely or virtually and which ones require people to come in," said Ting, chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, which has held hearings on DMV operations.

But many DMV employees have said that the agency should close its offices entirely given efforts to move more of its services online.

The San Joaquin Valley employee said she has gloves at work and has been instructed to disinfect her station with Clorox wipes after each customer. But her customers, she said, often have trouble maintaining their distance.

"Our customers are not six feet from us," she said. "They're right at our counter at about two feet from us. A lot of them are elderly and a lot of them hover."

She said she had been told she could opt to stay home if she felt her health was at risk but that employees without sick leave or vacation time left to use would not be paid. As a single mom who supports a 23-year-old daughter in college, the employee felt she had no choice

but to continue going in.

Some employees have decided to stop going to work at the expense of their livelihood. A manager at a DMV field office in San Jose told The Times that he stopped going to work shortly after ordering masks, hand sanitizer, gloves and disinfecting wipes for his office in late February. He worried about contracting the virus even with protective equipment and passing it on to his 8-year-old daughter, who is now spending her days at home.

“The public, you have to interact with them face to face,” he said. “They have to be at your counter when you sign documents. They have to hand you the money.”

He’s part of a text message group in which employees from various DMV offices have reported running low on equipment and are sharing worries about having few pairs of gloves left or needing to use sanitizer sparingly.

“Everyone is just concerned that they are bringing it home to their family,” the DMV manager said. “Other locations are closed down — DMV should be one of them.”

Customs and Border Protection

[AZ] Protesters block lanes at Mexico border, demand coronavirus screening (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 10:39 AM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]

Protesters blocked lanes on the Mexico side of the southern border on Wednesday, requesting Mexico institute more coronavirus screenings for southbound travelers to avoid further spread.

The protests, involving fewer than a dozen people and two vehicles blocking two southbound lanes at the DeConcini crossing, lasted hours Wednesday on the Mexican side of the border in Ambos Nogales, USA Today reported.

The demonstrators held up signs that requested U.S. residents “stay at home” and others demanding Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador increase restrictions and screenings on everyone entering Mexico. The protesters also requested a ban on tourism visits and those for minor medical procedures for U.S. citizens and Mexicans in the U.S.

The blockade led to backed-up traffic in the bordering Nogales, Ariz., prompting police to redirect cars headed to Mexico.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials said the crossing had reopened at 5:30 p.m., but the city of Nogales cautioned that the protests may continue Thursday, according to a statement obtained by USA Today.

Jose Luis Hernandez, who was with the group Sonorans for Health and Life, said the protests were the Mexican president’s “first warning.”

“There are no health screenings by the federal government to deal with this pandemic,” he told USA Today. “That’s why we’re here in Nogales. We’ve taken this action to call on the

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to act now.”

The U.S. and Mexico agreed last week to allow travel only for “essential” reasons such as medical emergencies, school or work. Mexico, however, has faced international criticism for its relatively hands-off response to the coronavirus.

The U.S. has recorded the third highest confirmed cases of COVID-19 of any country in the world, much higher than Mexico. As of Thursday morning, the U.S. has recorded almost 69,200 confirmed cases with 869 deaths. In Mexico, 405 people have been diagnosed, with five deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[AZ] Mexican protesters block Arizona border traffic, demand coronavirus screenings on travelers from US (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 12:32 PM, Danielle Wallace, 8943K]

Protesters on the Mexican side of a border crossing with Arizona blocked southbound lanes Wednesday demanding the Mexican government require health screening for travelers entering from the United States to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

A group called the Sonorenses Por la Salud y la Vida (Sonorans for Health and Life) parked two trucks in the vehicle lanes leading away from the Dennis DeConcini Port of Entry connecting the twin border cities of Ambo Nogales at around 1 p.m. Less than a dozen protesters, donning masks and gloves, held up signs that either read #QuedateEnCasa (#StayHome) or called on Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to up his response to the outbreak.

“There are no health screenings by the federal government to deal with this pandemic,” Jose Luis Hernandez, the leader of the protest, told the Arizona Republic. “That’s why we’re here in Nogales. We’ve taken this action to call on the Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to act now.

Last week, both the U.S. and Mexican governments banned all non-essential travel across the border, with some exceptions for medical emergencies, work and school. U.S. Customs and Border Control have ramped up medical screenings at U.S.-Mexico ports of entry, including the one admitting people into Ambos Nogales, Ariz.

Protesters said Mexican officials haven’t taken the same degree of precaution. The state of Sonora deployed health officials to several border crossings, including the DeConcini Port of Entry, but only has staff stationed at pedestrian lanes, USA Today reported.

Mexican Public Health Secretariat staff have also set up tables near the border crossing where they hand out literature about COVID-19, provide hand sanitizer and offer temperature screenings, Nogales International reported. It is not required to have your temperature taken to pass through a port of entry into Mexico.

The blockade shut down all southbound traffic at the DeConcini Port of Entry for hours until it was eventually reopened around 5:30 p.m., U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials in Nogales said. Officers with the Nogales Police Department redirected traffic to the Mariposa Port of Entry on the west side of the city.

"Nogales Police anticipates demonstrations may continue tomorrow. The closure of any Port of Entry will negatively impact commerce and the way of life in Nogales," the city of Nogales, Ariz. said in a statement Wednesday night.

Lopez Obrador banned large private gatherings across Mexico Tuesday -- breaking from a video message he posted two days that urged Mexicans to continue to eat out to bolster the economy.

"Don't stop going out, we are still in the first phase," he said in the video posted Sunday from a restaurant table in Oaxaca, according to the Yucatan Times. "If you can do it and you have the economic possibility, keep taking the family out to eat, to restaurants, to the inns, because that is strengthening the family economy and the popular economy."

He had received widespread criticism for continuing to host large rallies around Mexico, where he shook hands with supporters and kissed babies amid the global coronavirus pandemic.

The U.S. recorded at least 69,197 confirmed cases of the coronavirus Thursday, according to Johns Hopkins University, making it the third most-infected country in the world. Mexico falls far below that figure -- with only at least 475 confirmed cases.

Border towns have been concerned about the transfer of infection across country lines. The number of confirmed cases in Arizona spiked to over 400 Wednesday, the state department of health services said, with new cases in Santa Cruz County, where Nogales is located. Sonora has recorded only 19 cases across the Mexican state.

[AZ] Incomplete Tunnel Found Under Arizona Border Wall (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 2:37 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]

Yuma Sector Border Patrol teamed up with agents from Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) to disrupt a tunnel operation into southwestern Arizona.

Federal agents with Border Patrol and HSI received information about a possible sinkhole or tunnel at the international border located west of the San Luis Port of Entry on Monday. The agents responded to the area to investigate, according to information provided by Yuma Sector Border Patrol officials.

Agents responded to the scene after border wall construction crews discovered a possible tunnel in an area where they were working. They discovered plywood and boards utilized by smugglers to shore up tunnel construction.

Agents investigated the area and found a tunnel running about eight to twelve feet below the surface of the ground, officials reported. The smugglers had not completed the tunnel.

Yuma Sector Border Patrol officials reported this is the sixth tunnel discovered in their area of responsibility.

Mexican officials responded to their side of the border after being contacted by U.S.

authorities. They found a similar sinkhole on the Mexican side of the border about 10 to 12 feet south of the hole on the U.S. side of the wall.

During the investigation of the Mexican side of the tunnel, located in San Luis, Rio Colorado, Sonora, officials discovered an aluminum ladder within the hole. The ladder measured six to eight feet in length, officials reported. The Mexican authorities removed the ladder.

Investigators on both sides of the border are now monitoring the tunnel and will continue to inspect the area for activity by smugglers.

[AZ] Deported Two-Time Sex Offender Arrested in Arizona near Border (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 10:59 AM, Bob Price, 1973K]

Tucson Sector Border Patrol agents arrested a previously deported criminal alien with convictions for sex offenses in California and Florida.

Border Patrol agents patrolling near Three Points, Arizona, encountered a man suspected of being in the country illegally. Agents transported the man to the Tucson Station for processing and a biometric background investigation, according to information obtained from Tucson Sector Border Patrol officials.

During a background investigation, the agents identified the man as 39-year-old Darwin Escobar-Lopez. A criminal background check revealed that a California court in Redwood City convicted the man in 2005 for Lewd and Lascivious Acts with a Child under 14. The court sentenced him to one year in jail and three years of probation.

In 2016, a Florida court in Fort Meyers convicted Escobar-Lopez for failing to register as a sex offender. The court sentenced him to 48 months in prison.

Border Patrol officials reported the man has previously been deported by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.

Escobar-Lopez could now face federal felony charges for illegal re-entry after removal as a sex offender. If convicted, he could face up to 20 years in federal prison.

Border Patrol agents subject all illegal immigrants apprehended after crossing the border are subjected to biometric background investigations. Since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2020, Border Patrol agents apprehended 1,294 criminal aliens who illegally crossed the border as of the end of February.

“Criminals illegally crossing the border do not typically stay at the border; their final destinations towns and cities across the entire United States,” officials said in a written statement.

[Canada] U.S. to return Canada-bound asylum seekers stopped at border to home nations (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 12:44 PM, Anna Mehler Perny, 5304K]

After years of asylum-seekers crossing the Canada-U.S. border illegally to file refugee

claims, Canada is turning them around and sending them back to the United States, which says it plans to send them swiftly back to their countries of origin.

Canada said last week it will no longer accept irregular migrants trying to cross the shared border with the United States and will instead return them to U.S. authorities, as a temporary measure amid the coronavirus outbreak.

"In the event an alien cannot be returned to Mexico or Canada, CBP will work with interagency partners to secure return to the alien's country of origin and hold the alien for the shortest time possible," U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesman Michael Niezgoda told Reuters in an email.

"For those who remain in CBP custody, CBP will, to the extent possible, keep them separated. Symptomatic individuals will be referred to CDC and placed in isolation."

Since 2017 around 54,000 people have crossed the border into Canada, many saying they want to evade U.S. President Donald Trump's crackdown on refugees and illegal immigrants.

Initially, in early March, Ottawa had said it would keep irregular migrants crossing the border in quarantine for two weeks. Last week, it said it reached an agreement with the United States to close the border to all but essential travel.

Amnesty International said the Canadian position violates its obligations under the 1951 UN refugee convention, including a clause on non-refoulement or the return of asylum seekers to places they fled due to persecution, often their home countries.

"It demonstrates a lack of leadership. It demonstrates a lack of legal commitment to the obligations Canada has signed up for," said Justin Mohammed, a human rights law and policy campaigner for Amnesty International Canada.

Immigration and Refugees Minister Marco Mendicino's office referred questions about irregular migrants to Public Safety Minister Bill Blair, who was not available.

Blair's spokeswoman said Ottawa was "committed to ensuring Canada remains a welcoming country for those fleeing war and persecution" and meeting its international commitments.

"We must note that these restrictions are temporary, and are constantly being re-evaluated to best reflect the advice of our public health officials," spokeswoman Mary-Liz Power said in an email.

Amnesty International considers aspects of U.S. immigration detention policy a violation of human rights, citing high detention rates, inadequate conditions and the practice of separating parents and children.

U.S. authorities said last week they will delay arresting some people suspected of violating immigration laws until after the coronavirus crisis.

Returning people to their country of origin will be tough given flight restrictions in the U.S, said Janet McFetridge, whose organization Plattsburgh Cares helps migrants on the U.S. side of the New York-Quebec border near Roxham Road, a popular crossing spot.

"If they need to return to wherever they came from, they're going to have a very difficult time getting there right now," she said. "It's an absolutely bleak situation."

Federal Emergency Management Agency

[NJ] New Jersey reports nearly 2,500 new coronavirus cases in one day (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 2:45 PM, Kaelan Deese, 1762K]

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) announced a total of more than 6,800 cases of COVID-19 in the state on Thursday, marking an uptick of 2,492 cases since Wednesday.

"We've received 2,492 new positive #COVID19 test results since yesterday, bringing our statewide total to 6,876. This includes 436 positive tests from our mass-testing sites," Murphy wrote in a Twitter update.

President Trump approved a disaster declaration for New Jersey on Wednesday, making more federal funding and aid available as conditions in the state grow worse, according to a local ABC affiliate.

Murphy confirmed that of the 2,492 additional cases from yesterday, 436 of the positive tests came from mass-testing sites.

New Jersey is expanding its drive-thru testing centers for the coronavirus throughout the state, but focusing its most significant efforts on the northern part closest to the New York City epicenter.

Two drive-thru testing centers opened in the state this week — one in Newark's Weequahic Park and a facility for Passaic County residents at William Paterson University.

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo declared that appointments are mandatory to get tested for the coronavirus, and residents should go to the county's website to complete a screening form and make an appointment.

On Wednesday, officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the current outbreak in New York City is just the first in a wave of local outbreaks that could affect major cities in the coming weeks.

Anne Schuchat, the principal deputy director of the CDC, said it would be surprising if cases did not increase in many parts of the country.

"We're looking at our flu syndromic data, our respiratory illness that presents at emergency departments. Across the country there's a number of areas that are escalating," she said. "The numbers in New York are so large that they show up, but we're looking at increases over time and we're really seeing some in a number of places."

[NJ] Trump Approves New Jersey Disaster Declaration — Ninth State So Far Where Coronavirus Is A ‘Major Disaster’ (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 11:35 AM, Christian Datoc, 566K]

President Donald Trump has approved New Jersey’s coronavirus disaster declaration, the White House announced Thursday.

New Jersey joins California, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Texas and Washington in declaring pandemic a “major disaster.”

The declaration allows New Jersey to receive both individual and public assistance funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA named Robert Little the Federal Coordinating Officer for the state.

The president previously mobilized the National Guard to carry out approved coronavirus missions in California, New York, and Washington, the three states hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic, and said that FEMA would foot the cost of all coronavirus missions. At the time, Gaynor stressed that the action was not equivalent to “martial law.”

In particular, New York, just a stone’s throw from New Jersey, has seen drastically higher infection and mortality rates than the rest of the nation, and the trend has spread to the remainder of the tri-state area.

[MD] Trump grants major disaster declaration for state of Maryland (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 9:37 PM, Marty Johnson, 1762K]

President Trump on Thursday approved Maryland’s major disaster declaration, allowing the state to access federal aid as it combats the coronavirus outbreak.

"The President’s action makes Federal funding available to State, tribal, and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency protective measures, including direct Federal assistance, for all areas in the State of Maryland impacted by COVID-19," the White House said in a statement.

Other states also had disaster declarations approved on Thursday, including Missouri and Illinois.

In a statement of his own, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) said that the president’s move will help "provide much-needed funding for state and local governments and nonprofits, and it will be another important step in Maryland’s aggressive and coordinated response to COVID-19."

Maryland confirmed 157 new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday, bringing the statewide total to 580. Between Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia, there are more than 1,200 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Thursday evening, the U.S. surpassed both China and Italy in the total number of confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 85,000 sickened in the country and more than 1,200 dead.

[MD] Hogan: Maryland receives federal disaster designation (AP)

AP [3/26/2020 9:44 PM, Staff, 337K]

Maryland received a federal disaster declaration in response to the coronavirus, Gov. Larry Hogan announced Thursday night.

“This declaration will help provide much-needed funding for state and local governments and nonprofits, and it will be another important step in Maryland’s aggressive and coordinated response to COVID-19,” Hogan said in a news release.

Maryland received more than 42,000 unemployment insurance claims last week, and the state is closing child care programs in response to the coronavirus, state officials announced earlier in the day.

The 42,334 unemployment claims as businesses closed in response to the virus breaks the previous record for a week set in 1982. A record-shattering 3.3 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits in a single week.

Meanwhile, all child care programs in the state are to be closed by the end of the day Friday, Karen Salmon announced on the state board of education’s website. Salmon noted that the state has established child care programs to serve only designated essential personnel. The announcement comes a day after she announced that Maryland was extending school closings for four weeks through April 24.

Maryland announced the state has confirmed at least 580 cases of the virus. That’s 157 more cases than the day before, the highest one-day total increase yet. Maryland has had at least four deaths due to the virus.

For most people, the new 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.

On Wednesday, the Maryland Board of Elections announced it is planning to do away with polling stations for the state’s already delayed primary. Voters would instead be required to mail in or drop off their ballots in an effort to limit coronavirus infections.

If approved, the move would eliminate any need for Maryland’s more than 4 million registered voters to cast their ballots in person on June 2, according to a draft presented by elections officials at their Wednesday meeting, held by teleconference.

The state’s primary was originally scheduled for April 28. Gov. Larry Hogan postponed it by executive order on March 17.

Ballots, with clear instructions explaining how to return them, would likely need to be mailed to all registered voters by the end of April, Nikki Charlson, deputy administrator for the Board of Elections, said during Wednesday’s meeting.

[TN] Tennessee Gets \$476K Grant for Tornado Victim Mental Health (AP)

AP [3/27/2020 2:50 AM, Staff, 3020K]

Tennessee has landed a \$476,000 federal grant to support the mental health needs of victims of deadly tornadoes earlier this month.

The Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services says the grant comes from the Federal Emergency Management Agency Crisis Counseling & Training Program.

The grant will help provide outreach and support services to storm survivors in Davidson, Putnam, and Wilson Counties.

State staffers will work alongside Centerstone, Mental Health Cooperative, and Volunteer Behavioral Health Care System to provide the mental health services.

Severe storms that spun up multiple tornadoes on March 3 killed 25 people in Tennessee and caused significant damage across several communities.

The state is also applying for a longer-term program for mental health disaster response run by FEMA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

[IL] President Trump approves federal disaster declaration for Illinois (Chicago Tribune)

Chicago Tribune [3/26/2020 3:43 PM, Rick Pearson, 1293K]

President Donald Trump on Thursday approved a major federal disaster declaration for the state of Illinois, which provides additional governmental assistance in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump's action came a day after Democratic Sens. Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth sent a letter in support of Gov. J.B. Pritzker's request for a major federal disaster declaration.

In his announcement, Trump said his action made federal funding available for crisis counseling for affected individuals in all areas in the state of Illinois.

Secret Service

[NY] Duo Nabbed Using Fake \$100 Bills In Northern Westchester, Police Say (Daily Voice)

Daily Voice [3/26/2020 10:00 AM, Zak Failla, 83K, Positive, Secondary]

Two men were taken into custody after allegedly attempting to use phony \$100 bills to make purchases in Northern Westchester, police said.

The two suspects entered a Mount Kisco business on South Moger Avenue at approximately 10:40 a.m. on Sunday, March 22, attempting to make small purchases using a \$100 bill, Westchester County Police said.

When the owner of the store used a device to determine the legitimacy of the bill, it was determined that it was counterfeit and alerted the county police when the duo ran off.

According to the department, county police officers were alerted by a different police agency that they may have located the suspects' vehicle parked in the parking lot of Target on North Bedford Road.

Officers staked out the vehicle and both men were taken into custody when they returned to the car.

At the time they were arrested, the men were in possession of multiple counterfeit bills, and it was later determined that they had used the phony bills to make small purchases at Target, Stop & Shop and other stores in the area.

Shaquille McLean, 24, and Andrew Holt, 25, both of Greenburgh, were charged with multiple counts of possession of a forged instrument, felonies. They were released and are scheduled to appear back in Mount Kisco Justice Court on Thursday, May 7.

Police said that "the current economic climate is hard enough for businesses large and small, so no one needs some scam artists trying to pass off funny money at local stores"

"The timely notification from this business owner enabled us to immediately begin to search for these suspects," Westchester County Police Commissioner Thomas Gleason added. "The great teamwork between Patrol Officers and Real Time Crime led to these arrests."

[VA] Suffolk PD need help identifying woman wanted for counterfeit fraud (Wavy)

Wavy [3/26/2020 10:54 PM, Kaylynn Stephens, 32K, Neutral, Secondary]

Police are seeking the public's help identifying a woman wanted for passing counterfeit money and obtaining money by false pretense.

According to police, the incidents occurred on Feb. 19 at several businesses in Suffolk, including Cypress Saddlery, two local ABC Stores, Subway, Dollar Tree, and Pizza Hut.

Police say the woman is between 5 feet 4 inches tall and 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighs approximately 180 pounds.

The subject is described to have a nose ring on the left side and is possibly pregnant as she rubbed her stomach in surveillance video footage, police say.

Anyone that is able to identify the woman or has any information is asked to contact Suffolk Police Department or call the Suffolk Crime Line at 888-LOCK-U-UP.

[KY] Counterfeit 100s being passed in Pendleton County (Falmouth Outlook)

Falmouth Outlook [3/26/2020 2:35 PM, Keith Smith, Neutral, Secondary]

A mid-30s, dark-haired, white male entered Wells Market wishing to pay for his \$10 in gas with a \$100 bill. Tina Rodgers who was working behind the counter noticed the bill just did not feel or look right and refused to accept it. She did not return the bill and he fled.

It was the second time in the day that a person had attempted to pass a counterfeit bill. Earlier, a male with a tattoo on his face also tried to use a fake \$100 bill. The clerk refused to accept it but the individual was able to leave with the bill.

Falmouth police officer Mark Branham said that they would be investigating the incident.

Wells has several cameras and they were reviewing the digital tapes to try and obtain a photo of the two individuals.

[KY] Secret Service helps sheriff's department find kidnapped twins (News Democrat Leader)

News Democrat Leader [3/26/2020 7:00 AM, Oj Stapleton, Positive, Secondary]

Twin girls have been returned to their home after a long day of hard work by law enforcement that ended with an Amber Alert being issued and help by the United States Secret Service.

According to the Logan County Sheriff's Department, on Friday, March 20th around 1 p.m., 33-year-old Neely Blanchard of Bowman Lane, Bowling Green, Ky., left the home of her mother, Susan Blanchard in Auburn with her two 7-year-old daughters and did not return.

Susan Blanchard, of Auburn, had obtained sole guardianship of the girls previously through a Logan County Court Order, which described Neely as "extremely unstable."

"The girls were residing with the grandmother, who has sole custody," said Logan County Sheriff Stephen Stratton. "The mother had some supervised visitation and was at the grandmother's home visiting with the girls, when the grandmother left to do a short errand."

When Susan Blanchard returned home, Neely Blanchard was gone with the girls and later told her mother that she was going to Dawson Springs to visit friends and for a camping trip, according to the sheriff.

"We weren't contacted about the abduction until Wednesday morning, though, so we really started out in the hole," Stratton said.

Neely Blanchard was involved with a sovereign citizen group known as "E-Clause," which believes the U.S. government is using the current COVID-19 crisis to control citizens, Stratton said.

Deputy Josh Toomey initiated the investigation Wednesday morning and worked until 1 a.m. when the girls were found safe.

"He really deserves a lot of credit for this," Stratton said.

Once Toomey and the sheriff's department had met the criteria for an Amber Alert, the notifications were sent out Wednesday night, around 9 p.m.

"When the Amber Alert went out, we started getting tons of good information," Stratton said. "We had a good idea where they were and then the Secret Service got involved and used their resources to track her through her phone and social media."

Neely Blanchard was then found and arrested on charges of two counts of kidnapping and

two counts of custodial interference. She was lodged in the Hopkins County jail, but will be extradited to Logan County to face charges. Additional charges could be added as the investigation continues.

"There were people in Dawson Springs harboring her and further charges could be coming," Stratton said. "We're going to be presenting that information to a grand jury."

According to news reports, this is not the first time Neely Blanchard has been charged with custodial interference. She was arrested in 2013 after taking another of her children from a South Carolina elementary school when she did not have legal custody of the child.

[TN] Evelyn Boswell's grandmother charged with aggravated burglary, shoplifting (WBIR TV - Knoxville)

WBIR TV - Knoxville [3/26/2020 4:49 PM, Staff, 36K, Positive, Secondary]

The Sullivan County Sheriff's Office reports baby Evelyn's grandmother, Angela Mae Boswell, has been arrested after she and a male accomplice reportedly robbed a home in the 300 block of West Valley Drive in Kingsport on Wednesday.

SCSO reports Boswell and her accomplice entered the Kingsport home and concealed items on their bodies as they walked back to their vehicle.

The pair allegedly stole two televisions, a shotgun, a pistol and various tools, according to officials.

Authorities have identified Boswell's accomplice as 37-year-old Larry Chad Fields of Kingsport. They are currently trying to locate Fields.

Boswell has been charged with aggravated burglary, theft under \$10,000 introduction of drugs into a penal facility and possession of counterfeit money.

[MN] Counterfeit cash reported by business owners in Waseca (KEYC Television)

KEYC Television [3/26/2020 2:31 PM, Benjamin Broze, 2K, Neutral, Secondary]

The Waseca Chamber of Commerce warning business owners after they received a report of counterfeit money being passed.

The Chamber says a restaurant owner reported a customer using a fake \$20 bill. City officials are now reminding all business owners to use their counterfeit pens to check each individual bill.

Coast Guard

[FL] Two Costa Ships Begin Disembarking Sick Crew Members in Miami (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 4:36 PM, Christopher Palmeri, 6400K]

Sick crew members aboard two Costa Cruises ships are disembarking in Miami after failing to find other ports that would take them.

A Miami-Dade Fire Rescue boat took several people off one of the ships, which was anchored away from port, and brought them to the Miami Beach Coast Guard station, a

spokesman for the county said. The passengers had left earlier.

Costa, a division of cruise-line giant Carnival Corp., had been struggling to find a port in the Caribbean that would accept those on board, before finally working out a deal with authorities in Miami, the company said Thursday.

As many as 13 crew members on the Costa Magica and Costa Favolosa who need medical attention will receive treatment there. The ships will remain three miles offshore until Saturday as Costa organizes flights to Europe and Asia to repatriate the majority of the crew members. A small number will remain on board to maintain the vessels.

[FL] Costa cruise ships anchor near Miami looking for 'life-critical' care (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 4:12 PM, Zack Budryk, 1762K]

Two Costa cruise ships anchored near Miami with permission from local health and port officials have asked for "life-critical care" for crew members stricken with flu-like symptoms, according to the Port Miami Unified Command.

"The U.S. Coast Guard is facilitating medical evacuations Thursday after requests were made by Costa Magica and Costa Favolosa for life-critical care ashore for multiple crew members presenting with respiratory symptoms consistent with pneumonia and bronchitis," the Command said in a statement posted to Miami-Dade County's website.

The command comprises representatives from numerous local and federal agencies, including Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Miami-Dade Police Department, Costa Cruises and the Florida Department of Health, according to USA Today.

The ships are not in port and lack clearance for entry, with the Coast Guard ordering them to remain at least 3 miles offshore, Roger Frizzell, spokesperson for Carnival Cruise Line, parent company for Costa Cruises, told the newspaper.

About 30 people on the ships, none of whom have had testing, reported flu-like symptoms as of Thursday, Frizzell reported. Between the two ships, just over 1,000 crew members are on board, he told USA Today.

"It is worth noting that ... in the last weeks Costa struggled to find a feasible solution to allow its crew members to disembark in the safest condition possible and organize their trip back home, several ports in the Caribbean had not accepted the two ships," the cruise line said in a release shared by Frizzell.

The situation has unfolded the same week Miami Mayor Francis Suarez (R), who has himself tested positive for the virus, issued a "shelter in place" order for the city, barring all nonessential travel.

Numerous ships have been forced to anchor offshore or in port due to the presence of suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases on board. Last week, the Carnival line offered its unused ships as hospital space.

[FL] 2 Costa cruise ships heading toward Florida with dozens of sick crew members on board (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 8:55 AM, Michael Bartiromo, 8943K]

Two cruise ships operated by Costa Cruises are reportedly heading toward Florida with dozens of sick crew members on board.

The Costa Favolosa and the Costa Magica had each departed from the French island of Guadeloupe, but disembarked passengers after the cruise line announced the suspension of operations earlier this month. Since that time, six people who disembarked the Favolosa, and two from the Magica, have tested positive for COVID-19, according to the Miami Herald, citing a company spokesperson.

Now, only 1,939 crew members remain aboard both ships (1,009 on the Favolosa, 930 on the Magica), and least of 30 are reporting flu-like symptoms, the Miami Herald reports. One symptomatic person claims he and several others have also lost their sense of smell, a phenomenon which doctors have identified as a possible symptom of coronavirus.

The ships had originally been stationed outside of Guadeloupe and Martinique, though authorities in those islands denied docking. A representative for the Carnival Corporation, which owns Costa Cruises, confirmed to Fox News that both ships are now traveling toward Florida, though neither currently has official clearance to enter the Port of Miami.

Carnival also confirmed that “some crew members on board” were experiencing influenza-like symptoms.

A Coast Guard spokesperson told the Miami Herald that it is closely monitoring the situation, and coordinating with federal and local authorities in assisting.

The Herald reported that the ships are due to arrive outside of Miami on Thursday.

In addition to the Favolosa and the Magica, the Zaandam Cruise Liner, operated by the Holland America Line (also a subsidiary of Carnival), is also currently sailing toward Florida with at least 77 sick passengers and crew on board. Holland America said it had deployed another ship, the Rotterdam, to meet up with the Zaandam to provide “extra supplies, staff, COVID-19 test kits and other support as needed. The two ships are scheduled to meet on March 26.

Carnival originally announced it would be suspending all cruise operations on March 13, for a period of at least 30 days. The company said it would be making a decision about extending the suspension on March 27.

Both the CDC and the U.S. State Department are currently advising Americans to avoid traveling by cruise ship.

[FL] Miami accepts 13 sick cruise ship crew members (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 6:24 PM, Staff, 1973K]

Thirteen crew members from two ships operated by Italy’s Costa Cruises line were allowed ashore in Miami after experiencing coronavirus-like symptoms, port officials said Thursday.

The 13 crew members — six from the Costa Magica and seven from the Costa Favulosa — were showing symptoms of bronchitis and pneumonia, similar to those of people infected with the COVID-19 virus, officials said.

“Upon consultation with the ship’s doctors, local, state and federal health agencies, it was determined as many as 13 crew members between both ships may need transportation ashore,” officials at the Port of Miami said in a statement.

The patients were transported to shore aboard small covered boats, as the cruise ships had been denied permission to dock and were ordered to remain three miles (five kilometers) offshore.

US Coast Guard and emergency personnel in full-body protective gear, including face masks and rubber gloves, helped move the sick crew members from the boats to infectious disease units in local hospitals.

There are nearly 1,000 people, all crew members, aboard each ship. Around 30 of them are sick with flu-like symptoms – but lacking tests, there is no confirmation that they are infected with the COVID-19 virus.

The Costa Magica has room for nearly 3,500 passengers, while the Costa Favulosa has room for nearly 3,800 – but the passengers were all dropped off in mid-March on the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Several of the passengers presented coronavirus-like symptoms once they landed.

Since then ports across the Caribbean have denied the two cruise ships permission to dock.

[FL] Sick Cruise Ship Crew Taken to Miami Hospitals (Boise State Public Radio)

Boise State Public Radio [3/26/2020 4:24 PM, Greg Allen, 9K]

The Coast Guard is overseeing medical evacuations of crew members from two cruise ships off of Miami. The ships, the Costa Magica and the Costa Favulosa, don’t have any passengers on board. As many as 13 crew members on the two ships are being transported ashore on small boats and taken to area hospitals. According to Carnival, the parent company of the Costa line, as many as 30 crew members on the two ships have flu-like symptoms. According to a spokesperson with the Port of Miami, those being transported ashore have respiratory symptoms consistent with pneumonia and bronchitis.

The two ships have not been given permission to enter Miami’s port and have been ordered by the Coast Guard to remain three miles offshore. In a statement on Twitter, Miami-Dade Mayor Carolos Gimenez said, “We’re a global community and cannot turn our backs on those requiring life-critical care.”

Another cruise ship, Holland America’s Zaandam, has at least 42 sick passengers and crew members aboard and is headed to Fort Lauderdale where it’s expected to arrive Monday.

Members of Broward County's Board of Commissioners are debating whether to allow it to dock.

CISA/Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity Experts Say Hacking Risk Is High for Mobile Voting (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 4:00 AM, Kartikay Mehrota, 6400K]

While Senators Amy Klobuchar and Ron Wyden push to expand vote-by-mail programs, a small group of companies argue for an alternative, one they claim will boost voter participation nationwide: mobile voting.

Jurisdictions in at least 15 states are planning to use mobile balloting in a limited capacity in 2020 to account for overseas voters and those with disabilities. Proponents of a digital electorate hope the coronavirus spurs adoption of their technology. The virus has provided an "opportunity," says Bradley Tusk, chief executive officer of Tusk Holdings and a supporter of mobile voting: "People are being told by the government not to congregate, and that's a pretty clear directive not to go vote." Tusk, who says he hasn't invested in any mobile voting companies, has spent "in the low seven figures" helping local governments cover the costs of adopting the systems.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology doctoral student Michael Specter describes Tusk's position as a "false dichotomy" that ignores postal ballots. He and his colleagues say mobile voting technology is unproven and opens the door to cyber risks.

A mobile voting app called Voatz has already been used in federal, local, and partywide elections in Denver, Oregon, Utah, and West Virginia. In a paper published in March, cybersecurity research firm Trail of Bits discovered 79 flaws in the Voatz system, including one that allows someone armed with the proper credentials to alter votes. The paper, funded in part by Tusk and Voatz, expanded on findings published in February by Specter and his MIT colleague James Koppel.

West Virginia was set to adopt Voatz for its May 12 presidential primary, before the state pulled the plug, citing security concerns raised in the paper. Voatz founder and CEO Nimit Sawhney describes the findings as a malicious attack by entities ideologically opposed to online voting. He says state and local election administrators aren't prepared to handle the burden of an exponential increase in postal ballots, which have been known to get lost and go uncounted. "The current crisis heightens the need to have an alternative method like mobile voting," says Sawhney, who created Voatz after winning a 2014 hackathon at South by Southwest in Austin. Despite the "animus towards us," he says Voatz is meeting with potential customers.

Security experts say that even if attackers don't change votes, their threat to a mobile election system may trigger questions about the credibility of results. According to J. Alex Halderman, a University of Michigan professor who specializes in election security: "We're at least a decade away, if at all."

West Virginia now plans to use Seattle-based Democracy Live to handle digital voting in its primary. With Democracy Live, jurisdictions get access to an Amazon Web Services portal

where users go to download a ballot or make selections online. Either way, the ballots are printed and counted by local election officials, in contrast to Voatz, which is an all-digital system.

For three weeks leading up to Feb. 11, voters in the Seattle region cast ballots online in an election for a board of supervisors position on the King Conservation District using Democracy Live. The vote was the first election in the U.S. to enable voters to cast ballots by phone, tablet, or computer. It worked without a glitch for the more than 3,000 voters who cast ballots, according to the local election administrator. Bryan Finney, founder and CEO of Democracy Live, says multiple states and local jurisdictions have since approached him. While Finney says he's discussing testing hacking vulnerabilities with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, he declined to disclose details of earlier tests.

Senator Wyden isn't impressed. "Security experts have shown over and over again that online voting isn't safe, isn't reliable, and is dangerously vulnerable to foreign hackers," the Oregon Democrat says. Tusk says that misses the point. "The cybersecurity experts will say it's terrible if people over the age of 70 are voting on their phone," he says. "But is that more terrible than them dying of the virus because they voted in public? I don't think so."

Experts see over 600 percent spike in malicious emails during coronavirus crisis (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 2:21 PM, Maggie Miller, 1762K]

Malicious emails that used coronavirus information to target individuals spiked over the past month as the crisis ramped up, according to a report from cyber threat researchers at Barracuda Networks released Thursday.

The researchers saw a 667 percent increase in malicious phishing emails that were using the coronavirus. These types of emails try to lure individuals to click on dangerous links or download attachments that typically include computer viruses.

Barracuda Networks tracked almost 10,000 attempted phishing email cyberattacks linked to the coronavirus crisis since the beginning of March, while by comparison the researchers only saw about 1,800 in February and even fewer in January.

"Although the overall number of these attacks is still low compared to other threats, the threat is growing quickly," the researchers wrote.

They cautioned that hackers were "taking advantage of the heightened focus on COVID-19 to distribute malware, steal credentials, and scam users out of money. The attacks use common phishing tactics that are seen regularly, however a growing number of campaigns are using the coronavirus as a lure to try to trick distracted users [and] capitalize on the fear and uncertainty of their intended victims."

The majority of the emails studied by the researchers were classified as scams, while about a third were brand impersonation emails, and 11 percent were blackmail attacks.

The researchers warned that as the coronavirus crisis continues, they expect hackers to grow increasingly "sophisticated" at using coronavirus to lure individuals.

The findings by the researchers were released a week after the FBI put out an alert warning Americans to be wary of suspicious emails, such as those claiming to be from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or those asking for sensitive information in exchange for coronavirus stimulus checks from the government.

The FBI recommended that Americans conduct research prior to clicking on or responding to a suspicious email, before donating to a charity through social media and before purchasing products online.

“Scammers are leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to steal your money, your personal information, or both,” the FBI warned. “Don’t let them.”

Hackers have increasingly been observed to be taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to target Americans.

Reuters reported earlier this week that the World Health Organization had suffered an unsuccessful cyberattack and was seeing a spike in attempted attacks, while the Department of Health and Human Services was also attacked by hackers earlier this month.

COVID-19 Phishing Attacks Have Increased, Says CrowdStrike CEO (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 6:20 PM, Staff, 6400K]

Millions of people are now working from home, logging into corporate networks and giving hackers possible gateways into troves of sensitive data. George Kurtz, chief executive officer of cybersecurity company CrowdStrike Holdings Inc., discusses what vulnerabilities he is seeing.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

Google sees 350 percent increase in phishing websites during COVID-19 pandemic, report reveals (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 1:42 PM, Christopher Carbone, 8943K]

Hackers have been trying to take advantage of the coronavirus crisis, with a new report revealing a 350 percent increase in phishing websites over the last three months.

Atlas VPN gathered the numbers of phishing websites detected by Google and compared them.

In January, Google registered a total of 149,195 active phishing websites, according to the report. That number increased to 293,235 the following month. When looking at March versus January, the number of total phishing websites skyrocketed by 350 percent, hitting 522,495.

Thousands of malicious websites are being created on a daily basis.

Rachel Welsh, COO of Atlas VPN, explained why the number of phishing sites jumped so dramatically during the COVID-19 outbreak.

"I believe that hackers identified coronavirus as something users are desperate to find information on. Panic leads to irrational thinking and people forget the basics of cybersecurity. Users then download malicious files or try to purchase in-demand items from unsafe websites, in result becoming victims of scams," Welsh said in a statement provided to Fox News.

Since more people are spending time online while they are quarantined at home, hackers and cybercriminals are all able to take advantage of the coronavirus pandemic.

Terrorism Investigations

[NJ] A grocery store threw out \$35,000 in food that a woman intentionally coughed on, sparking coronavirus fears, police said (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 12:40 PM, Scottie Andrew and Anna Sturla, 5551K]

A woman purposely coughed on \$35,000 worth of food at a Pennsylvania grocery store, police said. She likely faces criminal charges for coughing, one of the primary ways the novel coronavirus spreads.

The unnamed woman entered small grocery chain Gerrity's Supermarket in Hanover Township and started coughing on produce, bakery items, meat and other merchandise, chain co-owner Joe Fasula wrote on Facebook.

Staff quickly removed her from the store and called Hanover Township Police, who found her a few hours later and took her into custody, Police Chief Albert Walker told CNN.

Hanover Township police said the woman "intentionally contaminated" the food, and they plan to file criminal charges against her once her mental health treatment concludes.

Officials don't believe she's infected with coronavirus but "will make every effort to see that she is tested," Fasula wrote.

Despite considering what she did a "very twisted prank," Fasula said the store threw out every item she came into contact with and worked with a local health inspector to identify and disinfect areas she entered.

Ultimately, he said, the store disposed of \$35,000 worth of food.

"I am absolutely sick to my stomach about the loss of food," Fasula said. "While it is always a shame when food is wasted, in these times when so many people are worried about the security of our food supply, it is even more disturbing."

It's not clear what charges the woman may face when she leaves mental health treatment.

People who threatened to spread the virus charged with terrorism

The Department of Justice affirmed Wednesday that people who intentionally spread the novel coronavirus could be charged with terrorism.

Officials across the states are taking threats of spreading coronavirus seriously. Earlier this week, a New Jersey man who police said purposely coughed on a grocery store employee and said he had coronavirus was charged with making "terroristic threats." It was not clear whether the man had a lawyer, the state's attorney general said.

And in Missouri, a 26-year-old man was charged this week with making a terrorist threat after he was filmed in early March licking sticks of deodorant at a Walmart, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. In a video, the man asks, "Who's scared of coronavirus?" the newspaper reported.

That man's attorney called the action "immature ... tasteless and impulsive" but said it happened before the World Health Organization declared the virus a pandemic, the Post-Dispatch reported. That declaration "should not work retroactively and convert a tasteless and impulsive act into a criminal terrorist threat," the lawyer told the paper.

According to a Justice Department memo, the virus meets the criteria for a "biological agent," and threatening to spread it or "use Covid-19 as a weapon against Americans" could constitute a terrorist threat.

Grocery stores brave the pandemic

Coronavirus is changing the way grocery stores operate. Stores like Gerrity's are deemed "essential businesses" under states' stay-at-home orders, so they're one of the few public places residents of those states can visit during the pandemic.

But as customer visits to grocery stores spike and consumers continue to hoard supplies, industry groups fear that the US food supply will eventually dry up, too. A group that represents brands like PepsiCo and Clorox wrote to the State Department that panic buying coupled with countries cutting off exports to the US could exacerbate the public health crisis.

So stores like Gerrity's are taking extra measures to ensure their stores are safe. Some chains have slashed hours to disinfect stores after closing and restock supplies that sell out quickly. Others have beefed up security and installed off-duty police officers or private guards to manage crowded aisles and jammed parking lots.

The incident with the unnamed woman at Gerrity's showed employees why their strict safety measures are necessary, Fasula wrote on Facebook.

"The only silver lining to this travesty is that it gave us the unfortunate opportunity to test our protocols and demonstrate how seriously we take your safety," he said.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[MO] Suspect killed by FBI during investigation into plot to bomb medical facility (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 7:14 AM, John Bowden, 1762K]

A suspect in a months-long FBI investigation is dead after he was shot by FBI agents during an operation to arrest him.

FBI Special Agent Timothy Langan of the Kansas City field office identified the man killed in Belton, Missouri, as 36-year-old Timothy Wilson, according to The Associated Press.

The suspect reportedly planned to use a vehicle-based explosive device in an attack on a hospital in the Kansas City area. Many hospitals around the country have been overwhelmed in recent days by cases of coronavirus, with tens of thousands of cases reported across the country.

FBI officials told CNN that the case involved the bureau's efforts against racially motivated extremists, adding that the investigation was part of a probe into violent white supremacist movements and had uncovered credible threats made by Wilson.

"The FBI takes any shooting incident involving our agents seriously," FBI spokeswoman Bridget Patton told the network. "In accordance with FBI policy, the shooting incident will be investigated by the FBI's Inspection Division. The review process is thorough and objective, and is conducted as expeditiously as possible under the circumstances."

Law enforcement officials have warned in recent days that white supremacists and other politically motivated terrorist groups could seek to weaponize the novel strain of coronavirus, which has sickened more than 470,000 globally.

"Because coronavirus appears to meet the statutory definition of a 'biological agent,'" Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen wrote of possible intentional efforts to spread the disease in a memo obtained by CNN, adding that "such acts potentially could implicate the Nation's terrorism-related statutes."

[MO] FBI learned of coronavirus-inspired bomb plotter through radicalized US Army soldier (ABC News)

ABC News [3/26/2020 4:00 PM, Mike Levine, 2182K]

The suspected white supremacist who plotted to bomb a hospital facing the coronavirus crisis was in touch with a then-active U.S. Army soldier who wanted to launch his own attack on a major American news network and discussed targeting a Democratic presidential candidate, according to an FBI alert summarizing the case.

On Tuesday, as 36-year-old Timothy Wilson was on the verge of trying to detonate a car bomb at a Kansas City-area medical center, agents from the FBI's field office in Missouri attempted to arrest him. But shots were fired, fatally wounding Wilson, according to the FBI.

Ahead of Tuesday's incident, Wilson "espoused white supremacist ideology" and "made a threat that if any agent attempted to [search his property] they should 'bring a lot of body bags,'" said the FBI alert, distributed to state and local law enforcement agencies in the region on Wednesday.

The FBI alert also said Wilson had "shared instructions on how to make an [improvised

explosive device] with another ... Domestic Terrorism (DT) subject” from near Kansas City.

ABC News has identified that other domestic terrorism “subject” as Jarrett Smith, who was arrested in September 2019 while still stationed at Ft. Riley, Kansas, as an active member of the U.S. Army.

According to charging documents filed at the time in Topeka, Kansas, Smith allegedly planned to travel to Ukraine to fight with the violent far-right group Azov Battalion; suggested targeting then-Democratic presidential candidate Beto O’Rourke; proposed bombing the headquarters of a still-unidentified news network; and distributed bomb-making tips online.

Smith has since pleaded guilty to federal charges of distributing information that relates to weapons of mass destruction, and he is awaiting sentencing.

On Wednesday, sources familiar with the matter told ABC News that Wilson had been on the FBI’s radar for more than a year, indicating that the FBI’s probe of Smith led authorities to Wilson months before he sought to take advantage of the unfolding coronavirus crisis.

“With the current COVID-19 pandemic, Wilson decided to accelerate his plan to detonate a [car bomb] to cause severe harm and mass casualties,” the FBI said in its alert. “Wilson may have also believed the additional stress on society posed by the COVID-19 pandemic provided unique opportunities to exploit.”

The FBI believes other extremists inside the U.S. homeland may similarly “aspire to capitalize on the current health crisis,” but it is “unlikely” any of their actions “will rise to the level of terroristic actions like Wilson,” the alert issued Wednesday said.

During a conference call with police chiefs from across the nation on Friday, the Department of Homeland Security’s assistant secretary for Infrastructure Protection, Brian Harrell, and the department’s liaison to state and local law enforcement, John Hill, tried to assure the chiefs that the federal government is doing all it can to protect “critical infrastructure” in their cities and towns, including hospitals.

But even before coronavirus became a crisis inside America, Harrell offered this stark assessment: “Based off of current events and the frequency of events, I am convinced that this country is becoming more and more violent every single day.”

“I live my life as if the worst day is right around the corner,” he told Congress last month, adding that the U.S. government is “focused on preparedness and protection.”

[MO] Missouri man plotting coronavirus hospital bombing killed in shooting, FBI says (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 11:49 AM, Stephen Sorace, 8943K]

A Missouri man who was plotting to bomb a hospital was killed in a shooting this week after he “decided to accelerate his plan” due to the coronavirus pandemic, federal authorities said Wednesday.

Timothy Wilson, 36, was injured Tuesday in Belton, a suburb of Kansas City, when FBI agents tried to arrest him after a long-running domestic terrorism investigation, according to a statement Wednesday from Timothy Langan, special agent in charge of the FBI's Kansas City office.

Wilson was armed at the time. He was injured and died later at a hospital. The statement did not say how he suffered the fatal injury or give further details on the shooting incident.

A months-long investigation determined Wilson was a potentially violent extremist, motivated by religious, racial and anti-government beliefs, according to the statement.

He planned for several months to carry out a bombing and decided to target a Kansas City-area hospital using a "vehicle-borne" improvised explosive "to cause severe harm and mass casualties," the FBI said. The name of the hospital was not given.

Wilson took steps to acquire materials for the bomb even as the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force was surveilling him. He was picking up what he thought was a bomb when agents tried to arrest him Tuesday. The FBI said the bomb wasn't real, but did not provide further details.

The FBI described the incident as an "an agent-involved shooting" and said it will be investigated by the FBI's Inspection Division in accordance with agency policy.

The coronavirus has sickened 356 people and killed eight as of Wednesday in Missouri, according to the state health department.

[MO] Man Who Attempted To Bomb Missouri Hospital That Was Treating Coronavirus Killed In Shootout, FBI Says (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 5:08 PM, Allison Call, 566K]

A man who planned to blow up a Missouri hospital treating coronavirus cases was fatally wounded after a shootout with FBI agents.

The incident occurred Tuesday in Belton, Missouri, after agents attempted to arrest 36-year-old Timothy Wilson based on evidence gathered "at the conclusion of a long-running domestic terrorism investigation," according to a Wednesday statement by Special Agent Timothy Langan of the FBI's Kansas City office, per the Guardian.

Wilson planned the bombing months in advance and considered various other targets before settling on the Kansas City medical center, FBI officials

The medical center Wilson targeted has been providing emergency care to patients affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Wilson allegedly had begun the process of collecting the materials needed to build explosives and intended to use the explosives to cause "severe harm and mass casualties," the Guardian reported.

A months-long FBI investigation revealed that Wilson was a "potentially violent extremist, motivated by racial, religious, and anti-government animus," the FBI said.

FBI officials conducting the sting operation led Wilson to believe he was picking up a vehicle filled with explosives, according The Guardian. Wilson, who was armed, was reportedly shot after agents tried to arrest him.

After the incident, Wilson was taken to a nearby hospital where he was later pronounced dead.

The state of Missouri currently has 356 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and eight confirmed deaths, according to Missouri's health department.

National Security News

Pentagon orders US troops worldwide to hold in place to halt spread of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 7:08 AM, Jamie McIntyre, 570K]

DON'T MOVE AND NO ONE GETS HURT: Defense Secretary Mark Esper has issued a 60-day stop movement order to all uniformed and civilian DOD personnel and their family members who are currently outside the United States in a move aimed at preventing the further spread of COVID-19.

"The purpose is to make sure that we're not bringing the virus back home, infecting others, that we're not spreading it around the military," Esper told Reuters in an interview Wednesday.

The stop movement order will affect some 90,000 people, who were scheduled to deploy or redeploy, according to the Pentagon, and applies to military exercises, deployments, redeployments, and other "global force management activities."

SOME EXCEPTIONS: The Pentagon says the order does not apply to the drawdown of several thousand U.S. troops from Afghanistan, which is scheduled to be completed this summer.

Travel by patients and medical providers for the purposes of medical treatment

Scheduled deployments of U.S. Navy vessels that have been in transit for 14 days

People who have already initiated travel or are returning to their home station after temporary duty

CURVE NOT FLATTENING: As a Marine assigned to the Pentagon became the first case of coronavirus infection of someone stationed in the building, the department raised the Health Protection Condition level, or "HPCON," to "Charlie" at all DOD installations around the world.

"Some of the measures that that entails is going to maximum telework, cancellation of large-scale meetings, taking temperatures at certain access points within buildings," said Pentagon spokeswoman Alyssa Farah.

"Our curve is not flattening, and that's why we went to HPCON Charlie," added Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, joint staff surgeon. "We're stepping through this like everyone else is and adjusting based on the data as it's coming in and what we're seeing with our units."

The number of active-duty service members reportedly infected by the virus rose by 53 overnight to a total of 227, with 19 recoveries as of yesterday. According to a count kept by Johns Hopkins University, the U.S. is now up to 69,197 infections and 1,050 deaths, with a sharp upward trajectory.

AN INFUSION OF DOCS, NURSES: The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, the military's medical school at Walter Reed, has decided to accelerate the graduation of more than 200 military medical students and graduate nursing students to speed their entry into the military health system to help deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

"The students, who are all active-duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force or Public Health Service, will have completed all of their requirements to be awarded a degree and will be available for reassignment by their respective services," the university said in a statement.

"Our curriculum has a specific focus on threats like emerging infectious diseases and disasters that our military and Public Health Service forces are likely to encounter in the course of their careers," said USU President Dr. Richard Thomas. "Our students are uniquely prepared to meet and address the readiness needs of the Department of Defense and our Nation the moment they step out of our doors."

ESPER ON NPR: Esper tells NPR that the U.S. military is not positioned to deploy enough medical resources to address the scale of the coronavirus outbreak.

In an interview with NPR's Steve Inskeep that aired this morning, Esper said that while the military may have "a lot of capability, [it is] not as much, I think, as many people think."

"What we have great capacity for is planning and logistics and things like that, when it comes to supporting civilian authorities," Esper said. "But in terms of hospitals, we have a limited capacity, maybe a few thousand beds ... at most."

\$2.2 TRILLION RESCUE PACKAGE PASSES UNANIMOUSLY: The vote was 96 to 0 late last night as the Senate passed the largest economic relief package in U.S. history, an 880-page measure that spreads \$2.2 trillion among hard-hit workers, businesses, and healthcare systems.

"The historic measure mostly earned praise from lawmakers in both parties and their leaders, who said the sweeping bill will address the most serious of the economic and health consequences of the coronavirus outbreak with a huge injection of federal dollars and lending capacity," writes Susan Ferrechio in the Washington Examiner.

Ferrechio reports that Majority Leader Rep. Steny Hoyer, a Maryland Democrat, says the House plans to pass the measure by voice vote tomorrow, avoiding the need for lawmakers to return to Washington.

Navy brings aircraft carrier into port, will test thousands of sailors for coronavirus (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 12:18 PM, Missy Ryan, 12625K]

The Navy plans to test thousands of sailors aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt for the coronavirus after a spate of confirmed cases and will pause the aircraft carrier's operations at sea, officials said Thursday.

Acting Navy secretary Thomas B. Modly said that eight sailors had tested positive for the virus and that the ship was pulling into Guam, where it would remain pierside. About 5,000 sailors are aboard the Nimitz-class nuclear-powered ship.

"We are in the process now of testing 100 percent of the crew of that ship to ensure that we were able to contain whatever spread might have occurred there on the ship," Modly said in a briefing at the Pentagon. "But I also want to emphasize that the ship is operationally capable and can do its mission if required to do so."

Modly said the infected sailors, who were flown off the ship and were under quarantine in Guam, had mild symptoms that had not required hospitalization so far. The remainder of the crew would not be permitted to disembark in Guam "other than on pier-side," he said.

It is the first such measure taken aboard one of the Navy's 11 aircraft carriers since the crisis began.

In the last month, the carrier and its strike group have pulled into Vietnam and conducted operations in the South China Sea.

The Navy decision comes as the military scrambles to assist civilian authorities with the U.S. coronavirus response while seeking to confront the threat of widespread contagion in its own ranks — without disrupting its regular overseas missions.

Pentagon leaders have implemented a host of new restrictions, including a crackdown on military movements globally, but many troops continue to live, work and drill in proximity to each other.

As of Thursday morning, the Pentagon had confirmed 280 coronavirus cases among uniformed personnel, 134 among its civilian employees and 62 among contractors.

The Navy accounts for 133 of the Defense Department cases, including 104 active-duty military members, the largest share among the services. Modly declined to speculate about why that might be.

Navy ships seek to stop missile, drone and surface attacks -- all at once (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 6:14 PM, Kris Osborn, 8943K]

How would the U.S. Navy stop a massive, coordinated, multi-pronged weapons attack? Major power enemies might seek to overwhelm and destroy U.S. Navy surface ships by simultaneously launching a series of coordinated attacks -- firing surface-skimming anti-ship missiles, unleashing small boat attacks, conducting aerial drone missile strikes and launching land-fired ballistic missiles --- all at the same time.

Very serious concern about these kinds of scenarios, involving integrated enemy attacks, is inspiring the Navy's current effort to fast-track new ship defenses and counterattack technologies. Much of this includes interceptor missiles, air-surface-undersea information sharing, close-in guns and even ship-fired lasers.

However, in order for Commanders to make decisions about which defenses are best suited for different kinds of attacks -- they first have to see a threat, and know it's on the way. This is the reason why the Navy is quickly expanding applications for its emerging family of AN/SPY-6 radar systems. Not only will the longest range variant, the AN/SPY-6 (V)1, go on new Flight III DDG 51 destroyers, but the Navy is now networking its entire fleet with the systems with various kinds of SPY-6 radars ... amphibians, carriers, new frigates and more.

The new radars are much more sensitive, much longer range, and engineered to discriminate threats from one another. The current SPY-6 integration initiative, now underway at a rapid pace, is changing Navy surface warfare tactics, according to the Navy's Above Water Sensors Program Manager, Capt. Jason Hall.

Hall said multiple track functionality, signal processing and increased sensitivity provide "the heart" of how SPY-6 radars change tactics for ocean warfare.

We are looking at how you get after the increased capability that it (SPY-6 radar) brings, vs. the SPY-1 (current AN/SPY-1) legacy system. We have run the gamut as to what this radar can do," Hall said in January at the Surface Navy Association Symposium, Arlington, Va.

Hall further explained that the SPY-6 radar systems, combined with fire control and an advanced software-ballistic missile defense system called Aegis Baseline 10, set the technical foundation for the fleet. "We will be leveraging this combat system as we look at frigates, amphibians and carriers," Hall said.

Multiple-track sensing and detection is expected to bring the desired radar detection strategy, as SPY-6 radars combine air-warfare and ballistic missile defense into a single system. When it comes to application, the SPY-6 radar systems streamline otherwise disparate fire-control and detection technologies; the SPY-6 can cue short-range, closer-in interceptors as well as longer-range ballistic missile interceptors such as an SM-3. This shortens sensor-to-shooter time and offers war commanders a longer window with which to make decisions about which countermeasure is needed. This integration is precisely the kind of defense needed to counter a multi-pronged, coordinated enemy attack potentially combining ballistic missiles with cruise missiles, drone attacks ... and other threats.

The SPY-6 family moves beyond existing AN/SPY-1 ship-integrated radar system and, according to an interesting essay in "Microwave Journal," "handles 30 times more targets and has 30-times greater sensitivity than the SPY-1D(V)."

Marine Corps readiness outweighs coronavirus hesitation as first Pentagon case reported (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 5:40 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]

The Marine Corps said Thursday that it would not cancel large-scale formations and certain

readiness exercises across the service, while a Marine became the first Pentagon employee to test positive for COVID-19.

"If the pictures look different to you, son, if they look unique, it's probably because it's true, the Marine Corps is unique," Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. David H. Berger said at a Pentagon press conference in response to a question about photographs showing different practices across bases.

"We are mandated by law to be the nation's most ready force, and that's what I think you expect us to be," he added.

Berger and acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly said guidance had gone out to commanders to scale back exercises where possible but maintain readiness. That means social distancing measures are not universal.

"Our force has to be ready to respond when we're given the direction to do so," Berger said. "So, you need to conduct a training that's necessary to maintain your readiness."

Berger said the Twentynine Palms exercise scheduled for April in California is an example of a practice that was "nice to do" but not critical to preserving force readiness.

The number of positive cases of coronavirus in the military rose by 73 overnight to a total of 280. The Marine Corps alone has 31 active-duty cases.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Surgeon Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs said Wednesday that he expected Department of Defense cases to continue to rise, and the department raised its health protection condition to the third-highest level, "Charlie," Wednesday, coinciding with the Marine's positive test at the Pentagon.

"Our curve is not flattening, and that's why we went to HPCON Charlie," Friedrichs said. The staff surgeon said HPCON Charlie guidance includes "restrictions on large gatherings, includes additional social distancing. We're stepping through this like everyone else is and adjusting based on the data that's coming in."

Two other Pentagon employees are now in self-isolation after coming in contact with the infected Marine, who sought medical advice when his wife began to show coronavirus symptoms. The Marine's last day at the Pentagon was March 13.

Across all DOD personnel, 179 additional cases were reported Thursday morning to include 53 more civilians, 31 more dependents, and 22 additional contractors. DOD confirmed that five additional service members have recovered, for a total of 24 recoveries. A total of 27 DOD personnel are now hospitalized.

In all, the Department of Defense has now seen 600 cases of the coronavirus.

Modly said 37,000 Marines are forward deployed or stationed to respond to any threat to U.S. national security that may arise across the globe.

World leaders vow to coordinate response to pandemic (San Francisco Chronicle)

San Francisco Chronicle [3/26/2020 7:01 PM, Staff, 1670K]

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told leaders of the world's 20 major industrialized nations during an emergency virtual summit Thursday that "we are at war with a virus — and not winning it" despite dramatic measures by countries to seal their borders, shutter businesses and enforce home isolation for well over a quarter of the world's population.

The unusual video call in lieu of a physical gathering comes as governments around the world stress the importance of social distancing to curb the spread of the highly infectious virus, which has prompted closures, curfews and lockdowns globally.

The Group of 20 nations, which faces criticism for not taking cohesive action against the virus or its economic impact, vowed to work together. The group said they are collectively injecting more than \$4.8 trillion into the global economy to counteract the social and financial impacts of the pandemic.

Italy reports 6,153 new coronavirus infections, taking the global total over 500,000

MEXICO

Poor 'immune' to outbreak

Puebla State Gov. Miguel Barbosa argues the poor are "immune" to the new coronavirus, even as the federal government suspends all nonessential government activities beginning Thursday in a bid to prevent the spread of the virus.

His comment was apparently a response to indications that three-quarters of Mexico's 475 confirmed cases are related to international travel, and the poor do not make many international trips. The country has seen six deaths so far.

PAKISTAN

Nation faces its biggest challenge

By Thursday afternoon, Pakistan's cases had risen to 1,098, up from some 250 a week ago. Eight deaths have been reported. But many fear that the real numbers are much higher because of a lack of testing and, in some cases, suppressed information. Already, Pakistan was struggling to provide electricity, water and adequate health care to its 220 million people. Diseases that have been controlled elsewhere, like rabies and polio, still persist here.

BANGLADESH

Soldiers enforce 10-day shutdown

Bangladesh deployed soldiers and police on Thursday to enforce the start of a nationwide 10-day shutdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus in the densely populated country. The government also canceled all state programs, including parades to celebrate the country's Independence Day on Thursday.

LEBANON

Government extends lockdown

The coronavirus pandemic has managed to do what various wars in Lebanon could not: Close bars, restaurants and entertainment spots across the tiny Mediterranean country. The government extended a lockdown until April 12. Lebanon, a country of nearly 5 million, has recorded six deaths of the virus while 35 new infected cases were recorded Thursday, raising the total to 386 cases.

ITALY

Most factories shut to halt spread

Italy has become the first western developed nation to idle most of its industry to halt the spread of the coronavirus, citing the biggest emergency the country has faced since World War II. After more than two weeks of a nationwide lockdown, the government decided to expand the mandatory closure of nonessential commercial activities to heavy industry in the eurozone's third-largest economy.

CHINA

Beijing bars most foreigners

China says it is temporarily barring most foreigners from entering the country as it seeks to curb the number of imported coronavirus cases. The foreign ministry announced late Thursday that even foreign citizens with residence permits will be prevented from entering starting on Saturday. All visa-free transit policies also will be temporarily suspended. It said diplomatic workers will be exempt, and foreign citizens coming to China for "necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs" can still apply for visas.

BRAZIL

Governors defy leader's policy

Brazil's governors are defying President Jair Bolsonaro over his call to reopen schools and businesses, dismissing his argument that the "cure" of widespread shutdowns to contain the spread of the coronavirus is worse than the disease. Bolsonaro contends that the clampdown already ordered by many governors will deeply wound the already beleaguered economy and spark social unrest. He urged governors to limit isolation to high-risk people.

[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro on narcoterrorism charges, offers \$15 million reward for his capture (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 5:42 PM, Anthony Faiola, Matt Zapotosky, and Karen DeYoung, 12625K]

The Trump administration unsealed sweeping indictments against Venezuelan President

Nicolás Maduro and members of his inner circle on narcoterrorism charges Thursday, a dramatic escalation in the U.S. campaign to force the authoritarian socialist from power.

The administration also announced a \$15 million reward for information leading to Maduro's capture or conviction, an extraordinary bounty on a man still recognized by the Russians, Chinese and others as Venezuela's rightful leader. The move effectively turns the 57-year-old former union leader into an internationally wanted man, giving Venezuelans new motivation to act against him and adding a new level of risk to any travel he might attempt beyond the confines of his power center in Caracas.

Attorney General William P. Barr announced the indictments of Maduro and other current and former Venezuelan officials on charges including money laundering, drug trafficking and narcoterrorism. Barr and other U.S. officials alleged a detailed conspiracy headed by Maduro that worked with Colombian guerrillas to transform Venezuela into a transshipment point for moving massive amounts of cocaine to the United States.

The action, rumored for years, comes as the U.S.-backed opposition movement to oust Maduro has struggled to maintain momentum. The coronavirus has effectively halted the opposition rallies that have been a signature of the movement.

On Thursday, Barr accused Maduro of "deploying cocaine as a weapon" to undermine the United States.

"Maduro and the other defendants expressly intended to flood the United States with cocaine in order to undermine the health and well-being of our nation," Barr said during a news conference in Washington.

The charges against Maduro, brought in indictments in New York and Florida, carry a mandatory minimum sentence of 50 years in prison and a maximum of life. The U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, Geoff Berman, seemed to concede that U.S. authorities could not arrest Maduro in Venezuela, but noted that the leader might travel outside his country.

The charges, described as "a decade" in the making, recalled the U.S. indictment of Panamanian strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega in 1988. In that case, President George H.W. Bush eventually ordered U.S. forces to invade and capture Noriega. But Venezuela's far better-equipped military and Russian support for Maduro would complicate any attempt by the U.S. to take him into custody the same way.

The Trump administration broke diplomatic relations with Maduro last year and recognized National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate president. Barr said officials expect to arrest Maduro, but declined to say whether the administration would entertain a military option, as it did in Panama.

"We're going to explore all options for getting custody," Barr said. "Hopefully, the Venezuelan people will see what's going on and will eventually regain control of their country."

Also charged were the head of Venezuela's National Constituent Assembly, a former director of military intelligence, a former high-ranking general, the defense minister and the

chief justice of the Supreme Court. Some of the indicted officials — notably Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López and Chief Justice Maikel Moreno — were involved in plotting a military uprising against Maduro last spring, but failed to live up to secret pledges to move against the president. The charges suggest the Justice Department was pursuing their alleged links to narcotrafficking even as U.S. officials endorsed and encouraged the efforts of the Venezuelan opposition to solicit their participation in that plot.

The indictments are a sharp escalation in tactics that officials have gradually ramped up against Maduro since President Trump entered the White House. A campaign that started with targeted sanctions on individual Venezuelan officials broadened to measures that have locked the government out of the U.S. financial system. A U.S. oil embargo imposed last year has denied Caracas its single largest source of hard currency.

Maduro rejected the U.S. charges Thursday.

“There’s a conspiracy from the United States and Colombia and they’ve given the order of filling Venezuela with violence,” he said on Twitter. “As head of state I’m obliged to defend peace and stability for all the motherland, under any circumstances.”

Maduro is scrambling to cope with an outbreak of the coronavirus as Venezuela’s broken hospitals reel from chronic shortages of medicines, dilapidated equipment and unsanitary conditions. Barr suggested the pandemic had delayed Thursday’s announcement, but he said the time was right because Venezuela’s “people are suffering.”

“They need an effective government that cares about the people,” Barr said. “We think that the best way to support the Venezuelan people during this period is to do all we can to rid the country of this corrupt cabal.”

In a January interview with The Washington Post, Maduro scoffed at allegations that his government had established agreements with Colombian guerrillas engaged in narcotrafficking and kidnapping on the Venezuelan-Colombian border.

“It makes me laugh,” he said.

Prosecutors allege that Maduro and other Venezuelan officials have operated the Cartel do los Soles, or Cartel of the Suns, since at least 1999, corrupting Venezuela’s government institutions so they could flood the U.S. with hundreds of tons of cocaine. They say the cartel worked with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, to ship the drug by air and sea through the Caribbean and Central America to the United States. (The FARC, a Marxist guerrilla movement that engaged in a decades-long war against the Colombian government, officially disbanded with the Colombian peace accord of 2016, but more than 2,500 dissident members remain active.)

Prosecutors allege that Maduro led the operation, negotiating shipment quantities, directing the cartel to provide military-grade weapons to the FARC and coordinating with officials in other countries to facilitate the drug trafficking.

Barr said the Maduro government is “awash in corruption and criminality.”

“While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money and the proceeds of their corruption,” Barr said.

U.S. authorities charged myriad Venezuelan officials in separate drug and money laundering cases in federal courts in New York, Florida and Washington.

In one case, prosecutors alleged Padrino López took bribes to allow drug traffickers to fly planes in his country’s airspace without fear of being shot down. In another, they said Moreno fixed criminal and civil court cases in exchange for kickbacks — including dismissing a fraud case against the state oil company and authorizing the sale of a \$100 million General Motors plant in exchange for a cut of the proceeds.

U.S. officials and Venezuelan opposition leaders have sought dialogue with members of Maduro’s inner circle in an attempt to strip away or at least weaken his internal support. By targeting several members of his inner circle, the administration could push them to close ranks around Maduro, complicating efforts to isolate him.

The indictments appear to conflict with long-standing administration policy toward Maduro. For most of the last year, administration officials repeatedly emphasized their desire for Maduro to leave Venezuela for exile, where they pledged not to pursue him. “This is not about revenge,” one senior official said last year. “We would be happy to pay the airfare.”

By reducing the likelihood of a negotiated settlement, they could be putting Maduro in a position where he has little left to lose — and could increase pressure on Guaidó, who has enjoyed a level of protection under U.S. patronage.

In what appeared to be a retaliatory move, Maduro’s attorney general on Thursday announced an investigation into Guaidó and others for allegedly plotting a “coup.”

U.S. officials who deal with Venezuela policy say that the charges announced Thursday had more to do with Justice Department investigations — and the timing of grand juries weighing the matter in New York and Florida — than any change of position within the administration.

“This was not a policy move,” said one official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Venezuela’s opposition embraced the charges. Iván Simonovis, Guaidó’s security commissioner, called the \$15 million reward for Maduro’s capture and conviction, and \$10 million for others, powerful incentive for other government officials to turn against them.

“There is a price for each one of them,” he told The Post. “You never know what could happen with that.”

Trump administration officials have given strong support to Guaidó, notably in his military uprising last April 30. That effort quickly petered out, and is increasingly being viewed as Venezuela’s Bay of Pigs — a lost opportunity to oust Maduro that might not come again.

One of the Venezuelans charged, retired Gen. Cliver Alcalá Cordones, posted video clips

on Twitter proclaiming his innocence. He said he was living in Barranquilla, Colombia, with the full knowledge of the Colombian government, and had been cooperating for some time with both Guaidó and American officials.

"I'm at my home," he said. "I'm not running."

Last year, Maduro's former spy chief, Gen. Manuel Ricardo Cristopher Figuera, told The Washington Post that he had provided details on locations and activities of Colombian drug cartels and criminal gangs operating on Venezuelan soil directly to Maduro, but Maduro declined to act.

"I gave him a folder with this and told him, 'Look, this is the situation with the guerrillas,'" said Figuera, who turned against Maduro last year and is now in the United States.

"They never took action," he said. "You could say that Maduro is a friend of the guerrillas."

Analysts see differences between going after Maduro now and Noriega in the 1980s.

Maduro maintains a firmer grip on the Venezuelan military than Noriega had, and its officers have been less influenced by contact and cooperation with the U.S. military than were Panama's. Venezuela's military is better equipped with more sophisticated Russian weaponry.

Maduro's government also has more international support. The Russians and Cubans, and to a lesser extent, the Chinese, have stood behind him, and Moscow has turned the shipment of Venezuelan oil to circumvent U.S. sanctions into a cash cow.

Perhaps the biggest difference is that Maduro, although broadly unpopular, is still seen by some in Venezuela as the anointed successor of Hugo Chávez, the father of the socialist state, who died of cancer in 2013. Maduro's inner circle maintains control of the Venezuelan socialist movement, known as Chavismo, a still-formidable apparatus.

"You can lob a cruise missile and take him out, but you don't take out Chavismo," said Eric Farnsworth, vice president of the Council of the Americas and the Americas Society. "You don't really take out the regime unless the military lays down its weapons and says we're going to support the Americans. I don't see that happening."

[Venezuela] U.S. charges Venezuelan president for drug trafficking (CBS News)

CBS News [3/26/2020 12:13 PM, Clare Hymes and Melissa Quinn, 2394K]

The Justice Department announced federal charges against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his top deputies for crimes related to narco-terrorism, money laundering and drug trafficking, marking the most aggressive action taken by the United States against the socialist country.

Attorney General William Barr announced the unsealing of superseding indictments in federal court in New York and South Florida against Maduro and other Venezuelan officials, alleging they orchestrated a "narco-terrorism conspiracy" spanning more than two decades.

"As alleged, the Maduro regime is awash in corruption and criminality. Maduro and his other defendants have betrayed the Venezuelan people and corrupted Venezuela's institutions," Barr said during a "virtual" news conference in Washington, D.C., to reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus. "While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money and the proceeds of their corruption, and this has to come to an end."

In addition to Maduro, the head of Venezuela's Constituent Assembly, its former director of military intelligence and a former high-ranking general were charged in New York for their involvement in narco-terrorism. The chief justice of Venezuela's Supreme Court was charged for involvement in money laundering in South Florida, Barr said, and the country's minister of defense was indicted on drug trafficking charges in the District of Columbia. Fifteen people in total were charged.

The State Department is offering rewards of up to \$15 million for information leading to the arrests of Maduro and the others charged.

Federal prosecutors allege Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders worked with FARC, a Colombian guerilla group, as part of efforts to "flood the United States with cocaine."

According to the Justice Department, Maduro and the others charged served as leaders of the Cartel de Los Soles, which worked with FARC to dispatch shipments of cocaine that traveled from Venezuela to the U.S. through Central America and the Caribbean. The shipments were made by sea through "go-fast" vessels, fishing boats and container ships, as well as by air, by using clandestine airstrips.

The State Department estimates 75 unauthorized flights suspected of drug-trafficking activities used an "air bridge" cocaine route between Venezuela and Honduras and entered Honduran airspace. The State Department also estimates that by 2004, roughly 250 or more tons of cocaine were traveling through Venezuela.

The Justice Department alleges FARC and members of the Cartel de Los Soles paid bribes in exchange for access to commercial ports and data from air and maritime radar in Venezuela in order to ensure safe passage of the cocaine shipments, which benefited Maduro and the other defendants. Federal prosecutors also said the Venezuelan president directed the cartel to provide military-grade weapons to the FARC.

"Maduro very deliberately deployed cocaine as a weapon," said Geoffrey Berman, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

The Justice Department alleges Maikel Moreno, the chief justice of the Venezuelan Supreme Court, demanded bribes from those who appeared before him. In one instance, he allegedly authorized the seizure of a General Motors plant in exchange for a kickback, leaving thousands without jobs.

The charges against Moreno "demonstrate that the last line of defense in Venezuela has crumbled, creating a system without rule of law and without justice," said Ariana Fajardo Orshan, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida,

"In short, Venezuela has descended in a state of corruption, resulting in a massive treasure

grab for the rich and powerful," she said.

The decision to pursue criminal charges against top officials further escalates tensions between the U.S. and Venezuela. The Trump administration has engaged in a maximum pressure campaign against Venezuela, seeking to topple Maduro amid the country's ongoing political and economic crisis. Last year, the Trump administration froze all Venezuelan government assets and blocked American companies and individuals from doing business with Maduro's regime.

The U.S. and other countries have recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's rightful leader, and Guaidó met with President Trump at the White House in February. He also attended this year's State of the Union address as a guest of Mr. Trump's, during which the president introduced Guaidó as Venezuela's "true and legitimate" and said Maduro was a "tyrant."

Barr said the Justice Department has not been in contact with Guaidó about the charges against Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders.

Still, Maduro has retained control of Venezuela in the wake of last year's uprising led by Guaidó and clashes between civilians and Maduro's security forces. Maduro took over as president of Venezuela in 2013 after the death of Hugo Chavez.

The last Latin American leader charged by the U.S. was Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, who faced charges of narcotics trafficking and money laundering in 1990. Noriega surrendered after the United States invaded the country and was flown back to Miami, where he was ultimately sentenced to 40 years in prison.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro, a political foe, for 'narco-terrorism' (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 12:29 PM, Matt Spetalnick and Sarah N. Lynch, 5304K]

The U.S. government on Thursday indicted Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and more than a dozen other top Venezuelan officials on charges of "narco-terrorism," the latest escalation of the Trump administration's pressure campaign aimed at ousting the socialist leader.

The State Department offered a reward of up to \$15 million for information leading to the arrest of Maduro, whose country has been convulsed by years of a deep economic crisis and political upheaval.

The indictment, a rare U.S. action against a foreign head of state, marks a serious new phase against Maduro at a time when some U.S. officials have privately said President Donald Trump is increasingly frustrated with the results of his Venezuela policy.

Attorney General William Barr, announcing charges that include narco-terrorism conspiracy, corruption and drug trafficking, accused Maduro and his associates of colluding with a dissident faction of the demobilized Colombian guerrilla group, the FARC, "to flood the

United States with cocaine.”

But Trump administration officials are mindful that their chances are slim of getting Maduro or the other major figures in custody anytime soon, a person familiar with the situation said on condition of anonymity.

“While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money and the proceeds of their corruption,” Barr said.

“You are a miserable person, Donald Trump,” Maduro said in a state television address during which he dismissed the charges as false and racist. Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza said the charges were aimed at benefiting Trump’s 2020 re-election campaign.

Trump’s pressure on Venezuela, an OPEC member, has gone over well among Cuban Americans in South Florida, a key voting bloc in a major presidential swing state.

The U.S. government has previously lodged criminal indictments against members of Maduro’s family and inner circle. He and his allies have dismissed such allegations as a smear campaign, and argue the United States is responsible for drug trafficking, given its role as a leading consumer.

Maduro is already under U.S. sanctions and has been the target of a U.S. effort aimed at pushing him from power. He took office in 2013 after the death of his mentor President Hugo Chavez, a staunch foe of the United States.

Other Venezuelan officials whose indictments were announced on Thursday include Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, senior socialist leader Diosdado Cabello, and the chief justice of the country’s supreme court, Maikel Moreno, who was charged with money laundering. The U.S. government is offering \$10 million for information leading to Cabello’s arrest.

The United States and dozens of other countries have recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as Venezuela’s legitimate president, regarding Maduro’s 2018 re-election as a sham. But Maduro has remained in power, backed by the country’s military and by Russia, China and Cuba.

U.S. officials have long accused Maduro and his associates of running a “narco-state,” saying they have used proceeds from drugs transshipped from neighboring Colombia to make up for lost revenue from a Venezuelan oil sector hit by U.S. sanctions.

Trump denied that the charges were an attempt to take advantage of Venezuela at a vulnerable time when it is expected to be hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

“No, no. We don’t look at a weak point. This is a serious problem for over 150 nations,” Trump said in response to a reporter’s question. But he added: “Maduro and Venezuela, we’re watching it very closely.”

‘DEPLOYED COCAINE AS A WEAPON’

The indictments were unsealed in New York, Florida and Washington.

Barr dodged a reporter's question on whether Trump, who has pressed his aides in recent months for a tougher approach on Venezuela, was briefed in advance.

Maduro and his closest allies ran a "narco-terrorism partnership with the FARC for the past 20 years," stated Geoffrey Berman, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, who said the Venezuelan president "very deliberately deployed cocaine as a weapon."

"The scope and magnitude of the drug trafficking alleged was made possible only because Maduro and others corrupted the institutions of Venezuela and provided political and military protection for the rampant narco-terrorism crimes," he added.

The U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, Ariana Fajardo Orshan, said she sees signs of Venezuelan officials' laundered money throughout her area every day, from lavish yachts to million-dollar condos.

"This party is coming to an end," she said.

Asked whether the U.S. government was also considering designating Venezuela a state sponsor of terrorism, which carries further sanctions, Barr said: "It's really one step at time, so I really have nothing to say about that right now."

Thursday's charges altogether carry a maximum penalty of up to life in prison. Asked whether the U.S. government wants to capture Maduro dead or alive, Barr said: "We want him captured so he can face justice in U.S. court."

But he offered no indication of how U.S. authorities might get their hands on Maduro, who has endured more than a year of international pressure and on-again, off-again street protests.

Maduro's international travel could be restricted, given Washington would be able to request that he be handed over if he visits a country that has an extradition treaty with the United States. U.S. authorities can also freeze any assets he has in the United States, though such holdings are considered unlikely.

The Justice Department said that since 1999, Maduro, along with Cabello and others, acted as leaders of the "Cartel of the Suns." The name, it said, refers to the sun insignias affixed to uniforms of high-ranking Venezuelan military officials.

An indictment accused Padrino of using his control of the n military to facilitate cocaine flights to the United States.

[Venezuela] Experts: Venezuela Is 'Worst Case Scenario' for Coronavirus Spread (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 5:29 PM, Elliott Davis, 3020K]

As the case numbers and death toll from the novel coronavirus increase exponentially throughout the world, Venezuela – with rampant poverty and an already damaged health

care system – represents an extremely dire situation, experts said Thursday during an online panel discussion.

"We are the worst case scenario," said Dr. Julio Castro, a member of the COVID-19 Technical Experts Commission with the interim government of Venezuela. "We need urgent logistics, urgent help."

Castro and other speakers on the panel, hosted by the Council of the Americas, shared statistics that illustrate Venezuela's vulnerability. Castro noted that the country's health crisis actually began 10 years ago, with the crude mortality rate rising rapidly since.

Carrie Filipetti, the deputy assistant secretary for Cuba and Venezuela at the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, said the country is lacking in water, soap and electricity. In a country with an official population around 30 million, there are only 84 ICU hospital beds in the entire country, and 90% of hospitals don't have protocols for respiratory virus care, she added. A March 2019 U.N. review noted that more than 90% of Venezuelans live in poverty, according to Reuters.

"It's really everyone's business to care about the damage of COVID-19 inside Venezuela and across the entire region," Filipetti said.

Venezuela has at least 91 active cases of the coronavirus and no reported deaths as of Thursday, according to a tracker of cases maintained by Johns Hopkins University.

Other countries in Latin America have been hit harder; Brazil has more than 2,000 cases and Ecuador has more than 1,000. Countries like Colombia, Peru and Panama have several hundred cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

But Filipetti said that Venezuela's official numbers might be misleading due to the lack of government transparency and the silencing of local journalists. She said there might be as many as 141 coronavirus cases in the country.

Filipetti's comments come as the U.S. Justice Department announced on Thursday charges against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and other officials for narco-terrorism, corruption, drug trafficking and other offenses, according to a news release. Filipetti said during the panel that previous sanctions against the Venezuelan regime have humanitarian "carve-outs."

"The sanctions are not going to have an impact on curtailing the imports of any kinds of medical products or equipment," she said. "And certainly the indictments, which are against already sanctioned individuals, shouldn't have an impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance itself."

Filipetti added that the Maduro regime has previously politicized humanitarian assistance by using aid "only to provide care and support to its own supporters and to its loyalists," and the U.S. wants to ensure that any food and medical assistance is distributed impartially.

"That's one area where we wouldn't compromise," Filipetti said. "But we are committed to making sure that we're getting assistance there."

David Smolansky, a coordinator for the Working Group on the Crisis of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees at the Organization of American States, noted concerns for the 5 million people who have fled Venezuela, which he described as the "largest migration in Latin American history." Pregnant Venezuelan women began flooding into Colombia last year to give birth, overwhelming that country's network of hospitals and clinics.

Smolansky said that 75% of the migrants are in six neighboring countries, and the "vast majority of borders are closed in the region" due to the spread of the coronavirus. These people are thus "one of the most vulnerable populations in the region," he added.

Eric Farnsworth, vice president at the Washington office of the Council of the Americas, said that the migration crisis and the "collapsing" health care system make Venezuela "a particularly fertile ground for devastation."

"Every Venezuelan right now is facing the death," added Manuela Bolívar, a politician from the country's Miranda state.

[South Africa] South Africa braces for coronavirus lockdown (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 12:34 PM, Staff, 1973K]

South Africa braced for a nationwide lockdown Thursday, joining other African countries imposing strict curfews and shutdowns in an attempt to halt the spread of the coronavirus across the continent.

Some 57 million people will be restricted to their homes during South Africa's three-week total lockdown which begins at midnight.

Kenya, Rwanda and Mali are some of the African countries that have imposed restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus with the continent recording 2,748 cases and 73 deaths so far.

Although Africa's toll is far lower than in Europe, the United States and the Middle East, health experts say the world's poorest continent is especially vulnerable and the figures likely fall far short of the reality.

During South Africa's 21-day shutdown there will be no jogging, dog-walking or sale of alcohol across the country, which has so far recorded 709 cases, the highest number of detected infections in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nigeria's government warned Thursday that Africa's most populous nation could soon see an "exponential" increase in coronavirus infections unless contacts of confirmed cases are tracked down quicker.

Panic shopping

Hours before the start of the lockdown, panicky residents in South Africa's economic hub Johannesburg stocked up on food and other supplies with some large supermarkets running out of eggs and the staple maize meal powder.

Queues formed outside food shops across the country as people stocked up for the 21-day shutdown.

At a popular chain of grocery shop in Johannesburg's Douglasdale suburb some customers were loading trolleys full of lagers and wines.

One man tried to jump the queue saying he was only going to the liquor store and did not consider it necessary for him to join the long queue of other shoppers. He was politely told to be patient by a face-masked marshal who carried a jar of hand sanitizer to spray trolley handles.

Elsewhere, thousands of people crammed long-distance bus terminals to escape to the countryside to be with families, raising fears they would export the virus to the most vulnerable old who normally reside or retire to farms and villages.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has called for half-an-hour of national prayers on the eve of the lockdown.

He requested South Africans observe two minutes of "prayer, reflection or silent meditation" between 6pm (1600 GMT) and 6:30pm (1630 GMT) wherever they will be.

"These are challenging times. We are traversing a path we have never travelled before. There are many amongst us who are fearful, uncertain and vulnerable," he said.

"I call on our people to offer a prayer and a thought for the protection and healing of our land and its people from this disease."

As with other African countries, South Africa's lockdown will be patrolled by the military and the police.

'Fear and prayer'

Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula warned "if people are not complying, they (the military) may be forced to take extraordinary measures."

Violation of any of the regulations will carry a six-month jail sentence or fine.

Two men have already been charged with attempted murder for defying a quarantine order and allegedly going out after they tested positive for the coronavirus, exposing others to the infection.

"It's not a fairytale to say the law will act and act very harsh on you," Police Minister Bheki Cele said.

Moody's Investors Service warned Friday that the effect of border closures, commodity price declines and financial market volatility due to the pandemic will have "severe macroeconomic and financial impact on African sovereigns".

In one early indication of the likely impact of the pandemic on Africa's economy, rubber processors in Ivory Coast — the continent's largest producer — said they were bracing for

losses of around \$100 million a month.

"Right now, our biggest clients, in Asia, Europe and America, have closed down. The progressive impact of this will be a slowdown in rubber processing activity, even a close down," said Eugene Kremien, president of industry association Apromac.

"Our industry is already suffering, and it's just the start. We are going to lose 60 billion CFA francs (\$100 million, 91 million euros) each month, which compares with the 600 billion CFA (in income) we were expecting this year."

[Syria] U.S. Forces In Syria Tackle A More Complex — And Possibly Dangerous — Mission (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 4:15 PM, Tom Bowman and Marisa Penaloza, 4112K]

It's early morning in northeast Syria. It's sunny and chilly. Capt. Alex Quataert briefs his soldiers on the day's patrol.

"In the last 48 hours we've had two attacks on critical petroleum infrastructure," he says.

The convoy will visit one of those sites today.

A group of fresh-faced soldiers cluster around in a circle near their hulking armored vehicles, standing in the mud and gravel of this bare-bones combat outpost. It's a drab collection of tents and trailers and massive sand bag walls. He tells his soldiers U.S. forces were stationed at one of the attacked facilities.

"So we're going to have a show of presence there to deter any further attacks on these forces," Quataert says.

The mission for U.S. forces in Syria is now more complex — and possibly more dangerous. Though U.S. forces are doing a variety of things in Syria, 29-year-old Quataert says, "our primary mission is to secure the oil infrastructure for use of our partner force."

These soldiers had to quickly move east last fall when Turkish troops invaded cutting U.S. supply lines and threatening U.S. forces.

Capt. Quataert says his soldiers came under fire from Turkish artillery, and they nearly fired back. Russian troops followed close behind the troops and were able to take over an American outpost. For a while they had to sleep in their trucks before building their new outpost.

That all happened because President Trump essentially gave the green light for Turkey to invade, then tweeted that all U.S. troops would be leaving Syria. Soldiers here and in neighboring Iraq refer to that order as simply, "the Tweet."

But Trump reversed himself because military officials convinced him. The White House allowed hundreds of U.S. troops to stay and secure the oil fields for Kurdish forces.

Cat and mouse game

U.S. forces in Syria work with a group of Kurdish and Arab fighters, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF.

"They are the partner force that primarily defeated the physical caliphate — the actual ISIS-controlled area," says Quataert, a small, compact and serious West Point graduate from Rochester, N.Y. He says ISIS is not defeated yet.

"They still have a lot of fight left to give," he says. "ISIS has become a guerilla force. They are still active, especially further to the south."

This convoy rumbles north, through farmland that stretches green and unbroken to the horizon. One of the few landmarks visible is the tell-tale sign of an oil facility — a gas flare. It's a long thin tower with a tongue of yellow flame.

In recent weeks Quataert's soldiers have, again, come under attack from Syrian government militias, an attack that ended with one militia member dead and another wounded. The Russians routinely harass and confront the American patrols, provoking them with their erratic driving. The Americans block them or head them off. Quataert dryly calls it, "not necessarily a friendly situation."

What the Russians don't know is that the captain has a secret weapon.

"When we stop for the mission, I'm in the background and I don't even tell them I speak Russian because the whole job is to gather information," says Sgt. Vlad. He's a former Russian soldier who ended up in North Carolina and joined the U.S. Army. He asked that his full name not be used for security purposes.

Vlad says that lately the Russians have been playing tricks on the roads --speeding and jumping the blockades set up by the Americans, "and once in a while, you'll get lucky where a Russian vehicle gets stuck in the mud and they can't go anywhere. And the Russians keep going in and they realize we can't leave our brothers behind. They come back and we've got him trapped."

Despite the cat and mouse game, there have so far been no dangerous encounters. It seems neither country wants an escalation. Quataert says they aren't going to start World War III over this.

Safety, stability and security

The convoy enters the city of Dirik, a bustling town not far from the Turkish border. Children flash the peace sign and run along the convoy through city streets. Others wave. Many adults run out of their homes and stare. The soldiers are here with the goal of getting information from the locals, ask what they're seeing and hearing. And how safe they feel. The Americans fan out and set up a defensive perimeter near a variety store.

Quataert walks in and talks to the man behind the counter, Mohammed Abdullah Ismael. Kurdish music plays in the background and several customers are milling around the store.

Ismael is a 40-year-old father of five children ages one to 16. He's a short balding man, a Kurd with a sad face though he flashes a smile when he spots the soldiers walking into his store.

Ismael greets Quataert through an Army interpreter.

"How are you doing guys?" he asks. "When you guys are here we always feel safe."

What happens when the Americans leave?

"When the Americans leave there's no stability and security in the area," Ismael says, adding that his number one, biggest fear is Turkey.

That's because the Turks see the Kurds around here as a threat, allied with Kurdish separatist in Turkey.

Ismael's store is well-stocked with groceries, cleaning supplies and a wide variety of nuts. Large bins filled with pistachios, walnuts, cashews and many other Syrian snacks fill a wall. Two 12-year-old boys, including one of Ismael's children, help customers buying dates and other Syrian staples. The soldiers stock up on Mars chocolate bars made in Russia, Pringles and soft drinks.

Soon the soldiers move on. As they walk the streets, a man and his small child perched on the front of his motorcycle stop to greet them and thank them for their visit. The group stops at a bakery and at a restaurant too. Quataert asks the owners the same questions: have you seen Russians around, do you feel safe? People nod and smile.

Next, the convoy heads to an oil facility. It's a worn collection of pipes and tanks, closer to the Turkish border — so close you can spot a Turkish flag at an outpost.

It was here, before dawn on two consecutive days that a drone struck, dropping mortars, where soldiers from the West Virginia National Guard were helping secure the oil facility.

"They hit us with one mortar. It was around three o'clock in the morning and I got my guys up, we were out in two minutes," says Sgt. 1st Class Mitch Morgan, as he points to the destruction.

There's a hole in a concrete side walk the size of a Frisbee and several inches deep. Morgan, a detective in the civilian world in Charleston, W.Va., says that one of the mortars barely missed him.

"As we were mounting up in our vehicles," he says, pointing to the side door of a Humvee. "You see the paint missing?" Shrapnel hit that door, he says.

The West Virginia troops were ordered to leave Syria for Kuwait, shortly after the second attack. Other soldiers will take their place, Quataert says. The next platoon will bring along a handheld jamming device — the captain says it looks like the weapon from Ghostbusters. It can disrupt the drone's signal and force it to land. That way investigators can learn its origins.

The Kurds blame Turkey. U.S. suspicion points to the Syrian government militias, who operated just a half hour away. The mortars show some sophistication. At least one of the components was made with a 3-D printer.

For the next several months, Quataert and his soldiers will continue these patrols. Then they'll head back to Alaska and pass the job off to other Americans.

[Editorial note: consult source link for audio]

[Iraq] Rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone, US-led coalition leaves base (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 1:13 PM, Staff, 1973K]

Two rockets slammed into the Iraqi capital's high-security Green Zone early Thursday, hours before US-led forces were set to pull out of a second base in the country.

Some 7,500 foreign troops are in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition helping local troops fight jihadist remnants, but those numbers are being significantly drawn down this month.

The alliance is temporarily bringing some trainers home as a precautionary measure against the coronavirus pandemic and is also leaving some Iraqi bases altogether.

Those bases and foreign embassies, particularly the American mission, have been targeted in more than two dozen rocket strikes since late October.

The attacks, which the US has blamed on an Iran-backed armed group, have prompted fears of a proxy war on Iraqi soil.

Before dawn on Thursday, two rockets punched into an empty square near an Iraqi security headquarters in the Green Zone, where government buildings and foreign embassies are based, Iraqi security forces said in a statement.

An Iraqi security source told AFP the intended target appeared to be the US embassy, a sprawling compound a few hundred metres (yards) further south on the banks of the Tigris.

There were no reports of casualties, but other attacks have been deadly.

Coalition transfers base

Earlier this month, two US military personnel and a British soldier were killed in a rocket attack on Taji airbase north of Baghdad, that was hit again two days later.

The 5,200 US troops stationed across Iraqi bases make up the bulk of the coalition force helping hunt down Islamic State group sleeper cells across the country.

Iraq declared IS defeated in late 2017, and the coalition is now implementing plans developed last year to consolidate its troop presence across the country.

Around 300 coalition troops left the western Qaim base in mid-March, handing it over in full to Iraqi troops.

On Thursday, around 800 troops were set to leave the northern Qayyarah air base, used in 2016 and 2017 to help plan the fight against IS in the nearby city of Mosul.

"Today the coalition transferred Qayyarah airbase to the full control of the Iraqi security forces," Myles Caggins, a coalition spokesman, told AFP.

"The coalition had a small area inside the base and we will have several hundred troops departing this base and eventually leaving Iraq," Caggins said.

The departing forces include US and French troops as well as civilian contractors, according to a coalition statement.

In the coming weeks, they will also leave an expansive base in Kirkuk.

Rockets have rained down on both Qayyarah and Kirkuk in recent months, with one late December attack killing a US contractor stationed in Kirkuk.

The US has blamed those attacks on Kataeb Hezbollah, an Iran-backed group within the Hashed al-Shaabi military network.

The Hashed has been formally integrated into the Iraqi state's security forces but more hardline groups continue to operate independently.

'Same actors'

This month's attacks, however, have been claimed by a previously unknown group identifying itself as Usbat al-Thaereen (League of the Revolutionaries).

In online videos set to music, masked men carrying weapons rail against the "American Satan" and pledge to avenge "victims" of US air strikes on Iraqi forces.

The coalition, however, expects the group is an amalgamation of more well-known, anti-US groups.

"It's the same old actors, and they're organising themselves slightly differently," a senior coalition official told reporters.

The global alliance has simultaneously been redeploying training forces who had been coaching Iraqi troops.

Trainers amount to a third of the total coalition force.

British, French, Australian and Czech troops coaching Iraqi counterparts were being temporarily sent home as Baghdad had put a hold on training operations to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The US embassy on Thursday also said it was drawing down staff "due to a combination of security conditions and restricted travel options as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic".

At least 36 Iraqis have died from the respiratory illness and more than 380 other cases have been confirmed, according to the latest toll from Iraqi authorities.

But there are fears the real number of sufferers is much higher, as only around 2,000 of Iraq's 40 million people have been tested.

A spike in cases could overwhelm the country's dilapidated health system, ravaged by years of conflict and slim investment by government authorities.

[Iraq] U.S.-led forces depart Iraqi military base near Mosul in drawdown (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 8:26 AM, Thaier al-Sudani and Maher Nazeh, 5304K]

Troops with the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State began departing an air base in northern Iraq on Thursday, handing it over fully to the Iraqi military as part of a reduction of foreign forces in the country.

The overall drawdown will see coalition forces move into a smaller number of bases and reduce personnel. The coalition has not provided details or numbers.

Qayyara air base, south of the city of Mosul where Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014, is the second base to be handed over to the Iraqis this month. Coalition troops left a base at al-Qaim on the Syrian border last week.

"The coalition will operate from fewer locations, but remains committed to supporting our partners in their fight against Daesh (Islamic States)," Brigadier General Vincent Barker of the coalition said in a statement.

Coalition officials say the troop cuts and relocation of units into fewer Iraqi bases is because Iraqi forces are mostly capable of containing the threat from leftover Islamic State militants on their own.

The U.S.-led coalition has supported the Iraqi military since 2014 in the fight to neutralise Islamic State. A few thousand militants are believed to remain active, mostly confined to remote areas such as desert and mountains across northern Iraq. They periodically attack security forces but have held no major territory like towns and cities since 2017.

The coalition currently deploys around 7,500 troops in Iraq, including 5,000 Americans.

[Iraq] As planned, US-led coalition pulling out of 2nd Iraqi base (Washington Times)

Washington Times [3/26/2020 7:46 AM, Samya Kullab and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, AP, 482K]

The U.S.-led coalition on Thursday started pulling out of a second base in Iraq, in line with a planned drawdown of troops, hours after two rockets hit inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone.

The attack in the Iraqi capital, the seat of government and home to the American Embassy, was the first following a brief lull in violence from earlier this month. Iraqi officials also said the U.S. renewed a sanctions waiver enabling Iraq to import crucial gas and electricity from Iran, but with a shorter deadline.

The pullout from the Qayara airfield in northern Iraq is in line with plans to withdraw from bases across Iraq and consolidate coalition forces in Baghdad and at Ain al-Asad Air Base in the country's western desert. The plan has been in the works since late last year, a senior coalition military official said last week, and accelerated when Iraqi forces proved they were capable of facing the threat from the Islamic State with limited coalition assistance.

Coalition spokesman Myles Caggins said several hundred troops would depart the Qayara base in the coming days and that \$1 million worth of property would be transferred to the Iraqi government at the handover ceremony. Last week, coalition troops withdrew from the al-Qaim base on the border with Syria.

"Our partnership continues with the Iraqi security forces, but in the future you will see less coalition troops in fewer places with fewer bases," said Caggins.

France said late Wednesday that it will pull out all of its military forces from Iraq, citing the need for French forces to help fight the new coronavirus at home. Caggins said, however, that only French trainers had gone home over coronavirus fears and that France continues to provide advisers and air support.

"We think in some time, maybe some weeks, the French trainers will come back," he said.

In the Green Zone attack, the two projectiles struck near the Baghdad Operations Command, which coordinates Iraq's police and military forces, the military statement said. The command center is a few hundred meters (yards) away from the U.S. Embassy, which is a regular target of rocket attacks.

There were no casualties, according to an Iraqi security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

No rockets had been fired at the Green Zone since last Tuesday, when three hit an area near the embassy. That was the fourth rocket attack in the span of a week targeting U.S. interests in Iraq, after assaults on the Basmaya training camp and two separate attacks on Camp Taji. Both bases are near the Iraqi capital.

The first attack on Camp Taji killed three coalition servicemen, including two Americans. That prompted U.S. airstrikes against what Washington said were mainly weapons facilities belonging to Kataib Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Iraqi militia believed to be responsible for the attack.

However, Iraq's military said those airstrikes killed five security force members and a civilian, while wounding five fighters from the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella organization including an array of Iraqi militias, including some Iran-backed groups.

Iran-backed Iraqi militias have vowed revenge for the attacks.

Thursday morning's attack came as a state-imposed curfew to contain the spread of the new coronavirus was extended for a second time until April 11, according to an Iraqi Cabinet statement. The effective lockdown prohibits large public gatherings and has

shuttered all businesses except essential ones like pharmacies and supermarkets.

An Iraqi army statement said it was enforcing the curfew by allocating army units to assist police forces on the street and to cordon off areas if a flare up of virus cases occurs.

Meanwhile, three Iraqi officials said the U.S. will keep letting Iraq import gas and power from neighboring Iran without facing American sanctions. But the officials said Washington has reduced the deadline by which Iraq would need to prove it is making headway in becoming energy independent.

There was no immediate confirmation from U.S. officials.

The last waiver was granted Feb. 13 for a period of 45 days. Officials said they received word Thursday from U.S. officials that the next waiver would expire in 30 days. The U.S. has applied stringent sanctions on Iran that punish any country trading with it. The U.S. waiver enables Iraq to avoid penalties while paying Iran billions of dollars for energy imports.

The issuance of the last waiver came amid fraught U.S.-Iraq ties following an American drone strike that killed the top Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, near Baghdad airport on Jan. 3.

Iraq remains highly dependent on Iranian natural gas to meet electricity demands, especially during the scorching summer months when imports account for a third of consumption. Late payments by Baghdad for Iranian power and gas have resulted in interruptions in recent years. In the summer of 2018, these interruptions were a factor that led to destabilizing protests in the southern oil-rich province of Basra.

[Iraq] Trump Admin Sanctions Vast Iranian Terror Network in Iraq (Free Beacon)

Free Beacon [3/26/2020 2:00 PM, Adam Kredo, 118K]

The Trump administration on Thursday designated a vast network of front companies and entities tied to Iran's terrorism operations in Iraq, where U.S. personnel have been under near-constant attack by militia groups armed and funded by Tehran.

The new designations target "Iraq-based front companies, senior officials, and business associates that provide support to, or act for or on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), in addition to transferring lethal aid to Iranian-backed terrorist militias in Iraq, such as Kata'ib Hizballah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)," according to the Treasury Department.

The companies and terror groups have organized a series of rocket attacks and bombing on U.S. positions in Iraq, including one earlier this month that killed two American troops and one British soldier. At least two rockets struck inside Baghdad's Green Zone early Thursday, with no casualties reported at the time of this writing.

The Trump administration has been engaged in a growing conflict with Iran in Iraq since its killing of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani. The new terror designations are meant to disrupt Iran's financial networks and deal a blow to these militia groups' capabilities.

"Iran employs a web of front companies to fund terrorist groups across the region, siphoning resources away from the Iranian people and prioritizing terrorist proxies over the basic needs of its people," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement.

These sanctions do not impact the import of food and medicine needed to help Iran combat the spreading coronavirus, which has ravaged the Islamic Republic.

The organizations targeted in these new terror designations have participated in the smuggling of arms and money through Iraq's Umm Qasr Port, according to the Treasury Department. Many of the entities also have illegally sold Iranian oil to the Syrian regime and shipped weapons to militants operating in Yemen.

The State Department issued a sanctions waiver ensuring these new sanctions do not impact Iraqi imports of Iranian electricity—a move that highlights the administration's efforts to balance its tough sanctions regime with the need for humanitarian exemptions.

"The United States will not tolerate profiteering by malign Iranian actors from transactions that take place under the sanctions waiver, and we will remain focused on sanctioning those who do so for the benefit of the IRGC-QF or other designated terrorist groups," State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said.

[Iraq] Iran-Backed Iraqi Terrorists Claim 'U.S. Plot to Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic' (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 3:58 PM, John Hayward, 1973K]

Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Shiite militia group that killed an American civilian contractor in December while launching terrorist rocket attacks against Iraqi military bases, issued a statement on Wednesday accusing the U.S. military of using the coronavirus pandemic as cover to attack its own bases.

Iran's Fars news agency uncritically quoted the Kata'ib Hezbollah statement, which included threats to respond with "full force" to any U.S. move by attacking American "military, security, and economic facilities" across Iraq:

In the current difficult situation, when Iraq has mobilized all its resources to contain the spread of the coronavirus and the popular forces are busy helping the government in the battle, the PMU has been monitoring "suspicious moves by US forces and their mercenaries," who intend to exploit the pandemic and advance certain plots in the country, the statement said.

The US plans to conduct heliborne operations backed up by ground troops and fighter jets against positions belonging to security agencies and positions of Iraq's resistance groups, the statement added.

The statement further said that certain Iraqi military and security forces would participate in the operation.

Kata'ib Hezbollah also warned against the dangerous consequences of such a raid, saying

it would worsen the health crisis in Iraq and bring about a humanitarian and social disaster there.

The terrorists vowed bloody revenge against any Iraqis they decide are “collaborating” with the United States.

“The Iraqi side will be treated like an enemy, and its betrayal and crime will never be forgiven ... and will be heavily punished according to law,” the group said.

Unsurprisingly, Kata’ib Hezbollah is still upset by the deaths of their deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Iranian terrorist mastermind Gen. Qassem Soleimani in an airstrike the United States conducted to retaliate for the militia’s attacks on American positions and the unsuccessful siege of the U.S. embassy organized by Soleimani.

The Iran-backed militia group denied involvement in several more recent rocket attacks, including one conducted against an Iraqi police and military command center in Baghdad’s fortified Green Zone on Thursday. The command center is located only a few hundred yards away from the U.S. Embassy.

Contrary to Kata’ib Hezbollah’s coronavirus conspiracy theories, the U.S. and its coalition partners are actually withdrawing from Iraqi military bases, not planning major new operations. Coalition forces commenced a scheduled withdrawal from the Qayara airbase in northern Iraq on Thursday, not long after the rocket attack on the Green Zone.

“Our partnership continues with the Iraqi security forces, but in the future you will see less coalition troops in fewer places with fewer bases,” coalition spokesman Myles Caggins said.

Meanwhile, France announced it would withdraw all military forces from Iraq because they are needed at home to deal with the coronavirus crisis. Caggins stated that only French training personnel have gone home, leaving military advisers and air support in position in Iraq, and he expected the trainers to return as soon as possible.

Iraq’s Health Ministry has logged a relatively modest 346 coronavirus cases so far, with 29 deaths. Internal and external travel bans were extended until April 11 on Thursday to keep the virus from spreading. Last weekend, the Iraqi government deployed troops to prevent hundreds of thousands of Shiite Muslims from gathering at a shrine north of Baghdad in defiance of curfew orders and restrictions on large gatherings.

[Iran] Iran says has ‘no knowledge’ of missing ex-FBI agent (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 4:24 AM, AFP, 1973K]

Iran said on Thursday it had “no knowledge” of the whereabouts of a former FBI agent missing since 2007, after his family said he had died in Iranian custody.

US President Donald Trump did not confirm Bob Levinson’s death, saying that Iran had not communicated any news on the former agent, who would have turned 72 this month.

“Iran has always maintained that its officials have no knowledge of Mr. Levinson’s whereabouts, and that he is not in Iranian custody,” said Alireza Miryousefi, chief press

officer at Iran's mission to the United Nations.

"Those facts have not changed."

Levinson's family said that it had learnt that he was dead, although it gave no information on how or when.

"We recently received information from US officials that has led both them and us to conclude that our wonderful husband and father died while in Iranian custody," said a statement from the family.

The family said Levinson died before the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit Iran hard and led authorities to release thousands of prisoners temporarily.

Levinson is one of a number of Americans who have disappeared in arch-enemy Iran, but his case has been among the most perplexing, with his family until now insisting he was alive.

The father of seven vanished in March 2007 in Kish, an island that has more lenient visa rules than the rest of Iran, and was said to have been investigating cigarette counterfeiting.

But The Washington Post reported in 2013 that Levinson, who had retired from the FBI, was working for the CIA and had gone on a rogue mission aimed at gathering intelligence on Iran.

Iranian officials have repeatedly said they had no information about him.

Iran's foreign ministry said in 2018 that Levinson had "travelled to Iran at a certain point and then left" and that it had no information about anything that might have happened after he left.

[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iranian individuals, companies -Treasury (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 10:30 AM, Lisa Lambert, 5304K]

The United States has imposed sanctions on 15 Iranian individuals and five companies in Iran under a counter-terrorism program, according to a post on the Treasury web site on Thursday.

The sanctions were tied to shipping, trading and construction companies, as well as a chemical firm, according to the post.

[Iran] Hezbollah Joins Iranian Terrorists in Jihad Against Chinese Coronavirus (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 12:29 PM, Frances Martel, 1973K]

The Shiite terrorist organization Hezbollah announced it would invest in doctors, medical equipment, and clinics to treat Chinese coronavirus patients in Lebanon, joining a growing list of terrorist organizations waging what Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dubbed a "jihad" against the pandemic.

Hezbollah is a terrorist organization that disguises itself as a political party in Lebanon. It has deep ties to the Iranian regime and is active in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere in the region in addition to Iran and Lebanon.

Iran's Tasnim News Agency claimed that Hezbollah "is deploying 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics and 20,000 more activists" to help contain the coronavirus outbreak in Lebanon, where government officials have documented 368 cases of coronavirus and six deaths as of Thursday. It is not clear where Hezbollah, an organization that specializes in acts of violence to promote radical Islam, is finding doctors, nurses, and paramedics to hire for the fight against the Chinese virus. The 20,000 "activists" are presumably jihadists who participate in promoting the terrorist organization elsewhere.

"It is a real war that we must confront with the mindset of a warrior," Tasnim quoted Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, head of Hezbollah's executive council, as saying on television. "Our role is to complement the government apparatus and not to stand in its place."

Safieddine repeatedly compared Hezbollah's efforts to wartime actions and described the terrorist organization as "fighting coronavirus with capabilities initially put to confront war and aggression."

Safieddine notably made the announcement rather than the head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, who has mostly kept a low profile since the outbreak reached the Middle East. Rumors abounded this month that, in light of dozens of senior members of the Iranian Islamic regime testing positive for the virus, senior Hezbollah members who often meet with them have self-quarantined to prevent from contaminating more people. Some reports speculated that Nasrallah himself had either self-quarantined or become sick after being exposed to the coronavirus.

Hezbollah has been using the coronavirus outbreak for propaganda purposes all week, publishing videos showing alleged "Hezbollah health units" helping disinfect parts of Lebanon and Iran with water hoses, a method the Middle East Monitor noted that scientists have dismissed as "ineffective."

The mobilization of terrorist groups to confront the Chinese virus follows a dismissive statement at the beginning of the month from Ayatollah Khamenei, who himself at age 80 is in the high-risk group for life-threatening complications as a result of a Chinese coronavirus infection.

"The Coronavirus is not such a big tragedy and this country has surmounted graver ones," Khamenei claimed in a televised speech. "I don't want to say it's unimportant, but let's not exaggerate it either. The Coronavirus will affect the country briefly & leave."

Khamenei referred to the response to the outbreak in the country as "doing Jihad for the sake of God."

The supreme leader tasked the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization with close ties to Hezbollah, with running the nation's response to the coronavirus pandemic. The IRGC specializes in aggressive actions to

suppress dissidents at home and expand Iran's influence abroad, particularly in places like Iraq and Syria, where Tehran has used its profits from the Iran nuclear deal to empower its allies.

The IRGC claimed this month that its jihadis are working on a vaccine to fight the Chinese coronavirus and that it would engage in several "biological defense exercises," as Khamenei has accused the United States of deploying the coronavirus as a biological weapon, without evidence. IRGC officials are using the pandemic to fundraise for further terrorist activities.

Khamenei's regime claimed this week that it had control of the outbreak in the country and expelled the prestigious humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders (MSF). MSF said in a statement it was "deeply surprised" by its unceremonious removal as Iran had already allowed two cargo planes full of medical supplies to land in the country.

Iran is currently facing the deadliest regional outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East. Official government numbers – which even regional Iranian government officials claim are incorrect and lower than the real extent of the problem – show nearly 30,000 cases of coronavirus in the country and slightly over 2,200 deaths. The dissident National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which has kept its own daily tally citing medical sources in the country, claims that the death toll is far higher, and the highest in the world. As of Thursday, the NCRI says it has confirmed over 11,500 deaths at the hands of the Chinese coronavirus in Iran.

Both Iranian officials and dissidents agree that the first cases of coronavirus in the country were identified in Qom, a city of religious significance for Shiite Muslims. NCRI accused Chinese nationals traveling to the city of bringing the virus with them in a report on Thursday.

The Chinese coronavirus pandemic began in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in November 2019, according to scientists who have traced back diagnoses to that month. The Chinese Communist Party did not make the existence of a contagious disease in the country public until late January 2020, allowing the free traffic of Wuhan residents worldwide amid Lunar New Year, one of the world's biggest travel occasions. The Communist Party now denies that the virus originated in Wuhan and claims it was biologically engineered in the United States, citing no evidence. Iran has made similar claims.

[Russia] Moscow Starts Shutting Down as Kremlin Says No Epidemic Here (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 6:13 AM, Jake Rudnitsky, 6400K]

With the extent of Russia's coronavirus epidemic distorted by a lack of testing, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin ordered restaurants and most stores in Europe's biggest city to shut down for a week.

Restaurants, parks and stores except for pharmacies and food shops in the city of 12.7 million will shut down from Saturday for eight days, Sobyenin wrote on his website Thursday. Confirmed infections in Moscow jumped by a third to 546 over the last day and make up 65% of the country's total.

“The restrictions introduced today are unprecedented in the modern history of Moscow and will create many inconveniences for the everyday life of every person,” Sobyenin said. “But, believe me, they are absolutely necessary in order to slow the spread of coronavirus infection and reduce the number of cases.”

Russia is taking the outbreak increasingly seriously. President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday declared paid leave for most workers nationwide next week in a bid to reduce contagion and delayed next month’s vote on constitutional changes that could keep him in office until 2036 as he faces the biggest public-health crisis of his 20-year rule. The government halted all international flights starting March 27 after earlier limits on travel and visas.

While in Russia “there is de facto no epidemic” and the Kremlin hopes “to be able to avoid one,” Putin is cutting back on his domestic travel and canceled a planned trip to St. Petersburg, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on a conference call with reporters Thursday.

On Tuesday, Sobyenin told Putin during a visit to Russia’s biggest hospital treating coronavirus patients that the official numbers don’t reflect the “full picture” given a lack of testing in the country of 146 million people. Moscow’s new measures follow the closing of schools until April 10 and a recommendation that people over 65 to stay at home. Earlier in the month, Moscow banned gatherings of more than 50 people indoors.

[China] To Slow Virus, China Bars Entry by Almost All Foreigners (New York Times)
New York Times [3/26/2020 3:36 PM, Keith Bradsher, 23673K]

Worried that international travelers might trigger a second wave of coronavirus infections, China announced late Thursday night that it was suspending practically all entry to the country by foreigners and was halting almost all international passenger flights as well.

The announcement came after official Chinese data indicated that the country had almost completely halted domestic transmission of the virus but was struggling to handle a growing number of people who were infected overseas.

Foreign residents of China and foreigners with previously issued visas will no longer be allowed to enter the country as of midnight Friday, China’s foreign ministry declared late Thursday. The announcement represents one of the most comprehensive international travel bans imposed anywhere in the world, as governments try to slow the spread of the coronavirus that has already infected more than a half million people and killed more than 22,000.

Other leaders who have imposed travel bans, including President Trump, have tended to allow long-term residents from other countries to keep coming and going, even as they restricted most other arrivals. President Trump’s travel ban on China on Jan. 31 also exempted immediate family members of American citizens.

China’s more stringent travel ban has only a handful of exceptions, notably for diplomats.

The foreign ministry suggested that others who still need to travel to China should apply for new visas at Chinese embassies or consulates elsewhere. New visas would be considered “for necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs,” the ministry said.

“The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries,” the ministry added.

The Civil Aviation Administration of China issued a separate announcement ordering that each domestic or foreign airline only operate a single passenger flight into China each week until further notice.

Fully 90 percent of the people now coming to China are returning Chinese citizens, Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui told reporters in Beijing earlier on Thursday, and the sharp reduction in flights will make it much harder for them to go home. Even before the latest measures, Beijing had tried in recent days to discourage overseas Chinese from coming back.

The government has done so through measures like insisting that recent arrivals would have to pay for their hotel rooms during mandatory 14-day quarantines. Beijing has also threatened that the country’s labyrinth of government-run health insurance systems might not cover coronavirus infections acquired overseas.

The halt to almost all international passenger flights in and out of China will make it even harder for other countries to import N95 respirators, disposable surgical masks and other personal protection gear from China for their own doctors and nurses. About half the world’s airfreight typically moves in the bellies of passenger aircraft, while the rest travels aboard air freighters.

Previous, large-scale cancellations of passenger air services to China have already created an acute shortage of air cargo capacity over the past two weeks. Most Chinese factories have reopened.

Businesses around the world have been rushing to book space on the available air freighters so as to quickly refill supply chains that usually rely on ships. Many of these supply chains had emptied during the four to six weeks that much of the manufacturing in China was shuttered as Beijing clamped down on economic activity to control the virus.

The effectiveness of international travel bans is contentious. President Trump said on Wednesday that while many of his health advisers had opposed his ban affecting most travel from China, “if we didn’t do that, thousands and thousands of people would have died.”

Mr. Trump’s travel ban on China had been strenuously opposed through February by senior Chinese officials, who called repeatedly for it to be removed. Many affluent or politically connected Chinese families send their children to the United States for university, and sometimes for high school as well. The travel ban disrupted their educations.

But flights back to China have been jammed over the past week as the epidemic has

mushroomed in the United States and has started to spread beyond cities that receive a lot of international travelers, including New York, Seattle and San Francisco. Mr. Luo said that 40 percent of the Chinese passport holders coming back in recent days were returning students.

China's National Health Commission said earlier on Thursday that all 67 new coronavirus cases officially reported across the country on Wednesday were people who had been infected overseas, as were all 47 reported the previous day.

[China] China closes border to foreign travelers (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 2:18 PM, Doug Palmer, 2003K]

China will temporarily close its border to most foreign travelers, effective at 12:01 a.m. on Saturday, to prevent a new outbreak of the coronavirus in the country.

The restriction applies to foreigners holding visas or resident permits, as well as to those holding APEC Business Travel Cards.

"The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries," China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement released today. "China will stay in close touch with all sides and properly handle personnel exchanges with the rest of the world under the special circumstances."

The ministry said the ban will not affect those with diplomatic, service, courtesy or C visas.

"Foreign nationals coming to China for necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs may apply for visas at Chinese embassies or consulates," it added.

President Donald Trump banned travel from China in late January to stop the spread of the disease, and other countries, including the European Union, have adopted similar restrictions.

White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, in an interview on CNN on Thursday, blamed the scale of the crisis in the United States and around the world on China, saying the country failed to aggressively deal with the initial outbreak.

"The Chinese did not tell us early to mid-December that there was a crisis of human to human transmission with a new novel coronavirus. That has set the world back six weeks," Navarro said.

[China] China to Suspend Foreigners' Entry Starting Saturday (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 1:24 PM, Crystal Chui, Belinda Cao, and Nick Wadhams, 6400K]

China announced it will block almost all foreigners from entering the country starting Saturday, a recognition that most new coronavirus cases were coming from overseas now that the government slowed the spread of the disease among its own people.

Foreigners won't be allowed to enter even with valid visas and work permits, the foreign ministry said in a statement late Thursday, in what it called a "necessary and temporary"

step. Diplomats aren't included in the order, and neither are people coming to China "to engage in necessary economic, trade, scientific and technological activities, and for urgent humanitarian needs," it said.

The move mimics travel bans imposed by many other countries, which China had resisted when the majority of global cases were within its borders.

After President Donald Trump barred entry into the U.S. at the end of January by anyone who had been in China in the previous 14 days, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the step could "only create and spread fear, setting a bad example for others."

But China changed its stance after getting the virus under control domestically and as cases have surged in countries around the world, including Italy, Spain and the U.S.

Greater Restrictions

In recent days, China had imposed greater restrictions on foreigners entering the country, including 14-day quarantines on people arriving from countries hit hard by the pandemic. The virus, which originated in the city of Wuhan, has infected a reported 82,000 people in China and killed nearly 3,300 there. A massive lockdown on people in the worst-affected areas has gradually brought the spread of the virus under control, and some cities have allowed workers to return to their jobs.

China had already been drastically scaling back the number of foreigners who could come to the country. Foreign airlines with routes to the country are only being permitted a few flights a week.

According to China's National Health Commission, there were 67 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 on the Chinese mainland Wednesday, all of them imported from overseas, the Xinhua News Agency reported. There were an additional 58 suspected cases, all of which were also from abroad.

[China] China Temporarily Closes Its Borders To Foreign Nationals (Aspen Public Radio)

Aspen Public Radio [3/26/2020 3:45 PM, John Ruwitch and Merrit Kennedy, 1K]

China will close its borders to foreigners starting on Saturday, March 28, in a dramatic step to try to stop the coronavirus coming in from abroad.

The move is the latest in a string of tough steps by the Chinese government to combat the virus, which first appeared in the city of Wuhan late last year and has spread widely since.

China's civil aviation authority on Thursday slashed incoming and outgoing flights to a maximum of one per airline per foreign country each week. It also limited flights to passenger load factors of 75% or lower.

The government of Shanghai ordered most passengers entering the country to undergo a 14-day quarantine as of 6 p.m. Thursday. The capital, Beijing, had already adopted a similar measure. Previously, Shanghai had not been quarantining people without symptoms

arriving from locations deemed to be low risk.

It's not clear how long the closure of the border to foreigners — which affects those holding valid visas and residence permits — will remain in place.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Immigration said in a notice posted online Thursday that diplomats, plane or vessel crews, and select others with specific types of visas would be exempted.

"The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries," the notice said. "China will stay in close touch with all sides and properly handle personnel exchanges with the rest of the world under the special circumstances."

Foreign nationals seeking entry to China "for necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs" can still apply at its embassies and consulates, the notice said. Visas issued after this announcement will still be honored, it said.

China began to impose strict quarantines and limits on the flow of people domestically in late January, as the outbreak spread. The number of domestically transmitted cases had fallen to near zero.

But the government has reported an increasing number of imported cases in recent days. It reported 67 new cases of the disease on Thursday, all from abroad.

China had been gradually tightening screening and quarantining of inbound passengers. All passengers coming to China from overseas are required to be tested for the coronavirus.

The "leading group" overseeing China's response, chaired by Premier Li Keqiang, met on Thursday and called for tougher preventative measures at borders, state media reported.

[China] China bars foreigners, citing fears of imported virus cases (Washington Times)

Washington Times [3/26/2020 8:59 AM, Tom Howell Jr., 482K]

China announced it is barring the entry of foreign nationals holding visas or residence permits as of midnight Saturday as part of its efforts to prevent a flare-up of the coronavirus pandemic that started in their country.

The communist government says it got the outbreak under control and is worried about a rebounding effect, as cases soar in Europe and the Americas.

"The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries," China's Foreign Ministry said. "China will stay in close touch with all sides and properly handle personnel exchanges with the rest of the world under the special circumstances."

The coronavirus was discovered in Wuhan, China, in December. It killed thousands in

China before the epicenter shifted to South Korea and then to places such as Italy and Spain.

U.S. deaths reached a grim milestone of 1,000 deaths Thursday, after New York — the nation's epicenter — reported 100 more deaths in the last 24-hour period.

There are nearly 70,000 cases from across the U.S. though more than 600 people have already recovered, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

President Trump says his late-January decision to ban foreign nationals who'd been in China for the previous 14 days prevented a far worse problem.

Now, it's China that is setting up barriers, saying it doesn't want to squander the fruits of its draconian measures earlier in the year.

The Trump administration has blamed China for not acting swiftly enough or sounding the alarm for the rest of the world, as the outbreak struck Wuhan and its surrounding province at the start of the year.

Mr. Trump praised Chinese President Xi Jinping, however, for his efforts as China mobilized against the virus.

Mr. Xi called for global cooperation during a discussion by video link among leaders of the Group of 20 nations.

"We have mobilized the whole nation, set up collective control and treatment mechanisms and acted with openness and transparency. What we fought was a people's war against the outbreak. We have put up a strenuous struggle and made tremendous sacrifices," Mr. Xi told leaders, according to the state-run Xinhua outlet. "Now the situation in China is moving steadily in a positive direction. Life and work are quickly returning to normal. Yet, there is no way we will lower our guard or relax control."

On Twitter, Mr. Trump said he will discuss the G-20 talks during his White House press conference later Thursday.

[China] China's Xi offers Trump help in fighting coronavirus as U.S. faces wave of new patients (Reuters)

Reuters [3/27/2020 3:00 AM, Se Young Lee, Lusha Zhang, 5304K]

Chinese President Xi Jinping told U.S. President Donald Trump during a phone call on Friday that he would have China's support in fighting the coronavirus, as the United States faces the prospect of becoming the next global epicentre of the pandemic.

The United States now has the most coronavirus cases of any country, with 84,946 infections and 1,259 deaths. Hospitals in cities like New York and New Orleans struggle to cope with the wave of patients.

Xi's offer of assistance came amid a long-running war of words between Beijing and Washington over various issues including the coronavirus epidemic.

Trump and some U.S. officials have accused China of a lack of transparency on the virus, and Trump has at times called the coronavirus a “China virus” as it originated there, angering Beijing.

In the call, Xi reiterated to Trump that China had been open and transparent about the epidemic, according to an account of the conversation published by the Chinese foreign ministry.

Trump said on Twitter that he discussed the coronavirus outbreak “in great detail” with Xi.

“China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the virus,” Trump said. “We are working closely together. Much respect!”.

The World Health Organization has said the United States, which saw 17,099 new coronavirus cases and 281 deaths in the past 24 hours, is expected to become the epicentre of the pandemic.

CHINA CUTS FLIGHTS

Like U.S. hospitals now, China’s medical system struggled to contain the coronavirus just two months ago, but draconian city lockdowns and severe travel restrictions has seen China dramatically ease the epidemic.

Mainland China on Friday reported its first local coronavirus case in three days and 54 new imported cases, as Beijing ordered airlines to sharply cut international flights, for fear travellers could reignite the coronavirus outbreak.

The 55 new cases detected on Thursday were down from 67 a day earlier, the National Health Commission said on Friday, taking the tally of infections to 81,340. China’s death toll stood at 3,292 as of Thursday, up by five from a day earlier.

The central province of Hubei, with a population of about 60 million, reported no new cases on Thursday, a day after lifting a lockdown and reopening its borders as the epidemic eased there.

The commercial capital of Shanghai reported the most new imported cases with 17, followed by 12 in the southern province of Guangdong and four each in the capital Beijing and the nearby city of Tianjin.

Shanghai now has 125 patients who arrived from overseas, including 46 from Britain and 27 from the United States.

In effect from Sunday, China has ordered its airlines to fly only one route to any country, on just one flight each week. Foreign airlines must comply with similar curbs on flights to China, although many had already halted services.

About 90% of current international flights into China will be suspended, cutting arrivals to 5,000 passengers a day, from 25,000, the civil aviation regulator said late on Thursday.

From Saturday, China will temporarily suspend entry for foreigners with valid visas and residence permits, in an interim measure, the foreign ministry added.

Before the new curbs, foreign nationals made up about a tenth of the roughly 20,000 travellers arriving on international flights every day, an official of China's National Immigration Administration said last week.

As commercial flights dwindle, Chinese students from wealthy families are paying tens of thousands of dollars to fly home on private jets.

International demand for chartered and private flights into China increased 227% in March from a year earlier, said Shanghai-based private jet service provider iFlyPlus.

Notably, requests for flights from the United States to China rose 10-fold in late March, iFlyPlus told Reuters.

[China] Chinese Distributed Faulty Coronavirus Test Kits Throughout Europe, Reports Indicate (Free Beacon)

Free Beacon [3/26/2020 4:00 PM, Yuichiro Kakutani, 118K]

Thousands of rapid test kits purchased from China by European countries have proven to be defective, according to local reports.

In Spain, which currently has the fourth-highest number of coronavirus cases in the world, the government purchased 640,000 rapid test kits from China and South Korea as it fights the pandemic. Experts soon discovered, however, that the tests it purchased from Chinese company Bioeasy were only correctly identifying coronavirus cases 30 percent of the time, according to Spain's El Pais.

The Czech Republic also purchased 150,000 rapid test kits from China, and have likewise found problems. One doctor using the tests found that 80 percent of the kits were faulty and has reverted back to the conventional lab tests, which are significantly slower to process.

The Spanish government confirmed that the tests did not meet its standards and returned them. The Czech Republic is standing by its purchase, arguing that the kits do work and methodological errors are to blame for the high error rate identified by the doctor.

The Chinese government has distanced itself from reports of defective tests. The Chinese embassy in Spain said the regime did not donate the defective test kits, adding that it has not approved Bioeasy to sell its coronavirus test kits.

The frequent errors of Chinese test kits come as the country's regime receives praise around the world for its efforts to assist European countries afflicted with the coronavirus, which originated in China. In the Washington Post, former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul wrote that the United States should use Chinese efforts as a model.

"Framing Chinese and U.S. international efforts in response to the coronavirus in zero-sum terms is counterproductive," McFaul, a contributing columnist for the Post, wrote. "Chinese

aid to Europe does not undermine American interests. U.S. officials should applaud Chinese humanitarian assistance to Italy, and then provide the same for our ailing ally."

[China] U.S. Officials Push for Expelling Suspected Chinese Spies at Media Outlets (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 6:02 PM, Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, 23673K]

As China moves forward with expelling almost all American journalists from three major American newspapers, Trump administration officials have intensified discussions over whether to evict employees of Chinese media outlets who they say mainly act as spies.

The action is under consideration because some U.S. officials want to retaliate against China in a new conflict that has revolved around news organizations and is being fueled by hostility over the coronavirus pandemic.

Since the virus began spreading across the United States, Washington and Beijing have waged a global information war over the outbreak. President Trump and his aides are trying to pin responsibility on China, where Communist Party officials initially covered up the dangers of the virus as it was first discovered. Mr. Trump, though, has been criticized for vast failures in the American response.

Some American intelligence officials have pushed for years to expel employees of Chinese media organizations who they say mainly file intelligence reports. The officials now see an opening to make a strong case after Beijing abruptly announced this month that it would expel almost all American citizens who report from mainland China for The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.

China also demanded those organizations, as well as Voice of America and Time magazine, turn over information on employees, budgets, assets and other operational details.

American officials view the state-run outlets in China as a potent threat in the growing strategic rivalry between the two superpowers, both because it disseminates propaganda around the world and because of its ability to provide cover for intelligence operatives.

"Propaganda outlets that report to the Chinese Communist Party are foreign agents, not 'journalists,'" the State Department spokeswoman, Morgan Ortagus, said on Twitter on Thursday.

"Even General Secretary Xi says they 'must speak for the Party,'" she added, referring to remarks that President Xi Jinping of China made in 2016 as he toured the headquarters of state-run media organizations. In recent days, Ms. Ortagus and Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, have engaged in an information duel on Twitter.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has insisted on using the term "Wuhan virus" to refer to the coronavirus, which ignited tensions at an online meeting Wednesday of foreign ministers of the Group of 7 nations. Mr. Trump has used the term "Chinese virus" despite widespread criticism that the label is racist and encourages attacks on Asian-Americans. Meanwhile, a

spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, has pushed the conspiracy theory that the U.S. Army might have taken the virus to Wuhan, where the pandemic began.

Against that backdrop, some American officials want to move quickly against Chinese intelligence operatives. American counterintelligence officials have more closely scrutinized the work of Chinese diplomats, journalists, scientists and others in the United States, though some critics have denounced this as a new “red scare.” In September, the United States secretly expelled two employees of the Chinese Embassy in Washington who had been caught driving on a sensitive military base in Virginia with their wives; it appeared to be the first expulsion of Chinese diplomats accused of espionage in more than 30 years.

Any expulsion of Chinese employees at media outlets accused of conducting intelligence work could include ones based at the United Nations, where China has a permanent seat on the Security Council, according to an intelligence official familiar with the plans. Most Chinese employees of state-run organizations work in Washington for large organizations.

Some Chinese intelligence operatives pose as journalists at those agencies and at smaller state-run outlets, using “nonofficial cover,” in the parlance of spies, experts on Chinese espionage say. Some American officials have spoken of entirely shutting down those small outfits as well as any Chinese organization or company accused of being a front for intelligence work.

American officials declined to estimate the number of Chinese intelligence operatives in the United States they say use journalism employment as a cover or the number they would like to expel.

The F.B.I. referred questions to the State Department, which said it does not comment on intelligence matters. The Chinese Embassy did not reply to a request for comment.

American intelligence officials have long asserted that many Chinese journalists abroad play a hybrid role in which they not only provide reports for publications and broadcasters in China, but also give information to Beijing’s intelligence apparatus.

The action now under consideration would try to avoid evicting most of those who play a hybrid role and focus more on people the U.S. government believes are mainly spies, according to intelligence officials. The journalistic reports filed by those Chinese citizens are simply a screen for covertly collecting intelligence, the officials said.

The United States is scrutinizing most closely China Central Television, the main state-run network that has extensive operations overseas, the intelligence official said. It has an arm, China Global Television Network, that runs its own operations and broadcasts in foreign languages.

The main Chinese overseas spy agency, the Ministry of State Security, has operatives at various media outlets, say intelligence officials and experts on Chinese espionage. The People’s Liberation Army also has intelligence operatives overseas with media cover.

American officials were infuriated by China’s announcement of the new wave of expulsions of American journalists, who are not spies. The officials saw the action as part of Beijing’s

attempts to censor reporting about the government's missteps over the coronavirus outbreak.

The officials are now seeking a way to retaliate beyond continuing a cycle of retribution that harms people who practice actual journalism. Taking the fight to the intelligence services would do that, they say, as well as allowing the Americans to avoid criticism that they are clamping down on press freedoms.

One option that some officials have discussed that does not involve spies is limiting the reach and distribution of the Chinese outlets in the United States, whether those are television networks or newspapers. But that runs into the thorny issue of press freedoms. For years, the Chinese government has blocked online access to major foreign news websites and apps, and it often censors broadcasts by international television networks.

The wave of expulsions of journalists in the two countries began when China announced on Feb. 19 it would evict three Wall Street Journal reporters, the first outright expulsions of foreign journalists since 1998.

After that announcement, which came a day after the Trump administration imposed new rules on five Chinese state-run media organizations, American officials grappled with how to respond. Some raised the idea of expelling Chinese state media employees who did intelligence work. Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national security adviser and a former Wall Street Journal reporter based in China, led a meeting on Feb. 24 to discuss options.

The administration announced on March 2 it was issuing new visa quotas on Chinese citizens working at five Chinese media organizations. In total, they could employ only 100 Chinese citizens in their American operations. That would result in the de facto expulsion of about 60.

A senior State Department official said last week that the "Chinese government" had met a deadline of March 13 to identify employees who would remain at the organizations. It was unlikely that Chinese officials had selected intelligence operatives to send back to China, American officials said.

China retaliated against the new quotas by expelling journalists at The Times, The Journal and The Post, affecting at least 13 Americans, even though those newspapers are not tied to the U.S. government.

"Did they really believe they can silence a country like China without any consequences?" Hua Chunying, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday.

"China clearly no longer sees Western journalists as useful or critical to getting its message out," said Daniel M. Kliman, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a former Asia policy official in the Pentagon. "With the expansion of state-run organizations globally, it seems they don't need Western journalists around."

On Tuesday, the publishers of the three newspapers issued an open letter to China.

The decision by Beijing to expel the journalists during a pandemic, they said, was "uniquely

damaging and reckless as the world continues the struggle to control this disease, a struggle that will require the free flow of reliable news and information.”

[China] Senior administration officials agree to limit Huawei’s access to chips: report (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 1:22 PM, Maggie Miller, 1762K]

Senior Trump administration officials have come to an agreement to limit the access of embattled Chinese telecommunications group Huawei to the global chip supply chain, Reuters reported Thursday.

The new rule would require foreign companies that use American chip-making equipment to obtain a license from the U.S. before being allowed to sell this equipment to Huawei, which is the largest 5G equipment manufacturer in the world.

According to Reuters, the decision was made to alter the Foreign Direct Product Rule to reflect the change around Huawei following a meeting on Wednesday between officials from various federal agencies.

Both the White House and the Commerce Department declined to comment to The Hill, while a spokesperson for Huawei did not immediately have a comment.

The move against Huawei follows months of pushback against the company from both the Trump administration and bipartisan members of Congress.

Concerns have largely stemmed from a Chinese intelligence law that requires Chinese companies and citizens to participate in state intelligence work and share data if requested.

The Commerce Department added Huawei to its “entity list” last year, effectively blacklisting the company, while the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) unanimously voted in November to classify Huawei as a national security threat and banned U.S. telecom groups from using FCC funds to purchase Huawei equipment.

More recently, President Trump signed into law a raft of measures intended to limit Huawei’s use in the U.S., including a law that bans use of any federal funds to purchase Huawei equipment. Justice Department prosecutors brought charges against Huawei last month for stealing trade secrets and conspiracy to commit racketeering.

Huawei has consistently pushed back against charges brought against it and has filed a lawsuit against the FCC.

[China] U.S. prepares crackdown on Huawei’s global chip supply - sources (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 2:46 PM, Karen Freifeld, David Shepardson, and Alexandra Alper, 5304K]

Senior officials in the Trump administration agreed to new measures to restrict the global supply of chips to China’s Huawei Technologies, sources familiar with the matter said, as the White House ramps up criticism of China over coronavirus.

The move comes as ties between Washington and Beijing grow more strained, with both

sides trading barbs over who is to blame for the spread of the disease and an escalating tit-for-tat over the expulsion of journalists from both countries.

Under the proposed rule change, foreign companies that use U.S. chipmaking equipment would be required to obtain a U.S. license before supplying certain chips to Huawei. The Chinese telecoms company was blacklisted last year, limiting the company's suppliers.

One of the sources said the rule-change is aimed at curbing sales of chips to Huawei by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co, a major producer of chips for Huawei's HiSilicon unit, as well as the world's largest contract maker.

It is unclear if President Donald Trump, who appeared to push back against the proposal last month, will sign off on the rule change. But if finalized, it could deal a blow to Huawei and TSMC, hurting U.S. companies as well, sources said.

"This is going to have a far more negative impact on U.S. companies than it will on Huawei, because Huawei will develop their own supply chain," trade lawyer Doug Jacobson said. "Ultimately, Huawei will find alternatives."

A person familiar with the matter said the U.S. government has gone to great lengths to ensure impacts on U.S. industry will be minimal.

The move could anger Beijing, which has spoken out against a global campaign by the United States to compel allies to exclude Huawei from their 5G networks over spying concerns. Huawei has denied the allegations.

Most chip manufacturers rely on equipment produced by U.S. companies such as KLA Corp, Lam Research and Applied Materials, according to a report last year from China's Everbright Securities.

The equipment makers did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The decision came when U.S. officials from various agencies met and agreed on Wednesday to alter the Foreign Direct Product Rule, which subjects some foreign-made goods based on U.S. technology or software to U.S. regulations, the sources said.

Attendees likely included top officials from the National Security Council and the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, Energy and Commerce. None of them responded to requests for comment.

Huawei declined to comment. TSMC said it "is unable to answer hypothetical questions and does not comment on any individual customer."

One of the sources said the rule-change is aimed at restricting the sale of sophisticated chips to Huawei and not older, more commoditized and widely available semiconductors.

"It's impossible to tell the impact until we know the technical thresholds that may apply," said Washington lawyer Kevin Wolf, a former Commerce Department official.

“Different foundries make different chips at different capabilities so you wouldn’t know which foundries are affected the most until you know the technical thresholds,” he said.

U.S.-CHINA TENSIONS

The United States placed Huawei on a blacklist in May last year, citing national security concerns. The entity listing, as it is known, allowed the U.S. government to restrict sales of U.S.-made goods to the company and some more limited items made abroad that contain U.S. technology.

But under current regulations, key foreign supply chains remain beyond the reach of U.S. authorities, fueling frustration among China hawks in the administration and prompting a push to toughen up export rules for the company, Reuters reported in November.

The hawks’ efforts appeared in jeopardy last month when Trump reacted strongly against the proposed crackdown, after Reuters and the Wall Street Journal reported that a move to block global chip sales to Huawei was under consideration.

“I want our companies to be allowed to do business. I mean, things are put on my desk that have nothing to do with national security, including with chipmakers and various others. So we’re going to give it up, and what will happen? They’ll make those chips in a different country or they’ll make them in China or someplace else,” Trump said.

Presidential Tweets

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet1 [3/26/2020 11:36 AM] I will be doing a News Conference live from the @WhiteHouse at 5:00 P.M. (Eastern) to discuss the mtg of the G20 Leaders that took place this morning at 7:55 A.M. by World Teleconference. Also, my 12:00 P.M. Teleconference call w/50 Governors, plus Territories, will be discussed.

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet2 [3/26/2020 4:57 PM] Will be going out in 10 minutes for the press conference.

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet3 [3/26/2020 7:06 PM] Our great Oil & Gas industry is under under seige after having one of the best years in recorded history. It will get better than ever as soon as our Country starts up again. Vital that it does for our National Security!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet4 [3/26/2020 7:50 PM] The world is at war with a hidden enemy. WE WILL WIN!
[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet5 [3/26/2020 9:05 PM] Will be interviewed on @seanhannity at 9:10 P.M. @FoxNews

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet6 [3/27/2020 1:19 AM] Just finished a very good conversation with President Xi of China. Discussed in great detail the CoronaVirus that is ravaging large parts of our Planet. China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the Virus. We are working closely together. Much respect!

{End of Report} [RETURN TO TOP](#)



DHS MORNING BRIEFING

Prepared for the Office of Public Affairs (OPA)

U.S. Department of Homeland Security

By TechMIS

www.TechMIS.com

Mobile User Copy

TO: Homeland Security Secretary & Staff

DATE: Friday, March 27, 2020 6:00 AM ET

Top News

The U.S. Now Leads the World in Confirmed Coronavirus Cases (New York Times) 6

US has more known cases of coronavirus than any other country (CNN) 8

US overtakes China with 82,000 coronavirus cases, the most in the world (Washington Examiner) 11

Senate Passes \$2 Trillion Economic Aid Deal as Coronavirus Deaths Top 1,000 (US News & World Report) 12

Coronavirus bill includes \$350 million for migration, refugee assistance (FOX News) 15

Pandemic Disrupting U.S. Immigration Process At Every Level (NPR) 15

Amid Coronavirus Concerns, Pentagon To Send Troops To U.S. Borders With Mexico, Canada (NPR) 16

DOJ postpones 'Remain in Mexico' hearings in response to coronavirus threat (FOX News) 17

Three migrant children in US government custody test positive for coronavirus (CNN) 17

Coronavirus: 3 migrant children in US custody in New York test positive (USA Today) 18

First Migrant Children In US Custody Test Positive For Coronavirus (Daily Caller) 19

Federal agencies would get money for telework, equipment — and cleaning the office (Washington Post) 20

Unemployment claims soared to 3.3 million last week, most in history (CNN) 22

Trump administration suspends emergency oil purchase after Congress denies funding (Washington Examiner) 23

House leaders seek to expedite emergency aid package amid uncertainty about GOP lawmaker delaying measure (Washington Post) 24

Pelosi forecasts House OK of Senate's \$2.2T virus aid plan (Houston Chronicle) 26

Hospitals on soccer fields, in state park cabins and converted convention centers (Washington Post)	29
US to free some prisoners amid coronavirus threat (Breitbart)	31
Releases, infections, fear: U.S. coronavirus crisis in jails and prisons looms (ABC News)	32
Pompeo defends efforts to bring Americans home amid pandemic (Politico)	36
HHS implements anti-price gouging order amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)	37
Coronavirus Pandemic Reaching Critical Tipping Point in America, Analysis Shows (US News & World Report)	38
Prepare For Outbreaks Like New York's In Other States, Warns Anthony Fauci (NPR)	43
Pandemic deaths could top 1.8 mn even with tough response: study (Breitbart)	45
White House officials push back on calls to activate DPA for critical medical supplies (Politico)	47
Cases explode in Michigan but states outside of the hotspots can't get supplies (CNN)	49
Feds have 1.5 million expired N95 masks in storage despite CDC clearing them for use on COVID-19: report (The Hill)	52
After Considering \$1 Billion Price Tag for Ventilators, White House Has Second Thoughts (New York Times) ..	53
[NY] 'The Other Option Is Death': New York Starts Sharing of Ventilators (New York Times)	55
[NY] Nurses treating coronavirus say they are reusing masks, back to work before 14-day quarantine (USA Today)	58

[NY] For the first time since 9/11, NYC has set up makeshift morgues. This time, it's in anticipation of coronavirus deaths (CNN)	62
[NY] Trump keeps touting an unproven coronavirus treatment. It's now being tested on thousands in New York. (Washington Post)	63
[LA] New Orleans on Louisiana's front line in coronavirus war, as disaster has state monitoring nursing homes (CNN)	67
[MI] Hundreds of thousands of masks missing from federal shipments to Michigan (The Hill)	69
[IN] Fort Wayne Jail Releases 25 Inmates Early Amid Pandemic (US News & World Report)	70
[Canada] Trump Expected to Send U.S. Troops to Canada Border to Support Operations Amid Coronavirus Crisis (US News & World Report)	70
[Canada] Trudeau Pushes Back on U.S. Notion to Use Military Near Border (Bloomberg)	70
[Canada] Trudeau calls for keeping US-Canada border demilitarized (The Hill)	71
[Canada] Canada asks US not to put troops at border during coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)	72
[Canada] Canada Urges US Not to Put Troops at Border During Pandemic (US News & World Report)	73
[Canada] Canada attacks Trump plan to deploy troops at border as unnecessary and damaging (Reuters)	74
[Mexico] US-Mexico border closure brings local economy to a halt (Public Radio International)	76
[Mexico] Tijuana's oldest migrant shelter closes to new arrivals to protect against coronavirus (San Diego Union Tribune)	77

[Mexico] VIDEO: Mexican Border State Mayor Bans U.S. Citizens over Coronavirus (Breitbart) 79

[Mexico] Coronavirus stalls asylum system and exacerbates conditions of migrants waiting in Mexico (San Diego Union Tribune) 79

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Amid pandemic, medically vulnerable people remain trapped in ICE jails (The Hill) 81

ICE resists calls to release immigrants as desperation mounts over coronavirus (CBS News) 83

ICE deportation planes begin to ship stranded U.S. citizens home (Reuters) 86

Trump Admin Can't Bar Sanctuary Cities From Receiving Law Enforcement Funding From Stimulus (Daily Caller) 86

Immigration chief on thin ice for adopting Obama's stance during crisis (Politico) 87

[NJ] Judge orders release of 10 immigration detainees from N.J. jails (Politico) 88

[NJ] ICE detainees in facilities with coronavirus cases ordered released by judge (ABC News) 90

[NJ] New Jersey jails must release at least 10 'at risk' ICE detainees over coronavirus concerns: judge (FOX News) 90

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Legal immigrants at risk of losing status during coronavirus pandemic (The Hill) 91

Travel industry hails REAL ID extension, says may need to be longer (The Hill)..... 94

U.S. delays enforcing tougher ID requirements until October 2021 (Reuters) 95

Americans will get an extra year to obtain their Real ID (San Diego Union Tribune) 95

[CA] California DMV is scaling back over coronavirus. Some employees say it's not enough (Los Angeles Times).. 96

Customs and Border Protection

[AZ] Protesters block lanes at Mexico border, demand coronavirus screening (The Hill) 100

[AZ] Mexican protesters block Arizona border traffic, demand coronavirus screenings on travelers from US (FOX News) 101

[AZ] Incomplete Tunnel Found Under Arizona Border Wall (Breitbart) 102

[AZ] Deported Two-Time Sex Offender Arrested in Arizona near Border (Breitbart) 103

[Canada] U.S. to return Canada-bound asylum seekers stopped at border to home nations (Reuters) 103

Federal Emergency Management Agency

[NJ] New Jersey reports nearly 2,500 new coronavirus cases in one day (The Hill) 105

[NJ] Trump Approves New Jersey Disaster Declaration — Ninth State So Far Where Coronavirus Is A 'Major Disaster' (Daily Caller) 105

[MD] Trump grants major disaster declaration for state of Maryland (The Hill) 106

[MD] Hogan: Maryland receives federal disaster designation (AP)..... 106

[TN] Tennessee Gets \$476K Grant for Tornado Victim Mental Health (AP) . 107

[IL] President Trump approves federal disaster declaration for Illinois (Chicago Tribune) 108

Secret Service

[NY] Duo Nabbed Using Fake \$100 Bills In Northern Westchester, Police Say (Daily Voice)	108
[VA] Suffolk PD need help identifying woman wanted for counterfeit fraud (Wavy)	109
[KY] Counterfeit 100s being passed in Pendleton County (Falmouth Outlook)	109
[KY] Secret Service helps sheriff's department find kidnapped twins (News Democrat Leader)	109
[TN] Evelyn Boswell's grandmother charged with aggravated burglary, shoplifting (WBIR TV - Knoxville)	110
[MN] Counterfeit cash reported by business owners in Waseca (KEYC Television)	111

Coast Guard

[FL] Two Costa Ships Begin Disembarking Sick Crew Members in Miami (Bloomberg)	111
[FL] Costa cruise ships anchor near Miami looking for 'life-critical' care (The Hill)	111
[FL] 2 Costa cruise ships heading toward Florida with dozens of sick crew members on board (FOX News)	112
[FL] Miami accepts 13 sick cruise ship crew members (Breitbart)	113
[FL] Sick Cruise Ship Crew Taken to Miami Hospitals (Boise State Public Radio)	114

CISA/Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity Experts Say Hacking Risk Is High for Mobile Voting (Bloomberg)	114
Experts see over 600 percent spike in malicious emails during coronavirus crisis (The Hill)	115
COVID-19 Phishing Attacks Have Increased, Says CrowdStrike CEO (Bloomberg)	116

Google sees 350 percent increase in phishing websites during COVID-19 pandemic, report reveals (FOX News)	117
---	-----

Terrorism Investigations

[NJ] A grocery store threw out \$35,000 in food that a woman intentionally coughed on, sparking coronavirus fears, police said (CNN)	117
[MO] Suspect killed by FBI during investigation into plot to bomb medical facility (The Hill)	119
[MO] FBI learned of coronavirus-inspired bomb plotter through radicalized US Army soldier (ABC News)	119
[MO] Missouri man plotting coronavirus hospital bombing killed in shooting, FBI says (FOX News)	121
[MO] Man Who Attempted To Bomb Missouri Hospital That Was Treating Coronavirus Killed In Shootout, FBI Says (Daily Caller)	121

National Security News

Pentagon orders US troops worldwide to hold in place to halt spread of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)	122
Navy brings aircraft carrier into port, will test thousands of sailors for coronavirus (Washington Post)	124
Navy ships seek to stop missile, drone and surface attacks -- all at once (FOX News)	125
Marine Corps readiness outweighs coronavirus hesitance as first Pentagon case reported (Washington Examiner)	126
World leaders vow to coordinate response to pandemic (San Francisco Chronicle)	127
[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro on narcoterrorism charges, offers \$15 million reward for his capture (Washington Post)	128

[Venezuela] U.S. charges Venezuelan president for drug trafficking (CBS News)	132
[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro, a political foe, for 'narco-terrorism' (Reuters)	134
[Venezuela] Experts: Venezuela Is 'Worst Case Scenario' for Coronavirus Spread (US News & World Report) .	136
[South Africa] South Africa braces for coronavirus lockdown (Breitbart)	138
[Syria] U.S. Forces In Syria Tackle A More Complex — And Possibly Dangerous — Mission (NPR)	139
[Iraq] Rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone, US-led coalition leaves base (Breitbart)	142
[Iraq] U.S.-led forces depart Iraqi military base near Mosul in drawdown (Reuters)	144
[Iraq] As planned, US-led coalition pulling out of 2nd Iraqi base (Washington Times)	145
[Iraq] Trump Admin Sanctions Vast Iranian Terror Network in Iraq (Free Beacon)	147
[Iraq] Iran-Backed Iraqi Terrorists Claim 'U.S. Plot to Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic' (Breitbart).....	147
[Iran] Iran says has 'no knowledge' of missing ex-FBI agent (Breitbart)	149
[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iranian individuals, companies - Treasury (Reuters)	150
[Iran] Hezbollah Joins Iranian Terrorists in Jihad Against Chinese Coronavirus (Breitbart)	150

[Russia] Moscow Starts Shutting Down as Kremlin Says No Epidemic Here (Bloomberg)	152
[China] To Slow Virus, China Bars Entry by Almost All Foreigners (New York Times)	152
[China] China closes border to foreign travelers (Politico)	154
[China] China to Suspend Foreigners' Entry Starting Saturday (Bloomberg).....	155
[China] China Temporarily Closes Its Borders To Foreign Nationals (Aspen Public Radio)	155
[China] China bars foreigners, citing fears of imported virus cases (Washington Times)	156
[China] China's Xi offers Trump help in fighting coronavirus as U.S. faces wave of new patients (Reuters).....	157
[China] Chinese Distributed Faulty Coronavirus Test Kits Throughout Europe, Reports Indicate (Free Beacon)	159
[China] U.S. Officials Push for Expelling Suspected Chinese Spies at Media Outlets (New York Times).....	160
[China] Senior administration officials agree to limit Huawei's access to chips: report (The Hill).....	163
[China] U.S. prepares crackdown on Huawei's global chip supply - sources (Reuters)	163

Presidential Tweets

Editorial Note: The DHS Daily Briefing is a collection of news articles related to Department's mission. The inclusion of particular stories is not intended to reflect their importance, nor is it intended to endorse the political viewpoints or affiliations included in news coverage.

Top News

The U.S. Now Leads the World in Confirmed Coronavirus Cases (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 6:27 PM, Donald G. McNeil Jr, 23673K]

Scientists warned that the United States someday would become the country hardest hit by the coronavirus pandemic. That moment arrived on Thursday.

In the United States, at least 81,321 people are known to have been infected with the coronavirus, including more than 1,000 deaths — more cases than China, Italy or any other country has seen, according to data gathered by The New York Times.

The Times is engaged in a comprehensive effort to track the details of every confirmed case in the United States, collecting information from federal, state and local officials.

With 330 million residents, the United States is the world's third most populous nation, meaning it provides a vast pool of people who can potentially get Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus.

And it is a sprawling, cacophonous democracy, where states set their own policies and President Trump has sent mixed messages about the scale of the danger and how to fight it, ensuring there was no coherent, unified response to a grave public health threat.

A series of missteps and lost opportunities dogged the nation's response.

Among them: a failure to take the pandemic seriously even as it engulfed China, a deeply flawed effort to provide broad testing for the virus that left the country blind to the extent of the crisis, and a dire shortage of masks and protective gear to protect doctors and nurses on the front lines, as well as ventilators to keep the critically ill alive.

"This could have been stopped by implementing testing and surveillance much earlier — for example, when the first imported cases were identified," said Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at Columbia University in New York.

"If these are the cases we've confirmed, how many cases are we still missing?" she added.

China's leaders, stung by the SARS epidemic in 2003 and several bird flu scares since then, were slow to respond to the outbreak that began in the city of Wuhan, as local officials suppressed news of the outbreak.

But China's autocratic government acted with ferocious intensity after the belated start, eventually shutting down swaths of the country. Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea and Japan quickly began preparing for the worst.

The United States instead remained preoccupied with business as usual. Impeachment. Harvey Weinstein. Brexit and the Oscars.

Only a few virologists recognized the threat for what it was. The virus was not influenza, but it had the hallmarks of the 1918 Spanish flu: relatively low lethality, but relentlessly transmissible.

Cellphone videos leaking out of China showed what was happening as it spread in Wuhan: dead bodies on hospital floors, doctors crying in frustration, rows of unattended coffins outside the crematories.

What the cameras missed — in part because Beijing made Western journalists' lives difficult by withholding visas and imposing quarantines — was the slow, relentless way China's public health system was hunting down the virus, case by case, cluster by cluster, city by city.

For now, at least, China has contained the coronavirus with draconian measures. But the pathogen had embarked on a Grand Tour of most countries on Earth, with devastating epidemics in Iran, Italy, France. More videos emerged of prostrate victims, exhausted nurses and lines of coffins.

The United States, which should have been ready, was not. This country has an unsurpassed medical system supported by trillions of dollars from insurers, Medicare and Medicaid. Armies of doctors transplant hearts and cure cancer.

The public health system, limping along on local tax receipts, kills mosquitoes and traces the contacts of people with sexually transmitted diseases. It has been outmatched by the pandemic.

There was no Pentagon ready to fight the war on this pandemic, no wartime draft law. There was eventually a White House Coronavirus Task Force, but it has been led by politicians, not medical experts.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is one of the great disease-detective agencies in the world, and its doctors have contributed mightily in skirmishes against Ebola, Zika and any number of other health threats.

But the agency retreated into silence, its director, Dr. Robert Redfield, almost invisible — humbled by a fiasco in the failure to produce basic diagnostic testing.

Now at least 160 million Americans have been ordered to stay home in states from California to New York. Schools are closed, often along with bars, restaurants and many other businesses. Hospitals are coping with soaring numbers of patients in New York City, even as supplies of essential protective gear and equipment dwindle.

Other hospitals, other communities fear what may be coming.

"We are the new global epicenter of the disease," said Dr. Sara Keller, an infectious disease specialist at Johns Hopkins Medicine.

"Now, all we can do is to slow the transmission as much as possible by hunkering down in our houses while, as a country, we ramp up production of personal protective equipment, materials needed for testing, and ventilators."

The world will be a different place when the pandemic is over. India may surpass the United States as the country with the most deaths. Like the United States, it, too, is a vast,

democracy with deep internal divisions. But its population, 1.3 billion, is far larger, and its people are crowded even more tightly into megacities.

China could still stumble into a new round of contagion as its economy restarts, and be forced to do it all again.

In the meantime, with the virus loose in the streets while millions of Americans huddle indoors, when will it be safe to come out and go back to work?

“The virus will tell us,” said Dr. William Schaffner, a preventive medicine specialist at Vanderbilt University Medical School.

When a baseline of daily testing is established across the country, a drop in the percentage of positive tests will signal that the virus has found as many hosts as it can for the moment, and is beginning to recede.

When hospital admissions have hit a clear peak and begun to plateau, “we can feel optimistic,” Dr. Schaffner said. “And when they begin to drop, we can begin to smile.”

That moment may arrive this summer. But as soon as the first of Americans begin venturing cautiously out, we will have to start planning for the second wave.

US has more known cases of coronavirus than any other country (CNN)

CNN [3/27/2020 4:25 AM, Nicole Chavez, Holly Yan and Madeline Holcombe, 5551K]

The United States now has the highest number of known cases of coronavirus in the world with more than 82,000, according to CNN’s tally of cases reported by health officials.

The US cases piled up Thursday, surpassing China and Italy. The per capita rate of cases varies because of the countries’ vast differences in population.

As of Thursday evening, the United States had at least 82,100 cases while China was reporting 81,782. There have been more than 510,000 cases reported worldwide. The countries’ numbers are changing constantly and both the totals and the rank order of countries could change at any time.

The grim milestone comes just as US officials said there was a new high for fatalities reported in a single day.

At least 246 new deaths were reported Thursday, bringing the total number of deaths nationwide to at least 1,195.

The spike of cases has hospitals around the country scrambling to keep up with the demand for care.

In New York, where more than half of the US cases have been reported, exhausted hospital workers are turning to increasingly desperate measures to combat the virus.

New York Bellevue Hospital Center created a makeshift morgue using tents and refrigerated trucks. At Elmhurst Hospital Center in Queens, 13 patients died from coronavirus within 24 hours.

A registered nurse described what she has experienced inside a Long Island hospital and the toll that caring for coronavirus patients is taking on health care workers.

"I haven't slept because my mind won't shut off. I cried in the bathroom on my break, as I peeled off the PPE from my sweaty self, mask indentations on my face. I cried the entire ride home," the nurse wrote in a social media post.

The nurse, whom CNN is not naming, says patients are streaming in with "non stop coughing, sweaty, fevers" and with "fear in their eyes."

"I cry for the ones who passed away. I cry because we intubated 5 patients within 10 min and im terrified. I cry for my co workers, because we know it will get worse and I already feel like that is impossible and we are already at our breaking point, I cry for the parents, children, siblings, spouses who cannot be with their loved ones who may be dying but cant have visitors because there is no visiting allowed," the nurse added.

Chicago and Detroit could be next new hot spots

Outbreaks in New York, Washington and California have captured the nation's attention for weeks -- but some health officials predict areas of Michigan and Illinois could be the next epicenters of the crisis.

Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House's coronavirus response coordinator, said health officials are concerned that counties like Wayne County, Michigan and Cook County, Illinois are showing a "more rapid increase" in cases.

Birx noted that 40% of the country has "extraordinary low rates" of coronavirus" About 19 states have fewer than 200 cases, she said.

Louisiana, which has seen coronavirus cases climb this week, is already emerging as another hot spot. New Orleans is facing critical shortages of ventilators and protective equipment, an official told CNN Thursday.

"This is going to be the disaster that defines our generation," Collin Arnold, director of the city's Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, said.

Health officials said they are monitoring six nursing homes in the state, including the 268-resident Lambeth House Retirement Community in New Orleans, where 11 deaths were reported on Tuesday.

Hospitals brace for equipment shortages

Numerous hospitals expect to run out of beds within two weeks, as cases continue to rise.

If more beds don't become available, "then we don't have resources to save the lives that we need to save," former Louisiana Secretary of Health Dr. Rebekah Gee said. "That's why these stay-at-home orders are so important."

But "we have not seen the peak of the crisis yet," Gee said.

Desperate for protective face masks, Gee said health care workers have been punching holes in plastic office report covers and running string through those holes.

"I think what's just as concerning is the fact that we need more ventilators," she said. "And that is something that the federal government needs to step in and fix."

Many have called for President Donald Trump to use the Defense Production Act to speed up the availability of critical health equipment.

This week, Trump and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) gave conflicting information about whether the act was being used.

New York will allow two patients to share a single ventilator

In an effort to address the desperate need for medical equipment, New York state has approved technology that allows two patients to share a ventilator.

As of Thursday, more than half of US coronavirus cases were in New York state, with more than 37,000, according to CNN's tally of cases reported by state health officials nationwide. Gov. Andrew Cuomo referred to the method as "splitting" and said it involves adding a second set of tubes to a ventilator.

"It's not ideal," Cuomo said on Thursday, "but we believe it's workable."

New York hospitals need about 30,000 ventilators and have enough personal protection equipment for only the next two weeks, the governor has said.

Wednesday, the state had 4,000 ventilators in hospitals and another 4,000 on the way from the federal government. New York has also purchased 7,000 ventilators and is "still shopping," the governor said.

The ventilators are the "difference between life and death for thousands of New Yorkers," New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

In San Francisco, Mayor London Breed said her city could see a surge in cases similar to that seen in New York City.

She estimated San Francisco could need as many as 1,500 more ventilators and 5,000 more hospital beds.

"If people who are out on the streets continue to congregate with one another, continue to interact with one another which increases the spread of this virus, we will not have enough beds, enough ICU units, enough ventilators to support the people that we know are going to need them," Breed said.

'Dear God, stay home, save lives'

Across the country, 21 states have issued stay-at-home orders, with some not going into effect until the end of the week.

Georgia and Florida do not have statewide rules, but Atlanta enacted its own stay-at-home order, and Miami announced a nighttime curfew.

People without symptoms are fueling the spread of coronavirus

In Chicago, Mayor Lori Lightfoot announced Thursday that bike trails, paths and green spaces will be closed after crowds were spotted on the city's lakefront.

"Congregating on our lakefront, to be blunt, is going to create a risk that is unacceptable and could lead to death," Lightfoot said. "Dear God, stay home, save lives."

The decision comes after Interim Chicago Police Superintendent Charlie Beck said police will start issuing citations Thursday to residents who do not follow rules around social distancing and staying at home.

Breaking the orders is a misdemeanor punishable by a citation with a fine of up to \$500, Beck said. If violation continues, it could result in physical arrest.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

US overtakes China with 82,000 coronavirus cases, the most in the world (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 6:08 PM, Cassidy Morrison, 570K]

The U.S. coronavirus case count surpassed that of China Thursday with 82,404 now testing positive for the disease. The U.S. now has the most cases in the world.

The pandemic tracker maintained by Johns Hopkins University reported that the number of cases in the U.S. had overtaken the 81,782 cases confirmed in China. Italy has 80,589.

Earlier Wednesday, the Chinese government announced it would shut down China's borders to most foreign arrivals, calling it an "interim measure" that will go into effect on Friday.

"In view of the rapid spread of the new coronavirus epidemic worldwide, China has decided to temporarily suspend entry of foreigners with currently valid visas and residence permits in China," the country's Foreign Ministry said.

The move is a reversal of U.S. policies enacted first in January to ban arrivals from China and then mid-March banning arrivals from Europe and the U.K. Though the Trump administration's ban exempted non-citizen family members of American citizens, China's ban on foreigners is more stringent, making exemptions only for some diplomatic visa holders.

China's health ministry did not announce any new cases last week for the first time, but President Trump cast doubt on the government's level of transparency in his Thursday White House Press briefing.

"Number one, you don't know what the numbers are in China. China tells you numbers... you just don't know," Trump said. "I'm sure you're not able to tell what China is testing or not

testing, I think that's a little hard."

Still, China's border shutdown is symptomatic of widespread worries that the coronavirus disease is not on its way out for good. In fact, top infectious disease expert Anthony Fauci said Wednesday that "we need to be prepared that we'll get a cycle around the second time."

Senate Passes \$2 Trillion Economic Aid Deal as Coronavirus Deaths Top 1,000 (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 9:00 AM, Robin Foster and E.J. Mundell, HealthDay, 3020K]

The U.S. Senate voted late Wednesday to pass a \$2 trillion stimulus package to bolster the U.S. economy as the country's coronavirus death toll passed 1,000.

The unprecedented legislation will send \$1,200 checks to many Americans, create a \$367 billion loan program for small businesses and set up a \$500 billion fund for industries, cities and states, the Washington Post reported. The House was expected to pass the bill on Friday, and then send it to President Donald Trump for his signature.

The help cannot come too soon, as more than 100 million Americans -- nearly 1 in 3 -- have been ordered by their state's governors to stay home, away from work and school.

Nearly 70,000 U.S. COVID-19 cases have been confirmed, with 1,050 deaths, the Associated Press reported Thursday. New York is the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak, with more than 30,000 cases and close to 300 deaths, the wire service said.

Despite the steep rise in U.S. cases, Trump said Tuesday he would like to re-open the country by Easter, April 12, the New York Times reported.

"We can socially distance ourselves and go to work, and you'll have to work a little bit harder," Trump said. "You can clean your hands five times more than you used to. You don't have to shake hands anymore with people."

Most health experts reacted negatively to Trump's plan however.

If people are told they can head back to work, commuting by bus or subway while thousands of new infections are confirmed each day, "the virus will surge, many will fall ill and there will be more deaths," Dr. William Schaffner, a preventive medicine expert at Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine, told the Times.

Trump's remarks also came in sharp contrast to actions other leaders have taken around the world: India ordered a 21-day shutdown of a country in which 1.3 billion people live, while Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and International Olympic Committee (IOC) president Thomas Bach agreed to postpone the Summer Olympics in that country until at least the summer of 2021.

The United Kingdom has also ordered a shutdown of its country, while Prince Charles, the 71-year-old heir to the British throne, was diagnosed with coronavirus on Wednesday, CNN reported.

Grim statistics pile up in the U.S.

In the United States, a tripling in the number of coronavirus cases could make America the world's next hot spot, World Health Organization spokeswoman Margaret Harris said Tuesday, the Post reported.

"It's just going to get worse this week and worse next week," Dr. Leana Wen, a visiting professor at George Washington University, told CNN Monday night.

Things are particularly grim in New York City, where one hospital in Queens saw 13 COVID-19 deaths in the past 24 hours, the Times reported.

At Elmhurst Hospital Center, a 545-bed public hospital, doctors and nurses have only a few dozen ventilators for their patients, some of whom have died while waiting for a bed. A refrigerated truck has been stationed outside the hospital to hold the dead, the newspaper reported.

Citywide, all of the more than 1,800 intensive care beds are expected to be full by Friday, according to a Federal Emergency Management Agency briefing memo obtained by Times.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo did offer up some good news on Wednesday, saying that social distancing measures might be working. This week, the state's hospitalization estimations were down markedly, from a doubling of cases every two days to a doubling every four days.

It is "almost too good to be true," Mr. Cuomo said during a media briefing.

South sees spike in cases

But cases are just starting to spike elsewhere, particularly in the South: Louisiana, Florida and Georgia are facing alarming increases, with more than 4,700 cases and 125 deaths reported in those three states alone, CBS News reported.

New Orleans now has more cases than Los Angeles County, which is 25 times larger. In just over two weeks, the number of cases in Louisiana has skyrocketed to almost 1,800, CBS News reported.

Along with Cuomo, at least 19 other governors have announced stay-at-home orders in states including California, Illinois, Louisiana, Ohio, Oregon, Washington state and Hawaii, CNN reported.

On Monday, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis issued an executive order that all residents coming into Florida from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut airports quarantine themselves for 14 days.

Many cases in places like Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach have been tied to travelers arriving from New York, the Times reported.

"Hopefully that [order] will be a deterrent for people if you're just trying to escape here," DeSantis said Monday.

National public health officials quickly followed suit with a recommendation of their own: Dr. Deborah Birx, who's coordinating the U.S. coronavirus response, told reporters during a media briefing Tuesday night that people leaving New York City should quarantine themselves for two weeks because of the spike in infections there.

Economic help, medical supplies coming

On Sunday, Trump also approved disaster declarations for regions hit hardest by the pandemic, activating the National Guard in three states.

The declarations will bring supplies, medical stations and naval hospital ships to New York, Washington state and California, CNN reported.

Last week, President Donald Trump signed an \$850 billion coronavirus relief package into law.

The package will provide sick leave, unemployment benefits and free coronavirus testing.

Trump has also invoked a wartime law that would allow the federal government to direct companies to produce medical supplies if needed.

As countries around the world wonder what is in store for their citizens in the coming months, one glimmer of hope has emerged: On Tuesday, China lifted travel restrictions on the Hubei province, which was hardest hit by coronavirus earlier this year. And China's National Health Commission said Thursday that its 67 new COVID-19 cases were all in recent arrivals from abroad, the AP reported.

The good news in China stood in sharp relief to what is unfolding in Italy.

On Wednesday, Italy reported more than 7,500 deaths, by far the highest of any country, the AP reported. The virus has been especially deadly for old Italians. But the country has seen a slowing in the rate of new infections for the fourth day in a row, the Times reported.

State, local officials continue shutdowns

Meanwhile, state and local officials across the country continued to order the temporary closings of bars, nightclubs and restaurants.

Last Monday, the Trump administration ramped up its coronavirus "social distancing" advisory to now discourage gatherings of 10 or more people.

In addition to advising against group gatherings of more than 10 people, Trump also discouraged eating and drinking at restaurants, bars and food courts, and any discretionary travel.

The president also said his administration is doubling down on testing for COVID-19. Stores such as Walmart, CVS and Walgreens have set aside part of their parking lots for drive-through testing.

States Race to Contain Virus

In the meantime, the public lives of Americans have come to a halt, as the coronavirus pandemic has prompted officials across the country to close, cancel or postpone any event or activity that might foster the spread of COVID-19.

A majority of states have shuttered all public schools, Broadway has gone dark, Disney World and Disneyland were closed, March Madness was canceled, and most professional sports leagues postponed their seasons.

New York, Washington state and California have been hard hit by coronavirus cases in the United States. New York has 30,811 cases, Washington state has 2,580 cases and California has 2,535.

Meanwhile, officials in Florida closed most beaches in the state on Sunday, after young spring breakers ignored social distancing guidelines and partied with abandon on the sand. That state now has 1,977 cases, with 23 deaths.

Worldwide, the case count approached 490,000 while the death toll climbed past 22,000 on Thursday, according to a running count kept by Johns Hopkins University.

Coronavirus bill includes \$350 million for migration, refugee assistance (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 1:16 PM, Adam Shaw, 8943K] Video: [HERE](#)

The \$2 trillion spending package to boost the economy in response to the coronavirus crisis includes a \$350 million pot of money for “Migration and Refugee Assistance” -- the latest item in the legislative behemoth that is angering critics.

While a number of items that Republicans objected to got trimmed in the final Senate bill, the Migrant and Refugee Assistance item actually increased by \$50 million to \$350 million. That’s more than the bill put forward by House Democrats earlier this week, which included \$300 million in “Migrant and Refugee Assistance” for the State Department.

Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla, called it a “poison pill” that put “America LAST.”

“Democrats: This is not the time to advance your legislative agenda,” he tweeted before the bill passed the Senate late Wednesday. “This is the time to put #AmericaFirst.”

The bill ultimately passed the Senate 96-0 and is expected to pass the House in a voice vote on Friday. It includes a number of measures to boost businesses and help individuals hurt by the economic downturn triggered by the coronavirus pandemic.

But it includes controversial items, such as \$25 million in funding for the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts in Washington, D.C.

The Senate bill also provides \$75 million to each the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities. That is down from the \$300 million for each that was in the House stimulus bill.

Pandemic Disrupting U.S. Immigration Process At Every Level (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 4:15 PM, Joel Rose, 4112K] Audio: [HERE](#)

Many immigrant doctors who want to help fight the coronavirus outbreak find they can't because of limits on their work visas. It's just one way the pandemic is affecting immigrant communities.

Amid Coronavirus Concerns, Pentagon To Send Troops To U.S. Borders With Mexico, Canada (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 5:14 PM, Tom Bowman and Brakkton Booker, 4112K]

Two U.S. officials tell NPR that the Pentagon is expected to send 1,500 troops to the nation's borders with Canada and Mexico to assist Customs and Border Protection operations as the coronavirus death toll tops 1,100 in the United States.

The officials said the plan is to send up to 1,000 troops to the border with Canada to assist Customs and Border Protection as concern about COVID-19 increases. Another roughly 500 troops are expected to head to the Mexican border to help CBP there, the officials said.

The troops will not perform law enforcement duties but instead help in areas such as planning and logistics, much as they did under President Trump's orders during the influx of Central American migrants.

The troop deployments come on the heels of the Trump administration's announcement last week suspending nonessential travel between U.S. and Mexico.

"The United States and Mexico have agreed to restrict nonessential travel over our shared border," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told reporters Friday.

That suspension went into effect on Saturday, three days after Trump ordered a partial closure of the nation's northern border to help stem the spread of the deadly virus. The president tweeted on March 18 that trade with Canada "will not be affected" by the temporary border closing.

Prior to the Pentagon's announcement, Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was asked about the development during a Thursday press conference from Ottawa. He said his administration had been "in discussions" with the U.S.

"Canada and the United States have the longest, unmilitarized border in the world," Trudeau said. "And it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way."

Trudeau was also pushed on safety concerns for Quebec and Ontario. Those provinces border the state of New York which leads the U.S. in confirmed coronavirus cases and deaths. The prime minister demurred when asked if Canada would impose a ban on goods or people traveling from there.

"Part of protecting Canadians is ensuring a good supply of food, of medical supplies, of necessary equipment across our border," Trudeau said. "We will continue to look for ways to make sure we're keeping Canadians safe, while providing us with the things we need."

According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, Canada has roughly 3,800 confirmed coronavirus cases; Mexico has more than 470 confirmed cases.

Meanwhile, the U.S. has more than 80,000 confirmed cases and more than 1,100 COVID-19 related deaths.

DOJ postpones 'Remain in Mexico' hearings in response to coronavirus threat (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 5:06 PM, Adam Shaw, 8943K]

The Trump administration has postponed hearings related to the "Remain in Mexico" policy in response to the coronavirus crisis -- although it confirmed that the program itself is not being stopped.

The Department of Justice's (DOJ) Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) announced the change to procedures related to the policy, formally known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), earlier this week as part of the broader response by the government to the spread of the virus.

"Due to circumstances resulting from COVID-19, all Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) master calendar and merit hearings presently scheduled through April 22 will be rescheduled," the DOJ's Executive Office for Immigration Review said on its website. "Neither the MPP program nor any hearings will be canceled."

The "Remain in Mexico" policy has formed the centerpiece of the administration's efforts to combat the crisis at the southern border. It involves sending migrants back to Mexico to await their immigration hearings rather than holding them in the U.S. or releasing them into the interior.

Officials say it has been vital in bringing down numbers at the border, shrinks down the time to get cases processed, and has reduced the "pull factor" bringing migrants north. Specifically, it helps end "catch and release" by which migrants were detained and then released into the interior of the U.S. But opponents say migrants are not given due process, and they are often sent back into areas where they are at risk of kidnapping and violence.

It has been subject to court challenges and was struck down by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals. But the Supreme Court has issued a stay allowing the policy to continue as litigation surrounding it continues.

The EOIR said that any migrant with a hearing date through April 22 should present themselves at a port of entry to get a new hearing notice.

"[Department of Homeland Security] and EOIR are deeply committed to ensuring that individuals 'have their day in court' while also ensuring the health and safety of aliens, our frontline officers, immigration court professionals and our citizens," the office said in a statement.

Three migrant children in US government custody test positive for coronavirus (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 6:16 PM, Priscilla Alvarez, 5551K]

Three unaccompanied migrant children in government custody have tested positive for coronavirus, according to the Office of Refugee Resettlement, marking the first announced positive cases among children in the agency's care.

The children are in the care of one of the agency's facilities in New York.

"ORR's medical team is working with the programs in New York and local health department to collect information and determine next steps," the agency stated. It did not say which countries the children were from or their ages.

The agency, which is charged with the care of unaccompanied children, had earlier stopped placing children in New York amid the increase in coronavirus cases. It will also stop releasing children to sponsors, such as a parent or relative, in the interim as well.

Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate care provider facilities in New York also recently tested positive for coronavirus, ORR said Thursday, as well as one staff member at a facility in Texas and one foster parent in Washington State.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement, which falls under the Department of Health and Human Services, has had to adjust to the pandemic, tweaking its procedures to prevent the spread of the virus among the approximately 3,500 children in its custody.

The number of children in government care tested for coronavirus has been increasing. As of Thursday, 18 unaccompanied migrant children have been tested for coronavirus, up from 12 on Monday.

ORR is requiring temperature checks twice a day at each facility, and people entering facilities must also have their temperature checked.

Migrant children who arrive at the US-Mexico border without a parent or guardian are taken into custody by the Department of Homeland Security and referred to US Health and Human Services. While in care, case managers work to place a child with a sponsor in the United States. As a precautionary measure, ORR said it's prioritizing local placements for new referrals "to limit air travel when possible."

Thursday's announced cases come the same week Immigration and Customs Enforcement, an agency within the Department of Homeland Security, announced its first detainee in custody testing positive. The 31-year-old Mexican national, held at the Bergen County Jail in Hackensack, New Jersey, has been quarantined and is receiving care, ICE said, adding that the agency "is suspending intake at the facility until further information is available."

Immigrant advocates and some lawmakers have been calling for ICE to release detainees, warning that deadly consequences could result if the disease spreads in ICE facilities that have long faced criticism for how they handle even routine medical care.

Likewise, some immigrant-rights groups requested the expedited release of children from ORR custody in light of the coronavirus pandemic, arguing that the children "have little or no ability to practice social distancing or take other measures" to avoid contracting the virus.

ORR reiterated Thursday that the "situation remains extremely fluid and can change rapidly."

Coronavirus: 3 migrant children in US custody in New York test positive (USA Today)

USA Today [3/26/2020 9:10 PM, Monsy Alvarado, 5611K]

Three unaccompanied minor children in U.S. custody in New York have tested positive for the coronavirus, officials said Thursday.

The children, whose ages and nationalities weren't released, are in the custody of the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The office is responsible for housing migrant minors.

The agency said it is doing an evaluation of the children and will not release them from New York care provider facilities.

The resettlement office's medical team "is working with the programs in New York and local health department to collect information and determine next steps," a statement from the agency said.

The statement said the office has stopped placements of unaccompanied minor children in the states of California, New York, and Washington, which have been the hardest hit by the coronavirus. With more than 30,000 cases in New York, the state has become the epicenter of the coronavirus epidemic in the United States.

"ORR is prioritizing local placements for all new referrals from DHS to limit air travel when possible," the statement said.

The agency said 18 children have been tested for COVID-19, with three presumptive cases confirmed, 11 negative results, and 4 that are still pending.

The agency said if a health care provider or public health department recommends testing for a child, that they receive the testing. Any child showing symptoms is medically isolated from other children, pending negative test results, the agency said.

Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate care provider facilities in New York recently tested positive for COVID-19, the statement said. One staff member at a facility in Texas, and one foster parent in Washington State have also tested positive.

"ORR is currently tracking down and notifying anyone that may have been exposed at these care provider facilities," according to the statement. The ORR medical team and affected programs are actively coordinating with state and local public health departments on appropriate public health measures."

There are approximately 3,500 unaccompanied minor children presently in ORR care and custody.

The children are the latest in federal immigration custody to test positive for the virus which has spread quickly across the country, with more than 80,000 cases in the United States. More than 1,000 have died. The United States has more coronavirus cases than China, where the virus began.

First Migrant Children In US Custody Test Positive For Coronavirus (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 8:17 PM, Jason Hopkins, 566K]

Several unaccompanied alien children have tested positive for coronavirus, according to the

Office of Refugee Resettlement, making them the first minors in the agency's custody to carry the disease.

The Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the agency within the Department of Health and Human Services that manages the care of alien minors who enter the U.S. without any adult family members, announced on Thursday that three unaccompanied alien children (UAC) in New York have tested positive for COVID-19.

"As of March 26, 2020, there have been three confirmed COVID-19 disease cases among UAC in one ORR care provider facility in New York," read an ORR statement provided to the Daily Caller News Foundation.

"At this time, ORR is suspending releases from New York care provider facilities. ORR's medical team is working with the programs in New York and local health department to collect information and determine next steps," the statement continued.

As a precautionary measure, ORR will cease all placements of unaccompanied alien children (UAC) in New York, California, and Washington state — three states hit remarkably hard by coronavirus. ORR added that it is "prioritizing local placements for all new referrals from DHS to limit air travel when possible."

A total of 18 unaccompanied children in ORR care have been tested for the coronavirus, with 11 testing negative, three testing positive, and the other four are still awaiting results. There are roughly 3,500 UAC currently in ORR care, according to the agency.

The positive cases come as several ORR staffers and others who operate around UAC have also contracted the virus.

"Five staff members and one staff contractor at three separate care provider facilities in New York recently tested positive for COVID-19. One staff member at a facility in Texas, and one foster parent in Washington State have also tested positive," the agency said, adding that it's contacting anyone who may have been exposed at these facilities.

As of Thursday afternoon, more than 81,500 people in the U.S. have tested positive for COVID-19. Of those who have contracted the virus, at least 1,180 have died.

Federal agencies would get money for telework, equipment — and cleaning the office (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 7:19 AM, Eric Yoder, 12625K]

Numerous federal agencies would get money to buy protective equipment, sanitize their offices and accommodate increased telework by their employees under the coronavirus emergency spending bill approved by the Senate.

The funding follows concerns about inadequate protections for federal employees ranging from lack of protective masks to inadequate cleaning of work spaces, especially for those in positions whose jobs require face-to-face contact with the public.

The measure, which was approved unanimously, also provides money to cover expected overtime pay for front-line employees including food inspectors, federal prison correctional officers, airport screeners and medical personnel.

And many agencies would receive funds to beef up information technology systems burdened by the increasing number of federal employees now teleworking, according to a summary by the Senate Appropriations Committee.

The Veterans Affairs Department would get money for all those purposes: \$19.6 billion to support “increased demand for health care services at VA facilities and through telehealth, including the purchase of medical equipment and supplies, testing kits, and personal protective equipment,” plus programs for homeless or at-risk veterans. Also, limits on overtime pay would be waived.

The Department of Homeland Security would get \$178 million for “personal protection equipment for personnel including gloves, garments, goggles, hand sanitizer, respirators, and surgical masks” to be distributed among its component agencies, including the Transportation Security Administration.

Money for protective equipment also would go to law enforcement agencies and the Bureau of Prisons in the Justice Department, medical care providers of the Defense Department and the Public Health Service and the Capitol Building’s Office of Attending Physician, among others.

TSA also would get \$100 million for “increased cleaning and sanitization at TSA operations at airports and other facilities, overtime and travel costs required to maintain operations while infected employees are quarantined, and additional explosive detection materials that must be disposed of after a single use to prevent the spread of coronavirus.”

The General Services Administration, which owns and leases buildings for agencies other than the Defense Department, would get an extra \$275 million for “deep cleaning, enhanced screening, and unanticipated space and space management requirements.” Others that would get extra money for cleaning and disinfecting include parts of Interior, the VA, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Forest Service, Smithsonian and Kennedy Center.

Additional money to boost telework capabilities would go to the Justice, Interior and Veterans Affairs departments, the EPA and to Congress itself.

The bill does not specify precise amounts for each purpose by agency, instead providing sums to be used for a number of listed reasons. And unlike a bill offered by House Democratic leadership on Monday, the bill would not require that agencies allow telework by all employees eligible for it.

“This legislation includes personal protective equipment measures for federal employees at the VA, DHS, Bureau of Prisons and the National Forest System, who are especially vulnerable given their public-facing and essential roles,” Sen. Mark R. Warner (D-Va.) said in an emailed statement. “This is an improvement over the status quo, but it’s not enough. I remain concerned that the federal government isn’t being flexible enough about expanding telework arrangements for employees who can.”

The House measure has been set aside, and the House is expected to approve the Senate bill on Friday. President Trump said he intends to sign it immediately.

"It's encouraging that important protections for federal workers are being added into law — especially at a time when the American people are relying on essential government services more than ever before," Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-Va.) said in an emailed statement. "However, ambiguous guidance and uneven application across agencies on common-sense steps like expanded telework has been an unforced error."

Sen. Chris Van Hollen (D-Md.) said that while the provisions "are a step forward, we will keep pushing for more. In the meantime, President Trump should issue an executive order — as my colleagues and I have called for — to provide clear direction for all federal agencies to maximize telework wherever possible."

Unemployment claims soared to 3.3 million last week, most in history (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 10:07 AM, Anneken Tpe, 5551K]

A record number of Americans filed for their first week of unemployment benefits last week, as businesses shut down to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Initial jobless claims soared to a seasonally adjusted 3.28 million in the week ended March 21, according to the Department of Labor.

That is the highest number of initial jobless claims in history, since the Department of Labor started tracking the data in 1967. The previous high was 695,000 claims filed in the week ending October 2, 1982.

"Most historical comparisons of this scale are inadequate. The closest would be natural disasters like major hurricanes. However, as today's report shows, the coronavirus outbreak is economically akin to a major hurricane occurring in every state around the country for weeks on end," Glassdoor senior economist Daniel Zhao wrote in emailed comments.

Last week's jump marked a massive increase from a revised 282,000 claims in the prior week. Prior to the pandemic, initial claims had been hovering in the low 200,000s each week, reflecting a strong job market.

But in the last couple weeks, the coronavirus outbreak has forced many businesses to suddenly shut down as the country tries to slow the spreading virus. For many businesses that also means laying off or furloughing workers, at least temporarily.

That is the key difference between the coronavirus shock compared with past periods of economic distress: it is sudden and impacts virtually every industry and business model around.

As a result, economists are expecting millions of job losses in the coming weeks.

Heidi Shierholz, a former chief economist for the US Department of Labor who is now with the Economic Policy Institute, called the surge in unemployment claims just the tip of the iceberg.

"We estimate that by summer, 14 million workers will lost their jobs due to the coronavirus shock," she said in a tweet.

Economists now expect the US economy to fall into a recession in the second quarter,

before staging a comeback later in the year after the spread of the virus slows.

Meanwhile, state labor departments across the country are have struggled to deal with the sudden influx in claims for unemployment benefits. The New York Labor Department, for example, has added server capacity and hired more than 65 additional staff to handle all the claims that are suddenly pouring in. And last week, Florida's Department of Economic Opportunity said it planned to hire 100 extra staff to help answer calls and walk people through the application process.

Speaking later on Thursday morning, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin downplayed last week's surge in unemployment claims in an interview with CNBC, calling the numbers "not relevant" because they pre-dated an economic relief bill passed by Congress on Wednesday. That bill includes support for workers, including checks from the government and expanded unemployment benefits.

He added businesses "hopefully will be able to hire back a lot of those people."

Trump administration suspends emergency oil purchase after Congress denies funding (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 10:45 AM, Josh Siegel, 570K]

The Energy Department is suspending its plan to buy low-priced oil to restock the nation's emergency Strategic Petroleum Reserve after Congress chose not to provide funding for the purchase in its emergency pandemic relief package.

The department withdrew a solicitation Thursday for buying 30 million barrels of oil from U.S. producers, which would have been the first round of purchases for a total of 77 million barrels — the full amount of open capacity in the SPR.

That doesn't mean Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette is abandoning President Trump's order to fill the oil reserve in order to help U.S. producers struggling from a historic price crash. But he needs Congress to allocate \$3 billion in funding in order to proceed, and he's calling on lawmakers to do it in future rounds of legislation responding to the coronavirus.

"Small- to medium-size American energy companies and their employees should be provided the same relief being provided to other parts of our economy, and the Secretary calls on Congress to work with the administration to fund the president's request as soon as possible," Energy Department spokeswoman Shaylyn Hynes told the Washington Examiner.

Brouillette had been confident Congress would fulfill his \$3 billion request for SPR purchases in the package approved by the Senate Wednesday night, but it was removed from the final bill after Democrats and Republicans haggled over energy and climate-related provisions.

Administration officials say restocking the SPR won't halt the price crash rocking the shale industry, but they say it makes sense on energy security grounds and would benefit taxpayers. Congress has been selling off oil from the reserve in recent years to fund unrelated priorities, but a sustained period of low prices represents a good opportunity to fill the SPR back up, the administration says.

"President Trump's directive to buy oil at a competitive price for the SPR is a common-sense move benefiting taxpayers and supporting our nation's economic and national security interest," Hynes said. "The American energy sector is a major driver of our nation's economy, and it is being significantly harmed by the impacts of COVID-19 and international market manipulation."

House leaders seek to expedite emergency aid package amid uncertainty about GOP lawmaker delaying measure (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 6:54 PM, John Wagner, Paul Kane, and Mike DeBonis, 12625K]

House leaders sought to expedite the emergency \$2 trillion relief bill aimed at mitigating the financial havoc caused by the coronavirus pandemic amid uncertainty about whether a renegade lawmaker could delay sending the measure to President Trump.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) agreed to approve the measure with a voice vote Friday that would not require all 430 current members of the House to travel to the Capitol, given that two lawmakers have contracted the disease and others are self-quarantining due to exposure to confirmed carriers.

The leadership also is taking meticulous steps to change the protocol for debate and voting to ensure the safety of lawmakers.

But at least one lawmaker is considering upending the plans for swift passage. Rep. Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) said Thursday that he opposed the bill, approved unanimously by the Senate on Wednesday, as it would add to the national debt. The libertarian lawmaker also is concerned that voting without a quorum present — the majority of the House chamber — would violate the Constitution. He said he has yet to decide whether to press the issue, which could delay a House vote until late Saturday or Sunday.

At the White House on Thursday, Trump acknowledged that one House member could slow the process.

"You might have one grandstander, and for that we'll have to come back and take a little more time and it'll pass, it'll just take a little longer. But let's see whether or not we have a grandstander," Trump said.

The planned vote Friday will culminate nearly two weeks of often heated debate about how to structure a sweeping bill that is attempting to provide hospitals and the health industry the tools to arrest the escalating spread of the virus and to shore up an economy that has gone into a free fall.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that unemployment claims topped 3.3 million just last week in another blow to the economy.

The sprawling legislation would send checks to more than 150 million American households, set up enormous loan programs for businesses large and small, pump billions of dollars into unemployment insurance programs, greatly boost spending on hospitals and much more. Trump, just before 1 a.m. Thursday, joyfully tweeted about the Senate vote, part of his effort to get the legislation to his desk as fast as possible.

Massie traveled from his Kentucky home to Washington on Wednesday in anticipation of the final vote.

“What the American people should ask is not, why is one guy asking for everybody to follow the Constitution, but why can’t these other people who are getting paid \$174,000 make the same trip that the truckers are making that are bringing the food to the grocery stores?” he asked.

Pelosi said she was ready to defeat such an effort.

“I feel certain that we will have a strong bipartisan vote,” she said at a news conference Thursday morning.

She did not address the specific issue raised by Massie but said she is prepared to deal with any member who objects to moving forward with a voice vote — as he and some others have suggested they might.

At a subsequent news conference, McCarthy said he thinks a voice vote on the bill will be sufficient. “I do not think there’s a need for anything else,” he said.

He noted that there will be time for debate on the House floor and those members that come to the House can make their views known.

McCarthy described several precautions that would be taken during Friday’s debate, including wiping microphones after each speaker and ensuring that House members do not congregate closely. Members are also being encouraged to submit arguments via video so that they do not have to be in the Capitol, and in a rare step, C-SPAN has offered to air those statements to create a virtual debate.

Only lawmakers who are overseeing the debate and those directly scheduled to speak will be permitted into the House chamber during the debate, according to a memo issued by the House sergeant at arms. Elevator rides are limited to two people.

The situation is so fluid that some lawmakers do not know whether they should attend Friday’s proceedings.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) has already returned to Washington, at a moment when federal health experts have suggested anyone in the New York region self-quarantine for two weeks because the area has been the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

In a brief interview Thursday, she said she is asking for guidance about whether she can participate in the debate or just submit a video statement.

A rising star among liberal activists, Ocasio-Cortez has been considering voting against the legislation. She carried out her own internal debate Thursday through her Twitter account, both criticizing Republicans for “holding hostage” hospitals and workers in exchange for a corporate bailout — but also praising nearly \$1 trillion in funds.

A Thursday afternoon conference call hosted for House Democrats in anticipation of the

vote ended in confusion, according to four people who participated and spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private call.

All four cited a conflict between the guidance offered by Pelosi and House Majority Leader Steny H. Hoyer (D-Md.). Both said they hoped to clear the coronavirus rescue bill Friday morning by voice vote, but they offered different messages on whether members should try to attend.

Hoyer, they said, said that if Massie or some other lawmaker forced a recorded vote, that would push deliberations to Saturday and there would be no need for any member to come to Washington on Friday unless they wanted to speak on the bill.

But Pelosi, toward the end of the call, suggested that members who could travel to Washington should do so, in hopes of resolving any possible issue Friday.

Regardless of any Democratic opposition, Pelosi made clear that no one on her side of the aisle would go the extra step and force a roll-call vote to delay the passage of legislation that is certain to pass on a strong bipartisan vote.

She also began to spell what she wants to see in the fourth major piece of legislation dealing with coronavirus, including more help for New York and other states hit hard by the outbreak. Pelosi also wants job safety provisions in the next legislation to protect those workers who are still going to offices, manufacturing sites and hospitals, potentially endangering themselves to contracting the virus.

But McCarthy, reflecting the reservations of a GOP caucus that used to preach fiscal discipline, was cool to the idea of Congress tackling another bill in a matter of weeks.

“Let’s let this bill work,” he said, before considering next steps.

Pelosi indicated that any future effort would involve all four leaders in Congress. She intends to hunker down in Washington to work on the next steps, rather than heading back to her home in San Francisco, even though the House is not expected to be in session for weeks to come.

“I’ll be working most of it from here,” she told reporters.

Pelosi forecasts House OK of Senate’s \$2.2T virus aid plan (Houston Chronicle)

Houston Chronicle [3/26/2020 1:08 PM, Andrew Taylor and Alan Fram, AP, 167K]

The House will give final approval Friday to the massive \$2.2 trillion economic rescue bill with robust backing from both parties, Speaker Nancy Pelosi said, a vote that would cap Congress’ tumultuous effort to rush the relief to a nation battered by the coronavirus.

Pelosi spoke Thursday morning, just hours after the Senate used an overnight vote to approve the measure 96-0. With House members dispersed around the country, Pelosi and Republican leaders were planning to bless the measure by a voice vote, probably with just a sprinkling of lawmakers present in the chamber.

“It will pass with strong bipartisan support,” said Pelosi, D-Calif. President Donald Trump has implored lawmakers to finish with the package so he can sign it into law.

The package comes to the House as fresh evidence emerges that the economy is in a recession. The government reported 3.3 million new weekly unemployment claims, four times the previous record. Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in a TV interview the economy “may well be in a recession.”

Pelosi praised the bill’s expansion of unemployment benefits and provisions that encourage companies hit by the pandemic to keep paying their workers, even those who are furloughed.

“We will have a victory tomorrow for America’s workers,” she said. “If somebody has a different point of view, they can put it in the record, but we’re not worried about that.”

The package would give direct payments to most Americans, expand unemployment benefits and provide a \$367 billion program for small businesses to keep making payroll while workers are forced to stay home. It would steer substantial aid to larger industries, too.

The unanimous Senate vote late Wednesday came despite misgivings on both sides about whether it goes too far or not far enough and capped days of difficult negotiations as Washington confronted a national challenge unlike any it has faced.

The 880-page measure is the largest economic relief bill in U.S. history. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell appeared somber and exhausted as he announced the vote — and he released senators from Washington until April 20, though he promised to recall them if needed.

“Pray for one another, for all of our families and for our country,” said McConnell, R-Ky.

“The legislation now before us now is historic because it is meant to match a historic crisis,” said Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. “Our health care system is not prepared to care for the sick. Our workers are without work. Our businesses cannot do business. Our factories lie idle. The gears of the American economy have ground to a halt.”

The package is intended as relief for a sinking economy and a nation facing a grim toll from an infection that’s killed more than 21,000 people worldwide. The U.S. death toll has surpassed 1,000 people.

“This is a unique situation,” Powell told NBC’s “Today” show. “This is not a typical downturn.”

The Fed chief went on: “What’s happening here is people are being asked to close their businesses, to stay home from work and to not engage in certain kinds of economic activity and so they’re pulling back. And at a certain point, we will get the spread of the virus under control and at that time confidence will return, businesses will open again, people will come back to work.”

Underscoring the effort’s sheer magnitude, the bill finances a response with a price tag that equals half the size of the entire \$4 trillion-plus annual federal budget. The \$2.2 trillion estimate is the White House’s best guess.

The drive by leaders to speed the bill through the Senate on Wednesday slowed as four conservative Republican senators from states whose economies are dominated by low-wage jobs demanded changes. They said the legislation as written was so generous that workers like store clerks might opt to stay on unemployment rather than return to their jobs. They settled for a failed vote to modify the provision.

Wednesday's delays followed Democratic stalling tactics earlier in the week as Schumer held out for additional money for states and hospitals and other provisions.

The sprawling measure is the third coronavirus response bill produced by Congress and by far the largest. It builds on efforts focused on vaccines and emergency response, sick and family medical leave for workers and food aid.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said earlier he expected the measure to pass by a voice vote without lawmakers having to return to Washington. House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy said Thursday his members were on board with that.

"We'll have a debate, and then we'll have a voice vote to bring it up and move it to the president's desk," McCarthy told Fox News. He said that while Democrats inserted things in the bill that didn't deal with coronavirus, "we will still get this package done for hospitals, workers, small businesses."

"Every day matters, so we want to get this done quickly," McCarthy said.

The package has a heavily negotiated \$500 billion program for guaranteed, subsidized loans to larger industries, including airlines. Hospitals would get significant help as well.

The bill would provide one-time direct payments to Americans of \$1,200 per adult making up to \$75,000 a year and \$2,400 to a married couple making up to \$150,000, with \$500 payments per child.

A huge cash infusion for hospitals expecting a flood of COVID-19 patients grew during the talks to an estimated \$130 billion. Another \$45 billion would fund additional relief through the Federal Emergency Management Agency for local response efforts and community services.

Democrats said the package would help replace the salaries of furloughed workers for four months, rather than the three months first proposed. Furloughed workers would get whatever amount a state usually provides for unemployment, plus a \$600-per-week add-on, with gig workers like Uber drivers covered for the first time.

Businesses controlled by members of Congress and top administration officials, including Trump and his immediate family members, would be ineligible for the bill's business assistance.

State and local authorities would receive up to \$150 billion in grants to fight the virus, care for their residents and provide basic services.

Republicans won inclusion of an employee retention tax credit that's estimated to provide

\$50 billion to companies that retain employees on payroll and cover 50% of workers' paycheck up to \$10,000. Companies would also be able to defer payment of the 6.2% Social Security payroll tax.

Pelosi was a force behind \$400 million in grants to states to expand voting by mail and other steps that Democrats billed as making voting safer but Republican critics called political opportunism. The package also contains \$15.5 billion more for a surge in demand for food stamps as part of a massive \$330 billion title for agency operations.

Most people who contract the new coronavirus have 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, or death.

In the United States, more than 69,000 people have been sickened by the virus.

Hospitals on soccer fields, in state park cabins and converted convention centers (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 1:30 AM, Ariana Eunjung Cha, Brittney Martin, and Steven Mufson, 12625K]

Louisiana is renting cabins and trailers in state parks to isolate the ill. The county that includes Seattle is erecting a 200-bed facility on a soccer field. And New York is setting up a medical surge center inside the six-block-long Jacob K. Javits Convention Center on the west side of Manhattan — better known for hosting auto shows and Comic-Con.

As the United States enters a new stage of the pandemic wave, hospital systems are being reconfigured in radical ways to handle the growing number of sick, and over the next few weeks, hospitals appear likely to look and operate very differently than today. With the need for social distancing even among the sick, securing and configuring physical spaces large enough to handle the load has become one of the biggest challenges facing state officials and hospital administrators.

"What we've done is shift from all daily operations to preparing for mass numbers of people with covid-19," Omar Lateef, chief executive of Rush University Medical Center in Chicago, said.

The mounting costs of the hospital build-out are being borne mostly by individual state treasuries and private medical centers, with some help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and Army Corps of Engineers. But there is an expectation the federal government will provide some relief. The \$2 trillion aid bill Congress is rushing to pass this week contains \$100 billion for hospitals to offset expenses related to the coronavirus surge.

Part of the reason for the need for auxiliary, emergency measures is that many hospitals have closed in recent years because of financial trouble. The United States has fewer beds per capita — just 2.7 per 1,000 people — than many other countries. That compares with 6.5 per 1,000 for South Korea and France, for example, and 4.3 for China.

The U.S. has 924,100 hospital beds, most of which are occupied on a typical day, according to a 2018 survey from the American Hospital Association. But in a severe pandemic situation, such as the one the country faced during the 1918 flu pandemic, experts have

estimated that 38 million people would need medical care, resulting in 9.6 million hospitalizations and 2.9 million intensive care stays.

The ongoing transformation of the American hospital system mirrors what was done in other countries that faced the pandemic first.

There was the Chinese megalopolis Wuhan, where patients were sorted by severity of disease into different hospitals — 10 temporary ones for the mildly sick or contagious in sports stadiums and similar facilities, 39 for those with critical illness or who were 65 and older and six for critical care. In Italy's Lombardy region, the hospital system was essentially cleaved into two: one for coronavirus patients with 55 hospitals, and the remaining few hospitals reserved for those experiencing more ordinary emergencies such as strokes, accidents or childbirth.

With public health officials estimating millions of Americans — up to a fifth of the population — may need to be hospitalized, states and hospitals are taking creative approaches to housing the ill while containing the contagion.

Plans remain in flux in many areas, but health officials describe four general tiers of treatment.

The first is triage, which includes drive-through test sites and tents in parking lots. This is where most patients would have initial contact with the hospital system. They would be swabbed, and their temperatures taken. At Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, staff stop those who enter the emergency room and direct anyone with flu-like symptoms to a separate area.

"We took over a clinic space right next to the emergency department, and we made it a zone for patients with respiratory illness," Jolion McGreevy, the hospital's emergency department medical director, said. A dedicated team in protective gear treats patients escorted to that area.

The second tier is for the mildly ill or those awaiting test results. Chicago is renting thousands of hotel rooms. San Francisco is setting up RVs in the Presidio, a park in the northern part of the city.

As shown in a photo that went viral Monday, Yale University in New Haven, Conn., is setting up rows of beds in its gymnasium. Yale University spokeswoman Karen N. Peart said the space would be activated if the school's health center fills up. She said it would offer only general care such as the monitoring of vital signs and provision of food and water.

"We hope we never have to use it. But it could support those who are unable to care for themselves at home, yet are not sick enough for hospital admission," Peart said.

In Louisiana, Lt. Gov. Billy Nungesser (R) said cabins in state parks will temporarily shelter the homeless or people who cannot return to their homes while awaiting coronavirus test results. A park ranger will stand watch to make sure "nobody goes in and out unassisted." State police will also guard the cabins, he said. A caterer will provide meals to be delivered to each cabin.

"By putting one person in each cabin, if it comes back negative, then they can just reuse the cabin. If it's positive, then they've got to clean that cabin good, but they can then just reuse that cabin," Nungesser said in an interview.

The third level of care consists of the existing hospital system, and administrators interviewed in recent weeks said they anticipate handling mostly severe to critical cases. Many major medical centers in several large cities said they would continue accepting patients with ordinary emergencies ranging from heart attacks to births, but they confined coronavirus patients to separate areas so they cannot transmit the virus to other patients.

Of particular concern is finding enough room for the large number of patients expected to need mechanical ventilators to breathe.

At Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, doctors are working to increase the 97 intensive care beds to 240. Richard Wunderink, medical director for one of the ICUs, said rooms have been shifted to create a dedicated covid-19 unit that has negative airflow to prevent infectious material from contaminating other areas.

In some parts of the country, existing facilities such as M Health Fairview Bethesda Hospital, a long-term care center in St. Paul, Minn., are being remade as covid centers. Bethesda has 90 beds including 35 intensive care beds. M Health Fairview, which owns the property, said current patients were being transferred to other facilities in preparation.

In New York, the epicenter of the virus in the United States and where the ill are mounting, construction of the four temporary hospitals inside the Javits convention center began this week. Each will have 250 beds and occupy 40,000 square feet. New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo (D) has said another 1,000 beds could be added for those who are less ill if needed.

Some states are preparing for patients who have received significantly less attention than the sick: the recovering.

Taking lessons from a surge in coronavirus patients that overwhelmed hospitals in Washington State, Colorado hospitals are setting up a system that would allow patients recovering from the illness to transfer out of hospitals to make room for the critically ill, said Julie Lonborg, spokeswoman for the Colorado Hospital Association.

Lonborg said the state had talked to states that were seven or 10 days ahead of Colorado in the outbreak and asked what they wish they had done differently: "They said part of what was stressing the system was that once patients were no longer critically ill, but still needed to be cared for, they were taking up space in the hospital that could be used by critically ill patients," she said.

With nursing homes refusing to accept patients without a negative covid-19 test, recently vacated college dorm rooms and hotels in Denver may be pressed into service, she said.

"It's a pressure relief valve on the back end," she said.

US to free some prisoners amid coronavirus threat (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 6:24 PM, Staff, 1973K]

US Attorney General Bill Barr said Thursday he had instructed federal prisons to free some

inmates to lessen the impact of the coronavirus epidemic.

One day after the United Nations human rights chief urged countries to protect people held in overcrowded jails and other enclosed facilities, Barr said he had encouraged US prisons to release qualified inmates.

"I've asked and issued a memorandum just today to the Bureau of Prisons to increase the use of home confinement, based on a number of factors... particularly for those older prisoners who have served substantial parts of their sentences," Barr said.

He said the instruction was focused on prisoners who are not considered dangerous and who may have underlying medical conditions that make them particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 virus.

"We want to make sure that our institutions don't become petri dishes" for the disease, Barr said.

His instructions apply to the some 170,000 inmates in the US federal prison system, where about a dozen cases of coronavirus have been discovered among prisoners and prison staff.

The directive will favor prisoners over 60 years old who have not been convicted of violent or sexual crimes.

Possibly 2,000 inmates could qualify.

The majority of the 2.2 million people serving prison time in the United States are in state and local institutions.

A number of state governors have come under pressure to free elderly inmates with greater risks of coronavirus infection.

The leaders of California and New Jersey are already moving with similar actions to Barr's.

On Wednesday, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Michelle Bachelet, called for governments to ease the pressure on prison populations.

"COVID-19 has begun to strike prisons, jails and immigration detention centres, as well as residential care homes and psychiatric hospitals, and risks rampaging through such institutions' extremely vulnerable populations," Bachelet said in a statement.

Ethiopia announced it would free more than 4,000 prisoners and Afghanistan also plans to let go up to 10,000 detainees.

Releases, infections, fear: U.S. coronavirus crisis in jails and prisons looms (ABC News)

ABC News [3/26/2020 5:02 AM, Chris Francescani, Sasha Pezenik, Luke Barr and Claire Weinraub, 2182K]

As the COVID-19 virus continues its relentless march across the nation, the looming crisis inside America's jails and prisons appears to be deepening, as corrections officials dig in to

prevent outbreaks in the nation's more than 6,000 prisons and jails.

So far this week, a total of 23 inmates have escaped correctional facilities in two states after at least one inmate had tested positive at each of two facilities -- and by late Wednesday a dozen remained at large, officials said.

In the past week, judges from coast to coast have ordered thousands of inmates released — both those detained before trial and convicted inmates — but calls for release have broadened to all medically-vulnerable inmates, as reports of medical and cleaning supplies shortages at correctional facilities nationwide climb as well.

In New York City -- America's current epicenter of infection -- tension is building inside some units of Rikers Island's sprawling jail complex, where a sharp spike in inmates testing positive for COVID-19 this week is driving fears that the situation will bloom into the nation's first major outbreak inside a correctional facility.

As of Wednesday, 75 New York City inmates have tested positive for COVID-19 and 37 city corrections staff members, up from 50 inmates and 30 staffers the previous day, city Department of Corrections officials said.

Outside jails, federal officials have encouraged citizens to keep at least 6 feet away from each other to better protect against the spread of the virus. Inside, however, inmates are facing crowded conditions in some city jails, including dorm-style sleeping quarters tight enough for an inmate to reach out and touch the next bed over, and in at least one instance, 29 people sharing a single toilet, according to interviews with New York City public defenders with clients behind bars, and friends and family of city inmates.

"The conditions on Rikers were horrific and inhumane before coronavirus. That is nothing new," Scott Hechinger, a public defender in Brooklyn, told ABC News.

"The difference is those conditions have now become imminently deadly. We've seen the hell of Rikers. We see human misery. We're all terrified," he said. "It's bad and it's only going to get worse. Every day that goes by is only setting us up for more pain and death."

'I've never seen anything like this'

One frustrated New York City woman whose 25-year-old boyfriend has been incarcerated at Rikers for less than a year after violating parole on an assault charge, said conditions in his unit are deteriorating. With two months left to serve and a history of asthma, her boyfriend feels like a sitting duck, she told ABC News.

"When people have been taken out who were tested positive ... they just leave the mattress there and they're like, 'well, if you want to, clean it up,' [and] basically leave it up to the inmates," said the woman, who requested anonymity because she said she fears retaliation against him in response to her complaints.

"They're crammed together in one building," she said, describing dorm conditions.

Her boyfriend "was sleeping in the bunk next to somebody who's been infected," she said. "And when they transferred him to another building, he was handcuffed to another guy who

got tested positive, and half of them don't even know their result yet."

Over the weekend, eight inmates at Rikers Island were reportedly pepper-sprayed while trying to go to the jail medical clinic after an inmate they were housed with was removed from the area for displaying flu-like symptoms.

"I understand everybody's going to want to go to the clinic if they're worried," New York City Department of Correction press secretary Jason Kersten told ABC News on Wednesday. "But there needs to be procedures in place ... I know it's being investigated. We referred it to the investigation division right away." Still, he said, staffers "have to be careful about how people are moved in these facilities."

City corrections officials said they are doing all they can to contain the spread of the virus at Rikers Island and all city facilities.

"This is something none of us has ever faced," Kersten said. "The longer this goes on, the more staff is going to be out. And the harder you know, the harder it's going to be."

"This is really challenging, a crisis like this -- things start to fray," he continued. "It's really going to test everybody's strength and [the] ability to perform their jobs. So, I mean," he said, pausing. "I've never seen anything like this."

In terms of cleaning supplies, Kersten said city inmates have supplies to maintain good hygiene.

"There's plenty of soap and water," he said. "We can't give them hand sanitizer because it's very flammable. And it can also be used to distill their own alcohol. But it's unfortunate because you want to give it to them to make them feel better."

Kersten said that reports of dangerous conditions emerging from the city's jail facilities are isolated and not representative of the entire system.

"These do not paint an accurate widespread picture of what's going on on the island," he said. "We're following very specific protocols related to containing outbreaks in jails and confined areas. Unfortunately, jail is not a good place to have something like this happen, because it's a confining place, naturally. So we're doing everything we can to separate people. People are working really hard to contain this."

One inmate at the federal Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn has tested positive for the virus and remains in isolation, according to the federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP). Elsewhere, two inmates at Manhattan's Metropolitan Corrections Center have tested positive, a federal law enforcement sources told ABC News late Wednesday.

There are about 1.3 million people in state prisons, about three-quarters of a million in local jails and about a quarter million in federal prisons, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

Additionally, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) is currently detaining about 38,000. A spokesperson did not immediately respond to questions from ABC News about the agency's plans for the detainees during the pandemic or whether any detainees had yet tested positive for the coronavirus.

Some inmates released in shadow of virus

While a growing number of states have begun releasing some inmates, advocates said that more needs to be done for the vulnerable behind bars.

On Sunday, the New Jersey Supreme Court issued a consent order based on an agreement reached between the New Jersey Public Defender's Office, state Attorney General's Office, County Prosecutors Association and American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey to release about 800 inmates serving time for low-level offenses in county jails.

According to the consent order some of the inmates may be called to return to complete their sentences after the public health emergency is over.

On Tuesday, the Los Angeles County Sheriff said that about 1,700 inmates — or 10% of the county jail population — has been released so far and more could be released this week.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said late Wednesday that 200 additional city jail inmates are being released, in addition to the 75 that have already been released.

"That number will keep growing in the short term, with a particular focus on those who are really older, particularly over 70, and inmates who have pre-existing conditions," de Blasio said. "I think you'll see substantial number of the next few days."

High-risk inmates behind bars

On Monday, the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released interim guidance for corrections facilities — though the guidance does not address the issue of releasing some inmates to guard against the spread of the virus.

In separate guidelines issued earlier this month, the CDC identified those at "higher risk" for contracting the contagion: Americans 55 or older, and those with underlying health conditions.

Based on those guidelines, a large swath of the roughly 2.3 million Americans serving time behind bars appears to be at elevated risk of contracting COVID-19.

Among the higher-risk category of inmates are the aging — about 12% of all inmates are over 55, or more than 171,000 -- according to Wanda Bertram of the Prison Policy Initiative.

A large portion of the nation's prison population also suffers chronic health conditions including diabetes, high-blood pressure and heart disease. About 65% of state prisoners were smokers in 2016, and 45% of federal inmates, the last year for which data is available, according to the Prison Policy Initiative.

At the federal level, a bipartisan group of U.S. senators took up the call for the care of vulnerable inmates.

"It is important that consistent with the law and taking into account public safety and health concerns, that the most vulnerable inmates are released or transferred to home

confinement, if possible,” the legislators wrote in their letter.

Two escapes, fugitives still on the loose

Fourteen inmates in Washington State escaped a correctional facility yesterday and nine female inmates, who fled a minimum-security prison in Pierre, South Dakota on Monday after being housed with an inmate that tested positive, state governor Kristi Noem said at a Tuesday press conference.

Seven of the escaped 14 in Washington were recovered by Wednesday morning, and four of the nine in South Dakota have been recaptured — but seven men and five women remained at large as of late Wednesday.

Pompeo defends efforts to bring Americans home amid pandemic (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 11:17 AM, Quint Forgy, 2003K]

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Thursday defended the Trump administration’s efforts to bring home Americans from foreign countries amid criticism that his department has left U.S. citizens stranded during a global pandemic.

“There’s still a lot of work to do. We’ve got a lot of people who are trying to get back this way, and with travel shut down in many of these countries without any notice or little notice, there’s still a major undertaking,” Pompeo told conservative talk radio host Hugh Hewitt during an interview on his show.

“But the team has marshaled the resources,” Pompeo continued. “It’s an airlift back home like we’ve not seen in an awfully long time, and I’m really proud of the way our team has responded.”

Former State Department officials, as well as members of Congress, have accused Pompeo of an insufficient response to the international coronavirus outbreak, charging that the secretary and his senior leadership team acted too slowly to evacuate Americans as various travel bans complicated their movements.

Although Pompeo said the State Department had “now brought over 10,000 Americans back home from places where they were stranded through no fault of their own,” thousands more still trapped overseas have been forced to resort to dangerous or expensive methods of return travel, including risky border crossings, bribing customs officials and chartering a jet flown by a private security firm.

Still, Pompeo asserted that State officials have answered the myriad challenges posed by the coronavirus “in a way that’s in the finest tradition of American diplomacy,” adding that “our team is out there taking care of Americans [and] keeping our own teams safe.”

Pompeo earlier this month also faced scrutiny from congressional lawmakers and his own employees for not being more transparent about the coronavirus’ threat to the State Department’s workforce.

Throughout the public health crisis, Pompeo has remained closely allied with President Donald Trump in criticizing China for hinting, without evidence, that the coronavirus may have originated in the U.S. and for failing to adequately warn other nations of the deadly

disease.

Pompeo's insistence on branding the coronavirus as the "Wuhan virus" — in reference to the city in China's central province of Hubei where the illness first emerged — reportedly resulted in a dispute with foreign ministers from the Group of 7 leading industrialized democracies during a video conference meeting on Wednesday.

HHS implements anti-price gouging order amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 10:08 AM, Brooke Singman, 8943K]

The Department of Health and Human Services on Thursday implemented President Trump's executive order to prevent the hoarding of certain health and medical resources necessary to respond to the coronavirus outbreak.

HHS Secretary Alex Azar on Thursday announced a list of certain health and medical resources subject to the hoarding prevention measures, which also target price-gouging.

"Today, we designated a set of medical products that will be subject to the president's recent executive order to prevent hoarding and price-gouging," Azar said.

The order prevents accumulation in excess of reasonable demands of business, personal or home consumption, or for the purpose of resale prices in excess of current market prices.

The designated materials include N-95 filtering face masks, other "filtering face piece respirators," air purifying respirators and filters and cartridges. The order also protects chloroquine or hydroxychloroquine (the malaria drugs that are being used to help the symptoms of COVID-19); sterilization services for medical devices; and disinfecting and hand sanitizing products.

Personal protective equipment (PPE) including medical gowns, apparel, surgical gowns, Tyvek suits, PPE face masks, surgical masks and face shields are also protected under the order.

The order also covers portable ventilators, regular ventilators, anesthesia gas machines, and other breathing devices.

"HHS and FEMA will continue working closely together to monitor and address shortages of necessary medical products, and we look forward to working closely with the Department of Justice on hoarding prevention measures," Azar said Thursday. "The president will take every possible step to get American health care providers the supplies they need to stay safe and save lives."

Earlier this week, the Trump administration vowed to go after price gougers and those hoarding critical medical supplies amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Very simply, we will not allow anyone to exploit the suffering of American citizens for their own profit," Trump said Monday.

Attorney General Bill Barr said Monday that he has seen evidence of price gouging and hoarding in recent weeks.

"Once specific materials are so designated, persons are prohibited from accumulating those items in excess of reasonable personal or business needs or for the purpose of selling them in excess of prevailing market prices," Barr said Monday.

"We're talking about people hoarding these goods and materials on an industrial scale for the purposes of manipulating the market and ultimately driving windfall profits," Barr said. "If you have a big supply of toilet paper in your house, this is not something you have to worry about. But, if you are sitting on a warehouse with masks, surgical masks, you will be hearing a knock on your door."

The order comes after states, like New York, which has become the epicenter of the country's COVID-19 outbreak, complained about price-gouging on necessary PPE like N-95 masks.

As of Thursday morning, the U.S. reported more than 69,100 positive cases of COVID-19. Late Wednesday night, the death toll in the country exceeded 1,000.

Coronavirus Pandemic Reaching Critical Tipping Point in America, Analysis Shows (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 2:38 PM, Gaby Galvin, 3020K]

A U.S. news analysis of coronavirus deaths in eight countries indicates the pandemic is approaching a crucial point in America, when an aggressive and sustained national response could save thousands – perhaps millions – of lives and protect health systems in hard-hit areas from collapse.

The analysis indicates that the death toll in the U.S. is surging and soon will likely top 300 deaths per day. Without a comprehensive response to prevent new infections and care for those who are sick, the U.S. is poised to follow the paths of other nations with rising infection rates and mounting deaths.

Plotting daily deaths over time offers a sense of which measures were most effective at bending the curve and saving lives in other countries. In China, for example, aggressive testing, isolation and quarantine efforts that began in the third week of January culminated in a pivotal moment in mid-February, the analysis shows, when the number of new deaths fell to about 100 to touch off a steep decline.

In Iran, where leaders initially downplayed the threat and saw a surge in deaths, the tide appears to have turned for the better around March 22. In Italy, the death toll reached a critical milestone the same day, topping 500 reported deaths for the first time. But in the last few days, the toll appears to be leveling out and may decline.

The brunt of the pandemic hit the U.S. later than in other countries, but deaths have been rising rapidly in recent days. There were more than 200 new deaths reported Wednesday to push the total past 1,000 – and the analysis shows that, barring considerable intervention, the daily death toll is poised to accelerate.

Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of preventive medicine and infectious diseases at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, says the findings underscore the critical need for people to continue to stay at home and physically distance themselves from others.

"If they don't, it's likely that there will be a substantial increase in deaths from coronavirus in the United States," Schaffner says.

Deaths represent the most reliable measure of COVID-19's spread and the arc of the pandemic. Trying to track infections and hospitalizations is much more challenging due to fragmented testing and reporting across counties, states and countries. In the U.S., it can even be difficult to track deaths, as the federal government and other institutions, such as Johns Hopkins University, regularly publish different numbers.

"Deaths may be the best measure of the incidence of coronavirus," says Dr. James Curran, dean of the Emory University Rollins School of Public Health, who led the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's AIDS task force. "The reason to follow deaths and analyze them carefully is to see how we're doing at saving lives."

Yet policymakers, health officials and the public have, for the most part, focused on surging case counts in epicenters like New York City and Seattle, trying to fashion a response based on an incomplete picture of the virus' spread. The U.S. News comparison offers a window into different scenarios that may unfold depending on how aggressively the U.S. acts in the coming days.

Some parts of the country are already at a crisis point. This week, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo pleaded with the Trump administration to provide 30,000 ventilators, which he said will be crucial when a tidal wave of coronavirus cases hits the state in two to three weeks. New York's roughly 31,000 cases so far represent about 6% of those diagnosed worldwide, and the state has the highest death toll in the U.S., with more than 320 dead – though New York's population density might produce a higher infection rate and death toll than other parts of the country, experts say.

In Washington State, which was the country's first hot spot and now has one-tenth as many cases as New York, the coronavirus has killed more than 130 people, with most of the deaths in the Seattle area and many linked to a nursing home.

Louisiana appears headed for the same precipice. Three weeks ago, the state had no confirmed cases of the coronavirus. There are now about 1,800 cases in the state, and Gov. John Bel Edwards, who issued a stay-at-home order on March 22, said hospitals in the New Orleans area could be overwhelmed by April 4.

"We're already low on protective equipment," says Dr. Rebekah Gee, who until recently served as Louisiana's health secretary and now leads the LSU Health Care Services Division. "The biggest issue is personnel, because you can make masks and you can actually create field hospitals, but you can't make pulmonary critical care specialists in a week."

With the number of COVID-19 cases growing at a faster pace in some places than in others, Americans are constantly flooded with news and information, much of it conflicting and difficult to interpret, says Rocco Perla, co-founder of nonprofit The Health Initiative and an assistant professor of biostatistics at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Perla carried out the analysis with Lloyd Provost, principal statistician at Associates in Process Improvement, with help from Shannon Provost, a lecturer at the McCombs School

of Business at the University of Texas in Austin, and shared it with U.S. News.

This barrage of information, on some days frightening and on others reassuring, "encourages a cycle of panic and relief" that keeps the public guessing and stokes the sense of alarm, Perla says. Most importantly, Perla and Provost say, most of the data released by health agencies in the U.S. and abroad doesn't account for random variation.

Without statistical analysis, there's no way to know whether these ups and downs in the data are random or convey "something important about whether things are getting worse or better," they say in a description of their analysis, which uses coronavirus data from Our World in Data – a nonprofit affiliated with the University of Oxford that draws on information from the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control – and the World Health Organization's daily situation reports.

The data in the analysis represents the best information available, Perla says; it also reflects the dates new daily deaths were reported, not necessarily when they occurred. Viewing the data in its entirety and over time offers a clearer window into the trajectory of the outbreak, one that isn't clouded by noise and can detect meaningful differences in patterns that can inform official public guidance and decision-making.

"With all the talk of 'flattening the curve,' we think the approach we used and our analysis sheds light on early signals of when the increase in new deaths peaks and the curve begins to flatten," Perla and Provost say.

The analysis indicates a pivotal point where the death toll deviated from its expected course in various countries – whether for better or worse. Comparing the U.S. curve with those from other countries offers insight into the value of measures that can slow the pandemic's growth.

Experts who reviewed the data say China's curve reflects its draconian crackdown on the virus. On Jan. 23, with about 835 infections and 26 deaths in the country, Chinese officials quarantined Wuhan, a city of 11 million that was the center of the outbreak at the time. As cases continued climbing, authorities put more cities on lockdown and began aggressively screening and contact tracing. Sick patients were separated from their families, workers went to homes looking for illnesses and residents were paid to monitor and report on quarantine-violating neighbors.

"They put into force a truly amazing response that was brutal and oppressive, that was unprecedented in scale, that was intolerant of dissent, intolerant of the free flow of information, untransparent and rapidly scaled," says Steve Morrison, director of the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank in the nation's capital. "And it worked."

On Feb. 17, 25 days after the country cut off Wuhan, the number of new deaths reported in China fell to 105 in the first signal that deaths would soon begin dropping, the U.S. News analysis shows – even as the number of total cases there remained high. On March 22, China reported just six new deaths.

But by then, the virus had taken hold across the world. In Italy, as China began gaining traction against the pandemic, the governing Democratic Party leader, Nicola Zingaretti

downplayed the risk of the virus, encouraging people "not to change our habits."

Today, the country has about 74,000 confirmed cases and more than 7,500 coronavirus deaths, the Johns Hopkins tracker shows – though the true number of infections may be much higher, according to Angelo Borrelli, who heads Italy's Civil Protection Agency. About 9% of the country's infections have occurred among health workers.

In Italy, the death toll hit a peak on March 22, when 795 deaths were reported. New deaths fell below the expected trajectory in more recent days, according to the U.S. News analysis, indicating they may begin to decline. Many in the country have died because the health system is overwhelmed and can't care for a flood of critically ill patients needing ventilators and other respiratory support.

"It's just a measure of how ill-prepared they were for this," Morrison says.

A look at Iran offers another view of the global pandemic. Leaders in the secretive state said in February that the virus wouldn't spread in the country, but a steep upward climb in deaths began around March 9, the analysis shows. Satellite images show mass graves in Qom – the country's first coronavirus hot spot – and that week, authorities shut down popular religious shrines in Qom and Mashhad and authorized the military to intervene, The New York Times reported. Iran now has more than 29,000 cases and 2,200 deaths, according to the Johns Hopkins tracker.

Even so, while new deaths reported in Iran remained high at 123 on March 22, the analysis indicates that had the outbreak maintained its recent trajectory, that number actually would have been higher – meaning restrictive measures at the state and individual levels may be starting to blunt the uptick in deaths.

That trend still could be reversed, especially if the data are inaccurate or delayed due to reporting issues, Perla notes. But it gives the strongest indication of Iran's current coronavirus trajectory.

South Korea offers a contrast to other countries in the analysis. Its response, which involved a dedicated public health campaign of testing, contact tracing and isolation, was so successful that the country kept its death toll low and prevented a surge of cases.

The country was hit hard by another coronavirus – one that causes Middle East Respiratory Syndrome – in 2015, and already had the laws and emergency infrastructure in place to manage such an outbreak.

"We have the blueprints for the solution – we just need to follow them," says Gee from Louisiana. "We understand what worked in South Korea and in China, and if we do these things, they will work here."

A soon-to-be released analysis by the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation buttresses the U.S. News findings. The IHME research team also examined deaths globally, from the start of each country's outbreak – the date the death rate hit 0.3 per 1 million – to the moment it gained momentum.

The IHME analysis additionally delved deeper and found that each country's trajectory is

driven by the pandemic's arc in different communities, some of which – such as the Lombardy and Liguria regions in Italy – experienced explosive growth, while others, such as Venice, are seeing deaths mount more slowly.

Spain is now one of the hardest hit countries in Europe, driven by a surge of deaths in Madrid, says Dr. Christopher Murray, IHME's director, who describes the situation in Madrid as "really alarming."

Madrid's death rate 14 days after the start of its epidemic is 10 times higher than Wuhan's was at that same point: "Madrid's going to be the worst by far of the European cities," Murray says.

In all, the results of both the U.S. News and IHME analyses "confirm that early, decisive action toward self-isolation, social distancing, will pay off," says Dr. Julio Frenk, the president of the University of Miami, former dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and chairman of IHME's board.

Frenk says social distancing measures can help curb the outbreak in three ways: They interrupt transmission of the virus, and ensure that even if the same number of people are infected, those infections occur over a longer period of time, preventing health systems from becoming overwhelmed – "the famous flattening of the curve," Frenk says.

Perhaps most importantly, he says, slowing the spread of the virus buys scientists time to develop better ways to screen, diagnose and treat patients.

"We need to work together, because physical distancing gives us more time for those scientific solutions to emerge and be tested and deployed," Frenk says.

With roughly a fifth of Americans under orders to stay at home, the U.S. News analysis also reinforces agreement among health experts that short-term business and school closures will not be enough to meaningfully turn the tide on the outbreak.

President Donald Trump this week signaled a desire to have the country "opened" by Easter on April 12 to curb the virus' damaging economic effects. The virus' astonishingly rapid potential for spread makes this a potentially dangerous move, and Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, advised "flexibility" in determining when to relax stay-at-home orders.

"On a literally day-by-day and week-by-week basis, you need to evaluate the feasibility of what you're trying to do," Fauci said. "I think people might get the misinterpretation you're just going to lift everything up and ... that's not going to happen. It's going to be looking at the data."

In the U.S., the best approach to the virus emphasizes the voluntary measures now in place, says Dr. Clay Marsh, vice president and executive dean for health sciences at the West Virginia University Health Sciences Center. His state – which just recorded its first instance of community transmission at a nursing home – is aggressively trying to avoid a wave of cases similar to the one that now threatens to capsize New York City's health system.

If 75% of people heed those stay-at-home warnings, Marsh says, the tsunami of cases could be transformed into a steady stream of patients that health workers can manage. If 90% of people heed the order, "you don't see a surge," he says.

IHME's Murray says it won't be long before we learn whether these measures are working.

"I think we're keying up to a critical time," he says. "I think people are going to be very nervous as we wait to see whether social distancing ... is bending the curve or not."

Prepare For Outbreaks Like New York's In Other States, Warns Anthony Fauci (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 1:22 PM, Elena Renken, 4112K]

Over a thousand people in the U.S. have died from COVID-19, and over a third of those deaths have taken place in New York. Nearly half the confirmed cases in the United States are in New York. The state has become a coronavirus hot spot — anyone leaving New York City is being asked to self-quarantine for two weeks.

A key adviser to President Trump, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and member of the White House coronavirus task force, says other states need to prepare to take on outbreaks of this scale.

NPR's Noel King spoke with Fauci about where the U.S. is headed and what strategies may help stop the spread of the coronavirus. He weighed in on increased testing capacity in the U.S. and on President Trump's comment that he hopes to see the economy reopen by Easter. That possibility, according to Fauci, remains to be seen.

Earlier this week, an official with the World Health Organization warned that the United States could become the new epicenter of the virus — could it?

Well, clearly in the beginning, China was the epicenter. Then it moved to Europe, particularly in Italy. And now we're seeing a rather substantial outbreak in the New York City metropolitan area. Now, there are a lot of other areas in the United States. But clearly, the acceleration of cases that we're seeing in New York City is really quite disturbing.

Nearly half of all cases in the country right now are in the state of New York. What should hospitals in New York expect over the next few weeks?

What they're seeing already, and we'll expect more, is an influx of cases which they're trying to deal with locally and with the help of the federal government, with regard to beds, ICU beds and ventilators. I am in close contact with Gov. Cuomo of New York and he's dealing with the federal government, with FEMA and other organizations to try to get to him the material and equipment that he will need.

There are other states, including Florida, that are seeing a surge in cases reminiscent of what we saw in New York maybe a week ago. Should those states be looking at New York and thinking: That's what's going to happen here and we need to be prepared for that?

Absolutely. That's the course of these types of outbreaks. So Florida has gotten hit both from internal [cases], but also from travel-related cases of people who leave New York, many of whom have second homes in Florida. So we're having a situation, as is predictable when you have outbreaks like this, that you seed different areas from hot spots.

Right now, New York is bearing a major burden of the outbreak. But when people leave New York, they go other places. And that's the reason why yesterday at the White House press conference, we made the recommendation that when individuals leave New York, that when they get to [their] destination that they essentially self-isolate for 14 days, as well as monitor their own symptoms to make sure they don't get sick. And if they do, to actually report it to a health care provider.

There's still some confusion about who should be getting tested. The president tweeted last night that testing in this country has increased significantly. He also said there is no need to test all 350 million or so Americans. So who should go and get the test?

The president is correct on both counts that there are many, many, many more tests that are out there now than there were just a few weeks ago. The other thing that the president was referring to is he wants to make sure that those people who need the tests, get the tests first. Because right now, when you haven't had enough tests to give to everyone, you need to make sure that the people who are having symptoms and need to be diagnosed are the ones who get the tests, particularly those who are in the hospital.

In South Korea, a country that has handled this virus remarkably well, they tested broadly. They tested everyone with symptoms and isolated those people and tested and isolated people they'd been in contact with. We don't have enough tests to do that. Is there a South Korea strategy for the U.S., or have we passed that point?

Well, the United States is a big country and it isn't uni-dimensional. So what we're seeing, for example, is two components of how you address an outbreak. There's containment, in which you identify as best as you can each individual person who's infected. You identify them. You isolate them. You get them out of circulation and you do contact tracing. That's what we needed to do in situations before it became a massive outbreak.

When you have a situation like we're seeing in New York, they're in what we call mitigation, because there's so many cases up there. They need to be able to take care of the people who are infected.

Today the testing situation is infinitely better than what it was a few weeks ago. We now have hundreds of thousands of tests out there. And in the next week or so, we'll be having like a million a week. In the beginning, it was a slow start. But right now that the commercial firms have gotten involved, we really have caught up. And we will be seeing a much improved system with regard to the availability and the implementation of testing.

Italy, the U.K. and India have all moved to lockdowns where they've suspended all nonessential activities. In India, people have been told not to leave their houses for three weeks. Should every state in the U.S. be doing this right now, given that we don't have enough testing to know where the next epicenter will be?

I don't think that we should do this uniformly throughout the entire country. I mean, obviously, you'll always keep an open mind that you might have to revert to something like that. But today, there are clearly places that need to do that, and the governors are doing that. You saw what Gov. Newsom did in California, we're seeing what Gov. Cuomo has done in New York state and in New York City. And we're seeing versions of that in places

like Louisiana.

So you're going to be seeing more stringent shutdowns depending upon where you are. But there are regions of the country where, rather than shut down, we should be doing the kind of containment, which is identifying, testing, contact tracing and isolating.

At White House briefings, you and Dr. Deborah Birx have talked about an interesting scenario where scientists are able to gather data about cases all across this country and then policymakers can tailor their response based on local characteristics, like "how bad is it here?" Do you have the data you need now to tell different areas of the country they should be doing different things?

We are quickly getting to the point where we will be able to get that data. But you are correct. To be honest, we don't have all that data now uniformly throughout the country to make those determinations. But that's a major, primary goal that we have right now, is to get those data, because you have to make informed decisions and your decisions are informed by the information you have.

The president said this week that he'd like to see the economy reopened, up and running by Easter. That's April 12. There seem to be real risks if states and communities come out of shutdowns too early. What are you advising right now? Should we even be considering April 12?

The president has set April 12 as an aspirational goal. He knows, and we've discussed this with him, that you have to be very flexible on that. He put that out because he wanted to give some hope to people. But he is not absolutely wed to that. And he keeps saying that although he would like that to be the date, he's open-minded and flexible to make sure that the facts and the pattern of the virus determine what we do.

We have heard hopeful statements that warmer weather might slow this virus down. Does the science bear that out?

You know, the science bears it out in part because if you look historically with viruses like influenza and some of the more common, benign coronaviruses, when the weather gets warmer, viruses don't do as well. And people tend to spend more time outdoors where the free flow of air is always good for preventing respiratory infections. That's a pattern that's real. What we don't know is whether this is going to happen with this virus because this is a unique virus, which we had no experience [with] before. We're hoping that's the case. We hope we get a respite as we get into April, May and June.

Likely it will come around [again] next season because it's a very vigorous virus, and we're seeing it already infecting people in the Southern Hemisphere, now, as they enter into their winter. So I hope and I think we might get a respite with the weather, which would hopefully give us more time to better prepare for what might be a second round or a seasonal cycling.

Pandemic deaths could top 1.8 mn even with tough response: study (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 4:43 PM, Staff, 1973K]

The death toll from the coronavirus pandemic sweeping the globe could hit 1.8 million worldwide this year even with swift and stringent measures to stop it, according to a study from Britain's Imperial College published Thursday.

Researchers estimate that tens of millions of lives could be saved if governments act fast to adopt strict public health measures, including testing, quarantining and broad social distancing.

The latest report from Imperial College London, whose previous research spurred the British government to ramp up its efforts to curb the virus, comes as an AFP toll based on country data and World Health Organisation figures showed global infections topping 500,000, including more than 22,000 deaths.

The Imperial College modelling simulations are based on current data about the severity of the virus — its contagiousness and estimated mortality rate — as well as demographic and societal factors.

In a sobering projection of what could have happened with no interventions at all, the study said that if left unchecked COVID-19 could have infected almost everyone on the planet this year and killed 40 million people.

The report then looks at different levels of response, from spontaneous social distancing to the tough lock down measures currently imposed in some worst-affected countries, and projects the potential health impacts across 202 countries.

With strict containment measures imposed early enough — resulting in a rate of deaths of 0.2 per 100,000 of population per week — the modelling shows a death toll of 1.86 million people, with nearly 470 million infected this year.

If the same measures were taken later — leading to 1.6 deaths per 100,000 of population per week — the estimated toll rises sharply to 10.45 million deaths and 2.4 billion people infected.

“Our analysis highlights the challenging decisions faced by all governments in the coming weeks and months, but demonstrates the extent to which rapid, decisive and collective action now could save millions of lives,” the authors said.

Estimates of mortality levels and healthcare demand were based on data from China and high-income countries, the report said, adding that variances in health systems could result in different patterns in low income countries.

They stressed that the modelling mapped out “possible trajectories” for the pandemic and containment strategies, based on countries that have been affected early in the pandemic.

“However, at the current time, it is not possible to predict with any certainty the exact number of cases for any given country or the precise mortality and disease burden that will result.”

The report does not take into account the social and economic costs of the containment measures, “which will be high and may be disproportionately so in lower income settings”.

It also warned that “suppression strategies will need to be maintained in some manner until vaccines or effective treatments become available to avoid the risk of later epidemics”.

White House officials push back on calls to activate DPA for critical medical supplies (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 7:27 PM, Myah Ward, 2003K]

As state leaders across the country call on the federal government to activate the Defense Production Act, White House officials continue to push back — instead insisting that companies have stepped up to provide the dire medical equipment needed to tackle the coronavirus pandemic across the U.S.

On Tuesday, the Federal Emergency Management Agency said it ultimately did not need to use the DPA to secure medical equipment, walking back on an announcement made by the head of the agency earlier that morning. But state authorities and health leaders have called for more federal intervention as they struggle to get their hands on ventilators and personal protective equipment necessary to brace for overwhelmed hospitals amid the intensifying outbreak.

The Service Employees International Union on Thursday announced that it had located 39 million N95 masks and was working with states, counties, health systems and hospitals to connect them to the supplier — an illustration of how states might benefit from a national response.

“Within 48 hours of painstakingly calling leads and potential suppliers,” the SEIU said in a statement, “the union discovered a distributor who had the 39 million masks, and has since found another supplier who says his company can produce 20 million more masks a week. The union also has found a supplier who can deliver millions of face shields.”

But Adm. Brett Giroir, a member of the White House coronavirus task force, on Thursday defended the administration’s decision to keep the DPA in its back pocket, saying the federal government had poured supplies into New York — providing the state with everything it needs, including masks and ventilators.

“The Defense Production Act, it’s very important that potential is there,” Giroir said on “Fox & Friends.” “But as the president has clearly said, industry is pouring in with offers. Everything we have asked, they have done. And they come every single day to provide more and more goods.”

The pushback also comes as more than 100 current and former national security professionals, including former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, joined the call for action this week, urging the president to use the act to ramp up production of critical medical supplies.

The letter, obtained by The Wall Street Journal, says that despite the administration’s using the DPA on a “narrow and limited basis,” health care workers continue to “sound the alarm, citing the increasingly urgent and dire need for ventilators, masks, testing supplies and other resources.”

“Some private companies have been willing and able to scale up production — and admirably so,” the letter says. “But as governors and local leaders around the country are making clear, private efforts without more extensive government support are proving far from sufficient to meet the current and anticipated needs. Beyond questions of supply, the private sector lacks the ability to process incoming requests, prioritize the most urgent

needs, and coordinate with other companies absent more concerted government involvement. That is precisely what the DPA is designed to do.”

Though President Donald Trump signed an executive order last week to invoke the DPA, he has yet to make a single order, saying that “we have the act to use in case we need it, but we have so many things being made right now” by companies that are volunteering. During Monday’s White House briefing, the president offered another reason for not activating the DPA, suggesting that doing so would be socialist.

“We’re a country not based on nationalizing our business,” Trump said. “Call a person over in Venezuela. Ask them, how did nationalization of their businesses work out? Not too well.”

Trump addressed the subject during Thursday’s White House briefing, reiterating that “companies want to do this.” But the president added that he’d used the DPA on “two minor occasions,” though he didn’t provide any specifics or evidence to support the statement.

“I talk about the Defense Production Act a lot. I’ve enacted it. I have it. I can do it with a pen,” Trump told reporters. “We have actually used it on two minor occasions, and then we could withdraw it. But for the most part, the companies, we don’t need it. We say we need this, and they say don’t bother, we’re going to do it.”

Trump added: “Frankly, they don’t need somebody to walk over there with a hammer and say, do it. They are getting it done.”

During the briefing, Dr. Deborah Birx, the White House coronavirus response coordinator, also said she was reassured after a conversation with New York leaders this week, saying there were an adequate number of ICU beds and ventilators that haven’t been used.

“There is still significant — over a thousand or two thousand ventilators that have not been utilized yet,” she said. “Please, for the reassurance of people around the world, to wake up this morning and look at people talking about creating DNR situations — do not resuscitate situations for patients — there is no situation in the United States right now that warrants that kind of discussion. You can be thinking about it in a hospital. Certainly many hospitals talk about this on a daily basis.”

She continued: “But to say that to the American people, to make the implication that when they need a hospital bed it’s not going to be there, or when they need a ventilator it’s not going to be there, we don’t have an evidence of that right now. And it’s our job to assure the American people that it’s our collective job to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Earlier Thursday, the White House trade adviser, Peter Navarro, who appears to be leading the effort on sourcing supplies for states across the country, said he was working with FEMA, the Department of Health and Human Services and the private sector to get health care professionals what “they need, and we’re just getting that done.”

“I couldn’t be prouder of the federal government and private enterprise and President Trump for bringing that effort together, because every time I call somebody — if I call 1,000 people today, 999 of them in the private sector will be more than willing to do whatever we ask,” Navarro said on Fox on Thursday morning.

Navarro had a more intense exchange later on CNN when he was asked about not activating the DPA. He said the administration was stepping up, “working very, very hard” to get equipment to hot spots like New York and other states facing an intensifying surge of coronavirus cases. Navarro also downplayed reports that people were using garbage bags for protection, suggesting that CNN was sensationalizing the crisis.

“So, there’ll be pictures of people that you’re citing or whatever with garbage bags or whatever. But that’s going to be the exception that proves the rule that we’re doing everything we can,” Navarro said.

“Let’s not sensationalize this crisis at a time when we create more anxiety or panicked behavior with people,” he added.

In an Instagram Live Q&A with NBA player Stephen Curry, Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the White task force, also touted the private sector’s willingness to step up when he was asked whether the federal government’s approach to the supply problems was appropriate.

“Once you get the private sector, these companies involved, they can whip out billions and billions of masks,” Fauci said. “I mean, literally at the last meeting, we had to say, OK, enough is enough. Let’s get them and flood it. Let’s get those companies to make them, and they’re willing to do it. You know, it’s very interesting, you would think that the federal government would almost have to force them to do it. You’re not seeing that. We’re seeing they’re stepping forward, wanting to do it themselves.”

But the praise stands in stark contrast to complaints from leaders across the country who say their states still don’t have the necessary supplies to battle the outbreak. Sen. Kamala Harris (D-Calif.) on Thursday said she didn’t understand why Trump, just a day after reportedly telling Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer that he would activate the DPA, had walked back on the decision.

“But unfortunately, we have someone in the White House who I don’t think understands the core and essential functions of government,” Harris said on MSNBC on Thursday. “I don’t think he respects those core and essential functions of government to understand what he should be unlocking and, in this case, to require and to encourage and incentivize domestic production of the health resources like masks and ventilators that will save American lives. I don’t understand. I don’t understand it. I don’t get it. I think it’s an abject failure of leadership.”

Cases explode in Michigan but states outside of the hotspots can’t get supplies (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 6:54 PM, Lauren Fox, Jeremy Herb, Daniella Diaz, Jasmine Wright, and Ali Zaslav, 5551K]

The number of coronavirus cases in Michigan has skyrocketed to nearly 3,000 from less than 350 a week ago, but the state is still struggling to obtain supplies behind the states where the pandemic has hit the hardest.

For weeks, the scenes of coronavirus outbreaks in New York, Washington and California have captured the nation’s attention as the epicenters of the crisis in the United States.

But as the pandemic takes hold elsewhere, the finite number of live-saving equipment like ventilators, face masks and personal protective equipment -- as well as the inability of the national stockpile to make up for all of the shortages -- is coming into clear view, leaving a gap between states that encountered outbreaks early and those that are seeing their numbers ramp up now.

Michigan, the site of one of the country's fastest growing outbreaks, has found itself unable to get an adequate supply of personal protective equipment, with lawmakers telling CNN that Gov. Gretchen Whitmer had placed an order only to be told by the company later the federal government had placed an order that would take priority.

When even New York, the epicenter of the coronavirus crisis in the US, says it isn't getting enough supplies, states that have seen less spread worry they will miss out as the federal government doles out the limited resources it has at its disposal.

"We are seeing numbers that look a lot like the numbers those states were seeing 10 days ago," said Rep. Dan Kildee, a Michigan Democrat. "There is real urgency that we don't want to miss the opportunity to stop this in order to slow it down."

Michigan lawmakers are also reporting the state has received just a fraction of the materials they've requested from the national stockpile. Kildee said the state's entire congressional delegation sent a letter to Vice President Mike Pence, the head of the coronavirus task force, urging the federal government to intervene.

"Confusion has arisen as both states and the federal government attempt to rapidly secure (personal protective equipment) and testing supplies," the lawmakers wrote. "In the midst of this challenge, the federal government must ensure it communicates a clear chain of command to the states and utilize a data-driven prioritization process to address states' needs."

Detroit and Chicago are demonstrating concerning spread of coronavirus, Dr. Deborah Birx said at Thursday's White House briefing.

"We are concerned about certain counties" that have seen increased spreading of the virus, Birx said, naming Wayne County, Michigan (home to Detroit), and Cook County, Illinois (home of Chicago), as examples.

She said those locations were showing a "more rapid increase" of spread.

Pence said Wednesday that the Federal Emergency Management Agency would be playing a greater role in helping states get what they need, saying he had spoken to Whitmer, a Democrat, about Michigan's issues. "As I told Gov. Whitmer today, who's leading her state through all this with great energy, we want to partner with her, want to partner with every governor and make sure the left hand knows what the right hand is doing in terms of acquiring resources," Pence said.

But state officials and members of Congress say the federal government remains slow to help states as President Donald Trump is unwilling to fully embrace the powers of the Defense Production Act to ramp up and allocate nationwide production. There's simply not enough supply to go around right now -- and even if Trump used the DPA to allow the

federal government to intervene in factory production and force companies to make more ventilators, masks and respirators, the effort could still take weeks or months to ramp up.

Trump and Pence held a conference call with governors on Thursday, where the tension over the Defense Production Act arose once again.

Washington Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee urged Trump and Pence to nationalize supply and manufacturing under the 1950 law, specifically referencing the shortage in swabs used for testing, according to two sources familiar with the call. Inslee encouraged Trump to be a "quarterback" and use the authority at his disposal.

Trump said that the federal government would not nationalize supply and manufacturing, one of the sources said, but another Trump administration official said there was new guidance from the Federal Drug Administration allowing for easier use of swabs in testing.

"I think it would be very, very helpful if the federal government could be more assertive and aggressive and more organized in helping all of us to obtain these systems," Inslee said at a Thursday press conference.

Meanwhile, states may be looking to take things into their own hands. Earlier this week in Michigan, the bipartisan delegation and Whitmer discussed whether the state could create its own supply chain to make up for shortages from the federal government. Still, there is recognition that even if it could be done, it would take weeks or months.

"We're working with manufacturers to work on their supply chains. We're getting our own manufacturers involved like Ford, GM and Chrysler," said Rep. Andy Levin, a Michigan Democrat. But he contended it was "a distant second place to having the President of the United States use the power of the Defense Production Act."

Outside of Michigan

And it is not just Michigan. Other states -- where outbreaks may be less severe than New York but where the situation is nevertheless escalating -- are growing uneasy sharing their hard fought resources, knowing it could be hard to get more later.

On Thursday, Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb rejected the idea of sending PPE and ventilators to New York right now even though there are only 645 cases of coronavirus in Indiana, according to CNN Health's most recent tally.

"We're not in a position right now as much as we want to be focused outside of our borders," Holcomb, a Republican, said. "And we realize that there are hotspots in the country, Los Angeles, or New York City or Seattle, others are growing... but right now we're focused on Hoosier needs so when we get to that happy day where we can start to help the rest of the other country recover, we will."

In Pennsylvania, where cases have grown to more than 1,600, there is more evidence that the federal government has injected uncertainty.

Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, a Pennsylvania Democrat, said a hospital in her state had paid for 80,000 N95 respirator masks, only to learn that FEMA had diverted its order.

"Not only isn't the federal government helping streamline the supply chain and helping to get supplies into the supply chain, it's now disrupting it," Scanlon said in an interview. "These are unusual times and require extraordinary measures. People working very, very hard at local level -- we're running into roadblocks because we don't have interstate coordination."

Two Florida Democrats, Reps. Ted Deutch and Lois Frankel, wrote a letter to Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar warning Florida needs more swabs for testing, but that the state has received its orders in "'drips and drabs' leaving much of the testing capacity unused."

In some areas, the competition for equipment is happening even at the county level. Rep. Tom Malinowski, a Democrat from New Jersey, where there are nearly 7,000 cases, said in his own district, he's seen mayors and county officials competing with each other for goods. In one county he represents, officials were able to quickly establish a drive-thru testing site that has been running efficiently and with adequate resources. Meanwhile, a FEMA drive-thru in a neighboring county has experienced a number of shortages, he said.

"It is crazy that your ability to get tested depends on how quickly your county officials acted to tap into a limited supply chain," Malinowski said.

In Massachusetts, where there are more than 1,800 cases, officials say they "continue to try and work the supply chain hard" to increase supplies of personal protective equipment, but to date, the state has only received approximately 17% of its requests from the Strategic National Stockpile, with another shipment still to arrive.

Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker, a Republican, said Thursday the state has submitted a request through FEMA for federal disaster assistance. "We hope to see the feds move on this quickly," he said at a press conference.

Rep. Joe Kennedy, a Massachusetts Democrat, said matters were made worse for the states when they received supplies from the federal government's stockpile because they weren't inventoried, and workers in his state had to spend a full day creating one so they could be sent out across the state. Kennedy called the competition on bids for supplies between the states as well as the federal government "completely detrimental to this process."

"You couldn't come up with a dumber way of doing this," Kennedy said.

Feds have 1.5 million expired N95 masks in storage despite CDC clearing them for use on COVID-19: report (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 8:52 PM, Marty Johnson, 1762K]

Nearly 1.5 million N95 respirator masks, a medical product that is crucial in hospitals fight against the coronavirus, haven't been shipped because they are past their expiration date, according to The Washington Post.

The masks are reportedly part of Customs and Border Protection's emergency stock. In a meeting Wednesday about what to do with the masks, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) officials decided to turn the masks over to the Transportation Security Administration,

which has demanded masks of its own, according to the Post's sources.

The sources told the paper that CBP has no plans of giving the masks to hospitals or the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

Manufacturers of the masks have said that the masks stay effective if stored properly and that the largest problem with older masks is that the elastic bands on the mask can weaken, which prevents a proper seal from being created against a user's face.

But the CDC has released guidelines that outline how to safely use expired N95 masks.

CBP spokesman Nathan Peeters told the Post that Border Patrol agents and officers had been given a 30-day supply of protective equipment.

Health officials in hard-hit parts of the country like California and New York has repeatedly stressed to the federal government that their supplies of N95 masks have been exhausted.

On Wednesday, President Trump said that FEMA was in the process of shipping 9.4 million N95 respirators and 20 million surgical masks to hospitals around the country.

After Considering \$1 Billion Price Tag for Ventilators, White House Has Second Thoughts (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 8:10 PM, David E. Sanger, Maggie Haberman and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, 23673K]

The White House had been preparing to reveal on Wednesday a joint venture between General Motors and Ventec Life Systems that would allow for the production of as many as 80,000 desperately needed ventilators to respond to an escalating pandemic when word suddenly came down that the announcement was off.

The decision to cancel the announcement, government officials say, came after the Federal Emergency Management Agency said it needed more time to assess whether the estimated cost was prohibitive. That price tag was more than \$1 billion, with several hundred million dollars to be paid upfront to General Motors to retool a car parts plant in Kokomo, Ind., where the ventilators would be made with Ventec's technology.

Government officials said that the deal might still happen but that they are examining at least a dozen other proposals. And they contend that an initial promise that the joint venture could turn out 20,000 ventilators in short order had shrunk to 7,500, with even that number in doubt. Longtime emergency managers at FEMA are working with military officials to sort through the competing offers and federal procurement rules while under pressure to give President Trump something to announce.

By early Thursday evening, at the coronavirus task force's regular news briefing, where the president often appears, there was still nothing to disclose, and the outcome of the deliberations remained unclear.

But a General Motors spokesman said that "Project V," as the ventilator program is known, was moving very fast, and a company official said "there's no issue with retooling."

A Ventec representative agreed.

“Ventec and G.M. have been working at breakneck speed to leverage our collective expertise in ventilation and manufacturing to meet the needs of the country as quickly as possible and arm medical professionals with the number of ventilators needed to save lives,” said Chris O. Brooks, Ventec’s chief strategy officer.

The only thing missing was clarity from the government about how many ventilators they needed — and who would be paid to build them.

The shortage of ventilators has emerged as one of the major criticisms of the Trump administration’s response to the coronavirus. The need to quickly equip hospitals across the country with tens of thousands more of the devices to treat those most seriously ill with the virus was not anticipated despite the Trump administration’s own projection in a simulation last year that millions of people could be hospitalized. And even now, the effort to produce them has been confused and disorganized.

At the center of the discussion about how to ramp up the production of ventilators is Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and a senior White House aide, who has told people that he was called in two weeks ago by Vice President Mike Pence to produce more coronavirus test kits and who has now turned his attention to ventilators.

He has been directing officials at FEMA in the effort. Two officials said the suggestion to wait on the General Motors offer came from Col. Patrick Work, who is working at FEMA. Some government officials expressed concern about the possibility of ordering too many ventilators, leaving them with an expensive surplus.

As the agency has sorted through offers, trying to weigh production ability and costs, hospitals in New York and elsewhere are reporting a desperate need for more ventilators, which are critical in treating respiratory problems in a fast-rising tide of severe coronavirus cases.

A spokeswoman for FEMA said Colonel Work presented information on each contract in such meetings but did not make any recommendations. A White House spokesman declined to comment.

The involvement of General Motors was first floated this month as the carmaker’s factory floor in Kokomo was grinding to a halt and workers were being sent home — partly because the market was collapsing but also because workers would otherwise risk exposure to the coronavirus.

Last week, General Motors, Ventec Life Systems and a coalition of business executives called StopTheSpread.org issued a statement saying that Ventec would “leverage G.M.’s logistics, purchasing and manufacturing expertise to build more of their critically important ventilators,” including some portable units.

By Sunday, Mr. Trump appeared to suggest on Twitter that a deal had been completed to mass-produce the ventilators, even though it was unclear who would pay to equip the General Motors plant or how long that process would take.

“Ford, General Motors and Tesla are being given the go ahead to make ventilators and

other metal products, FAST! @fema,” he wrote. “Go for it auto execs, lets see how good you are?”

Not for the first time has Mr. Trump jumped the gun.

Tesla officials had in fact met with engineers from the medical device company Medtronic in a separate negotiation, but no partnership has yet been announced. And while the chief executive of General Motors, Mary T. Barra, was enthused about the ventilator idea, Mr. Trump’s own aides had not embraced the G.M.-Ventec partnership — in part because they had not seen the specifics of the proposal.

Administration officials said Thursday that they were struggling to understand just how many ventilators the new venture could make.

The initial projection, one senior administration official said, was that after three weeks of preparation it could produce an initial run of 20,000 ventilators, or about two-thirds of what Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York recently said his state alone needed to cover the influx of coronavirus patients expected in two weeks, if not sooner.

That number then shrank to 7,500 ventilators in the initial run, or maybe 5,000, an apparent recognition that auto transmissions and ventilators had very little in common. Those numbers are in flux and so are the Trump administration’s because the White House cannot decide how many ventilators it wants.

Targets have changed by the hour, officials said, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Health and Human Services, the Food and Drug Administration, which approves the use of medical devices, and the White House try to figure out how many ventilators to request and how much they should cost.

Those issues appeared to come to a head on Wednesday afternoon, when FEMA told the White House that it was premature to make a decision.

The \$1.5 billion price tag comes to around \$18,000 a ventilator. And the overall cost, by comparison, is roughly equal to buying 18 F-35s, the Pentagon’s most advanced fighter jet.

So on Wednesday, despite the president’s tweet three days earlier, FEMA was still weighing competing offers in order to make a recommendation to Mr. Kushner. And it seemed clear to several officials that the agency would have to select multiple manufacturers, in part to avoid the risk that one production line runs into technical troubles, or that its workers contract the very virus the ventilators are being built to defeat.

[NY] ‘The Other Option Is Death’: New York Starts Sharing of Ventilators (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 5:58 PM, Brian M. Rosenthal, Jennifer Pinkowski, and Joseph Goldstein. 23673K]

A New York hospital system has begun treating two patients instead of one on some ventilators, a desperate measure that could help alleviate a shortage of the critical breathing machines and help hospitals around the country respond to the surge of coronavirus patients expected in the coming weeks.

NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital, began “ventilator sharing” this week, said Dr. Laureen Hill, chief operating officer at the Presbyterian/Columbia University Irving Medical Center system. Doctors have developed protocols for the maneuver and now are rapidly scaling it up while also sharing their methods with the federal and state governments and other hospitals.

Ventilator sharing has been explored in a few scientific studies and has been used twice in crisis situations — the immediate aftermath of the 2017 Las Vegas shooting and, as of several days ago, by an emergency physician, Dr. Marco Garrone, for coronavirus patients in Italy. This is believed to be the first time that it has been put forth as a longer-term strategy in the United States.

“We’re doing something that hasn’t really ever been done before,” said Dr. Jeremy Beitler, a pulmonary disease specialist at NewYork-Presbyterian/Columbia. “Now is the time to do it.”

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York said on Thursday that the state had approved the new method, which is also being studied by federal officials. And this week, the Food and Drug Administration granted emergency use approval to a device called VESper, developed by the South Carolina-based Prisma Health, that adapts one ventilator for use with four patients.

The New York action reflects the intense need felt worldwide to make ventilators serve more of the sickest Covid-19 patients.

On March 14, Dr. Charlene Babcock, an emergency physician at Ascension St. John Hospital in Detroit, posted a YouTube video showing how to modify a ventilator to keep not one but four people breathing. It has already has more than 724,000 views.

Generally, when patients are mechanically ventilated, a flexible tube is placed into their windpipe, and a finely calibrated pump sends oxygen-rich air into the lungs. In the video, Dr. Babcock uses a T-tube and three adapters to split two valves into four ports, and suggests positioning the patients headfirst around the machine. Dr. Babcock and her colleague Dr. Greg Nyman had published a study of the hack in 2006 — but tested it on four lung simulators, not patients.

“Here’s my disclaimer: This is off-label use for a ventilator,” she says in the video. “If it was me, and I had four patients, and they all need intubation, and I only had one ventilator, I would simply have a shared discussion meeting with all four families and say, ‘I can pick one to live, or we can try to have all four live.’”

NewYork-Presbyterian is using ventilator sharing for only two patients at a time who need settings on the ventilator that are very similar. Dr. Beitler emphasized that each patient is still receiving the same amount of oxygen and level of care as previously. Sharing will not immediately double ventilator access, he added, because many patients will need their own.

The hospital has not yet run out of ventilators, but Dr. Beitler said it was better to try the technique now than “when you have absolutely no choice.” Notably, he believes the technique will not increase staffing needs.

Officials are desperate for ventilators because they expect the need to far outstrip their

supply in the coming weeks. Even after a shipment of 4,000 of the complex machines from the federal government and other emergency efforts, the state is expecting a shortage in the thousands. “Our single greatest challenge is ventilators,” Mr. Cuomo wrote on Twitter on Wednesday. “We need 30,000 ventilators. We have 11,000.”

With about 175,000 ventilators in hospitals and the federal stockpile, other states are also braced for shortages. Coronavirus patients often need to stay on ventilators for days or weeks.

The subject of splitting ventilators is “highly controversial” among respiratory specialists, said Dr. Josh Farkas, an assistant professor of pulmonary and critical care medicine at the University of Vermont.

“While this is a technique that potentially could work for maybe a few hours, there are some significant hurdles,” said Dr. MeiLan Han, a pulmonologist at the University of Michigan Health System and a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association.

Among the concerns are the inability to monitor the impact on each individual; the potential for cross-contamination of infectious pathogens; and the possibility that instead of one person receiving lifesaving treatment, multiple patients would get dangerously subpar therapy.

“When we ventilate a patient, there’s two things we’re trying to control: pressure and volume,” Dr. Han said. “And for this to work, every single patient would have to be OK with the same setting.” While she wasn’t speaking specifically about the NewYork-Presbyterian method, she noted that patients tend to have unique, dynamic needs.

“If you have one set of lungs that’s in pretty good shape, that one’s going to blow up beautifully,” she said. “But if you have another set of lungs that has a really dense pneumonia from Covid, that set of lungs may get nothing. There’s no way to regulate that.”

There have been three follow-up studies to Dr. Babcock’s. A 2008 study of four sheep kept the animals breathing for 12 hours. In a tiny 2009 study, two healthy, awake volunteers shared a split ventilator for 10 minutes. And a 2012 study on test lungs concluded that the findings “cannot support the use of this concept for mass-casualty respiratory failure.”

“There is no way to monitor the individual patients without some invasive monitoring or additional monitors for each patient,” said Dr. Richard Branson, a co-author of the 2012 study, a pulmonologist at the University of Cincinnati College of Medicine and editor in chief of the journal *Respiratory Care*.

The lack of evidence is what alarms Dr. Branson. “I think the time to try an untested treatment not previously used in humans is not in the midst of a pandemic,” he said.

But the pandemic is straining the normal rules.

One of the authors of the 2008 sheep study is Dr. Lorenzo Paladino, an associate professor at SUNY Downstate Health Sciences University in Brooklyn. He and several colleagues kept four adult sheep alive on a single ventilator for 12 hours.

On Tuesday, while tending to Covid-19 patients at Kings County Hospital, he received a call inviting him to Washington to discuss his research with federal officials, he said.

On Wednesday, he met with federal officials at FEMA's headquarters to explore the possibility of establishing protocols for how to put multiple patients on one ventilator, he said in an interview Wednesday evening.

"We spent the day writing out physician protocols on how to use this," Dr. Paladino said. The idea, he said, was that the federal government could issue guidance to doctors and hospitals nationwide.

He acknowledged that there were risks.

"Nobody believes this is the best way to ventilate somebody — this is for the doomsday scenario when we run out of ventilators," Dr. Paladino said. "It's suboptimal, but the other option is death."

[NY] Nurses treating coronavirus say they are reusing masks, back to work before 14-day quarantine (USA Today)

USA Today [3/26/2020 11:07 AM, Frank Esposito and David Robinson, Rockland/Westchester Journal News, 5611K] Video: [HERE](#)

New York nurses on the front line of the coronavirus outbreak are afraid their safety is being sacrificed so hospitals can stretch dwindling stockpiles of protective equipment.

Central to the fear are new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines seeking to help hospitals conserve medical masks as thousands of New Yorkers are infected with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

Some nurses asserted hospital officials asked them to make a typically single-use surgical mask last week, leaving them to store it in paper bags between shifts.

Other nurses described begging for access to higher level N95 masks and watching fellow nurses get quarantined after suspected COVID-19 exposures amid shortages.

Mostly, they talked of living in constant dread of infecting themselves or loved ones with the virus that has killed more than 18,000 across the globe and confirmed cases mounted in New York, surpassing 30,000 on Wednesday.

"We're really just beginning this, which is the scary part," said Mary-Lynn Boyts, a nurse at Westchester Medical Center, about 30 miles north of New York City. "I feel like we're going into a battle we're just not prepared for."

Even with millions of masks being distributed since last week in the greater New York City area, Gov. Andrew Cuomo warned hospitals could run out in coming weeks.

"The burn rate on this equipment is very, very high. I can't find any more equipment. It's not a question of money. I don't care what you're willing to pay," he said at a news briefing Tuesday. Cuomo said about 2 million N95 masks could shore up supplies at the hardest-hit hospitals for anywhere from two to six weeks.

To avoid that grim fate, Cuomo has urged the federal government to take control of protective equipment production and get more supplies to New York as soon as possible.

He noted that the shortages threaten countless other communities across the country just starting to get hit by the virus.

Cuomo also praised health care workers and first responders for their bravery.

"Most of us are in our home hunkered down, worried. They're worried and they're going out there every day despite their fear. ... Overcoming their fear, and not for their family, they're doing it for your family," he said.

What nurses say about equipment shortages

Some nurses described a disconnect between Cuomo's comments at daily news briefings and what some hospitals are demanding of workers.

"They're being asked to do things that jeopardize their health and make it hard to take care of their patients," said Boyts, who gathers Westchester Medical Center nurse grievances for the New York State Nurses Association union.

"You wouldn't ask police to go into a gun battle without a gun, but we're being asked to put our lives on the line each day without the equipment that we need to do it."

Lori Glazer, a registered nurse from Ossining, also is worried by the lack of gear.

"We don't have N95 masks, we just have (surgical masks). They're protecting other people, not us," Glazer said. "It's scary going in because you never know when you're going to get sick."

At Montefiore Health's hospital in the Bronx, nurses with suspected COVID-19 exposures are being told to break the typical 14-day quarantine and return to work early, according to Karine Raymond, a Montefiore nurse and union leader.

The order apparently came as the CDC recommended loosening quarantine rules for medical workers, joining the already diminished infection control practices that nurses say put them at risk.

"They keep lowering the guidelines as we fall sicker and sicker. I'm afraid we're going to lose some of our colleagues," Raymond said.

The federal agency in late February recommended extended use and reuse of masks connected to COVID-19 related shortages, deviating from long-held infection control standards. The quarantine strategy for medical workers was last updated on March 16, records show.

It is all part of what state and federal health officials say is a dire attempt to keep hospitals afloat in the face of potentially overwhelming COVID-19 infections.

Yet amid debate over the emergency actions, nurses at Montefiore were being warned they

could be fired if they didn't adhere to the hospital's new protective gear rules, according to Montefiore records reviewed by the USA TODAY Network – New York.

Eventually, Montefiore sent out a message Friday canceling the original order threatening termination and said it was "sent in error," the records show.

Michele Brailsford-Paul, a home care nurse for Montefiore, said she recently filed a complaint with federal worker safety regulators in Tarrytown about the shortages in protective equipment.

She compared the crisis to workers sickened while working at Ground Zero after the terrorist attacks on Sept. 11, 2001.

"What's at the back of my mind is 9/11 and the trouble those workers had in getting health care coverage, so I wanted to take an active role in noting the lack of protective gear," Brailsford-Paul said.

What hospitals say about nurses' equipment complaints

Montefiore officials asserted the Bronx-based health system with 15 hospitals is following CDC guidelines on COVID-19 and prepares for all types of emergencies.

"Comprehensive plans have been in place to reduce risk of potential exposure to our patients, staff and community," the officials said in a statement.

Westchester Medical Center Health Network officials disputed that nurses have limited access to N95 masks and asserted the health system with 10 hospitals across the region is following CDC guidelines.

"Like every other hospital and healthcare organization, we are managing our supply pipeline and use very carefully," the officials said in a statement.

They added the health system's workforce is "coming to work every day to help and serve their friends and neighbors. They truly are healthcare heroes."

Montefiore likewise disputes the allegations that nurses are short of protective gear.

"Protecting our staff is also of utmost importance so we can continue to provide care as this pandemic continues to worsen. We are working tirelessly with state and federal governments to secure appropriate protective gear for our providers and equipment for our patients", the Montefiore officials said in a statement.

Meanwhile, some nurses criticized the CDC guidelines for giving hospitals the green light to limit access to protective gear, regardless of the safety ramifications.

"What they're telling us to do is not based on the science of the virus; it's based on what is available for any given day," Boyts said.

CDC officials didn't immediately respond to a request to comment on the nurses' complaints in New York.

The state Department of Health would not say if it is investigating complaints from nurses about the conditions at hospitals. It noted the CDC continues to issue revised guidance regarding the use of protective gear.

"The (Health) Department takes the safety of New Yorkers very seriously and is also working to provide additional guidance to hospitals," agency spokeswoman Jill Montag said in a statement.

How one hospital adjusted protective equipment rules for COVID-19

Hospital officials, in many ways, have been tasked with finding the balance between implementing the new CDC guidelines for stretching protective equipment supplies and worker safety.

One is Dr. Erick Eiting, vice chair of operations for emergency medicine at Mount Sinai Downtown, which includes an emergency department and urgent care in New York City that handles about 97,000 patients a year.

Eiting compared the effort to implement new mask-use guidelines to the rapidly evolving outbreak response in New York.

It is all seemingly part of a daily stream of drastic actions, such as converting the Javits Center in Manhattan into a temporary hospital, aimed at helping prepare the health system to handle surging infections.

"A lot of it is there is so much anxiety about this because we're dealing with a totally new phenomenon and trying to take the best practices we've built with other diseases and apply them here, but we're also learning on the fly," he said.

For example, the rise in potential COVID-19 patients is forcing Eiting and colleagues to devise ways for some staff in high-traffic roles to use N-95 masks more efficiently.

"We're having to come into contact with so many different patients in such a short time. ... Does that mean keeping that mask on the whole time?" he said.

Medical workers typically had used the N95 masks for brief periods to care for the limited pool of patients with airborne infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis.

"It's an adjustment, because anybody who's worn one of these masks before knows just having to keep them on for a few minutes isn't the most comfortable thing, but having to keep it on for the entire shift is something else altogether," Eiting said.

The decisions at Mount Sinai are made by a team of doctors and nurses with infectious control expertise, Eiting said, adding the practices in place protect staff and patients.

Eiting on Monday noted Mount Sinai hasn't faced protective equipment shortages yet. But the need to gear up more often to handle people walking into the ER with COVID-19 symptoms is running through stockpiles at a historic rate, he said.

"I think that creates an anxiety and knowing the supply chain has been disrupted adds to the uncertainty," Eiting said. "We have a lot of work to do to make sure we continue to secure the equipment."

[NY] For the first time since 9/11, NYC has set up makeshift morgues. This time, it's in anticipation of coronavirus deaths (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 4:41 PM, Brynn Gingras, Mark Morales and Ray Sanchez, 5551K]
Refrigerated trailers to be used as makeshift morgues hummed outside two hospitals on Thursday as New York City deals with the surging death count in the epicenter of the nation's coronavirus pandemic.

The last time New York took such drastic measures was after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, when the city medical examiner's office was tasked with identifying tens of thousands of body parts from the 2,753 people killed in the World Trade Center collapse.

The makeshift morgues signal the historic challenge posed by the national health crisis.

At least 281 people have died from Covid-19 across the city, Mayor Bill De Blasio said Thursday. There are 21,873 confirmed cases of the virus.

New York State, where 385 people have died from the virus, has more than 37,000 of the nation's more than 80,000 coronavirus cases.

The US death toll from coronavirus has topped 1,100.

At least 13 patients had died from Covid-19 over a 24-hour period this week at Elmhurst Hospital in Queens -- where the medical examiner's office stationed a refrigerated trailer, according to agency spokeswoman Aja Worthy-Davis.

Another four deaths were reported at the hospital in the last 24 hours, said Mitch Katz, president and chief executive officer of NYC Health + Hospitals, the largest municipal health system in the country.

Trailers and white tents were also set up outside New York Bellevue Hospital Center, which is adjacent to the medical examiner's building.

Davis noted the refrigerated trucks are not specifically for coronavirus cases. They're intended to help alleviate the morgue space at hospitals if needed. The trailers will be used if the hospital morgues reach capacity.

"We're in a public health crisis, and the city has declared a state of emergency," the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME) said in a statement.

"As part of that declaration, agencies like OCME have enacted emergency contingency plans to help prepare for every possible outcome."

The trucks are part of a city plan to prepare for the potential surge of bodies from the coronavirus pandemic, Worthy-Davis said.

The trailers outside the two hospitals are property of the city Office of Emergency Management.

The medical examiner has another 45 large trucks at its disposal. No OCME trailers have been deployed. Those trailers were purchased recently in response to a disaster plan that called for a "significant stocking up," Davis said.

"We have a pretty large capacity compared to hospitals," said Davis, adding that the trucks plus the mobile tents increase the morgue capacity to 3,500 to 3,600 bodies.

The city has a capacity of 900 bodies in morgues in all five boroughs, along with expanded capacity at certain other locations.

OCME workers are taking precautions in handling bodies, sanitizing the outside of the body bags and the surfaces that the bodies touched, Davis said.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency has said it received a request from New York and other states for assistance with mortuary operations. Hawaii and North Carolina have made similar requests.

The agency is reviewing the requests, according to FEMA.

New York City also has longstanding contracts with companies to provide refrigerated trucks but that plan is not active, officials said. Those trucks would likely be stationed at various locations, including makeshift hospitals such as the one set up at the Javits Convention Center.

[NY] Trump keeps touting an unproven coronavirus treatment. It's now being tested on thousands in New York. (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 3:29 PM, Christopher Rowland, Jon Swaine, and Josh Dawsey, 12625K]

New York is moving at unprecedented speed and scale in a human experiment to distribute tens of thousands of doses of anti-malarial drugs to seriously ill patients, spurred by political leaders including President Trump to try a treatment that is not proved to be effective against the coronavirus.

With no proven treatment for the coronavirus, and infections in New York topping 30,000, health experts say the Food and Drug Administration has moved with uncommon speed to authorize New York's sweeping plan to distribute the drugs through hospital networks.

Planning for such a complex initiative would ordinarily take up to nine months, those experts say. In New York, the U.S. epicenter of the covid-19 pandemic, that timeline has been compressed into three days.

While the effort has raised concerns among health experts about safety risks to patients and raising false hopes in the American public, Trump's direct intervention into complex medical issues, as well as New York Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's embrace of the strategy has generated popular excitement about the drugs.

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The first wave of patients will receive hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, the New York official said.

Launching such a plan, the official said, "is something that normally would have been done in six to nine months and we're doing it in three or four days."

Patient outcomes from the experiment will be gathered electronically and contribute to an "observational" trial being coordinated by the government, the official said. In an observational trial, which is considered less rigorous than a controlled trial comparing a treatment with a placebo, researchers see if a therapy is safe and effective by gathering and comparing the results in a large database.

In addition to mortality and overall recovery, the study will measure patients' overall viral load, duration on a ventilator and number of days in the hospital.

The FDA would not comment on any aspects of the massive New York experimental effort, citing its own confidentiality rules.

Ground-level hospital administrators are scrambling to set up the reporting programs so outcomes data from patients treated with the drugs can be reported back to the state and federal authorities.

"I have never seen anything like this. It is amazing how the country and everybody can pull together and come up with quick, innovative ways to try to attack it," said Onisis Stefanis, chief pharmacy officer for Northwell Health, which has 22 hospitals in New York and has already been using the anti-malarial drugs to treat patients on a "compassionate-use" basis.

"Everybody's questioning it, and that's why these studies need to be done to confirm it," he said. "There aren't a lot of other options out there."

The initiative is freighted with equal parts hope and politics, which some health-care officials and states suggest are eclipsing science.

Nevada, via executive order, this week banned prescriptions of the drugs for the coronavirus until the results of rigorous clinical trials are known.

“We must deal with facts, not fiction,” Nevada’s chief state medical officer, Ishan Azzam, said. Nevada is among states trying to stop runs and hoarding that have depleted supply for people who need the treatments for established uses, including lupus patients. New York’s Cuomo in an executive order has also limited new prescriptions of the anti-malarial drugs to patients with previously approved FDA conditions and to coronavirus patients participating in state-sponsored experiments.

Despite some tantalizing early results, there is scant published evidence that the two anti-malarial drugs will have a benefit for coronavirus patients. More rigorous controlled clinical trials are being conducted in the United States, including in New York and Minnesota, and around the world to prove whether the drugs will work. Anthony S. Fauci, head of the National Institute for Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has repeatedly cautioned, from the same White House lectern as Trump, that indications of benefit so far are anecdotal.

But in the absence of viable alternatives, there has been a global rush to try the drugs. Doctors and hospitals have virtually wiped out U.S. supplies by prescribing them “off label.”

The low-cost generic pills have been on the market for decades for malaria, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis. Many experts have said they believe they are relatively safe, although hydroxychloroquine can cause dangerous heart problems and some specialists recommend electrocardiogram screening tests, especially when used in combination with azithromycin. The drugs also can cause permanent eye damage called retinopathy.

The FDA’s quick action on large-scale observational trials was spurred by Trump’s sudden interest in the anti-malarial drugs. As Fauci and others urged caution, Rep. Mark Meadows (R-N.C.), Trump’s incoming chief of staff, contacted a family doctor in Upstate New York who claims to have used them to successfully treat hundreds of suspected covid-19 cases.

Vladimir “Zev” Zelenko, a doctor in Monroe, N.Y., said in an interview that he was contacted by Meadows after posting an unsolicited video message to Trump on Facebook in which he told the president: “Please advise the country that they should be taking this medication.”

The doctor also published an open letter on Google Docs to fellow medics outlining a treatment plan of recommended doses, which was picked up by conservative media.

Zelenko said that over one call and several text messages, Meadows was “very kind and receptive,” and told him his treatment plan was being evaluated at high levels. A person close to Meadows, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity to candidly discuss internal deliberations, confirmed the two had been in touch this week about the drugs, and said White House experts were evaluating the plan.

Another official said Trump saw Zelenko’s treatment plan on television and flagged it in the White House.

Sean Hannity, the Fox News host and informal Trump adviser, read from Zelenko’s open letter during a telephone conversation with Vice President Pence that aired on his prime-time show Monday evening. Rudolph W. Giuliani, the president’s personal attorney,

championed Zelenko's treatment plan on Twitter the following morning.

Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, Zelenko, 46, has shared material on Facebook suggesting that the virus may have been deliberately developed by China as a population control device and that its threat was exaggerated by Democrats.

Zelenko acknowledged the drugs could have side effects. "They're not candy," he said. "However, this is an unprecedented health crisis, the world's under attack, this is battlefield medicine."

Supporters of using anti-malarial drugs against the coronavirus have cited several published studies using small patient groups in France, Japan and China. Some other, equally small analysis, has suggested there is no benefit.

But within a matter of days after Trump expressed his support for the drugs last week, Cuomo announced Sunday that 70,000 doses of hydroxychloroquine and up to 750,000 doses of chloroquine are in the pipeline for New York's patients.

"There's a good basis to believe they could work," Cuomo said Sunday.

Although the scale and urgency of New York's efforts are new, trying unproven drugs on patients who otherwise might die is common in American health care for cancer and many other ailments including rare diseases. The FDA has the power to grant such "compassionate-use" permission, both on an individual basis and under blanket protocols for larger populations, specialists said.

Drug manufacturer Gilead Sciences has said it is working with the FDA to develop a new, broader program of compassionate use for its experimental antiviral drug remdesivir. If successful, the broader program will allow doctors to get the drug for severely ill coronavirus patients without having to seek individual permission from the company and FDA for each patient.

"On this scale, I think it is unprecedented. I have never seen anything like this," said Dianne Bourque, a lawyer specializing in FDA rules at the firm Mintz. "We are seeing an explosion of compassionate-use requests and I think that's a factor of many of our clients trying desperately to find anything that works for desperately ill people right now.

"People are throwing everything at this," she said.

The FDA is working quickly to accommodate such requests, Bourque added, including issuing compassionate-use approval over the past weekend.

The FDA is clearly reacting to pressure from Trump and the general public, who are clamoring for some sort of treatment, said Alison Bateman-House, a professor of population health at New York University and a specialist in compassionate-use programs. She said the FDA is doing the best it can to balance competing interests in a time of crisis.

"It is very dangerous to take your medical advice from someone who does not actually practice medicine," she said of Trump's boosterism statements about the anti-malarial drugs at the White House. Yet, she said, there is some reason to believe the treatments

could have a beneficial effect, so large-scale compassionate-use trials could be appropriate.

"The FDA is caught between saying it wants good science, and good processes, and what evidence-based medicine requires," she said, "and this is what our bosses, the people and the president are telling us they want.

"Sometimes safeguarding the public health ... is not what the public wants at a given moment," Bateman-House said. "They want unfettered access."

[LA] New Orleans on Louisiana's front line in coronavirus war, as disaster has state monitoring nursing homes (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 1:37 PM, Elliott C. McLaughlin, 5551K]

As Louisiana sees its coronavirus cases climb -- and state health experts are monitoring "clusters" at six nursing homes -- New Orleans is facing critical shortages of ventilators and protective equipment, an official said Thursday.

"This is going to be the disaster that defines our generation," Collin Arnold, director of the city's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness, told CNN.

Numbers, state by state

Another concern: As the state's tally of coronavirus cases stands at about 2,305, scores of them fatal, New Orleans' food banks have only about two days worth of goods left, Arnold said.

He called New Orleans "kind of the epicenter" for the state, with almost 1,700 cases in the metro area, according to state figures.

Arnold's warning comes as the Louisiana Department of Health says it is monitoring clusters -- defined as situations in which two or more cases appear connected -- at six nursing homes in the state. The department is working to contain the spread at the facilities, spokeswoman Mindy Faciane said.

One of those -- the 268-resident Lambeth House Retirement Community in New Orleans -- was reporting 11 deaths as of Tuesday, she said.

"The intensity of sadness that accompanies what our community is currently enduring is almost indescribable," Christina Fay, board director of Lambeth House, said in a statement earlier this week.

Where the numbers stand Thursday is unclear. Owing to the number of nursing homes reporting cases and the involvement of multiple health care providers, the state health department "will no longer be reporting where positive cases have been identified," Faciane said in a Wednesday email.

Test results and, likely, Mardi Gras fuel spike

Jefferson and Orleans parishes, which make up most of metro New Orleans, were two of the deadliest counties to be infected with the virus, a CNN analysis earlier this week of data collected by Johns Hopkins University showed.

They also ranked among the top seven counties nationwide -- of those reporting 100 cases or more -- in deaths per 100,000 residents.

Health officials are testing 3,000 people Thursday in Orleans Parish alone, Arnold said, and they expect to get a new supply of tests and do the same thing Friday.

Testing is a big reason for the spike in cases, Arnold said, and Mardi Gras -- during which 1.5 million people, including international visitors, converged on the city -- is "obviously probably" a variable in the spread of Covid-19 throughout the city.

Gov. John Bel Edwards has ordered state residents to stay home until April 12, and data shows movement in the city is down 73%, which Arnold applauded.

"I'm seeing that it's pretty empty, and it's encouraging that people are listening and we need them to really push through this. We know it's a very difficult thing to have to do, but it's very necessary," he told CNN.

Surrounded by states that have not implemented mandatory stay-at-home orders, Arnold believes the directives are vital, he said.

Louisiana pastor continued holding services

"We need our people to stay home," Arnold said. "Somebody saying (stay-at-home orders are unnecessary), they're not doing enough testing. That's the bottom line. It just hasn't affected them yet, but it's in their community. It is there."

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told CNN he felt officials in New Orleans and Louisiana should've taken action sooner to close nonessential businesses.

"They are now shutting things down in a very vigorous way," he said in an interview late Wednesday. "It is likely that that should have been done a little bit sooner -- not blaming anyone on that, but you get caught unaware because the nature of this outbreak."
'Stay home'

Edwards spoke with similar urgency Sunday: "If we want to flatten the curve, we have to take more aggressive mitigation measures now and limit social contact now. ... We've got to take action now."

As part of his stay-at-home order, effective Monday, Edwards instituted restrictions on visiting retirement communities. He has warned that the state's hospitals could reach their capacity in days if the cases continue to increase at the current pace.

The governor has repeatedly said coronavirus cases are increasing at a frightening clip, adding, "There is no reason to believe that we won't be the next Italy."

Earlier this week, responding to Edwards' plea stating the outbreak is "beyond the capabilities" of state and local agencies, the White House granted his request for a federal major disaster declaration, which opens the door to additional resources the state to combat

the pandemic.

New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell issued a stay-at-home order last week, closing businesses and banning gatherings of more than 10 people.

"If you don't have any essential function or cannot safely maintain social distancing, you need to stay home," Cantrell said Friday. "Don't look for ways for the rules to not apply for you. ... Stay home."

The city has created a special police team to enforce order and respond to reports of large gatherings. Establishments that don't comply with the order could permanently lose their business licenses, the New Orleans Police Department said in a tweet.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[MI] Hundreds of thousands of masks missing from federal shipments to Michigan (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 6:21 PM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]

Hundreds of thousands of masks went missing from federal shipments containing the equipment to Michigan as the state continues to battle the rising number of COVID-19 cases, state officials said.

State officials told The Detroit News Wednesday that they were 225,000 surgical masks short of what the federal government said it sent from the Strategic National Stockpile (SNS).

The state was supposed to receive 450,000 masks, but it obtained about half of that, a spokeswoman from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services told the news outlet.

The spokeswoman, Lynn Sutfin, told The Hill that the SNS "was aware of the missing masks as it was reported to them after we completed an inventory of Michigan's shipment."

"We received notification yesterday evening that we should receive those masks tonight," she said in a statement.

Michigan's health department said it has received 190,000 N95 respirators, about 250,000 non-sterile gloves, 70,000 surgical gowns and 86,000 face shields in two federal shipments, according to The Detroit News. The first shipment was distributed to 45 local health departments and eight health care coalitions on a population-formula basis.

Sutfin told The Detroit News that the shipments are "nowhere near enough."

Federal officials are reportedly giving out 25 percent of the stockpile to states according to population size and 25 percent to states with the greatest need, while leaving 50 percent for "strategic reserve."

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (D), along with other governors, has pressured the federal government to send more medical supplies and protective gear for health care workers. The governor's office said Wednesday they were drafting a major disaster declaration request to

the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

But Rep. Paul Mitchell (R-Mich.) told The Detroit News that the governor's office has not been specific in its requests for supplies.

"My job is not to just vaguely grocery shop," Mitchell told the news outlet.

Michigan has recorded 2,856 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, leading to 60 deaths, according to the state's health department. About 85 percent of the cases documented are in Metro Detroit's three counties.

[IN] Fort Wayne Jail Releases 25 Inmates Early Amid Pandemic (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 4:57 PM, Associated Press, 3020K]

Twenty-five jail inmates in Fort Wayne have received early releases amid the coronavirus pandemic, officials said.

The Allen County Prosecutor's Office agreed to release certain inmates with less than 30 days remaining on misdemeanor convictions to ease crowding at the Allen County Jail, WPTA-TV reported.

Allen County Sheriff's Capt. Steve Stone confirmed 25 inmates were released on Wednesday.

Allen Superior Court Executive John McGauley said the court consulted with the prosecutor's office on ways to manage the jail population during the pandemic. The prosecutor's office agreed to release low level, non-violent offenders who had less than 30 days to serve.

The court said it was unaware of any COVID-19 cases at the jail.

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, such as pneumonia, and death.

[Canada] Trump Expected to Send U.S. Troops to Canada Border to Support Operations Amid Coronavirus Crisis (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 12:36 AM, Idrees Ali and Jonathan Landay]

U.S. President Donald Trump is expected to send troops to the border with Canada to support border operations amid the growing coronavirus crisis, two U.S. government officials told Reuters.

Under the plan, the Pentagon would send less than 1,000 troops to the U.S. northern border to support U.S. Customs and Border Protection efforts and several additional hundred troops to the border with Mexico, one of the officials said.

[Canada] Trudeau Pushes Back on U.S. Notion to Use Military Near Border (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 4:21 PM, Josh Wingrove, 6400K]

The Canadian government is urging the U.S. not to dispatch troops to its northern border, as Donald Trump's administration looks to ramp up security to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said the U.S. is considering sending the military to block any illegal migrants after the countries agreed to travel restrictions aimed at halting the contagion.

"Canada and the United States have the longest, unmilitarized border in the world and it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way. We have been in discussions with the United States on this," Trudeau said Thursday.

Freeland said it would "be a problem for our bilateral relationship," but added it was not a trade issue. Last week's agreement allows goods to continue flowing through the border.

The White House and U.S. Department of Defense referred questions to the Department of Homeland Security, which issued a statement on condition of anonymity.

The statement did not specifically acknowledge that troops are under consideration, but said it's looking at every option to help slow the spread of the virus and to make sure border personnel have the resources they need.

Freeland said she had not yet spoken to Vice President Mike Pence, who leads Trump's coronavirus task force or Secretary of State Michael Pompeo about the measure.

[Canada] Trudeau calls for keeping US-Canada border demilitarized (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 3:32 PM, Justin Wise, 1762K]

Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau on Thursday called for keeping the U.S.-Canada border demilitarized amid the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, saying that it's "very much" in both countries' interests for it to remain that way.

Trudeau said at press conference that his administration has been in discussions with the United States about the possibility, confirming a Global News report that the White House was considering sending troops to the border.

"Canada and the United States have the longest unmilitarized border in the world," Trudeau said. "And it is very much in both of our interests for it remain that way."

Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland added that Canada was "strongly opposed" to the U.S. taking this step, saying that "we've made that very clear to our U.S. counterparts."

Global News, a Canadian television network, early Thursday reported that the Trump administration was considering dispatching troops along the northern border to help border guards detect irregular crossings.

Sources told the network that the deployment would likely involve fewer than 1,000 service members.

Asked whether the Trump administration was considering putting troops at the U.S. border

with Canada, a senior administration official said broadly that the administration would "continue to consider additional actions" to ensure law enforcement personnel at the country's borders are properly supported to address the public health threat.

"The administration is considering every option to help slow the spread of the virus, minimize health threats entering the country, and protect Americans while ensuring essential travel for workers, movement of goods, and security of supply chains are not impeded," the senior administration official said.

The coronavirus, which originated in China in December, has since spread throughout the U.S., infecting more than 75,000 people as of Thursday afternoon, according to a Johns Hopkins University database. Canada has reported more than 3,500 confirmed cases of the virus.

President Trump said last week that the U.S. and Canada had agreed to close their border to nonessential travel as part of their efforts to slow the virus's spread. He said trade between the nations would not be affected.

[Canada] Canada asks US not to put troops at border during coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 6:45 PM, Bradford Betz, 8943K]

Canada has turned down a proposal by the United States to put troops at U.S.-Canada border during the coronavirus outbreak, arguing that such a move would be unnecessary given the low amount of illegal crossings and it would damage relations between the longtime allies.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Thursday his government has been in discussions with the White House about convincing the U.S. not to do it.

"Canada and the United States have the longest un-militarized border in the world and it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way," Trudeau said.

The Department of Homeland Security did make a formal request to the Pentagon for military forces to provide additional security along the northern border, between entry points, according to a U.S. official.

The official said the request was made a few days ago and the Defense Department has done some initial planning but there has been no final decision on whether or not to approve the request.

Another Trump administration official said they are considering additional actions to ensure "personnel at our borders have the resources and operational support needed to address the profound public health threat of uncontrolled cross-border movement during a pandemic."

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said they have told the Trump administration there is no justification for troops.

"What we have said is, 'We really do not believe at all that there would be a public health justification for you to take this action,'" Freeland said. "And we have said 'We really don't

think is the right way to treat a trusted friend and military ally.”

She stressed that they are talking about a potential decision by the U.S. and said they first learned of the proposal a few days ago. Trudeau’s office has been in direct contact with the White House and Canada’s defense and public safety ministers have spoken to their counterparts.

“Our understanding is that a decision has yet not been acted upon or fully taken. But having said that, decisions are taken speedily by all governments around the world including ours,” Freeland said. “Canada is strongly opposed to this U.S. proposal.”

Canada has more than 3,900 cases and 38 deaths as of Thursday afternoon. The United States has more than 82,400 cases – higher than in China where the outbreak began – and 1,178 deaths.

Canada relies on the U.S. for 75 percent of its exports. About 18 percent of Canada’s exports go to the U.S. The two countries have already closed the border both ways to all non-essential travel.

[Canada] Canada Urges US Not to Put Troops at Border During Pandemic (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 3:53 PM, Rob Gillies, AP, 3020K]

Canada has told the Trump administration that a proposal to put troops at the U.S.-Canada border amid the pandemic is entirely unnecessary and would damage relations between the two longtime allies.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his government has been in discussions with the White House about convincing the U.S. not to do it.

“Canada and the United States have the longest un-militarized border in the world and it is very much in both of our interests for it to remain that way,” Trudeau said.

According to a U.S. official, the Department of Homeland Security did make a formal request to the Pentagon for military forces to provide additional security along the northern border, between entry points. The official said that the request was made a few days ago and the Defense Department has done some initial planning but there has been no final decision on whether or not to approve the request.

The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said there was no discussion about closing the border, only about beefing up efforts to prevent any illegal crossings. It wasn’t clear if by Thursday afternoon whether the department was still pursuing the request, or if approved, whether it would be filled by active duty or National Guard troops.

Another Trump administration official said they are considering additional actions to ensure “personnel at our borders have the resources and operational support needed to address the profound public health threat of uncontrolled cross-border movement during a pandemic.” The official spoke on condition of anonymity as they were not authorized to discuss internal discussions.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland said they have told the Trump administration there is no justification for troops. Very few people cross into the border into the U.S. from Canada illegally and Canada has universal health care and widespread testing for the virus. And COVID-19 cases are surging more in the U.S. than in Canada.

"What we have said is, 'We really do not believe at all that there would be a public health justification for you to take this action,'" Freeland said. "And we have said 'We really don't think is the right way to treat a trusted friend and military ally.'"

Freeland said the specifics of what the U.S. is proposing is a question for American officials to answer and declined to say what the Trump administration is contemplating.

She said they are "very directly and very forcefully" expressing the view that "this is an entirely unnecessary step" that Canada would "view as damaging to the relationship."

Freeland stressed that they are talking about a potential decision by the U.S. and said they first learned of the proposal a few days ago. Trudeau's office has been in direct contact with the White House and Canada's defense and public safety ministers have spoken to their counterparts.

"Our understanding is that a decision has yet not been acted upon or fully taken. But having said that, decisions are taken speedily by all governments around the world including ours," Freeland said. "Canada is strongly opposed to this U.S. proposal."

Canada has more than 3,400 cases, 35 deaths and has tested over 158,000 people.

Canada relies on the U.S. for 75 percent of its exports. About 18 percent of Canada's exports go to the U.S. The two countries have already closed the border both ways to all non-essential travel.

"This is strictly showmanship on the part of the American president. It will have no practical impact. It is an attempt to impress the American public that the president is doing something," said Nelson Wiseman, a political science professor at the University of Toronto.

Bruce Heyman, a former U.S. ambassador to Canada, said it would be a serious misuse of resources and a dangerous and inappropriate use of American troops.

"It makes no military sense. It makes no economic sense. It makes no sense at any level other than Donald Trump's political level," Heyman said.

[Canada] Canada attacks Trump plan to deploy troops at border as unnecessary and damaging (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 3:23 PM, David Ljunggren and Idrees Ali, 5304K]

Canada on Thursday attacked a U.S. proposal to deploy troops along the undefended joint border to help fight the spread of coronavirus, saying the idea was unnecessary and would damage relations.

The uncompromising comments came as a surprise, since Ottawa has enjoyed smooth relations with the administration of U.S. President Donald Trump over the past 18 months. Last week the two nations agreed to close the border to non-essential travel to ease the

strain on health systems from the outbreak.

Canadian Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland, however, made clear the Liberal government had no time for a plan to send hundreds of troops to the border to help boost security.

“Canada is strongly opposed to this U.S. proposal and we have made that opposition very, very clear ... this is an entirely unnecessary step which we would view as damaging to our relationship,” Freeland told a news conference.

“The public health situation does not require such action,” she said, noting Washington had yet to take a final decision.

A U.S. official said the proposed deployment would help border patrol officers enforce the ban on non-essential travel by providing communications and monitoring capabilities.

The Canada-U.S. border stretches 8,891 km (5,525 miles), touches three oceans and is a crossing point for one of the world’s largest bilateral trading relationships.

“Symbolically speaking ... it’s important for us to have an unmilitarised border between neighboring countries that have been friends for a very long time,” said Freeland.

Ottawa feels the best way to prevent the deployment is to speak out strongly in public and private to ensure Washington gets the message, said a Canadian official who asked to remain anonymous, given the sensitivity of the situation.

There was no immediate reaction from the White House.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau earlier said Ottawa was in constant touch with U.S. authorities and would adjust border security measures if needed.

The state of New York, which shares a border with Canada, has been an epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

Tim Currier, the mayor of Massena, New York, a town of about 13,000 people that is located about 15 km (9 miles) from the border, said the deployment of troops could spark panic if it were not communicated properly.

“I’m concerned about perception. I’m concerned about how citizens look at that,” he said in a telephone interview.

Canada has confirmed 3,409 coronavirus cases and 35 deaths, medical officials said.

As part of the crackdown Canada is no longer accepting irregular migrants, instead turning them round and sending them back to the United States. Washington says it plans to send them swiftly back to their countries of origin.

Theresa Cardinal Brown, director of immigration policy with the Washington-based Bipartisan Policy Center, said the undefended U.S.-Canada border has long been a point of pride.

"I have not seen any reporting whatsoever of an increased threat posture at the U.S.-Canada border," she said. "Did we not have other stuff that troops could and should be doing?"

[Mexico] US-Mexico border closure brings local economy to a halt (Public Radio International)

Public Radio International [3/26/2020 1:45 PM, Jorge Valencia, 105K] Audio: [HERE](#)

Ida Ann Pedregó thought this spring, like many before it, would mark the busiest time of the year for her store. She owns Illusions Boutique, a party dress store in Douglas, Arizona, and she typically sees sales pick up in March, April and May ahead of the summer party season.

Not this year. As news of the novel coronavirus reached Pedregó's hometown just north of the US-Mexico border this month, Mexican shoppers — who make up the majority of her clientele — slowly stopped arriving.

"It was in the atmosphere," Pedregó said. "People started to run scared. All you could hear was, 'Do you think it's really going to be this bad?'"

The economic shock of the new coronavirus has been felt especially hard along the US-Mexico border. An order by both countries' governments last Friday has allowed through-traffic for commerce, but has barred many people who commute locally from one side of the border to the other — cutting off businesses like Pedregó's from most of their customers.

The mostly rural, US border region depends on commerce from northern Mexico. Sales taxes collected from Mexican shoppers represent at least 40% of local US government revenues near the border, according to multiple estimates, said Erik Lee, director of the North American Research Partnership, a Phoenix-based think tank. Many cross the border to visit friends and family and shop at big-box retailers including Costco and Walmart or specialty shops like Pedregó's.

That revenue is critical in communities like Douglas, Arizona, where cross-border visitors spent as much as \$95 million in 2016, according to a study conducted by the North American Research Partnership and the Crossborder Group. The new travel restrictions allow for medical or academic purposes, but block travel for sightseeing or recreation.

These measures are more dramatic than even the ones put in place after the 9/11 attacks or after the murder of Drug Enforcement Administration agent Kiki Camarena in central Mexico in 1985, Lee said.

"From the US perspective, these border crossings are absolutely essential for what are still frontier-border communities," Lee said. "That just tells you how unusual and how serious this situation is."

Government messaging in Mexico has been mixed. As late as last Sunday, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador encouraged citizens to go out and spend money. But many mayors and governors, including Gov. Claudia Pavlovich of Arizona's neighboring state of Sonora have implemented measures in an effort to slow the spread of the disease.

Pavlovich declared a state of emergency on Wednesday, calling on businesses to close and

allow workers to stay home. She had already ordered state beaches closed for a month — including through Holy Week, one of Mexico's busiest travel holidays. And she had made multiple pleas to state residents, telling them that reducing social contact was the best way to slow down the spread of the disease.

"Let me reiterate and underscore," she said in a video last weekend, "unless it is urgent, do not leave your home."

Many in northern Mexico have stayed home following government recommendations — or simply because they don't want to get sick. Pedregó shares those concerns.

Pedregó temporarily closed the business March 21, she said. And it was a difficult decision. Her mother opened the business on G Avenue in downtown Douglas, Arizona, in 1994, and she took it over eight years later. Illusions Boutique caters mostly to shoppers traveling from the neighboring state of Sonora looking for dresses, shoes and jewelry for weddings or teenage girls' quinceañera birthday parties. When she closed, Pedregó had to tell her only employee, who'd been with the store for nine years, that there would be no more work.

"She pretty much knew," Pedregó said. "Right now, the most important thing is the well-being of the community."

If she looks back at the crisis after 9/11 and the recession of 2008, it helps her remain optimistic, Pedregó said. And whenever border activity returns to normal and local schools open their doors again, so will she, she added.

"I believe we will overcome this, too," she said. "We just have to have faith. As a community, and as a country, we will overcome this."

[Mexico] Tijuana's oldest migrant shelter closes to new arrivals to protect against coronavirus (San Diego Union Tribune)

San Diego Union Tribune [3/26/2020 9:58 PM, Wendy Fry, 241K]

Tijuana's oldest migrant shelter is closing its doors to new arrivals because of concerns about the devastating impacts a coronavirus outbreak could have on its already vulnerable population.

"We really want to keep people healthy," said Father Pat Murphy, a Scalabrini priest who runs Casa del Migrante.

"We may accept some people who have previously lived here, who need to come back because of the downturn in the economy, but we're constantly re-evaluating as the situation develops," he said.

Casa del Migrante is a shelter and social service center, established in Tijuana in 1987, that serves both northbound migrants and deportees from the United States.

The refuge is closing its doors to new residents just as the United States has implemented a policy that allows border officials to immediately turn back all asylum seekers and other foreigners trying to cross the U.S.-Mexico border illegally.

"I call it the Deportation Express," said Murphy, who said he has concerns about people

bringing the virus to Tijuana from San Diego. “Last week, they just started sending massive numbers of people back.”

Humanitarian advocates in Tijuana fear other shelter directors may follow the lead of the city’s most well-established migrant shelter, leaving many people with nowhere to go.

“We have to protect the group that is here,” said Murphy.

Murphy is also part of a coalition of migrant shelters that have urged the federal and local government in Baja California to take greater measures to protect its migrant population from the coronavirus.

On March 18, the Coalition for the Defense of Migrants asked authorities to expand testing, open access to Tijuana’s nearly empty federal shelter for those returned or deported from the United States and “carefully analyze the situation of deportations and returns from the United States.”

“We urge the federal government authorities to urgently create specific strategies in the event that migrants with symptoms appear inside the shelters and that this impacts their capacity,” the coalition wrote.

“In the same way, we request measures to protect their rights and avoid discrimination and xenophobia towards this transient population, we must respond urgently and with empathy to the most vulnerable population,” stated the letter, which was signed by Father Murphy and others.

Baja California state health officials have confirmed 20 cases of coronavirus as of Thursday. Secretary of Health Alonso Óscar Pérez Rico said the state has tested 226 people for the virus.

Murphy said the government should be using resources such as the federal shelter that opened in Tijuana in December with a capacity for 3,000 people.

“There’s still less than 100 people at that shelter,” said Murphy. “It’s time the government does their job and take responsibility.”

Last week, Casa del Migrante reduced the hours when they could accept migrants and cut the number of migrants they will accept to 80, half its normal capacity.

Currently, the shelter has 50 people staying there, but many others come daily for food. The shelter also asked their volunteer cooks, who are senior citizens, not to come.

“We don’t want to kick any people out, but we can’t let people in when they’re sick.... Everything we do has been amplified and made more difficult because of the virus,” said Murphy.

The director of the Agape migrant shelter, Alberto Rivera Colón, said he does not plan to close his shelter to new arrivals, but he currently has 35 migrants isolated in a special room because they are sick.

He said the state government is not testing migrants for the coronavirus even when they have symptoms including fever, cough, body aches and headaches — symptoms associated with the coronavirus.

“The government says it is too expensive to test them,” said Rivera.

During morning press briefings, state officials have said they are reserving limited supplies of tests for people with severe symptoms.

[Mexico] VIDEO: Mexican Border State Mayor Bans U.S. Citizens over Coronavirus (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 3:37 PM, Ildefonso Ortiz and Brandon Darby, 1973K]

A Mexican border state mayor banned all U.S. citizens from visiting his municipality, claiming they are responsible for spreading Coronavirus (Covid-19) in the region.

Through a video shared on social media, Daniel Omar Gonzalez Garza, the mayor of Sabinas Hidalgo in Nuevo Leon, said that he would not allow U.S. citizens or individuals who work in the U.S. to travel to his town after learning that two local women are now undergoing tests.

“In a few more minutes we will not be allowing that U.S. citizens visit our municipality,” Gonzalez Garza said in the video.

A Mexican law enforcement source consulted by Breitbart Texas revealed that municipal officers are ordered to ask the immigration status of drivers with Texas license plates.

The statements by Garza come at a time when Mexico has 475 confirmed cases of Coronavirus, 1,656 being tested, and seven fatalities. In Nuevo Leon, officials confirmed 52 cases and no fatalities. Authorities closed schools and, in some municipalities, used police to clear public parks and other areas.

Sabinas Hidalgo continues to be a busy corridor for the Cartel Del Noreste faction of Los Zetas to move drugs into Texas.

[Mexico] Coronavirus stalls asylum system and exacerbates conditions of migrants waiting in Mexico (San Diego Union Tribune)

San Diego Union Tribune [3/26/2020 9:54 PM, Kate Morrissey, 241K]

Migrants waiting south of the border for their chance at asylum in the United States are facing new levels of uncertainty as court hearings get rescheduled and border officials stop processing new cases as part of the federal government’s response to the coronavirus pandemic.

The Executive Office for Immigration Review, a Department of Justice agency responsible for immigration courts, announced earlier this week that all hearings for asylum seekers in the “Remain in Mexico” program would be postponed until after April 22. The move came after San Diego judges began canceling hearings, defying the agency’s instructions to keep hearing cases under the program, officially known as Migrant Protection Protocols.

Ports of entry have stopped accepting new asylum seekers altogether, and anyone caught

crossing illegally will be either immediately returned to Mexico or deported, depending on the migrant's nationality. Mexico has agreed to take in Central American migrants apprehended by U.S. Border Patrol, but not others.

As of Wednesday afternoon, Tijuana officials had received 88 people who had been caught by Border Patrol and turned back since the new policy went into effect late Friday, according to Carlos González Gutiérrez, the consul general for Mexico in San Diego. All but five of those people were Mexican, he said in a webinar on Thursday.

At the same time, the U.S.-Mexico border has closed to “nonessential travel” in an effort to contain the spread of the coronavirus. U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, as well as cargo and workers in key industries can still cross north.

“This is an unprecedented response to an unprecedented situation,” said Pete Flores, director of field operations for Customs and Border Protection’s San Diego field office, in a press call on Monday.

Meanwhile, controversy continues to surround the ongoing operation of immigration courts around the country.

Migrant advocates, the immigration judges union, and attorneys — both those who represent immigrants and the union for those who represent the federal government — have pushed for immigration courts to close completely and allow time-sensitive matters, such as bond hearings for detainees, to happen over teleconference.

“Close all the immigration courts,” the National Association for Immigration Judges said over Twitter on Wednesday. “EOIR, you are endangering all of our lives.”

While many hearings have been postponed, including Remain in Mexico cases, San Diego’s immigration court is one of many that are still open for filing documents and holding hearings for people held in immigration detention centers.

Some attorneys entering detention facilities have resorted to using swimming masks to visit their clients.

At Otay Mesa Detention Center, which has its own court, judges and attorneys still have to go in and out daily along with the guards and officers who work inside, increasing the likelihood that someone will unknowingly bring in the virus.

An ICE detainee in New Jersey has reportedly already tested positive for the virus. And an immigration judge in Colorado had symptoms consistent with the virus earlier this week, while attorneys who appeared recently in immigration courts in several cities have later reported similar symptoms.

In an emailed statement late Thursday, EOIR said that it is operating “largely in line” with federal courts.

“Recognizing that cases of detained individuals may implicate unique constitutional concerns and raise particular issues of public safety, personal liberty, and due process, few federal courts have closed completely,” the statement said. “Most federal courts have

continued to receive filings and to hold critical hearings for detained individuals even as they have postponed other hearings.”

While advocates had wanted the courts to close for Remain in Mexico hearings, they are also worried about the potential for COVID-19 to exacerbate difficulties for people in the program.

Migrant rights advocates have already condemned many of the Trump administration’s policies that cause large numbers of asylum seekers to spend long waits in Mexican border cities because of the likelihood that as migrants, they will be targets of kidnapping, assault or even murder.

The combination of policies now leaves migrants stranded in conditions that often do not allow for social distancing or other hygiene recommendations from public health experts.

“We have people exposed to risky conditions,” Dr. Ietza Bojorquez, an epidemiologist at Tijuana’s El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, said in Spanish in a webinar on Thursday. “How can we ask those people to keep a safe distance and wash hands if they don’t even have access to water?”

Bojorquez studied the spread of infectious diseases in a temporary shelter in Tijuana where a large migrant caravan stayed after traveling north from Honduras in the fall of 2018. She said that despite most members of the caravan being young — and healthy under normal conditions — the living situation in that camp made infectious diseases like the flu extremely likely to spread.

She criticized both the United States and Mexico’s lack of planning for access to care for stranded migrants during the pandemic. Countries need to do better to ensure migrants can get health care in these kinds of situations, she said.

Some of Tijuana’s migrant shelters are closing to new arrivals in order to avoid the spread within their walls, knowing they will have limited resources to act if and when the virus reaches them. That means that asylum seekers who just reached the border have fewer options to find places to sleep out of the streets.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association has called for asylum seekers in the Remain in Mexico program to be allowed into the United States as their cases are postponed. But that is not likely given the Trump administration’s stance on asylum seekers.

“It’s a terrible situation,” AILA’s Jeremy McKinney said in a recent press call about the issue. “There are fixes that can be put in place during this temporary court shut down.”

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Amid pandemic, medically vulnerable people remain trapped in ICE jails (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 1:30 PM, Dr. Catherine Jones and Dr. Paulina Rebolledo, 1762K]

Across the country, people are doing their part to “flatten the curve” in order to give hospitals and healthcare workers a fighting chance at caring for people infected with COVID-19. It will take a nationwide effort to save lives, and it will take all of us.

So why has the federal government chosen to overlook immigrant communities, especially those trapped in Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) custody?

We know the virus puts people with serious chronic medical conditions at higher risk of death. Right now, there are thousands of medically vulnerable people who remain locked up in ICE's cages. We urge our fellow Americans not to forget about them.

In our collective experience working and volunteering as independent medical evaluators of people detained in ICE jails before the pandemic, we have pored over thousands of pages of medical records documenting patients being harmed — or even killed — because of ICE's system-wide failure to provide basic medical care and disability accommodations in its facilities.

Now, ICE's inadequacy and negligence are compounded by the pandemic. Let's examine just one case.

Martín Muñoz is a diabetic man who has been detained at Adelanto Detention Center in California for over two years. According to court documents, ICE once gave Muñoz triple his regular dose of insulin, resulting in an overdose, which can be fatal. Despite ICE's admission of fault, Mr. Muñoz remains in ICE custody, where he continues to suffer from inadequate care. His diabetes has progressively worsened.

Diabetes is one of the underlying health conditions that puts individuals at high risk if exposed to COVID-19. Given ICE's track record, is Mr. Muñoz expected to count on ICE now?

For years, the federal government has overseen a system in which inadequate medical care and patient neglect run rampant.

But it doesn't stop there.

ICE allows its contractors to repeatedly violate the civil rights of people in its custody. Deaf people are unable to communicate with medical personnel because their wrists are shackled during appointments. Those who require wheelchairs are placed in solitary confinement without their wheelchairs.

ICE has been able to operate under these procedures — which are appalling — because it has zero accountability to patients or to the larger network of doctors in the U.S. who have sworn an oath to do no harm.

That's why ICE's response to the pandemic has been predictably and woefully insufficient. Detained individuals are reporting that they don't have soap or hand sanitizer. Their only communication with the outside is relegated to shared phones that aren't cleaned between each use. Their bathrooms and dorms are shared. It's simply impossible to practice "social distancing" in detention.

The squalid conditions in ICE detention centers have given way to outbreaks of infectious diseases before, and now it's only a matter of time before a full-blown COVID-19 crisis sweeps through detention centers across the country.

Last year, civil rights groups including Disability Rights Advocates (DRA), the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and Civil Rights Education and Enforcement Center (CREEC) filed a nationwide class action lawsuit against ICE. The lawsuit, of which Mr. Muñoz is a plaintiff, outlines story after story of neglect and abuse.

This litigation seeks an overhaul of the system that allows this abuse. But in the meantime, we're working with attorneys on the case for more immediate forms of relief. There's not much time left to act.

The tragic stories of people like Mr. Muñoz suffering in ICE custody are mounting. His story is just one of thousands. ICE jails nearly 40,000 individuals today, the vast majority of which haven't even been convicted of a crime. They're trapped in what other doctors are calling a "tinderbox scenario," and the first case of someone in ICE detention testing positive COVID-19 has already been reported.

If we fail to move swiftly, and if we don't start releasing people from ICE detention, we will soon watch in horror as the disease spreads inside detention centers and claims lives that could have been protected.

As physicians on the frontline in the fight against COVID-19, we have first-hand knowledge of the dire situation in our hospitals, which are already experiencing a greater influx of patients. We know the squalid conditions in ICE detention centers, coupled with the agency's insufficient treatment of detained people, will only lead to greater spread within detention centers. This spread will compound the strain on health care workers and work against our efforts to flatten the curve.

We demand the federal government give us and our patients a fighting chance.

We must begin releasing people from ICE custody, and we must release them now.

ICE resists calls to release immigrants as desperation mounts over coronavirus (CBS News)

CBS News [3/26/2020 3:20 PM, Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 2394K]

The coronavirus pandemic has killed more than 23,000 people worldwide, including more than 1,000 in the U.S. It has paralyzed the U.S. economy and changed nearly all facets of American life.

To curb the rapid spread of the contagion, cities and states across the U.S., from Houston and New York, to California and New Jersey, have released thousands of low-level offenders from custody, as well as older inmates and those with preexisting medical conditions. Countries like the United Kingdom have moved to release hundreds of detained immigrants. The top United Nations human rights official, Michelle Bachelet, has urged governments to reduce their incarcerated populations.

But U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which controls the largest immigration detention system in the world, has so far resisted calls to significantly downsize its detention population, despite a flurry of lawsuits and positive coronavirus cases in its facilities.

On Tuesday, the agency announced the first case of COVID-19 among the more than 38,000 detainees currently in its custody. On Thursday, New Jersey officials announced a second case, saying a 52-year-old immigrant held by ICE in Newark also tested positive, which an ICE official later confirmed. Four staff members at facilities used by ICE to hold immigrants in New Jersey, Texas and Colorado have also tested positive.

Lawyers believe their clients are sitting ducks in crowded detention centers that have long been plagued by reports of poor hygiene and subpar medical care. The detained immigrants and asylum-seekers are growing increasingly desperate, feeling powerless to protect themselves from the deadly contagion.

"We are very scared," María, a 23-year-old Cuban asylum-seeker held at a for-profit prison in Jena, Louisiana, told CBS News in Spanish. "We know we can die inside here. The situation does not bode well for us. We don't have a way to protect ourselves."

On Wednesday morning, ICE officials held an "informational briefing" on COVID-19 at the facility where María has been detained for months. María said fellow immigrant women in the cell started protesting after the staff gave "evasive" answers to their concerns. After some of them tried to leave their housing area, María said staff pepper-sprayed them and locked the group of more than 70 women, even those who did not try to leave, inside for more than 30 minutes.

ICE confirmed the use of pepper spray, saying it was used on four detainees who "became confrontational." The agency also confirmed that guards at least two other detention centers in Texas and Louisiana used pepper spray against detainees who staged protests this week demanding their release. BuzzFeed News on Thursday also reported a fourth incident in which staff used pepper spray on Monday.

Attorneys and advocates said the immigrants wanted the staff to do more to protect them from the coronavirus. According to ICE, the detainees were "combative" and "disruptive." The agency said some in Texas were placed in solitary confinement and are facing disciplinary charges.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, a coalition of advocacy groups led by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) asked four federal courts across the country to order the release of immigrants in California, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Massachusetts who are at increased risk of severe illness from the coronavirus.

Another lawsuit on Wednesday by the Southern Poverty Law Center in federal court in California demanded that ICE take steps to safeguard the health of vulnerable immigrants, and asked the court to order their release if the agency can't do so. In its lawsuit last week seeking the release of migrant families with children in Texas and Pennsylvania, the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services also cited the pandemic.

Because immigration detention is a civil matter meant to ensure immigrants show up to court hearings, ICE has broad authority to release detainees.

Despite the intensifying pressure, ICE has not revealed any policy for releasing detainees. A spokesperson said the agency has "not made any announcements regarding the detained population," but added that officials make "custody determinations every day,

sometimes releasing people" for "a variety of reasons."

Instead, ICE's detainee population increased last week, even as the public health crisis deepened, according to government figures. The agency went from detaining 37,311 immigrants on March 14, to holding 38,058 people as of March 21. The number of detained asylum-seekers who established credible fear of persecution in their home countries grew by nearly 300.

"They are not protecting us"

María, the asylum-seeker in Louisiana, asked for her name to be changed because she fears reprisals for speaking out. Detainees at the ICE detention center in Jena feel like "children," María said, and are unable to implement the hygiene and social distancing measures experts say are the only ways to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus.

"They are not protecting us," she said, referring to staff at the facility, which is operated by the private prison company GEO Group. The corporation did not respond to a request for comment.

Having struggled with severe asthma for much of her life, María feels particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus. She's not alone.

The immigrants named as plaintiffs in the lawsuits filed in recent days are all at higher risk of getting severely ill from the coronavirus because of their age or underlying health issues. They include an 82-year-old grandfather with "significant medical and neurological illnesses" detained in California; a 63-year-old man with prostate cancer held in Massachusetts; and a 51-year-old Guatemalan immigrant detained in Pennsylvania who was recently coughing blood and has gotten the flu four times while in detention.

ICE has said it has taken the necessary measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus in its facilities, some of which experienced outbreaks of mumps, measles and flu last year. The agency said it has implemented new and existing protocols to screen new detainees, and isolate and treat those with symptoms. It has also suspended family visitations at detention centers.

In response to a lawsuit filed last week by the ACLU in Seattle, Justice Department lawyers said the argument that detention "poses an increased risk of health complications or death from COVID-19 is purely speculative." The government lawyers said immigrants at a detention center in Tacoma, Washington, have "greater access to robust medical care than the general public."

"Ordering their release ... would leave Plaintiffs without their present access to health care would arguably put Plaintiffs at greater risk of serious complications in the event that they contract COVID-19," the government said in a filing.

Eunice Cho, an ACLU attorney who specializes in detention matters, strongly disagreed.

"Everything that we know about health care in ICE facilities flies in the face of that assertion. There have been a record number of deaths alone this year, as compared to other administrations," Cho said, referring to the deaths of 10 immigrants in ICE custody

registered this fiscal year.

"Medical care that is provided in ICE facilities is widely known to be substandard, so it is shocking to hear ICE claim that people are better off in detention than outside," she added.

Cho said she's also concerned that the agency has revealed little publicly about the number of detainees it has tested for the virus. As of March 4, the agency had tested four immigrants.

In New Jersey, where ICE's "patient zero" is being held, the advocacy group Make the Road has been working to release two immigrants from detention, including Yimy, a 25-year-old transgender asylum-seeker from Honduras detained at the Hudson County Correctional Facility. One of the group's attorneys, Jackie Pearce, said Yimy and other detainees are feeling "desperate."

"With COVID-19 spreading in the detention centers, this is a human rights disaster waiting to happen," Pearce told CBS News. "Our clients are stuck in cages and they are sitting ducks."

ICE deportation planes begin to ship stranded U.S. citizens home (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 1:58 PM, Staff, 5304K]

Planes used by the U.S. government to deport Central American nationals will bring back U.S. citizens in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador as coronavirus travel restrictions reduce commercial flights.

The U.S. State Department is tracking 50,000 Americans abroad it said might seek help to return to the United States, straining the department's resources as it seeks to arrange travel around the spread of the coronavirus.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), working with the State Department, repatriated 64 U.S. citizens on an ICE Air Operations plane from Honduras on the return journey from a deportation flight on Tuesday, ICE said in a statement.

"ICE will continue to work with the State Department to facilitate the safe return of U.S. citizens on future removal flight returns from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador throughout the duration of the COVID-19 pandemic," ICE said in a statement.

The initiative may be expanded beyond those three countries, the statement said.

Trump Admin Can't Bar Sanctuary Cities From Receiving Law Enforcement Funding From Stimulus (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 11:35 AM, Jason Hopkins, 566K]

The Senate's emergency relief package includes hundreds of millions of dollars in law enforcement grants, but language in the bill specifically forbids the Trump administration from withholding these funds from sanctuary jurisdictions.

Late Wednesday night, Senate lawmakers passed their \$2 trillion stimulus bill aimed at reviving the U.S. economy and helping Americans make it through the coronavirus pandemic. The 880-page bill would, among many things, provide billions of dollars to

struggling companies, boost unemployment insurance and dole out cash to Americans.

The legislation also includes an additional \$850 million toward law enforcement grants. However, there's a catch: language in the bill is tailored to preventing the administration from withholding these funds from cities and other jurisdictions that refuse to cooperate with federal immigration authorities.

"That awards hereunder, shall not be subject to restrictions or special conditions that are the same as (or substantially similar to) those, imposed on awards under such subpart in fiscal year 2018, that forbid interference with Federal law enforcement," a section of the provision reads.

The battle between the Trump administration and sanctuary jurisdictions began in 2017, when the Justice Department moved to withhold enforcement grants from cities and states that refuse Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials from accessing their jails or notifying them when an illegal aliens is set to be released from their custody.

The Edward Byrne Memorial Justice Assistance Grant Program distributes millions of dollars annually in support of local law enforcement. What the Justice Department did in 2017 was impose certain conditions on recipients to receive these funds: not restrict information sharing with immigration authorities, give notice of an alien's release date upon request, and give immigration authorities access to their facilities.

President Donald Trump scored a major victory in February when the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that the White House can legally withhold funding from sanctuary cities.

To be sure, the coronavirus bill passed out of the Senate only applies to the additional \$850,000,000 being appropriated to the Justice Department, and is not a statutory change to the Trump administration's original order.

The relief package was passed by an overwhelming vote of 96-0 in the Senate late Wednesday night, and it now heads to the Democratically controlled House. House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer said he expects his chamber to vote on the relief package by Friday.

Immigration chief on thin ice for adopting Obama's stance during crisis (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 2:40 PM, Daniel Lippman and Anita Kumar, 2003K]

Top Trump administration officials grew angry with Matt Albence, the acting director of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, after he announced that immigration authorities would halt most enforcement efforts during the coronavirus outbreak, according to three people familiar with the situation.

The displeasure with Albence spread throughout Trumpworld and triggered worries about the political implications of adopting — even temporarily — an immigration stance similar to the Obama administration approach. "He's been on thin ice for some time," a fourth person said.

The White House, the Department of Homeland Security, in which ICE is housed, and ICE didn't immediately respond to requests for comment. Albence did not provide a comment.

ICE last week said it would prioritize deportation for foreign nationals who have committed

crimes or pose a threat to public safety, and not those at doctors' offices and hospitals.

"ICE Enforcement and Removal Operations (ERO) will focus enforcement on public safety risks and individuals subject to mandatory detention based on criminal grounds," ICE said in a statement posted on its website. "For those individuals who do not fall into those categories, ERO will exercise discretion to delay enforcement actions until after the crisis or utilize alternatives to detention, as appropriate."

Trump made cracking down on immigration a centerpiece of his 2016 campaign, calling for a southern border wall and deporting all 11 million immigrants in the country illegally.

The change, announced March 18, is similar to an Obama administration policy that focused on immigrants who had committed crimes. Albence made the decision unilaterally, according to two people familiar with the matter.

After Albence notified lawmakers about the change in phone calls last week and the press release was issued, he was chastised by acting deputy secretary Ken Cuccinelli who wasn't happy with him after the surprise announcement, according to a former senior DHS official.

The day after the press release, Cuccinelli tried to walk back the statement. He tweeted a thread issuing a "clarification" of ICE's announcement about enforcement during the pandemic.

"@ICEgov will, as it has during other times of crisis, conduct enforcement operations that protect our communities and uphold our laws. This means that @ICEgov will continue to prioritize arresting and removing criminal aliens and other aliens who pose a threat to public safety, just as it always has during President @realDonaldTrump's administration," he also said.

"That does not mean that no other removable aliens will in fact be removed, but during the current public health situation, removals will be done in such a way as to minimize the exposure of our agents and of the removable aliens we are encountering."

Trump also saw news on it and was wondering what was going on, according to the former senior DHS official.

Senior DHS officials were "really ripping in terms of that happening because it wasn't really coordinated with anyone else," said the person. "He got in deep shit for that the next day. So they've been trying to un-ring that bell."

A DHS official confirmed that DHS headquarters telegraphed frustration to Enforcement and Removal Operations — the ICE component that handles detentions and deportations — over reports regarding a pause in some enforcement operations.

[NJ] Judge orders release of 10 immigration detainees from N.J. jails (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 11:59 PM, Josh Gerstein, 2003K]

A federal judge in New York City has ordered the immediate release from detention of 10 immigrants whose attorneys said they were at increased risk of illness from coronavirus due to underlying health conditions.

The group, all held in New Jersey county jails and facing deportation proceedings in Manhattan, appears to be the largest in the nation subject to a court-ordered release since the pandemic broke out.

Acting on a petition from the Brooklyn Federal Defenders office, U.S. District Court Judge Analisa Torres said the immigrants were entitled to a temporary restraining order because of the danger to their health posed by being in county jails that many experts consider a breeding ground for the virus.

“The risk that Petitioners will face a severe, and quite possibly fatal, infection if they remain in immigration detention constitutes irreparable harm warranting a TRO,” wrote Torres, an appointee of President Barack Obama.

In her order issued Thursday evening, Torres also sharply criticized Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials for inadequate preparation for the outbreak and a lack of safeguards for the most vulnerable detainees.

“Respondents have exhibited, and continue to exhibit, deliberate indifference to Petitioners’ medical needs,” the judge wrote.

She noted that ICE claimed detainees are being screened for the virus, isolated if suspected of infection and that cleaning of facilities has been stepped up.

However, Torres called those measures “patently insufficient to protect” the detainees in the case before her and she noted that lawyers representing ICE could not provide “any information about steps taken to protect high-risk detainees.”

There are about 40,000 immigrants in ICE custody across the country. Immigrant rights activists have called for the vast majority of them to be released to minimize their risk of contracting the virus.

While ICE has not formally announced any policy to consider release of immigration detainees due to dangers from the pandemic, Torres’ order says a lawyer from the U.S. Attorney’s Office in Manhattan indicated during a phone hearing earlier Thursday that five of the ten prisoners covered by the petition were “expected” to be released Thursday regardless of the judge’s order.

It was not immediately clear why those five were due to be released or whether a broad review of immigration detainees for virus-related health risks is underway.

Spokespeople for ICE, the U.S. Attorney’s Office and the Justice Department did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the ruling Thursday night.

At least two other courts — the U.S. District Court in Boston and the San Francisco-based 9th Circuit — have ordered releases of individual immigration detainees in recent days due to virus concerns. But, last week, a federal judge in Seattle turned down a request for release of nine immigrants being held at a center in neighboring Tacoma.

Other cases pressing for release of detained immigrants are continuing to work their way through the courts.

[NJ] ICE detainees in facilities with coronavirus cases ordered released by judge (ABC News)

ABC News [3/26/2020 11:14 PM, Aaron Katersky, 2182K]

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement detainees must be immediately released from county jails where cases of novel coronavirus have been confirmed, a federal judge in New York ordered Thursday night.

The 10 detainees asked for their release "because of the public health crisis posed by COVID-19," their petition said.

The men and women had been detained by federal immigration authorities and had removal proceedings pending in immigration court. They were being held at three jails in New Jersey where either detainees or staff had tested positive for coronavirus.

"Each Petitioner suffers from chronic medical conditions, and faces an imminent risk of death or serious injury in immigration detention if exposed to COVID-19," the decision said.

The jails where the detainees were being housed has each reported confirmed cases: two detainees and one correctional officer in the Hudson County Jail; one detainee at the Bergen County Jail; and a superior officer at the Essex County Jail.

"The nature of detention facilities makes exposure and spread of the virus particularly harmful," Judge Analisa Torres wrote.

"Moreover, medical doctors, including two medical experts for the Department of Homeland Security, have warned of a 'tinderbox scenario' as COVID-19 spreads to immigration detention centers and the resulting 'imminent risk to the health and safety of immigrant detainees' and the public," she added.

The decision also cited the "failure" of jail operators to say with certainty the detention facilities were in a position to allow inmates to remain 6-feet apart, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

New York has been particularly hard-hit by the virus. There have been at least 39,125 cases in the state and at least 454 deaths, according to data compiled by the Center for Systems Science and Engineering at Johns Hopkins University.

[NJ] New Jersey jails must release at least 10 'at risk' ICE detainees over coronavirus concerns: judge (FOX News)

FOX News [3/27/2020 1:01 AM, Dom Calicchio, 8943K]

At least 10 migrants deemed "at risk" were ordered freed from jails in three New Jersey counties Thursday night over coronavirus concerns.

The jails – in Hudson, Bergen and Essex counties – had each reported cases of coronavirus, either among detainees, staff members or both, ABC News reported.

U.S. Judge Analisa Torres in New York ruled that the group of detainees, which included both men and women, had requested release "because of the public health crisis posed by COVID-19," their petition said, according to ABC.

The detainees were not identified and were being detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) for unspecified reasons. The migrant group was believed to be the largest in the nation to be ordered freed over concerns about the virus, Politico reported.

The three New Jersey counties lie just across the Hudson River from New York, which has the most coronavirus cases in the nation. New Jersey ranks No. 2 on the list.

"Each Petitioner suffers from chronic medical conditions, and faces an imminent risk of death or serious injury in immigration detention if exposed to COVID-19," the judge's decision said, according to the station.

Torres also addressed the conditions at the jails in her decision.

"The nature of detention facilities makes exposure and spread of the virus particularly harmful," Torres wrote.

Nationwide, the U.S. holds about 37,000 people in detention over immigration issues, according to The Associated Press.

Many of the detainees are elderly or have pre-existing medical conditions, making them vulnerable to coronavirus, and are held in conditions in which beds are just three feet apart with lack of access to protective gear such as face masks.

The Hudson County jail reported two detainees and one correctional officer with the virus, while the Bergen County jail reported one detainee had been infected and the Essex County jail reported a superior officer had been diagnosed with the illness, ABC reported.

At least two other federal courts -- in Boston and San Francisco -- have ordered individual migrants to be freed from detention in recent days over coronavirus concerns, Politico reported.

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Legal immigrants at risk of losing status during coronavirus pandemic (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 6:00 AM, Rafael Bernal, 1762K]

Thousands of people with legal status in the United States could inadvertently violate immigration law over the next few months, as the government agency that processes applications remains closed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

Attorneys, think tanks, activists and United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) — the agency that issues work permits and naturalizations to foreign nationals — have put forward some proposals to plug holes in existing immigration law, but potentially millions remain at risk.

"Times of crisis point out the failures in the system you've got. And one of the failures in our immigration system is it's not responsive to crises. Period," said Theresa Cardinal Brown, director of immigration and cross-border policy at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

A main concern for immigration attorneys are foreign nationals whose work permits are

about to expire, whether they plan to request an extension or leave the country.

USCIS, a largely paper-based organization, has suspended in-person service until at least April 1 to protect its staff, contractors and prospective applicants from contagion.

"The immediate and most pressing concern for our members and employees is ensuring individuals whose status is expiring have means and measures to remain lawfully," said Sharvari Dalal-Dheini, director of government relations at the American Immigration Lawyers Association (AILA).

In a letter Monday to Ken Cuccinelli, the USCIS senior official performing the duties of the director, AILA demanded the agency freeze all deadlines as of Friday, threatening litigation if the agency does not comply.

Cuccinelli holds the top job at USCIS and the number two post at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), both as a senior official performing duties, as he has not been put forward by President Trump for Senate confirmation.

"You're putting people into a catch-22. You're being forced to jeopardize your health and the health of those around you to file things in a timely way, or you're violating immigration law," Dalal-Dheini said.

DHS has ample authority to suspend deadlines and prolong work authorizations, according to Ur Jaddou, former chief counsel for USCIS.

"They have tremendous authority to extend those periods of authorized stay inside the United States and the associated work authorization," said Jaddou, the director of DHS Watch, an immigration policy oversight project at progressive advocacy group America's Voice.

A USCIS spokesman said the agency "is considering a number of options" for people who are unable to leave the United States after their work permits have expired and highlighted the agency's ability to provide special consideration and expedited processing on a case-by-case basis.

Brown said USCIS could issue extensions for work permits, including for beneficiaries of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program, but the Byzantine nature of the immigration system could still complicate many cases.

And Brown warned against any push to relitigate immigration reform in Congress during a time of crisis.

"Right now we need to focus on the immediate needs and what's pragmatic. I believe what we need to do for immigration right now is just maintain the status quo," she said.

Some Democrats pushed for a permanent legislative replacement for the DACA program in the House coronavirus stimulus package, but that language was not adopted in the Democratic draft legislation published Monday.

The Democratic proposal did include a provision forcing USCIS to automatically extend

status or work authorization to all immigrants whose permits expired within a year of enactment.

The final version of the Senate's stimulus bill, based on a deal reached by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, does not include provisions on immigration.

"In negotiations with Republicans, Sen. Schumer pushed to include language that would have automatically extended work authorizations in light of the closures," said an aide to Schumer.

A source familiar with the negotiations said both Schumer and Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) pushed the language, but it was rejected by Majority Leader Sen. Mitch McConnell's office, with input from Republicans from the House Judiciary Committee.

The source said a Department of Homeland Security official involved in negotiations called the provision "a Graham-Durbin attempt to save DACA," referring to Sen. Lindsay Graham (R-S.C.), who in the past has supported measures to protect DACA recipients.

The Treasury Department did not comment to The Hill.

Still, whether or not stopgap measures are applied could have far-reaching consequences, not just for the applicants, but for critical sectors such as medicine, construction, tech and agriculture.

"The thing that worries me most is all the essential workers in these fields. The number of doctors serving us now who are foreign nationals is large, and nurses and pharmacists," said Jaddou.

"Think about nursing homes and nurse aides, personal aides at home helping the elderly who are at very high risk," she added.

Depending on how long USCIS remains shut down, the effects could be felt by millions of such workers.

They include more than 1 million yearly applicants for legal permanent residency, also known as a green card.

USCIS also manages work permits for immigration programs including DACA and temporary protected status (TPS), which together grant permission to work and live in the United States to about a million people.

According to the Institute of International Education, more than 1 million foreign students were enrolled in U.S. educational institutions in the 2018-2019 school year, and nearly 1 million people lived in the country on temporary work visas as of 2018, according to a report by the Migration Policy Institute.

USCIS has taken some measures to simplify filing forms online while minimizing contact between applicants, agency employees and contractors.

On Friday, for instance, USCIS announced it would admit electronic or photocopy signatures on the I-129, a form necessary for any work authorization, departing from its longstanding policy of requiring a "wet," or ink, signature.

Jaddou said "it's great" for USCIS employees that the notoriously paper-based agency made that change, but it did little for attorneys and applicants, as the wet signature still has to be collected and filed.

"It's on them because they're still requiring the wet signature to be someplace, and that means it has to be collected," said Jaddou.

"Attorneys still have to collect wet signatures and hold them," she added.

Travel industry hails REAL ID extension, says may need to be longer (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 5:17 PM, Alex Gangitano, 1762K]

The U.S. Travel Association applauded the administration for delaying the enforcement date of REAL ID requirements, which the group said would have likely caused greater economic uncertainty, but cautioned the extension may need to be longer.

Americans will now have until Oct. 1, 2021, to get Real ID Act compliant identification, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced on Thursday, which will be needed to board commercial flights, enter federal buildings or gain access to American nuclear plants.

"We applaud the administration for recognizing the challenges enforcing REAL ID requirements on travelers would present to what we hope will be a full and speedy economic recovery. We believe implementing REAL ID enforcement prior to full recovery would severely delay or reverse the travel industry's ability to recover quickly from the coronavirus crisis," U.S. Travel CEO Roger Dow wrote in a letter to DHS acting Secretary Chad Wolf.

If REAL ID were implemented today, an estimated 67,400 travelers would be turned away at airport security checkpoints on the first day, and more than 471,800 within the first week, according to a new analysis compiled in part by U.S. Travel.

But, Dow also called for a further extension for more time for Americans to recover from the coronavirus pandemic.

"Over the next 18 months people will be focused on building their lives back, not going to the DMV. The economic damage of coronavirus is already massive, and as we move toward a recovery phase it would be awful if the REAL ID deadline hits and creates yet another obstacle to people traveling," U.S. Travel CEO Roger Dow said in a statement on Thursday.

The REAL ID compliance rate was only at 35 percent as of February, according to the letter.

The letter also noted that the struggling travel industry will cost the economy \$910 billion from a \$355 billion decline in direct travel spending due to the coronavirus pandemic. It also estimates that 5.9 million travel industry jobs will be lost before May.

President Trump recommended delaying the enforcement date earlier this week to ease

crowding at Department of Motor Vehicle offices, telling reporters he would postpone it until October 2020.

U.S. delays enforcing tougher ID requirements until October 2021 (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 11:36 AM, David Shepardson, 5304K]

The U.S. Homeland Security Department (DHS) on Wednesday said it would delay enforcement of rules requiring Americans to get new identification cards in order to board airplanes or enter a federal building by another 12 month.

The department said in a statement it was extending the “REAL ID” deadline until October 2021. In January, DHS said U.S. states had issued more than 95 million compliant licenses and ID cards — only one-third of 276 million total U.S. cards. Congress in 2005 approved federal standards for issuing identification cards but enforcement has been repeatedly delayed.

Americans will get an extra year to obtain their Real ID (San Diego Union Tribune)

San Diego Union Tribune [3/26/2020 12:54 PM, Patrick McGreevy, 241K]

With the COVID-19 pandemic further stifling the efforts of California and other states to issue Real ID licenses, federal officials said Thursday they will grant a one-year extension, til Oct. 1, 2021, on the deadline for people to obtain the identification cards in order to board domestic flights in the United States.

President Trump originally announced a delay Monday during a news briefing on the nation’s response to the virus. The number of confirmed cases across the U.S. now stands at nearly 70,000. The resulting public health anxiety has left many Californians reluctant or unwilling to visit local branches of the Department of Motor Vehicles for fear of being infected.

“I’m also announcing that we’re postponing the deadline with Real ID requirements,” Trump said during the White House event. “We will be announcing the new deadline very soon.”

The president seemed to acknowledge the challenge with asking people to visit their local DMV “at a time that we’re asking Americans to maintain social distancing.”

On Thursday, acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said the postponement would be for one year.

“The federal, state and local response to the spread of coronavirus here in the United States necessitates a delay in the deadline,” Wolf said in a statement, adding, “We want to remove any impediment to response and recovery efforts.”

Steven Gordon, director of the California DMV, said the announcement is welcome news because the agency has had to restrict visits to field offices for many people seeking driver’s licenses and vehicle registrations.

“The California DMV is encouraged by the President’s remarks indicating that the federal government will extend the enforcement date for REAL ID,” Gordon said in a written statement. “This would relieve the urgency for people to visit local DMV offices and bolster the state’s efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. We look forward to learning more

about the President's direction and sharing that information with the public."

Trump has been under pressure to postpone the Oct. 1 deadline from state officials across the country. The National Governors Assn., which includes Gov. Gavin Newsom, recently asked the Department of Homeland Security to extend the deadline by at least one year.

"We believe an extension will allow all of us to focus our efforts on combating the spread and severity of COVID-19," the governors said in a March 17 letter to Wolf. "More time will also give Congress the ability to pass legislation that will update the 2005 REAL ID Act and bring it up to speed with today's technology."

A representative for Newsom declined to comment on the extension request.

California lawmakers had already called for a delay in the Real ID deadline based on bureaucratic problems identified before COVID-19 was labeled a global pandemic.

Assemblymen Jim Frazier (D-Fairfield) and Vince Fong (R-Bakersfield), the chair and vice-chairman of the Assembly Transportation Committee, respectively, introduced a resolution asking for a delay.

"Over 7 million Californians have a Real ID and the Department of Motor Vehicles estimates that 16 million Californians will need one by October 1st of this year," Frazier said. "That means more than twice as many people need to come into a DMV field office between now and October, than in the entire previous two years combined."

[CA] California DMV is scaling back over coronavirus. Some employees say it's not enough (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [3/26/2020 12:48 PM, Leila Miller and Patrick McGreevy, 1907K]

To slow the spread of COVID-19, the California Department of Motor Vehicles has dramatically restricted customer visits to its field offices, barring people who do not have appointments and warning that no new slots to appear in person are currently available. But some field office employees who spoke to The Times on condition of anonymity raised concerns that the measures don't go far enough, leaving staff and customers vulnerable to infection while offices remain open.

The employees also say that a recent decision by the DMV to quietly waive knowledge tests that had previously been required for license renewals and those with an out of state license could potentially put the public at risk.

A memo sent to employees last Tuesday by Sonia Huestis, identified on the agency's website as the deputy director of the customer services division, expanded the number of those eligible to forgo the in-person test. Tests may now be waived for those who are maintaining their driver's license class or endorsement, or those who can provide proof of an equivalent out-of-state license.

Under current rules outlined in the California Driver Handbook, people who may be eligible to forgo the written test and renew their license by mail or online include those whose license expired before they turned 70, who don't have a probationary or suspended license, and who have not violated a written promise to appear in court in the last two year.

The change also covers applicants who previously failed the knowledge test multiple times.

"They're saying we're being kept open because we're an essential part of the community," said an employee who works at a DMV office in Salinas and requested anonymity to speak freely about the agency. "How can we be essential when we're not protecting the public? We're putting the public in danger by doing this."

Last week, the employee helped process license paperwork for two customers, 75 and 77. One had previously failed the written test five times and the other had failed seven times.

Aware of the policy change, she brought the cases to her manager, asking whether she should waive tests for people who had failed so many times.

"We were told, 'Nope, just give them their license,'" the employee said. "We issued their license for another five years."

Meanwhile, a DMV employee in the San Joaquin Valley said her office waived about a half-dozen tests last week, including those for multiple people who had been cited for driving under the influence.

"All of this is baffling to me," said the employee, who also agreed to speak on condition of anonymity. "They want to keep their license, but maybe they shouldn't have it. ... [The test is] only just a barrier, but that's what it's for."

In a written statement, DMV spokeswoman Anita Gore said that the new policy was one of many temporary actions that the DMV has been taking to protect the health of customers and employees during the pandemic.

"Since the knowledge test is typically administered on a touchscreen in a close-quartered testing area, waiving this requirement promotes social distancing and reduces the possibility of a surface transmission of the virus," she wrote.

Najmedin Meshkati, a professor and safety expert at USC's Viterbi School of Engineering, said the written tests are in place for a reason.

"Those people that have some issues with [their] driver's license need to revisit those instructions and rules and regulations," he said. "It [the change] sends the message that there is no need to study and learn that."

The DMV has more than 170 field offices, and some 27 million drivers have California licenses while 35 million vehicles are registered with the state. Registrations and many other tasks can be done online, through the mail, at one of the 365 kiosks statewide or in select businesses that have DMV services.

Since the agency moved to appointment-only service on March 19, the number of customers visiting field offices has dropped from approximately 95,000 per day a month ago to about 17,000 per day, Gore said, a move that has "significantly reduced the number of people in our offices at any given time and promotes social distancing recommendations."

The DMV received some relief Thursday when the U.S. Department of Homeland Security

delayed the deadline for issuing Real IDs to millions of Californians who don't have them for one year, until Oct. 1, 2021. The postponement relieves pressure on the agency to get Californians into field offices now.

Obtaining a federally required Real ID license or card must be done in a DMV office. The DMV has been struggling to issue the licenses to millions of Californians before an Oct. 1 deadline this year, after which time the new identification would have been required to board domestic airline flights.

"The federal, state and local response to the spread of coronavirus here in the United States necessitates a delay in the deadline," acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said in a statement.

For existing appointments, the DMV is giving priority to those who need to complete transactions that can only be accomplished at a field office, including the reinstatement of a suspended or revoked driver license, adding an endorsement to a commercial driver license, special registration transactions to reclaim an impounded vehicle and issuing identification to underserved populations, Gore said.

The scaling back of in-person operations comes as DMV employees and customers alike have expressed anxiety over the risks of working in or visiting field offices. Karen Patterson, 73, of Manhattan Beach said she received a pre-recorded voice message on Monday confirming an appointment in San Pedro next weekend where she expected to take a written test to renew her license.

Patterson had already decided she wouldn't be going. Her driver's license will expire on April 15, but she worried that leaving her home and going into the DMV office might put her at risk for contracting COVID-19.

"It just feels counter-intuitive to how we are supposed to be taking care of ourselves," she said. "It seems that under the circumstances, you could take that test online rather than submit yourself to being so vulnerable to the virus."

The DMV also has canceled all driving tests, suspended extended morning hours and Saturday service at its field offices, and requested law enforcement to exercise discretion for 60 days in their enforcement of driving with a recently expired license or vehicle registration.

Among those who will benefit from the grace period are people whose vehicle registration must be renewed in person because they have outdated insurance information, those whose registration has been expired for 90 days or more, and those with cars that have smog issues.

The San Joaquin Valley DMV employee said that the extension provides another reason to close field offices.

"There isn't really a need for us to be there and risk our health and our families' health and the very public we're serving's health if we have these extensions implemented," she said.

California's Real ID policy requires an office visit for a new photo, presentation of documents and a thumbprint, Gore said. With millions of Californians still without a Real ID,

the DMV has decided to honor the existing appointments for the new identification cards but not to approve any new ones for the time being, Gore said.

As DMV field offices have scaled back their visits, some agency employees have voiced concern over risking their health while working in offices in close proximity to customers who may have been exposed to COVID-19. The DMV closed its Riverside call center — one of three in the state — for a cleaning Tuesday after an employee tested positive for COVID-19, but the center was reopened Wednesday, a representative said.

Following the governor's stay-at-home order, DMV employees received letters that they've been instructed to show law enforcement officials if they are stopped and asked why they are not at home. The letters state that the DMV has been identified by the governor as "a vital public entity required to continue core operations" and that the employee named in the letter is required to report to their work site on a daily basis.

"Your dedication to public service in these trying and uncertain times continues to amaze me," wrote DMV Director Steve Gordon in a March 23 memo to employees. "I hope you know how important you are to California and how much I appreciate all you do."

Gov. Gavin Newsom has also offered assurances to leaders of the Service Employees International Union, Local 1000, which represents DMV employees, that protection of state workers is a priority.

The new policy limiting visits to the DMV offices was welcomed by Local 1000 President Yvonne R. Walker.

"We feel the DMV did the right thing to limit transmission of COVID-19 and flatten the curve," Walker said, "and we fully support their efforts to do so."

Assemblyman Phil Ting (D-San Francisco) said that DMV officials need to determine whether the agency can continue to serve people at a safe distance while respecting orders from the Department of Health.

"I know the DMV is deemed an essential service. And the question is which services are the most essential and how many can be done remotely or virtually and which ones require people to come in," said Ting, chairman of the Assembly Budget Committee, which has held hearings on DMV operations.

But many DMV employees have said that the agency should close its offices entirely given efforts to move more of its services online.

The San Joaquin Valley employee said she has gloves at work and has been instructed to disinfect her station with Clorox wipes after each customer. But her customers, she said, often have trouble maintaining their distance.

"Our customers are not six feet from us," she said. "They're right at our counter at about two feet from us. A lot of them are elderly and a lot of them hover."

She said she had been told she could opt to stay home if she felt her health was at risk but that employees without sick leave or vacation time left to use would not be paid. As a single

mom who supports a 23-year-old daughter in college, the employee felt she had no choice but to continue going in.

Some employees have decided to stop going to work at the expense of their livelihood. A manager at a DMV field office in San Jose told The Times that he stopped going to work shortly after ordering masks, hand sanitizer, gloves and disinfecting wipes for his office in late February. He worried about contracting the virus even with protective equipment and passing it on to his 8-year-old daughter, who is now spending her days at home.

“The public, you have to interact with them face to face,” he said. “They have to be at your counter when you sign documents. They have to hand you the money.”

He’s part of a text message group in which employees from various DMV offices have reported running low on equipment and are sharing worries about having few pairs of gloves left or needing to use sanitizer sparingly.

“Everyone is just concerned that they are bringing it home to their family,” the DMV manager said. “Other locations are closed down — DMV should be one of them.”

Customs and Border Protection

[AZ] Protesters block lanes at Mexico border, demand coronavirus screening (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 10:39 AM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]

Protesters blocked lanes on the Mexico side of the southern border on Wednesday, requesting Mexico institute more coronavirus screenings for southbound travelers to avoid further spread.

The protests, involving fewer than a dozen people and two vehicles blocking two southbound lanes at the DeConcini crossing, lasted hours Wednesday on the Mexican side of the border in Ambos Nogales, USA Today reported.

The demonstrators held up signs that requested U.S. residents “stay at home” and others demanding Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador increase restrictions and screenings on everyone entering Mexico. The protesters also requested a ban on tourism visits and those for minor medical procedures for U.S. citizens and Mexicans in the U.S.

The blockade led to backed-up traffic in the bordering Nogales, Ariz., prompting police to redirect cars headed to Mexico.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials said the crossing had reopened at 5:30 p.m., but the city of Nogales cautioned that the protests may continue Thursday, according to a statement obtained by USA Today.

Jose Luis Hernandez, who was with the group Sonorans for Health and Life, said the protests were the Mexican president’s “first warning.”

“There are no health screenings by the federal government to deal with this pandemic,” he told USA Today. “That’s why we’re here in Nogales. We’ve taken this action to call on the

Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to act now.”

The U.S. and Mexico agreed last week to allow travel only for “essential” reasons such as medical emergencies, school or work. Mexico, however, has faced international criticism for its relatively hands-off response to the coronavirus.

The U.S. has recorded the third highest confirmed cases of COVID-19 of any country in the world, much higher than Mexico. As of Thursday morning, the U.S. has recorded almost 69,200 confirmed cases with 869 deaths. In Mexico, 405 people have been diagnosed, with five deaths, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[AZ] Mexican protesters block Arizona border traffic, demand coronavirus screenings on travelers from US (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 12:32 PM, Danielle Wallace, 8943K]

Protesters on the Mexican side of a border crossing with Arizona blocked southbound lanes Wednesday demanding the Mexican government require health screening for travelers entering from the United States to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

A group called the Sonorenses Por la Salud y la Vida (Sonorans for Health and Life) parked two trucks in the vehicle lanes leading away from the Dennis DeConcini Port of Entry connecting the twin border cities of Ambo Nogales at around 1 p.m. Less than a dozen protesters, donning masks and gloves, held up signs that either read #QuedateEnCasa (#StayHome) or called on Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to up his response to the outbreak.

“There are no health screenings by the federal government to deal with this pandemic,” Jose Luis Hernandez, the leader of the protest, told the Arizona Republic. “That’s why we’re here in Nogales. We’ve taken this action to call on the Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador to act now.

Last week, both the U.S. and Mexican governments banned all non-essential travel across the border, with some exceptions for medical emergencies, work and school. U.S. Customs and Border Control have ramped up medical screenings at U.S.-Mexico ports of entry, including the one admitting people into Ambos Nogales, Ariz.

Protesters said Mexican officials haven’t taken the same degree of precaution. The state of Sonora deployed health officials to several border crossings, including the DeConcini Port of Entry, but only has staff stationed at pedestrian lanes, USA Today reported.

Mexican Public Health Secretariat staff have also set up tables near the border crossing where they hand out literature about COVID-19, provide hand sanitizer and offer temperature screenings, Nogales International reported. It is not required to have your temperature taken to pass through a port of entry into Mexico.

The blockade shut down all southbound traffic at the DeConcini Port of Entry for hours until it was eventually reopened around 5:30 p.m., U.S. Customs and Border Protection officials in Nogales said. Officers with the Nogales Police Department redirected traffic to the Mariposa Port of Entry on the west side of the city.

“Nogales Police anticipates demonstrations may continue tomorrow. The closure of any

Port of Entry will negatively impact commerce and the way of life in Nogales," the city of Nogales, Ariz. said in a statement Wednesday night.

Lopez Obrador banned large private gatherings across Mexico Tuesday -- breaking from a video message he posted two days that urged Mexicans to continue to eat out to bolster the economy.

"Don't stop going out, we are still in the first phase," he said in the video posted Sunday from a restaurant table in Oaxaca, according to the Yucatan Times. "If you can do it and you have the economic possibility, keep taking the family out to eat, to restaurants, to the inns, because that is strengthening the family economy and the popular economy."

He had received widespread criticism for continuing to host large rallies around Mexico, where he shook hands with supporters and kissed babies amid the global coronavirus pandemic.

The U.S. recorded at least 69,197 confirmed cases of the coronavirus Thursday, according to Johns Hopkins University, making it the third most-infected country in the world. Mexico falls far below that figure -- with only at least 475 confirmed cases.

Border towns have been concerned about the transfer of infection across country lines. The number of confirmed cases in Arizona spiked to over 400 Wednesday, the state department of health services said, with new cases in Santa Cruz County, where Nogales is located. Sonora has recorded only 19 cases across the Mexican state.

[AZ] Incomplete Tunnel Found Under Arizona Border Wall (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 2:37 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]

Yuma Sector Border Patrol teamed up with agents from Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) to disrupt a tunnel operation into southwestern Arizona.

Federal agents with Border Patrol and HSI received information about a possible sinkhole or tunnel at the international border located west of the San Luis Port of Entry on Monday. The agents responded to the area to investigate, according to information provided by Yuma Sector Border Patrol officials.

Agents responded to the scene after border wall construction crews discovered a possible tunnel in an area where they were working. They discovered plywood and boards utilized by smugglers to shore up tunnel construction.

Agents investigated the area and found a tunnel running about eight to twelve feet below the surface of the ground, officials reported. The smugglers had not completed the tunnel.

Yuma Sector Border Patrol officials reported this is the sixth tunnel discovered in their area of responsibility.

Mexican officials responded to their side of the border after being contacted by U.S. authorities. They found a similar sinkhole on the Mexican side of the border about 10 to 12 feet south of the hole on the U.S. side of the wall.

During the investigation of the Mexican side of the tunnel, located in San Luis, Rio

Colorado, Sonora, officials discovered an aluminum ladder within the hole. The ladder measured six to eight feet in length, officials reported. The Mexican authorities removed the ladder.

Investigators on both sides of the border are now monitoring the tunnel and will continue to inspect the area for activity by smugglers.

[AZ] Deported Two-Time Sex Offender Arrested in Arizona near Border (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 10:59 AM, Bob Price, 1973K]

Tucson Sector Border Patrol agents arrested a previously deported criminal alien with convictions for sex offenses in California and Florida.

Border Patrol agents patrolling near Three Points, Arizona, encountered a man suspected of being in the country illegally. Agents transported the man to the Tucson Station for processing and a biometric background investigation, according to information obtained from Tucson Sector Border Patrol officials.

During a background investigation, the agents identified the man as 39-year-old Darwin Escobar-Lopez. A criminal background check revealed that a California court in Redwood City convicted the man in 2005 for Lewd and Lascivious Acts with a Child under 14. The court sentenced him to one year in jail and three years of probation.

In 2016, a Florida court in Fort Meyers convicted Escobar-Lopez for failing to register as a sex offender. The court sentenced him to 48 months in prison.

Border Patrol officials reported the man has previously been deported by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.

Escobar-Lopez could now face federal felony charges for illegal re-entry after removal as a sex offender. If convicted, he could face up to 20 years in federal prison.

Border Patrol agents subject all illegal immigrants apprehended after crossing the border are subjected to biometric background investigations. Since the beginning of Fiscal Year 2020, Border Patrol agents apprehended 1,294 criminal aliens who illegally crossed the border as of the end of February.

“Criminals illegally crossing the border do not typically stay at the border; their final destinations towns and cities across the entire United States,” officials said in a written statement.

[Canada] U.S. to return Canada-bound asylum seekers stopped at border to home nations (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 12:44 PM, Anna Mehler Perny, 5304K]

After years of asylum-seekers crossing the Canada-U.S. border illegally to file refugee claims, Canada is turning them around and sending them back to the United States, which says it plans to send them swiftly back to their countries of origin.

Canada said last week it will no longer accept irregular migrants trying to cross the shared border with the United States and will instead return them to U.S. authorities, as a

temporary measure amid the coronavirus outbreak.

“In the event an alien cannot be returned to Mexico or Canada, CBP will work with interagency partners to secure return to the alien’s country of origin and hold the alien for the shortest time possible,” U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesman Michael Niezgoda told Reuters in an email.

“For those who remain in CBP custody, CBP will, to the extent possible, keep them separated. Symptomatic individuals will be referred to CDC and placed in isolation.”

Since 2017 around 54,000 people have crossed the border into Canada, many saying they want to evade U.S. President Donald Trump’s crackdown on refugees and illegal immigrants.

Initially, in early March, Ottawa had said it would keep irregular migrants crossing the border in quarantine for two weeks. Last week, it said it reached an agreement with the United States to close the border to all but essential travel.

Amnesty International said the Canadian position violates its obligations under the 1951 UN refugee convention, including a clause on non-refoulement or the return of asylum seekers to places they fled due to persecution, often their home countries.

“It demonstrates a lack of leadership. It demonstrates a lack of legal commitment to the obligations Canada has signed up for,” said Justin Mohammed, a human rights law and policy campaigner for Amnesty International Canada.

Immigration and Refugees Minister Marco Mendicino’s office referred questions about irregular migrants to Public Safety Minister Bill Blair, who was not available.

Blair’s spokeswoman said Ottawa was “committed to ensuring Canada remains a welcoming country for those fleeing war and persecution” and meeting its international commitments.

“We must note that these restrictions are temporary, and are constantly being re-evaluated to best reflect the advice of our public health officials,” spokeswoman Mary-Liz Power said in an email.

Amnesty International considers aspects of U.S. immigration detention policy a violation of human rights, citing high detention rates, inadequate conditions and the practice of separating parents and children.

U.S. authorities said last week they will delay arresting some people suspected of violating immigration laws until after the coronavirus crisis.

Returning people to their country of origin will be tough given flight restrictions in the U.S., said Janet McFetridge, whose organization Plattsburgh Cares helps migrants on the U.S. side of the New York-Quebec border near Roxham Road, a popular crossing spot.

“If they need to return to wherever they came from, they’re going to have a very difficult time getting there right now,” she said. “It’s an absolutely bleak situation.”

Federal Emergency Management Agency

[NJ] New Jersey reports nearly 2,500 new coronavirus cases in one day (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 2:45 PM, Kaelan Deese, 1762K]

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy (D) announced a total of more than 6,800 cases of COVID-19 in the state on Thursday, marking an uptick of 2,492 cases since Wednesday.

"We've received 2,492 new positive #COVID19 test results since yesterday, bringing our statewide total to 6,876. This includes 436 positive tests from our mass-testing sites," Murphy wrote in a Twitter update.

President Trump approved a disaster declaration for New Jersey on Wednesday, making more federal funding and aid available as conditions in the state grow worse, according to a local ABC affiliate.

Murphy confirmed that of the 2,492 additional cases from yesterday, 436 of the positive tests came from mass-testing sites.

New Jersey is expanding its drive-thru testing centers for the coronavirus throughout the state, but focusing its most significant efforts on the northern part closest to the New York City epicenter.

Two drive-thru testing centers opened in the state this week — one in Newark's Weequahic Park and a facility for Passaic County residents at William Paterson University.

Essex County Executive Joseph DiVincenzo declared that appointments are mandatory to get tested for the coronavirus, and residents should go to the county's website to complete a screening form and make an appointment.

On Wednesday, officials with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) said the current outbreak in New York City is just the first in a wave of local outbreaks that could affect major cities in the coming weeks.

Anne Schuchat, the principal deputy director of the CDC, said it would be surprising if cases did not increase in many parts of the country.

"We're looking at our flu syndromic data, our respiratory illness that presents at emergency departments. Across the country there's a number of areas that are escalating," she said. "The numbers in New York are so large that they show up, but we're looking at increases over time and we're really seeing some in a number of places."

[NJ] Trump Approves New Jersey Disaster Declaration — Ninth State So Far Where Coronavirus Is A 'Major Disaster' (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 11:35 AM, Christian Datoc, 566K]

President Donald Trump has approved New Jersey's coronavirus disaster declaration, the White House announced Thursday.

New Jersey joins California, Florida, Iowa, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina, Texas and Washington in declaring pandemic a "major disaster."

The declaration allows New Jersey to receive both individual and public assistance funds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). FEMA named Robert Little the Federal Coordinating Officer for the state.

The president previously mobilized the National Guard to carry out approved coronavirus missions in California, New York, and Washington, the three states hit hardest by the coronavirus pandemic, and said that FEMA would foot the cost of all coronavirus missions. At the time, Gaynor stressed that the action was not equivalent to “martial law.”

In particular, New York, just a stone’s throw from New Jersey, has seen drastically higher infection and mortality rates than the rest of the nation, and the trend has spread to the remainder of the tri-state area.

[MD] Trump grants major disaster declaration for state of Maryland (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 9:37 PM, Marty Johnson, 1762K]

President Trump on Thursday approved Maryland’s major disaster declaration, allowing the state to access federal aid as it combats the coronavirus outbreak.

“The President’s action makes Federal funding available to State, tribal, and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency protective measures, including direct Federal assistance, for all areas in the State of Maryland impacted by COVID-19,” the White House said in a statement.

Other states also had disaster declarations approved on Thursday, including Missouri and Illinois.

In a statement of his own, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) said that the president’s move will help “provide much-needed funding for state and local governments and nonprofits, and it will be another important step in Maryland’s aggressive and coordinated response to COVID-19.”

Maryland confirmed 157 new cases of COVID-19 on Thursday, bringing the statewide total to 580. Between Maryland, Washington, D.C., and Virginia, there are more than 1,200 confirmed cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

Thursday evening, the U.S. surpassed both China and Italy in the total number of confirmed coronavirus cases, with more than 85,000 sickened in the country and more than 1,200 dead.

[MD] Hogan: Maryland receives federal disaster designation (AP)

AP [3/26/2020 9:44 PM, Staff, 337K]

Maryland received a federal disaster declaration in response to the coronavirus, Gov. Larry Hogan announced Thursday night.

“This declaration will help provide much-needed funding for state and local governments and nonprofits, and it will be another important step in Maryland’s aggressive and coordinated response to COVID-19,” Hogan said in a news release.

Maryland received more than 42,000 unemployment insurance claims last week, and the

state is closing child care programs in response to the coronavirus, state officials announced earlier in the day.

The 42,334 unemployment claims as businesses closed in response to the virus breaks the previous record for a week set in 1982. A record-shattering 3.3 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits in a single week.

Meanwhile, all child care programs in the state are to be closed by the end of the day Friday, Karen Salmon announced on the state board of education's website. Salmon noted that the state has established child care programs to serve only designated essential personnel. The announcement comes a day after she announced that Maryland was extending school closings for four weeks through April 24.

Maryland announced the state has confirmed at least 580 cases of the virus. That's 157 more cases than the day before, the highest one-day total increase yet. Maryland has had at least four deaths due to the virus.

For most people, the new 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.

On Wednesday, the Maryland Board of Elections announced it is planning to do away with polling stations for the state's already delayed primary. Voters would instead be required to mail in or drop off their ballots in an effort to limit coronavirus infections.

If approved, the move would eliminate any need for Maryland's more than 4 million registered voters to cast their ballots in person on June 2, according to a draft presented by elections officials at their Wednesday meeting, held by teleconference.

The state's primary was originally scheduled for April 28. Gov. Larry Hogan postponed it by executive order on March 17.

Ballots, with clear instructions explaining how to return them, would likely need to be mailed to all registered voters by the end of April, Nikki Charlson, deputy administrator for the Board of Elections, said during Wednesday's meeting.

[TN] Tennessee Gets \$476K Grant for Tornado Victim Mental Health (AP)

AP [3/27/2020 2:50 AM, Staff, 3020K]

Tennessee has landed a \$476,000 federal grant to support the mental health needs of victims of deadly tornadoes earlier this month.

The Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services says the grant comes from the Federal Emergency Management Agency Crisis Counseling & Training Program.

The grant will help provide outreach and support services to storm survivors in Davidson, Putnam, and Wilson Counties.

State staffers will work alongside Centerstone, Mental Health Cooperative, and Volunteer

Behavioral Health Care System to provide the mental health services.

Severe storms that spun up multiple tornadoes on March 3 killed 25 people in Tennessee and caused significant damage across several communities.

The state is also applying for a longer-term program for mental health disaster response run by FEMA and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

[IL] President Trump approves federal disaster declaration for Illinois (Chicago Tribune)

Chicago Tribune [3/26/2020 3:43 PM, Rick Pearson, 1293K]

President Donald Trump on Thursday approved a major federal disaster declaration for the state of Illinois, which provides additional governmental assistance in dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.

Trump's action came a day after Democratic Sens. Dick Durbin and Tammy Duckworth sent a letter in support of Gov. J.B. Pritzker's request for a major federal disaster declaration.

In his announcement, Trump said his action made federal funding available for crisis counseling for affected individuals in all areas in the state of Illinois.

Secret Service

[NY] Duo Nabbed Using Fake \$100 Bills In Northern Westchester, Police Say (Daily Voice)

Daily Voice [3/26/2020 10:00 AM, Zak Failla, 83K, Positive, Secondary]

Two men were taken into custody after allegedly attempting to use phony \$100 bills to make purchases in Northern Westchester, police said.

The two suspects entered a Mount Kisco business on South Moger Avenue at approximately 10:40 a.m. on Sunday, March 22, attempting to make small purchases using a \$100 bill, Westchester County Police said.

When the owner of the store used a device to determine the legitimacy of the bill, it was determined that it was counterfeit and alerted the county police when the duo ran off.

According to the department, county police officers were alerted by a different police agency that they may have located the suspects' vehicle parked in the parking lot of Target on North Bedford Road.

Officers staked out the vehicle and both men were taken into custody when they returned to the car.

At the time they were arrested, the men were in possession of multiple counterfeit bills, and it was later determined that they had used the phony bills to make small purchases at Target, Stop & Shop and other stores in the area.

Shaquille McLean, 24, and Andrew Holt, 25, both of Greenburgh, were charged with multiple counts of possession of a forged instrument, felonies. They were released and are

scheduled to appear back in Mount Kisco Justice Court on Thursday, May 7.

Police said that “the current economic climate is hard enough for businesses large and small, so no one needs some scam artists trying to pass off funny money at local stores”

“The timely notification from this business owner enabled us to immediately begin to search for these suspects,” Westchester County Police Commissioner Thomas Gleason added. “The great teamwork between Patrol Officers and Real Time Crime led to these arrests.”

[VA] Suffolk PD need help identifying woman wanted for counterfeit fraud (Wavy)

Wavy [3/26/2020 10:54 PM, Kaylynn Stephens, 32K, Neutral, Secondary]

Police are seeking the public’s help identifying a woman wanted for passing counterfeit money and obtaining money by false pretense.

According to police, the incidents occurred on Feb. 19 at several businesses in Suffolk, including Cypress Saddlery, two local ABC Stores, Subway, Dollar Tree, and Pizza Hut.

Police say the woman is between 5 feet 4 inches tall and 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighs approximately 180 pounds.

The subject is described to have a nose ring on the left side and is possibly pregnant as she rubbed her stomach in surveillance video footage, police say.

Anyone that is able to identify the woman or has any information is asked to contact Suffolk Police Department or call the Suffolk Crime Line at 888-LOCK-U-UP.

[KY] Counterfeit 100s being passed in Pendleton County (Falmouth Outlook)

Falmouth Outlook [3/26/2020 2:35 PM, Keith Smith, Neutral, Secondary]

A mid-30s, dark-haired, white male entered Wells Market wishing to pay for his \$10 in gas with a \$100 bill. Tina Rodgers who was working behind the counter noticed the bill just did not feel or look right and refused to accept it. She did not return the bill and he fled.

It was the second time in the day that a person had attempted to pass a counterfeit bill. Earlier, a male with a tattoo on his face also tried to use a fake \$100 bill. The clerk refused to accept it but the individual was able to leave with the bill.

Falmouth police officer Mark Branham said that they would be investigating the incident.

Wells has several cameras and they were reviewing the digital tapes to try and obtain a photo of the two individuals.

[KY] Secret Service helps sheriff’s department find kidnapped twins (News Democrat Leader)

News Democrat Leader [3/26/2020 7:00 AM, Oj Stapleton, Positive, Secondary]

Twin girls have been returned to their home after a long day of hard work by law enforcement that ended with an Amber Alert being issued and help by the United States Secret Service.

According to the Logan County Sheriff’s Department, on Friday, March 20th around 1 p.m.,

33-year-old Neely Blanchard of Bowman Lane, Bowling Green, Ky., left the home of her mother, Susan Blanchard in Auburn with her two 7-year-old daughters and did not return.

Susan Blanchard, of Auburn, had obtained sole guardianship of the girls previously through a Logan County Court Order, which described Neely as "extremely unstable."

"The girls were residing with the grandmother, who has sole custody," said Logan County Sheriff Stephen Stratton. "The mother had some supervised visitation and was at the grandmother's home visiting with the girls, when the grandmother left to do a short errand."

When Susan Blanchard returned home, Neely Blanchard was gone with the girls and later told her mother that she was going to Dawson Springs to visit friends and for a camping trip, according to the sheriff.

"We weren't contacted about the abduction until Wednesday morning, though, so we really started out in the hole," Stratton said.

Neely Blanchard was involved with a sovereign citizen group known as "E-Clause," which believes the U.S. government is using the current COVID-19 crisis to control citizens, Stratton said.

Deputy Josh Toomey initiated the investigation Wednesday morning and worked until 1 a.m. when the girls were found safe.

"He really deserves a lot of credit for this," Stratton said.

Once Toomey and the sheriff's department had met the criteria for an Amber Alert, the notifications were sent out Wednesday night, around 9 p.m.

"When the Amber Alert went out, we started getting tons of good information," Stratton said. "We had a good idea where they were and then the Secret Service got involved and used their resources to track her through her phone and social media."

Neely Blanchard was then found and arrested on charges of two counts of kidnapping and two counts of custodial interference. She was lodged in the Hopkins County jail, but will be extradited to Logan County to face charges. Additional charges could be added as the investigation continues.

"There were people in Dawson Springs harboring her and further charges could be coming," Stratton said. "We're going to be presenting that information to a grand jury."

According to news reports, this is not the first time Neely Blanchard has been charged with custodial interference. She was arrested in 2013 after taking another of her children from a South Carolina elementary school when she did not have legal custody of the child.

[TN] Evelyn Boswell's grandmother charged with aggravated burglary, shoplifting (WBIR TV - Knoxville)

WBIR TV - Knoxville [3/26/2020 4:49 PM, Staff, 36K, Positive, Secondary]

The Sullivan County Sheriff's Office reports baby Evelyn's grandmother, Angela Mae Boswell, has been arrested after she and a male accomplice reportedly robbed a home in

the 300 block of West Valley Drive in Kingsport on Wednesday.

SCSO reports Boswell and her accomplice entered the Kingsport home and concealed items on their bodies as they walked back to their vehicle.

The pair allegedly stole two televisions, a shotgun, a pistol and various tools, according to officials.

Authorities have identified Boswell's accomplice as 37-year-old Larry Chad Fields of Kingsport. They are currently trying to locate Fields.

Boswell has been charged with aggravated burglary, theft under \$10,000 introduction of drugs into a penal facility and possession of counterfeit money.

[MN] Counterfeit cash reported by business owners in Waseca (KEYC Television)

KEYC Television [3/26/2020 2:31 PM, Benjamin Broze, 2K, Neutral, Secondary]

The Waseca Chamber of Commerce warning business owners after they received a report of counterfeit money being passed.

The Chamber says a restaurant owner reported a customer using a fake \$20 bill. City officials are now reminding all business owners to use their counterfeit pens to check each individual bill.

Coast Guard

[FL] Two Costa Ships Begin Disembarking Sick Crew Members in Miami (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 4:36 PM, Christopher Palmeri, 6400K]

Sick crew members aboard two Costa Cruises ships are disembarking in Miami after failing to find other ports that would take them.

A Miami-Dade Fire Rescue boat took several people off one of the ships, which was anchored away from port, and brought them to the Miami Beach Coast Guard station, a spokesman for the county said. The passengers had left earlier.

Costa, a division of cruise-line giant Carnival Corp., had been struggling to find a port in the Caribbean that would accept those on board, before finally working out a deal with authorities in Miami, the company said Thursday.

As many as 13 crew members on the Costa Magica and Costa Favolosa who need medical attention will receive treatment there. The ships will remain three miles offshore until Saturday as Costa organizes flights to Europe and Asia to repatriate the majority of the crew members. A small number will remain on board to maintain the vessels.

[FL] Costa cruise ships anchor near Miami looking for 'life-critical' care (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 4:12 PM, Zack Budryk, 1762K]

Two Costa cruise ships anchored near Miami with permission from local health and port officials have asked for "life-critical care" for crew members stricken with flu-like symptoms, according to the Port Miami Unified Command.

"The U.S. Coast Guard is facilitating medical evacuations Thursday after requests were made by Costa Magica and Costa Favolosa for life-critical care ashore for multiple crew members presenting with respiratory symptoms consistent with pneumonia and bronchitis," the Command said in a statement posted to Miami-Dade County's website.

The command comprises representatives from numerous local and federal agencies, including Customs and Border Protection, the U.S. Coast Guard, the Miami-Dade Police Department, Costa Cruises and the Florida Department of Health, according to USA Today.

The ships are not in port and lack clearance for entry, with the Coast Guard ordering them to remain at least 3 miles offshore, Roger Frizzell, spokesperson for Carnival Cruise Line, parent company for Costa Cruises, told the newspaper.

About 30 people on the ships, none of whom have had testing, reported flu-like symptoms as of Thursday, Frizzell reported. Between the two ships, just over 1,000 crew members are on board, he told USA Today.

"It is worth noting that ... in the last weeks Costa struggled to find a feasible solution to allow its crew members to disembark in the safest condition possible and organize their trip back home, several ports in the Caribbean had not accepted the two ships," the cruise line said in a release shared by Frizzell.

The situation has unfolded the same week Miami Mayor Francis Suarez (R), who has himself tested positive for the virus, issued a "shelter in place" order for the city, barring all nonessential travel.

Numerous ships have been forced to anchor offshore or in port due to the presence of suspected or confirmed coronavirus cases on board. Last week, the Carnival line offered its unused ships as hospital space.

[FL] 2 Costa cruise ships heading toward Florida with dozens of sick crew members on board (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 8:55 AM, Michael Bartiromo, 8943K]

Two cruise ships operated by Costa Cruises are reportedly heading toward Florida with dozens of sick crew members on board.

The Costa Favolosa and the Costa Magica had each departed from the French island of Guadeloupe, but disembarked passengers after the cruise line announced the suspension of operations earlier this month. Since that time, six people who disembarked the Favolosa, and two from the Magica, have tested positive for COVID-19, according to the Miami Herald, citing a company spokesperson.

Now, only 1,939 crew members remain aboard both ships (1,009 on the Favolosa, 930 on the Magica), and least of 30 are reporting flu-like symptoms, the Miami Herald reports. One symptomatic person claims he and several others have also lost their sense of smell, a phenomenon which doctors have identified as a possible symptom of coronavirus.

The ships had originally been stationed outside of Guadeloupe and Martinique, though authorities in those islands denied docking. A representative for the Carnival Corporation,

which owns Costa Cruises, confirmed to Fox News that both ships are now traveling toward Florida, though neither currently has official clearance to enter the Port of Miami.

Carnival also confirmed that “some crew members on board” were experiencing influenza-like symptoms.

A Coast Guard spokesperson told the Miami Herald that it is closely monitoring the situation, and coordinating with federal and local authorities in assisting.

The Herald reported that the ships are due to arrive outside of Miami on Thursday.

In addition to the Favolosa and the Magica, the Zaandam Cruise Liner, operated by the Holland America Line (also a subsidiary of Carnival), is also currently sailing toward Florida with at least 77 sick passengers and crew on board. Holland America said it had deployed another ship, the Rotterdam, to meet up with the Zaandam to provide “extra supplies, staff, COVID-19 test kits and other support as needed. The two ships are scheduled to meet on March 26.

Carnival originally announced it would be suspending all cruise operations on March 13, for a period of at least 30 days. The company said it would be making a decision about extending the suspension on March 27.

Both the CDC and the U.S. State Department are currently advising Americans to avoid traveling by cruise ship.

[FL] Miami accepts 13 sick cruise ship crew members (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 6:24 PM, Staff, 1973K]

Thirteen crew members from two ships operated by Italy’s Costa Cruises line were allowed ashore in Miami after experiencing coronavirus-like symptoms, port officials said Thursday.

The 13 crew members — six from the Costa Magica and seven from the Costa Favolosa — were showing symptoms of bronchitis and pneumonia, similar to those of people infected with the COVID-19 virus, officials said.

“Upon consultation with the ship’s doctors, local, state and federal health agencies, it was determined as many as 13 crew members between both ships may need transportation ashore,” officials at the Port of Miami said in a statement.

The patients were transported to shore aboard small covered boats, as the cruise ships had been denied permission to dock and were ordered to remain three miles (five kilometers) offshore.

US Coast Guard and emergency personnel in full-body protective gear, including face masks and rubber gloves, helped move the sick crew members from the boats to infectious disease units in local hospitals.

There are nearly 1,000 people, all crew members, aboard each ship. Around 30 of them are sick with flu-like symptoms – but lacking tests, there is no confirmation that they are infected with the COVID-19 virus.

The Costa Magica has room for nearly 3,500 passengers, while the Costa Favulosa has room for nearly 3,800 – but the passengers were all dropped off in mid-March on the Caribbean islands of Martinique and Guadeloupe.

Several of the passengers presented coronavirus-like symptoms once they landed.

Since then ports across the Caribbean have denied the two cruise ships permission to dock.

[FL] Sick Cruise Ship Crew Taken to Miami Hospitals (Boise State Public Radio)

Boise State Public Radio [3/26/2020 4:24 PM, Greg Allen, 9K]

The Coast Guard is overseeing medical evacuations of crew members from two cruise ships off of Miami. The ships, the Costa Magica and the Costa Favulosa, don't have any passengers on board. As many as 13 crew members on the two ships are being transported ashore on small boats and taken to area hospitals. According to Carnival, the parent company of the Costa line, as many as 30 crew members on the two ships have flu-like symptoms. According to a spokesperson with the Port of Miami, those being transported ashore have respiratory symptoms consistent with pneumonia and bronchitis.

The two ships have not been given permission to enter Miami's port and have been ordered by the Coast Guard to remain three miles offshore. In a statement on Twitter, Miami-Dade Mayor Carolos Gimenez said, "We're a global community and cannot turn our backs on those requiring life-critical care."

Another cruise ship, Holland America's Zaandam, has at least 42 sick passengers and crew members aboard and is headed to Fort Lauderdale where it's expected to arrive Monday. Members of Broward County's Board of Commissioners are debating whether to allow it to dock.

CISA/Cybersecurity

Cybersecurity Experts Say Hacking Risk Is High for Mobile Voting (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 4:00 AM, Kartikay Mehrota, 6400K]

While Senators Amy Klobuchar and Ron Wyden push to expand vote-by-mail programs, a small group of companies argue for an alternative, one they claim will boost voter participation nationwide: mobile voting.

Jurisdictions in at least 15 states are planning to use mobile balloting in a limited capacity in 2020 to account for overseas voters and those with disabilities. Proponents of a digital electorate hope the coronavirus spurs adoption of their technology. The virus has provided an "opportunity," says Bradley Tusk, chief executive officer of Tusk Holdings and a supporter of mobile voting: "People are being told by the government not to congregate, and that's a pretty clear directive not to go vote." Tusk, who says he hasn't invested in any mobile voting companies, has spent "in the low seven figures" helping local governments cover the costs of adopting the systems.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology doctoral student Michael Specter describes Tusk's position as a "false dichotomy" that ignores postal ballots. He and his colleagues say mobile voting technology is unproven and opens the door to cyber risks.

A mobile voting app called Voatz has already been used in federal, local, and partywide elections in Denver, Oregon, Utah, and West Virginia. In a paper published in March, cybersecurity research firm Trail of Bits discovered 79 flaws in the Voatz system, including one that allows someone armed with the proper credentials to alter votes. The paper, funded in part by Tusk and Voatz, expanded on findings published in February by Specter and his MIT colleague James Koppel.

West Virginia was set to adopt Voatz for its May 12 presidential primary, before the state pulled the plug, citing security concerns raised in the paper. Voatz founder and CEO Nimit Sawhney describes the findings as a malicious attack by entities ideologically opposed to online voting. He says state and local election administrators aren't prepared to handle the burden of an exponential increase in postal ballots, which have been known to get lost and go uncounted. "The current crisis heightens the need to have an alternative method like mobile voting," says Sawhney, who created Voatz after winning a 2014 hackathon at South by Southwest in Austin. Despite the "animus towards us," he says Voatz is meeting with potential customers.

Security experts say that even if attackers don't change votes, their threat to a mobile election system may trigger questions about the credibility of results. According to J. Alex Halderman, a University of Michigan professor who specializes in election security: "We're at least a decade away, if at all."

West Virginia now plans to use Seattle-based Democracy Live to handle digital voting in its primary. With Democracy Live, jurisdictions get access to an Amazon Web Services portal where users go to download a ballot or make selections online. Either way, the ballots are printed and counted by local election officials, in contrast to Voatz, which is an all-digital system.

For three weeks leading up to Feb. 11, voters in the Seattle region cast ballots online in an election for a board of supervisors position on the King Conservation District using Democracy Live. The vote was the first election in the U.S. to enable voters to cast ballots by phone, tablet, or computer. It worked without a glitch for the more than 3,000 voters who cast ballots, according to the local election administrator. Bryan Finney, founder and CEO of Democracy Live, says multiple states and local jurisdictions have since approached him. While Finney says he's discussing testing hacking vulnerabilities with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, he declined to disclose details of earlier tests.

Senator Wyden isn't impressed. "Security experts have shown over and over again that online voting isn't safe, isn't reliable, and is dangerously vulnerable to foreign hackers," the Oregon Democrat says. Tusk says that misses the point. "The cybersecurity experts will say it's terrible if people over the age of 70 are voting on their phone," he says. "But is that more terrible than them dying of the virus because they voted in public? I don't think so."

Experts see over 600 percent spike in malicious emails during coronavirus crisis (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 2:21 PM, Maggie Miller, 1762K]

Malicious emails that used coronavirus information to target individuals spiked over the past month as the crisis ramped up, according to a report from cyber threat researchers at Barracuda Networks released Thursday.

The researchers saw a 667 percent increase in malicious phishing emails that were using the coronavirus. These types of emails try to lure individuals to click on dangerous links or download attachments that typically include computer viruses.

Barracuda Networks tracked almost 10,000 attempted phishing email cyberattacks linked to the coronavirus crisis since the beginning of March, while by comparison the researchers only saw about 1,800 in February and even fewer in January.

“Although the overall number of these attacks is still low compared to other threats, the threat is growing quickly,” the researchers wrote.

They cautioned that hackers were “taking advantage of the heightened focus on COVID-19 to distribute malware, steal credentials, and scam users out of money. The attacks use common phishing tactics that are seen regularly, however a growing number of campaigns are using the coronavirus as a lure to try to trick distracted users [and] capitalize on the fear and uncertainty of their intended victims.”

The majority of the emails studied by the researchers were classified as scams, while about a third were brand impersonation emails, and 11 percent were blackmail attacks.

The researchers warned that as the coronavirus crisis continues, they expect hackers to grow increasingly “sophisticated” at using coronavirus to lure individuals.

The findings by the researchers were released a week after the FBI put out an alert warning Americans to be wary of suspicious emails, such as those claiming to be from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or those asking for sensitive information in exchange for coronavirus stimulus checks from the government.

The FBI recommended that Americans conduct research prior to clicking on or responding to a suspicious email, before donating to a charity through social media and before purchasing products online.

“Scammers are leveraging the COVID-19 pandemic to steal your money, your personal information, or both,” the FBI warned. “Don’t let them.”

Hackers have increasingly been observed to be taking advantage of the coronavirus crisis to target Americans.

Reuters reported earlier this week that the World Health Organization had suffered an unsuccessful cyberattack and was seeing a spike in attempted attacks, while the Department of Health and Human Services was also attacked by hackers earlier this month.

COVID-19 Phishing Attacks Have Increased, Says CrowdStrike CEO (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 6:20 PM, Staff, 6400K]

Millions of people are now working from home, logging into corporate networks and giving hackers possible gateways into troves of sensitive data. George Kurtz, chief executive officer of cybersecurity company CrowdStrike Holdings Inc., discusses what vulnerabilities he is seeing.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

Google sees 350 percent increase in phishing websites during COVID-19 pandemic, report reveals (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 1:42 PM, Christopher Carbone, 8943K]

Hackers have been trying to take advantage of the coronavirus crisis, with a new report revealing a 350 percent increase in phishing websites over the last three months.

Atlas VPN gathered the numbers of phishing websites detected by Google and compared them.

In January, Google registered a total of 149,195 active phishing websites, according to the report. That number increased to 293,235 the following month. When looking at March versus January, the number of total phishing websites skyrocketed by 350 percent, hitting 522,495.

Thousands of malicious websites are being created on a daily basis.

Rachel Welsh, COO of Atlas VPN, explained why the number of phishing sites jumped so dramatically during the COVID-19 outbreak.

"I believe that hackers identified coronavirus as something users are desperate to find information on. Panic leads to irrational thinking and people forget the basics of cybersecurity. Users then download malicious files or try to purchase in-demand items from unsafe websites, in result becoming victims of scams," Welsh said in a statement provided to Fox News.

Since more people are spending time online while they are quarantined at home, hackers and cybercriminals are all able to take advantage of the coronavirus pandemic.

Terrorism Investigations

[NJ] A grocery store threw out \$35,000 in food that a woman intentionally coughed on, sparking coronavirus fears, police said (CNN)

CNN [3/26/2020 12:40 PM, Scottie Andrew and Anna Sturla, 5551K]

A woman purposely coughed on \$35,000 worth of food at a Pennsylvania grocery store, police said. She likely faces criminal charges for coughing, one of the primary ways the novel coronavirus spreads.

The unnamed woman entered small grocery chain Gerrity's Supermarket in Hanover Township and started coughing on produce, bakery items, meat and other merchandise, chain co-owner Joe Fasula wrote on Facebook.

Staff quickly removed her from the store and called Hanover Township Police, who found her a few hours later and took her into custody, Police Chief Albert Walker told CNN.

Hanover Township police said the woman "intentionally contaminated" the food, and they plan to file criminal charges against her once her mental health treatment concludes.

Officials don't believe she's infected with coronavirus but "will make every effort to see that she is tested," Fasula wrote.

Despite considering what she did a "very twisted prank," Fasula said the store threw out every item she came into contact with and worked with a local health inspector to identify and disinfect areas she entered.

Ultimately, he said, the store disposed of \$35,000 worth of food.

"I am absolutely sick to my stomach about the loss of food," Fasula said. "While it is always a shame when food is wasted, in these times when so many people are worried about the security of our food supply, it is even more disturbing."

It's not clear what charges the woman may face when she leaves mental health treatment.

People who threatened to spread the virus charged with terrorism

The Department of Justice affirmed Wednesday that people who intentionally spread the novel coronavirus could be charged with terrorism.

Officials across the states are taking threats of spreading coronavirus seriously. Earlier this week, a New Jersey man who police said purposely coughed on a grocery store employee and said he had coronavirus was charged with making "terroristic threats." It was not clear whether the man had a lawyer, the state's attorney general said.

And in Missouri, a 26-year-old man was charged this week with making a terrorist threat after he was filmed in early March licking sticks of deodorant at a Walmart, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported. In a video, the man asks, "Who's scared of coronavirus?" the newspaper reported.

That man's attorney called the action "immature ... tasteless and impulsive" but said it happened before the World Health Organization declared the virus a pandemic, the Post-Dispatch reported. That declaration "should not work retroactively and convert a tasteless and impulsive act into a criminal terrorist threat," the lawyer told the paper.

According to a Justice Department memo, the virus meets the criteria for a "biological agent," and threatening to spread it or "use Covid-19 as a weapon against Americans" could constitute a terrorist threat.

Grocery stores brave the pandemic

Coronavirus is changing the way grocery stores operate. Stores like Gerrity's are deemed "essential businesses" under states' stay-at-home orders, so they're one of the few public places residents of those states can visit during the pandemic.

But as customer visits to grocery stores spike and consumers continue to hoard supplies, industry groups fear that the US food supply will eventually dry up, too. A group that represents brands like PepsiCo and Clorox wrote to the State Department that panic buying coupled with countries cutting off exports to the US could exacerbate the public health crisis.

So stores like Gerrity's are taking extra measures to ensure their stores are safe. Some

chains have slashed hours to disinfect stores after closing and restock supplies that sell out quickly. Others have beefed up security and installed off-duty police officers or private guards to manage crowded aisles and jammed parking lots.

The incident with the unnamed woman at Gerrity's showed employees why their strict safety measures are necessary, Fasula wrote on Facebook.

"The only silver lining to this travesty is that it gave us the unfortunate opportunity to test our protocols and demonstrate how seriously we take your safety," he said.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[MO] Suspect killed by FBI during investigation into plot to bomb medical facility (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 7:14 AM, John Bowden, 1762K]

A suspect in a months-long FBI investigation is dead after he was shot by FBI agents during an operation to arrest him.

FBI Special Agent Timothy Langan of the Kansas City field office identified the man killed in Belton, Missouri, as 36-year-old Timothy Wilson, according to The Associated Press.

The suspect reportedly planned to use a vehicle-based explosive device in an attack on a hospital in the Kansas City area. Many hospitals around the country have been overwhelmed in recent days by cases of coronavirus, with tens of thousands of cases reported across the country.

FBI officials told CNN that the case involved the bureau's efforts against racially motivated extremists, adding that the investigation was part of a probe into violent white supremacist movements and had uncovered credible threats made by Wilson.

"The FBI takes any shooting incident involving our agents seriously," FBI spokeswoman Bridget Patton told the network. "In accordance with FBI policy, the shooting incident will be investigated by the FBI's Inspection Division. The review process is thorough and objective, and is conducted as expeditiously as possible under the circumstances."

Law enforcement officials have warned in recent days that white supremacists and other politically motivated terrorist groups could seek to weaponize the novel strain of coronavirus, which has sickened more than 470,000 globally.

"Because coronavirus appears to meet the statutory definition of a 'biological agent,'" Deputy Attorney General Jeffrey Rosen wrote of possible intentional efforts to spread the disease in a memo obtained by CNN, adding that "such acts potentially could implicate the Nation's terrorism-related statutes."

[MO] FBI learned of coronavirus-inspired bomb plotter through radicalized US Army soldier (ABC News)

ABC News [3/26/2020 4:00 PM, Mike Levine, 2182K]

The suspected white supremacist who plotted to bomb a hospital facing the coronavirus crisis was in touch with a then-active U.S. Army soldier who wanted to launch his own

attack on a major American news network and discussed targeting a Democratic presidential candidate, according to an FBI alert summarizing the case.

On Tuesday, as 36-year-old Timothy Wilson was on the verge of trying to detonate a car bomb at a Kansas City-area medical center, agents from the FBI's field office in Missouri attempted to arrest him. But shots were fired, fatally wounding Wilson, according to the FBI.

Ahead of Tuesday's incident, Wilson "espoused white supremacist ideology" and "made a threat that if any agent attempted to [search his property] they should 'bring a lot of body bags,'" said the FBI alert, distributed to state and local law enforcement agencies in the region on Wednesday.

The FBI alert also said Wilson had "shared instructions on how to make an [improvised explosive device] with another ... Domestic Terrorism (DT) subject" from near Kansas City.

ABC News has identified that other domestic terrorism "subject" as Jarrett Smith, who was arrested in September 2019 while still stationed at Ft. Riley, Kansas, as an active member of the U.S. Army.

According to charging documents filed at the time in Topeka, Kansas, Smith allegedly planned to travel to Ukraine to fight with the violent far-right group Azov Battalion; suggested targeting then-Democratic presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke; proposed bombing the headquarters of a still-unidentified news network; and distributed bomb-making tips online.

Smith has since pleaded guilty to federal charges of distributing information that relates to weapons of mass destruction, and he is awaiting sentencing.

On Wednesday, sources familiar with the matter told ABC News that Wilson had been on the FBI's radar for more than a year, indicating that the FBI's probe of Smith led authorities to Wilson months before he sought to take advantage of the unfolding coronavirus crisis.

"With the current COVID-19 pandemic, Wilson decided to accelerate his plan to detonate a [car bomb] to cause severe harm and mass casualties," the FBI said in its alert. "Wilson may have also believed the additional stress on society posed by the COVID-19 pandemic provided unique opportunities to exploit."

The FBI believes other extremists inside the U.S. homeland may similarly "aspire to capitalize on the current health crisis," but it is "unlikely" any of their actions "will rise to the level of terroristic actions like Wilson," the alert issued Wednesday said.

During a conference call with police chiefs from across the nation on Friday, the Department of Homeland Security's assistant secretary for Infrastructure Protection, Brian Harrell, and the department's liaison to state and local law enforcement, John Hill, tried to assure the chiefs that the federal government is doing all it can to protect "critical infrastructure" in their cities and towns, including hospitals.

But even before coronavirus became a crisis inside America, Harrell offered this stark assessment: "Based off of current events and the frequency of events, I am convinced that this country is becoming more and more violent every single day."

"I live my life as if the worst day is right around the corner," he told Congress last month, adding that the U.S. government is "focused on preparedness and protection."

[MO] Missouri man plotting coronavirus hospital bombing killed in shooting, FBI says (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 11:49 AM, Stephen Sorace, 8943K]

A Missouri man who was plotting to bomb a hospital was killed in a shooting this week after he "decided to accelerate his plan" due to the coronavirus pandemic, federal authorities said Wednesday.

Timothy Wilson, 36, was injured Tuesday in Belton, a suburb of Kansas City, when FBI agents tried to arrest him after a long-running domestic terrorism investigation, according to a statement Wednesday from Timothy Langan, special agent in charge of the FBI's Kansas City office.

Wilson was armed at the time. He was injured and died later at a hospital. The statement did not say how he suffered the fatal injury or give further details on the shooting incident.

A months-long investigation determined Wilson was a potentially violent extremist, motivated by religious, racial and anti-government beliefs, according to the statement.

He planned for several months to carry out a bombing and decided to target a Kansas City-area hospital using a "vehicle-borne" improvised explosive "to cause severe harm and mass casualties," the FBI said. The name of the hospital was not given.

Wilson took steps to acquire materials for the bomb even as the FBI's Joint Terrorism Task Force was surveilling him. He was picking up what he thought was a bomb when agents tried to arrest him Tuesday. The FBI said the bomb wasn't real, but did not provide further details.

The FBI described the incident as an "an agent-involved shooting" and said it will be investigated by the FBI's Inspection Division in accordance with agency policy.

The coronavirus has sickened 356 people and killed eight as of Wednesday in Missouri, according to the state health department.

[MO] Man Who Attempted To Bomb Missouri Hospital That Was Treating Coronavirus Killed In Shootout, FBI Says (Daily Caller)

Daily Caller [3/26/2020 5:08 PM, Allison Call, 566K]

A man who planned to blow up a Missouri hospital treating coronavirus cases was fatally wounded after a shootout with FBI agents.

The incident occurred Tuesday in Belton, Missouri, after agents attempted to arrest 36-year-old Timothy Wilson based on evidence gathered "at the conclusion of a long-running domestic terrorism investigation," according to a Wednesday statement by Special Agent Timothy Langan of the FBI's Kansas City office, per the Guardian.

Wilson planned the bombing months in advance and considered various other targets

before settling on the Kansas City medical center, FBI officials

The medical center Wilson targeted has been providing emergency care to patients affected by the coronavirus pandemic. Wilson allegedly had begun the process of collecting the materials needed to build explosives and intended to use the explosives to cause “severe harm and mass casualties,” the Guardian reported.

A months-long FBI investigation revealed that Wilson was a “potentially violent extremist, motivated by racial, religious, and anti-government animus,” the FBI said.

FBI officials conducting the sting operation led Wilson to believe he was picking up a vehicle filled with explosives, according The Guardian. Wilson, who was armed, was reportedly shot after agents tried to arrest him.

After the incident, Wilson was taken to a nearby hospital where he was later pronounced dead.

The state of Missouri currently has 356 confirmed cases of Covid-19 and eight confirmed deaths, according to Missouri’s health department.

National Security News

Pentagon orders US troops worldwide to hold in place to halt spread of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 7:08 AM, Jamie McIntyre, 570K]

DON’T MOVE AND NO ONE GETS HURT: Defense Secretary Mark Esper has issued a 60-day stop movement order to all uniformed and civilian DOD personnel and their family members who are currently outside the United States in a move aimed at preventing the further spread of COVID-19.

“The purpose is to make sure that we’re not bringing the virus back home, infecting others, that we’re not spreading it around the military,” Esper told Reuters in an interview Wednesday.

The stop movement order will affect some 90,000 people, who were scheduled to deploy or redeploy, according to the Pentagon, and applies to military exercises, deployments, redeployments, and other “global force management activities.”

SOME EXCEPTIONS: The Pentagon says the order does not apply to the drawdown of several thousand U.S. troops from Afghanistan, which is scheduled to be completed this summer.

Travel by patients and medical providers for the purposes of medical treatment

Scheduled deployments of U.S. Navy vessels that have been in transit for 14 days

People who have already initiated travel or are returning to their home station after temporary duty

CURVE NOT FLATTENING: As a Marine assigned to the Pentagon became the first case of coronavirus infection of someone stationed in the building, the department raised the Health Protection Condition level, or "HPCON," to "Charlie" at all DOD installations around the world.

"Some of the measures that that entails is going to maximum telework, cancellation of large-scale meetings, taking temperatures at certain access points within buildings," said Pentagon spokeswoman Alyssa Farah.

"Our curve is not flattening, and that's why we went to HPCON Charlie," added Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, joint staff surgeon. "We're stepping through this like everyone else is and adjusting based on the data as it's coming in and what we're seeing with our units."

The number of active-duty service members reportedly infected by the virus rose by 53 overnight to a total of 227, with 19 recoveries as of yesterday. According to a count kept by Johns Hopkins University, the U.S. is now up to 69,197 infections and 1,050 deaths, with a sharp upward trajectory.

AN INFUSION OF DOCS, NURSES: The Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences, the military's medical school at Walter Reed, has decided to accelerate the graduation of more than 200 military medical students and graduate nursing students to speed their entry into the military health system to help deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

"The students, who are all active-duty uniformed officers in the Army, Navy, Air Force or Public Health Service, will have completed all of their requirements to be awarded a degree and will be available for reassignment by their respective services," the university said in a statement.

"Our curriculum has a specific focus on threats like emerging infectious diseases and disasters that our military and Public Health Service forces are likely to encounter in the course of their careers," said USU President Dr. Richard Thomas. "Our students are uniquely prepared to meet and address the readiness needs of the Department of Defense and our Nation the moment they step out of our doors."

ESPER ON NPR: Esper tells NPR that the U.S. military is not positioned to deploy enough medical resources to address the scale of the coronavirus outbreak.

In an interview with NPR's Steve Inskeep that aired this morning, Esper said that while the military may have "a lot of capability, [it is] not as much, I think, as many people think."

"What we have great capacity for is planning and logistics and things like that, when it comes to supporting civilian authorities," Esper said. "But in terms of hospitals, we have a limited capacity, maybe a few thousand beds ... at most."

\$2.2 TRILLION RESCUE PACKAGE PASSES UNANIMOUSLY: The vote was 96 to 0 late last night as the Senate passed the largest economic relief package in U.S. history, an 880-page measure that spreads \$2.2 trillion among hard-hit workers, businesses, and healthcare systems.

“The historic measure mostly earned praise from lawmakers in both parties and their leaders, who said the sweeping bill will address the most serious of the economic and health consequences of the coronavirus outbreak with a huge injection of federal dollars and lending capacity,” writes Susan Ferrechio in the Washington Examiner.

Ferrechio reports that Majority Leader Rep. Steny Hoyer, a Maryland Democrat, says the House plans to pass the measure by voice vote tomorrow, avoiding the need for lawmakers to return to Washington.

Navy brings aircraft carrier into port, will test thousands of sailors for coronavirus (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 12:18 PM, Missy Ryan, 12625K]

The Navy plans to test thousands of sailors aboard the USS Theodore Roosevelt for the coronavirus after a spate of confirmed cases and will pause the aircraft carrier’s operations at sea, officials said Thursday.

Acting Navy secretary Thomas B. Modly said that eight sailors had tested positive for the virus and that the ship was pulling into Guam, where it would remain pierside. About 5,000 sailors are aboard the Nimitz-class nuclear-powered ship.

“We are in the process now of testing 100 percent of the crew of that ship to ensure that we were able to contain whatever spread might have occurred there on the ship,” Modly said in a briefing at the Pentagon. “But I also want to emphasize that the ship is operationally capable and can do its mission if required to do so.”

Modly said the infected sailors, who were flown off the ship and were under quarantine in Guam, had mild symptoms that had not required hospitalization so far. The remainder of the crew would not be permitted to disembark in Guam “other than on pier-side,” he said.

It is the first such measure taken aboard one of the Navy’s 11 aircraft carriers since the crisis began.

In the last month, the carrier and its strike group have pulled into Vietnam and conducted operations in the South China Sea.

The Navy decision comes as the military scrambles to assist civilian authorities with the U.S. coronavirus response while seeking to confront the threat of widespread contagion in its own ranks — without disrupting its regular overseas missions.

Pentagon leaders have implemented a host of new restrictions, including a crackdown on military movements globally, but many troops continue to live, work and drill in proximity to each other.

As of Thursday morning, the Pentagon had confirmed 280 coronavirus cases among uniformed personnel, 134 among its civilian employees and 62 among contractors.

The Navy accounts for 133 of the Defense Department cases, including 104 active-duty military members, the largest share among the services. Modly declined to speculate about why that might be.

Navy ships seek to stop missile, drone and surface attacks -- all at once (FOX News)

FOX News [3/26/2020 6:14 PM, Kris Osborn, 8943K]

How would the U.S. Navy stop a massive, coordinated, multi-pronged weapons attack? Major power enemies might seek to overwhelm and destroy U.S. Navy surface ships by simultaneously launching a series of coordinated attacks -- firing surface-skimming anti-ship missiles, unleashing small boat attacks, conducting aerial drone missile strikes and launching land-fired ballistic missiles --- all at the same time.

Very serious concern about these kinds of scenarios, involving integrated enemy attacks, is inspiring the Navy's current effort to fast-track new ship defenses and counterattack technologies. Much of this includes interceptor missiles, air-surface-undersea information sharing, close-in guns and even ship-fired lasers.

However, in order for Commanders to make decisions about which defenses are best suited for different kinds of attacks -- they first have to see a threat, and know it's on the way. This is the reason why the Navy is quickly expanding applications for its emerging family of AN/SPY-6 radar systems. Not only will the longest range variant, the AN/SPY-6 (V)1, go on new Flight III DDG 51 destroyers, but the Navy is now networking its entire fleet with the systems with various kinds of SPY-6 radars ... amphibians, carriers, new frigates and more.

The new radars are much more sensitive, much longer range, and engineered to discriminate threats from one another. The current SPY-6 integration initiative, now underway at a rapid pace, is changing Navy surface warfare tactics, according to the Navy's Above Water Sensors Program Manager, Capt. Jason Hall.

Hall said multiple track functionality, signal processing and increased sensitivity provide "the heart" of how SPY-6 radars change tactics for ocean warfare.

We are looking at how you get after the increased capability that it (SPY-6 radar) brings, vs. the SPY-1 (current AN/SPY-1) legacy system. We have run the gamut as to what this radar can do," Hall said in January at the Surface Navy Association Symposium, Arlington, Va.

Hall further explained that the SPY-6 radar systems, combined with fire control and an advanced software-ballistic missile defense system called Aegis Baseline 10, set the technical foundation for the fleet. "We will be leveraging this combat system as we look at frigate, amphibians and carriers," Hall said.

Multiple-track sensing and detection is expected to bring the desired radar detection strategy, as SPY-6 radars combine air-warfare and ballistic missile defense into a single system. When it comes to application, the SPY-6 radar systems streamline otherwise disparate fire-control and detection technologies; the SPY-6 can cue short-range, closer-in interceptors as well as longer-range ballistic missile interceptors such as an SM-3. This shortens sensor-to-shooter time and offers war commanders a longer window with which to make decisions about which countermeasure is needed. This integration is precisely the kind of defense needed to counter a multi-pronged, coordinated enemy attack potentially combining ballistic missiles with cruise missiles, drone attacks ... and other threats.

The SPY-6 family moves beyond existing AN/SPY-1 ship-integrated radar system and, according to an interesting essay in "Microwave Journal," "handles 30 times more targets and has 30-times greater sensitivity than the SPY-1D(V)."

Marine Corps readiness outweighs coronavirus hesitance as first Pentagon case reported (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/26/2020 5:40 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]

The Marine Corps said Thursday that it would not cancel large-scale formations and certain readiness exercises across the service, while a Marine became the first Pentagon employee to test positive for COVID-19.

"If the pictures look different to you, son, if they look unique, it's probably because it's true, the Marine Corps is unique," Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. David H. Berger said at a Pentagon press conference in response to a question about photographs showing different practices across bases.

"We are mandated by law to be the nation's most ready force, and that's what I think you expect us to be," he added.

Berger and acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly said guidance had gone out to commanders to scale back exercises where possible but maintain readiness. That means social distancing measures are not universal.

"Our force has to be ready to respond when we're given the direction to do so," Berger said. "So, you need to conduct a training that's necessary to maintain your readiness."

Berger said the Twentynine Palms exercise scheduled for April in California is an example of a practice that was "nice to do" but not critical to preserving force readiness.

The number of positive cases of coronavirus in the military rose by 73 overnight to a total of 280. The Marine Corps alone has 31 active-duty cases.

Joint Chiefs of Staff Surgeon Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs said Wednesday that he expected Department of Defense cases to continue to rise, and the department raised its health protection condition to the third-highest level, "Charlie," Wednesday, coinciding with the Marine's positive test at the Pentagon.

"Our curve is not flattening, and that's why we went to HPCON Charlie," Friedrichs said. The staff surgeon said HPCON Charlie guidance includes "restrictions on large gatherings, includes additional social distancing. We're stepping through this like everyone else is and adjusting based on the data that's coming in."

Two other Pentagon employees are now in self-isolation after coming in contact with the infected Marine, who sought medical advice when his wife began to show coronavirus symptoms. The Marine's last day at the Pentagon was March 13.

Across all DOD personnel, 179 additional cases were reported Thursday morning to include 53 more civilians, 31 more dependents, and 22 additional contractors. DOD confirmed that five additional service members have recovered, for a total of 24 recoveries. A total of 27 DOD personnel are now hospitalized.

In all, the Department of Defense has now seen 600 cases of the coronavirus.

Modly said 37,000 Marines are forward deployed or stationed to respond to any threat to U.S. national security that may arise across the globe.

World leaders vow to coordinate response to pandemic (San Francisco Chronicle)

San Francisco Chronicle [3/26/2020 7:01 PM, Staff, 1670K]

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told leaders of the world's 20 major industrialized nations during an emergency virtual summit Thursday that "we are at war with a virus — and not winning it" despite dramatic measures by countries to seal their borders, shutter businesses and enforce home isolation for well over a quarter of the world's population.

The unusual video call in lieu of a physical gathering comes as governments around the world stress the importance of social distancing to curb the spread of the highly infectious virus, which has prompted closures, curfews and lockdowns globally.

The Group of 20 nations, which faces criticism for not taking cohesive action against the virus or its economic impact, vowed to work together. The group said they are collectively injecting more than \$4.8 trillion into the global economy to counteract the social and financial impacts of the pandemic.

Italy reports 6,153 new coronavirus infections, taking the global total over 500,000

MEXICO

Poor 'immune' to outbreak

Puebla State Gov. Miguel Barbosa argues the poor are "immune" to the new coronavirus, even as the federal government suspends all nonessential government activities beginning Thursday in a bid to prevent the spread of the virus.

His comment was apparently a response to indications that three-quarters of Mexico's 475 confirmed cases are related to international travel, and the poor do not make many international trips. The country has seen six deaths so far.

PAKISTAN

Nation faces its biggest challenge

By Thursday afternoon, Pakistan's cases had risen to 1,098, up from some 250 a week ago. Eight deaths have been reported. But many fear that the real numbers are much higher because of a lack of testing and, in some cases, suppressed information. Already, Pakistan was struggling to provide electricity, water and adequate health care to its 220 million people. Diseases that have been controlled elsewhere, like rabies and polio, still persist here.

BANGLADESH

Soldiers enforce 10-day shutdown

Bangladesh deployed soldiers and police on Thursday to enforce the start of a nationwide 10-day shutdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus in the densely populated country.

The government also canceled all state programs, including parades to celebrate the country's Independence Day on Thursday.

LEBANON

Government extends lockdown

The coronavirus pandemic has managed to do what various wars in Lebanon could not: Close bars, restaurants and entertainment spots across the tiny Mediterranean country. The government extended a lockdown until April 12. Lebanon, a country of nearly 5 million, has recorded six deaths of the virus while 35 new infected cases were recorded Thursday, raising the total to 386 cases.

ITALY

Most factories shut to halt spread

Italy has become the first western developed nation to idle most of its industry to halt the spread of the coronavirus, citing the biggest emergency the country has faced since World War II. After more than two weeks of a nationwide lockdown, the government decided to expand the mandatory closure of nonessential commercial activities to heavy industry in the eurozone's third-largest economy.

CHINA

Beijing bars most foreigners

China says it is temporarily barring most foreigners from entering the country as it seeks to curb the number of imported coronavirus cases. The foreign ministry announced late Thursday that even foreign citizens with residence permits will be prevented from entering starting on Saturday. All visa-free transit policies also will be temporarily suspended. It said diplomatic workers will be exempt, and foreign citizens coming to China for "necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs" can still apply for visas.

BRAZIL

Governors defy leader's policy

Brazil's governors are defying President Jair Bolsonaro over his call to reopen schools and businesses, dismissing his argument that the "cure" of widespread shutdowns to contain the spread of the coronavirus is worse than the disease. Bolsonaro contends that the clampdown already ordered by many governors will deeply wound the already beleaguered economy and spark social unrest. He urged governors to limit isolation to high-risk people.

[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro on narcoterrorism charges, offers \$15 million reward for his capture (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/26/2020 5:42 PM, Anthony Faiola, Matt Zapposky, and Karen DeYoung, 12625K]

The Trump administration unsealed sweeping indictments against Venezuelan President

Nicolás Maduro and members of his inner circle on narcoterrorism charges Thursday, a dramatic escalation in the U.S. campaign to force the authoritarian socialist from power.

The administration also announced a \$15 million reward for information leading to Maduro's capture or conviction, an extraordinary bounty on a man still recognized by the Russians, Chinese and others as Venezuela's rightful leader. The move effectively turns the 57-year-old former union leader into an internationally wanted man, giving Venezuelans new motivation to act against him and adding a new level of risk to any travel he might attempt beyond the confines of his power center in Caracas.

Attorney General William P. Barr announced the indictments of Maduro and other current and former Venezuelan officials on charges including money laundering, drug trafficking and narcoterrorism. Barr and other U.S. officials alleged a detailed conspiracy headed by Maduro that worked with Colombian guerrillas to transform Venezuela into a transshipment point for moving massive amounts of cocaine to the United States.

The action, rumored for years, comes as the U.S.-backed opposition movement to oust Maduro has struggled to maintain momentum. The coronavirus has effectively halted the opposition rallies that have been a signature of the movement.

On Thursday, Barr accused Maduro of "deploying cocaine as a weapon" to undermine the United States.

"Maduro and the other defendants expressly intended to flood the United States with cocaine in order to undermine the health and well-being of our nation," Barr said during a news conference in Washington.

The charges against Maduro, brought in indictments in New York and Florida, carry a mandatory minimum sentence of 50 years in prison and a maximum of life. The U.S. Attorney in Manhattan, Geoff Berman, seemed to concede that U.S. authorities could not arrest Maduro in Venezuela, but noted that the leader might travel outside his country.

The charges, described as "a decade" in the making, recalled the U.S. indictment of Panamanian strongman Manuel Antonio Noriega in 1988. In that case, President George H.W. Bush eventually ordered U.S. forces to invade and capture Noriega. But Venezuela's far better-equipped military and Russian support for Maduro would complicate any attempt by the U.S. to take him into custody the same way.

The Trump administration broke diplomatic relations with Maduro last year and recognized National Assembly leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate president. Barr said officials expect to arrest Maduro, but declined to say whether the administration would entertain a military option, as it did in Panama.

"We're going to explore all options for getting custody," Barr said. "Hopefully, the Venezuelan people will see what's going on and will eventually regain control of their country."

Also charged were the head of Venezuela's National Constituent Assembly, a former director of military intelligence, a former high-ranking general, the defense minister and the chief justice of the Supreme Court. Some of the indicted officials — notably Defense

Minister Vladimir Padrino López and Chief Justice Maikel Moreno — were involved in plotting a military uprising against Maduro last spring, but failed to live up to secret pledges to move against the president. The charges suggest the Justice Department was pursuing their alleged links to narcotrafficking even as U.S. officials endorsed and encouraged the efforts of the Venezuelan opposition to solicit their participation in that plot.

The indictments are a sharp escalation in tactics that officials have gradually ramped up against Maduro since President Trump entered the White House. A campaign that started with targeted sanctions on individual Venezuelan officials broadened to measures that have locked the government out of the U.S. financial system. A U.S. oil embargo imposed last year has denied Caracas its single largest source of hard currency.

Maduro rejected the U.S. charges Thursday.

“There’s a conspiracy from the United States and Colombia and they’ve given the order of filling Venezuela with violence,” he said on Twitter. “As head of state I’m obliged to defend peace and stability for all the motherland, under any circumstances.”

Maduro is scrambling to cope with an outbreak of the coronavirus as Venezuela’s broken hospitals reel from chronic shortages of medicines, dilapidated equipment and unsanitary conditions. Barr suggested the pandemic had delayed Thursday’s announcement, but he said the time was right because Venezuela’s “people are suffering.”

“They need an effective government that cares about the people,” Barr said. “We think that the best way to support the Venezuelan people during this period is to do all we can to rid the country of this corrupt cabal.”

In a January interview with The Washington Post, Maduro scoffed at allegations that his government had established agreements with Colombian guerrillas engaged in narcotrafficking and kidnapping on the Venezuelan-Colombian border.

“It makes me laugh,” he said.

Prosecutors allege that Maduro and other Venezuelan officials have operated the Cartel do los Soles, or Cartel of the Suns, since at least 1999, corrupting Venezuela’s government institutions so they could flood the U.S. with hundreds of tons of cocaine. They say the cartel worked with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, to ship the drug by air and sea through the Caribbean and Central America to the United States. (The FARC, a Marxist guerrilla movement that engaged in a decades-long war against the Colombian government, officially disbanded with the Colombian peace accord of 2016, but more than 2,500 dissident members remain active.)

Prosecutors allege that Maduro led the operation, negotiating shipment quantities, directing the cartel to provide military-grade weapons to the FARC and coordinating with officials in other countries to facilitate the drug trafficking.

Barr said the Maduro government is “awash in corruption and criminality.”

“While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money and the proceeds of their corruption,” Barr said.

U.S. authorities charged myriad Venezuelan officials in separate drug and money laundering cases in federal courts in New York, Florida and Washington.

In one case, prosecutors alleged Padrino López took bribes to allow drug traffickers to fly planes in his country's airspace without fear of being shot down. In another, they said Moreno fixed criminal and civil court cases in exchange for kickbacks — including dismissing a fraud case against the state oil company and authorizing the sale of a \$100 million General Motors plant in exchange for a cut of the proceeds.

U.S. officials and Venezuelan opposition leaders have sought dialogue with members of Maduro's inner circle in an attempt to strip away or at least weaken his internal support. By targeting several members of his inner circle, the administration could push them to close ranks around Maduro, complicating efforts to isolate him.

The indictments appear to conflict with long-standing administration policy toward Maduro. For most of the last year, administration officials repeatedly emphasized their desire for Maduro to leave Venezuela for exile, where they pledged not to pursue him. "This is not about revenge," one senior official said last year. "We would be happy to pay the airfare."

By reducing the likelihood of a negotiated settlement, they could be putting Maduro in a position where he has little left to lose — and could increase pressure on Guaidó, who has enjoyed a level of protection under U.S. patronage.

In what appeared to be a retaliatory move, Maduro's attorney general on Thursday announced an investigation into Guaidó and others for allegedly plotting a "coup."

U.S. officials who deal with Venezuela policy say that the charges announced Thursday had more to do with Justice Department investigations — and the timing of grand juries weighing the matter in New York and Florida — than any change of position within the administration.

"This was not a policy move," said one official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the official was not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Venezuela's opposition embraced the charges. Iván Simonovis, Guaidó's security commissioner, called the \$15 million reward for Maduro's capture and conviction, and \$10 million for others, powerful incentive for other government officials to turn against them.

"There is a price for each one of them," he told The Post. "You never know what could happen with that."

Trump administration officials have given strong support to Guaidó, notably in his military uprising last April 30. That effort quickly petered out, and is increasingly being viewed as Venezuela's Bay of Pigs — a lost opportunity to oust Maduro that might not come again.

One of the Venezuelans charged, retired Gen. Cliver Alcalá Cordones, posted video clips on Twitter proclaiming his innocence. He said he was living in Barranquilla, Colombia, with the full knowledge of the Colombian government, and had been cooperating for some time with both Guaidó and American officials.

"I'm at my home," he said. "I'm not running."

Last year, Maduro's former spy chief, Gen. Manuel Ricardo Cristopher Figuera, told The Washington Post that he had provided details on locations and activities of Colombian drug cartels and criminal gangs operating on Venezuelan soil directly to Maduro, but Maduro declined to act.

"I gave him a folder with this and told him, 'Look, this is the situation with the guerrillas,'" said Figuera, who turned against Maduro last year and is now in the United States.

"They never took action," he said. "You could say that Maduro is a friend of the guerrillas."

Analysts see differences between going after Maduro now and Noriega in the 1980s.

Maduro maintains a firmer grip on the Venezuelan military than Noriega had, and its officers have been less influenced by contact and cooperation with the U.S. military than were Panama's. Venezuela's military is better equipped with more sophisticated Russian weaponry.

Maduro's government also has more international support. The Russians and Cubans, and to a lesser extent, the Chinese, have stood behind him, and Moscow has turned the shipment of Venezuelan oil to circumvent U.S. sanctions into a cash cow.

Perhaps the biggest difference is that Maduro, although broadly unpopular, is still seen by some in Venezuela as the anointed successor of Hugo Chávez, the father of the socialist state, who died of cancer in 2013. Maduro's inner circle maintains control of the Venezuelan socialist movement, known as Chavismo, a still-formidable apparatus.

"You can lob a cruise missile and take him out, but you don't take out Chavismo," said Eric Farnsworth, vice president of the Council of the Americas and the Americas Society. "You don't really take out the regime unless the military lays down its weapons and says we're going to support the Americans. I don't see that happening."

[Venezuela] U.S. charges Venezuelan president for drug trafficking (CBS News)

CBS News [3/26/2020 12:13 PM, Clare Hymes and Melissa Quinn, 2394K]

The Justice Department announced federal charges against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his top deputies for crimes related to narco-terrorism, money laundering and drug trafficking, marking the most aggressive action taken by the United States against the socialist country.

Attorney General William Barr announced the unsealing of superseding indictments in federal court in New York and South Florida against Maduro and other Venezuelan officials, alleging they orchestrated a "narco-terrorism conspiracy" spanning more than two decades.

"As alleged, the Maduro regime is awash in corruption and criminality. Maduro and his other defendants have betrayed the Venezuelan people and corrupted Venezuela's institutions," Barr said during a "virtual" news conference in Washington, D.C., to reduce the risk of exposure to coronavirus. "While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money and the proceeds of their corruption, and this has to come to an end."

In addition to Maduro, the head of Venezuela's Constituent Assembly, its former director of military intelligence and a former high-ranking general were charged in New York for their involvement in narco-terrorism. The chief justice of Venezuela's Supreme Court was charged for involvement in money laundering in South Florida, Barr said, and the country's minister of defense was indicted on drug trafficking charges in the District of Columbia. Fifteen people in total were charged.

The State Department is offering rewards of up to \$15 million for information leading to the arrests of Maduro and the others charged.

Federal prosecutors allege Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders worked with FARC, a Colombian guerilla group, as part of efforts to "flood the United States with cocaine."

According to the Justice Department, Maduro and the others charged served as leaders of the Cartel de Los Soles, which worked with FARC to dispatch shipments of cocaine that traveled from Venezuela to the U.S. through Central America and the Caribbean. The shipments were made by sea through "go-fast" vessels, fishing boats and container ships, as well as by air, by using clandestine airstrips.

The State Department estimates 75 unauthorized flights suspected of drug-trafficking activities used an "air bridge" cocaine route between Venezuela and Honduras and entered Honduran airspace. The State Department also estimates that by 2004, roughly 250 or more tons of cocaine were traveling through Venezuela.

The Justice Department alleges FARC and members of the Cartel de Los Soles paid bribes in exchange for access to commercial ports and data from air and maritime radar in Venezuela in order to ensure safe passage of the cocaine shipments, which benefited Maduro and the other defendants. Federal prosecutors also said the Venezuelan president directed the cartel to provide military-grade weapons to the FARC.

"Maduro very deliberately deployed cocaine as a weapon," said Geoffrey Berman, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York.

The Justice Department alleges Maikel Moreno, the chief justice of the Venezuelan Supreme Court, demanded bribes from those who appeared before him. In one instance, he allegedly authorized the seizure of a General Motors plant in exchange for a kickback, leaving thousands without jobs.

The charges against Moreno "demonstrate that the last line of defense in Venezuela has crumbled, creating a system without rule of law and without justice," said Ariana Fajardo Orshan, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida,

"In short, Venezuela has descended in a state of corruption, resulting in a massive treasure grab for the rich and powerful," she said.

The decision to pursue criminal charges against top officials further escalates tensions between the U.S. and Venezuela. The Trump administration has engaged in a maximum pressure campaign against Venezuela, seeking to topple Maduro amid the country's ongoing political and economic crisis. Last year, the Trump administration froze all

Venezuelan government assets and blocked American companies and individuals from doing business with Maduro's regime.

The U.S. and other countries have recognized opposition leader Juan Guaidó as Venezuela's rightful leader, and Guaidó met with President Trump at the White House in February. He also attended this year's State of the Union address as a guest of Mr. Trump's, during which the president introduced Guaidó as Venezuela's "true and legitimate" and said Maduro was a "tyrant."

Barr said the Justice Department has not been in contact with Guaidó about the charges against Maduro and other Venezuelan leaders.

Still, Maduro has retained control of Venezuela in the wake of last year's uprising led by Guaidó and clashes between civilians and Maduro's security forces. Maduro took over as president of Venezuela in 2013 after the death of Hugo Chavez.

The last Latin American leader charged by the U.S. was Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega, who faced charges of narcotics trafficking and money laundering in 1990. Noriega surrendered after the United States invaded the country and was flown back to Miami, where he was ultimately sentenced to 40 years in prison.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[Venezuela] U.S. indicts Venezuela's Maduro, a political foe, for 'narco-terrorism' (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 12:29 PM, Matt Spetalnick and Sarah N. Lynch, 5304K]

The U.S. government on Thursday indicted Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and more than a dozen other top Venezuelan officials on charges of "narco-terrorism," the latest escalation of the Trump administration's pressure campaign aimed at ousting the socialist leader.

The State Department offered a reward of up to \$15 million for information leading to the arrest of Maduro, whose country has been convulsed by years of a deep economic crisis and political upheaval.

The indictment, a rare U.S. action against a foreign head of state, marks a serious new phase against Maduro at a time when some U.S. officials have privately said President Donald Trump is increasingly frustrated with the results of his Venezuela policy.

Attorney General William Barr, announcing charges that include narco-terrorism conspiracy, corruption and drug trafficking, accused Maduro and his associates of colluding with a dissident faction of the demobilized Colombian guerrilla group, the FARC, "to flood the United States with cocaine."

But Trump administration officials are mindful that their chances are slim of getting Maduro or the other major figures in custody anytime soon, a person familiar with the situation said on condition of anonymity.

"While the Venezuelan people suffer, this cabal lines their pockets with drug money and the proceeds of their corruption," Barr said.

"You are a miserable person, Donald Trump," Maduro said in a state television address during which he dismissed the charges as false and racist. Foreign Minister Jorge Arreaza said the charges were aimed at benefiting Trump's 2020 re-election campaign.

Trump's pressure on Venezuela, an OPEC member, has gone over well among Cuban Americans in South Florida, a key voting bloc in a major presidential swing state.

The U.S. government has previously lodged criminal indictments against members of Maduro's family and inner circle. He and his allies have dismissed such allegations as a smear campaign, and argue the United States is responsible for drug trafficking, given its role as a leading consumer.

Maduro is already under U.S. sanctions and has been the target of a U.S. effort aimed at pushing him from power. He took office in 2013 after the death of his mentor President Hugo Chavez, a staunch foe of the United States.

Other Venezuelan officials whose indictments were announced on Thursday include Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino, senior socialist leader Diosdado Cabello, and the chief justice of the country's supreme court, Maikel Moreno, who was charged with money laundering. The U.S. government is offering \$10 million for information leading to Cabello's arrest.

The United States and dozens of other countries have recognized opposition leader Juan Guaido as Venezuela's legitimate president, regarding Maduro's 2018 re-election as a sham. But Maduro has remained in power, backed by the country's military and by Russia, China and Cuba.

U.S. officials have long accused Maduro and his associates of running a "narco-state," saying they have used proceeds from drugs transshipped from neighboring Colombia to make up for lost revenue from a Venezuelan oil sector hit by U.S. sanctions.

Trump denied that the charges were an attempt to take advantage of Venezuela at a vulnerable time when it is expected to be hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic.

"No, no. We don't look at a weak point. This is a serious problem for over 150 nations," Trump said in response to a reporter's question. But he added: "Maduro and Venezuela, we're watching it very closely."

'DEPLOYED COCAINE AS A WEAPON'

The indictments were unsealed in New York, Florida and Washington.

Barr dodged a reporter's question on whether Trump, who has pressed his aides in recent months for a tougher approach on Venezuela, was briefed in advance.

Maduro and his closest allies ran a "narco-terrorism partnership with the FARC for the past 20 years," stated Geoffrey Berman, the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York, who said the Venezuelan president "very deliberately deployed cocaine as a weapon."

"The scope and magnitude of the drug trafficking alleged was made possible only because Maduro and others corrupted the institutions of Venezuela and provided political and military protection for the rampant narco-terrorism crimes," he added.

The U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Florida, Ariana Fajardo Orshan, said she sees signs of Venezuelan officials' laundered money throughout her area every day, from lavish yachts to million-dollar condos.

"This party is coming to an end," she said.

Asked whether the U.S. government was also considering designating Venezuela a state sponsor of terrorism, which carries further sanctions, Barr said: "It's really one step at a time, so I really have nothing to say about that right now."

Thursday's charges altogether carry a maximum penalty of up to life in prison. Asked whether the U.S. government wants to capture Maduro dead or alive, Barr said: "We want him captured so he can face justice in U.S. court."

But he offered no indication of how U.S. authorities might get their hands on Maduro, who has endured more than a year of international pressure and on-again, off-again street protests.

Maduro's international travel could be restricted, given Washington would be able to request that he be handed over if he visits a country that has an extradition treaty with the United States. U.S. authorities can also freeze any assets he has in the United States, though such holdings are considered unlikely.

The Justice Department said that since 1999, Maduro, along with Cabello and others, acted as leaders of the "Cartel of the Suns." The name, it said, refers to the sun insignias affixed to uniforms of high-ranking Venezuelan military officials.

An indictment accused Padrino of using his control of the military to facilitate cocaine flights to the United States.

[Venezuela] Experts: Venezuela Is 'Worst Case Scenario' for Coronavirus Spread (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/26/2020 5:29 PM, Elliott Davis, 3020K]

As the case numbers and death toll from the novel coronavirus increase exponentially throughout the world, Venezuela – with rampant poverty and an already damaged health care system – represents an extremely dire situation, experts said Thursday during an online panel discussion.

"We are the worst case scenario," said Dr. Julio Castro, a member of the COVID-19 Technical Experts Commission with the interim government of Venezuela. "We need urgent logistics, urgent help."

Castro and other speakers on the panel, hosted by the Council of the Americas, shared statistics that illustrate Venezuela's vulnerability. Castro noted that the country's health crisis actually began 10 years ago, with the crude mortality rate rising rapidly since.

Carrie Filipetti, the deputy assistant secretary for Cuba and Venezuela at the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, said the country is lacking in water, soap and electricity. In a country with an official population around 30 million, there are only 84 ICU hospital beds in the entire country, and 90% of hospitals don't have protocols for respiratory virus care, she added. A March 2019 U.N. review noted that more than 90% of Venezuelans live in poverty, according to Reuters.

"It's really everyone's business to care about the damage of COVID-19 inside Venezuela and across the entire region," Filipetti said.

Venezuela has at least 91 active cases of the coronavirus and no reported deaths as of Thursday, according to a tracker of cases maintained by Johns Hopkins University.

Other countries in Latin America have been hit harder; Brazil has more than 2,000 cases and Ecuador has more than 1,000. Countries like Colombia, Peru and Panama have several hundred cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

But Filipetti said that Venezuela's official numbers might be misleading due to the lack of government transparency and the silencing of local journalists. She said there might be as many as 141 coronavirus cases in the country.

Filipetti's comments come as the U.S. Justice Department announced on Thursday charges against Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and other officials for narco-terrorism, corruption, drug trafficking and other offenses, according to a news release. Filipetti said during the panel that previous sanctions against the Venezuelan regime have humanitarian "carve-outs."

"The sanctions are not going to have an impact on curtailing the imports of any kinds of medical products or equipment," she said. "And certainly the indictments, which are against already sanctioned individuals, shouldn't have an impact on the delivery of humanitarian assistance itself."

Filipetti added that the Maduro regime has previously politicized humanitarian assistance by using aid "only to provide care and support to its own supporters and to its loyalists," and the U.S. wants to ensure that any food and medical assistance is distributed impartially.

"That's one area where we wouldn't compromise," Filipetti said. "But we are committed to making sure that we're getting assistance there."

David Smolansky, a coordinator for the Working Group on the Crisis of Venezuelan Migrants and Refugees at the Organization of American States, noted concerns for the 5 million people who have fled Venezuela, which he described as the "largest migration in Latin American history." Pregnant Venezuelan women began flooding into Colombia last year to give birth, overwhelming that country's network of hospitals and clinics.

Smolansky said that 75% of the migrants are in six neighboring countries, and the "vast majority of borders are closed in the region" due to the spread of the coronavirus. These people are thus "one of the most vulnerable populations in the region," he added.

Eric Farnsworth, vice president at the Washington office of the Council of the Americas,

said that the migration crisis and the "collapsing" health care system make Venezuela "a particularly fertile ground for devastation."

"Every Venezuelan right now is facing the death," added Manuela Bolívar, a politician from the country's Miranda state.

[South Africa] South Africa braces for coronavirus lockdown (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 12:34 PM, Staff, 1973K]

South Africa braced for a nationwide lockdown Thursday, joining other African countries imposing strict curfews and shutdowns in an attempt to halt the spread of the coronavirus across the continent.

Some 57 million people will be restricted to their homes during South Africa's three-week total lockdown which begins at midnight.

Kenya, Rwanda and Mali are some of the African countries that have imposed restrictions to curb the spread of the coronavirus with the continent recording 2,748 cases and 73 deaths so far.

Although Africa's toll is far lower than in Europe, the United States and the Middle East, health experts say the world's poorest continent is especially vulnerable and the figures likely fall far short of the reality.

During South Africa's 21-day shutdown there will be no jogging, dog-walking or sale of alcohol across the country, which has so far recorded 709 cases, the highest number of detected infections in sub-Saharan Africa.

Nigeria's government warned Thursday that Africa's most populous nation could soon see an "exponential" increase in coronavirus infections unless contacts of confirmed cases are tracked down quicker.

Panic shopping

Hours before the start of the lockdown, panicky residents in South Africa's economic hub Johannesburg stocked up on food and other supplies with some large supermarkets running out of eggs and the staple maize meal powder.

Queues formed outside food shops across the country as people stocked up for the 21-day shutdown.

At a popular chain of grocery shop in Johannesburg's Douglasdale suburb some customers were loading trolleys full of lagers and wines.

One man tried to jump the queue saying he was only going to the liquor store and did not consider it necessary for him to join the long queue of other shoppers. He was politely told to be patient by a face-masked marshal who carried a jar of hand sanitizer to spray trolley handles.

Elsewhere, thousands of people crammed long-distance bus terminals to escape to the countryside to be with families, raising fears they would export the virus to the most vulnerable old who normally reside or retire to farms and villages.

President Cyril Ramaphosa has called for half-an-hour of national prayers on the eve of the lockdown.

He requested South Africans observe two minutes of “prayer, reflection or silent meditation” between 6pm (1600 GMT) and 6:30pm (1630 GMT) wherever they will be.

“These are challenging times. We are traversing a path we have never travelled before. There are many amongst us who are fearful, uncertain and vulnerable,” he said.

“I call on our people to offer a prayer and a thought for the protection and healing of our land and its people from this disease.”

As with other African countries, South Africa’s lockdown will be patrolled by the military and the police.

‘Fear and prayer’

Defence Minister Nosiviwe Mapisa-Nqakula warned “if people are not complying, they (the military) may be forced to take extraordinary measures.”

Violation of any of the regulations will carry a six-month jail sentence or fine.

Two men have already been charged with attempted murder for defying a quarantine order and allegedly going out after they tested positive for the coronavirus, exposing others to the infection.

“It’s not a fairytale to say the law will act and act very harsh on you,” Police Minister Bheki Cele said.

Moody’s Investors Service warned Friday that the effect of border closures, commodity price declines and financial market volatility due to the pandemic will have “severe macroeconomic and financial impact on African sovereigns”.

In one early indication of the likely impact of the pandemic on Africa’s economy, rubber processors in Ivory Coast — the continent’s largest producer — said they were bracing for losses of around \$100 million a month.

“Right now, our biggest clients, in Asia, Europe and America, have closed down. The progressive impact of this will be a slowdown in rubber processing activity, even a close down,” said Eugene Kremien, president of industry association Apromac.

“Our industry is already suffering, and it’s just the start. We are going to lose 60 billion CFA francs (\$100 million, 91 million euros) each month, which compares with the 600 billion CFA (in income) we were expecting this year.”

[Syria] U.S. Forces In Syria Tackle A More Complex — And Possibly Dangerous — Mission (NPR)

NPR [3/26/2020 4:15 PM, Tom Bowman and Marisa Penalosa, 4112K]

It’s early morning in northeast Syria. It’s sunny and chilly. Capt. Alex Quataert briefs his soldiers on the day’s patrol.

"In the last 48 hours we've had two attacks on critical petroleum infrastructure," he says.

The convoy will visit one of those sites today.

A group of fresh-faced soldiers cluster around in a circle near their hulking armored vehicles, standing in the mud and gravel of this bare-bones combat outpost. It's a drab collection of tents and trailers and massive sand bag walls. He tells his soldiers U.S. forces were stationed at one of the attacked facilities.

"So we're going to have a show of presence there to deter any further attacks on these forces," Quataert says.

The mission for U.S. forces in Syria is now more complex — and possibly more dangerous. Though U.S. forces are doing a variety of things in Syria, 29-year-old Quataert says, "our primary mission is to secure the oil infrastructure for use of our partner force."

These soldiers had to quickly move east last fall when Turkish troops invaded cutting U.S. supply lines and threatening U.S. forces.

Capt. Quataert says his soldiers came under fire from Turkish artillery, and they nearly fired back. Russian troops followed close behind the troops and were able to take over an American outpost. For a while they had to sleep in their trucks before building their new outpost.

That all happened because President Trump essentially gave the green light for Turkey to invade, then tweeted that all U.S. troops would be leaving Syria. Soldiers here and in neighboring Iraq refer to that order as simply, "the Tweet."

But Trump reversed himself because military officials convinced him. The White House allowed hundreds of U.S. troops to stay and secure the oil fields for Kurdish forces.

Cat and mouse game

U.S. forces in Syria work with a group of Kurdish and Arab fighters, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces, the SDF.

"They are the partner force that primarily defeated the physical caliphate — the actual ISIS-controlled area," says Quataert, a small, compact and serious West Point graduate from Rochester, N.Y. He says ISIS is not defeated yet.

"They still have a lot of fight left to give," he says. "ISIS has become a guerilla force. They are still active, especially further to the south."

This convoy rumbles north, through farmland that stretches green and unbroken to the horizon. One of the few landmarks visible is the tell-tale sign of an oil facility — a gas flare. It's a long thin tower with a tongue of yellow flame.

In recent weeks Quataert's soldiers have, again, come under attack from Syrian government militias, an attack that ended with one militia member dead and another

wounded. The Russians routinely harass and confront the American patrols, provoking them with their erratic driving. The Americans block them or head them off. Quataert dryly calls it, "not necessarily a friendly situation."

What the Russians don't know is that the captain has a secret weapon.

"When we stop for the mission, I'm in the background and I don't even tell them I speak Russian because the whole job is to gather information," says Sgt. Vlad. He's a former Russian soldier who ended up in North Carolina and joined the U.S. Army. He asked that his full name not be used for security purposes.

Vlad says that lately the Russians have been playing tricks on the roads --speeding and jumping the blockades set up by the Americans, "and once in a while, you'll get lucky where a Russian vehicle gets stuck in the mud and they can't go anywhere. And the Russians keep going in and they realize we can't leave our brothers behind. They come back and we've got him trapped."

Despite the cat and mouse game, there have so far been no dangerous encounters. It seems neither country wants an escalation. Quataert says they aren't going to start World War III over this.

Safety, stability and security

The convoy enters the city of Dirik, a bustling town not far from the Turkish border. Children flash the peace sign and run along the convoy through city streets. Others wave. Many adults run out of their homes and stare. The soldiers are here with the goal of getting information from the locals, ask what they're seeing and hearing. And how safe they feel. The Americans fan out and set up a defensive perimeter near a variety store.

Quataert walks in and talks to the man behind the counter, Mohammed Abdullah Ismael. Kurdish music plays in the background and several customers are milling around the store.

Ismael is a 40-year-old father of five children ages one to 16. He's a short balding man, a Kurd with a sad face though he flashes a smile when he spots the soldiers walking into his store.

Ismael greets Quataert through an Army interpreter.

"How are you doing guys?" he asks. "When you guys are here we always feel safe."

What happens when the Americans leave?

"When the Americans leave there's no stability and security in the area," Ismael says, adding that his number one, biggest fear is Turkey.

That's because the Turks see the Kurds around here as a threat, allied with Kurdish separatist in Turkey.

Ismael's store is well-stocked with groceries, cleaning supplies and a wide variety of nuts. Large bins filled with pistachios, walnuts, cashews and many other Syrian snacks fill a wall.

Two 12-year-old boys, including one of Ismael's children, help customers buying dates and other Syrian staples. The soldiers stock up on Mars chocolate bars made in Russia, Pringles and soft drinks.

Soon the soldiers move on. As they walk the streets, a man and his small child perched on the front of his motorcycle stop to greet them and thank them for their visit. The group stops at a bakery and at a restaurant too. Quataert asks the owners the same questions: have you seen Russians around, do you feel safe? People nod and smile.

Next, the convoy heads to an oil facility. It's a worn collection of pipes and tanks, closer to the Turkish border — so close you can spot a Turkish flag at an outpost.

It was here, before dawn on two consecutive days that a drone struck, dropping mortars, where soldiers from the West Virginia National Guard were helping secure the oil facility.

"They hit us with one mortar. It was around three o'clock in the morning and I got my guys up, we were out in two minutes," says Sgt. 1st Class Mitch Morgan, as he points to the destruction.

There's a hole in a concrete side walk the size of a Frisbee and several inches deep. Morgan, a detective in the civilian world in Charleston, W.Va., says that one of the mortars barely missed him.

"As we were mounting up in our vehicles," he says, pointing to the side door of a Humvee. "You see the paint missing?" Shrapnel hit that door, he says.

The West Virginia troops were ordered to leave Syria for Kuwait, shortly after the second attack. Other soldiers will take their place, Quataert says. The next platoon will bring along a handheld jamming device — the captain says it looks like the weapon from Ghostbusters. It can disrupt the drone's signal and force it to land. That way investigators can learn its origins.

The Kurds blame Turkey. U.S. suspicion points to the Syrian government militias, who operated just a half hour away. The mortars show some sophistication. At least one of the components was made with a 3-D printer.

For the next several months, Quataert and his soldiers will continue these patrols. Then they'll head back to Alaska and pass the job off to other Americans.

[Editorial note: consult source link for audio]

[Iraq] Rockets hit Iraq's Green Zone, US-led coalition leaves base (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 1:13 PM, Staff, 1973K]

Two rockets slammed into the Iraqi capital's high-security Green Zone early Thursday, hours before US-led forces were set to pull out of a second base in the country.

Some 7,500 foreign troops are in Iraq as part of the US-led coalition helping local troops fight jihadist remnants, but those numbers are being significantly drawn down this month.

The alliance is temporarily bringing some trainers home as a precautionary measure

against the coronavirus pandemic and is also leaving some Iraqi bases altogether.

Those bases and foreign embassies, particularly the American mission, have been targeted in more than two dozen rocket strikes since late October.

The attacks, which the US has blamed on an Iran-backed armed group, have prompted fears of a proxy war on Iraqi soil.

Before dawn on Thursday, two rockets punched into an empty square near an Iraqi security headquarters in the Green Zone, where government buildings and foreign embassies are based, Iraqi security forces said in a statement.

An Iraqi security source told AFP the intended target appeared to be the US embassy, a sprawling compound a few hundred metres (yards) further south on the banks of the Tigris.

There were no reports of casualties, but other attacks have been deadly.

Coalition transfers base

Earlier this month, two US military personnel and a British soldier were killed in a rocket attack on Taji airbase north of Baghdad, that was hit again two days later.

The 5,200 US troops stationed across Iraqi bases make up the bulk of the coalition force helping hunt down Islamic State group sleeper cells across the country.

Iraq declared IS defeated in late 2017, and the coalition is now implementing plans developed last year to consolidate its troop presence across the country.

Around 300 coalition troops left the western Qaim base in mid-March, handing it over in full to Iraqi troops.

On Thursday, around 800 troops were set to leave the northern Qayyarah air base, used in 2016 and 2017 to help plan the fight against IS in the nearby city of Mosul.

"Today the coalition transferred Qayyarah airbase to the full control of the Iraqi security forces," Myles Caggins, a coalition spokesman, told AFP.

"The coalition had a small area inside the base and we will have several hundred troops departing this base and eventually leaving Iraq," Caggins said.

The departing forces include US and French troops as well as civilian contractors, according to a coalition statement.

In the coming weeks, they will also leave an expansive base in Kirkuk.

Rockets have rained down on both Qayyarah and Kirkuk in recent months, with one late December attack killing a US contractor stationed in Kirkuk.

The US has blamed those attacks on Kataeb Hezbollah, an Iran-backed group within the Hashed al-Shaabi military network.

The Hashed has been formally integrated into the Iraqi state's security forces but more hardline groups continue to operate independently.

'Same actors'

This month's attacks, however, have been claimed by a previously unknown group identifying itself as Usbat al-Thaereen (League of the Revolutionaries).

In online videos set to music, masked men carrying weapons rail against the "American Satan" and pledge to avenge "victims" of US air strikes on Iraqi forces.

The coalition, however, expects the group is an amalgamation of more well-known, anti-US groups.

"It's the same old actors, and they're organising themselves slightly differently," a senior coalition official told reporters.

The global alliance has simultaneously been redeploying training forces who had been coaching Iraqi troops.

Trainers amount to a third of the total coalition force.

British, French, Australian and Czech troops coaching Iraqi counterparts were being temporarily sent home as Baghdad had put a hold on training operations to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The US embassy on Thursday also said it was drawing down staff "due to a combination of security conditions and restricted travel options as a result of the global COVID-19 pandemic".

At least 36 Iraqis have died from the respiratory illness and more than 380 other cases have been confirmed, according to the latest toll from Iraqi authorities.

But there are fears the real number of sufferers is much higher, as only around 2,000 of Iraq's 40 million people have been tested.

A spike in cases could overwhelm the country's dilapidated health system, ravaged by years of conflict and slim investment by government authorities.

[Iraq] U.S.-led forces depart Iraqi military base near Mosul in drawdown (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 8:26 AM, Thaier al-Sudani and Maher Naze, 5304K]

Troops with the U.S.-led coalition fighting Islamic State began departing an air base in northern Iraq on Thursday, handing it over fully to the Iraqi military as part of a reduction of foreign forces in the country.

The overall drawdown will see coalition forces move into a smaller number of bases and reduce personnel. The coalition has not provided details or numbers.

Qayyara air base, south of the city of Mosul where Islamic State declared its caliphate in 2014, is the second base to be handed over to the Iraqis this month. Coalition troops left a base at al-Qaim on the Syrian border last week.

"The coalition will operate from fewer locations, but remains committed to supporting our partners in their fight against Daesh (Islamic States)," Brigadier General Vincent Barker of the coalition said in a statement.

Coalition officials say the troop cuts and relocation of units into fewer Iraqi bases is because Iraqi forces are mostly capable of containing the threat from leftover Islamic State militants on their own.

The U.S.-led coalition has supported the Iraqi military since 2014 in the fight to neutralise Islamic State. A few thousand militants are believed to remain active, mostly confined to remote areas such as desert and mountains across northern Iraq. They periodically attack security forces but have held no major territory like towns and cities since 2017.

The coalition currently deploys around 7,500 troops in Iraq, including 5,000 Americans.

[Iraq] As planned, US-led coalition pulling out of 2nd Iraqi base (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/26/2020 7:46 AM, Samya Kullab and Qassim Abdul-Zahra, AP, 482K]
The U.S.-led coalition on Thursday started pulling out of a second base in Iraq, in line with a planned drawdown of troops, hours after two rockets hit inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone.

The attack in the Iraqi capital, the seat of government and home to the American Embassy, was the first following a brief lull in violence from earlier this month. Iraqi officials also said the U.S. renewed a sanctions waiver enabling Iraq to import crucial gas and electricity from Iran, but with a shorter deadline.

The pullout from the Qayara airfield in northern Iraq is in line with plans to withdraw from bases across Iraq and consolidate coalition forces in Baghdad and at Ain al-Asad Air Base in the country's western desert. The plan has been in the works since late last year, a senior coalition military official said last week, and accelerated when Iraqi forces proved they were capable of facing the threat from the Islamic State with limited coalition assistance.

Coalition spokesman Myles Caggins said several hundred troops would depart the Qayara base in the coming days and that \$1 million worth of property would be transferred to the Iraqi government at the handover ceremony. Last week, coalition troops withdrew from the al-Qaim base on the border with Syria.

"Our partnership continues with the Iraqi security forces, but in the future you will see less coalition troops in fewer places with fewer bases," said Caggins.

France said late Wednesday that it will pull out all of its military forces from Iraq, citing the need for French forces to help fight the new coronavirus at home. Caggins said, however, that only French trainers had gone home over coronavirus fears and that France continues to provide advisers and air support.

"We think in some time, maybe some weeks, the French trainers will come back," he said.

In the Green Zone attack, the two projectiles struck near the Baghdad Operations Command, which coordinates Iraq's police and military forces, the military statement said.

The command center is a few hundred meters (yards) away from the U.S. Embassy, which is a regular target of rocket attacks.

There were no casualties, according to an Iraqi security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations.

No rockets had been fired at the Green Zone since last Tuesday, when three hit an area near the embassy. That was the fourth rocket attack in the span of a week targeting U.S. interests in Iraq, after assaults on the Basmaya training camp and two separate attacks on Camp Taji. Both bases are near the Iraqi capital.

The first attack on Camp Taji killed three coalition servicemen, including two Americans. That prompted U.S. airstrikes against what Washington said were mainly weapons facilities belonging to Kataib Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Iraqi militia believed to be responsible for the attack.

However, Iraq's military said those airstrikes killed five security force members and a civilian, while wounding five fighters from the Popular Mobilization Forces, an umbrella organization including an array of Iraqi militias, including some Iran-backed groups.

Iran-backed Iraqi militias have vowed revenge for the attacks.

Thursday morning's attack came as a state-imposed curfew to contain the spread of the new coronavirus was extended for a second time until April 11, according to an Iraqi Cabinet statement. The effective lockdown prohibits large public gatherings and has shuttered all businesses except essential ones like pharmacies and supermarkets.

An Iraqi army statement said it was enforcing the curfew by allocating army units to assist police forces on the street and to cordon off areas if a flare up of virus cases occurs.

Meanwhile, three Iraqi officials said the U.S. will keep letting Iraq import gas and power from neighboring Iran without facing American sanctions. But the officials said Washington has reduced the deadline by which Iraq would need to prove it is making headway in becoming energy independent.

There was no immediate confirmation from U.S. officials.

The last waiver was granted Feb. 13 for a period of 45 days. Officials said they received word Thursday from U.S. officials that the next waiver would expire in 30 days. The U.S. has applied stringent sanctions on Iran that punish any country trading with it. The U.S. waiver enables Iraq to avoid penalties while paying Iran billions of dollars for energy imports.

The issuance of the last waiver came amid fraught U.S.-Iraq ties following an American drone strike that killed the top Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, near Baghdad airport on Jan. 3.

Iraq remains highly dependent on Iranian natural gas to meet electricity demands, especially during the scorching summer months when imports account for a third of consumption. Late payments by Baghdad for Iranian power and gas have resulted in

interruptions in recent years. In the summer of 2018, these interruptions were a factor that led to destabilizing protests in the southern oil-rich province of Basra.

[Iraq] Trump Admin Sanctions Vast Iranian Terror Network in Iraq (Free Beacon)

Free Beacon [3/26/2020 2:00 PM, Adam Kredo, 118K]

The Trump administration on Thursday designated a vast network of front companies and entities tied to Iran's terrorism operations in Iraq, where U.S. personnel have been under near-constant attack by militia groups armed and funded by Tehran.

The new designations target "Iraq-based front companies, senior officials, and business associates that provide support to, or act for or on behalf of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), in addition to transferring lethal aid to Iranian-backed terrorist militias in Iraq, such as Kata'ib Hizballah (KH) and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq (AAH)," according to the Treasury Department.

The companies and terror groups have organized a series of rocket attacks and bombing on U.S. positions in Iraq, including one earlier this month that killed two American troops and one British soldier. At least two rockets struck inside Baghdad's Green Zone early Thursday, with no casualties reported at the time of this writing.

The Trump administration has been engaged in a growing conflict with Iran in Iraq since its killing of top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani. The new terror designations are meant to disrupt Iran's financial networks and deal a blow to these militia groups' capabilities.

"Iran employs a web of front companies to fund terrorist groups across the region, siphoning resources away from the Iranian people and prioritizing terrorist proxies over the basic needs of its people," Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said in a statement.

These sanctions do not impact the import of food and medicine needed to help Iran combat the spreading coronavirus, which has ravaged the Islamic Republic.

The organizations targeted in these new terror designations have participated in the smuggling of arms and money through Iraq's Umm Qasr Port, according to the Treasury Department. Many of the entities also have illegally sold Iranian oil to the Syrian regime and shipped weapons to militants operating in Yemen.

The State Department issued a sanctions waiver ensuring these new sanctions do not impact Iraqi imports of Iranian electricity—a move that highlights the administration's efforts to balance its tough sanctions regime with the need for humanitarian exemptions.

"The United States will not tolerate profiteering by malign Iranian actors from transactions that take place under the sanctions waiver, and we will remain focused on sanctioning those who do so for the benefit of the IRGC-QF or other designated terrorist groups," State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus said.

[Iraq] Iran-Backed Iraqi Terrorists Claim 'U.S. Plot to Exploit Coronavirus Pandemic' (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 3:58 PM, John Hayward, 1973K]

Iraq's Kata'ib Hezbollah, the Iran-backed Shiite militia group that killed an American civilian

contractor in December while launching terrorist rocket attacks against Iraqi military bases, issued a statement on Wednesday accusing the U.S. military of using the coronavirus pandemic as cover to attack its own bases.

Iran's Fars news agency uncritically quoted the Kata'ib Hezbollah statement, which included threats to respond with "full force" to any U.S. move by attacking American "military, security, and economic facilities" across Iraq:

In the current difficult situation, when Iraq has mobilized all its resources to contain the spread of the coronavirus and the popular forces are busy helping the government in the battle, the PMU has been monitoring "suspicious moves by US forces and their mercenaries," who intend to exploit the pandemic and advance certain plots in the country, the statement said.

The US plans to conduct heliborne operations backed up by ground troops and fighter jets against positions belonging to security agencies and positions of Iraq's resistance groups, the statement added.

The statement further said that certain Iraqi military and security forces would participate in the operation.

Kata'ib Hezbollah also warned against the dangerous consequences of such a raid, saying it would worsen the health crisis in Iraq and bring about a humanitarian and social disaster there.

The terrorists vowed bloody revenge against any Iraqis they decide are "collaborating" with the United States.

"The Iraqi side will be treated like an enemy, and its betrayal and crime will never be forgiven ... and will be heavily punished according to law," the group said.

Unsurprisingly, Kata'ib Hezbollah is still upset by the deaths of their deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and Iranian terrorist mastermind Gen. Qassem Soleimani in an airstrike the United States conducted to retaliate for the militia's attacks on American positions and the unsuccessful siege of the U.S. embassy organized by Soleimani.

The Iran-backed militia group denied involvement in several more recent rocket attacks, including one conducted against an Iraqi police and military command center in Baghdad's fortified Green Zone on Thursday. The command center is located only a few hundred yards away from the U.S. Embassy.

Contrary to Kata'ib Hezbollah's coronavirus conspiracy theories, the U.S. and its coalition partners are actually withdrawing from Iraqi military bases, not planning major new operations. Coalition forces commenced a scheduled withdrawal from the Qayara airbase in northern Iraq on Thursday, not long after the rocket attack on the Green Zone.

"Our partnership continues with the Iraqi security forces, but in the future you will see less coalition troops in fewer places with fewer bases," coalition spokesman Myles Caggins said.

Meanwhile, France announced it would withdraw all military forces from Iraq because they

are needed at home to deal with the coronavirus crisis. Caggins stated that only French training personnel have gone home, leaving military advisers and air support in position in Iraq, and he expected the trainers to return as soon as possible.

Iraq's Health Ministry has logged a relatively modest 346 coronavirus cases so far, with 29 deaths. Internal and external travel bans were extended until April 11 on Thursday to keep the virus from spreading. Last weekend, the Iraqi government deployed troops to prevent hundreds of thousands of Shiite Muslims from gathering at a shrine north of Baghdad in defiance of curfew orders and restrictions on large gatherings.

[Iran] Iran says has 'no knowledge' of missing ex-FBI agent (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 4:24 AM, AFP, 1973K]

Iran said on Thursday it had "no knowledge" of the whereabouts of a former FBI agent missing since 2007, after his family said he had died in Iranian custody.

US President Donald Trump did not confirm Bob Levinson's death, saying that Iran had not communicated any news on the former agent, who would have turned 72 this month.

"Iran has always maintained that its officials have no knowledge of Mr. Levinson's whereabouts, and that he is not in Iranian custody," said Alireza Miryousefi, chief press officer at Iran's mission to the United Nations.

"Those facts have not changed."

Levinson's family said that it had learnt that he was dead, although it gave no information on how or when.

"We recently received information from US officials that has led both them and us to conclude that our wonderful husband and father died while in Iranian custody," said a statement from the family.

The family said Levinson died before the coronavirus pandemic, which has hit Iran hard and led authorities to release thousands of prisoners temporarily.

Levinson is one of a number of Americans who have disappeared in arch-enemy Iran, but his case has been among the most perplexing, with his family until now insisting he was alive.

The father of seven vanished in March 2007 in Kish, an island that has more lenient visa rules than the rest of Iran, and was said to have been investigating cigarette counterfeiting.

But The Washington Post reported in 2013 that Levinson, who had retired from the FBI, was working for the CIA and had gone on a rogue mission aimed at gathering intelligence on Iran.

Iranian officials have repeatedly said they had no information about him.

Iran's foreign ministry said in 2018 that Levinson had "travelled to Iran at a certain point and then left" and that it had no information about anything that might have happened after he left.

[Iran] U.S. imposes fresh sanctions on Iranian individuals, companies -Treasury (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 10:30 AM, Lisa Lambert, 5304K]

The United States has imposed sanctions on 15 Iranian individuals and five companies in Iran under a counter-terrorism program, according to a post on the Treasury web site on Thursday.

The sanctions were tied to shipping, trading and construction companies, as well as a chemical firm, according to the post.

[Iran] Hezbollah Joins Iranian Terrorists in Jihad Against Chinese Coronavirus (Breitbart)

Breitbart [3/26/2020 12:29 PM, Frances Martel, 1973K]

The Shiite terrorist organization Hezbollah announced it would invest in doctors, medical equipment, and clinics to treat Chinese coronavirus patients in Lebanon, joining a growing list of terrorist organizations waging what Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dubbed a “jihad” against the pandemic.

Hezbollah is a terrorist organization that disguises itself as a political party in Lebanon. It has deep ties to the Iranian regime and is active in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere in the region in addition to Iran and Lebanon.

Iran’s Tasnim News Agency claimed that Hezbollah “is deploying 1,500 doctors, 3,000 nurses and paramedics and 20,000 more activists” to help contain the coronavirus outbreak in Lebanon, where government officials have documented 368 cases of coronavirus and six deaths as of Thursday. It is not clear where Hezbollah, an organization that specializes in acts of violence to promote radical Islam, is finding doctors, nurses, and paramedics to hire for the fight against the Chinese virus. The 20,000 “activists” are presumably jihadists who participate in promoting the terrorist organization elsewhere.

“It is a real war that we must confront with the mindset of a warrior,” Tasnim quoted Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, head of Hezbollah’s executive council, as saying on television. “Our role is to complement the government apparatus and not to stand in its place.”

Safieddine repeatedly compared Hezbollah’s efforts to wartime actions and described the terrorist organization as “fighting coronavirus with capabilities initially put to confront war and aggression.”

Safieddine notably made the announcement rather than the head of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, who has mostly kept a low profile since the outbreak reached the Middle East. Rumors abounded this month that, in light of dozens of senior members of the Iranian Islamic regime testing positive for the virus, senior Hezbollah members who often meet with them have self-quarantined to prevent from contaminating more people. Some reports speculated that Nasrallah himself had either self-quarantined or become sick after being exposed to the coronavirus.

Hezbollah has been using the coronavirus outbreak for propaganda purposes all week, publishing videos showing alleged “Hezbollah health units” helping disinfect parts of Lebanon and Iran with water hoses, a method the Middle East Monitor noted that scientists have dismissed as “ineffective.”

The mobilization of terrorist groups to confront the Chinese virus follows a dismissive statement at the beginning of the month from Ayatollah Khamenei, who himself at age 80 is in the high-risk group for life-threatening complications as a result of a Chinese coronavirus infection.

“The Coronavirus is not such a big tragedy and this country has surmounted graver ones,” Khamenei claimed in a televised speech. “I don’t want to say it’s unimportant, but let’s not exaggerate it either. The Coronavirus will affect the country briefly & leave.”

Khamenei referred to the response to the outbreak in the country as “doing Jihad for the sake of God.”

The supreme leader tasked the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a U.S.-designated terrorist organization with close ties to Hezbollah, with running the nation’s response to the coronavirus pandemic. The IRGC specializes in aggressive actions to suppress dissidents at home and expand Iran’s influence abroad, particularly in places like Iraq and Syria, where Tehran has used its profits from the Iran nuclear deal to empower its allies.

The IRGC claimed this month that its jihadis are working on a vaccine to fight the Chinese coronavirus and that it would engage in several “biological defense exercises,” as Khamenei has accused the United States of deploying the coronavirus as a biological weapon, without evidence. IRGC officials are using the pandemic to fundraise for further terrorist activities.

Khamenei’s regime claimed this week that it had control of the outbreak in the country and expelled the prestigious humanitarian organization Doctors Without Borders (MSF). MSF said in a statement it was “deeply surprised” by its unceremonious removal as Iran had already allowed two cargo planes full of medical supplies to land in the country.

Iran is currently facing the deadliest regional outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in the Middle East. Official government numbers – which even regional Iranian government officials claim are incorrect and lower than the real extent of the problem – show nearly 30,000 cases of coronavirus in the country and slightly over 2,200 deaths. The dissident National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), which has kept its own daily tally citing medical sources in the country, claims that the death toll is far higher, and the highest in the world. As of Thursday, the NCRI says it has confirmed over 11,500 deaths at the hands of the Chinese coronavirus in Iran.

Both Iranian officials and dissidents agree that the first cases of coronavirus in the country were identified in Qom, a city of religious significance for Shiite Muslims. NCRI accused Chinese nationals traveling to the city of bringing the virus with them in a report on Thursday.

The Chinese coronavirus pandemic began in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in November 2019, according to scientists who have traced back diagnoses to that month. The Chinese Communist Party did not make the existence of a contagious disease in the country public until late January 2020, allowing the free traffic of Wuhan residents worldwide amid Lunar New Year, one of the world’s biggest travel occasions. The Communist Party

now denies that the virus originated in Wuhan and claims it was biologically engineered in the United States, citing no evidence. Iran has made similar claims.

[Russia] Moscow Starts Shutting Down as Kremlin Says No Epidemic Here (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 6:13 AM, Jake Rudnitsky, 6400K]

With the extent of Russia's coronavirus epidemic distorted by a lack of testing, Moscow Mayor Sergey Sobyenin ordered restaurants and most stores in Europe's biggest city to shut down for a week.

Restaurants, parks and stores except for pharmacies and food shops in the city of 12.7 million will shut down from Saturday for eight days, Sobyenin wrote on his website Thursday. Confirmed infections in Moscow jumped by a third to 546 over the last day and make up 65% of the country's total.

"The restrictions introduced today are unprecedented in the modern history of Moscow and will create many inconveniences for the everyday life of every person," Sobyenin said. "But, believe me, they are absolutely necessary in order to slow the spread of coronavirus infection and reduce the number of cases."

Russia is taking the outbreak increasingly seriously. President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday declared paid leave for most workers nationwide next week in a bid to reduce contagion and delayed next month's vote on constitutional changes that could keep him in office until 2036 as he faces the biggest public-health crisis of his 20-year rule. The government halted all international flights starting March 27 after earlier limits on travel and visas.

While in Russia "there is de facto no epidemic" and the Kremlin hopes "to be able to avoid one," Putin is cutting back on his domestic travel and canceled a planned trip to St. Petersburg, his spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on a conference call with reporters Thursday.

On Tuesday, Sobyenin told Putin during a visit to Russia's biggest hospital treating coronavirus patients that the official numbers don't reflect the "full picture" given a lack of testing in the country of 146 million people. Moscow's new measures follow the closing of schools until April 10 and a recommendation that people over 65 to stay at home. Earlier in the month, Moscow banned gatherings of more than 50 people indoors.

[China] To Slow Virus, China Bars Entry by Almost All Foreigners (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 3:36 PM, Keith Bradsher, 23673K]

Worried that international travelers might trigger a second wave of coronavirus infections, China announced late Thursday night that it was suspending practically all entry to the country by foreigners and was halting almost all international passenger flights as well.

The announcement came after official Chinese data indicated that the country had almost completely halted domestic transmission of the virus but was struggling to handle a growing number of people who were infected overseas.

Foreign residents of China and foreigners with previously issued visas will no longer be

allowed to enter the country as of midnight Friday, China's foreign ministry declared late Thursday. The announcement represents one of the most comprehensive international travel bans imposed anywhere in the world, as governments try to slow the spread of the coronavirus that has already infected more than a half million people and killed more than 22,000.

Other leaders who have imposed travel bans, including President Trump, have tended to allow long-term residents from other countries to keep coming and going, even as they restricted most other arrivals. President Trump's travel ban on China on Jan. 31 also exempted immediate family members of American citizens.

China's more stringent travel ban has only a handful of exceptions, notably for diplomats.

The foreign ministry suggested that others who still need to travel to China should apply for new visas at Chinese embassies or consulates elsewhere. New visas would be considered "for necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs," the ministry said.

"The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries," the ministry added.

The Civil Aviation Administration of China issued a separate announcement ordering that each domestic or foreign airline only operate a single passenger flight into China each week until further notice.

Fully 90 percent of the people now coming to China are returning Chinese citizens, Vice Foreign Minister Luo Zhaohui told reporters in Beijing earlier on Thursday, and the sharp reduction in flights will make it much harder for them to go home. Even before the latest measures, Beijing had tried in recent days to discourage overseas Chinese from coming back.

The government has done so through measures like insisting that recent arrivals would have to pay for their hotel rooms during mandatory 14-day quarantines. Beijing has also threatened that the country's labyrinth of government-run health insurance systems might not cover coronavirus infections acquired overseas.

The halt to almost all international passenger flights in and out of China will make it even harder for other countries to import N95 respirators, disposable surgical masks and other personal protection gear from China for their own doctors and nurses. About half the world's airfreight typically moves in the bellies of passenger aircraft, while the rest travels aboard air freighters.

Previous, large-scale cancellations of passenger air services to China have already created an acute shortage of air cargo capacity over the past two weeks. Most Chinese factories have reopened.

Businesses around the world have been rushing to book space on the available air freighters so as to quickly refill supply chains that usually rely on ships. Many of these supply chains had emptied during the four to six weeks that much of the manufacturing in China was shuttered as Beijing clamped down on economic activity to control the virus.

The effectiveness of international travel bans is contentious. President Trump said on Wednesday that while many of his health advisers had opposed his ban affecting most travel from China, "if we didn't do that, thousands and thousands of people would have died."

Mr. Trump's travel ban on China had been strenuously opposed through February by senior Chinese officials, who called repeatedly for it to be removed. Many affluent or politically connected Chinese families send their children to the United States for university, and sometimes for high school as well. The travel ban disrupted their educations.

But flights back to China have been jammed over the past week as the epidemic has mushroomed in the United States and has started to spread beyond cities that receive a lot of international travelers, including New York, Seattle and San Francisco. Mr. Luo said that 40 percent of the Chinese passport holders coming back in recent days were returning students.

China's National Health Commission said earlier on Thursday that all 67 new coronavirus cases officially reported across the country on Wednesday were people who had been infected overseas, as were all 47 reported the previous day.

[China] China closes border to foreign travelers (Politico)

Politico [3/26/2020 2:18 PM, Doug Palmer, 2003K]

China will temporarily close its border to most foreign travelers, effective at 12:01 a.m. on Saturday, to prevent a new outbreak of the coronavirus in the country.

The restriction applies to foreigners holding visas or resident permits, as well as to those holding APEC Business Travel Cards.

"The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries," China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said in a statement released today. "China will stay in close touch with all sides and properly handle personnel exchanges with the rest of the world under the special circumstances."

The ministry said the ban will not affect those with diplomatic, service, courtesy or C visas.

"Foreign nationals coming to China for necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs may apply for visas at Chinese embassies or consulates," it added.

President Donald Trump banned travel from China in late January to stop the spread of the disease, and other countries, including the European Union, have adopted similar restrictions.

White House trade adviser Peter Navarro, in an interview on CNN on Thursday, blamed the scale of the crisis in the United States and around the world on China, saying the country failed to aggressively deal with the initial outbreak.

"The Chinese did not tell us early to mid-December that there was a crisis of human to

human transmission with a new novel coronavirus. That has set the world back six weeks," Navarro said.

[China] China to Suspend Foreigners' Entry Starting Saturday (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/26/2020 1:24 PM, Crystal Chui, Belinda Cao, and Nick Wadhams, 6400K]

China announced it will block almost all foreigners from entering the country starting Saturday, a recognition that most new coronavirus cases were coming from overseas now that the government slowed the spread of the disease among its own people.

Foreigners won't be allowed to enter even with valid visas and work permits, the foreign ministry said in a statement late Thursday, in what it called a "necessary and temporary" step. Diplomats aren't included in the order, and neither are people coming to China "to engage in necessary economic, trade, scientific and technological activities, and for urgent humanitarian needs," it said.

The move mimics travel bans imposed by many other countries, which China had resisted when the majority of global cases were within its borders.

After President Donald Trump barred entry into the U.S. at the end of January by anyone who had been in China in the previous 14 days, Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying said the step could "only create and spread fear, setting a bad example for others."

But China changed its stance after getting the virus under control domestically and as cases have surged in countries around the world, including Italy, Spain and the U.S.

Greater Restrictions

In recent days, China had imposed greater restrictions on foreigners entering the country, including 14-day quarantines on people arriving from countries hit hard by the pandemic. The virus, which originated in the city of Wuhan, has infected a reported 82,000 people in China and killed nearly 3,300 there. A massive lockdown on people in the worst-affected areas has gradually brought the spread of the virus under control, and some cities have allowed workers to return to their jobs.

China had already been drastically scaling back the number of foreigners who could come to the country. Foreign airlines with routes to the country are only being permitted a few flights a week.

According to China's National Health Commission, there were 67 new confirmed cases of COVID-19 on the Chinese mainland Wednesday, all of them imported from overseas, the Xinhua News Agency reported. There were an additional 58 suspected cases, all of which were also from abroad.

[China] China Temporarily Closes Its Borders To Foreign Nationals (Aspen Public Radio)

Aspen Public Radio [3/26/2020 3:45 PM, John Ruwitch and Merrit Kennedy, 1K]

China will close its borders to foreigners starting on Saturday, March 28, in a dramatic step to try to stop the coronavirus coming in from abroad.

The move is the latest in a string of tough steps by the Chinese government to combat the virus, which first appeared in the city of Wuhan late last year and has spread widely since.

China's civil aviation authority on Thursday slashed incoming and outgoing flights to a maximum of one per airline per foreign country each week. It also limited flights to passenger load factors of 75% or lower.

The government of Shanghai ordered most passengers entering the country to undergo a 14-day quarantine as of 6 p.m. Thursday. The capital, Beijing, had already adopted a similar measure. Previously, Shanghai had not been quarantining people without symptoms arriving from locations deemed to be low risk.

It's not clear how long the closure of the border to foreigners — which affects those holding valid visas and residence permits — will remain in place.

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and National Immigration said in a notice posted online Thursday that diplomats, plane or vessel crews, and select others with specific types of visas would be exempted.

"The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries," the notice said. "China will stay in close touch with all sides and properly handle personnel exchanges with the rest of the world under the special circumstances."

Foreign nationals seeking entry to China "for necessary economic, trade, scientific or technological activities or out of emergency humanitarian needs" can still apply at its embassies and consulates, the notice said. Visas issued after this announcement will still be honored, it said.

China began to impose strict quarantines and limits on the flow of people domestically in late January, as the outbreak spread. The number of domestically transmitted cases had fallen to near zero.

But the government has reported an increasing number of imported cases in recent days. It reported 67 new cases of the disease on Thursday, all from abroad.

China had been gradually tightening screening and quarantining of inbound passengers. All passengers coming to China from overseas are required to be tested for the coronavirus.

The "leading group" overseeing China's response, chaired by Premier Li Keqiang, met on Thursday and called for tougher preventative measures at borders, state media reported.

[China] China bars foreigners, citing fears of imported virus cases (Washington Times)

Washington Times [3/26/2020 8:59 AM, Tom Howell Jr., 482K]

China announced it is barring the entry of foreign nationals holding visas or residence permits as of midnight Saturday as part of its efforts to prevent a flare-up of the coronavirus pandemic that started in their country.

The communist government says it got the outbreak under control and is worried about a

rebounding effect, as cases soar in Europe and the Americas.

“The suspension is a temporary measure that China is compelled to take in light of the outbreak situation and the practices of other countries,” China’s Foreign Ministry said. “China will stay in close touch with all sides and properly handle personnel exchanges with the rest of the world under the special circumstances.”

The coronavirus was discovered in Wuhan, China, in December. It killed thousands in China before the epicenter shifted to South Korea and then to places such as Italy and Spain.

U.S. deaths reached a grim milestone of 1,000 deaths Thursday, after New York — the nation’s epicenter — reported 100 more deaths in the last 24-hour period.

There are nearly 70,000 cases from across the U.S. though more than 600 people have already recovered, according to a Johns Hopkins University tracker.

President Trump says his late-January decision to ban foreign nationals who’d been in China for the previous 14 days prevented a far worse problem.

Now, it’s China that is setting up barriers, saying it doesn’t want to squander the fruits of its draconian measures earlier in the year.

The Trump administration has blamed China for not acting swiftly enough or sounding the alarm for the rest of the world, as the outbreak struck Wuhan and its surrounding province at the start of the year.

Mr. Trump praised Chinese President Xi Jinping, however, for his efforts as China mobilized against the virus.

Mr. Xi called for global cooperation during a discussion by video link among leaders of the Group of 20 nations.

“We have mobilized the whole nation, set up collective control and treatment mechanisms and acted with openness and transparency. What we fought was a people’s war against the outbreak. We have put up a strenuous struggle and made tremendous sacrifices,” Mr. Xi told leaders, according to the state-run Xinhua outlet. “Now the situation in China is moving steadily in a positive direction. Life and work are quickly returning to normal. Yet, there is no way we will lower our guard or relax control.”

On Twitter, Mr. Trump said he will discuss the G-20 talks during his White House press conference later Thursday.

[China] China’s Xi offers Trump help in fighting coronavirus as U.S. faces wave of new patients (Reuters)

Reuters [3/27/2020 3:00 AM, Se Young Lee, Lusha Zhang, 5304K]

Chinese President Xi Jinping told U.S. President Donald Trump during a phone call on Friday that he would have China’s support in fighting the coronavirus, as the United States faces the prospect of becoming the next global epicentre of the pandemic.

The United States now has the most coronavirus cases of any country, with 84,946 infections and 1,259 deaths. Hospitals in cities like New York and New Orleans struggle to cope with the wave of patients.

Xi's offer of assistance came amid a long-running war of words between Beijing and Washington over various issues including the coronavirus epidemic.

Trump and some U.S. officials have accused China of a lack of transparency on the virus, and Trump has at times called the coronavirus a "China virus" as it originated there, angering Beijing.

In the call, Xi reiterated to Trump that China had been open and transparent about the epidemic, according to an account of the conversation published by the Chinese foreign ministry.

Trump said on Twitter that he discussed the coronavirus outbreak "in great detail" with Xi.

"China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the virus," Trump said. "We are working closely together. Much respect!"

The World Health Organization has said the United States, which saw 17,099 new coronavirus cases and 281 deaths in the past 24 hours, is expected to become the epicentre of the pandemic.

CHINA CUTS FLIGHTS

Like U.S. hospitals now, China's medical system struggled to contain the coronavirus just two months ago, but draconian city lockdowns and severe travel restrictions has seen China dramatically ease the epidemic.

Mainland China on Friday reported its first local coronavirus case in three days and 54 new imported cases, as Beijing ordered airlines to sharply cut international flights, for fear travellers could reignite the coronavirus outbreak.

The 55 new cases detected on Thursday were down from 67 a day earlier, the National Health Commission said on Friday, taking the tally of infections to 81,340. China's death toll stood at 3,292 as of Thursday, up by five from a day earlier.

The central province of Hubei, with a population of about 60 million, reported no new cases on Thursday, a day after lifting a lockdown and reopening its borders as the epidemic eased there.

The commercial capital of Shanghai reported the most new imported cases with 17, followed by 12 in the southern province of Guangdong and four each in the capital Beijing and the nearby city of Tianjin.

Shanghai now has 125 patients who arrived from overseas, including 46 from Britain and 27 from the United States.

In effect from Sunday, China has ordered its airlines to fly only one route to any country, on

just one flight each week. Foreign airlines must comply with similar curbs on flights to China, although many had already halted services.

About 90% of current international flights into China will be suspended, cutting arrivals to 5,000 passengers a day, from 25,000, the civil aviation regulator said late on Thursday.

From Saturday, China will temporarily suspend entry for foreigners with valid visas and residence permits, in an interim measure, the foreign ministry added.

Before the new curbs, foreign nationals made up about a tenth of the roughly 20,000 travellers arriving on international flights every day, an official of China's National Immigration Administration said last week.

As commercial flights dwindle, Chinese students from wealthy families are paying tens of thousands of dollars to fly home on private jets.

International demand for chartered and private flights into China increased 227% in March from a year earlier, said Shanghai-based private jet service provider iFlyPlus.

Notably, requests for flights from the United States to China rose 10-fold in late March, iFlyPlus told Reuters.

[China] Chinese Distributed Faulty Coronavirus Test Kits Throughout Europe, Reports Indicate (Free Beacon)

Free Beacon [3/26/2020 4:00 PM, Yuichiro Kakutani, 118K]

Thousands of rapid test kits purchased from China by European countries have proven to be defective, according to local reports.

In Spain, which currently has the fourth-highest number of coronavirus cases in the world, the government purchased 640,000 rapid test kits from China and South Korea as it fights the pandemic. Experts soon discovered, however, that the tests it purchased from Chinese company Bioeasy were only correctly identifying coronavirus cases 30 percent of the time, according to Spain's El Pais.

The Czech Republic also purchased 150,000 rapid test kits from China, and have likewise found problems. One doctor using the tests found that 80 percent of the kits were faulty and has reverted back to the conventional lab tests, which are significantly slower to process.

The Spanish government confirmed that the tests did not meet its standards and returned them. The Czech Republic is standing by its purchase, arguing that the kits do work and methodological errors are to blame for the high error rate identified by the doctor.

The Chinese government has distanced itself from reports of defective tests. The Chinese embassy in Spain said the regime did not donate the defective test kits, adding that it has not approved Bioeasy to sell its coronavirus test kits.

The frequent errors of Chinese test kits come as the country's regime receives praise around the world for its efforts to assist European countries afflicted with the coronavirus, which originated in China. In the Washington Post, former U.S. ambassador to Russia Michael McFaul wrote that the United States should use Chinese efforts as a model.

"Framing Chinese and U.S. international efforts in response to the coronavirus in zero-sum terms is counterproductive," McFaul, a contributing columnist for the Post, wrote. "Chinese aid to Europe does not undermine American interests. U.S. officials should applaud Chinese humanitarian assistance to Italy, and then provide the same for our ailing ally."

[China] U.S. Officials Push for Expelling Suspected Chinese Spies at Media Outlets (New York Times)

New York Times [3/26/2020 6:02 PM, Edward Wong and Julian E. Barnes, 23673K]

As China moves forward with expelling almost all American journalists from three major American newspapers, Trump administration officials have intensified discussions over whether to evict employees of Chinese media outlets who they say mainly act as spies.

The action is under consideration because some U.S. officials want to retaliate against China in a new conflict that has revolved around news organizations and is being fueled by hostility over the coronavirus pandemic.

Since the virus began spreading across the United States, Washington and Beijing have waged a global information war over the outbreak. President Trump and his aides are trying to pin responsibility on China, where Communist Party officials initially covered up the dangers of the virus as it was first discovered. Mr. Trump, though, has been criticized for vast failures in the American response.

Some American intelligence officials have pushed for years to expel employees of Chinese media organizations who they say mainly file intelligence reports. The officials now see an opening to make a strong case after Beijing abruptly announced this month that it would expel almost all American citizens who report from mainland China for The New York Times, The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal.

China also demanded those organizations, as well as Voice of America and Time magazine, turn over information on employees, budgets, assets and other operational details.

American officials view the state-run outlets in China as a potent threat in the growing strategic rivalry between the two superpowers, both because it disseminates propaganda around the world and because of its ability to provide cover for intelligence operatives.

"Propaganda outlets that report to the Chinese Communist Party are foreign agents, not 'journalists,'" the State Department spokeswoman, Morgan Ortagus, said on Twitter on Thursday.

"Even General Secretary Xi says they 'must speak for the Party,'" she added, referring to remarks that President Xi Jinping of China made in 2016 as he toured the headquarters of state-run media organizations. In recent days, Ms. Ortagus and Hua Chunying, a spokeswoman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, have engaged in an information duel on Twitter.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has insisted on using the term "Wuhan virus" to refer to the coronavirus, which ignited tensions at an online meeting Wednesday of foreign ministers of the Group of 7 nations. Mr. Trump has used the term "Chinese virus" despite widespread

criticism that the label is racist and encourages attacks on Asian-Americans. Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Ministry, Zhao Lijian, has pushed the conspiracy theory that the U.S. Army might have taken the virus to Wuhan, where the pandemic began.

Against that backdrop, some American officials want to move quickly against Chinese intelligence operatives. American counterintelligence officials have more closely scrutinized the work of Chinese diplomats, journalists, scientists and others in the United States, though some critics have denounced this as a new “red scare.” In September, the United States secretly expelled two employees of the Chinese Embassy in Washington who had been caught driving on a sensitive military base in Virginia with their wives; it appeared to be the first expulsion of Chinese diplomats accused of espionage in more than 30 years.

Any expulsion of Chinese employees at media outlets accused of conducting intelligence work could include ones based at the United Nations, where China has a permanent seat on the Security Council, according to an intelligence official familiar with the plans. Most Chinese employees of state-run organizations work in Washington for large organizations.

Some Chinese intelligence operatives pose as journalists at those agencies and at smaller state-run outlets, using “nonofficial cover,” in the parlance of spies, experts on Chinese espionage say. Some American officials have spoken of entirely shutting down those small outfits as well as any Chinese organization or company accused of being a front for intelligence work.

American officials declined to estimate the number of Chinese intelligence operatives in the United States they say use journalism employment as a cover or the number they would like to expel.

The F.B.I. referred questions to the State Department, which said it does not comment on intelligence matters. The Chinese Embassy did not reply to a request for comment.

American intelligence officials have long asserted that many Chinese journalists abroad play a hybrid role in which they not only provide reports for publications and broadcasters in China, but also give information to Beijing’s intelligence apparatus.

The action now under consideration would try to avoid evicting most of those who play a hybrid role and focus more on people the U.S. government believes are mainly spies, according to intelligence officials. The journalistic reports filed by those Chinese citizens are simply a screen for covertly collecting intelligence, the officials said.

The United States is scrutinizing most closely China Central Television, the main state-run network that has extensive operations overseas, the intelligence official said. It has an arm, China Global Television Network, that runs its own operations and broadcasts in foreign languages.

The main Chinese overseas spy agency, the Ministry of State Security, has operatives at various media outlets, say intelligence officials and experts on Chinese espionage. The People’s Liberation Army also has intelligence operatives overseas with media cover.

American officials were infuriated by China’s announcement of the new wave of expulsions of American journalists, who are not spies. The officials saw the action as part of Beijing’s

attempts to censor reporting about the government's missteps over the coronavirus outbreak.

The officials are now seeking a way to retaliate beyond continuing a cycle of retribution that harms people who practice actual journalism. Taking the fight to the intelligence services would do that, they say, as well as allowing the Americans to avoid criticism that they are clamping down on press freedoms.

One option that some officials have discussed that does not involve spies is limiting the reach and distribution of the Chinese outlets in the United States, whether those are television networks or newspapers. But that runs into the thorny issue of press freedoms. For years, the Chinese government has blocked online access to major foreign news websites and apps, and it often censors broadcasts by international television networks.

The wave of expulsions of journalists in the two countries began when China announced on Feb. 19 it would evict three Wall Street Journal reporters, the first outright expulsions of foreign journalists since 1998.

After that announcement, which came a day after the Trump administration imposed new rules on five Chinese state-run media organizations, American officials grappled with how to respond. Some raised the idea of expelling Chinese state media employees who did intelligence work. Matthew Pottinger, the deputy national security adviser and a former Wall Street Journal reporter based in China, led a meeting on Feb. 24 to discuss options.

The administration announced on March 2 it was issuing new visa quotas on Chinese citizens working at five Chinese media organizations. In total, they could employ only 100 Chinese citizens in their American operations. That would result in the de facto expulsion of about 60.

A senior State Department official said last week that the "Chinese government" had met a deadline of March 13 to identify employees who would remain at the organizations. It was unlikely that Chinese officials had selected intelligence operatives to send back to China, American officials said.

China retaliated against the new quotas by expelling journalists at The Times, The Journal and The Post, affecting at least 13 Americans, even though those newspapers are not tied to the U.S. government.

"Did they really believe they can silence a country like China without any consequences?" Hua Chunying, a Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, wrote on Twitter on Tuesday.

"China clearly no longer sees Western journalists as useful or critical to getting its message out," said Daniel M. Kliman, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a former Asia policy official in the Pentagon. "With the expansion of state-run organizations globally, it seems they don't need Western journalists around."

On Tuesday, the publishers of the three newspapers issued an open letter to China.

The decision by Beijing to expel the journalists during a pandemic, they said, was "uniquely

damaging and reckless as the world continues the struggle to control this disease, a struggle that will require the free flow of reliable news and information.”

[China] Senior administration officials agree to limit Huawei’s access to chips: report (The Hill)

The Hill [3/26/2020 1:22 PM, Maggie Miller, 1762K]

Senior Trump administration officials have come to an agreement to limit the access of embattled Chinese telecommunications group Huawei to the global chip supply chain, Reuters reported Thursday.

The new rule would require foreign companies that use American chip-making equipment to obtain a license from the U.S. before being allowed to sell this equipment to Huawei, which is the largest 5G equipment manufacturer in the world.

According to Reuters, the decision was made to alter the Foreign Direct Product Rule to reflect the change around Huawei following a meeting on Wednesday between officials from various federal agencies.

Both the White House and the Commerce Department declined to comment to The Hill, while a spokesperson for Huawei did not immediately have a comment.

The move against Huawei follows months of pushback against the company from both the Trump administration and bipartisan members of Congress.

Concerns have largely stemmed from a Chinese intelligence law that requires Chinese companies and citizens to participate in state intelligence work and share data if requested.

The Commerce Department added Huawei to its “entity list” last year, effectively blacklisting the company, while the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) unanimously voted in November to classify Huawei as a national security threat and banned U.S. telecom groups from using FCC funds to purchase Huawei equipment.

More recently, President Trump signed into law a raft of measures intended to limit Huawei’s use in the U.S., including a law that bans use of any federal funds to purchase Huawei equipment. Justice Department prosecutors brought charges against Huawei last month for stealing trade secrets and conspiracy to commit racketeering.

Huawei has consistently pushed back against charges brought against it and has filed a lawsuit against the FCC.

[China] U.S. prepares crackdown on Huawei’s global chip supply - sources (Reuters)

Reuters [3/26/2020 2:46 PM, Karen Freifeld, David Shepardson, and Alexandra Alper, 5304K]

Senior officials in the Trump administration agreed to new measures to restrict the global supply of chips to China’s Huawei Technologies, sources familiar with the matter said, as the White House ramps up criticism of China over coronavirus.

The move comes as ties between Washington and Beijing grow more strained, with both sides trading barbs over who is to blame for the spread of the disease and an escalating tit-

for-tat over the expulsion of journalists from both countries.

Under the proposed rule change, foreign companies that use U.S. chipmaking equipment would be required to obtain a U.S. license before supplying certain chips to Huawei. The Chinese telecoms company was blacklisted last year, limiting the company's suppliers.

One of the sources said the rule-change is aimed at curbing sales of chips to Huawei by Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co, a major producer of chips for Huawei's HiSilicon unit, as well as the world's largest contract maker.

It is unclear if President Donald Trump, who appeared to push back against the proposal last month, will sign off on the rule change. But if finalized, it could deal a blow to Huawei and TSMC, hurting U.S. companies as well, sources said.

"This is going to have a far more negative impact on U.S. companies than it will on Huawei, because Huawei will develop their own supply chain," trade lawyer Doug Jacobson said. "Ultimately, Huawei will find alternatives."

A person familiar with the matter said the U.S. government has gone to great lengths to ensure impacts on U.S. industry will be minimal.

The move could anger Beijing, which has spoken out against a global campaign by the United States to compel allies to exclude Huawei from their 5G networks over spying concerns. Huawei has denied the allegations.

Most chip manufacturers rely on equipment produced by U.S. companies such as KLA Corp, Lam Research and Applied Materials, according to a report last year from China's Everbright Securities.

The equipment makers did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

The decision came when U.S. officials from various agencies met and agreed on Wednesday to alter the Foreign Direct Product Rule, which subjects some foreign-made goods based on U.S. technology or software to U.S. regulations, the sources said.

Attendees likely included top officials from the National Security Council and the U.S. Departments of State, Defense, Energy and Commerce. None of them responded to requests for comment.

Huawei declined to comment. TSMC said it "is unable to answer hypothetical questions and does not comment on any individual customer."

One of the sources said the rule-change is aimed at restricting the sale of sophisticated chips to Huawei and not older, more commoditized and widely available semiconductors.

"It's impossible to tell the impact until we know the technical thresholds that may apply," said Washington lawyer Kevin Wolf, a former Commerce Department official.

"Different foundries make different chips at different capabilities so you wouldn't know which foundries are affected the most until you know the technical thresholds," he said.

U.S.-CHINA TENSIONS

The United States placed Huawei on a blacklist in May last year, citing national security concerns. The entity listing, as it is known, allowed the U.S. government to restrict sales of U.S.-made goods to the company and some more limited items made abroad that contain U.S. technology.

But under current regulations, key foreign supply chains remain beyond the reach of U.S. authorities, fueling frustration among China hawks in the administration and prompting a push to toughen up export rules for the company, Reuters reported in November.

The hawks' efforts appeared in jeopardy last month when Trump reacted strongly against the proposed crackdown, after Reuters and the Wall Street Journal reported that a move to block global chip sales to Huawei was under consideration.

"I want our companies to be allowed to do business. I mean, things are put on my desk that have nothing to do with national security, including with chipmakers and various others. So we're going to give it up, and what will happen? They'll make those chips in a different country or they'll make them in China or someplace else," Trump said.

Presidential Tweets

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet1 [3/26/2020 11:36 AM] I will be doing a News Conference live from the @WhiteHouse at 5:00 P.M. (Eastern) to discuss the mtg of the G20 Leaders that took place this morning at 7:55 A.M. by World Teleconference. Also, my 12:00 P.M. Teleconference call w/50 Governors, plus Territories, will be discussed.

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet2 [3/26/2020 4:57 PM] Will be going out in 10 minutes for the press conference.

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet3 [3/26/2020 7:06 PM] Our great Oil & Gas industry is under under seige after having one of the best years in recorded history. It will get better than ever as soon as our Country starts up again. Vital that it does for our National Security!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet4 [3/26/2020 7:50 PM] The world is at war with a hidden enemy. WE WILL WIN!
[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet5 [3/26/2020 9:05 PM] Will be interviewed on @seanhannity at 9:10 P.M. @FoxNews

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

Tweet6 [3/27/2020 1:19 AM] Just finished a very good conversation with President Xi of China. Discussed in great detail the CoronaVirus that is ravaging large parts of our Planet. China has been through much & has developed a strong understanding of the Virus. We are working closely together. Much respect!

{End of Report} [RETURN TO TOP](#)