Office of Information Governance and Privacy

U.S. Department of Homeland Security
500 12th St., SW
Washington, D.C. 20536

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement

May 26, 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
Fourth Release

Dear Mr. Hart:

This letter is the fourth 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 579 pages of records were reviewed for this interim production. These 579 pages of records were located pursuant to a search of the Director's Office. After review of these documents, ICE has determined that 10 pages were deemed non-responsive and 335 pages were duplicative. The responsive 234 pages of records are attached and have been marked 2021-ICLI-00064 660 to 2021-ICLI-00064 893 .

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

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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: 2022.05.27 09:36:34 -04'00'

Korrina Stewart
ICE Litigation Supervisor

Enclosure(s): 234 page(s)

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

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Withheld pursuant to exemption

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of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Act

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From: DHS Daily
Sent: Sun, 22 Mar 2020 07:30:36 -0400
To: (b)(6); @techmis.com
Subject: DHS Morning Briefing (3-22-20)
Attachments: DHS Morning Briefing (3-22-20).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: Sunday, March 22, 2020 8:00 AM ET

Top News

Negotiators race to finalize coronavirus rescue bill to aid reeling economy (Washington Post)

Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf: 'We Have No Plans for a National Lockdown or a National Quarantine' (Breitbart)

DHS chief refutes rumors of national lockdown due to coronavirus: 'It's simply not true' (FOX News)

DOJ seeks new emergency powers amid coronavirus pandemic (Politico)

Barr nudges Congress for expanded powers during coronavirus-like emergencies (Washington Examiner)

Pence To Be Tested For COVID-19; 'Hundreds Of Millions' Of Face Masks In Production (NPR)

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Vice President Mike Pence, second lady Karen Pence test negative for coronavirus, White House says (CNN)

Governments and Companies Race to Make Masks Vital to Virus Fight (New York Times)

Coronavirus cases surge at nursing homes as workers battle 'almost perfect killing machine' (Washington Post)

U.S. airlines reduce passenger flights amid coronavirus pandemic (Breitbart)

National Guard Chief: No Demand for Forces to Act as Law Enforcement (Breitbart)

Coronavirus: 1,200 Young Doctors Sidelined by Lack of Training Residencies (Breitbart)

COVID-19 doctors running out of masks? Try a bandanna, the CDC says (Los Angeles Times)

Hanes will start making masks for health care professionals treating coronavirus (ABC News)

US coronavirus death toll hits 300 as more states urge residents to stay home (CNN)

Some hard-hit areas restrict testing as coronavirus death toll grows in the US (CNN)

Italy virus cases soar again; NY eyes temporary hospitals (San Francisco Chronicle)

Trump renews calls for agencies to 'move fast' on potential coronavirus treatments (FOX News)

Trump steps up effort to tout malaria drug as coronavirus 'game changer' despite doubts from FDA (The Hill)

Lockdowns, stay-at-home policies multiply as coronavirus cases, deaths mount (FOX News)

US unemployment filings surge, reaches two-year high amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

[NY] FAA says 11 air traffic facilities affected by coronavirus outbreak (Washington Post)

[NY] U.S. Court Warns of 'Grave' Pandemic in Prisoner Access Ruling (Bloomberg)

[NY] Trump approves disaster declaration for New York (The Hill)

[NY] New York state is sending 1 million masks to NYC, Gov. Cuomo says (CNN)

[NY] Cuomo says New York coronavirus temporary hospitals to include Javits Center, more as state grapples with crisis (FOX News)

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[IL] Pritzker Calls On Former Medical Professionals, And Asks For Donations Of Gloves, Masks, Other Equip (Northern Public Radio)

[WI] Final 4 Wisconsin Passengers Aboard Cruise Ship Return Home (AP)

[TX] Texas Border County Issues Coronavirus Pandemic-Related Curfew (Breitbart)

[TX] Texas Coronavirus-Related Price Gouging Complaints Mounting Despite Threat of Prosecution (Breitbart)

[TX] Despite sky-high demand, first Harris County testing site off to slow start (Houston Chronicle)

[CA] L.A. County strengthens coronavirus bans: Nail and hair salons, drive-in movies among closures (Los Angeles Times)

[CA] Gavin Newsom Allows Voting by Mail to Protect Californians from Coronavirus (Breitbart)

[CA] Newsom directs $42 million to health care needs during coronavirus (San Francisco Chronicle)

[CA] LA County shifts from containing coronavirus, advises doctors to skip testing of some patients: report (FOX News)

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Coronavirus: Federal Judge Rules Migrants Must Stay in Detention Center (Breitbart)

Growing Calls To Close Immigration Courts And Release Detainees As Virus Spreads (NPR)

Omar joins 14 Democrats calling for ICE to halt deportations because of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)

Citizenship and Immigration Services

DHS Changes Rule to Import More H-1B Foreign Workers in Economic Meltdown (Breitbart)

Customs and Border Protection

Acting CBP commissioner Mark Morgan on enhanced border security amid COVID-19 pandemic (FOX News)

[AZ] Claim they're going shopping: Border officials allow hundreds of Mexican vehicles to cross despite Trump ban (Washington Examiner)

[CA] 5 Migrants Rescued After Being Abandoned in Cold California Mountains by Cartel Smugglers (Breitbart)

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[CA] Coronavirus border travel restrictions start to impact daily life (San Diego Union Tribune)

[Mexico] Some Central Americans awaiting U.S. asylum to be allowed legal entry to Mexico (Reuters)

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Coronavirus and Climate Change Could Stretch FEMA Past Its Limit (Bloomberg)

Katrina-era FEMA director: Trump invoking Stafford Act was 'smart,' important (FOX News)

National Security News

Top U.S. Intelligence Official Taps New Counterterrorism Chief (New York Times)

Africa Lockdowns Begin as Coronavirus Cases Above 1,000 (AP)

[Canada] Canada's coronavirus death toll rises to 13 as repatriation efforts step up (Reuters)

[Peru] Americans stuck in Peru because of coronavirus speak out: 'We are just crossing our fingers' (FOX News)

[Italy] Italy, Pandemic's New Epicenter, Has Lessons for the World (New York Times)

[Gaza Strip] First coronavirus cases confirmed in the Palestinian Gaza Strip (Reuters)

[Somalia] Al Qaeda Branch in Somalia Threatens Americans in East Africa — and Even the U.S. (New York Times)

[Iran] Iran Leader Refuses US Help, Citing Virus Conspiracy Theory (New York Times)

[Pakistan] Pakistan locks down province, bans flights as coronavirus spreads (Washington Post)

[Pakistan] Pakistan halts international passenger flights for two weeks (Breitbart)

[United Arab Emirates] Emirates Airlines suspends flights to dozens more cities (Breitbart)

[China] China's imported coronavirus cases soar as students, expats flock home (Reuters)

[Thailand] Thailand virus cases rocket to 600 as crisis fears grow (Breitbart)

[Japan] An Olympic Showdown: The Rising Clamor to Postpone the Tokyo Summer Games (New York Times)

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[North Korea] North Korea says it received a letter from Trump (CNN)

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

Negotiators race to finalize coronavirus rescue bill to aid reeling economy (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/21/2020 3:46 PM, Mike DeBonis, and Karoun Demirjian 12625K]
Congressional negotiators made progress Saturday on a sweeping stimulus package meant to blunt the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic, a deal that is expected to inject upward of $2 trillion into a reeling U.S. economy over the coming months.

But Republicans and Democrats failed to secure an agreement ahead of a self-imposed 5 p.m. deadline, and hopes of a rapid resolution were thrown into doubt when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) indicated his party would begin drafting "final legislative text" without a deal with Democrats.

"I believe we are poised to deliver the significant relief that Americans need with the speed that this crisis demands," McConnell said in a Saturday night statement, with the Senate poised to take its first procedural votes on the package Sunday.

Justin Goodman, a spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), said any such announcement was premature: "There is not yet an agreement, and we still have not seen large parts of the Republican draft."

The immediate fate of the rescue package — likely to become the most expensive fiscal stimulus in American history — could depend on a Sunday morning meeting of the top four congressional leaders. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) will join McConnell and Schumer, as well as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, to discuss the rescue bill.

Earlier in the day Saturday, GOP senators said an accord was within reach — citing key concessions to Democrats on the expansion of unemployment insurance benefits, emergency health-care funding and other matters.

"Generally speaking, the building blocks of this thing are pretty much in place, and, you know, now some of the differences come down to the finer points of how some of this stuff gets gets done," said Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), the No. 2 Republican leader, following a meeting of key GOP negotiators.

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Schumer was also upbeat earlier in the evening — telling reporters at the Capitol that he was “optimistic we can get a deal” and that senators would be “working through the night” — before Democratic officials warned of a setback due to McConnell’s decision to end talks and start drafting legislation.

With the nation in the grip of a pandemic that has upended daily life, shuttered businesses, left an untold number out of work and sent stocks plummeting, Republicans and Democrats have stressed the imperative to move quickly on what would be the third emergency aid package in less than three weeks. At the White House, President Trump said the legislation is “going to keep companies together, keep workers paid, so they can live and sustain.” A central proposal would deliver checks as large as $1,200 to most U.S. taxpayers.

Lawmakers signaled progress on key fronts, with McConnell asserting in a late-night statement that the “intense bipartisan talks are very close to a resolution.”

Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), the Finance Committee chairman, said there was “a good bipartisan agreement” to expand unemployment insurance — a top Democratic priority — while Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) said a deal to provide some $350 billion for small businesses, giving them financial lifeblood during the health crisis, was all but final.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, said Republicans agreed to a Democratic request to add tens of billions of dollars in emergency aid to hospitals and other parts of the public health infrastructure under massive strain — an influx that Schumer has billed as a “Marshall Plan” for fighting the virus.

Challenges, however, remain: Two officials familiar with the negotiations, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly, said the parties remained divided on how to structure relief measures for larger businesses — including a GOP request to expand the Federal Reserve’s emergency lending program and Democratic requests for restrictions on how firms can use any federal rescue funds.

Underscoring the urgency and rapid pace of the negotiations, Pelosi boarded a flight back to Washington on Saturday after spending the past week at home in San Francisco, according to a senior Democratic aide — indicating she plans to play a central role in negotiating the final plan with Republicans.

Larry Kudlow, director of the National Economic Council, offered the $2 trillion economic impact estimate as he joined Senate negotiations Saturday morning. He put the direct cost of the bill at about $1.4 trillion. A portion of that, he said, would capitalize Federal Reserve emergency lending that could support hundreds of billions of dollars in additional loans.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates 2019’s gross domestic product at $21.4 trillion. Even a bill of $1.4 trillion would amount to nearly double the cost of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act — the fiscal stimulus passed during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.

The ballooning size of the federal coronavirus response has mirrored the escalation of the global health crisis. The legislative response began this month with a $2.5 billion White

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House request, which grew into an $8.3 billion appropriation directed mainly at public health needs. A follow-up package signed into law Wednesday spent more than $100 billion in initial economic relief, providing free testing for covid-19, the disease the virus causes, and an emergency boost to the federal safety net.

“I expect we’ll have a bill by tomorrow that will have significant Democratic priorities, significant Republican priorities, and, hopefully, we can pass a bill Monday morning and send a strong message to the American people that we’re going to get through this,” Alexander said Saturday.

The thorniest issues involve balancing direct aid to Americans through tax rebates with enhanced unemployment benefits directed through the state unemployment insurance systems. Democrats have argued for a significant boost to the latter, but Republicans have expressed doubts about whether states can handle an influx of the dimensions Democrats have proposed.

Democrats have also pushed for more direct cash aid to states to backfill certain budget shortfalls that could lead to drastic cuts in front-line services. Republicans have instead advocated for increasing aid to existing programs such as Medicaid and encouraging states to tap rainy-day funds, White House legislative affairs director Eric Ueland said late Friday.

One area where negotiators appear to have made progress is on the structure of a small-business lending program, which would use existing Small Business Administration credit programs to inject as much as $350 billion into struggling firms.

Rubio told reporters that level of funding could help sustain companies for six to seven weeks, letting them meet payroll and potentially rehire workers who have been laid off because of the pandemic. Eligible businesses would be those employing fewer than 500 people or those otherwise eligible for SBA lending.

“A large, enormous majority of businesses that qualify will be able to get one of these quickly and really provide some certainty for over a month and a half, maybe longer,” he said.

Schumer said in a CNN interview Saturday evening that frequent meetings and calls with Mnuchin, a key White House negotiator, had generated optimism. He said talks had greatly advanced on the Democrats’ unemployment insurance proposal, a key sticking point earlier in the day: “We haven’t dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s, but, conceptually, I think we’re there.”

The hopeful note stood in contrast to a missive that Pelosi sent to House Democrats on Friday evening, calling an initial Senate GOP measure introduced late Wednesday a “nonstarter.” Any bipartisan agreement, she said, must “greatly increase unemployment insurance and Medicaid, help small businesses survive, expand paid sick and family leave and put money directly into the hands of those who need it most.”

While Pelosi has not been directly involved in talks, Schumer said Saturday he had consulted with her “hour by hour.” Should the Senate reach a deal and pass it, House members would have to be called back to vote on the bill, a complication unto itself, given

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the spread of the virus and with two House members announcing they've tested positive for it.

"We are talking to each other, and they know exactly what's in the package, and much of what we want and what they want are very similar," Schumer said on CNN.

Agreement also appeared near on one major issue — how to structure direct payments to people in a way that would effectively flood the economy with hundreds of billions of dollars in cash. The bill McConnell released Thursday drew bipartisan criticism because many would have gotten one-time payments of $1,200, but the poorest Americans — those without federal tax liability — would have gotten as little as $600.

Throughout the day Friday, lawmakers of both parties and administration officials voiced objections to that structure, and as the talks broke up late Friday, Ueland said they were near agreement on ensuring that the poorest Americans didn't get less money. Three congressional aides involved in the talks but not authorized to discuss them publicly confirmed Saturday that all taxpayers would receive equal checks.

Schumer and Democrats were pushing to expand unemployment benefits to provide six weeks of full pay while waiving waiting periods and job-search requirements. That would be a sea change for the nation's unemployment insurance system, which is meant to deliver much smaller checks, not to wholly replace lost wages.

But some Republicans were voicing concerns about the ability of states to administer large-scale increases in the unemployment program, and Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia joined a meeting of senators Friday to issue a warning on that front.

Paul Winfree, a former White House policy aide who now serves as a Heritage Foundation fellow, said conservatives are reluctant to funnel too much money through the unemployment insurance system. An Office of Management and Budget review early in the Trump administration, he said, found states had unspent unemployment insurance balances from the 2009 economic stimulus because they didn't have the systems in place to easily disburse the money to people who qualified.

Democrats warned that even small disagreements about discrete but closely linked pieces of the bill could inhibit an accord.

"There's still a lot more to agree on until we agree on everything," said Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), a Finance Committee member closely involved in the talks about expanding unemployment insurance funding. "This is going to be the largest, when it's all concluded, relief package in history. So, yes, speed is necessary, but getting this done right so that it actually has the effect that we want is equally as important."

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf: 'We Have No Plans for a National Lockdown or a National Quarantine' (Breitbart)

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Breitbart [3/21/2020 4:18 PM, Jeff Poor, 1973K]
Saturday during an appearance on Fox News, acting Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Chad Wolf outright dismissed speculation of a national lockdown or national quarantine as part of the response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak.

Wolf urged viewers to get information from trusted sources.

“It’s simply not true,” he said. “What we see is a lot of disinformation campaigns via text, via social media. So we want to make sure that we refute those, we knock those down. I did that yesterday on Twitter. But a lot of disinformation is just that, disinformation. So again, we want to make sure that individuals are getting their information from trusted sources, so those are your state and federal officials. And we’re asking them not to spread this type of information around. So there is no — we have no plans for a national lockdown or a national quarantine. And again, it’s just that, it’s disinformation.”

Wolf also laid out other measures taken by DHS to be proactive in its response.

“We have a number of different activities underway,” Wolf said. “Obviously, we continue to screen individuals coming back from affected countries. We have travel restrictions on 30 different countries around the world. We still see flights coming back into the U.S. from those countries. So we have CBP officers. We have contract medical screeners screening those individuals. To date, we’ve screened over 220,000 individuals coming back from corona-affected areas. And we’ll continue to do that.”

“Yesterday, we just announced some additional travel restrictions regarding non-essential travel across our land borders with both Canada and Mexico,” he continued. “We are also repatriating and removing individuals coming here illegally from affected areas as well. So there’s a lot that we’re doing. I would also like to mention FEMA. FEMA has stood up their National Response Center. It’s at a level one which is their highest level. It’s a level that you would see after a natural or man-made event that FEMA does. And so FEMA is in the lead of coordinating our federal response. So there’s a lot of activities the Department is doing across the board in response to corona.”

DHS chief refutes rumors of national lockdown due to coronavirus: ‘It’s simply not true’ (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 10:13 AM, Adam Shaw, 8943K] Video: HERE
Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf on Saturday shot down rumors of a potential national lockdown because of the coronavirus, saying that there are no such plans and that such rumors are "disinformation."

“It’s simply not true,” Wolf said on Fox & Friends. “What we see is a lot of disinformation campaigns via text, via social media, so we want to make sure we refute those, knock those down... a lot of this information is just that: disinformation.”

A number of states, including New York, California and Illinois, have issued “stay-at-home” orders, as part of the effort to combat the spread of the virus. Such moves have stoked rumors that such policies could be enacted nationwide by the federal government.

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Some of those rumors include the claim that martial law would be invoked with the assistance of the National Guard -- but they are false, Wolf said.

“We want to make sure that individuals are getting information from trusted sources, so those are your state and federal officials, and we’re asking them not to spread this information around,” he said.

“So we have no plans for a national lockdown or a national quarantine, and again it’s just that -- its disinformation.”

Other officials had also stepped up to shoot down the rumors on Friday.

"I hear unfounded rumors about #NationalGuard troops supporting a nationwide quarantine," tweeted Gen. Joseph Lengyel, chief of the National Guard Bureau. "Let me be clear: There has been no such discussion."

Many people across the U.S. reported receiving text messages warning of martial law, prompting authorities to assure residents the messages were fake. U.S. defense officials have warned that foreign bad actors could use this uncertain time to plant bad rumors in order to panic the American public.

Governors across the country continue to deploy Guard troops in response to the coronavirus pandemic. More than 3,000 have been activated in nearly 30 states to help with efforts to contain the outbreak.

Troops in New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Louisiana and Michigan, among other states, are supporting relief efforts. Their mission includes disinfecting public spaces, distributing food, assisting with transportation and logistical support of health officials, and collecting and delivering samples, the Guard said in a news release.

At the national level, the administration has taken a number of actions to restrict entry into the U.S. as part of the effort to curb the virus’ spread. On Friday, the administration announced restrictions on non-essential travel at the borders with Mexico and Canada.

The U.S. currently has more than 19,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, and 260 deaths.

DOJ seeks new emergency powers amid coronavirus pandemic (Politico)
Politico [3/21/2020 1:01 PM, Betsy Woodruff Swan, 2003K]
The Justice Department has quietly asked Congress for the ability to ask chief judges to detain people indefinitely without trial during emergencies — part of a push for new powers that comes as the coronavirus spreads through the United States.

Documents reviewed by POLITICO detail the department’s requests to lawmakers on a host of topics, including the statute of limitations, asylum and the way court hearings are conducted. POLITICO also reviewed and previously reported on documents seeking the authority to extend deadlines on merger reviews and prosecutions.

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A Justice Department spokesperson declined to comment on the documents.

The move has tapped into a broader fear among civil liberties advocates and Donald Trump's critics — that the president will use a moment of crisis to push for controversial policy changes. Already, he has cited the pandemic as a reason for heightening border restrictions and restricting asylum claims. He has also pushed for further tax cuts as the economy withers, arguing that it would soften the financial blow to Americans. And even without policy changes, Trump has vast emergency powers that he could legally deploy right now to try and slow the coronavirus outbreak.

The DOJ requests — which are unlikely to make it through a Democratic-led House — span several stages of the legal process, from initial arrest to how cases are processed and investigated.

In one of the documents, the department proposed that Congress grant the attorney general power to ask the chief judge of any district court to pause court proceedings "whenever the district court is fully or partially closed by virtue of any natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation."

The proposal would also grant those top judges broad authority to pause court proceedings during emergencies. It would apply to "any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings," according to draft legislative language the department shared with Congress. In making the case for the change, the DOJ document wrote that individual judges can currently pause proceedings during emergencies, but that their proposal would make sure all judges in any particular district could handle emergencies "in a consistent manner."

The request raised eyebrows because of its potential implications for habeas corpus — the constitutional right to appear before a judge after arrest and seek release.

"Not only would it be a violation of that, but it says 'affecting pre-arrest,'" said Norman L. Reimer, the executive director of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. "So that means you could be arrested and never brought before a judge until they decide that the emergency or the civil disobedience is over. I find it absolutely terrifying. Especially in a time of emergency, we should be very careful about granting new powers to the government."

Reimer said the possibility of chief judges suspending all court rules during an emergency without a clear end in sight was deeply disturbing.

"That is something that should not happen in a democracy," he said.

The department also asked Congress to pause the statute of limitations for criminal investigations and civil proceedings during national emergencies, "and for one year following the end of the national emergency," according to the draft legislative text.

Trump recently declared the coronavirus crisis a national emergency.

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Another controversial request: The department is looking to change the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure in some cases to expand the use of videoconference hearings, and to let some of those hearings happen without defendants' consent, according to the draft legislative text.

"Video teleconferencing may be used to conduct an appearance under this rule," read a draft of potential new language for Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 5(f), crossing out the phrase "if the defendant consents."

"Video teleconferencing may be used to arraign a defendant," read draft text of rule 10(c), again striking out the phrase "if the defendant consents."

Reimer said forcing people to have hearings over video rather than in person would threaten civil liberties.

"If it were with the consent of the accused person it would be fine," he said. "But if it's not with the consent of the accused person, it's a terrible road to go down. We have a right to public trials. People have a right to be present in court."

The department also wants Congress to change the law to explicitly say that people with Covid-19 — the illness caused by the novel coronavirus — are not included among those who may apply for asylum. And the department asked for the same change regarding people who are "subject to a presidential proclamation suspending and limiting the entry of aliens into the United States," according to the draft legislative language.

Layli Miller-Munro, the CEO of the Tahirih Justice Center, which advocates for women and girls fleeing violence, said the language would block anyone on a presidential travel ban list from seeking asylum in the U.S.

"I think it's a humanitarian tragedy that fails to recognize that vulnerable people from those countries are among the most persecuted and that protecting them is exactly what the refugee convention was designed to do," she said.

The asylum request comes as the Trump administration on Friday said that it would begin denying entry to all migrants illegally crossing the U.S. southern border, including those seeking asylum.

"I hope we come out of this with a sense of oneness, interconnectedness," Miller-Munro said of the coronavirus pandemic. "Borders can't protect us. Viruses do not care."

Barr nudges Congress for expanded powers during coronavirus-like emergencies (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/21/2020 8:07 PM, Jerry Dunleavy, 570K]
The Justice Department pressed Congress to expand its powers, as well as those of the courts, during national emergencies such as the coronavirus outbreak.

Draft legislative text shared with lawmakers would allow the agency to pause the statute of limitations in both civil and criminal cases and extend them "for one year following the end

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of the national emergency," according to Politico. President Trump declared a national emergency earlier this month in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the language would give the attorney general the authority to ask district court chief judges to pause these court proceedings “whenever the district court is fully or partially closed by virtue of any natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation.” Judges currently can halt such proceedings in emergency situations in their own jurisdictions, but the draft language would make the emergency process more consistent.

The proposal also contained language that seeks to give judges the authority to halt court proceedings in extreme circumstances and would apply to “any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings.”

The Justice Department did not return the Washington Examiner’s request for comment.

Just last week Attorney General William Barr spoke about the coronavirus and what the pandemic would entail for his department.

"As we face the nationwide spread of COVID-19, I want to emphasize that the critical mission of the Department of Justice must and will continue," he said. “It is vital that we work together to safeguard our justice system and thus the safety and security of our nation.”

There were 303,816 confirmed coronavirus cases around the world and at least 12,950 deaths tied to the infection of of Saturday evening, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker. There have been 81,305 confirmed cases in China, where the disease originated, and 3,259 confirmed deaths there. In the U.S., there were 24,148 cases, which have resulted in 301 deaths.

Barr has urged the federal prosecutors to “work closely with the Chief Judge in your district to ensure that every appropriate precaution is taken to protect the health of those who practice in or are called before our courts” and to “take every appropriate precaution to protect those who make the system function, including the judges, court staff, lawyers, parties, jurors, and witnesses who appear in courtrooms.”

The draft legislation language given to Congress would expand the ability of courts to carry out hearings through video teleconferences, including without the consent of the defendant. It additionally would remove the phrase “if the defendant consents” from two different parts of the Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure.

The Southern District of New York — one of the busiest and most important federal districts in the nation — has already begun to move toward allowing grand juries to meet via teleconference amid the coronavirus outbreak, per a standing order issued by Chief U.S. District Judge Colleen McMahon on Friday.

The report from Politico stated that the Justice Department “also wants Congress to change the law to explicitly say that people with COVID-19 — the illness caused by the novel coronavirus — are not included among those who may apply for asylum” and said the draft

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language asked for that rule to apply to those who are “subject to a presidential proclamation suspending and limiting the entry of aliens into the United States.”

Trump imposed a travel ban against Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen. North Korea, and Venezuela earlier in his presidency; Chad and Iraq have since been removed from the list. Travel restrictions against Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania were also instituted earlier this year.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar declared a public health emergency for the entire U.S. in response to the coronavirus on Jan. 31. That same day, Azar announced travel restrictions related to China. At the end of February, Trump implemented restrictions on travel to and from Iran. Trump announced a European travel ban earlier in March.

Barr issued a directive to federal prosecutors last week to prioritize investigations of scam artists and hackers looking to exploit the coronavirus pandemic.

“The pandemic is dangerous enough without wrongdoers seeking to profit from public panic, and this sort of conduct cannot be tolerated,” Barr said. “Every U.S. attorney’s office is thus hereby directed to prioritize the detection, investigation, and prosecution of all criminal conduct related to the current pandemic.”

The attorney general also vowed there would be “severe” consequences if a foreign country was found to be behind the cyberattack against the Health and Human Services Department’s website on Sunday or behind false coronavirus nationwide lockdown rumors.

Barr promised in early March the Justice Department "stands ready to make sure that bad actors do not take advantage of emergency response efforts, healthcare providers, or the American people during this crucial time."

Pence To Be Tested For COVID-19; ‘Hundreds Of Millions’ Of Face Masks In Production (NPR)

NPR [3/21/2020 3:40 PM, Barbara Sprunt and Vanessa Romo]

Vice President Pence on Saturday announced he and his wife will be tested for the COVID-19 coronavirus, following confirmation that an aide on his staff was diagnosed with the respiratory disease last week.

Pence made the remarks at a news conference following the coronavirus task force meeting at the White House. Earlier in the week the vice president, who leads the task force, told reporters that he has not been tested for the virus because the White House doctor had told him he didn’t need to be.

"I’m pleased to report that he is doing well," Pence said of his aide, adding that "he had mild cold-like symptoms for a day and half."

Pence explained that all contact-tracing has been completed and neither he nor the president had direct contact with the aide. Regardless, he said, he would undergo testing later in the day.

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He also offered the latest figures on the number of Americans who have been tested: More than 195,000 people have been tested, not including those who were tested in county hospitals or health care labs around the nation. Of those, roughly 19,350 have tested positive for the coronavirus, Pence said.

President Trump, who was first to speak at the news conference at the White House, ran through the list of steps the administration has taken to fight the spread of the virus, including an order for "hundreds of millions" of face masks and other supplies for health care professionals.

"We started with very few masks and now we're making tens of millions of masks," Trump said after blaming previous administrations for the stockpile shortages the country now faces.

He later specified the government has issued a contract for 500 million N95 masks, saying they are "now" available to hospitals and other health care centers.

Part of the demand for supplies is being met by the private sector in "sixth gear," he said, which is heeding the call to make masks, swabs and ventilators by pivoting from their primary industries to making the desperately needed supplies.

Trump praised Hanes, the cotton clothing maker, for retrofitting its manufacturing capabilities to produce masks for medical use. He also noted the shift by alcohol distilleries in Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia toward making hand sanitizer products that will be distributed throughout all 50 states.

He touted his work on legislation to bring economic relief to businesses and workers. He said his administration will give people extra time to file taxes, moving the deadline from April 15 to July 15. Additionally, he said students will not face interest penalties or fines for delaying student loan payments. Homeowners will also get help: Foreclosures and evictions on HUD loans are suspended for the next 60 days.

Trump talked about reaching agreements with Canada and Mexico to halt the entry of what he called the "Chinese virus," a term some have criticized as stigmatizing.

Adm. Brett Giroir, head of the U.S. Public Health Service, is leading the effort to expand testing. He said the agency is distributing equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile to "many states" on a daily basis.

But there's no clear answer to when states would have enough masks or other equipment.

Giroir said the outcry for more tests is not necessarily an issue of supply — he said there are tens of thousands of tests out there — but of making sure the right facilities are getting the right kind of tests and training.

This week, governors across the country warned that they were seeing shortages of supplies needed for testing, including testing reagents, used to create a chemical reaction to detect the virus, and swabs. On Friday, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said there had been "tremendous progress" in lab testing and dismissed complaints about

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shortages as "anecdotal."

But groups that represent public health labs, epidemiologists and state health officials said late Friday that there were "widespread shortages of laboratory supplies and reagents."

The Association of Public Health Laboratories said testing should be reserved for health care workers and first responders, older Americans with symptoms and other people at high risk of getting seriously ill from the virus.

The groups said mass testing would quickly deplete supplies, and it instead urged people with mild respiratory illness to stay at home and isolate themselves.

Hospitals have also said health care workers lack masks and other gear needed to protect themselves when treating patients with the virus. Pence said on Friday that there would be an announcement this weekend about what he called "a major acquisition" of masks.

A week ago, Trump and Pence had said there would be a website where people could find out whether they needed to be tested for the virus and direct them to nearby drive-through sites. While a division of Google's parent company has developed a pilot project in San Francisco, no website for national use has materialized.

After the president thanked Google for developing the website last week, the tech company put out a statement saying the life sciences division, Verily, was only in the "early stages" of such a rollout.

Vice President Mike Pence, second lady Karen Pence test negative for coronavirus, White House says (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 9:01 PM, Veronica Stracqualursi and Jason Hoffman, 5551K]
Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence have both tested negative for coronavirus, his spokeswoman announced Saturday evening.

"Pleased to report that the COVID-19 test results came back negative for both Vice President @Mike_Pence and Second Lady @KarenPence," said Katie Miller, the press secretary for the vice president, via her Twitter account.

Pence had said he and his wife would be tested Saturday afternoon after a staff member of his office had tested positive for coronavirus.

"Given the unique position that I have as vice president and as the leader of the White House coronavirus task force, both I and my wife will be tested for the coronavirus later this afternoon," Pence said during a news conference at the White House.

His office announced Friday that one of its members tested positive for the coronavirus -- the closest confirmed case to Pence that is publicly known.

Pence told reporters Saturday that his staffer who tested positive for coronavirus is "doing well," had "mild" cold-like symptoms for a day and a half, and has not been at the White House since Monday.

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He reiterated neither President Donald Trump nor himself had direct contact with the staff member, and said that health authorities have traced his contacts. Trump has already tested negative for the virus, the White House said last week.

Pence and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stressed to Americans that they do not have to get tested if they are not displaying symptoms in order to preserve resources.

195,000 Americans tested, more masks ordered

Pence also announced that more than 195,000 Americans have been tested for the virus as cases surpass 22,000 with about half confirmed in New York.

He noted that the number does not include county hospitals or health care labs around the country. Currently, only 19,343 tests have come back positive, Pence said.

Pence said that US Department of Health and Human Services "is completing a half billion dollar order of the (N95) masks."

The purchase is being coordinated through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the federal government is responding specifically to state requests, he said.

He said Apple would be donating 2 million industrial masks and working with the administration to distribute them. The company's CEO confirmed the donation later Saturday, saying Apple was sourcing supplies for health care providers in the US and Europe.

Pence also urged businesses to donate as many N95 masks as they could spare to local hospitals.

Fauci said that there are multiple avenues available for hospitals to acquire personal protective equipment through FEMA.

Pressed on a timeline, Fauci said the supplies would be delivered "sooner than weeks. It is going to be days, I would hope."

Trump also said that while he has signed the Defense Production Act, he has not used it to ramp up production of personal protective equipment because "we have so many companies making so many products."

"We have the act to use in case we need it," Trump said.

He mentioned Hanes as a company that is voluntarily manufacturing masks and claimed that Ford and General Motors have begun making ventilators.

"I had three calls yesterday directly, without having to institute like you will do this. These companies are making them right now," Trump said.

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Asked by CNN why doctors and nurses don't have the medical equipment they need, Trump said that "many administrations preceded me and for the most part they did very little in terms of what you're talking about."

He went on to say, "We are making much of this stuff now, and it's being delivered now."

Trump says Congress close to deal on stimulus bill

Trump also told reporters on Saturday that Congress is close to reaching a deal on a proposal for the next stimulus bill to deal with the pandemic.

"They're all negotiating, and everybody is working hard, and they want to get to a solution that's the right solution. I think we're getting very close," Trump said.

Trump said he's "strongly recommending a buyback exclusion" for companies in the legislation.

On Saturday, congressional and administration negotiators entered a crucial day in the effort to deploy more than $1 trillion in emergency stimulus to a staggering economy, with a growing consensus on a final agreement, but a handful of significant hang-ups still needed to be resolved.

Bipartisan groups of senators worked late into Friday night with top officials from Trump's administration to lock in a final agreement -- a deal that people directly involved in the negotiations tell CNN could top a cost of $1.5 trillion -- before falling short of a midnight deadline imposed by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Larry Kudlow, a top economic adviser to Trump, went even further on the overall scope of the package Saturday, telling reporters it could top $2 trillion.

Governments and Companies Race to Make Masks Vital to Virus Fight (New York Times)
New York Times [3/22/2020 12:14 AM, Rachel Abrams, Jessica Silver-Greenberg, Andrew
President Trump on Saturday sought to assure an anxious American public that help was on the way to overwhelmed hospitals, and that private companies had agreed to provide desperately needed medical supplies to fight the fast-spreading coronavirus.

But Mr. Trump resisted appeals from state and local officials and hospital administrators for more aggressive action, saying he would not compel companies to make face masks and other gear to protect front-line health workers from the virus.

Speaking at a White House briefing with Mr. Trump, Vice President Mike Pence said the federal government had placed orders for "hundreds of millions" of the N-95 face masks that can shield medical workers from the virus. Mr. Trump said the clothing company Hanes was among those that had been enlisted to start churning out masks, although the company said they would not be the N-95 masks that are most effective in protecting medical workers.

Neither Mr. Trump nor Mr. Pence would say when the masks would be ready. And it is

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unclear whether enough new masks and other protective gear will be available before health care facilities start getting overwhelmed by a flood of infected patients. More than 21,000 cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed in the United States, and that number is expected to soar in coming weeks.

As more of the nation goes into an unprecedented lockdown — businesses shuttered, one in four Americans urged to stay in their homes, layoffs soaring — experts expect the United States economy to shrink at a quick pace in the first half of this year.

Seeking to cushion that blow, lawmakers and Trump administration officials were holding weekend negotiations over an economic-stabilization package with a price tag of more than $1 trillion. Resolving one of the major remaining sticking points in the legislation, Democrats and Republicans appeared to be nearing an agreement to send cash payments to Americans.

Federal officials also continued to scramble to make it easier for people to get tested for the coronavirus. The Food and Drug Administration said on Saturday that it would permit a Silicon Valley company, Cepheid, to start selling a diagnostic test that could determine in about 45 minutes whether a patient has the virus that causes Covid-19.

The company's chief medical officer, David Persing, said the new tests were likely to hit the market late in the coming week. He did not say how many would be available or at what cost.

The lack of widespread access to tests has provoked a weekslong outcry nationwide.

But as tests have become more readily available, the supplies of masks and other protective gear needed for those administering the tests have been running low. In other words, a shortage of masks has become a bottleneck slowing the rollout of testing, which experts say is crucial to containing the virus.

In the past two days, health officials in New York, California and elsewhere have started discouraging people from taking the tests if they are only mildly ill.

"We had a chance at mass testing at an early stage, but we blew it as a country," said Mark Levine, a New York City Council member who leads the health committee. "Now testing mildly sick people poses an enormous threat. They should be at home resting, not waiting in line at a testing site."

Doctors and hospital administrators have been warning for weeks that they face acute shortages of masks and lifesaving equipment such as ventilators. State and local officials in New York and elsewhere have been pleading for help from Washington and industry.

Mr. Trump on Saturday continued to resist calls to use the Defense Production Act, a Korean War era law that empowers the federal government to exert control over the private sector to meet national defense needs and ensure that supplies get to where they are most needed, regardless of the business plans of the companies involved.

Mr. Trump said that his inclination was not to interfere with market forces. And because

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companies were voluntarily heeding his calls to action, he said it was unnecessary to invoke the act.

The manufacturing company 3M has said it is sharply increasing its production of N-95 masks, which filter small particles and droplets from the air. The company plans to increase its production in the United States, where it makes about 400 million masks a year, by more than 30 percent over the next year. Honeywell said it had more than doubled its production of N-95 masks in recent months.

And Tim Cook, the chief executive of Apple, said on Saturday that the company planned to donate millions of face masks in the United States and Europe.

But executives in the medical supply industry said that while they are rushing to accelerate their output of face masks, it could take months to ramp up.

Traditional surgical masks can prevent sick people from spreading the virus, but they are believed to be of limited use in keeping healthy people from getting infected. Doctors treating infected patients need the special N-95 masks, which can filter out the virus.

There have been scattered signs of progress at addressing the mask shortage. At a news conference on Saturday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York said the state was purchasing 2 million N-95 masks from American and foreign companies. He said the state was paying a rich price for the coveted masks: $4 apiece for products that normally go for 80 cents.

“It’s price-gouging, but we need them,” Mr. Cuomo said. “And most of these are coming from overseas.”

Matt Hall, a spokesman for Hanes, said Trump administration officials called the company about a week ago to see if Hanes could start making face masks. Hanes and a group of other yarn and clothing companies agreed to make up to 6 million masks a week, he said.

But Hanes is not making the most-sought-after N-95 masks. “They are masks that would be helpful to prevent somebody from sneezing and coughing from spreading any kind of germs that they might have,” Mr. Hall said, adding that the Food and Drug Administration approved a prototype that can be used if N-95s were not available.

Mr. Hall said that Hanes was currently negotiating a contract with the U.S. government to supply the masks at market rates.

Executives at Parkdale Mills, a company in Gastonia, N.C., that provides yarn to Hanes, received a call a few days ago from Peter Navarro, Mr. Trump’s trade adviser. He wanted to know if the company could make masks.

“He said, ‘I need a Manhattan Project,’” said Anderson Warlick, the chairman and chief executive of Parkdale Mills. The company is part of the consortium with Hanes, Fruit of the Loom and several others.

But other companies are struggling to quickly expand their mask-making capacities, in part because of broken overseas supply chains and some countries’ restrictions on exporting

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protective gear during the crisis.

“We have calls from doctors and hospitals that are calling us directly asking if we could ship them masks to their houses in desperation, because the masks are being stolen from the hospitals,” said Ronald Reuben, the chief executive of Medicom, a Canadian company that is one of the world’s leading manufacturers of N-95 and other medical face masks.

Medicom has factories all over the world, including in China, which has barred the company from taking its masks out of the country, Mr. Reuben said. But it only makes N-95 masks in France, where the government has taken over factories that produce essential medical supplies. Mr. Reuben said there is no way to get those N-95 masks to the United States.

Industry officials have been warning for years about the perils of relying on foreign supply chains for essential medical supplies.

Mike Bowen, whose company, Prestige Ameritech, makes masks in a factory in North Richland Hills, Tex., said that he told officials in the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations that about 95 percent of surgical masks are manufactured outside the United States, including by American companies that moved factories overseas to reduce costs. Mr. Bowen said he had repeatedly told federal officials that American hospitals would be at the mercy of other countries in a pandemic.

“Aside from sitting in front of the White House and lighting myself on fire, I feel like I’ve done everything I can,” Mr. Bowen said. Recently, Mr. Bowen said, his company has been fielding roughly 100 calls a day from hospitals and others desperate for more masks.

Other American companies are finding their supply chains frozen.

In its factory in Charlotte, N.C., Strong Manufacturers has three L-shaped machines that are set up to churn out about 70 masks a minute, or roughly 9 million a month.

But the company sourced the raw materials for the masks from a supplier in Wuhan, China, where the coronavirus outbreak started. Now, the goods aren’t coming.

“Our materials were ready to ship from Wuhan, and they got hung up on the dock as soon as this started,” said Alan Bagliore, the chief executive of Strong Manufacturers. He said orders from other suppliers aren’t expected to arrive for up to four weeks.

Companies and individuals with no experience making masks are trying to fill the void.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

Coronavirus cases surge at nursing homes as workers battle ‘almost perfect killing machine’ (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/21/2020 1:43 AM, Peter Whoriskey, Maria Sacchetti, Richard A. Webster, 12625K]
As senior care centers across the country scrambled this week to bolster their defenses against the coronavirus, dozens discovered it already was inside.

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Across the United States, the number of reported cases of coronavirus at nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other elder care centers have spiked, with at least 73 facilities in 22 states reporting infections, according to a review by The Washington Post of reports from states, local media and nursing homes.

As of Friday evening, at least 55 coronavirus deaths occurred among people living in elder care facilities, though the number is probably higher because official counts often omit a description of the person's last place of residence. That figure represented more than a quarter of U.S. deaths attributed to the pandemic, even though fewer than 1 percent of Americans live in care facilities.

The dangers the coronavirus pose to older people have been well documented, and in a nursing home, the virus can move quickly from person to person and be particularly lethal.

Indeed, in late February, an outbreak at the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Wash., showed just how deadly the virus could be in such settings: At least 129 cases have been reported, and 35 people have died. After that outbreak, at another home in New Orleans, five people died this week.

The Kirkland deaths, government and nursing home officials say, spurred their preparations. But as the recent surge in infections shows, some of the defenses may have been deployed too late to slow the virus, while others have been undermined by the same shortages that have constrained the U.S. response to the coronavirus.

Some nursing homes are not requiring workers to use "personal protective equipment" — the disposable masks, gloves and gowns — because of potential shortages, the inconvenience and costs, The Post found. Nationally, some health officials are worried about running out of the protective gear that, among other things, is supposed to prevent the virus from sidelining nursing home workers, firefighters, EMTs and other emergency responders.

Moreover, there are few signs that state health departments are thoroughly testing residents and staff at nursing homes even after an outbreak. At several homes where residents have tested positive, officials are testing only those already showing symptoms, even though some carrying coronavirus show no symptoms at all.

The federal response to the crisis appears to have been a step behind the virus as well. The government agency that regulates most nursing homes, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, offered guidance on March 9 limiting nursing home visitors. Four days later, it offered stricter rules, effectively prohibiting visitors unless a resident was about to die, and shutting down communal activities and dining.

The agency regulates more than 15,000 nursing homes across the country that receive federal Medicaid funding.

"America's patients and providers should rest secure knowing that we are taking aggressive precautions to safeguard your health," CMS Administrator Seema Verma said in a statement announcing the rules March 9.

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Despite assurances, nursing home residents and their loved ones often feel adrift, unable to decide where a person would be best protected from the virus.

“Should I pull him out of there? What should I do?” Elizabeth Penner, a Seattle lawyer whose 71-year-old father is in a retirement home, said earlier this week.

Her father’s facility, the Lakeshore, has had two positive coronavirus cases, one on March 14, and another on March 18.

She worried officials seemed unable to test quickly enough to separate the healthy from the sick.

“There’s completely insufficient resources to deal with what they know is coming,” said Penner, 32, her voice cracking.

She also has a husband, 3-year-old son and two stepchildren who shuttle between homes and could infect him if he stayed with her.

Her father was not tested until Wednesday and on Friday learned his results were negative. She felt he was safest staying put.

‘This could happen anywhere’

Approximately 1.3 million people resided in federally certified nursing facilities in 2017, the most recent data available, and another nearly 1 million others were in assisted living or retirement communities, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), a health policy research organization.

Nursing facilities have accounted for a significant number of deaths because they can turn into breeding grounds for illnesses, the foundation said in a policy brief released after the outbreak in Washington state. Facilities often are densely packed with elderly or sick residents sharing a room. Infection and respiratory issues are common.

Most people who contract coronavirus have mild symptoms, but the elderly and those with diabetes or heart or lung disease are at higher risk of falling severely ill, or dying. Approximately 16 percent of all nursing home residents nationwide underwent treatment for a respiratory illness in 2017, according to the analysis.

“The grim reality is that, for the elderly, covid-19 is an almost perfect killing machine,” said Mark Parkinson, president and CEO of the American Health Care Association (AHCA), during a recent CNN interview.

Jeffrey Duchin, the public health officer in Seattle’s King County, warned that the tragedy at Life Care was not a fluke, noting conditions there are no different from “any long-term care facility, anywhere in the country.”

“This could happen anywhere,” Duchin said.

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While nobody has pinpointed how the virus entered the home, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found staff members working in multiple facilities and "limitations" in infection control helped propel the virus through the home and others in the area. Almost 40 percent of nursing homes nationwide had at least one infection control "deficiency" in 2017, which could include staff failing to wash hands, according to the Kaiser analysis.

Infection control is complicated and requires robust staffing and sustained monitoring often found in hospitals but less so in short-staffed nursing facilities, Duchin said.

"The unfortunate truth is that long-term care facilities do not have the same infection control resources on a daily basis that acute care hospitals have," he said. "They're not required to have the same amount of infection control, oversight of their work or training. And they don't have funding to bring on people to do that routinely."

At Life Care, county health officials said, a typical night shift had nine people for 120 residents.

"It's difficult for staff who are working very hard and sometimes understaffed at these facilities to take on that responsibility," Duchin said. "So for all those reasons, I think you'll see around the country that these facilities are going to be hit very hard by covid-19, just like they're hit very hard every year when we have a H3N2 influenza season."

Indeed, Kirkland is hardly alone. On Wednesday, officials in Florida reported residents or workers at 19 elder-care facilities tested positive. In Oregon, possible cases were being monitored at 97 long-term care facilities. In Washington, at least a dozen elder-care facilities reported cases.

Outbreaks at several facilities raised alarm because of how quickly they spread to other residents: At one nursing home near Chicago 46 residents tested positive, state officials reported this week. At another in Lander, Wyo., eight tested positive, and one in New Orleans has 23 cases, including five dead.

Protective gear shortage 'a money thing'

The nation's nursing homes have taken important steps to address the threat. Many have followed federal guidance and essentially banned visitors. Many facilities have suspended group classes for exercise or crafts and do not allow residents to gather for meals. They also have set up extra hand-washing stations and take residents' temperatures more frequently.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

U.S. airlines reduce passenger flights amid coronavirus pandemic (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 11:45 AM, UPI, 1973K]
United and Southwest airlines have reduced flights and American is flying its first cargo-only flights in decades amid a slow-down in business due to the coronavirus pandemic.

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Southwest made the decision to cancel approximately 1,000 of its almost 4,000 daily flights from Sunday until April 14, amid the “drop in travel demand”, a statement Friday said. The airline will also suspend service to all of its international destinations at the end of the operating day on Sunday.

“We have made this decision due to the number of governments restricting air travel across their borders, as well as guidance from the United States government, and we hope to resume normal operations to our international destinations on May 4, subject to change,” the statement said.

Then, from April 14 through June 5, Southwest will reduce capacity by at least 20 percent, according to a previously revised schedule.

“We sincerely regret any inconvenience to our customers and our employees,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, United Airlines said in a statement Friday that it is reducing its international schedule by 95 percent for April.

American Airlines announced a day earlier it would use its grounded passenger aircraft to fly its first cargo-only flight in decades between the United States and Europe and “help keep business moving,” amid coronavirus.

The first cargo-only flight since 1984 — when American retired the last of its Boeing 747 freighters — has been scheduled to depart Friday from Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport and land Saturday at Frankfurt Airport in Germany.

The airline said in the announcement it will operate two round-trip cargo flights between Dallas and Frankfurt over the next four days. The flights are expected to carry medical supplies, active U.S. military mail, electronics to support people working at home and e-commerce packages.

“It’s an honor to be part of these cargo-only flights, said Ken Jarrell, fleet service clerk, cargo services, DFW, in a statement. “Our team members across the airline are ready and willing to do what it takes to make sure people have the things they need during these unprecedented times.”

Earlier in the week, Airlines for America, the trade group for U.S. airlines, called for $60 billion in direct assistance and loan guarantees amid slowing business from the coronavirus pandemic. Three global alliances, Oneworld, SkyTeam and Star Alliance, representing nearly 60 airlines worldwide, also pleaded for help from government and stakeholders amid estimates of billions of dollars in lost revenue due to the decline in travel.

The reduced business has impacted workers at airports across the country. In New York and New Jersey alone, 1,200 airport workers, employed at airport restaurants and stores operated by OTG, were laid off with no severance and told their health insurance would lapse on March 31.

The laid-off workers were employed at La Guardia, Kennedy International and Newark

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Liberty International airports, according to the union representing them, Unite Here Local 100.

“You can’t pay people,” when the company is taking in very little revenue, senior OTG executive Lawrence Schwartz said.

“The airports are dead,” he added. “No one’s flying.”

United Arab Emirates on Thursday effectively temporarily suspended issuance of all entry visas to the country, a Dubai Airports statement said.

All scheduled UAE passenger flights from several countries have been suspended, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Italy, except for Rome, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, People’s Republic of China, except Beijing, Syria, Turkey and Morocco.

National Guard Chief: No Demand for Forces to Act as Law Enforcement (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 5:57 PM, Kristina Wong, 1973K]
National Guard Bureau Chief Air Force Gen. Joseph Lengyel said recently he does not see any demand from states to have Guard members act in law enforcement roles.

He said during a Pentagon briefing on Thursday:

In many disasters and response, when there’s a pressure put on otherwise civilian, law enforcement activities, people get sick, they need more law enforcement potential out there, then the National Guard could be used in that capacity.

But, he said, “I don’t see any demand signal that’s demanding we’re going to use the National Guard in that kind of scenario.”

He said state governors could ask National Guard members to augment law enforcement if needed — something they could not do if the president federalizes them.

Lengyel also said federalizing the National Guard does “not make sense” in dealing with coronavirus, or mobilizing them under the federal government versus state governments.

He explained that it would make things more difficult for governors who wish to use the National Guard in different capacities:

> The best use of the National Guard is to use the National Guard for the unique authorities that it has, and that is to remain under the command and control of the networks in the states.
>
> Every state has a different way to deal with disasters, and the National Guard is uniquely qualified and postured to act under the command and control of the governors in the state. And so if you were to federalize them, you would lose that ability, and you would lose some other things.

…

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So, while — I mean certainly the president can mobilize and federalize the National Guard but it would be my advice and there's no plans that I'm aware of to take the National Guards in the states and put them in a federal status. They are much better used in a state status under command and control of the governors.

There are 450,000 men and women who serve in the National Guard.

Lengyel said so far, 27 states have mobilized about 2,000 Guard members. He said he expects that to grow to tens of thousands of Guard members being mobilized within states in the next couple of weeks.

He said Guard members are doing a number of things in the nation's coronavirus response. He said they can provide assistance with testing, ground transportation, air transportation, logistics, and a number of other things: For example, he said:

the New York National Guard has been helping local officials distribute food;

the Tennessee Air National Guard's C-17 delivered half a million swabs for test kits to Memphis;
more than 500 soldiers in South Florida are assisting with collecting samples for drive-through testing in Broward County;

in Maryland, the National Guard is supporting medical assessments and testing site operations;
in Wisconsin they are supporting transportation missions for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services; and

in Louisiana, Guard liaison officers are assisting the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

"This is just a sample of the efforts that we are supporting across the country," he said, adding:

Going forward, we expect the role of the National Guard will continue to grow and evolve to meet the country's needs during this historic pandemic. We remain flexible and committed to whatever mission we may be called to do.

"I want to thank all of our Guard members and all the first responders for their service during this difficult time. We continue to rise to every challenge before us and continue to work with our partners to keep our nation safe and remain true to our motto: Always Ready, Always There."

Coronavirus: 1,200 Young Doctors Sidelined by Lack of Training Residencies (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 7:24 PM, Neil Munro, 1973K]
Just as the coronavirus epidemic went nationwide, 1,200 young American doctors have been put on the sidelines because they were denied a place in the limited number of

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medical residencies for 2020, said Kevin Lynn, founder of Doctors Without Jobs.

“More than 6 percent of the graduates of U.S. medical colleges did not get ‘matched’ into a residency this week in a hospital, which means they will never practice medicine,” said Lynn,

“That is a systemic problem,” he said, adding, “we have an ever-increasing need for effective healthcare delivery in this country, and yet we seem to have made it extremely difficult to become a doctor.”

Without a residency for specialized training on their resumé, the fully qualified doctors cannot get doctors’ jobs because they are excluded from employers’ insurance coverage, he said.

Congress should quickly get the doctors into work during the epidemic by extending employers’ insurance coverage to include the many doctors who pass their tests but who have not had a residency, Lynn said.

The annual match process allocates graduates to the limited number of hospital residencies. The graduates — including several thousand foreign graduates — have already passed the Medical Licensing Examination (MLE) but they cannot work as doctors until they serve a residency in a hospital, he said.

“Failing to Match can represent a critical junction for medical students,” according to a 2019 article in opmed.doximity.com. It continued:

Now is the time to decide if you want to move forward with your medical training. While this may seem like an obvious choice — after all, you’ve already put four years and tens of thousands of dollars into the process — that may not actually be the case for many.

So, take the time to take stock of your goals. Talk to your family, loved ones, or partner. Consider looking into other careers in health care, such as hospital operations or consulting. Ultimately, you should ask yourself – is being a doctor truly my dream?

“It took weeks, if not months, to recover from the emotional trauma of not matching,” according to a 2018 article at KevinMd, com. The female doctor continued, “The feeling of watching your friends and classmates see their dreams come to fruition while yours crumbled around you is earth-shattering for a medical student.”

The American doctors are not excluded because they are unqualified, said Lynn. They have passed their college courses and the national MLE test, but do not get picked for specialized training because Congress does not fund enough residencies at hospitals, he said. “Are they at the top of their class? No, but they’re not in the bottom,” said Lynn.

The 1,218 doctors excluded in 2020 is an increase from the 1,162 excluded doctors in 2019, the 1,078 excluded doctors in 2018, the 1,059 excluded doctors in 2017, and the excluded doctors 1,130 in 2016. These exclusion do not count the doctors who repeated their effort to get matched, he said.

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The accumulated lists of excluded doctors have created an unrecognized national reserve of perhaps 5,000 fully qualified doctors who can be deployed during the coronavirus, Lynn said.

Last week, President Donald Trump and Congress changed insurance rules to allow people to use tens of millions of N95 face masks that were designed for non-medical purposes. McClatchy reported March 20:

The purpose of the new legislative provision is to protect manufacturers from liability if U.S. citizens use the masks outside of a hospital environment during a public health crisis, and contract disease.

Under current law, “someone could buy one from Home Depot and say they got coronavirus while walking on the street and wearing a respirator, and the manufacturer will be liable,” said one congressional aide involved in the deliberations.

In Italy, where the epidemic is further advanced, the government has mobilized roughly 10,000 student doctors to the front line.

The supply of hospital residencies is limited because they are funded by Congress — and Congress limits the funding each year.

The number of residencies puts a cap on the flow of new doctors into the sector — and so drives up salaries for current doctors.

The mismatch also encourages various employers to import doctors from the Middle East, India, and Africa under various visa-worker programs.

The visa programs, such as the H-1B and J-1 programs, extract the foreign doctors that people in the foreign countries need for their health and economic growth.

Africa’s doctors are being extracted by U.S, European, and Arab governments who refuse to fund training programs for their own would-be-doctors, according to an April 2019 report in Al Jazeera:

Abuja, Nigeria – In March, hundreds of Nigerian doctors gathered at a hotel in Abuja, the capital, and another in Lagos, the country’s commercial centre, to take a test conducted by the Saudi Arabian health ministry.

In a symbol of the Nigerian medical “brain drain”, those yet to migrate must complete foreign exams in order to get work placements abroad.

Weeks before the attempt by Saudi Arabia to lure Nigeria’s greatest medical talents, dozens had sat the regular Professional Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) exams at the British Council. Once they pass, it will enable them to work in the UK.

“The trend of doctors emigrating to other countries is at an all-time high,” Chike Nwangwu, head of NOIPolls, told Al Jazeera in Abuja. “Our survey … showed that 88 percent of doctors are considering work opportunities abroad.”

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In the United States, the imported doctors most slowly migrate through a complex immigration system, often leaving them with partial workplace rights for several years.

For example, roughly 5,000 Indian-born doctors are waiting in a multi-year waiting line for green cards. The line is long because it is choked by an army of roughly 600,000 Indian H-1B workers and family members who have been imported by U.S. technology companies, banks, and insurance firms and their Indian-run staffing companies.

Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) is pushing his S.386 bill to put the many Indian workers to the front of the green card line — regardless of the impact on non-Indian migrants, and without any exemption for doctors.

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) is pushing a bill that would provide more funding for 15,000 extra residencies per year.

His S.348 bill is titled the "Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2019," sand it ays:

the aggregate number of increases in the otherwise applicable resident limit under this subparagraph shall be equal to 3,000 in each of fiscal years 2021 through 2025, of which at least 1,500 in each such fiscal year shall be used for full-time equivalent residents training in a shortage specialty residency program.

Menendez's bill has 17 co-sponsors, including Sen. Susan Collins, (R-ME)

"Not only do we need the additional residencies, but we also need the prioritization of American graduates to get those residencies," said Lynn, who noted that U.S. hospitals awarded residencies to thousands of foreign doctors each year.

"It gets down to OK, what's the value of spending years at an Americans college, accumulating all that debt and cost? Why not go to India and go to medical school there?" he asked. "There has to be a value in going to an accredited U.S. medical college.201D

COVID-19 doctors running out of masks? Try a bandanna, the CDC says (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/21/2020 9:00 AM, Emily Baumgaertner, 1907K]
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has new advice for medical workers desperate for protective gear against COVID-19: Try a bandanna for protection.

The agency, scrambling to advise healthcare workers faced with severe shortages of gear, also recommends that another "last resort" solution could be a scarf.

"Caution should be exercised," the CDC warns about matching up a house cloth against the new coronavirus. "Their capability to protect [medical workers] is unknown."

It's the latest tip from an increasingly beleaguered agency that continues to loosen safety guidelines, even as coronavirus infections rise.

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“It’s all incredibly disturbing to me. I’ve just been shocked at the CDC’s fall-down,” said Beth Hasenauer, a former pediatric oncology nurse in Monrovia, Calif., who plans to sew makeshift masks for endangered healthcare workers.

“But I don’t want people thinking they’re necessarily safe wearing these. They’re just an emergency stopgap measure.”

U.S. health officials in the early days of the outbreak recommended that any medical worker treating a suspected coronavirus patient wear an N95 mask, which seals tightly around the nose and mouth and filters out about 95% of small airborne particles. But federal officials have said that the Strategic National Stockpile contains just 1% of the masks that experts predict could be needed throughout the pandemic.

There are plans to add 500 million N95 respirators to the stockpile, but those could take up to 18 months to be delivered, according to the grant application. The CDC now says looser-fitting surgical masks are considered “an acceptable alternative” for most medical staff.

And in a worst-case scenario? A DIY-mask, made from household fabrics, is an option.

YouTube and Pinterest now abound with unverified mask-making tutorials: some strung from paper towels and rubber bands; others made with toilet paper (which could soon be depleted as well).

Providence St. Joseph Health, a large hospital chain based in Seattle, is now recruiting volunteers to sew a supplementary supply. Called the 100 Million Mask Challenge, the group is distributing crafting kits to anyone with a sewing machine and “a willing heart.”

“Quilters have always been altruistic,” Hasenauer said, describing blankets sewn for charities and animal pouches crafted during wildfires. “People are sitting at home with nothing to do, wondering how to help out. So we want to channel that energy and salvage the healthcare system.”

In an email sent Friday, Judy Garner, the vice dean for faculty affairs at USC’s Keck School of Medicine, told the faculty that workers who were at “greatest risk of exposure” were facing shortages. She asked them to pool any remaining stashes of face masks and eye protection in communal boxes in the administrative office’s lobby.

In the meantime, hospitals have begun hiding mask inventories behind lock and key. Some doctors say they have researched methods to wash and reuse their masks; others are simply going without.

An emergency room doctor in a Downey hospital said the lax regulations have made her fearful to work, and she called the changes “so, so shortsighted.”

“Saving a few masks today will create an exponentially greater need for more masks later on,” she said. “If we don’t protect the healthcare workers, they will become the main driver of the pandemic. And they will become vectors for the spread.”

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Hanes will start making masks for health care professionals treating coronavirus (ABC News)

ABC News [3/21/2020 9:32 PM, Olivia Eubanks, 2182K] Video: HERE

Hanes clothing company is retrofitting factories to make masks to combat the aggressive spread of novel coronavirus, President Donald Trump announced at a press conference Saturday. The company later confirmed it was pairing with the government to make N95 masks for health care workers on the front line of fighting the disease.

"By way of example, Hanes ... [is] retrofitting manufacturing capabilities in large sections of the plants to produce masks and they're in the process right now," Trump said at Saturday's coronavirus task force briefing.

Health care providers across the country are fearing shortages of face masks and other critical equipment amid the coronavirus outbreak.

Hanes expects to ramp up to production of 1.5 million masks weekly, and the consortium of companies it has joined, led by Parkdale Mills America, is expected to ramp up to production of 5 million to 6 million masks weekly using HanesBrands' design and patterns, the company said in a statement.

"The company's supply chain and product development experts created technical product specifications, including product chemistry, and samples of cotton masks in coordination with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that were approved by the FDA." Hanes said.

Equipment to keep nurses and doctors healthy while treating patients is already in short supply in some parts of the country.

"It's a serious issue," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said at the briefing. "I get the calls every night the way you get emails. ... You're not making things up. I know that because I'm experiencing myself."

Fauci said he hopes it will be "days" before doctors get supplies they need.

Apple will also be donating masks, Vice President Mike Pence said.

"The president and I literally heard directly from Apple that they are donating 2 million industrial masks for this effort around the country and working with our administration to distribute those," he said.

The U.S. Health and Human Services Department has placed an order for 600 million N95 respirator masks over the next 18 months to be made available to health care providers across the country. The masks will come at a price tag of $500 million, according to information provided by HHS.

"Within the national center we have a supply chain task force and in a basic sense we are trying to identify the universe of what's out there, what we hold at the federal level and hold at private sector and mash it up with demand and [we're] asking people to be creative," Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Pete Gaynor said.

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He added, "There's a range of requests across the country and we are trying to match those, again, supply and demand, every day."

Earlier this month, HHS said it had requested proposals to provide 500 million masks to doctors and nurses across the country. Officials have estimated the demand could creep up to a billion in the next six months.

US coronavirus death toll hits 300 as more states urge residents to stay home (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 10:46 PM, Christina Maxouris, Dakin Andone, and Nicole Chavez 5551K]
More than 300 people in the United States have now died from coronavirus, as the illness tightens its grip on the country and prompts fears of widespread shortages of medical supplies.

As of Saturday night, a total of 323 people infected with the disease have died. Minnesota reported its first death while Washington had the highest number of deaths at 94, followed by 70 deaths in New York, according to CNN's tally.

A number of private companies joined the government's efforts to restock masks, ventilators and other supplies while the US Food and Drug Administration authorized the use of the first rapid diagnostic test that could detect the disease in approximately 45 minutes.

Millions of people in five states were spending their first full weekend at home as states ramped up restrictions in an attempt to curb the spread. The number of cases is now surpassing 25,000 nationwide.

As Californians adjusted to their new normal, Gov. Gavin Newsom urged younger residents to avoid visiting beaches.

"Be a good neighbor, be a good citizen," Newsom said. "(It's) time to recognize it's not only about the old folks, it's about your impact in their lives. Don't be selfish."

A few hours earlier, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo had warned younger people of the risk after 54% of the more than 10,000 confirmed cases in the states were individuals between the ages of 18 and 49.

"You're not Superman and you're not Superwoman," the governor said. "You can get this virus and you can transfer the virus and you can wind up hurting someone who you love."

California and New York are among a handful of states that have urged nonessential workers to stay home in an effort to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, alleviate stress on the health-care system and preserve dwindling medical supplies.

The most recent state to enact such a measure was New Jersey, where Gov. Phil Murphy announced a statewide "stay at home" order, closing nonessential retail businesses and asking residents to stay home until further notice. The order, effective at 9 p.m. ET Saturday, also prohibits gatherings and asks individuals to practice social distancing.

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"We know the virus spreads through person-to person contact," the governor said in a news release, "and the best way to prevent further exposure is to limit our public interactions to only the most essential purposes."

Similar measures have been announced in Illinois and Connecticut, directing nonessential workers to stay home, though each state provides for certain exceptions, such as visiting grocery stories, pharmacies or healthcare facilities, among others.

Those restrictions followed similar directives issued by state and local leaders urging residents to stay put and limiting bars and restaurants to take-out and delivery services.

"Every state will head this way," CNN national security analyst Juliette Kayyem said Friday. "People need to prepare themselves that this gets harder before this gets easier."

Cases climb as more are tested

There were at least 25,740 confirmed cases as of Saturday evening -- a number that has soared as testing became more available.

More than 195,000 Americans have been tested, Vice President Mike Pence told reporters in a White House briefing. That total does not include county hospitals or health care labs, the vice president said.

Pence and his wife both tested negative on Saturday afternoon, his press secretary tweeted. A staff member in his office tested positive. The staffer is doing well, Pence said, and neither the vice president nor the President had direct contact with the staffer.

The White House doctor determined there was no reason to believe Pence was exposed, but Pence was tested, "given the unique position that I have as the vice president and as leader of the White House coronavirus task force," the vice president said.

The US Food and Drug Administration on Friday authorized the use of the first rapid diagnostic test that could detect coronavirus in about 45 minutes. The tests will begin shipping next week, according to a statement from the California-based company manufacturing the tests.

In a strategic shift, New York City and Los Angeles County health authorities recommended this week that health care providers avoid testing patients except in cases in which a test result would significantly change the course of treatment.

Guidance from the Los Angeles County Department of Health, dated Thursday, said testing at public health labs would prioritize patients with symptoms, health care workers, residents of long-term care facilities, paramedics and other high-risk patients. Others were encouraged to simply stay at home.

The recommendation reflects a "shifting from a strategy of case containment to slowing disease transmission and averting excess morbidity and mortality," the guidance said.

Guidance from the New York Department of Health directed health care facilities to stop

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testing non-hospitalized patients in an effort to preserve medical supplies.

"At this point in the pandemic, demand for unnecessary testing is contributing to the rapidly diminishing supply of PPE and leading to a decreasing supply of swabs and viral transport media used to collect diagnostic specimens for COVID-19 testing," the guidance read. "Testing may play a more significant role after the pandemic has peaked."

Makeshift masks and hospitals

But as numbers climb, health care workers and state leaders have sounded the alarm on medical supplies beginning to run short.

"Unless we increase the number of masks and gowns available, it's a matter of time before most frontline healthcare workers are infected," said Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency physician with Lifespan, a Rhode Island health system affiliated with Brown University.

"We just don't have adequate equipment and really reusing stuff -- the CDC might be recommending that right now, but that's only because we don't have enough," she said. "It is not standard practice in normal times."

In New York City, now the epicenter of the outbreak in the US, Mayor Bill de Blasio called on Trump for help and said supplies may only last for the next few weeks.

New York state has identified 2 million N95 masks for purchase, Cuomo's office announced. One million masks will be sent to New York City, while 500,000 masks will go to Long Island.

Cuomo said earlier that masks typically priced at 80 cents were now $4, but said, "We need them."

Masks are being donated to healthcare workers from a variety of places and industries, including dentists and woodworkers. Pence said Saturday that Apple was donating masks, too, which CEO Tim Cook later confirmed on Twitter.

"We're donating millions of masks for health professionals in the US and Europe," Cook wrote. "To every one of the heroes on the front lines, we thank you."

The vice president encouraged anyone with spare masks to donate them, particularly people in business and dentistry, saying "that story is literally happening all over the country."

"Look at the supplies of the N95 masks and pack up as much as you can spare," Pence said, "and drop them off at your local hospital, and it would be a great service to our country."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in new guidance this week said facilities facing a "crisis" should consider options to combat shortages that "are not commensurate with US standards of care," including reusing masks or using "homemade ones" from materials like bandanas and scarves.

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Hospitals have already reported they've had to get creative with how to make more masks and make them last longer.

Some have moved to makeshift hospital facilities, too, with one Washington state community getting ready to open a 200-bed hospital on a soccer field. And de Blasio said his city will use "every building we can ... to become essentially annexes to hospitals."

"Supplies are a major issue -- (personal protective equipment), gloves, gowns, mask suppliers," Cuomo said Friday. "I am now asking all product providers, all companies who are in this business, we will pay a premium for these products."

[Editorial note: consult source link for video and extended commentary]

Some hard-hit areas restrict testing as coronavirus death toll grows in the US (CNN)
CNN [3/22/2020 2:35 AM, Faith Karimi, 5551K]
As the coronavirus pandemic grows and more states order residents to stay home, officials are making a tough choice to only test high-risk patients and those who are severely ill.

The number of coronavirus deaths has surged to 323 in the United States as the virus tightens its grip, leading to fears of a widespread shortage of medical supplies.

Officials in hard-hit states such as New York and California are warning that panicked people are flooding hospitals for tests and health care facilities will run out of crucial items. The focus has shifted to avoiding broad testing to conserve rapidly dwindling resources such as masks, ventilators and intensive care beds.

In a strategic shift, authorities are recommending that health care providers avoid testing patients except in cases in which results would significantly change the course of treatment.

New York health officials issued guidance asking medical facilities to stop testing non-hospitalized patients in an effort to preserve medical supplies.

"At this point in the pandemic, demand for unnecessary testing is contributing to the rapidly diminishing supply of PPE (personal protective equipment) ... ," the guidance read. "Testing may play a more significant role after the pandemic has peaked."

California Gov. Gavin Newsom said testing should prioritize hospitalized patients, people with compromised immunities, health care workers, seniors and other high-risk patients.

"Not every single person in the US needs to get tested," said Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. "When you go in and get tested, you are consuming personal protective equipment, masks and gowns — those are high priority for the health care workers who are taking care of people who have coronavirus disease."

A first weekend under restriction for millions

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As the number of confirmed cases surpassed 25,000 nationwide and concerns over testing grow, states are ramping up efforts to stop the spread of the virus.

Millions of people in five states spent their first full weekend at home under new orders by their governors. California, New York, Illinois, Connecticut and New Jersey have urged nonessential workers to stay home in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus and reduce stress on the health care system.

Newsom urged younger residents to avoid visiting beaches as Californians adjusted to their new normal. "(It's) time to recognize it's not only about the old folks, it's about your impact in their lives. Don't be selfish," he said.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo also warned younger people of the risk after 54% of the more than 10,000 confirmed cases in the state were individuals between ages 18 and 49.

"You're not Superman and you're not Superwoman," the governor said. "You can get this virus and you can transfer the virus and you can wind up hurting someone who you love."

The most recent state to enact such a measure was New Jersey, where Gov. Phil Murphy announced a statewide order closing nonessential retail businesses and asking residents to stay home until further notice. The order went into effect at 9 p.m. ET Saturday.

"We know the virus spreads through person-to person contact," the governor said. "The best way to prevent further exposure is to limit our public interactions to only the most essential purposes."

Each state provides for certain exceptions, such as visiting grocery stories, pharmacies or healthcare facilities, among others.

"Every state will head this way," CNN national security analyst Juliette Kayyem said. "People need to prepare themselves that this gets harder before this gets easier."

Cases climb as more people are tested

Numbers have soared as testing became more available, with at least 25,740 confirmed cases as of Saturday evening.

More than 195,000 Americans have been tested, Vice President Mike Pence told reporters. That total does not include county hospitals or health care labs, the vice president said.

As the demand for tests grows, private companies are joining the government's efforts to restock masks, ventilators and other supplies. The US Food and Drug Administration authorized the use of the first rapid diagnostic test that could detect the disease in approximately 45 minutes. The tests will start shipping this week, according to the California-based manufacturer.

Meanwhile, Pence and his wife tested negative Saturday after a staff member in his office tested positive.

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Physician predicts staffing shortages

Health care workers and state leaders have sounded the alarm on medical supplies beginning to run short. Some medical experts are going a step further and adding staff shortages.

Staffing shortages will likely come even before equipment starts to run out, said Dr. David Hill, a pulmonary critical care physician and a spokesman for the American Lung Association.

"Part of it is just exhausting our personnel. Health care is complicated and people make mistakes when they're overworked," Hill said.

If health care workers get sick, "everything can fall apart very quickly," says Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

Italy virus cases soar again; NY eyes temporary hospitals (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/21/2020 5:14 PM, Amy Forliti and Frances D'emilio, AP, 337K]
The coronavirus pandemic took an increasingly bleak toll Saturday in the U.S. and in Europe, producing staggering caseloads in New York and Italy and setting off a desperate scramble to set up thousands of additional hospital beds as the disease notched another grim advance.

Italy, at the heart of Europe's rampaging outbreak, announced 793 new deaths and 6,557 new cases on Saturday — its biggest day-to-day increase yet. In New York, state officials sought out desperately needed medical supplies and hospital beds as confirmed coronavirus cases soared above 10,000 statewide, with 56 deaths.

"Everything that can be done is being done," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said, adding, "We are literally scouring the globe looking for medical supplies."

Across the world, streets, squares and highways in major cities were deserted as curfews and lockdowns multiplied to try to stop the spread of COVID-19. In the U.S., New Jersey and St. Louis were added to a growing list of areas where residents were ordered to stay home. Health care workers from Oklahoma City to Minneapolis sought donations of protective equipment. Staff at a Detroit hospital began creating homemade face masks for workers. Even rural hospitals were strained as people increasingly felt the pandemic closing in.

"There's definitely this underlying fear in the community. You can see it," said Dr. Robert Wagner, an emergency room doctor in the farming community of Vidalia, Georgia, which has not yet seen a confirmed COVID-19 infection, But the 50-bed Meadows Regional Medical Center felt the pressure.

"People are scared, and they don't know where else to turn, so they're turning to us," Wagner said, adding that so far, the hospital has had enough tests for any patient who warrants one, and supplies of masks, gloves and protective gowns were holding up for now.

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But Wagner said he's concerned supplies may start to run out as patient volumes increase. And he worries about staffing shortages if nurses and doctors start to get sick.

In Washington, negotiators from Congress and the White House resumed top-level talks on a ballooning $1 trillion-plus economic rescue package, urged by President Donald Trump to strike a deal to steady a nation thoroughly upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

In Nebraska, 81 counties are without intensive-care beds, and 28 of the most rural counties have no hospital at all. In western Minnesota, three counties are exploring converting part of a former prison into a center to care for coronavirus patients.

The shortage of medical equipment and protective gear was a concern in major cities too. Supplies including protective gear, respirators and hand sanitizer, were dwindling. New Hampshire's largest hospital, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical center, encouraged volunteers to sew face masks for patients, visitors and staff so medical-grade protective equipment could be conserved for health care workers. Integris Health, in Oklahoma, was asking the public to donate masks, hand sanitizers, disposable gloves, and other supplies.

"On a national and global basis, the key supplies are in very short supply," said Jim O'Connor, vice president of Supply Chain Management for Henry Ford Health System in the Detroit area. "We're all struggling to obtain supplies at the level we would like. We are currently providing our supplies as required."

"It's just the perfect storm of a worldwide pandemic, health care systems around the country and around the world are needing the same things at the same time," Integris spokeswoman Brooke Cayot said.

The virus was slower in coming to Oklahoma, Cayot said, but there are now 53 confirmed cases and one death.

When people realize that the virus is in their community, "the anxiety kicks in, and they are rushing to the emergency room," Cayot said. "It's the emergency rooms that are feeling overrun at the moment (by) people who are frightened and understandably so."

For most people, the new virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority recover.

More than 297,000 cases have been confirmed globally, including 12,755 deaths, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University. More than 91,540 people have recovered.

The United States has seen 276 deaths so far. Italy, which has Europe's largest outbreak, now has at least 4,825 dead.

Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza called for a "great alliance" between citizens and institutions, saying "what counts more is the behavior of every individual." Giuseppe Sala, mayor of Milan, capital of the hardest-stricken region of Lombardy, tried to rally the city's 1.4 million citizens, tweeting that "by now, we have understood, this is a marathon, not a sprint."

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Spain now has the third-highest number of infections worldwide. On Saturday it reported a total of nearly 25,000 cases, including 1,326 deaths. Spanish health authorities have acknowledged that some intensive care units in the hardest-hit areas are close to their limit; the army was building a field hospital with 5,500 beds in a convention center in Madrid, where hotels are also being turned into wards for virus patients without serious breathing problems.

Dr. Olga Mediano, who treated victims of a 2004 jihadist bomb attack in Madrid that killed nearly 200 people and wounded many times more, said nothing prepared her for the national health tragedy that Spain is now enduring.

“I have been through many situations," she said from the central city of Guadalajara. “But nothing is like this.”

“If we keep seeing daily increases of 23%, this cannot be withstood much longer,” Mediano said. “We are doubling up on our shifts. We have strategies to hang in there this week, but beyond that we need the situation to improve because we professionals are bearing a lot of pressure, including emotional.”

In Germany’s southern state of Bavaria, town squares were empty. Pigeons outnumbered people in London’s usually bustling Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square a day after the British government ordered the closure of all bars, restaurants, movie theaters and other places where people congregate.

But shoppers still flocked to street markets in both countries, in a sign that restrictions were being interpreted in a patchwork fashion.

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 recorded in Africa rose above 1,000 Saturday, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At least 40 of Africa’s 54 countries now have cases.

Britain still lags behind Italy, Spain and France in the spread of the virus, but the country’s overstretched health system is creaking. Britain, which has recorded 3,983 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 177 deaths, has already asked 65,000 retired nurses and doctors to return to work.

Workers near Moscow are rushing to build a clinic to treat hundreds of coronavirus patients as Russia prepares for a wave of infections. Placards in the style of Soviet propaganda posters have been erected near the site, with one showing Mayor Sergei Sobyanin pointing at the viewer and the slogan "Builders — Minutes count!"

Back in the U.S., restrictions on movement were scheduled to take effect Saturday in Illinois and New Jersey and Sunday in New York. All workers in nonessential businesses will be required to stay home and gatherings of any size are banned in New York. Exceptions will be made for important errands, such as buying groceries and medicine, and for exercise.

Trump renews calls for agencies to ‘move fast’ on potential coronavirus treatments (FOX News)

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FOX News [3/21/2020 12:18 PM, Adam Shaw, 8943K]
President Trump on Saturday renewed his calls for government agencies to “move fast” to expand experimental treatments to treat the coronavirus outbreak, citing a combo of drugs he said could “one of the biggest game changers” in medicine.

“HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine,” he tweeted. “The FDA has moved mountains - Thank You!”

“Hopefully they will BOTH (H works better with A, International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents).....be put in use IMMEDIATELY. PEOPLE ARE DYING, MOVE FAST, and GOD BLESS EVERYONE!”

Trump was referring to a French study that found the antimalarial and antibiotic was effective in counteracting the virus.

“Despite its small sample size our survey shows that hydroxychloroquine treatment is significantly associated with viral load reduction/disappearance in COVID-19 patients and its effect is reinforced by azithromycin,” the study found.

Trump said at a White House press briefing Thursday that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine will be made available to test whether it helps patients recover from coronavirus. He said it was one of a number of antiviral therapies to limit the symptoms of the virus that the administration is trying to get to Americans as quickly as possible.

“I have directed the FDA to eliminate rules and bureaucracy so work can proceed rapidly, quickly and fast,” Trump said. "We have to remove every barrier.”

FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn explained during the press conference it would be allowed under what’s known as “compassionate use” -- where doctors can request to use the experimental drug and get permission from the FDA to give to patients.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, urged caution Friday on the treatments, saying the evidence was, as of yet, only anecdotal.

“So as the Commissioner of FDA and the President mentioned yesterday, we’re trying to strike a balance between making something with a potential of an effect to the American people available, at the same time that we do it under the auspices of a protocol that would give us information to determine if it’s truly safe and truly effective,” he said alongside Trump at a White House press briefing Friday.

“But the information that you’re referring to specifically is anecdotal; it was not done in a controlled clinical trial. So you really can’t make any definitive statement about it,” he said.

But as Trump and Fauci were pressed on whether there was a disagreement, Fauci downplayed the idea that there was a significant difference between them: “The President feels optimistic about something — his feeling about it.”

“What I’m saying is that it might — it might be effective. I’m not saying that it isn’t,” he said.

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“It might be effective. But as a scientist, as we’re getting it out there, we need to do it in a way as — while we are making it available for people who might want the hope that it might work, you’re also collecting data that will ultimately show that it is truly effective and safe under the conditions of COVID-19.”

Trump steps up effort to tout malaria drug as coronavirus ‘game changer’ despite doubts from FDA (The Hill)
The Hill [3/21/2020 11:19 AM, Tal Axelrod, 1762K]
President Trump doubled down on his campaign to cast a malaria drug as a coronavirus cure, saying the treatment could be a game changer despite skepticism from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other government officials.

“HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine. The FDA has moved mountains - Thank You!” Trump tweeted Saturday morning.

“Hopefully they will BOTH…be put in use IMMEDIATELY. PEOPLE ARE DYING, MOVE FAST, and GOD BLESS EVERYONE!”

Trump has repeatedly hyped the malaria treatment as a possible cure for COVID-19, which has already infected nearly 20,000 people in the U.S.

The president repeatedly said he has a good "feeling" about the drug at a White House press conference Friday.

“I feel good about it. That’s all it is. Just a feeling,” he said. “You know, I’m a smart guy. I feel good about it. And we’re going to see. You’re going to see soon enough.”

However, Trump’s confidence over the drug flies in the face of remarks from other government officials who are less bullish over the treatment’s possible effect on the coronavirus.

When asked on Friday if hydroxychloroquine could be used to prevent COVID-19, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert, replied "no."

“The information that you’re referring to specifically is anecdotal,” Fauci added. “It was not done in a controlled clinical trial, so you really can’t make any definitive statement about it.”

FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn has also downplayed the potency of the drug on COVID-19, saying this week he does not want to “provide false hope.”

“We may have the right drug, but it might not be in the appropriate dosage form right now, and it might do more harm than good,” he said.

Hahn added during the White House press conference that a vaccine for the coronavirus is currently in the first phase of a clinical trial and wouldn’t be ready for 12 months.

The muddled messaging comes as the White House grapples with the spread of the

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coronavirus, which has infected nearly 18,000 people and killed 239 in the U.S. as of Saturday morning, according to The New York Times's tally.

Lockdowns, stay-at-home policies multiply as coronavirus cases, deaths mount (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 5:29 AM, Dom Calicchio, 8943K]
In the U.S. and across the globe, more people were under official lockdowns or stay-at-home policies early Saturday as coronavirus cases and fatalities mounted.

In New York City, coronavirus patients were dying at a rate of more than one an hour, with that rate expected to rise, the city's health commissioner said Friday, according to The New York Post.

After California's governor issued the nation's strictest "stay at home" order Thursday night, taking effect at midnight Friday. The governors of New York, Illinois and Connecticut did likewise, with Oregon among the states expected to follow suit.

All told, the orders would confine around 75 million Americans to their homes – able to go out only for essential reasons, such as vital work duties or to gather food and supplies.

"This is not a permanent state, this is a moment in time," California Gov. Gavin Newsom said, trying to assure the nation's most populous state that the order would eventually lift.

In Los Angeles, the sight of nearly empty freeways was startling in a city long known for extensive traffic snarls.

New York, the state with the most COVID-19 cases in the nation, received a "major disaster" declaration Friday from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), giving it access to a share of $42 billion in federal Disaster Relief Fund dollars.

Early Saturday, New York had more than 8,400 confirmed coronavirus cases and nearly 50 deaths, while the entire U.S. had more than 19,600 confirmed cases and about 250 deaths.

"No, this is not life as usual," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said as the death toll in the U.S. topped 200, with at least 35 in his state. "Accept it and realize it and deal with it."

Cuomo said that starting Sunday, all workers in nonessential businesses must stay home as much as possible, and all nonessential gatherings of any size for any reason will be banned in the state of over 19 million people.

"When I talk about the most drastic action we can take, this is the most drastic action we can take," Cuomo said.

After announcing the state's fourth fatality related to coronavirus, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont said of the lockdown: "It's tough medicine. I think it's the right medicine. What we're trying to do is everything we can to improve the supply when it comes to what we can do for our health care system."

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Outside the U.S., Colombia's president called for three weeks of home isolation, to begin Tuesday, with the capital Bogota already on lockdown Friday, The Associated Press reported.

Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela were already on lockdown.

Nations were hoping to avoid situations in China and Italy, where the most cases have occurred. China had more than 81,000 cases early Saturday while Italy had more than 47,000.

Worldwide, there were more than 275,000 coronavirus cases reported and 11,300 deaths.

US unemployment filings surge, reaches two-year high amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)
FOX News [3/20/2020 6:05 PM, Bret Baier, 8943K]
This is a rush transcript from "Special Report," March 20, 2020. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

BRET BAIER, FOX NEWS ANCHOR: Good evening, I'm Bret Baier. "BREAKING TONIGHT", the governors of the three of the country's most populous states, California, New York and Illinois, are ordering workers in non-essential businesses to stay home because of the coronavirus pandemic.

President Trump is still downplaying the prospect of a national lockdown. Saying, he does not think he will ever be necessary. Members of Congress and the administration are working on a massive economic stimulus package right now.

As more Americans take tests for the coronavirus, the infection rate is skyrocketing as predicted to more than 14,000 cases. So far, 210 deaths in the U.S.

Vice President Pence, says about 90 percent of Americans who have taken the test, so far, did not have the virus.

While the president is strongly, and at times, compatibly pushing alternative therapies to fight the COVID-19 virus, he is receiving some pushback from one of his top advisors. Dr. Anthony Fauci is cautioning reports of success are anecdotal and data needs to be collected.

The U.S. is closing its borders with Mexico and Canada to non-essential travel because of the coronavirus. The president's response coordinator, says young people under 20 are being seriously affected but all have recovered.

Dr. Deborah Birx, emphasizing today that no one is immune, as she did last night on SPECIAL REPORT.

The administration is pushing back the tax deadline from April 15th to July 15th. It is also waiving interest on federal student loans. At least 32 states have activated or plan to activate National Guard forces. And that's what we begin.

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Chief White House correspondent John Roberts, begins our coverage live on the North Lawn tonight. Good evening, John.

JOHN ROBERTS, FOX NEWS CHIEF WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Bret, good evening to you. Just a few moments ago, you mentioned this idea of some sort of looming national shutdown and is one on the way. Well, just a few minutes ago, the DHS Secretary Chad Wolf, tweeted out that rumors of a national lockdown are just that rumors and that there is nothing in the works. But the administration is taking strict new measures to stop the spread of the virus.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ROBERTS: President Trump, today moved to close the border between the United States and Mexico to all but essential travel and trade. Also taking steps to turn back people who crossed the southern and northern borders illegally.

Saying, in the midst of a global pandemic, illegal immigration could create a perfect storm to spread infection.

DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Left unchecked, this would cripple our immigration system, overwhelm our healthcare system, and severely damage our national security. We're not going to let that happen.

ROBERTS: On Capitol Hill, negotiations will continue all weekend to come up with a massive financial package that could top $1.3 trillion. Democrats concerned it means too much toward corporations and not enough toward individuals.

Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and the president speaking by phone this morning.

TRUMP: All of that is being discussed right now. We talked about, as an example, buyback -- stock buybacks. I want that money to be used for the workers and also for the company to keep the company going.

ROBERTS: Are you in the same page with Senator Schumer?

TRUMP: Not so far away. I tell you, we're not very -- we're not very far away.

ROBERTS: And the need for a stimulus growing by the hour. New York State now joining California, telling all non-essential businesses to tell their employees to stay home as of Sunday night.

GOV. ANDREW CUOMO (D-NY): Today, we're bringing it to 100 percent of the workforce. Must stay home.

ROBERTS: From the podium at the White House today, applause for Governor Andrew Cuomo from infectious disease specialist Dr. Anthony Fauci.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY AND

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INFECTIOUS DISEASES: I want to say, I strongly support what he's doing.

ROBERTS: But also in the briefing room, differing views on whether an anti- malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, might be quickly available to treat coronavirus infection. President Trump bullish on it.

TRUMP: I feel good about it. It's all it is, just a feeling, you know, smart guy. I feel good about it.

ROBERTS: Dr. Anthony Fauci, saying, it might be effective but more circumspect about its prospects as a treatment.

FAUCI: We need to do it in a way as while we are making it available for people who might want the hope that it might work, you're also collecting data that will ultimately show that it is truly effective and safe under the conditions of COVID-19.

ROBERTS: There was also a contradiction in whether President Trump had started using the defense production act to build up inventories of medical equipment in short supply, at first, saying he had.

TRUMP: I invoke the Defense Production Act. And last night, we put it into gear.

ROBERTS: But later indicating, he didn't have to.

TRUMP: So far, we haven't had to. It's an amazing thing that happened. We are literally being besieged in a beautiful way by companies that want to do the work. They want to do the job, they want to help us. They want to help our country.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

ROBERTS: At the coronavirus briefing today, for the very first time, the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who warned Americans about disinformation regarding the coronavirus from bad actors overseas. Saying that elements in China, Iran, and Russia, are launching a coordinating effort -- a coordinated effort to disparage what the Trump administration is doing to respond to the coronavirus. Bret.

BAIER: John Roberts, live in the North Lawn. John, thanks.

Speaking of coordinated effort, another message a short while ago, General Joseph Lengyel, the head of the National Guard, tweeting, "I hear unfounded rumors about National Guard troops supporting a nationwide quarantine. Let me be clear, there has been no such discussion."

The Dow today plunging 913 points to end its worst week since 2008. It's worth a month since 1931. The S&P 500 lost 104, the NASDAQ dropped 271. For the week, the Dow hammered 17.3 percent. The S&P 500 lost 15. The NASDAQ fell 12-2/3.

Let's get some analysis now from Susan Li of Fox Business, who joins us from New York. Good evening, Susan.

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SUSAN LI, FOX BUSINESS NETWORK CORRESPONDENT: Good evening, Bret. A worst week, as you mentioned, for the stock markets since 2008. With the Dow on pace now for its worst month since the Great Depression.

The Dow trading at its lowest in four years, the S&P 500 lowest levels in three years, and the NASDAQ down 12 percent in just five trading sessions.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

TRUMP: If you look at your stock market geniuses that some of whom are not geniuses, but they think they are. A lot of people think that I'm right about that, that once we defeat the virus. I think you're going to have a very steep like a rocket ship, it's going to go up.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

LI: As America's two biggest states: California and New York orders nonessential workers to stay home. That means job losses and lost paychecks. Goldman Sachs predicting jobless claims will hit a record 2-1/4 million next week. That's more than three times the previous high of 695,000 back in 1982.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

[NY] FAA says 11 air traffic facilities affected by coronavirus outbreak (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/21/2020 11:44 PM, Michael Laris, 12625K]
The Federal Aviation Administration said late Saturday that 11 of its air traffic control facilities nationwide have employees who have tested positive for covid-19.

They include the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center in Long Island, which handles a broad swath of airspace; the air traffic control towers at John F. Kennedy International (JFK) and LaGuardia airports in New York; executive airports in Leesburg, Va., and Long Island; and facilities in Peoria, Ill. and Wilmington, De., in addition to previously reported cases in Las Vegas, Indianapolis and Chicago.

Widespread disruptions were seen Saturday after an air traffic control trainee and others in New York tested positive, according to the FAA.

The FAA said it was not specifying the total number of employees infected because the numbers keep changing.

"Like much of the country, the Federal Aviation Administration is experiencing an increase in COVID-19 cases at air traffic facilities and other offices across the nation," the agency said in a statement. "Despite the challenges, our commitment to safety will not waver."

Demand for aviation has plummeted with the spread of the virus, hammering airlines, though significant numbers of travelers are still taking to the air.

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The FAA described actions it is taking to keep planes flying and its employees safe, including “transferring duties” to other facilities; closing the LaGuardia control tower and the New York air route center for overnight cleaning Saturday night through early Sunday morning; working to disinfect other facilities; and tracing contacts between the infected workers and their colleagues and others.

“Each disruption has a distinct impact on the air traffic system,” the agency said. “This is frustrating and inconvenient, but is necessary in the interest of safety.”

The agency said the “effects on traffic” because of the overnight New York closures “are expected to be minimal due to the low volume during those hours.” It said other facilities “will provide key services” during that time.

Earlier Saturday, the FAA also pointed to limited supplies of basic cleaning products, such as wipes and sanitizer, as a challenge at some of its facilities. Shortages of masks and test kits have hampered the U.S. response to the novel coronavirus.

“We are restocking cleaning supplies at air traffic facilities where they are running low,” the FAA said in a statement. “As an interim measure, the agency has authorized managers to purchase cleaning products at local stores if needed to sanitize workspaces. We are not requiring employees to bring supplies from home, although some employees are doing so voluntarily.”

The acknowledgment came after Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-Va.) pressed the agency last week on the availability of cleaning supplies for FAA employees.

On Saturday, a trainee at the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center and an employe or employees at LaGuardia air traffic control tower tested positive, the agency said.The FAA also said Saturday that personnel at JFK’s tower tested positive on Thursday, and that operations there were “temporarily moved to an alternative site during cleaning.”

On Saturday, major flight restrictions affected airports around the country.

Even as the FAA said in a statement that it may have to close “sectors of airspace during the sanitization process,” the FAA issued “ground stops” Saturday for New York’s JFK and Philadelphia International Airport, among others.

That meant flights headed for those airports were not permitted to take off from their original airports. And if they had already taken off, they could be held in the air or diverted to other places depending on how long the restrictions were in place.

The restrictions were quickly lifted on Philadelphia and some other locations but stayed in effect longer at JFK. Planes headed there from Florida, Texas, Georgia and the D.C. region were all blocked by the JFK ground stop Saturday afternoon, but the limits were later removed, according to an FAA notice.

Earlier positive tests by employees in air traffic control towers at Chicago’s Midway airport and elsewhere have also prompted closures for cleaning in recent days.

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FAA administrator Steve Dickson is under self-quarantine after having a “brief interaction” with Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), who has tested positive, before a House hearing earlier this month.

Wexton wrote the FAA on Thursday, raising concerns from employees about sanitation and the need for additional teleworking.

“We received word that ‘no action is required until a case is confirmed positive by a medical authority’ and that the extent of action taken so far has been to advise facilities to make local purchases of cleaning supplies while the FAA takes steps to find other sources of cleaning products and establish enhanced cleaning protocols,” Wexton wrote.

Wexton said in a statement that it is “absolutely unacceptable that the FAA has not implemented critical measures to safeguard the health of its workforce,” and that the “well-being of our air traffic controllers is vital to preserving not only the safety of our airspace but also our national security.”

The FAA said Saturday that it is “encouraging all eligible employees to telework to the maximum extent possible” and has limited outsiders from FAA facilities to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Still, it added, “many employees perform critical functions that cannot be handled remotely.” In such cases, “we are employing social distancing measures and increasing the cleaning of workspaces to reduce risk of exposure,” the agency said. Contingency plans are in place to make sure oversight of airlines and aviation safety do not suffer, it said.

“In extreme cases, service levels could vary, but safety will not be compromised,” the agency said.

In responses it provided to Wexton, the FAA said its Air Traffic Organization “is asking our facilities to make local purchases for cleaners, wipes, and hand sanitizer where possible” and the agency is “supplementing supplies from our Logistics Center as best we can.”

“Cleaning materials that meet the criteria are in short supply across the marketplace, and we may face further challenges maintaining adequate quantities,” the agency said. The FAA said it is searching for vendors to make and deliver cleaning products to the agency to support the work of air traffic controllers.

“We also continue to reach out to FEMA and DOD to see if they can help augment our supplies,” the FAA said, referring to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Defense.

In an added statement Saturday, the FAA said, “with the exception of a couple of isolated cases, we have adequate supplies nationally.” It said “restocking to ensure the health and safety of our workforce is a priority.”

The infected employee or employees in the air traffic control tower at Leesburg Executive Airport tested positive Saturday, as did personnel at LaGuardia and in Peoria, the FAA said. The positive test or tests in Wilmington came Friday, it said.

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Employees at two separate facilities at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas tested positive. The air traffic control tower there remained closed as of Saturday night, as workers were “cleaning to standards,” the FAA said, but the McCarran Terminal Radar Approach Control Facility was operating.

Operations are normal at the Republic Airport in Long Island, and in Leesburg, the FAA said.

[NY] U.S. Court Warns of ‘Grave’ Pandemic in Prisoner Access Ruling (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/21/2020 12:50 PM, Erik Larson, 6400K]
The U.S. Bureau of Prisons was urged by a federal appeals court to work quickly with defense attorneys to adopt procedures for granting New York inmates’ access to lawyers during emergencies, including the potentially “grave and enduring” coronavirus outbreak.

The U.S. Court of Appeals in Manhattan said in a ruling Friday that the prison bureau and the Federal Defenders of New York should find a mediator to “diligently and speedily” put a new process in place.

The case, filed last year before the pandemic hit, came in response to what the defenders said was the “severe curtailment” of their access to inmates at a jail in Brooklyn, New York. They cited emergencies including a fire, a bomb scare and staffing issues caused by a partial shutdown of the federal government.

“As we write this opinion, a different and even more dramatic challenge is presented by Covid-19, a novel and easily transmitted viral disease that has prompted a rapid reorientation of workplace practices and social life in support of public health,” the three-judge panel wrote.

The U.S. prison system has been upended by the worsening pandemic, which has sickened 260,000 worldwide and killed more than 10,000. Prisoner rights groups have urged state and federal jailers to release some non-violent detainees on bail to protect their safety, given the ability of the virus to spread quickly in confined spaces such as prisons and jails.

The panel didn’t weigh in on the merits of the lawsuit, saying the case raised “novel questions of constitutional law.” Instead, the court sent the dispute back to a district judge and urged the lower court “in the strongest possible terms” to quickly get the parties to agree to a mediator who could help work out a new policy.

The Bureau of Prisons didn’t immediately respond to a call for comment. In a statement on its website in response to the outbreak, the agency said inmates’ access to legal counsel “remains a paramount requirement.”

The agency has nevertheless suspended legal visits for 30 days, after which it will reevaluate the policy. The Trump administration has warned that disruptions from the pandemic could last months.

“Case-by-case approval at the local level and confidential legal calls will be allowed in order

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to ensure access to counsel," the agency said on its website. "If approved for an in-person visit, the attorney will need to undergo screening using the same procedures as staff."

[NY] Trump approves disaster declaration for New York (The Hill)
The Hill [3/21/2020 7:39 AM, Marty Johnson, 1762K]
President Trump late Friday evening approved a disaster declaration for New York, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States.

Trump's order opens up federal support for state and local recovery efforts in areas affected by COVID-19, the White House said in a statement.

It also gives New York residents who have been affected by the illness access to crisis counseling.

As of Saturday morning, more than 7,100 cases of COVID-19 had been reported in the Empire State, according to The New York Times.

Last week, Trump declared the coronavirus outbreak a national health emergency, which freed up billions of dollars in federal aid.

Trump has already signed two coronavirus stimulus packages that cost more than $100 billion combined. The third stimulus bill being negotiated by senators will cost roughly $1 trillion.

The legislation was sent to congressional Democrats late Thursday, but lawmakers left Friday night without a finalized bill. They are expected to resume talks on Saturday.

[NY] New York state is sending 1 million masks to NYC, Gov. Cuomo says (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 4:26 PM, Melanie Schuman and Sheena Jones, 5551K]
Gov. Andrew Cuomo said during a news conference Saturday that New York is sending 1 million N95 respirator masks to New York City as Covid-19 confirmed cases have surpassed 10,300 across the state.

"One million masks won't get us through the crisis, but it will make a significant contribution to New York City's mask issue," Cuomo said. A number of apparel companies in New York are converting to mask manufacturers, and Cuomo said he is exploring the state also manufacturing masks.

Cuomo announced that there are 10,356 confirmed Covid-19 cases across New York. There are 3,254 new cases across New York state, Cuomo said, with at least 1,803 new cases in New York City alone for a combined total of 6,211.

Fifty-four percent of New York State cases are of people between 18 and 49 years old.

At least 45,000 people have been tested for Covid-19, and about 15% of those cases are being hospitalized. "The more tests you take, the more positives you find," Cuomo said.

Cuomo tweeted on Saturday that 500,000 masks will go to Long Island and that "we are

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purchasing 6,000 additional ventilators and gathering supplies from every source we can get."

New York has both a hospital gown and ventilator shortage, Cuomo said, adding that the state has about 6,000 ventilators when it needs about 30,000. Cuomo has said that the ventilators "are to this war what missiles were to World War II."

Officials are working on getting creative and maybe having two people share one ventilator, the New York governor said.

The Democratic governor is touring sites Saturday with the Army Corps of Engineers for alternate hospitals, including the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York City. These sites would be Army Corps temporary hospitals and include SUNY Stonybrook, SUNY Westbury and Westchester Convention Center.

When asked by a reporter at the news conference Saturday, Cuomo said he has not been tested for the virus because he doesn't want to waste the test and he does not have any of the symptoms. A member of Cuomo's press office tested positive for the coronavirus, his office confirmed to CNN on Friday night.

"A member of our press office felt ill mid-day Thursday and immediately isolated themselves," Secretary to the Governor Melissa DeRosa said in a statement. "This staffer was tested for COVID-19 this morning and that test has come back positive. While none of the other members of the press office are demonstrating COVID-19 symptoms, those who worked in and around the staffer's work station have been placed in precautionary quarantine."

The staffer did not interact with Cuomo, a source with knowledge of the situation told CNN.

Cuomo issues executive order

Cuomo announced Friday morning that all workers in nonessential businesses across the state are required to stay home in an effort to combat the spread of coronavirus.

The executive order takes effect Sunday evening, Cuomo said, and comes a day after California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, ordered the state's nearly 40 million residents to stay home. The two states have a combined population of nearly 59 million people, meaning the two orders affect nearly 1 in 5 Americans.

Cuomo insisted he wasn't issuing a "shelter in place" order, which he said referred to active shooter situations, but rather the state was "closing the valve" of everyday life to limit the outbreak. He urged New Yorkers to "remain indoors to the greatest extent."

Civil fines and mandatory closures for businesses that don't comply with the new mandate will be enforced beginning on Sunday, he announced.

[NY] Cuomo says New York coronavirus temporary hospitals to include Javits Center, more as state grapples with crisis (FOX News)

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FOX News [3/21/2020 5:01 PM, Brooke Singman, 8943K]
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced four sites that will serve as temporary hospitals in the state Saturday, amid the coronavirus outbreak rocking the state and the nation.

The four initial sites, recommended by the Army Corps of Engineers, are the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City, locations at SUNY Stony Brook in Long Island, SUNY Old Westbury and the Westchester Convention Center.

New York State, as of Saturday morning, accounts for more than one-third of all confirmed cases in the United States, with more than 8,000 confirmed cases. Fifty-six people in New York have died due to coronavirus.

"Every day we see the number of cases of novel coronavirus continue to rise, and we know that by all projections we're going to have more hospitalizations than we can deal with in our healthcare system," Cuomo said in a statement Saturday. "We have a plan of action to help stop the spread of this virus, including expanding hospital capacity and identifying new hospital beds, and after meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers and hearing their recommendations, we stand ready for the building of temporary hospitals at four facilities in New York State."

He added: "This is a public health crisis, but worse than the virus is the fear, but we have a plan and we are doing everything we can to keep the people informed and save lives."

The sites were identified by an inspection team led by the Army Corps of Engineers and included state officials from New York's Office of General Services, the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York, the New York Department of Health and the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs. The team visited more than a dozen sites to review their capability to serve as temporary hospitals, Cuomo's office said.

"Upon the Governor's determination, the Army Corps is expected to immediately begin work to construct the temporary hospitals," Cuomo's office said in a statement. "The Governor is also requesting FEMA designate four field hospitals with 250 for each state, intended for use in the Javits Center in addition to the temporary hospital to be constructed by the Army Corps."

Cuomo has warned that the virus puts stress on New York state hospitals, and that the state's hospital system only has 53,000 beds. For days, he has weighed how to create additional space for the expected influx of patients in the coming days and weeks due to the virus.

Earlier this week, Cuomo and President Trump came to an agreement to "immediately" dispatch U.S. Navy hospital, USNS Comfort, to New York City Harbor, which the Pentagon offered as part of the domestic response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The USNS Comfort has 1,000 beds and is run by military personnel, according to the U.S. Naval Institute.

The USNS Comfort was in port in Norfolk, Va. undergoing repairs after a six-month tour in South America and would not be ready to arrive in New York until "mid April" at the earliest. At this point, efforts are being made to expedite the timeline.

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The Pentagon, though, said that the ship's capabilities "are focused on trauma," rather than infectious disease.

Meanwhile, on Saturday, Cuomo also announced that the state has identified two million additional N95 masks for purchase, and plans to send one million to New York City and 500,000 to hospitals in Long Island. The governor's office also said that apparel manufacturers in the state are going to begin to manufacture masks and other medical equipment.

New York, according to the governor's office, is also gathering ventilators form different health facilities across the state to be used in "the most critical areas." The state has already purchased 6,000 additional ventilators.

Additionally, Cuomo announced that State Department of Health Commissioner has recommended trials for new drug therapy to help combat COVID-19.

"The FDA is acquiring 10,000 doses of Hydroxychloroquine and Zithromax for New York State to use on a trial basis," Cuomo's office said Saturday.

Cuomo also warned that the coronavirus outbreak was something the state is likely to grapple with for months.

"I don't believe it's going to be a matter of weeks, it's going to be a matter of months," Cuomo said at his daily briefing in Albany, a day after issuing a stay at home order for most New Yorkers.

The U.S. has more than 23,400 confirmed cases. 285 people in the U.S. have died.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[IL] Pritzker Calls On Former Medical Professionals, And Asks For Donations Of Gloves, Masks, Other Equip (Northern Public Radio)
Northern Public Radio [3/21/2020 9:51 PM, Olivia Mitchell, 1K]
Gov. J.B. Pritzker called on former physicians and medical professionals, including those who are retired, to "join the fight" against COVID-19.

He announced his administration will waive normal license fees and expedite getting license reinstated.

They can apply for new licenses starting Monday through the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation.

The governor is also allowing healthcare workers living at Illinois' borders to get their licenses in Illinois, too, so they can work where they're most needed.

"We're going to make it easier for you to practice here," said Pritzker. "This will allow health systems in Quad Cities and East. St. Louis to deploy physicians where they need them most on either side of the border."

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Those whose licenses expire soon will automatically have theirs renewed until September. Pritzker also said his administration is working on expanding the availability of child care, especially for essential personnel who must remain on the job. This will include low-income workers, as well.

Dr. Ngozi Ezike, head of the Illinois Department of Public Health, said supplies of personal protective equipment for medical workers, including masks and gloves, are in need.

She announced the administration is urging a temporary stop to elective or non-essential surgery, and dental procedures in part so clinics and other health care organizations can give their gear to hospitals that are treating patients with COVID-19.

“The availability of critical resources such as gloves, gowns, eye protections and N-95 respirator masks is essential,” said Ezike.

They asked that any extra protective gear be donated to hospitals.

Information on donations can be found on Illinois’ coronavirus website.

The governor said the state has received only part of the supplies the federal government has promised, but has a reasonable inventory of equipment.

Ezike confirmed another 168 cases of COVID-19 in Illinois, bringing the total to 753 cases, with six deaths to date – the latest a Cook County man in his 70s. Around 6,200 tests have been done by IDPH.

Officials again urged everyone to comply with the stay-at-home order that took effect Saturday evening to keep vulnerable groups healthy, and prevent overcrowding in hospitals.

“I asked you to help them out by simply staying at home,” said Pritzker. “You will be keeping the virus from spreading, and helping the heroes who live and work in your neighborhoods.”

He assured residents that food, gas, medicine, and essential services will remain available.

The governor is asking people to enforce the rules themselves. But he said law enforcement can get a cease and desist order from the court if someone refuses to comply. Law enforcement can charge people with a misdemeanor of reckless conduct, in an “extreme case,” Pritzker said.

[WI] Final 4 Wisconsin Passengers Aboard Cruise Ship Return Home (AP)
AP [3/20/2020 8:00 PM, Staff, 3020K]
The last four Wisconsin citizens who were aboard the Grand Princess cruise ship that docked in the Port of Oakland, California, last week after a long ordeal due to the coronavirus have arrived in the state, Gov. Tony Evers announced Saturday.

Evers said the residents arrived late Friday and will self-quarantine for 14 days. There were originally 38 Wisconsin citizens aboard the ship, where several people were confirmed to

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have COVID-19.

The announcement came after Milwaukee County authorities said a 69-year-old man who traveled to Wisconsin from out of state died Saturday from the virus, raising the total number of state deaths to four.

The man reported to Milwaukee County Hospital on March 14 complaining of shortness of breath, according to a release from the county medical examiner's office. The man had chronic health issues, the office reported. It's not clear why he came to Milwaukee.

The state Department of Health Services reported 281 cases of COVID-19 as of Saturday afternoon, up 75 from Friday night. More than 4,620 people have tested negative.

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections said Saturday it is no longer accepting admissions to its state prisons and juvenile facilities in an effort to slow down spread of the coronavirus. Officials will allow some essential transfers and work with the counties on any potential tweaks to the order.

State officials also announced that the deadline for filing state income tax returns has been extended to July 15, as is the case with federal taxes.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover.

[TX] Texas Border County Issues Coronavirus Pandemic-Related Curfew (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 8:31 AM, Ildefonso Ortiz and Brandon Darby, 1973K]
A Texas border county issued a curfew ordering residents to stay off public and private roads during nighttime hours in an attempt to curb the spread of the Chinese coronavirus (COVID-19).

On Friday afternoon, Cameron County Judge Eddie Trevino, Jr. issued a series of emergency orders that will keep residents off public and private roads and streets between midnight and 5 a.m. An exception is made for law enforcement, medical, and emergency personnel. Cameron County includes the border city of Brownsville and the beach hotspot of South Padre Island.

Another provision of the order excuses individuals going to and from work that is permitted at those hours, and those seeking medical attention, prescriptions, fuel or food. Individuals who violate the curfew could be fined up to $1,000 and/or be sent to jail for up to 180 days. Trevino previously ordered the closing of county beaches in an attempt to minimize the spread of the coronavirus.

During a recent news conference, Trevino said that recreational fishermen had become upset over the closing of the beaches. He reiterated it was all done to prevent the spread of the virus. This week Cameron County announced its first confirmed case of the virus involving a 21-year-old man from Rancho Viejo who had recently returned from Europe and subsequently tested positive for COVID-19.

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The emergency order adds to the federal and state orders already issued in recent days that closed down dine-in restaurants but allow for delivery and pickup of food items and alcohol. The existing orders issued by Texas Governor Greg Abbott already limit the size of social gatherings to less than 10 individuals among other restrictions, Breitbart Texas reported.

[TX] Texas Coronavirus-Related Price Gouging Complaints Mounting Despite Threat of Prosecution (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 8:25 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]
Despite a warning by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton that price gouging related to the Chinese coronavirus will be prosecuted, more than 300 complaints have been filed as of Friday.

“Any person or business selling goods must be aware that they are prohibited by law from engaging in price gouging if they unreasonably raise the cost of necessary supplies at any point during a declared disaster,” Attorney General Paxton said in a written statement on March 13. “My office will work aggressively to prevent disaster scams and stands ready to prosecute any price-gouger who takes advantage of those taking precautions and looking for safety and supplies.”

Despite this warning, price gouging complaints are piling up in the AG’s office, San Antonio Regional Better Business Bureau Director Jason Meza told KSAT12. Meza told the local news outlet his organization has also received complaints.

During a disaster declaration, like the ones issued by President Donald Trump and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, the Texas Attorney General has the authority and responsibility to enforce anti-price gouging laws. The Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Act provides a penalty of up to $10,000 per violation. That penalty increases to $250,000 per incident if the victims are elderly, the AG’s website states. Attorney General Paxton encourages those who may have been victimized by unscrupulous vendors to call 800-621-0508 or file an online complaint.

Most of the complaints involve the sale of toilet paper, bottled water, and hand sanitizer, the Dallas Morning News reported. These products have been in short supply since panic buying began in recent weeks. Most of the complaints have been filed in the Dallas and Houston metropolitan areas, the newspaper reported.

[TX] Despite sky-high demand, first Harris County testing site off to slow start (Houston Chronicle)
Houston Chronicle [3/21/2020 10:09 PM, Dylan McGuinness, 167K]
Despite sky-high demand for COVID-19 tests, Harris County’s first government-backed testing site got off to a crawling start Saturday in Baytown.

The site opened at 1 p.m., reserved exclusively for pre-screened first responders and medical workers, who officials said were given priority amid a national shortage of testing capacity and medical supplies.

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Mac McClendon, who leads preparedness and response for Harris County Public Health, told news media earlier in the day that they had a capacity to test 250 people per day at the site and expected to use it.

County officials asked news organizations not to disclose the Baytown site's location, fearing members of the general public would show up unprompted. They said they notified qualifying people using an email distribution list of health care employees and first responders.

"We're expecting 250, probably a little more," McClendon said of the anticipated crowd.

Instead, hardly anyone came.

Around 4 p.m., one sheriff's deputy driving from the sight said just eight people had been tested. There weren't many more in the next few hours, before workers started packing their things at 7 p.m. Medical workers in long-awaited protective gear were reduced to waiting idly in white tents while prized nasal swabs went mostly unused.

Harris County Public Health said it couldn't confirm a count, though it acknowledged the site wasn't busy.

Officials didn't answer questions about whether they should have opened the site to the public, or at least seniors, given the paltry attendance and the advance warning that the screening process would seemingly have provided.

At a similar site opened by Houston Health Department, officials said they tested 159 people Friday. Like the county site, that was limited to pre-screened first responders and health care workers. It expanded Saturday to include seniors over 65 with certain symptoms, and officials said they would allow people with chronic conditions as well on Sunday.

People who think they qualify can call 832-393-4220 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. to start that process.

The county plans a similar expansion in coming days, though it couldn't confirm Saturday night whether seniors would be allowed tests on Sunday. The county is opening a second site in Katy as well. The screening line is 832-927-7575.

Private groups, like United Memorial Medical Center and Legacy Community Health, are offering tests for members of the general public with symptoms. Pre-screening is required for those sites as well, and more information is available on their websites.

Legacy, for one, said it had tested 500 people at its four sites at the close of business Thursday.

Sen. John Cornyn. R-Texas, said on Twitter that the federal Department of Health and Human Services was also opening a new site Saturday in Cypress. But Texas, Harris County and Houston health officials said they either didn't know about that site or weren't involved in its operations. It wasn't clear if one actually opened.

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Officials have warned that increasing testing capacity will uncover a dramatic spike in the number of confirmed cases. As of 8 p.m., the statewide total had climbed to more than 600 cases, including more than 130 in the eight-county Houston region.

The city is also expected to open a second site, though it's not yet clear when that will take place.

The few Baytown tests will be shipped overnight to labs operated by Quest Diagnostics and LabCorp, under an agreement with the federal government. To avoid overwhelming the labs, each site has a cap of 250 samples per day.

A shortage of protective gear for the workers who staff the site had delayed the rollout. McClendon said the gear used here came from a national stockpile and was delivered Thursday. Gear from that stockpile was sent to select sites across the country, he said.

[CA] L.A. County strengthens coronavirus bans: Nail and hair salons, drive-in movies among closures (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/22/2020 1:00 AM, Rong-Gong Lin II, 1907K]
The Los Angeles County health officer has issued a stronger "Safer at Home" order following Gov. Gavin Newsom's unprecedented statewide order instructing 40 million Californians to stay at home as much as possible, with certain exceptions, to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The new county order largely matches the stronger stay-at-home order issued for the city of Los Angeles by Mayor Eric Garcetti on Thursday night, just moments before the statewide order was announced.

Here's what the new Los Angeles County order, issued Saturday, does:

All businesses ordered shut, with exceptions

All businesses were ordered to cease in-person operations and close to the public. There are exceptions for essential businesses, which are detailed below.

This new order is much stronger than the one issued just two nights earlier.

The county order issued Thursday night ordered only retail businesses that were not considered essential to shut.

As a result, the new order will require more businesses to close their physical premises — specifically, nonessential businesses that are not retail stores. People can still work from home.

All gatherings are banned

All public and private gatherings are prohibited anywhere within the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, which, the order said, includes all

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unincorporated areas and cities in the county except Long Beach and Pasadena. Those cities have their own health departments and have issued their own orders.

Previously, only gatherings of 10 or more people were banned.

Nail and hair salons are ordered shut

On Thursday night, Los Angeles County had classified personal grooming services as an essential retail business exempt from an earlier order to close nonessential stores. On Saturday night, the county clarified that personal grooming services "are nonessential services that are closed."

Long Beach on Friday also ordered shut personal grooming services, including hair salons, barbershops, nail salons , waxing services and spas.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

[CA] Gavin Newsom Allows Voting by Mail to Protect Californians from Coronavirus (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 8:52 PM, Amy Furr, 1973K]
California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order Friday allowing residents to vote by mail in three upcoming special elections as a precaution against the Chinese coronavirus.

The press release continued:

"The order also extends the deadlines for ballot counting, tabulation, and other responsibilities related to the official canvass of California's Presidential Primary Election that could risk undermining social distancing measures, and suspends the timeframes for public hearings required by political subdivisions that are in the process of changing from an at-large method of election to district elections."

The governor's office said the purpose of the order is to protect public health and safety during the Chinese coronavirus pandemic.

The special elections "shall each be held as an all-mail ballot election and conducted according to those provisions of the Elections Code that govern all-mail ballot elections," the order's text read.

The document continued:

"The respective county elections officials responsible for conducting each respective election shall transmit vote-by-mail ballots to all voters eligible to vote in each respective election. Notwithstanding the other provisions of this Order, elections officials are also authorized, and encouraged, to make in-person voting opportunities available on or before Election Day for each of these elections in a manner consistent with public health and safety, to maximize voter accessibility.

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Elections officials shall provide maximum possible notice to voters about how to participate in each of these elections, paying particular attention to the needs of voters at high risk from COVID-19, individuals with disabilities, and other voters with particularized needs."

However, states would be better off taking small steps at first when it comes to voting by mail, according to Charles Stewart, a professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"Hastily implemented changes to voting rules and laws can end up causing all types of problems that you didn't anticipate," he noted.

Despite the dangers, Hillary Clinton urged government leaders on Twitter recently to "make voting by mail the norm going forward".

"Several states already allow voting by mail, though Republicans have warned that California's system is vulnerable to fraud," wrote Breitbart News's Joel B. Pollak on Wednesday.

"There, Democrats legalized a system called 'ballot harvesting,' which allows unverified third parties to deliver each other's ballots — effectively allowing party organizers to bring thousands of ballots to be counted," he concluded.

[CA] Newsom directs $42 million to health care needs during coronavirus (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/21/2020 8:33 PM, Janelle Bitker, 337K]
Last week's statewide shelter-in-place order was an attempt to not only slow the spread of the coronavirus but also to give hospitals a better chance of keeping up. Gov. Gavin Newsom threw California's medical field another life raft Saturday in the form of $42 million in emergency funding.

The money will allow California to lease two hospitals, as well as secure more equipment to serve patients with COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

As of Saturday, there were 1,464 coronavirus cases in California, including 646 in the Bay Area, and 26 people have died. The total number of cases is up 45.5% from Thursday's 1,006 confirmed cases. At that point, there were 19 deaths. The latest figures from Johns Hopkins University show that global coronavirus cases have reached 300,000, with more than 13,000 deaths. U.S. cases have surpassed 26,000.

"California is mobilizing every part of government to support our health care delivery system, its workers and those among us who are most vulnerable to COVID-19," Newsom said in a statement.

The state will lease Seton Medical Center in Daly City and St. Vincent Medical Center in Los Angeles for three months for $30 million. Seton will expand capacity to offer 120 more beds for COVID-19 patients as soon as Wednesday. St. Vincent is expected to provide up to 366 beds.

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It's a significant turnaround for both hospitals, which are owned by Verity Health System. Verity filed for bankruptcy in 2018 and closed St. Vincent in January. Seton has been on the verge of closure ever since a potential sale fell through in late 2019 — this month, San Mateo County supervisors decided to contribute $20 million to help keep the hospital intact. Verity will reopen St. Vincent on behalf of the state, though no timeline was given.

The emergency funding will also bring $1.5 million to the state's public health lab in Richmond to expand its capacity. Another $2 million will provide patient transportation through American Medical Response. And the state will spend more than $8.6 million on new ventilators and IV fusion pumps, in addition to refurbishing ventilators.

A nationwide shortage of protective gear for medical professionals has sparked an outcry for donations. Nurses protested Thursday outside a Kaiser Permanente hospital in San Francisco, saying they were forced to reuse masks because they're running out. Some companies are responding quickly, like PG&E, which on Friday promised to donate nearly 1 million masks to hospital workers, and Facebook, which on Saturday announced a donation of about 720,000 masks.

In a Saturday news conference, Newsom said Tesla chief executive officer Elon Musk has pledged to provide 250,000 masks for health care workers and has committed, with other companies, to produce 1,000 ventilators. Apple CEO Tim Cook is pledging 1 million masks, Newsom said.

In response to complaints about the lack of masks, President Trump promised Saturday that more are coming quickly. The administration's efforts are getting "tremendous reviews from many people who can't believe how fast (masks) are coming," Trump said.

Newsom announced that the state did, in fact, start receiving some equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile, including 358,381 N95 masks, which are the most protective, and 853,730 surgical masks.

But California needs much more. The state has already requested 20 million N95 masks, 10 million surgical masks and hundreds of thousands of surgical gowns, face shields and other protective gear.

[CA] LA County shifts from containing coronavirus, advises doctors to skip testing of some patients: report (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 9:14 AM, Robert Gearty, 8943K]
A surge in coronavirus cases has Los Angeles County health officials telling doctors to give up on testing patients in the hope of containing the outbreak and instructing them to test patients only if a positive result could change how they would be treated, according to a new report.

The advisory from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Thursday was prompted by a crush of patients and shortage of tests and could make it difficult to ever know precisely how many people in L.A. County contracted the virus, The Los Angeles Times reported.

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The department “is shifting from a strategy of case containment to slowing disease transmission and averting excess morbidity and mortality,” according to the letter, the Times reported. Doctors should test symptomatic patients only when “a diagnostic result will change clinical management or inform public health response.”

The paper reports the guidance sets in writing what has been a reality all along--the shortage of tests nationwide has meant that many patients suspected of having COVID-19 have not had the diagnosis confirmed by a laboratory.

In addition to the lack of tests, public health agencies across the country lack the staff to trace the source of new cases, drastically reducing the chances of isolating people who have been exposed and thereby containing the outbreak, the paper reported.

The Times quoted a front-line healthcare provider as saying that county doctors were interpreting Thursday’s advisory to mean they should only test patients who are going to be hospitalized or have something unique about the way they contracted the virus.

They are not planning to test patients who have the symptoms but are otherwise healthy enough to be sent home to self-quarantine — meaning they may never show up in official tallies of people who tested positive.

The Los Angeles Department of Health Services, which runs the nation’s second-largest municipal health system, “is mobilizing all of its resources to fight the on-coming wave of COVID-19 cases expected in the coming weeks,” said Dr. Christina Ghaly, DHS Director, according to the paper. “We are ramping up hospital capacity and taking extraordinary measures to increase supplies.”

Gov. Gavin Newsom issued the nation’s strictest “stay at home” order Thursday night, taking effect at midnight Friday.

“This is not a permanent state, this is a moment in time,” California Gov. Gavin Newsom said, trying to assure the nation’s most populous state that the order would eventually lift.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Coronavirus: Federal Judge Rules Migrants Must Stay in Detention Center (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 11:43 AM, Penny Starr, 1973K]
A federal judge in Seattle rejected three nonprofits’ effort to force U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to release migrants in a detention center in Washington state because of the threat from coronavirus.

U.S. District Judge James L. Robart on Thursday denied a request for a restraining order requested by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the ACLU of Washington, and the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project. The organizations argued that holding migrants who are older or have underlying medical conditions puts them at high risk for contracting the virus.

“There is no evidence that anyone at NWDC has COVID-19, and plaintiffs do not address

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the measures defendants are taking to prevent such a spread from occurring," Robart said in a Law360 article on the development.

Law360 reported on the ruling:

Attorneys have told Law360 that they are concerned ICE is not prepared to handle a potential outbreak of the virus at the agency's detention centers, where immigrants are trapped in communal spaces.

ICE has been hit with numerous lawsuits accusing it of not providing detainees with adequate medical care, including an August complaint alleging the agency has been failing to ensure centers operated by private contractors are meeting the standards of confinement mandated by federal law and the U.S. Constitution.

Eunice Cho, an attorney for migrants, issued a statement vowing continued litigation.

"Public health officials are in agreement — it is not a matter of if there is a COVID-19 outbreak in immigrant detention centers, but when," Cho said. "ICE should heed their warning. By refusing to immediately release our clients, ICE is jeopardizing their lives and the lives of its staff and their families."

Law 360 reported that ICE responded Wednesday to the request for the restraining order, but the filing is not being made public.

The case is Dawson v. Asher, No. 2:20-cv-00409 in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington.

Growing Calls To Close Immigration Courts And Release Detainees As Virus Spreads (NPR)
NPR [3/21/2020 9:00 AM, Joel Rose]
U.S. authorities face growing calls to shutter all of the nation's immigration courts, and to release detained immigrants who do not pose a threat to public safety after an ICE detention center worker tested positive for the coronavirus.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement reported for the first time this week that one of its workers has the virus that causes COVID-19. ICE also says there are no confirmed cases of coronavirus among its more than 37,000 detainees nationwide.

But immigrant advocates and physicians warn that an outbreak in an ICE detention facility is inevitable as the pandemic spreads and the number of cases in the U.S. rises quickly.

"A coronavirus outbreak at immigration detention facilities is imminent, if it's not already happening," said Silky Shah with the Detention Watch Network.

More than 3,000 physicians signed a letter urging ICE to release detainees while their legal cases proceed — particularly adults over 60 and people with serious chronic medical conditions that would put them at higher risk in the event of an outbreak.

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"They're just stuck there like sitting ducks," said Dr. Ranit Mishori, who also signed the letter. Mishori is a professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine and medical adviser to the group Physicians for Human Rights. "The window of opportunity is rapidly, rapidly closing because I think we need to let them out before they become sick."

ICE says the worker who tested positive is a member of the medical staff at the Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey. The staffer did not routinely engage directly with detainees, according to ICE, and has been in self-quarantine since developing symptoms.

Nearly half of immigrants detained by ICE have been accused of no crime other than civil immigration violations, and many probably would not have been held under previous administrations.

Some detained immigrants described a feeling of helplessness and confusion in the face of the widening pandemic.

"I wish they were transparent and tell us the truth, so we wouldn't be anxious," said Virginia, an asylum-seeker from Venezuela who's detained at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center, about 90 miles west of Baton Rouge.

"We know people have gotten sick, but we don't know what it is," she said in Spanish through an interpreter. "It's so hard being in here without knowing."

Virginia says she's detained in a large room along with more than 50 other women, including her sister Patricia, who is also seeking asylum. They asked us not to use their full names because their cases are still pending.

Their room is under quarantine, along with several others in the detention facility, the sisters said. Patricia says her concern about the coronavirus spiked after an Ecuadorian woman in their room developed flu-like symptoms.

"Her bed is two beds away from mine," Patricia said. "She'd spend hours sleeping, deep coughing, lots of it. Her body was aching, she didn't get out of bed one day. ... Her face was red, flushed. She looked hot, she had a high temperature."

Patricia said the Ecuadorian woman had tested negative for the flu, and was now being tested for coronavirus.

"We know there are cases near here, about an hour from here," Patricia said. "The staff comes and goes, we are locked up here, we really don't know anything."

ICE says it is taking precautions to protect detainees. The agency has temporarily suspended social visits at all of its detention centers.

And some U.S. immigration courts have closed in response to the coronavirus pandemic. But others are still open, and hearings for immigrants in detention are still taking place — despite calls from judges, prosecutors and immigration lawyers to postpone them.

The union that represents immigration judges renewed its calls to close down all

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immigration courts after an ICE prosecutor in Newark, N.J., tested positive for coronavirus, the union said on Twitter.

Ashley Tabaddor, president of the immigration judge's union, said there's been no transparency from the government. "COVID-19 does not discriminate," she told reporters, according to KERA. "There's no engagement. There's no discussion with any stakeholder."

Fanny Behar-Ostrow, head of the union representing ICE attorneys, told reporters that migrants are being forced to choose "between attending court on the one hand or protecting themselves against exposure to the coronavirus by not attending court."

Imelda Maynard, an attorney with Catholic Charities, attended immigration court in El Paso earlier this week. "None of the people in there had masks on," she told KERA. "There really isn't room in that courtroom for the people appearing to sit six feet apart from one another. It's a pretty small courtroom."

Immigration lawyers in Boston say they're increasingly concerned about the spread of coronavirus after a courtroom there abruptly closed earlier this week.

"I was walking towards the waiting room, and one of the judges popped out of the courtroom and loudly announced: 'My courtroom is now closed because yesterday there was someone in the courtroom who is presumed positive,' " immigration attorney Susan Roses told WBUR.

There's also growing concern about the spread of the coronavirus in shelters for unaccompanied migrant children that are run by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

"It is our responsibility to effectively limit exposure to this disease and prepare to manage outbreaks of COVID-19," Sen. Ed Markey wrote in a letter to the Administration for Children and Families, which oversees ORR. "This responsibility is especially serious when it comes to the care of vulnerable children."

Omar joins 14 Democrats calling for ICE to halt deportations because of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/21/2020 4:08 PM, Andrew Mark Miller, 570K]
Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar is leading a charge with fellow Democrats calling for Immigration and Customs Enforcement to halt all deportations of illegal immigrants immediately because of the spread of the coronavirus.

"Immigration detention facilities, even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have been breeding grounds for illness," Omar and 14 other Democrats wrote to acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf on Friday.

"For detainees who are immunocompromised or otherwise susceptible to the worst consequences of contracting COVID-19, holding them in detention may be literally a matter of life and death," they said.

Omar and her fellow Democrats also expressed concern about deporting illegal immigrants

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who are already carrying the virus.

“Deporting people who may have been exposed to coronavirus to either countries that have few or no cases or to countries with weak health care infrastructure is an unacceptable risk to take,” the letter said. “Many countries, including the United States, are implementing strict border controls during this pandemic, and we should make no exception for ICE Air and deportations.”

The letter did not make it clear whether or not illegal immigrants suspected of violent crimes such as murder should be included in this request.

ICE arrested illegal immigrants responsible for over 1,500 murder convictions last year and over 4,700 over the past three years.

The Minnesota Democrat has been a vocal critic of ICE since being elected to Congress and has called for the agency to be abolished, the Department of Homeland Security to be defunded, and for President Trump to stop treating people in the country illegally like “criminals.”

Omar’s letter comes amid reports that states across the country are letting inmates out of jail to help stop the spread of the virus in a move that has drawn stern criticism from police groups nationwide.

Democratic Reps. Rashida Tlaib, Joseph P. Kennedy, Raúl M. Grijalva, Barbara Lee, David E. Price, Scott Peters, Hank Johnson, Jr., Mark Takano, Judy Chu, Tony Cárdenas, Jan Schakowsky, Debbie Dingell, Mark Pocan, and Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton joined Omar in signing the letter Friday.

Citizenship and Immigration Services

DHS Changes Rule to Import More H-1B Foreign Workers in Economic Meltdown (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 11:32 AM, Neil Munro, 1973K]
President Donald Trump’s Department of Homeland Security quietly adopted a second tactic to speed the inflow of foreign H-1B workers into U.S. jobs — even though hundreds of thousands of American graduates are expected to lose their jobs in the next few weeks.

An email sent out March 19 told companies that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agency would accept electronic signatures instead of the original ink signatures that are normally required on the I-129 forms that must be filed to import foreign visa-workers:

We will accept all benefit forms and documents with reproduced signatures. … For forms that require an original “wet” signature, per form instructions, USCIS will accept electronically reproduced original signatures for the duration of the National Emergency,

Greg Siskind, a Tennessee-based immigration lawyer who works for employers, described the concession as “very good news.”

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The announcement came after the agency said it would speed the overall process by barring wealthier employers from buying their way to the front of the processing line, via the "premium processing" procedure.

"Boooo!!! – Premium Processing Program Suspended by USCIS," said another tweet by Siskind, some of whose clients prefer to pay the fee for premium processing.

The signature concession removed another barrier for the many lawyers who were trying to submit tens of thousands of requests for new H-1B workers by Friday, March 20.

But the economic crash means the federal government must stop the inflow of H-1B workers so that sidelined American professionals can get jobs, a Florida-based American computer expert told Breitbart News March 19.

"Fiona" earned two college degrees in the early 2000s after she left the real estate industry following the 2007 collapse. Since then, she has worked a series of contract jobs, most recently at a seven-month stint at an insurance company run by an imported workforce of H-1B workers from India. She said her job ended when she was forced out by Indian managers, in part, because of her excellent performance reviews. She is in her 50s, has been unemployed for several months, and fears recruiters will blackball her if she speaks on the record.

She told Breitbart News, "I'm not eligible for unemployment. So I have lived off my savings, and I'm living with my son. I'm still applying for jobs, but they're very few and far between. I can't relocate again because when they cut my contract job, I had to cut my lease off early, so now, my credit is bad. My lease history is bad. I can't go and take the risks that I did before. I was getting ready to go and look for a minimum wage job until this coronavirus came here, you know. Come next month, you know what? I can't pay my bills because I've gone for like eight months on my savings."

She added, "To be honest with you, I have given up on American companies. I have given up on being able to be hired by America because I'm American, and Americans don't matter. And I'm sorry I'm going to get a little bit emotional here. … Americans don't matter. I hear politicians, you know, saying, "Okay, you know what? We're going to open our borders, and you can have free health…I don't have health insurance. You know, Americans don't matter. All that matters is foreign workers. All that matters is if the foreign individuals…I mean, it's like we don't matter. America doesn't matter."

The federal government should help Americans by stopping the inflow of visa workers, Fiona said: "Not only should they cancel the H-1B inflow, they should not renew H-1B visas. If American companies want to hire, they hire Americans. And if they say, 'Americans don't have the skills,' give them the skills because we are America. And we take care of our own."

"Americans should be outraged if they're going to bring in another 85,000 foreigners this year," said Dawn Collins, a former vice-president at JP Morgan Chase, who founded Protect U.S. Workers to oppose the H-1B program. She continued, "If American graduates are being replaced by foreigners while this [economic crash] is going on … We're in a total crisis, and the H-1B program has to be ended right now … If there is any loyalty to the

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country in Congress, they have to give Americans a chance, a chance … [in this] this situation where people are losing theme homes, their jobs."

Nationwide, roughly 1.5 million U.S. white-collar jobs are held by foreign graduates, including roughly 1 million Indians. The H-1B program admits roughly 100,000 new foreign workers a year and they who can stay permanently once they are nominated for a green card by their employer. The resident population of H-1B workers is roughly 1 million, including roughly 750,000 Indian H-1Bs.

Company executives and "Human Resources" managers use the H-1Bs program to procure blocs of compliant, lower-skill foreign workers — mostly Indian or Chinese — for the many jobs sought by qualified and eager U.S. graduates and mid-career professionals.

The H-1B workers sometimes cost more than American professionals, partly because they are often less productive than American graduates.

But U.S. managers prefer them because the federal government rarely enforces routine workplace laws in H-1B workplaces. The government's refusal to enforce the laws means the H-1Bs can be hired, fired, and abused by their bosses, most of whom are Indians who grew up in Indians' own culture. These abuses include workplace intimidation, sexual discrimination, and unpaid overtime hours, Americans tell Breitbart News.

The government inaction in H-1B workplaces also strips American graduates of routine workplace protections, including protections against commonplace discrimination because of their nationality.

Numerous American graduates report that native-born Americans are a rarity in most Silicon Valley companies, as well as in insurance and banking industries on both coasts.

Each April, 85,000 H-1B visas are awarded to U.S. companies via a USCIS rushed application and lottery process. Another "cap-exempt" 15,000 H-1Bs are awarded throughout the year to non-profit employers at universities, research laboratories, and hospitals. The cap-exempt employers are allowed to hire as many H-1Bs as they wish.

The current head of DHS, Chad Wolf, formerly served as a lobbyist for the Indian-based outsourcing industry. The group's mix of Indian and U.S. companies use the H-1B program to hire Indians graduates for jobs in the United States, and they split the economic gains among both countries' companies, executives, and investors.

Breitbart News asked DHS if the agency is considering curbs on the 2020 award of H-1B visas. "No changes at this time," a spokesman responded on March 19.

Meanwhile, business groups are trying to expand the H-1B program. For example, activists are citing the coronavirus as an excuse for Congress to allow investors to hire an unlimited number of foreign graduates for jobs in the healthcare sector. Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) is also pushing his S.386 bill to reward additional Indians if they take jobs from American graduates.

Trump's failure to set curbs on the H-1B program has angered many of the swing-voting

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university graduates who supported him in 2016. In March 2016, after much zig-zagging, Trump declared:

The H-1B program is neither high-skilled nor immigration: these are temporary foreign workers, imported from abroad, for the explicit purpose of substituting for American workers at lower pay. I remain totally committed to eliminating rampant, widespread H-1B abuse and ending outrageous practices such as those that occurred at Disney in Florida when Americans were forced to train their foreign replacements. I will end forever the use of the H-1B as a cheap labor program, and institute an absolute requirement to hire American workers for every visa and immigration program. No exceptions.

In February 2020, a U.S. judge struck down the token H-1B curbs set by USCIS managers since Trump's election.

Immigration reformers are calling for the cancellation of the 2020 H-1B awards amid the economic crash.

American professionals have organized to lobby against the H-1B program via the American Workers Coalition, U.S. TechWorkers, and ProUSworkers. In turn, these groups are backed up by a few sites that track the scale and location of the outsourcing industry in each legislator's district. The sites include SAITJ.org and H1BFacts.com. "The scope of this thing is really unbelievable," said one researcher.

Other sites document the conflicts created by diverse foreign business practices in the United States. The non-political MyVisaJobs.com site also provides much information about H-1B outsourcing and green card rewards in multiple industries.

The federal USCIS agency provides some data, including data about the uncapped OPT program, sometimes called the "Mini-H-1B".

Customs and Border Protection

Acting CBP commissioner Mark Morgan on enhanced border security amid COVID-19 pandemic (FOX News)
FOX News [3/20/2020 10:26 PM, Laura Ingraham, 8943K]
This is a rush transcript from "The Ingraham Angle," March 20, 2020. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

LAURA INGRAHAM, FOX NEWS HOST: I'm Laura Ingraham and this is the Ingraham Angle from Washington tonight. The Trump administration taking bold action against the coronavirus, closing our southern border, I guess we can do that after all, and sending it anyone who crosses it illegally back to Mexico.

We should've already been doing this. Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan is here with that good news. Plus Senator Tom Cotton has a grave warning about our dependency on China. He and I've been talking about this for decades but guess what, I hate to say see, I told you so but see we told you so.

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Also imagine, if celebrities thought of anyone else but themselves during this outbreak, that can't be. We got to be joking. Raymond Arroyo is here from New Orleans with the trouble in deeds in Fridays Follies.

But first, a dose of reality. That's the focus of tonight's Angle. All right, today my favorite subject came up again at the Covid-19 briefing or that - are there treatments out there that are already in use with minimal side effects, that could bring relief to our people and our economy?

Well, our own John Roberts pressed doctor Anthony Fauci about the drug we first introduced to the wider public on Monday.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOHN ROBERTS, FOX NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Dr. Fauci, this is explained yesterday. There has been some promise hydroxychloroquine, this particular therapy for people who are infected with the coronavirus. Is there any evidence to suggest that as with malaria, it might be used as a prophylaxis against Covid-19.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES: The answer is no and - and the evidence that you're talking about John is anecdotal evidence so as the commissioner of FDA and the president mentioned yesterday, we're trying to strike a balance between making something with potential of an effect to the American people available at the same time that we do it under the auspices of the protocol that would give us information to determine if it's truly safe and truly effective.

But the information that you're referring to specifically is anecdotal. It was not done in a controlled clinical trial so you really can't make any definitive statement about it.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

INGRAHAM: Well, first, I have great respect for Doctor Fauci, his sacrifice for the country but when you hear something is just anecdotal, again aside from the clinical terminology, to most people and we're talking to most people in these press conferences, it just doesn't sound too hopeful or too impressive and anecdotal doesn't really describe the findings of the world's top researchers, who just a few days ago published results of their first study on hydroxychloroquine and hydroxychloroquine with azithromycin.

A lot of you probably have taken Z-packs over the years. Well, check out their findings. This is in a long study. Despite its small sample size, our survey shows that hydroxychloroquine treatment is significantly associated, the word significantly there with viral load reduction or disappearance in Covid-19 patients and it's effect is reinforced by azithromycin.

Now look at this chart that accompanied the report. The blue line is the control group OK, say they took nothing so bad for them they all have the virus even after 6 days. The red represents those who received hydroxychloroquine so some improvement so only what is it, 40 percent or so still had the virus but look at the yellow line.

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Now the yellow line represents the patients at the end of day 5 only who were on a protocol that included hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin. Now the researchers in this study and they're all incredibly prominent epidemiologist and researchers, dozens and dozens.

They understood when they undertook this project, they were tasked by the French government to do this. They understood the severity of the global crisis we're all facing and they also understood the risk to millions - millions of people around the world including our health care workers and they concluded as a result of all this thinking and what they looked at the following.

We therefore recommend that Covid-19 patients be treated with hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin to cure their infection and to limit the transmission of the virus to other people in order to curb the spread of Covid-19 in the world.

Now, I understand that we want our own data that is a large controlled study, I understand that's necessary. And the Trump administration is 100 percent correct. At the same time and recognizing the benefits already reported in the use of this drug and the drug combo that we just mentioned.

Now by the way hydroxychloroquine, lot of people don't understand this but it does not need to be approved by the FDA in order to be administered by doctors for off-label use because as I said before, we don't have to go over it but it's prescribed for anti-malarial use and also for lupus in some cases.

Our physicians are already using it in our major hospitals for Covid patients. They also used it successfully in some cases against SARS which had a higher mortality rate. The president as usual has sharp instincts. He sees things that sometimes the intellectuals and academics, they might get lost in some of the details but he has sharp instincts about things.

And he's pushing to get millions of doses now into the United States.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: That I'm a big fan of. We'll see what happens and we all understand what the doctor said is 100 percent correct surely but we've you know, I've seen things that are impressive. We will see. It's very effective. It's a strong - strong drug.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

INGRAHAM: I can also report tonight that another drug is also showing significant promise in the fight against Covid-19. It's called Actamra. It's an IL6 or an antilukin-6. It's an anti-inflammatory prescribed mostly for rheumatoid arthritis. Again an off-label use is being implemented now by the Chinese who are finding that it works very well against Covid-19.

Pharmaceutical giants Roche and Sanofi make different versions of this drug. Our doctors and our hospitals need all the ammo they can get to fight this disease. We want fewer people to need ventilators, right?

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We need to reduce that that absolute necessity to have vents in our ICUs because we have a critical shortage. We need to get people home to quarantine if they're sick then we need after a necessary amount of time, we need to get those people healthy and back to work.

As soon as they're medically cleared. Again, I respect all the professionals who are working on this and they're working ridiculous hours and I respect Doctor Fauci, an enormous amount.

And I realize in an ideal world, we want everything buttoned up and as perfect as far as randomized trials go but our country needs solutions and hope now. And old bureaucracies have to give way to fast action. The president understands this. We can't stay in our homes for ever. America wants to get back to work. And that's the Angle.

All right, joining me now is Doctor William Grace an oncologist at Lenox Hill hospital in New York City. Doctor, what's the best way to keep people - keep infected people away from those with compromised immune systems? Is it the mass shut down that we're seeing or is it a focus on those compromised population?

DR. WILLIAM GRACE, ONCOLOGIST LENOX HILL HOSPITAL: Well, we know - we've had the understanding that the old people seem to have a compromised immune systems and I think it's just the opposite. It's a paradigm change.

They have the more mature immune systems even though their bodies may be weak and their immune systems are actually quite strong and it's the strength of that immunity that causes the damage to the lungs and the deaths in these cases.

Hence the reason why hydroxychloroquine, an immunosuppressive agent is beneficial it by two mechanisms. Suppressing the immune response and number two, acting to suppress the replication of the virus. That's why the anti- inflammatory drugs you just mentioned before I came on, is working in China because it's cutting down what we call the cytokine storm, the inflammatory storm that the virus causes in the percentage of people and those are the people who go on to die.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

[AZ] Claim they're going shopping: Border officials allow hundreds of Mexican vehicles to cross despite Trump ban (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/21/2020 2:35 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K]
Customs and Border Protection officials are defying the Trump administration's directive to block all nonessential foreign travel into the United States from Mexico, allowing noncitizens claiming to be on shopping trips to continue entering, according to two officials involved in the implementation of the order.

CBP employees in Arizona told the Washington Examiner Saturday they were instructed Friday night at the start of the executive order and again this morning not to turn around noncitizens who said they were coming in to shop, visit family, or for medical appointments. By Saturday morning, "hundreds" of vehicles that should have been blocked at the port of

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entry had been allowed through, two officials said.

“We’re letting them through. And that’s pretty much the gist of it,” one official said. “Nobody’s enforcing it. It was put up — the president put it out. The chief patrol put it out. And we’re just not doing it.”

“In plain English, it was a giant shit show," said a second official. "Nobody followed the directive, a plain and simple directive. You’re trying to keep the coronavirus from going north ... yet you just let it bleed through anyway, so you’re not doing the job you’re directed to. That’s what’s aggravating.”

CBP’s Office of Field Operations officers who inspect vehicles at the border crossings were supposed to begin at 9 p.m. PT Friday turning away all noncitizens unless they had a permit to work in the U.S., are a legal permanent resident, or are a student. However, officers were told by supervisors not to do so, according to sources.

Border Patrol agents familiar with operations at highway checkpoints located north of the ports of entry said employees at checkpoints were caught off guard late Friday when cars with Mexican license plates continued arriving since they should have been blocked at the border.

Agents continued to see vehicles with plates from the Mexican state of Sonora, which runs up along the entirety of Arizona.

“I’m asking in Spanish and English, whatever they can understand, ‘Where are you guys going?’ And it was either they’re going shopping at Walmart, or they’re going to visit family, which is not essential," said a Border Patrol agent. This source added that he was confused about why people who had passed Walmart after crossing the border were driving further north instead of returning to Mexico. Others who passed through overnight claimed to have doctor’s appointments.

Agents said Border Patrol managers ordered them against turning around any cars. In more than 10 hours, not a single vehicle was turned around out of hundreds that passed through and did not meet U.S. standards for admission.

“The customs agents told us their supervisors told them to continue to let them go north because they don’t want the Mexican citizens to get mad at them,” an agent said.

“Another customs guy, he said flat out, ‘There was an issue between the first-line supers and second-line,’” the agent said, referring to senior supervisors and junior supervisors. “Basically, second-line didn’t want to make the public angry. That’s pretty much your job at the port — to make people angry.”

CBP referred the Washington Examiner to its Federal Register notice, which defines essential travelers as including those “individuals traveling for medical purposes (e.g., to receive medical treatment in the United States)." It describes “individuals traveling for tourism purposes (e.g., sightseeing, recreation, gambling, or attending cultural events)” as engaging in nonessential travel.

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As of Saturday morning, port of entry officers were still sending through noncitizens entering for nonessential travel, the officials said.

[CA] 5 Migrants Rescued After Being Abandoned in Cold California Mountains by Cartel Smugglers (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 2:06 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]
San Diego Sector Border Patrol agents and other first responders teamed up to rescue a group of Mexican migrants who were abandoned in inclement conditions in the Otay Mountains of Southern California. The group of five illegal aliens included a minor.

During the night of March 18, the San Diego Sector's Foreign Operation Branch (FOB) received an emergency call for help from a group of Mexican nationals who reported themselves to be lost in the cold mountainous region near the California-Mexico border, according to information obtained from San Diego Sector Border Patrol officials.

The FOB team contacted San Diego Sector Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue (BORSTAR) operators, U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Air and Marine Operations (AMO) aircrews, the San Diego Fire Department, and Cal-Fire to prosecute a rescue operation.

Teamwork between BORSTAR, AMO, and FOB led to the successful location of the migrant group less than four hours later, officials stated. The searchers found the missing migrants at about 1 a.m. Thursday morning in an area known as Colonel's Ridgeline. The mountainous region is located about two miles north of the Mexican border with California and three miles east of the Otay Mesa Port of Entry where they could have legally and safely attempted to cross the border.

BORSTAR agents carried out a medical evaluation of the migrants and found one, an 18-year-old Mexican female, to be suffering hypothermia. She was in and out of consciousness at the time, the agents reported.

Bad weather and low visibility precluded AMO from extracting the distressed woman at the scene. BORSTAR agents carried her through extremely rugged terrain to a fire-break road where the helicopter was able to land and fly her to a hospital for treatment. As of the time of the press release, the woman remains in critical condition and is reported to be unconscious.

The four remaining migrants, all Mexican males, including one 17-year-old juvenile, were guided to safety and taken to the Border Patrol station for processing and likely removal to the interior regions of Mexico.

"We have said it many times, do not place your life or the lives of your loved ones in the hands of ruthless smugglers," San Diego Sector Chief Patrol Agent Aaron Heitke said in a written statement. "I am proud of the heroic efforts that these agents and our partners made to locate and provide aid to those in need. These criminal organizations smuggle people through dangerous routes in an attempt to avoid apprehension."

Chief Heitke continued, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the woman and her family

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during this difficult time."

So far this fiscal year, which began October 1, 2019, San Diego Sector agents have rescued 36 migrants on land and at sea.

In February, three Mexican women died from exposure to the cold mountainous region after human smugglers abandoned them and they became separated from their group, officials reported.

So far this calendar year, at least 32 migrants have died while, or shortly after illegally crossing the border from Mexico, according to the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants Project.

[CA] Coronavirus border travel restrictions start to impact daily life (San Diego Union Tribune)
San Diego Union Tribune [3/21/2020 7:12 PM, Gustavo Solis, 241K]
Martin Arce, a Tijuana factory worker, spent the past week manufacturing respirators that are being shipped throughout the U.S. to fight to coronavirus pandemic.

Work was so hectic, that Arce didn't have time to pay his phone bill. Because unlimited plans are cheaper in San Diego than they are in Tijuana, Arce has a plan from Cricket Wireless. And because his phone is now shut off and he doesn't have a computer, Arce has to cross the border to pay his bill in person.

But when he tried to cross through the San Ysidro Port of Entry Saturday morning, Arce was turned away because of new restrictions prohibiting "non-essential" cross-border travel.

The restrictions, announced Friday by President Donald Trump, went into effect just after midnight Eastern time Saturday — 9 p.m. Friday here. The goal is to stem the spread of the coronavirus by limiting cross-border travel while still protecting trade and commerce. A similar deal is in place with Canada.

U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, people with work visas, and those traveling for education or medical reasons are still allowed to travel freely across the border with proper documentation.

The travel restrictions created an unusually quiet scene at the border Saturday morning.

The sidewalks, usually bustling with people running errands, were empty, as were the pedestrian lanes into San Diego. The Tijuana street vendors — normally running in-between cars to sell candies, sombreros and other trinkets — slouched next to their merchandise as they waited for northbound customers.

Wait times for pedestrians clocked in at less than 10 minutes, while cars waited less than 20.

Acting Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Mark Morgan hailed the rollout of the measure on Twitter Saturday: "Ports of entry seeing reductions in pedestrian & vehicle

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traffic while trade continues to flow! Everyone is going their part to stop the spread!”

U.S. citizens and green-card holders who crossed into San Diego Saturday morning noted that the new travel restrictions had virtually no direct impact on them.

“It’s business as usual,” said Neil Adams, a U.S. citizen who was coming back to San Diego after a couple of days of eating fresh lobster and visiting family in Rosarito.

But for many others whose lives straddle both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border — such as Arce — the restrictions are already having an impact.

Maria Guadalupe Garcia, 63, flew from Guadalajara to Tijuana Saturday morning. She came to help watch her grandchildren in San Diego while their mother works from home.

The grandkids are 5 and 6 years old. They require so much attention that their mother cannot get any work done.

“I was going to help,” said Garcia, who had a suitcase full of clothes with her.

As soon as Garcia told U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents that she was on a tourist visa, they turned her away without event asking to see it.

While walking away from the border, Garcia got a phone call from her daughter asking if she made it through.

Officials told her that the travel restrictions will be in place for at least 30 days and can be extended if the coronavirus situation worsens.

“They told me I couldn’t go in at least a month, can you believe it?” she told her daughter.

A short time later, Jose Salazar was also turned back.

He was on his way to pick up a care package that relatives from Salinas had sent to his post office box in San Diego. The package included diapers, a stroller and other supplies for his pregnant wife.

Until the restrictions are lifted, all of those things will simply sit in storage, Salazar said.

“I can’t really do anything about that,” he said.

The restrictions will also impact those who use tourist visas to cross the border and unlawfully work under the table — cooking in restaurants, mowing lawns and cleaning houses in the U.S.

The new travel restrictions were not as heavily enforced for people traveling from the U.S. into Mexico at San Ysidro Saturday morning.

A San Diego Union-Tribune reporter crossing south walked by Mexican customs officials without showing a passport or being asked any questions about the purpose of the trip.

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[Mexico] Some Central Americans awaiting U.S. asylum to be allowed legal entry to Mexico (Reuters)
Reuters [3/22/2020 1:20 AM, Anthony Esposito, 5304K]
Mexico's foreign ministry said late on Saturday that it will allow a limited number of Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States to legally enter Mexico in order to minimize the number of people at U.S. border stations.

The ministry said Mexican immigration authorities would evaluate who is allowed into Mexico on a case by case basis and said the measure will exclusively apply to people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

"We're evaluating the regular admission of some nationals from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala who are presented to the Mexican immigration authorities, in order to minimize crowding at U.S. Border Patrol stations," the ministry said in a statement.

Fewer than 100 people per day will be allowed into Mexico, it added.

"Minors, senior citizens, among others will not be accepted. Also, people from countries other than those mentioned, nor migrants previously in the custody of the U.S. authorities will not be accepted," it added.

The United States already sends non-Mexican asylum seekers to Mexico under a program known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). The U.S. Supreme Court allowed that program to remain in effect last week pending the outcome of a legal challenge.

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Friday the United States will swiftly return migrants who attempt to cross into the country illegally from Mexico and Canada while closing the borders to "non-essential" travel to limit the spread of the new coronavirus.

Flanked by top U.S. officials at the White House, Trump also said the United States and Mexico would work to keep commerce moving as much as possible across the border to try to limit disruptions to business.

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Coronavirus and Climate Change Could Stretch FEMA Past Its Limit (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/21/2020 1:22 PM, Leslie Kaufman, and Brian K Sullivan 6400K]
It wasn't until Wednesday, five days after President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, that the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced it was "leading the federal coordination" to the Covid-19 pandemic in the U.S.

While the disaster-response agency is better known for its work in the aftermath of storms than disease outbreaks, it is the part of the federal government often charged with procuring supplies quickly. The decision to activate FEMA to its highest state, Level 1, didn't surprise James Kendra, who directs the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware. But Kendra did wonder if FEMA could possibly handle both a once-in-a-lifetime public health crisis and the upcoming spring flood season. The National Weather Service warned this week that flooding could affect 128 million Americans this year.

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“FEMA is stretched,” he said. “All the other hazards we have in the U.S. will not go away and will only complicate the task of responding to the coronavirus.”

Problems at the agency have been mounting for years in the face of record-breaking storms, wildfires and floods that have revealed widening gaps in its abilities. A series of reports from the federal government’s General Accounting Office has shown the agency to be consistently understaffed. FEMA’s own after-action report in the wake of the 2017 hurricane season found that it had missed an internal target for what the agency calls “force strength,” the number of staff trained and ready for deployment. The goal was to have around 12,400 personnel ready, and FEMA’s ranks at the time had fallen short by more than 1,700 people.

FEMA officials reject the idea that the agency isn’t ready. In an interview, a FEMA spokesperson said the agency’s “incident management workforce” had grown by more than 25% since Hurricane Harvey in 2017. “Additionally, FEMA hired more than 1,500 temporary local hires to support response and recovery missions in their communities,” said the spokesperson, who asked to be unnamed as a matter of departmental policy.

By its own count, however, FEMA remains below its 2017 target for force strength. There are now around 11,000 personnel at the ready, FEMA said, about 1,400 short. Right now, the spokesperson said, only 35% of its employees are currently available to deploy, although more could be freed up as necessary.

The consequences of missing staffing targets became apparent after the particularly severe storm season of 2017. That was the year Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and caused 2,975 deaths, according to a study by the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health. FEMA proved unprepared in both supplies and personnel. The after-action report released by FEMA the following year acknowledged that the agency had “placed staff in positions beyond their experiences and, in some instance, beyond their capabilities.”

FEMA’s preparedness now will depend on whether or not it needs to deploy large numbers of personnel to states to manage the Covid-19 crisis, said Chris Currie, GAO’s director in charge of reviewing emergency-management services. FEMA has the ability to do surge staffing—pulling in workers from other federal agencies and expanding its ranks through contractors—but it’s not yet clear if that will be used.

Regardless, Currie said it would be challenging for FEMA to balance all the new work from the pandemic with its already heavy load. “They presently have about 600 declared federal disasters, both major and minor, where they are still assisting with long-term recovery,” he said. “They have 2,000 people still in Puerto Rico.”

The FEMA spokesperson said the agency has cut the number of major disasters whose long-term recovery it is managing, from 60 two years ago to 43 at the time of the pandemic. The agency also emphasizes that its role is not to respond first, but rather to organize and support state and local response efforts. “It’s not just FEMA—it’s a whole team effort,” the spokesperson said. “Like all emergencies, response is most successful when it is locally executed, state managed, and federally supported. But it starts with individual

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preparedness."

Brock Long, who led FEMA for the first two years of the Trump administration, said he thinks the agency had been made stronger by the trials of 2017. "This is the most battle-hardened FEMA staff ever," he said in an interview. "They are tired. It is not ideal by any means. But they do have the skill set and availability." Long resigned in early 2019, after enduring criticism from lawmakers over the agency's response to Hurricane Maria.

Long's deputy at the time, Peter Gaynor, assumed the role of FEMA acting director for nine months until he was approved by the Senate in January 2020. Prior to joining FEMA, Gaynor served as a well-regarded emergency manager in Rhode Island, holding both local and state-level positions. In his nearly four-year tenure as Rhode Island's chief emergency officer, he faced only one event that reached FEMA disaster level: a snowstorm in January 2015.

At his confirmation hearing in November, Gayner acknowledged that the U.S. was experiencing more frequent and intense storms but did not attribute the increase to global warming; he demurred by saying he's "not a scientist." Asked directly whether he thought climate change was real, Gaynor answered: "The climate has changed. I cannot attribute the scientific reasons why."

U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a Democrat from New York, cast her vote against Gaynor's nomination "due to his deeply inadequate responses to natural disasters," said Evan Lukaske, communications director for the senator. Lukaske also cited "his lack of understanding of the threat of climate change."

As acting administrator in April 2019, Gaynor went before a U.S. House subcommittee to defend the Trump administration's request to cut FEMA's overall budget by 8.5%. Gaynor batted away lawmakers' concerns that his agency would be unprepared should multiple disasters occur at once. "A bigger FEMA is not the answer," he said. "We need to be a smarter FEMA when we deal with disasters and how we source our staff."

The response to the pandemic will be an extraordinary test for a disaster-response agency with fewer resources. "It's a very unique situation when you have to help people but not get within six feet of them," said Tim Frazier, director of Georgetown University's emergency and disaster management program. "Stretching the resources has more to do with people power. FEMA doesn't have an unlimited supply of human capital."

Even before the novel coronavirus reached the U.S., this year was already shaping up to be exceptionally challenging for FEMA. Relentless rains across the Southeast in February caused near-record flooding from Jackson, Mississippi to Birmingham, Alabama. In early March, roughly 10 tornadoes touched down in Tennessee, leaving at least 25 dead.

Scientists have tied extreme weather such as unusually heavy precipitation to warming temperatures, and early floods and tornadoes are just the start of the looming risks. Flood season is around the corner, and tornadoes usually peak in April. Atlantic hurricane season begins in June 1.

"We have a saying that hope is never a good strategy," Frazier said. "But at the same time,

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we have to hope we don't get a hurricane, we don't get a tsunami somewhere. Let's hope we don't have the flooding in the Midwest."

Katrina-era FEMA director: Trump invoking Stafford Act was 'smart,' important (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 12:44 PM, Charles Creitz, 8943K]
Michael Brown, who led the federal emergency response to Hurricane Katrina, says President Trump was "smart" to invoke the Stafford Act and Defense Production Act to help battle the coronavirus pandemic.

Brown said Saturday on "Cavuto Live" that the moves essentially let the Federal Emergency Management Agency take control of the physical disaster response -- covering the majority of costs for state and local emergency operations when necessary.

That allows the White House to focus on the efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services and its coronavirus task force, he said.

Brown said the outbreak in the U.S. could continue longer than expected, but that by using the legislation to give FEMA control over a large segment of the response, the agency is free to do what it does best.

"I think that's why the president was smart in turning to the Stafford Act and declaring a national emergency because that does two things: It takes the pressure off the White House, and it takes the pressure off HHS, so they can focus as subject-matter experts," he said.

"Then all of the coordination, all of the financial arrangements, everything else can now be done through FEMA, which is precisely what FEMA is good at."

Brown said that under the 1988 act, named for former Vermont Republican Sen. Robert Stafford, FEMA is able to access emergency funds and cover up to 75 percent of the costs of operating a regional emergency operations center, law enforcement and first responder overtime, a National Guard deployments and other virus-fighting efforts.

"I want to emphasize to people that it's just like a natural disaster, it's just that in this case it's nationwide and it happens to be a virus. That's the big difference," he said.

Brown, who responded to Katrina in 2005 under President George W. Bush, also answered questions as to whether governors in affected states, like California's Gavin Newsom, Pennsylvania's Tom Wolf, New York's Andrew Cuomo and Connecticut's Ned Lamont, are allowed to issue shelter-in-place restrictions or commercial restrictions.

The Oklahoma native said that the statewide orders are subject to their own statutes and that they have the power to set the parameters of such policies. But the states also have the responsibility to inform FEMA of their decisions.

"The governors of each state have the power to do that under existing statutes and court rulings, so every governor makes that decision on their own," he said. "But when they're

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making that decision, they reach out to FEMA and they reach out to the White House coronavirus task force just so that everybody ... communicate[s] with each other."

He said that communication is important in case there is something FEMA needs to assist with.

National Security News

Top U.S. Intelligence Official Taps New Counterterrorism Chief (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 5:00 PM, Eric Schmitt, 23673K]
Lora Shiao, a career American intelligence officer, will be the next acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center, the government's central clearinghouse for intelligence on terrorist threats, Trump administration officials said on Saturday.

Ms. Shiao, who is currently the center's third-ranking official, replaces Russell Travers, who was abruptly replaced last week amid planned cutbacks by the acting director of national intelligence, Richard Grenell, that have prompted fears among career officials of potential political retribution and a widespread loss of expertise.

Ms. Shiao will begin serving as acting director on April 3, a spokeswoman for Mr. Grenell, Maura Beard, said in an email. President Trump has nominated Christopher C. Miller, a former National Security Council aide now working at the Pentagon, as his permanent choice for the top counterterrorism job, but it could take months for the Senate to confirm him.

Mr. Grenell was installed in recent weeks to temporarily serve as the nation's top intelligence official and he has made clear he plans to overhaul his office. The effort, coming from a leader serving in an acting capacity and as the federal government confronts the coronavirus pandemic, has incited concern that the Trump administration is intent on purging career officials. But supporters of Mr. Grenell say that the office, which oversees the intelligence community, has grown top heavy and that other agencies could more efficiently handle some of its functions.

The selection of Ms. Shiao, first reported Saturday by Bloomberg News, won praise from intelligence and counterterrorism officials, who had feared a political appointee with little experience in the field would be installed in the post. Ms. Shiao will also serve as the center's permanent deputy director.

"She's held multiple senior roles across the center, and is an excellent choice," said Javed Ali, a former counterterrorism center official who is now a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. "The key question now will be if all the big changes happen under her watch via Grenell's mandate, or whether they wait for Miller to get there — which will likely take months."

Ms. Shiao has been executive director, or chief administrative officer, of the counterterrorism center since March 2019. She will become the center's first female director. Much of her work had focused on terrorists plotting against the United States and terrorist activities in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, according to her official biography.

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She has also served in intelligence jobs at the Justice and Defense Departments.

Mr. Grenell has begun a review to pare back the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, sending officers detailed there back to their home agencies, like the C.I.A. With about 1,000 employees, the counterterrorism center is by far the largest part of the national intelligence office.

The creation of the counterterrorism center has been one of the success stories of the government's overhauls after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, collecting and fusing information from across agencies. Though terrorism remains a significant threat, it is not treated as the same urgent problem it was a decade ago, and some current officials believe the center could be trimmed back.

Africa Lockdowns Begin as Coronavirus Cases Above 1,000 (AP)
AP [3/21/2020 5:08 PM, Bashir Adigun, Sam Mednick and Cara Anna, 3020K]
Lockdowns have begun in Africa as coronavirus cases rise above 1,000, while Nigeria on Saturday announced it is closing airports to all incoming international flights for one month in the continent's most populous country.

Rwanda said all unnecessary movements outside the home are banned for two weeks as of midnight except for essential services such as health care and shopping. The East African nation, which has 17 cases, told all public and private employees to work from home. Tunisia earlier imposed a lockdown as well.

Meanwhile, two African heads of state appeared to defy their own travel restrictions to attend another president's inauguration.

Uganda, Eritrea and Angola announced their first cases, meaning 42 of Africa's 54 countries are now affected. Congo reported its first death; Burkina Faso reported two new ones. Uganda is closing its borders to all but cargo. Ethiopia said all arriving passengers will face mandatory quarantine as of Monday. Republic of Congo closed its borders. But Somalia is lifting its ban on international flights for two days so stranded citizens can come home.

Nigeria's international flight ban came a day after Africa's busiest airport, in Johannesburg, blocked foreigners from disembarking and two major airlines — Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways — announced sweeping cancellations of international flights.

Nigeria's announcement followed its first cases in the capital, Abuja.

The Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority said "emergency and essential" flights are exempt from the ban that starts Monday. An adviser to President Muhammadu Buhari, Bashir Ahmad, said Nigeria also plans to suspend passenger rail services starting then.

While Angola closed air, land and sea borders this week, President Joao Lourenco attended Saturday's inauguration of Namibian President Hage Geingob. Also there was President Mokgweetsi Masisi of Botswana, which this week suspended international travel by all government employees. Namibia has three cases.

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“My conscience tells me ... I did not give a bad example to Angolans,” Lourenco told state television, saying his earlier decree left room for extraordinary circumstances, the Portuguese news agency Lusa reported.

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa also was there. On Saturday, his country announced the first case in the capital, Harare.

Africa now has more than 1,100 cases, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Burkina Faso now has the most virus deaths of any country in sub-Saharan Africa and the most cases in West Africa with 64.

Several government ministers there have tested positive. On Friday, President Roch Marc Christian Kabore announced the country’s two international airports would close for two weeks with exceptions for military and cargo.

Burkina Faso is one of Africa’s most fragile states with a growing humanitarian crisis caused by attacks linked to Islamic extremists. More than 130 health centers have closed, the government and aid groups say.

According to a government response plan seen by The Associated Press, emergency teams aren’t trained for a respiratory disease outbreak and don’t have appropriate protective gear.

There’s also insufficient screening at borders. Of Burkina Faso’s 44 high-flow entry points, only 23% have coronavirus screening devices.

Jerry-Jonas Mbasha, cluster coordinator for the World Health Organization in Burkina Faso, said he was “much worried about what might happen in the next one week, two weeks from now.”

Most people only experience minor flu-like symptoms from the coronavirus and recover within a few weeks, but the virus is highly contagious and can be spread by those who appear well. It can cause severe illness, including pneumonia, in some patients, particularly those with underlying health problems.

More than 275,000 cases have been confirmed globally, including over 11,000 deaths, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University. At least 88,000 people have recovered.

In Nigeria, which just three weeks ago announced the first coronavirus case in sub-Saharan Africa, authorities said that first patient, a man who had traveled from Italy, was now fit to go home.

In Kenya, health officials disinfected crowded markets in the capital, Nairobi.

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“It’s for the sake of us, it’s for the sake of the country,” said Simon Kimani, public health council chairman.

[Canada] Canada’s coronavirus death toll rises to 13 as repatriation efforts step up (Reuters)
Reuters [3/21/2020 11:43 PM, Denny Thomas, 5304K] Video: HERE
Canada’s death toll from the coronavirus rose to 13 on Saturday, and the country stepped up efforts to repatriate Canadians stranded overseas as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the situation “unprecedented

The government has tested around 83,000 people so far for COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, Canada’s deputy chief public health officer Howard Njoo told reporters. There have been 1,099 confirmed cases.

Canada has taken several measures to contain the fast-spreading virus, including closing its border with the United States, which came into effect on Friday night.

Trudeau, who is himself in self-isolation after his wife tested positive for COVID-19, told reporters on Saturday the government is ramping up testing to detect as many cases as possible.

“The ramping up of testing is increasing at a tremendous pace.... we are getting more equipment for testing. We recognize that broad scale testing is an essential tool in continuing to fight the spread of this disease,” Trudeau told reporters.

There are around 5,000 ventilators across the country, Njoo said.

He also said Canada is making efforts to bring home stranded citizens, and an Air Canada (AC.TO) plane is in the process of repatriating citizens from Morocco. He named Peru and Spain as two potential countries from which Canada was working with airlines to bring home stranded citizens.

But Trudeau said the travel restriction put in place by many countries mean not every Canadian stuck overseas would be able to come home immediately.

“We are going to ask people to stay safe, make smart choices and do the best they can in a situation that is unprecedented, exceptional and very difficult,” Trudeau said.

Canada’s foreign minister François-Philippe Champagne estimated there are ten of thousands of Canadians overseas.

Trudeau’s government has pledged C$27 billion ($18.6 billion) to help the economy amid the virus outbreak, which could blow out the fiscal deficit and lead to higher government borrowing by nearly 40%, according to Reuters calculations.

“We have heard a wide range of estimates from economists and banks about how bad it is going to get. The only thing they seem to agree on is, it is going to get very bad. Fortunately, Canada is in an extremely strong fiscal position... and that gives us room to

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inject money into people's pocket," Trudeau added.

Meanwhile, Canada's decision to turn back asylum seekers who walk over the U.S.-Canada border has been criticized by advocates.

"The government's decision... ignores the recommendations of the World Health Organization and isn't part of a sound pandemic management plan," said Nazila Bettache, with the Caring for Social Justice Collective.

She said asylum seekers will cross by other means that are less controlled and will not have access to proper safety measures, such as a 14-day quarantine.

[Peru] Americans stuck in Peru because of coronavirus speak out: 'We are just crossing our fingers' (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 7:45 AM, Julia Musto, 8943K] Video: HERE
Two Americans who became stuck in Peru after borders closed amid the threat of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic are speaking out about their experience.

In an interview on "Fox & Friends Weekend" with host Pete Hegseth, Dan West and Jonathan Du said that the order made by the Peruvian government to close borders for two weeks took them by surprise.

West said that originally things "seemed like they were fine" but quickly evolved as news broke from Italy and the United States.

"And then, all of a sudden the president announces that they are closing borders here in Peru and that just completely [caught] us off guard," he admitted.

What was originally a once-in-a-lifetime trip became a desperate attempt to return home.

"Well, initially I mean there was just so much anxiety revolving around whether or not we could go home," Du said. "We went to the airport around 3 a.m. on Monday morning and there were just hundreds of people at the airport all trying to get out. All people who didn't have tickets."

"At first we didn't get any help from the U.S. Embassy. We didn't get any answers. The Department of Homeland Security didn't know what was going on. None of the airlines knew what was going on," he continued further.

Du said that's when the pair decided to reach out to other Americans in the same situation. In a matter of days, they had hit capacity on WhatsApp, moved over to Telegram, have a thousand people on their Facebook, and now over 1,600 on a spreadsheet they've been circulating.

Although there is currently no official count, more than a thousand U.S. citizens are believed to be stuck in the South American country. On Thursday, President Trump said that the military is going to help bring them home.

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“They got caught, they were late with their flights, we gave them a period of time, they didn’t make it, but we’re looking to get them out probably through the military," Trump told reporters.

"And we are hearing now the president announced that they are going to be helping us out," West remarked. "We are hearing flights have gotten to Morocco. We already saw that a United charter had landed in Lima yesterday and took some Americans back to Washington, D.C. And, the U.S. Embassy said that they are working to get everyone out."

"They are working on Lima first and then they are coming to Cuzco. So, we are just crossing our fingers and hoping that our time is soon," he concluded.

[Italy] Italy, Pandemic’s New Epicenter, Has Lessons for the World (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 4:05 PM, Jason Horowitz, Emma Bubola and Elisabetta Povoledo, 23673K]
As Italy’s coronavirus infections ticked above 400 cases and deaths hit the double digits, the leader of the governing Democratic Party posted a picture of himself clinking glasses for “an aperitivo in Milan,” urging people “not to change our habits.”

That was on Feb. 27. Not 10 days later, as the toll hit 5,883 infections and 233 dead, the party boss, Nicola Zingaretti, posted a new video, this time informing Italy that he, too, had the virus.

Italy now has more than 53,000 recorded infections and more than 4,800 dead, and the rate of increase keeps growing, with more than half the cases and fatalities coming in the past week. On Saturday, officials reported 793 additional deaths, by far the largest single-day increase so far. Italy has surpassed China as the country with the highest death toll, becoming the epicenter of a shifting pandemic.

The government has sent in the army to enforce the lockdown in Lombardy, the northern region at the center of the outbreak, where bodies have piled up in churches. On Friday night, the authorities tightened the nationwide lockdown, closing parks, banning outdoor activities including walking or jogging far from home.

The tragedy of Italy now stands as a warning to its European neighbors and the United States, where the virus is coming with equal velocity. If Italy’s experience shows anything, it is that measures to isolate affected areas and limit the movement of the broader population need to be taken early, put in place with absolute clarity, then strictly enforced.

Despite now having some of the toughest measures in the world, Italian authorities fumbled many of those steps early in the contagion — when it most mattered as they sought to preserve basic civil liberties as well as the economy.

Italy’s piecemeal attempts to cut it off — isolating towns first, then regions, then shutting down the country in an intentionally porous lockdown — always lagged behind the virus’s lethal trajectory.

“Now we are running after it,” said Sandra Zampa, the under secretary at the Ministry of

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Health, who said Italy did the best it could given the information it had. “We closed gradually, as Europe is doing. France, Spain, Germany, the U.S. are doing the same. Every day you close a bit, you give up on a bit of normal life. Because the virus does not allow normal life.”

Some officials gave in to magical thinking, reluctant to make painful decisions sooner. All the while, the virus fed on that complacency.

Governments beyond Italy are now in danger of following the same path, repeating familiar mistakes and inviting similar calamity. And unlike Italy, which navigated uncharted territory for a Western democracy, other governments have less room for excuses.

Italian officials, for their part, have defended their response, emphasizing that the crisis is unprecedented in modern times. They assert that the government responded with speed and competence, immediately acting on the advice of its scientists and moving more swiftly on drastic, economically devastating measures than their European counterparts.

But tracing the record of their actions shows missed opportunities and critical missteps that have left the country in its worst state since World War II.

In the critical early days of the outbreak, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and other top officials sought to down play the threat, creating confusion and a false sense of security that allowed the virus to spread.

They blamed Italy’s high number of infections on aggressive testing of people without symptoms in the north, which they argued only created hysteria and tarnished the country’s image abroad.

Even once the Italian government considered a universal lockdown necessary to defeat the virus, it failed to communicate the threat powerfully enough to persuade Italians to abide by the rules, which seemed riddled with loopholes.

“It is not easy in a liberal democracy,” said Walter Ricciardi, a World Health Organization board member and a top adviser to the health ministry, who argued that the Italian government acted on the scientific evidence made available to it.

He said the Italian government had moved at a much faster clip, and took the threat much more seriously, than its European neighbors or the United States.

Still, he acknowledged that the health minister had struggled to persuade his government colleagues to move more quickly and that the difficulties of navigating Italy’s division of powers between Rome and the regions resulted in a fragmented chain of command and inconsistent messages.

“In times of war, like an epidemic,” that system presented grave problems, he said, adding that it perhaps delayed the imposing of restrictive measures.

“I would have done them 10 days before, that is the only difference.”

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It Could Never Happen Here

For the coronavirus, 10 days can be a lifetime.

On Jan. 21, as top Chinese officials warned that those hiding virus cases “will be nailed on the pillar of shame for eternity,” Italy’s culture and tourism minister hosted a Chinese delegation for a concert at the National Academy of Santa Cecilia to inaugurate the year of Italy-China Culture and Tourism.

Michele Geraci, Italy’s former under secretary in the economic development ministry and a booster of closer relations with China, had a drink with other politicians but looked around uneasily.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” he said he asked them. “Should we be here today?”

With the benefit of hindsight, Italian officials say certainly not.

Ms. Zampa, the health ministry under secretary, said in retrospect she would have closed everything immediately. But in real time, it wasn’t that clear.

Politicians across the spectrum worried about the economy and feeding the country, and found it difficult to accept their impotence in the face of the virus.

Most importantly, Italy looked at the example of China, Ms. Zampa said, not as a practical warning, but as a “science fiction movie that had nothing to do with us.” And when the virus exploded, Europe, she said, “looked at us the same way we looked at China.”

But already in January, some officials on the right were urging Mr. Conte, their former ally and now political enemy, to quarantine schoolchildren in the northern regions who were returning from holidays in China, a measure aimed at protecting schools. Many of those children were from Chinese immigrant families.

Many liberals criticized the proposal as populist fear-mongering. Mr. Conte declined the proposal and responded that the northern governors should trust the judgment of education and health authorities who, he said, had proposed no such thing.

But Mr. Conte also demonstrated that he was taking the threat of contagion seriously. On Jan. 30, he blocked all flights in and out of China.

“We are the first country in Europe to adopt such a precautionary measure,” he said.

Over the next month, Italy responded swiftly to coronavirus scares. Two sick Chinese tourists and an Italian returning from China received care from a prominent infectious disease hospital in Rome. A false alarm led authorities to briefly confine passengers on a cruise ship docked outside of Rome.

‘Patient One,’ Super-spreader

When a 38-year-old man went to the emergency room at a hospital in Codogno, a small

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town in the Lodi province of Lombardy, with severe flu symptoms on Feb. 18, the case did not set off alarms.

The patient declined to be hospitalized and went home. He got sicker and returned to the hospital a few hours later and was admitted to a general medicine ward. On Feb. 20, he went into intensive care, where he tested positive for the virus.

The man, who became known as Patient One, had had a busy month. He attended at least three dinners, played soccer and ran with a team, all apparently while contagious and without heavy symptoms.

Mr. Ricciardi said Italy had the bad luck of having a super spreader in a densely populated and dynamic area who went to the hospital not once, but twice, infecting hundreds of people, including doctors and nurses.

“He was incredibly active,” Mr. Ricciardi said.

But he also had not had any direct contacts with China, and experts suspect he contracted the virus from another European, meaning Italy did not have an identifiable patient zero or a traceable source of contagion that could help it contain the virus.

The virus had already been active in Italy for weeks by that time, experts now say, passed by people without symptoms and often mistaken for a flu. It spread around Lombardy, the Italian region that has by far the most trade with China and the home of Milan, the country’s most culturally vibrant and business-centered city.

“Who we call ‘Patient One’ was probably ‘Patient 200,’ “ said Fabrizio Pregliasco, an epidemiologist.

On Sunday, Feb. 23, the number of infections clicked past 130 and Italy sealed off 11 towns with police and military checkpoints. The last days of Venice Carnival were canceled. The Lombardy region closed its schools, museums and movie theaters. The Milanese made a run on the supermarkets.

But while Mr. Conte again commended Italy for its firm hand, he also sought to downplay the contagion, attributing the high numbers of infected to Lombardy’s overzealous testing.

“We have been the first country in the European Union to opt for more rigorous and strict controls in airports and cities,” he said in an address to the nation. “We have more people infected because we made more swabs.”

The next day, as infections surpassed 200, seven people died and the stock market plunged, Mr. Conte and his health aides doubled down.

He blamed the Codogno hospital for the spread, saying it had handled things in “a not-completely-proper way” and argued that Lombardy and Veneto, another northern region, were inflating the severity of the problem by diverging from global guidelines and testing people without symptoms.

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As Lombardy officials scrambled to free up hospital beds, and the number of infected people rose to 309 with 11 dead, Mr. Conte said on Feb. 25 that “Italy is a safe country and probably safer than many others.”

On Friday, Mr. Conte’s office offered an interview on the condition that he could answer questions in writing. When sent questions, including those about his past statements, he declined to respond.

Mixed Messages Sow Confusion

Reassurances from leaders confused the Italian population.

On Feb. 27, Mr. Zingaretti posted his aperitivo picture. That same day, the country’s foreign minister, Luigi Di Maio, the former leader of one of the governing parties, the Five Star Movement, held a news conference in Rome.

“In Italy, we went from the risk of an epidemic to an infodemic,” Mr. Di Maio said, disparaging media coverage that highlighted the threat of the contagion, and adding that only “0.089 percent” of the Italian population was quarantined.

In Milan, only miles from the center of the outbreak, the mayor, Beppe Sala, publicized a ‘‘Milan Doesn’t Stop’’ campaign, and the Duomo, the city’s landmark cathedral that is a draw for tourists, reopened. People went out.

But on the sixth floor of the regional government headquarters in Milan, Giacomo Grasselli, who is the coordinator of the intensive care units throughout Lombardy, saw the numbers going up and quickly realized that it would be impossible to treat all the sick if the infections continued unabated.

His task force worked to match the sick to beds in intensive-care units in the nearest possible hospitals and appropriate dwindling resources.

At one of the daily meetings of about 20 health and political officials, he told the regional president, Attilio Fontana, about the growing numbers.

An epidemiologist showed the curves of infection. There was a catastrophe facing the region’s well-respected health system.

“We need to do something more,” Mr. Grasselli told the room.

Mr. Fontana, who had been pressing the central government for tougher action, agreed. He said that the mixed messages from Rome and the easing of restrictions had led Italians to believe “that everything was a joke, and they kept living as they used to.”

He said he appealed for tougher national measures in video conferences with the prime minister and other regional presidents, arguing that climbing numbers of cases threatened to collapse the hospital system in the north, but that his requests were repeatedly turned down.

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“They were convinced that the situation was less serious and they did not want to hurt our economy too much,” said Mr. Fontana.

The government started providing some economic assistance, which would later be followed by a 25 billion euro ($28 billion) relief package, but the nation became divided between those who saw the threat and those who didn’t.

Ms. Zampa said that it was around that time that government learned that infections in the town of Vò, the virus epicenter of the Veneto region, had no epidemiological link to the Codogno outbreak.

She said that the health minister, Mr. Speranza, and Mr. Conte deliberated about what to do and within the day, they decided to close down much of the north.

In a surprise 2 a.m. news conference on March 8, when 7,375 people had already tested positive for coronavirus and 366 had died, Mr. Conte announced the extraordinary step of restricting movement for about a quarter of the Italian population in the northern regions that serve as the country’s economic engine.

“We are facing an emergency,” Mr. Conte said at the time. “A national emergency.”

A draft of the decree, leaked to Italian media on Saturday night, pushed many Milan residents to rush to the train station in crowds and attempt to leave the region, causing what many later considered a dangerous wave of contagion toward the south.

Yet the following day, most Italians were still confused about the severity of the restrictions.

To clarify the issue, the interior ministry issued “auto-certification” forms that would allow people to travel in and out of the locked-down area for work, health or “other” necessities.

In the meantime, some regional governors independently ordered people coming from the newly locked-down area to self-quarantine. Others didn’t.

The broader restrictions in Lombardy also effectively lifted the quarantine on Codogno and other “red zone” towns linked to the original outbreak. Checkpoints disappeared. Local mayors complained that their sacrifices had been wasted.

A day later, on March 9, when the positive cases reached 9,172 and the death toll climbed to 463, Mr. Conte toughened the restrictions and extended them nationally.

But by then, some experts say, it was already too late.

Local Experiments

Italy is still paying the price of those early mixed messages by scientists and politicians. The people who have died in staggering numbers recently — more than 2,300 in the last four days — were mostly infected during the confusion of a week or two ago.

Roberto Burioni, a prominent virologist at the San Raffaele University in Milan, said that

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people had felt safe to go about their usual routines and he attributed the spike in cases last week to “that behavior.”

The government has urged national unity in obeying its restrictive measures. But on Saturday, hundreds of mayors from the hardest-hit areas told the government those measures were fatally insufficient.

Leaders in the north are desperate for the government to crack down harder.

On Friday, Mr. Fontana complained that the 114 troops the government deployed were insignificant, and that at least 1,000 should be sent. On Saturday, he closed public offices, work sites and banned jogging. He said in an interview that the government needed to stop messing around and “apply rigid measures.”

“My idea is that if we had shut everything in the beginning, for two weeks, probably now we would be celebrating victory,” he said.

His political ally, Luca Zaia, the president of the Veneto region, pre-empted the national government with his own crackdown, and said that Rome needed to enforce “a more drastic isolation,” including closing all stores and prohibiting public activities other than commuting to work.

“Walks should be banned,” he said.

Mr. Zaia has some credibility on the issue. As new infections have proliferated around the country, they have significantly dropped in Vò, a town of about 3,000 people that was one of the first quarantined and which had the country’s first coronavirus death.

Some government experts attributed that turnaround to the strict quarantine that had been in place for two weeks. But Mr. Zaia had also ordered blanket tests there, in defiance of international scientific guidelines and the national government. The government has argued that testing people without symptoms is a drain on resources.

“At least this slows down the virus’ speed,’’ Mr. Zaia said, arguing that testing helped identify potentially contagious people without symptoms. ‘‘And slowing down the virus’ speed allows the hospitals to breathe.’’

If not, the overwhelming number of patients would crater health care systems and cause a national catastrophe.

Americans and others, he said, “need to be ready.”

[Gaza Strip] First coronavirus cases confirmed in the Palestinian Gaza Strip (Reuters)
Reuters [3/21/2020 8:09 PM, Nidal al-Mughrabi, 5304K]
The first two cases of coronavirus have been confirmed in the densely-populated Gaza Strip, Palestinian health officials said on Sunday.

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Two Palestinians who had traveled from Pakistan and entered Gaza through Egypt had tested positive for the virus late on Saturday and have been in quarantine in Rafah, a town near the Egyptian border, since their arrival on Thursday, the Gaza health ministry said.

Schools, public markets and event halls have all been shut in Gaza over the past two weeks to minimize the risk of coronavirus transmission.

The coastal enclave, measuring 375 square kilometers (145 square miles) is home to around two million Palestinians and poverty and unemployment rates are high.

An Israeli-led blockade has put restrictions on the movement of people and goods for years, amid security concerns following the 2007 takeover of Gaza by the Islamist militant group Hamas, three subsequent wars and frequent rounds of violence.

Last week Hamas said it would allow only patients requiring urgent medical treatment outside Gaza to cross into Egypt or Israel. According to the Palestinian health ministry 53 people coronavirus cases have been confirmed in the occupied West Bank.

[Somalia] Al Qaeda Branch in Somalia Threatens Americans in East Africa — and Even the U.S. (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 12:07 PM, Eric Schmitt and Abdi Latif Dahir, 23673K]
Al Qaeda's branch in Somalia, the terrorist group's largest and most active global affiliate, has issued specific new threats against Americans in East Africa and even the United States, U.S. commandos, counterterrorism officials and intelligence analysts say.

Several ominous signs indicate that the Qaeda affiliate, the Shabab, is seeking to expand its lethal mayhem well beyond its home base, and attack Americans wherever it can — threats that have prompted a recent flurry of American drone strikes in Somalia to snuff out the plotters.

In recent months, two Shabab operatives have been arrested while taking flying lessons — one last summer in the Philippines and another more recently in an African country, intelligence officials say. Those arrests carried eerie echoes of the original Sept. 11 plotters, who trained to fly jetliners. Shabab fighters are seeking to acquire Chinese-made, shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles, which could pose a deadly new risk to U.S. helicopters and other aircraft in Somalia.

American commanders are hardening defenses at bases in the region after a Shabab attack in January at Manda Bay, Kenya, killed three Americans and revealed serious security vulnerabilities. That attack came about a week after an explosives-laden truck blew up at a busy intersection in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, killing 82 people. The Shabab also claimed responsibility for that attack.

The strike in Kenya came two months after the Shabab released a 52-minute video narrated by the group's leader, Abu Ubaidah, in which he called for attacks against Americans wherever they are, saying the American public is a legitimate target. The statement mirrored Osama bin Laden's declaration of war against the United States in 1996.

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“Shabab is a very real threat to Somalia, the region, the international community and even the U.S. homeland,” Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the head of the military’s Africa Command, told a House committee in Washington this month.

The Shabab control large parts of Somalia and raise considerable funds through local taxation and extortion. Despite intensified American airstrikes and a long-running offensive against the African Union, the group has carried out deadly attacks not only in Somalia but also in neighboring Kenya and Uganda.

American and other Western intelligence analysts and Special Operations officers express fears that Shabab militants could threaten the 3,500 personnel at the Pentagon’s largest permanent base on the continent, in Djibouti, as well as international shipping in the critical Bab al Mandab waterway off the southern Yemeni coast.

And last month, the United States Embassy in Nairobi warned of a possible terrorist attack against a major hotel in the Kenyan capital that is popular with tourists and business travelers. The warning did not specifically mention the Shabab, but intelligence officials said the threat bore the hallmarks of such an operation.

The Defense Intelligence Agency told the Pentagon’s inspector general in a recent report that the chances of the Shabab attacking the United States remained relatively low, but the analysts noted that the group had made clear its intentions to kill Americans at any location.

One threat could be home grown, from radicalized Somali-Americans living in cities like Minneapolis or Columbus, Ohio, which have large Somali-American communities, analysts said. Another could be from Shabab militants in East Africa, who have pilot training and might be able to slip into the United States — a much more difficult feat now than when the original Sept. 11 plotters entered the country in 2001.

For now, Shabab threats against Americans remain highest in East Africa.

In September, a suicide bomber detonated a car packed with explosives at the gate of a military airfield in Bale Dogle, Somalia, injuring one American service member. Afterward, according to the Pentagon’s inspector general report, the Shabab and other Qaeda-related groups released near-simultaneous messages on social media, suggesting a coordinated media strategy among the Qaeda branches.

“This is what we struggle with,” Brig. Gen. Dagvin R.M. Anderson, the commander of American Special Operations forces in Africa, said in an interview last month on the sidelines of a counterterrorism exercise in Mauritania. “Their intent is clearly stated. The question is, are they able to develop a safe haven to plan, fund and plot these attacks against the U.S.? What’s their timeline? How do we and our partners keep them off balance?”

It is unclear how the Shabab might try to exploit the spread of the coronavirus pandemic on the continent, where many countries face huge challenges responding to the crisis, General Anderson said on Friday in a separate telephone interview from his headquarters in Germany.

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There are also now about 500 American troops in Somalia. Most are Special Operations forces stationed at a small number of bases across the country. Their missions include training and advising Somali army and counterterrorism troops and conducting kill-or-capture raids of their own.

The threat from the Shabab has increased so sharply that last November, General Townsend created a Special Operations task force with about 100 troops and analysts to focus on shoring up security in Somalia and countering the Shabab.

But the weapon of choice against the Shabab is drone strikes. The United States has carried out 31 strikes against Shabab militants already this year, and is on pace to nearly double the previous high of 63 last year — almost all against Shabab militants, with a few against a branch of the Islamic State. That compares with 47 strikes against the Shabab in 2018.

Several recent strikes have focused on targets near Jilib, about 220 miles south of Mogadishu, which American and Somali officials say is a major hub for the Shabab's operations cell that plots attacks outside Somalia. Other drone attacks have targeted fighters in Shabab strongholds such as Jamame, Sakow, Bu'aale and Janaale.

The Africa Command, also called Africom, said that a strike on Feb. 22 in the vicinity of Sakow killed Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud, who the military says was a senior Shabab commander responsible for planning and directing the deadly Manda Bay attack.

"I would say that the threat is higher, has been higher in the last few months than it was eight months ago when I first got to Africom," General Townsend told reporters after the House hearing last week. "That's exactly why you've seen this increase in strike activity."

The air campaign, however, has been shrouded in secrecy, and an investigation by Amnesty International last year reported on evidence that these airstrikes had killed or wounded more than two dozen civilians since 2017. A recent report by Airwars, a conflict-monitoring group, also challenged the military's findings that its strikes had resulted in very few civilian casualties.

The Shabab formally pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2012. But long before that, its members fought Western-backed governments in Mogadishu as the group sought to impose its extremist interpretation of Islam across Somalia. In defending the fragile government, the United States has largely relied on proxy forces, including about 20,000 African Union peacekeepers from Uganda, Kenya and other East African nations.

The United States estimates that the Shabab have about 5,000 to 7,000 fighters in Somalia, but the group's ranks are fluid.

In recent years, the Shabab have proved adept at transforming itself into an agile and adaptive guerrilla force that has developed fiendishly sophisticated homemade bombs, including improvised explosives devices, or I.E.D.s.

"Now more than ever, Al Shabab effectively deploys I.E.D.s, complex attacks on both civilian and military targets, blockades to disrupt access, devises sophisticated extortion

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generating schemes, and utilizes intimidation tactics to afford itself invincibility status aimed at destabilizing Somalia and threatening neighboring countries," said Abdisaid Muse Ali, Somalia's national security adviser.

Mr. Ali said the Shabab had expanded its popular base by building on the issues that afflicted Somalia, including the influence of warlords, tribalism, regional meddling, and the lack of a government to expand and deliver services.

"Ensuring that we deliver services, register and pay civil-service and soldiers, and properly register weapons coming into the country, these are important," he said of the government's priorities.

Mr. Ali said Shabab leaders also sought to broaden their global jihadist appeal by striking American targets. "Al Shabab tries to internationalize their aggression by saying they are fighting America while seeking attention from Al Qaeda leaders," he said.

Indeed, the authorities in the Philippines last July arrested a person accused of being a Shabab operative from Kenya who was studying to be a pilot at a local aviation academy. In announcing the arrest of the suspect, Cholo Abdi Abdullah, local reports in the news media said that he had been accused of conducting research on "aviation threats, aircraft hijacking and falsifying travel documents."

"Al Shabab is a prime lesson in the Al Qaeda movement's stubborn resiliency," said Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations. "The group has suffered leadership losses, loss of territory and revenue; and the attrition of its fighters, but keeps on fighting — and escalating and expanding its operations elsewhere."

[Iran] Iran Leader Refuses US Help, Citing Virus Conspiracy Theory (New York Times)

New York Times [3/22/2020 3:50 AM, Associated Press, 23673K]

Iran's supreme leader refused U.S. assistance Sunday to fight the new coronavirus, citing an unfounded conspiracy theory that the virus could be man-made by America.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's comments come as Iran faces crushing U.S. sanctions blocking the country from selling its crude oil and accessing international financial markets.

But while Iranian civilian officials in recent days have increasingly criticized those sanctions, 80-year-old Khamenei instead chose to traffic in the same conspiracy theory increasingly used by Chinese officials about the new virus to deflect blame for the pandemic.

"I do not know how real this accusation is but when it exists, who in their right mind would trust you to bring them medication?" Khamenei said. "Possibly your medicine is a way to spread the virus more."

He also alleged without offering any evidence that the virus "is specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians which they have obtained through different means."

"You might send people as doctors and therapists, maybe they would want to come here

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and see the effect of the poison they have produced in person," he said.

There is no scientific proof offered anywhere in the world to support Khamenei's comments.

However, his comments come after Chinese government spokesman Lijian Zhao tweeted earlier this month that it "might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe(s) us an explanation!"

Lijian likewise offered no evidence to support his claim, which saw the U.S. State Department summon China's ambassador to complain.

Wuhan is the Chinese city where the first cases of the disease were detected in December. In recent days, the Trump administration has increasingly referred to the virus as the "Chinese" or "Wuhan" virus, while the World Health Organization used the term COVID-19 to describe the illness the virus causes. Even a U.S. senator from Arkansas has trafficked in the unfounded conspiracy theory it was a man-made Chinese bioweapon.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover from the new virus.

Scientists have not yet determined exactly how the new coronavirus first infected people. Evidence suggests it originated in bats, which infected another animal that spread it to people at a market in Wuhan. The now-shuttered Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market advertised dozens of species such as giant salamanders, baby crocodiles and raccoon dogs that were often referred to as wildlife, even when they were farmed.

An article published last week in the peer-reviewed scientific journal Nature Medicine similarly said it was "improbable" that the virus "emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus."

Khamenei made the comments in a speech in Tehran broadcast live Sunday across Iran marking Nowruz, the Persian New Year. He had called off his usual speech at Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad over the virus outbreak.

His comments come as Iran has over 21,600 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus amid 1,685 reported deaths, according to government figures released Sunday.

Iran is one of the hardest-hit countries in the world by the new virus. Across the Mideast, Iran represents eight of 10 cases of the virus and those leaving the Islamic Republic have carried the virus to other countries.

Iranian officials have criticized U.S. offers of aid during the virus crisis as being disingenuous. They have accused the Trump administration of wanting to capitalize on its "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran since withdrawing from the nuclear deal in May 2018. However, the U.S. has directly offered the Islamic Republic aid in the past despite decades of enmity, like during the devastating Bam earthquake of 2003.

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Reassigning blame could be helpful to Iran's government, which faced widespread public anger after denying for days it shot down a Ukrainian jetliner, killing 176 people. Widespread economic problems as well has seen mass demonstrations in recent years that saw hundreds reportedly killed.

Iranian hard-liners have supported conspiracy theories in the past when it suited their interests. Following the Sept. 11 attacks, some publicly doubted al-Qaida's role and state TV promoting the unfounded conspiracy theory that the Americans blew up the building themselves.

Former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad similarly raised doubt about the Sept. 11 attack, calling it a "big lie," while also describing the Holocaust as a "myth."

Meanwhile on Sunday, Iran imposed a two-week closure on major shopping malls and centers across the country to prevent spreading the virus. Pharmacies, supermarkets, groceries and bakeries will remain open.

In Saudi Arabia, the kingdom said its armed forces are now taking part in combating the virus, setting up mobile hospitals in various cities.

And in Kuwait, authorities have instituted a nightly curfew from 5 p.m. to 4 a.m., warning violators face up to three years in prison and fines of $32,000 if arrested and convicted.

[Pakistan] Pakistan locks down province, bans flights as coronavirus spreads (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/22/2020 3:37 AM, Pamela Constable and Shaiq Hussain, 12625K]
With the number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan soaring to 645 in the past few days, officials there have banned all international flights and have requested that security forces help institute a full lockdown in Sindh Province, where a majority of cases have been reported. A third death from the virus was reported Friday.

Most of those found to be infected are Shiite pilgrims from Sindh who returned from visiting shrines in neighboring Iran, where the virus has already killed more than 1,400 people. Most reentered Pakistan via a single border crossing in Baluchistan province. A similar problem is affecting next-door Afghanistan, where tens of thousands of refugees have recently flooded back from Iran.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, facing public panic, has stopped short of declaring a nationwide lockdown but asked all citizens to self-quarantine for two weeks. Earlier this week, Khan came under strong criticism after playing down the threat in a nationwide address. He said people should not "run to hospitals" to get tested and that 90 percent of those testing positive would "recover easily."

On Friday, with several hundred new cases reported, Khan told a group of TV anchors that he hoped the coming of hot and dry weather would help mitigate the outbreak. He urged people to stay at home but remain calm, saying that "panicking is more dangerous for us than coronavirus." He said he was still reluctant to impose a nationwide lockdown because it would harm the working poor.

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“We don’t want to try and save people from corona but they end up dying due to hunger and poverty,” Khan said. Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country of 210 million people, has a high poverty rate, with about one-quarter of the populace earning less than $2 per day.

But in Sindh, a vast and impoverished region of close to 50 million, officials decided to impose a total lockdown beginning Sunday night. Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah was in discussions with army and police officials Sunday night. He was expected to formally enlist their help to ensure public compliance with the lockdown.

“Time for some tough decisions,” Murtaza Wahab, the minister’s spokesman, said in a tweet early Sunday. He said security forces would likely be asked to “ensure full implementation” of the decision to keep people in their homes, while grocery stores and pharmacies will remain open.

But the leader of the Pakistan People’s Party, which is based in Sindh, said the country needs to impose a complete nationwide lockdown to prevent the virus from spreading further. In a tweet, Saturday, Bilawal Bhutto said the decision had already been delayed for too long.

“We do need to learn from the experiences of other countries,” he said in the tweet, noting that the unchecked virus could “overwhelm” the public health system. “While we are optimistic for a good outcome, at the same time we should prepare for the worst.”

In Punjab province, where nearly 100 cases of coronavirus infection have been reported, officials announced a three-day lockdown, with all parks, malls and restaurants closed until Tuesday. Media outlets published photos of unarmed security forces guarding a new isolation facility in Lahore city. In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, a partial lockdown has also been instituted for the next three days, with all shopping malls and restaurants closed.

The government decided Saturday to ban all international arriving flights for 14 days, but the national carrier, Pakistan International Airlines, was allowed to bring back several of its planes from abroad, including one from London carrying Shahbaz Sharif, the opposition leader from the Pakistan Muslim League (N). He has been in London visiting his ailing brother, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

On Sunday, officials at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, the capital, said it was “aware” of reports from Pakistani health authorities that an unidentified embassy employee had been found to be infected with the virus after landing at the international airport. They declined to provide further information, citing privacy reasons. Pakistani media reported that the individual was being treated in an isolation ward at the embassy.

Pakistan’s army chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, ordered the army on Saturday to step up its assistance to civil authorities and urged all Pakistanis to take precautions to help curb the virus. The army is the most powerful institution in Pakistan, with a history of intervening in civilian power. Bajwa has emphasized his deference to civilian authority and desire to help in emergencies.

The army has said it will open all military hospitals and health facilities nationwide to assist

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in testing and treating virus cases.

Khan and his aides appealed to international financial institutions to write off loans to Pakistan and other developing countries to allow them to use more resources to fight the virus. Pakistan has a huge foreign debt, and Khan has struggled to implement economic austerity measures to bring it down.

Pakistan shares a border with China and there is constant travel by workers, students and others between the two countries. A first, no Pakistani students were allowed to return after the virus broke out, and no cases were reported until Feb. 26, when a man in Karachi tested positive after returning from Iran.

Several days later, authorities began reporting a sharp surge in cases among pilgrims returning from Iran across the border at Taftan, Baluchistan, even after they had been held in quarantine there for 14 days. The three fatalities from coronavirus to date were pilgrims who had returned from Iran or Saudi Arabia.

In the past several weeks, the rate of reported infections has risen sharply. As of Saturday, there were more than 290 confirmed cases in Sindh, more than 100 in Balochistan, more than 150 in Punjab, 31 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, 55 in Gilgit-Baltistan, 11 in Islamabad and one in Kashmir.

As of this weekend, health officials said a 3,000-room quarantine center has been set up in Multan, a city in Punjab, for infected pilgrims who returned from Iran. They said it has 171 isolation rooms. After screening there, patients will be sent to a new general hospital for treatment, they said.

[Pakistan] Pakistan halts international passenger flights for two weeks (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 9:33 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Pakistan announced Saturday it is suspending for a fortnight all international passenger flights into and out of the country in a bid to slow the spread of coronavirus.

“We are suspending international flight operations effective tonight at 8:00 pm (1500 GMT),” the prime minister’s special assistant on national security, Moeed Yusuf, told an Islamabad press briefing.

“No international flights will be allowed to land in Pakistan for two weeks.”

As of Saturday, Pakistan had tested 4,046 people for the virus, with 524 positive cases and three deaths.

Yusuf said a few flights already en route to Pakistan would be able to land Sunday morning, adding that diplomats coming to Pakistan as well as cargo planes would be exempted.

According to Yusuf, the suspension will “certainly create problems”, as Pakistan was expecting more than 200,000 passengers, including tourists, by end of March.

Observers fear the virus could spread quickly in the country of 215 million people, where

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health care is frequently inadequate.

Pakistan's porous borders, creaking hospitals, a culture of shaking hands and hugging, and large illiterate populations in crowded urban centers mean containing the crisis could be a huge challenge.

To prevent the virus's transmission, Islamabad has closed the Afghan and Iranian borders, shuttered wedding halls shuttered, and stopped schools for the remainder of the month.

But Prime Minister Imran Khan said early this week Pakistan cannot afford the type of urban lockdowns currently underway in the West.

Pakistan has a history of failing to contain infectious diseases such as polio, tuberculosis and hepatitis.

[United Arab Emirates] Emirates Airlines suspends flights to dozens more cities (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 2:55 PM, AFP, 1973K]
Dubai carrier Emirates Airlines announced Saturday it would suspend flights to dozens more cities, taking its total route closures past 100, in a bid to forestall the spread of coronavirus.

The United Arab Emirates on Friday announced its first two deaths from the disease. Total recorded infections in the UAE stood at 153, of which 38 have recovered.

The latest suspensions by Emirates Airlines take the carrier's total closed routes to 111.

The airline normally serves 159 destinations.

"In response to the latest developments in the COVID-19 outbreak around the world, Emirates is taking extra steps that go above and beyond industry and regulatory requirements to ensure our customers' health and comfort," the company said in a statement.

Emirates said flights to some destinations would be suspended for up to three months while others, including to Paris, Frankfurt and Islamabad "until further notice".

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of coronavirus, particularly in the air transport sector.

The UAE has stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but who are currently outside the country from returning.

[China] China's imported coronavirus cases soar as students, expats flock home (Reuters)
Reuters [3/21/2020 5:29 AM, Engen Tham and Yilei Sun, 5304K]
China reported a record rise in imported coronavirus cases on Friday as students and expatriates returned home from the United States and Europe, sparking fears of a second

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wave of infections just as the country recovers from the initial outbreak.

All 41 of the new confirmed cases in China were imported from overseas, the country's National Health Commission said on Saturday, bringing the total number of such cases to 269. There were no locally transmitted cases for the third consecutive day.

Beijing and Shanghai were the main entry points for the returnees, many of whom are students studying abroad. They have come back after many campuses in the United States and Europe shut down to stem rapidly rising infection rates there.

Also returning in a flight to safety were China-based expats, as businesses begin to reopen.

While there is no reported transmission of the virus from people arriving from abroad to local communities, authorities across China are tightening public health measures.

"Since March 11, when the World Health Organization characterized the epidemic as a pandemic, the cumulative number of imported cases (in China) has risen from 85 to 269, up by 216% and outpacing the 98% increase in the cumulative worldwide confirmed cases during the same period," Mi Feng, spokesman of the National Health Commission, said at a regular press briefing.

China must strictly prevent the import of the virus from overseas and a rebound in cases, Mi said.

Of the 14 new imported cases in Beijing on Friday, five were Chinese students returning from abroad. Among Shanghai's record nine cases, five were students flying back from Britain, France and Switzerland.

The southern provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and the eastern provinces of Shandong and Zhejiang, as well as Shaanxi and Sichuan, all reported cases.

Guangdong's health commission said on Saturday travelers who enter Guangdong province from abroad will be subject to a 14-day quarantine on arrival either in personal residences or at a centralized quarantine center at the expense of the traveler.

Infected people have also entered China through the major transport hub of Shenzhen, including people making their way back to the mainland from Hong Kong by land.

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While the influx of infections from overseas remains modest, they present a potential threat to Chinese authorities keen to restart factories and get consumers to spend again.

Analysts have slashed forecasts for China's first-quarter gross domestic product to levels not seen since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, with all sectors of the economy hammered by the coronavirus outbreak this year.

The total number of confirmed cases in mainland China stood at 81,008 at the end of Friday, the health authority said. The death toll was 3,255, up by seven, a much slower rate

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than at the height of the crisis.

The lack of locally transmitted cases for the third day running underscored a recovery that has prompted officials to relax restrictions, even in the virus epicenter of Wuhan.

On Saturday, the official Xinhua news agency said commercial outlets in residential communities and villages without existing cases of virus can resume business, citing the municipal bureau of commerce.

The first phase of a clinical trial of a vaccine has kicked off, state-backed Science and Technology Daily reported on Saturday.

The first batch of 36 volunteers, comprising Wuhan residents aged between 18 and 60, will undergo a 14-day quarantine at a centralized location.

[Thailand] Thailand virus cases rocket to 600 as crisis fears grow (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/22/2020 6:15 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Thailand's confirmed coronavirus cases rose by a third to nearly 600, the kingdom announced Sunday, as fears of a full-blown crisis take hold in a country largely spared until now.

Thailand's health ministry announced the spike was mainly in the capital, but warned residents of Bangkok not to leave and risk spreading the virus around the country.

"We would like you to stay home. Do not travel upcountry," said health ministry official Taweesin Visanuyothin.

Southeast Asia has so far been spared the worst of the pandemic that has swept the world, confining nearly one billion to their homes and killing more than 13,000.

But that could be about to change.

With a boxing stadium and night club among the likely transmission sites, Bangkok has now imposed tough restrictions.

Virtually all public spaces have been shuttered, from shopping malls and beauty parlours to golf courses and swimming pools.

Residents packed out supermarkets over the weekend to stockpile food, fearing a full lockdown.

Transport links are also slowly being severed.

A frontier crossing point near northern city Chiang Rai saw thousands of Thai and Myanmar citizens rushing to get home before land border closures came into effect.

Bangkok Airways and Thai AirAsia have cancelled all international flights while Thai Lion Air has grounded its fleet entirely.

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Yet elsewhere in the tropical tourist destination, life continued unabated with beaches in Pattaya and Phuket thronged with sun-seekers.

One doctor at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn hospital warned tougher measures were needed — even calling for three weeks of martial law to force people to self-isolate.

The nation is "on the verge of a crisis" and heading for the Italian model, a doctor told AFP, adding hospitals are already straining under the pressure.

Meanwhile Vietnam on Saturday imposed a blanket ban on all foreigners entering the country, even though the number of confirmed cases still hovers below 100.

In under-developed Myanmar and Laos, there is increasing scepticism about claims of zero cases as fears grow for the their decrepit healthcare systems and fragile economies.

[Japan] An Olympic Showdown: The Rising Clamor to Postpone the Tokyo Summer Games (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 1:08 PM, Andrew Keh, Matt Futterman, Tariq Panja and Motoko Rich, 23673K]
On July 24, as far as the organizers of the Olympics are still concerned, thousands of athletes will march as scheduled into the national stadium in Tokyo for the opening ceremony of the biggest sporting event on the planet. The Summer Olympics.

Is this a vision of reality or just a mirage?

While the international sports calendar has been wiped almost clean by the spread of the coronavirus, the organizers of the 2020 Olympics — seemingly unwilling to meddle just yet with years of planning and billions of dollars in television rights and other anticipated revenue — insist the Games can go on.

Yet now, in a showdown over public safety, the organizers are facing a remarkable groundswell of criticism and pushback from their own athletes, fans and national Olympic officials, who are increasingly and unusually vocal in calling for a postponement.

One of the biggest cracks in the usual solidarity behind the Games came Friday when U.S.A. Swimming, which governs the sport in the United States and regularly produces stars at the Games like Katie Ledecky and Simone Manuel, called for a postponement because of the growing obstacles to training amid practical restrictions imposed by the virus. The following day, U.S.A. Track & Field, which along with swimming has produced the most medals for the United States, also requested a delay.

Norway's national Olympic committee, in a statement on Friday, became the first to clearly state a preference for the Olympics to be delayed until the global pandemic can be brought under control. The Brazilian Olympic committee on Saturday also endorsed postponing the Games until 2021.

There were signs of pressure within Japan, with a member of its Olympic committee coming

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out in favor of postponing the Games.

“Opening the Olympics at a time when athletes could not train as much as they wanted to runs counter to the motto of ‘athletes first,’” Kaori Yamaguchi, a member of the Japanese Olympic committee board who won a bronze medal in judo in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, said in an interview with The Asahi Shimbun. “The Games should be postponed.”

Hayley Wickenheiser, a six-time Canadian Olympian and a member of the I.O.C. Athletes’ Commission, has denounced the plan to go forward. “I think the IOC insisting this will move ahead with such conviction is insensitive and irresponsible given the state of humanity,” she wrote Tuesday on Twitter.

Thomas Bach, the president of the International Olympic Committee, said in an interview Thursday that the Games would not be canceled. And while he left open the possibility of postponing them, he said a decision did not have to be made soon.

“Nobody today can tell you what the developments are tomorrow, what they are in one month, not to mention in more than four months,” Bach said, justifying the wait-and-see approach.

But in reality the organizers may not have that much time, and in many ways, outside forces could be making the decision for Bach.

Japan has travel bans and strict quarantining measures imposed on visitors from scores of countries, and a recent national poll showed that a large majority of people there did not believe the Games could proceed as planned.

Broadcasters and marketers are fretting about a sports calendar already upended by cancellations and postponements involving nearly every other league and major event in the world — which, among other challenges, would make it difficult for marquee athletes like N.B.A. superstars to come to Tokyo. Even NBC, the American broadcaster that has great sway with the organizers, has prepared for the possibility that the Games will be shifted to next year or farther down the road, by taking out the necessary insurance protections, though it has yet to make any major logistical preparations.

And then there is the negotiating partner that cannot be reasoned with: the Covid-19 virus itself, which has torn an uncontrollable, unpredictable path across the global map, yielding a cascade of consequences that have altered the fabric of daily life.

The modern Olympics are a multibillion-dollar, made-for-television extravaganza that serve as an investment vehicle for scores of sponsors and media partners and as a source of entertainment for millions of fans.

But the heart of the Games remains the athletes, and so it was no surprise that the calls for postponement only seemed to gain traction in recent days, as their cries and concerns grew louder and more explicit.

The outcry arrived almost simultaneously with a rash of restrictions on movement and public gatherings and a sharp rise this week in coronavirus cases in Europe and North America —

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all of it clashing with Mr. Bach's advice that athletes should train "full steam ahead," as if the Games would still occur in late July and early August.

Many found the I.O.C.'s stance tone deaf. Not only have athletes in affected countries struggled to maintain their elite-level training routines, but stubbornly trying to do so might exacerbate the spread of the virus.

"I recognize they're treading a light line: They're conscious of the brands, they're conscious of the impact on the Japanese economy, and they're in a precarious position," Iñaki Gómez, a member of the Canadian Olympic Athletes' Commission, said of the I.O.C. "But for me, I think that all has to go out the window. We're trying to contain something that's unprecedented in the last 100 years."

Some American gymnasts, who tend to be a centerpiece of the Games, are also openly calling for a postponement.

"For all of those athletes in the U.S., but also globally, like in Italy and in China, who are on complete lockdowns, I think it would make it a fairer competition in Tokyo if the Olympics were postponed to give everyone the time they need to be ready," said Laurie Hernandez, a 2016 gold medal winner who has been scrambling to find a place to train since her gym in California closed its doors on Thursday night because of the state's shelter-in-place order.

The president of U.S.A. Gymnastics, Li Li Leung, said Friday that the organization would survey its athletes before deciding whether to take a position on postponing the Games.

The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, however, said it would continue to endorse the I.O.C.'s wait-and-see approach. That decision provoked the ire of athletes, and hours later U.S.A. Swimming added its voice to those calling for postponing the Games.

"Pressing forward amidst the global health crisis this summer is not the answer," Tim Hinchey, the chief executive of U.S.A. Swimming, wrote in a letter to the U.S.O.P.C.

Mr. Bach had acknowledged the day before that in some corners of the I.O.C.'s headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, alternative plans were being weighed.

Given that canceling the Games entirely was ruled out this week by the I.O.C., many analysts now believe that the most logical decision would be to wait a year, when it is hoped the world will have emerged from the worst of the pandemic.

That could disrupt other big events, including world championships for swimming and for track and field that are scheduled in 2021.

Whatever decision is made, Mr. Bach has repeatedly insisted that it would not be driven by financial interests. Still, I.O.C. executives have been in constant contact with leading sponsors and broadcast executives.

The I.O.C. derives roughly half of its revenues from its media partners, and about 75 percent of those come from NBC, which in 2014 agreed to pay $7.75 billion for all the U.S. media rights to the Olympics through 2032. (That is an average of $1.29 billion for each

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Games from 2022 to 2032, 17 percent more than the average fee of $1.1 billion the NBC committed for the 2014-2020 Games.)

Brian Roberts, the chief executive of Comcast, which owns NBC, said at a conference in San Francisco this month that the company had insurance to guarantee it would incur “no losses” should the Games be postponed this year.

At this point, in fact, pushing ahead with the Olympics this summer could cause scheduling conflicts for NBC.

The network televises the N.H.L. and England’s Premier League, both of which are on hiatus but intend to finish their seasons. Their rescheduled games may ultimately conflict with the Olympics, which NBC shows on several channels through its parent company, NBCUniversal.

In a statement, NBC promised to “continue to do the best we can to be prepared to stand behind any decision made by the I.O.C., the Japanese government and the world health officials with whom they are working regarding the 2020 Olympics.”

Every media agreement is different, but Neal Pilson, the former president of CBS Sports and a former media consultant to the I.O.C., said many deals are set up so that the broadcaster partners do not have to pay the bulk of the fees for each Olympics until just before the Games actually begin. That means the I.O.C. would have to wait for its money in the event of a postponement.

Pilson said the idea of staging the Olympics with just athletes and no spectators — effectively making it a global television event — would not solve the central problem of how many people are required simply to run the Games. NBC alone is expected to take roughly 2,000 people to Japan. In addition, the Olympics typically require more than 50,000 workers, support staff and volunteers.

“Delaying to October doesn’t really work, because you don’t really know how much better things will be then,” Mr. Pilson said. “That brings you back to the idea that postponing for a year is probably the best solution.”

Michael Lynch, the former director of global sponsorship marketing for Visa who now consults with Olympic sponsors, said the uncertainty surrounding the Games had put companies that spent $100 million or more to partner with the I.O.C. in a bind at a difficult moment for all businesses. All have advertising, promotions, retail engagements, hospitality and other events planned for Tokyo during the Games. All typically spend one to three dollars supporting those efforts for every dollar they devoted to buying Olympic sponsorship rights.

“How do you invite people to the Games at this time?” Mr. Lynch said.

While Mr. Bach said the I.O.C. had no cash-flow issues, there are other entities that rely on payments from the Olympics to finance their operations, including the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee. The U.S.O.P.C. has a revenue-sharing arrangement with the I.O.C. that gives it about 12 percent of the fees from NBC and roughly 20 percent of

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the I.O.C.'s sponsorship revenue.

The broadcast payments alone, which totaled $169 million from the Summer Games in 2016 and $121 million from the Winter Games in 2018, account for about half of the U.S.O.P.C.'s revenues. Because the payment is not made until after the Games have occurred, a delay could cause a serious financial shortfall for the organization.

Even if the I.O.C. does decide that the Olympics should be postponed, it must find some harmony with the wants and needs of the host nation.

It was four years ago, at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro, that Japan assumed control of the Summer Olympics spotlight. That night, Shinzo Abe, the prime minister of Japan, emerged from a green drainpipe dressed as Super Mario, the popular video game character. For the normally staid politician, the appearance signaled in colorful terms the depth of his commitment to what could be the defining project of his legacy.

Since being awarded the Games in 2013, Japan has invested tens of billions of dollars as the partner of the I.O.C. Navigating the current crisis, then, has become a test of pride for the country's government and its Olympic committee officials, and in the current predicament over possible postponement, they hold many of the cards.

Until recently, their public statements reflected a show-must-go-on mentality, but within the last two weeks, cracks have started to appear.

On March 10, Haruyuki Takahashi, a member of the local organizing committee, suggested that a delay of one or two years would be the most prudent option if the Olympics could not be held as planned. Though he was forced to apologize, a shift seemed to have begun.

Mr. Abe, in a video conference call Monday with the leaders of the Group of 7 countries, said, "I want to hold the Olympics and Paralympics perfectly, as proof that the human race will conquer the new coronavirus, and I gained support for that from the G-7 leaders."

The fact the prime minister did not specifically mention holding the Games in 2020 signaled to some that he was starting to accept the idea of a delay.

Speaking in Parliament two days later, Mr. Abe's deputy, Taro Aso, who is also the finance minister, referred to prior Olympics that were disrupted by world events, including the 1940 Games, which were canceled because of World War II, and the 1980 Moscow Olympics, boycotted by 65 nations including the United States and Japan.

"This time, it doesn't make sense if others cannot attend from other countries, even if Japan alone will become all right," Mr. Aso said.

"As the prime minister said, it's desirable to hold the Olympics in an environment where everyone feels safe and happy," Mr. Aso added. "But that's not something Japan alone can decide."

Close watchers of the government said that a decision most likely had not yet been made,

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but that Mr. Abe was signaling a willingness to consider options.

His recent comment to the Group of 7 “is a strategic ambiguity,” said Kunihiko Miyake, a former Japanese diplomat now teaching at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. “In these cases, what is not said is the most important.”

Even though the Olympic flame arrived in Japan from Greece on Friday, the Japanese public already seemed farther along in accepting a postponement than the government. In a poll released Monday by Kyodo News, a Japanese news service, close to 70 percent of respondents said they did not expect the Tokyo Games to go on as scheduled.

Amid all this, the hunger for the Olympics remains strong.

Mr. Abe and Mr. Bach have both alluded to the fact that the Games could have the power to bring people together and help the world heal after the horrors of the pandemic.

“Tokyo could end up staging the greatest Olympics ever,” Michael Payne, a longtime former marketing director at the I.O.C., said. “It would be the celebration of the world having come through this very difficult time.”

But the almost impossible task, now, is somehow ensuring that such a celebration would not be premature.

[North Korea] North Korea says it received a letter from Trump (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 5:04 PM, Jennifer Hauser, 5551K]
North Korea said President Donald Trump sent Kim Jong Un a personal letter in which he expressed his willingness to help with "anti-epidemic work," according to North Korea state-run media KCNA early Sunday.

"We regard it as a good judgment and proper action for the U.S. president to make efforts to keep the good relations he had with our Chairman by sending a personal letter again at a time as now when big difficulties and challenges lie in the way of developing the bilateral relations, and think that this should be highly estimated .... In the letter, he also explained his plan to propel the relations between the two countries of the DPRK and the U.S. and expressed his intent to render cooperation in the anti-epidemic work, saying that he was impressed by the efforts made by the Chairman to defend his people from the serious threat of the epidemic," according to a statement by Kim Yo Jong, first vice department director for WPK Central Committee, as reported by KCNA.

More than 300,000 people have contracted the virus worldwide and at least 11,570 have died, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.
More than 280 people have now died from the novel coronavirus in the United States.

CNN has reached out to both the White House and National Security Council for comment.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link

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Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet1 [3/21/2020 9:21 AM] Great story. Thank you to Mr. Young of Jonesboro, Arkansas! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet2 [3/21/2020 10:31 AM] HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine. The FDA has moved mountains - Thank You! Hopefully they will BOTH (H works better with A, International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents).....be put in use IMMEDIATELY. PEOPLE ARE DYING, MOVE FAST, and GOD BLESS EVERYONE! @US_FDA @SteveFDA @CDCgov @DHSgov

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet3 [3/21/2020 11:14 PM] Thank you! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet4 [3/21/2020 11:19 PM] Thank you David, so true! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet5 [3/21/2020 11:46 PM] Thank you @JennPellegrino @OANN [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet6 [3/21/2020 10:53 PM] CHINESE VIRUS FACT CHECK [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

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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: Sunday, March 22, 2020 8:00 AM ET

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Top News

Negotiators race to finalize coronavirus rescue bill to aid reeling economy (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/21/2020 3:46 PM, Mike DeBonis, and Karoun Demirjian 12625K]
Congressional negotiators made progress Saturday on a sweeping stimulus package meant to blunt the devastating impact of the coronavirus pandemic, a deal that is expected to inject

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upward of $2 trillion into a reeling U.S. economy over the coming months.

But Republicans and Democrats failed to secure an agreement ahead of a self-imposed 5 p.m. deadline, and hopes of a rapid resolution were thrown into doubt when Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) indicated his party would begin drafting “final legislative text” without a deal with Democrats.

“I believe we are poised to deliver the significant relief that Americans need with the speed that this crisis demands,” McConnell said in a Saturday night statement, with the Senate poised to take its first procedural votes on the package Sunday.
Justin Goodman, a spokesman for Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.), said any such announcement was premature: “There is not yet an agreement, and we still have not seen large parts of the Republican draft.”

The immediate fate of the rescue package — likely to become the most expensive fiscal stimulus in American history — could depend on a Sunday morning meeting of the top four congressional leaders. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) will join McConnell and Schumer, as well as Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, to discuss the rescue bill.

Earlier in the day Saturday, GOP senators said an accord was within reach — citing key concessions to Democrats on the expansion of unemployment insurance benefits, emergency health-care funding and other matters.

“Generally speaking, the building blocks of this thing are pretty much in place, and, you know, now some of the differences come down to the finer points of how some of this stuff gets gets done,” said Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.), the No. 2 Republican leader, following a meeting of key GOP negotiators.

Schumer was also upbeat earlier in the evening — telling reporters at the Capitol that he was “optimistic we can get a deal” and that senators would be “working through the night” — before Democratic officials warned of a setback due to McConnell’s decision to end talks and start drafting legislation.

With the nation in the grip of a pandemic that has upended daily life, shuttered businesses, left an untold number out of work and sent stocks plummeting, Republicans and Democrats have stressed the imperative to move quickly on what would be the third emergency aid package in less than three weeks. At the White House, President Trump said the legislation is “going to keep companies together, keep workers paid, so they can live and sustain.” A central proposal would deliver checks as large as $1,200 to most U.S. taxpayers.

Lawmakers signaled progress on key fronts, with McConnell asserting in a late-night statement that the “intense bipartisan talks are very close to a resolution.”

Sen. Charles E. Grassley (R-Iowa), the Finance Committee chairman, said there was “a good bipartisan agreement” to expand unemployment insurance — a top Democratic priority — while Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) said a deal to provide some $350 billion for small businesses, giving them financial lifeblood during the health crisis, was all but final.

Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.), chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions

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Committee, said Republicans agreed to a Democratic request to add tens of billions of dollars in emergency aid to hospitals and other parts of the public health infrastructure under massive strain — an influx that Schumer has billed as a “Marshall Plan” for fighting the virus.

Challenges, however, remain: Two officials familiar with the negotiations, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to comment publicly, said the parties remained divided on how to structure relief measures for larger businesses — including a GOP request to expand the Federal Reserve’s emergency lending program and Democratic requests for restrictions on how firms can use any federal rescue funds.

Underscoring the urgency and rapid pace of the negotiations, Pelosi boarded a flight back to Washington on Saturday after spending the past week at home in San Francisco, according to a senior Democratic aide — indicating she plans to play a central role in negotiating the final plan with Republicans.

Larry Kudlow, director of the National Economic Council, offered the $2 trillion economic impact estimate as he joined Senate negotiations Saturday morning. He put the direct cost of the bill at about $1.4 trillion. A portion of that, he said, would capitalize Federal Reserve emergency lending that could support hundreds of billions of dollars in additional loans.

The U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis estimates 2019’s gross domestic product at $21.4 trillion. Even a bill of $1.4 trillion would amount to nearly double the cost of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act — the fiscal stimulus passed during the 2008-2009 global financial crisis.

The ballooning size of the federal coronavirus response has mirrored the escalation of the global health crisis. The legislative response began this month with a $2.5 billion White House request, which grew into an $8.3 billion appropriation directed mainly at public health needs. A follow-up package signed into law Wednesday spent more than $100 billion in initial economic relief, providing free testing for covid-19, the disease the virus causes, and an emergency boost to the federal safety net.

“I expect we’ll have a bill by tomorrow that will have significant Democratic priorities, significant Republican priorities, and, hopefully, we can pass a bill Monday morning and send a strong message to the American people that we’re going to get through this,” Alexander said Saturday.

The thorniest issues involve balancing direct aid to Americans through tax rebates with enhanced unemployment benefits directed through the state unemployment insurance systems. Democrats have argued for a significant boost to the latter, but Republicans have expressed doubts about whether states can handle an influx of the dimensions Democrats have proposed.

Democrats have also pushed for more direct cash aid to states to backfill certain budget shortfalls that could lead to drastic cuts in front-line services. Republicans have instead advocated for increasing aid to existing programs such as Medicaid and encouraging states to tap rainy-day funds, White House legislative affairs director Eric Ueland said late Friday.

One area where negotiators appear to have made progress is on the structure of a small-

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business lending program, which would use existing Small Business Administration credit programs to inject as much as $350 billion into struggling firms.

Rubio told reporters that level of funding could help sustain companies for six to seven weeks, letting them meet payroll and potentially rehire workers who have been laid off because of the pandemic. Eligible businesses would be those employing fewer than 500 people or those otherwise eligible for SBA lending.

“A large, enormous majority of businesses that qualify will be able to get one of these quickly and really provide some certainty for over a month and a half, maybe longer,” he said.

Schumer said in a CNN interview Saturday evening that frequent meetings and calls with Mnuchin, a key White House negotiator, had generated optimism. He said talks had greatly advanced on the Democrats’ unemployment insurance proposal, a key sticking point earlier in the day: “We haven’t dotted the i’s and crossed the t’s, but, conceptually, I think we’re there.”

The hopeful note stood in contrast to a missive that Pelosi sent to House Democrats on Friday evening, calling an initial Senate GOP measure introduced late Wednesday a “nonstarter.” Any bipartisan agreement, she said, must “greatly increase unemployment insurance and Medi-caid, help small businesses survive, expand paid sick and family leave and put money directly into the hands of those who need it most.”

While Pelosi has not been directly involved in talks, Schumer said Saturday he had consulted with her “hour by hour.” Should the Senate reach a deal and pass it, House members would have to be called back to vote on the bill, a complication unto itself, given the spread of the virus and with two House members announcing they’ve tested positive for it.

“We are talking to each other, and they know exactly what’s in the package, and much of what we want and what they want are very similar,” Schumer said on CNN.

Agreement also appeared near on one major issue — how to structure direct payments to people in a way that would effectively flood the economy with hundreds of billions of dollars in cash. The bill McConnell released Thursday drew bipartisan criticism because many would have gotten one-time payments of $1,200, but the poorest Americans — those without federal tax liability — would have gotten as little as $600.

Throughout the day Friday, lawmakers of both parties and administration officials voiced objections to that structure, and as the talks broke up late Friday, Ueland said they were near agreement on ensuring that the poorest Americans didn’t get less money. Three congressional aides involved in the talks but not authorized to discuss them publicly confirmed Saturday that all taxpayers would receive equal checks.

Schumer and Democrats were pushing to expand unemployment benefits to provide six weeks of full pay while waiving waiting periods and job-search requirements. That would be a sea change for the nation’s unemployment insurance system, which is meant to deliver much smaller checks, not to wholly replace lost wages.

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But some Republicans were voicing concerns about the ability of states to administer large-scale increases in the unemployment program, and Labor Secretary Eugene Scalia joined a meeting of senators Friday to issue a warning on that front.

Paul Winfree, a former White House policy aide who now serves as a Heritage Foundation fellow, said conservatives are reluctant to funnel too much money through the unemployment insurance system. An Office of Management and Budget review early in the Trump administration, he said, found states had unspent unemployment insurance balances from the 2009 economic stimulus because they didn't have the systems in place to easily disburse the money to people who qualified.

Democrats warned that even small disagreements about discrete but closely linked pieces of the bill could inhibit an accord.

"There's still a lot more to agree on until we agree on everything," said Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.), a Finance Committee member closely involved in the talks about expanding unemployment insurance funding. "This is going to be the largest, when it's all concluded, relief package in history. So, yes, speed is necessary, but getting this done right so that it actually has the effect that we want is equally as important."

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Acting DHS Secretary Chad Wolf: 'We Have No Plans for a National Lockdown or a National Quarantine' (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 4:18 PM, Jeff Poor, 1973K]
Saturday during an appearance on Fox News, acting Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Secretary Chad Wolf outright dismissed speculation of a national lockdown or national quarantine as part of the response to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak.

Wolf urged viewers to get information from trusted sources.

"It's simply not true," he said. "What we see is a lot of disinformation campaigns via text, via social media. So we want to make sure that we refute those, we knock those down. I did that yesterday on Twitter. But a lot of disinformation is just that, disinformation. So again, we want to make sure that individuals are getting their information from trusted sources, so those are your state and federal officials. And we're asking them not to spread this type of information around. So there is no — we have no plans for a national lockdown or a national quarantine. And again, it's just that, it's disinformation."

Wolf also laid out other measures taken by DHS to be proactive in its response.

"We have a number of different activities underway," Wolf said. "Obviously, we continue to screen individuals coming back from affected countries. We have travel restrictions on 30 different countries around the world. We still see flights coming back into the U.S. from those countries. So we have CBP officers. We have contract medical screeners screening those individuals. To date, we've screened over 220,000 individuals coming back from corona-affected areas. And we'll continue to do that."

"Yesterday, we just announced some additional travel restrictions regarding non-essential travel across our land borders with both Canada and Mexico," he continued. "We are also

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repatriating and removing individuals coming here illegally from affected areas as well. So there's a lot that we're doing. I would also like to mention FEMA. FEMA has stood up their National Response Center. It's at a level one which is their highest level. It's a level that you would see after a natural or man-made event that FEMA does. And so FEMA is in the lead of coordinating our federal response. So there's a lot of activities the Department is doing across the board in response to corona."

DHS chief refutes rumors of national lockdown due to coronavirus: 'It's simply not true' (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 10:13 AM, Adam Shaw, 8943K] Video: HERE
Acting Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf on Saturday shot down rumors of a potential national lockdown because of the coronavirus, saying that there are no such plans and that such rumors are "disinformation."

"It's simply not true," Wolf said on Fox & Friends. "What we see is a lot of disinformation campaigns via text, via social media, so we want to make sure we refute those, knock those down... a lot of this information is just that: disinformation."

A number of states, including New York, California and Illinois, have issued "stay-at-home" orders, as part of the effort to combat the spread of the virus. Such moves have stoked rumors that such policies could be enacted nationwide by the federal government.

Some of those rumors include the claim that martial law would be invoked with the assistance of the National Guard -- but they are false, Wolf said.

"We want to make sure that individuals are getting information from trusted sources, so those are your state and federal officials, and we're asking them not to spread this information around," he said.

"So we have no plans for a national lockdown or a national quarantine, and again it's just that -- its disinformation."

Other officials had also stepped up to shoot down the rumors on Friday.

"I hear unfounded rumors about #NationalGuard troops supporting a nationwide quarantine," tweeted Gen. Joseph Lengyel, chief of the National Guard Bureau. "Let me be clear: There has been no such discussion."

Many people across the U.S. reported receiving text messages warning of martial law, prompting authorities to assure residents the messages were fake. U.S. defense officials have warned that foreign bad actors could use this uncertain time to plant bad rumors in order to panic the American public.

Governors across the country continue to deploy Guard troops in response to the coronavirus pandemic. More than 3,000 have been activated in nearly 30 states to help with efforts to contain the outbreak.

Troops in New York, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Louisiana and Michigan, among other states, are supporting relief efforts. Their mission includes disinfecting public spaces, distributing food, assisting with transportation and logistical support of health officials, and collecting

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and delivering samples, the Guard said in a news release.

At the national level, the administration has taken a number of actions to restrict entry into the U.S. as part of the effort to curb the virus' spread. On Friday, the administration announced restrictions on non-essential travel at the borders with Mexico and Canada.

The U.S. currently has more than 19,000 confirmed cases of the coronavirus, and 260 deaths.

DOJ seeks new emergency powers amid coronavirus pandemic (Politico)
Politico [3/21/2020 1:01 PM, Betsy Woodruff Swan, 2003K]
The Justice Department has quietly asked Congress for the ability to ask chief judges to detain people indefinitely without trial during emergencies — part of a push for new powers that comes as the coronavirus spreads through the United States.

Documents reviewed by POLITICO detail the department's requests to lawmakers on a host of topics, including the statute of limitations, asylum and the way court hearings are conducted. POLITICO also reviewed and previously reported on documents seeking the authority to extend deadlines on merger reviews and prosecutions.

A Justice Department spokesperson declined to comment on the documents.

The move has tapped into a broader fear among civil liberties advocates and Donald Trump's critics — that the president will use a moment of crisis to push for controversial policy changes. Already, he has cited the pandemic as a reason for heightening border restrictions and restricting asylum claims. He has also pushed for further tax cuts as the economy withers, arguing that it would soften the financial blow to Americans. And even without policy changes, Trump has vast emergency powers that he could legally deploy right now to try and slow the coronavirus outbreak.

The DOJ requests — which are unlikely to make it through a Democratic-led House — span several stages of the legal process, from initial arrest to how cases are processed and investigated.

In one of the documents, the department proposed that Congress grant the attorney general power to ask the chief judge of any district court to pause court proceedings "whenever the district court is fully or partially closed by virtue of any natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation."

The proposal would also grant those top judges broad authority to pause court proceedings during emergencies. It would apply to "any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings," according to draft legislative language the department shared with Congress. In making the case for the change, the DOJ document wrote that individual judges can currently pause proceedings during emergencies, but that their proposal would make sure all judges in any particular district could handle emergencies "in a consistent manner."

The request raised eyebrows because of its potential implications for habeas corpus — the constitutional right to appear before a judge after arrest and seek release.

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“Not only would it be a violation of that, but it says ‘affecting pre-arrest,’” said Norman L. Reimer, the executive director of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers. “So that means you could be arrested and never brought before a judge until they decide that the emergency or the civil disobedience is over. I find it absolutely terrifying. Especially in a time of emergency, we should be very careful about granting new powers to the government.”

Reimer said the possibility of chief judges suspending all court rules during an emergency without a clear end in sight was deeply disturbing.

“That is something that should not happen in a democracy,” he said.

The department also asked Congress to pause the statute of limitations for criminal investigations and civil proceedings during national emergencies, “and for one year following the end of the national emergency,” according to the draft legislative text.

Trump recently declared the coronavirus crisis a national emergency.

Another controversial request: The department is looking to change the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure in some cases to expand the use of videoconference hearings, and to let some of those hearings happen without defendants’ consent, according to the draft legislative text.

“Video teleconferencing may be used to conduct an appearance under this rule,” read a draft of potential new language for Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 5(f), crossing out the phrase “if the defendant consents.”

“Video teleconferencing may be used to arraign a defendant,” read draft text of rule 10(c), again striking out the phrase “if the defendant consents.”

Reimer said forcing people to have hearings over video rather than in person would threaten civil liberties.

“If it were with the consent of the accused person it would be fine,” he said. “But if it’s not with the consent of the accused person, it’s a terrible road to go down. We have a right to public trials. People have a right to be present in court.”

The department also wants Congress to change the law to explicitly say that people with Covid-19 — the illness caused by the novel coronavirus — are not included among those who may apply for asylum. And the department asked for the same change regarding people who are “subject to a presidential proclamation suspending and limiting the entry of aliens into the United States,” according to the draft legislative language.

Layli Miller-Munro, the CEO of the Tahirih Justice Center, which advocates for women and girls fleeing violence, said the language would block anyone on a presidential travel ban list from seeking asylum in the U.S.

“I think it’s a humanitarian tragedy that fails to recognize that vulnerable people from those countries are among the most persecuted and that protecting them is exactly what the

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refugee convention was designed to do," she said.

The asylum request comes as the Trump administration on Friday said that it would begin denying entry to all migrants illegally crossing the U.S. southern border, including those seeking asylum.

"I hope we come out of this with a sense of oneness, interconnectedness," Miller-Munro said of the coronavirus pandemic. "Borders can't protect us. Viruses do not care."

Barr nudges Congress for expanded powers during coronavirus-like emergencies (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/21/2020 8:07 PM, Jerry Dunleavy, 570K]
The Justice Department pressed Congress to expand its powers, as well as those of the courts, during national emergencies such as the coronavirus outbreak.

Draft legislative text shared with lawmakers would allow the agency to pause the statute of limitations in both civil and criminal cases and extend them "for one year following the end of the national emergency," according to Politico. President Trump declared a national emergency earlier this month in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition, the language would give the attorney general the authority to ask district court chief judges to pause these court proceedings "whenever the district court is fully or partially closed by virtue of any natural disaster, civil disobedience, or other emergency situation." Judges currently can halt such proceedings in emergency situations in their own jurisdictions, but the draft language would make the emergency process more consistent.

The proposal also contained language that seeks to give judges the authority to halt court proceedings in extreme circumstances and would apply to "any statutes or rules of procedure otherwise affecting pre-arrest, post-arrest, pre-trial, trial, and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings."

The Justice Department did not return the Washington Examiner's request for comment.

Just last week Attorney General William Barr spoke about the coronavirus and what the pandemic would entail for his department.

"As we face the nationwide spread of COVID-19, I want to emphasize that the critical mission of the Department of Justice must and will continue," he said. "It is vital that we work together to safeguard our justice system and thus the safety and security of our nation."

There were 303,816 confirmed coronavirus cases around the world and at least 12,950 deaths tied to the infection of of Saturday evening, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker. There have been 81,305 confirmed cases in China, where the disease originated, and 3,259 confirmed deaths there. In the U.S., there were 24,148 cases, which have resulted in 301 deaths.

Barr has urged the federal prosecutors to "work closely with the Chief Judge in your district to ensure that every appropriate precaution is taken to protect the health of those who practice in or are called before our courts" and to "take every appropriate precaution to

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protect those who make the system function, including the judges, court staff, lawyers, parties, jurors, and witnesses who appear in courtrooms."

The draft legislation language given to Congress would expand the ability of courts to carry out hearings through video teleconferences, including without the consent of the defendant. It additionally would remove the phrase "if the defendant consents" from two different parts of the Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure.

The Southern District of New York — one of the busiest and most important federal districts in the nation — has already begun to move toward allowing grand juries to meet via teleconference amid the coronavirus outbreak, per a standing order issued by Chief U.S. District Judge Colleen McMahon on Friday.

The report from Politico stated that the Justice Department "also wants Congress to change the law to explicitly say that people with COVID-19 — the illness caused by the novel coronavirus — are not included among those who may apply for asylum" and said the draft language asked for that rule to apply to those who are "subject to a presidential proclamation suspending and limiting the entry of aliens into the United States."

Trump imposed a travel ban against Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria, Yemen. North Korea, and Venezuela earlier in his presidency; Chad and Iraq have since been removed from the list. Travel restrictions against Eritrea, Kyrgyzstan, Myanmar, Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania were also instituted earlier this year.

Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar declared a public health emergency for the entire U.S. in response to the coronavirus on Jan. 31. That same day, Azar announced travel restrictions related to China. At the end of February, Trump implemented restrictions on travel to and from Iran. Trump announced a European travel ban earlier in March.

Barr issued a directive to federal prosecutors last week to prioritize investigations of scam artists and hackers looking to exploit the coronavirus pandemic.

"The pandemic is dangerous enough without wrongdoers seeking to profit from public panic, and this sort of conduct cannot be tolerated," Barr said. "Every U.S. attorney's office is thus hereby directed to prioritize the detection, investigation, and prosecution of all criminal conduct related to the current pandemic."

The attorney general also vowed there would be "severe" consequences if a foreign country was found to be behind the cyberattack against the Health and Human Services Department's website on Sunday or behind false coronavirus nationwide lockdown rumors.

Barr promised in early March the Justice Department "stands ready to make sure that bad actors do not take advantage of emergency response efforts, healthcare providers, or the American people during this crucial time."

Pence To Be Tested For COVID-19; 'Hundreds Of Millions' Of Face Masks In Production (NPR)

NPR [3/21/2020 3:40 PM, Barbara Sprunt and Vanessa Romo]

Vice President Pence on Saturday announced he and his wife will be tested for the COVID-19 coronavirus, following confirmation that an aide on his staff was diagnosed with the

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respiratory disease last week.

Pence made the remarks at a news conference following the coronavirus task force meeting at the White House. Earlier in the week the vice president, who leads the task force, told reporters that he has not been tested for the virus because the White House doctor had told him he didn't need to be.

"I'm pleased to report that he is doing well," Pence said of his aide, adding that "he had mild cold-like symptoms for a day and half."

Pence explained that all contact-tracing has been completed and neither he nor the president had direct contact with the aide. Regardless, he said, he would undergo testing later in the day.

He also offered the latest figures on the number of Americans who have been tested: More than 195,000 people have been tested, not including those who were tested in county hospitals or health care labs around the nation. Of those, roughly 19,350 have tested positive for the coronavirus, Pence said.

President Trump, who was first to speak at the news conference at the White House, ran through the list of steps the administration has taken to fight the spread of the virus, including an order for "hundreds of millions" of face masks and other supplies for health care professionals.

"We started with very few masks and now we're making tens of millions of masks," Trump said after blaming previous administrations for the stockpile shortages the country now faces.

He later specified the government has issued a contract for 500 million N95 masks, saying they are "now" available to hospitals and other health care centers.

Part of the demand for supplies is being met by the private sector in "sixth gear," he said, which is heeding the call to make masks, swabs and ventilators by pivoting from their primary industries to making the desperately needed supplies.

Trump praised Hanes, the cotton clothing maker, for retrofitting its manufacturing capabilities to produce masks for medical use. He also noted the shift by alcohol distilleries in Tennessee, Kentucky and West Virginia toward making hand sanitizer products that will be distributed throughout all 50 states.

He touted his work on legislation to bring economic relief to businesses and workers. He said his administration will give people extra time to file taxes, moving the deadline from April 15 to July 15. Additionally, he said students will not face interest penalties or fines for delaying student loan payments. Homeowners will also get help: Foreclosures and evictions on HUD loans are suspended for the next 60 days.

Trump talked about reaching agreements with Canada and Mexico to halt the entry of what he called the "Chinese virus," a term some have criticized as stigmatizing.

Adm. Brett Giroir, head of the U.S. Public Health Service, is leading the effort to expand

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testing. He said the agency is distributing equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile to "many states" on a daily basis.

But there's no clear answer to when states would have enough masks or other equipment.

Giroir said the outcry for more tests is not necessarily an issue of supply — he said there are tens of thousands of tests out there — but of making sure the right facilities are getting the right kind of tests and training.

This week, governors across the country warned that they were seeing shortages of supplies needed for testing, including testing reagents, used to create a chemical reaction to detect the virus, and swabs. On Friday, Health and Human Services Secretary Alex Azar said there had been "tremendous progress" in lab testing and dismissed complaints about shortages as "anecdotal."

But groups that represent public health labs, epidemiologists and state health officials said late Friday that there were "widespread shortages of laboratory supplies and reagents."

The Association of Public Health Laboratories said testing should be reserved for health care workers and first responders, older Americans with symptoms and other people at high risk of getting seriously ill from the virus.

The groups said mass testing would quickly deplete supplies, and it instead urged people with mild respiratory illness to stay at home and isolate themselves.

Hospitals have also said health care workers lack masks and other gear needed to protect themselves when treating patients with the virus. Pence said on Friday that there would be an announcement this weekend about what he called "a major acquisition" of masks.

A week ago, Trump and Pence had said there would be a website where people could find out whether they needed to be tested for the virus and direct them to nearby drive-through sites. While a division of Google's parent company has developed a pilot project in San Francisco, no website for national use has materialized.

After the president thanked Google for developing the website last week, the tech company put out a statement saying the life sciences division, Verily, was only in the "early stages" of such a rollout.

Vice President Mike Pence, second lady Karen Pence test negative for coronavirus, White House says (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 9:01 PM, Veronica Stracqualursi and Jason Hoffman, 5551K]
Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence have both tested negative for coronavirus, his spokeswoman announced Saturday evening.

"Pleased to report that the COVID-19 test results came back negative for both Vice President @Mike_Pence and Second Lady @KarenPence," said Katie Miller, the press secretary for the vice president, via her Twitter account.

Pence had said he and his wife would be tested Saturday afternoon after a staff member of his office had tested positive for coronavirus.

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"Given the unique position that I have as vice president and as the leader of the White House coronavirus task force, both I and my wife will be tested for the coronavirus later this afternoon," Pence said during a news conference at the White House.

His office announced Friday that one of its members tested positive for the coronavirus -- the closest confirmed case to Pence that is publicly known.

Pence told reporters Saturday that his staffer who tested positive for coronavirus is "doing well," had "mild" cold-like symptoms for a day and a half, and has not been at the White House since Monday.

He reiterated neither President Donald Trump nor himself had direct contact with the staff member, and said that health authorities have traced his contacts. Trump has already tested negative for the virus, the White House said last week.

Pence and Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, stressed to Americans that they do not have to get tested if they are not displaying symptoms in order to preserve resources.

195,000 Americans tested, more masks ordered

Pence also announced that more than 195,000 Americans have been tested for the virus as cases surpass 22,000 with about half confirmed in New York.

He noted that the number does not include county hospitals or health care labs around the country. Currently, only 19,343 tests have come back positive, Pence said.

Pence said that US Department of Health and Human Services "is completing a half billion dollar order of the (N95) masks."

The purchase is being coordinated through the Federal Emergency Management Agency, and the federal government is responding specifically to state requests, he said.

He said Apple would be donating 2 million industrial masks and working with the administration to distribute them. The company’s CEO confirmed the donation later Saturday, saying Apple was sourcing supplies for health care providers in the US and Europe.

Pence also urged businesses to donate as many N95 masks as they could spare to local hospitals.

Fauci said that there are multiple avenues available for hospitals to acquire personal protective equipment through FEMA.

Pressed on a timeline, Fauci said the supplies would be delivered "sooner than weeks. It is going to be days, I would hope."

Trump also said that while he has signed the Defense Production Act, he has not used it to ramp up production of personal protective equipment because "we have so many

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companies making so many products."

"We have the act to use in case we need it," Trump said.

He mentioned Hanes as a company that is voluntarily manufacturing masks and claimed that Ford and General Motors have begun making ventilators.

"I had three calls yesterday directly, without having to institute like you will do this. These companies are making them right now," Trump said.

Asked by CNN why doctors and nurses don't have the medical equipment they need, Trump said that "many administrations preceded me and for the most part they did very little in terms of what you're talking about."

He went on to say, "We are making much of this stuff now, and it's being delivered now."

Trump says Congress close to deal on stimulus bill

Trump also told reporters on Saturday that Congress is close to reaching a deal on a proposal for the next stimulus bill to deal with the pandemic.

"They're all negotiating, and everybody is working hard, and they want to get to a solution that's the right solution. I think we're getting very close," Trump said.

Trump said he's "strongly recommending a buyback exclusion" for companies in the legislation.

On Saturday, congressional and administration negotiators entered a crucial day in the effort to deploy more than $1 trillion in emergency stimulus to a staggering economy, with a growing consensus on a final agreement, but a handful of significant hang-ups still needed to be resolved.

Bipartisan groups of senators worked late into Friday night with top officials from Trump's administration to lock in a final agreement -- a deal that people directly involved in the negotiations tell CNN could top a cost of $1.5 trillion -- before falling short of a midnight deadline imposed by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell.

Larry Kudlow, a top economic adviser to Trump, went even further on the overall scope of the package Saturday, telling reporters it could top $2 trillion.

Governments and Companies Race to Make Masks Vital to Virus Fight (New York Times)

New York Times [3/22/2020 12:14 AM, Rachel Abrams, Jessica Silver-Greenberg, Andrew President Trump on Saturday sought to assure an anxious American public that help was on the way to overwhelmed hospitals, and that private companies had agreed to provide desperately needed medical supplies to fight the fast-spreading coronavirus.

But Mr. Trump resisted appeals from state and local officials and hospital administrators for more aggressive action, saying he would not compel companies to make face masks and other gear to protect front-line health workers from the virus.

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Speaking at a White House briefing with Mr. Trump, Vice President Mike Pence said the federal government had placed orders for “hundreds of millions” of the N-95 face masks that can shield medical workers from the virus. Mr. Trump said the clothing company Hanes was among those that had been enlisted to start churning out masks, although the company said they would not be the N-95 masks that are most effective in protecting medical workers.

Neither Mr. Trump nor Mr. Pence would say when the masks would be ready. And it is unclear whether enough new masks and other protective gear will be available before health care facilities start getting overwhelmed by a flood of infected patients. More than 21,000 cases of the coronavirus have been confirmed in the United States, and that number is expected to soar in coming weeks.

As more of the nation goes into an unprecedented lockdown — businesses shuttered, one in four Americans urged to stay in their homes, layoffs soaring — experts expect the United States economy to shrink at a quick pace in the first half of this year.

Seeking to cushion that blow, lawmakers and Trump administration officials were holding weekend negotiations over an economic-stabilization package with a price tag of more than $1 trillion. Resolving one of the major remaining sticking points in the legislation, Democrats and Republicans appeared to be nearing an agreement to send cash payments to Americans.

Federal officials also continued to scramble to make it easier for people to get tested for the coronavirus. The Food and Drug Administration said on Saturday that it would permit a Silicon Valley company, Cepheid, to start selling a diagnostic test that could determine in about 45 minutes whether a patient has the virus that causes Covid-19.

The company’s chief medical officer, David Persing, said the new tests were likely to hit the market late in the coming week. He did not say how many would be available or at what cost.

The lack of widespread access to tests has provoked a weekslong outcry nationwide.

But as tests have become more readily available, the supplies of masks and other protective gear needed for those administering the tests have been running low. In other words, a shortage of masks has become a bottleneck slowing the rollout of testing, which experts say is crucial to containing the virus.

In the past two days, health officials in New York, California and elsewhere have started discouraging people from taking the tests if they are only mildly ill.

“We had a chance at mass testing at an early stage, but we blew it as a country,” said Mark Levine, a New York City Council member who leads the health committee. “Now testing mildly sick people poses an enormous threat. They should be at home resting, not waiting in line at a testing site.”

Doctors and hospital administrators have been warning for weeks that they face acute shortages of masks and lifesaving equipment such as ventilators. State and local officials in New York and elsewhere have been pleading for help from Washington and industry.

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Mr. Trump on Saturday continued to resist calls to use the Defense Production Act, a Korean War era law that empowers the federal government to exert control over the private sector to meet national defense needs and ensure that supplies get to where they are most needed, regardless of the business plans of the companies involved.

Mr. Trump said that his inclination was not to interfere with market forces. And because companies were voluntarily heeding his calls to action, he said it was unnecessary to invoke the act.

The manufacturing company 3M has said it is sharply increasing its production of N-95 masks, which filter small particles and droplets from the air. The company plans to increase its production in the United States, where it makes about 400 million masks a year, by more than 30 percent over the next year. Honeywell said it had more than doubled its production of N-95 masks in recent months.

And Tim Cook, the chief executive of Apple, said on Saturday that the company planned to donate millions of face masks in the United States and Europe.

But executives in the medical supply industry said that while they are rushing to accelerate their output of face masks, it could take months to ramp up.

Traditional surgical masks can prevent sick people from spreading the virus, but they are believed to be of limited use in keeping healthy people from getting infected. Doctors treating infected patients need the special N-95 masks, which can filter out the virus.

There have been scattered signs of progress at addressing the mask shortage. At a news conference on Saturday, Gov. Andrew Cuomo of New York said the state was purchasing 2 million N-95 masks from American and foreign companies. He said the state was paying a rich price for the coveted masks: $4 apiece for products that normally go for 80 cents.

“It’s price-gouging, but we need them,” Mr. Cuomo said. “And most of these are coming from overseas.”

Matt Hall, a spokesman for Hanes, said Trump administration officials called the company about a week ago to see if Hanes could start making face masks. Hanes and a group of other yarn and clothing companies agreed to make up to 6 million masks a week, he said.

But Hanes is not making the most-sought-after N-95 masks. “They are masks that would be helpful to prevent somebody from sneezing and coughing from spreading any kind of germs that they might have,” Mr. Hall said, adding that the Food and Drug Administration approved a prototype that can be used if N-95s were not available.

Mr. Hall said that Hanes was currently negotiating a contract with the U.S. government to supply the masks at market rates.

Executives at Parkdale Mills, a company in Gastonia, N.C., that provides yarn to Hanes, received a call a few days ago from Peter Navarro, Mr. Trump’s trade adviser. He wanted to know if the company could make masks.

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“He said, ‘I need a Manhattan Project,’” said Anderson Warlick, the chairman and chief executive of Parkdale Mills. The company is part of the consortium with Hanes, Fruit of the Loom and several others.

But other companies are struggling to quickly expand their mask-making capacities, in part because of broken overseas supply chains and some countries’ restrictions on exporting protective gear during the crisis.

“We have calls from doctors and hospitals that are calling us directly asking if we could ship them masks to their houses in desperation, because the masks are being stolen from the hospitals,” said Ronald Reuben, the chief executive of Medicom, a Canadian company that is one of the world’s leading manufacturers of N-95 and other medical face masks.

Medicom has factories all over the world, including in China, which has barred the company from taking its masks out of the country, Mr. Reuben said. But it only makes N-95 masks in France, where the government has taken over factories that produce essential medical supplies. Mr. Reuben said there is no way to get those N-95 masks to the United States.

Industry officials have been warning for years about the perils of relying on foreign supply chains for essential medical supplies.

Mike Bowen, whose company, Prestige Ameritech, makes masks in a factory in North Richland Hills, Tex., said that he told officials in the Bush, Obama and Trump administrations that about 95 percent of surgical masks are manufactured outside the United States, including by American companies that moved factories overseas to reduce costs. Mr. Bowen said he had repeatedly told federal officials that American hospitals would be at the mercy of other countries in a pandemic.

“Aside from sitting in front of the White House and lighting myself on fire, I feel like I’ve done everything I can,” Mr. Bowen said. Recently, Mr. Bowen said, his company has been fielding roughly 100 calls a day from hospitals and others desperate for more masks.

Other American companies are finding their supply chains frozen.

In its factory in Charlotte, N.C., Strong Manufacturers has three L-shaped machines that are set up to churn out about 70 masks a minute, or roughly 9 million a month.

But the company sourced the raw materials for the masks from a supplier in Wuhan, China, where the coronavirus outbreak started. Now, the goods aren’t coming.

“Our materials were ready to ship from Wuhan, and they got hung up on the dock as soon as this started,” said Alan Bagliore, the chief executive of Strong Manufacturers. He said orders from other suppliers aren’t expected to arrive for up to four weeks.

Companies and individuals with no experience making masks are trying to fill the void.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

Coronavirus cases surge at nursing homes as workers battle ‘almost perfect killing machine’ (Washington Post)

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Washington Post [3/21/2020 1:43 AM, Peter Whoriskey, Maria Sacchetti, Richard A. Webster, 12625K]
As senior care centers across the country scrambled this week to bolster their defenses against the coronavirus, dozens discovered it already was inside.

Across the United States, the number of reported cases of coronavirus at nursing homes, assisted living facilities and other elder care centers have spiked, with at least 73 facilities in 22 states reporting infections, according to a review by The Washington Post of reports from states, local media and nursing homes.

As of Friday evening, at least 55 coronavirus deaths occurred among people living in elder care facilities, though the number is probably higher because official counts often omit a description of the person's last place of residence. That figure represented more than a quarter of U.S. deaths attributed to the pandemic, even though fewer than 1 percent of Americans live in care facilities.

The dangers the coronavirus pose to older people have been well documented, and in a nursing home, the virus can move quickly from person to person and be particularly lethal.

Indeed, in late February, an outbreak at the Life Care Center in Kirkland, Wash., showed just how deadly the virus could be in such settings: At least 129 cases have been reported, and 35 people have died. After that outbreak, at another home in New Orleans, five people died this week.

The Kirkland deaths, government and nursing home officials say, spurred their preparations. But as the recent surge in infections shows, some of the defenses may have been deployed too late to slow the virus, while others have been undermined by the same shortages that have constrained the U.S. response to the coronavirus.

Some nursing homes are not requiring workers to use "personal protective equipment" — the disposable masks, gloves and gowns — because of potential shortages, the inconvenience and costs, The Post found. Nationally, some health officials are worried about running out of the protective gear that, among other things, is supposed to prevent the virus from sidelining nursing home workers, firefighters, EMTs and other emergency responders.

Moreover, there are few signs that state health departments are thoroughly testing residents and staff at nursing homes even after an outbreak. At several homes where residents have tested positive, officials are testing only those already showing symptoms, even though some carrying coronavirus show no symptoms at all.

The federal response to the crisis appears to have been a step behind the virus as well. The government agency that regulates most nursing homes, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, offered guidance on March 9 limiting nursing home visitors. Four days later, it offered stricter rules, effectively prohibiting visitors unless a resident was about to die, and shutting down communal activities and dining.

The agency regulates more than 15,000 nursing homes across the country that receive federal Medicaid funding.

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“America’s patients and providers should rest secure knowing that we are taking aggressive precautions to safeguard your health,” CMS Administrator Seema Verma said in a statement announcing the rules March 9.

Despite assurances, nursing home residents and their loved ones often feel adrift, unable to decide where a person would be best protected from the virus.

“Should I pull him out of there? What should I do?” Elizabeth Penner, a Seattle lawyer whose 71-year-old father is in a retirement home, said earlier this week.

Her father’s facility, the Lakeshore, has had two positive coronavirus cases, one on March 14, and another on March 18.

She worried officials seemed unable to test quickly enough to separate the healthy from the sick.

“There’s completely insufficient resources to deal with what they know is coming,” said Penner, 32, her voice cracking.

She also has a husband, 3-year-old son and two stepchildren who shuttle between homes and could infect him if he stayed with her.

Her father was not tested until Wednesday and on Friday learned his results were negative. She felt he was safest staying put.

‘This could happen anywhere’

Approximately 1.3 million people resided in federally certified nursing facilities in 2017, the most recent data available, and another nearly 1 million others were in assisted living or retirement communities, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF), a health policy research organization.

Nursing facilities have accounted for a significant number of deaths because they can turn into breeding grounds for illnesses, the foundation said in a policy brief released after the outbreak in Washington state. Facilities often are densely packed with elderly or sick residents sharing a room. Infection and respiratory issues are common.

Most people who contract coronavirus have mild symptoms, but the elderly and those with diabetes or heart or lung disease are at higher risk of falling severely ill, or dying. Approximately 16 percent of all nursing home residents nationwide underwent treatment for a respiratory illness in 2017, according to the analysis.

“The grim reality is that, for the elderly, covid-19 is an almost perfect killing machine,” said Mark Parkinson, president and CEO of the American Health Care Association (AHCA), during a recent CNN interview.

Jeffrey Duchin, the public health officer in Seattle’s King County, warned that the tragedy at Life Care was not a fluke, noting conditions there are no different from “any long-term care facility, anywhere in the country.”

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“This could happen anywhere,” Duchin said.

While nobody has pinpointed how the virus entered the home, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found staff members working in multiple facilities and “limitations” in infection control helped propel the virus through the home and others in the area. Almost 40 percent of nursing homes nationwide had at least one infection control “deficiency” in 2017, which could include staff failing to wash hands, according to the Kaiser analysis.

Infection control is complicated and requires robust staffing and sustained monitoring often found in hospitals but less so in short-staffed nursing facilities, Duchin said.

“The unfortunate truth is that long-term care facilities do not have the same infection control resources on a daily basis that acute care hospitals have,” he said. “They’re not required to have the same amount of infection control, oversight of their work or training. And they don’t have funding to bring on people to do that routinely.”

At Life Care, county health officials said, a typical night shift had nine people for 120 residents.

“It’s difficult for staff who are working very hard and sometimes understaffed at these facilities to take on that responsibility,” Duchin said. “So for all those reasons, I think you’ll see around the country that these facilities are going to be hit very hard by covid-19, just like they’re hit very hard every year when we have a H3N2 influenza season.”

Indeed, Kirkland is hardly alone. On Wednesday, officials in Florida reported residents or workers at 19 elder-care facilities tested positive. In Oregon, possible cases were being monitored at 97 long-term care facilities. In Washington, at least a dozen elder-care facilities reported cases.

Outbreaks at several facilities raised alarm because of how quickly they spread to other residents: At one nursing home near Chicago 46 residents tested positive, state officials reported this week. At another in Lander, Wyo., eight tested positive, and one in New Orleans has 23 cases, including five dead.

Protective gear shortage ‘a money thing’

The nation’s nursing homes have taken important steps to address the threat. Many have followed federal guidance and essentially banned visitors. Many facilities have suspended group classes for exercise or crafts and do not allow residents to gather for meals. They also have set up extra hand-washing stations and take residents’ temperatures more frequently.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

U.S. airlines reduce passenger flights amid coronavirus pandemic (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 11:45 AM, UPI, 1973K]
United and Southwest airlines have reduced flights and American is flying its first cargo-only flights in decades amid a slow-down in business due to the coronavirus pandemic.

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Southwest made the decision to cancel approximately 1,000 of its almost 4,000 daily flights from Sunday until April 14, amid the “drop in travel demand”, a statement Friday said. The airline will also suspend service to all of its international destinations at the end of the operating day on Sunday.

“We have made this decision due to the number of governments restricting air travel across their borders, as well as guidance from the United States government, and we hope to resume normal operations to our international destinations on May 4, subject to change,” the statement said.

Then, from April 14 through June 5, Southwest will reduce capacity by at least 20 percent, according to a previously revised schedule.

“We sincerely regret any inconvenience to our customers and our employees,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, United Airlines said in a statement Friday that it is reducing its international schedule by 95 percent for April.

American Airlines announced a day earlier it would use its grounded passenger aircraft to fly its first cargo-only flight in decades between the United States and Europe and “help keep business moving,” amid coronavirus.

The first cargo-only flight since 1984 — when American retired the last of its Boeing 747 freighters — has been scheduled to depart Friday from Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport and land Saturday at Frankfurt Airport in Germany.

The airline said in the announcement it will operate two round-trip cargo flights between Dallas and Frankfurt over the next four days. The flights are expected to carry medical supplies, active U.S. military mail, electronics to support people working at home and e-commerce packages.

“It’s an honor to be part of these cargo-only flights, said Ken Jarrell, fleet service clerk, cargo services, DFW, in a statement. “Our team members across the airline are ready and willing to do what it takes to make sure people have the things they need during these unprecedented times.”

Earlier in the week, Airlines for America, the trade group for U.S. airlines, called for $60 billion in direct assistance and loan guarantees amid slowing business from the coronavirus pandemic. Three global alliances, Oneworld, SkyTeam and Star Alliance, representing nearly 60 airlines worldwide, also pleaded for help from government and stakeholders amid estimates of billions of dollars in lost revenue due to the decline in travel.

The reduced business has impacted workers at airports across the country. In New York and New Jersey alone, 1,200 airport workers, employed at airport restaurants and stores operated by OTG, were laid off with no severance and told their health insurance would lapse on March 31.

The laid-off workers were employed at La Guardia, Kennedy International and Newark Liberty International airports, according to the union representing them, Unite Here Local

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100.

“You can’t pay people,” when the company is taking in very little revenue, senior OTG executive Lawrence Schwartz said.

“The airports are dead,” he added. “No one’s flying.”

United Arab Emirates on Thursday effectively temporarily suspended issuance of all entry visas to the country, a Dubai Airports statement said.

All scheduled UAE passenger flights from several countries have been suspended, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Iran, Italy, except for Rome, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, People’s Republic of China, except Beijing, Syria, Turkey and Morocco.

National Guard Chief: No Demand for Forces to Act as Law Enforcement (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 5:57 PM, Kristina Wong, 1973K]
National Guard Bureau Chief Air Force Gen. Joseph Lengyel said recently he does not see any demand from states to have Guard members act in law enforcement roles.

He said during a Pentagon briefing on Thursday:

In many disasters and response, when there’s a pressure put on otherwise civilian, law enforcement activities, people get sick, they need more law enforcement potential out there, then the National Guard could be used in that capacity.

But, he said, “I don’t see any demand signal that’s demanding we’re going to use the National Guard in that kind of scenario.”

He said state governors could ask National Guard members to augment law enforcement if needed — something they could not do if the president federalizes them.

Lengyel also said federalizing the National Guard does “not make sense” in dealing with coronavirus, or mobilizing them under the federal government versus state governments.

He explained that it would make things more difficult for governors who wish to use the National Guard in different capacities:

The best use of the National Guard is to use the National Guard for the unique authorities that it has, and that is to remain under the command and control of the networks in the states.

Every state has a different way to deal with disasters, and the National Guard is uniquely qualified and postured to act under the command and control of the governors in the state. And so if you were to federalize them, you would lose that ability, and you would lose some other things.

…

So, while — I mean certainly the president can mobilize and federalize the National Guard but it would be my advice and there’s no plans that I’m aware of to take the National

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Guards in the states and put them in a federal status. They are much better used in a state status under command and control of the governors.

There are 450,000 men and women who serve in the National Guard.

Lengyel said so far, 27 states have mobilized about 2,000 Guard members. He said he expects that to grow to tens of thousands of Guard members being mobilized within states in the next couple of weeks.

He said Guard members are doing a number of things in the nation's coronavirus response. He said they can provide assistance with testing, ground transportation, air transportation, logistics, and a number of other things: For example, he said:

the New York National Guard has been helping local officials distribute food;

the Tennessee Air National Guard's C-17 delivered half a million swabs for test kits to Memphis;
more than 500 soldiers in South Florida are assisting with collecting samples for drive-through testing in Broward County;

in Maryland, the National Guard is supporting medical assessments and testing site operations;
in Wisconsin they are supporting transportation missions for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services; and

in Louisiana, Guard liaison officers are assisting the New Orleans Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

"This is just a sample of the efforts that we are supporting across the country," he said, adding:

Going forward, we expect the role of the National Guard will continue to grow and evolve to meet the country's needs during this historic pandemic. We remain flexible and committed to whatever mission we may be called to do.

"I want to thank all of our Guard members and all the first responders for their service during this difficult time. We continue to rise to every challenge before us and continue to work with our partners to keep our nation safe and remain true to our motto: Always Ready, Always There."

Coronavirus: 1,200 Young Doctors Sidelined by Lack of Training Residencies (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 7:24 PM, Neil Munro, 1973K]
Just as the coronavirus epidemic went nationwide, 1,200 young American doctors have been put on the sidelines because they were denied a place in the limited number of medical residencies for 2020, said Kevin Lynn, founder of Doctors Without Jobs.

"More than 6 percent of the graduates of U.S. medical colleges did not get 'matched' into a residency this week in a hospital, which means they will never practice medicine," said Lynn,

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"That is a systemic problem," he said, adding, "we have an ever-increasing need for effective healthcare delivery in this country, and yet we seem to have made it extremely difficult to become a doctor."

Without a residency for specialized training on their resumé, the fully qualified doctors cannot get doctors' jobs because they are excluded from employers' insurance coverage, he said.

Congress should quickly get the doctors into work during the epidemic by extending employers' insurance coverage to include the many doctors who pass their tests but who have not had a residency, Lynn said.

The annual match process allocates graduates to the limited number of hospital residencies. The graduates — including several thousand foreign graduates — have already passed the Medical Licensing Examination (MLE) but they cannot work as doctors until they serve a residency in a hospital, he said.

"Failing to Match can represent a critical junction for medical students," according to a 2019 article in opmed.doximity.com. It continued:

Now is the time to decide if you want to move forward with your medical training. While this may seem like an obvious choice — after all, you've already put four years and tens of thousands of dollars into the process — that may not actually be the case for many.

So, take the time to take stock of your goals. Talk to your family, loved ones, or partner. Consider looking into other careers in health care, such as hospital operations or consulting. Ultimately, you should ask yourself – is being a doctor truly my dream?

"It took weeks, if not months, to recover from the emotional trauma of not matching," according to a 2018 article at KevinMd, com. The female doctor continued, "The feeling of watching your friends and classmates see their dreams come to fruition while yours crumbled around you is earth-shattering for a medical student."

The American doctors are not excluded because they are unqualified, said Lynn. They have passed their college courses and the national MLE test, but do not get picked for specialized training because Congress does not fund enough residencies at hospitals, he said. "Are they at the top of their class? No, but they're not in the bottom," said Lynn.

The 1,218 doctors excluded in 2020 is an increase from the 1,162 excluded doctors in 2019, the 1,078 excluded doctors in 2018, the 1,059 excluded doctors in 2017, and the excluded doctors 1,130 in 2016. These exclusion do not count the doctors who repeated their effort to get matched, he said.

The accumulated lists of excluded doctors have created an unrecognized national reserve of perhaps 5,000 fully qualified doctors who can be deployed during the coronavirus, Lynn said.

Last week, President Donald Trump and Congress changed insurance rules to allow people to use tens of millions of N95 face masks that were designed for non-medical purposes.

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McClatchy reported March 20:

The purpose of the new legislative provision is to protect manufacturers from liability if U.S. citizens use the masks outside of a hospital environment during a public health crisis, and contract disease.

Under current law, “someone could buy one from Home Depot and say they got coronavirus while walking on the street and wearing a respirator, and the manufacturer will be liable,” said one congressional aide involved in the deliberations.

In Italy, where the epidemic is further advanced, the government has mobilized roughly 10,000 student doctors to the front line.

The supply of hospital residencies is limited because they are funded by Congress — and Congress limits the funding each year.

The number of residencies puts a cap on the flow of new doctors into the sector — and so drives up salaries for current doctors.

The mismatch also encourages various employers to import doctors from the Middle East, India, and Africa under various visa-worker programs.

The visa programs, such as the H-1B and J-1 programs, extract the foreign doctors that people in the foreign countries need for their health and economic growth.

Africa’s doctors are being extracted by U.S, European, and Arab governments who refuse to fund training programs for their own would-be-doctors, according to an April 2019 report in Al Jazeera:

Abuja, Nigeria – In March, hundreds of Nigerian doctors gathered at a hotel in Abuja, the capital, and another in Lagos, the country’s commercial centre, to take a test conducted by the Saudi Arabian health ministry.

In a symbol of the Nigerian medical “brain drain”, those yet to migrate must complete foreign exams in order to get work placements abroad.

Weeks before the attempt by Saudi Arabia to lure Nigeria’s greatest medical talents, dozens had sat the regular Professional Linguistic Assessments Board (PLAB) exams at the British Council. Once they pass, it will enable them to work in the UK.

“The trend of doctors emigrating to other countries is at an all-time high,” Chike Nwangwu, head of NOIPolls, told Al Jazeera in Abuja. “Our survey … showed that 88 percent of doctors are considering work opportunities abroad.”

In the United States, the imported doctors most slowly migrate through a complex immigration system, often leaving them with partial workplace rights for several years.

For example, roughly 5,000 Indian-born doctors are waiting in a multi-year waiting line for green cards. The line is long because it is choked by an army of roughly 600,000 Indian H-1B workers and family members who have been imported by U.S. technology companies,

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banks, and insurance firms and their Indian-run staffing companies.

Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) is pushing his S.386 bill to put the many Indian workers to the front of the green card line — regardless of the impact on non-Indian migrants, and without any exemption for doctors.

Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) is pushing a bill that would provide more funding for 15,000 extra residencies per year.

His S.348 bill is titled the "Resident Physician Shortage Reduction Act of 2019," sand it ays:

the aggregate number of increases in the otherwise applicable resident limit under this subparagraph shall be equal to 3,000 in each of fiscal years 2021 through 2025, of which at least 1,500 in each such fiscal year shall be used for full-time equivalent residents training in a shortage specialty residency program.

Menendez's bill has 17 co-sponsors, including Sen. Susan Collins, (R-ME)

"Not only do we need the additional residencies, but we also need the prioritization of American graduates to get those residencies," said Lynn, who noted that U.S. hospitals awarded residencies to thousands of foreign doctors each year.

"It gets down to OK, what's the value of spending years at an Americans college, accumulating all that debt and cost? Why not go to India and go to medical school there?" he asked. "There has to be a value in going to an accredited U.S. medical college.201D

COVID-19 doctors running out of masks? Try a bandanna, the CDC says (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/21/2020 9:00 AM, Emily Baumgaertner, 1907K]
The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has new advice for medical workers desperate for protective gear against COVID-19: Try a bandanna for protection.

The agency, scrambling to advise healthcare workers faced with severe shortages of gear, also recommends that another "last resort" solution could be a scarf.

"Caution should be exercised," the CDC warns about matching up a house cloth against the new coronavirus. "Their capability to protect [medical workers] is unknown."

It's the latest tip from an increasingly beleaguered agency that continues to loosen safety guidelines, even as coronavirus infections rise.

"It's all incredibly disturbing to me. I've just been shocked at the CDC's fall-down," said Beth Hasenauer, a former pediatric oncology nurse in Monrovia, Calif., who plans to sew makeshift masks for endangered healthcare workers.

"But I don't want people thinking they're necessarily safe wearing these. They're just an emergency stopgap measure."

U.S. health officials in the early days of the outbreak recommended that any medical worker treating a suspected coronavirus patient wear an N95 mask, which seals tightly around the

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nose and mouth and filters out about 95% of small airborne particles. But federal officials have said that the Strategic National Stockpile contains just 1% of the masks that experts predict could be needed throughout the pandemic.

There are plans to add 500 million N95 respirators to the stockpile, but those could take up to 18 months to be delivered, according to the grant application. The CDC now says looser-fitting surgical masks are considered “an acceptable alternative” for most medical staff.

And in a worst-case scenario? A DIY-mask, made from household fabrics, is an option.

YouTube and Pinterest now abound with unverified mask-making tutorials: some strung from paper towels and rubber bands; others made with toilet paper (which could soon be depleted as well).

Providence St. Joseph Health, a large hospital chain based in Seattle, is now recruiting volunteers to sew a supplementary supply. Called the 100 Million Mask Challenge, the group is distributing crafting kits to anyone with a sewing machine and “a willing heart.”

“Quilters have always been altruistic,” Hasenauer said, describing blankets sewn for charities and animal pouches crafted during wildfires. “People are sitting at home with nothing to do, wondering how to help out. So we want to channel that energy and salvage the healthcare system.”

In an email sent Friday, Judy Garner, the vice dean for faculty affairs at USC’s Keck School of Medicine, told the faculty that workers who were at “greatest risk of exposure” were facing shortages. She asked them to pool any remaining stashes of face masks and eye protection in communal boxes in the administrative office’s lobby.

In the meantime, hospitals have begun hiding mask inventories behind lock and key. Some doctors say they have researched methods to wash and reuse their masks; others are simply going without.

An emergency room doctor in a Downey hospital said the lax regulations have made her fearful to work, and she called the changes “so, so shortsighted.”

“Saving a few masks today will create an exponentially greater need for more masks later on,” she said. “If we don’t protect the healthcare workers, they will become the main driver of the pandemic. And they will become vectors for the spread.”

Hanes will start making masks for health care professionals treating coronavirus (ABC News)
ABC News [3/21/2020 9:32 PM, Olivia Eubanks, 2182K] Video: HERE
Hanes clothing company is retrofitting factories to make masks to combat the aggressive spread of novel coronavirus, President Donald Trump announced at a press conference Saturday. The company later confirmed it was pairing with the government to make N95 masks for health care workers on the front line of fighting the disease.

"By way of example, Hanes ... [is] retrofitting manufacturing capabilities in large sections of the plants to produce masks and they’re in the process right now," Trump said at Saturday’s coronavirus task force briefing.

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Health care providers across the country are fearing shortages of face masks and other critical equipment amid the coronavirus outbreak.

Hanes expects to ramp up to production of 1.5 million masks weekly, and the consortium of companies it has joined, led by Parkdale Mills America, is expected to ramp up to production of 5 million to 6 million masks weekly using HanesBrands' design and patterns, the company said in a statement.

"The company's supply chain and product development experts created technical product specifications, including product chemistry, and samples of cotton masks in coordination with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that were approved by the FDA." Hanes said.

Equipment to keep nurses and doctors healthy while treating patients is already in short supply in some parts of the country.

"It's a serious issue," Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases said at the briefing. "I get the calls every night the way you get emails. ... You're not making things up. I know that because I'm experiencing myself."

Fauci said he hopes it will be "days" before doctors get supplies they need.

Apple will also be donating masks, Vice President Mike Pence said.

"The president and I literally heard directly from Apple that they are donating 2 million industrial masks for this effort around the country and working with our administration to distribute those," he said.

The U.S. Health and Human Services Department has placed an order for 600 million N95 respirator masks over the next 18 months to be made available to health care providers across the country. The masks will come at a price tag of $500 million, according to information provided by HHS.

"Within the national center we have a supply chain task force and in a basic sense we are trying to identify the universe of what's out there, what we hold at the federal level and hold at private sector and mash it up with demand and [we're] asking people to be creative," Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Pete Gaynor said.

He added, "There's a range of requests across the country and we are trying to match those, again, supply and demand, every day."

Earlier this month, HHS said it had requested proposals to provide 500 million masks to doctors and nurses across the country. Officials have estimated the demand could creep up to a billion in the next six months.

US coronavirus death toll hits 300 as more states urge residents to stay home (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 10:46 PM, Christina Maxouris, Dakin Andone, and Nicole Chavez 5551K]
More than 300 people in the United States have now died from coronavirus, as the illness tightens its grip on the country and prompts fears of widespread shortages of medical

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supplies.

As of Saturday night, a total of 323 people infected with the disease have died. Minnesota reported its first death while Washington had the highest number of deaths at 94, followed by 70 deaths in New York, according to CNN's tally.

A number of private companies joined the government's efforts to restock masks, ventilators and other supplies while the US Food and Drug Administration authorized the use of the first rapid diagnostic test that could detect the disease in approximately 45 minutes.

Millions of people in five states were spending their first full weekend at home as states ramped up restrictions in an attempt to curb the spread. The number of cases is now surpassing 25,000 nationwide.

As Californians adjusted to their new normal, Gov. Gavin Newsom urged younger residents to avoid visiting beaches.

"Be a good neighbor, be a good citizen," Newsom said. "(It's) time to recognize it's not only about the old folks, it's about your impact in their lives. Don't be selfish."

A few hours earlier, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo had warned younger people of the risk after 54% of the more than 10,000 confirmed cases in the states were individuals between the ages of 18 and 49.

"You're not Superman and you're not Superwoman," the governor said. "You can get this virus and you can transfer the virus and you can wind up hurting someone who you love."

California and New York are among a handful of states that have urged nonessential workers to stay home in an effort to prevent the spread of the novel coronavirus, alleviate stress on the health-care system and preserve dwindling medical supplies.

The most recent state to enact such a measure was New Jersey, where Gov. Phil Murphy announced a statewide "stay at home" order, closing nonessential retail businesses and asking residents to stay home until further notice. The order, effective at 9 p.m. ET Saturday, also prohibits gatherings and asks individuals to practice social distancing.

"We know the virus spreads through person-to person contact," the governor said in a news release, "and the best way to prevent further exposure is to limit our public interactions to only the most essential purposes."

Similar measures have been announced in Illinois and Connecticut, directing nonessential workers to stay home, though each state provides for certain exceptions, such as visiting grocery stories, pharmacies or healthcare facilities, among others.

Those restrictions followed similar directives issued by state and local leaders urging residents to stay put and limiting bars and restaurants to take-out and delivery services.

"Every state will head this way," CNN national security analyst Juliette Kayyem said Friday. "People need to prepare themselves that this gets harder before this gets easier."

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Cases climb as more are tested

There were at least 25,740 confirmed cases as of Saturday evening -- a number that has soared as testing became more available.

More than 195,000 Americans have been tested, Vice President Mike Pence told reporters in a White House briefing. That total does not include county hospitals or health care labs, the vice president said.

Pence and his wife both tested negative on Saturday afternoon, his press secretary tweeted. A staff member in his office tested positive. The staffer is doing well, Pence said, and neither the vice president nor the President had direct contact with the staffer.

The White House doctor determined there was no reason to believe Pence was exposed, but Pence was tested, "given the unique position that I have as the vice president and as leader of the White House coronavirus task force," the vice president said.

The US Food and Drug Administration on Friday authorized the use of the first rapid diagnostic test that could detect coronavirus in about 45 minutes. The tests will begin shipping next week, according to a statement from the California-based company manufacturing the tests.

In a strategic shift, New York City and Los Angeles County health authorities recommended this week that health care providers avoid testing patients except in cases in which a test result would significantly change the course of treatment.

Guidance from the Los Angeles County Department of Health, dated Thursday, said testing at public health labs would prioritize patients with symptoms, health care workers, residents of long-term care facilities, paramedics and other high-risk patients. Others were encouraged to simply stay at home.

The recommendation reflects a "shifting from a strategy of case containment to slowing disease transmission and averting excess morbidity and mortality," the guidance said.

Guidance from the New York Department of Health directed health care facilities to stop testing non-hospitalized patients in an effort to preserve medical supplies.

"At this point in the pandemic, demand for unnecessary testing is contributing to the rapidly diminishing supply of PPE and leading to a decreasing supply of swabs and viral transport media used to collect diagnostic specimens for COVID-19 testing," the guidance read. "Testing may play a more significant role after the pandemic has peaked."

Makeshift masks and hospitals

But as numbers climb, health care workers and state leaders have sounded the alarm on medical supplies beginning to run short.

"Unless we increase the number of masks and gowns available, it’s a matter of time before most frontline healthcare workers are infected," said Dr. Megan Ranney, an emergency physician with Lifespan, a Rhode Island health system affiliated with Brown University.

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"We just don't have adequate equipment and really reusing stuff -- the CDC might be recommending that right now, but that's only because we don't have enough," she said. "It is not standard practice in normal times."

In New York City, now the epicenter of the outbreak in the US, Mayor Bill de Blasio called on Trump for help and said supplies may only last for the next few weeks.

New York state has identified 2 million N95 masks for purchase, Cuomo's office announced. One million masks will be sent to New York City, while 500,000 masks will go to Long Island.

Cuomo said earlier that masks typically priced at 80 cents were now $4, but said, "We need them."

Masks are being donated to healthcare workers from a variety of places and industries, including dentists and woodworkers. Pence said Saturday that Apple was donating masks, too, which CEO Tim Cook later confirmed on Twitter.

"We're donating millions of masks for health professionals in the US and Europe," Cook wrote. "To every one of the heroes on the front lines, we thank you."

The vice president encouraged anyone with spare masks to donate them, particularly people in business and dentistry, saying "that story is literally happening all over the country."

"Look at the supplies of the N95 masks and pack up as much as you can spare," Pence said, "and drop them off at your local hospital, and it would be a great service to our country."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in new guidance this week said facilities facing a "crisis" should consider options to combat shortages that "are not commensurate with US standards of care," including reusing masks or using "homemade ones" from materials like bandanas and scarves.

Hospitals have already reported they've had to get creative with how to make more masks and make them last longer.

Some have moved to makeshift hospital facilities, too, with one Washington state community getting ready to open a 200-bed hospital on a soccer field. And de Blasio said his city will use "every building we can ... to become essentially annexes to hospitals."

"Supplies are a major issue -- (personal protective equipment), gloves, gowns, mask suppliers," Cuomo said Friday. "I am now asking all product providers, all companies who are in this business, we will pay a premium for these products."

[Editorial note: consult source link for video and extended commentary]

Some hard-hit areas restrict testing as coronavirus death toll grows in the US (CNN)

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CNN [3/22/2020 2:35 AM, Faith Karimi, 5551K]
As the coronavirus pandemic grows and more states order residents to stay home, officials are making a tough choice to only test high-risk patients and those who are severely ill.

The number of coronavirus deaths has surged to 323 in the United States as the virus tightens its grip, leading to fears of a widespread shortage of medical supplies.

Officials in hard-hit states such as New York and California are warning that panicked people are flooding hospitals for tests and health care facilities will run out of crucial items. The focus has shifted to avoiding broad testing to conserve rapidly dwindling resources such as masks, ventilators and intensive care beds.

In a strategic shift, authorities are recommending that health care providers avoid testing patients except in cases in which results would significantly change the course of treatment.

New York health officials issued guidance asking medical facilities to stop testing non-hospitalized patients in an effort to preserve medical supplies.

"At this point in the pandemic, demand for unnecessary testing is contributing to the rapidly diminishing supply of PPE (personal protective equipment) ... ," the guidance read. "Testing may play a more significant role after the pandemic has peaked."

California Gov. Gavin Newsom said testing should prioritize hospitalized patients, people with compromised immunities, health care workers, seniors and other high-risk patients.

"Not every single person in the US needs to get tested," said Anthony S. Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases. "When you go in and get tested, you are consuming personal protective equipment, masks and gowns — those are high priority for the health care workers who are taking care of people who have coronavirus disease."

A first weekend under restriction for millions

As the number of confirmed cases surpassed 25,000 nationwide and concerns over testing grow, states are ramping up efforts to stop the spread of the virus.

Millions of people in five states spent their first full weekend at home under new orders by their governors. California, New York, Illinois, Connecticut and New Jersey have urged nonessential workers to stay home in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus and reduce stress on the health care system.

Newsom urged younger residents to avoid visiting beaches as Californians adjusted to their new normal. "(It's) time to recognize it's not only about the old folks, it's about your impact in their lives. Don't be selfish," he said.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo also warned younger people of the risk after 54% of the more than 10,000 confirmed cases in the state were individuals between ages 18 and 49.

"You're not Superman and you're not Superwoman," the governor said. "You can get this virus and you can transfer the virus and you can wind up hurting someone who you love."

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The most recent state to enact such a measure was New Jersey, where Gov. Phil Murphy announced a statewide order closing nonessential retail businesses and asking residents to stay home until further notice. The order went into effect at 9 p.m. ET Saturday.

"We know the virus spreads through person-to person contact," the governor said. "The best way to prevent further exposure is to limit our public interactions to only the most essential purposes."

Each state provides for certain exceptions, such as visiting grocery stories, pharmacies or healthcare facilities, among others.

"Every state will head this way," CNN national security analyst Juliette Kayyem said. "People need to prepare themselves that this gets harder before this gets easier."

Cases climb as more people are tested

Numbers have soared as testing became more available, with at least 25,740 confirmed cases as of Saturday evening.

More than 195,000 Americans have been tested, Vice President Mike Pence told reporters. That total does not include county hospitals or health care labs, the vice president said.

As the demand for tests grows, private companies are joining the government's efforts to restock masks, ventilators and other supplies. The US Food and Drug Administration authorized the use of the first rapid diagnostic test that could detect the disease in approximately 45 minutes. The tests will start shipping this week, according to the California-based manufacturer.

Meanwhile, Pence and his wife tested negative Saturday after a staff member in his office tested positive.

Physician predicts staffing shortages

Health care workers and state leaders have sounded the alarm on medical supplies beginning to run short. Some medical experts are going a step further and adding staff shortages.

Staffing shortages will likely come even before equipment starts to run out, said Dr. David Hill, a pulmonary critical care physician and a spokesman for the American Lung Association.

"Part of it is just exhausting our personnel. Health care is complicated and people make mistakes when they're overworked," Hill said.

If health care workers get sick, "everything can fall apart very quickly," says Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine.

Italy virus cases soar again; NY eyes temporary hospitals (San Francisco Chronicle)

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San Francisco Chronicle [3/21/2020 5:14 PM, Amy Forliti and Frances D'emilio, AP, 337K] The coronavirus pandemic took an increasingly bleak toll Saturday in the U.S. and in Europe, producing staggering caseloads in New York and Italy and setting off a desperate scramble to set up thousands of additional hospital beds as the disease notched another grim advance.

Italy, at the heart of Europe's rampaging outbreak, announced 793 new deaths and 6,557 new cases on Saturday — its biggest day-to-day increase yet. In New York, state officials sought out desperately needed medical supplies and hospital beds as confirmed coronavirus cases soared above 10,000 statewide, with 56 deaths.

"Everything that can be done is being done," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said, adding, "We are literally scouring the globe looking for medical supplies."

Across the world, streets, squares and highways in major cities were deserted as curfews and lockdowns multiplied to try to stop the spread of COVID-19. In the U.S., New Jersey and St. Louis were added to a growing list of areas where residents were ordered to stay home. Health care workers from Oklahoma City to Minneapolis sought donations of protective equipment. Staff at a Detroit hospital began creating homemade face masks for workers. Even rural hospitals were strained as people increasingly felt the pandemic closing in.

"There's definitely this underlying fear in the community. You can see it," said Dr. Robert Wagner, an emergency room doctor in the farming community of Vidalia, Georgia, which has not yet seen a confirmed COVID-19 infection, But the 50-bed Meadows Regional Medical Center felt the pressure.

"People are scared, and they don't know where else to turn, so they're turning to us," Wagner said, adding that so far, the hospital has had enough tests for any patient who warrants one, and supplies of masks, gloves and protective gowns were holding up for now.

But Wagner said he's concerned supplies may start to run out as patient volumes increase. And he worries about staffing shortages if nurses and doctors start to get sick.

In Washington, negotiators from Congress and the White House resumed top-level talks on a ballooning $1 trillion-plus economic rescue package, urged by President Donald Trump to strike a deal to steady a nation thoroughly upended by the coronavirus pandemic.

In Nebraska, 81 counties are without intensive-care beds, and 28 of the most rural counties have no hospital at all. In western Minnesota, three counties are exploring converting part of a former prison into a center to care for coronavirus patients.

The shortage of medical equipment and protective gear was a concern in major cities too. Supplies including protective gear, respirators and hand sanitizer, were dwindling. New Hampshire's largest hospital, Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical center, encouraged volunteers to sew face masks for patients, visitors and staff so medical-grade protective equipment could be conserved for health care workers. Integris Health, in Oklahoma, was asking the public to donate masks, hand sanitizers, disposable gloves, and other supplies.

"On a national and global basis, the key supplies are in very short supply," said Jim

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O'Connor, vice president of Supply Chain Management for Henry Ford Health System in the Detroit area. "We're all struggling to obtain supplies at the level we would like. We are currently providing our supplies as required."

"It's just the perfect storm of a worldwide pandemic, health care systems around the country and around the world are needing the same things at the same time," Integris spokeswoman Brooke Cayot said.

The virus was slower in coming to Oklahoma, Cayot said, but there are now 53 confirmed cases and one death.

When people realize that the virus is in their community, "the anxiety kicks in, and they are rushing to the emergency room," Cayot said. "It's the emergency rooms that are feeling overrun at the moment (by) people who are frightened and understandably so."

For most people, the new virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority recover.

More than 297,000 cases have been confirmed globally, including 12,755 deaths, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University. More than 91,540 people have recovered.

The United States has seen 276 deaths so far. Italy, which has Europe's largest outbreak, now has at least 4,825 dead.

Italian Health Minister Roberto Speranza called for a "great alliance" between citizens and institutions, saying "what counts more is the behavior of every individual." Giuseppe Sala, mayor of Milan, capital of the hardest-stricken region of Lombardy, tried to rally the city's 1.4 million citizens, tweeting that "by now, we have understood, this is a marathon, not a sprint."

Spain now has the third-highest number of infections worldwide. On Saturday it reported a total of nearly 25,000 cases, including 1,326 deaths. Spanish health authorities have acknowledged that some intensive care units in the hardest-hit areas are close to their limit; the army was building a field hospital with 5,500 beds in a convention center in Madrid, where hotels are also being turned into wards for virus patients without serious breathing problems.

Dr. Olga Mediano, who treated victims of a 2004 jihadist bomb attack in Madrid that killed nearly 200 people and wounded many times more, said nothing prepared her for the national health tragedy that Spain is now enduring.

"I have been through many situations," she said from the central city of Guadalajara. "But nothing is like this."

"If we keep seeing daily increases of 23%, this cannot be withstood much longer," Mediano said. "We are doubling up on our shifts. We have strategies to hang in there this week, but beyond that we need the situation to improve because we professionals are bearing a lot of pressure, including emotional."

In Germany's southern state of Bavaria, town squares were empty. Pigeons outnumbered

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people in London's usually bustling Trafalgar Square and Leicester Square a day after the British government ordered the closure of all bars, restaurants, movie theaters and other places where people congregate.

But shoppers still flocked to street markets in both countries, in a sign that restrictions were being interpreted in a patchwork fashion.

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 recorded in Africa rose above 1,000 Saturday, according to the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. At least 40 of Africa's 54 countries now have cases.

Britain still lags behind Italy, Spain and France in the spread of the virus, but the country's overstretched health system is creaking. Britain, which has recorded 3,983 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 177 deaths, has already asked 65,000 retired nurses and doctors to return to work.

Workers near Moscow are rushing to build a clinic to treat hundreds of coronavirus patients as Russia prepares for a wave of infections. Placards in the style of Soviet propaganda posters have been erected near the site, with one showing Mayor Sergei Sobyanin pointing at the viewer and the slogan "Builders — Minutes count!"

Back in the U.S., restrictions on movement were scheduled to take effect Saturday in Illinois and New Jersey and Sunday in New York. All workers in nonessential businesses will be required to stay home and gatherings of any size are banned in New York. Exceptions will be made for important errands, such as buying groceries and medicine, and for exercise.

Trump renews calls for agencies to 'move fast' on potential coronavirus treatments (FOX News)

FOX News [3/21/2020 12:18 PM, Adam Shaw, 8943K]

President Trump on Saturday renewed his calls for government agencies to "move fast" to expand experimental treatments to treat the coronavirus outbreak, citing a combo of drugs he said could "one of the biggest game changers" in medicine.

"HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine," he tweeted. "The FDA has moved mountains - Thank You!"

"Hopefully they will BOTH (H works better with A, International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents).....be put in use IMMEDIATELY. PEOPLE ARE DYING, MOVE FAST, and GOD BLESS EVERYONE!"

Trump was referring to a French study that found the antimalarial and antibiotic was effective in counteracting the virus.

"Despite its small sample size our survey shows that hydroxychloroquine treatment is significantly associated with viral load reduction/disappearance in COVID-19 patients and its effect is reinforced by azithromycin," the study found.

Trump said at a White House press briefing Thursday that chloroquine and hydroxychloroquine will be made available to test whether it helps patients recover from

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coronavirus. He said it was one of a number of antiviral therapies to limit the symptoms of the virus that the administration is trying to get to Americans as quickly as possible.

“I have directed the FDA to eliminate rules and bureaucracy so work can proceed rapidly, quickly and fast,” Trump said. "We have to remove every barrier.”

FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn explained during the press conference it would be allowed under what’s known as “compassionate use” -- where doctors can request to use the experimental drug and get permission from the FDA to give to patients.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, urged caution Friday on the treatments, saying the evidence was, as of yet, only anecdotal.

“So as the Commissioner of FDA and the President mentioned yesterday, we’re trying to strike a balance between making something with a potential of an effect to the American people available, at the same time that we do it under the auspices of a protocol that would give us information to determine if it’s truly safe and truly effective,” he said alongside Trump at a White House press briefing Friday.

“But the information that you’re referring to specifically is anecdotal; it was not done in a controlled clinical trial. So you really can’t make any definitive statement about it,” he said.

But as Trump and Fauci were pressed on whether there was a disagreement, Fauci downplayed the idea that there was a significant difference between them: “The President feels optimistic about something — his feeling about it.”

“What I’m saying is that it might — it might be effective. I’m not saying that it isn’t,” he said. “It might be effective. But as a scientist, as we’re getting it out there, we need to do it in a way as — while we are making it available for people who might want the hope that it might work, you’re also collecting data that will ultimately show that it is truly effective and safe under the conditions of COVID-19.”

Trump steps up effort to tout malaria drug as coronavirus ‘game changer’ despite doubts from FDA (The Hill)
The Hill [3/21/2020 11:19 AM, Tal Axelrod, 1762K]
President Trump doubled down on his campaign to cast a malaria drug as a coronavirus cure, saying the treatment could be a game changer despite skepticism from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other government officials.

“HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine. The FDA has moved mountains - Thank You!” Trump tweeted Saturday morning.

“Hopefully they will BOTH…be put in use IMMEDIATELY. PEOPLE ARE DYING, MOVE FAST, and GOD BLESS EVERYONE!”

Trump has repeatedly hyped the malaria treatment as a possible cure for COVID-19, which has already infected nearly 20,000 people in the U.S.

The president repeatedly said he has a good "feeling" about the drug at a White House

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press conference Friday.

“I feel good about it. That’s all it is. Just a feeling,” he said. “You know, I’m a smart guy. I feel good about it. And we’re going to see. You’re going to see soon enough.”

However, Trump’s confidence over the drug flies in the face of remarks from other government officials who are less bullish over the treatment’s possible effect on the coronavirus.

When asked on Friday if hydroxychloroquine could be used to prevent COVID-19, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert, replied "no."

“The information that you’re referring to specifically is anecdotal,” Fauci added. “It was not done in a controlled clinical trial, so you really can’t make any definitive statement about it.”

FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn has also downplayed the potency of the drug on COVID-19, saying this week he does not want to “provide false hope.”

“We may have the right drug, but it might not be in the appropriate dosage form right now, and it might do more harm than good,” he said.

Hahn added during the White House press conference that a vaccine for the coronavirus is currently in the first phase of a clinical trial and wouldn’t be ready for 12 months.

The muddled messaging comes as the White House grapples with the spread of the coronavirus, which has infected nearly 18,000 people and killed 239 in the U.S. as of Saturday morning, according to The New York Times’s tally.

Lockdowns, stay-at-home policies multiply as coronavirus cases, deaths mount (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 5:29 AM, Dom Calicchio, 8943K]
In the U.S. and across the globe, more people were under official lockdowns or stay-at-home policies early Saturday as coronavirus cases and fatalities mounted.

In New York City, coronavirus patients were dying at a rate of more than one an hour, with that rate expected to rise, the city’s health commissioner said Friday, according to The New York Post.

After California’s governor issued the nation’s strictest “stay at home” order Thursday night, taking effect at midnight Friday. The governors of New York, Illinois and Connecticut did likewise, with Oregon among the states expected to follow suit.

All told, the orders would confine around 75 million Americans to their homes – able to go out only for essential reasons, such as vital work duties or to gather food and supplies.

“This is not a permanent state, this is a moment in time,” California Gov. Gavin Newsom said, trying to assure the nation’s most populous state that the order would eventually lift.

In Los Angeles, the sight of nearly empty freeways was startling in a city long known for extensive traffic snarls.

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New York, the state with the most COVID-19 cases in the nation, received a "major disaster" declaration Friday from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), giving it access to a share of $42 billion in federal Disaster Relief Fund dollars.

Early Saturday, New York had more than 8,400 confirmed coronavirus cases and nearly 50 deaths, while the entire U.S. had more than 19,600 confirmed cases and about 250 deaths.

“No, this is not life as usual,” New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said as the death toll in the U.S. topped 200, with at least 35 in his state. “Accept it and realize it and deal with it.”

Cuomo said that starting Sunday, all workers in nonessential businesses must stay home as much as possible, and all nonessential gatherings of any size for any reason will be banned in the state of over 19 million people.

"When I talk about the most drastic action we can take, this is the most drastic action we can take," Cuomo said.

After announcing the state’s fourth fatality related to coronavirus, Connecticut Gov. Ned Lamont said of the lockdown: “It’s tough medicine. I think it’s the right medicine. What we’re trying to do is everything we can to improve the supply when it comes to what we can do for our health care system.”

Outside the U.S., Colombia’s president called for three weeks of home isolation, to begin Tuesday, with the capital Bogota already on lockdown Friday, The Associated Press reported.

Peru, Ecuador and Venezuela were already on lockdown.

Nations were hoping to avoid situations in China and Italy, where the most cases have occurred. China had more than 81,000 cases early Saturday while Italy had more than 47,000.

Worldwide, there were more than 275,000 coronavirus cases reported and 11,300 deaths.

US unemployment filings surge, reaches two-year high amid coronavirus outbreak (FOX News)

FOX News [3/20/2020 6:05 PM, Bret Baier, 8943K]

This is a rush transcript from "Special Report," March 20, 2020. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

BRET BAIER, FOX NEWS ANCHOR: Good evening, I’m Bret Baier. "BREAKING TONIGHT", the governors of the three of the country’s most populous states, California, New York and Illinois, are ordering workers in non-essential businesses to stay home because of the coronavirus pandemic.

President Trump is still downplaying the prospect of a national lockdown. Saying, he does not think he will ever be necessary. Members of Congress and the administration are working on a massive economic stimulus package right now.

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As more Americans take tests for the coronavirus, the infection rate is skyrocketing as predicted to more than 14,000 cases. So far, 210 deaths in the U.S.

Vice President Pence, says about 90 percent of Americans who have taken the test, so far, did not have the virus.

While the president is strongly, and at times, compatibly pushing alternative therapies to fight the COVID-19 virus, he is receiving some pushback from one of his top advisors. Dr. Anthony Fauci is cautioning reports of success are anecdotal and data needs to be collected.

The U.S. is closing its borders with Mexico and Canada to non-essential travel because of the coronavirus. The president's response coordinator, says young people under 20 are being seriously affected but all have recovered.

Dr. Deborah Birx, emphasizing today that no one is immune, as she did last night on SPECIAL REPORT.

The administration is pushing back the tax deadline from April 15th to July 15th. It is also waiving interest on federal student loans. At least 32 states have activated or plan to activate National Guard forces. And that's what we begin.

Chief White House correspondent John Roberts, begins our coverage live on the North Lawn tonight. Good evening, John.

JOHN ROBERTS, FOX NEWS CHIEF WHITE HOUSE CORRESPONDENT: Bret, good evening to you. Just a few moments ago, you mentioned this idea of some sort of looming national shutdown and is one on the way. Well, just a few minutes ago, the DHS Secretary Chad Wolf, tweeted out that rumors of a national lockdown are just that rumors and that there is nothing in the works. But the administration is taking strict new measures to stop the spread of the virus.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

ROBERTS: President Trump, today moved to close the border between the United States and Mexico to all but essential travel and trade. Also taking steps to turn back people who crossed the southern and northern borders illegally.

Saying, in the midst of a global pandemic, illegal immigration could create a perfect storm to spread infection.

DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: Left unchecked, this would cripple our immigration system, overwhelm our healthcare system, and severely damage our national security. We're not going to let that happen.

ROBERTS: On Capitol Hill, negotiations will continue all weekend to come up with a massive financial package that could top $1.3 trillion. Democrats concerned it means too much toward corporations and not enough toward individuals.

Minority Leader Chuck Schumer and the president speaking by phone this morning.

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TRUMP: All of that is being discussed right now. We talked about, as an example, buyback -- stock buybacks. I want that money to be used for the workers and also for the company to keep the company going.

ROBERTS: Are you in the same page with Senator Schumer?

TRUMP: Not so far away. I tell you, we're not very -- we're not very far away.

ROBERTS: And the need for a stimulus growing by the hour. New York State now joining California, telling all non-essential businesses to tell their employees to stay home as of Sunday night.

GOV. ANDREW CUOMO (D-NY): Today, we're bringing it to 100 percent of the workforce. Must stay home.

ROBERTS: From the podium at the White House today, applause for Governor Andrew Cuomo from infectious disease specialist Dr. Anthony Fauci.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES: I want to say, I strongly support what he's doing.

ROBERTS: But also in the briefing room, differing views on whether an anti- malaria drug, hydroxychloroquine, might be quickly available to treat coronavirus infection. President Trump bullish on it.

TRUMP: I feel good about it. It's all it is, just a feeling, you know, smart guy. I feel good about it.

ROBERTS: Dr. Anthony Fauci, saying, it might be effective but more circumspect about its prospects as a treatment.

FAUCI: We need to do it in a way as while we are making it available for people who might want the hope that it might work, you're also collecting data that will ultimately show that it is truly effective and safe under the conditions of COVID-19.

ROBERTS: There was also a contradiction in whether President Trump had started using the defense production act to build up inventories of medical equipment in short supply, at first, saying he had.

TRUMP: I invoke the Defense Production Act. And last night, we put it into gear.

ROBERTS: But later indicating, he didn't have to.

TRUMP: So far, we haven't had to. It's an amazing thing that happened. We are literally being besieged in a beautiful way by companies that want to do the work. They want to do the job, they want to help us. They want to help our country.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

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ROBERTS: At the coronavirus briefing today, for the very first time, the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who warned Americans about disinformation regarding the coronavirus from bad actors overseas. Saying that elements in China, Iran, and Russia, are launching a coordinating effort -- a coordinated effort to disparage what the Trump administration is doing to respond to the coronavirus. Bret.

BAIER: John Roberts, live in the North Lawn. John, thanks.

Speaking of coordinated effort, another message a short while ago, General Joseph Lengyel, the head of the National Guard, tweeting, "I hear unfounded rumors about National Guard troops supporting a nationwide quarantine. Let me be clear, there has been no such discussion."

The Dow today plunging 913 points to end its worst week since 2008. It's worth a month since 1931. The S&P 500 lost 104, the NASDAQ dropped 271. For the week, the Dow hammered 17.3 percent. The S&P 500 lost 15. The NASDAQ fell 12-2/3.

Let's get some analysis now from Susan Li of Fox Business, who joins us from New York. Good evening, Susan.

SUSAN LI, FOX BUSINESS NETWORK CORRESPONDENT: Good evening, Bret. A worst week, as you mentioned, for the stock markets since 2008. With the Dow on pace now for its worst month since the Great Depression.

The Dow trading at its lowest in four years, the S&P 500 lowest levels in three years, and the NASDAQ down 12 percent in just five trading sessions.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

TRUMP: If you look at your stock market geniuses that some of whom are not geniuses, but they think they are. A lot of people think that I'm right about that, that once we defeat the virus. I think you're going to have a very steep like a rocket ship, it's going to go up.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

LI: As America's two biggest states: California and New York orders nonessential workers to stay home. That means job losses and lost paychecks. Goldman Sachs predicting jobless claims will hit a record 2-1/4 million next week. That's more than three times the previous high of 695,000 back in 1982.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

[NY] FAA says 11 air traffic facilities affected by coronavirus outbreak (Washington Post)

Washington Post [3/21/2020 11:44 PM, Michael Laris, 12625K]

The Federal Aviation Administration said late Saturday that 11 of its air traffic control facilities nationwide have employees who have tested positive for covid-19.

They include the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center in Long Island, which handles a broad swath of airspace; the air traffic control towers at John F. Kennedy International (JFK)

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and LaGuardia airports in New York; executive airports in Leesburg, Va., and Long Island; and facilities in Peoria, Ill. and Wilmington, De., in addition to previously reported cases in Las Vegas, Indianapolis and Chicago.

Widespread disruptions were seen Saturday after an air traffic control trainee and others in New York tested positive, according to the FAA.

The FAA said it was not specifying the total number of employees infected because the numbers keep changing.

“Like much of the country, the Federal Aviation Administration is experiencing an increase in COVID-19 cases at air traffic facilities and other offices across the nation,” the agency said in a statement. “Despite the challenges, our commitment to safety will not waver.”

Demand for aviation has plummeted with the spread of the virus, hammering airlines, though significant numbers of travelers are still taking to the air.

The FAA described actions it is taking to keep planes flying and its employees safe, including “transferring duties” to other facilities; closing the LaGuardia control tower and the New York air route center for overnight cleaning Saturday night through early Sunday morning; working to disinfect other facilities; and tracing contacts between the infected workers and their colleagues and others.

“Each disruption has a distinct impact on the air traffic system,” the agency said. “This is frustrating and inconvenient, but is necessary in the interest of safety.”

The agency said the “effects on traffic” because of the overnight New York closures “are expected to be minimal due to the low volume during those hours.” It said other facilities “will provide key services” during that time.

Earlier Saturday, the FAA also pointed to limited supplies of basic cleaning products, such as wipes and sanitizer, as a challenge at some of its facilities. Shortages of masks and test kits have hampered the U.S. response to the novel coronavirus.

“We are restocking cleaning supplies at air traffic facilities where they are running low,” the FAA said in a statement. “As an interim measure, the agency has authorized managers to purchase cleaning products at local stores if needed to sanitize workspaces. We are not requiring employees to bring supplies from home, although some employees are doing so voluntarily.”

The acknowledgment came after Rep. Jennifer Wexton (D-Va.) pressed the agency last week on the availability of cleaning supplies for FAA employees.

On Saturday, a trainee at the New York Air Route Traffic Control Center and an employe or employees at LaGuardia air traffic control tower tested positive, the agency said.The FAA also said Saturday that personnel at JFK’s tower tested positive on Thursday, and that operations there were “temporarily moved to an alternative site during cleaning.”

On Saturday, major flight restrictions affected airports around the country.

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Even as the FAA said in a statement that it may have to close “sectors of airspace during the sanitization process,” the FAA issued “ground stops” Saturday for New York’s JFK and Philadelphia International Airport, among others.

That meant flights headed for those airports were not permitted to take off from their original airports. And if they had already taken off, they could be held in the air or diverted to other places depending on how long the restrictions were in place.

The restrictions were quickly lifted on Philadelphia and some other locations but stayed in effect longer at JFK. Planes headed there from Florida, Texas, Georgia and the D.C. region were all blocked by the JFK ground stop Saturday afternoon, but the limits were later removed, according to an FAA notice.

Earlier positive tests by employees in air traffic control towers at Chicago’s Midway airport and elsewhere have also prompted closures for cleaning in recent days.

FAA administrator Steve Dickson is under self-quarantine after having a “brief interaction” with Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart (R-Fla.), who has tested positive, before a House hearing earlier this month.

Wexton wrote the FAA on Thursday, raising concerns from employees about sanitation and the need for additional teleworking.

“We received word that ‘no action is required until a case is confirmed positive by a medical authority’ and that the extent of action taken so far has been to advise facilities to make local purchases of cleaning supplies while the FAA takes steps to find other sources of cleaning products and establish enhanced cleaning protocols,” Wexton wrote.

Wexton said in a statement that it is “absolutely unacceptable that the FAA has not implemented critical measures to safeguard the health of its workforce,” and that the “well-being of our air traffic controllers is vital to preserving not only the safety of our airspace but also our national security.”

The FAA said Saturday that it is “encouraging all eligible employees to telework to the maximum extent possible” and has limited outsiders from FAA facilities to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

Still, it added, “many employees perform critical functions that cannot be handled remotely.” In such cases, “we are employing social distancing measures and increasing the cleaning of workspaces to reduce risk of exposure,” the agency said. Contingency plans are in place to make sure oversight of airlines and aviation safety do not suffer, it said.

“In extreme cases, service levels could vary, but safety will not be compromised,” the agency said.

In responses it provided to Wexton, the FAA said its Air Traffic Organization “is asking our facilities to make local purchases for cleaners, wipes, and hand sanitizer where possible” and the agency is “supplementing supplies from our Logistics Center as best we can.”

“Cleaning materials that meet the criteria are in short supply across the marketplace, and

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we may face further challenges maintaining adequate quantities," the agency said. The FAA said it is searching for vendors to make and deliver cleaning products to the agency to support the work of air traffic controllers.

"We also continue to reach out to FEMA and DOD to see if they can help augment our supplies," the FAA said, referring to the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Defense.

In an added statement Saturday, the FAA said, "with the exception of a couple of isolated cases, we have adequate supplies nationally." It said "restocking to ensure the health and safety of our workforce is a priority."

The infected employee or employees in the air traffic control tower at Leesburg Executive Airport tested positive Saturday, as did personnel at LaGuardia and in Peoria, the FAA said. The positive test or tests in Wilmington came Friday, it said.

Employees at two separate facilities at McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas tested positive. The air traffic control tower there remained closed as of Saturday night, as workers were "cleaning to standards," the FAA said, but the McCarran Terminal Radar Approach Control Facility was operating.

Operations are normal at the Republic Airport in Long Island, and in Leesburg, the FAA said.

[NY] U.S. Court Warns of 'Grave' Pandemic in Prisoner Access Ruling (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/21/2020 12:50 PM, Erik Larson, 6400K]
The U.S. Bureau of Prisons was urged by a federal appeals court to work quickly with defense attorneys to adopt procedures for granting New York inmates' access to lawyers during emergencies, including the potentially "grave and enduring" coronavirus outbreak.

The U.S. Court of Appeals in Manhattan said in a ruling Friday that the prison bureau and the Federal Defenders of New York should find a mediator to "diligently and speedily" put a new process in place.

The case, filed last year before the pandemic hit, came in response to what the defenders said was the "severe curtailment" of their access to inmates at a jail in Brooklyn, New York. They cited emergencies including a fire, a bomb scare and staffing issues caused by a partial shutdown of the federal government.

"As we write this opinion, a different and even more dramatic challenge is presented by Covid-19, a novel and easily transmitted viral disease that has prompted a rapid reorientation of workplace practices and social life in support of public health," the three-judge panel wrote.

The U.S. prison system has been upended by the worsening pandemic, which has sickened 260,000 worldwide and killed more than 10,000. Prisoner rights groups have urged state and federal jailers to release some non-violent detainees on bail to protect their safety, given the ability of the virus to spread quickly in confined spaces such as prisons and jails.

The panel didn't weigh in on the merits of the lawsuit, saying the case raised "novel

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questions of constitutional law." Instead, the court sent the dispute back to a district judge and urged the lower court "in the strongest possible terms" to quickly get the parties to agree to a mediator who could help work out a new policy.

The Bureau of Prisons didn't immediately respond to a call for comment. In a statement on its website in response to the outbreak, the agency said inmates' access to legal counsel "remains a paramount requirement."

The agency has nevertheless suspended legal visits for 30 days, after which it will reevaluate the policy. The Trump administration has warned that disruptions from the pandemic could last months.

"Case-by-case approval at the local level and confidential legal calls will be allowed in order to ensure access to counsel," the agency said on its website. "If approved for an in-person visit, the attorney will need to undergo screening using the same procedures as staff."

[NY] Trump approves disaster declaration for New York (The Hill)
The Hill [3/21/2020 7:39 AM, Marty Johnson, 1762K]
President Trump late Friday evening approved a disaster declaration for New York, the epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak in the United States.

Trump's order opens up federal support for state and local recovery efforts in areas affected by COVID-19, the White House said in a statement.

It also gives New York residents who have been affected by the illness access to crisis counseling.

As of Saturday morning, more than 7,100 cases of COVID-19 had been reported in the Empire State, according to The New York Times.

Last week, Trump declared the coronavirus outbreak a national health emergency, which freed up billions of dollars in federal aid.

Trump has already signed two coronavirus stimulus packages that cost more than $100 billion combined. The third stimulus bill being negotiated by senators will cost roughly $1 trillion.

The legislation was sent to congressional Democrats late Thursday, but lawmakers left Friday night without a finalized bill. They are expected to resume talks on Saturday.

[NY] New York state is sending 1 million masks to NYC, Gov. Cuomo says (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 4:26 PM, Melanie Schuman and Sheena Jones, 5551K]
Gov. Andrew Cuomo said during a news conference Saturday that New York is sending 1 million N95 respirator masks to New York City as Covid-19 confirmed cases have surpassed 10,300 across the state.

"One million masks won't get us through the crisis, but it will make a significant contribution to New York City's mask issue," Cuomo said. A number of apparel companies in New York are converting to mask manufacturers, and Cuomo said he is exploring the state also

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manufacturing masks.

Cuomo announced that there are 10,356 confirmed Covid-19 cases across New York. There are 3,254 new cases across New York state, Cuomo said, with at least 1,803 new cases in New York City alone for a combined total of 6,211.

Fifty-four percent of New York State cases are of people between 18 and 49 years old.

At least 45,000 people have been tested for Covid-19, and about 15% of those cases are being hospitalized. "The more tests you take, the more positives you find," Cuomo said.

Cuomo tweeted on Saturday that 500,000 masks will go to Long Island and that "we are purchasing 6,000 additional ventilators and gathering supplies from every source we can get."

New York has both a hospital gown and ventilator shortage, Cuomo said, adding that the state has about 6,000 ventilators when it needs about 30,000. Cuomo has said that the ventilators "are to this war what missiles were to World War II."

Officials are working on getting creative and maybe having two people share one ventilator, the New York governor said.

The Democratic governor is touring sites Saturday with the Army Corps of Engineers for alternate hospitals, including the Jacob Javits Convention Center in New York City. These sites would be Army Corps temporary hospitals and include SUNY Stonybrook, SUNY Westbury and Westchester Convention Center.

When asked by a reporter at the news conference Saturday, Cuomo said he has not been tested for the virus because he doesn't want to waste the test and he does not have any of the symptoms. A member of Cuomo's press office tested positive for the coronavirus, his office confirmed to CNN on Friday night.

"A member of our press office felt ill mid-day Thursday and immediately isolated themselves," Secretary to the Governor Melissa DeRosa said in a statement. "This staffer was tested for COVID-19 this morning and that test has come back positive. While none of the other members of the press office are demonstrating COVID-19 symptoms, those who worked in and around the staffer's work station have been placed in precautionary quarantine."

The staffer did not interact with Cuomo, a source with knowledge of the situation told CNN.

Cuomo issues executive order

Cuomo announced Friday morning that all workers in nonessential businesses across the state are required to stay home in an effort to combat the spread of coronavirus.

The executive order takes effect Sunday evening, Cuomo said, and comes a day after California Gov. Gavin Newsom, a Democrat, ordered the state's nearly 40 million residents to stay home. The two states have a combined population of nearly 59 million people, meaning the two orders affect nearly 1 in 5 Americans.

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Cuomo insisted he wasn't issuing a "shelter in place" order, which he said referred to active shooter situations, but rather the state was "closing the valve" of everyday life to limit the outbreak. He urged New Yorkers to "remain indoors to the greatest extent."

Civil fines and mandatory closures for businesses that don't comply with the new mandate will be enforced beginning on Sunday, he announced.

[NY] Cuomo says New York coronavirus temporary hospitals to include Javits Center, more as state grapples with crisis (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 5:01 PM, Brooke Singman, 8943K]
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced four sites that will serve as temporary hospitals in the state Saturday, amid the coronavirus outbreak rocking the state and the nation.

The four initial sites, recommended by the Army Corps of Engineers, are the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in New York City, locations at SUNY Stony Brook in Long Island, SUNY Old Westbury and the Westchester Convention Center.

New York State, as of Saturday morning, accounts for more than one-third of all confirmed cases in the United States, with more than 8,000 confirmed cases. Fifty-six people in New York have died due to coronavirus.

"Every day we see the number of cases of novel coronavirus continue to rise, and we know that by all projections we're going to have more hospitalizations than we can deal with in our healthcare system," Cuomo said in a statement Saturday. "We have a plan of action to help stop the spread of this virus, including expanding hospital capacity and identifying new hospital beds, and after meeting with the Army Corps of Engineers and hearing their recommendations, we stand ready for the building of temporary hospitals at four facilities in New York State."

He added: "This is a public health crisis, but worse than the virus is the fear, but we have a plan and we are doing everything we can to keep the people informed and save lives."

The sites were identified by an inspection team led by the Army Corps of Engineers and included state officials from New York's Office of General Services, the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York, the New York Department of Health and the New York State Division of Military and Naval Affairs. The team visited more than a dozen sites to review their capability to serve as temporary hospitals, Cuomo's office said.

"Upon the Governor's determination, the Army Corps is expected to immediately begin work to construct the temporary hospitals," Cuomo's office said in a statement. "The Governor is also requesting FEMA designate four field hospitals with 250 for each state, intended for use in the Javits Center in addition to the temporary hospital to be constructed by the Army Corps."

Cuomo has warned that the virus puts stress on New York state hospitals, and that the state's hospital system only has 53,000 beds. For days, he has weighed how to create additional space for the expected influx of patients in the coming days and weeks due to the virus.

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Earlier this week, Cuomo and President Trump came to an agreement to "immediately" dispatch U.S. Navy hospital, USNS Comfort, to New York City Harbor, which the Pentagon offered as part of the domestic response to the COVID-19 outbreak. The USNS Comfort has 1,000 beds and is run by military personnel, according to the U.S. Naval Institute.

The USNS Comfort was in port in Norfolk, Va. undergoing repairs after a six-month tour in South America and would not be ready to arrive in New York until "mid April" at the earliest. At this point, efforts are being made to expedite the timeline.

The Pentagon, though, said that the ship's capabilities "are focused on trauma," rather than infectious disease.

Meanwhile, on Saturday, Cuomo also announced that the state has identified two million additional N95 masks for purchase, and plans to send one million to New York City and 500,000 to hospitals in Long Island. The governor's office also said that apparel manufacturers in the state are going to begin to manufacture masks and other medical equipment.

New York, according to the governor's office, is also gathering ventilators form different health facilities across the state to be used in "the most critical areas." The state has already purchased 6,000 additional ventilators.

Additionally, Cuomo announced that State Department of Health Commissioner has recommended trials for new drug therapy to help combat COVID-19.

"The FDA is acquiring 10,000 doses of Hydroxychloroquine and Zithromax for New York State to use on a trial basis," Cuomo's office said Saturday.

Cuomo also warned that the coronavirus outbreak was something the state is likely to grapple with for months.

"I don't believe it's going to be a matter of weeks, it's going to be a matter of months," Cuomo said at his daily briefing in Albany, a day after issuing a stay at home order for most New Yorkers.

The U.S. has more than 23,400 confirmed cases. 285 people in the U.S. have died.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[IL] Pritzker Calls On Former Medical Professionals, And Asks For Donations Of Gloves, Masks, Other Equip (Northern Public Radio)
Northern Public Radio [3/21/2020 9:51 PM, Olivia Mitchell, 1K]
Gov. J.B. Pritzker called on former physicians and medical professionals, including those who are retired, to "join the fight" against COVID-19.

He announced his administration will waive normal license fees and expedite getting license reinstated.

They can apply for new licenses starting Monday through the Illinois Department of Financial and Professional Regulation.

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The governor is also allowing healthcare workers living at Illinois' borders to get their licenses in Illinois, too, so they can work where they're most needed.

"We're going to make it easier for you to practice here," said Pritzker. "This will allow health systems in Quad Cities and East. St. Louis to deploy physicians where they need them most on either side of the border."

Those whose licenses expire soon will automatically have theirs renewed until September. Pritzker also said his administration is working on expanding the availability of child care, especially for essential personnel who must remain on the job. This will include low-income workers, as well.

Dr. Ngozi Ezike, head of the Illinois Department of Public Health, said supplies of personal protective equipment for medical workers, including masks and gloves, are in need.

She announced the administration is urging a temporary stop to elective or non-essential surgery, and dental procedures in part so clinics and other health care organizations can give their gear to hospitals that are treating patients with COVID-19.

"The availability of critical resources such as gloves, gowns, eye protections and N-95 respirator masks is essential," said Ezike.

They asked that any extra protective gear be donated to hospitals.

Information on donations can be found on Illinois' coronavirus website.

The governor said the state has received only part of the supplies the federal government has promised, but has a reasonable inventory of equipment.

Ezike confirmed another 168 cases of COVID-19 in Illinois, bringing the total to 753 cases, with six deaths to date – the latest a Cook County man in his 70s. Around 6,200 tests have been done by IDPH.

Officials again urged everyone to comply with the stay-at-home order that took effect Saturday evening to keep vulnerable groups healthy, and prevent overcrowding in hospitals.

"I asked you to help them out by simply staying at home," said Pritzker. "You will be keeping the virus from spreading, and helping the heroes who live and work in your neighborhoods."

He assured residents that food, gas, medicine, and essential services will remain available.

The governor is asking people to enforce the rules themselves. But he said law enforcement can get a cease and desist order from the court if someone refuses to comply. Law enforcement can charge people with a misdemeanor of reckless conduct, in an "extreme case," Pritzker said.

[WI] Final 4 Wisconsin Passengers Aboard Cruise Ship Return Home (AP)
AP [3/20/2020 8:00 PM, Staff, 3020K]
The last four Wisconsin citizens who were aboard the Grand Princess cruise ship that

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docked in the Port of Oakland, California, last week after a long ordeal due to the coronavirus have arrived in the state, Gov. Tony Evers announced Saturday.

Evers said the residents arrived late Friday and will self-quarantine for 14 days. There were originally 38 Wisconsin citizens aboard the ship, where several people were confirmed to have COVID-19.

The announcement came after Milwaukee County authorities said a 69-year-old man who traveled to Wisconsin from out of state died Saturday from the virus, raising the total number of state deaths to four.

The man reported to Milwaukee County Hospital on March 14 complaining of shortness of breath, according to a release from the county medical examiner's office. The man had chronic health issues, the office reported. It's not clear why he came to Milwaukee.

The state Department of Health Services reported 281 cases of COVID-19 as of Saturday afternoon, up 75 from Friday night. More than 4,620 people have tested negative.

The Wisconsin Department of Corrections said Saturday it is no longer accepting admissions to its state prisons and juvenile facilities in an effort to slow down spread of the coronavirus. Officials will allow some essential transfers and work with the counties on any potential tweaks to the order.

State officials also announced that the deadline for filing state income tax returns has been extended to July 15, as is the case with federal taxes.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover.

[TX] Texas Border County Issues Coronavirus Pandemic-Related Curfew (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 8:31 AM, Ildefonso Ortiz and Brandon Darby, 1973K]
A Texas border county issued a curfew ordering residents to stay off public and private roads during nighttime hours in an attempt to curb the spread of the Chinese coronavirus (COVID-19).

On Friday afternoon, Cameron County Judge Eddie Trevino, Jr. issued a series of emergency orders that will keep residents off public and private roads and streets between midnight and 5 a.m. An exception is made for law enforcement, medical, and emergency personnel. Cameron County includes the border city of Brownsville and the beach hotspot of South Padre Island.

Another provision of the order excuses individuals going to and from work that is permitted at those hours, and those seeking medical attention, prescriptions, fuel or food. Individuals who violate the curfew could be fined up to $1,000 and/or be sent to jail for up to 180 days. Trevino previously ordered the closing of county beaches in an attempt to minimize the spread of the coronavirus.

During a recent news conference, Trevino said that recreational fishermen had become upset over the closing of the beaches. He reiterated it was all done to prevent the spread of

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the virus. This week Cameron County announced its first confirmed case of the virus involving a 21-year-old man from Rancho Viejo who had recently returned from Europe and subsequently tested positive for COVID-19.

The emergency order adds to the federal and state orders already issued in recent days that closed down dine-in restaurants but allow for delivery and pickup of food items and alcohol. The existing orders issued by Texas Governor Greg Abbott already limit the size of social gatherings to less than 10 individuals among other restrictions, Breitbart Texas reported.

[TX] Texas Coronavirus-Related Price Gouging Complaints Mounting Despite Threat of Prosecution (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 8:25 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]
Despite a warning by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton that price gouging related to the Chinese coronavirus will be prosecuted, more than 300 complaints have been filed as of Friday.

“Any person or business selling goods must be aware that they are prohibited by law from engaging in price gouging if they unreasonably raise the cost of necessary supplies at any point during a declared disaster,” Attorney General Paxton said in a written statement on March 13. “My office will work aggressively to prevent disaster scams and stands ready to prosecute any price-gouger who takes advantage of those taking precautions and looking for safety and supplies.”

Despite this warning, price gouging complaints are piling up in the AG’s office, San Antonio Regional Better Business Bureau Director Jason Meza told KSAT12. Meza told the local news outlet his organization has also received complaints.

During a disaster declaration, like the ones issued by President Donald Trump and Texas Governor Greg Abbott, the Texas Attorney General has the authority and responsibility to enforce anti-price gouging laws. The Texas Deceptive Trade Practices Act provides a penalty of up to $10,000 per violation. That penalty increases to $250,000 per incident if the victims are elderly, the AG’s website states. Attorney General Paxton encourages those who may have been victimized by unscrupulous vendors to call 800-621-0508 or file an online complaint.

Most of the complaints involve the sale of toilet paper, bottled water, and hand sanitizer, the Dallas Morning News reported. These products have been in short supply since panic buying began in recent weeks. Most of the complaints have been filed in the Dallas and Houston metropolitan areas, the newspaper reported.

[TX] Despite sky-high demand, first Harris County testing site off to slow start (Houston Chronicle)
Houston Chronicle [3/21/2020 10:09 PM, Dylan McGuinness, 167K]
Despite sky-high demand for COVID-19 tests, Harris County’s first government-backed testing site got off to a crawling start Saturday in Baytown.

The site opened at 1 p.m., reserved exclusively for pre-screened first responders and medical workers, who officials said were given priority amid a national shortage of testing

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capacity and medical supplies.

Mac McClendon, who leads preparedness and response for Harris County Public Health, told news media earlier in the day that they had a capacity to test 250 people per day at the site and expected to use it.

County officials asked news organizations not to disclose the Baytown site's location, fearing members of the general public would show up unprompted. They said they notified qualifying people using an email distribution list of health care employees and first responders.

"We're expecting 250, probably a little more," McClendon said of the anticipated crowd.

Instead, hardly anyone came.

Around 4 p.m., one sheriff's deputy driving from the sight said just eight people had been tested. There weren't many more in the next few hours, before workers started packing their things at 7 p.m. Medical workers in long-awaited protective gear were reduced to waiting idly in white tents while prized nasal swabs went mostly unused.

Harris County Public Health said it couldn't confirm a count, though it acknowledged the site wasn't busy.

Officials didn't answer questions about whether they should have opened the site to the public, or at least seniors, given the paltry attendance and the advance warning that the screening process would seemingly have provided.

At a similar site opened by Houston Health Department, officials said they tested 159 people Friday. Like the county site, that was limited to pre-screened first responders and health care workers. It expanded Saturday to include seniors over 65 with certain symptoms, and officials said they would allow people with chronic conditions as well on Sunday.

People who think they qualify can call 832-393-4220 from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. to start that process.

The county plans a similar expansion in coming days, though it couldn't confirm Saturday night whether seniors would be allowed tests on Sunday. The county is opening a second site in Katy as well. The screening line is 832-927-7575.

Private groups, like United Memorial Medical Center and Legacy Community Health, are offering tests for members of the general public with symptoms. Pre-screening is required for those sites as well, and more information is available on their websites.

Legacy, for one, said it had tested 500 people at its four sites at the close of business Thursday.

Sen. John Cornyn. R-Texas, said on Twitter that the federal Department of Health and Human Services was also opening a new site Saturday in Cypress. But Texas, Harris County and Houston health officials said they either didn't know about that site or weren't

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involved in its operations. It wasn't clear if one actually opened.

Officials have warned that increasing testing capacity will uncover a dramatic spike in the number of confirmed cases. As of 8 p.m., the statewide total had climbed to more than 600 cases, including more than 130 in the eight-county Houston region.

The city is also expected to open a second site, though it's not yet clear when that will take place.

The few Baytown tests will be shipped overnight to labs operated by Quest Diagnostics and LabCorp, under an agreement with the federal government. To avoid overwhelming the labs, each site has a cap of 250 samples per day.

A shortage of protective gear for the workers who staff the site had delayed the rollout. McClendon said the gear used here came from a national stockpile and was delivered Thursday. Gear from that stockpile was sent to select sites across the country, he said.

[CA] L.A. County strengthens coronavirus bans: Nail and hair salons, drive-in movies among closures (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/22/2020 1:00 AM, Rong-Gong Lin II, 1907K]
The Los Angeles County health officer has issued a stronger "Safer at Home" order following Gov. Gavin Newsom's unprecedented statewide order instructing 40 million Californians to stay at home as much as possible, with certain exceptions, to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

The new county order largely matches the stronger stay-at-home order issued for the city of Los Angeles by Mayor Eric Garcetti on Thursday night, just moments before the statewide order was announced.

Here's what the new Los Angeles County order, issued Saturday, does:

All businesses ordered shut, with exceptions

All businesses were ordered to cease in-person operations and close to the public. There are exceptions for essential businesses, which are detailed below.

This new order is much stronger than the one issued just two nights earlier.

The county order issued Thursday night ordered only retail businesses that were not considered essential to shut.

As a result, the new order will require more businesses to close their physical premises — specifically, nonessential businesses that are not retail stores. People can still work from home.

All gatherings are banned

All public and private gatherings are prohibited anywhere within the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health, which, the order said, includes all unincorporated areas and cities in the county except Long Beach and Pasadena. Those

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cities have their own health departments and have issued their own orders.

Previously, only gatherings of 10 or more people were banned.

Nail and hair salons are ordered shut

On Thursday night, Los Angeles County had classified personal grooming services as an essential retail business exempt from an earlier order to close nonessential stores. On Saturday night, the county clarified that personal grooming services "are nonessential services that are closed."

Long Beach on Friday also ordered shut personal grooming services, including hair salons, barbershops, nail salons , waxing services and spas.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

[CA] Gavin Newsom Allows Voting by Mail to Protect Californians from Coronavirus (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 8:52 PM, Amy Furr, 1973K]
California Gov. Gavin Newsom issued an executive order Friday allowing residents to vote by mail in three upcoming special elections as a precaution against the Chinese coronavirus.

The press release continued:

"The order also extends the deadlines for ballot counting, tabulation, and other responsibilities related to the official canvass of California's Presidential Primary Election that could risk undermining social distancing measures, and suspends the timeframes for public hearings required by political subdivisions that are in the process of changing from an at-large method of election to district elections."

The governor's office said the purpose of the order is to protect public health and safety during the Chinese coronavirus pandemic.

The special elections "shall each be held as an all-mail ballot election and conducted according to those provisions of the Elections Code that govern all-mail ballot elections," the order's text read.

The document continued:

"The respective county elections officials responsible for conducting each respective election shall transmit vote-by-mail ballots to all voters eligible to vote in each respective election. Notwithstanding the other provisions of this Order, elections officials are also authorized, and encouraged, to make in-person voting opportunities available on or before Election Day for each of these elections in a manner consistent with public health and safety, to maximize voter accessibility.

Elections officials shall provide maximum possible notice to voters about how to participate in each of these elections, paying particular attention to the needs of voters at high risk from COVID-19, individuals with disabilities, and other voters with particularized needs."

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However, states would be better off taking small steps at first when it comes to voting by mail, according to Charles Stewart, a professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

“Hastily implemented changes to voting rules and laws can end up causing all types of problems that you didn’t anticipate,” he noted.

Despite the dangers, Hillary Clinton urged government leaders on Twitter recently to “make voting by mail the norm going forward”.

“Several states already allow voting by mail, though Republicans have warned that California’s system is vulnerable to fraud,” wrote Breitbart News’s Joel B. Pollak on Wednesday.

“There, Democrats legalized a system called ‘ballot harvesting,’ which allows unverified third parties to deliver each other’s ballots — effectively allowing party organizers to bring thousands of ballots to be counted,” he concluded.

[CA] Newsom directs $42 million to health care needs during coronavirus (San Francisco Chronicle)

San Francisco Chronicle [3/21/2020 8:33 PM, Janelle Bitker, 337K]

Last week’s statewide shelter-in-place order was an attempt to not only slow the spread of the coronavirus but also to give hospitals a better chance of keeping up. Gov. Gavin Newsom threw California’s medical field another life raft Saturday in the form of $42 million in emergency funding.

The money will allow California to lease two hospitals, as well as secure more equipment to serve patients with COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

As of Saturday, there were 1,464 coronavirus cases in California, including 646 in the Bay Area, and 26 people have died. The total number of cases is up 45.5% from Thursday’s 1,006 confirmed cases. At that point, there were 19 deaths. The latest figures from Johns Hopkins University show that global coronavirus cases have reached 300,000, with more than 13,000 deaths. U.S. cases have surpassed 26,000.

“California is mobilizing every part of government to support our health care delivery system, its workers and those among us who are most vulnerable to COVID-19,” Newsom said in a statement.

The state will lease Seton Medical Center in Daly City and St. Vincent Medical Center in Los Angeles for three months for $30 million. Seton will expand capacity to offer 120 more beds for COVID-19 patients as soon as Wednesday. St. Vincent is expected to provide up to 366 beds.

It’s a significant turnaround for both hospitals, which are owned by Verity Health System. Verity filed for bankruptcy in 2018 and closed St. Vincent in January. Seton has been on the verge of closure ever since a potential sale fell through in late 2019 — this month, San Mateo County supervisors decided to contribute $20 million to help keep the hospital intact. Verity will reopen St. Vincent on behalf of the state, though no timeline was given.

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The emergency funding will also bring $1.5 million to the state's public health lab in Richmond to expand its capacity. Another $2 million will provide patient transportation through American Medical Response. And the state will spend more than $8.6 million on new ventilators and IV fusion pumps, in addition to refurbishing ventilators.

A nationwide shortage of protective gear for medical professionals has sparked an outcry for donations. Nurses protested Thursday outside a Kaiser Permanente hospital in San Francisco, saying they were forced to reuse masks because they're running out. Some companies are responding quickly, like PG&E, which on Friday promised to donate nearly 1 million masks to hospital workers, and Facebook, which on Saturday announced a donation of about 720,000 masks.

In a Saturday news conference, Newsom said Tesla chief executive officer Elon Musk has pledged to provide 250,000 masks for health care workers and has committed, with other companies, to produce 1,000 ventilators. Apple CEO Tim Cook is pledging 1 million masks, Newsom said.

In response to complaints about the lack of masks, President Trump promised Saturday that more are coming quickly. The administration's efforts are getting "tremendous reviews from many people who can't believe how fast (masks) are coming," Trump said.

Newsom announced that the state did, in fact, start receiving some equipment from the Strategic National Stockpile, including 358,381 N95 masks, which are the most protective, and 853,730 surgical masks.

But California needs much more. The state has already requested 20 million N95 masks, 10 million surgical masks and hundreds of thousands of surgical gowns, face shields and other protective gear.

[CA] LA County shifts from containing coronavirus, advises doctors to skip testing of some patients: report (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 9:14 AM, Robert Gearty, 8943K]
A surge in coronavirus cases has Los Angeles County health officials telling doctors to give up on testing patients in the hope of containing the outbreak and instructing them to test patients only if a positive result could change how they would be treated, according to a new report.

The advisory from the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Thursday was prompted by a crush of patients and shortage of tests and could make it difficult to ever know precisely how many people in L.A. County contracted the virus, The Los Angeles Times reported.

The department "is shifting from a strategy of case containment to slowing disease transmission and averting excess morbidity and mortality," according to the letter, the Times reported. Doctors should test symptomatic patients only when "a diagnostic result will change clinical management or inform public health response."

The paper reports the guidance sets in writing what has been a reality all along--the shortage of tests nationwide has meant that many patients suspected of having COVID-19

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have not had the diagnosis confirmed by a laboratory.

In addition to the lack of tests, public health agencies across the country lack the staff to trace the source of new cases, drastically reducing the chances of isolating people who have been exposed and thereby containing the outbreak, the paper reported.

The Times quoted a front-line healthcare provider as saying that county doctors were interpreting Thursday's advisory to mean they should only test patients who are going to be hospitalized or have something unique about the way they contracted the virus.

They are not planning to test patients who have the symptoms but are otherwise healthy enough to be sent home to self-quarantine — meaning they may never show up in official tallies of people who tested positive.

The Los Angeles Department of Health Services, which runs the nation's second-largest municipal health system, "is mobilizing all of its resources to fight the on-coming wave of COVID-19 cases expected in the coming weeks," said Dr. Christina Ghaly, DHS Director, according to the paper. "We are ramping up hospital capacity and taking extraordinary measures to increase supplies."

Gov. Gavin Newsom issued the nation's strictest "stay at home" order Thursday night, taking effect at midnight Friday.

"This is not a permanent state, this is a moment in time," California Gov. Gavin Newsom said, trying to assure the nation's most populous state that the order would eventually lift.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

Coronavirus: Federal Judge Rules Migrants Must Stay in Detention Center (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 11:43 AM, Penny Starr, 1973K]
A federal judge in Seattle rejected three nonprofits' effort to force U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to release migrants in a detention center in Washington state because of the threat from coronavirus.

U.S. District Judge James L. Robart on Thursday denied a request for a restraining order requested by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the ACLU of Washington, and the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project. The organizations argued that holding migrants who are older or have underlying medical conditions puts them at high risk for contracting the virus.

"There is no evidence that anyone at NWDC has COVID-19, and plaintiffs do not address the measures defendants are taking to prevent such a spread from occurring," Robart said in a Law360 article on the development.

Law360 reported on the ruling:

Attorneys have told Law360 that they are concerned ICE is not prepared to handle a potential outbreak of the virus at the agency's detention centers, where immigrants are trapped in communal spaces.

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ICE has been hit with numerous lawsuits accusing it of not providing detainees with adequate medical care, including an August complaint alleging the agency has been failing to ensure centers operated by private contractors are meeting the standards of confinement mandated by federal law and the U.S. Constitution.

Eunice Cho, an attorney for migrants, issued a statement vowing continued litigation.

“Public health officials are in agreement — it is not a matter of if there is a COVID-19 outbreak in immigrant detention centers, but when,” Cho said. “ICE should heed their warning. By refusing to immediately release our clients, ICE is jeopardizing their lives and the lives of its staff and their families.”

Law 360 reported that ICE responded Wednesday to the request for the restraining order, but the filing is not being made public.

The case is Dawson v. Asher, No. 2:20-cv-00409 in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington.

Growing Calls To Close Immigration Courts And Release Detainees As Virus Spreads (NPR)
NPR [3/21/2020 9:00 AM, Joel Rose]
U.S. authorities face growing calls to shutter all of the nation’s immigration courts, and to release detained immigrants who do not pose a threat to public safety after an ICE detention center worker tested positive for the coronavirus.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement reported for the first time this week that one of its workers has the virus that causes COVID-19. ICE also says there are no confirmed cases of coronavirus among its more than 37,000 detainees nationwide.

But immigrant advocates and physicians warn that an outbreak in an ICE detention facility is inevitable as the pandemic spreads and the number of cases in the U.S. rises quickly.

"A coronavirus outbreak at immigration detention facilities is imminent, if it’s not already happening," said Silky Shah with the Detention Watch Network.

More than 3,000 physicians signed a letter urging ICE to release detainees while their legal cases proceed — particularly adults over 60 and people with serious chronic medical conditions that would put them at higher risk in the event of an outbreak.

"They’re just stuck there like sitting ducks," said Dr. Ranit Mishori, who also signed the letter. Mishori is a professor at Georgetown University School of Medicine and medical adviser to the group Physicians for Human Rights. "The window of opportunity is rapidly, rapidly closing because I think we need to let them out before they become sick."

ICE says the worker who tested positive is a member of the medical staff at the Elizabeth Detention Center in New Jersey. The staffer did not routinely engage directly with detainees, according to ICE, and has been in self-quarantine since developing symptoms.

Nearly half of immigrants detained by ICE have been accused of no crime other than civil

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immigration violations, and many probably would not have been held under previous administrations.

Some detained immigrants described a feeling of helplessness and confusion in the face of the widening pandemic.

"I wish they were transparent and tell us the truth, so we wouldn't be anxious," said Virginia, an asylum-seeker from Venezuela who's detained at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center, about 90 miles west of Baton Rouge.

"We know people have gotten sick, but we don't know what it is," she said in Spanish through an interpreter. "It's so hard being in here without knowing."

Virginia says she's detained in a large room along with more than 50 other women, including her sister Patricia, who is also seeking asylum. They asked us not to use their full names because their cases are still pending.

Their room is under quarantine, along with several others in the detention facility, the sisters said. Patricia says her concern about the coronavirus spiked after an Ecuadorian woman in their room developed flu-like symptoms.

"Her bed is two beds away from mine," Patricia said. "She'd spend hours sleeping, deep coughing, lots of it. Her body was aching, she didn't get out of bed one day. ... Her face was red, flushed. She looked hot, she had a high temperature."

Patricia said the Ecuadorian woman had tested negative for the flu, and was now being tested for coronavirus.

"We know there are cases near here, about an hour from here," Patricia said. "The staff comes and goes, we are locked up here, we really don't know anything."

ICE says it is taking precautions to protect detainees. The agency has temporarily suspended social visits at all of its detention centers.

And some U.S. immigration courts have closed in response to the coronavirus pandemic. But others are still open, and hearings for immigrants in detention are still taking place — despite calls from judges, prosecutors and immigration lawyers to postpone them.

The union that represents immigration judges renewed its calls to close down all immigration courts after an ICE prosecutor in Newark, N.J., tested positive for coronavirus, the union said on Twitter.

Ashley Tabaddor, president of the immigration judge's union, said there's been no transparency from the government. "COVID-19 does not discriminate," she told reporters, according to KERA. "There's no engagement. There's no discussion with any stakeholder."

Fanny Behar-Ostrow, head of the union representing ICE attorneys, told reporters that migrants are being forced to choose "between attending court on the one hand or protecting themselves against exposure to the coronavirus by not attending court."

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Imelda Maynard, an attorney with Catholic Charities, attended immigration court in El Paso earlier this week. "None of the people in there had masks on," she told KERA. "There really isn't room in that courtroom for the people appearing to sit six feet apart from one another. It's a pretty small courtroom."

Immigration lawyers in Boston say they're increasingly concerned about the spread of coronavirus after a courtroom there abruptly closed earlier this week.

"I was walking towards the waiting room, and one of the judges popped out of the courtroom and loudly announced: 'My courtroom is now closed because yesterday there was someone in the courtroom who is presumed positive,' " immigration attorney Susan Roses told WBUR.

There's also growing concern about the spread of the coronavirus in shelters for unaccompanied migrant children that are run by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

"It is our responsibility to effectively limit exposure to this disease and prepare to manage outbreaks of COVID-19," Sen. Ed Markey wrote in a letter to the Administration for Children and Families, which oversees ORR. "This responsibility is especially serious when it comes to the care of vulnerable children."

Omar joins 14 Democrats calling for ICE to halt deportations because of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/21/2020 4:08 PM, Andrew Mark Miller, 570K]
Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar is leading a charge with fellow Democrats calling for Immigration and Customs Enforcement to halt all deportations of illegal immigrants immediately because of the spread of the coronavirus.

"Immigration detention facilities, even before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, have been breeding grounds for illness," Omar and 14 other Democrats wrote to acting Secretary of Homeland Security Chad Wolf on Friday.

"For detainees who are immunocompromised or otherwise susceptible to the worst consequences of contracting COVID-19, holding them in detention may be literally a matter of life and death," they said.

Omar and her fellow Democrats also expressed concern about deporting illegal immigrants who are already carrying the virus.

"Deporting people who may have been exposed to coronavirus to either countries that have few or no cases or to countries with weak health care infrastructure is an unacceptable risk to take," the letter said. "Many countries, including the United States, are implementing strict border controls during this pandemic, and we should make no exception for ICE Air and deportations."

The letter did not make it clear whether or not illegal immigrants suspected of violent crimes such as murder should be included in this request.

ICE arrested illegal immigrants responsible for over 1,500 murder convictions last year and over 4,700 over the past three years.

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The Minnesota Democrat has been a vocal critic of ICE since being elected to Congress and has called for the agency to be abolished, the Department of Homeland Security to be defunded, and for President Trump to stop treating people in the country illegally like "criminals."

Omar's letter comes amid reports that states across the country are letting inmates out of jail to help stop the spread of the virus in a move that has drawn stern criticism from police groups nationwide.

Democratic Reps. Rashida Tlaib, Joseph P. Kennedy, Raúl M. Grijalva, Barbara Lee, David E. Price, Scott Peters, Hank Johnson, Jr., Mark Takano, Judy Chu, Tony Cárdenas, Jan Schakowsky, Debbie Dingell, Mark Pocan, and Del. Eleanor Holmes Norton joined Omar in signing the letter Friday.

Citizenship and Immigration Services

DHS Changes Rule to Import More H-1B Foreign Workers in Economic Meltdown (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 11:32 AM, Neil Munro, 1973K]
President Donald Trump's Department of Homeland Security quietly adopted a second tactic to speed the inflow of foreign H-1B workers into U.S. jobs — even though hundreds of thousands of American graduates are expected to lose their jobs in the next few weeks.

An email sent out March 19 told companies that the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) agency would accept electronic signatures instead of the original ink signatures that are normally required on the I-129 forms that must be filed to import foreign visa-workers:

We will accept all benefit forms and documents with reproduced signatures. … For forms that require an original "wet" signature, per form instructions, USCIS will accept electronically reproduced original signatures for the duration of the National Emergency,

Greg Siskind, a Tennessee-based immigration lawyer who works for employers, described the concession as "very good news."

The announcement came after the agency said it would speed the overall process by barring wealthier employers from buying their way to the front of the processing line, via the "premium processing" procedure.

"Boooo!!! – Premium Processing Program Suspended by USCIS," said another tweet by Siskind, some of whose clients prefer to pay the fee for premium processing.

The signature concession removed another barrier for the many lawyers who were trying to submit tens of thousands of requests for new H-1B workers by Friday, March 20.

But the economic crash means the federal government must stop the inflow of H-1B workers so that sidelined American professionals can get jobs, a Florida-based American computer expert told Breitbart News March 19.

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“Fiona” earned two college degrees in the early 2000s after she left the real estate industry following the 2007 collapse. Since then, she has worked a series of contract jobs, most recently at a seven-month stint at an insurance company run by an imported workforce of H-1B workers from India. She said her job ended when she was forced out by Indian managers, in part, because of her excellent performance reviews. She is in her 50s, has been unemployed for several months, and fears recruiters will blackball her if she speaks on the record.

She told Breitbart News, “I’m not eligible for unemployment. So I have lived off my savings, and I’m living with my son. I’m still applying for jobs, but they’re very few and far between. I can’t relocate again because when they cut my contract job, I had to cut my lease off early, so now, my credit is bad. My lease history is bad. I can’t go and take the risks that I did before. I was getting ready to go and look for a minimum wage job until this coronavirus came here, you know. Come next month, you know what? I can’t pay my bills because I’ve gone for like eight months on my savings.”

She added, “To be honest with you, I have given up on American companies. I have given up on being able to be hired by America because I’m American, and Americans don’t matter. And I’m sorry I’m going to get a little bit emotional here. … Americans don’t matter. I hear politicians, you know, saying, “Okay, you know what? We’re going to open our borders, and you can have free health…I don’t have health insurance. You know, Americans don’t matter. All that matters is foreign workers. All that matters is if the foreign individuals…I mean, it’s like we don’t matter. America doesn’t matter.”

The federal government should help Americans by stopping the inflow of visa workers, Fiona said: “Not only should they cancel the H-1B inflow, they should not renew H-1B visas. If American companies want to hire, they hire Americans. And if they say, ‘Americans don’t have the skills,’ give them the skills because we are America. And we take care of our own.”

“Americans should be outraged if they’re going to bring in another 85,000 foreigners this year,” said Dawn Collins, a former vice-president at JP Morgan Chase, who founded Protect U.S. Workers to oppose the H-1B program. She continued, “If American graduates are being replaced by foreigners while this [economic crash] is going on … We’re in a total crisis, and the H-1B program has to be ended right now … If there is any loyalty to the country in Congress, they have to give Americans a chance, a chance … [in this] this situation where people are losing theme homes, their jobs.”

Nationwide, roughly 1.5 million U.S. white-collar jobs are held by foreign graduates, including roughly 1 million Indians. The H-1B program admits roughly 100,000 new foreign workers a year and they who can stay permanently once they are nominated for a green card by their employer. The resident population of H-1B workers is roughly 1 million, including roughly 750,000 Indian H-1Bs.

Company executives and “Human Resources” managers use the H-1Bs program to procure blocs of compliant, lower-skill foreign workers — mostly Indian or Chinese — for the many jobs sought by qualified and eager U.S. graduates and mid-career professionals.

The H-1B workers sometimes cost more than American professionals, partly because they are often less productive than American graduates.

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But U.S. managers prefer them because the federal government rarely enforces routine workplace laws in H-1B workplaces. The government's refusal to enforce the laws means the H-1Bs can be hired, fired, and abused by their bosses, most of whom are Indians who grew up in Indians' own culture. These abuses include workplace intimidation, sexual discrimination, and unpaid overtime hours, Americans tell Breitbart News.

The government inaction in H-1B workplaces also strips American graduates of routine workplace protections, including protections against commonplace discrimination because of their nationality.

Numerous American graduates report that native-born Americans are a rarity in most Silicon Valley companies, as well as in insurance and banking industries on both coasts.

Each April, 85,000 H-1B visas are awarded to U.S. companies via a USCIS rushed application and lottery process. Another "cap-exempt" 15,000 H-1Bs are awarded throughout the year to non-profit employers at universities, research laboratories, and hospitals. The cap-exempt employers are allowed to hire as many H-1Bs as they wish.

The current head of DHS, Chad Wolf, formerly served as a lobbyist for the Indian-based outsourcing industry. The group's mix of Indian and U.S. companies use the H-1B program to hire Indians graduates for jobs in the United States, and they split the economic gains among both countries' companies, executives, and investors.

Breitbart News asked DHS if the agency is considering curbs on the 2020 award of H-1B visas. "No changes at this time," a spokesman responded on March 19.

Meanwhile, business groups are trying to expand the H-1B program. For example, activists are citing the coronavirus as an excuse for Congress to allow investors to hire an unlimited number of foreign graduates for jobs in the healthcare sector. Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah) is also pushing his S.386 bill to reward additional Indians if they take jobs from American graduates.

Trump's failure to set curbs on the H-1B program has angered many of the swing-voting university graduates who supported him in 2016. In March 2016, after much zig-zagging, Trump declared:

The H-1B program is neither high-skilled nor immigration: these are temporary foreign workers, imported from abroad, for the explicit purpose of substituting for American workers at lower pay. I remain totally committed to eliminating rampant, widespread H-1B abuse and ending outrageous practices such as those that occurred at Disney in Florida when Americans were forced to train their foreign replacements. I will end forever the use of the H-1B as a cheap labor program, and institute an absolute requirement to hire American workers for every visa and immigration program. No exceptions.

In February 2020, a U.S. judge struck down the token H-1B curbs set by USCIS managers since Trump's election.

Immigration reformers are calling for the cancellation of the 2020 H-1B awards amid the economic crash.

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American professionals have organized to lobby against the H-1B program via the American Workers Coalition, U.S. TechWorkers, and ProUSworkers. In turn, these groups are backed up by a few sites that track the scale and location of the outsourcing industry in each legislator's district. The sites include SAITJ.org and H1BFacts.com. "The scope of this thing is really unbelievable," said one researcher.

Other sites document the conflicts created by diverse foreign business practices in the United States. The non-political MyVisaJobs.com site also provides much information about H-1B outsourcing and green card rewards in multiple industries.

The federal USCIS agency provides some data, including data about the uncapped OPT program, sometimes called the "Mini-H-1B".

Customs and Border Protection

Acting CBP commissioner Mark Morgan on enhanced border security amid COVID-19 pandemic (FOX News)
FOX News [3/20/2020 10:26 PM, Laura Ingraham, 8943K]
This is a rush transcript from "The Ingraham Angle," March 20, 2020. This copy may not be in its final form and may be updated.

LAURA INGRAHAM, FOX NEWS HOST: I'm Laura Ingraham and this is the Ingraham Angle from Washington tonight. The Trump administration taking bold action against the coronavirus, closing our southern border, I guess we can do that after all, and sending it anyone who crosses it illegally back to Mexico.

We should've already been doing this. Acting CBP Commissioner Mark Morgan is here with that good news. Plus Senator Tom Cotton has a grave warning about our dependency on China. He and I've been talking about this for decades but guess what, I hate to say see, I told you so but see we told you so.

Also imagine, if celebrities thought of anyone else but themselves during this outbreak, that can't be. We got to be joking. Raymond Arroyo is here from New Orleans with the trouble in deeds in Fridays Follies.

But first, a dose of reality. That's the focus of tonight's Angle. All right, today my favorite subject came up again at the Covid-19 briefing or that - are there treatments out there that are already in use with minimal side effects, that could bring relief to our people and our economy?

Well, our own John Roberts pressed doctor Anthony Fauci about the drug we first introduced to the wider public on Monday.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JOHN ROBERTS, FOX NEWS CORRESPONDENT: Dr. Fauci, this is explained yesterday. There has been some promise hydroxychloroquine, this particular therapy for people who are infected with the coronavirus. Is there any evidence to suggest that as with malaria, it

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might be used as a prophylaxis against Covid-19.

DR. ANTHONY FAUCI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ALLERGY AND INFECTIOUS DISEASES: The answer is no and - and the evidence that you're talking about John is anecdotal evidence so as the commissioner of FDA and the president mentioned yesterday, we're trying to strike a balance between making something with potential of an effect to the American people available at the same time that we do it under the auspices of the protocol that would give us information to determine if it's truly safe and truly effective.

But the information that you're referring to specifically is anecdotal. It was not done in a controlled clinical trial so you really can't make any definitive statement about it.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

INGRAHAM: Well, first, I have great respect for Doctor Fauci, his sacrifice for the country but when you hear something is just anecdotal, again aside from the clinical terminology, to most people and we're talking to most people in these press conferences, it just doesn't sound too hopeful or too impressive and anecdotal doesn't really describe the findings of the world's top researchers, who just a few days ago published results of their first study on hydroxychloroquine and hydroxychloroquine with azithromycin.

A lot of you probably have taken Z-packs over the years. Well, check out their findings. This is in a long study. Despite its small sample size, our survey shows that hydroxychloroquine treatment is significantly associated, the word significantly there with viral load reduction or disappearance in Covid-19 patients and it's effect is reinforced by azithromycin.

Now look at this chart that accompanied the report. The blue line is the control group OK, say they took nothing so bad for them they all have the virus even after 6 days. The red represents those who received hydroxychloroquine so some improvement so only what is it, 40 percent or so still had the virus but look at the yellow line.

Now the yellow line represents the patients at the end of day 5 only who were on a protocol that included hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin. Now the researchers in this study and they're all incredibly prominent epidemiologist and researchers, dozens and dozens.

They understood when they undertook this project, they were tasked by the French government to do this. They understood the severity of the global crisis we're all facing and they also understood the risk to millions - millions of people around the world including our health care workers and they concluded as a result of all this thinking and what they looked at the following.

We therefore recommend that Covid-19 patients be treated with hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin to cure their infection and to limit the transmission of the virus to other people in order to curb the spread of Covid-19 in the world.

Now, I understand that we want our own data that is a large controlled study, I understand that's necessary. And the Trump administration is 100 percent correct. At the same time and recognizing the benefits already reported in the use of this drug and the drug combo that we just mentioned.

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Now by the way hydroxychloroquine, lot of people don't understand this but it does not need to be approved by the FDA in order to be administered by doctors for off-label use because as I said before, we don't have to go over it but it's prescribed for anti-malarial use and also for lupus in some cases.

Our physicians are already using it in our major hospitals for Covid patients. They also used it successfully in some cases against SARS which had a higher mortality rate. The president as usual has sharp instincts. He sees things that sometimes the intellectuals and academics, they might get lost in some of the details but he has sharp instincts about things.

And he's pushing to get millions of doses now into the United States.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

DONALD TRUMP, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES: That I'm a big fan of. We'll see what happens and we all understand what the doctor said is 100 percent correct surely but we've you know, I've seen things that are impressive. We will see. It's very effective. It's a strong - strong drug.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

INGRAHAM: I can also report tonight that another drug is also showing significant promise in the fight against Covid-19. It's called Actamra. It's an IL6 or an antilukin-6. It's an anti-inflammatory prescribed mostly for rheumatoid arthritis. Again an off-label use is being implemented now by the Chinese who are finding that it works very well against Covid-19.

Pharmaceutical giants Roche and Sanofi make different versions of this drug. Our doctors and our hospitals need all the ammo they can get to fight this disease. We want fewer people to need ventilators, right?

We need to reduce that that absolute necessity to have vents in our ICUs because we have a critical shortage. We need to get people home to quarantine if they're sick then we need after a necessary amount of time, we need to get those people healthy and back to work.

As soon as they're medically cleared. Again, I respect all the professionals who are working on this and they're working ridiculous hours and I respect Doctor Fauci, an enormous amount.

And I realize in an ideal world, we want everything buttoned up and as perfect as far as randomized trials go but our country needs solutions and hope now. And old bureaucracies have to give way to fast action. The president understands this. We can't stay in our homes for ever. America wants to get back to work. And that's the Angle.

All right, joining me now is Doctor William Grace an oncologist at Lenox Hill hospital in New York City. Doctor, what's the best way to keep people - keep infected people away from those with compromised immune systems? Is it the mass shut down that we're seeing or is it a focus on those compromised population?

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DR. WILLIAM GRACE, ONCOLOGIST LENOX HILL HOSPITAL: Well, we know - we've had the understanding that the old people seem to have a compromised immune systems and I think it's just the opposite. It's a paradigm change.

They have the more mature immune systems even though their bodies may be weak and their immune systems are actually quite strong and it's the strength of that immunity that causes the damage to the lungs and the deaths in these cases.

Hence the reason why hydroxychloroquine, an immunosuppressive agent is beneficial it by two mechanisms. Suppressing the immune response and number two, acting to suppress the replication of the virus. That's why the anti- inflammatory drugs you just mentioned before I came on, is working in China because it's cutting down what we call the cytokine storm, the inflammatory storm that the virus causes in the percentage of people and those are the people who go on to die.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

[AZ] Claim they're going shopping: Border officials allow hundreds of Mexican vehicles to cross despite Trump ban (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/21/2020 2:35 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K]
Customs and Border Protection officials are defying the Trump administration's directive to block all nonessential foreign travel into the United States from Mexico, allowing noncitizens claiming to be on shopping trips to continue entering, according to two officials involved in the implementation of the order.

CBP employees in Arizona told the Washington Examiner Saturday they were instructed Friday night at the start of the executive order and again this morning not to turn around noncitizens who said they were coming in to shop, visit family, or for medical appointments. By Saturday morning, "hundreds" of vehicles that should have been blocked at the port of entry had been allowed through, two officials said.

"We're letting them through. And that's pretty much the gist of it," one official said. "Nobody's enforcing it. It was put up — the president put it out. The chief patrol put it out. And we're just not doing it."

"In plain English, it was a giant shit show," said a second official. "Nobody followed the directive, a plain and simple directive. You're trying to keep the coronavirus from going north ... yet you just let it bleed through anyway, so you're not doing the job you're directed to. That's what's aggravating."

CBP's Office of Field Operations officers who inspect vehicles at the border crossings were supposed to begin at 9 p.m. PT Friday turning away all noncitizens unless they had a permit to work in the U.S., are a legal permanent resident, or are a student. However, officers were told by supervisors not to do so, according to sources.

Border Patrol agents familiar with operations at highway checkpoints located north of the ports of entry said employees at checkpoints were caught off guard late Friday when cars with Mexican license plates continued arriving since they should have been blocked at the border.

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Agents continued to see vehicles with plates from the Mexican state of Sonora, which runs up along the entirety of Arizona.

“I’m asking in Spanish and English, whatever they can understand, ‘Where are you guys going?’ And it was either they’re going shopping at Walmart, or they’re going to visit family, which is not essential," said a Border Patrol agent. This source added that he was confused about why people who had passed Walmart after crossing the border were driving further north instead of returning to Mexico. Others who passed through overnight claimed to have doctor’s appointments.

Agents said Border Patrol managers ordered them against turning around any cars. In more than 10 hours, not a single vehicle was turned around out of hundreds that passed through and did not meet U.S. standards for admission.

“The customs agents told us their supervisors told them to continue to let them go north because they don’t want the Mexican citizens to get mad at them,” an agent said.

“Another customs guy, he said flat out, ‘There was an issue between the first-line supers and second-line,’" the agent said, referring to senior supervisors and junior supervisors. “Basically, second-line didn’t want to make the public angry. That’s pretty much your job at the port — to make people angry.”

CBP referred the Washington Examiner to its Federal Register notice, which defines essential travelers as including those “individuals traveling for medical purposes (e.g., to receive medical treatment in the United States)." It describes “individuals traveling for tourism purposes (e.g., sightseeing, recreation, gambling, or attending cultural events)” as engaging in nonessential travel.

As of Saturday morning, port of entry officers were still sending through noncitizens entering for nonessential travel, the officials said.

[CA] 5 Migrants Rescued After Being Abandoned in Cold California Mountains by Cartel Smugglers (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 2:06 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]
San Diego Sector Border Patrol agents and other first responders teamed up to rescue a group of Mexican migrants who were abandoned in inclement conditions in the Otay Mountains of Southern California. The group of five illegal aliens included a minor.

During the night of March 18, the San Diego Sector’s Foreign Operation Branch (FOB) received an emergency call for help from a group of Mexican nationals who reported themselves to be lost in the cold mountainous region near the California-Mexico border, according to information obtained from San Diego Sector Border Patrol officials.

The FOB team contacted San Diego Sector Border Patrol Search, Trauma, and Rescue (BORSTAR) operators, U.S. Customs and Border Protection’s Air and Marine Operations (AMO) aircrews, the San Diego Fire Department, and Cal-Fire to prosecute a rescue operation.

Teamwork between BORSTAR, AMO, and FOB led to the successful location of the migrant group less than four hours later, officials stated. The searchers found the missing migrants

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at about 1 a.m. Thursday morning in an area known as Colonel's Ridgeline. The mountainous region is located about two miles north of the Mexican border with California and three miles east of the Otay Mesa Port of Entry where they could have legally and safely attempted to cross the border.

BORSTAR agents carried out a medical evaluation of the migrants and found one, an 18-year-old Mexican female, to be suffering hypothermia. She was in and out of consciousness at the time, the agents reported.

Bad weather and low visibility precluded AMO from extracting the distressed woman at the scene. BORSTAR agents carried her through extremely rugged terrain to a fire-break road where the helicopter was able to land and fly her to a hospital for treatment. As of the time of the press release, the woman remains in critical condition and is reported to be unconscious.

The four remaining migrants, all Mexican males, including one 17-year-old juvenile, were guided to safety and taken to the Border Patrol station for processing and likely removal to the interior regions of Mexico.

"We have said it many times, do not place your life or the lives of your loved ones in the hands of ruthless smugglers," San Diego Sector Chief Patrol Agent Aaron Heitke said in a written statement. "I am proud of the heroic efforts that these agents and our partners made to locate and provide aid to those in need. These criminal organizations smuggle people through dangerous routes in an attempt to avoid apprehension."

Chief Heitke continued, "Our thoughts and prayers are with the woman and her family during this difficult time."

So far this fiscal year, which began October 1, 2019, San Diego Sector agents have rescued 36 migrants on land and at sea.

In February, three Mexican women died from exposure to the cold mountainous region after human smugglers abandoned them and they became separated from their group, officials reported.

So far this calendar year, at least 32 migrants have died while, or shortly after illegally crossing the border from Mexico, according to the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants Project.

[CA] Coronavirus border travel restrictions start to impact daily life (San Diego Union Tribune)
San Diego Union Tribune [3/21/2020 7:12 PM, Gustavo Solis, 241K]
Martin Arce, a Tijuana factory worker, spent the past week manufacturing respirators that are being shipped throughout the U.S. to fight to coronavirus pandemic.

Work was so hectic, that Arce didn't have time to pay his phone bill. Because unlimited plans are cheaper in San Diego than they are in Tijuana, Arce has a plan from Cricket Wireless. And because his phone is now shut off and he doesn't have a computer, Arce has to cross the border to pay his bill in person.

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But when he tried to cross through the San Ysidro Port of Entry Saturday morning, Arce was turned away because of new restrictions prohibiting “non-essential” cross-border travel.

The restrictions, announced Friday by President Donald Trump, went into effect just after midnight Eastern time Saturday — 9 p.m. Friday here. The goal is to stem the spread of the coronavirus by limiting cross-border travel while still protecting trade and commerce. A similar deal is in place with Canada.

U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, people with work visas, and those traveling for education or medical reasons are still allowed to travel freely across the border with proper documentation.

The travel restrictions created an unusually quiet scene at the border Saturday morning.

The sidewalks, usually bustling with people running errands, were empty, as were the pedestrian lanes into San Diego. The Tijuana street vendors — normally running in-between cars to sell candies, sombreros and other trinkets — slouched next to their merchandise as they waited for northbound customers.

Wait times for pedestrians clocked in at less than 10 minutes, while cars waited less than 20.

Acting Customs and Border Protection Commissioner Mark Morgan hailed the rollout of the measure on Twitter Saturday: “Ports of entry seeing reductions in pedestrian & vehicle traffic while trade continues to flow! Everyone is going their part to stop the spread!”

U.S. citizens and green-card holders who crossed into San Diego Saturday morning noted that the new travel restrictions had virtually no direct impact on them.

“It’s business as usual,” said Neil Adams, a U.S. citizen who was coming back to San Diego after a couple of days of eating fresh lobster and visiting family in Rosarito.

But for many others whose lives straddle both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border — such as Arce — the restrictions are already having an impact.

Maria Guadalupe Garcia, 63, flew from Guadalajara to Tijuana Saturday morning. She came to help watch her grandchildren in San Diego while their mother works from home.

The grandkids are 5 and 6 years old. They require so much attention that their mother cannot get any work done.

“I was going to help,” said Garcia, who had a suitcase full of clothes with her.

As soon as Garcia told U.S. Customs and Border Protection agents that she was on a tourist visa, they turned her away without event asking to see it.

While walking away from the border, Garcia got a phone call from her daughter asking if she made it through.

Officials told her that the travel restrictions will be in place for at least 30 days and can be

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extended if the coronavirus situation worsens.

“They told me I couldn’t go in at least a month, can you believe it?” she told her daughter.

A short time later, Jose Salazar was also turned back.

He was on his way to pick up a care package that relatives from Salinas had sent to his post office box in San Diego. The package included diapers, a stroller and other supplies for his pregnant wife.

Until the restrictions are lifted, all of those things will simply sit in storage, Salazar said.

“I can’t really do anything about that,” he said.

The restrictions will also impact those who use tourist visas to cross the border and unlawfully work under the table — cooking in restaurants, mowing lawns and cleaning houses in the U.S.

The new travel restrictions were not as heavily enforced for people traveling from the U.S. into Mexico at San Ysidro Saturday morning.

A San Diego Union-Tribune reporter crossing south walked by Mexican customs officials without showing a passport or being asked any questions about the purpose of the trip.

[Mexico] Some Central Americans awaiting U.S. asylum to be allowed legal entry to Mexico (Reuters)
Reuters [3/22/2020 1:20 AM, Anthony Esposito, 5304K]
Mexico’s foreign ministry said late on Saturday that it will allow a limited number of Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States to legally enter Mexico in order to minimize the number of people at U.S. border stations.

The ministry said Mexican immigration authorities would evaluate who is allowed into Mexico on a case by case basis and said the measure will exclusively apply to people from Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala.

“We’re evaluating the regular admission of some nationals from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala who are presented to the Mexican immigration authorities, in order to minimize crowding at U.S. Border Patrol stations,” the ministry said in a statement.

Fewer than 100 people per day will be allowed into Mexico, it added.

“Minors, senior citizens, among others will not be accepted. Also, people from countries other than those mentioned, nor migrants previously in the custody of the U.S. authorities will not be accepted,” it added.

The United States already sends non-Mexican asylum seekers to Mexico under a program known as the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP). The U.S. Supreme Court allowed that program to remain in effect last week pending the outcome of a legal challenge.

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Friday the United States will swiftly return migrants

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who attempt to cross into the country illegally from Mexico and Canada while closing the borders to “non-essential” travel to limit the spread of the new coronavirus.

Flanked by top U.S. officials at the White House, Trump also said the United States and Mexico would work to keep commerce moving as much as possible across the border to try to limit disruptions to business.

Federal Emergency Management Agency

Coronavirus and Climate Change Could Stretch FEMA Past Its Limit (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/21/2020 1:22 PM, Leslie Kaufman, and Brian K Sullivan 6400K]
It wasn’t until Wednesday, five days after President Donald Trump declared a national emergency, that the Federal Emergency Management Agency announced it was “leading the federal coordination” to the Covid-19 pandemic in the U.S.

While the disaster-response agency is better known for its work in the aftermath of storms than disease outbreaks, it is the part of the federal government often charged with procuring supplies quickly. The decision to activate FEMA to its highest state, Level 1, didn’t surprise James Kendra, who directs the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware. But Kendra did wonder if FEMA could possibly handle both a once-in-a-lifetime public health crisis and the upcoming spring flood season. The National Weather Service warned this week that flooding could affect 128 million Americans this year.

“FEMA is stretched,” he said. “All the other hazards we have in the U.S. will not go away and will only complicate the task of responding to the coronavirus.”

Problems at the agency have been mounting for years in the face of record-breaking storms, wildfires and floods that have revealed widening gaps in its abilities. A series of reports from the federal government’s General Accounting Office has shown the agency to be consistently understaffed. FEMA’s own after-action report in the wake of the 2017 hurricane season found that it had missed an internal target for what the agency calls “force strength,” the number of staff trained and ready for deployment. The goal was to have around 12,400 personnel ready, and FEMA’s ranks at the time had fallen short by more than 1,700 people.

FEMA officials reject the idea that the agency isn’t ready. In an interview, a FEMA spokesperson said the agency’s “incident management workforce” had grown by more than 25% since Hurricane Harvey in 2017. “Additionally, FEMA hired more than 1,500 temporary local hires to support response and recovery missions in their communities,” said the spokesperson, who asked to be unnamed as a matter of departmental policy.

By its own count, however, FEMA remains below its 2017 target for force strength. There are now around 11,000 personnel at the ready, FEMA said, about 1,400 short. Right now, the spokesperson said, only 35% of its employees are currently available to deploy, although more could be freed up as necessary.

The consequences of missing staffing targets became apparent after the particularly severe storm season of 2017. That was the year Hurricane Maria devastated Puerto Rico and caused 2,975 deaths, according to a study by the George Washington University Milken

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Institute School of Public Health. FEMA proved unprepared in both supplies and personnel. The after-action report released by FEMA the following year acknowledged that the agency had "placed staff in positions beyond their experiences and, in some instance, beyond their capabilities."

FEMA's preparedness now will depend on whether or not it needs to deploy large numbers of personnel to states to manage the Covid-19 crisis, said Chris Currie, GAO's director in charge of reviewing emergency-management services. FEMA has the ability to do surge staffing—pulling in workers from other federal agencies and expanding its ranks through contractors—but it's not yet clear if that will be used.

Regardless, Currie said it would be challenging for FEMA to balance all the new work from the pandemic with its already heavy load. "They presently have about 600 declared federal disasters, both major and minor, where they are still assisting with long-term recovery," he said. "They have 2,000 people still in Puerto Rico."

The FEMA spokesperson said the agency has cut the number of major disasters whose long-term recovery it is managing, from 60 two years ago to 43 at the time of the pandemic. The agency also emphasizes that its role is not to respond first, but rather to organize and support state and local response efforts. "It's not just FEMA—it's a whole team effort," the spokesperson said. "Like all emergencies, response is most successful when it is locally executed, state managed, and federally supported. But it starts with individual preparedness."

Brock Long, who led FEMA for the first two years of the Trump administration, said he thinks the agency had been made stronger by the trials of 2017. "This is the most battle-hardened FEMA staff ever," he said in an interview. "They are tired. It is not ideal by any means. But they do have the skill set and availability." Long resigned in early 2019, after enduring criticism from lawmakers over the agency's response to Hurricane Maria.

Long's deputy at the time, Peter Gaynor, assumed the role of FEMA acting director for nine months until he was approved by the Senate in January 2020. Prior to joining FEMA, Gaynor served as a well-regarded emergency manager in Rhode Island, holding both local and state-level positions. In his nearly four-year tenure as Rhode Island's chief emergency officer, he faced only one event that reached FEMA disaster level: a snowstorm in January 2015.

At his confirmation hearing in November, Gayner acknowledged that the U.S. was experiencing more frequent and intense storms but did not attribute the increase to global warming; he demurred by saying he's "not a scientist." Asked directly whether he thought climate change was real, Gaynor answered: "The climate has changed. I cannot attribute the scientific reasons why."

U.S. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, a Democrat from New York, cast her vote against Gaynor's nomination "due to his deeply inadequate responses to natural disasters," said Evan Lukaske, communications director for the senator. Lukaske also cited "his lack of understanding of the threat of climate change."

As acting administrator in April 2019, Gaynor went before a U.S. House subcommittee to defend the Trump administration's request to cut FEMA's overall budget by 8.5%. Gaynor

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batted away lawmakers' concerns that his agency would be unprepared should multiple disasters occur at once. "A bigger FEMA is not the answer," he said. "We need to be a smarter FEMA when we deal with disasters and how we source our staff."

The response to the pandemic will be an extraordinary test for a disaster-response agency with fewer resources. "It's a very unique situation when you have to help people but not get within six feet of them," said Tim Frazier, director of Georgetown University's emergency and disaster management program. "Stretching the resources has more to do with people power. FEMA doesn't have an unlimited supply of human capital."

Even before the novel coronavirus reached the U.S., this year was already shaping up to be exceptionally challenging for FEMA. Relentless rains across the Southeast in February caused near-record flooding from Jackson, Mississippi to Birmingham, Alabama. In early March, roughly 10 tornadoes touched down in Tennessee, leaving at least 25 dead.

Scientists have tied extreme weather such as unusually heavy precipitation to warming temperatures, and early floods and tornadoes are just the start of the looming risks. Flood season is around the corner, and tornadoes usually peak in April. Atlantic hurricane season begins in June 1.

"We have a saying that hope is never a good strategy," Frazier said. "But at the same time, we have to hope we don't get a hurricane, we don't get a tsunami somewhere. Let's hope we don't have the flooding in the Midwest."

Katrina-era FEMA director: Trump invoking Stafford Act was 'smart,' important (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 12:44 PM, Charles Creitz, 8943K]
Michael Brown, who led the federal emergency response to Hurricane Katrina, says President Trump was "smart" to invoke the Stafford Act and Defense Production Act to help battle the coronavirus pandemic.

Brown said Saturday on "Cavuto Live" that the moves essentially let the Federal Emergency Management Agency take control of the physical disaster response -- covering the majority of costs for state and local emergency operations when necessary.

That allows the White House to focus on the efforts of the Department of Health and Human Services and its coronavirus task force, he said.

Brown said the outbreak in the U.S. could continue longer than expected, but that by using the legislation to give FEMA control over a large segment of the response, the agency is free to do what it does best.

"I think that's why the president was smart in turning to the Stafford Act and declaring a national emergency because that does two things: It takes the pressure off the White House, and it takes the pressure off HHS, so they can focus as subject-matter experts," he said.

"Then all of the coordination, all of the financial arrangements, everything else can now be done through FEMA, which is precisely what FEMA is good at."

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Brown said that under the 1988 act, named for former Vermont Republican Sen. Robert Stafford, FEMA is able to access emergency funds and cover up to 75 percent of the costs of operating a regional emergency operations center, law enforcement and first responder overtime, a National Guard deployments and other virus-fighting efforts.

"I want to emphasize to people that it's just like a natural disaster, it's just that in this case it's nationwide and it happens to be a virus. That's the big difference," he said.

Brown, who responded to Katrina in 2005 under President George W. Bush, also answered questions as to whether governors in affected states, like California's Gavin Newsom, Pennsylvania's Tom Wolf, New York's Andrew Cuomo and Connecticut's Ned Lamont, are allowed to issue shelter-in-place restrictions or commercial restrictions.

The Oklahoma native said that the statewide orders are subject to their own statutes and that they have the power to set the parameters of such policies. But the states also have the responsibility to inform FEMA of their decisions.

"The governors of each state have the power to do that under existing statutes and court rulings, so every governor makes that decision on their own," he said. "But when they're making that decision, they reach out to FEMA and they reach out to the White House coronavirus task force just so that everybody ... communicate[s] with each other."

He said that communication is important in case there is something FEMA needs to assist with.

National Security News

Top U.S. Intelligence Official Taps New Counterterrorism Chief (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 5:00 PM, Eric Schmitt, 23673K]
Lora Shiao, a career American intelligence officer, will be the next acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center, the government's central clearinghouse for intelligence on terrorist threats, Trump administration officials said on Saturday.

Ms. Shiao, who is currently the center's third-ranking official, replaces Russell Travers, who was abruptly replaced last week amid planned cutbacks by the acting director of national intelligence, Richard Grenell, that have prompted fears among career officials of potential political retribution and a widespread loss of expertise.

Ms. Shiao will begin serving as acting director on April 3, a spokeswoman for Mr. Grenell, Maura Beard, said in an email. President Trump has nominated Christopher C. Miller, a former National Security Council aide now working at the Pentagon, as his permanent choice for the top counterterrorism job, but it could take months for the Senate to confirm him.

Mr. Grenell was installed in recent weeks to temporarily serve as the nation's top intelligence official and he has made clear he plans to overhaul his office. The effort, coming from a leader serving in an acting capacity and as the federal government confronts the coronavirus pandemic, has incited concern that the Trump administration is intent on purging career officials. But supporters of Mr. Grenell say that the office, which oversees the

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intelligence community, has grown top heavy and that other agencies could more efficiently handle some of its functions.

The selection of Ms. Shiao, first reported Saturday by Bloomberg News, won praise from intelligence and counterterrorism officials, who had feared a political appointee with little experience in the field would be installed in the post. Ms. Shiao will also serve as the center's permanent deputy director.

"She's held multiple senior roles across the center, and is an excellent choice," said Javed Ali, a former counterterrorism center official who is now a visiting professor at the University of Michigan. "The key question now will be if all the big changes happen under her watch via Grenell's mandate, or whether they wait for Miller to get there — which will likely take months."

Ms. Shiao has been executive director, or chief administrative officer, of the counterterrorism center since March 2019. She will become the center's first female director. Much of her work had focused on terrorists plotting against the United States and terrorist activities in the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, according to her official biography. She has also served in intelligence jobs at the Justice and Defense Departments.

Mr. Grenell has begun a review to pare back the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, sending officers detailed there back to their home agencies, like the C.I.A. With about 1,000 employees, the counterterrorism center is by far the largest part of the national intelligence office.

The creation of the counterterrorism center has been one of the success stories of the government's overhauls after the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, collecting and fusing information from across agencies. Though terrorism remains a significant threat, it is not treated as the same urgent problem it was a decade ago, and some current officials believe the center could be trimmed back.

Africa Lockdowns Begin as Coronavirus Cases Above 1,000 (AP)
AP [3/21/2020 5:08 PM, Bashir Adigun, Sam Mednick and Cara Anna, 3020K]
Lockdowns have begun in Africa as coronavirus cases rise above 1,000, while Nigeria on Saturday announced it is closing airports to all incoming international flights for one month in the continent's most populous country.

Rwanda said all unnecessary movements outside the home are banned for two weeks as of midnight except for essential services such as health care and shopping. The East African nation, which has 17 cases, told all public and private employees to work from home. Tunisia earlier imposed a lockdown as well.

Meanwhile, two African heads of state appeared to defy their own travel restrictions to attend another president's inauguration.

Uganda, Eritrea and Angola announced their first cases, meaning 42 of Africa's 54 countries are now affected. Congo reported its first death; Burkina Faso reported two new ones. Uganda is closing its borders to all but cargo. Ethiopia said all arriving passengers will face mandatory quarantine as of Monday. Republic of Congo closed its borders. But Somalia is lifting its ban on international flights for two days so stranded citizens can come

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home.

Nigeria's international flight ban came a day after Africa's busiest airport, in Johannesburg, blocked foreigners from disembarking and two major airlines — Ethiopian Airlines and South African Airways — announced sweeping cancellations of international flights.

Nigeria's announcement followed its first cases in the capital, Abuja.

The Nigerian Civil Aviation Authority said "emergency and essential" flights are exempt from the ban that starts Monday. An adviser to President Muhammadu Buhari, Bashir Ahmad, said Nigeria also plans to suspend passenger rail services starting then.

While Angola closed air, land and sea borders this week, President Joao Lourenco attended Saturday's inauguration of Namibian President Hage Geingob. Also there was President Mokgweetsi Masisi of Botswana, which this week suspended international travel by all government employees. Namibia has three cases.

"My conscience tells me ... I did not give a bad example to Angolans," Lourenco told state television, saying his earlier decree left room for extraordinary circumstances, the Portuguese news agency Lusa reported.

Zimbabwean President Emmerson Mnangagwa also was there. On Saturday, his country announced the first case in the capital, Harare.

Africa now has more than 1,100 cases, the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

Burkina Faso now has the most virus deaths of any country in sub-Saharan Africa and the most cases in West Africa with 64.

Several government ministers there have tested positive. On Friday, President Roch Marc Christian Kabore announced the country's two international airports would close for two weeks with exceptions for military and cargo.

Burkina Faso is one of Africa's most fragile states with a growing humanitarian crisis caused by attacks linked to Islamic extremists. More than 130 health centers have closed, the government and aid groups say.

According to a government response plan seen by The Associated Press, emergency teams aren't trained for a respiratory disease outbreak and don't have appropriate protective gear.

There's also insufficient screening at borders. Of Burkina Faso's 44 high-flow entry points, only 23% have coronavirus screening devices.

Jerry-Jonas Mbasha, cluster coordinator for the World Health Organization in Burkina Faso, said he was "much worried about what might happen in the next one week, two weeks from now."

Most people only experience minor flu-like symptoms from the coronavirus and recover

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within a few weeks, but the virus is highly contagious and can be spread by those who appear well. It can cause severe illness, including pneumonia, in some patients, particularly those with underlying health problems.

More than 275,000 cases have been confirmed globally, including over 11,000 deaths, according to a running tally by Johns Hopkins University. At least 88,000 people have recovered.

In Nigeria, which just three weeks ago announced the first coronavirus case in sub-Saharan Africa, authorities said that first patient, a man who had traveled from Italy, was now fit to go home.

In Kenya, health officials disinfected crowded markets in the capital, Nairobi.

“It’s for the sake of us, it’s for the sake of the country,” said Simon Kimani, public health council chairman.

[Canada] Canada’s coronavirus death toll rises to 13 as repatriation efforts step up (Reuters)
Reuters [3/21/2020 11:43 PM, Denny Thomas, 5304K] Video: HERE
Canada’s death toll from the coronavirus rose to 13 on Saturday, and the country stepped up efforts to repatriate Canadians stranded overseas as Prime Minister Justin Trudeau called the situation “unprecedented

The government has tested around 83,000 people so far for COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, Canada’s deputy chief public health officer Howard Njoo told reporters. There have been 1,099 confirmed cases.

Canada has taken several measures to contain the fast-spreading virus, including closing its border with the United States, which came into effect on Friday night.

Trudeau, who is himself in self-isolation after his wife tested positive for COVID-19, told reporters on Saturday the government is ramping up testing to detect as many cases as possible.

“The ramping up of testing is increasing at a tremendous pace.... we are getting more equipment for testing. We recognize that broad scale testing is an essential tool in continuing to fight the spread of this disease,” Trudeau told reporters.

There are around 5,000 ventilators across the country, Njoo said.

He also said Canada is making efforts to bring home stranded citizens, and an Air Canada (AC.TO) plane is in the process of repatriating citizens from Morocco. He named Peru and Spain as two potential countries from which Canada was working with airlines to bring home stranded citizens.

But Trudeau said the travel restriction put in place by many countries mean not every Canadian stuck overseas would be able to come home immediately.

“We are going to ask people to stay safe, make smart choices and do the best they can in a

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situation that is unprecedented, exceptional and very difficult," Trudeau said.

Canada's foreign minister François-Philippe Champagne estimated there are ten of thousands of Canadians overseas.

Trudeau's government has pledged C$27 billion ($18.6 billion) to help the economy amid the virus outbreak, which could blow out the fiscal deficit and lead to higher government borrowing by nearly 40%, according to Reuters calculations.

"We have heard a wide range of estimates from economists and banks about how bad it is going to get. The only thing they seem to agree on is, it is going to get very bad. Fortunately, Canada is in an extremely strong fiscal position... and that gives us room to inject money into people's pocket," Trudeau added.

Meanwhile, Canada's decision to turn back asylum seekers who walk over the U.S.-Canada border has been criticized by advocates.

"The government's decision... ignores the recommendations of the World Health Organization and isn't part of a sound pandemic management plan," said Nazila Bettache, with the Caring for Social Justice Collective.

She said asylum seekers will cross by other means that are less controlled and will not have access to proper safety measures, such as a 14-day quarantine.

[Peru] Americans stuck in Peru because of coronavirus speak out: 'We are just crossing our fingers' (FOX News)
FOX News [3/21/2020 7:45 AM, Julia Musto, 8943K] Video: HERE
Two Americans who became stuck in Peru after borders closed amid the threat of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic are speaking out about their experience.

In an interview on "Fox & Friends Weekend" with host Pete Hegseth, Dan West and Jonathan Du said that the order made by the Peruvian government to close borders for two weeks took them by surprise.

West said that originally things "seemed like they were fine" but quickly evolved as news broke from Italy and the United States.

"And then, all of a sudden the president announces that they are closing borders here in Peru and that just completely [caught] us off guard," he admitted.

What was originally a once-in-a-lifetime trip became a desperate attempt to return home.

"Well, initially I mean there was just so much anxiety revolving around whether or not we could go home," Du said. "We went to the airport around 3 a.m. on Monday morning and there were just hundreds of people at the airport all trying to get out. All people who didn't have tickets."

"At first we didn't get any help from the U.S. Embassy. We didn't get any answers. The Department of Homeland Security didn't know what was going on. None of the airlines knew what was going on," he continued further.

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Du said that's when the pair decided to reach out to other Americans in the same situation. In a matter of days, they had hit capacity on WhatsApp, moved over to Telegram, have a thousand people on their Facebook, and now over 1,600 on a spreadsheet they've been circulating.

Although there is currently no official count, more than a thousand U.S. citizens are believed to be stuck in the South American country. On Thursday, President Trump said that the military is going to help bring them home.

"They got caught, they were late with their flights, we gave them a period of time, they didn't make it, but we're looking to get them out probably through the military," Trump told reporters.

"And we are hearing now the president announced that they are going to be helping us out," West remarked. "We are hearing flights have gotten to Morocco. We already saw that a United charter had landed in Lima yesterday and took some Americans back to Washington, D.C. And, the U.S. Embassy said that they are working to get everyone out."

"They are working on Lima first and then they are coming to Cuzco. So, we are just crossing our fingers and hoping that our time is soon," he concluded.

[Italy] Italy, Pandemic's New Epicenter, Has Lessons for the World (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 4:05 PM, Jason Horowitz, Emma Bubola and Elisabetta Povoledo, 23673K]
As Italy's coronavirus infections ticked above 400 cases and deaths hit the double digits, the leader of the governing Democratic Party posted a picture of himself clinking glasses for "an aperitivo in Milan," urging people "not to change our habits."

That was on Feb. 27. Not 10 days later, as the toll hit 5,883 infections and 233 dead, the party boss, Nicola Zingaretti, posted a new video, this time informing Italy that he, too, had the virus.

Italy now has more than 53,000 recorded infections and more than 4,800 dead, and the rate of increase keeps growing, with more than half the cases and fatalities coming in the past week. On Saturday, officials reported 793 additional deaths, by far the largest single-day increase so far. Italy has surpassed China as the country with the highest death toll, becoming the epicenter of a shifting pandemic.

The government has sent in the army to enforce the lockdown in Lombardy, the northern region at the center of the outbreak, where bodies have piled up in churches. On Friday night, the authorities tightened the nationwide lockdown, closing parks, banning outdoor activities including walking or jogging far from home.

The tragedy of Italy now stands as a warning to its European neighbors and the United States, where the virus is coming with equal velocity. If Italy's experience shows anything, it is that measures to isolate affected areas and limit the movement of the broader population need to be taken early, put in place with absolute clarity, then strictly enforced.

Despite now having some of the toughest measures in the world, Italian authorities fumbled

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many of those steps early in the contagion — when it most mattered as they sought to preserve basic civil liberties as well as the economy.

Italy's piecemeal attempts to cut it off — isolating towns first, then regions, then shutting down the country in an intentionally porous lockdown — always lagged behind the virus's lethal trajectory.

"Now we are running after it," said Sandra Zampa, the under secretary at the Ministry of Health, who said Italy did the best it could given the information it had. "We closed gradually, as Europe is doing. France, Spain, Germany, the U.S. are doing the same. Every day you close a bit, you give up on a bit of normal life. Because the virus does not allow normal life."

Some officials gave in to magical thinking, reluctant to make painful decisions sooner. All the while, the virus fed on that complacency.

Governments beyond Italy are now in danger of following the same path, repeating familiar mistakes and inviting similar calamity. And unlike Italy, which navigated uncharted territory for a Western democracy, other governments have less room for excuses.

Italian officials, for their part, have defended their response, emphasizing that the crisis is unprecedented in modern times. They assert that the government responded with speed and competence, immediately acting on the advice of its scientists and moving more swiftly on drastic, economically devastating measures than their European counterparts.

But tracing the record of their actions shows missed opportunities and critical missteps that have left the country in its worst state since World War II.

In the critical early days of the outbreak, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and other top officials sought to down play the threat, creating confusion and a false sense of security that allowed the virus to spread.

They blamed Italy's high number of infections on aggressive testing of people without symptoms in the north, which they argued only created hysteria and tarnished the country's image abroad.

Even once the Italian government considered a universal lockdown necessary to defeat the virus, it failed to communicate the threat powerfully enough to persuade Italians to abide by the rules, which seemed riddled with loopholes.

"It is not easy in a liberal democracy," said Walter Ricciardi, a World Health Organization board member and a top adviser to the health ministry, who argued that the Italian government acted on the scientific evidence made available to it.

He said the Italian government had moved at a much faster clip, and took the threat much more seriously, than its European neighbors or the United States.

Still, he acknowledged that the health minister had struggled to persuade his government colleagues to move more quickly and that the difficulties of navigating Italy's division of powers between Rome and the regions resulted in a fragmented chain of command and

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inconsistent messages.

“In times of war, like an epidemic,” that system presented grave problems, he said, adding that it perhaps delayed the imposing of restrictive measures.

“I would have done them 10 days before, that is the only difference.”

It Could Never Happen Here

For the coronavirus, 10 days can be a lifetime.

On Jan. 21, as top Chinese officials warned that those hiding virus cases “will be nailed on the pillar of shame for eternity,” Italy’s culture and tourism minister hosted a Chinese delegation for a concert at the National Academy of Santa Cecilia to inaugurate the year of Italy-China Culture and Tourism.

Michele Geraci, Italy’s former under secretary in the economic development ministry and a booster of closer relations with China, had a drink with other politicians but looked around uneasily.

“Are we sure we want to do this?” he said he asked them. “Should we be here today?”

With the benefit of hindsight, Italian officials say certainly not.

Ms. Zampa, the health ministry under secretary, said in retrospect she would have closed everything immediately. But in real time, it wasn’t that clear.

Politicians across the spectrum worried about the economy and feeding the country, and found it difficult to accept their impotence in the face of the virus.

Most importantly, Italy looked at the example of China, Ms. Zampa said, not as a practical warning, but as a “science fiction movie that had nothing to do with us.” And when the virus exploded, Europe, she said, “looked at us the same way we looked at China.”

But already in January, some officials on the right were urging Mr. Conte, their former ally and now political enemy, to quarantine schoolchildren in the northern regions who were returning from holidays in China, a measure aimed at protecting schools. Many of those children were from Chinese immigrant families.

Many liberals criticized the proposal as populist fear-mongering. Mr. Conte declined the proposal and responded that the northern governors should trust the judgment of education and health authorities who, he said, had proposed no such thing.

But Mr. Conte also demonstrated that he was taking the threat of contagion seriously. On Jan. 30, he blocked all flights in and out of China.

“We are the first country in Europe to adopt such a precautionary measure,” he said.

Over the next month, Italy responded swiftly to coronavirus scares. Two sick Chinese tourists and an Italian returning from China received care from a prominent infectious

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disease hospital in Rome. A false alarm led authorities to briefly confine passengers on a cruise ship docked outside of Rome.

‘Patient One,’ Super-spreader

When a 38-year-old man went to the emergency room at a hospital in Codogno, a small town in the Lodi province of Lombardy, with severe flu symptoms on Feb. 18, the case did not set off alarms.

The patient declined to be hospitalized and went home. He got sicker and returned to the hospital a few hours later and was admitted to a general medicine ward. On Feb. 20, he went into intensive care, where he tested positive for the virus.

The man, who became known as Patient One, had had a busy month. He attended at least three dinners, played soccer and ran with a team, all apparently while contagious and without heavy symptoms.

Mr. Ricciardi said Italy had the bad luck of having a super spreader in a densely populated and dynamic area who went to the hospital not once, but twice, infecting hundreds of people, including doctors and nurses.

“He was incredibly active,” Mr. Ricciardi said.

But he also had not had any direct contacts with China, and experts suspect he contracted the virus from another European, meaning Italy did not have an identifiable patient zero or a traceable source of contagion that could help it contain the virus.

The virus had already been active in Italy for weeks by that time, experts now say, passed by people without symptoms and often mistaken for a flu. It spread around Lombardy, the Italian region that has by far the most trade with China and the home of Milan, the country’s most culturally vibrant and business-centered city.

“Who we call ‘Patient One’ was probably ‘Patient 200,’ “ said Fabrizio Pregliasco, an epidemiologist.

On Sunday, Feb. 23, the number of infections clicked past 130 and Italy sealed off 11 towns with police and military checkpoints. The last days of Venice Carnival were canceled. The Lombardy region closed its schools, museums and movie theaters. The Milanese made a run on the supermarkets.

But while Mr. Conte again commended Italy for its firm hand, he also sought to downplay the contagion, attributing the high numbers of infected to Lombardy’s overzealous testing.

“We have been the first country in the European Union to opt for more rigorous and strict controls in airports and cities,” he said in an address to the nation. “We have more people infected because we made more swabs.”

The next day, as infections surpassed 200, seven people died and the stock market plunged, Mr. Conte and his health aides doubled down.

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He blamed the Codogno hospital for the spread, saying it had handled things in “a not-completely-proper way” and argued that Lombardy and Veneto, another northern region, were inflating the severity of the problem by diverging from global guidelines and testing people without symptoms.

As Lombardy officials scrambled to free up hospital beds, and the number of infected people rose to 309 with 11 dead, Mr. Conte said on Feb. 25 that “Italy is a safe country and probably safer than many others.”

On Friday, Mr. Conte’s office offered an interview on the condition that he could answer questions in writing. When sent questions, including those about his past statements, he declined to respond.

Mixed Messages Sow Confusion

Reassurances from leaders confused the Italian population.

On Feb. 27, Mr. Zingaretti posted his aperitivo picture. That same day, the country’s foreign minister, Luigi Di Maio, the former leader of one of the governing parties, the Five Star Movement, held a news conference in Rome.

“In Italy, we went from the risk of an epidemic to an infodemic,” Mr. Di Maio said, disparaging media coverage that highlighted the threat of the contagion, and adding that only “0.089 percent” of the Italian population was quarantined.

In Milan, only miles from the center of the outbreak, the mayor, Beppe Sala, publicized a ‘‘Milan Doesn’t Stop’’ campaign, and the Duomo, the city’s landmark cathedral that is a draw for tourists, reopened. People went out.

But on the sixth floor of the regional government headquarters in Milan, Giacomo Grasselli, who is the coordinator of the intensive care units throughout Lombardy, saw the numbers going up and quickly realized that it would be impossible to treat all the sick if the infections continued unabated.

His task force worked to match the sick to beds in intensive-care units in the nearest possible hospitals and appropriate dwindling resources.

At one of the daily meetings of about 20 health and political officials, he told the regional president, Attilio Fontana, about the growing numbers.

An epidemiologist showed the curves of infection. There was a catastrophe facing the region’s well-respected health system.

“We need to do something more,” Mr. Grasselli told the room.

Mr. Fontana, who had been pressing the central government for tougher action, agreed. He said that the mixed messages from Rome and the easing of restrictions had led Italians to believe “that everything was a joke, and they kept living as they used to.”

He said he appealed for tougher national measures in video conferences with the prime

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minister and other regional presidents, arguing that climbing numbers of cases threatened to collapse the hospital system in the north, but that his requests were repeatedly turned down.

“They were convinced that the situation was less serious and they did not want to hurt our economy too much,” said Mr. Fontana.

The government started providing some economic assistance, which would later be followed by a 25 billion euro ($28 billion) relief package, but the nation became divided between those who saw the threat and those who didn’t.

Ms. Zampa said that it was around that time that government learned that infections in the town of Vò, the virus epicenter of the Veneto region, had no epidemiological link to the Codogno outbreak.

She said that the health minister, Mr. Speranza, and Mr. Conte deliberated about what to do and within the day, they decided to close down much of the north.

In a surprise 2 a.m. news conference on March 8, when 7,375 people had already tested positive for coronavirus and 366 had died, Mr. Conte announced the extraordinary step of restricting movement for about a quarter of the Italian population in the northern regions that serve as the country’s economic engine.

“We are facing an emergency,” Mr. Conte said at the time. “A national emergency.”

A draft of the decree, leaked to Italian media on Saturday night, pushed many Milan residents to rush to the train station in crowds and attempt to leave the region, causing what many later considered a dangerous wave of contagion toward the south.

Yet the following day, most Italians were still confused about the severity of the restrictions.

To clarify the issue, the interior ministry issued “auto-certification” forms that would allow people to travel in and out of the locked-down area for work, health or “other” necessities.

In the meantime, some regional governors independently ordered people coming from the newly locked-down area to self-quarantine. Others didn’t.

The broader restrictions in Lombardy also effectively lifted the quarantine on Codogno and other “red zone” towns linked to the original outbreak. Checkpoints disappeared. Local mayors complained that their sacrifices had been wasted.

A day later, on March 9, when the positive cases reached 9,172 and the death toll climbed to 463, Mr. Conte toughened the restrictions and extended them nationally.

But by then, some experts say, it was already too late.

Local Experiments

Italy is still paying the price of those early mixed messages by scientists and politicians. The people who have died in staggering numbers recently — more than 2,300 in the last four

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days — were mostly infected during the confusion of a week or two ago.

Roberto Burioni, a prominent virologist at the San Raffaele University in Milan, said that people had felt safe to go about their usual routines and he attributed the spike in cases last week to “that behavior.”

The government has urged national unity in obeying its restrictive measures. But on Saturday, hundreds of mayors from the hardest-hit areas told the government those measures were fatally insufficient.

Leaders in the north are desperate for the government to crack down harder.

On Friday, Mr. Fontana complained that the 114 troops the government deployed were insignificant, and that at least 1,000 should be sent. On Saturday, he closed public offices, work sites and banned jogging. He said in an interview that the government needed to stop messing around and “apply rigid measures.”

“My idea is that if we had shut everything in the beginning, for two weeks, probably now we would be celebrating victory,” he said.

His political ally, Luca Zaia, the president of the Veneto region, pre-empted the national government with his own crackdown, and said that Rome needed to enforce “a more drastic isolation,” including closing all stores and prohibiting public activities other than commuting to work.

“Walks should be banned,” he said.

Mr. Zaia has some credibility on the issue. As new infections have proliferated around the country, they have significantly dropped in Vò, a town of about 3,000 people that was one of the first quarantined and which had the country’s first coronavirus death.

Some government experts attributed that turnaround to the strict quarantine that had been in place for two weeks. But Mr. Zaia had also ordered blanket tests there, in defiance of international scientific guidelines and the national government. The government has argued that testing people without symptoms is a drain on resources.

“At least this slows down the virus’ speed,’’ Mr. Zaia said, arguing that testing helped identify potentially contagious people without symptoms. ‘‘And slowing down the virus’ speed allows the hospitals to breathe.’’

If not, the overwhelming number of patients would crater health care systems and cause a national catastrophe.

Americans and others, he said, “need to be ready.”

[Gaza Strip] First coronavirus cases confirmed in the Palestinian Gaza Strip (Reuters)
Reuters [3/21/2020 8:09 PM, Nidal al-Mughrabi, 5304K]
The first two cases of coronavirus have been confirmed in the densely-populated Gaza Strip, Palestinian health officials said on Sunday.

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Two Palestinians who had traveled from Pakistan and entered Gaza through Egypt had tested positive for the virus late on Saturday and have been in quarantine in Rafah, a town near the Egyptian border, since their arrival on Thursday, the Gaza health ministry said.

Schools, public markets and event halls have all been shut in Gaza over the past two weeks to minimize the risk of coronavirus transmission.

The coastal enclave, measuring 375 square kilometers (145 square miles) is home to around two million Palestinians and poverty and unemployment rates are high.

An Israeli-led blockade has put restrictions on the movement of people and goods for years, amid security concerns following the 2007 takeover of Gaza by the Islamist militant group Hamas, three subsequent wars and frequent rounds of violence.

Last week Hamas said it would allow only patients requiring urgent medical treatment outside Gaza to cross into Egypt or Israel. According to the Palestinian health ministry 53 people coronavirus cases have been confirmed in the occupied West Bank.

[Somalia] Al Qaeda Branch in Somalia Threatens Americans in East Africa — and Even the U.S. (New York Times)

New York Times [3/21/2020 12:07 PM, Eric Schmitt and Abdi Latif Dahir, 23673K]

Al Qaeda's branch in Somalia, the terrorist group's largest and most active global affiliate, has issued specific new threats against Americans in East Africa and even the United States, U.S. commandos, counterterrorism officials and intelligence analysts say.

Several ominous signs indicate that the Qaeda affiliate, the Shabab, is seeking to expand its lethal mayhem well beyond its home base, and attack Americans wherever it can — threats that have prompted a recent flurry of American drone strikes in Somalia to snuff out the plotters.

In recent months, two Shabab operatives have been arrested while taking flying lessons — one last summer in the Philippines and another more recently in an African country, intelligence officials say. Those arrests carried eerie echoes of the original Sept. 11 plotters, who trained to fly jetliners. Shabab fighters are seeking to acquire Chinese-made, shoulder-fired antiaircraft missiles, which could pose a deadly new risk to U.S. helicopters and other aircraft in Somalia.

American commanders are hardening defenses at bases in the region after a Shabab attack in January at Manda Bay, Kenya, killed three Americans and revealed serious security vulnerabilities. That attack came about a week after an explosives-laden truck blew up at a busy intersection in Mogadishu, the Somali capital, killing 82 people. The Shabab also claimed responsibility for that attack.

The strike in Kenya came two months after the Shabab released a 52-minute video narrated by the group's leader, Abu Ubaidah, in which he called for attacks against Americans wherever they are, saying the American public is a legitimate target. The statement mirrored Osama bin Laden's declaration of war against the United States in 1996.

"Shabab is a very real threat to Somalia, the region, the international community and even the U.S. homeland," Gen. Stephen J. Townsend, the head of the military's Africa Command,

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told a House committee in Washington this month.

The Shabab control large parts of Somalia and raise considerable funds through local taxation and extortion. Despite intensified American airstrikes and a long-running offensive against the African Union, the group has carried out deadly attacks not only in Somalia but also in neighboring Kenya and Uganda.

American and other Western intelligence analysts and Special Operations officers express fears that Shabab militants could threaten the 3,500 personnel at the Pentagon's largest permanent base on the continent, in Djibouti, as well as international shipping in the critical Bab al Mandab waterway off the southern Yemeni coast.

And last month, the United States Embassy in Nairobi warned of a possible terrorist attack against a major hotel in the Kenyan capital that is popular with tourists and business travelers. The warning did not specifically mention the Shabab, but intelligence officials said the threat bore the hallmarks of such an operation.

The Defense Intelligence Agency told the Pentagon's inspector general in a recent report that the chances of the Shabab attacking the United States remained relatively low, but the analysts noted that the group had made clear its intentions to kill Americans at any location.

One threat could be home grown, from radicalized Somali-Americans living in cities like Minneapolis or Columbus, Ohio, which have large Somali-American communities, analysts said. Another could be from Shabab militants in East Africa, who have pilot training and might be able to slip into the United States — a much more difficult feat now than when the original Sept. 11 plotters entered the country in 2001.

For now, Shabab threats against Americans remain highest in East Africa.

In September, a suicide bomber detonated a car packed with explosives at the gate of a military airfield in Bale Dogle, Somalia, injuring one American service member. Afterward, according to the Pentagon's inspector general report, the Shabab and other Qaeda-related groups released near-simultaneous messages on social media, suggesting a coordinated media strategy among the Qaeda branches.

"This is what we struggle with," Brig. Gen. Dagvin R.M. Anderson, the commander of American Special Operations forces in Africa, said in an interview last month on the sidelines of a counterterrorism exercise in Mauritania. "Their intent is clearly stated. The question is, are they able to develop a safe haven to plan, fund and plot these attacks against the U.S.? What's their timeline? How do we and our partners keep them off balance?"

It is unclear how the Shabab might try to exploit the spread of the coronavirus pandemic on the continent, where many countries face huge challenges responding to the crisis, General Anderson said on Friday in a separate telephone interview from his headquarters in Germany.

There are also now about 500 American troops in Somalia. Most are Special Operations forces stationed at a small number of bases across the country. Their missions include training and advising Somali army and counterterrorism troops and conducting kill-or-

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capture raids of their own.

The threat from the Shabab has increased so sharply that last November, General Townsend created a Special Operations task force with about 100 troops and analysts to focus on shoring up security in Somalia and countering the Shabab.

But the weapon of choice against the Shabab is drone strikes. The United States has carried out 31 strikes against Shabab militants already this year, and is on pace to nearly double the previous high of 63 last year — almost all against Shabab militants, with a few against a branch of the Islamic State. That compares with 47 strikes against the Shabab in 2018.

Several recent strikes have focused on targets near Jilib, about 220 miles south of Mogadishu, which American and Somali officials say is a major hub for the Shabab's operations cell that plots attacks outside Somalia. Other drone attacks have targeted fighters in Shabab strongholds such as Jamame, Sakow, Bu'aale and Janaale.

The Africa Command, also called Africom, said that a strike on Feb. 22 in the vicinity of Sakow killed Bashir Mohamed Mahamoud, who the military says was a senior Shabab commander responsible for planning and directing the deadly Manda Bay attack.

"I would say that the threat is higher, has been higher in the last few months than it was eight months ago when I first got to Africom," General Townsend told reporters after the House hearing last week. "That's exactly why you've seen this increase in strike activity."

The air campaign, however, has been shrouded in secrecy, and an investigation by Amnesty International last year reported on evidence that these airstrikes had killed or wounded more than two dozen civilians since 2017. A recent report by Airwars, a conflict-monitoring group, also challenged the military's findings that its strikes had resulted in very few civilian casualties.

The Shabab formally pledged allegiance to Al Qaeda in 2012. But long before that, its members fought Western-backed governments in Mogadishu as the group sought to impose its extremist interpretation of Islam across Somalia. In defending the fragile government, the United States has largely relied on proxy forces, including about 20,000 African Union peacekeepers from Uganda, Kenya and other East African nations.

The United States estimates that the Shabab have about 5,000 to 7,000 fighters in Somalia, but the group's ranks are fluid.

In recent years, the Shabab have proved adept at transforming itself into an agile and adaptive guerrilla force that has developed fiendishly sophisticated homemade bombs, including improvised explosives devices, or I.E.D.s.

"Now more than ever, Al Shabab effectively deploys I.E.D.s, complex attacks on both civilian and military targets, blockades to disrupt access, devises sophisticated extortion generating schemes, and utilizes intimidation tactics to afford itself invincibility status aimed at destabilizing Somalia and threatening neighboring countries," said Abdisaid Muse Ali, Somalia's national security adviser.

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Mr. Ali said the Shabab had expanded its popular base by building on the issues that afflicted Somalia, including the influence of warlords, tribalism, regional meddling, and the lack of a government to expand and deliver services.

“Ensuring that we deliver services, register and pay civil-service and soldiers, and properly register weapons coming into the country, these are important,” he said of the government’s priorities.

Mr. Ali said Shabab leaders also sought to broaden their global jihadist appeal by striking American targets. “Al Shabab tries to internationalize their aggression by saying they are fighting America while seeking attention from Al Qaeda leaders,” he said.

Indeed, the authorities in the Philippines last July arrested a person accused of being a Shabab operative from Kenya who was studying to be a pilot at a local aviation academy. In announcing the arrest of the suspect, Cholo Abdi Abdullah, local reports in the news media said that he had been accused of conducting research on “aviation threats, aircraft hijacking and falsifying travel documents.”

“Al Shabab is a prime lesson in the Al Qaeda movement’s stubborn resiliency,” said Bruce Hoffman, a terrorism scholar at the Council on Foreign Relations. “The group has suffered leadership losses, loss of territory and revenue; and the attrition of its fighters, but keeps on fighting — and escalating and expanding its operations elsewhere.”

[Iran] Iran Leader Refuses US Help, Citing Virus Conspiracy Theory (New York Times)
New York Times [3/22/2020 3:50 AM, Associated Press, 23673K]
Iran’s supreme leader refused U.S. assistance Sunday to fight the new coronavirus, citing an unfounded conspiracy theory that the virus could be man-made by America.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s comments come as Iran faces crushing U.S. sanctions blocking the country from selling its crude oil and accessing international financial markets.

But while Iranian civilian officials in recent days have increasingly criticized those sanctions, 80-year-old Khamenei instead chose to traffic in the same conspiracy theory increasingly used by Chinese officials about the new virus to deflect blame for the pandemic.

“I do not know how real this accusation is but when it exists, who in their right mind would trust you to bring them medication?" Khamenei said. "Possibly your medicine is a way to spread the virus more.”

He also alleged without offering any evidence that the virus “is specifically built for Iran using the genetic data of Iranians which they have obtained through different means.”

“You might send people as doctors and therapists, maybe they would want to come here and see the effect of the poison they have produced in person," he said.

There is no scientific proof offered anywhere in the world to support Khamenei’s comments.

However, his comments come after Chinese government spokesman Lijian Zhao tweeted earlier this month that it “might be US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. Be transparent! Make public your data! US owe(s) us an explanation!”

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Lijian likewise offered no evidence to support his claim, which saw the U.S. State Department summon China's ambassador to complain.

Wuhan is the Chinese city where the first cases of the disease were detected in December. In recent days, the Trump administration has increasingly referred to the virus as the "Chinese" or "Wuhan" virus, while the World Health Organization used the term COVID-19 to describe the illness the virus causes. Even a U.S. senator from Arkansas has trafficked in the unfounded conspiracy theory it was a man-made Chinese bioweapon.

For most people, the new coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia. The vast majority of people recover from the new virus.

Scientists have not yet determined exactly how the new coronavirus first infected people. Evidence suggests it originated in bats, which infected another animal that spread it to people at a market in Wuhan. The now-shuttered Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market advertised dozens of species such as giant salamanders, baby crocodiles and raccoon dogs that were often referred to as wildlife, even when they were farmed.

An article published last week in the peer-reviewed scientific journal Nature Medicine similarly said it was "improbable" that the virus "emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus."

Khamenei made the comments in a speech in Tehran broadcast live Sunday across Iran marking Nowruz, the Persian New Year. He had called off his usual speech at Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad over the virus outbreak.

His comments come as Iran has over 21,600 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus amid 1,685 reported deaths, according to government figures released Sunday.

Iran is one of the hardest-hit countries in the world by the new virus. Across the Mideast, Iran represents eight of 10 cases of the virus and those leaving the Islamic Republic have carried the virus to other countries.

Iranian officials have criticized U.S. offers of aid during the virus crisis as being disingenuous. They have accused the Trump administration of wanting to capitalize on its "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran since withdrawing from the nuclear deal in May 2018. However, the U.S. has directly offered the Islamic Republic aid in the past despite decades of enmity, like during the devastating Bam earthquake of 2003.

Reassigning blame could be helpful to Iran's government, which faced widespread public anger after denying for days it shot down a Ukrainian jetliner, killing 176 people. Widespread economic problems as well has seen mass demonstrations in recent years that saw hundreds reportedly killed.

Iranian hard-liners have supported conspiracy theories in the past when it suited their interests. Following the Sept. 11 attacks, some publicly doubted al-Qaida's role and state TV promoting the unfounded conspiracy theory that the Americans blew up the building

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themselves.

Former hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad similarly raised doubt about the Sept. 11 attack, calling it a “big lie," while also describing the Holocaust as a “myth.”

Meanwhile on Sunday, Iran imposed a two-week closure on major shopping malls and centers across the country to prevent spreading the virus. Pharmacies, supermarkets, groceries and bakeries will remain open.

In Saudi Arabia, the kingdom said its armed forces are now taking part in combating the virus, setting up mobile hospitals in various cities.

And in Kuwait, authorities have instituted a nightly curfew from 5 p.m. to 4 a.m., warning violators face up to three years in prison and fines of $32,000 if arrested and convicted.

[Pakistan] Pakistan locks down province, bans flights as coronavirus spreads (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/22/2020 3:37 AM, Pamela Constable and Shaiq Hussain, 12625K]
With the number of coronavirus cases in Pakistan soaring to 645 in the past few days, officials there have banned all international flights and have requested that security forces help institute a full lockdown in Sindh Province, where a majority of cases have been reported. A third death from the virus was reported Friday.

Most of those found to be infected are Shiite pilgrims from Sindh who returned from visiting shrines in neighboring Iran, where the virus has already killed more than 1,400 people. Most reentered Pakistan via a single border crossing in Baluchistan province. A similar problem is affecting next-door Afghanistan, where tens of thousands of refugees have recently flooded back from Iran.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan, facing public panic, has stopped short of declaring a nationwide lockdown but asked all citizens to self-quarantine for two weeks. Earlier this week, Khan came under strong criticism after playing down the threat in a nationwide address. He said people should not “run to hospitals” to get tested and that 90 percent of those testing positive would “recover easily.”

On Friday, with several hundred new cases reported, Khan told a group of TV anchors that he hoped the coming of hot and dry weather would help mitigate the outbreak. He urged people to stay at home but remain calm, saying that “panicking is more dangerous for us than coronavirus.” He said he was still reluctant to impose a nationwide lockdown because it would harm the working poor.

“We don’t want to try and save people from corona but they end up dying due to hunger and poverty,” Khan said. Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country of 210 million people, has a high poverty rate, with about one-quarter of the populace earning less than $2 per day.

But in Sindh, a vast and impoverished region of close to 50 million, officials decided to impose a total lockdown beginning Sunday night. Chief Minister Murad Ali Shah was in discussions with army and police officials Sunday night. He was expected to formally enlist their help to ensure public compliance with the lockdown.

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“Time for some tough decisions,” Murtaza Wahab, the minister’s spokesman, said in a tweet early Sunday. He said security forces would likely be asked to “ensure full implementation” of the decision to keep people in their homes, while grocery stores and pharmacies will remain open.

But the leader of the Pakistan People’s Party, which is based in Sindh, said the country needs to impose a complete nationwide lockdown to prevent the virus from spreading further. In a tweet, Saturday, Bilawal Bhutto said the decision had already been delayed for too long.

“We do need to learn from the experiences of other countries,” he said in the tweet, noting that the unchecked virus could “overwhelm” the public health system. “While we are optimistic for a good outcome, at the same time we should prepare for the worst.”

In Punjab province, where nearly 100 cases of coronavirus infection have been reported, officials announced a three-day lockdown, with all parks, malls and restaurants closed until Tuesday. Media outlets published photos of unarmed security forces guarding a new isolation facility in Lahore city. In Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, a partial lockdown has also been instituted for the next three days, with all shopping malls and restaurants closed.

The government decided Saturday to ban all international arriving flights for 14 days, but the national carrier, Pakistan International Airlines, was allowed to bring back several of its planes from abroad, including one from London carrying Shahbaz Sharif, the opposition leader from the Pakistan Muslim League (N). He has been in London visiting his ailing brother, former prime minister Nawaz Sharif.

On Sunday, officials at the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, the capital, said it was “aware” of reports from Pakistani health authorities that an unidentified embassy employee had been found to be infected with the virus after landing at the international airport. They declined to provide further information, citing privacy reasons. Pakistani media reported that the individual was being treated in an isolation ward at the embassy.

Pakistan’s army chief, Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa, ordered the army on Saturday to step up its assistance to civil authorities and urged all Pakistanis to take precautions to help curb the virus. The army is the most powerful institution in Pakistan, with a history of intervening in civilian power. Bajwa has emphasized his deference to civilian authority and desire to help in emergencies.

The army has said it will open all military hospitals and health facilities nationwide to assist in testing and treating virus cases.

Khan and his aides appealed to international financial institutions to write off loans to Pakistan and other developing countries to allow them to use more resources to fight the virus. Pakistan has a huge foreign debt, and Khan has struggled to implement economic austerity measures to bring it down.

Pakistan shares a border with China and there is constant travel by workers, students and others between the two countries. A first, no Pakistani students were allowed to return after the virus broke out, and no cases were reported until Feb. 26, when a man in Karachi tested positive after returning from Iran.

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Several days later, authorities began reporting a sharp surge in cases among pilgrims returning from Iran across the border at Taftan, Baluchistan, even after they had been held in quarantine there for 14 days. The three fatalities from coronavirus to date were pilgrims who had returned from Iran or Saudi Arabia.

In the past several weeks, the rate of reported infections has risen sharply. As of Saturday, there were more than 290 confirmed cases in Sindh, more than 100 in Balochistan, more than 150 in Punjab, 31 in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa, 55 in Gilgit-Baltistan, 11 in Islamabad and one in Kashmir.

As of this weekend, health officials said a 3,000-room quarantine center has been set up in Multan, a city in Punjab, for infected pilgrims who returned from Iran. They said it has 171 isolation rooms. After screening there, patients will be sent to a new general hospital for treatment, they said.

[Pakistan] Pakistan halts international passenger flights for two weeks (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 9:33 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Pakistan announced Saturday it is suspending for a fortnight all international passenger flights into and out of the country in a bid to slow the spread of coronavirus.

“We are suspending international flight operations effective tonight at 8:00 pm (1500 GMT),” the prime minister’s special assistant on national security, Moeed Yusuf, told an Islamabad press briefing.

“No international flights will be allowed to land in Pakistan for two weeks.”

As of Saturday, Pakistan had tested 4,046 people for the virus, with 524 positive cases and three deaths.

Yusuf said a few flights already en route to Pakistan would be able to land Sunday morning, adding that diplomats coming to Pakistan as well as cargo planes would be exempted.

According to Yusuf, the suspension will “certainly create problems”, as Pakistan was expecting more than 200,000 passengers, including tourists, by end of March.

Observers fear the virus could spread quickly in the country of 215 million people, where health care is frequently inadequate.

Pakistan’s porous borders, creaking hospitals, a culture of shaking hands and hugging, and large illiterate populations in crowded urban centers mean containing the crisis could be a huge challenge.

To prevent the virus’s transmission, Islamabad has closed the Afghan and Iranian borders, shuttered wedding halls shuttered, and stopped schools for the remainder of the month.

But Prime Minister Imran Khan said early this week Pakistan cannot afford the type of urban lockdowns currently underway in the West.

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Pakistan has a history of failing to contain infectious diseases such as polio, tuberculosis and hepatitis.

[United Arab Emirates] Emirates Airlines suspends flights to dozens more cities (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/21/2020 2:55 PM, AFP, 1973K]
Dubai carrier Emirates Airlines announced Saturday it would suspend flights to dozens more cities, taking its total route closures past 100, in a bid to forestall the spread of coronavirus.

The United Arab Emirates on Friday announced its first two deaths from the disease. Total recorded infections in the UAE stood at 153, of which 38 have recovered.

The latest suspensions by Emirates Airlines take the carrier's total closed routes to 111.

The airline normally serves 159 destinations.

"In response to the latest developments in the COVID-19 outbreak around the world, Emirates is taking extra steps that go above and beyond industry and regulatory requirements to ensure our customers' health and comfort," the company said in a statement.

Emirates said flights to some destinations would be suspended for up to three months while others, including to Paris, Frankfurt and Islamabad "until further notice".

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of coronavirus, particularly in the air transport sector.

The UAE has stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but who are currently outside the country from returning.

[China] China's imported coronavirus cases soar as students, expats flock home (Reuters)
Reuters [3/21/2020 5:29 AM, Engen Tham and Yilei Sun, 5304K]
China reported a record rise in imported coronavirus cases on Friday as students and expatriates returned home from the United States and Europe, sparking fears of a second wave of infections just as the country recovers from the initial outbreak.

All 41 of the new confirmed cases in China were imported from overseas, the country's National Health Commission said on Saturday, bringing the total number of such cases to 269. There were no locally transmitted cases for the third consecutive day.

Beijing and Shanghai were the main entry points for the returnees, many of whom are students studying abroad. They have come back after many campuses in the United States and Europe shut down to stem rapidly rising infection rates there.

Also returning in a flight to safety were China-based expats, as businesses begin to reopen.

While there is no reported transmission of the virus from people arriving from abroad to

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local communities, authorities across China are tightening public health measures.

“Since March 11, when the World Health Organization characterized the epidemic as a pandemic, the cumulative number of imported cases (in China) has risen from 85 to 269, up by 216% and outpacing the 98% increase in the cumulative worldwide confirmed cases during the same period,” Mi Feng, spokesman of the National Health Commission, said at a regular press briefing.

China must strictly prevent the import of the virus from overseas and a rebound in cases, Mi said.

Of the 14 new imported cases in Beijing on Friday, five were Chinese students returning from abroad. Among Shanghai’s record nine cases, five were students flying back from Britain, France and Switzerland.

The southern provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, and the eastern provinces of Shandong and Zhejiang, as well as Shaanxi and Sichuan, all reported cases.

Guangdong’s health commission said on Saturday travelers who enter Guangdong province from abroad will be subject to a 14-day quarantine on arrival either in personal residences or at a centralized quarantine center at the expense of the traveler.

Infected people have also entered China through the major transport hub of Shenzhen, including people making their way back to the mainland from Hong Kong by land.

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While the influx of infections from overseas remains modest, they present a potential threat to Chinese authorities keen to restart factories and get consumers to spend again.

Analysts have slashed forecasts for China’s first-quarter gross domestic product to levels not seen since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, with all sectors of the economy hammered by the coronavirus outbreak this year.

The total number of confirmed cases in mainland China stood at 81,008 at the end of Friday, the health authority said. The death toll was 3,255, up by seven, a much slower rate than at the height of the crisis.

The lack of locally transmitted cases for the third day running underscored a recovery that has prompted officials to relax restrictions, even in the virus epicenter of Wuhan.

On Saturday, the official Xinhua news agency said commercial outlets in residential communities and villages without existing cases of virus can resume business, citing the municipal bureau of commerce.

The first phase of a clinical trial of a vaccine has kicked off, state-backed Science and Technology Daily reported on Saturday.

The first batch of 36 volunteers, comprising Wuhan residents aged between 18 and 60, will undergo a 14-day quarantine at a centralized location.

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[Thailand] Thailand virus cases rocket to 600 as crisis fears grow (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/22/2020 6:15 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Thailand's confirmed coronavirus cases rose by a third to nearly 600, the kingdom announced Sunday, as fears of a full-blown crisis take hold in a country largely spared until now.

Thailand's health ministry announced the spike was mainly in the capital, but warned residents of Bangkok not to leave and risk spreading the virus around the country.

"We would like you to stay home. Do not travel upcountry," said health ministry official Taweesin Visanuyothin.

Southeast Asia has so far been spared the worst of the pandemic that has swept the world, confining nearly one billion to their homes and killing more than 13,000.

But that could be about to change.

With a boxing stadium and night club among the likely transmission sites, Bangkok has now imposed tough restrictions.

Virtually all public spaces have been shuttered, from shopping malls and beauty parlours to golf courses and swimming pools.

Residents packed out supermarkets over the weekend to stockpile food, fearing a full lockdown.

Transport links are also slowly being severed.

A frontier crossing point near northern city Chiang Rai saw thousands of Thai and Myanmar citizens rushing to get home before land border closures came into effect.

Bangkok Airways and Thai AirAsia have cancelled all international flights while Thai Lion Air has grounded its fleet entirely.

Yet elsewhere in the tropical tourist destination, life continued unabated with beaches in Pattaya and Phuket thronged with sun-seekers.

One doctor at Bangkok's Chulalongkorn hospital warned tougher measures were needed — even calling for three weeks of martial law to force people to self-isolate.

The nation is "on the verge of a crisis" and heading for the Italian model, a doctor told AFP, adding hospitals are already straining under the pressure.

Meanwhile Vietnam on Saturday imposed a blanket ban on all foreigners entering the country, even though the number of confirmed cases still hovers below 100.

In under-developed Myanmar and Laos, there is increasing scepticism about claims of zero cases as fears grow for the their decrepit healthcare systems and fragile economies.

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[Japan] An Olympic Showdown: The Rising Clamor to Postpone the Tokyo Summer Games (New York Times)
New York Times [3/21/2020 1:08 PM, Andrew Keh, Matt Futterman, Tariq Panja and Motoko Rich, 23673K]
On July 24, as far as the organizers of the Olympics are still concerned, thousands of athletes will march as scheduled into the national stadium in Tokyo for the opening ceremony of the biggest sporting event on the planet. The Summer Olympics.

Is this a vision of reality or just a mirage?

While the international sports calendar has been wiped almost clean by the spread of the coronavirus, the organizers of the 2020 Olympics — seemingly unwilling to meddle just yet with years of planning and billions of dollars in television rights and other anticipated revenue — insist the Games can go on.

Yet now, in a showdown over public safety, the organizers are facing a remarkable groundswell of criticism and pushback from their own athletes, fans and national Olympic officials, who are increasingly and unusually vocal in calling for a postponement.

One of the biggest cracks in the usual solidarity behind the Games came Friday when U.S.A. Swimming, which governs the sport in the United States and regularly produces stars at the Games like Katie Ledecky and Simone Manuel, called for a postponement because of the growing obstacles to training amid practical restrictions imposed by the virus. The following day, U.S.A. Track & Field, which along with swimming has produced the most medals for the United States, also requested a delay.

Norway's national Olympic committee, in a statement on Friday, became the first to clearly state a preference for the Olympics to be delayed until the global pandemic can be brought under control. The Brazilian Olympic committee on Saturday also endorsed postponing the Games until 2021.

There were signs of pressure within Japan, with a member of its Olympic committee coming out in favor of postponing the Games.

"Opening the Olympics at a time when athletes could not train as much as they wanted to runs counter to the motto of 'athletes first,'" Kaori Yamaguchi, a member of the Japanese Olympic committee board who won a bronze medal in judo in the 1988 Seoul Olympics, said in an interview with The Asahi Shimbun. "The Games should be postponed."

Hayley Wickenheiser, a six-time Canadian Olympian and a member of the I.O.C. Athletes' Commission, has denounced the plan to go forward. "I think the IOC insisting this will move ahead with such conviction is insensitive and irresponsible given the state of humanity," she wrote Tuesday on Twitter.

Thomas Bach, the president of the International Olympic Committee, said in an interview Thursday that the Games would not be canceled. And while he left open the possibility of postponing them, he said a decision did not have to be made soon.

"Nobody today can tell you what the developments are tomorrow, what they are in one month, not to mention in more than four months," Bach said, justifying the wait-and-see

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approach.

But in reality the organizers may not have that much time, and in many ways, outside forces could be making the decision for Bach.

Japan has travel bans and strict quarantining measures imposed on visitors from scores of countries, and a recent national poll showed that a large majority of people there did not believe the Games could proceed as planned.

Broadcasters and marketers are fretting about a sports calendar already upended by cancellations and postponements involving nearly every other league and major event in the world — which, among other challenges, would make it difficult for marquee athletes like N.B.A. superstars to come to Tokyo. Even NBC, the American broadcaster that has great sway with the organizers, has prepared for the possibility that the Games will be shifted to next year or farther down the road, by taking out the necessary insurance protections, though it has yet to make any major logistical preparations.

And then there is the negotiating partner that cannot be reasoned with: the Covid-19 virus itself, which has torn an uncontrollable, unpredictable path across the global map, yielding a cascade of consequences that have altered the fabric of daily life.

The modern Olympics are a multibillion-dollar, made-for-television extravaganza that serve as an investment vehicle for scores of sponsors and media partners and as a source of entertainment for millions of fans.

But the heart of the Games remains the athletes, and so it was no surprise that the calls for postponement only seemed to gain traction in recent days, as their cries and concerns grew louder and more explicit.

The outcry arrived almost simultaneously with a rash of restrictions on movement and public gatherings and a sharp rise this week in coronavirus cases in Europe and North America — all of it clashing with Mr. Bach's advice that athletes should train "full steam ahead," as if the Games would still occur in late July and early August.

Many found the I.O.C.'s stance tone deaf. Not only have athletes in affected countries struggled to maintain their elite-level training routines, but stubbornly trying to do so might exacerbate the spread of the virus.

"I recognize they're treading a light line: They're conscious of the brands, they're conscious of the impact on the Japanese economy, and they're in a precarious position," Iñaki Gómez, a member of the Canadian Olympic Athletes' Commission, said of the I.O.C. "But for me, I think that all has to go out the window. We're trying to contain something that's unprecedented in the last 100 years."

Some American gymnasts, who tend to be a centerpiece of the Games, are also openly calling for a postponement.

"For all of those athletes in the U.S., but also globally, like in Italy and in China, who are on complete lockdowns, I think it would make it a fairer competition in Tokyo if the Olympics were postponed to give everyone the time they need to be ready," said Laurie Hernandez, a

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2016 gold medal winner who has been scrambling to find a place to train since her gym in California closed its doors on Thursday night because of the state's shelter-in-place order.

The president of U.S.A. Gymnastics, Li Li Leung, said Friday that the organization would survey its athletes before deciding whether to take a position on postponing the Games.

The United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee, however, said it would continue to endorse the I.O.C.'s wait-and-see approach. That decision provoked the ire of athletes, and hours later U.S.A. Swimming added its voice to those calling for postponing the Games.

"Pressing forward amidst the global health crisis this summer is not the answer," Tim Hinchey, the chief executive of U.S.A. Swimming, wrote in a letter to the U.S.O.P.C.

Mr. Bach had acknowledged the day before that in some corners of the I.O.C.'s headquarters in Lausanne, Switzerland, alternative plans were being weighed.

Given that canceling the Games entirely was ruled out this week by the I.O.C., many analysts now believe that the most logical decision would be to wait a year, when it is hoped the world will have emerged from the worst of the pandemic.

That could disrupt other big events, including world championships for swimming and for track and field that are scheduled in 2021.

Whatever decision is made, Mr. Bach has repeatedly insisted that it would not be driven by financial interests. Still, I.O.C. executives have been in constant contact with leading sponsors and broadcast executives.

The I.O.C. derives roughly half of its revenues from its media partners, and about 75 percent of those come from NBC, which in 2014 agreed to pay $7.75 billion for all the U.S. media rights to the Olympics through 2032. (That is an average of $1.29 billion for each Games from 2022 to 2032, 17 percent more than the average fee of $1.1 billion the NBC committed for the 2014-2020 Games.)

Brian Roberts, the chief executive of Comcast, which owns NBC, said at a conference in San Francisco this month that the company had insurance to guarantee it would incur "no losses" should the Games be postponed this year.

At this point, in fact, pushing ahead with the Olympics this summer could cause scheduling conflicts for NBC.

The network televises the N.H.L. and England's Premier League, both of which are on hiatus but intend to finish their seasons. Their rescheduled games may ultimately conflict with the Olympics, which NBC shows on several channels through its parent company, NBCUniversal.

In a statement, NBC promised to "continue to do the best we can to be prepared to stand behind any decision made by the I.O.C., the Japanese government and the world health officials with whom they are working regarding the 2020 Olympics."

Every media agreement is different, but Neal Pilson, the former president of CBS Sports

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and a former media consultant to the I.O.C., said many deals are set up so that the broadcaster partners do not have to pay the bulk of the fees for each Olympics until just before the Games actually begin. That means the I.O.C. would have to wait for its money in the event of a postponement.

Pilson said the idea of staging the Olympics with just athletes and no spectators — effectively making it a global television event — would not solve the central problem of how many people are required simply to run the Games. NBC alone is expected to take roughly 2,000 people to Japan. In addition, the Olympics typically require more than 50,000 workers, support staff and volunteers.

“Delaying to October doesn’t really work, because you don’t really know how much better things will be then,” Mr. Pilson said. “That brings you back to the idea that postponing for a year is probably the best solution.”

Michael Lynch, the former director of global sponsorship marketing for Visa who now consults with Olympic sponsors, said the uncertainty surrounding the Games had put companies that spent $100 million or more to partner with the I.O.C. in a bind at a difficult moment for all businesses. All have advertising, promotions, retail engagements, hospitality and other events planned for Tokyo during the Games. All typically spend one to three dollars supporting those efforts for every dollar they devoted to buying Olympic sponsorship rights.

“How do you invite people to the Games at this time?” Mr. Lynch said.

While Mr. Bach said the I.O.C. had no cash-flow issues, there are other entities that rely on payments from the Olympics to finance their operations, including the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee. The U.S.O.P.C. has a revenue-sharing arrangement with the I.O.C. that gives it about 12 percent of the fees from NBC and roughly 20 percent of the I.O.C.’s sponsorship revenue.

The broadcast payments alone, which totaled $169 million from the Summer Games in 2016 and $121 million from the Winter Games in 2018, account for about half of the U.S.O.P.C.’s revenues. Because the payment is not made until after the Games have occurred, a delay could cause a serious financial shortfall for the organization.

Even if the I.O.C. does decide that the Olympics should be postponed, it must find some harmony with the wants and needs of the host nation.

It was four years ago, at the closing ceremony of the 2016 Games in Rio de Janeiro, that Japan assumed control of the Summer Olympics spotlight. That night, Shinzo Abe, the prime minister of Japan, emerged from a green drainpipe dressed as Super Mario, the popular video game character. For the normally staid politician, the appearance signaled in colorful terms the depth of his commitment to what could be the defining project of his legacy.

Since being awarded the Games in 2013, Japan has invested tens of billions of dollars as the partner of the I.O.C. Navigating the current crisis, then, has become a test of pride for the country’s government and its Olympic committee officials, and in the current predicament over possible postponement, they hold many of the cards.

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Until recently, their public statements reflected a show-must-go-on mentality, but within the last two weeks, cracks have started to appear.

On March 10, Haruyuki Takahashi, a member of the local organizing committee, suggested that a delay of one or two years would be the most prudent option if the Olympics could not be held as planned. Though he was forced to apologize, a shift seemed to have begun.

Mr. Abe, in a video conference call Monday with the leaders of the Group of 7 countries, said, “I want to hold the Olympics and Paralympics perfectly, as proof that the human race will conquer the new coronavirus, and I gained support for that from the G-7 leaders.”

The fact the prime minister did not specifically mention holding the Games in 2020 signaled to some that he was starting to accept the idea of a delay.

Speaking in Parliament two days later, Mr. Abe’s deputy, Taro Aso, who is also the finance minister, referred to prior Olympics that were disrupted by world events, including the 1940 Games, which were canceled because of World War II, and the 1980 Moscow Olympics, boycotted by 65 nations including the United States and Japan.

“This time, it doesn’t make sense if others cannot attend from other countries, even if Japan alone will become all right,” Mr. Aso said.

“As the prime minister said, it’s desirable to hold the Olympics in an environment where everyone feels safe and happy,” Mr. Aso added. “But that’s not something Japan alone can decide.”

Close watchers of the government said that a decision most likely had not yet been made, but that Mr. Abe was signaling a willingness to consider options.

His recent comment to the Group of 7 “is a strategic ambiguity,” said Kunihiko Miyake, a former Japanese diplomat now teaching at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. “In these cases, what is not said is the most important.”

Even though the Olympic flame arrived in Japan from Greece on Friday, the Japanese public already seemed farther along in accepting a postponement than the government. In a poll released Monday by Kyodo News, a Japanese news service, close to 70 percent of respondents said they did not expect the Tokyo Games to go on as scheduled.

Amid all this, the hunger for the Olympics remains strong.

Mr. Abe and Mr. Bach have both alluded to the fact that the Games could have the power to bring people together and help the world heal after the horrors of the pandemic.

“Tokyo could end up staging the greatest Olympics ever,” Michael Payne, a longtime former marketing director at the I.O.C., said. “It would be the celebration of the world having come through this very difficult time.”

But the almost impossible task, now, is somehow ensuring that such a celebration would not be premature.

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[North Korea] North Korea says it received a letter from Trump (CNN)
CNN [3/21/2020 5:04 PM, Jennifer Hauser, 5551K]
North Korea said President Donald Trump sent Kim Jong Un a personal letter in which he expressed his willingness to help with "anti-epidemic work," according to North Korea state-run media KCNA early Sunday.

"We regard it as a good judgment and proper action for the U.S. president to make efforts to keep the good relations he had with our Chairman by sending a personal letter again at a time as now when big difficulties and challenges lie in the way of developing the bilateral relations, and think that this should be highly estimated .... In the letter, he also explained his plan to propel the relations between the two countries of the DPRK and the U.S. and expressed his intent to render cooperation in the anti-epidemic work, saying that he was impressed by the efforts made by the Chairman to defend his people from the serious threat of the epidemic," according to a statement by Kim Yo Jong, first vice department director for WPK Central Committee, as reported by KCNA.

More than 300,000 people have contracted the virus worldwide and at least 11,570 have died, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.
More than 280 people have now died from the novel coronavirus in the United States.

CNN has reached out to both the White House and National Security Council for comment.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link

Presidential Tweets

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet1 [3/21/2020 9:21 AM] Great story. Thank you to Mr. Young of Jonesboro, Arkansas! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet2 [3/21/2020 10:31 AM] HYDROXYCHLOROQUINE & AZITHROMYCIN, taken together, have a real chance to be one of the biggest game changers in the history of medicine. The FDA has moved mountains - Thank You! Hopefully they will BOTH (H works better with A, International Journal of Antimicrobial Agents).....be put in use IMMEDIATELY. PEOPLE ARE DYING, MOVE FAST, and GOD BLESS EVERYONE! @US_FDA @SteveFDA @CDCgov @DHSgov

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet3 [3/21/2020 11:14 PM] Thank you! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet4 [3/21/2020 11:19 PM] Thank you David, so true! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet5 [3/21/2020 11:46 PM] Thank you @JennPellegrino @OANN [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

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Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet6 [3/21/2020 10:53 PM] CHINESE VIRUS FACT CHECK [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

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