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

July 1, 2022

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
Fifth Release

Dear Mr. Hart:

This letter is the fifth 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 593 pages of records were reviewed for this interim production. These 593 pages of records were located pursuant to a search of the Director's Office. After review of these documents, ICE has determined that 267 pages were duplicative. The responsive 326 pages of records are attached and have been marked 2021-ICLI-00064 894 to 2021-ICLI-00064 1219.

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

FOIA Exemption 5 protects inter-agency or intra-agency deliberative process privilege, attorney work-product privilege, or attorney-client privilege information. Exemption 5 protects the integrity of the decision-making processes within the agency by exempting from mandatory disclosure opinions, conclusions, and recommendations included within inter-agency or intra-agency memoranda or letters. The release of this internal information would discourage the expression of candid opinions and inhibit the free and frank exchange of information among agency personnel.

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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,

MERONICA D STONEY Digitally signed by MERONICA D STONEY Date: 2022.07.01 12:06:59 -04'00'

Meronica D. Stoney
(A)Litigation Team Supervisor

Enclosure(s): 326 page(s)

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

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

From: DHS Daily
Sent: Tue, 24 Mar 2020 05:51:32 -0400
To: (b)(6); @techmis.com
Subject: DHS Morning Briefing (3-24-20)
Attachments: DHS Morning Briefing (3-24-20).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: Tuesday, March 24, 2020 6:00 AM ET

Top News

Senate negotiators cite progress on coronavirus bill after day of drama and rancor (Washington Post)

Pentagon to deploy field hospitals to New York, Seattle (The Hill)

U.S. military to send field hospitals to New York, Seattle (Reuters)

Military field hospitals heading to New York City and Seattle this week to fight coronavirus (Washington Times)

8,000 National Guard deployed across all states and territories: 'It's like we have 54 different hurricanes' (Washington Examiner)

State Department says 13,500 Americans stranded abroad have asked for help (Washington Post)

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U.S. to bring home stranded Americans using planes that deport immigrants (Los Angeles Times)

Americans stranded overseas grow frustrated with State Dept. response (ABC News)

Esper further restricts Pentagon access as coronavirus spreads (The Hill)

Esper says military 'can't meet everybody's needs' as coronavirus outbreak escalates (CNN)

Defense Secretary Mark Esper: In coronavirus fight, US military is on the front lines (FOX News)

Esper says coronavirus needs taking toll on military resources (Washington Examiner)

In Pandemic, Justice Dept. Seeks Video Court Hearings and Home Detention (New York Times)

Justice Department responds to 'confusion' about 'emergency powers' request during coronavirus outbreak (Washington Examiner)

Justices Back Broader Review of Deportation Orders (Bloomberg)

Pence says officials will weigh potential adjustments to social distancing guidelines (The Hill)

Trump team fiercely debates how long coronavirus restrictions should stay in place (The Hill)

Trump considering loosening coronavirus guidelines amid growing economic fallout (ABC News)

Hispanic Democrats demand funding for multilingual coronavirus messaging (The Hill)

White House: Mobile beds, faster tests coming (USA Today)

FDA Warns Americans to Beware of Fake COVID-19 Test Kits (US News & World Report)

States see surge of scams, price-gouging tied to pandemic (The Hill)

How scammers are trying to exploit the pandemic (CBS News)

Trump Signs Executive Order Cracking Down On Price Gouging For Masks, Ventilators (Daily Caller)

We're going to come for you': Trump trade czar Peter Navarro warns medical supply 'hoarders' (Washington Examiner)

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White House Not Using Defense Powers To Boost Medical Supplies (Public Radio WNMU)

Trump privately says he's facing pressure over refusal to use Defense Production Act (CNN)

FDA relaxes rules to boost auto companies making ventilators for coronavirus effort (Washington Examiner)

Breakthrough' self-swab test kits coming soon, coronavirus task force coordinator says (Washington Examiner)

U.S. Coronavirus Cases reach 35,000, Trump Signs 'Major' Disaster Declarations (US News & World Report)

The Virus Can Be Stopped, but Only With Harsh Steps, Experts Say (New York Times)

Coronavirus Pandemic Is Accelerating, WHO's Tedros Says (Bloomberg)

WHO chief: 'Pandemic is accelerating' (The Hill)

Defense Department reports jump in coronavirus cases and one death (Washington Examiner)

Trump weighs restarting economy despite warnings from U.S. public health officials (Washington Post)

Delta to Park Half of Fleet on $2 Billion Sales Drop (Bloomberg)

US airlines drafting plans for potential shutdown: report (The Hill)

How the coronavirus outbreak is affecting the U.S. criminal justice system (ABC News)

Despite coronavirus warnings, federal Bureau of Prisons still transporting inmates: Sources (ABC News)

U.S. prison union official urges halt to inmate transfers due to coronavirus spread (Reuters)

[NY] Cuomo directs nurses to 'enlist' as state looks to double bed capacity (Politico)

[NY] N.Y.'s Javits Center to Add 2,000 Beds to System Under Strain (Bloomberg)

[NY] Cuomo commands New York hospitals to increase available beds by 50 percent as coronavirus cases increase by more than 4,800 (Washington Examiner)

[NY] U.S. states, cities desperate for coronavirus help, military prepares (Reuters)

[NY] New York City's Javits Center transforming into field hospital for coronavirus patients (CBS News)

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[NY] Virus cases top 20,000 in NY as new restrictions start (San Francisco Chronicle)

[KY] Kentucky gov orders nonessential businesses to close (AP)

[FL] Florida officials say at least 1,000 test positive for virus (AP)

[LA] Louisiana virus cases surge; Edwards plans primetime address (San Francisco Chronicle)

[IL] Illinois sees three new deaths, nearly 300 new cases, of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)

[OR] Oregon Gov. Kate Brown Orders Residents to Stay Home Amid Coronavirus Pandemic (US News & World Report)

[OR] Man stole thousands of N95 masks, police say. They were recovered and are now being donated. (USA Today)

[CA] L.A. County increases coronavirus testing capacity, securing 20,000 new tests (Los Angeles Times)

[CA] Coronavirus cases in California pass 2,000. Here is what you need to know (Los Angeles Times)

[CA] Trump approves disaster declaration for coronavirus in California (The Hill)

[CA] Newsom says California needs 30,000 more hospital beds than anticipated for coronavirus patients (Los Angeles Times)

[CA] Navy hospital ship deploying Monday to Los Angeles (The Hill)

[CA] Trump approves federal aid for California (San Francisco Chronicle)

[CA] Southern California police to patrol with drones during coronavirus lockdown: report (FOX News)

[CA] Some California beaches closed to deter crowds amid outbreak (AP)

[AK] Alaska Democrats cancel in-person primary voting (San Francisco Chronicle)

[HI] Cruise Ship Passengers Bused to Flights Out of Honolulu (US News & World Report)

[Mexico] Trump administration delays court hearings for asylum-seekers in Mexico amid pandemic: report (The Hill)

[Mexico] U.S. postpones court hearings for asylum-seekers in Mexico over coronavirus (CBS News)

[Mexico] Trump administration postpones immigration hearings for migrants waiting in Mexico (CNN)

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[Mexico] Hearings for 'Remain in Mexico' migrants delayed, DHS says (Washington Times)

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

[TX] Mexican man dies in ICE custody; 10th since October (Breitbart)

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Trump extends Real ID deadline amid coronavirus crisis (Washington Post)

Customs and Border Protection

U.S. troops remain at southern border despite waning migration, as coronavirus spreads elsewhere (Los Angeles Times)

Illegal border crossings drop by half amid coronavirus pandemic, DHS says (The Hill)

Illegal Border Crossings Drop By Half Under Coronavirus Shutdown (Daily Caller)

Hung out to dry': Border Patrol agents say agency doing too little to protect them against coronavirus (Washington Examiner)

[TX] Fake, Unsealed Cleaning Products Seized by CBP at Texas Border Crossing (Breitbart)

Transportation Security Administration

More TSA agents test positive for coronavirus; new cases identified at New York, New Jersey, Orlando airports (FOX News)

Secret Service

Secret Service employee tests positive for the coronavirus (Washington Times)

Secret Service employee who tested positive for coronavirus had no contact with Trump (Washington Examiner)

Court grapples with White House's right to suspend press passes (Politico)

[CT] Connecticut State Police warn against COVID-19 scams (Westerly Sun)

[PA] Police seize marijuana in East Side raid (New Castle News)

[KY] State police make cold case arrest, probe shooting in I-71 corridor counties (WTVQ)

[KY] Three arrests made in connection to 31-year-old KSP cold case murder investigation in Gallatin County (Northern KY Tribune)

[GA] Columbus police release surveillance photos of counterfeit money suspect (WTVM)

AMERICAN OVERSIGHT

[MN] Man Charged With Using Counterfeit Money To Buy Food, Lotto Tickets (KNSI)

[WY] Rock Spring PD Warn Of Counterfeit Bills Being Circulated (Oil City News)

[Canada] Counterfeit money suspects nabbed after trying to flee from Orillia OPP (OrilliaMatters)

CISA/Cybersecurity

As Coronavirus Surveillance Escalates, Personal Privacy Plummets (New York Times)

WHO unsuccessfully targeted by hackers earlier this month: report (The Hill)

Elite Hackers Target WHO as Coronavirus Cyberattacks Spike (Reuters)

[MO] Ameren Missouri Equipment Supplier Targeted In Ransomware Attack (St. Louis Public Radio)

Terrorism Investigations

[OK] Man Convicted of Trying to Blow Up Oklahoma City Bank Gets 25 Years in Prison (New York Times)

National Security News

Grenell taps new acting director of National Counterterrorism Center (The Hill)

Intelligence leadership shuffled again as broader reforms continue (CBS News)

Acting Director Of National Intelligence Taps First-Ever Woman To Lead National Counterterrorism Center (Daily Caller)

Coronavirus confinement challenges intelligence services (Breitbart)

US launches hypersonic glide body test in race to catch up with China and Russia (Washington Examiner)

New Army technology can track and destroy maneuvering cruise missiles (FOX News)

As Virus Reaches War Zones, UN Chief Calls for Global Cease-Fire (Bloomberg)

U.N. chief wants $2 billion to help poor countries combat coronavirus (Reuters)

[Cuba] Cuba Coronavirus Cases Rise as People Lack Soap and Water (Breitbart)

[South Africa] South Africa Orders Three-Week Lockdown to Curb Virus Spread (Bloomberg)

[Iran] Iran reports 127 new coronavirus deaths, raising toll to 1,812 (Breitbart)

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[Iran] Iranian Officials Stole More Than $1 Billion in Coronavirus Funds, Pompeo Says (Free Beacon)

[Afghanistan] Video Chat With the Taliban Keeps Afghan Peace Deal on Life Support (New York Times)

[Afghanistan] U.S. vows to cut $1 billion in aid to Afghanistan as political crisis threatens peace deal (Washington Post)

[Afghanistan] US slashes aid to Afghanistan by $1B as power struggle threatens Taliban peace deal (Washington Examiner)

[Afghanistan] Coronavirus threatens to undermine Afghan peace plan (The Hill)

[Pakistan] Pakistan approves military deployment to curb virus (Breitbart)

[United Arab Emirates] Emirates reverses decision to suspend all passenger flights (Breitbart)

[United Arab Emirates] Dubai's vast malls to close under UAE plan to curb virus (Breitbart)

[India] World's Biggest Lockdown Triggers Record Stocks Crash in India (Bloomberg)

[Russia] Russia is underreporting coronavirus cases, Russian doctor says (Public Radio International)

[China] Trump's China tariffs hampered US coronavirus preparedness, expert says (Public Radio International)

[China] China sees drop in new coronavirus cases; all of them imported (Reuters)

[China] Marine Corps plans to scrap tank battalions, trim infantry to counter China with lighter force (Washington Times)

[China] China-Owned TikTok Hires American Professors for 'Content Council' (Breitbart)

[North Korea] North Korea still officially claims zero coronavirus cases (Public Radio International)

[South Korea] South Korea sees lowest coronavirus case increase to date, tightens border over fears of imported infections (FOX News)

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.

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Top News

Senate negotiators cite progress on coronavirus bill after day of drama and rancor (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/24/2020 12:31 AM, Erica Werner, Paul Kane, Rachael Bade, and Mike DeBonis, 12625K] Video: HERE
Senate leaders and the Trump administration neared bipartisan agreement Monday night on a massive stimulus bill that could inject $2 trillion into the economy to blunt the impacts of the coronavirus.

After a day of partisan rancor and posturing on Capitol Hill, the outlook grew markedly more positive later in the afternoon, when offers and counteroffers were exchanged. Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) convened Democrats on a conference call and told them he was hopeful about striking a deal by the end of the day, according to a person familiar with the call who spoke on the condition of anonymity to reveal details.

Schumer was very upbeat, according to another Democrat, who listened into the call and spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe it. Some senators encouraged Schumer to announce a deal in principle Monday evening, but several issues remained unresolved.

So after hours of negotiations that wrapped up shortly before midnight, Schumer and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin prepared to leave the Capitol without a deal in hand, but optimistic they could announce one Tuesday morning.

“Secretary Mnuchin called the president, we told him we were very, very close to an agreement; he seemed very happy with that and wanted us to try to — get us to get it done tomorrow,” Schumer told reporters.

Mnuchin said there are “still documents that are going to be reviewed tonight and are going to be turned around,” but added that he was “very hopeful” of a deal Tuesday morning.

At the White House earlier, President Trump also told reporters that a deal was near.

“They have to get together and just stop with the partisan politics, and I think that’s happening,” Trump said. “I got a call a little while ago, I guess they are getting closer. It should go quickly and it must go quickly. It’s not really a choice. They don’t have a choice. They have to make a deal.”

Overall, the legislation is aimed at flooding the economy with capital to revive businesses and households that have been knocked off course by fears about the virus’s rapid spread. Though details remained fluid, the legislation would include direct payments of $1,200 to many American adults and $500 to children, and would create roughly $850 billion in loan and assistance programs for businesses, states and cities. There would also be large spending increases for the unemployment insurance program, as well as hospitals and health-care providers that are being overwhelmed by the crisis.

Democratic concerns have focused on a $500 billion funding program Republicans want to create for loans and loan guarantees, with some Democrats calling it a “slush fund” that

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lacks any oversight because the Treasury Department would have broad discretion over who receives the money. Asked about this Monday evening, Trump responded, “I’ll be the oversight.”

There is little precedent for a program with a similar size and scope. Republicans have said the funding would be handled appropriately and that a cash infusion of this scale is necessary to address a major economic crisis. As a final step in talks Monday, Senate negotiators were working on putting an oversight mechanism in place.

The situation was in flux, and a handful of issues awaited final resolution Monday evening after four straight days of unsuccessful attempts to finalize a deal — including two procedural votes that Democrats blocked.

Presuming a deal is clinched, lawmakers and administration officials are hoping for swift passage through both chambers of Congress. How the House would process the legislation remains to be determined as House members are currently out of session and seemed unlikely to return en masse to vote, but several options were under review.

Unresolved issues as of Monday evening included several under the jurisdiction of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, related to student loans and other issues, according to one Democratic aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations. Negotiators were also working on how to tailor large pots of money that were supposed to be disbursed to the airline industry, state governments and others.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.), leaving a Senate GOP leadership meeting Monday evening, said Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) gave a positive report about the state of the talks, suggesting that some Democratic demands had been dropped or addressed.

Cornyn described three-way talks among the White House, Senate Democrats and Senate Republicans, and said they were keeping in touch about potential pitfalls that might imperil a final deal.

The upbeat assessments marked a positive turn after Democrats blocked the rescue bill earlier in the day. This was part of a rancorous chain of events, with lawmakers venting fury about their failed efforts to address the pandemic’s impact on the U.S. economy. Even senators who are typically careful and measured erupted in anger at their colleagues as the process kept bogging down.

“This is unbelievable,” Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) exclaimed at one point.

Ahead of the procedural vote, senators clashed angrily over the delays. Some lawmakers had hoped to reach an agreement three days ago, but talks kept breaking down even as they negotiated throughout the weekend. Meanwhile the nation was reeling from the health consequences and economic pain inflicted by the virus.

Democrats have argued that the Senate GOP bill is disproportionately tilted toward helping companies and needs to extend more benefits to families and health-care providers. Republicans have countered that the measure offers unprecedented financial assistance to

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the entire economy and needs to be passed before more people lose their jobs. Some economists have projected that more than 3 million people were laid off last week as businesses and consumers pulled back, and those numbers are only expected to grow.

The vote Monday was 49 to 46, well short of the 60-vote threshold needed to advance the legislation for a final debate.

“This has got to stop, and today is the day it has to stop,” an exasperated McConnell said. “The country is out of time.”

McConnell accused Democrats of holding up the sorely needed rescue package so they can try to add extraneous provisions sought by special interests and organized labor. Democrats have refused to support the key procedural vote that would make it easier to pass the bill, with many complaining that the legislation did not include much transparency into which businesses could receive hundreds of billions of dollars in emergency loans.

Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) said that the bill, with its $500 billion program for businesses, states and cities, makes the Senate look “more focused on the big corporations and the health of Wall Street than we are on the health care of the people in rural America and Main Street.” The Trump administration would have wide latitude to disburse these loans and loan guarantees, a dynamic that has given numerous Democrats pause. The Senate bill also includes a $350 billion program to help small businesses meet payroll costs, which is meant to stem the rising tide of layoffs.

Speaking on the Senate floor hours ahead of his conference call with fellow Democrats, Schumer insisted he was continuing to negotiate in good faith with Mnuchin and hoped to secure a deal as long as he could ensure that worker protections were included and that the fund for industries had appropriate controls.

“We have an obligation to get the details right, get them done quickly,” Schumer said. “That doesn’t mean blindly accepting a Republican-only bill.”

As the markets fell Monday, the Senate floor descended into an uproar as Collins sought recognition to speak, which Schumer objected to, prompting Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) to exclaim, “This is bullshit!”

The fiery developments reflected rising tensions among lawmakers over the nation’s predicament and what’s happening in the Senate itself; Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) announced Sunday that he has covid-19, and four other GOP senators are quarantined. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) disclosed Monday that her husband, too, is infected with the virus.

But despite the acrimony, negotiations continued. The White House and lawmakers were continuing to push ahead because of obvious signs that major parts of the U.S. economy are reeling. The Dow Jones industrial average has lost more than 10,000 points in six weeks. With more than 40,000 confirmed covid-19 cases in the United States, the effects of the crisis are growing worse.

A number of states are directing citizens to stay home to avoid more contagion, putting pressure on businesses that are losing workers and customers. Many of these companies

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have rushed to Washington seeking emergency assistance, and health-care providers are overrun and in dire need of testing kits and safety equipment.

Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) advised everyone to "assume the appropriate distance and take a deep breath." Several hours later, signs of optimism appeared from both parties, and White House officials became more hopeful that a deal was within reach.

Even as senators were clashing on one side of the Capitol on Monday, on the other side House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) was holding a news conference to unveil House Democrats' version of the stimulus bill. Pelosi's $2.5 trillion-plus package would send $1,500 to individual Americans; pump money into the health-care system, unemployment insurance and schools; and — according to a draft circulating Monday — require airlines and other companies that receive aid to pay a $15-an-hour minimum wage.

"Democrats take responsibility for our workers," Pelosi said. "We require that any corporation that takes taxpayer dollars must protect their workers' wages and benefits — not CEO pay, stock buybacks or layoffs."

But if the House charts its own course on a competing piece of legislation, it could take even longer to arrive at a bipartisan consensus that can pass both chambers and get signed into law.

The $500 billion in loan programs in the Senate bill includes $425 billion for companies, states and cities, though it doesn't prescribe many terms to dictate how the Treasury Department would determine who received the assistance. An additional $50 billion would go to helping passenger airline companies, $8 billion for cargo air companies and $17 billion to help firms deemed important for national security.

At the insistence of Democrats, who were participating in drafting the bill before bipartisan talks broke down over the weekend, more than $100 billion is being included for hospitals and some $250 billion to boost unemployment insurance. The sweeping economic package is designed to last for 10 to 12 weeks, after which the administration could revisit whether it would seek additional assistance from Congress.

The huge bill now under negotiation is Congress's third attempt to address the coronavirus crisis. As the scope of the crisis started coming into focus early this month, Congress passed $8.3 billion in emergency spending for the public health system. Then Mnuchin and Pelosi negotiated a $100 billion-plus package that included paid sick leave, a Medicaid expansion, free vaccines and more, which the Senate passed last week despite misgivings by many Senate Republicans over the structure of the paid-sick-leave program.

Along the way, intermittent bipartisanship has given way to occasional partisan outbursts, but partisan rancor now seems to have largely overtaken the process.

Pentagon to deploy field hospitals to New York, Seattle (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 4:13 PM, Ellen Mitchell, 1762K]
The Defense Department is preparing to deploy field hospitals to New York City and Seattle later this week, Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced Monday.

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“Right now, I anticipate sending a [field] hospital to Seattle and a hospital to New York City,” Esper told reporters at the Pentagon, adding, “my aim is to get them out this week.”

He said five such expeditionary units had been given “prepare to deploy orders,” and the Pentagon is looking to send them to other locations as needed.

He said the deployments will include the hospital, equipment and medical professionals. They will be sent once the Federal Emergency Management Agency validates the move.

Washington State has the most confirmed cases of coronavirus on the West Coast while New York has the most such cases on the East Coast.

The Pentagon’s other efforts to help with the outbreak include deploying a Navy hospital ship in San Diego to Los Angeles to help relieve medical facilities expected to become overburdened by coronavirus patients.

The USNS Mercy will treat non-coronavirus patients referred to the ship by hospitals on shore, and it is expected to arrive at the port of Los Angeles "within the week,” Capt. John Rotruck, commanding officer of the ship, told reporters at the Pentagon via teleconference later on Monday.

The USNS Comfort will deploy to New York City to carry out a similar mission but is not expected to leave its port in Virginia until next week.

Esper also announced Monday that the Pentagon’s health protection level had been upgraded to its second highest setting, putting more restrictions on entering the building.

As of Monday morning, 133 service members had tested positive for the coronavirus, as had 44 civilian employees, 35 dependents and 31 contractors, with one contractor death Saturday.

Esper said he has not been tested for the coronavirus but was monitoring his health.

He also for the first time acknowledged that the coronavirus pandemic may affect military readiness down the line.

“If this pandemic continues at the scale and scope of what some are predicting, over time you could start seeing an impact on readiness. ... But nothing to which I fear impacts our mission readiness to conduct our national missions,” he said.

U.S. military to send field hospitals to New York, Seattle (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 8:00 PM, Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, 5304K]
The U.S. military is preparing to deploy field hospitals to New York and Seattle, the Pentagon said on Monday, as its top civilian and military leaders acknowledged for the first time that the coronavirus pandemic could impact military readiness.

U.S. Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the armed forces

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had been preparing administratively since Feb. 1 for the possibility of providing the U.S. government support in a pandemic-like scenario.

But the field hospitals — to be established in the two U.S. cities hardest hit by the pandemic — were the latest in a string of deployment announcements that show how the military has moved from planning to the execution of an expanding support role to the U.S. government's domestic coronavirus response effort.

This includes sending military hospital ships to Los Angeles and New York City and tasking the Army Corps of Engineers to convert hotels and dormitories into treatment facilities for sick patients. Tens of thousands of National Guard are eventually expected to be deployed nationwide.

Milley said the Pentagon had issued prepare-to-deploy orders to 10 expeditionary units that could set up field hospitals.

"What we want to do is make sure that the local communities take care of the coronavirus patient and we can handle the excess capacity that they won't have in terms of trauma ... and other more routine cases," Milley said.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced more security restrictions at the Pentagon, just a day after the first coronavirus death of an employee at a Defense Department agency. Esper said he has not been tested for the coronavirus but has been having his temperature checked.

U.S. TROOPS HOSPITALIZED

Esper said 133 military personnel had been confirmed with the virus so far. Milley said 11 of those cases required hospitalization.

But as the number of infections climb and military exercises are canceled, Esper and Milley both acknowledged military readiness for a potential conflict or crisis could be impacted.

"Typical military planning, I'm going to assume worst case and that there will be some readiness impact to the military in some capacity," Milley said. "I'm just not at a place right now where I can give you an accurate description of what that's going to look like."

Esper predicted the coronavirus would have "more and more impact" on personnel.

"While it may have some impact on readiness, it will not affect our ability to conduct our national security missions," he said.

Military field hospitals heading to New York City and Seattle this week to fight coronavirus (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 10:24 AM, Mike Glenn, 482K]
Patients aboard a U.S. Navy hospital ship sent to Los Angeles to help take the pressure off local medical centers overtaxed by the coronavirus pandemic will already have been seen at a civilian hospital before they ever come aboard.

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The USNS Mercy, which departed San Diego on Monday for its journey to the Port of Los Angeles, will fill its 1,000 hospital beds with patients other than those with COVID-19. The ship, a massive converted supertanker noteworthy for its all-white paint scheme with red crosses, will only be taking transfer patients.

“If they’re an intensive care unit patient, they’ll come to our intensive care unit,” said Navy Capt. John Rotruck, a Navy physician in charge of the medical personnel aboard the Mercy. “If they’re on their hospital’s ward, they’ll come to our ward. We’re prepared to offer a pretty broad range of critical care and other medical care.”

More than 1,000 Navy doctors, nurses and other medical professionals assigned to the hospital ship will be able to handle just about any medical need a patient might have.

“We have a pretty broad surgical capability as well,” Dr. Rotruck said.

Navy officials said the ship won’t be providing any medical service for coronavirus patients. In fact, every patient coming aboard will be screened and tested if necessary. Any patient who comes up positive for COVID-19 will be sent back to the hospital ashore, officials said.

The USNS Comfort, sister ship to the Mercy, is slated to go to New York once its maintenance needs are dealt with in Norfolk, Va., officials said.

Other military services also are joining the fight against the coronavirus. The Army Corps of Engineers has begun converting old hotels, college dormitories and other buildings into temporary medical facilities.

Meanwhile, at least two Army field hospitals are being sent to New York City and Seattle to bolster medical attention in those areas hit hard by the pandemic. Other military hospitals are on standby for possible deployment, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper told reporters at the Pentagon.

While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is ultimately in charge of the operation, Mr. Esper said he envisions the field hospitals, with about 250 beds, filling the gap for treating patients until the Corps of Engineers has finished its work.

“We can then pull out and go on to the next site and again cover that gap for the next city,” Mr. Esper said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will also be setting up a temporary hospital in Seattle. Mr. Esper said he has spoken with almost a dozen governors since the novel coronavirus was first detected in the U.S.

“Each of them has had requests for field hospitals,” Mr. Esper said. “We clearly can’t meet everybody’s needs with what we have in our inventory, so we rely on FEMA to do the assessment, the validation and then the prioritization.”

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8,000 National Guard deployed across all states and territories: 'It's like we have 54 different hurricanes' (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 5:38 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K]
Military deployments in response to the coronavirus pandemic expanded over the weekend to include all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia and three U.S. territories, according to the National Guard.

As of Monday afternoon, the Guard said 8,000 personnel with the Air National Guard and the Army National Guard are deployed nationwide. That figure was up from 400 deployments on March 13 as a result of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases jumping from 2,000 at the time to more than 41,000 by Monday afternoon.

"With COVID-19, it's like we have 54 different hurricanes hitting every state, every territory, and the District of Columbia. Some are Category 5, some are Category 3, and some are Category 1," National Guard chief, Gen. Joseph Lengyel, said in a statement.

The several thousand deployed are just under 2% of the Guard's 450,000 members. Governors must activate the National Guard, then determine where the state or territory needs help. The Guard's members outside the continental United States in Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam were called in since last week.

Guard personnel tasks include delivering food, working at call centers, conducting oral coronavirus tests, and cleaning public places.

Half of all coronavirus cases nationwide are in New York, where 1,800 guardsmen are deployed. They staff six drive-through test sites, which saw a total 3,000 people get tested on Sunday, according to Col. Richard Goldenberg.

In Florida, more than 1,000 personnel assist at testing sites in Broward, Orange, and Miami-Dade counties. Another testing site at Marlins Stadium in downtown Miami is expected to open soon, according to 1st Lt. Tahisha Coleman, spokeswoman for the state Guard's operations.

State Department says 13,500 Americans stranded abroad have asked for help (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 4:33 PM, Carol Morello, 12625K]
The State Department is preparing to evacuate thousands of Americans stranded overseas, with 16 flights scheduled in the next five days and more to follow, officials said Monday.

The officials also said that about 30 State Department employees posted in embassies and consulates abroad have tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Small numbers of employees in six U.S. locations — Washington, Houston, Boston, New York, Seattle and Quantico, Va. — have also tested positive.

A task force assembled by the State Department is working on getting flights out for the 13,500 Americans who have reached out asking for help, officials said.

"Consider whether you are ready to ride out an undetermined period of time where you are

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now, or do you want to go to the United States to wait out events," a senior State Department official said of the advice he is telling diplomats to advise Americans. "If it's the latter, do so now, and that last bit is all caps."

The effort to repatriate Americans has become the main focus of the State Department as it has suspended all routine visa operations and reassigned personnel to the often-complex task of getting people out of countries as borders and airports close.

Many Americans in countries that have imposed travel restrictions have complained that the diplomatic missions have not been reachable or provided inadequate assistance.

Roughly 10 million Americans are expatriates who reside in foreign countries and an unknown number are tourists or abroad on business trips. The State Department already has evacuated 5,000 Americans starting with about 800 flown out Wuhan, China, where the virus originated.

A second official said the State Department expects to evacuate at least 1,600 more Americans over the next five days.

"We prioritize people, taking account of their vulnerability," the official said. "If somebody is 70 years old and has an underlying condition such as diabetes or heart disease, that person has priority over a hale and hearty 20-year-old."

The State Department has adopted new policies for voluntary, authorized departures, so some diplomats and civil servants have returned to the United States. They have been assigned to help evacuate Americans. Other employees have also been enlisted, including some who normally work on economics, diplomatic security, public affairs and legislative affairs.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under State Department rules for briefing reporters, said the window is rapidly closing for commercial flights. In some places, civilians have been flown out on U.S. military flights when space was available. The State Department is working with the Defense Department to see if more flights and spaces can be arranged.

Officials also are working with foreign governments to arrange evacuations on private chartered flights. Flights taking undocumented immigrants back to their countries also are returning to the United States with American civilians.

"We're hearing from people in very remote parts of the world," the first official said. "It's complicated."

In Peru, for example, diplomats are trying to move Americans out of areas reachable only by airplane, at a time when the Peruvians have shut down internal air travel. International flights are limited because the civilian side of the Lima airport has been closed, and the military part of the facility has less capacity.

"I hesitate to guarantee we can move every person," the official said. "But we will move very large numbers."

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U.S. to bring home stranded Americans using planes that deport immigrants (Los Angeles Times)

Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 9:30 PM, Tracy Wilkinson, 1907K]

With pressure mounting over Americans stranded outside the United States because of coronavirus-related travel restrictions, the government plans to use its planes that deport migrants to bring U.S. citizens home, a senior administration official said Monday.

The use of repurposed deportation flights is one of several actions the State Department is taking to retrieve thousands of Americans grounded in foreign countries since the U.S. began closing its borders and barring arrivals from some nations, in an effort to slow the spread of the highly infectious virus. At the same time, commercial airlines dramatically cut back on flights.

“We’re working around the clock to bring U.S. citizens who are stranded overseas back home,” a senior State Department official said, briefing reporters by phone on grounds of anonymity, in keeping with administration protocol. Consular staffs “have been working night and day to help Americans get on flights.”

About 5,000 American citizens in 17 countries have been transported back to the U.S. in recent days through a fleet of commercial, charter and U.S. military flights, the official said. Another 13,500 have asked for help, and 16 more flights are scheduled for the coming days.

Some travelers in Central America were taken home in U.S. Air Force aircraft that were already in the region on routine missions.

In considering other options, the government decided to take advantage of flights commissioned by the Department of Homeland Security to deport thousands of Central American and Mexican migrants who either entered the U.S. illegally or were attempting to seek asylum, the official said. It was not clear if either the migrants or the returning American travelers were getting any medical screenings.

The use of deportation flights, which the administration revealed Monday only under questioning, seemed an unusual move. Some officials in the Central American countries where the U.S. has deported the most migrants have started to bar the flights, citing a fear of spreading disease. Guatemala briefly stopped the flights last week. But the Trump administration has been determined to continue the deportations.

Jesse Curry, 38, a software developer from Tampa, Fla., was vacationing in Lima, Peru, when the crisis erupted and that country’s government shut borders. His numerous flight rebookings were canceled one after another, he said, and only on Saturday was he able, after many efforts, to reach a U.S. official who could help. He submitted information to the U.S. Embassy for himself, his wife, two children, and his mother to eventually get on a flight.

In the meantime, Curry said, he and his family have done their best to stock their Airbnb rental property with provisions and to avoid the streets. “There is a ton of uncertainty,” Curry said in a phone interview from the seaside Lima neighborhood of Miraflores.

Numerous members of Congress complained to Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo that

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their constituents were stranded from Peru to Morocco and unable to find assistance in U.S. embassies and consulates abroad. Many U.S. diplomatic missions have been forced to curtail services because of the pandemic.

Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote Pompeo late last week to demand that the State Department plan additional flights and invoke regulations allowing it to do so.

Some lawmakers' ire peaked over the weekend when Pompeo tweeted that he and his wife, Susan, were staying at home working puzzles as their form of social distancing.

"When you're done with that puzzle, could you please help get my 30+ constituents out of Peru, Guatemala, and other countries where they are stuck right now and getting little or no help from our State Department!?" Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) responded, also via Twitter. "That's a solvable puzzle if we have a competent State Department."

Americans stranded overseas grow frustrated with State Dept. response (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 7:10 PM, Conor Finnegan, 2182K]
With thousands of Americans still stranded overseas after flights were canceled and borders shut to stem the spread of novel coronavirus, the State Department says it is working overtime to get them home -- even as many of those Americans grow frustrated and angry at the slow U.S. response or the unresponsiveness of local U.S. embassies.

Approximately 5,700 Americans have been repatriated from 17 countries to the U.S., according to a senior State Department official. That total includes more than 800 from Wuhan, China -- the original hot zone of the novel coronavirus -- and more than 300 from the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Japan, meaning about 4,600 have returned in recent days, including 1,200 from Morocco and over 600 from Peru.

That's still less than half of those who have reached out to U.S. embassies and consulates around the world asking for help -- a total of at least 13,500 Americans, according to the senior official. To that end, there will be 16 more repatriation flights in the next five days, they added, without offering details on which countries.

The department and its new repatriation task force, led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs Ian Brownlee, are focused on evacuating the most vulnerable first -- those at higher risk of contracting the virus, known as COVID-19, or -- like many Americans who have contacted ABC News -- those running out of life-sustaining medications or food.

But the senior official said they cannot guarantee that they will be able to reach every American.

"I'm hesitant to give a guarantee we can move every single person," the senior official said, especially those in the "most remote locations."

Instead, they urged Americans who can still travel commercially to do so immediately or be prepared to hunker down where they are -- but for thousands, it's already too late.

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To carry out this "unprecedented" operation, the official said, the U.S. government is using a "variety of means," including aircraft from the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. That includes an Air Force aircraft that picked up a women's football team and others from Honduras late last week, and DHS planes that are deporting migrants from the U.S. to Central America and then turning around to bring U.S. citizens home.

But the department is focusing its efforts on chartering commercial aircraft, with the senior official saying that was the most "efficient way." These are paid for using an emergency State Department fund and money collected from those Americans who are repatriated. No one has to pay up front, but they are required to sign a promissory note with a specific sum.

"'Whole of government' is a cliche. This is more of a whole of possibility effort to get people out," said the senior official, briefing reporters Monday, "so no option is foreclosed."

To arrange these flights though, the department has to get permission from local governments, made even more difficult after they've closed their borders, and from U.S. authorities at DHS and the Federal Aviation Administration. The task force has been working around the clock to do that, the official said, for chartered flights arranged by the U.S. or by private companies and citizens.

But it's still unclear how the department chooses which method, in which country and who gets a seat, beyond focusing on the most vulnerable. The State Department did not respond to questions about that on Monday.

After the U.S. military used a military cargo plane to evacuate the women's football team and others from Honduras, two American missionaries in the country told ABC News that they were enrolled in the STEP system with the embassy, but were never offered a seat on a repatriation flight.

"I understand the U.S. is going through a bunch right now, but in our eyes, the fact that they already got a bunch of people out on two C-130's leaves us asking, 'Can you just do one or two more trips?" said Jonathan Garcia, whose flight with American Airlines was canceled after the airliner was forced to halt all flights from Honduras until mid-May. "As of right now, we really are stuck until the government helps us out."

While military aircraft deployed to Honduras, none have been used in Peru, where roughly 2,000 Americans have been stranded by the government's sudden closure of borders and halt to domestic travel.

"This is a very stressful time for all, and it is even more stressful being in a foreign country away from family," said Kimberly Gleason, whose two daughters are stuck in Peru, where one was studying abroad and the other was visiting her. "We are all counting on the help of the United States president to do the right thing and to organize a flight out of the country as soon as possible."

Making matters more confusing for so many is the unresponsiveness of the local U.S. embassy or consulate in many of the countries where Americans are stranded and have reached out to ABC News, including Peru, Ecuador, Namibia, Madagascar, Morocco,

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Indonesia, Australia and Argentina.

"The Trump administration has been completely unresponsive and uncaring about Americans stuck in Peru," said Michelle Schmitt, whose husband Henry and their friend Alan Studley have been stuck in Lima. "There are people there who are in need of money, medicine and a way out. ... Americans are starting to lose hope down there."

These U.S. missions are reportedly overwhelmed by the need and are usually only reaching out to Americans enrolled in STEP once travel options like flights have been arranged. But the lack of response has left many confused as to what, if any plans, are being made to help them.

"The system is working," the senior official said in defense of STEP, after receiving an alert from the embassy in Lima during the briefing.

All last week, as Americans were panicking, that embassy repeatedly referred folks to commercial airliners, even though airspace had already been shut down and flights canceled. Now, two flights have carried a couple hundred people out, with more on the way, the embassy said Monday in its most recent alert.

But the situation there is growing more difficult by the day as the Peruvian government struggles to contain its novel coronavirus outbreak, which has now forced the closure of Lima's international airport. Instead, the government is relying on the airport's military side, which has much less capacity.

The senior official said the U.S. is still awaiting authorization from Peruvian authorities for more flights in and to shepherd hundreds of Americans from remote cities like Cusco and Iquitos to Lima to fly back to the U.S.

Esper further restricts Pentagon access as coronavirus spreads (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 3:01 PM, Ellen Mitchell, 1762K]
Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Monday upgraded the Pentagon's health protection level to its second-highest setting, putting more restrictions on entering the building in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

"Today we are elevating the Pentagon reservation status to Health Protection Condition C," Esper told reporters at a press conference in the building.

"This limits the number of access points to the Pentagon and increases the amount of personnel who would telework, among a few other things."

He added that the latest health protection level could include "some medical screening," including temperature testing.

Defense One was the first to report on the new designation, which lines up with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Level 3 warning for some countries.

The move is the latest in a series of Department of Defense (DOD) measures to limit the

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spread of COVID-19 among its personnel.

On March 16, the DOD implemented new rules for who can enter the building itself, stipulating that all unofficial visits to the Pentagon — to include personal guests and friends of DOD personnel and contractors — are "suspended," as are visits from international partners and visitors.

Prior to that, the department sought to cut staff in the building by encouraging employees to telework and to practice social distancing.

Esper said the number of personnel now working at the Pentagon is "down considerably, maybe 60-some percent if not more."

"There is no intent whatsoever to limit the access to the press and we want to keep the building open for essential personnel and the media."

As of Monday morning, 133 service members had tested positive for the coronavirus — nearly double the number from Friday — with seven in the hospital.

In addition, 44 civilian employees, 35 dependents and 31 contractors have the illness, with one contractor death on Saturday, the first military-related death from virus.

Esper said he had spoken with several infected service members and he was not worried about a slip in readiness as the illness continues to spread.

"As this virus ramps up and spreads, we'll obviously see more and more impact of persons in our ranks. I'm confident that while it may have some impact on readiness, it will not affect our ability to conduct national security missions both at home and abroad," he said.

The Pentagon has scrambled to prevent more coronavirus cases in the military. Earlier this month it suspended almost all nonessential travel for eight weeks for DOD personnel and families, limited access to military installations and canceled or scaled back exercises.

Still, there are now two Pentagon-related coronavirus cases, an active-duty airman and an Air Force contractor who both visited the building in recent weeks.

Esper says military 'can't meet everybody's needs' as coronavirus outbreak escalates (CNN)
CNN [3/23/2020 3:16 PM, Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, 5551K]
Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said Monday that he has received requests for assistance from multiple governors and stated the military "can't meet everybody's needs," as the coronavirus pandemic continues to escalate.

However, he did say that the Pentagon is looking to send military field hospitals to New York and Seattle to help support local medical systems which are struggling to cope with a large number of virus cases. That would be in addition to the hospital ships being sent to New York and Los Angeles and the military working to convert civilian buildings into hospitals.

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"I've spoken with seven, eight, nine, 10 governors so far. Each one of them has had requests for field hospitals. Those who have been along the coastline have talked about the need for ships, so we clearly can't meet everybody's needs with what we have in our inventory so we rely on (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) to do the assessment, validation and then the prioritization," Esper said.

Esper said he has ordered five expeditionary medical facilities to prepare to deploy, though the location of those deployments will depend on guidance from FEMA.

"Right now I anticipate sending a hospital to Seattle and a hospital to New York City and beyond that once that's confirmed we will look at sending to other places, and as necessary we will continue to alert units to prepare to deploy and deploy them as appropriate," Esper added.

The field hospitals are expected to be transported by truck and arrive in New York and Seattle within the next "72 hours or less," Gen. Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a group of reporters later on Monday.

Each hospital has 248 beds of which 48 are ICU beds. The mobile hospitals also each come with 11 ventilators. Several mobile military medical facilities are on "prepare to deploy" orders, but these two are expected to be among the first to go.

The Pentagon has also ordered two of the Navy's hospital ships, the USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy, to deploy to New York City and Los Angeles respectively to help alleviate some of the strain on civilian medical infrastructure.

"We expect to be there within the week and we anticipate being able to begin taking patients the day after we arrive, we definitely have a sense of urgency and want to be there as quickly as we can," Capt. John Rotruck, the commanding officer of the medical facility on the USNS Mercy, said Monday.

The Comfort is expected to arrive in New York later.

Esper said he anticipates the field hospitals being used to temporarily alleviate the strain on civilian hospitals in order to allow the US Army Corps of Engineers to retrofit hotels, convention centers and college dormitories into makeshift hospitals.

"How I foresee our hospitals being used is during the early stages of the pandemic, the virus hitting a city where they're still trying to ramp up capability, bed space, we can come in for a short period of time, for a few weeks to provide that capacity until they get either gyms converted, hotels converted, college dorms converted, all those things that the Corps of Engineers is working on right now," Esper said.

The head of the Army Corps of Engineers said Friday that such retrofitting could take three to four weeks.

"What we're talking about is the need for thousands of beds. We can provide in a field hospital 248 and we only have so many field hospitals so I see us playing this role where

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we're the gap filler for a period of weeks with our capabilities once the capacity is met through these other mechanisms," Esper said, while adding, "We can then pullout and go to the next site and cover again that gap for the next city or locality that is ramping up."

Defense Secretary Mark Esper: In coronavirus fight, US military is on the front lines (FOX News)

FOX News [3/23/2020 10:49 AM, Mark T. Esper, 8943K] Video: HERE

The United States is facing one of the greatest challenges of our time as we fight to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. As thousands of American service members continue to stand watch around the world in defense of our great nation, the U.S. military is also helping to combat the invisible enemy now within our borders.

As part of President Trump's aggressive whole-of-government response, the Department of Defense (DoD) is surging people, capabilities, researchers and equipment to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect the American people. Like other fights, against other enemies, in other times, we will win.

The DoD has been at the forefront of the fight against coronavirus since the early days of our nation's response effort. In January, we provided housing at March Air Reserve Base in California to assist the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in caring for hundreds of State Department employees, dependents and U.S. citizens who were evacuated from Wuhan, China. Our contributions and efforts to the interagency's response has only grown since then, as we simultaneously took major steps to ensure the safety of our military personnel and their families.

Last week, I directed the release of critical supplies from DoD's strategic medical reserves to assist the civilian doctors, nurses and technicians who are on the front lines of this fight. One million N-95 respirator masks and 2,000 deployable ventilators are being provided to HHS for distribution across the country to hospitals where they are needed most. An additional 4 million masks and other protective equipment from these reserves will be distributed to medical facilities in the coming days and weeks, as needed.

Meanwhile, our world-class doctors and scientists are at the forefront of infectious disease research, working alongside other government and private sector efforts to accelerate a vaccine and therapeutics for this virus. These are the same medical researchers whose contributions were critical to the development of vaccines for the Ebola and Zika viruses.

Additionally, we will soon deploy our Navy's two hospital ships, the USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy, to key locations on the East and West Coasts of the United States. These ships, and their exceptional crews of medical professionals, are optimized for trauma support and will supplement non-COVID-19 medical care, thereby freeing up hospital beds for those most affected by the virus. Concurrently, we have alerted a number of military field hospitals and expeditionary medical units to be prepared to deploy around the country to increase the nation's medical capacity.

In the meantime, I continue to speak with governors to offer the DoD's continued assistance with planning, logistics and medical support to their states. Over 7,000 National Guard members are currently mobilized in all 54 states, territories and the District of Columbia

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working in support of state and local authorities, with many more on track to be mobilized in the coming days.

Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers is on the ground in New York and elsewhere, beginning critical work to retrofit existing buildings to provide additional hospital beds and intensive care facilities in the most severely impacted regions of our country. The Corps remains in close coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency as it expands this support to other areas.

The men and women of the Armed Forces are highly trained and well prepared to operate in times of crisis. As we continue to support the president's bold response efforts, we will use all of the tools at our disposal to help protect the nation.

The United States military has proven throughout our history that we are at our best when the stakes are high. I am proud of our service members and DoD civilians who are answering the call, all around our great country. I can assure the American people that we will do whatever it takes to defeat this virus, return to our normal way of life and to come back even stronger. Together, we will get through this.

Esper says coronavirus needs taking toll on military resources (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 3:54 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]
The Department of Defense can't meet all of the domestic needs created by the coronavirus, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said, acknowledging the pandemic may also take a toll on force readiness.

"We clearly can't meet everybody's needs with what we have in our inventory," Esper said Monday, after noting he spoke to as many as 10 governors in recent days.

Esper also said the largest Army field hospitals have a capacity of 248 beds, not the "thousands" needed to meet hospital surge demands in the hardest-hit areas. Instead, he said, the focus has been turned toward Army Corps of Engineers planning across several states, where they will contract out work to convert existing buildings to hospitals.

"What we're talking about is the need for thousands of beds. We could provide with the field hospital 248, and we only have so many field hospitals," Esper said. "It would take a few weeks to do all that."

Instead, the Defense secretary explained that he "thinks" the field hospitals would be used as temporary solutions while permanent structures are outfitted by Army contractors. Those temporary hospitals would then be repositioned to new locations in need when the Army facilities are ready.

To protect his own forces, Esper said currently, the Department of Defense has 16 labs globally with a capacity to process more than 6,000 tests per day, but he revealed, "The issue is test kits."

"As more of those come on board, we can test more," he added.

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The Defense Department confirmed Monday that COVID-19 virus cases doubled over the weekend to 133 military personnel, and exercises across the world have been canceled.

"If this pandemic continues at the scale and scope of what some are predicting, over time, you could start seeing an impact on readiness," Esper said. "As this virus ramps up and spreads, we'll obviously see more and more impact [on] persons in our ranks."

Asked about U.S. citizens stranded abroad, Esper could not say if the Defense Department will play the role it did in Honduras over the weekend bringing home Americans in countries with closed borders. He deferred to the State Department and the Department of Health and Human Services. Likewise, Esper deferred to the Federal Emergency Management Agency when asked about the status of 5 million N-95 masks and 2,000 ventilators that he said would come from the military's reserve to support domestic shortfalls.

Esper said military personnel are not being tested for coronavirus unless they show symptoms, and that he has not been tested but that his temperature is checked regularly and he is asymptomatic.

Asked why military units across the globe are still holding all-hands meetings and working in close quarters despite claims that the Defense Department is following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for social distancing, Esper said each situation is unique, and it is up to commanders to decide how best to implement prevention guidelines.

"Tell me how I do six-feet distancing in an attack submarine, or how do I do that in a bomber with two pilots sitting side-by-side?" Esper said. "There will be inconsistencies because every situation is unique."

The defense secretary also declined to reveal his assessment of the Feb. 29 peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which suffered another blow yesterday when a Taliban attack on an Afghan security checkpoint killed 24 members of Afghan security forces before the Taliban burned the facility to the ground.

Esper also confirmed that the Pentagon compound had been elevated to HPCON Charlie, the third-highest health protection level. Access points are reduced, and temperature checks and screenings are taking place for all personnel entering the building.

In Pandemic, Justice Dept. Seeks Video Court Hearings and Home Detention (New York Times)
New York Times [3/23/2020 9:18 PM, Charlie Savage, 23673K]
Invoking the coronavirus crisis, the Justice Department has asked Congress to let more federal inmates serve their time at home and to steer scarce masks and testing kits to federal prisons ahead of other agencies, according to draft legislation submitted last week to congressional leaders.

The department has also asked Congress to relax speedy trial rules and expand opportunities for law enforcement officials to use video conferencing for certain preliminary federal criminal and detention proceedings, like arraignments for newly arrested people.

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“Authorizing the general use of teleconferencing for these preliminary proceedings would ensure that defendants are able to access courts shortly after their arrest,” the Justice Department wrote. “It also would limit any disruptions caused by the coronavirus.”

Those proposals are among a handful that the Trump administration has told congressional leaders that it is making a priority — and that lawmakers of both parties are considering enacting — after both Republicans and Democrats reacted skeptically to more sweeping ideas in the proposal, according to congressional aides.

Those ideas that appear to be dead on arrival included a plan to empower President Trump or his successors to eliminate legal protections for asylum seekers. That would amount to a permanent change to immigration law that would require no finding of any connection to a public health risk.

It is not clear what Congress will do with the proposals, several of which Politico first reported. As the Senate fights over a nearly $2 trillion stimulus package, some of the Justice Department’s ideas could end up attached to it, one congressional aide said, while another said that none of the proposals were likely to be part of the current round of legislation.

But the pandemic is growing worse, and history has shown that Congress can sometimes rush to enact sudden and major expansions of government power during a crisis as lawmakers feel pressure to show they are responding, as when it abruptly passed the USA Patriot Act after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Another part of the Justice Department’s proposal calls for empowering Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. to pause the statute of limitations during a national emergency, and similarly permitting chief judges of district courts to suspend deadlines for “pre-arrest, post-arrest, pretrial, trial and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings.”

But lawmakers of both parties greeted with skepticism the notion of extended detentions without judicial process even if the court system was disrupted, according to congressional aides briefed on the negotiations.

Still, one aide said, lawmakers are considering easing some of the requirements of the Speedy Trial Act — which generally lets defendants demand a trial within 70 days of arraignment — if the coronavirus pandemic makes it impossible to hold in-person trials for a while, including by sequestering 12 jurors in the same room for deliberations.

Lawmakers are also said to be open to another part of the Justice Department proposal for the Bureau of Prisons. It would give the bureau the power to expand the use of home confinement — now capped at 10 percent of an inmate’s term or six months — and prioritize steering masks and testing kits to federal prisons.

Federal prisons officials are confronting the nationwide shortage of masks and other personal protective equipment for medical personnel, the department wrote, labeling the shortfall a “vulnerability” as it seeks preferential status.

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“B.O.P. is currently competing and engaging the same landscape of vendors as all other federal agencies and private entities,” the proposal said.

The Justice Department’s spokeswoman, Kerri Kupec, said on Twitter on Sunday in response to the Politico report that the proposal was prompted by a congressional request for suggestions and that department officials were seeking to empower judges, not the executive branch.

“Bottom line: The proposed legislative text confers powers upon judges,” she wrote. “It does not confer new powers upon the executive branch. These provisions are designed to empower the courts to ensure the fair and effective administration of justice.”

However, two congressional aides said they were unaware of any request from Congress going to the Justice Department, and understood that the department itself had decided on its own to ask all of its components for ideas and sent them over.

Justice Department representatives did not respond to follow-up questions about who asked the department to come up with ideas for new laws because of the pandemic, nor about the justifications for the request to confer new powers on the executive branch over asylum matters, which her statement did not address.

Under that part of the draft legislation — said to be quickly dismissed by lawmakers — presidents could exempt immigrants from eligibility to apply for asylum and from a domestic legal rule forbidding the federal government from sending them home to countries where they are likely to face persecution, which is also a requirement of international law.

The proposal would eliminate those legal protections not only for migrants found to be infected with the coronavirus or other communicable diseases of “public health significance,” but also to any others who are separately “subject to a presidential proclamation suspending and limiting the entry of aliens into the United States.”

The Trump administration has been trying to curb asylum claims at the southwestern border for the past three years, and last week it developed plans to use the pandemic to shut down that process under the president’s existing authority — a move that is certain to face legal challenge.

The proposal to expand Mr. Trump’s powers over asylum law would be a “really dangerous weapon” to put in his hands, placing at greater risk people who come to the United States seeking protection, said Omar Jadwat, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union’s Immigrants’ Rights Project.

“I am glad people are on the ball enough to see the danger here,” he said.

Justice Department responds to ‘confusion’ about ‘emergency powers’ request during coronavirus outbreak (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 4:14 PM, Jerry Dunleavy, 570K]
The Justice Department responded to an article about its congressional request for

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"emergency powers" for courts during crises such as the coronavirus, arguing that these proposals would empower judges to ensure criminals don't avoid justice during national emergencies.

Facing bipartisan backlash from lawmakers on Capitol Hill, Kerri Kupec, the spokeswoman for Attorney General William Barr, shared a statement Monday that claimed it was Congress that first asked for the proposals.

"There has been some confusion re: reports about DOJ asking Congress for certain 'emergency powers.' This was triggered by Congress asking DOJ for suggested proposals necessary to ensure that federal courts would be able to administer fair and impartial justice during the pandemic," the lengthy statement tweeted by Kupec said.

The report on the draft legislative text by Politico said, "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 novel coronavirus spreads throughout the United States."

Kupec noted: "Because of pandemic-related measures, courts are closing and grand juries are not meeting. ... That means prosecutors may not be able to indict criminals before a statute of limitations expires, or that dangerous criminals who have been arrested may be released because of time limits." The DOJ spokeswoman argued that "criminals should not be able to avoid justice because of a public health emergency."

Therefore, Kupec said, "Individual judges are already extending deadlines" but that "to promote consistency by ensuring ALL cases in a particular district are treated similarly, DOJ suggested provisions to allow judges to consistently manage the cases within their districts."

Kupec said the goal of the proposed legislative text would be to empower judges to extend deadlines and statutes of limitation "in the interests of justice." She said this authority would end either at the "termination of the COVID-19 national emergency" or "the Chief Justice's finding that the emergency conditions no longer materially affect the functioning of the federal courts." She said that any such orders would "remain in effect no longer than 30 days beyond the termination."

Barr spoke about the department's work during the coronavirus pandemic in an interview with the Wall Street Journal that was published Monday.

"There's some discombobulation, but part of what we're trying to do is keep up the mission," he said of the agency's commitment to proceed with criminal investigations, prioritize coronavirus-related fraud prosecutions, keep the justice system functioning, and pursue other Trump administration priorities during a deadly outbreak.

Barr said he was worried that "things are getting out of control" with local liberal prosecutors releasing people from prison and declining charges as the COVID-19 outbreak spreads.

The 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. It would also expand the ability of

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courts to carry out hearings through video teleconferences, including without the consent of the defendant.

The report stated 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."

The proposals in the Politico article were met with swift blowback from some lawmakers this weekend. Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah tweeted: "OVER MY DEAD BODY." Newly independent Rep. Justin Amash of Michigan proclaimed that "Congress must loudly reply NO." Democratic New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said simply: "Absolutely not."

"The goal of these provisions to ensure that the justice system continues to operate equitably and effectively, and to harmonize what is already being done on an ad hoc basis by the courts around the country," Kupec argued. "Bottom line: The proposed legislative text confers powers upon judges. It does not confer new powers upon the executive branch. These provisions are designed to empower the courts to ensure the fair and effective administration of justice."

Kupec said that "it is Congress that will decide whether to enact them into law."

There were over 372,000 confirmed coronavirus cases around the world and at least 16,300 deaths tied to the infection as of Monday afternoon, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker. There have been 81,496 confirmed cases in China, where the disease originated, and 3,274 confirmed deaths there. In the U.S., there have been over 41,700 cases, which have resulted in 573 deaths.

Justices Back Broader Review of Deportation Orders (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 4:28 PM, Kimberly Strawbridge Robinson, 25K]
The U.S. Supreme Court broadened the scope of when federal courts can review deportation orders in a ruling that the government said could frustrate congressional efforts to streamline the removal of immigrants convicted of certain crimes.

Under federal law, appellate courts can only review constitutional claims or those involving "questions of law." Immigrants convicted of certain crimes cannot get federal courts to review factual issues related to their deportation orders.

But on Monday, the Supreme Court said in a 7-2 decision that the application of a legal standard to undisputed or established facts is a question of law subject to judicial review.

There's a "strong presumption" of judicial review of agency actions that can only be overcome by clear and convincing statutory language, Justice Stephen Breyer wrote for the court.

The case is one of three this term testing the reach of federal courts to review immigration decisions.

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Monday's decision could point to broader judicial review in those cases, too, said University of Houston Law Center's Geoffrey Hoffman, who directs the school's immigration clinic.

The "black letter" holding of today's decision is that legal questions encompass the application of law to undisputed facts, Hoffman said.

But, he said, "the real power of the decision comes from its acknowledgment of the importance of habeas corpus"—that is, the ability to have a judge look at your case.

The other two cases are DHS v. Thuraissigiam, involving "expedited removal" or the limited process for deporting those found close to the boarder, and Nasrallah v. Barr, involving the deportation of those who claim they will be persecuted or tortured if returned to their home country. Both were argued March 2.

Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito said in dissenting from Monday's ruling that it "effectively nullifies a jurisdiction-stripping statute, expanding the scope of judicial review well past the boundaries set by Congress."

Christopher Hajec of the Immigration Reform Law Institute said "the majority used fancy footwork to get around a jurisdiction-stripping provision."

But, the court's "constitutional role is to respect, by its own free will, congressional preeminence in setting the bounds of its jurisdiction," Hajec said.

The decision overturned a U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruling reading the term "question of law" narrowly to find it had no jurisdiction to consider claims by Pablo Guerrero-Lasprilla and Ruben Ovalle. Both men, deported following drug convictions, can now have a federal court take a second look at whether they waited too long to reopen their cases.

The case is Guerrero-Lasprilla v. Barr, U.S., No. 18-776.

Pence says officials will weigh potential adjustments to social distancing guidelines (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 4:55 PM, Morgan Chalfant, 1762K] Video: HERE
Vice President Pence said Monday that the White House coronavirus task force would evaluate ways to potentially adjust recommendations for social distancing after the 15-day period specified in the initial guidelines expires next week.

"At the end of this 15 days, we're going to get with our health experts. We're going to evaluate ways in which we might be able to adjust that guidance for the American people," Pence told reporters at Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters Monday when asked about whether the administration was considering relaxing the guidance in order to stimulate the U.S. economy.

"We'll look at where we are, and we'll evaluate based on our health experts what steps might be possible," Pence continued.

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The vice president noted that the guidelines, which President Trump unveiled one week ago, were meant to flatten the curve of the spread of the coronavirus domestically.

Pence also said the federal government would issue guidance later Monday aimed at helping workers in critical sectors return to work after being exposed to COVID-19 if they don't have symptoms of the virus.

Pence's remarks came after Trump tweeted overnight that "we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself" and retweeted a number of supporters calling for Americans to get back to work amid the outbreak. The tweets were seen as a signal the president may be leaning toward easing the recommendations in order to help stem the economic damage.

The pandemic has taken a considerable toll on the economy, shuttering businesses and spurring mass layoffs across the country.

Trump last week recommended Americans avoid restaurants and bars, limit in-person gatherings to 10 people or fewer, and bypass nonessential travel for 15 days in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. The guidelines were described as a trial, and officials signaled they would evaluate them following the two-week period.

Separately, state and local officials have ordered closures of schools, businesses and other public gatherings in order to reduce the spread of the virus, restrictions that in some areas are expected to last weeks or months.

The decision about how quickly to reduce the federal guidelines has been a source of debate among those in and around the administration, with some arguing they should be relaxed after 15 days to help people in areas that have been less impacted by the virus return to work.

A move to relax the recommendations after the 15-day mark passes would likely put Trump at odds with public health experts who have advocated for Americans to practice social distancing for a longer period of time.

The number of coronavirus cases has exceeded 40,000 in the United States, marking a large increase over the past several days.

Trump team fiercely debates how long coronavirus restrictions should stay in place (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 3:51 PM, Brett Samuels and Morgan Chalfant, 1762K]
A high-stakes debate is playing out among key figures in President Trump's orbit over how quickly to loosen restrictions meant to combat the coronavirus.

A number of people around Trump have pushed for prioritizing the economy and sending people back to work as quickly as possible, particularly in less afflicted areas.

But Trump's own public health officials and some of his allies on Capitol Hill have warned against risking higher infection rates and deaths for the sake of boosting the economy in the short term.

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Sources close to the Trump administration described a “split” in the larger Trump World where some people around the president believe the federal government should ease recommendations on social distancing after the 15-day period while others favor waiting a few more weeks or taking even more dramatic action to stamp out the spread of the virus.

“I think there’s a recognition that there needs to be some sort of medium between listening to the doctors and listening to other experts as well,” the person said. “There really isn’t a perfect answer.”

There were more than 41,500 confirmed coronavirus cases in the U.S. as of Monday afternoon, a large percentage of them concentrated in New York. More than 500 people in the U.S. had died of the disease. The pandemic has resulted in unforeseen businesses closures and massive layoffs across the country.

On Monday, the camp in favor of kick-starting the economy as quickly as possible seemed to be winning out. Trump, apparently spurred on by commentary from Fox News host Steve Hilton, tweeted overnight that “we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself" and retweeted several supporters on Monday calling for Americans to get back to work.

Advisers and prominent commentators in conservative media lined up to voice concerns that the economic costs of maintaining restrictions had to be taken into consideration.

“In one week we need to be heading back to work, school, stores, restaurants and churches with new protocols in place,” Fox News host Laura Ingraham tweeted. “The risk if we don’t is that we lose far more in terms of death, pain and suffering than this pandemic will bring.”

Larry Kudlow, the White House’s top economic adviser, said the administration was discussing possible economic remedies and acknowledged “we’re going to have to make some difficult tradeoffs.”

“We can’t shut in the economy,” he said on Fox News. “The economic cost to individuals is just too great.”

Asked Monday whether the administration was considering relaxing the guidelines to stimulate the economy, Vice President Pence told reporters that the coronavirus task force would evaluate ways to potentially "adjust" the guidance after the 15-day period.

“At the end of this 15 days, we’re going to get with our health experts, we’re going to evaluate ways in which we might be able to adjust that guidance for the American people,” Pence told reporters after a teleconference with governors at FEMA headquarters. “We’ll look at where we are and we’ll evaluate based on our health experts, what steps might be possible.”

The White House has bolstered its team of economic advisers amid the pandemic, bringing on Kevin Hassett, Trump’s former chief economist, as a temporary adviser. Hassett last week suggested on CNN that the U.S. may have to consider sending Americans back to work at a certain point even if the pandemic hasn’t abated to avoid a Great Depression-like event.

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Trump also tapped Joseph Lavorgna, former chief economist for the Americas for Natixis, to a position on the White House National Economic Council where he will be responsible in part for studying the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the economy.

Social distancing policies put in place by local governments and backed by the federal government are intended to slow the virus's spread. This is seen as vitally important to prevent hospitals from being over-crowded with coronavirus victims. Fears about supply shortages in masks or ventilators have been widely reported.

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has been one of the most prominent members of the coronavirus task force who has advocated for drastic measures to stem the outbreak. He said Friday that Americans would likely need to stay home for several more weeks to blunt the spread of the virus.

"If you look at the trajectory of the curves of outbreaks in other areas, it's at least going to be several weeks," Fauci told NBC News. "I cannot see that all of a sudden next week or two weeks from now it's going to be over. I don't think there's a chance of that."

At the same time, the economic harm caused by the coronavirus and the shutting down of the economy is leading to deep fears about millions of job losses. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told GOP senators last week that it was possible unemployment could hit 20 percent, though he later backtracked somewhat by saying he was not offering a prediction.

Trump one week ago detailed recommendations urging Americans nationwide to avoid restaurants and bars, limit gatherings to 10 people or fewer and cancel nonessential travel for 15 days. The measures came as a handful of states and localities ordered schools and eating establishments to be closed and large events to be canceled. The federal government has ramped up testing for the virus in the days since, and the number of domestic cases have skyrocketed from a few thousand to more than 40,000.

Surgeon General Jerome Adams on Monday warned that not enough Americans were taking the guidance seriously.

Some argue that by loosening the social distancing recommendations sometime soon after the 15-day mark, the federal government would be allowing people, particularly in parts of the country that aren't seeing large numbers of cases, to begin returning to normal life.

One source close to the administration argued that the decision shouldn't be left entirely up to the public health officials because they are not experts on the economic effects of the virus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday is expected to unveil new guidance for people working in critical infrastructure sectors, including first responders, which will help people who have been exposed return to work more quickly by wearing masks.

But some of Trump's staunchest allies have cautioned against the public health risks of

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ignoring experts and shaking off social distancing recommendations before the virus is contained.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) said Monday that he would urge the White House to follow the advice of Fauci and other medical experts and insisted that continuing with mitigation measures should be the priority to avoid overrun hospitals and catastrophic consequences.

“There is no functioning economy unless we control the virus,” Graham said.

Steve Bannon, the president’s former chief strategist, advocated on Sunday for an aggressive national shutdown to blunt the spread of the virus, “take the pain up front,” and hopefully shorten the amount of time businesses remain closed.

A similar debate is playing out across the country as governors who are imposing shelter-in-place advisories and ordering nonessential businesses to close are mulling how to keep their state economies from collapsing entirely.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D), who has emerged as the most visible Democrat leading the charge against the virus, told reporters at a news conference on Monday that he is already trying to plan for how to best wind down restrictions on workers.

“You have to walk and chew gum in life,” Cuomo said.

One consideration, he said, is that young people who are less vulnerable to the virus could return to their jobs sooner than other populations.

But Cuomo has been consistent in warning constituents that restrictions meant to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus could be in place for the foreseeable future, predicting last week that New York would see the peak of the virus in 45 days.

Trump, with an eye on November, may be less inclined to wait out the virus while the economy contracts and unemployment skyrockets.

“The economic future of America is always going to be right toward the front of a president’s decision-making,” one former Trump adviser said. “But in this case if we take the big, bold, dramatic action now, then we’ll put ourselves on course to have a nice rebound in advance of the fall. If we just try to flatten the curve, that’s just going to prolong the national pain.”

Trump considering loosening coronavirus guidelines amid growing economic fallout (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 4:03 PM, Jonathan Karl, Jordyn Phelps, Katherine Faulders, and John Santucci, 2182K] Video: HERE
There is an active debate within the White House – and among senior advisers on President Donald Trump’s coronavirus task force -- about loosening his guidelines for the public to help slow the spread of the coronavirus, multiple sources told ABC News Monday.

Some in the president’s inner circle are advocating for the guidelines on social distancing to be significantly scaled back with hopes of reviving the economy while others have warned

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that approach could quickly overload hospital systems around the country.

In a White House tasked with handling a pandemic crippling the nation, the factions are only growing. While Vice President Mike Pence's team is leading the coronavirus task force, there is a also a pseudo-operation being led by the president's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner. A source familiar with the matter said that Kushner's team is largely focused on the supply-side elements of the crisis, working to coordinate with companies, manufactures, and FEMA on sourcing and supplying masks to states. It's unclear exactly which members are taking the different positions in the economic debate.

The president and Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, have both publicly acknowledged they disagree on some aspects of the government response, with Fauci often contradicting Trump and clarifying his comments.

Fauci said in an interview over the weekend that even though they disagree, Trump does listen to what he says.

"Well, that's pretty interesting because to [Trump's] credit, even though we disagree on some things, he listens," Fauci said when asked by Science Magazine how he's managing to not get fired. He goes his own way. He has his own style. But on substantive issues, he does listen to what I say."

"Well, I don't disagree in the substance. It is expressed in a way that I would not express it, because it could lead to some misunderstanding about what the facts are about a given subject," he said.

A senior administration official in favor of loosening guidelines, who spoke to ABC News on the condition of anonymity, counters that it's the president's job is to weigh all the factors. While doctors and public health officials are not wrong to raise the public health concerns, the president has to weigh those concerns against the economic crisis that is resulting from major sectors of the economy grinding to a halt amid the spreading pandemic, the official said.

This official pointed out that the overwhelming majority of people who get COVID-19 will fully recover and that the majority of deaths are among the elderly and those with underlying conditions.

The president's guidance, which he unveiled a week ago and called for the public to follow for a 15-day period, advises people to avoid social gatherings of more than 10 people, not to dine in restaurants or bars, and to work from home whenever possible.

The internal debate spilled into the public view with a tweet from President Trump just before midnight on Sunday night, warning that "WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF."

The president went on to send a number of retweets Monday morning supportive of the argument that the economic cost of extending strict social distancing guidance beyond the 15-day period is unaffordable.

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The president's top economic adviser took to FOX News later in the day to echo the same message, declaring that "we can't shutter the economy."

"The president was right. The cure can't be worse than the disease, and we're going to have to make some difficult tradeoffs," Kudlow said.

Surgeon General Jerome Adams – a top member of the president's task force - went on NBC Monday morning to argue the opposing sentiment, warning that things are "going to get bad" this week and called it a "somber" occasion in America.

"I want America to understand, this week, it's going to get bad. And we really need to come together as a nation," Adams said in the interview. "Everyone needs to be taking the right steps right now and that means stay at home."

The Trump administration has said the CDC plans to update its guidelines on Monday, but the latest revision isn't likely to apply to the general public but rather health care workers and others in "critical infrastructure" jobs.

Vice President Pence announced in Sunday's briefing that the CDC rules for people working critical infrastructure jobs would "make it possible for people that have been exposed to return to work more quickly with, by wearing a mask for a certain period of time."

Contacted by ABC News, the CDC did not provide any additional information.

Hispanic Democrats demand funding for multilingual coronavirus messaging (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 11:35 AM, Rafael Bernal, 1762K]
A group of Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) members asked Monday for Congress to fund coronavirus-response messaging in languages other than English.

In a letter to House and Senate leaders of both parties, the members asked "that any further legislation include robust funding for the development and dissemination of all official public health information, announcements, and proclamations in multiple languages on radio and television networks."

"Over the past several days, we have learned that our non-English speaking constituents have had limited access to reliable information concerning the COVID-19 response, including official documents, announcements and proclamations from local, state, and federal officials," the members wrote to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.).

"The lack of information and prevalence of disinformation have demonstrated the urgent need for announcements to be disseminated effectively and in a multi-lingual way," they added.

The letter was signed by Reps. Vicente Gonzalez (Texas), Jesús García (Ill.), Ben Ray

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Luján (N.M), Jimmy Gomez (Calif.), Filemon Vela (Texas), Norma Torres (Calif.), Tony Cárdenas (Calif.), Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (Fla.), Sylvia Garcia (Texas), Darren Soto (Fla.), Ruben Gallego (Ariz.), Veronica Escobar (Texas), Raul Ruiz (Calif.), Nanette Diaz Barragán (Calif.), and Grace Napolitano (Calif.).

The response to the coronavirus crisis, and its accompanying public service announcements, has for the most part been delivered in English by the federal government, despite the around 25 million Americans who are not proficient in the English language.

"In the absence of medical treatments or vaccines, we know that one of the few means to halt the spread of the virus is through preventive actions by the public," wrote the CHC members.

"Therefore, local, state, and federal public officials must communicate clear and concise messages that are targeted to local audiences, available in the media they regularly utilize, and in the languages they primarily speak at home," they added.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) information is available online in Spanish and Simplified Chinese, but on a more limited basis than English-language information.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a language action plan that includes 19 widely-spoken languages, but it has not yet been fully activated to deal with the coronavirus response.

And non-English-language messaging has been slow to reach the communities it targets, increasing the chances of contagion among those populations.

In one case, the CHC's campaign arm, Bold PAC, made a federal one-page information sheet available in Spanish before the federal government published its own translation, a day after publishing the original in English.

In their letter, the CHC members ask for funding to be included not only to translate the materials, but to make them available through media consumed regularly by language-diverse populations.

"Reaching our non-English speaking communities will enable us to more effectively curb the spread of this virus," wrote the members.

White House: Mobile beds, faster tests coming (USA Today)
USA Today [3/22/2020 10:20 PM, Staff, 5611K] Video: HERE
President Donald Trump says he's ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ship mobile hospital centers to the hard-hit states of Washington, California and New York amid the coronavirus pandemic

FDA Warns Americans to Beware of Fake COVID-19 Test Kits (US News & World Report)

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US News & World Report [3/22/2020 8:00 PM, Robert Preidt, 3020K]
Fake in-home test kits for coronavirus are being marketed in the United States and could pose serious health risks, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration says.

"We want to alert the American public that, at this time, the FDA has not authorized any test that is available to purchase for testing yourself at home for COVID-19," said FDA Commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn and Associate Commissioner for Regulatory Affairs Judith McMeekin.

They said the FDA sees the public health value in expanding availability of safe, accurate tests for COVID-19 that may include home collection and is actively working with test developers.

"Fraudulent health claims, tests and products can pose serious health risks," Hahn and McMeekin warned in an agency news release. "They may keep some patients from seeking care or delay necessary medical treatment."

If you think you have symptoms of COVID-19, the FDA said you should follow U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and talk to your health care provider. He or she will advise you about whether you should get tested and how to receive an appropriate test.

"The FDA will take appropriate action to protect consumers from bad actors who take advantage of a crisis to deceive the public by marketing tests that pose risks to patient health," Hahn and McMeekin said. "This may include issuing warning letters, seizures or injunctions."

The agency has issued warning letters to companies selling and promoting fake test kits. It has also stepped up enforcement at ports of entry, including international mail facilities, to prevent fake kits from other countries from getting into the United States.

Consumers who know about fake test kits for COVID-19 should report them to the FDA, the agency said.

States see surge of scams, price-gouging tied to pandemic (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 11:49 AM, Reid Wilson, 1762K]
State law enforcement officers are seeing a surge of complaints about retailers hiking prices of essential goods and scammers preying on the elderly with fake messages about the coronavirus sweeping across the country.

In interviews, attorneys general across the country say their offices are being inundated with hundreds or thousands of new reports. In some cases, retailers and resellers are raising prices of basic supplies as Americans race to stock up.

"What we're hearing and seeing right now is an uptick in price gouging reports," said Connecticut Attorney General William Tong (D). "What's happening is we're seeing hand sanitizer for $20, $30 a bottle. We're seeing water priced at a much higher rate than we would normally see. We're seeing essential paper products, paper towels, toilet paper, six

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rolls for $30."

Tong's office has fielded more than 200 formal complaints, and his aides are looking into less formal complaints delivered through Facebook and Twitter messages.

In other cases, scammers are exploiting the loneliness created by social distancing to lure older people into handing over money, either for fake coronavirus cures or vaccines or by pretending to be from medical facilities in need of money.

Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry (R) said his office had heard of scammers who pretended to be from a hospital where a victim's grandson was being treated for the coronavirus; the scammers asked for money to ensure the grandson got a ventilator. Tong's office has received reports that scammers were offering fake coronavirus tests for hundreds or thousands of dollars.

"We should, when we catch some of these people, lock them up for the entire rest of their lives. This is no joke. This is the kind of thing that endangers people more," Landry said in an interview. "They affect people at their lowest points."

Several states have used the coronavirus pandemic to establish new hotlines and websites allowing consumers to report scams and gouging.

In Kentucky and Tennessee, the attorneys general contacted two brothers who had been stockpiling gloves and sanitizers along Interstate 75 with the intent to sell them later at excessive prices. The attorneys general convinced the brothers instead to donate their goods back to first responders; Kentucky's half of the loot arrived last week, distributed to health care workers in seven counties.

"It's unfortunate that we find ourselves in this circumstance. It's unfortunate that some people try to take advantage of this circumstance," Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron (R) said in an interview Monday.

Some states have been so overwhelmed by calls to consumer protection hotlines that they have recruited outside help. In Michigan, Attorney General Dana Nessel (D) got help from several state legislators and Rep. Elissa Slotkin (D), who answered consumer calls over the weekend.

Major online retailers like Amazon, eBay, Walmart and Facebook have become breeding grounds for resellers who markup essential goods in hopes of a quick profit, too. Several states are working with those companies to find and stamp out those who would profit from panic. In Missouri, Attorney General Eric Schmitt (R) said Friday his office had reached a deal with Amazon to monitor potential price gouging.

"When you have big marketplaces like Amazon or eBay or Facebook, we the office of the Attorney General are able to combat that, and we're working very closely with them," said Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro (D), whose office has fielded more than 1,700 price gouging complaints. "They have been responsive when we've asked them."

Shapiro is among a handful of attorneys general who have partnered with federal agencies

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and U.S. Attorneys offices in his state to monitor a growing number of cyber scams. He has established a state-federal task force with the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the United States Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania.

Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody (R) launched her own efforts with the state's three U.S. attorneys to monitor new scams. Moody's office said Monday that about 40 percent of the price gouging complaints her office had received came from online offers. Moody also created a rapid response team to get in touch quickly with the businesses accused of unfair price hikes.

Some states are targeting prominent conspiracy theorists who have used the coronavirus pandemic to hawk their own fake cures. New York Attorney General Letitia James (D) last week ordered InfoWars founder Alex Jones and Newsmax host Wayne Allyn Root to stop selling products they have claimed will cure or prevent the virus. James and Missouri's Schmitt both ordered televangelist Jim Bakker to stop claiming his products offered a cure.

Several attorneys general said price gouging complaints could be difficult to prove, especially at times when demand spikes. In many cases, the retailer has to raise prices when a supplier increases wholesale prices. The retailer may not make any more money than before the price hike, but the consumer still suffers.

"Price gouging is a subjective test. We have to factor in market supply, demand, where the product is coming from," Landry said.

Law enforcement officials urged consumers to let state governments decide what amounts to an unlawful price hike, and to help identify potential scofflaws.

"What I keep telling consumers is don't get yourself caught up in doing math and figuring out the legal definition of price gouging. If something doesn't look right, just let us know and we'll do the work for you," Pennsylvania's Shapiro said.

In Kentucky, Cameron said: "The old adage, 'see something, say something' applies here."

How scammers are trying to exploit the pandemic (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 2:29 PM, David Morgan, 2394K]
The Justice Department announced its first enforcement action against alleged coronavirus fraud. It obtained a temporary restraining order Sunday against coronavirusmedicalkit.com, a website that claimed to offer consumers access to coronavirus vaccine kits.

There are currently no vaccines to treat this disease.

CBS News consumer investigative correspondent Anna Werner said the website claimed to offer vaccine kits from the World Health Organization, for a $4.95 shipping charge. "They said if you added water, it would work," Werner said. "Of course we know that there are no vaccine kits available.

"If you do happen to see one of these things, you can contact your state attorney general's office. But no, these are not vaccine kits."

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Co-host Gayle King asked, "Are there any approved at-home testing kits anywhere that are legit?"

"No, there aren't," Werner replied. "It's important to make clear to people there are no at-home testing kits. The FDA has not authorized any home testing kits at all for use. If you see something that says, 'Hey, you can test yourself at home,' it's not a real deal here."

Werner noted some recent coronavirus-related scam products. "Customs and Border Protection has been tweeting photos of items that it has seized," said Werner. "One of them is sort of like a box of little vials [claiming to be] either at-home treatments or a treatment kit. The acting commissioner said on Twitter that police in the U.K. arrested a man for selling those kits."

Also seized earlier this month: counterfeit COVID-19 test kits that came through Los Angeles International Airport, labeled as "purified water vials."

Werner said, "These are the kind of things that people, you might call them creative or just call them scammers frankly, are saying 'I can make a quick buck off of this. Sell something to people.' One of these things actually had what might be dangerous ingredients to it. So, there are dangers there, too."

Co-host Tony Dokoupil asked, "What are people listening to when it comes to robocalls?"

"The robocallers have jumped into this—I'm sure you're not surprised to hear this," Werner said. "They're saying, 'Hey, we can clean your home air ducts, your air filters, for coronavirus.' 'We also are going to help you with your student loan payments.' You've heard that one before. And even the social security scammers are jumping in and saying, 'Hey, there's going to be something with the coronavirus and your social security number.' So, be careful about these calls. If you get one of these calls, just hang up."

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

Trump Signs Executive Order Cracking Down On Price Gouging For Masks, Ventilators (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [3/23/2020 5:34 PM, William Davis, 566K]
President Donald Trump signed an executive order Monday to combat the hoarding and price gouging of items integral to the nation's fight against the coronavirus pandemic, including masks and ventilators, among other items.

"This sends a strong message – we will not let those hoarding vital supplies & price gougers to harm the health of America in this hour of need," White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham said.

The president officially announced the executive order during Monday's White House press briefing.

"We wanna prevent price gouging, and critical health and medical resources are going to be

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protected in every form," Trump said. "Under this directive, the secretary of Health and Human Services is authorized to designate essential health and medical supplies as scarce."

"Very simply, we will not allow anyone to exploit the suffering of American citizens for their own profit," Trump added.

The executive order specifically targets price gouging of N95 masks, which are considered critical in preventing the spread of the virus. Prices for the masks were going for as high as $1,000 on online retail stores, and sales of the mask were ultimately banned by E-Bay.

Democratic New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said this weekend that he's had trouble securing deals with companies for the masks, because companies continue to return and ask for more money from the state, according to USA Today.

"I'll contract with a company for 1,000 masks," Cuomo said. "They'll call back 20 minutes later and say, 'The price just went up,' because they had a better offer. I understand that. Other states who are desperate for these goods literally offer more money than we were paying. It's a race that's raising prices higher and higher."

We're going to come for you': Trump trade czar Peter Navarro warns medical supply 'hoarders' (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 1:29 PM, Katherine Doyle, 570K]
President Trump's top trade and manufacturing policy adviser took aim at medical supply brokers trying to sell critical items at vastly inflated prices.

"Brokers are offering millions of items, whether they are goggles, masks, or whatever, and you go through three different brokers, tracing to a warehouse in [Los Angeles] that's allegedly got ten million masks, and they want to charge you seven times what they cost," White House Director of Trade and Industrial Policy Peter Navarro said during a coronavirus press briefing on Sunday. "That's price gouging," he added.

"A message to the hoarders: If you've got any large quantities of materials that this country needs right now, get them to market or get them to us, we'll pay you a fair price," Navarro said. "But if you don't do that, we're going to come for you and make sure that doesn't happen in this country."

Navarro said that stopping brokers selling much-needed supplies far above their normal price would be a "good use of the Defense Production Act," which allows the president to force manufacturers to expand production of resources in short supply, among other powers.

Trump has resisted calls to directly invoke the Defense Production Act in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Peter Gaynor said on CNN's State of the Union on Sunday that state officials should purchase needed items on the open market, and the agency would reimburse them.

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Contending with these shortages, some governors have called for federal intervention.

"We are competing against other states. In some ways, we're savaging other states," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said at a press conference Sunday, calling price gouging, "a tremendous problem" and saying the White House should nationalize certain industries in response.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat, compared the situation to the "wild west" on CNN's State of the Union on Sunday. States are competing against one another and against other countries for medical supplies, Pritzker said, and they are overpaying for them as a result.

White House Not Using Defense Powers To Boost Medical Supplies (Public Radio WNMU)
Public Radio WNMU [3/23/2020 2:37 PM, Camila Domonoske]
The medical community is sounding increasingly urgent alarms about shortages of masks, gloves and ventilators — essential supplies in the fight against the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, President Trump has issued contradictory statements about whether his administration is ordering private companies to ramp up production of those items.

Here's an updated Q&A on the Defense Production Act, the invoked-but-not-really-invoked law at the heart of the confusion.

Is the White House actually using the Defense Production Act?

The president has invoked the act, called the DPA, and used it to give broad powers to the secretary of health and human services. But five days later, those powers have not actually been used.

Some governors are calling for the law to be used at once, because states are currently scrambling over scarce resources in a free-for-all.

What does the DPA allow the White House to do?

The White House could:

Give government orders top priority — so when there aren't enough gloves to go around, for instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gets its gloves first.
Distribute limited resources according to national interests. For instance, the government decides how many gloves go to each state.

Order manufacturers to produce a certain item and take control of the supply chain to enable maximum production of that product.
The law also grants other powers, like giving manufacturers incentives to make certain products in the U.S. and allowing cooperative efforts that would otherwise violate antitrust laws.

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Is it unusual to use the DPA?

Parts of the DPA are used all the time. For instance, the departments of Defense and Homeland Security routinely use it to force a business to fill their orders first. The Federal Emergency Management Agency also uses that authority.

Other parts have not been used in decades — like the authority to order manufacturers to produce essential items, or to allow the government to take control of supply chains.

Without the DPA being invoked, what's happening to the supply of medical goods?

Businesses that make medical equipment are already working to increase their production to meet demand. 3M has doubled its output of masks. The ventilator maker Philips is planning to quadruple production, but that will take months.

Some businesses — from fashion companies to furniture makers — are starting to produce masks. General Motors is working with a ventilator maker to support its efforts to ramp up production.

These efforts are all voluntary.

What would happen if the White House started to use the DPA?

HHS could immediately step in to manage the distribution of existing resources.

It could take longer for production increases to happen. Existing medical manufacturers are already trying to maximize production. Converting new factories to make medical equipment can't happen overnight, and all the plants would be limited by the availability of supplies and raw materials.

But the DPA could be used to direct all available resources toward those manufacturing needs. It would also allow defense contractors to shift resources away from their military orders and toward medical needs.

Why hasn't the White House used the DPA authorities it has invoked?

Trump said Sunday that he wanted to avoid "nationalizing our businesses," citing the example of Venezuela, which routinely seized private companies without compensation. That's very different than the authorities granted under the DPA, which do not give the U.S. government ownership of a business.

Trump privately says he's facing pressure over refusal to use Defense Production Act (CNN)
CNN [3/23/2020 10:44 AM, Kaitlan Collins, 5551K]
President Donald Trump has told people around him that he's under pressure to utilize the authorities given to him under the Defense Production Act, after he spent the weekend fielding criticism over why he hasn't mandated that private companies mass produce needed medical supplies during the coronavirus pandemic.

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On Sunday, Trump's coronavirus task force had a briefing scheduled for 4:30 p.m. ET, but the President wanted it moved to "prime time," according to two people familiar with what happened. The White House pushed the briefing until 5:00 p.m., then 5:30 p.m. and the President finally entered the room nearly an hour and a half after it was initially scheduled to begin.

Trump told aides he wanted to be at the microphone during optimal viewing hours -- and his appearance came after he spent the day paying close attention to appeals from New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who called on him to use the Defense Production Act instead of having states get into "a mad bidding war" over supplies.

Trump signed the act that grants him authority to direct private companies to ramp up production of needed supplies last week, but has refused to wield his powers for now.

Shortly after announcing he would be invoking the Defense Production Act, the White House received pushback from business leaders who expressed concern that the act which could cause major unforeseen problems, including profit loss.

A source familiar with these closed door conversations described the sentiment as "just tells us what we need to do and we'll do it," as long as the Defense Production Act was not in use. Trump confirmed this Sunday, saying when the war powers act was announced "it sent tremors" through the business community.

Trump appeared to paraphrase what some have asked him about how the act will be used.

"What are you doing? ... You're going to take away companies? You're going to tell companies what to do?" he said, appearing to paraphrase the questions he received.

There has been an internal divide in the West Wing over whether to move forward with it or to continue to let companies voluntarily speed up production without orders from the federal government. Health care providers have bluntly warned they do not have the protective gear or medical equipment to treat an influx of coronavirus patients, and state officials have said attempts to get more supplies has turned into a free-for-all.

The divide over how to proceed was on full display when Peter Navarro, Trump's trade adviser who is not on the coronavirus task force, stepped up to the microphone Sunday. Navarro was one official who urged Trump to sign the Defense Production Act initially, but has argued doing that has given the administration leverage over private companies and the next step is not necessary yet.

"We're getting what we need without putting the heavy hand of government down," Navarro said Sunday.

Navarro has taken a leading role in coordinating the supply chain with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which he acknowledged to CNN.

"My job at the White House now is to help marry the full force of the federal government with the full power of private enterprise to mobilize our industrial base and thereby quickly

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get what we need, most urgently Personal Protective Equipment such as masks and gloves and testing kit element like swabs," Navarro told CNN.

"It's been enormously helpful that the President signed the DPA last week. We've seen a noticeable uptick in the intensity of that mobilization, and my office is using the DPA every day as quiet leverage to turbocharge the great outpouring of volunteer efforts from the business community," he added.

But it's still not clear that the administration has a well thought out strategy to get private companies to voluntarily produce enough medical supplies without purchasing guarantees.

While several forces inside the White House, including Larry Kudlow, have told the President he does not need to utilize the Defense Production Act, others have argued he should before it's too late -- a line of thinking that has stayed with the president in recent days.

Trump himself has caused confusion over the process. In a briefing Friday, he argued he had already used the act, though aides later clarified he had only signed it and the status had remained unchanged, which his FEMA administrator Pete Gaynor confirmed during an interview on CNN Sunday.

"If it comes to a point we have to pull the lever, we will," Gaynor said.

Two people familiar with the President's thinking said he's now languishing in a place where neither side is satisfied by his moves on Defense Production Act. Those who wanted him to sign the act aren't pleased because he did but isn't using it. And the people who didn't want him to sign it aren't because he did, while holding out hope he won't actually use it.

FDA relaxes rules to boost auto companies making ventilators for coronavirus effort (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 3:17 PM, Tim Pearce, 570K]
The Food and Drug Administration temporarily relaxed regulations on manufacturing regulators to give private companies more flexibility to build medical supplies needed to combat the coronavirus.

Ford, General Motors, and Tesla are adapting their facilities from building automobiles to pumping out regulators for hospitals struggling under an influx of COVID-19 patients. The federal government is simultaneously easing regulations to help the car companies pass through the bureaucratic process to make medical supplies faster, according to Axios. This includes easing restrictions on sourcing materials, allowing companies to buy ventilator components from a broader range of suppliers.

"We believe this approach will help manufacturers that want to add production lines or manufacture at alternative sites which may have different manufacturing equipment to increase manufacturing capacity," the FDA said about easing some policy guidelines.

President Trump tweeted about the auto companies' efforts on Sunday, announcing that his administration was rolling back regulations to help the companies start production on

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regulators more quickly.

"Ford, General Motors and Tesla are being given the go ahead to make ventilators and other metal products, FAST!" Trump tweeted. "Go for it auto execs, lets see how good you are?"

Auto companies have taken a financial hit because of the coronavirus pandemic. Demand for cars has sunk as people have stayed home as they abide by social distancing regulations.

Breakthrough' self-swab test kits coming soon, coronavirus task force coordinator says (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 8:41 PM, Cassidy Morrison, 570K]
The coronavirus task force response coordinator said Monday that new self-swab coronavirus tests will become available later this week.

"There was a breakthrough today for those of you waiting for 'self-swabbing' options. Those are going to be available some time later this week to be able for individuals to do their own test," Deborah Birx said during Monday's White House press briefing.

So far, over 250,000 people have been given coronavirus tests and have received their results, but there is still a widespread shortage of diagnostic tests. Self-swab tests would allow people to use a nasal swab while in their homes self-isolating. They would then bring the sample to a clinic or drive-through test site and receive their results that same day.

"This will expedite the testing process, of course, but it will also reduce the risk to healthcare providers for exposure to the coronavirus, and it'll minimize the drain on personal protective equipment," Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

Healthcare workers, even if they have minimal exposure to potential infection, need to wear protective masks and full-body covering. Hospitals and clinics are already facing a severe shortage of required protective equipment. In fact, Dr. Craig Smith, chairman of the department of surgery at New York-Presbyterian reported Friday that protective mask consumption at the hospital has increased tenfold and that reserves are dwindling.

"NYP normally uses 4,000 non-N95 masks per day. Currently, NYP is consuming 40,000 such masks per day, which is estimated to reach 70,000 per day," Smith said. "The entire United States strategic reserve holds only 75 million masks."

While FEMA is in the midst of distributing about 8 million N95 protective masks and 13.3 million surgical masks, according to President Trump, physicians worry that increased manufacturing and distribution could come too late for many healthcare workers.

"We're told that manufacturing is beginning to accelerate, but that relief is weeks away at best," Smith said.

U.S. Coronavirus Cases reach 35,000, Trump Signs 'Major' Disaster Declarations (US News & World Report)

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US News & World Report [3/23/2020 9:07 AM, Cecelia Smith-Schoenwalder, 3020K]
Health officials are reporting more than 35,000 cases of the coronavirus in the U.S. and roughly 470 deaths, according to researchers.

At least seven states have seen more than 1,000 cases: Washington, New York, California, New Jersey, Illinois, Michigan and Florida.

Last week, President Donald Trump released coronavirus guidelines that were set to last 15 days. The suggestions include limiting gatherings to 10 people or fewer. Trump said on Twitter Sunday night that a decision as to whether to extend the timeline would come at the end of the period, which is next week, and he warned that "we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself."

Trump activated the National Guard in Washington, New York and California and approved the states' "major" disaster declarations. He said medical facilities will also be built in the three states.

As of Sunday, at least eight states have ordered residents to stay home, shelter-in-place or stop non-essential travel: Delaware, Ohio, Louisiana, New Jersey, California, New York, Illinois and Connecticut.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Sunday said lockdowns of the public are likely to last until early June.

Despite California's shelter in place order, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said that outdoor areas were packed over the weekend and announced the closure of the city's parks.

"This weekend we saw too many people packing beaches, trails and parks. So we are closing sports and recreation at @LACityParks and closing parking at city beaches. That doesn't mean gather elsewhere. This is serious. Stay home and save lives," he tweeted on Sunday night.

Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky on Sunday became the first senator to test positive for the virus.

Trump tweeted on Sunday night: "My friend (always there when I've needed him!), Senator @RandPaul, was just tested 'positive' from the Chinese Virus. That is not good! He is strong and will get better. Just spoke to him and he was in good spirits."

Also in the Senate, Democrats blocked the third coronavirus stimulus package from advancing on Sunday. The nearly $2 trillion measure includes direct payments to Americans, relief for small businesses, loans to struggling industries like airlines and emergency aid to hospitals.

The Virus Can Be Stopped, but Only With Harsh Steps, Experts Say (New York Times)

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New York Times [3/22/2020 6:00 PM, Donald G. McNeil Jr, 23673K]
Terrifying though the coronavirus may be, it can be turned back. China, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan have demonstrated that, with furious efforts, the contagion can be brought to heel.

Whether they can keep it suppressed remains to be seen. But for the United States to repeat their successes will take extraordinary levels of coordination and money from the country's leaders, and extraordinary levels of trust and cooperation from citizens. It will also require international partnerships in an interconnected world.

There is a chance to stop the coronavirus. This contagion has a weakness.

Although there are incidents of rampant spread, as happened on the cruise ship Diamond Princess, the coronavirus more often infects clusters of family members, friends and work colleagues, said Dr. David L. Heymann, who chairs an expert panel advising the World Health Organization on emergencies.

No one is certain why the virus travels in this way, but experts see an opening nonetheless. "You can contain clusters," Dr. Heymann said. "You need to identify and stop discrete outbreaks, and then do rigorous contact tracing."

But doing so takes intelligent, rapidly adaptive work by health officials, and near-total cooperation from the populace. Containment becomes realistic only when Americans realize that working together is the only way to protect themselves and their loved ones.

In interviews with a dozen of the world's leading experts on fighting epidemics, there was wide agreement on the steps that must be taken immediately.

Those experts included international public health officials who have fought AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis, flu and Ebola; scientists and epidemiologists; and former health officials who led major American global health programs in both Republican and Democratic administrations.

Americans must be persuaded to stay home, they said, and a system put in place to isolate the infected and care for them outside the home. Travel restrictions should be extended, they said; productions of masks and ventilators must be accelerated, and testing problems must be resolved.

But tactics like forced isolation, school closings and pervasive GPS tracking of patients brought more divided reactions.

It was not at all clear that a nation so fundamentally committed to individual liberty and distrustful of government could learn to adapt to many of these measures, especially those that smack of state compulsion.

"The American way is to look for better outcomes through a voluntary system," said Dr. Luciana Borio, who was director of medical and biodefense preparedness for the National Security Council before it was disbanded in 2018.

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“I think you can appeal to people to do the right thing.”

In the week since the interviews began, remarkable changes have come over American life. State governments are telling residents they must stay home. Nonessential businesses are being shuttered.

The streets are quieter than they have been in generations, and even friends keep a wary distance. What seemed unthinkable just a week ago is rapidly becoming the new normal.

What follows are the recommendations offered by the experts interviewed by The Times.

Scientists must be heard

The White House holds frequent media briefings to describe the administration’s progress against the pandemic, often led by President Trump or Vice President Mike Pence, flanked by a rotating cast of officials.

Many experts, some of whom are international civil servants, declined to speak on the record for fear of offending the president. But they were united in the opinion that politicians must step aside and let scientists both lead the effort to contain the virus and explain to Americans what must be done.

Just as generals take the lead in giving daily briefings in wartime — as Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf did during the Persian Gulf war — medical experts should be at the microphone now to explain complex ideas like epidemic curves, social distancing and off-label use of drugs.

The microphone should not even be at the White House, scientists said, so that briefings of historic importance do not dissolve into angry, politically charged exchanges with the press corps, as happened again on Friday.

Instead, leaders must describe the looming crisis and the possible solutions in ways that will win the trust of Americans.

Above all, the experts said, briefings should focus on saving lives and making sure that average wage earners survive the coming hard times — not on the stock market, the tourism industry or the president’s health. There is no time left to point fingers and assign blame.

“At this point in the emergency, there’s little merit in spending time on what we should have done or who’s at fault,” said Adm. Tim Ziemer, who was the coordinator of the President’s Malaria Initiative from 2006 until early 2017 and led the pandemic response unit on the National Security Council before its disbanding.

“We need to focus on the enemy, and that’s the virus.”

Stop transmission between cities

The next priority, experts said, is extreme social distancing.

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If it were possible to wave a magic wand and make all Americans freeze in place for 14 days while sitting six feet apart, epidemiologists say, the whole epidemic would sputter to a halt.

The virus would die out on every contaminated surface and, because almost everyone shows symptoms within two weeks, it would be evident who was infected. If we had enough tests for every American, even the completely asymptomatic cases could be found and isolated.

The crisis would be over.

Obviously, there is no magic wand, and no 300 million tests. But the goal of lockdowns and social distancing is to approximate such a total freeze.

To attempt that, experts said, travel and human interaction must be reduced to a minimum.

Italy moved incrementally: Officials slowly and reluctantly closed restaurants, churches and museums, and banned weddings and funerals. Nonetheless, the country's death count continues to rise.

The United States is slowly following suit. International flights are all but banned, but not domestic ones. California has ordered all residents to stay at home; New York was to shutter all nonessential businesses on Sunday evening.

But other states have fewer restrictions, and in Florida, for days spring break revelers ignored government requests to clear the beaches.

On Friday, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, chief medical adviser to the White House Coronavirus Task Force, said he advocated restrictive measures all across the country.

In contrast to the halting steps taken here, China shut down Wuhan — the epicenter of the nation's outbreak — and restricted movement in much of the country on Jan. 23, when the country had a mere 500 cases and 17 deaths.

Its rapid action had an important effect: With the virus mostly isolated in one province, the rest of China was able to save Wuhan.

Even as many cities fought their own smaller outbreaks, they sent 40,000 medical workers into Wuhan, roughly doubling its medical force.

In a vast, largely closed society, it can be difficult to know what is happening on the ground, and there is no guarantee that the virus won't roar back as the Chinese economy restarts.

But the lesson is that relatively unaffected regions of the United States will be needed to help rescue overwhelmed cities like New York and Seattle. Keeping these areas at least somewhat free of the coronavirus means enacting strict measures, and quickly.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

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Coronavirus Pandemic Is Accelerating, WHO's Tedros Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 2:02 PM, Thomas Mulier and Corinne Gretler, 6400K] Video: HERE
It took two months to reach 100,000 coronavirus cases and just two weeks to get to 200,000. It only took four days for the tally to reach 300,000, a clear sign the pandemic is accelerating, the World Health Organization said.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said it's "heartbreaking" that the disease is present in almost every country in the world now.

Making people stay at home and distance themselves from each other are defensive moves and need to be paired with more aggressive measures such as testing every suspected case, isolating infected people and quarantining close contacts of patients with Covid-19, he said.

"You can't win a football game only by defending," he said. "To win, we need to attack."

Countries are justifiably concerned about the economic effects of lockdowns, which are very difficult to sustain, said Mike Ryan, head of the WHO's health emergencies program. While governments buy time through such measures, they should try to be more aggressive in testing suspected cases and isolating patients, he said.

Japan and the International Olympics Committee will probably make a decision on the Tokyo games very soon, Ryan said. "We have every confidence they will not proceed with the games should it be a danger to athletes or spectators."

WHO chief: 'Pandemic is accelerating' (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 12:27 PM, Reid Wilson, 1762K]
The director-general of the World Health Organization said Monday that the coronavirus pandemic is spreading at an increasingly rapid pace as he called for cooperation from the world's wealthiest nations to fight the outbreak.

At a press briefing Monday in Geneva, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said more than 350,000 cases had been confirmed around the world.

"The pandemic is accelerating," Tedros said. "We need to attack the virus with aggressive and targeted tactics."

More than 15,000 people have died worldwide, including at least 200 in the United States.

Tedros said Monday that it took 67 days to confirm the first hundred thousand cases, 11 days to confirm the second hundred thousand cases and just four days to confirm the third hundred thousand cases.

He added that it's essential for the world's wealthiest nations to work together to combat the virus, a comment that seemed aimed at a growing feud between the United States and China.

President Trump in recent days has increasingly sought to blame China for the spread of

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the virus, while Chinese officials have spread baseless rumors about the United States.

"We need unity in the G-20 countries," Tedros said Monday, referring to the Group of 20. "Political commitment at the G-20 level means a very strong solidarity that can help us to move forward and fight this pandemic in the strongest terms possible."

Defense Department reports jump in coronavirus cases and one death (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 12:50 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]
The number of military members infected by the coronavirus nearly doubled since Friday to 133, with hospitalizations rising from one to seven. The first death was also reported, a contractor in Crystal City, Virginia.

As of Friday, 67 members of the military were known to be infected with the virus. Rising numbers reflect increased testing as thousands more Department of Defense personnel remain in quarantine and self-isolation at military installations worldwide.

More than 1,300 civilians, passengers from the cruise ship Grand Princess, remain quarantined at four military bases in the United States.

The Department of Defense contractor who died of COVID-19 Saturday worked for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. His co-workers have been teleworking.

The DOD's breakdown of positive cases, including a correction for dependents, includes 133 members of the military, 44 civilians, 35 dependents, and 31 contractors. The number of dependents as reported Friday was 26.

The Pentagon reported recoveries of four members of the military and one civilian. Fifteen total individuals remain hospitalized.

On Friday, two groups of Americans in Honduras, including a U.S. women's football team, returned on a C-17 and C-130 from Soto Cano Air Base, where the U.S. maintains a military presence. Both were scheduled to land at Joint Base Charleston, according to United States Southern Command.

In support of domestic COVID-19 response efforts, Navy hospital ship USNS Mercy deployed Monday from San Diego, California.

The Army Corps of Engineers also began a Federal Emergency Management Agency assignment to plan medical facility shortfalls across the country, and the U.S. Army activated 10 units at FEMA regional headquarters to coordinate federal military assistance requests.

The Air Force also flew an en-route patient staging system to the Italian Ministry of Defense to help that country support up to 40 patients in a 24-hour period.

Trump weighs restarting economy despite warnings from U.S. public health officials (Washington Post)

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Washington Post [3/23/2020 8:06 PM, Josh Dawsey, Yasmeen Abutaleb, Jeff Stein, John Wagner, 12625K] Video: HERE
President Trump on Monday said he is considering scaling back steps to constrain the spread of the coronavirus in the next week or two because of concerns that the impact on the economy has become too severe.

But loosening restrictions on social distancing and similar measures soon probably would require him to override the internal warnings of senior U.S. health officials, including Anthony S. Fauci, who have said that the United States has not yet felt the worst of the pandemic, according to several people with knowledge of the internal deliberations.

Trump said at a news conference Monday night that at some point soon the damage being done to the economy could be worse than the threat of the virus spreading further. He said the decision could be based geographically with areas of the country with a low number of positive cases moving back to a normal routine while areas such as New York remain under restrictions.

“America will again — and soon — be open for business,” he said. “Very soon, a lot sooner than three or four months that somebody was suggesting. A lot sooner. We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself.”

When asked if he would make the decision to loosen social-distancing recommendations even if it went against the advice of federal public health officials, Trump said: “If it was up to the doctors they might say shut down the entire world.”

Trump later said he would consider the advice of Fauci and other public health officials before making a decision.

He said any decision would come when what the White House has dubbed “15 Days to Slow the Spread” ends March 30 and that the restrictions could continue for another week or more but not for months.

“This could create a much bigger problem than the problem you started off with,” the president told reporters.

He also compared the effort to combat the virus to auto accidents.

“You look at automobile accidents, which are far greater than any numbers we are talking about,” Trump says. “That doesn’t mean we are going to tell everybody no driving with cars.”

Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the president’s coronavirus task force, and other leading public health experts have told administration officials and Republican lawmakers that prematurely scaling back social-distancing measures would hamper efforts to mitigate the virus and would devastate hospitals, according to the people with knowledge of the conversations, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private deliberations. More than 40,000 people in the United States have tested positive for the coronavirus, a number expected to significantly increase in the coming days and potentially overwhelm the nation’s health-care

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infrastructure.

But the push to reopen parts of the economy has gained traction among some Republican lawmakers in both the Senate and the House, said two people with knowledge of the matter.

Conservative economists Steven Moore and Art Laffer have been lobbying the White House for more than a week to consider scaling back the recommendation that restaurants, stores and other gathering spots be closed, although exactly what that would entail remains unclear. Leading Wall Street and conservative media figures have also embraced the idea.

Trump has begun canvassing his advisers, GOP senators and other allies about what his course of action should be, according to a senior administration official. He is worried about the impact of soaring unemployment numbers and severe economic contraction on his 2020 reelection bid, and fielded phone calls for much of the weekend from alarmed business leaders. He remains fixated on the plummeting stock market, is chafing at the idea of the country remaining closed until the summer and growing tired of talking only about the coronavirus, one person said.

Three people who have recently spoken with the White House economic team, including Moore, confirmed the growing push for restoring normalcy to the U.S. economy and returning workers to their jobs.

Trump signaled his concerns with the outbreak restrictions and the economy in a tweet late Sunday night.

“WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF,” Trump said. “AT THE END OF THE 15 DAY PERIOD, WE WILL MAKE A DECISION AS TO WHICH WAY WE WANT TO GO!”

Asked about Trump’s tweet, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) characterized it Monday as part of a scattershot response to the crisis.

“The president will not take responsibility,” she said. “He’s a notion-monger, just tossing out things that have no relationship to a well-coordinated science-based government-wide response to this. Thank God for the governors, who are taking the leads in their states, and for some of the people in the administration, who speak truth to power.”

Some Republicans also oppose changing course.

“It would be a major mistake to suggest any change of course when it comes to containment,” Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (S.C.), a close ally of Trump, said in an interview. “I just spoke with Dr. Fauci — he believes that, if anything, we should be more aggressive and do more . . . You can’t have a functioning economy if you have hospitals overflowing. People aren’t going to go to work like that.”

One senior administration official said that there is a widespread understanding among government officials about the need to reopen the economy but that proposals have not yet been presented to Trump. The administration has looked at options such as whether people

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can go back to work if they are able to avoid public transportation, or if they can return to their jobs if they are not in areas with high infection rates.

Internally, National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and officials from the Office of Management and Budget are pushing to get the economy back on track as quickly as possible, according to people familiar with the matter.

“The president is right. The cure can’t be worse than the disease,” Kudlow said on Fox News on Monday. “And we’re going to have to make some difficult trade-offs.”

One option under consideration is a gradual scaling back of current restrictions, where people younger than 40 who are healthy go back to work on a certain date, followed by people ages 40 to 50, according to one person briefed on the discussions.

“You have a classic case of the public health people saying, ‘We have to keep everyone sequestered for as long as this takes without any regard to the economic cost.’ The economics team is saying, ‘If this lasts seven to 10 weeks, there won’t be much of an economy to save. From my sources, the view in the White House is shifting toward getting the economy reopened,” Moore said. “There has been a pivot.”

Moore added: “I’m not in any way disparaging the public health people. They are vital to this process. But you can’t have a policy that says we’re going to save every human life at any cost, no matter how many trillions of dollars you’re talking about.”

Health officials have said there needs to be some flexibility on the restrictions even as they have argued for robust social-distancing measures to be put in place.

“There is a discussion and a delicate balance about what’s the overall impact of shutting everything down completely for an indefinite period of time. So, there’s a compromise,” Fauci told Science magazine in a recent interview. “If you knock down the economy completely and disrupt infrastructure, you may be causing health issues, unintended consequences, for people who need to be able to get to places and can’t. You do the best you can.”

While Trump has focused on the 15-day timeline, health experts said that is not expected to be enough time to defeat the virus’s spread.

Hospitals have been sounding the alarm that they are facing severe shortages of protective equipment and ventilators to treat increasing numbers of patients. Cases in the United States are still rapidly increasing and have not yet reached their peak. The nation still does not have comprehensive data about the spread of the virus, its mortality rate, or data about available intensive care unit beds, ventilators and other hospital equipment.

Public health experts are strongly warning against the idea of loosening social distancing measures. Marc Lipsitch, an epidemiology professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of Harvard’s Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, said “every well-informed infectious epidemiologist I know of” believes the United States should be tightening the restrictions.

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“We haven’t yet even seen signs that the growth is slowing, much less reversing. Now is the time to tighten restrictions on contacts that could transmit the virus, not loosen them,” Lipsitch said. “If we let up now we can be virtually certain that health care will be overwhelmed in many if not all parts of the country. This is the view of every well-informed infectious epidemiologist I know of.”

But pressure is also mounting on Trump from top business leaders and conservative media outlets alarmed about the effect on the economy. James Bullard, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, warned Sunday that the unemployment rate in the nation could reach 30 percent in the second quarter amid the outbreak. The stock market, a key selling point of Trump’s reelection bid, has been floundering.

Conservatives close to Trump and numerous administration officials have been circulating an article by Richard A. Epstein of the Hoover Institution, titled “Coronavirus Perspective,” that plays down the extent of the spread and the threat.

Some Wall Street figures have begun calling for measures to mitigate the economic impact of the public health response to the pandemic.

“Extreme measures to flatten the virus ‘curve’ is sensible — for a time — to stretch out the strain on health infrastructure,” Lloyd Blankfein, former chief executive of Goldman Sachs, said on Twitter. “But crushing the economy, jobs and morale is also a health issue — and beyond. Within a very few weeks let those with a lower risk to the disease return to work.”

Delta to Park Half of Fleet on $2 Billion Sales Drop (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 1:11 PM, Mary Schlangenstein, 6400K]
Delta Air Lines Inc. will park more than 600 planes, or about half its fleet, as it cuts flying capacity 70% amid collapsing travel demand from the coronavirus pandemic.

Revenue this month is expected to drop by almost $2 billion from a year earlier, with April projected to be even worse, Chief Executive Officer Ed Bastian told employees Wednesday. About 10,000 Delta workers have applied for voluntary leave since the carrier made it available.

“Cash preservation remains our top financial priority right now,” Bastian said in a memo released by Delta. “Making swift decisions now to reduce the losses and preserve cash will provide us the resources to rebound from the other side of this crisis and protect Delta’s future.”

Delta fell 28% to $22.89 at 3:43 p.m. in New York, after earlier falling as much as 40%.

The Treasury Department will propose $50 billion in secured lending for airlines as part of a broader economic stimulus plan to ease the effects of coronavirus, rejecting the industry’s request that the package include nearly $30 billion in grants, according to a document obtained by Bloomberg News. “Constructive discussions” with the White House and Congress have fueled optimism that the industry will secure government support, Bastian said. The $50 billion plan includes both passenger and cargo carriers.

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Carrier Cuts

Delta's actions added to another round of cutbacks by U.S. carriers that have been caught off guard by how swiftly demand deteriorated. JetBlue Airways Corp., Allegiant Airlines and United Airlines Holdings Inc. have announced additional or new reductions since Tuesday. Carriers battered by the loss of travel also have had to cut fares and refund billions as reservations are canceled.

At Delta, international capacity will be slashed more than 80% over the next two to three months. All Delta officers will take a 50% pay cut through June 30, with a 25% reduction for company directors and managing directors. New aircraft deliveries are being deferred, along with nearly all other capital spending as it seeks $4 billion in cash savings in the second quarter.

"I know everyone is concerned about the security of your jobs and pay," Bastian said. "Given the uncertainty about the duration of this crisis, we are not yet at a point to make any decisions."

Changes in pay rates or jobs will be "the absolute last thing we would do, and only if necessary to secure Delta's long-term future," he said.

The carrier also will retire older aircraft sooner than it had planned, including Boeing Co. MD-88s and MD-90s with averages ages of 29 and 23 years, respectively, and some Boeing 767s. Delta had 47 MD-88s at the end of 2019 and 30 MD-90s.

82% Plunge

JetBlue is paring capacity by 40% in April and May, with "substantial cuts" expected in the two months after that. Average daily bookings and ancillary fees have tumbled 82% this month from a year earlier to below $4 million, while the airline issues $20 million a day in credits for trip cancellations, executives of the carrier said Wednesday.

United said Tuesday it would slash international flying by 85%, the most among U.S. carriers, while reducing service in the U.S. and Canada by 42%. The cuts expanded moves United took to reduce flying just days ago. It's also talking with labor groups on ways to reduce payroll spending and has reduced salaries of corporate officers by about half.

Allegiant Travel Co., parent of Allegiant Airlines, trimmed capacity 15% for April and May -- a figure it expects to grow to as much as 35% going forward -- and halted new hiring. Construction of a Florida resort complex is being halted, the company said Wednesday.

US airlines drafting plans for potential shutdown: report (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 10:53 PM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]
U.S. airlines are drafting plans for a potential voluntary or government-ordered shutdown of passenger flights, The Wall Street Journal reported Monday night.

Industry and federal officials told the Journal that no final decisions have been made by the carriers or the White House, while airlines currently struggle to operate with limited

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passengers.

Officials also said other options were under consideration to prevent a shutdown, but the spreading pandemic has made the shut down seem more unavoidable to airline officials, pilot-union leaders and federal transportation officials, according to the Journal.

The Federal Aviation Administration officials are concerned that the virus will spread among agency controllers and technicians as almost a dozen of traffic-control facilities have had to cease operations temporarily after positive cases.

The U.S. airlines have already been hit financially from the virus as most international flights have been canceled and plans have been announced to reduce domestic flights by as much as 40 percent. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) reported an 80 percent drop in travelers Sunday compared to the same day last year.

Carriers, like American Airlines and United Airlines, have been forced to cancel more than 40 percent of their flights Monday because of a lack of passengers, according to Flightaware.com.

An industry official told the Journal that the airlines would “definitely prefer” if the government initiated a shutdown somewhat because they could use it as leverage during calls for federal aid.

But President Trump and his advisers have been reportedly hesitant to issue an order to stop commercial flights partly due to the fact that these aircrafts also carry U.S. mail and essential cargo shipments.

One option for the government to continue cargo shipments is to use portions of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet, which are commercial jets for the Pentagon to use during national emergencies. The fleet would need to be activated by the Pentagon or the White House.

The Pentagon and the White House were not immediately available for comment.

Officials told the newspaper that implementation of any shutdown would take several days.

Several states have issued stay-at-home orders that prevent 80 million U.S. residents from conducting nonessential travel outside of their homes.

How the coronavirus outbreak is affecting the U.S. criminal justice system (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 5:39 PM, Staff, 2182K]
In the span of a single week, the U.S. criminal justice system endured unprecedented upheaval, as law enforcement officials around the country — from police to prosecutors, courts to corrections – enacted bold new initiatives to continue their work in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

Here is a snapshot of last week’s dramatic changes and what to expect in the week ahead.

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POLICE

Police departments in numerous states have begun scaling back arrests for low-level offenses, precipitating what is expected to be a significant drop in the number of arrests nationwide, in an effort to limit the exposure of officers to the virus.

“We’re looking at essential calls for service,” Steve Casstevens, president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), told ABC News. “Situations like losing a license, getting into a fender bender, don’t require an emergency response or a sworn officer to respond to.”

Sheriff David Mahoney, who leads the National Sheriffs’ Association, also said his organization is working with local, state and federal partners “to decrease the number of people who are physically arrested and brought to jail.”

Last Thursday, for example, the Nashville Police Department (NPD) announced that its officers would essentially stop making misdemeanor arrests, with the exception of domestic violence or driving under the influence charges, in order to “reduce the opportunity for COVID-19 exposure within Nashville’s detention facilities and to Sheriff’s Office detention staff.”

Law enforcement officials told ABC News last week that police officers are facing the same shortages in personal protective equipment and access to testing that has plagued the healthcare system, even as they are increasingly tasked with enforcing new stay-at-home orders and other restrictions.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) has already faced significant exposure to the virus, as the number of confirmed coronavirus cases within its ranks surged from four on Thursday to 52 on Friday.

As a result, more departments are expected to cut back on non-essential services during the outbreak.

Last Wednesday, for example, the sprawling Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) closed its precincts’ front desks to the public, in order to “ensure social distancing and do our part to slow the spread.”

FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Federal law enforcement agencies, meanwhile, are focusing on the ways in which criminals could seek to profit from the coronavirus outbreak as well as adopting new strategies to continue their missions.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and several federal prosecutors around the country have devoted resources toward combatting coronavirus-related fraud, warning the public of several schemes and scams that have emerged amid the health crisis.

"The last thing the American people need, in the middle of this pandemic, is criminals trying to take advantage of them and profit off their concerns," FBI Director Christopher Wray said

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last week. "That is the kind of thing we need to stay especially vigilant about. And of course, other kinds of criminals and adversaries may also seek to capitalize on this situation. And that is why we will not let our guard down."

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials are enforcing new restrictions on travel and commerce along the borders with Canada and Mexico, restricting all nonessential travel, which limits crossings to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents returning to the U.S., people traveling for medical purposes, to attend educational institutions and for work in the United States. Also included are emergency response workers, people involved in trade, government and diplomatic travel and the military. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is shutting down its asylum services office and cancelling pending appointments.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents will continue to pursue investigations involving child exploitation, gangs, narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, human smuggling, and terrorism, but the agency has ceased enforcement operations "at or near health care facilities," except in extraordinary circumstances determined necessary for public safety. Officials urged undocumented immigrants to "not avoid seeking medical care because they fear civil immigration enforcement."

The Drug Enforcement Administration, while it continues to pursue investigations related to illegal drugs, is working to ensure medicines that are regulated as controlled substances remain available for medical needs, dropping a requirement that patients be seen in person and allowing for the use of telemedicine to write prescriptions for those drugs.

COURTS

Dozens of federal courts around the United States have now closed and delayed trials, and according to the National Center for State Courts, at least 30 state courts (including the District of Columbia) have either restricted or ended jury trials, with many suspending in-person proceedings entirely for the time being.

Other major municipalities, including New York City, have moved as many proceedings as possible to video. That suspension didn't include parole hearings, but protests from public defenders and social workers brought them to a grinding halt anyway.

"The hearing rooms are a disaster," Lorraine McEvilley of the New York City Legal Aid Society told the nonprofit news outlet The City. "It's like a small dining room table."

As for the nation's highest court, the Supreme Court took the extraordinary step this week of delaying oral arguments for the month -- the most significant disruption to the court's business since the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. On Friday, several of the Supreme Court justices participated in their regularly scheduled private conference by phone.

A few courts have struggled to stay open. One large Ohio county tried to rush as many people through the system as possible, holding mass plea hearings. Courts in Orange County, Calif., tried to "re-open" on Thursday after a brief halt but quickly descended into what the Los Angeles Times described as "total chaos."

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As judges from the San Mateo County Superior Court in California noted in a statement issued last week: “The Court has a constitutional duty to remain open to serve the needs of the community to the greatest extent possible, even in the face of a potential COVID-19 outbreak.”

CORRECTIONS

The crisis is perhaps most immediate within correctional institutions, as wardens of prisons and jails across the U.S. – fearing a viral outbreak that leads to riots – are scrambling to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

As the former New York City jails commissioner Martin Horn told ABC News on Thursday, “People refer to cruise ships as petri dishes, but nobody has invented a more effective vector for transmitting disease than a city jail.”

On March 13, the Federal Bureau of Prisons issued an order that suspended social and legal visits and halted all inmate transfers. But two independent federal law enforcement sources told ABC News that inmate transfers were continuing and complained of a massive shortage of supplies nationwide.

Inmates across the nation began testing positive for COVID-19 late last week. The BOP has an infectious disease emergency plan, but it is contingent on having the right testing and medical equipment. Sources told ABC News that personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer and soap are at a premium in these facilities.

Only a quarter million of the nation’s 2.3 million inmates are federal prisoners, however, with about 1.3 million in state prisons, and about three-quarters of a million in local jails, according to the non-profit Prison Policy Initiative.

Pressure has been building all week from corrections officers, healthcare leaders and even some prosecutors to free as many low-level inmates from their local institutions as possible.

"Imagine you have to suffer through the COVID-19 outbreak in a closed building,” Tim Zerillo, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, wrote in a blog post on March 16. "You are in that building in close quarters with others. You cannot leave. You cannot step outside for a breath of fresh air. You cannot wash your hands or douse yourself in Purell whenever you like. You are stuck there, with others, waiting for the virus to get you.”

Early last week, Cuyahuga County in Ohio and Los Angeles County in California began releasing hundreds of inmates incarcerated for low-level offenses. New York City released a small amount of inmates from city facilities later in the week.

Dr. Homer Venters, the former chief medical officer of the New York City Jail System, predicted that the coronavirus pandemic will put extraordinary pressure on a long-neglected corner of the healthcare system.

“COVID-19 will remind us of a central hypocrisy in our approach to health behind bars,” wrote Venters in an op-ed for The Hill on Feb. 29. “We’ve built the world’s largest collection

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of jails and prisons, and kept the health services in these places remarkably separate from the rest of our national health systems."

"The CDC, state departments of health, the Joint Commission and other bodies that promote evidence-based care in our hospitals, ambulatory care clinics and nursing homes are largely absent in these settings," he continued." As a result, management of this pandemic will be harder and less effective for incarcerated people, their families and staff in these institutions."

Despite coronavirus warnings, federal Bureau of Prisons still transporting inmates: Sources (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 1:22 PM, Luke Barr, 2182K]
Despite the federal government's guidance to stay inside and many states' stay-in-place orders, the Bureau of Prisons is still moving inmates from facility to facility, internal documents obtained by ABC News show.

One document, written to staff at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York City, says that inmate movement is suspended for 30 days, but at the end adds, "Other case-by-case exceptions for judicial proceedings [are to] be brought to the attention of the appropriate Regional Counsel for consideration."

Over the weekend, three inmates in the Bureau of Prisons tested positive for the coronavirus. Two tested positive at FCC Oakdale, Louisiana, and one at MDC New York.

According to the BOP, the inmate arrived at Metropolitan Detention Center, Brooklyn, on March 16. On March 19, he complained of chest pains and was taken to an outside hospital, where personnel performed a test for COVID-19. On March 20, he was discharged back to MDC Brooklyn and immediately placed in isolation. On Monday, the BOP was notified that his test results for COVID-19 were positive.

BOP says the inmate "remains in isolation." The other inmates he was housed with are being quarantined, as will any staff that need to be as a result of the contact investigation.

Two other staff members – one in Kansas and one in Texas, have tested positive for COVID-19.

Two sources, at different facilities, have told ABC News that inmates came into their facilities, with no explanation given.

At FCI Tallahassee in Tallahassee, Florida, recently 12 inmates, were transferred into the facility – despite the 30-day stoppage on inmate movements.

Inmates from prisons in New York were transferred to three facilities in Pennsylvania, a source explained.

A senator's concern

In a letter to the Bureau of Prisons Director, Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) said that he is

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concerned about the inmate movements.

“These concerns coincide with reports that my office has received indicating that BOP and the U.S. Marshals Service intend to transport incarcerated individuals from out-of-state facilities to multiple facilities in Pennsylvania, including USP Lewisburg, USP Canaan and FCC Allenwood,” Casey writes.

Casey also says that the guidance changed “to permit moving and transferring incarcerated individuals between facilities to ‘better manage bed space.’”

Prisons officials also told ABC News that they lack the proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to protect themselves from these inmate transfers.

On Monday, a judge denied former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen’s plea to be released early, citing COVID-19 as a reason why he should be released.

In its response, the Southern District of New York, in its court filing, citied the Bureau of Prisons coronavirus policy, which includes the inmate transfer guidance.

"Cohen has offered no evidence or argument as to why these measures are insufficient, other than his conclusory assertion to the contrary," the filing says.

The BOP is running on empty with hand sanitizer, soap and masks, sources said, adding that the BOP doesn’t have the ability to order more due to backorder.

Meals for inmates are also getting a change, additional documents show.

Changes in meals

“Breakfast is a flexible meal, it can be sent to the units. One unit at a time for lunch and dinner or a Grab & Go option. Isolated or quarantined inmates should be satellite fed,” noted a document from the South Regional office obtained by ABC News.

The document also stresses the need for prison leadership to find “an area in your institution to isolate or quarantine inmates. Preferably not the Special Housing Unit.”

According to the Associated Press, one of the inmates that tested positive at FCC Oakdale, is in the Special Housing Unit. Those units hold inmates considered high-risk, either for their own safety or the safety of others.

Regional counsels have discretion on inmate movements, the Bureau of Prisons said in its memo to the staff; last week sources confirmed that policy to ABC News.

In Washington, D.C., a U.S. Marshal tested positive for COVID-19, and two inmates were put in quarantine for suspected contact with that U.S. Marshal.

Inmates with ICE

BOP inmates are not the only group in federal government custody, U.S. Immigration and

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Customs Enforcement has a population that is incarcerated.

When asked by ABC News if they are still transporting inmates, ICE referred ABC News to its website which states that it puts detainees with symptoms in a single medical housing room – but the website doesn't address the movement concerns.

U.S. prison union official urges halt to inmate transfers due to coronavirus spread (Reuters)

Reuters [3/23/2020 5:25 PM, Sarah N. Lynch, 5304K]

The federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is still transferring some inmates from coronavirus hotspots such as New York City to prisons in other parts of the country, even as three prisoners tested positive for the COVID-19 respiratory illness over the weekend, a top union official said on Monday.

American Federation of Government Employees Council of Prison Local 33 President Shane Fausey called on Attorney General William Barr to take "unprecedented" action to temporarily stop the movement of all prisoners between facilities until the virus can be contained.

"I am imploring the attorney general of the United States to stop all inmate movement, shelter in place at least for 14 to 21 days, following the guidance of the White House press briefings," he said in a phone interview.

"We need to flatten this curve," he added, referring to the strategy of slowing the virus' spread to prevent hospitals and healthcare systems from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients.

A BOP spokesman said the bureau has "ample" medical and sanitation supplies and has taken protective measures, such as placing all new inmates into 14-day quarantines.

"BOP may need to move inmates to better manage the detention bedspace as well as assure that administrative facilities do not become overcrowded beyond available resources," the spokesman added.

The BOP, which operates 122 facilities, has taken some precautions similar to those in state and local jails and prisons by suspending social visits, though some states have taken more drastic measures. New Jersey, for instance, said on Monday it plans to release "low-risk" inmates serving county jail sentences.

U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed on Sunday he is mulling an executive order to let BOP release some "totally nonviolent prisoners," while criminal justice advocates are pushing Congress to let some elderly inmates free sooner.

The BOP's new policies do call for scaling back inmate movements, but exemptions exist for managing bed space and medical and court trips.

Fausey flagged as particularly concerning cases where newly processed prisoners are sent from facilities in New York City to prisons in western Pennsylvania.

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New York City is the current epicenter of the national epidemic with nearly 17,000 known cases.

Over the weekend, one inmate at a BOP detention facility in the New York borough of Brooklyn tested positive for COVID-19.

Another two inmates at a prison complex in Oakdale, Louisiana are in isolation after becoming infected, and three BOP staffers have the illness, the BOP website says.

[NY] Cuomo directs nurses to 'enlist' as state looks to double bed capacity (Politico)
Politico [3/23/2020 9:55 AM, Shannon Young and Marie J. French, 2003K]
Gov. Andrew Cuomo is asking all registered nurses in New York to "enlist" in the state's effort to expand its surge capacity to combat the coronavirus' spread.

Cuomo announced an emergency executive action on Monday that could ultimately send nurses registered in the state, including those working for insurance companies, to hospitals and new temporary health care facilities to treat the growing number of Covid-19 cases.

The state is looking to double its hospital beds — from 53,000 to 110,000 — through new temporary hospital facilities such as the 1,000-bed field hospital being built at the Javits Center on Manhattan's West Side. It's also suspending capacity regulations at existing medical facilities. The governor said Monday that means New York must secure the staff needed to treat many of those new beds, as well as relieve the nurses and doctors who become infected with the virus.

"We are going to the entire retired community of health care professionals, who are licensed, registered, and we're saying, 'We want you to enlist to help.' It's not a mandatory directive, I can't legally — well I probably could legally — ask them to come into state service. But this is just a request," Cuomo said during an Albany news conference. "We put it out, we've gotten … 30,000 responses to date. I'm doing an emergency executive order for all nurses who are registered to enlist."

Cuomo added that the state's Department of Financial Services is reaching out to insurance companies about the health care professionals they employ.

"This is not about assessing insurance claims at this point, this is about saving lives," he said.

Cuomo's administration sent a letter to health professionals asking them to respond within 36 hours with information about their qualifications and interest in helping to treat patients on March 20.

The governor, who has previously asked hospitals to add more beds on a voluntary basis, said another new executive order will mandate that they increase their capacity by at least 50 percent. He noted, though, that will only increase the number of hospital beds in the state to 75,000.

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“We still have a problem between 75,000 and 110,000 [beds],” he said.

The governor said the state has swiftly ramped up testing capabilities and is outpacing South Korea’s per capita efforts at its peak — about 16,000 tests were performed overnight. There are now 20,875 confirmed positive cases. Of those, 13 percent are currently hospitalized.

There have been 157 deaths related to the coronavirus in New York as of Monday morning.

The governor has been urging New Yorkers to stay home and follow “social distancing” guidelines. He’s awaiting a plan from New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to reduce density after he said he witnessed crowds of people in parks over the weekend.

Cuomo said he’d want to apply whatever plan the city comes up with to Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester County to ensure people don’t simply get in the car to go find somewhere else to gather.

Cuomo plans to visit the Javits Center, where FEMA is setting up a 1,000 bed hospital with ventilators that will be fully staffed, later Monday. Cuomo commended President Donald Trump for his help so far.

“I thank him for it, it makes a big difference to New York,” he said.

Cuomo has brought in several former aides; Bill Mulrow, Steven Cohen and Larry Schwartz to assist with the response. His daughter Cara Kennedy-Cuomo also attended the briefing and is helping his administration’s efforts (Cuomo joked that while his father Mario Cuomo did not pay him $1, he’d make sure to give her the symbolic pay).

The governor acknowledged the economic strain his shutdown is placing on residents and businesses. On Sunday evening, sweeping restrictions on the types of businesses where workers are allowed to report in-person went into effect. Retail stores are largely closed, but grocery stores, pharmacies, building supply centers, laundromats and liquor stores remain open.

The state’s Department of Labor has reported a tremendous spike in people trying to file for unemployment, overloading phone lines and the website.

“I take total responsibility in terms of shutting off the economy,” Cuomo said. “You turned off the engine quickly. How do you now start or begin to restart or plan the restart of that economic engine — separate task but one we have to consider.”

The governor said Mulrow — currently a Blackstone adviser and former secretary to the governor — and Cohen, another former top aide, would be spearheading efforts to restart the economy.

Cuomo suggested the state might consider a “risk stratification” approach put forth by David Katz, founding director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, that could mean younger people return to work sooner and those who have already recovered from the virus also return.

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[NY] N.Y.'s Javits Center to Add 2,000 Beds to System Under Strain (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 3:20 PM, Keshia Clukey and Elise Young, 6400K]
Construction will begin this week to turn the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Manhattan into a 1,000-bed hospital, a first step toward eventually doubling that number, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said.

The main showroom of the center will be broken up into four 250-bed hospitals each about 40,000 square feet in size, Cuomo said at a briefing Monday at the center. There will be 320 Federal Emergency Management Agency workers assigned to the hospitals.

New Jersey, too, expects to increase patient capacity and is asking FEMA to operate four pop-up hospitals, a step that has support from President Donald Trump, Governor Phil Murphy said.

Across the Hudson River on the west side of Manhattan, Javits is one of the nation's biggest event spaces. The New York National Guard, center workers and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are working to prepare the makeshift hospital facility, which is expected to begin operating in a week to 10 days, Cuomo said.

The state is hoping to add an additional 1,000 beds at the center on top of that for less intensive medical care, for a total of 2,000 beds, Cuomo said.

"For us a major thrust is increasing hospital capacity," Cuomo said.

New York is anticipating a surge of coronavirus cases that could require 110,000 beds. The state currently has about 53,000 beds.

Earlier, Cuomo said he was preparing an executive order to compel hospitals to increase their capacity by 50% to handle the surging numbers of coronavirus patients.

The state added more than 5,700 confirmed infections, Cuomo said, for a total of 20,875. Of those cases, about 12,300 are in New York City, 3,260 more than there were on Sunday.

New York accounts for more than a third of all deaths nationwide from Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, with 157 compared with 114 a day earlier.

In neighboring New Jersey, expanded testing for coronavirus turned up another 930 confirmed cases in the last day, pushing the total to 2,884, Murphy said. Seven more deaths from Covid-19 were reported, for a total of 27.

New Jersey is also trying to add hospital beds. Murphy said he had a one-on-one phone call Monday with Trump in which the president "said he would support" the creation of four pop-up field hospitals, to be run by FEMA.

Murphy on Monday outlined new steps the state was taking to slow the virus's march, including a plan to release as many as 1,000 low-level offenders from county jails. They include people with low-level indictable offenses and municipal-level convictions, and all will be screened to determine whether they pose a danger to themselves or others.

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“Jails can be incubators for disease,” state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said.

The disclosure follows an order by New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio on Sunday for the release of 23 inmates from the city’s jail system. The city’s correctional authorities are reviewing 200 other cases as well, de Blasio said.

[NY] Cuomo commands New York hospitals to increase available beds by 50 percent as coronavirus cases increase by more than 4,800 (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 12:00 PM, Dave Lemery, 570K]
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Sunday mandated that all hospitals in the state increase the number of beds in their facilities by at least 50 percent as part of a multipronged effort to ensure that an anticipated surge in COVID-19 cases won’t overwhelm the medical system.

Cuomo, during his daily coronavirus briefing, encouraged hospitals across the state to aim for a 100 percent increase. The governor has repeatedly cited statistics showing that the state currently has about 53,000 beds, but projections show there might be a need for as many as 110,000 within a few weeks.

Many state regulations relating to how many hospital beds can be in a room have been waived during the crisis. Nevertheless, Cuomo acknowledged that hitting a 100 percent increase might not be doable for many hospitals.

“However, at a minimum, hospitals must give us a plan to increase capacity by at least 50 percent,” he said. “So we would be at about 75,000 minimum against the [110,000] need. We would still have to find additional beds.”

To fill the gap, the state is working with the Army Corps of Engineers to establish temporary hospital sites. Cuomo has already notified the corps that four sites have been approved by the state. Another four hospital setups are in the works through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

“The federal hospital by FEMA is different than the Army Corps of Engineers temporary facility,” he said. “The FEMA hospitals come with staff and with supplies. They’re in 250-bed configurations. We’re asking for four of those 250-bed configurations to be assembled in the Javits Center.”

The need for beds continued to take on urgency as the latest coronavirus numbers in New York showed no slowdown. There were 4,812 new cases added to the state’s total on Sunday, bringing the latter number to 15,915. There have been 114 deaths in the state, about 30 percent of the 374 in the nation. And the hospitalization rate of the identified cases so far is 13 percent.

The governor also directed New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council to bring him a plan within 24 hours to address what he saw as a dangerous amount of defiance toward social distancing directives in the city.

“I was in New York City [on Saturday],” he said. “It was a pretty day. There is a density level in New York City that is wholly inappropriate. You would think there was nothing going on in

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parts of New York City. You would think it was just a bright, sunny Saturday. … You would not know that anything was going on. This is just a mistake. It's a mistake. It's insensitive, it's arrogant, it's self-destructive, it's disrespectful to other people and it has to stop, and it has to stop now. This is not a joke and I am not kidding."

On top of the many orders Cuomo has issued in the past week that have shut down almost every aspect of daily life in the state, he announced Sunday that all elective surgeries would be halted starting Wednesday.

"That alone should get us 25 to 35 percent more beds, and again that is a mandate that is going into effect for the hospitals," he said. "I understand the hospitals are not happy about it. I heard that elective surgery is a big source of revenue for the hospitals. I understand that but this is not about money. This is about public health and we're putting that mandate in place starting today."

He also encouraged the federal government to take over stewardship from the individual states when it comes to acquiring personal protective equipment, noting that New York's efforts to purchase face masks have seen the cost rise from 85 cents to 7 dollars per mask due to competition.

"We are competing against other states," he said. "In some ways we're savaging other states … I'm trying to buy masks. I'm competing with California and Illinois, and Florida and that's not the way it should be, frankly."

[NY] U.S. states, cities desperate for coronavirus help, military prepares (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 11:44 AM, Stephanie Kelly and Doina Chiacu, 5304K]
Several more U.S. governors on Monday joined the procession of states ordering millions of Americans to stay at home to slow the spread of the coronavirus, while President Trump signaled he's considering a move in the opposite direction.

Public health authorities have pushed for the stay-at-home restrictions as essential to curb widespread transmission of a highly contagious respiratory virus that has infected more than 42,000 people in the United States, killing at least 559.

While a wave of statewide social distancing measures expanded, further stifling the U.S. economy amid another day of plunging stock prices and growing fears of a global recession, Trump said, "we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself."

"America will again and soon be open for business," Trump told a White House news conference. "We are not going to let it turn into a long-lasting financial problem."

A $2 trillion economic stimulus bill, however, stalled in the U.S. Senate as Democrats pressed for more money for states and hospitals and restrictions on business bailouts.

The president said he would re-evaluate his administration's position on whether to continue restricting business activity at the end of the month, after the lapse of a 15-day guidance the White House issued on March 15 to limit social interactions and curb unnecessary travel.

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Trump suggested it was possible to ease up on businesses in states experiencing what he said were relatively low infection rates, like Nebraska, Idaho and Iowa, while continuing to clamp down on hot zones in other states, such as New York.

“If it were up to the doctors, they’d say let’s shut down the entire world,” Trump said.

MORE STATES IN LOCKDOWN

Since last week, governors in at least 18 states accounting for nearly half the U.S. population have issued directives requiring residents to stay mostly indoors, except for necessary trips to grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations and doctors’ offices. “Non-essential” businesses have also been ordered closed.

The measures are based on social distancing principles aimed at increasing the amount of space between individuals in order to stem transmission of a potentially lethal illness that threatens to overwhelm the nation’s hospitals.

Washington, which accounts for over a quarter of the deaths, became the latest state to issue “stay at home” orders.

“This is a human tragedy on a scale we cannot yet project. So it’s time to hunker down to win this fight,” Washington Governor Jay Inslee said.

Even before statewide restrictions began to go into effect last week, the coronavirus pandemic had virtually paralyzed sectors of the U.S. economy and shattered U.S. lifestyles as school districts and colleges canceled classes, and many companies shuttered workplaces, either voluntarily or under local government orders.

While Trump’s latest remarks showed his concern about the economic fallout, state and local officials continued to raise alarms about a healthcare delivery system in danger of collapse.

California Governor Gavin Newsom said on Monday his state needs 50,000 additional hospital beds to accommodate a surge in coronavirus patients predicted by computer modeling.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio appealed for ventilators, masks and other medical equipment, even asking for help from private citizens.

New York State is now at the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak with 157 deaths, the most of any state.

Karine Raymond, a nurse at Jack D. Weiler Hospital in New York City’s Bronx borough, said most nurses were unable to get specialized N95 masks and even simpler surgical masks were in short supply. Nurses are being told to wear them for as long as possible, she said.

“We are the be all and end all and lifeline to these patients, and yet we are being contaminated and cross contaminating,” Raymond said.

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RESCUES SOUGHT BY FED, CONGRESS

A far-reaching economic stabilization package for the coronavirus crisis failed to advance on Monday in the Senate after Democrats said it contained too little money for hospitals and not enough restrictions on a fund to help big businesses. Democrats predicted a modified version would win passage soon.

Both Democrats and Republicans say they are aware that failure to agree on the bill could have a devastating effect on states, cities and businesses, and trigger further heavy losses in U.S. stock markets.

Wall Street's slide deepened on Monday as an unprecedented moves by the U.S. Federal Reserve to shore up credit across the economy proved insufficient to sooth investors' fears about the swiftly spreading coronavirus.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average tumbled 3.04% to end at 18,591.93 points, while the S&P 500, a broader-market index, lost 2.93% to 2,237.4. The S&P 500 is now down about 34% from its February record high, its lowest level since fears of the coronavirus swept across Wall Street.

The steps briefly lifted U.S. stock index futures but share prices quickly dropped back into the red, putting the S&P 500 on pace for its worst month since World War Two.

A lack of coordinated federal action was causing chaos for states and municipalities, and even putting them in competition with each other for medical resources, the governors of New York, New Jersey and Illinois said.

The states "are all out looking for the same thing," New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy told CNN on Monday.

[NY] New York City's Javits Center transforming into field hospital for coronavirus patients (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 7:00 PM, Staff, 2394K]
Conversion of the main showroom floor of the Javits Center in Manhattan is expected to begin this week, turning the 1.8 million square feet of convention space into New York City's first field hospital to respond to the coronavirus crisis, CBS New York reports.

Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the plans Saturday and toured the space Monday afternoon. He said setting up four 250-bed field hospitals at the site would take about a week to 10 days.

"This is going to get much worse before it gets better," said Cuomo. "We are still in the relative calm before the storm. You're going to see the number of infections, the number of cases increase dramatically.

"You're going to see an over-capacity of our health system," he said. "Right now we're projecting you'll see more people come into the health care system than we can handle."

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In addition to the initial 1,000 beds being made available, Cuomo said an additional 1,000 beds for "lighter medical care" could also be built within the Javits Center, a venue that until known has been known for events like auto shows and comic cons, not medical care.

"This was never an intended use, but you do what you have to do," Cuomo said. "That's the New York way. That's the American way."

In total there will be 320 federal staffers working in the initial combined site within Javits, covering 160,000 square feet.

Other locations Cuomo put on his list as field hospital sites included the campuses at SUNY Stony Brook and SUNY Westbury on Long Island, and the Westchester Convention Center, north of New York City. Each of those would have one 250-bed unit under the management of FEMA.

New York is facing the largest number of people infected with coronavirus in the U.S., with more than 12,000 confirmed cases as of Monday, according to Johns Hopkins University.

In Cuomo's earlier press briefing Monday, he urged retired health care professionals to lend their hands in response to the pandemic by enlisting online.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[NY] Virus cases top 20,000 in NY as new restrictions start (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 4:01 PM, Robert Bumsted and Michael Hill, AP, 337K]
New Yorkers started their first full day of severe restrictions Monday that are intended to curb the spread of the virus after the number of cases in the state continues to surge amid an uptick in testing.

All of the state's "nonessential" businesses were ordered closed by 8 p.m. Sunday under an order that also banned nonessential gatherings of individuals. New Yorkers may still go outside their homes to pick up groceries or exercise, but must stay 6 feet away from anyone who isn't a member of their household.

Here are the latest updates about the coronavirus in New York:

EMERGENCY BEDS

Gov. Andrew Cuomo promised 1,000 temporary hospital beds will be swiftly placed inside a vast Manhattan convention center as officials raced to prepare for an overwhelming number of coronavirus patients.

"This is going to get much worse before it gets better. We are still in the relative calm before the storm," Cuomo said during a stop at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. "You're going to see the number of infections, the number of cases, increase dramatically. You are going to see an overcapacity of our health system."

The number of positive coronavirus cases in New York state surged to more than 20,000,

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with more than half the cases in New York City. The city has emerged as a worldwide hotspot for the outbreak, with more than 12,000 known cases.

Cuomo said the swift climb in numbers also is due to aggressive testing, with the state now testing 16,000 people a day.

Construction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency temporary hospitals at the convention center will start this week and hopefully be done within 10 days, Cuomo said. The state is working with the federal government to add another 1,000 beds for a lighter level of care in the cavernous space typically used for auto and trade shows.

“This was never an anticipated use,” Cuomo said, “but you do what you have to do.”

Cuomo said the 1,000 hospital beds will relieve pressure on hospitals at capacity as the outbreak spreads. He said 320 federal staff will come to take care of 1,000 people initially.

The governor also has ordered existing hospitals to increase their capacity by 50%.

The scramble to add beds is part of a larger effort to line up adequate supplies of ventilators, masks and other medical equipment. Cuomo said the state has enough supplies for today, but cannot make predictions about next week or the week after.

There have been 157 deaths in New York state. And there have been more than 2,500 hospitalizations in the state, with 621 ICU patients.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Monday that he spoke with President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence about the city’s urgent need for medical supplies to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

"We’re literally in that very tight window now that if we don’t get the ventilators in particular we will actually start to lose lives that could have been saved,” de Blasio said on CNN.

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

EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT

Cuomo said state health officials will proceed with an experimental treatment for patients seriously ill with the coronavirus. The treatment involves taking plasma from someone who has been infected, processing it and injecting the antibodies into a sick person to stimulate their immune system.

“It’s a trial for people who are in serious condition,” Cuomo said.

The Food and Drug Administration approved the trial, which will begin this week on a "compassionate care basis," the governor said.

Also, the state on Tuesday will begin to conduct trials of an experimental treatment with the

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malaria drug hydroxychloroquine and the antibiotic Zithromax, a treatment touted by President Donald Trump.

ONLINE SCHOOLING STARTS

School was back in session Monday for New York City's 1.1 million public school students, though instruction was happening in digital classrooms.

City education officials gave teachers a crash course in online instruction last week and distributed laptops and tablets to some students who lack them, but Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged that many students still lack devices to access their classes and do their homework with.

"We will reach a lot more kids over time," de Blasio told WPIX-TV. Officials have said pencil-and-paper packets will be available in the meantime.

[KY] Kentucky gov orders nonessential businesses to close (AP)
AP [3/22/2020 6:41 PM, Staff, 1670K]
Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear on Sunday ordered nonessential retail businesses to close in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Beshear said the move is effective at 8 p.m. Monday and includes businesses such as entertainment, clothing, bookstores, jewelry stores and car dealerships. He said auto repair and parts shops are exempt.

He said businesses such as grocery stores, pharmacies, drug stores, liquor stores and gas stations will remain open.

"This is the next step that we need to take to reduce the contacts to Kentuckians until we defeat this virus," the Democratic governor said.

Beshear also said he is mandating that all hospitals cease elective procedures. He said the vast majority already have.

Some other states have ordered residents to shelter in their homes, but Beshear said that has not been discussed.

"Shelter in place evokes emotions in us that (there is) a deadly chemical spill near our house or even an active shooter," Beshear said. "It says get in your house and board it up until we call you. That's not the way that we will address this coronavirus."

The governor said Kentuckians will always be able to go outside to exercise or to go to the grocery store. He also said store supplies are being replenished and there was no need to jam grocery carts full.

"We are our own worst enemy in that," Beshear said. "Remember that your actions have consequences on your neighbor. Make sure that you buy enough for your family, but there's enough for the next family coming behind you."

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Like other states, Beshear reiterated that his administration is constantly searching for personal protection equipment such as masks, gloves and goggles.

“We are chasing down every lead,” he said. “We are pressuring every person. We are making every phone call. It is a problem. I’m working like heck that we have as much as humanly possible.”

Three people have died in Kentucky from the virus. Health officials said the total number of confirmed cases in the state increased to about 100.

For most people, the virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For people with existing health problems and older adults, it can cause more severe illness requiring hospitalization.

The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.

[FL] Florida officials say at least 1,000 test positive for virus (AP)
AP [3/22/2020 6:33 PM, Staff, 3020K]
Gov. Ron DeSantis urged Floridians to stay home and not panic about the spread of the novel coronavirus, which had infected at least 1,000 people across the state as of Sunday.

Twelve people have died, including the first fatality in Palm Beach County. Nearly half of the state’s positive cases are in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

But DeSantis stressed that the results should not cause undue concern.

“The vast, vast majority of people are testing negative for this,” DeSantis said.

DeSantis held a news conference at the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens. Less than two months after hosting the Super Bowl, the stadium is now the home of a drive-thru testing site recently opened by the National Guard. On Sunday, they were only testing first responders and health care workers. On Monday, they planned to expand it to people at least 65 years old who are showing symptoms of the illness. A testing center at Marlins Park will also open in the coming days, officials said.

According to state figures, more than 11,000 people have been tested for the virus. That’s more than most states, but less than New York.

Also Sunday, students at multiple Florida colleges were found to have the virus. Ten students and one employee at the University of Florida in Gainesville, six students at University of Tampa, and one student at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg all tested positive, the schools announced. The University of Miami also said a student had the virus.

In addition, a fourth TSA worker at Orlando International Airport has tested positive, officials

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said. The Transportation Security Administration said the screening officer, last worked March 16 and is quarantining at home.

Around the state, the virus rippled through communities — figuratively, if not literally. Boat ramps were closed, more businesses were shuttered, and officials warned that residents should brace themselves for difficult times ahead.

“I want everybody to get mentally and emotionally prepared,” he said.

During a news conference Sunday, Orange County Mayor Val Demings said the county would offer rental assistance for those who have lost jobs.

In Southwest Florida, two Fort Myers restaurants prepared about 2,000 meals Saturday and gave them away to hospitality industry workers who have been laid off. On Friday, DeSantis ordered restaurants statewide to close their dining rooms in an attempt to slow the spread of the virus. The order could last through May 8 or longer — a devastating blow to a state whose lifeblood is tourism.

DeSantis has not called for a “shelter in place” order, unlike governors in California, New York and Illinois, who have ordered such restrictive measures.

The virus causes only minor flu-like symptoms in most people, who recover in a matter of weeks. But it is highly contagious and can cause severe illness or death in some patients, particularly the elderly and those with underlying health problems. Severe cases are often only able to breathe with respirators.

[LA] Louisiana virus cases surge; Edwards plans primetime address (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 3:52 PM, Melinda Deslatte, AP, 337K]
The number of Louisiana residents confirmed to be infected with the coronavirus spiked Monday to nearly 1,200 people, and the virus’s death toll in the state grew dramatically overnight, a troubling trend that had Gov. John Bel Edwards enacting a statewide “stay at home” order and planning a televised plea for people to comply.

At least 34 residents have died from the COVID-19 disease caused by the virus, according to Louisiana’s health department, up from 20 confirmed deaths a day earlier.

Edwards ordered his state’s 4.6 million residents to voluntarily stay at home starting at 5 p.m. Monday unless they need to carry out essential tasks such as getting food or medicine. First responders and workers in grocery stores, pharmacies, doctors’ offices and other critical operations are exempt from the directive, which will remain in effect until at least April 12.

The Democratic governor planned a prime-time, statewide TV broadcast Monday night to talk about Louisiana’s response to the coronavirus. The state has one of the highest per-capita rates of confirmed infection, with the outbreak spreading so rapidly that Edwards has warned that Louisiana is on a trajectory similar to Italy’s, with health care facilities at risk of being overwhelmed within the next week.

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The virus has spread to at least 41 of the state's 64 parishes, according to the health department figures. The epicenter of the state's outbreak remains in the New Orleans region, which accounts for 25 of the deaths. Residents of the Baton Rouge area and in north and central Louisiana also have died from the virus.

Louisiana joins New York and Georgia in leading the nation in the number of nursing homes with coronavirus cases, a federal report shows. At least seven homes in each of the three states have confirmed or suspected coronavirus cases, according to Sunday's report from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Current or suspected cases of COVID-19 have been found in at least four nursing homes in each of three other states: Washington, Illinois and New Jersey.

This coronavirus causes only minor flu-like symptoms in most people, who recover in a matter of weeks. But it is highly contagious and can cause severe illness or death in higher numbers among the elderly and people with underlying health problems.

Of the Louisiana residents who have died from COVID-19, nine lived at Lambeth House, a New Orleans retirement home and nursing facility, state health officials said. Forty-two people from Lambeth House have tested positive for the coronavirus. A second cluster of cases has been identified at a Donaldsonville retirement and nursing home, with five infections identified Monday, the health department said.

"We continue to be in daily contact with Lambeth House and in daily contact with any other facility that has people with symptoms. We even start at the point of symptoms. We want to be very cautious and watchful here," said Dr. Alexander Billioux, Louisiana assistant secretary of health.

Even as Edwards and public health officials called on people to stay home, one pastor refused to comply with a ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. A Baton Rouge area church held services for more than 1,800 people Sunday, many of them brought in on buses, according to WVLA-TV. Edwards described that as disappointing.

"We need everybody to embrace these mitigation measures and to be part of the solution, not part of the problem," the governor said.

Meanwhile, the leader of the Catholic Church in New Orleans, Archbishop Gregory Aymond, announced Monday that he had tested positive for COVID-19, saying in a statement that he had "very mild symptoms" and had self-quarantined.

Complicating New Orleans' fight of the disease spread, rats and mice are abandoning their hiding places in walls and rafters of shuttered businesses and venturing outside. On Bourbon Street workers in protective clothing placed poisonous bait in storm drains and set out traps.

"Unfortunately, what's happening is, many of these rodents are looking for an alternative food source," Claudia Riegel, the city's pest control director, said Monday.

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[IL] Illinois sees three new deaths, nearly 300 new cases, of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 11:00 AM, Cole Lauterbach, 570K]
Illinois officials said Sunday nearly 300 more Illinois residents have tested positive for coronavirus and three more died.

This brings the total number of people who have, or have had, COVID-19 to more than 1,000.

“Unfortunately, I have to report that there are 296 new cases of coronavirus disease in Illinois, including one infant and sadly we’re also announcing three additional deaths,” Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike said.

She said it has yet to be determined whether a pregnant woman can transmit the virus to her unborn child.

Officials continued to ask people to remain home while they work to track as many sick residents as possible.

Without being asked, Gov. J.B. Pritzker addressed his and President Donald Trump’s comments toward one another.

On CNN, Pritzker criticized the Trump Administration for not requiring private businesses to begin mass producing medical equipment, leaving Illinois taxpayers to compete with other states and countries for equipment and paying a premium for it, referring to it as “the wild west.”

Trump responded on Twitter later Sunday morning, saying “@JBPritzker, Governor of Illinois, and a very small group of certain other Governors, together with Fake News @CNN & Concast (MSDNC), shouldn’t be blaming the Federal Government for their own shortcomings. We are there to back you up should you fail, and always will be!”

Pritzker said the Trump administration has consistently failed to do what it could to stop the virus.

“I’m a pretty even-keeled guy but even I am finding it hard to contain my anger about Donald Trump’s response,” he said.

[OR] Oregon Gov. Kate Brown Orders Residents to Stay Home Amid Coronavirus Pandemic (US News & World Report)
US News & World Report [3/23/2020 3:40 PM, Claire Hansen, 3020K]
Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on Monday ordered residents to stay at home and expanded the list of businesses that will be forced close in an effort to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

The order, which goes into effect immediately, mandates that residents stay home when possible and prohibits any nonessential gatherings, regardless of size, if a distance of 6 feet cannot be maintained between people.

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The order also closes businesses, including hair salons, gyms and theatres, as well as playgrounds and outdoor parks. Grocery stores, gas stations, pharmacies, restaurants that offer takeout or delivery and other essential businesses will remain open. Those that remain open must enforce social distancing guidelines. Anyone in violation of the order will be considered an immediate danger to public health and subject to a misdemeanor charge.

Governors of several other states on Monday announced similar restrictions as the number of coronavirus cases grows exponentially nationwide.

Health officials have reported 162 cases in Oregon and five deaths, according to researchers.

"Staying home both keeps you safe from infection, and ensures you do not unknowingly infect others," Brown said in a press release. "None of us have ever been through this before, and that means there is no way to know exactly what lies ahead. We don't know yet when this outbreak will end, or what changes this will bring for our state and for our country. But I want to make sure that we've done all we can to end it as quickly as possible."

[OR] Man stole thousands of N95 masks, police say. They were recovered and are now being donated. (USA Today)
USA Today [3/23/2020 8:05 AM, Ryan W. Miller, 5611K]
Oregon police recovered thousands of N95 respirators after a man allegedly stole at least 20 cases of the masks, worth nearly $2,500.

Portland Police Bureau said The Rebuilding Center, a construction and sustainability nonprofit, reported the theft on March 6 when 20 to 25 cases, each with 400 masks, were stolen.

The next day, staff at the center found the N95 respirators listed on Craigslist and being sold in nearby Beaverton. A meetup was scheduled and police were contacted.

Vladislav V. Drozdek, 22, of Beaverton, was arrested and charged with first degree theft, and six cases of the masks were recovered.

On Saturday, police recovered seven more cases of the masks being stored inside a house. More arrests and charges are possible, police said.

95 mask shortage: How FEMA, businesses and Donald Trump are confronting the country's N95 mask shortage amid coronavirus pandemic

When the masks were returned, they were donated to local hospitals amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Health care workers and public health officials have reported shortages of personal protective equipment, including the N95 respirators, as more people fall ill to COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

N95 respirators block "at least 95 percent of very small (0.3 micron) test particles,"

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according to the Food and Drug Administration, and provide more protection than loose-fitting surgical masks.

"This was a good example of interagency teamwork and cooperation, along with some helpful detective work by the victim," said Portland Police Bureau Assistant Chief of Operations Mike Frome. "This is even more significant during a time when these medical supplies are in such short supply."

[CA] L.A. County increases coronavirus testing capacity, securing 20,000 new tests (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 4:14 PM, Patrick McGreevy, Ruben Vives, Colleen Shalby, and Hannah Fry, 1907K]
L.A. County has secured 20,000 new coronavirus tests with a processing capacity of 5,000 tests per day, officials announced Monday. The tests will be free and healthcare workers and first-responders will be prioritized.

Additionally, L.A. City Councilman David Ryu said that officials are working with a South Korean company to have 100,000 coronavirus tests available to the area per week, with the ability to run 30,000 per day.

“With increase testing comes an increased in reported infections. This does not necessarily mean we’re having an outbreak of new infections. Rather, testing is helping us identify our current problem,” Ryu said.

To date, Ryu said that roughly 25,200 test have been conducted in California.

County officials confirmed on Monday 128 new cases and two more deaths, bringing the total number of deaths in the county to seven, and the total case count to 536.

Of those who have tested positive, 80% are people between the ages of 18 and 65 and 42% are people between the ages of 18-40.

Ninety people who have been infected in the county have at some point been hospitalized while sick, L.A. County Public Health Department Dr. Barbara Ferrer said. That’s 17% of those who have tested positive.

As the number of confirmed coronavirus infections and deaths in California rises, federal, state and local officials are ramping up unprecedented restrictions on people’s movements in an effort to slow the spread of the virus and increasing resources to assist during the crisis.

Parks have been closed throughout the state, following a weekend that saw packed hiking trails and beaches as people flocked to outdoor spaces following statewide instructions to “shelter in place.” All the while, the call for help from the federal government has remained a constant need.

To help cities in California beef up their response to the pandemic, President Trump on Sunday approved a request from Gov. Gavin Newsom to declare a major disaster and for

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the federal government to provide “mass care,” emergency aid, unemployment assistance and disaster legal services.

The president said the Federal Emergency Management Agency would ship mobile hospital units to California within the next 48 hours. The state is in line to get eight of these units, for a total of 2,000 beds.

The Navy hospital ship Mercy, based in San Diego, has been deployed to Los Angeles, according to the chief of naval operations. Adm. Michael M. Gilday tweeted on Monday: "#USNSMercy will be getting underway #TODAY in support of the nation’s #COVID19 response efforts.” Though its facilities will not be used to treat COVID-19 patients, it will accept patients with other medical issues in an attempt to relieve the burden on hospitals, FEMA administrator Peter Gaynor said.

The Pentagon is additionally planning to send a military field hospital to Seattle and New York City later this week to treat non-coronavirus patients and to free up bed space in civilian hospitals, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said at news conference Monday.

The planned move is still awaiting approval by officials at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Los Angeles Unified School District Supt. Austin Beutner announced Monday that schools, which closed along with others across California last week to help quell the outbreak, will remain shuttered through at least May 1.

The closures are a hardship for children and families in a state where 60% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals because they are members of low-income households. In Los Angeles public schools, the percentage is even higher, with 80% of students who qualify; in Compton, it’s 83%; Pomona, 89%.

“Students are learning in different ways, teachers are teaching in different ways and families are struggling to support their children in their studies while balancing other responsibilities,” Beutner said in a prepared statement. “I wish I could tell you it will all be back to normal sometime soon, but it does not look like that will be the case.”

Beutner announced that Verizon will provide free internet access for all students who do not currently have access, as not to disrupt their learning.

The district is currently working on a plan to distribute more computers to students and instructions for accessing the Verizon program.

Additionally, L.A. City Council president canceled all upcoming meetings into April.

As of early Monday, more than 1,800 cases of coronavirus infection had been reported in California, and 35 people had died. The number of confirmed cases is expected to grow as more testing occurs statewide. Los Angeles County health officials on Sunday confirmed a fifth death from COVID-19. They also reported 71 new cases in the county, with the total now at least 411.

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The Los Angeles Community College District reported on Sunday its first confirmed case of the virus at East Los Angeles College in Monterey Park. A student there was tested Wednesday after reporting symptoms and is in quarantine and recovering, a letter from interim president Raul Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said the student was believed to have been exposed while at UCLA during the week of March 8 and last came to the East L.A. College campus on March 12.

All faculty and staff who were supposed to come to campus on Monday were directed to work from home unless otherwise notified by their supervisors.

A ground-support employee responsible for handling luggage at Hollywood Burbank Airport has tested positive for COVID-19, according to a statement released Monday by the company that employs the worker.

A fifth Transportation Service Authority employee at San Jose International Airport has tested positive for the virus. The employee last worked at the airport on March 11 at a passenger screening checkpoint

And an inmate in the state's prison system, along with five prison workers, have also tested positive. The prisoner, housed in L.A. County, was in stable condition and was being treated on site as of Sunday night.

Elsewhere, healthcare workers are increasingly feeling the toll of their work.

In a video message recorded Sunday night, Marin County's Public Health Officer Dr. Matt Willis announced that he tested positive for the virus that afternoon. Willis said he has been self-quarantined from his family since his symptoms first appeared late last week.

"My case is further proof that COVID-19 is with us," said Willis. "While my symptoms are now mild, as most people's will be, we also know that for many, especially our elders, this same illness can be life threatening."

Willis' source of exposure is currently unknown, since he has actively met with healthcare workers around the Bay Area for work.

Meanwhile, as more testing becomes available, the need for increased capacity has not dissipated.

The city of Hayward opened a free, public COVID-19 testing center Monday that officials say should be able to screen up to 350 people a day and provide results within 24 hours.

In a joint-effort between the Alameda County city and Avellino, a Menlo Park-based precision medicine company, the center at city Fire Station #7 will be open daily and staffed by personnel from the Hayward Fire Department.

No doctor's referral is required, but people arriving at the center will be screened for symptoms of the disease — such as fever, cough and shortness of breath — before they're tested.

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As of Monday morning, there were “dozens of people who have presented themselves for testing, arriving both by car and on foot,” said city spokesman Chuck Finnie.

In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti on Sunday admonished Angelenos who hadn’t taken orders to practice social distancing seriously, announcing the closure of the city’s golf courses and parking lots at Venice Beach and called a halt to organized group sports at city parks, which were continuing to attract throngs of people.

“This weekend we saw too many images of too many people crowding beaches or canyons beyond their capacity. Too many people, too close together, too often,” Garcetti said during his daily briefing on the impact of the novel coronavirus.

“The longer we do that, the more people will get sick, and the more people will die,” he said. “There’s no way to sugarcoat that.”

Parking lots near Venice Beach and the boardwalk were closed Monday, he said. In Santa Monica, the city also decided to close its beach parking lots.

L.A. County Sheriff Alex Villaneuva closed beach parking lots throughout Malibu’s 26 miles of coast as part of an effort to allow for social distancing. Among the parking lots shut were Topanga, Surfrider, Corral Canyon, Point Dume, Zuma, El Matador, La Piedra, Nicolas Canyon and Leo Carrillo.

On Sunday night, Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia announced the closure of Long Beach’s public basketball, tennis and volleyball courts, as well as its dog parks, playgrounds and skate parks.

Officials in Orange County also were tightening regulations after groups of people descended on beaches and public trails over the weekend despite warnings about social distancing.

The Laguna Beach City Council voted in a closed session Sunday night to close trail access to county wilderness parks as early as Monday morning. The council also directed staff to close all city beaches by Monday night and request that the county do the same for all stretches of sand in its jurisdiction.

“We were unanimous that these steps must be taken now in our city to slow the spread of COVID-19,” Laguna Beach Mayor Bob Whalen said. “I urge everyone to comply with our actions for the health of everyone in our community and beyond.”

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority announced over the weekend that it was closing all of its parks and trails, including parkland owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Access roads and parking lots also will be closed. Many were packed over the weekend as people — eager to get out of the house and into the warm weather after days of rain — flocked to the outdoor destinations.

In Marin County, health officials have ordered the immediate closure of all county parks to stem the tide of visitors.

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The measures build on Newsom's sweeping order, issued Thursday, urging Californians to stay home — with a few exceptions — and put distance between themselves and others to slow the spread of COVID-19. Garcetti issued similar orders last week, which have closed most businesses in the city.

Many who flocked to public areas over the weekend insisted they needed time outdoors to maintain their sanity.

Clifford Aquino and Ryan Castro, both 28, couldn't go to their gyms in Cerritos, as they had closed under government orders. So they decided to go to Long Beach instead, where there are plenty of outdoor gyms and paths for running.

"This is only Day 2," Castro said. "It sucks."

"It does suck," Aquino replied, "but you have to find different ways to stay active."

Aquino said he felt safe using the outdoor machines because he was able to keep a safe distance from others. If one area is too busy, he finds another, he said. He said he wiped down each machine with a Lysol wipe before using it.

Trump announced that he had signed paperwork to have the federal government pay for National Guard deployments in California, New York and Washington.

Newsom on Friday deployed the California National Guard to assist food banks statewide in serving residents whose needs had not been met due to food shortages.

The governor said the guard would focus on both humanitarian and public safety needs. Newsom specifically pointed out that the state wanted to ensure that "food delivery is happening appropriately" and expressed concern about grocery stores overwhelmed by customers hoarding food and other essential household goods.

California's National Guard force of roughly 22,000 troops has often been activated in times of disaster and crisis, particularly in response to devastating wildfires and earthquakes.

Meanwhile, Garcetti urged residents with disposable income to donate to the city's emergency crisis response fund, which will help pay for childcare for medical workers, grants for families and individuals who need financial assistance and meals for seniors.

[CA] Coronavirus cases in California pass 2,000. Here is what you need to know (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 11:02 PM, Colleen Shalby, Rong-Gong Lin II, Hannah Fry, 1907K]
California hit another milestone with coronavirus: more than 2,000 cases confirmed.

Officials expect that number to rise significantly amid aggressive new pushes to get more people tested.

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The death toll now stands at 43, with two new deaths reported in Los Angeles County. Both state and local numbers show it's not just the old getting sick. Of those who have tested positive in Los Angeles County, for example, 80% are people ages 18 to 65, and 42% are in the 18-40 age group.

"This virus can infect people from across the board," Dr. Barbara Ferrer, director of the L.A. County Public Health Department, said Monday.

Here are the basics:

MORE CLOSURES: Gov. Gavin Newsom said Monday that he is closing parking lots at California's state parks in order to deter people from congregating and unintentionally spreading the novel coronavirus. It comes after many cities and agencies closed down beach parking lots, parks, hiking trails and recreation areas.

NATIONAL GUARD: The California National Guard on Monday provided details about how personnel would be deployed across the state to assist in coronavirus aid. Officials said the Guard is being used purely for humanitarian purposes, such as distributing food and medical supplies as well as helping at food banks and working with officials on the Grand Princess cruise ship, which docked in California after an outbreak of the virus on board.

SAN FRANCISCO WARNING: San Francisco officials warned that a surge in coronavirus is expected to come within a week or two, and voiced dismay over images of the public crowding at beaches and parks across California. "The worst is yet to come," San Francisco Director of Public Health Dr. Grant Colfax said at a news conference Monday.

REAL ID: With the COVID-19 pandemic further stifling the efforts of California and other states to issue Real ID licenses, President Trump on Monday said he will extend the Oct. 1 deadline for people to apply for the identification cards to board domestic flights in the United States.

HELP SAILING TO L.A.: The Navy hospital ship Mercy, based in San Diego, has been deployed to Los Angeles and should be here within days. The Federal Emergency Management Agency was set to ship mobile hospital units to California within the next 48 hours. The state is in line to get eight of these units, for a total of 2,000 beds.

SCHOOLS: Los Angeles public schools will remain closed until May 1 in response to the coronavirus outbreak as Supt. Austin Beutner announced Monday that Verizon would provide free internet access for all students who did not currently have it so learning can continue. Beutner said he had authorized $100 million in spending on technology to help students as the district struggled to provide online learning for about half a million students, many without internet access at home. The district is working on a plan to distribute more computers to students and instructions for accessing the Verizon program.

[CA] Trump approves disaster declaration for coronavirus in California (The Hill)
The Hill [3/22/2020 9:20 PM, John Bowden, 1762K]
President Trump on Sunday approved a disaster declaration for California over cases of the coronavirus spreading in the state.

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A news release Sunday evening from the White House stated that federal funding would be available for state, local and tribal organizations in California as officials attempt to prevent the further spread of coronavirus. More than 1,600 case have been confirmed in the state.

"The President's action makes Federal funding available for Crisis Counseling for affected individuals in all areas in the State of California," said the release.

"Federal funding is also available to State, tribal, and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency protective measures, including direct Federal assistance, for all areas in the State of California impacted by COVID-19," the White House continued.

30 people have died in the state as California has reported the third-highest number of cases among all 50 states, behind only Washington state and New York.

In a letter to President Trump this week, California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) predicted that more than half of the state's 25.5 million people will be infected within weeks.

That number, a spokesman later explained, was calculated without considering actions taken to mitigate the disease's spread.

"Governor Newsom has been honest about the threat of the virus and its impact on the health and welfare of Californians," Jesse Melgar told The Hill. "This projection shows why it's so critical that Californians take action to slow the spread of the disease – and those mitigation efforts aren't taken into account in those numbers. The state is deploying every resource at its disposal to meet this challenge, and we continue to ask for the federal government's assistance in this fight."

[CA] Newsom says California needs 30,000 more hospital beds than anticipated for coronavirus patients (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 10:57 PM, Taryn Luna, 1907K]
Gov. Gavin Newsom announced new action on Monday to encourage social-distancing measures, including closing parking lots at state parks, and warned that California will need more than twice as many hospital beds for coronavirus patients than previously anticipated.

The governor said he was closing parking lots in an effort to prevent people from congregating at California's outdoor recreational areas and unintentionally spreading the virus.

His announcement came four days after he ordered all residents to remain in their homes, making California the first state in the nation to place such restrictions on the movement of its residents.

As of Monday, 40 people have died and 2065 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in the state.

"We're looking at bending the curve. We're looking at interventions that work," Newsom

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said. “As a consequence of updating our models, we are looking to significantly increase our procurement of assets, specifically beds, throughout our healthcare delivery system.”

Newsom said he believes California will need 50,000 hospital beds for coronavirus patients, a significant increase from the 20,000 beds his administration had forecast last week. The Democratic governor said the state’s 416 hospitals were doubling so-called “surge plans” to 40% of their capacity, which includes providing 30,000 new beds across the system.

At the same time, the state is securing an additional 20,000 beds outside the state hospital system. Newsom said his administration had identified 3,000 new beds through mobile hospital units sent from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, an agreement to lease an empty hospital near downtown Los Angeles, and other plans, but still needs another 17,000 beds.

Under Newsom’s stay-at-home executive order announced last Thursday, Californians are allowed to venture outside for necessities and for recreational purposes, but are required to stay at least six feet away from one another.

Despite millions of residents heeding the call, reports of noncompliance prompted local officials to admonish people and take additional action over the weekend.

A thick crowd of shoppers at a farmers’ market in Sacramento on Saturday made it nearly impossible for people to stay a safe distance from one another. Laguna Beach officials closed beaches and blocked trail access to county wilderness parks in response to growing alarm about people amassing on the city’s pristine coastline.

While anyone who defies Newsom’s order could be punished with a misdemeanor, the first-term Democrat has repeatedly said that he doesn’t believe law enforcement intervention is necessary. Newsom said his administration is conducting a public awareness campaign and he believes that “social pressure” will encourage people to remain at home.

President Trump granted Newsom’s request on Sunday to declare a major disaster in California to help the state respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with emergency medical aid and unemployment assistance.

Newsom declared his own state of emergency in California on March 4 to help the state prepare for the spread of the coronavirus. At the time, the California Department of Public Health reported that 53 people had tested positive and one had died from the virus.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[CA] Navy hospital ship deploying Monday to Los Angeles (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 3:15 PM, Rebecca Kheel, 1762K]
A Navy hospital ship in San Diego is deploying Monday to Los Angeles to help relieve hospitals expected to become overburdened by coronavirus patients, the Navy announced.

In a news release, the U.S. Navy 3rd Fleet said the USNS Mercy will treat non-coronavirus patients referred to the ship by hospitals ashore, providing them with “a full spectrum of

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medical care."

"This will allow local health professionals to focus on treating COVID-19 patients and for shore-based hospitals to use their Intensive Care Units and ventilators for those patients," the release said.

The Mercy will leave San Diego with more than 800 Navy medical personnel and support staff aboard, as well as more than 70 civil service mariners.

"#USNSMercy will be getting underway #TODAY in support of the nation's #COVID19 response efforts. As announced by @realDonaldTrump, the ship will head to Los Angeles," Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday tweeted Monday.

U.S. officials confirmed Sunday during a White House briefing that the Mercy's destination will be Los Angeles.

While Washington State has the most confirmed cases of coronavirus on the West Coast, officials said Los Angeles was chosen because California is expected to have the greater need.

"Even though there are more cases right now in Washington, the projected needs for beds in California is five times more that of Washington," Pete Gaynor, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) administrator, said Sunday at the White House.

At a briefing Monday, Navy officials said the Mercy is scheduled to leave San Diego at 2 p.m. local time Monday. The Mercy is expected to arrive at the port of Los Angeles "within the week" and will be able to treat patients the day after arriving, Capt. John Rotruck, commanding officer of the ship, told reporters at the Pentagon via teleconference.

Despite San Diego's proximity to Los Angeles, the Mercy will take a couple extra days to travel to conduct operations, tests and certifications that must be done at sea before arrival, as well as to allow the crew time to train, Navy officials said.

Once in Los Angeles, the ship will 1,128 active-duty military staffing the medical treatment facility. There will also be 58 reservists who have "self-identified as being members of the clinical community helping their local jurisdiction with COVID-10," said Rear Adm. Tim Weber, commander of Naval Medical Forces Pacific.

The Mercy is prepared to stay in Los Angeles as long as necessary and can go elsewhere after if directed by FEMA, officials said at the briefing.

The U.S. Navy operates two hospital ships, the Mercy and the Comfort, to help with relief efforts during crises, such as Puerto Rico in 2017 after Hurricane Maria. Each ship has a 1,000-bed capacity.

U.S. and New York officials have previously said the Comfort will deploy to New York City. The Comfort is undergoing maintenance in Virginia, meaning it is not expected to deploy until next week.

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[CA] Trump approves federal aid for California (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/22/2020 10:04 PM, John King and Tatiana Sanchez, 337K]
A new wave of federal assistance to battle the effects of the coronavirus is headed to California after Gov. Gavin Newsom requested Sunday — and President Trump approved — a "Major Disaster Declaration" for the state.

The declaration clears the way for individual assistance programs to assist those affected by the outbreak, including medical care, emergency aid, unemployment assistance, legal services and supplemental nutrition assistance.

In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will ship eight mobile hospital units with 2,000 beds to California in the next few days, and the federal government will pay for National Guard deployments aimed at helping in the response to what is expected to be a surge in coronavirus cases across the state.

The looming impacts of the coronavirus are "of such severity that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments," Newsom wrote Trump on Sunday — saying that without the resources freed up by such a declaration, "impacts will be felt throughout the nation, as well as around the world."

Over the weekend, other governors castigated the president over what they called a lack of a coordinated federal strategy to respond to a virus that now has spread to all 50 states, with more than 33,000 cases and 400 deaths reported worldwide as of Sunday evening.

But Newsom's letter was a study in calibrated tact. He began by thanking Trump for the president's declaration of a national state of emergency on March 13, and how "you and many of the members of your Coronavirus Task Force have been personally available to me and my team."

After Trump agreed to California's request for open-ended aid, the governor struck an equally positive tone.

"The declaration will supplement our state's comprehensive COVID-19 surge planning and make vital resources available," Newsom said in a statement released by his office Sunday evening. "We appreciate the quick response and partnership from the White House."

The long-term price tag could be vast, given the number of Californians whose lives have been thrown into economic turmoil by the ripple effects of the virus. Particularly disruptive, by intent, is the move by Bay Area counties and then the state to close all nonessential businesses for at least the next two weeks in a bid to slow the spread of COVID-19.

The declaration will unlock federal unemployment benefits for workers who don't qualify for regular state unemployment benefits. This includes the self-employed, business owners and people who haven't worked long enough to qualify or who have run out of benefits in California or any other state.

In the past, these benefits have been made available to people who lost work as a direct result of natural disasters, including the 2017 North Bay wildfires.

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How much workers can get under the Disaster Unemployment Assistance program depends on their income. In the past, benefits have gone up to $450 a week for 26 weeks in California, the same maximum for regular state unemployment benefits.

The disaster declaration capped a day where recorded coronavirus cases continued to grow in both numbers and extent.

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the region was 772 as of Sunday evening, with Napa County reporting its first two cases and becoming the final Bay Area county to do so. Nearby Yolo County reported its first death, increasing the number of confirmed COVID-19 fatalities to 35 in the state; of these, 13 have been in the Bay Area.

The city of Hayward, meanwhile, announced it will open a free testing facility Monday.

The COVID-19 Testing Center at Hayward Fire Station No. 7, 28270 Huntwood Ave., will open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and will be managed by Hayward firefighter-paramedics and EMTs. It's free and open to anyone, regardless of immigration status.

Up to 370 people a day will be tested, said city spokesman Chuck Finnie, and Hayward police will be on hand to control traffic. The desire is to avoid an "unnecessary rush" to get the tests — giving priority to first responders, health care workers and people who are already ill.

"We want sick people to come," Finnie said. "We want the wondering and the worried to stay home and continue to shelter in place."

Hayward officials partnered with Avellino Lab USA, Inc., in Menlo Park, which will process the test kits in as little as six hours or by the next day, officials said.

All drivers who pull up to the testing site will be asked a series of questions, such as whether they traveled recently or if they've had contact with someone who has the virus, Finnie said. Those who qualify for testing will then get screened for fever, cough, shortness of breath and respiratory issues, among other symptoms.

[CA] Southern California police to patrol with drones during coronavirus lockdown: report (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 1:44 AM, David Aaro, 8943K]
Some police departments in California plan on using drones to enforce a coronavirus lockdown and to, in part, monitor the homeless population, according to a report on Friday.

The Chula Vista Police Department, located just south of San Diego near the California-Mexico border, recently purchased two $11,000 drones -- doubling its fleet -- that will be outfitted with speakers and night vision cameras.

"We have not traditionally mounted speakers to our drones, but ... if we need to cover a large area to get an announcement out, or if there were a crowd somewhere that we needed to disperse -- we could do it without getting police officers involved," said Capt. Vern Sallee, according to the Financial Times.

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“The outbreak has changed my view of expanding the program as rapidly as I can,” he added.

One of the reasons for the drones will be to monitor the homeless population in the city, who Sallee believes have a lack of reliable information on the severity of the coronavirus outbreak.

“We need to tell them we actually have resources for them -- they are vulnerable right now,” Sallee said, according to the paper. “It might be impractical or unsafe for our officers to be put into those areas.”

The drones were made by the Chinese company DJI -- the largest civilian drone company -- that accounts for roughly 70 percent of the market. Officials had previously warned about Chinese drones being a possible threat to security, the Financial Times reported.

The department currently flies about 10-15 operations a day, but solely for emergency situations. They started using them for emergency situations back in Oct. 2018.

"With strong support from the community, the Chula Vista Police Department began deploying drones from the rooftop of the Police Department Headquarters to 911 calls and other reports of emergency incidents such as crimes in progress, fires, traffic accidents, and reports of dangerous subjects," the department said.

Sallee is working with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to expand drone usage in order to protect those in the community during the outbreak.

“This crisis could be a catalyst to spur the FAA to free up resources faster,” he said, according to the paper.

[CA] Some California beaches closed to deter crowds amid outbreak (AP)
AP [3/22/2020 7:34 PM, Christopher Weber, 337K]
Sunshine lured crowds to California beaches and parks on Sunday despite a statewide stay-at-home order, prompting more closures as officials announced plans to ramp up testing procedures for the coronavirus.

Santa Monica closed seaside parking lots to discourage people from visiting its famous strand, and Los Angeles was expected to do the same starting Monday in neighboring Venice Beach to curb the virus spread.

Most people on the sand took care to heed guidelines to stay 6 feet (1.8 meters) away from others. But spacing became an issue in popular areas like the Venice boardwalk, causing Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti to chide visitors for being “too close together, too often.”

“The longer we do that, the more people will get sick and more people will die,” Garcetti said at an evening news conference.

Dozens of Los Angeles-area parks, trails and facilities overseen by the Mountains

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Recreation and Conservation Authority were closed down Sunday.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, authorities shut Drakes Beach, Agate Beach and other popular coastal spots, including Point Reyes Lighthouse and Chimney Rock Headlands.

President Donald Trump on Sunday approved a Major Disaster Declaration to assist in California's COVID-19 preparedness and emergency response efforts. The move frees federal funds to help with mass care and emergency assistance, unemployment assistance and disaster legal services.

Trump also announced that he ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ship mobile hospital centers to California, Washington and New York.

When the US Naval Ship Mercy arrives in Los Angeles, it will open 1,000 beds and become the largest hospital in the city, Garcetti said. The timing for the vessel's arrival was not announced.

The mayor said the city would launch a website this week that will direct people to centers where they can be tested for the virus. The first tests would be reserved for the "most vulnerable," including patients showing symptoms, people 65 or older and those with underlying health conditions, the mayor said.

In neighboring Riverside County, testing began this weekend at a drive-through facility outside a minor league baseball stadium in Lake Elsinore.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's order last week that Californians should stay home to curb the pandemic in the nation's most populous state was by far the most sweeping and was followed by similar announcements in New York and Illinois.

California is one of the hardest-hit states, with more than 1,600 confirmed cases and 30 deaths as of Sunday, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

On Sunday night, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation reported the first case of a prisoner with the coronavirus: an inmate at California State Prison-Los Angeles County.

The department also reported that five more employees have tested positive for the virus. Two of them are at California State Prison, Sacramento, two are at the California Institution for Men, and one is at Folsom State Prison.

Newsom has said infection rates of the COVID-19 virus are doubling every four days in some areas. He projected that millions could contract the virus in the next two months if aggressive prevention isn't taken.

Newsom ordered spending $42 million in emergency funding to allow the state to lease two hospitals — Seton Medical Center in Daly City and St. Vincent Medical Center in Los Angeles — for three months to provide care for patients with COVID-19.

The emergency fund will also be used to buy or refurbish ventilators, provide more patient

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transportation service and expand testing capacity at a state laboratory.

Residents have been told to keep away from others, not gather in groups and wash their hands frequently. They can go out to get food, fill prescriptions, seek medical care, care for vulnerable relatives or neighbors and get exercise, such as walking.

Gas stations, supermarkets and convenience stores were open, along with auto repair shops. Those providing essential services, such as plumbers and electricians, were still on the job. But restaurants were only delivering or providing take-out.

[AK] Alaska Democrats cancel in-person primary voting (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 3:04 PM, Associated Press, 337K]
The Alaska Democratic Party will hold its party-run presidential primary exclusively by mail and is moving back the deadlines for returning and tabulating ballots.

The party announced Monday it is canceling in-person voting sites planned for April 4 due to concerns with the coronavirus. But it is extending the deadline to return ballots by mail. Originally, ballots were to be postmarked by Tuesday. The party now says they must be received in Anchorage no later than April 10 to be counted.

Results are expected no later than just before midnight on April 11.

The party sent more than 71,000 registered Democrats ballots, which is seven times the number of people who participated in the 2016 caucuses, the party's executive director, Lindsay Kavanaugh, said in a statement.

"We want to continue to allow for maximum participation in this historic primary while respecting the health and safety of our voters and volunteers," she said.

Ballots also will be made available to download, the party said.

The primary is open only to registered Democrats.

In other coronavirus news in Alaska:

KETCHIKAN CRUISE SHIPS

Ketchikan is considering whether to allow cruise ships to dock there while waiting out the global ocean cruise suspension because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.

The Ketchikan City Council discussed allowing cruise operators to pay for space and services at its downtown berths during the nearly industry-wide suspension, The Ketchikan Daily News reported Saturday.

At least one cruise line approached the city about docking multiple ships at the berths, Ketchikan Port and Harbors Director Steve Corporon said.

Cruise Line International Association, accounting for 95% of the market, announced March

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13 that its member lines planned to suspend cruises for 30 days.

“It’s kind of like 9/11 with the airplanes,” Corporon said. “The infrastructure wasn’t there to land all the airplanes at once. (It’s) similar here. The infrastructure isn’t in place to have all the cruise ships in port.”

The Canadian government announced port restrictions that could delay the Alaska cruise ship season until July 1.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. But for the elderly and people with existing conditions, it can cause more severe illness. The vast majority of those who are infected recover.

The city could take in between $1,700 to $2,800 daily per ship in docking fees. Additional costs depending on the needs of the ships could include drinking water and waste management.

Each ship would likely operate at least one electric generator or engine for power while docked. The largest cost estimate for the city to provide power was $10 million, Corporon said.

Additional port security would be required by under a U.S. Coast Guard plan, costing the city between $1,500 and $2,500 for personnel.

The ships would not be subject to commercial passenger vessel fees or port development fees because there would be no passengers.

[HI] Cruise Ship Passengers Bused to Flights Out of Honolulu (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/23/2020 6:36 PM, Jennifer Sinco Kelleher, AP, 3020K]
Passengers from a cruise ship that was turned away by other ports began disembarking at a Honolulu harbor Monday to catch chartered flights home. The development came after Hawaii officials changed their minds several times about whether the 2,000 passengers on the Norwegian Jewel could set foot in the state.

New measures to seal off borders to reduce the spread of coronavirus have left some cruise ships stranded, with local governments denying permission to disembark as more cases of infected passengers have come to light.

There were no suspected or confirmed cases of coronavirus on the Jewel, according to state and cruise line officials.

The Centers for Disease Control said in a report Monday that at least 120 Americans who were aboard two sailings of the Grand Princess cruise ship, based in San Francisco, have tested positive for the virus, even though fewer than 500 were tested after being sent to 14 days of quarantine at several U.S. military bases. At least 13 Canadians also have tested positive from the Grand Princess.

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The Norwegian Cruise Line ship first set sail on Feb. 28 in Sydney, Australia. It was later turned away by Fiji and New Zealand. It was allowed to refuel in American Samoa but passengers weren't allowed to disembark. The ship then headed toward to Honolulu, where Hawaii officials initially said passengers would be allowed to disembark and catch flights home.

After complaints from Hawaii residents, including threats to block the ship from arriving, state officials changed course and said the ship could only stop to refuel and stock up on supplies.

On Sunday, as the ship headed to Honolulu, Hawaii officials announced that passengers would be allowed to disembark because the ship needed repairs.

The cruise line chartered at least 10 flights to locations including, Sydney, London and Los Angeles, said Tim Sakahara, spokesman for Hawaii's Department of Transportation.

On the ship, passengers would go through U.S. customs and be screened by cruise line doctors. Then, they would enter a terminal at the harbor, where they would undergo thermal screening. Anyone with symptoms, such as a fever, would be evaluated by doctors. Passengers with no symptoms would board buses to the airport for their flights, Sakahara said.

"So far there haven't been any symptomatic passengers at this point," Sakahara said Monday morning after about four large buses transported passengers to the airport. "At no point will the cruise passengers be with the general public at large."

The process will continue Tuesday, until all passengers have departed. About 1,000 crew members will remain on the ship, Sakahara said.

There were 25 Hawaii residents on the ship, who will be directed to self-quarantine for 14 days, even though the governor's quarantine order travelers arriving to the state doesn't take effect until Thursday, Sakahara said.

The 13 passengers who live on the island of Oahu will be shuttled to their homes, while those who live on other Hawaiian islands will take chartered flights, Sakahara said.

Passenger Edmund Pinto, who is a former Associated Press editor, called Hawaii's restrictions "over the top" for people who haven't walked on land since March 11. "The state rules make little sense," he said via text message while going through customs screening on the ship. "Flights into Honolulu are bringing more risk to your population than this ship."

On Monday, passengers lounged in reclining chairs and walked about the deck of the ship. The harbor area where the ship was docked was gated-off and officers were standing guard at the entrance.

[Mexico] Trump administration delays court hearings for asylum-seekers in Mexico amid pandemic: report (The Hill)

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The Hill [3/23/2020 11:19 PM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]
The Trump administration moved Monday to delay the court hearings for asylum-seekers sent to Mexico, citing concerns about the coronavirus pandemic.

The Justice Department said hearings for those affected by the “Remain in Mexico” program that were scheduled for before April 22 will be postponed, CBS News reported. Those who have scheduled court dates before April 22 will need to obtain new government documents and a new hearing date from border officials, on the day of their scheduled hearing.

A spokesperson for the Executive Office for Immigration Review within the department told CBS News the decision would allow the department to protect migrants, officials and U.S. citizens from the coronavirus and allow the migrants to have their “day in court.”

The spokesperson maintained that the “Remain in Mexico” program, officially called the Migrant Protections Protocols, was not being canceled. The program has already sent more than 6,000 Latin American asylum-seekers to northern Mexico as they wait for their cases to process.

The delays come after the administration announced Friday that it would deny entry to migrants, including those seeking asylum, who attempt to cross borders without authorization. Officials said the decision was made in an effort to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The Justice Department canceled all hearings for immigrants not detained as the outbreak sweeps the country, but it has received criticism for not closing most courts or postponing hearings for those who are detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The novel coronavirus, which has disrupted American society, has infected more than 46,000 people in the U.S., killing at least 610, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[Mexico] U.S. postpones court hearings for asylum-seekers in Mexico over coronavirus (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 10:09 PM, Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 2394K]
Citing the global response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Trump administration on Monday moved to postpone all court hearings for the thousands of asylum-seekers it has returned to Mexico.

The Justice Department said hearings for migrants in the so-called "Remain in Mexico" program that were initially slated to take place before April 22 would be postponed. A spokesperson for the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), the Justice Department branch that oversees the nation’s immigration courts, said the decision will ensure asylum-seekers in the program can have their "day in court," while safeguarding the health of migrants, officials and U.S. citizens.

Though the spokesperson said the "Remain in Mexico" policy was not being "canceled," Monday’s move will partially paralyze the centerpiece of the Trump administration’s

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restrictive asylum policies designed to discourage migration to the U.S. southern border. Under the policy, known officially as the Migrant Protections Protocols, or MPP, U.S. border officials have returned more than 60,000 Latin American migrants to northern Mexico, requiring them to wait there as their asylum cases are adjudicated.

In its statement, the Justice Department spokesperson said asylum-seekers in Mexico who are scheduled to appear before an immigration judge in the U.S. through April 22 should report to U.S. border officials on their previously scheduled court dates to get new government documents and a new hearing date.

Monday's move comes days after the Trump administration invoked sweeping immigration restriction powers in public health law to allow officials to rapidly turn away migrants who cross both the northern and southern borders without authorization. The restrictions, which the administration said were necessary because of the pandemic, bar the entry of migrants without proper documents, even at ports of entry.

Though officials did not clarify whether asylum-seekers in the MPP policy would be allowed inside the U.S. to attend their hearings in light of the new measures, immigration attorneys reported Monday morning that migrants in the program were denied entry. Customs and Border Protection officials did not say whether they will continue to return asylum-seekers to Mexico as part of the MPP program.

Earlier this month, the Justice Department cancelled all hearings for immigrants who were not detained because of the coronavirus outbreak. But the department has come under withering criticism for refusing to close most courts or delay hearings for immigrants detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, despite a flurry of calls do so by judges, prosecutors and lawyers.

Richard Newman, an immigration attorney with the non-profit San Antonio Region Justice For Our Neighbors, said Monday's announcement was a good move from a public health perspective. He said he and other lawyers who are representing asylum-seekers in the MPP program had been dreading telling their clients they would not go to court with them or visit them in Mexico, fearing community transmission of the coronavirus.

"If one of us lawyers has COVID-19 and we walk over and talk to our clients, the entire refugee camp will get it," Newman said. "It had put us in this impossible position of trying to protect ourselves, protect our communities and protect the refugee community."

"I'm thankful that EOIR made that decision so it doesn't make the immigration lawyers look like bad guys," he added.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) order that U.S. border officials are using to justify the entry restrictions implemented over the weekend cited assessments by medical experts who said an outbreak of the coronavirus inside the encampments and shelters for asylum-seekers returned to Mexico by the U.S. is "inevitable."

Though well-aware of the public health considerations, Newman noted that migrants he represents are disheartened that they won't be able to make their case to win U.S. asylum in front of a judge anytime soon. He noted that while waiting months for their hearings,

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many asylum-seekers have been living in squalid conditions inside camps and shelters located in crime-ridden Mexican borders cities like Matamoros, Tamaulipas, a state the U.S government warns Americans not to visit because of rampant violence.

"These people are broken-hearted," Newman told CBS News. "They are stuck in a horrible situation in Mexico."

[Mexico] Trump administration postpones immigration hearings for migrants waiting in Mexico (CNN)
CNN [3/23/2020 9:40 PM, Priscilla Alvarez, 5551K]
The Trump administration is postponing all hearings related to the administration's controversial policy of returning migrants to Mexico until their court date in the US as a result of the coronavirus, the Justice Department's Executive Office for Immigration Review announced Monday evening.

Hearings set through through April 22 will be rescheduled, according to a statement from EOIR, which oversees the nation's immigration courts. It added, however, that the administration's policy -- officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols -- will not be canceled, nor will any hearings. .

The administration's so-called Remain in Mexico policy requires migrants, many of whom are from Central America, to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration hearings. It has resulted in the creation of makeshift camps where hundreds of migrants have waited for weeks, if not months, in squalid and unsafe conditions. In some cases, migrant families have opted to send children across the US-Mexico border alone.

The growing coronavirus pandemic and new restrictions at the US-Mexico border have raised questions about the program and its enrollees.

EOIR said Monday that any individual with a hearing date through April 22 should still present themselves at their designated port of entry on their previously scheduled date "to receive a tear sheet and hearing notice containing their new hearing dates."

The administration's policy has ping-ponged in the courts since its implementation, ultimately landing before the Supreme Court.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court said that the policy can stay in effect while legal challenges play out, marking a victory for the administration, which has increasingly relied on the program since its implementation.

Lawyers for the asylum seekers called the government's policy illegal, adding that in the months that it has been in effect "reports of murder, rape, torture kidnapping, and other violent assaults against returned asylum seekers have climbed."

But the administration argued, amid the coronavirus outbreak, that blocking the program would prompt a "rush to the border." In anticipation of the Supreme Court's ruling, the Defense Department deployed its Crisis Response Force in support of US Customs and Border Protection, resulting in approximately 160 active duty personnel shifted to the

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southern border.

EOIR concluded its statement Monday saying that the agency, along with the Department of Homeland Security, is "deeply committed to ensuring that individuals 'have their day in court' while also ensuring the health and safety of aliens, our frontline officers, immigration court professionals, and our citizens."

[Mexico] Hearings for 'Remain in Mexico' migrants delayed, DHS says (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 10:50 PM, Stephen Dinan, 482K]
Officials announced late Monday that immigration hearings for migrants who have been pushed back across the border into Mexico under the administration's so-called "Remain in Mexico" program are being delayed, due to coronavirus fears.

Homeland Security and the Justice Department's Executive Office of Immigration Review issued a joint statement saying that migrants who were supposed to have court dates over the next month will have them rescheduled for later.

Tens of thousands of migrants are waiting in Mexico for a chance to make their case for asylum in the U.S. under the Migrant Protection Protocol, a policy that helped solve last year's border surge.

Under the new terms, the migrants are still supposed to show up at the ports of entry at the designated time, but they'll be given a new court date then.

"DHS and EOIR are deeply committed to ensuring that individuals 'have their day in court' while also ensuring the health and safety of aliens, our frontline officers, immigration court professionals, and our citizens," the departments said.

The move comes just days after the administration announced a broad shutdown of non-essential border traffic, saying there's a danger that COVID-19 would be spread further by entry of unauthorized persons across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Immigrant-rights advocates blasted that move, and have said leaving asylum-seekers in Mexico under the MPP is cruel as well.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

[TX] Mexican man dies in ICE custody; 10th since October (Breitbart)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 2:09 PM, Staff, 337K]
A 42-year-old Mexican man died in a South Texas hospital while being held pending his deportation, immigration authorities said Monday.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement identified the man as Ramiro Hernandez Ibarra and said he died Saturday after being hospitalized Thursday. ICE said Hernandez's preliminary cause of death was complications related to septic shock but did not provide further details.

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Hernandez is the 10th person to die in ICE custody since October, the start of the governmental fiscal year. Eight people died in the previous fiscal year.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, immigration advocates have criticized the medical care ICE provides to people it detains and called on ICE to release some of its more than 37,000 detainees. About 47% of those people are being held on non-criminal violations of immigration law, according to the agency's most recent statistics.

As of last week, ICE had not confirmed any cases of COVID-19 in its facilities. The agency has placed sick detainees under observation and others in quarantine at several of its jails, including about 60 people confined to a dorm in the Pine Prairie facility in rural Louisiana, according to a lawyer who has spoken to detainees there.

ICE says Hernandez had repeatedly crossed the U.S.-Mexico border and voluntarily returned to Mexico eight times. He was most recently taken into ICE's custody in December after he was arrested and jailed for domestic violence at the Hidalgo County Jail.

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Trump extends Real ID deadline amid coronavirus crisis (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 10:09 AM, Luz Lazo, 12625K]
President Trump said Monday that he is pushing back the deadline for when Americans will be required to have the new Real ID credential to board domestic flights.

At a White House briefing, Trump said he is postponing the Oct. 1 deadline, citing the coronavirus crisis and concerns of crowding at state departments of motor vehicles from people trying to meet the looming deadline.

"At a time when we're asking Americans to maintain social distancing, we do not want to require people to go with their local DMV," Trump said.

Trump did not say when the new deadline was but said it would be announced "very soon."

Governors and lawmakers had asked for the extension in recent days, citing the states' inability to process Real ID applications during the coronavirus crisis. Many states have reduced or completely shut down motor vehicle services as part of their response to the public health emergency.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R), who chairs the National Governors Association, sent a letter to the Trump administration last week saying the coronavirus outbreak was already disrupting states' efforts to issue the credential and calling for a delay of the deadline. Some state and industry leaders say they expect at least a year extension.

"We are pleased that the federal administration has readily agreed to the governors' request to extend the REAL ID deadline. This will help contribute to our efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, and avoid major confusion for the states," Hogan said in a statement Monday night.

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States have been scrambling to comply with the 2005 domestic security program known as the Real ID Act, which was designed to help prevent terrorist attacks and reduce the number of licenses granted to undocumented immigrants. By law, states are mandated to issue IDs with counterfeit-resistant security features; applicants must provide several documents proving their identity and legal U.S. residency.

Most states are in the early phases of issuing the new security-enhanced licenses and identification cards. About one-third of Americans have a Real ID credential, according to Department of Homeland Security data.

Because Real ID requires an in-person visit to the DMV, applicants are not able to get the credential during the coronavirus closures.

The federal government had refused to give an extension in recent months, even as it was clear that many states were struggling to issue the credential. It was expected that starting Oct. 1, every U.S. air traveler would be required to present a Real ID-compliant license or another acceptable form of identification, such as a U.S. passport, to board a domestic flight as the last phase of implementation of the law.

Trump's announcement was also welcomed by the travel industry. Roger Dow, president and chief executive of the U.S. Travel Association, said the extension of the deadline "is clearly the wise course of action at this juncture."

The group had asked the Department of Homeland Security to delay the requirement until the economic environment improves and it can ensure that access to air travel will not be negatively affected once enforcement begins.

"The already difficult task of bringing the country closer to REAL ID compliance is now clearly impossible due to the coronavirus crisis," Dow said in a statement. "Clearly the administration understands that the economic damage of coronavirus is already massive, and as we move toward a recovery phase it would be terrible if the REAL ID deadline hits and creates yet another obstacle to people traveling. To get this economy moving again, people need to be able to move again."

Customs and Border Protection

U.S. troops remain at southern border despite waning migration, as coronavirus spreads elsewhere (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 9:05 PM, Molly O'Toole, 1907K]
The United States is in a state of emergency, with thousands of active-duty military and National Guard troops deployed — and not because of the coronavirus.

Under the "national emergency" that President Trump declared in February 2019, roughly 5,200 troops remain at the U.S. southern border to assist in detecting undocumented migrants, though apprehensions are at the lowest levels in years. While other National Guard and military units respond to the rapidly spreading virus, the troops at the border are authorized to stay there through Sept. 30, according to the Defense Department.

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The Pentagon “has no plans to pull units off the border for coronavirus response,” Lt. Col. Chris Mitchell told The Times in a statement Monday. The mission has cost more than $500 million, he said.

The troops mainly perform services in support of government border agencies because federal law prohibits the U.S. military from domestic law enforcement activities. Reports of some troops’ duties — including, at one point, painting a border barrier “to improve the aesthetic appearance of the wall” — have led to criticism from lawmakers and former officials that the military is being used for the president’s political agenda.

David Lapan, formerly an official at the Defense and Homeland Security departments and now a vice president at the Bipartisan Policy Center, said that in a department as large as the Pentagon, the border deployment isn’t likely to inhibit its ability to help against the pandemic.

“But,” Lapan wrote in an email to The Times, “the larger issue is the absence of a real mission at the [southwest] border because apprehensions have steadily decreased and new coronavirus measures taken by the administration are further restricting movements across the border.”

Last week, the administration halted most traffic at the border, restricting all nonessential travel to try to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Though the United States has far more confirmed cases of infection than Mexico or countries farther south, the Homeland Security Department said it will block almost all migrants, including asylum seekers, from entering, whether at an official port of entry or elsewhere, and will return them to Mexico or their country of origin.

Lapan added that the troops and military funding “could be put to better use in responding to coronavirus as well as to true national security threats.”

Trump’s declaration of a border emergency last year was part of his fight with Congress over funding for his proposed wall, a showdown that led to the longest partial government shutdown in U.S. history. Since then, the administration has diverted about $15 billion from military accounts and other federal funding for border barrier work, according to a March 13 status report by Customs and Border Protection and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Corps continues to work with the Homeland Security Department, primarily updating and replacing old fencing. The administration has built only two miles of barriers where none existed before, according to the report. John B. Mennell, the assistant chief at U.S. Border Patrol headquarters, said that construction schedules have not been affected by COVID-19, the illness caused by the novel coronavirus.

As part of the military’s separate mission to help against the virus, the Pentagon is planning to send military field hospitals to Seattle and New York City later this week to treat non-coronavirus patients, freeing up bed space in civilian hospitals, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said at news conference Monday. The Navy hospital ship Mercy, based in San Diego, has been deployed to Los Angeles to provide extra beds for patients, according to the chief of naval operations.

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Trump announced on Sunday that he had authorized the federal government to pay for National Guard deployments in California, New York and Washington. On Friday, California Gov. Gavin Newsom had deployed the California National Guard to assist food banks statewide.

Illegal border crossings drop by half amid coronavirus pandemic, DHS says (The Hill)

The Hill [3/23/2020 1:10 PM, Alexandra Kelley, 1762K]

Illegal border crossing has dropped by half since the Trump administration temporarily closed the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders, a Trump official said Sunday according to the Associated Press (AP).

Following U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) new order to combat the spread of the coronavirus, AP reports that any individuals caught crossing the border illegally will be immediately deported to Mexico or Canada.

According to Mark Morgan, the acting head of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the decision applies to all migrants, and the CBP will take anyone crossing the border into custody.

"We don't know anything about you [the immigrant]. You have no documents, we're not going to take you into our facilities and expose you to CBP personnel and the American people as well as immigrants," he said Saturday on Fox News.

Mexican officials, however, said that they would not accept any immigrants who are not Mexican or Central American. Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said on Friday that "The United States will take care of that."

Last Friday, the CDC issued an order that bars illegal entry into the U.S. for the next 30 days. The decision aims to prevent overcrowding in understaffed detention centers, which could enable the spread of COVID-19. The CDC also took into consideration that migrants suspected of having COVID-19 would be sent to local hospitals, possibly infecting others.

There have been calls from multiple activist groups urging the release of immigrants from detention centers for the sake of immigrants' health. Last week, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) shut down field officers across the country in response to the virus. Asylum applications will be temporarily suspended in between points of entry.

Speaking on Fox News, Morgan explained that trade cargo would still be permitted to cross both the U.S.'s northern and southern border. He said the Trump administration is taking "bold, aggressive action" at the border to prevent more cases of COVID-19.

"We're absolutely limiting and taking reasonable restrictions to contain and mitigate, but it's still going to be open to essential travel and cargo. commercial trade is going to continue to flow," Morgan explained.

The borders remain open to facilitate trade, as the U.S. has approximately $3 billion per day with Canada and Mexico, according to AP.

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Illegal Border Crossings Drop By Half Under Coronavirus Shutdown (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [3/23/2020 11:26 AM, Jason Hopkins, 566K]
Since the Trump administration ordered a shutdown of the U.S.-Mexico border, government officials are reporting a roughly 50% drop in illegal alien apprehensions.

Under orders from the Centers for Disease Control, the Trump administration on Friday declared a lockdown of the southern and northern borders, permitting only the flow of "essential" travel. In that short time, border officials have revealed that they are seeing a huge drop in the flow of illegal aliens.

"Since [Customs and Border Protection] began implementing [the CDC] order, we've seen a major decline in traffic at our borders — 54% decrease at ports and 52% decline in USBP encounters — while trade remains level," CBP acting commissioner Mark Morgan tweeted Sunday. "These reductions reflect a historic & aggressive containment strategy by [President Donald Trump] to protect the US."

Morgan was not the only one to report a steep decline in the flow of traffic at the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Without that documentation, we see individuals coming into the country without proper identity documents, without travel documents, without medical history. So it's very hard to make a public health determination on those individuals," Chad Wolf, the acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, said Sunday during an appearance on Fox Business.

Wolf was speaking about DHS actions in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic. Allowing individuals to enter the U.S. with unknown medical histories risks exacerbating the spread of the disease, and so the CDC ordered a shutdown of all non-essential flow between the border.

"The CDC said we need to suspend that, so that's what the Department has been doing over the last 24 hours — and I would say that it's working," Wolf added. "We've seen almost a 50% drop in illegal apprehensions, those illegal individuals coming across our borders."

Under the border shutdown order, only certain travel is permitted — which can include travel for medical reasons, educational purposes, emergency response operations, lawful cross-border trade, and some other "essential" services. Anyone appearing at the southern border without proper documentation will be turned back.

However, there appears to be an exception to this rule regarding unlawful immigration.

The Mexican government announced that it would not accept anyone other than Mexicans and Central Americans. While these people make up a vast bulk of the illegal aliens apprehended by Border Patrol, there are still thousands of "extra-contintenal" migrants that make it to the border. These migrants can include Brazilians, Chinese, Africans and others.

A fact sheet released by DHS on Monday said that all illegal aliens will be be "immediately" returned to the country where they entered from — either Mexico or Canada. DHS added that, concerning migrants who cannot be sent back, CBP would return them to their country

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of origin.

“Extra-continentals will be sent to ICE for repatriation to their countries as soon as possible,” Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesman Matthew Dyman clarified on Monday to the Daily Caller News Foundation.

As of Monday morning, there have been more than 33,000 individuals in the U.S. who have tested positive for coronavirus, and at least 428 people have died from the virus. Around the globe, more than 341,000 people have tested positive and at least 15,187 have died from coronavirus-related illnesses.

Hung out to dry’: Border Patrol agents say agency doing too little to protect them against coronavirus (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/24/2020 12:17 AM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K]
Federal law enforcement agents on the southern border expect Border Patrol personnel to get hit by the coronavirus but say they have not been briefed on how the agency will continue its national security operations and whether that includes their having to report to work sick.

Five Border Patrol agents who work in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California told the Washington Examiner that for weeks, the agency’s Washington and regional headquarters have done little to explain how they should protect themselves on the job beyond basic personal protective equipment.

Agents fear they are at risk for COVID-19 from the tens of thousands of crossers they arrest each month. One agent said he took into custody people from Mexico City who told them coronavirus was rampant there, and that’s why they fled.

Last week, the agency’s social media pages began sharing pictures and videos of agents and people arrested wearing masks and gloves with reassurances that the job was not significantly affected by the coronavirus, even as the Trump administration made the unprecedented move to restrict all nonessential travel at land borders.

“The management is sort of covering their ass, trying to implement some things that might make them say, ‘Look, I tried,’” said an agent. “And then that’s about it. I think they’re having their [regional] personnel telework, some of them. And then we’re still having musters.”

Musters are meetings in which a dozen or several dozen agents gather in a small area to talk before a shift starts. Two additional agents complained that the group meetings were still taking place despite these being prime venues for spreading the virus.

When, not if, you get it

“They’re sending us all out with gloves and masks saying, ‘If you just stay six feet away, you won’t get it," one agent said. "What they’re trying to do is give Border Patrol agents the same rules they’ve given the public. They know that they can’t come out and say, ‘We’re telling all our agents and staffers to stay six feet away from each other, but don’t worry.

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We're out there hunting down bad guys. We're just doing it from six feet away now.'"

The agent said he is bracing for the onset of symptoms as are his coworkers: "It's a matter of when, not if."

This source said he was aware of another agent who was out a couple days this month with a fever but returned to work the same week as being out. Four agents said they do not know what to do if they have been exposed to someone who is sick.

"There's been no guidance in terms of whether to use sick or admin leave," said one agent. "If you're gonna make me stay home for 14 days, are you gonna give me admin leave or do I have to use my own sick leave?"

Agents in the last few days were given guidance explaining when with respect to COVID-19 — including during the process of determining whether they have it — they could use admin leave, which is also referred to as safety leave, so they do not have to use vacation or annual accrued time and sick leave. In most cases, they are not allowed to use admin leave and in some cases, not even sick leave.

No workman's comp for the sick

Two agents cited emails they received that said they will only receive workman's compensation if they are sick enough that it mandates getting tested, the test comes back positive, and they can prove they got the virus while working.

"We have to prove that we got it at work," said an agent who inspects hundreds and sometimes more than 1,000 vehicles per shift at a Border Patrol highway checkpoint. "I don't go the gym or restaurants and I'm stuck at home with my girlfriend so I don't know how else I would get it. The only thing I can think of is you would have to pull the [vehicle license] plate readers and run all those plates to see who has it, which they're not going to do."

However, if other agents who work alongside an agent who has tested positive for coronavirus get sick, they would be eligible for workman's compensation. "But I'm the guy hung out to dry because I'm patient zero. But all the other guys get paid for it," another agent said.

Agents themselves could become COVID-19 'importers'

If agents at each of the 73 stations on the southern border start getting sick but are pressured not to stay home because staffing is already low, it could put healthy agents at risk, one man said.

"The Border Patrol is in this weird conundrum of, 'We know our agents are gonna get sick, but our agents have to go home every day," the agent said. "The agents themselves could become the importer of the disease into the country."

The same agent said he "might as well sleep in a parking lot" rather than going home to his family and risk bringing it home to them.

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“It is somewhat of a concern for some of us, especially for me because my kids have asthma,” said another agent.

A national security nightmare

“‘If you’re sick, take care of yourself.’ They’re saying that now, and then coronavirus comes in and wipes out all the Border Patrol, and we’re mustering no one, then all of a sudden it’s a national security concern,” an agent said. “They’re gonna get to a point — if it’s bad as they’re making it sound and it’s as contagious — then all of the Border Patrol agents are gonna get this. What do you do? It’s a civilian service. We’re not military. They can’t order us to stay in one place … They’ll probably end up, ‘You have to come to work because it’s national security. Just come to work sick, sorry,” said the agent, adding they could set up campers or house agents inside stations.

One agent said the United States was in a "unique" position compared to other countries that can deploy military to carry out law enforcement at its borders, but the U.S. was limited in its capacity. Still, not all agents are convinced the coronavirus will be a major issue.

“Our guys deal with it. You just want to have a 20-year career and the goal is to be able to retire — probably not get shot, not get [tuberculosis],” he said. “Coronavirus is just sort of like the flu — it’s shortness of breath. OK. Copy that. But really, I just don’t want to get TB. I don’t want to take lice home tonight.”

The CBP did not respond to a request for comment.

[TX] Fake, Unsealed Cleaning Products Seized by CBP at Texas Border Crossing (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 2:15 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]
El Paso Sector Customs and Border Protection officers seized a trailer-load of cleaning products being shipped through a Texas port of entry. Officials said the products exhibited evidence of tampering and were diluted with water.

CBP officers assigned to the El Paso Port of Entry on March 16 encountered a tractor-trailer loaded with household cleaning supplies arriving from Mexico. During initial inspection, CBP officers noticed missing safety seals and other signs of tampering.

The shipping manifest included 168 boxes of Clorox bleach (127 oz.), 75 boxes of Pinol (33.81 oz.), 28 boxes of Fabuloso (169 oz.), 23 boxes of Pinol (27.99 oz.), 9 boxes of Clorox (31.44 oz.), and 20 boxes of Adorable brand toilet paper.

As CBP officers and National Guardsmen conducted a physical inspection, they observed many of the bottles were unsealed. Bottles that allegedly contained bleach did not have the typical chlorine odor.

Field testing showed the bottles primarily contained water, officials stated. Formal CBP lab testing later confirmed suspicions about water dilution or replacement.

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“In the current environment, it is reprehensible that someone would attempt a scheme like this to prey upon the concerns and fears of our community, likely for financial gain,” CBP El Paso Director of Field Operations Hector Mancha said in a written statement. “Our officers remain focused and attentive to all threats they may encounter.”

CBP contacted the Clorox Company in Mexico. The representative advised the investigating officers that Spanish labeled products are never exported to the U.S. The spokesman did not explain how the products ended up being filled with water.

CBP officers seized the shipment pending further investigation.

Transportation Security Administration

More TSA agents test positive for coronavirus; new cases identified at New York, New Jersey, Orlando airports (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 10:58 AM, Michael Bartiromo, 8943K]
The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is continuing to update passengers of the locations where officers have tested positive for coronavirus, confirming six additional cases among officers employed at New York City, Orlando and Washington D.C.-area airports, among others, over the weekend.

“There are 23 TSA screening officers who have tested positive for COVID-19,” reads the TSA’s coronavirus webpage as of Monday morning. “In addition, five non-screening employees who have relatively limited interaction with the traveling public, have tested positive for the virus.”

On March 21, the TSA confirmed additional cases among officers at Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD), LaGuardia Airport (LGA) and Cyril E. King International Airport in the U.S. Virgin Islands (STT). On March 22, the TSA identified more cases at Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR), Orlando International Airport (MCO) and John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK).

As of Monday, the TSA had listed 23 confirmed cases recorded since late February:

5 at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) in New York

4 at Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport (SJC) in California

4 at the Orlando International Airport (MCO) in Florida

2 at Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL) in Florida

2 at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL) in Georgia

2 at Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR) in New Jersey

1 at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport (CLE) in Ohio

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1 at Cyril E. King International Airport (STT) in St. Thomas

1 at LaGuardia Airport (LGA) in New York

1 at Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) in Virginia

All but one of the officers (a baggage handler at EWR) are employed as screening officers, according to the TSA. As of March 23, all but five had been present for work within the past 14 days.

The Transportation Security Administration has also provided a map outlining the locations of where these cases were identified, as part of a relatively new website dedicated to answering people's most frequently asked questions about the coronavirus.

Further information about each employee's shifts and exact checkpoint locations can be found at the TSA's website.

In a statement shared with Fox News last week, the TSA confirmed that it was acting under guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in order to keep employees safe.

"Frontline personnel" who are required to inspect and come into contact with passengers are allowed to wear surgical masks. Security screeners are also urged to frequently wash hands and practice respiratory hygiene, the TSA said.

Secret Service

Secret Service employee tests positive for the coronavirus (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 6:53 AM, Jeff Mordock, 482K, Neutral, Secondary]
A Secret Service employee has tested positive for the coronavirus, the agency said Monday.

The employee is in quarantine and the agency will continue to monitor their condition, the Secret Service said in a statement.

It is not clear if the employee is an agent, but the Secret Service said the person did not have contact with other employees or anyone the agency is responsible for protecting for nearly three weeks.

The agency will continue to follow all guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and will communicate updates to its workforce, a spokesperson said in a statement.

"The Secret Service is committed to protecting the health and safety of its employees, its protectees and the public," the statement said.

President Trump tested negative for the coronavirus earlier this month, the White House said.

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Vice President Pence and his wife Karen also tested negative for the virus. They were tested after a staffer in the vice president's office was diagnosed with the virus.

Secret Service employee who tested positive for coronavirus had no contact with Trump (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 12:00 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K, Neutral, Secondary]
A Secret Service employee who tested positive for the coronavirus had no contact with President Trump or White House officials, according to a spokeswoman for the agency.

"The Secret Service has conducted a comprehensive contact trace assessment and determined that the employee has not had contact with any Secret Service employee or protectee for nearly three weeks," said the Department of Homeland Security in a statement Monday.

The agency said the person is in quarantine and following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols. The employee's name and job title were withheld.

Trump told reporters at the White House on March 14 he had tested negative for the virus. Other DHS employees, including those who work for the Transportation Security Administration at several airports across the country, have tested positive.

As of Monday morning, Johns Hopkins University's coronavirus tracker reported more than 35,000 confirmed cases in the United States.

Court grapples with White House's right to suspend press passes (Politico)
Politico [3/23/2020 7:02 PM, Josh Gerstein, 2003K, Neutral, Secondary]
A Justice Department lawyer urged a federal appeals court Monday to give President Donald Trump's White House broad leeway to pull journalists' press passes for conduct the president or his aides deem unprofessional — even though opinions seem to differ widely about how to define that term in the Trump era.

The case argued before a three-judge panel of the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals stems from an altercation in the Rose Garden last July between Playboy's White House reporter Brian Karem and former Trump aide Sebastian Gorka following a summit for social media influencers.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham on Aug. 16, 2019, suspended Karem's so-called hard pass for 30 days, saying he acted unprofessionally and disturbed "decorum" by insulting guests and challenging Gorka to a fight. In September, a federal judge restored Karem's pass in a preliminary ruling that said the journalist did not receive sufficient notice of the rules governing his conduct.

Justice Department attorney James Burnham said the White House wasn't required to have a formal policy in order to take action over behavior that was beyond the pale.

"Every credentialed White House reporter, including Mr. Karem, knows perfectly well that they are not permitted to engage in unprofessional behavior on the White House grounds,"

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Burnham said. “There has always been an enforceable requirement that reporters with hard passes behave in a professional manner.”

Burnham, who argued the case in the district court and was recently named as a counselor to Attorney General William Barr, said Karem’s position that he’s entitled to know all specific rules in advance would mean reporters couldn’t be punished for sexually harassing White House staff, shouting racial epithets or even for mooning the president unless the White House made public rules barring such acts.

“That’s clearly incorrect,” Burnham said during arguments that took place by telephone conference call as a result of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. He complained that Karem was claiming “one free shot at any egregiously unprofessional conduct that the White House has not expressly prohibited beforehand.”

Karem’s lawyer, Ted Boutrous, said Trump encourages a “carnival-like” environment at White House events that leaves considerable ambiguity about what kind of behavior by reporters is fair game.

“This unruly, raucous, circus-like atmosphere … President Trump, for better or worse, creates that sort of atmosphere,” Boutrous said.

At times, the differences between the two sides were stark. While Boutrous said letting the White House ban a reporter over his comments posed “a real First Amendment danger,” Burnham disagreed.

“This is just not a First Amendment case,” the Justice Department lawyer said.

Burnham also hammered away at Karem’s defenses of his conduct, particularly his claim that offering to have “a long conversation” with Gorka was a genuine invitation to have a discussion in nearby Lafayette Park.

“That is an utterly preposterous explanation for what Mr. Karem engaged in here,” Burnham said,

However, the judges did not seem particularly troubled by Karem’s actions, which the district court found not obviously outrageous in the context of the freewheeling event.

Judge Nina Pillard seemed most squarely in Karem’s corner, lambasting Burnham for arguing that the reporter wasn’t entitled to prior notice of what kinds of behavior could lead to suspension of his credentials.

“Mr. Karem had a press pass. And the notion that the standard for taking it away when the only basis was speech by Mr. Karem and the whole area is obviously you know a First Amendment-protected area, that the authority there would not have to be announced in advance, I just find that astounding,” said Pillard, an appointee of President Barack Obama. “I mean: Of course, it has to be announced in advance.”

Pillard also said she found it curious that there was no indication other White House reporters had ever had their passes pulled for “unprofessional” behavior.

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“Isn’t it relevant that nobody who has shouted at the president or jostled another journalist or done things that one might under your reading see as clearly unprofessional, has ever had [a] press pass suspended?” she asked.

Burnham said those sorts of actions were “categorically different” than insulting White House guests. “None of the other reporters who didn’t have their questions answered felt like they needed to insult the gathered guests,” he said.

Judge Sri Srinivasan was somewhat harder to read, expressing concern that letting Karem escape with no consequence might mean that reporters were free to engage in any behavior that wasn’t illegal, no matter how disruptive, offensive or inappropriate. He asked what the White House could do if a reporter was “screaming and yelling ad nauseam, laced with profanity and epithets.”

Boutrous said the Secret Service could take action against anyone who seemed like a threat and the White House could temporarily remove someone from an event if his or her behavior was bizarre. In addition, the White House could give a reporter a formal warning or call the person’s editor to complain.

“That’s how it’s always been done,” he said, but suspension of a reporter’s pass went too far in the absence of a clear rule, clearly violated.

During the episode last July, Karem unsuccessfully shouted a question at the president as he left the event. Guests at the event then began taunting him, prompting him to shout: “This is a group of people who are eager for demonic possession.”

Gorka then ran out of the crowd toward the press section, declaring: “You’re not a journalist. You’re a punk!” Karem then suggested taking the conversation “outside,” as a Secret Service agent stepped forward with apparent concern the two men might come to blows.

In response to another hypothetical from Srinivasan on Monday, Burnham took a sweeping position that the White House could suspend a reporter over just about any threat to fight a White House guest, even if the threat seemed to be in jest and followed a similar comment from the guest.

“The gray zone is fair game,” Burnham insisted.

The telephone arguments — which ran to about 70 minutes, more than double the allotted time — went off largely without incident. However, they were delayed briefly by difficulty getting Burnham on the line. The third judge on the panel, David Tatel, was extremely difficult to hear on the audio feed streamed via the internet.

The case is the first fight over White House credentialing to reach the powerful appeals court in more than 40 years. In 1977, the D.C. Circuit ruled that the First Amendment required that Nation Magazine reporter Robert Sherrill be given a clear basis for denial of a White House pass and an opportunity to challenge the refusal. The court also said the White House needed to articulate “an explicit and meaningful standard” for who was entitled to such passes.

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[CT] Connecticut State Police warn against COVID-19 scams (Westerly Sun)
Westerly Sun [3/23/2020 11:25 PM, Jason Vallee, 4K, Neutral, Secondary]
With residents across the nation stuck at home, there is an increased likelihood that you or your family will be spending more time online. Unfortunately, so will scammers.

State and local police said they are anticipating a rise in reported scams in the coming weeks as a result of a change in behaviors related to social distancing efforts. Connecticut State Police are asking residents to remain on alert for possible COVID-19 scams and know the warning signs.

State police said in a press release that when it comes to donating to charities that claim to be assisting with COVID-19 response, be sure to research the organization and cause before giving any money.

“Do your homework when it comes to donations, whether through charities or crowdfunding sites,” the state police said. “Don’t let anyone rush you into making a donation. If someone wants donations in cash, by gift card or by wiring money, just don’t do it.”

But donations aren’t the only scammers out there. The police said citizens should remain on alert for malicious links, fake information and other online efforts to steal your personal information.

The Federal Trade Commission and Secret Service are asking residents to consider the following precautions are they spend time online in the coming weeks:

Don’t click on links from sources you don’t know. They could download viruses onto your computer or device.

Watch for emails claiming to be from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or experts saying that have information about the virus. For the most up-to-date information about the Coronavirus, visit the CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Ignore online offers for vaccinations. There currently are no vaccines, pills, potions, lotions, lozenges or other prescription or over-the-counter products available to treat or cure Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) — online or in stores.

Avoid opening any attachment or links in emails from senders that you don’t recognize.

Be wary of emails requesting account information or to verify an account, as most businesses would never call you or email you directly to ask for your security credentials.

Always verify that requests for information comes from a legitimate source. And when in doubt, put a website’s domain into a browser yourself: Since most legitimate businesses use encryption known as Secure Socket Layer, "certificate errors" can be a warning sign that the website isn’t valid.

[PA] Police seize marijuana in East Side raid (New Castle News)

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New Castle News [3/23/2020 1:28 PM, Staff, Positive, Secondary]
Gunfire in an East Side neighborhood Sunday led police to find about 40 pounds of marijuana in a Frank Avenue residence, according to a New Castle police report.

The police as a result arrested Michael Jon Ortiz, 35, and Alexis K. Williams, 23, both of 853 Frank Ave., and officers during a search of the house seized a stolen gun, various packages of marijuana, about $5,000 in cash, ammunition, 276 vape pen cartridges, a counterfeit $20 bill and other suspicious items, according to a criminal complaint.

[KY] State police make cold case arrest, probe shooting in I-71 corridor counties (WTVQ)
WTVQ [3/23/2020 2:23 PM, Steve Rogers, 5K, Positive, Secondary]
Three people have been charged with a murder almost 31 years to the day after it happened Gallatin Coiunty, the Kentucky State Police announced.

And in unrelated cases, state police are investigating a separate shooting and unrelated fatal accident in Trimble County.

Curtis Wade Sharon, Shawn F. Satchwell, and Ricky H. Asher were arrested March 20 as part of an investigation into shooting death of Bernard “Cowboy” Hopkins, who was found killed in his residence in Gallatin County on March 13, 1989.

The investigation has continued since it was first reported, eventually becoming a cold case. Through further investigation in more recent years and following up on new leads, Kentucky State Police detectives were able to develop persons of interest in the case, the KSP said in a statement.

Friday, March 20 the case was presented to the Gallatin County Grand Jury, and indictment warrants were issued. In anticipation of the warrants, the KSP along with Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, United States Secret Service, Gallatin County Sheriff’s Office, and Switzerland County, Ind., Sheriff’s Office were ready to pick up the trio. They were arrested without incident, according to the KSP.

Sharon has been charged with complicity to murder and solicitation of murder, and was lodged at the Switzerland County Detention Center in Vevay, Ind.

Satchwell has been charged with murder and in the Boone County Detention Center. Asher is charged with tampering with physical evidence and criminal facilitation to murder and is in the Leslie County Detention Center.

Meanwhile KSP investigators are working on the fatal shooting of 48-year-old Timothy Luke Webster, of Madison, Ind.

According to the KSP, just before midnight Saturday, March 21, KSP Post 5 received a call from Herman Webster reporting shots had been fired at 32 Callis Lane in Bedford in Trimble County.

When troopers arrived, they found Timothy Webster dead from an apparent gunshot wound,

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the KSP said in a release.

Upon arrival, Troopers discovered Timothy Webster deceased from an apparent gunshot wound.

Through investigation, it appears that Timothy arrived at the residence late that evening in an intoxicated state and began shooting a firearm inside the residence and making threats toward his father. Herman attempted to flee the residence and was followed by Timothy.

While still on the property Herman fired a separate firearm, striking Timothy in the chest. Timothy was pronounced dead at the scene by the Trimble County Coroner, the KSP said, describing the preliminary results of its investigation.

The SP said the investigation continues but no charges have been filed.

In a separate Trimble County case, troopers are investigating a single-vehicle fatal collision on Barebone Road about a half mile from U.S. Highway 42.

According to a KSP release, just before 8 a.m. Saturday, troopers discovered that a Ford Focus driven by 28-year-old Zachary M. Taylor, of Bedford, was westbound on Barebone Road when it left the roadway, struck multiple trees, and overturned, according to the KSP.

Taylor was pronounced dead at the scene by the Trimble County Coroner.

Taylor was alone in the car, troopers said.

Trimble and Gallatin counties are along I-71 between Louisville and Cincinnati along the Indiana state line.

[KY] Three arrests made in connection to 31-year-old KSP cold case murder investigation in Gallatin County (Northern KY Tribune)
Northern KY Tribune [3/24/2020 1:44 AM, Mark Hansel, 6K, Positive, Secondary]
Kentucky State Police Post 5 detectives, along with the assistance of Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, United States Secret Service, Gallatin County Sheriff's Office, and Switzerland County (IN) Sheriff's Office arrested three individuals in connection with a murder investigation dating back to 1989.

Curtis Wade Sharon, Shawn F. Satchwell, and Ricky H. Asher were arrested on Friday, March 20. These arrests stem from the investigation into the murder of Bernard "Cowboy" Hopkins, who was found killed in his residence in Gallatin County on March 13, 1989.

The investigation has continued since it was first reported, eventually becoming a cold case. Through further investigation in more recent years and following up on new leads, Kentucky State Police detectives were able to develop persons of interest in the case.

Friday, March 20, the case was presented to the Gallatin County Grand Jury, and indictment warrants were issued for the arrests of Sharon, Satchwell, and Asher. In anticipation of the indictment warrants, Kentucky State Police and the above-mentioned

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agencies prepared to act quickly in an effort to place these individuals under arrest.

Upon receiving verification of the warrants, law enforcement were able to locate and arrest all three individuals without incident.

Satchwell has been charged with Murder and was lodged at the Boone County Detention Center.

Sharon has been charged with Complicity to Murder and Solicitation of Murder and was lodged at the Switzerland County Detention Center in Vevay, IN. Asher has been charged with Tampering with Physical Evidence and Criminal Facilitation to Murder and was lodged at the Leslie County Detention Center.

The case remains ongoing at this time.

[GA] Columbus police release surveillance photos of counterfeit money suspect (WTVM)
WTVM [3/23/2020 3:27 PM, Alex Jones, 6K, Neutral, Secondary]
Columbus police are releasing surveillance photos of a man wanted for questioning.

They say the man seen in the photos is involved in an incident of passing counterfeit money.

Anyone who recognizes the man in the photos is asked to contact CPD at 706-225-4381.

[MN] Man Charged With Using Counterfeit Money To Buy Food, Lotto Tickets (KNSI)
KNSI [3/23/2020 6:10 AM, Jennifer Lewerenz, Positive, Secondary]
A 28-year-old St. Francis man is charged after allegedly using fake money at stores in Anoka and Wright Counties.

Jacob Dean Theis was arrested and charged in Sherburne County Court with felony possession of counterfeit currency.

Police say Theis used four fake $10 bills to buy lottery tickets at a convenience store in Big Lake. Surveillance video shows him throwing the money on the counter before quickly leaving the store.

A similar incident was caught on tape in Blaine, where a woman used fake money to buy lottery tickets, threw the money on the counter, and ran. Theis is accused of driving the getaway car in that incident.

He is also accused of using counterfeit cash at a restaurant in Blaine and a convenience store in Monticello.

Following his arrest in the Blaine incident, a search of his truck turned up $156 in counterfeit money. Police also found paper, a paper slicer, laptops, cell phones, and partially printed fake money.

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[WY] Rock Spring PD Warn Of Counterfeit Bills Being Circulated (Oil City News)
Oil City News [3/23/2020 3:00 PM, Brendan LaChance, Neutral, Secondary]
The Rock Springs Police Department said on Monday, March 23 that they have received reports of counterfeit bills being circulated in the community.

"Several businesses have already reported receiving the bills in various denominations," Rock Springs PD said. "Cashiers are advised to inspect all bills before accepting them."

They warned people that the bills "look extremely real but are slightly different in color."

"On the bill, there is the word 'COPY' and the bill says 'FOR MOTION PICTURE USE ONLY' on the front and back," Rock Springs PD said.

"If you receive one of the bills please contact Detective Sgt. Brenda Baker at the Rock Springs Police Department at 307-352-1575."

[Canada] Counterfeit money suspects nabbed after trying to flee from Orillia OPP (OrilliaMatters)
OrilliaMatters [3/23/2020 12:00 PM, Staff, Positive, Secondary]
The Orillia Detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police have made arrests in relation to use of counterfeit currency in the City of Orillia.

On March 21 and 22, 2020 Orillia OPP members and Rama Police Service members received calls regarding the use of counterfeit American currency in Orillia and Rama First Nation.

On March 22, 2020, the Orillia OPP received a third call from a business on Atherley Road that a suspect, in relation to these incidents, was observed in the area. A description of the vehicle was provided to police and a traffic stop was conducted. Three suspects from the vehicle ran from police. After a short foot pursuit police were able to arrest the suspects.

Police arrested Allan Cliffe, age 38, and Derek Hall, age 36, of Barrie and charged them with the following offences:

Two counts of Uttering Counterfeit Money Contrary to section 452(a) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Counterfeit Money Contrary to Section 450(b) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Property Obtained by Crime Contrary to Section 354(1)(a) of the Criminal Code;

Flight from Police Officer Contrary to Section 320.17 of the Criminal Code;

Possession of a Schedule I Substance Contrary to Section 4(1) of the Controlled Drugs; and, Substances Act.

William Comstive, age 30 of Barrie was also arrested and charged with:

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Two counts of Uttering Counterfeit Money Contrary to section 452(a) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Counterfeit Money Contrary to Section 450(b) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Property Obtained by Crime Contrary to Section 354(1)(a) of the Criminal Code;

Personation with Intent to Avoid Arrest Contrary to Section 403(1)(d) of the Criminal Code;

Obstruct Police Officer Contrary to Section 129(a) of the Criminal Code;

Breach of Recognizance Contrary to Section 811 of the Criminal Code;

Breach of Probation Contrary to Section 733.1(1) of the Criminal Code;

Flight from Police Officer Contrary to Section 320.17 of the Criminal Code; and,

Possession of a Schedule I Substance Contrary to Section 4(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

All three suspects were released on a Form 10 and set to appear at the Ontario Court of Justice in Orillia on June 02, 2020.

Counterfeit currency makes its way through our communities from time-to-time and businesses should take precautions to avoid falling victim.

Consult with your financial institution on how to safeguard your business against the use of counterfeit money which may include use of technology or training. Enact strict policies and ensure your employees are aware of the potential that counterfeit currency can be used.

The Orillia OPP is committed to public safety and crime prevention. If you have any information about crime in our community please contact the OPP at 1-888-310-1122 or call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS).

You can submit your information online at crimestopperssdm.com if you have any information on this crime or any other crime. Crime Stoppers does not subscribe to call display and you will remain anonymous. Being anonymous, you will not testify in court and your information may lead to a cash reward of up to $2,000.00.

CISA/Cybersecurity

As Coronavirus Surveillance Escalates, Personal Privacy Plummets (New York Times)
New York Times [3/23/2020 9:04 AM, Natasha Singer and Choe Sang-Hun, 23673K]
In South Korea, government agencies are harnessing surveillance-camera footage, smartphone location data and credit card purchase records to help trace the recent movements of coronavirus patients and establish virus transmission chains.

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In Lombardy, Italy, the authorities are analyzing location data transmitted by citizens' mobile phones to determine how many people are obeying a government lockdown order and the typical distances they move every day. About 40 percent are moving around "too much," an official recently said.

In Israel, the country's internal security agency is poised to start using a cache of mobile phone location data — originally intended for counterterrorism operations — to try to pinpoint citizens who may have been exposed to the virus.

As countries around the world race to contain the pandemic, many are deploying digital surveillance tools as a means to exert social control, even turning security agency technologies on their own civilians. Health and law enforcement authorities are understandably eager to employ every tool at their disposal to try to hinder the virus — even as the surveillance efforts threaten to alter the precarious balance between public safety and personal privacy on a global scale.

Yet ratcheting up surveillance to combat the pandemic now could permanently open the doors to more invasive forms of snooping later. It is a lesson Americans learned after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, civil liberties experts say.

Nearly two decades later, law enforcement agencies have access to higher-powered surveillance systems, like fine-grained location tracking and facial recognition — technologies that may be repurposed to further political agendas like anti-immigration policies. Civil liberties experts warn that the public has little recourse to challenge these digital exercises of state power.

"We could so easily end up in a situation where we empower local, state or federal government to take measures in response to this pandemic that fundamentally change the scope of American civil rights," said Albert Fox Cahn, the executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a nonprofit organization in Manhattan.

As an example, he pointed to a law enacted by New York State this month that gives Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo unlimited authority to rule by executive order during state crises like pandemics and hurricanes. The law allows him to issue emergency response directives that could overrule any local regulations.

Increased surveillance and health data disclosures have also drastically eroded people's ability to keep their health status private.

This month, Australia's health minister publicly chastised a doctor whom she accused of treating patients while experiencing symptoms of the virus — essentially outing him by naming the small clinic in Victoria where he worked with a handful of other physicians.

The health provider, who tested positive for the coronavirus, responded with a Facebook post saying the minister had incorrectly characterized his actions for political gain and demanded an apology.

"That could extend to anyone, to suddenly have the status of your health blasted out to

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thousands or potentially millions of people," said Chris Gilliard, an independent privacy scholar based in the Detroit area. "It's a very strange thing to do because, in the alleged interest of public health, you are actually endangering people."

But in emergencies like pandemics, privacy must be weighed against other considerations, like saving lives, said Mila Romanoff, data and governance lead for United Nations Global Pulse, a U.N. program that has studied using data to improve emergency responses to epidemics like Ebola and dengue fever.

"We need to have a framework that would allow companies and public authorities to cooperate, to enable proper response for the public good," Ms. Romanoff said. To reduce the risk that coronavirus surveillance efforts might violate people's privacy, she said, governments and companies should limit the collection and use of data to only what is needed. "The challenge is," she added, "how much data is enough?" The fast pace of the pandemic, however, is prompting governments to put in place a patchwork of digital surveillance measures in the name of their own interests, with little international coordination on how appropriate or effective they are.

In hundreds of cities in China, the government is requiring citizens to use software on their phones that automatically classifies each person with a color code — red, yellow or green — indicating contagion risk. The software determines which people should be quarantined or permitted to enter public places like subways. But officials have not explained how the system makes such decisions, and citizens have felt powerless to challenge it.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Health has posted information online about each coronavirus patient, often in stunning detail, including relationships to other patients. The idea is to warn individuals who may have crossed paths with them, as well as alert the public to potentially infected locations. "Case 219 is a 30-year-old male," says one entry on the Health Ministry's site, who worked at the "Sengkang Fire Station (50 Buangkok Drive)," is "in an isolation room at Sengkang General Hospital" and "is a family member of Case 236."

On Friday, Singapore also introduced a smartphone app for citizens to help the authorities locate people who may have been exposed to the virus. The app, called TraceTogether, uses Bluetooth signals to detect mobile phones that are nearby. If an app user later tests positive for the virus, the health authorities may examine the data logs from the app to find people who crossed their paths. A government official said the app preserved privacy by not revealing users' identities to one another.

In Mexico, after public health officials notified Uber about a passenger infected with the virus, the company suspended the accounts of two drivers who had given him rides, along with more than 200 passengers who had ridden with those drivers.

In the United States, the White House recently spoke with Google, Facebook and other tech companies about potentially using aggregated location data captured from Americans' mobile phones for public health surveillance of the virus. Several members of Congress subsequently wrote a letter urging President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence to protect any virus-related data that companies collected from Americans.

The digital dictates may enable governments to exert more social control and enforce social

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distancing during the pandemic. They also raise questions about when surveillance may go too far.

In January, South Korea's government began posting detailed location histories on each person who tested positive for the coronavirus. The site has included a wealth of information — such as details about when people left for work, whether they wore masks in the subway, the name of the stations where they changed trains, the massage parlors and karaoke bars they frequented and the names of the clinics where they were tested for the virus.

In South Korea's highly wired society, however, internet mobs exploited patient data disclosed by the government site to identify people by name and hound them.

As other countries increase surveillance, South Korea had an unusual reaction. Concerned that privacy invasions might discourage citizens from getting tested for the virus, health officials announced this month that they would refine their data-sharing guidelines to minimize patient risk.

"We will balance the value of protecting individual human rights and privacy and the value of upholding public interest in preventing mass infections," said Jung Eun-kyeong, the director of South Korea's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That is a tricky balance that some United States officials may need to consider.

In New York this month, Mayor Bill de Blasio posted details on Twitter about a lawyer in Westchester County who was the second person in the state to test positive for the virus — including the name of the man's seven-person law firm and the names of the schools attended by two of his children. A few hours later, The New York Post identified the lawyer by name and was soon referring to him as "patient zero" in the coronavirus outbreak in New Rochelle.

In a response posted on Facebook, Adina Lewis Garbuz, a lawyer who is the wife of the man, Lawrence Garbuz, pleaded with the public to focus instead on the personal efforts the family had made to isolate themselves and notify people who came into contact with them.

"We would have preferred this all remain private," Ms. Garbuz wrote in the Facebook post, "but since it is no longer, I wanted to at least share some truths and allay people's fears."

WHO unsuccessfully targeted by hackers earlier this month: report (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 4:55 PM, Maggie Miller, 1762K]
The World Health Organization (WHO) was unsuccessfully targeted by elite hackers earlier this month in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Reuters reported Monday.

WHO Chief Information Security Officer Flavio Aggio told Reuters that while the hacking effort was unsuccessful, the WHO has seen a spike in attempted cyberattacks since the coronavirus crisis began.

"There has been a big increase in targeting of the WHO and other cybersecurity incidents,"

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Aggio told Reuters. “There are no hard numbers, but such compromise attempts against us and the use of [WHO] impersonations to target others have more than doubled.”

Reuters was tipped off to the attempted hack by Alexander Urbelis, a cybersecurity expert and attorney with Blackstone Law Group, who picked up on a live effort to hack the health agency on March 13.

The identity of the hackers involved is not known, though according to experts contacted by Reuters, a cybercrime group known as “DarkHotel” is suspected of carrying out the attack. This hacking group has previously targeted officials and business in the U.S., China, Japan and North Korea.

The WHO did not immediately respond to The Hill’s request for comment on the story.

The attempted cyberattack comes after the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was targeted in a separate cyberattack earlier this month. HHS Secretary Alex Azar told reporters that the hackers involved were not able to penetrate any networks, and that there was no data breach.

The WHO published an alert last month warning individuals to beware of “criminals disguising themselves as WHO to steal money or sensitive information.” The WHO noted that it would never send emails asking for usernames or passwords, or emails including attachments that an individual had not requested.

These types of emails, known as phishing, have increasingly been used to target individuals due to concerns around the coronavirus.

Elite Hackers Target WHO as Coronavirus Cyberattacks Spike (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 3:08 PM, Raphael Satter, Jack Stubbs, and Christopher Bing, 3020K]
Elite hackers tried to break into the World Health Organization earlier this month, sources told Reuters, part of what a senior agency official said was a more than two-fold increase in cyberattacks.

WHO Chief Information Security Officer Flavio Aggio said the identity of the hackers was unclear and the effort was unsuccessful. But he warned that hacking attempts against the agency and its partners have soared as they battle to contain the coronavirus, which has killed more than 15,000 worldwide.

The attempted break-in at the WHO was first flagged to Reuters by Alexander Urbelis, a cybersecurity expert and attorney with the New York-based Blackstone Law Group, which tracks suspicious internet domain registration activity.

Urbelis said he picked up on the activity around March 13, when a group of hackers he’d been following activated a malicious site mimicking the WHO’s internal email system.

“I realized quite quickly that this was a live attack on the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic,” he said.

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Urbelis said he didn't know who was responsible, but two other sources briefed on the matter said they suspected an advanced group of hackers known as DarkHotel, which has been conducting cyber-espionage operations since at least 2007.

Messages sent to email addresses maintained by the hackers went unreturned.

When asked by Reuters about the incident, the WHO's Aggio confirmed that the site spotted by Urbelis had been used in an attempt to steal passwords from multiple agency staffers.

"There has been a big increase in targeting of the WHO and other cybersecurity incidents," Aggio said in a telephone interview. "There are no hard numbers, but such compromise attempts against us and the use of (WHO) impersonations to target others have more than doubled."

The WHO published an alert last month - available here here - warning that hackers are posing as the agency to steal money and sensitive information from the public.

And government officials in the United States, Britain and elsewhere have issued cybersecurity warnings about the dangers of a newly remote workforce as people disperse to their homes to work and study because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The motives in the case identified by Reuters aren't clear. United Nations agencies, the WHO among them, are regularly targeted by digital espionage campaigns and Aggio said he did not know who precisely at the organization the hackers had in their sights.

Cybersecurity firms including Romania's Bitdefender and Moscow-based Kaspersky said they have traced many of DarkHotel's operations to East Asia - an area that has been particularly affected by the coronavirus. Specific targets have included government employees and business executives in places such as China, North Korea, Japan, and the United States.

Costin Raiu, head of global research and analysis at Kaspersky, could not confirm that DarkHotel was responsible for the WHO attack but said the same malicious web infrastructure had also been used to target other healthcare and humanitarian organizations in recent weeks.

"At times like this, any information about cures or tests or vaccines relating to coronavirus would be priceless and the priority of any intelligence organization of an affected country," he said.

Officials and cybersecurity experts have warned that hackers of all stripes are seeking to capitalize on international concern over the spread of the coronavirus.

Urbelis said he has tracked thousands of coronavirus-themed web sites being set up daily, many of them obviously malicious.

"It's still around 2,000 a day," he said. "I have never seen anything like this."

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[MO] Ameren Missouri Equipment Supplier Targeted In Ransomware Attack (St. Louis Public Radio)

St. Louis Public Radio [3/23/2020 8:15 AM, Shahla Farzan, 19K]

Ransomware attackers have stolen data from a third-party vendor that supplies utility equipment to Ameren Missouri power plants.

Dozens of data files from Ohio-based LTI Power Systems appeared on a ransomware server in late February, including equipment diagrams and schematics from two Ameren Missouri facilities. No customer information appears to have been involved in the data breach.

St. Louis Public Radio obtained copies of the data files, which span from 1996 to 2017, and involve the Ameren Sioux Power Plant in West Alton and the Labadie Power Plant.

The files include detailed schematics of uninterruptible power supply equipment, used to provide temporary backup power during outages.

Joe Scherrer, director of the Cybersecurity Strategic Initiative at Washington University, said this type of intellectual property can be a valuable commodity in the cybercriminal marketplace.

“This particular incident is, in my view, all about the theft of intellectual property and making it available for sale to nation states or other companies,” Scherrer said.

This type of data breach has become increasingly common across a wide range of sectors.

According to the cybersecurity company Emsisoft, ransomware attackers targeted 966 government agencies, schools and health care providers in 2019, at an estimated cost of $7.5 billion.

Many companies have strengthened their cybersecurity in recent years and trained employees to recognize phishing scams — one of the most common ways ransomware attacks gain access to internal systems.

Still, ensuring the security of third-party vendors remains a challenge, said Scherrer, particularly as attacks become more sophisticated.

“The attack techniques evolve literally on a day-to-day basis,” he said. “They’re approaching this as a business, as a revenue generator, so they’re going to adapt their techniques and procedures to maximize their returns.”

A spokesperson for Ameren Missouri said they were investigating the data breach, but added they “have no reason to believe that the information obtained is confidential or critical to our operations.”

“In some cases, standard schematics or drawings are shared with equipment suppliers to support the procurement of certain assets,” the spokesperson said in an email. “But these do not contain classified or confidential information.”

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Terrorism Investigations

[OK] Man Convicted of Trying to Blow Up Oklahoma City Bank Gets 25 Years in Prison (New York Times)

New York Times [3/23/2020 6:19 PM, Jacey Fortin, 23673K]

A man who was arrested in 2017 after a thwarted attempt to blow up a bank in downtown Oklahoma City — a plot that echoed the deadly bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building there in 1995 — was sentenced Monday to 25 years in prison, the authorities said.

The man, Jerry Drake Varnell, 26, of Sayre, Okla., will be on supervised release for the rest of his life once he completes his prison term, federal and local authorities said in a statement on Monday.

Mr. Varnell was arrested in August 2017 after he tried to detonate a van full of what he believed to be explosives in an alley beside the downtown branch of BancFirst, Oklahoma's largest state-chartered bank, the authorities said.

The site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, which was destroyed in the 1995 bombing that killed 168 people, was a few blocks away.

"This case is extremely poignant considering we are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing," Chief Wade Gourley of the Oklahoma City Police Department said in the statement. "This event not only scarred the community of Oklahoma City, but had a profound effect on the nation."

Mr. Varnell's lawyer, Vicki Behenna, said in an interview on Monday that the sentence was "a little bit higher than what we wanted" but that "we're very grateful it wasn't life, which is what the government was asking for."

Ms. Behenna said that she planned to appeal Mr. Varnell's 2019 conviction on counts of attempting to use an explosive device to damage and destroy BancFirst's corporate offices, and of attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction against property used in interstate commerce.

Mr. Varnell's arrest was the culmination of a domestic terrorism investigation involving an undercover operation, during which Mr. Varnell had been monitored closely for months as the bomb plot developed.

"This case required thorough investigation and careful coordination among agents and prosecutors in a matter that is our highest priority — terrorism," said Timothy J. Downing, the United States attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma.

According to court documents, Mr. Varnell had espoused an anti-government ideology. He had told federal agents working undercover that he wanted to form a small militia group, inspired in part by the movie "Fight Club," the authorities said.

"I'm out for blood," Mr. Varnell wrote in one text message to a confidential informant who cooperated with the authorities, according to an affidavit written by an F.B.I. special agent.

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"When militias start getting formed I'm going after government officials when I have a team," he wrote.

In another text message, Mr. Varnell wrote: "I think I'm going to go with what the okc bomber used. Diesel and anhydrous ammonia." He was referring to Timothy J. McVeigh, who was executed for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing. Mr. McVeigh and a co-conspirator, Terry L. Nichols, built a giant fertilizer bomb using ammonium nitrate and racing fuel as their primary ingredients.

Around 1 a.m. on Aug. 12, 2017, Mr. Varnell parked a van loaded with what he believed to be a working explosive device next to the bank, and then dialed a number on a cellphone that he thought would set it off, federal officials said. But the device was inert and would not explode, and he was subsequently arrested.

In October 2017, a federal grand jury indicted Mr. Varnell, and an additional charge against him was added in April 2018.

Lawyers representing Mr. Varnell said that he was mentally ill and that he had been coaxed and entrapped by the authorities. His mother and a clinical psychologist testified that he was schizophrenic, Ms. Behenna, his lawyer, said. But the court found him mentally competent to stand trial.

In February 2019, a federal jury convicted him on both counts.

National Security News

Grenell taps new acting director of National Counterterrorism Center (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 12:54 PM, Olivia Beavers, 1762K]
Acting Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Richard Grenell on Monday tapped a new counterterrorism chief to temporarily lead the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), a move that comes amid a shakeup in the center's leadership.

Lora Shiao, a career intelligence official who will serve as the NCTC's next deputy director, will also become its first female acting director until the Senate confirms a permanent replacement.

Shiao has a long record of intelligence experience, previously serving in multiple roles at the NCTC as well as the FBI and Pentagon. She also was an intelligence briefer to the attorney general and FBI director during the George W. Bush administration. She now serves as the center's No. 3 official.

Shiao is slated to take over the role April 3. Clare Linkins, meanwhile, will take over for her as the next NCTC executive director.

"Acting DNI Grenell is excited and proud to promote Lora and Clare to these critical positions, where they will lead the nation's efforts to counter terrorism. Lora and Clare are both NCTC veterans, with more than 25 years of combined experience at the Center," Amanda Schoch, assistant director of National Intelligence for Strategic Communications,

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said in a statement.

"Under their direction, NCTC is well-postured to lead the counterterrorism mission into the future," the statement continues.

The NCTC, which was formed after 9/11, is part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that works to unify "counterterrorism intelligence for the homeland and abroad" while "driving whole-of-government action" to protect the nation from attacks, according to its website.

Shiao's appointment comes after Russell Travers, who is the acting director, chose to step down from the interim position. According to reports, Travers had already been considering retiring, but when Grenell sought to shuffle the leadership at the center — offering Travers another senior government role — he ultimately chose to retire.

Last week, President Trump tapped Christopher Miller, who serves as the deputy assistant secretary of Defense for special operations and combating terrorism, to fill the key intelligence role as the next director, if the Senate confirms him.

Travers, who is expected to vacate the position over the next several weeks, explained to colleagues in a letter that Grenell wanted to assemble "a new team to best support" Miller after he is confirmed, The New York Times reported.

Intelligence leadership shuffled again as broader reforms continue (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 3:13 PM, Olivia Gazis, 2394K]
Career intelligence official Lora Shiao will head the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) until a Senate-confirmed director is in place, administration officials announced Monday, in a move that at once eased some concerns that the intelligence community might become politicized while raising questions about the reasons underlying recent personnel shuffles.

Shiao, who previously held NCTC's third-highest position as executive director and has held numerous government positions focused on counterterrorism, will become the center's first female acting director on April 3, officials from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) said. Her deputy will be Clare Linkins, another career official who was most recently NCTC's former director for strategic operational planning. Linkins will become executive director once a permanent NCTC director is in place; Shiao will then be deputy director.

Earlier this month President Trump nominated Christopher Miller, a former Army Special Forces officer who worked on counterterrorism issues at the National Security Council before moving to the Pentagon late last year. It is unclear when a confirmation process for Miller will begin.

"Acting DNI Grenell is excited and proud to promote Lora and Clare to these critical positions, where they will lead the nation's efforts to counter terrorism," said ODNI spokesperson Amanda Schoch. "Lora and Clare are both NCTC veterans, with more than 25 years of combined experience at the Center. They are well-respected career intelligence

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officials, with deep analytic, operational and leadership experience serving in the Intelligence Community and are recognized for their focus and commitment to workforce issues, including recruitment, development, retention and morale."

"Under their direction, NCTC is well-postured to lead the counterterrorism mission into the future," Schoch said.

Created in 2003 amid an extensive restructuring of the intelligence community following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, NCTC is a signature branch of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It comprises officials detailed from several other agencies – including the CIA and FBI – and is responsible for analyzing, integrating and sharing terrorism-related intelligence across the government. It has in recent years come under scrutiny as the administration's national security focus has shifted away from counterterrorism efforts toward strategic competition with world powers like China and Russia.

But separate from broader organizational reforms to the intelligence community, President Trump has also made moves to staff some major intelligence agencies with officials he perceives as being personally and politically loyal to him. Last month he abruptly announced the replacement of acting director of national intelligence Joseph Maguire with Richard Grenell, an outspoken ally of the president who is now concurrently serving as acting DNI, U.S. Ambassador to Germany, and a special envoy for Serbia and Kosovo peace negotiations.

Mr. Trump subsequently re-nominated Republican congressman John Ratcliffe of Texas to serve as permanent DNI, though it is also unclear when Ratcliffe's confirmation process might be initiated. The first time Ratcliffe – who publicly defended the president during special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into his presidential campaign and during the impeachment inquiry that concluded last month – was nominated to the role, his candidacy was sunk by questions related to his national security experience.

The series of leadership swaps at ODNI was originally set in motion last August, when Mr. Trump's first director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, as well as his deputy, career intelligence official Sue Gordon, were effectively removed from their posts. Maguire took the helm at ODNI in an acting capacity after Ratcliffe's nomination foundered and, along with a career CIA official who had been detailed to the office as its No. 2, remained in place until his replacement by Grenell was announced by Mr. Trump in February.

Though Maguire did face a time limit as interim chief, he could have remained acting director until a permanent nominee was confirmed – as Grenell is now doing. Maguire appeared to run afoul of the president, however, after an ODNI official delivered an election security briefing to the House Intelligence Committee that turned contentious.

At NCTC, Shiao will replace outgoing acting director Russell Travers, a former Army intelligence officer with over four decades of experience. He served as NCTC's deputy director since 2017 and as its acting director as of August 2019, when Maguire, then the Senate-confirmed NCTC director, was first tapped to lead ODNI.

ODNI officials have said Travers "wanted to retire" and "did not want another assignment," though his sudden replacement prompted concerns and some criticism from former senior

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intelligence officials, who questioned whether his replacement was part of a politically charged purge.

On Friday, nine former NCTC directors and other senior ODNI officials – including Maguire – wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post expressing concern about personnel changes at U.S. intelligence agencies. The op-ed was published before the nominations of Shiao and Linkins were announced.

The officials called the "unceremonious removal" of Travers and his deputy, another career official who will now return to the National Security Agency, the latest in a "deeply destructive path" being pursued by the Trump administration to remove apolitical experts.

"To be clear: This is not just about protecting a few senior officers. These unceremonious removals send a damaging message across the intelligence community," the officials wrote. "Every current officer sees that speaking truth to power in this administration is an immediate career-killer."

Officials at ODNI have previously said that Grenell is now overseeing an effort studied but not implemented by previous directors to "refocus or transfer activities at ODNI to eliminate duplication of work with other agencies."

"Since assuming his new role on Feb. 20, Acting DNI Grenell and the ODNI leadership team have embarked on a careful review of these studies completed prior to his arrival, with an eye to implementing key recommendations," spokeswoman Amanda Schoch said earlier this month.

"Acting DNI Grenell has emphasized with ODNI leadership this review is not an effort to purge, as some have erroneously suggested," she said. "The goal is to make sure scarce Intelligence Community resources are used in the best way possible."

"Further details will be provided as more specifics of the review are finalized," Schoch said.

Acting Director Of National Intelligence Taps First-Ever Woman To Lead National Counterterrorism Center (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [3/23/2020 7:43 PM, Christian Datoc, 566K]
Acting Director of National Intelligence Richard Grenell officially tapped Lora Shiao Monday to serve as the acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC).

Grenell's office pointed out to Daily Caller that Shiao will be the first ever woman to head the NCTC, and she will take over active duties from the current NCTC director, Russell Travers, in April. Shiao is expected to assume the deputy director position if the Senate confirms Pentagon Special Operations official Christopher Miller, whom President Donald Trump has signaled he will nominate to serve as the next permanent director of NCTC.

NCTC reports directly to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Shiao previously served as the center's executive director, and her previous role will be filled by Clare Linkins, the NCTC's current director of strategic operational planning.

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“Acting DNI Grenell is excited and proud to promote Lora and Clare to these critical positions, where they will lead the nation’s efforts to counter terrorism,” Assistant director of national intelligence Amanda Schoch said in a statement. “Lora and Clare are both NCTC veterans, with more than 25 years of combined experience at the Center.”

“They are well-respected career intelligence officials, with deep analytic, operational and leadership experience serving in the Intelligence Community (IC) and are recognized for their focus and commitment to workforce issues, including recruitment, development, retention and morale,” she continued. “Under their direction, NCTC is well-postured to lead the counterterrorism mission into the future.”

Trump announced Grenell would be pulling double duty as both the U.S. Ambassador to Germany and acting DNI back in February, though the president announced he would nominate Texas Republican Rep. John Ratcliffe to serve as permanent DNI later that month.

Coronavirus confinement challenges intelligence services (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 12:44 PM, Staff, 1973K]
The home confinement of hundreds of millions of people worldwide to halt coronavirus contagion has presented intelligence services with a challenge: monitoring an explosion in internet traffic, above board and not, even as their own capacity is reduced.

The global health crisis has exposed the internet as both a tool and a potential target for malefactors, experts say, with agents — many themselves working from home — having to sift through the deluge looking for credible threats.

Criminals could take advantage of the disarray to launch attacks on government and nuclear systems, alter scientific or electoral data, paralyse servers, or spread fake news.

Developing countries and those with weak monitoring systems are most at risk, with Western nations better geared to pick up external cyber threats.

“If you want to make mischief in… some other part of the world, and try to do so in a low-profile way and try to escape attention, now presents an opportunity to do that,” said Suzanne Spaulding of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington.

In a bid to curb virus contagion among their ranks, intelligence services are alternating teams at the office, like many other essential businesses and services continuing to function amid the unprecedented global lockdown.

And while some officials are equipped to work on encrypted systems from home, these generally do not grant them access to the most sensitive information, a former agent of France’s DGSE foreign intelligence agency told AFP on condition of anonymity.

“There is continuity, but strategic intelligence gathering will necessarily be lighter,” he said.

Brian Perkins, a researcher at the Jamestown Foundation, a Washington intelligence think-

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tank, pointed to a breakdown in covert fieldwork capabilities.

“The biggest challenge posed by COVID-19 is… the inability of intelligence field officers to extract human intelligence in areas with active outbreaks, particularly areas with significant restrictions on public interactions or travel,” he told AFP.

‘Malign actors’

Such restrictions create fertile ground for organised disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks.

“Malign actors are actively exploiting these new challenging circumstances,” cross-border policing agency Europol said last week.

And the World Economic Forum has warned that “broad-based cyberattacks could cause widespread infrastructure failures that take entire communities or cities offline, obstructing healthcare providers, public systems and networks.”

With the attention of governments around the world focused on a common, invisible enemy, one could have hoped for a drawdown of global hostilities.

But no such luck, experts say.

“Over the past six weeks, we’ve seen Chinese threat actors continue their operations against their usual external targets,” said Ben Reed of the cybersecurity group FireEye.

“It’s too early to see if there’s been any quantitative decrease in activity, but what we’re seeing matches previous patterns… no indication of a ‘truce’.”

He added that they have continued to see “cyber-espionage” activity from North Korea, Russia and South Asia despite the coronavirus activity.

Russia versus the West
Moscow is indeed also a focus for Western governments, which have accused it of stepping up a campaign of misinformation regarding the coronavirus outbreak.

“It does not take a lot of people nor resources to carry out these kind of attacks,” Spaulding from CSIS said.

The European Union’s East Stratcom anti-disinformation taskforce has pointed to more than 110 coronavirus-related campaigns between January 22 and March 19.

“Messages targeting domestic Russian audiences describe the virus as a form of foreign aggression”, it said in a statement, while messages targeting international audiences “focus primarily on conspiracy theories”.

“These messages are characteristic of the Kremlin’s well-established strategy of using disinformation to amplify divisions, sow distrust and chaos, and exacerbate crisis situations and issues of public concern,” East Stratcom said.

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Moscow regularly denies such accusations, accusing the West of similar tactics in return.

US launches hypersonic glide body test in race to catch up with China and Russia (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 11:57 AM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]
Amid a backdrop of nonstop coronavirus news coverage, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy wanted to highlight a major step in America's hypersonic missile arms race with China and Russia.

"I'd likely point out today that the Army, in a joint effort with the Navy, conducted a successful long-range flight of a hypersonic glide body missile," McCarthy said Friday in a briefing dominated by questions about how the Army Corps of Engineers would help address things such as coming hospital shortages.

"This is a significant milestone for our number-one priority, long-range precision fires," McCarthy said.

A C-HGB rocket on Thursday pierced the skies over Kauai, Hawaii. It created explosive smoke flumes similar to those of a space shuttle launch because the joint Navy- and Army-developed hypersonic glide body does reach space.

To reach speeds of Mach 20, or 20 times the speed of sound, the glide body that will carry the nation's fastest land-based missile passes between the upper atmosphere and space.

"There is no missile defense system from sensor to interceptor in the world, including the United States, that has been developed and is capable of defeating hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) like the C-HGB," wrote Riki Ellison, the head of the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, the day after the launch.

The test conducted at the Pacific Missile Range facility brings the military a step closer to catching up with adversaries who already have hypersonic missiles in their inventory.

Russia reportedly has tested several hypersonic weapons that can be launched from ships, submarines, ground sites, or midair. China already has an anti-ship hypersonic missile.

"In past decades, we've been world leaders in hypersonics technology," Mike White, the assistant director for hypersonics, told the Washington Examiner at a March 2 Pentagon briefing. "But we have consistently made the decision to not transition that to weapon applications and build weapons systems out of hypersonic technologies that we were working on in the laboratory."

But as McCarthy hinted at Friday's press conference, the Department of Defense is investing heavily now with hopes to have weapons in inventories across the services by the early to mid-2020s.

The services and DOD's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency have a combined $3.2 billion devoted to hypersonics development in fiscal year 2021, according to

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congressional testimony from Defense Secretary Mark Esper earlier this month.

Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett said at a Feb. 21 Johns Hopkins discussion that the effort is coordinated across all the services.

"So much of the advancing technology is very much a joint effort," she said. "If we did it individually, we would be finding duplication and inefficiencies that we wouldn't — that we cannot afford."

McCarthy explained during the same discussion that hypersonics research is not centrally managed but rather draws on each service's work and the strong relationships among the service secretaries.

"If you look at the hypersonics effort, it's joint interest, not a joint program like a big, joint program office with a coin and a seal and all that stuff," he said. "What we do is we share information, and we look at the test regime, and we share the data."

The Missile Defense Agency monitored and tracked data from the flight experiment conducted last Thursday. That data will be used to design a hypersonic weapon to defend against peer adversaries such as China and Russia.

The Pentagon has had false starts in the development of hypersonic missiles, canceling a $900 million program last year before starting a new one earlier this year.

Lately, the department has said it is focused on a glide body, which brings a missile to hypersonic speeds before it breaks away toward its target.

The DOD called the March 19 test a "major milestone" that builds on a test in October 2017.

''In this test, we put additional stresses on the system, and it was able to handle them all," said Vice Adm. Johnny Wolfe, the director of the Navy's Strategic Systems Programs, in a statement about the Navy-led program.

When ready, the C-HGB will carry a conventional warhead, guidance system, and thermal protection shield.

In his congressional testimony, Esper tried to assuage Senate Armed Services Committee concerns that we are far behind China and Russia.

"I'm very confident that in the next few years, we'll be deploying hypersonic weapons as the commanders need them throughout the theater, but in the Indo-Pacific theater in particular," he said in response to a question from Sen. Deb Fischer, a Nebraska Republican. "We are doing very innovative work, and I would tell you, it's more innovative than what you would see coming out of Russia or China — I can assure you that."

New Army technology can track and destroy maneuvering cruise missiles (FOX News)

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FOX News [3/23/2020 8:49 PM, Kris Osborn, 8943K]
Maneuvering cruise missiles, fast-moving stealthy fighter jets, armed drones, long-range helicopter-fired air-to-ground weapons and hypersonic rounds traveling at five times the speed of sound are all modern methods of air-attack able to destroy Army ground war units -- potentially even rendering them inoperable or, even worse, making them vulnerable to complete destruction.

The weapons, sensors and platforms now operated by potential adversaries have created an entirely new tactical environment now defining land combat, a scenario that has inspired the U.S. Army to fast-track new, advanced air and missile defense radar technologies sufficient to thwart this changing sphere of enemy attack possibilities.

The service is now surging forward in response to an urgent need with a new 360-degree radar system called Lower Tier Air & Missile Defense Sensor (LTAMDS), slated for initial fielding by 2022. Unlike the more linear directional configuration of the existing Patriot air and missile defense system, the Raytheon-built LTAMDS is engineered with overlapping 120-degree arrays intended to seamlessly track approaching threats using a 360-degree protection envelope.

“The Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor will deliver sensor capability to counter advanced threats and take full advantage of the Patriot Missile Segment Enhancement (Patriot upgrade) capability. It will provide significant improvement over the Patriot radar while enabling incremental growth,” Natalia Thaniel, director of communications, Army Futures Command, Air and Missile Defense Cross Functional Team, told Warrior in a statement.

The Patriot, well-known for its Gulf-War ability to track and destroy Saddam’s Scud missiles, has been brought into the modern area through a series of extensive upgrades. The kinetic-energy hit-to-kill Patriot Advanced Capability weapon in particular, has received new software, modern sensors and a special upgrade called Missile Segment Enhancement. The Patriot still has a lot of capability, and can defend against the threats of today and tomorrow. However, a new radar is needed to defend against the threats warfighters will face the day after tomorrow.

Nevertheless, while the Patriot continues to remain operational and effective in many respects, the decades-old system will start facing challenges when it comes to confronting increasingly advanced-kinds of attacks.

“The battlefield is not linear. What has happened is threat development. Every time we adapt, potential enemies do something to their threat systems. Cruise missiles, for example, do not have to fly in a straight line,” Bob Kelley, Raytheon’s director of IAMD (Integrated Air and Missile Defense) Domestic Programs for Business Development & Strategy, told Warrior in an interview. “The threats are so advanced, we decided we would need something brand new.”

The rapid engineering of LTAMDS, accelerated by the Army and Congress, could well be described as the technical or material manifestation of the Army’s strategic approach outlined in the Army Air & Missile Defense 2028 Vision document. The essay specifies some of the more challenging specifics associated with newly emerging drone, helicopter,

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aircraft and ballistic missile threats. For instance, regarding ballistic missile threats, the Army Vision essay explains that advanced weapons are now engineered with "countermeasures, maneuverable re-entry vehicles, multiple independent reentry vehicles, hypersonic/supersonic glide vehicles and electronic attack."

Increased maneuverability is also, according to the Army document, a specific concern regarding modern cruise missiles.

"Numerous countries are developing ground-, sea-, and air-launched land-attack CMs using an assortment of unconventional and inexpensive launch platforms. In addition, long-range, low-observable, advanced CMs enable our adversaries to present a complex air and missile defense problem with high-volume, high-precision missiles capable of 360-degree avenues of approach," the Army Vision document states.

Raytheon engineers recently completed the first round of indoor testing of its LTAMDS antenna, assessing the antenna's ability to track multiple threats simultaneously. The new LTAMDS antenna, Raytheon developers explain, is similar in size to the Patriot yet twice as sensitive. To conduct further testing, the array will be mounted onto a precision-machined enclosure.

As Virus Reaches War Zones, UN Chief Calls for Global Cease-Fire (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 4:32 PM, David Wainer, 6400K]
United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the spread of the coronavirus demands a global cease-fire in war zones so nations can focus on the pandemic as their true enemy.

With infections now reported in Syria and Gaza, Guterres said that weak health-care systems mean civilian populations face the "highest risk of suffering devastating losses." Refugees and others displaced by violent conflict are "doubly vulnerable," he said, calling for "an immediate global cease-fire in all corners of the world."

"It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives," he told reporters on Monday.

Millions of civilians in crowded refugee camps from Syria to Yemen to Myanmar lack basic requirements deployed in richer countries to fight the spread of the epidemic, from clean water and soap to enough space to keep a safe distance from one another. The UN is seeking $2 billion from wealthier countries as part of a global humanitarian plan to help poor countries combat the virus, he added.

While wealthy countries are trying to develop stimulus plans to buttress their healthcare systems and economies as global equity markets sink, Guterres said coordination is needed so that "not only the developed countries can respond effectively to the disease but that there is massive support to the developing world not to let the disease spread like wildfire in the developing world."

He said an aid package will need to keep households and businesses in poorer countries

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afloat “and this will require a double-digit GDP support in the developed world” and the “creation of new facilities” through the IMF to enable swaps among central banks.

U.N. chief wants $2 billion to help poor countries combat coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 2:16 PM, Michelle Nichols, 5304K]
U.N. chief Antonio Guterres said on Monday the world body wants $2 billion to help poor countries combat coronavirus and warned that a massive, coordinated package would also be needed to deal with the pandemic’s social and economic impact around the world.

“The package needs to make households be afloat, make businesses be afloat, keep societies being afloat,” Guterres told a virtual news conference.

“This will require a double-digit of GDP (gross domestic product) support in the developed world and creating the conditions through the IMF (International Monetary Fund), through the swaps among central banks, through the creation of new facilities,” he said.

So far more than 351,00 people have been infected and over 15,330 have died, according to a Reuters tally.

The spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus has drawn comparisons with devastating periods such as World War Two, the 2008 financial crisis and the 1918 Spanish flu.

“We need a much stronger coordination,” said Guterres, adding that he had written to the world’s 20 largest economies (G20) and would join their virtual meeting later this week.

“Coordination in making sure that not only the developed countries can respond effectively to the disease, but that there is massive support to the developing world not to let the disease spread like wildfire,” he said.

Guterres said he would launch a $2 billion humanitarian appeal on Wednesday.

He also called for a global ceasefire so the world can focus on fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

“It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives,” Guterres said.

The United Nations has been trying to mediate an end to conflicts in countries including Syria, Yemen and Libya, while also providing humanitarian assistance to millions of civilians.

“End the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world,” he said. “It starts by stopping the fighting everywhere. Now. That is what our human family needs, now more than ever.”

[Cuba] Cuba Coronavirus Cases Rise as People Lack Soap and Water (Breitbart)

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Breitbart [3/23/2020 6:09 PM, Ben Kew, 1973K]
The number of cases of the Chinese coronavirus in communist Cuba is continuing to rise as its population faces the pandemic without widespread access to hygienic essentials such as soap and clean water.

As of Monday afternoon, there were at least 40 confirmed cases of the virus across the island, two of whom are in critical condition, bringing it relatively in line with other Latin American countries. However, the dire state of the country's economy and the lack of access to medical and hygienic essentials means it runs the risk of an aggressive outbreak that health authorities will struggle to contain.

A shortage of sanitary products, even in foreign currency stores where there is a far greater selection of products, has led to large queues of people outside the shops that offer them. Last month, Minister of Internal Trade Betsy Díaz Velázquez told the official Granma newspaper that shortages would last until at least April due to economic constraints. The shortages are unrelated to hoarding or coronavirus-related spending. Cubans still use ration cards for many basic goods.

The first case of the coronavirus in Cuba was reported on March 11, carried by three Italians who had arrived on the island two days earlier. One of those patients, a 61-year-old man who had a history of bronchial asthma, died seven days later after presenting "clinical manifestations of complications of the disease."

According to the Cuban Health Ministry, in addition to the positive cases, 954 individuals are currently being held under epidemiological surveillance, 727 are Cubans and 528 are foreign citizens. A further 30,773 people are under regular surveillance in their homes.

Cuban officials will suspend tourism to the island from Tuesday, while citizens who return from abroad will be required to enter a two-week quarantine. The lockdown is scheduled to last 30 days but could be extended longer, and will undoubtedly inflict major damage on the country's already struggling economy.

"This should enable us to stop (importing) cases and to focus on detecting those there are in the country and stopping transmission," said Cuban second-in-command, President Miguel Diaz-Canel, in a television address on Sunday.

He also called on citizens to practice social distancing, something he said would naturally go against the nature of the Cuban people.

"Something very difficult due to Cubans' nature, but very necessary, is the elimination of effusive greetings," he said. "No kisses or hugs and greetings at a prudent distance until the epidemic passes by."

Despite the brewing crisis in their own country, communist authorities are nevertheless continuing the tradition of sending their slave doctors abroad, with teams already arriving in their crisis-hit ally Venezuela and Italy, the country with the most severe outbreak globally.

Supporters of the Cuban regime have long touted its supposedly high standards of health care, citing the fact that the country has the highest relative number of physicians in the

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entire world as well as the manipulation of health statistics such as infant mortality. However, the poverty inflicted as a result of decades of communist policy has, in reality, led to a decrepit health system with some of the worst health outcomes worldwide.

[South Africa] South Africa Orders Three-Week Lockdown to Curb Virus Spread (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 3:50 PM, Michael Cohen and Amogelang Mbatha, 6400K]
Video: HERE
South African authorities ordered a three-week lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus as infections continue to surge and threaten to spiral out of control.

Grocers, pharmacies, banks and filling stations will be allowed to remain open, while the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and other essential services can continue operating, President Cyril Ramaphosa said Monday in a televised address to the nation. Some mines and furnaces will have to shut and arrangements will have to be made to have them placed under care and maintenance to avoid them being damaged.

The army will help the police enforce the lockdown, which comes into effect at midnight on March 26. The restrictions on movement will be particularly hard to enforce in South Africa's sprawling townships, where tens of thousands of people live in cramped shacks.

"Immediate, swift and extraordinary action is required if we are to prevent a human catastrophe of enormous proportions," Ramaphosa said. "While this measure will have a considerable impact on people's livelihoods, on the life of our society and our economy, the human cost of delaying this action would be far greater."

South Africa has confirmed 402 Covid-19 infections -- the most in Africa. The first one was detected on March 5. Health Minister Zweli Mkhize has warned as much as 70% of the population could contract the illness over time. While Ramaphosa declared a national disaster a week ago and instituted travel bans, shut schools and banned large gatherings, those measures have failed to slow the pandemic's spread.

New Infections
The rand extended a decline, weakening 0.9% to 17.7638 per dollar by 9:14 p.m. in Johannesburg. South Africa's currency has slumped 12% in March.

There were 128 new infections reported on Monday, with cases confirmed in all nine provinces. Gauteng, the economic hub, which has 207 cases, and the Western Cape, which has 100, have been hardest hit. There have been no fatalities so far.

The health system was already strained before the pandemic hit, and the government fears it will buckle under the weight of a flood of new infections. The virus has dealt a body blow to the struggling economy and the new restrictions will exacerbate the fallout, but the government has said it has to prioritize the safety of the country's citizens.

"The next few days are crucial," Ramaphosa said. "Without decisive action the number of people infected will rapidly increase from a few hundred to tens of thousands, and within a few weeks to hundreds of thousands. This is extremely dangerous for a population like ours

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which has a large number of people with suppressed immunity."

'Big Hit'
The economy is likely to contract more than 2% this year as result of the restrictions, with services industries set to take "a big, big hit," said Citibank South Africa economist Gina Schoeman.

"Shutdowns like this just mean that some things will never be able to return to how they were," she said. "Base effects will help in the second half of the year, but this assumes we will go back to normal after three weeks."

The president announced several measures to help shore up the economy and mitigate the pandemic's impact. They include a four-month tax subsidy for low-income workers, and the establishment of a solidarity fund that will enable businesses, organizations and individuals to contribute to efforts to combat the spread of the virus, care for the ill and support those whose lives are disrupted.

Two of South Africa's richest families -- the Oppenheimers and the Ruperts -- each pledged 1 billion rand ($56.5 million) to help support small businesses and save jobs, according to Ramaphosa.

South African banks will be exempted from competition rules so that they can meet to discuss a common approach to debt relief for embattled customers, and are expected to announce measures within days.

Other key measures:

Regulations have been put in place to prohibit unjustified price hikes and ensure shops maintain adequate stocks of basic goods.

A safety net is being developed to support those who work in informal jobs.

The government is working on a plan to temporarily subsidize wages for employees of distressed companies to try and minimize job losses.

The Unemployment Insurance Fund's reserves will be utilized to support workers who lose their jobs.

Tax-compliant businesses with a turnover of less than 50 million rand will be allowed to delay paying over a portion of their taxes for six months.

The government is considering temporarily reducing employer and employee contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the Skills Development Fund.

The Department of Small Business Development has allocated more than 500 million rand to assist distressed small and medium-sized companies.

The Industrial Development Corp. and the Department of Trade and Industry will allocated more than 3 billion rand to assist vulnerable firms and provide funding to companies critical

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to efforts to fight the virus.

The Department of Tourism has allocated 200 million rand to assist small and medium-sized tourism and hospitality businesses sector who are suffering because of travel restrictions.

[Iran] Iran reports 127 new coronavirus deaths, raising toll to 1,812 (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 8:54 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Iran on Monday announced 127 new deaths from the novel coronavirus, raising the official toll to 1,812 in one of the worst hit countries along with Italy, Spain and China.

Health ministry spokesman Kianouche Jahanpour said 1,411 new cases had been recorded in Iran over the past 24 hours, bringing the total of those infected to 23,049.

Jahanpour, who was speaking during his daily news conference devoted to the pandemic, said he would no longer give a breakdown of cases by province.

This was necessary, he said, to avoid sparking undue concern among residents of the most stricken areas and ensure that those in less affected zones remained cautious.

All of Iran's 31 provinces have been hit by the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Tolls provided by the health ministry in recent days indicated that the spread of the virus has worsened especially in northern and central regions of Iran.

Jahanpour renewed a call by authorities for people to stay at home until "the virus is conquered".

That call has come as the Islamic republic is celebrating the Iranian New Year, a time when people usually travel far and wide across the country for holidays and family reunions.

Authorities, however, have not imposed any travel ban or lockdown on Iran where the Nowruz holiday continues until April 3.

On Sunday the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, urged Iranians to follow state instructions "so that Almighty God will put an end to this calamity for the Iranian people, for all Muslim nations and for all mankind".

[Iran] Iranian Officials Stole More Than $1 Billion in Coronavirus Funds, Pompeo Says (Free Beacon)
Free Beacon [3/23/2020 7:44 PM, Adam Kredo, 118K]
Iranian regime officials stole more than $1 billion in humanitarian funds meant to be used to help the country's people fight the spread of coronavirus, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

European countries intended for more than $1 billion cash for medical supplies to go to the Iranian people, who have been ravaged by the virus. But American officials say regime leaders instead pocketed the money and are now using it to protect themselves from the

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virus as it spreads throughout the population. This includes hoarding medical supplies that were meant to aid Iranian citizens.

Multiple regional reports have showed that before and since the virus began spreading, Iranian leaders stole funds purposed directly to support the ailing Iranian people.

Iran has been among the hardest hit by the virus, and its government's response has drawn international criticism, especially from the Trump administration. Secretary of State Pompeo accused Iran of mass corruption as the regime continues to spread propaganda, including accusations that the United States manufactured the coronavirus and is using its tough global sanctions campaign to prevent Iran from accessing medicine and humanitarian aid.

Pompeo on Monday issued a series of new allegations about Tehran's mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak. "Supreme leader [Ali] Khamenei's fabrications regarding the Wuhan virus are dangerous and they put Iranians and people around the world at greater risk," Pompeo said. "Facts matter."

"Regime officials stole over a billion euros intended for medical supplies," Pompeo said in one of the first public accountings of Iran's alleged misuse of humanitarian funds that were meant to be used in cases such as the coronavirus outbreak. That sum amounts to well over one billion in American currency. Pompeo also said Iranian officials "continue to hoard desperately needed masks, gloves, and other medical equipment for sale on the black market."

The State Department made clear in facts sheets distributed to reporters that the billions in humanitarian funds Iran stole could have been used to fight the coronavirus in Iran. This includes misusing millions of dollars in late 2019 to purchase tobacco instead of medical supplies.

Iranian officials have disseminated falsehoods about the nature of U.S. sanctions, which do not include restrictions on humanitarian assistance. These talking points have been picked up by Tehran's American allies, including members of the Obama administration's so-called echo chamber, as part of an effort to see sanctions on Iran lifted.

Pompeo said part of the reason Iran has become a hotspot for the coronavirus is that the regime refuses to stop flights between Tehran and China. Iran's Mahan Air—which is designated as a terrorist entity by the United States for its routine shipments of weapons and fighters across the Middle East—ran at least 55 flights between Tehran and China after most countries had enacted a travel ban.

International health authorities say at least five countries experienced their first cases of coronavirus as a direct result of contact with Iran.

It has also become clear in recent days that Iran failed to heed warnings from its own health officials about how volatile and deadly the virus could be. In a bid to hide this information from the world, Iran lied about the number of infections and deaths from the virus, the United States alleges.

Iran officially claims there have been 23,049 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 1,812

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deaths in the country as of Monday. However, the true numbers are likely far higher, though they are difficult to estimate due to Iran's efforts to hide information from international health groups.

"The regime continues to lie to the Iranian people and the world about the number of cases and deaths, which are unfortunately far higher than the regime admits," Pompeo said.

The U.S. government has continued to offer assistance to Iran but has been repeatedly turned down. Iran, in turn, has used the global pandemic as an opportunity to spread anti-U.S. sentiment.

"Khamenei rejected this offer because he works tirelessly to concoct conspiracy theories and prioritizes ideology over the Iranian people," Pompeo said.

U.S. sanctions have not and still do not target humanitarian channels meant to allow Iran to access medicine, food, equipment, and other life-saving items. In fact, Iranian health companies "have been able to import testing kits without obstacle from U.S. sanctions since January," according to the secretary of state.

Pompeo's statements appear to be in direct response to Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif, who accused the United States of using sanctions as a weapon to ensure the virus's spread across Iran.

"Iranian people appreciate the growing global campaign of government & civil society leaders calling for lifting of illegal US sanctions," Zarif tweeted on Monday.

"US sanctions has created serious problem for sending medical equipment and supplies to Iran to confront coronavirus," Iran's state-controlled Mehr News Agency claimed on Monday.

Prominent U.S. allies of the Iranian regime, who are now using the coronavirus outbreak to push against the Trump administration's tough economic sanctions campaign, have disseminated these talking points to an American audience.

Iranian leader Ali Khamenei has also spread inflammatory propaganda claiming the United States created the virus and is using it to poison Iranian citizens. The ayatollah said that any U.S. medicine given to Iran could be used to "further spread the disease."

"You cannot be trusted," Khamenei said of the United States in a wide-ranging speech late last week. "If you send some doctor or healer, he might want to come here to check on the effects of the poison you created."

[Afghanistan] Video Chat With the Taliban Keeps Afghan Peace Deal on Life Support (New York Times)
New York Times [3/23/2020 7:54 AM, Mujib Mashal, 23673K]
Balancing coronavirus concerns with fears that a painstakingly negotiated peace deal could fall apart, Afghan government officials met by videoconference on Sunday with Taliban delegates to discuss technical details of a prisoner release that is a part of the deal, officials

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said.

Though the meeting was not the formal start of direct talks between the government and the Taliban — that step is predicated on reaching agreement on the prisoner exchange — the technical discussion was the first negotiating meeting between them since the United States and the insurgents signed a deal last month.

Concerns about the global coronavirus pandemic, however, meant that the talks happened by video chat. And that in itself was a notable moment given the Taliban's origins as a national government that largely banned television and music.

The prisoner exchange, involving up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan government prisoners, as called for in the deal the Americans signed, has been an extreme point of contention. The prisoners were supposed to be released before the beginning of Afghan negotiations on March 10.

President Ashraf Ghani's government has vehemently disagreed with the terms the United States agreed to with the Taliban, delaying the future steps of the peace deal. After much shuttle diplomacy by the United States' special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, Mr. Ghani agreed only to a phased release of the prisoners in small batches and conditioned it on Taliban halting their attacks — something the insurgents have said goes against what they have signed with the United States.

"Today, the US and Qatar facilitated the first Afghan government to Taliban technical talks on prisoner releases, via Skype video conferencing," Mr. Khalilzad, who has been in Kabul for several weeks trying to find a solution to the prisoner release and calm a political crisis that has resulted in a split government, said in a series of Twitter posts late on Sunday.

"Everyone clearly understands the coronavirus threat makes prisoner releases that much more urgent."

The country's political crisis — a grinding election dispute between Mr. Ghani and his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah — brought another American diplomat to Kabul on Monday: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Mr. Ghani was declared the winner of a bitterly disputed election last month. Mr. Abdullah also declared himself winner and held his own inauguration next door. Days of efforts by Mr. Khalilzad, including into the early hours of inauguration day, failed to prevent the announcement of two presidents and keep the country's elite united around the peace process.

Mr. Pompeo was expected to hold meetings with both Afghan leaders, separately and together, to find a way to get them to work together.

In the videoconference with the Taliban over the weekend, the discussions lasted 2.5 hours, and attendants were dialed in from five locations, according to a senior Afghan official and a senior Taliban official.

The American team, led by Mr. Khalilzad, and a team of Qatari diplomats were facilitating

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the discussions. The Afghan government delegation was led by the deputy national security adviser, Salem Shah Ibrahimi. The Taliban delegation included several senior members of the group, including two negotiators from their political office in Doha and Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, who leads their prisoners' commission.

"The talks solely focused on prisoner release, and there were initial agreements on some issues regarding the release of prisoners," said Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman for the Taliban's negotiating team.

Mr. Shaheen said the sides would hold another videoconference on Tuesday to continue the discussions.

Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's national security adviser, suggested that the call had covered other issues in addition to "views on initial technical steps" to make the prisoner release possible.

"All sides emphasized the importance of a reduction in violence, direct negotiations, and a permanent and comprehensive cease-fire," Mr. Mohib said in a statement on Twitter.

In the days before signing the deal with the United States, the Taliban observed a partial cease-fire with the Afghan government. But that deal included no agreement on a lasting violence reduction that was envisioned as part of the ensuing talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

In recent weeks, the Taliban have made clear that they see violence as a major part of their leverage in talks, and have intensified their operations across Afghanistan. The Afghan forces, meanwhile, have largely remained in "active defense" and are beginning to suffer heavy casualties.

In one of the most brutal Taliban attacks since the group signed the deal with the United States, insurgents stormed an outpost in southern Zabul Province and killed at least 24 members of the Afghan security forces on Thursday, torching their outposts and burning the bodies to a point that many were unrecognizable.

The Taliban have also ramped up attacks in the north. In response to an overnight Taliban attack in Kunduz Province that had begun late on Saturday in Imam Saheb district, Afghan forces called for an airstrike on Sunday that resulted in the death of at least nine civilians — including four women and two children — according to Gul Bai, a local police commander.

[Afghanistan] U.S. vows to cut $1 billion in aid to Afghanistan as political crisis threatens peace deal (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 7:39 PM, Pamela Constable and John Hudson, 12625K]
In a sign of mounting frustration with Afghanistan's leaders, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced early Tuesday that the United States would cut $1 billion in aid to the country because of its inability to form a unity government to negotiate with the Taliban.

Pompeo said that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, had failed to set aside their differences, just hours after meeting with the two men in a

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quickly arranged visit to Kabul.

"The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests," Pompeo said in a statement. "Their failure has harmed U.S.-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonors those Afghan, Americans, and Coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country."

For weeks, the Trump administration has been pressuring the Afghan government to put together a united team to negotiate with the Taliban and form a lasting peace deal in Afghanistan that allows for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Pompeo's statement reflects the Trump administration's willingness to condition aid to Afghanistan in order to force the compliance of Ghani and Abdullah.

"We are prepared to reduce by another $1 billion in 2021," Pompeo said, emphasizing that the two leaders' intransigence would not delay America's withdrawal plans.

"We are proceeding with the conditions-based withdrawal of our forces in accordance with the U.S.-Taliban agreement," he added.

After leaving Afghanistan, Pompeo met with the Taliban's chief negotiator in Qatar. Following those discussions, he told reporters that the Trump administration's principal concern right now is the Afghan leadership, not the Taliban.

"They committed to reducing violence and they've largely done that," Pompeo said, referring to the Taliban.

He added that he hoped the United States wouldn't need to withhold aid from Afghanistan.

"We are hopeful, frankly, that they will get their act together and we won't have to do it. But we're prepared to do that," Pompeo said.

Pompeo arrived in Kabul on Monday in hopes of resolving a clash between Ghani and Abdullah, who is attempting to form a parallel government. Pompeo spent the day meeting privately with both leaders, first separately and then together, before leaving the country less than nine hours after he landed.

The secretary's sudden trip from Washington, even with the novel coronavirus upending life in the United States and consuming its government, was a dramatic indicator of U.S. officials' growing alarm at the lengthening political stalemate here — both for its potential to erupt into a violent civil conflict and to undermine the peace process.

The peace agreement signed Feb. 29 between U.S. and Taliban officials was expected to allow thousands of U.S. troops to begin leaving Afghanistan soon and to pave the way for negotiations between Taliban and Afghan leaders on a shared government in the future. Instead, both plans have bogged down, and no date has been set for the talks.

"Unless this crisis gets resolved and resolved soon, it could affect the peace process, which

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was an opportunity to end . . . 40 years of war. And our agreement with the Talibs could be put at risk," a senior State Department official told journalists traveling with Pompeo, speaking on the condition of anonymity to be candid.

The official said Pompeo's "authority" as the top U.S. diplomat and a close adviser to President Trump gives him more potential influence than other intermediaries on Ghani and Abdullah, who are bitterly estranged after co-governing for five years. In recent weeks, both Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. diplomat spearheading the peace talks, and senior Afghan political and religious leaders have tried to find a compromise — to no avail.

Even with "a lot going on," including the coronavirus pandemic, the official said, Pompeo had "come all the way here" to "push" both Afghan leaders to form an inclusive government and to stress the dangers that could result "if they don't do the right thing." The official said there was particular concern that the Afghan defense forces could split between "two presidents and two commanders in chief, or worse."

What the Trump administration wants is for Ghani and Abdullah to agree on an "inclusive government that is acceptable to both," the official said. "We are encouraging them to rise to the occasion" and "put the country first."

After back-to-back meetings, with Pompeo shuttling between Ghani's and Abdullah's palaces — one block apart — and then meeting with them together, no official statements were made.

Pompeo then flew to Qatar, where he met with the Taliban's chief negotiator, Abdul Ghani Baradar. The two men spoke for about an hour at Al Udeid Air Base in Doha, where Pompeo pressed the Taliban "to continue to comply with the agreement signed last month," said State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus.

The political crisis arose after the presidential election in September. Ghani, the incumbent, was declared the winner last month, but Abdullah alleged massive fraud and refused to concede. The two have been locked in a tense stalemate for two weeks, while Abdullah, backed by an array of former ethnic-minority militia leaders, has begun naming his own governors and cabinet members.

Meanwhile, no progress has been made on forming a government delegation to meet with the Taliban, even though those talks were scheduled to begin March 10. In a separate dispute, Ghani has refused to immediately release 5,000 Taliban prisoners as the U.S.-Taliban agreement stipulated, throwing that deal into doubt as well, and leaving unclear if and when American troops can begin pulling out in large numbers.

Pompeo's mission is eerily reminiscent of what transpired after the previous Afghan presidential election, in 2014, when then-Secretary of State John F. Kerry successfully mediated an identical spat between Ghani and Abdullah. Both claimed to have won the presidency in a fraud-marred election, but Kerry persuaded them to accept a power-sharing arrangement. It has proved tense and fractious.

Pompeo, who attended the signing of the peace agreement in Qatar, said at the time that the path forward would be "rocky" and that talks between Taliban and Afghan leaders would

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be difficult. But he also said that while Taliban leaders have “an enormous amount of blood on their hands, they have now made a break” with their past and promised not to allow anti-U.S. terrorist activities on Afghan soil.

[Afghanistan] US slashes aid to Afghanistan by $1B as power struggle threatens Taliban peace deal (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 7:37 PM, Joel Gehrke, 570K]
President Trump is slashing aid to Afghanistan in response to a deadlock over the results of the most recent presidential election, which threatens to blow up an historic deal with the Taliban.

“The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests,” Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday, in reference to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival, former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

Ghani was declared the winner of Afghanistan’s presidential election in December, but the campaign was postponed repeatedly, and Abdullah refused to concede defeat. Pompeo attempted to negotiate a breakthrough in an abrupt visit to Kabul on Monday, but the two Afghan leaders remained at odds, prompting a $1 billion cut in U.S. aid, with more to come if the problem lingers.

“We are prepared to reduce by another $1 billion in 2021,” Pompeo said. “We will also initiate a review of all of our programs and projects to identify additional reductions and reconsider our pledges to future donor conferences for Afghanistan.”

The political dispute is a significant impediment to the Taliban peace deal that Pompeo’s team signed last month. The agreement calls for the Taliban and Afghan officials to appoint negotiating teams to travel for talks in Norway, but the power struggle has delayed that process.

“We are in a crisis,” a senior State Department official told reporters in Kabul. “The fear is that, unless this crisis gets resolved and resolved soon, that could affect the peace process … and our agreement with the Talibs could be put at risk.”

The pact already is threatened by a vicious flurry of attacks by the Taliban, as the militant group maintains that the ceasefire agreed to at the signing of the deal only applies to conflict with U.S. forces.

“If the Taliban are not going to lower violence,” Army Gen. Scott Miller, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, warned earlier this month, “that causes a risk to the agreement.”

The withdrawal of support could even affect counterterrorism operations if Trump’s team believes that the Afghan security officials are being used as political pawns by leaders.

“We have made clear to the leadership that we will not back security operations that are politically motivated nor support political leaders who order such operations or those who advocate for or support parallel government,” Pompeo said.

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[Afghanistan] Coronavirus threatens to undermine Afghan peace plan (The Hill)
The Hill [3/22/2020 6:20 PM, Rebecca Kheel, 1762K]
The coronavirus pandemic is throwing another curveball at President Trump's already shaky efforts to end the war in Afghanistan.

The peace process is expected to take a back seat as Afghanistan's fragile health system will likely struggle to respond to the spread of the virus.

The top U.S. general in Afghanistan has already paused troop rotations in and out of the country in an effort to prevent the disease from spreading among service members, and any effort to kickstart stalled negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government is complicated by the inability to meet in person.

"With having this to deal with, the peace process is sort of put in the shadows," Marvin Weinbaum, director of Afghanistan and Pakistan studies at the Middle East Institute, said of the coronavirus. "The ramifications are so great that it's hard to know what really follows from this. It was difficult enough to get a peace process going because of the prisoner issue and so on. But this is still a further setback, if only because it comes to the point where, do you really want to put together 50 people in a room?"

The Trump administration's peace deal with the Taliban had already had several hiccups since it was signed at the end of February even before the pandemic exploded.

The Taliban resumed attacks against Afghan forces days after the agreement was signed, leading to at least one U.S. airstrike against the terror group in response. U.S. officials have said the Taliban attacks are not consistent with the deal and must stop.

Meanwhile, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani quickly rejected the deal's requirement to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners ahead of intra-Afghan talks. He later agreed to release 1,500 ahead of the negotiations and the remaining 3,500 during them if insurgent violence was reduced, but the Taliban rejected the offer.

As of Friday, Afghanistan had just 24 confirmed cases of coronavirus. But testing there is extremely limited, with just one lab able to analyze tests for the entire country.

The border with Iran, where more than 19,000 people have tested positive as of Friday, is famously porous.

In an effort to prevent troops in the U.S.-led Resolute Support mission from getting COVID-19, Gen. Scott Miller announced this past week that deployments into the country will be paused as officials develop a protocol for screening new arrivals. That means that some troops who were scheduled to leave might have to stay longer, Miller said.

It's unclear whether the pause will have a significant effect on the U.S. military's ability to draw down to 8,600 troops by the 135-day timeline laid out in the deal with the Taliban. International members of the coalition are also required to draw down by a commensurate amount.

U.S. Forces Afghanistan spokesman Col. Sonny Leggett tweeted this past week that

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officials “continue to execute the ordered drawdown to 8600” even as they work on ways “to reduce the risks of COVID-19 to those deployed.”

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg similarly said Thursday that alliance officials “continue to implement the decision to reduce the number of NATO personnel in Afghanistan.”

“At the same time, we will make sure that we do that in a way which is responsible and which protects the health and the safety of our personnel, which is always our top priority,” Stoltenberg added.

Weinbaum said an inability to relocate troops during the coronavirus crisis “might obviously affect the drawdown,” but added the bigger impediment continues to be whether the Taliban lives up to its commitments.

Scott Worden, director of Afghanistan and Central Asia programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace, said the Pentagon can mobilize very quickly after it has a plan, so he does not see the pause as “a significant obstacle at this point.”

In addition to his reticence for the prisoner swap, Ghani remains locked in a power struggle with his chief political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, which also poses a challenge to getting talks with the Taliban started.

In February, Ghani was declared the winner of Afghanistan’s September elections, and he was inaugurated earlier this month. But Abdullah continues to dispute the election results and has vowed to form a parallel government, holding his own inauguration the same day as Ghani’s.

In several Twitter threads this past week, U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad pleaded for Afghan leaders to set aside their differences amid the coronavirus outbreak.

“It is time for Afghans to compromise and put their differences aside to resolve the political crisis resulting from elections and dual inaugurations,” Khalilzad tweeted. “This crisis undermines security. Coronavirus poses a mortal threat and requires Afghans to put their country, and its people, first. It is a matter of life and death.”

In another thread Friday to mark Nowruz, Ghani said the “best gift” Afghanistan’s leaders can give their people is “an agreement on an inclusive government and end the political crisis.”

He also urged them to “take the needed steps to take advantage of historic opportunity for peace” and “work together including the Taliban to contain and take care of the people from the scourge of the coronavirus.”

Khalilzad also reiterated the U.S. call for prisoner releases, tweeting that coronavirus makes the issue “urgent.”

“Technical teams from both sides can work together and focus on technical steps to begin prisoner releases as soon as possible. I will participate in the initial meetings,” he tweeted

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Wednesday. “While [it is] preferable to meet face-to-face, Coronavirus and the resulting travel restrictions likely requires virtual engagement for now.”

Despite the tragedy of coronavirus and the likelihood of the peace process stalling, there could be one silver lining: Both Weinbaum and Worden expressed hope that Afghanistan could see a reduction in violence as the government and Taliban focus more on fighting the virus.

Worden was somewhat skeptical the Taliban’s calculations will be affected by the spread of the virus given the group “has viewed civilian targets as legitimate and the use of IEDs in crowded places as a means of advancing their agenda.”

Still, he said, “the greater concern that people have for their own health would tend to reduce the motivations for violence.”

“So humanitarian pause in the conflict is, I think, imperative,” Worden said. “I see the coronavirus issue advancing a continuation of the reduction in violence, which started before the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed, a little bit more than I see it affecting the prisoner release issue.”

[Pakistan] Pakistan approves military deployment to curb virus (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 1:05 PM, Staff, 1973K]
Pakistan on Monday authorised the army to deploy across the country and in the capital Islamabad in a bid to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The interior ministry announcement, which came as the death toll from coronavirus rose to six, means troops will be able to assist the civilian government with logistics and in providing supplies, if needed.

It also means troops could, if called on, help enforce any eventual curfews as the crisis worsens — as observers fear it will in a country with large illiterate populations in crowded urban centres where many people are ignoring guidelines on “social distancing”.

Since Pakistan’s birth in 1947, the military has exercised direct rule for about half of the country’s history, most recently under General Pervez Musharraf who seized power in 1999 for a period of nearly a decade.

In a statement, the interior ministry said it was “pleased to authorise” deployment of “sufficient” troops, depending on needs.

The orders came as health authorities confirmed 805 cases of coronavirus so far, including the six fatalities.

Pakistani officials have given conflicting advice on the best course of action against the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has argued the impoverished nation cannot afford the type of wide-scale lockdowns being implemented in the West, saying people living below the

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poverty line would be unable to support themselves without working.

But Pakistan's two most populous provinces of Punjab and Sindh — home to some 160 million people — have issued their own lockdown decrees for an initial period of two weeks.

Pakistan's constitution allows the civilian government to call for military aid in case of disasters and natural calamities, such as in the aftermath of a 2005 earthquake that killed more than 73,000 people.

[United Arab Emirates] Emirates reverses decision to suspend all passenger flights (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/22/2020 9:14 PM, AFP, 1973K]
Dubai carrier Emirates reversed on Sunday its decision to suspend all passenger flights, shortly after it said it would halt operations from March 25 amid the novel coronavirus outbreak.

The airline said it "received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travellers" and will continue to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations, down from its usual 159.

Emirates will continue to fly to the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, the United States and Canada.

The announcement was made just hours after a previous statement said the carrier "will have temporarily suspended all its passenger operations" by March 25.

"We continue to watch the situation closely, and as soon as things allow, we will reinstate our services," said the airline's chairman and CEO, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum.

The United Arab Emirates on Friday announced its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having reported 153 infections so far, of which 38 people have recovered.

Maktoum said that, until January this year, the Emirates Group was "doing well" against current financial year targets, but "COVID-19 has brought all that to a sudden and painful halt over the past six weeks".

"The world has literally gone into quarantine due to the COVID-19 outbreak," he said.

Emirates also announced it will slash the basic salaries of a majority of employees by between 25 and 50 percent for three months, but will not cut jobs.

"Rather than ask employees to leave the business, we chose to implement a temporary basic salary cut, as we want to protect our workforce," Maktoum said. "We want to avoid cutting jobs."

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the air transport sector.

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The UAE has stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but are outside the country from returning.

[United Arab Emirates] Dubai's vast malls to close under UAE plan to curb virus (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 2:33 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Dubai's famous malls will shut down for a fortnight under the United Arab Emirates' plan to curb coronavirus, which will also see its airports closed to passenger and transit flights.

The decision to close commercial centres takes in shopping centres as well as fresh food markets, but pharmacies and food retail outlets will be allowed to stay open. Restaurants are limited to home deliveries.

The health ministry and the disaster management authority said in a statement early Monday that the move would come into force within 48 hours and last "for a renewable period of two weeks".

Dubai's vast shopping centres include Mall of the Emirates, which has its own indoor ski slope, and Dubai Mall which is one of the world's largest and features a giant aquarium.

The move came as UAE authorities announced they would suspend all passenger and transit flights for two weeks, as the coronavirus outbreak prompts many countries to shut their borders.

Cargo and emergency evacuation flights are exempt from the measure.

"Additional examination and isolation arrangements will be taken later should flights resume in order to ensure the safety of passengers, air crews, and airport personnel and their protection from infection risks," they said in a statement.

The UAE is home to two major international airports, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which are major transit hubs.

Monday's announcement came hours after Dubai carrier Emirates said it would suspend all passenger flights by March 25, only to swiftly reverse its decision.

It later said it "received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travellers" and would continue to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations.

However, after the new UAE suspension the airline confirmed it would suspend all passenger services for two weeks starting from March 25.

"We are very sorry for any inconvenience caused to our customers and travellers. These measures are in place to contain the spread of COVID-19, and we hope to resume services as soon as feasible," it said.

The UAE announced on Friday its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having

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reported more than 150 cases so far.

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the air transport sector.

The UAE has already stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but are outside the country from returning.

[India] World's Biggest Lockdown Triggers Record Stocks Crash in India (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 9:37 AM, P R Sanjai, Anurag Kotoky, and Nupur Acharya, 6400K]
India will suspend all domestic flights from midnight Tuesday, the final piece of a nationwide lockdown that threatens Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempts to revive an economy already expanding at the slowest pace in more than a decade.

The open-ended flight ban compliments a nationwide cancellation of all passenger trains, as authorities try to halt the spread of the coronavirus in the world's second-most populous nation, and one which has poorly equipped hospitals and inadequate social security. Stocks fell by a record and the rupee sank to an all-time low, while government bonds also declined.

Over the past three days, state after state has declared curfews and India's international borders have been shut for most visitors since March 11. India so far has 433 virus cases, including seven deaths. But experts say the country could be on the same trajectory as Italy, where the outbreak quickly escalated, causing hospitals to overflow.

"This is the biggest lockdown in world history," said Raghu Raman, a former soldier with the Indian army and founder of the National Intelligence Grid, an umbrella database aimed at countering terrorism. "This strategic pause gives decision makers more time to arrest the exponential spread of the virus and evaluate trade offs."

Controlling the outbreak is crucial for Modi, who remains India's most popular political leader currently though his economic management has faced criticism. Foreign investors are selling Indian assets at an unprecedented pace and failure to contain deaths and infections could erode some of the prime minister's personal appeal at home.

Oxford Economics slashed India's January-April growth forecast to 3%, a number not seen even during the worst of the global financial crisis. The main equity gauge slumped by a record 13.2% Monday and the rupee weakened past 76 a dollar for the first time ever. The benchmark 10-year sovereign bond plunged the most in almost four months.

"A part of the cerebral cortex that senses fear and survival seems to have activated in the minds of investors," said Umesh Mehta, Mumbai-based head of research at Samco Securities Ltd. "The only relief in this market can come from either policy makers and regulators, or from some positive news that a cure for the pandemic is near."

Bloomberg Economics estimates Modi's administration needs at least 1% of gross domestic product -- $30 billion -- to meaningfully respond to the virus outbreak. Meanwhile, the

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nation's billionaires are diverting their factories to manufacture medical equipment and pledging to keep paying their staff even as production grinds to a halt.

Reliance Industries Ltd., controlled by India's richest man Mukesh Ambani, has helped equip a hospital in Mumbai dedicated to patients of Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. It will also build quarantine centers and produce 100,000 facemasks a day and other personal protective equipment for health workers. The group's telecom unit will offer free broadband to enable work-from-home during the lockdown and will pay its lowest paid workers twice a month to protect household incomes.

Ambani joins Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. Chairman Anand Mahindra and Vedanta Resources Ltd. Chairman Anil Agarwal -- a combined worth of more than $40 billion between the trio -- who have so far made pledges.

Indian companies are responding to Modi's shutdown call. Maruti Suzuki India Ltd., Tata Motors Ltd., Toyota Kirloskar Motor, Hero MotoCorp., Samsung Electronics Co. and LG Electronics Inc., Mahindra Group, TVS Motor Co., Kia Motors Corp., Renault Nissan Automotive India Private Ltd., and Yamaha Motor India are among companies that have announced factory suspensions.

Policy makers are aware of the risks of such a move. India -- with a record 5.9 trillion rupees of corporate debt maturing this year -- faces "waves of default" if cash flows aren't maintained, the government's principal economic adviser Sanjeev Sanyal said an interview.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman last week said the government will announce a relief package for coronavirus-affected sectors as soon as possible. The Reserve Bank of India, which is due to review interest rates April 3, announced a 1 trillion rupee cash injection on Monday.

"Let me assure, whatever it takes to keep the cash flow going in the economy will be done," Sanyal said. "We need to make sure that when we are past the health storm, we still have an economy that has not gotten gridlocked. Because unwinding that would be more difficult."

[Russia] Russia is underreporting coronavirus cases, Russian doctor says (Public Radio International)
Public Radio International [3/23/2020 3:45 PM, Daniel Ofman] Audio: HERE
Russia has relatively few reported cases of COVID-19 compared with other nations — less than 500 confirmed cases for a population around 144.5 million.

However, many in Russia are starting to doubt the government's numbers. Some have claimed Russia has been underreporting the instances of the novel coronavirus and has been classifying cases as pneumonia.

"You see that now in our country, we have [a] real increase of pneumonia cases. [The] government changed a lot of hospitals into hospitals where only pneumonia cases are [being treated]. In Moscow, now we have about 15 hospitals that are changed to treat pneumonia. And three hospitals where coronavirus is treated," Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva

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said. “Really we can associate increase of pneumonia cases with the [pandemic] of coronavirus all over the world. So our test is not really very good. We have not enough tests. We have not good diagnostics to understand which pneumonia cases [are] not coronavirus, which [are] the real coronavirus."

Vasilyeva, the head of Russia’s Alliance of Doctors trade union, says the Russian health care system is woefully underprepared to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Medical staff lack the necessary equipment, and rural areas lack necessary medical staff. Vasilyeva spoke with The World’s Marco Werman about Russia’s response to COVID-19.

Marco Werman: So, Dr. Vasilyeva, to be clear, you believe that there are many more cases of COVID-19 than the ones reported — that many of those pneumonia cases may actually be COVID-19 cases? Is that what you’re saying?

Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva: So I can only suppose. I can only suppose, because how can we have increased pneumonia without increase of coronavirus all over the world? So, of course, I think that the quantity of patients with coronavirus is much higher than the government says.

You put out a video about this, as well as the conditions that Russian health workers are working under right now. Are the health professionals in Russia and is a Russian health system prepared to take on this virus?

Our country’s really very big and we have not enough roads. And for coronavirus, it’s a very bad way to spread. This can protect, in some way, our people from coronavirus, and the speed of coronavirus spread, I think, will be much less than in Europe.

You’re saying basically Russia is geographically predisposed to fighting this virus because everything is so spread out.

So we have no roads. How can a coronavirus travel between towns and cities and villages without roads, without transport? So in Russia, to move from point A to point B — it sometimes is very difficult.

Of course, that doesn’t mean that coronavirus will not spread at all. In Russia, there are still flights.

Of course it will spread, but not in such quick way as in China and Europe. And also, you see that this disease is really dangerous for older people. But our older people have no money to travel. They’re sitting [at] home. They’re sitting there in villages, and they are very poor. This fact can protect our older people from quick spread of this disease. But our health system is also very poor. So we have not enough hospitals, not enough medical staff. We have no fabrics to provide masks, protection costumes, and so on.

So what measures has Russia taken so far in limiting the spread of the coronavirus?

So you see that now the borders are closed. The schools are closed. The universities are closed. But the metro underground transport is open. For me, it’s a great surprise. And I think that it’s the most dangerous source for spreading this infection.

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Dr. Vasilyeva, you're the head of the Alliance of Doctors trade union in Russia. What do you need from the government to help contain this? What do you think Russia should be doing right now?

So, of course, Russia should protect doctors. The government should equip every medical worker with protection, with masks, costumes and so on. It's very important. Every medical worker who goes for a walk and goes to the hospital and back home is really spreading this infection — in the transport, in the metro, in the streets, everywhere. So the medical workers should be well-equipped.

And you're saying today Russia is not prepared for that?

Of course. [In] some towns there is only one medical worker ... only one. He or she is working for four people. So it's very difficult to work, even now without any pandemic.

[China] Trump's China tariffs hampered US coronavirus preparedness, expert says (Public Radio International)
Public Radio International [3/23/2020 5:00 PM, Staff, 105K] Audio: HERE
The fight against the novel coronavirus is also a race for medical supplies: masks, ventilators, lifesaving medical equipment. A lot of that equipment comes from China. In the United States, there's a shortage of supplies and that's partly due to a trade policy of Washington's own making — tariffs imposed on Chinese imports by the Trump White House.

The Trump administration on Friday said it was soliciting public comments on lifting additional tariffs on Chinese imports that could help the United States battle the coronavirus pandemic, showing some flexibility in its trade war against Beijing.

The US Trade Representative (USTR) has in recent weeks granted "Section 301" tariff exclusions for certain medical products from China, including medical masks, examination gloves and antiseptic wipes.

But as it battles to try to keep the US economy from collapsing amid quarantine orders and halted commerce, the Trump administration so far has been resistant to broader removals of tariffs imposed over the past 20 months on some $370 billion worth of Chinese imports annually, despite calls from the industry that this would be an instant tax cut worth tens of billions of dollars.

US President Donald Trump considers his trade pressure on China among the biggest achievements of his presidency and a top argument for reelection in November.

Chad Bown is senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. He spoke with The World's Marco Werman about the impacts of the Trump administration's trade policies on supplies of medical equipment in the US.

Marco Werman: President Trump began his trade war with China in early 2018, and these tariffs hit many medical products and pretty hard. So we can't redo the past two years,

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Chad. But in theory, would we have less of a shortage of medical equipment if we never had these tariffs in the first place?

Chad Bown: I think the answer to that is clearly yes. There's a number of products that the Trump administration — when they were deciding what to impose tariffs on and what not to impose tariffs on over the last two years — they went out to the public and asked, you know, hey, what do you think of us imposing tariffs on these products? And the American medical community, in a lot of instances, came and said — try to avoid these. And in many instances, the Trump administration didn't. And so you end up with 25% tariffs on things like oxygen concentrators and thermometers and disposable medical headgear. You have 10% tariffs on a lot of protective clothing, or 15% tariffs even, and I think [that] made it difficult for buyers, American hospitals, to prepare for a pandemic like we're seeing today.

We should point out that the Trump administration did announce — quietly announced — earlier this month that some of these tariffs on medical supplies would be temporarily reduced to deal with the coronavirus when it charges onto American shores. Now it is here. So was that too little, too late?

Well, I think it was definitely a step in the right direction. We want to get rid of these tariffs and make it easier for American hospitals to be able to get access to whatever supplies they need from wherever they might need them. But I also think that it is a bit of a mea culpa by the administration, sort of recognizing that they have made it more difficult for the American medical community to be prepared for a pandemic that might arise. And so I think it's a step in the right direction. They, for what it's worth, put out another call at the end of the last week saying, "Hey, if there are other products that we haven't yet taken off of our tariff list, that you do actually need to buy from China, let us know and we'll consider removing them." But again, time is ticking by here. And that could take weeks. And hospitals and doctors and nurses — they need this stuff right now. And it seems to be a lot to ask them to go through this bureaucratic process, to ask for some tariffs to be removed when they really should be focusing their time and energy and efforts on other things.

Trump and critics of past trade policies say the US had become too dependent on China, and the crisis we're in now is an example of that dependency. Do you think that's a fair criticism?

Well, I think to deal with an epidemic and a pandemic like what we're facing right now, and the shortages of the supplies, you do need to have a diverse source of supply of these things. You know, you'd want to be producing some of these in the United States — which we are. You want to have supplies coming in from other countries around the world as well, not be entirely reliant on China. I think in this case, the United States was buying a fair amount of this equipment from China, but not only from China. We import a lot of this stuff from Mexico as well. So I don't necessarily think that we were too reliant on China. But I do think you do need to have a diverse source of supplies for these sorts of critical equipment.

Well, you kind of put your finger on it, Chad. Time is of the essence. So what does the US need to do right now? Play nice with China, make more medical supplies here or turn to other countries like Mexico? I mean, they rank second in medical equipment, bought by the US.

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Yeah, I think we need to do all of the above. I think no one knows how this is going to play out over the long-term. And I think that we need to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. The Trump administration, it needs to be thinking of creative ways to incentivize American production. We also though, I think, do need to make nice with China and decide that, well, some of the priorities that we were worried about six months ago or a year ago in fighting the trade war — maybe we need to put some of those on the backburner. And this is really actually much, much more important. This is about life and death. We need to get these supplies from wherever we can get them — as quickly as we can get them.

Given the trade war and the antagonism there — not to mention the nasty rhetoric coming out of the White House right now about the coronavirus — I mean, do you think playing nice with China is even an option?

I don't know. You know, I always hope that things can change. I'm an optimist by nature. It has not been the approach of the administration so far. You know, when everything was going fine, the economy was going fine and everybody was healthy, maybe it didn't need to be considered all that much. But now I think times really, really are quite different. And a new approach is needed.

[China] China sees drop in new coronavirus cases; all of them imported (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 4:57 AM, Ryan Woo, Lusha Zhang, Engen Tham, Jing Wang and Andrew Galbraith, 5304K]
Mainland China on Monday reported a drop in its daily tally of new coronavirus cases, reversing four straight days of increases, as the capital, Beijing, ramped up measures to contain the number of infections arriving from abroad.

China had 39 new confirmed cases on Sunday, the National Health Commission said, down from 46 a day earlier. All the new ones involved travellers arriving from abroad, many of them Chinese students returning home.

Beijing stepped up measures to contain imported infections, diverting all arriving international flights from Monday to other cities, including Shanghai and as far west as Xian, where passengers will undergo virus screening.

Foreigners who miss international connections as a result of the measure would have to leave China, an immigration official said at the health commission's daily briefing, adding that foreign visitors should "think carefully" before choosing Beijing as a transit point.

Beijing reported 10 new imported cases, the National Health Commission said, down from 13 a day earlier. Infections from abroad in the city hit an all-time daily high of 21 on March 18.

Shanghai and Guangzhou have also said all arriving international passengers will be tested to screen for the coronavirus, expanding a programme that previously only applied to those coming from heavily affected countries.

The coastal province of Zhejiang, near Shanghai, will also put all arrivals from overseas in centralised quarantine facilities for 14 days, media reported. Zhejiang on Monday lowered

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its emergency response level from 2 to 3, the lowest level, reflecting easing concern about the spread of the virus.

Shanghai, which reported 10 new cases on Sunday, down from a record 14 a day earlier, lowered its emergency response level to level 2 from level 1.

Guangdong province saw seven new imported infections, Fujian had four and Jiangsu had two. Hebei, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Shandong and Sichuan each saw just one case, bringing the total number of imported cases in China to 314.

Mainland China saw no new locally transmitted infections.

The health commission did not say from where the cases were believed to have been imported. Beijing authorities reported cases from Spain, Britain, France, the United States and Pakistan.

In Wuhan, capital of central province of Hubei, authorities have eased tough lockdown measures as the epicentre of the outbreak in China saw no new infections for the fifth day.

Downtown Wuhan remains the only high-risk area in the province, with other cities and counties classified as low-risk.

Wuhan went into a virtual lockdown on Jan. 23 to contain the spread of the virus to the rest of China.

According to authorities on Sunday, people can enter the city if they are certified healthy and have no fever.

Hubei residents who are in Wuhan can apply to leave the city, but they have to be tested for the virus.

There has been no indication that Wuhan residents can leave the city for non-essential reasons.

As of Sunday, the total number of cases in mainland China stood at 81,093. The death toll rose to 3,270, up by nine from the previous day.

[China] Marine Corps plans to scrap tank battalions, trim infantry to counter China with lighter force (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 7:50 AM, Douglas Ernst, 482K]
The Marine Corps says it needs to cut weight — all three of its tank battalions, in particular — to counter threats to national security by China.

Gen. David Berger, commandant of the Marine Corps, has a 10-year plan to make the service lighter and more nimble, which will require the abandonment of all tank battalions, trimming infantry units to more efficiently support naval expeditionary warfare, and reducing personnel by 12,000.

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Marine Corps Times noted Monday that aviation resources, artillery cannon batteries, amphibious vehicle companies, law enforcement battalions and bridging companies are scheduled to shrink or be reorganized before 2030.

“The Marine Corps is not optimized to meet the demands of the National Defense Strategy,” Marine Corps Combat Development Command said in the news release. “Our force design initiatives are designed to create and maintain a competitive edge against tireless and continuously changing peer adversaries.”

The plan, first covered by The Wall Street Journal on Sunday, will offset some of the changes by investing in long-range precision fires, along with unmanned air and ground systems.

“Moving forward, we will continue to judiciously evaluate, wargame, experiment, and refine our force design, improving service capabilities and lethality for deterrence, competition, and conflict,” MCCDC statement added.

[China] China-Owned TikTok Hires American Professors for ‘Content Council’ (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 10:58 AM, Tom Ciccotta, 1973K]
China-owned social media platform TikTok has recruited American professors to serve on its “content advisory council” to calm concerns that it engages in censorship at the behest of the Chinese government.

According to a report by Campus Reform, China-owned social media platform TikTok has hired American professors to serve on its “content advisory council.” Some believe that the company is hiring American professors to calm concerns about its relationship to China’s communist government.

In the fall, Senators Tom Cotton and Chuck Schumer encouraged national intelligence agencies to investigate whether or not TikTok posed a national security risk. At the time, Schumer argued that TikTok may be compromised by its relationship with China’s Communist Party.

In a statement posted to the TikTok website, the company announced that it has formed the council to develop content moderation policies that will help TikTok sustain its growth.

Mindful of our responsibility to our users, last year we shared our intention to form an external council of leading experts to advise TikTok on content moderation policies covering a wide range of topics. We’ve made great progress as a company since we took the first steps of partnering with global law firm K&L Gates LLP and their team, including former Congressmen Bart Gordon and Jeff Denham. Earlier this year we updated our Community Guidelines to provide clarity to our users, and last week we announced our Transparency Center that will provide content and coding insight to outside experts.

TikTok’s “content advisory council” will be chaired by George Washington Univesity Law School Professor Dawn Nunziato. In a statement, Nunziato argued that TikTok’s willingness to work with internet law experts suggests that the company is focused on providing healthy

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and open discourse on its platform.

“A company willing to open its doors to outside experts to help shape upcoming policy shows organizational maturity and humility,” Nunziato said. “I am working with TikTok because they’ve shown that they take content moderation seriously, are open to feedback, and understand the importance of this area both for their community and for the future of healthy public discourse.”

Tiktok moderation documents leaked to the Intercept show the company instructed moderations to “suppress posts created by users that were deemed too ugly, poor, or disabled for the platform, internal documents reveal. The same document also allegedly shows moderators being instructed to censor political speech and punish those who harmed ‘national honor.’”

[North Korea] North Korea still officially claims zero coronavirus cases (Public Radio International)
Public Radio International [3/23/2020 3:30 PM, Grace Moon, 105K] Audio: HERE
Throngs of consumers around the world are hoarding masks and rolls of toilet paper as world leaders plead with their citizens to stay home. Already more than 160 countries have seen cases of the novel coronavirus that has claimed more than 14,000 lives.

But amid a pandemic, North Korea has yet to report a single case.

Sharing an elongated border with China where the virus first broke out, and being in close proximity with South Korea, which was one of the world’s epicenters of COVID-19 just a month ago, the hermit kingdom remains obstinate, continuing to seal itself off from the world. Earlier this month, the regime allegedly quarantined roughly 3,700 soldiers, 180 of whom are said to have died, according to South Korea-based Daily NK news.

Kim Seung-chul, 60, who was born in North Korea’s South Hamgyong Province, which is northeast of Pyongyang, talked to The World about the coronavirus situation in the DPRK, or Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. He now lives in South Korea.

COVID-19’s spread in North Korea

Kim Seung-chul worked as an engineer at a design center specializing in hydraulic power plants, and like many young North Korean men in the 1990s, vied for a chance to work in the then Soviet Union. He was successful and worked as a logger until 1993 when he realized how brutal conditions were and defected to South Korea.

Today, Kim Seung-chul serves as the president of North Korea Reform Radio, which broadcasts into North Korea from over the border using shortwave radio signals. He regularly communicates with defectors residing in Seoul, South Korea, who have direct contact with those inside of North Korea.

According to Kim Seung-chul, the coronavirus is predicted to have started spreading inside of North Korea sometime near the end of last year — a period that overlaps with a deadline imposed as part of a UN Security Council resolution demanding that China repatriate all

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North Korean laborers by Dec. 22.

“Some North Korean workers remained in China despite the sanctions while some were repatriated,” Kim Seung-chul said. “But it was during this period when North Korean laborers were moving back and forth between China and the DPRK that the coronavirus is said to have been contracted and started to spread inside of North Korea.”

It wasn’t until early January, however, that North Korean authorities allegedly began to discover people suspected of having contracted the virus. By the end of January, the world’s most isolated country plummeted deeper into isolation, enforcing stringent entry bans and even cutting off trade with China, which generates roughly 92% of North Korea’s trade, according to the Korea international Trade Association.

“Prices of goods at the market have shot up and so has the cost of gasoline and diesel,” Kim Seung-chul said, juxtaposing the gravity of the situation to the Arduous March, a devastating famine that struck in the late 90s and killed millions of North Koreans. “We can predict that by the end of March or early April, the North Korean economy will reach its breaking point. And if authorities fail to control the spread of the coronavirus while remaining on lockdown mode, it will lead to a national crisis and many lives will be at stake.”

‘Hospitals lack the fundamental supplies’

The COVID-19 outbreak will prove extremely difficult to combat especially given North Korea’s crumbling health care situation, which Kim Seung-chul said is the most serious problem at hand for the regime.

“Simply put, without money, people cannot receive any kind of treatment,” Kim Seung-chul said. “But even if you had the money, you still may not be able to be treated because the hospitals lack the fundamental supplies to carry out any operations.”

As a result, many revert to the jangmadang or black market and buy their own medical appliances and antibiotics. Some will bring the appliances they purchase at the market to the doctor in hopes of at least receiving a consultation. However, during the coronavirus outbreak, those who are ill are not permitted to even visit medical facilities because the government is afraid they may further spread the virus. Kim Seung-chul said that people must first report their sickness and then wait to be granted entry to hospitals.

Themes of entry and access are long-standing traits of the regime that often draws a sharp line between life and death during pressing times. Though receiving aid will not likely be easy given the UN’s strict sanctions; if any resources are distributed, they will probably be divided up among only the most powerful elite circles that include military officers, the state security department and intellectuals.

Coping with an insufficient health care system

Everyday citizens, Kim Seung-chul said, find ways to circumvent these deeply ingrained systemic barriers. For instance, people working at garment factories are manufacturing masks instead of clothing to protect themselves against the virus. They use fabrics such as gauze, but in reality, these materials end up being flimsy and do not last long.

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As everyday North Korean citizens find ways to cope with insufficient medical systems, sharp upticks in the price of food and other necessities as well as uneven access to COVID-19 resources, they may longer have the choice to defect, let alone move from one city to another of their own free will.

Even though the number of defectors entering South Korea has significantly shrunk from 2,803 in 2008 to less than half or 1,137 in 2018, there is still a steady inflow of women defectors in particular. Women comprise roughly 85% of North Korean escapees.

Ramping up missile testing during the pandemic

“Because cross-border tourism and trade has been completely blocked, it is essentially impossible for ordinary North Koreans to defect as a survival tactic,” Kim Seung-chul said, adding that only a small handful of elites who are able to obtain permission and pass the entry application are usually granted the freedom to move around.

There are more than 343,000 cases of the coronavirus worldwide. While it is not possible to gauge how many lives in North Korea are in jeopardy, Kim Seung-chul said North Korea’s ramping up of projectile missile testing during the pandemic may symbolize growing anxiety permeating the country. In other words, people are beginning to sense the regime’s instability and Kim Jong-un’s failure to contain the coronavirus.

More and more North Koreans are tuning into programs like North Korea Reform Radio and have covert access to foreign media and documentaries, Kim Seung-chul said.

“There is no doubt that people inside North Korea are cognizant that they are in a dire situation," he said. "Kim Jong-un is demonstrating both a power move and fear tactic in efforts to prove the validity of his leadership in the midst of a fiasco.”

[South Korea] South Korea sees lowest coronavirus case increase to date, tightens border over fears of imported infections (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 11:27 AM, Stephen Sorace, 8943K]
South Korea reported its lowest daily total of new coronavirus cases Monday as the nation ramped up quarantine restrictions for travelers over fears of a new wave of infections from hard-hit regions overseas.

The 64 new COVID-19 cases brought South Korea’s total to 8,961 infections, the most of any Asian country outside of China, where the virus originated late last year. The death toll stood at 111.

Of the new cases, 13 were from overseas travelers entering the country, Reuters reported, adding to the 74 imported cases South Korea reported last week.

“We don’t give much meaning to numbers yet, but as there are some fluctuations despite a declining trend, our top priority is to prevent sporadic group infections and repatriated cases,” said Yoon Tae-ho, director-general for public health policy at the health ministry, according to the outlet.

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As the number of locally spread cases sees a marked slowdown, South Korean medical officials have urged vigilance and the government tightened border controls to prevent the illness from re-entering from the West.

South Korea began testing all passengers arriving from Europe on Sunday and enforcing 14-day quarantines on South Korean nationals arriving from Europe and foreigners entering the country from Europe on long-term stay visas.

"To prevent imported cases, it will be better to enforce a two-week quarantine on all arrivals," Ki Mo-ran, a doctor leading the nation's coronavirus task force, told South Korea's Yonhap news agency. "The country needs to reinforce its quarantine measures on people coming from other virus-hit countries in addition to Europe."

The pandemic has gripped Europe in the past two weeks, devastating Italy where cases have surged to 59,138 amid a mounting death toll of at least 5,476. The numbers have continued to rise in other European countries, including Spain (29,909 cases), Germany (26,159 cases) and France (16,257 cases).

The U.S. reached 35,000 coronavirus cases Monday, making it the nation with the third-highest number of infections in the world, behind only Italy and China.

China has also reported that the contagion rate has started to slow down, with at least 81,454 confirmed cases amid a death toll of 3,274. However, like South Korea, officials fear a fresh outbreak from abroad after seeing a record rise of 45 imported cases Sunday -- the fourth straight day with an increase, Reuters reported.

Presidential Tweets

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet1 [3/23/2020 7:53 AM] We will be guided by the wishes of Prime Minister Abe of Japan, a great friend of the United States and a man who has done a magnificent job on the Olympic Venue, as to attending the Olympic Games in Japan. He will make the proper decision!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet2 [3/23/2020 7:59 AM] Robert, we will end up stronger than ever before. Thank you! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet3 [3/23/2020 9:07 AM] STRONG & UNITED, WE WILL PREVAIL! GOD BLESS THE USA!! [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet4 [3/23/2020 10:16 AM] THIS IS WHY WE NEED BORDERS!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

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Tweet5 [3/23/2020 10:28 AM] The New York Times changed headlines 3 times in order to satisfy the Radical Left. What should have been a good story got “worse & worse”, until the headline alone made it very unfair. Fake & Corrupt News that is very dangerous for our Country!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet6 [3/23/2020 12:05 PM] A great early result from a drug that will start tomorrow in New York and other places! #COVID—19 [Editorial note: consult article at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet7 [3/23/2020 5:31 PM] It is very important that we totally protect our Asian American community in the United States, and all around the world. They are amazing people, and the spreading of the Virus.....is NOT their fault in any way, shape, or form. They are working closely with us to get rid of it. WE WILL PREVAIL TOGETHER!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet8 [3/23/2020 10:44 PM] This is the way the @nytimes finished a story on me. “You can see the contrast between the steady, assured, informed and strong leadership that VP Biden (Sleepy Joe) has shown, and the bungling, chaotic and dishonest start-stop approach that Mr. (not Pres.) Trump has shown.....us since the beginning of this crisis.” They meant the opposite? Forgot to mention that I closed our Country to China (and Europe) very early, long before it was considered acceptable to do so. Sleepy Joe said I was “xenophobic”, but I saved thousands of lives! Fake News!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet9 [3/23/2020 11:33 PM] Republicans had a deal until Nancy Pelosi rode into town from her extended vacation. The Democrats want the Virus to win? They are asking for things that have nothing to do with our great workers or companies. They want Open Borders & Green New Deal. Republicans shouldn’t agree!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet10 [3/23/2020 11:43 PM] The Hill/HarrisX: 61% to 39% Approval Rating on handling of Coronavirus situation. Thank you!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet11 [3/24/2020 12:16 AM] This will never be approved by me, or any other Republican! [Editorial note: consult retweet 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: Tuesday, March 24, 2020 6:00 AM ET

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Top News

Senate negotiators cite progress on coronavirus bill after day of drama and rancor (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/24/2020 12:31 AM, Erica Werner, Paul Kane, Rachael Bade, and Mike DeBonis, 12625K] Video: HERE
Senate leaders and the Trump administration neared bipartisan agreement Monday night on a massive stimulus bill that could inject $2 trillion into the economy to blunt the impacts of the coronavirus.

After a day of partisan rancor and posturing on Capitol Hill, the outlook grew markedly more

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positive later in the afternoon, when offers and counteroffers were exchanged. Senate Minority Leader Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) convened Democrats on a conference call and told them he was hopeful about striking a deal by the end of the day, according to a person familiar with the call who spoke on the condition of anonymity to reveal details.

Schumer was very upbeat, according to another Democrat, who listened into the call and spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe it. Some senators encouraged Schumer to announce a deal in principle Monday evening, but several issues remained unresolved.

So after hours of negotiations that wrapped up shortly before midnight, Schumer and Treasury Secretary Steve Mnuchin prepared to leave the Capitol without a deal in hand, but optimistic they could announce one Tuesday morning.

“Secretary Mnuchin called the president, we told him we were very, very close to an agreement; he seemed very happy with that and wanted us to try to — get us to get it done tomorrow,” Schumer told reporters.

Mnuchin said there are “still documents that are going to be reviewed tonight and are going to be turned around,” but added that he was “very hopeful” of a deal Tuesday morning.

At the White House earlier, President Trump also told reporters that a deal was near.

“They have to get together and just stop with the partisan politics, and I think that’s happening,” Trump said. “I got a call a little while ago, I guess they are getting closer. It should go quickly and it must go quickly. It’s not really a choice. They don’t have a choice. They have to make a deal.”

Overall, the legislation is aimed at flooding the economy with capital to revive businesses and households that have been knocked off course by fears about the virus’s rapid spread. Though details remained fluid, the legislation would include direct payments of $1,200 to many American adults and $500 to children, and would create roughly $850 billion in loan and assistance programs for businesses, states and cities. There would also be large spending increases for the unemployment insurance program, as well as hospitals and health-care providers that are being overwhelmed by the crisis.

Democratic concerns have focused on a $500 billion funding program Republicans want to create for loans and loan guarantees, with some Democrats calling it a “slush fund” that lacks any oversight because the Treasury Department would have broad discretion over who receives the money. Asked about this Monday evening, Trump responded, “I’ll be the oversight.”

There is little precedent for a program with a similar size and scope. Republicans have said the funding would be handled appropriately and that a cash infusion of this scale is necessary to address a major economic crisis. As a final step in talks Monday, Senate negotiators were working on putting an oversight mechanism in place.

The situation was in flux, and a handful of issues awaited final resolution Monday evening after four straight days of unsuccessful attempts to finalize a deal — including two procedural votes that Democrats blocked.

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Presuming a deal is clinched, lawmakers and administration officials are hoping for swift passage through both chambers of Congress. How the House would process the legislation remains to be determined as House members are currently out of session and seemed unlikely to return en masse to vote, but several options were under review.

Unresolved issues as of Monday evening included several under the jurisdiction of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, related to student loans and other issues, according to one Democratic aide, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private deliberations. Negotiators were also working on how to tailor large pots of money that were supposed to be disbursed to the airline industry, state governments and others.

Sen. John Cornyn (R-Tex.), leaving a Senate GOP leadership meeting Monday evening, said Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) gave a positive report about the state of the talks, suggesting that some Democratic demands had been dropped or addressed.

Cornyn described three-way talks among the White House, Senate Democrats and Senate Republicans, and said they were keeping in touch about potential pitfalls that might imperil a final deal.

The upbeat assessments marked a positive turn after Democrats blocked the rescue bill earlier in the day. This was part of a rancorous chain of events, with lawmakers venting fury about their failed efforts to address the pandemic's impact on the U.S. economy. Even senators who are typically careful and measured erupted in anger at their colleagues as the process kept bogging down.

"This is unbelievable," Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) exclaimed at one point.

Ahead of the procedural vote, senators clashed angrily over the delays. Some lawmakers had hoped to reach an agreement three days ago, but talks kept breaking down even as they negotiated throughout the weekend. Meanwhile the nation was reeling from the health consequences and economic pain inflicted by the virus.

Democrats have argued that the Senate GOP bill is disproportionately tilted toward helping companies and needs to extend more benefits to families and health-care providers. Republicans have countered that the measure offers unprecedented financial assistance to the entire economy and needs to be passed before more people lose their jobs. Some economists have projected that more than 3 million people were laid off last week as businesses and consumers pulled back, and those numbers are only expected to grow.

The vote Monday was 49 to 46, well short of the 60-vote threshold needed to advance the legislation for a final debate.

"This has got to stop, and today is the day it has to stop," an exasperated McConnell said. "The country is out of time."

McConnell accused Democrats of holding up the sorely needed rescue package so they can try to add extraneous provisions sought by special interests and organized labor. Democrats have refused to support the key procedural vote that would make it easier to pass the bill, with many complaining that the legislation did not include much transparency

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into which businesses could receive hundreds of billions of dollars in emergency loans.

Sen. Joe Manchin III (D-W.Va.) said that the bill, with its $500 billion program for businesses, states and cities, makes the Senate look "more focused on the big corporations and the health of Wall Street than we are on the health care of the people in rural America and Main Street." The Trump administration would have wide latitude to disburse these loans and loan guarantees, a dynamic that has given numerous Democrats pause. The Senate bill also includes a $350 billion program to help small businesses meet payroll costs, which is meant to stem the rising tide of layoffs.

Speaking on the Senate floor hours ahead of his conference call with fellow Democrats, Schumer insisted he was continuing to negotiate in good faith with Mnuchin and hoped to secure a deal as long as he could ensure that worker protections were included and that the fund for industries had appropriate controls.

"We have an obligation to get the details right, get them done quickly," Schumer said. "That doesn't mean blindly accepting a Republican-only bill."

As the markets fell Monday, the Senate floor descended into an uproar as Collins sought recognition to speak, which Schumer objected to, prompting Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) to exclaim, "This is bullshit!"

The fiery developments reflected rising tensions among lawmakers over the nation's predicament and what's happening in the Senate itself; Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) announced Sunday that he has covid-19, and four other GOP senators are quarantined. Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.) disclosed Monday that her husband, too, is infected with the virus.

But despite the acrimony, negotiations continued. The White House and lawmakers were continuing to push ahead because of obvious signs that major parts of the U.S. economy are reeling. The Dow Jones industrial average has lost more than 10,000 points in six weeks. With more than 40,000 confirmed covid-19 cases in the United States, the effects of the crisis are growing worse.

A number of states are directing citizens to stay home to avoid more contagion, putting pressure on businesses that are losing workers and customers. Many of these companies have rushed to Washington seeking emergency assistance, and health-care providers are overrun and in dire need of testing kits and safety equipment.

Sen. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.) advised everyone to "assume the appropriate distance and take a deep breath." Several hours later, signs of optimism appeared from both parties, and White House officials became more hopeful that a deal was within reach.

Even as senators were clashing on one side of the Capitol on Monday, on the other side House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) was holding a news conference to unveil House Democrats' version of the stimulus bill. Pelosi's $2.5 trillion-plus package would send $1,500 to individual Americans; pump money into the health-care system, unemployment insurance and schools; and — according to a draft circulating Monday — require airlines and other companies that receive aid to pay a $15-an-hour minimum wage.

"Democrats take responsibility for our workers," Pelosi said. "We require that any

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corporation that takes taxpayer dollars must protect their workers' wages and benefits — not CEO pay, stock buybacks or layoffs."

But if the House charts its own course on a competing piece of legislation, it could take even longer to arrive at a bipartisan consensus that can pass both chambers and get signed into law.

The $500 billion in loan programs in the Senate bill includes $425 billion for companies, states and cities, though it doesn't prescribe many terms to dictate how the Treasury Department would determine who received the assistance. An additional $50 billion would go to helping passenger airline companies, $8 billion for cargo air companies and $17 billion to help firms deemed important for national security.

At the insistence of Democrats, who were participating in drafting the bill before bipartisan talks broke down over the weekend, more than $100 billion is being included for hospitals and some $250 billion to boost unemployment insurance. The sweeping economic package is designed to last for 10 to 12 weeks, after which the administration could revisit whether it would seek additional assistance from Congress.

The huge bill now under negotiation is Congress's third attempt to address the coronavirus crisis. As the scope of the crisis started coming into focus early this month, Congress passed $8.3 billion in emergency spending for the public health system. Then Mnuchin and Pelosi negotiated a $100 billion-plus package that included paid sick leave, a Medicaid expansion, free vaccines and more, which the Senate passed last week despite misgivings by many Senate Republicans over the structure of the paid-sick-leave program.

Along the way, intermittent bipartisanship has given way to occasional partisan outbursts, but partisan rancor now seems to have largely overtaken the process.

Pentagon to deploy field hospitals to New York, Seattle (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 4:13 PM, Ellen Mitchell, 1762K]
The Defense Department is preparing to deploy field hospitals to New York City and Seattle later this week, Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced Monday.

"Right now, I anticipate sending a [field] hospital to Seattle and a hospital to New York City," Esper told reporters at the Pentagon, adding, "my aim is to get them out this week."

He said five such expeditionary units had been given "prepare to deploy orders," and the Pentagon is looking to send them to other locations as needed.

He said the deployments will include the hospital, equipment and medical professionals. They will be sent once the Federal Emergency Management Agency validates the move.

Washington State has the most confirmed cases of coronavirus on the West Coast while New York has the most such cases on the East Coast.

The Pentagon's other efforts to help with the outbreak include deploying a Navy hospital ship in San Diego to Los Angeles to help relieve medical facilities expected to become overburdened by coronavirus patients.

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The USNS Mercy will treat non-coronavirus patients referred to the ship by hospitals on shore, and it is expected to arrive at the port of Los Angeles "within the week," Capt. John Rotruck, commanding officer of the ship, told reporters at the Pentagon via teleconference later on Monday.

The USNS Comfort will deploy to New York City to carry out a similar mission but is not expected to leave its port in Virginia until next week.

Esper also announced Monday that the Pentagon's health protection level had been upgraded to its second highest setting, putting more restrictions on entering the building.

As of Monday morning, 133 service members had tested positive for the coronavirus, as had 44 civilian employees, 35 dependents and 31 contractors, with one contractor death Saturday.

Esper said he has not been tested for the coronavirus but was monitoring his health.

He also for the first time acknowledged that the coronavirus pandemic may affect military readiness down the line.

"If this pandemic continues at the scale and scope of what some are predicting, over time you could start seeing an impact on readiness. ... But nothing to which I fear impacts our mission readiness to conduct our national missions," he said.

U.S. military to send field hospitals to New York, Seattle (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 8:00 PM, Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, 5304K]
The U.S. military is preparing to deploy field hospitals to New York and Seattle, the Pentagon said on Monday, as its top civilian and military leaders acknowledged for the first time that the coronavirus pandemic could impact military readiness.

U.S. Army General Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the armed forces had been preparing administratively since Feb. 1 for the possibility of providing the U.S. government support in a pandemic-like scenario.

But the field hospitals — to be established in the two U.S. cities hardest hit by the pandemic — were the latest in a string of deployment announcements that show how the military has moved from planning to the execution of an expanding support role to the U.S. government's domestic coronavirus response effort.

This includes sending military hospital ships to Los Angeles and New York City and tasking the Army Corps of Engineers to convert hotels and dormitories into treatment facilities for sick patients. Tens of thousands of National Guard are eventually expected to be deployed nationwide.

Milley said the Pentagon had issued prepare-to-deploy orders to 10 expeditionary units that could set up field hospitals.

"What we want to do is make sure that the local communities take care of the coronavirus patient and we can handle the excess capacity that they won't have in terms of trauma ... and other more routine cases," Milley said.

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Defense Secretary Mark Esper announced more security restrictions at the Pentagon, just a day after the first coronavirus death of an employee at a Defense Department agency. Esper said he has not been tested for the coronavirus but has been having his temperature checked.

U.S. TROOPS HOSPITALIZED

Esper said 133 military personnel had been confirmed with the virus so far. Milley said 11 of those cases required hospitalization.

But as the number of infections climb and military exercises are canceled, Esper and Milley both acknowledged military readiness for a potential conflict or crisis could be impacted.

“Typical military planning, I’m going to assume worst case and that there will be some readiness impact to the military in some capacity,” Milley said. “I’m just not at a place right now where I can give you an accurate description of what that’s going to look like.”

Esper predicted the coronavirus would have “more and more impact” on personnel.

“While it may have some impact on readiness, it will not affect our ability to conduct our national security missions,” he said.

Military field hospitals heading to New York City and Seattle this week to fight coronavirus (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 10:24 AM, Mike Glenn, 482K]
Patients aboard a U.S. Navy hospital ship sent to Los Angeles to help take the pressure off local medical centers overtaxed by the coronavirus pandemic will already have been seen at a civilian hospital before they ever come aboard.

The USNS Mercy, which departed San Diego on Monday for its journey to the Port of Los Angeles, will fill its 1,000 hospital beds with patients other than those with COVID-19. The ship, a massive converted supertanker noteworthy for its all-white paint scheme with red crosses, will only be taking transfer patients.

“If they’re an intensive care unit patient, they’ll come to our intensive care unit,” said Navy Capt. John Rotruck, a Navy physician in charge of the medical personnel aboard the Mercy. “If they’re on their hospital’s ward, they’ll come to our ward. We’re prepared to offer a pretty broad range of critical care and other medical care.”

More than 1,000 Navy doctors, nurses and other medical professionals assigned to the hospital ship will be able to handle just about any medical need a patient might have.

“We have a pretty broad surgical capability as well,” Dr. Rotruck said.

Navy officials said the ship won’t be providing any medical service for coronavirus patients. In fact, every patient coming aboard will be screened and tested if necessary. Any patient who comes up positive for COVID-19 will be sent back to the hospital ashore, officials said.

The USNS Comfort, sister ship to the Mercy, is slated to go to New York once its

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maintenance needs are dealt with in Norfolk, Va., officials said.

Other military services also are joining the fight against the coronavirus. The Army Corps of Engineers has begun converting old hotels, college dormitories and other buildings into temporary medical facilities.

Meanwhile, at least two Army field hospitals are being sent to New York City and Seattle to bolster medical attention in those areas hit hard by the pandemic. Other military hospitals are on standby for possible deployment, Secretary of Defense Mark Esper told reporters at the Pentagon.

While the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is ultimately in charge of the operation, Mr. Esper said he envisions the field hospitals, with about 250 beds, filling the gap for treating patients until the Corps of Engineers has finished its work.

“We can then pull out and go on to the next site and again cover that gap for the next city,” Mr. Esper said.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will also be setting up a temporary hospital in Seattle. Mr. Esper said he has spoken with almost a dozen governors since the novel coronavirus was first detected in the U.S.

“Each of them has had requests for field hospitals,” Mr. Esper said. “We clearly can’t meet everybody’s needs with what we have in our inventory, so we rely on FEMA to do the assessment, the validation and then the prioritization.”

8,000 National Guard deployed across all states and territories: ‘It’s like we have 54 different hurricanes’ (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 5:38 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K]
Military deployments in response to the coronavirus pandemic expanded over the weekend to include all 50 states as well as the District of Columbia and three U.S. territories, according to the National Guard.

As of Monday afternoon, the Guard said 8,000 personnel with the Air National Guard and the Army National Guard are deployed nationwide. That figure was up from 400 deployments on March 13 as a result of the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases jumping from 2,000 at the time to more than 41,000 by Monday afternoon.

"With COVID-19, it’s like we have 54 different hurricanes hitting every state, every territory, and the District of Columbia. Some are Category 5, some are Category 3, and some are Category 1," National Guard chief, Gen. Joseph Lengyel, said in a statement.

The several thousand deployed are just under 2% of the Guard’s 450,000 members. Governors must activate the National Guard, then determine where the state or territory needs help. The Guard’s members outside the continental United States in Hawaii, Alaska, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Guam were called in since last week.

Guard personnel tasks include delivering food, working at call centers, conducting oral coronavirus tests, and cleaning public places.

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Half of all coronavirus cases nationwide are in New York, where 1,800 guardsmen are deployed. They staff six drive-through test sites, which saw a total 3,000 people get tested on Sunday, according to Col. Richard Goldenberg.

In Florida, more than 1,000 personnel assist at testing sites in Broward, Orange, and Miami-Dade counties. Another testing site at Marlins Stadium in downtown Miami is expected to open soon, according to 1st Lt. Tahisha Coleman, spokeswoman for the state Guard's operations.

State Department says 13,500 Americans stranded abroad have asked for help (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 4:33 PM, Carol Morello, 12625K]
The State Department is preparing to evacuate thousands of Americans stranded overseas, with 16 flights scheduled in the next five days and more to follow, officials said Monday.

The officials also said that about 30 State Department employees posted in embassies and consulates abroad have tested positive for the novel coronavirus. Small numbers of employees in six U.S. locations — Washington, Houston, Boston, New York, Seattle and Quantico, Va. — have also tested positive.

A task force assembled by the State Department is working on getting flights out for the 13,500 Americans who have reached out asking for help, officials said.

"Consider whether you are ready to ride out an undetermined period of time where you are now, or do you want to go to the United States to wait out events," a senior State Department official said of the advice he is telling diplomats to advise Americans. "If it's the latter, do so now, and that last bit is all caps."

The effort to repatriate Americans has become the main focus of the State Department as it has suspended all routine visa operations and reassigned personnel to the often-complex task of getting people out of countries as borders and airports close.

Many Americans in countries that have imposed travel restrictions have complained that the diplomatic missions have not been reachable or provided inadequate assistance.

Roughly 10 million Americans are expatriates who reside in foreign countries and an unknown number are tourists or abroad on business trips. The State Department already has evacuated 5,000 Americans starting with about 800 flown out Wuhan, China, where the virus originated.

A second official said the State Department expects to evacuate at least 1,600 more Americans over the next five days.

"We prioritize people, taking account of their vulnerability," the official said. "If somebody is 70 years old and has an underlying condition such as diabetes or heart disease, that person has priority over a hale and hearty 20-year-old."

The State Department has adopted new policies for voluntary, authorized departures, so some diplomats and civil servants have returned to the United States. They have been assigned to help evacuate Americans. Other employees have also been enlisted, including

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some who normally work on economics, diplomatic security, public affairs and legislative affairs.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under State Department rules for briefing reporters, said the window is rapidly closing for commercial flights. In some places, civilians have been flown out on U.S. military flights when space was available. The State Department is working with the Defense Department to see if more flights and spaces can be arranged.

Officials also are working with foreign governments to arrange evacuations on private chartered flights. Flights taking undocumented immigrants back to their countries also are returning to the United States with American civilians.

“We’re hearing from people in very remote parts of the world,” the first official said. “It’s complicated.”

In Peru, for example, diplomats are trying to move Americans out of areas reachable only by airplane, at a time when the Peruvians have shut down internal air travel. International flights are limited because the civilian side of the Lima airport has been closed, and the military part of the facility has less capacity.

“I hesitate to guarantee we can move every person,” the official said. “But we will move very large numbers.”

U.S. to bring home stranded Americans using planes that deport immigrants (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 9:30 PM, Tracy Wilkinson, 1907K]
With pressure mounting over Americans stranded outside the United States because of coronavirus-related travel restrictions, the government plans to use its planes that deport migrants to bring U.S. citizens home, a senior administration official said Monday.

The use of repurposed deportation flights is one of several actions the State Department is taking to retrieve thousands of Americans grounded in foreign countries since the U.S. began closing its borders and barring arrivals from some nations, in an effort to slow the spread of the highly infectious virus. At the same time, commercial airlines dramatically cut back on flights.

“We’re working around the clock to bring U.S. citizens who are stranded overseas back home,” a senior State Department official said, briefing reporters by phone on grounds of anonymity, in keeping with administration protocol. Consular staffs “have been working night and day to help Americans get on flights.”

About 5,000 American citizens in 17 countries have been transported back to the U.S. in recent days through a fleet of commercial, charter and U.S. military flights, the official said. Another 13,500 have asked for help, and 16 more flights are scheduled for the coming days.

Some travelers in Central America were taken home in U.S. Air Force aircraft that were already in the region on routine missions.

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In considering other options, the government decided to take advantage of flights commissioned by the Department of Homeland Security to deport thousands of Central American and Mexican migrants who either entered the U.S. illegally or were attempting to seek asylum, the official said. It was not clear if either the migrants or the returning American travelers were getting any medical screenings.

The use of deportation flights, which the administration revealed Monday only under questioning, seemed an unusual move. Some officials in the Central American countries where the U.S. has deported the most migrants have started to bar the flights, citing a fear of spreading disease. Guatemala briefly stopped the flights last week. But the Trump administration has been determined to continue the deportations.

Jesse Curry, 38, a software developer from Tampa, Fla., was vacationing in Lima, Peru, when the crisis erupted and that country's government shut borders. His numerous flight rebookings were canceled one after another, he said, and only on Saturday was he able, after many efforts, to reach a U.S. official who could help. He submitted information to the U.S. Embassy for himself, his wife, two children, and his mother to eventually get on a flight.

In the meantime, Curry said, he and his family have done their best to stock their Airbnb rental property with provisions and to avoid the streets. "There is a ton of uncertainty," Curry said in a phone interview from the seaside Lima neighborhood of Miraflores.

Numerous members of Congress complained to Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo that their constituents were stranded from Peru to Morocco and unable to find assistance in U.S. embassies and consulates abroad. Many U.S. diplomatic missions have been forced to curtail services because of the pandemic.

Sen. Bob Menendez of New Jersey, the senior Democrat on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, wrote Pompeo late last week to demand that the State Department plan additional flights and invoke regulations allowing it to do so.

Some lawmakers' ire peaked over the weekend when Pompeo tweeted that he and his wife, Susan, were staying at home working puzzles as their form of social distancing.

"When you're done with that puzzle, could you please help get my 30+ constituents out of Peru, Guatemala, and other countries where they are stuck right now and getting little or no help from our State Department!?" Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) responded, also via Twitter. "That's a solvable puzzle if we have a competent State Department."

Americans stranded overseas grow frustrated with State Dept. response (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 7:10 PM, Conor Finnegan, 2182K]
With thousands of Americans still stranded overseas after flights were canceled and borders shut to stem the spread of novel coronavirus, the State Department says it is working overtime to get them home -- even as many of those Americans grow frustrated and angry at the slow U.S. response or the unresponsiveness of local U.S. embassies.

Approximately 5,700 Americans have been repatriated from 17 countries to the U.S., according to a senior State Department official. That total includes more than 800 from Wuhan, China -- the original hot zone of the novel coronavirus -- and more than 300 from the Diamond Princess cruise ship docked in Japan, meaning about 4,600 have returned in

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recent days, including 1,200 from Morocco and over 600 from Peru.

That's still less than half of those who have reached out to U.S. embassies and consulates around the world asking for help -- a total of at least 13,500 Americans, according to the senior official. To that end, there will be 16 more repatriation flights in the next five days, they added, without offering details on which countries.

The department and its new repatriation task force, led by Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Consular Affairs Ian Brownlee, are focused on evacuating the most vulnerable first -- those at higher risk of contracting the virus, known as COVID-19, or -- like many Americans who have contacted ABC News -- those running out of life-sustaining medications or food.

But the senior official said they cannot guarantee that they will be able to reach every American.

"I'm hesitant to give a guarantee we can move every single person," the senior official said, especially those in the "most remote locations."

Instead, they urged Americans who can still travel commercially to do so immediately or be prepared to hunker down where they are -- but for thousands, it's already too late.

To carry out this "unprecedented" operation, the official said, the U.S. government is using a "variety of means," including aircraft from the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security. That includes an Air Force aircraft that picked up a women's football team and others from Honduras late last week, and DHS planes that are deporting migrants from the U.S. to Central America and then turning around to bring U.S. citizens home.

But the department is focusing its efforts on chartering commercial aircraft, with the senior official saying that was the most "efficient way." These are paid for using an emergency State Department fund and money collected from those Americans who are repatriated. No one has to pay up front, but they are required to sign a promissory note with a specific sum.

"'Whole of government' is a cliche. This is more of a whole of possibility effort to get people out," said the senior official, briefing reporters Monday, "so no option is foreclosed."

To arrange these flights though, the department has to get permission from local governments, made even more difficult after they've closed their borders, and from U.S. authorities at DHS and the Federal Aviation Administration. The task force has been working around the clock to do that, the official said, for chartered flights arranged by the U.S. or by private companies and citizens.

But it's still unclear how the department chooses which method, in which country and who gets a seat, beyond focusing on the most vulnerable. The State Department did not respond to questions about that on Monday.

After the U.S. military used a military cargo plane to evacuate the women's football team and others from Honduras, two American missionaries in the country told ABC News that they were enrolled in the STEP system with the embassy, but were never offered a seat on a repatriation flight.

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"I understand the U.S. is going through a bunch right now, but in our eyes, the fact that they already got a bunch of people out on two C-130's leaves us asking, 'Can you just do one or two more trips?" said Jonathan Garcia, whose flight with American Airlines was canceled after the airliner was forced to halt all flights from Honduras until mid-May. "As of right now, we really are stuck until the government helps us out."

While military aircraft deployed to Honduras, none have been used in Peru, where roughly 2,000 Americans have been stranded by the government's sudden closure of borders and halt to domestic travel.

"This is a very stressful time for all, and it is even more stressful being in a foreign country away from family," said Kimberly Gleason, whose two daughters are stuck in Peru, where one was studying abroad and the other was visiting her. "We are all counting on the help of the United States president to do the right thing and to organize a flight out of the country as soon as possible."

Making matters more confusing for so many is the unresponsiveness of the local U.S. embassy or consulate in many of the countries where Americans are stranded and have reached out to ABC News, including Peru, Ecuador, Namibia, Madagascar, Morocco, Indonesia, Australia and Argentina.

"The Trump administration has been completely unresponsive and uncaring about Americans stuck in Peru," said Michelle Schmitt, whose husband Henry and their friend Alan Studley have been stuck in Lima. "There are people there who are in need of money, medicine and a way out. ... Americans are starting to lose hope down there."

These U.S. missions are reportedly overwhelmed by the need and are usually only reaching out to Americans enrolled in STEP once travel options like flights have been arranged. But the lack of response has left many confused as to what, if any plans, are being made to help them.

"The system is working," the senior official said in defense of STEP, after receiving an alert from the embassy in Lima during the briefing.

All last week, as Americans were panicking, that embassy repeatedly referred folks to commercial airliners, even though airspace had already been shut down and flights canceled. Now, two flights have carried a couple hundred people out, with more on the way, the embassy said Monday in its most recent alert.

But the situation there is growing more difficult by the day as the Peruvian government struggles to contain its novel coronavirus outbreak, which has now forced the closure of Lima's international airport. Instead, the government is relying on the airport's military side, which has much less capacity.

The senior official said the U.S. is still awaiting authorization from Peruvian authorities for more flights in and to shepherd hundreds of Americans from remote cities like Cusco and Iquitos to Lima to fly back to the U.S.

Esper further restricts Pentagon access as coronavirus spreads (The Hill)

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The Hill [3/23/2020 3:01 PM, Ellen Mitchell, 1762K]
Defense Secretary Mark Esper on Monday upgraded the Pentagon's health protection level to its second-highest setting, putting more restrictions on entering the building in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

"Today we are elevating the Pentagon reservation status to Health Protection Condition C," Esper told reporters at a press conference in the building.

"This limits the number of access points to the Pentagon and increases the amount of personnel who would telework, among a few other things."

He added that the latest health protection level could include "some medical screening," including temperature testing.

Defense One was the first to report on the new designation, which lines up with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Level 3 warning for some countries.

The move is the latest in a series of Department of Defense (DOD) measures to limit the spread of COVID-19 among its personnel.

On March 16, the DOD implemented new rules for who can enter the building itself, stipulating that all unofficial visits to the Pentagon — to include personal guests and friends of DOD personnel and contractors — are "suspended," as are visits from international partners and visitors.

Prior to that, the department sought to cut staff in the building by encouraging employees to telework and to practice social distancing.

Esper said the number of personnel now working at the Pentagon is "down considerably, maybe 60-some percent if not more."

"There is no intent whatsoever to limit the access to the press and we want to keep the building open for essential personnel and the media."

As of Monday morning, 133 service members had tested positive for the coronavirus — nearly double the number from Friday — with seven in the hospital.

In addition, 44 civilian employees, 35 dependents and 31 contractors have the illness, with one contractor death on Saturday, the first military-related death from virus.

Esper said he had spoken with several infected service members and he was not worried about a slip in readiness as the illness continues to spread.

"As this virus ramps up and spreads, we'll obviously see more and more impact of persons in our ranks. I'm confident that while it may have some impact on readiness, it will not affect our ability to conduct national security missions both at home and abroad," he said.

The Pentagon has scrambled to prevent more coronavirus cases in the military. Earlier this month it suspended almost all nonessential travel for eight weeks for DOD personnel and families, limited access to military installations and canceled or scaled back exercises.

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Still, there are now two Pentagon-related coronavirus cases, an active-duty airman and an Air Force contractor who both visited the building in recent weeks.

Esper says military 'can't meet everybody's needs' as coronavirus outbreak escalates (CNN)

CNN [3/23/2020 3:16 PM, Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, 5551K]

Secretary of Defense Mark Esper said Monday that he has received requests for assistance from multiple governors and stated the military "can't meet everybody's needs," as the coronavirus pandemic continues to escalate.

However, he did say that the Pentagon is looking to send military field hospitals to New York and Seattle to help support local medical systems which are struggling to cope with a large number of virus cases. That would be in addition to the hospital ships being sent to New York and Los Angeles and the military working to convert civilian buildings into hospitals.

"I've spoken with seven, eight, nine, 10 governors so far. Each one of them has had requests for field hospitals. Those who have been along the coastline have talked about the need for ships, so we clearly can't meet everybody's needs with what we have in our inventory so we rely on (the Federal Emergency Management Agency) to do the assessment, validation and then the prioritization," Esper said.

Esper said he has ordered five expeditionary medical facilities to prepare to deploy, though the location of those deployments will depend on guidance from FEMA.

"Right now I anticipate sending a hospital to Seattle and a hospital to New York City and beyond that once that's confirmed we will look at sending to other places, and as necessary we will continue to alert units to prepare to deploy and deploy them as appropriate," Esper added.

The field hospitals are expected to be transported by truck and arrive in New York and Seattle within the next "72 hours or less," Gen. Mark Milley, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told a group of reporters later on Monday.

Each hospital has 248 beds of which 48 are ICU beds. The mobile hospitals also each come with 11 ventilators. Several mobile military medical facilities are on "prepare to deploy" orders, but these two are expected to be among the first to go.

The Pentagon has also ordered two of the Navy's hospital ships, the USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy, to deploy to New York City and Los Angeles respectively to help alleviate some of the strain on civilian medical infrastructure.

"We expect to be there within the week and we anticipate being able to begin taking patients the day after we arrive, we definitely have a sense of urgency and want to be there as quickly as we can," Capt. John Rotruck, the commanding officer of the medical facility on the USNS Mercy, said Monday.

The Comfort is expected to arrive in New York later.

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Esper said he anticipates the field hospitals being used to temporarily alleviate the strain on civilian hospitals in order to allow the US Army Corps of Engineers to retrofit hotels, convention centers and college dormitories into makeshift hospitals.

"How I foresee our hospitals being used is during the early stages of the pandemic, the virus hitting a city where they're still trying to ramp up capability, bed space, we can come in for a short period of time, for a few weeks to provide that capacity until they get either gyms converted, hotels converted, college dorms converted, all those things that the Corps of Engineers is working on right now," Esper said.

The head of the Army Corps of Engineers said Friday that such retrofitting could take three to four weeks.

"What we're talking about is the need for thousands of beds. We can provide in a field hospital 248 and we only have so many field hospitals so I see us playing this role where we're the gap filler for a period of weeks with our capabilities once the capacity is met through these other mechanisms," Esper said, while adding, "We can then pullout and go to the next site and cover again that gap for the next city or locality that is ramping up."

Defense Secretary Mark Esper: In coronavirus fight, US military is on the front lines (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 10:49 AM, Mark T. Esper, 8943K] Video: HERE
The United States is facing one of the greatest challenges of our time as we fight to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus. As thousands of American service members continue to stand watch around the world in defense of our great nation, the U.S. military is also helping to combat the invisible enemy now within our borders.

As part of President Trump's aggressive whole-of-government response, the Department of Defense (DoD) is surging people, capabilities, researchers and equipment to slow the spread of COVID-19 and protect the American people. Like other fights, against other enemies, in other times, we will win.

The DoD has been at the forefront of the fight against coronavirus since the early days of our nation's response effort. In January, we provided housing at March Air Reserve Base in California to assist the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in caring for hundreds of State Department employees, dependents and U.S. citizens who were evacuated from Wuhan, China. Our contributions and efforts to the interagency's response has only grown since then, as we simultaneously took major steps to ensure the safety of our military personnel and their families.

Last week, I directed the release of critical supplies from DoD's strategic medical reserves to assist the civilian doctors, nurses and technicians who are on the front lines of this fight. One million N-95 respirator masks and 2,000 deployable ventilators are being provided to HHS for distribution across the country to hospitals where they are needed most. An additional 4 million masks and other protective equipment from these reserves will be distributed to medical facilities in the coming days and weeks, as needed.

Meanwhile, our world-class doctors and scientists are at the forefront of infectious disease research, working alongside other government and private sector efforts to accelerate a vaccine and therapeutics for this virus. These are the same medical researchers whose

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contributions were critical to the development of vaccines for the Ebola and Zika viruses.

Additionally, we will soon deploy our Navy's two hospital ships, the USNS Comfort and USNS Mercy, to key locations on the East and West Coasts of the United States. These ships, and their exceptional crews of medical professionals, are optimized for trauma support and will supplement non-COVID-19 medical care, thereby freeing up hospital beds for those most affected by the virus. Concurrently, we have alerted a number of military field hospitals and expeditionary medical units to be prepared to deploy around the country to increase the nation's medical capacity.

In the meantime, I continue to speak with governors to offer the DoD's continued assistance with planning, logistics and medical support to their states. Over 7,000 National Guard members are currently mobilized in all 54 states, territories and the District of Columbia working in support of state and local authorities, with many more on track to be mobilized in the coming days.

Additionally, the Army Corps of Engineers is on the ground in New York and elsewhere, beginning critical work to retrofit existing buildings to provide additional hospital beds and intensive care facilities in the most severely impacted regions of our country. The Corps remains in close coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency as it expands this support to other areas.

The men and women of the Armed Forces are highly trained and well prepared to operate in times of crisis. As we continue to support the president's bold response efforts, we will use all of the tools at our disposal to help protect the nation.

The United States military has proven throughout our history that we are at our best when the stakes are high. I am proud of our service members and DoD civilians who are answering the call, all around our great country. I can assure the American people that we will do whatever it takes to defeat this virus, return to our normal way of life and to come back even stronger. Together, we will get through this.

Esper says coronavirus needs taking toll on military resources (Washington Examiner)

Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 3:54 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]

The Department of Defense can't meet all of the domestic needs created by the coronavirus, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said, acknowledging the pandemic may also take a toll on force readiness.

"We clearly can't meet everybody's needs with what we have in our inventory," Esper said Monday, after noting he spoke to as many as 10 governors in recent days.

Esper also said the largest Army field hospitals have a capacity of 248 beds, not the "thousands" needed to meet hospital surge demands in the hardest-hit areas. Instead, he said, the focus has been turned toward Army Corps of Engineers planning across several states, where they will contract out work to convert existing buildings to hospitals.

"What we're talking about is the need for thousands of beds. We could provide with the field hospital 248, and we only have so many field hospitals," Esper said. "It would take a few weeks to do all that."

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Instead, the Defense secretary explained that he "thinks" the field hospitals would be used as temporary solutions while permanent structures are outfitted by Army contractors. Those temporary hospitals would then be repositioned to new locations in need when the Army facilities are ready.

To protect his own forces, Esper said currently, the Department of Defense has 16 labs globally with a capacity to process more than 6,000 tests per day, but he revealed, "The issue is test kits."

"As more of those come on board, we can test more," he added.

The Defense Department confirmed Monday that COVID-19 virus cases doubled over the weekend to 133 military personnel, and exercises across the world have been canceled.

"If this pandemic continues at the scale and scope of what some are predicting, over time, you could start seeing an impact on readiness," Esper said. "As this virus ramps up and spreads, we'll obviously see more and more impact [on] persons in our ranks."

Asked about U.S. citizens stranded abroad, Esper could not say if the Defense Department will play the role it did in Honduras over the weekend bringing home Americans in countries with closed borders. He deferred to the State Department and the Department of Health and Human Services. Likewise, Esper deferred to the Federal Emergency Management Agency when asked about the status of 5 million N-95 masks and 2,000 ventilators that he said would come from the military's reserve to support domestic shortfalls.

Esper said military personnel are not being tested for coronavirus unless they show symptoms, and that he has not been tested but that his temperature is checked regularly and he is asymptomatic.

Asked why military units across the globe are still holding all-hands meetings and working in close quarters despite claims that the Defense Department is following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines for social distancing, Esper said each situation is unique, and it is up to commanders to decide how best to implement prevention guidelines.

"Tell me how I do six-feet distancing in an attack submarine, or how do I do that in a bomber with two pilots sitting side-by-side?" Esper said. "There will be inconsistencies because every situation is unique."

The defense secretary also declined to reveal his assessment of the Feb. 29 peace deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, which suffered another blow yesterday when a Taliban attack on an Afghan security checkpoint killed 24 members of Afghan security forces before the Taliban burned the facility to the ground.

Esper also confirmed that the Pentagon compound had been elevated to HPCON Charlie, the third-highest health protection level. Access points are reduced, and temperature checks and screenings are taking place for all personnel entering the building.

In Pandemic, Justice Dept. Seeks Video Court Hearings and Home Detention (New York Times)

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New York Times [3/23/2020 9:18 PM, Charlie Savage, 23673K]
Invoking the coronavirus crisis, the Justice Department has asked Congress to let more federal inmates serve their time at home and to steer scarce masks and testing kits to federal prisons ahead of other agencies, according to draft legislation submitted last week to congressional leaders.

The department has also asked Congress to relax speedy trial rules and expand opportunities for law enforcement officials to use video conferencing for certain preliminary federal criminal and detention proceedings, like arraignments for newly arrested people.

"Authorizing the general use of teleconferencing for these preliminary proceedings would ensure that defendants are able to access courts shortly after their arrest," the Justice Department wrote. "It also would limit any disruptions caused by the coronavirus."

Those proposals are among a handful that the Trump administration has told congressional leaders that it is making a priority — and that lawmakers of both parties are considering enacting — after both Republicans and Democrats reacted skeptically to more sweeping ideas in the proposal, according to congressional aides.

Those ideas that appear to be dead on arrival included a plan to empower President Trump or his successors to eliminate legal protections for asylum seekers. That would amount to a permanent change to immigration law that would require no finding of any connection to a public health risk.

It is not clear what Congress will do with the proposals, several of which Politico first reported. As the Senate fights over a nearly $2 trillion stimulus package, some of the Justice Department's ideas could end up attached to it, one congressional aide said, while another said that none of the proposals were likely to be part of the current round of legislation.

But the pandemic is growing worse, and history has shown that Congress can sometimes rush to enact sudden and major expansions of government power during a crisis as lawmakers feel pressure to show they are responding, as when it abruptly passed the USA Patriot Act after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

Another part of the Justice Department's proposal calls for empowering Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr. to pause the statute of limitations during a national emergency, and similarly permitting chief judges of district courts to suspend deadlines for "pre-arrest, post-arrest, pretrial, trial and post-trial procedures in criminal and juvenile proceedings and all civil process and proceedings."

But lawmakers of both parties greeted with skepticism the notion of extended detentions without judicial process even if the court system was disrupted, according to congressional aides briefed on the negotiations.

Still, one aide said, lawmakers are considering easing some of the requirements of the Speedy Trial Act — which generally lets defendants demand a trial within 70 days of arraignment — if the coronavirus pandemic makes it impossible to hold in-person trials for a while, including by sequestering 12 jurors in the same room for deliberations.

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Lawmakers are also said to be open to another part of the Justice Department proposal for the Bureau of Prisons. It would give the bureau the power to expand the use of home confinement — now capped at 10 percent of an inmate's term or six months — and prioritize steering masks and testing kits to federal prisons.

Federal prisons officials are confronting the nationwide shortage of masks and other personal protective equipment for medical personnel, the department wrote, labeling the shortfall a "vulnerability" as it seeks preferential status.

"B.O.P. is currently competing and engaging the same landscape of vendors as all other federal agencies and private entities," the proposal said.

The Justice Department's spokeswoman, Kerri Kupec, said on Twitter on Sunday in response to the Politico report that the proposal was prompted by a congressional request for suggestions and that department officials were seeking to empower judges, not the executive branch.

"Bottom line: The proposed legislative text confers powers upon judges," she wrote. "It does not confer new powers upon the executive branch. These provisions are designed to empower the courts to ensure the fair and effective administration of justice."

However, two congressional aides said they were unaware of any request from Congress going to the Justice Department, and understood that the department itself had decided on its own to ask all of its components for ideas and sent them over.

Justice Department representatives did not respond to follow-up questions about who asked the department to come up with ideas for new laws because of the pandemic, nor about the justifications for the request to confer new powers on the executive branch over asylum matters, which her statement did not address.

Under that part of the draft legislation — said to be quickly dismissed by lawmakers — presidents could exempt immigrants from eligibility to apply for asylum and from a domestic legal rule forbidding the federal government from sending them home to countries where they are likely to face persecution, which is also a requirement of international law.

The proposal would eliminate those legal protections not only for migrants found to be infected with the coronavirus or other communicable diseases of "public health significance," but also to any others who are separately "subject to a presidential proclamation suspending and limiting the entry of aliens into the United States."

The Trump administration has been trying to curb asylum claims at the southwestern border for the past three years, and last week it developed plans to use the pandemic to shut down that process under the president's existing authority — a move that is certain to face legal challenge.

The proposal to expand Mr. Trump's powers over asylum law would be a "really dangerous weapon" to put in his hands, placing at greater risk people who come to the United States seeking protection, said Omar Jadwat, the director of the American Civil Liberties Union's Immigrants' Rights Project.

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“I am glad people are on the ball enough to see the danger here,” he said.

Justice Department responds to ‘confusion’ about ‘emergency powers’ request during coronavirus outbreak (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 4:14 PM, Jerry Dunleavy, 570K]
The Justice Department responded to an article about its congressional request for "emergency powers" for courts during crises such as the coronavirus, arguing that these proposals would empower judges to ensure criminals don’t avoid justice during national emergencies.

Facing bipartisan backlash from lawmakers on Capitol Hill, Kerri Kupec, the spokeswoman for Attorney General William Barr, shared a statement Monday that claimed it was Congress that first asked for the proposals.

“There has been some confusion re: reports about DOJ asking Congress for certain ‘emergency powers.’ This was triggered by Congress asking DOJ for suggested proposals necessary to ensure that federal courts would be able to administer fair and impartial justice during the pandemic,” the lengthy statement tweeted by Kupec said.

The report on the draft legislative text by Politico said, “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 novel coronavirus spreads throughout the United States.”

Kupec noted: “Because of pandemic-related measures, courts are closing and grand juries are not meeting. ... That means prosecutors may not be able to indict criminals before a statute of limitations expires, or that dangerous criminals who have been arrested may be released because of time limits.” The DOJ spokeswoman argued that “criminals should not be able to avoid justice because of a public health emergency.”

Therefore, Kupec said, "Individual judges are already extending deadlines” but that “to promote consistency by ensuring ALL cases in a particular district are treated similarly, DOJ suggested provisions to allow judges to consistently manage the cases within their districts.”

Kupec said the goal of the proposed legislative text would be to empower judges to extend deadlines and statutes of limitation “in the interests of justice.” She said this authority would end either at the “termination of the COVID-19 national emergency” or “the Chief Justice’s finding that the emergency conditions no longer materially affect the functioning of the federal courts.” She said that any such orders would “remain in effect no longer than 30 days beyond the termination.”

Barr spoke about the department’s work during the coronavirus pandemic in an interview with the Wall Street Journal that was published Monday.

“There’s some discombobulation, but part of what we’re trying to do is keep up the mission,” he said of the agency’s commitment to proceed with criminal investigations, prioritize coronavirus-related fraud prosecutions, keep the justice system functioning, and pursue other Trump administration priorities during a deadly outbreak.

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Barr said he was worried that “things are getting out of control” with local liberal prosecutors releasing people from prison and declining charges as the COVID-19 outbreak spreads.

The 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. It would also expand the ability of courts to carry out hearings through video teleconferences, including without the consent of the defendant.

The report stated 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.”

The proposals in the Politico article were met with swift blowback from some lawmakers this weekend. Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah tweeted: “OVER MY DEAD BODY.” Newly independent Rep. Justin Amash of Michigan proclaimed that “Congress must loudly reply NO.” Democratic New York Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez said simply: “Absolutely not.”

“The goal of these provisions to ensure that the justice system continues to operate equitably and effectively, and to harmonize what is already being done on an ad hoc basis by the courts around the country,” Kupec argued. “Bottom line: The proposed legislative text confers powers upon judges. It does not confer new powers upon the executive branch. These provisions are designed to empower the courts to ensure the fair and effective administration of justice.”

Kupec said that “it is Congress that will decide whether to enact them into law.”

There were over 372,000 confirmed coronavirus cases around the world and at least 16,300 deaths tied to the infection as of Monday afternoon, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker. There have been 81,496 confirmed cases in China, where the disease originated, and 3,274 confirmed deaths there. In the U.S., there have been over 41,700 cases, which have resulted in 573 deaths.

Justices Back Broader Review of Deportation Orders (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 4:28 PM, Kimberly Strawbridge Robinson, 25K]
The U.S. Supreme Court broadened the scope of when federal courts can review deportation orders in a ruling that the government said could frustrate congressional efforts to streamline the removal of immigrants convicted of certain crimes.

Under federal law, appellate courts can only review constitutional claims or those involving “questions of law.” Immigrants convicted of certain crimes cannot get federal courts to review factual issues related to their deportation orders.

But on Monday, the Supreme Court said in a 7-2 decision that the application of a legal standard to undisputed or established facts is a question of law subject to judicial review.

There’s a “strong presumption” of judicial review of agency actions that can only be overcome by clear and convincing statutory language, Justice Stephen Breyer wrote for the

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court.

The case is one of three this term testing the reach of federal courts to review immigration decisions.

Monday's decision could point to broader judicial review in those cases, too, said University of Houston Law Center's Geoffrey Hoffman, who directs the school's immigration clinic.

The "black letter" holding of today's decision is that legal questions encompass the application of law to undisputed facts, Hoffman said.

But, he said, "the real power of the decision comes from its acknowledgment of the importance of habeas corpus"—that is, the ability to have a judge look at your case.

The other two cases are DHS v. Thuraissigiam, involving "expedited removal" or the limited process for deporting those found close to the boarder, and Nasrallah v. Barr, involving the deportation of those who claim they will be persecuted or tortured if returned to their home country. Both were argued March 2.

Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito said in dissenting from Monday's ruling that it "effectively nullifies a jurisdiction-stripping statute, expanding the scope of judicial review well past the boundaries set by Congress."

Christopher Hajec of the Immigration Reform Law Institute said "the majority used fancy footwork to get around a jurisdiction-stripping provision."

But, the court's "constitutional role is to respect, by its own free will, congressional preeminence in setting the bounds of its jurisdiction," Hajec said.

The decision overturned a U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit ruling reading the term "question of law" narrowly to find it had no jurisdiction to consider claims by Pablo Guerrero-Lasprilla and Ruben Ovalle. Both men, deported following drug convictions, can now have a federal court take a second look at whether they waited too long to reopen their cases.

The case is Guerrero-Lasprilla v. Barr, U.S., No. 18-776.

Pence says officials will weigh potential adjustments to social distancing guidelines (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 4:55 PM, Morgan Chalfant, 1762K] Video: HERE
Vice President Pence said Monday that the White House coronavirus task force would evaluate ways to potentially adjust recommendations for social distancing after the 15-day period specified in the initial guidelines expires next week.

"At the end of this 15 days, we're going to get with our health experts. We're going to evaluate ways in which we might be able to adjust that guidance for the American people," Pence told reporters at Federal Emergency Management Agency headquarters Monday when asked about whether the administration was considering relaxing the guidance in order to stimulate the U.S. economy.

"We'll look at where we are, and we'll evaluate based on our health experts what steps

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might be possible," Pence continued.

The vice president noted that the guidelines, which President Trump unveiled one week ago, were meant to flatten the curve of the spread of the coronavirus domestically.

Pence also said the federal government would issue guidance later Monday aimed at helping workers in critical sectors return to work after being exposed to COVID-19 if they don't have symptoms of the virus.

Pence's remarks came after Trump tweeted overnight that "we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself" and retweeted a number of supporters calling for Americans to get back to work amid the outbreak. The tweets were seen as a signal the president may be leaning toward easing the recommendations in order to help stem the economic damage.

The pandemic has taken a considerable toll on the economy, shuttering businesses and spurring mass layoffs across the country.

Trump last week recommended Americans avoid restaurants and bars, limit in-person gatherings to 10 people or fewer, and bypass nonessential travel for 15 days in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. The guidelines were described as a trial, and officials signaled they would evaluate them following the two-week period.

Separately, state and local officials have ordered closures of schools, businesses and other public gatherings in order to reduce the spread of the virus, restrictions that in some areas are expected to last weeks or months.

The decision about how quickly to reduce the federal guidelines has been a source of debate among those in and around the administration, with some arguing they should be relaxed after 15 days to help people in areas that have been less impacted by the virus return to work.

A move to relax the recommendations after the 15-day mark passes would likely put Trump at odds with public health experts who have advocated for Americans to practice social distancing for a longer period of time.

The number of coronavirus cases has exceeded 40,000 in the United States, marking a large increase over the past several days.

Trump team fiercely debates how long coronavirus restrictions should stay in place (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 3:51 PM, Brett Samuels and Morgan Chalfant, 1762K]
A high-stakes debate is playing out among key figures in President Trump's orbit over how quickly to loosen restrictions meant to combat the coronavirus.

A number of people around Trump have pushed for prioritizing the economy and sending people back to work as quickly as possible, particularly in less afflicted areas.

But Trump's own public health officials and some of his allies on Capitol Hill have warned against risking higher infection rates and deaths for the sake of boosting the economy in the short term.

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Sources close to the Trump administration described a “split” in the larger Trump World where some people around the president believe the federal government should ease recommendations on social distancing after the 15-day period while others favor waiting a few more weeks or taking even more dramatic action to stamp out the spread of the virus.

“I think there’s a recognition that there needs to be some sort of medium between listening to the doctors and listening to other experts as well,” the person said. “There really isn’t a perfect answer.”

There were more than 41,500 confirmed coronavirus cases in the U.S. as of Monday afternoon, a large percentage of them concentrated in New York. More than 500 people in the U.S. had died of the disease. The pandemic has resulted in unforeseen businesses closures and massive layoffs across the country.

On Monday, the camp in favor of kick-starting the economy as quickly as possible seemed to be winning out. Trump, apparently spurred on by commentary from Fox News host Steve Hilton, tweeted overnight that “we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself" and retweeted several supporters on Monday calling for Americans to get back to work.

Advisers and prominent commentators in conservative media lined up to voice concerns that the economic costs of maintaining restrictions had to be taken into consideration.

“In one week we need to be heading back to work, school, stores, restaurants and churches with new protocols in place,” Fox News host Laura Ingraham tweeted. “The risk if we don’t is that we lose far more in terms of death, pain and suffering than this pandemic will bring.”

Larry Kudlow, the White House’s top economic adviser, said the administration was discussing possible economic remedies and acknowledged “we’re going to have to make some difficult tradeoffs.”

“We can’t shut in the economy,” he said on Fox News. “The economic cost to individuals is just too great.”

Asked Monday whether the administration was considering relaxing the guidelines to stimulate the economy, Vice President Pence told reporters that the coronavirus task force would evaluate ways to potentially "adjust" the guidance after the 15-day period.

“At the end of this 15 days, we’re going to get with our health experts, we’re going to evaluate ways in which we might be able to adjust that guidance for the American people,” Pence told reporters after a teleconference with governors at FEMA headquarters. “We’ll look at where we are and we’ll evaluate based on our health experts, what steps might be possible.”

The White House has bolstered its team of economic advisers amid the pandemic, bringing on Kevin Hassett, Trump’s former chief economist, as a temporary adviser. Hassett last week suggested on CNN that the U.S. may have to consider sending Americans back to work at a certain point even if the pandemic hasn’t abated to avoid a Great Depression-like event.

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Trump also tapped Joseph Lavorgna, former chief economist for the Americas for Natixis, to a position on the White House National Economic Council where he will be responsible in part for studying the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak on the economy.

Social distancing policies put in place by local governments and backed by the federal government are intended to slow the virus's spread. This is seen as vitally important to prevent hospitals from being over-crowded with coronavirus victims. Fears about supply shortages in masks or ventilators have been widely reported.

Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, has been one of the most prominent members of the coronavirus task force who has advocated for drastic measures to stem the outbreak. He said Friday that Americans would likely need to stay home for several more weeks to blunt the spread of the virus.

"If you look at the trajectory of the curves of outbreaks in other areas, it's at least going to be several weeks," Fauci told NBC News. "I cannot see that all of a sudden next week or two weeks from now it's going to be over. I don't think there's a chance of that."

At the same time, the economic harm caused by the coronavirus and the shutting down of the economy is leading to deep fears about millions of job losses. Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin told GOP senators last week that it was possible unemployment could hit 20 percent, though he later backtracked somewhat by saying he was not offering a prediction.

Trump one week ago detailed recommendations urging Americans nationwide to avoid restaurants and bars, limit gatherings to 10 people or fewer and cancel nonessential travel for 15 days. The measures came as a handful of states and localities ordered schools and eating establishments to be closed and large events to be canceled. The federal government has ramped up testing for the virus in the days since, and the number of domestic cases have skyrocketed from a few thousand to more than 40,000.

Surgeon General Jerome Adams on Monday warned that not enough Americans were taking the guidance seriously.

Some argue that by loosening the social distancing recommendations sometime soon after the 15-day mark, the federal government would be allowing people, particularly in parts of the country that aren't seeing large numbers of cases, to begin returning to normal life.

One source close to the administration argued that the decision shouldn't be left entirely up to the public health officials because they are not experts on the economic effects of the virus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday is expected to unveil new guidance for people working in critical infrastructure sectors, including first responders, which will help people who have been exposed return to work more quickly by wearing masks.

But some of Trump's staunchest allies have cautioned against the public health risks of ignoring experts and shaking off social distancing recommendations before the virus is contained.

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Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) said Monday that he would urge the White House to follow the advice of Fauci and other medical experts and insisted that continuing with mitigation measures should be the priority to avoid overrun hospitals and catastrophic consequences.

“There is no functioning economy unless we control the virus,” Graham said.

Steve Bannon, the president’s former chief strategist, advocated on Sunday for an aggressive national shutdown to blunt the spread of the virus, “take the pain up front,” and hopefully shorten the amount of time businesses remain closed.

A similar debate is playing out across the country as governors who are imposing shelter-in-place advisories and ordering nonessential businesses to close are mulling how to keep their state economies from collapsing entirely.

New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D), who has emerged as the most visible Democrat leading the charge against the virus, told reporters at a news conference on Monday that he is already trying to plan for how to best wind down restrictions on workers.

“You have to walk and chew gum in life,” Cuomo said.

One consideration, he said, is that young people who are less vulnerable to the virus could return to their jobs sooner than other populations.

But Cuomo has been consistent in warning constituents that restrictions meant to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus could be in place for the foreseeable future, predicting last week that New York would see the peak of the virus in 45 days.

Trump, with an eye on November, may be less inclined to wait out the virus while the economy contracts and unemployment skyrockets.

“The economic future of America is always going to be right toward the front of a president’s decision-making,” one former Trump adviser said. “But in this case if we take the big, bold, dramatic action now, then we’ll put ourselves on course to have a nice rebound in advance of the fall. If we just try to flatten the curve, that’s just going to prolong the national pain.”

Trump considering loosening coronavirus guidelines amid growing economic fallout (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 4:03 PM, Jonathan Karl, Jordyn Phelps, Katherine Faulders, and John Santucci, 2182K] Video: HERE
There is an active debate within the White House – and among senior advisers on President Donald Trump’s coronavirus task force -- about loosening his guidelines for the public to help slow the spread of the coronavirus, multiple sources told ABC News Monday.

Some in the president’s inner circle are advocating for the guidelines on social distancing to be significantly scaled back with hopes of reviving the economy while others have warned that approach could quickly overload hospital systems around the country.

In a White House tasked with handling a pandemic crippling the nation, the factions are only growing. While Vice President Mike Pence’s team is leading the coronavirus task force,

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there is a also a pseudo-operation being led by the president's son-in-law and senior adviser Jared Kushner. A source familiar with the matter said that Kushner's team is largely focused on the supply-side elements of the crisis, working to coordinate with companies, manufactures, and FEMA on sourcing and supplying masks to states. It's unclear exactly which members are taking the different positions in the economic debate.

The president and Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, have both publicly acknowledged they disagree on some aspects of the government response, with Fauci often contradicting Trump and clarifying his comments.

Fauci said in an interview over the weekend that even though they disagree, Trump does listen to what he says.

"Well, that's pretty interesting because to [Trump's] credit, even though we disagree on some things, he listens," Fauci said when asked by Science Magazine how he's managing to not get fired. He goes his own way. He has his own style. But on substantive issues, he does listen to what I say."

"Well, I don't disagree in the substance. It is expressed in a way that I would not express it, because it could lead to some misunderstanding about what the facts are about a given subject," he said.

A senior administration official in favor of loosening guidelines, who spoke to ABC News on the condition of anonymity, counters that it's the president's job is to weigh all the factors. While doctors and public health officials are not wrong to raise the public health concerns, the president has to weigh those concerns against the economic crisis that is resulting from major sectors of the economy grinding to a halt amid the spreading pandemic, the official said.

This official pointed out that the overwhelming majority of people who get COVID-19 will fully recover and that the majority of deaths are among the elderly and those with underlying conditions.

The president's guidance, which he unveiled a week ago and called for the public to follow for a 15-day period, advises people to avoid social gatherings of more than 10 people, not to dine in restaurants or bars, and to work from home whenever possible.

The internal debate spilled into the public view with a tweet from President Trump just before midnight on Sunday night, warning that "WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF."

The president went on to send a number of retweets Monday morning supportive of the argument that the economic cost of extending strict social distancing guidance beyond the 15-day period is unaffordable.

The president's top economic adviser took to FOX News later in the day to echo the same message, declaring that "we can't shutter the economy."

"The president was right. The cure can't be worse than the disease, and we're going to

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have to make some difficult tradeoffs," Kudlow said.

Surgeon General Jerome Adams – a top member of the president's task force - went on NBC Monday morning to argue the opposing sentiment, warning that things are "going to get bad" this week and called it a "somber" occasion in America.

"I want America to understand, this week, it's going to get bad. And we really need to come together as a nation," Adams said in the interview. "Everyone needs to be taking the right steps right now and that means stay at home."

The Trump administration has said the CDC plans to update its guidelines on Monday, but the latest revision isn't likely to apply to the general public but rather health care workers and others in "critical infrastructure" jobs.

Vice President Pence announced in Sunday's briefing that the CDC rules for people working critical infrastructure jobs would "make it possible for people that have been exposed to return to work more quickly with, by wearing a mask for a certain period of time."

Contacted by ABC News, the CDC did not provide any additional information.

Hispanic Democrats demand funding for multilingual coronavirus messaging (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 11:35 AM, Rafael Bernal, 1762K]
A group of Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC) members asked Monday for Congress to fund coronavirus-response messaging in languages other than English.

In a letter to House and Senate leaders of both parties, the members asked "that any further legislation include robust funding for the development and dissemination of all official public health information, announcements, and proclamations in multiple languages on radio and television networks."

"Over the past several days, we have learned that our non-English speaking constituents have had limited access to reliable information concerning the COVID-19 response, including official documents, announcements and proclamations from local, state, and federal officials," the members wrote to Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.).

"The lack of information and prevalence of disinformation have demonstrated the urgent need for announcements to be disseminated effectively and in a multi-lingual way," they added.

The letter was signed by Reps. Vicente Gonzalez (Texas), Jesús García (Ill.), Ben Ray Luján (N.M), Jimmy Gomez (Calif.), Filemon Vela (Texas), Norma Torres (Calif.), Tony Cárdenas (Calif.), Debbie Mucarsel-Powell (Fla.), Sylvia Garcia (Texas), Darren Soto (Fla.), Ruben Gallego (Ariz.), Veronica Escobar (Texas), Raul Ruiz (Calif.), Nanette Diaz Barragán (Calif.), and Grace Napolitano (Calif.).

The response to the coronavirus crisis, and its accompanying public service announcements, has for the most part been delivered in English by the federal government,

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despite the around 25 million Americans who are not proficient in the English language.

"In the absence of medical treatments or vaccines, we know that one of the few means to halt the spread of the virus is through preventive actions by the public," wrote the CHC members.

"Therefore, local, state, and federal public officials must communicate clear and concise messages that are targeted to local audiences, available in the media they regularly utilize, and in the languages they primarily speak at home," they added.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) information is available online in Spanish and Simplified Chinese, but on a more limited basis than English-language information.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a language action plan that includes 19 widely-spoken languages, but it has not yet been fully activated to deal with the coronavirus response.

And non-English-language messaging has been slow to reach the communities it targets, increasing the chances of contagion among those populations.

In one case, the CHC's campaign arm, Bold PAC, made a federal one-page information sheet available in Spanish before the federal government published its own translation, a day after publishing the original in English.

In their letter, the CHC members ask for funding to be included not only to translate the materials, but to make them available through media consumed regularly by language-diverse populations.

"Reaching our non-English speaking communities will enable us to more effectively curb the spread of this virus," wrote the members.

White House: Mobile beds, faster tests coming (USA Today)
USA Today [3/22/2020 10:20 PM, Staff, 5611K] Video: HERE
President Donald Trump says he's ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ship mobile hospital centers to the hard-hit states of Washington, California and New York amid the coronavirus pandemic

FDA Warns Americans to Beware of Fake COVID-19 Test Kits (US News & World Report)
US News & World Report [3/22/2020 8:00 PM, Robert Preidt, 3020K]
Fake in-home test kits for coronavirus are being marketed in the United States and could pose serious health risks, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration says.

"We want to alert the American public that, at this time, the FDA has not authorized any test that is available to purchase for testing yourself at home for COVID-19," said FDA Commissioner Dr. Stephen Hahn and Associate Commissioner for Regulatory Affairs Judith McMeekin.

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They said the FDA sees the public health value in expanding availability of safe, accurate tests for COVID-19 that may include home collection and is actively working with test developers.

"Fraudulent health claims, tests and products can pose serious health risks," Hahn and McMeekin warned in an agency news release. "They may keep some patients from seeking care or delay necessary medical treatment."

If you think you have symptoms of COVID-19, the FDA said you should follow U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines and talk to your health care provider. He or she will advise you about whether you should get tested and how to receive an appropriate test.

"The FDA will take appropriate action to protect consumers from bad actors who take advantage of a crisis to deceive the public by marketing tests that pose risks to patient health," Hahn and McMeekin said. "This may include issuing warning letters, seizures or injunctions."

The agency has issued warning letters to companies selling and promoting fake test kits. It has also stepped up enforcement at ports of entry, including international mail facilities, to prevent fake kits from other countries from getting into the United States.

Consumers who know about fake test kits for COVID-19 should report them to the FDA, the agency said.

States see surge of scams, price-gouging tied to pandemic (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 11:49 AM, Reid Wilson, 1762K]
State law enforcement officers are seeing a surge of complaints about retailers hiking prices of essential goods and scammers preying on the elderly with fake messages about the coronavirus sweeping across the country.

In interviews, attorneys general across the country say their offices are being inundated with hundreds or thousands of new reports. In some cases, retailers and resellers are raising prices of basic supplies as Americans race to stock up.

"What we're hearing and seeing right now is an uptick in price gouging reports," said Connecticut Attorney General William Tong (D). "What's happening is we're seeing hand sanitizer for $20, $30 a bottle. We're seeing water priced at a much higher rate than we would normally see. We're seeing essential paper products, paper towels, toilet paper, six rolls for $30."

Tong's office has fielded more than 200 formal complaints, and his aides are looking into less formal complaints delivered through Facebook and Twitter messages.

In other cases, scammers are exploiting the loneliness created by social distancing to lure older people into handing over money, either for fake coronavirus cures or vaccines or by pretending to be from medical facilities in need of money.

Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry (R) said his office had heard of scammers who pretended to be from a hospital where a victim's grandson was being treated for the

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coronavirus; the scammers asked for money to ensure the grandson got a ventilator. Tong's office has received reports that scammers were offering fake coronavirus tests for hundreds or thousands of dollars.

"We should, when we catch some of these people, lock them up for the entire rest of their lives. This is no joke. This is the kind of thing that endangers people more," Landry said in an interview. "They affect people at their lowest points."

Several states have used the coronavirus pandemic to establish new hotlines and websites allowing consumers to report scams and gouging.

In Kentucky and Tennessee, the attorneys general contacted two brothers who had been stockpiling gloves and sanitizers along Interstate 75 with the intent to sell them later at excessive prices. The attorneys general convinced the brothers instead to donate their goods back to first responders; Kentucky's half of the loot arrived last week, distributed to health care workers in seven counties.

"It's unfortunate that we find ourselves in this circumstance. It's unfortunate that some people try to take advantage of this circumstance," Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron (R) said in an interview Monday.

Some states have been so overwhelmed by calls to consumer protection hotlines that they have recruited outside help. In Michigan, Attorney General Dana Nessel (D) got help from several state legislators and Rep. Elissa Slotkin (D), who answered consumer calls over the weekend.

Major online retailers like Amazon, eBay, Walmart and Facebook have become breeding grounds for resellers who markup essential goods in hopes of a quick profit, too. Several states are working with those companies to find and stamp out those who would profit from panic. In Missouri, Attorney General Eric Schmitt (R) said Friday his office had reached a deal with Amazon to monitor potential price gouging.

"When you have big marketplaces like Amazon or eBay or Facebook, we the office of the Attorney General are able to combat that, and we're working very closely with them," said Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro (D), whose office has fielded more than 1,700 price gouging complaints. "They have been responsive when we've asked them."

Shapiro is among a handful of attorneys general who have partnered with federal agencies and U.S. Attorneys offices in his state to monitor a growing number of cyber scams. He has established a state-federal task force with the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and the United States Attorney for the Western District of Pennsylvania.

Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody (R) launched her own efforts with the state's three U.S. attorneys to monitor new scams. Moody's office said Monday that about 40 percent of the price gouging complaints her office had received came from online offers. Moody also created a rapid response team to get in touch quickly with the businesses accused of unfair price hikes.

Some states are targeting prominent conspiracy theorists who have used the coronavirus pandemic to hawk their own fake cures. New York Attorney General Letitia James (D) last

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week ordered InfoWars founder Alex Jones and Newsmax host Wayne Allyn Root to stop selling products they have claimed will cure or prevent the virus. James and Missouri's Schmitt both ordered televangelist Jim Bakker to stop claiming his products offered a cure.

Several attorneys general said price gouging complaints could be difficult to prove, especially at times when demand spikes. In many cases, the retailer has to raise prices when a supplier increases wholesale prices. The retailer may not make any more money than before the price hike, but the consumer still suffers.

"Price gouging is a subjective test. We have to factor in market supply, demand, where the product is coming from," Landry said.

Law enforcement officials urged consumers to let state governments decide what amounts to an unlawful price hike, and to help identify potential scofflaws.

"What I keep telling consumers is don't get yourself caught up in doing math and figuring out the legal definition of price gouging. If something doesn't look right, just let us know and we'll do the work for you," Pennsylvania's Shapiro said.

In Kentucky, Cameron said: "The old adage, 'see something, say something' applies here."

How scammers are trying to exploit the pandemic (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 2:29 PM, David Morgan, 2394K]
The Justice Department announced its first enforcement action against alleged coronavirus fraud. It obtained a temporary restraining order Sunday against coronavirusmedicalkit.com, a website that claimed to offer consumers access to coronavirus vaccine kits.

There are currently no vaccines to treat this disease.

CBS News consumer investigative correspondent Anna Werner said the website claimed to offer vaccine kits from the World Health Organization, for a $4.95 shipping charge. "They said if you added water, it would work," Werner said. "Of course we know that there are no vaccine kits available.

"If you do happen to see one of these things, you can contact your state attorney general's office. But no, these are not vaccine kits."

Co-host Gayle King asked, "Are there any approved at-home testing kits anywhere that are legit?"

"No, there aren't," Werner replied. "It's important to make clear to people there are no at-home testing kits. The FDA has not authorized any home testing kits at all for use. If you see something that says, 'Hey, you can test yourself at home,' it's not a real deal here."

Werner noted some recent coronavirus-related scam products. "Customs and Border Protection has been tweeting photos of items that it has seized," said Werner. "One of them is sort of like a box of little vials [claiming to be] either at-home treatments or a treatment kit. The acting commissioner said on Twitter that police in the U.K. arrested a man for selling those kits."

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Also seized earlier this month: counterfeit COVID-19 test kits that came through Los Angeles International Airport, labeled as "purified water vials."

Werner said, "These are the kind of things that people, you might call them creative or just call them scammers frankly, are saying 'I can make a quick buck off of this. Sell something to people.' One of these things actually had what might be dangerous ingredients to it. So, there are dangers there, too."

Co-host Tony Dokoupil asked, "What are people listening to when it comes to robocalls?"

"The robocallers have jumped into this—I'm sure you're not surprised to hear this," Werner said. "They're saying, 'Hey, we can clean your home air ducts, your air filters, for coronavirus.' 'We also are going to help you with your student loan payments.' You've heard that one before. And even the social security scammers are jumping in and saying, 'Hey, there's going to be something with the coronavirus and your social security number.' So, be careful about these calls. If you get one of these calls, just hang up."

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

Trump Signs Executive Order Cracking Down On Price Gouging For Masks, Ventilators (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [3/23/2020 5:34 PM, William Davis, 566K]
President Donald Trump signed an executive order Monday to combat the hoarding and price gouging of items integral to the nation's fight against the coronavirus pandemic, including masks and ventilators, among other items.

"This sends a strong message – we will not let those hoarding vital supplies & price gougers to harm the health of America in this hour of need," White House Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham said.

The president officially announced the executive order during Monday's White House press briefing.

"We wanna prevent price gouging, and critical health and medical resources are going to be protected in every form," Trump said. "Under this directive, the secretary of Health and Human Services is authorized to designate essential health and medical supplies as scarce."

"Very simply, we will not allow anyone to exploit the suffering of American citizens for their own profit," Trump added.

The executive order specifically targets price gouging of N95 masks, which are considered critical in preventing the spread of the virus. Prices for the masks were going for as high as $1,000 on online retail stores, and sales of the mask were ultimately banned by E-Bay.

Democratic New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said this weekend that he's had trouble securing deals with companies for the masks, because companies continue to return and ask for more money from the state, according to USA Today.

"I'll contract with a company for 1,000 masks," Cuomo said. "They'll call back 20 minutes

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later and say, 'The price just went up,' because they had a better offer. I understand that. Other states who are desperate for these goods literally offer more money than we were paying. It's a race that's raising prices higher and higher."

We're going to come for you': Trump trade czar Peter Navarro warns medical supply 'hoarders' (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 1:29 PM, Katherine Doyle, 570K]
President Trump's top trade and manufacturing policy adviser took aim at medical supply brokers trying to sell critical items at vastly inflated prices.

"Brokers are offering millions of items, whether they are goggles, masks, or whatever, and you go through three different brokers, tracing to a warehouse in [Los Angeles] that's allegedly got ten million masks, and they want to charge you seven times what they cost," White House Director of Trade and Industrial Policy Peter Navarro said during a coronavirus press briefing on Sunday. "That's price gouging," he added.

"A message to the hoarders: If you've got any large quantities of materials that this country needs right now, get them to market or get them to us, we'll pay you a fair price," Navarro said. "But if you don't do that, we're going to come for you and make sure that doesn't happen in this country."

Navarro said that stopping brokers selling much-needed supplies far above their normal price would be a "good use of the Defense Production Act," which allows the president to force manufacturers to expand production of resources in short supply, among other powers.

Trump has resisted calls to directly invoke the Defense Production Act in response to the coronavirus outbreak.

Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Peter Gaynor said on CNN's State of the Union on Sunday that state officials should purchase needed items on the open market, and the agency would reimburse them.

Contending with these shortages, some governors have called for federal intervention.

"We are competing against other states. In some ways, we're savaging other states," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said at a press conference Sunday, calling price gouging, "a tremendous problem" and saying the White House should nationalize certain industries in response.

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker, a Democrat, compared the situation to the "wild west" on CNN's State of the Union on Sunday. States are competing against one another and against other countries for medical supplies, Pritzker said, and they are overpaying for them as a result.

White House Not Using Defense Powers To Boost Medical Supplies (Public Radio WNMU)
Public Radio WNMU [3/23/2020 2:37 PM, Camila Domonoske]
The medical community is sounding increasingly urgent alarms about shortages of masks, gloves and ventilators — essential supplies in the fight against the coronavirus.

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Meanwhile, President Trump has issued contradictory statements about whether his administration is ordering private companies to ramp up production of those items.

Here's an updated Q&A on the Defense Production Act, the invoked-but-not-really-invoked law at the heart of the confusion.

Is the White House actually using the Defense Production Act?

The president has invoked the act, called the DPA, and used it to give broad powers to the secretary of health and human services. But five days later, those powers have not actually been used.

Some governors are calling for the law to be used at once, because states are currently scrambling over scarce resources in a free-for-all.

What does the DPA allow the White House to do?

The White House could:

Give government orders top priority — so when there aren't enough gloves to go around, for instance, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention gets its gloves first.
Distribute limited resources according to national interests. For instance, the government decides how many gloves go to each state.

Order manufacturers to produce a certain item and take control of the supply chain to enable maximum production of that product.
The law also grants other powers, like giving manufacturers incentives to make certain products in the U.S. and allowing cooperative efforts that would otherwise violate antitrust laws.

Is it unusual to use the DPA?

Parts of the DPA are used all the time. For instance, the departments of Defense and Homeland Security routinely use it to force a business to fill their orders first. The Federal Emergency Management Agency also uses that authority.

Other parts have not been used in decades — like the authority to order manufacturers to produce essential items, or to allow the government to take control of supply chains.

Without the DPA being invoked, what's happening to the supply of medical goods?

Businesses that make medical equipment are already working to increase their production to meet demand. 3M has doubled its output of masks. The ventilator maker Philips is planning to quadruple production, but that will take months.

Some businesses — from fashion companies to furniture makers — are starting to produce masks. General Motors is working with a ventilator maker to support its efforts to ramp up production.

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These efforts are all voluntary.

What would happen if the White House started to use the DPA?

HHS could immediately step in to manage the distribution of existing resources.

It could take longer for production increases to happen. Existing medical manufacturers are already trying to maximize production. Converting new factories to make medical equipment can't happen overnight, and all the plants would be limited by the availability of supplies and raw materials.

But the DPA could be used to direct all available resources toward those manufacturing needs. It would also allow defense contractors to shift resources away from their military orders and toward medical needs.

Why hasn't the White House used the DPA authorities it has invoked?

Trump said Sunday that he wanted to avoid "nationalizing our businesses," citing the example of Venezuela, which routinely seized private companies without compensation. That's very different than the authorities granted under the DPA, which do not give the U.S. government ownership of a business.

Trump privately says he's facing pressure over refusal to use Defense Production Act (CNN)
CNN [3/23/2020 10:44 AM, Kaitlan Collins, 5551K]
President Donald Trump has told people around him that he's under pressure to utilize the authorities given to him under the Defense Production Act, after he spent the weekend fielding criticism over why he hasn't mandated that private companies mass produce needed medical supplies during the coronavirus pandemic.

On Sunday, Trump's coronavirus task force had a briefing scheduled for 4:30 p.m. ET, but the President wanted it moved to "prime time," according to two people familiar with what happened. The White House pushed the briefing until 5:00 p.m., then 5:30 p.m. and the President finally entered the room nearly an hour and a half after it was initially scheduled to begin.

Trump told aides he wanted to be at the microphone during optimal viewing hours -- and his appearance came after he spent the day paying close attention to appeals from New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who called on him to use the Defense Production Act instead of having states get into "a mad bidding war" over supplies.

Trump signed the act that grants him authority to direct private companies to ramp up production of needed supplies last week, but has refused to wield his powers for now.

Shortly after announcing he would be invoking the Defense Production Act, the White House received pushback from business leaders who expressed concern that the act which could cause major unforeseen problems, including profit loss.

A source familiar with these closed door conversations described the sentiment as "just tells us what we need to do and we'll do it," as long as the Defense Production Act was not in

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use. Trump confirmed this Sunday, saying when the war powers act was announced "it sent tremors" through the business community.

Trump appeared to paraphrase what some have asked him about how the act will be used.

"What are you doing? ... You're going to take away companies? You're going to tell companies what to do?" he said, appearing to paraphrase the questions he received.

There has been an internal divide in the West Wing over whether to move forward with it or to continue to let companies voluntarily speed up production without orders from the federal government. Health care providers have bluntly warned they do not have the protective gear or medical equipment to treat an influx of coronavirus patients, and state officials have said attempts to get more supplies has turned into a free-for-all.

The divide over how to proceed was on full display when Peter Navarro, Trump's trade adviser who is not on the coronavirus task force, stepped up to the microphone Sunday. Navarro was one official who urged Trump to sign the Defense Production Act initially, but has argued doing that has given the administration leverage over private companies and the next step is not necessary yet.

"We're getting what we need without putting the heavy hand of government down," Navarro said Sunday.

Navarro has taken a leading role in coordinating the supply chain with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which he acknowledged to CNN.

"My job at the White House now is to help marry the full force of the federal government with the full power of private enterprise to mobilize our industrial base and thereby quickly get what we need, most urgently Personal Protective Equipment such as masks and gloves and testing kit element like swabs," Navarro told CNN.

"It's been enormously helpful that the President signed the DPA last week. We've seen a noticeable uptick in the intensity of that mobilization, and my office is using the DPA every day as quiet leverage to turbocharge the great outpouring of volunteer efforts from the business community," he added.

But it's still not clear that the administration has a well thought out strategy to get private companies to voluntarily produce enough medical supplies without purchasing guarantees.

While several forces inside the White House, including Larry Kudlow, have told the President he does not need to utilize the Defense Production Act, others have argued he should before it's too late -- a line of thinking that has stayed with the president in recent days.

Trump himself has caused confusion over the process. In a briefing Friday, he argued he had already used the act, though aides later clarified he had only signed it and the status had remained unchanged, which his FEMA administrator Pete Gaynor confirmed during an interview on CNN Sunday.

"If it comes to a point we have to pull the lever, we will," Gaynor said.

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Two people familiar with the President's thinking said he's now languishing in a place where neither side is satisfied by his moves on Defense Production Act. Those who wanted him to sign the act aren't pleased because he did but isn't using it. And the people who didn't want him to sign it aren't because he did, while holding out hope he won't actually use it.

FDA relaxes rules to boost auto companies making ventilators for coronavirus effort (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 3:17 PM, Tim Pearce, 570K]
The Food and Drug Administration temporarily relaxed regulations on manufacturing regulators to give private companies more flexibility to build medical supplies needed to combat the coronavirus.

Ford, General Motors, and Tesla are adapting their facilities from building automobiles to pumping out regulators for hospitals struggling under an influx of COVID-19 patients. The federal government is simultaneously easing regulations to help the car companies pass through the bureaucratic process to make medical supplies faster, according to Axios. This includes easing restrictions on sourcing materials, allowing companies to buy ventilator components from a broader range of suppliers.

"We believe this approach will help manufacturers that want to add production lines or manufacture at alternative sites which may have different manufacturing equipment to increase manufacturing capacity," the FDA said about easing some policy guidelines.

President Trump tweeted about the auto companies' efforts on Sunday, announcing that his administration was rolling back regulations to help the companies start production on regulators more quickly.

"Ford, General Motors and Tesla are being given the go ahead to make ventilators and other metal products, FAST!" Trump tweeted. "Go for it auto execs, lets see how good you are?"

Auto companies have taken a financial hit because of the coronavirus pandemic. Demand for cars has sunk as people have stayed home as they abide by social distancing regulations.

Breakthrough' self-swab test kits coming soon, coronavirus task force coordinator says (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 8:41 PM, Cassidy Morrison, 570K]
The coronavirus task force response coordinator said Monday that new self-swab coronavirus tests will become available later this week.

"There was a breakthrough today for those of you waiting for 'self-swabbing' options. Those are going to be available some time later this week to be able for individuals to do their own test," Deborah Birx said during Monday's White House press briefing.

So far, over 250,000 people have been given coronavirus tests and have received their results, but there is still a widespread shortage of diagnostic tests. Self-swab tests would allow people to use a nasal swab while in their homes self-isolating. They would then bring

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the sample to a clinic or drive-through test site and receive their results that same day.

“This will expedite the testing process, of course, but it will also reduce the risk to healthcare providers for exposure to the coronavirus, and it’ll minimize the drain on personal protective equipment,” Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

Healthcare workers, even if they have minimal exposure to potential infection, need to wear protective masks and full-body covering. Hospitals and clinics are already facing a severe shortage of required protective equipment. In fact, Dr. Craig Smith, chairman of the department of surgery at New York-Presbyterian reported Friday that protective mask consumption at the hospital has increased tenfold and that reserves are dwindling.

“NYP normally uses 4,000 non-N95 masks per day. Currently, NYP is consuming 40,000 such masks per day, which is estimated to reach 70,000 per day,” Smith said. “The entire United States strategic reserve holds only 75 million masks.”

While FEMA is in the midst of distributing about 8 million N95 protective masks and 13.3 million surgical masks, according to President Trump, physicians worry that increased manufacturing and distribution could come too late for many healthcare workers.

“We’re told that manufacturing is beginning to accelerate, but that relief is weeks away at best,” Smith said.

U.S. Coronavirus Cases reach 35,000, Trump Signs ‘Major’ Disaster Declarations (US News & World Report)
US News & World Report [3/23/2020 9:07 AM, Cecelia Smith-Schoenwalder, 3020K]
Health officials are reporting more than 35,000 cases of the coronavirus in the U.S. and roughly 470 deaths, according to researchers.

At least seven states have seen more than 1,000 cases: Washington, New York, California, New Jersey, Illinois, Michigan and Florida.

Last week, President Donald Trump released coronavirus guidelines that were set to last 15 days. The suggestions include limiting gatherings to 10 people or fewer. Trump said on Twitter Sunday night that a decision as to whether to extend the timeline would come at the end of the period, which is next week, and he warned that "we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself."

Trump activated the National Guard in Washington, New York and California and approved the states’ "major" disaster declarations. He said medical facilities will also be built in the three states.

As of Sunday, at least eight states have ordered residents to stay home, shelter-in-place or stop non-essential travel: Delaware, Ohio, Louisiana, New Jersey, California, New York, Illinois and Connecticut.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin on Sunday said lockdowns of the public are likely to last until early June.

Despite California’s shelter in place order, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti said that

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outdoor areas were packed over the weekend and announced the closure of the city's parks.

"This weekend we saw too many people packing beaches, trails and parks. So we are closing sports and recreation at @LACityParks and closing parking at city beaches. That doesn't mean gather elsewhere. This is serious. Stay home and save lives," he tweeted on Sunday night.

Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky on Sunday became the first senator to test positive for the virus.

Trump tweeted on Sunday night: "My friend (always there when I've needed him!), Senator @RandPaul, was just tested 'positive' from the Chinese Virus. That is not good! He is strong and will get better. Just spoke to him and he was in good spirits."

Also in the Senate, Democrats blocked the third coronavirus stimulus package from advancing on Sunday. The nearly $2 trillion measure includes direct payments to Americans, relief for small businesses, loans to struggling industries like airlines and emergency aid to hospitals.

The Virus Can Be Stopped, but Only With Harsh Steps, Experts Say (New York Times)
New York Times [3/22/2020 6:00 PM, Donald G. McNeil Jr, 23673K]
Terrifying though the coronavirus may be, it can be turned back. China, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan have demonstrated that, with furious efforts, the contagion can be brought to heel.

Whether they can keep it suppressed remains to be seen. But for the United States to repeat their successes will take extraordinary levels of coordination and money from the country's leaders, and extraordinary levels of trust and cooperation from citizens. It will also require international partnerships in an interconnected world.

There is a chance to stop the coronavirus. This contagion has a weakness.

Although there are incidents of rampant spread, as happened on the cruise ship Diamond Princess, the coronavirus more often infects clusters of family members, friends and work colleagues, said Dr. David L. Heymann, who chairs an expert panel advising the World Health Organization on emergencies.

No one is certain why the virus travels in this way, but experts see an opening nonetheless. "You can contain clusters," Dr. Heymann said. "You need to identify and stop discrete outbreaks, and then do rigorous contact tracing."

But doing so takes intelligent, rapidly adaptive work by health officials, and near-total cooperation from the populace. Containment becomes realistic only when Americans realize that working together is the only way to protect themselves and their loved ones.

In interviews with a dozen of the world's leading experts on fighting epidemics, there was wide agreement on the steps that must be taken immediately.

Those experts included international public health officials who have fought AIDS, malaria,

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tuberculosis, flu and Ebola; scientists and epidemiologists; and former health officials who led major American global health programs in both Republican and Democratic administrations.

Americans must be persuaded to stay home, they said, and a system put in place to isolate the infected and care for them outside the home. Travel restrictions should be extended, they said; productions of masks and ventilators must be accelerated, and testing problems must be resolved.

But tactics like forced isolation, school closings and pervasive GPS tracking of patients brought more divided reactions.

It was not at all clear that a nation so fundamentally committed to individual liberty and distrustful of government could learn to adapt to many of these measures, especially those that smack of state compulsion.

“The American way is to look for better outcomes through a voluntary system,” said Dr. Luciana Borio, who was director of medical and biodefense preparedness for the National Security Council before it was disbanded in 2018.

“I think you can appeal to people to do the right thing.”

In the week since the interviews began, remarkable changes have come over American life. State governments are telling residents they must stay home. Nonessential businesses are being shuttered.

The streets are quieter than they have been in generations, and even friends keep a wary distance. What seemed unthinkable just a week ago is rapidly becoming the new normal.

What follows are the recommendations offered by the experts interviewed by The Times.

Scientists must be heard

The White House holds frequent media briefings to describe the administration’s progress against the pandemic, often led by President Trump or Vice President Mike Pence, flanked by a rotating cast of officials.

Many experts, some of whom are international civil servants, declined to speak on the record for fear of offending the president. But they were united in the opinion that politicians must step aside and let scientists both lead the effort to contain the virus and explain to Americans what must be done.

Just as generals take the lead in giving daily briefings in wartime — as Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf did during the Persian Gulf war — medical experts should be at the microphone now to explain complex ideas like epidemic curves, social distancing and off-label use of drugs.

The microphone should not even be at the White House, scientists said, so that briefings of historic importance do not dissolve into angry, politically charged exchanges with the press corps, as happened again on Friday.

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Instead, leaders must describe the looming crisis and the possible solutions in ways that will win the trust of Americans.

Above all, the experts said, briefings should focus on saving lives and making sure that average wage earners survive the coming hard times — not on the stock market, the tourism industry or the president's health. There is no time left to point fingers and assign blame.

"At this point in the emergency, there's little merit in spending time on what we should have done or who's at fault," said Adm. Tim Ziemer, who was the coordinator of the President's Malaria Initiative from 2006 until early 2017 and led the pandemic response unit on the National Security Council before its disbanding.

"We need to focus on the enemy, and that's the virus."

Stop transmission between cities

The next priority, experts said, is extreme social distancing.

If it were possible to wave a magic wand and make all Americans freeze in place for 14 days while sitting six feet apart, epidemiologists say, the whole epidemic would sputter to a halt.

The virus would die out on every contaminated surface and, because almost everyone shows symptoms within two weeks, it would be evident who was infected. If we had enough tests for every American, even the completely asymptomatic cases could be found and isolated.

The crisis would be over.

Obviously, there is no magic wand, and no 300 million tests. But the goal of lockdowns and social distancing is to approximate such a total freeze.

To attempt that, experts said, travel and human interaction must be reduced to a minimum.

Italy moved incrementally: Officials slowly and reluctantly closed restaurants, churches and museums, and banned weddings and funerals. Nonetheless, the country's death count continues to rise.

The United States is slowly following suit. International flights are all but banned, but not domestic ones. California has ordered all residents to stay at home; New York was to shutter all nonessential businesses on Sunday evening.

But other states have fewer restrictions, and in Florida, for days spring break revelers ignored government requests to clear the beaches.

On Friday, Dr. Anthony S. Fauci, chief medical adviser to the White House Coronavirus Task Force, said he advocated restrictive measures all across the country.

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In contrast to the halting steps taken here, China shut down Wuhan — the epicenter of the nation's outbreak — and restricted movement in much of the country on Jan. 23, when the country had a mere 500 cases and 17 deaths.

Its rapid action had an important effect: With the virus mostly isolated in one province, the rest of China was able to save Wuhan.

Even as many cities fought their own smaller outbreaks, they sent 40,000 medical workers into Wuhan, roughly doubling its medical force.

In a vast, largely closed society, it can be difficult to know what is happening on the ground, and there is no guarantee that the virus won't roar back as the Chinese economy restarts.

But the lesson is that relatively unaffected regions of the United States will be needed to help rescue overwhelmed cities like New York and Seattle. Keeping these areas at least somewhat free of the coronavirus means enacting strict measures, and quickly.

[Editorial note: consult source link for extended commentary]

Coronavirus Pandemic Is Accelerating, WHO's Tedros Says (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 2:02 PM, Thomas Mulier and Corinne Gretler, 6400K] Video: HERE
It took two months to reach 100,000 coronavirus cases and just two weeks to get to 200,000. It only took four days for the tally to reach 300,000, a clear sign the pandemic is accelerating, the World Health Organization said.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said it's "heartbreaking" that the disease is present in almost every country in the world now.

Making people stay at home and distance themselves from each other are defensive moves and need to be paired with more aggressive measures such as testing every suspected case, isolating infected people and quarantining close contacts of patients with Covid-19, he said.

"You can't win a football game only by defending," he said. "To win, we need to attack."

Countries are justifiably concerned about the economic effects of lockdowns, which are very difficult to sustain, said Mike Ryan, head of the WHO's health emergencies program. While governments buy time through such measures, they should try to be more aggressive in testing suspected cases and isolating patients, he said.

Japan and the International Olympics Committee will probably make a decision on the Tokyo games very soon, Ryan said. "We have every confidence they will not proceed with the games should it be a danger to athletes or spectators."

WHO chief: 'Pandemic is accelerating' (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 12:27 PM, Reid Wilson, 1762K]
The director-general of the World Health Organization said Monday that the coronavirus pandemic is spreading at an increasingly rapid pace as he called for cooperation from the world's wealthiest nations to fight the outbreak.

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At a press briefing Monday in Geneva, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said more than 350,000 cases had been confirmed around the world.

"The pandemic is accelerating," Tedros said. "We need to attack the virus with aggressive and targeted tactics."

More than 15,000 people have died worldwide, including at least 200 in the United States.

Tedros said Monday that it took 67 days to confirm the first hundred thousand cases, 11 days to confirm the second hundred thousand cases and just four days to confirm the third hundred thousand cases.

He added that it's essential for the world's wealthiest nations to work together to combat the virus, a comment that seemed aimed at a growing feud between the United States and China.

President Trump in recent days has increasingly sought to blame China for the spread of the virus, while Chinese officials have spread baseless rumors about the United States.

"We need unity in the G-20 countries," Tedros said Monday, referring to the Group of 20. "Political commitment at the G-20 level means a very strong solidarity that can help us to move forward and fight this pandemic in the strongest terms possible."

Defense Department reports jump in coronavirus cases and one death (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 12:50 PM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]
The number of military members infected by the coronavirus nearly doubled since Friday to 133, with hospitalizations rising from one to seven. The first death was also reported, a contractor in Crystal City, Virginia.

As of Friday, 67 members of the military were known to be infected with the virus. Rising numbers reflect increased testing as thousands more Department of Defense personnel remain in quarantine and self-isolation at military installations worldwide.

More than 1,300 civilians, passengers from the cruise ship Grand Princess, remain quarantined at four military bases in the United States.

The Department of Defense contractor who died of COVID-19 Saturday worked for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. His co-workers have been teleworking.

The DOD's breakdown of positive cases, including a correction for dependents, includes 133 members of the military, 44 civilians, 35 dependents, and 31 contractors. The number of dependents as reported Friday was 26.

The Pentagon reported recoveries of four members of the military and one civilian. Fifteen total individuals remain hospitalized.

On Friday, two groups of Americans in Honduras, including a U.S. women's football team, returned on a C-17 and C-130 from Soto Cano Air Base, where the U.S. maintains a military

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presence. Both were scheduled to land at Joint Base Charleston, according to United States Southern Command.

In support of domestic COVID-19 response efforts, Navy hospital ship USNS Mercy deployed Monday from San Diego, California.

The Army Corps of Engineers also began a Federal Emergency Management Agency assignment to plan medical facility shortfalls across the country, and the U.S. Army activated 10 units at FEMA regional headquarters to coordinate federal military assistance requests.

The Air Force also flew an en-route patient staging system to the Italian Ministry of Defense to help that country support up to 40 patients in a 24-hour period.

Trump weighs restarting economy despite warnings from U.S. public health officials (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 8:06 PM, Josh Dawsey, Yasmeen Abutaleb, Jeff Stein, John Wagner, 12625K] Video: HERE
President Trump on Monday said he is considering scaling back steps to constrain the spread of the coronavirus in the next week or two because of concerns that the impact on the economy has become too severe.

But loosening restrictions on social distancing and similar measures soon probably would require him to override the internal warnings of senior U.S. health officials, including Anthony S. Fauci, who have said that the United States has not yet felt the worst of the pandemic, according to several people with knowledge of the internal deliberations.

Trump said at a news conference Monday night that at some point soon the damage being done to the economy could be worse than the threat of the virus spreading further. He said the decision could be based geographically with areas of the country with a low number of positive cases moving back to a normal routine while areas such as New York remain under restrictions.

“America will again — and soon — be open for business,” he said. “Very soon, a lot sooner than three or four months that somebody was suggesting. A lot sooner. We cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself.”

When asked if he would make the decision to loosen social-distancing recommendations even if it went against the advice of federal public health officials, Trump said: “If it was up to the doctors they might say shut down the entire world.”

Trump later said he would consider the advice of Fauci and other public health officials before making a decision.

He said any decision would come when what the White House has dubbed “15 Days to Slow the Spread” ends March 30 and that the restrictions could continue for another week or more but not for months.

“This could create a much bigger problem than the problem you started off with,” the president told reporters.

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He also compared the effort to combat the virus to auto accidents.

“You look at automobile accidents, which are far greater than any numbers we are talking about,” Trump says. “That doesn’t mean we are going to tell everybody no driving with cars.”

Fauci, the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and a member of the president’s coronavirus task force, and other leading public health experts have told administration officials and Republican lawmakers that prematurely scaling back social-distancing measures would hamper efforts to mitigate the virus and would devastate hospitals, according to the people with knowledge of the conversations, who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe the private deliberations. More than 40,000 people in the United States have tested positive for the coronavirus, a number expected to significantly increase in the coming days and potentially overwhelm the nation’s health-care infrastructure.

But the push to reopen parts of the economy has gained traction among some Republican lawmakers in both the Senate and the House, said two people with knowledge of the matter.

Conservative economists Steven Moore and Art Laffer have been lobbying the White House for more than a week to consider scaling back the recommendation that restaurants, stores and other gathering spots be closed, although exactly what that would entail remains unclear. Leading Wall Street and conservative media figures have also embraced the idea.

Trump has begun canvassing his advisers, GOP senators and other allies about what his course of action should be, according to a senior administration official. He is worried about the impact of soaring unemployment numbers and severe economic contraction on his 2020 reelection bid, and fielded phone calls for much of the weekend from alarmed business leaders. He remains fixated on the plummeting stock market, is chafing at the idea of the country remaining closed until the summer and growing tired of talking only about the coronavirus, one person said.

Three people who have recently spoken with the White House economic team, including Moore, confirmed the growing push for restoring normalcy to the U.S. economy and returning workers to their jobs.

Trump signaled his concerns with the outbreak restrictions and the economy in a tweet late Sunday night.

“WE CANNOT LET THE CURE BE WORSE THAN THE PROBLEM ITSELF,” Trump said. “AT THE END OF THE 15 DAY PERIOD, WE WILL MAKE A DECISION AS TO WHICH WAY WE WANT TO GO!”

Asked about Trump’s tweet, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) characterized it Monday as part of a scattershot response to the crisis.

“The president will not take responsibility,” she said. “He’s a notion-monger, just tossing out things that have no relationship to a well-coordinated science-based government-wide

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response to this. Thank God for the governors, who are taking the leads in their states, and for some of the people in the administration, who speak truth to power."

Some Republicans also oppose changing course.

"It would be a major mistake to suggest any change of course when it comes to containment," Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (S.C.), a close ally of Trump, said in an interview. "I just spoke with Dr. Fauci — he believes that, if anything, we should be more aggressive and do more . . . You can't have a functioning economy if you have hospitals overflowing. People aren't going to go to work like that."

One senior administration official said that there is a widespread understanding among government officials about the need to reopen the economy but that proposals have not yet been presented to Trump. The administration has looked at options such as whether people can go back to work if they are able to avoid public transportation, or if they can return to their jobs if they are not in areas with high infection rates.

Internally, National Economic Council Director Larry Kudlow, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, and officials from the Office of Management and Budget are pushing to get the economy back on track as quickly as possible, according to people familiar with the matter.

"The president is right. The cure can't be worse than the disease," Kudlow said on Fox News on Monday. "And we're going to have to make some difficult trade-offs."

One option under consideration is a gradual scaling back of current restrictions, where people younger than 40 who are healthy go back to work on a certain date, followed by people ages 40 to 50, according to one person briefed on the discussions.

"You have a classic case of the public health people saying, 'We have to keep everyone sequestered for as long as this takes without any regard to the economic cost.' The economics team is saying, 'If this lasts seven to 10 weeks, there won't be much of an economy to save. From my sources, the view in the White House is shifting toward getting the economy reopened," Moore said. "There has been a pivot."

Moore added: "I'm not in any way disparaging the public health people. They are vital to this process. But you can't have a policy that says we're going to save every human life at any cost, no matter how many trillions of dollars you're talking about."

Health officials have said there needs to be some flexibility on the restrictions even as they have argued for robust social-distancing measures to be put in place.

"There is a discussion and a delicate balance about what's the overall impact of shutting everything down completely for an indefinite period of time. So, there's a compromise," Fauci told Science magazine in a recent interview. "If you knock down the economy completely and disrupt infrastructure, you may be causing health issues, unintended consequences, for people who need to be able to get to places and can't. You do the best you can."

While Trump has focused on the 15-day timeline, health experts said that is not expected to be enough time to defeat the virus's spread.

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Hospitals have been sounding the alarm that they are facing severe shortages of protective equipment and ventilators to treat increasing numbers of patients. Cases in the United States are still rapidly increasing and have not yet reached their peak. The nation still does not have comprehensive data about the spread of the virus, its mortality rate, or data about available intensive care unit beds, ventilators and other hospital equipment.

Public health experts are strongly warning against the idea of loosening social distancing measures. Marc Lipsitch, an epidemiology professor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of Harvard's Center for Communicable Disease Dynamics, said "every well-informed infectious epidemiologist I know of" believes the United States should be tightening the restrictions.

"We haven't yet even seen signs that the growth is slowing, much less reversing. Now is the time to tighten restrictions on contacts that could transmit the virus, not loosen them," Lipsitch said. "If we let up now we can be virtually certain that health care will be overwhelmed in many if not all parts of the country. This is the view of every well-informed infectious epidemiologist I know of."

But pressure is also mounting on Trump from top business leaders and conservative media outlets alarmed about the effect on the economy. James Bullard, president of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, warned Sunday that the unemployment rate in the nation could reach 30 percent in the second quarter amid the outbreak. The stock market, a key selling point of Trump's reelection bid, has been floundering.

Conservatives close to Trump and numerous administration officials have been circulating an article by Richard A. Epstein of the Hoover Institution, titled "Coronavirus Perspective," that plays down the extent of the spread and the threat.

Some Wall Street figures have begun calling for measures to mitigate the economic impact of the public health response to the pandemic.

"Extreme measures to flatten the virus 'curve' is sensible — for a time — to stretch out the strain on health infrastructure," Lloyd Blankfein, former chief executive of Goldman Sachs, said on Twitter. "But crushing the economy, jobs and morale is also a health issue — and beyond. Within a very few weeks let those with a lower risk to the disease return to work."

Delta to Park Half of Fleet on $2 Billion Sales Drop (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 1:11 PM, Mary Schlangenstein, 6400K]
Delta Air Lines Inc. will park more than 600 planes, or about half its fleet, as it cuts flying capacity 70% amid collapsing travel demand from the coronavirus pandemic.

Revenue this month is expected to drop by almost $2 billion from a year earlier, with April projected to be even worse, Chief Executive Officer Ed Bastian told employees Wednesday. About 10,000 Delta workers have applied for voluntary leave since the carrier made it available.

"Cash preservation remains our top financial priority right now," Bastian said in a memo released by Delta. "Making swift decisions now to reduce the losses and preserve cash will provide us the resources to rebound from the other side of this crisis and protect Delta's

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future."

Delta fell 28% to $22.89 at 3:43 p.m. in New York, after earlier falling as much as 40%.

The Treasury Department will propose $50 billion in secured lending for airlines as part of a broader economic stimulus plan to ease the effects of coronavirus, rejecting the industry's request that the package include nearly $30 billion in grants, according to a document obtained by Bloomberg News. "Constructive discussions" with the White House and Congress have fueled optimism that the industry will secure government support, Bastian said. The $50 billion plan includes both passenger and cargo carriers.

Carrier Cuts

Delta's actions added to another round of cutbacks by U.S. carriers that have been caught off guard by how swiftly demand deteriorated. JetBlue Airways Corp., Allegiant Airlines and United Airlines Holdings Inc. have announced additional or new reductions since Tuesday. Carriers battered by the loss of travel also have had to cut fares and refund billions as reservations are canceled.

At Delta, international capacity will be slashed more than 80% over the next two to three months. All Delta officers will take a 50% pay cut through June 30, with a 25% reduction for company directors and managing directors. New aircraft deliveries are being deferred, along with nearly all other capital spending as it seeks $4 billion in cash savings in the second quarter.

"I know everyone is concerned about the security of your jobs and pay," Bastian said. "Given the uncertainty about the duration of this crisis, we are not yet at a point to make any decisions."

Changes in pay rates or jobs will be "the absolute last thing we would do, and only if necessary to secure Delta's long-term future," he said.

The carrier also will retire older aircraft sooner than it had planned, including Boeing Co. MD-88s and MD-90s with averages ages of 29 and 23 years, respectively, and some Boeing 767s. Delta had 47 MD-88s at the end of 2019 and 30 MD-90s.

82% Plunge

JetBlue is paring capacity by 40% in April and May, with "substantial cuts" expected in the two months after that. Average daily bookings and ancillary fees have tumbled 82% this month from a year earlier to below $4 million, while the airline issues $20 million a day in credits for trip cancellations, executives of the carrier said Wednesday.

United said Tuesday it would slash international flying by 85%, the most among U.S. carriers, while reducing service in the U.S. and Canada by 42%. The cuts expanded moves United took to reduce flying just days ago. It's also talking with labor groups on ways to reduce payroll spending and has reduced salaries of corporate officers by about half.

Allegiant Travel Co., parent of Allegiant Airlines, trimmed capacity 15% for April and May --

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a figure it expects to grow to as much as 35% going forward -- and halted new hiring. Construction of a Florida resort complex is being halted, the company said Wednesday.

US airlines drafting plans for potential shutdown: report (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 10:53 PM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]
U.S. airlines are drafting plans for a potential voluntary or government-ordered shutdown of passenger flights, The Wall Street Journal reported Monday night.

Industry and federal officials told the Journal that no final decisions have been made by the carriers or the White House, while airlines currently struggle to operate with limited passengers.

Officials also said other options were under consideration to prevent a shutdown, but the spreading pandemic has made the shut down seem more unavoidable to airline officials, pilot-union leaders and federal transportation officials, according to the Journal.

The Federal Aviation Administration officials are concerned that the virus will spread among agency controllers and technicians as almost a dozen of traffic-control facilities have had to cease operations temporarily after positive cases.

The U.S. airlines have already been hit financially from the virus as most international flights have been canceled and plans have been announced to reduce domestic flights by as much as 40 percent. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) reported an 80 percent drop in travelers Sunday compared to the same day last year.

Carriers, like American Airlines and United Airlines, have been forced to cancel more than 40 percent of their flights Monday because of a lack of passengers, according to Flightaware.com.

An industry official told the Journal that the airlines would “definitely prefer” if the government initiated a shutdown somewhat because they could use it as leverage during calls for federal aid.

But President Trump and his advisers have been reportedly hesitant to issue an order to stop commercial flights partly due to the fact that these aircrafts also carry U.S. mail and essential cargo shipments.

One option for the government to continue cargo shipments is to use portions of the Civil Reserve Air Fleet, which are commercial jets for the Pentagon to use during national emergencies. The fleet would need to be activated by the Pentagon or the White House.

The Pentagon and the White House were not immediately available for comment.

Officials told the newspaper that implementation of any shutdown would take several days.

Several states have issued stay-at-home orders that prevent 80 million U.S. residents from conducting nonessential travel outside of their homes.

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How the coronavirus outbreak is affecting the U.S. criminal justice system (ABC News)

ABC News [3/23/2020 5:39 PM, Staff, 2182K]

In the span of a single week, the U.S. criminal justice system endured unprecedented upheaval, as law enforcement officials around the country — from police to prosecutors, courts to corrections – enacted bold new initiatives to continue their work in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

Here is a snapshot of last week's dramatic changes and what to expect in the week ahead.

POLICE

Police departments in numerous states have begun scaling back arrests for low-level offenses, precipitating what is expected to be a significant drop in the number of arrests nationwide, in an effort to limit the exposure of officers to the virus.

"We're looking at essential calls for service," Steve Casstevens, president of the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), told ABC News. "Situations like losing a license, getting into a fender bender, don't require an emergency response or a sworn officer to respond to."

Sheriff David Mahoney, who leads the National Sheriffs' Association, also said his organization is working with local, state and federal partners "to decrease the number of people who are physically arrested and brought to jail."

Last Thursday, for example, the Nashville Police Department (NPD) announced that its officers would essentially stop making misdemeanor arrests, with the exception of domestic violence or driving under the influence charges, in order to "reduce the opportunity for COVID-19 exposure within Nashville's detention facilities and to Sheriff's Office detention staff."

Law enforcement officials told ABC News last week that police officers are facing the same shortages in personal protective equipment and access to testing that has plagued the healthcare system, even as they are increasingly tasked with enforcing new stay-at-home orders and other restrictions.

The New York Police Department (NYPD) has already faced significant exposure to the virus, as the number of confirmed coronavirus cases within its ranks surged from four on Thursday to 52 on Friday.

As a result, more departments are expected to cut back on non-essential services during the outbreak.

Last Wednesday, for example, the sprawling Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) closed its precincts' front desks to the public, in order to "ensure social distancing and do our part to slow the spread."

FEDERAL LAW ENFORCEMENT

Federal law enforcement agencies, meanwhile, are focusing on the ways in which criminals

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could seek to profit from the coronavirus outbreak as well as adopting new strategies to continue their missions.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and several federal prosecutors around the country have devoted resources toward combatting coronavirus-related fraud, warning the public of several schemes and scams that have emerged amid the health crisis.

"The last thing the American people need, in the middle of this pandemic, is criminals trying to take advantage of them and profit off their concerns," FBI Director Christopher Wray said last week. "That is the kind of thing we need to stay especially vigilant about. And of course, other kinds of criminals and adversaries may also seek to capitalize on this situation. And that is why we will not let our guard down."

U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) officials are enforcing new restrictions on travel and commerce along the borders with Canada and Mexico, restricting all nonessential travel, which limits crossings to U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents returning to the U.S., people traveling for medical purposes, to attend educational institutions and for work in the United States. Also included are emergency response workers, people involved in trade, government and diplomatic travel and the military. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services is shutting down its asylum services office and cancelling pending appointments.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents will continue to pursue investigations involving child exploitation, gangs, narcotics trafficking, human trafficking, human smuggling, and terrorism, but the agency has ceased enforcement operations "at or near health care facilities," except in extraordinary circumstances determined necessary for public safety. Officials urged undocumented immigrants to "not avoid seeking medical care because they fear civil immigration enforcement."

The Drug Enforcement Administration, while it continues to pursue investigations related to illegal drugs, is working to ensure medicines that are regulated as controlled substances remain available for medical needs, dropping a requirement that patients be seen in person and allowing for the use of telemedicine to write prescriptions for those drugs.

COURTS

Dozens of federal courts around the United States have now closed and delayed trials, and according to the National Center for State Courts, at least 30 state courts (including the District of Columbia) have either restricted or ended jury trials, with many suspending in-person proceedings entirely for the time being.

Other major municipalities, including New York City, have moved as many proceedings as possible to video. That suspension didn't include parole hearings, but protests from public defenders and social workers brought them to a grinding halt anyway.

"The hearing rooms are a disaster," Lorraine McEvilley of the New York City Legal Aid Society told the nonprofit news outlet The City. "It's like a small dining room table."

As for the nation's highest court, the Supreme Court took the extraordinary step this week of delaying oral arguments for the month -- the most significant disruption to the court's

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business since the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic. On Friday, several of the Supreme Court justices participated in their regularly scheduled private conference by phone.

A few courts have struggled to stay open. One large Ohio county tried to rush as many people through the system as possible, holding mass plea hearings. Courts in Orange County, Calif., tried to “re-open” on Thursday after a brief halt but quickly descended into what the Los Angeles Times described as “total chaos.”

As judges from the San Mateo County Superior Court in California noted in a statement issued last week: “The Court has a constitutional duty to remain open to serve the needs of the community to the greatest extent possible, even in the face of a potential COVID-19 outbreak.”

CORRECTIONS

The crisis is perhaps most immediate within correctional institutions, as wardens of prisons and jails across the U.S. – fearing a viral outbreak that leads to riots – are scrambling to respond to the coronavirus pandemic.

As the former New York City jails commissioner Martin Horn told ABC News on Thursday, “People refer to cruise ships as petri dishes, but nobody has invented a more effective vector for transmitting disease than a city jail.”

On March 13, the Federal Bureau of Prisons issued an order that suspended social and legal visits and halted all inmate transfers. But two independent federal law enforcement sources told ABC News that inmate transfers were continuing and complained of a massive shortage of supplies nationwide.

Inmates across the nation began testing positive for COVID-19 late last week. The BOP has an infectious disease emergency plan, but it is contingent on having the right testing and medical equipment. Sources told ABC News that personal protective equipment, hand sanitizer and soap are at a premium in these facilities.

Only a quarter million of the nation’s 2.3 million inmates are federal prisoners, however, with about 1.3 million in state prisons, and about three-quarters of a million in local jails, according to the non-profit Prison Policy Initiative.

Pressure has been building all week from corrections officers, healthcare leaders and even some prosecutors to free as many low-level inmates from their local institutions as possible.

"Imagine you have to suffer through the COVID-19 outbreak in a closed building,” Tim Zerillo, a member of the Board of Directors of the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, wrote in a blog post on March 16. "You are in that building in close quarters with others. You cannot leave. You cannot step outside for a breath of fresh air. You cannot wash your hands or douse yourself in Purell whenever you like. You are stuck there, with others, waiting for the virus to get you.”

Early last week, Cuyahuga County in Ohio and Los Angeles County in California began releasing hundreds of inmates incarcerated for low-level offenses. New York City released a small amount of inmates from city facilities later in the week.

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Dr. Homer Venters, the former chief medical officer of the New York City Jail System, predicted that the coronavirus pandemic will put extraordinary pressure on a long-neglected corner of the healthcare system.

“COVID-19 will remind us of a central hypocrisy in our approach to health behind bars,” wrote Venters in an op-ed for The Hill on Feb. 29. “We’ve built the world’s largest collection of jails and prisons, and kept the health services in these places remarkably separate from the rest of our national health systems.”

"The CDC, state departments of health, the Joint Commission and other bodies that promote evidence-based care in our hospitals, ambulatory care clinics and nursing homes are largely absent in these settings,” he continued.” As a result, management of this pandemic will be harder and less effective for incarcerated people, their families and staff in these institutions."

Despite coronavirus warnings, federal Bureau of Prisons still transporting inmates: Sources (ABC News)
ABC News [3/23/2020 1:22 PM, Luke Barr, 2182K]
Despite the federal government’s guidance to stay inside and many states’ stay-in-place orders, the Bureau of Prisons is still moving inmates from facility to facility, internal documents obtained by ABC News show.

One document, written to staff at the Metropolitan Correctional Center in New York City, says that inmate movement is suspended for 30 days, but at the end adds, “Other case-by-case exceptions for judicial proceedings [are to] be brought to the attention of the appropriate Regional Counsel for consideration.”

Over the weekend, three inmates in the Bureau of Prisons tested positive for the coronavirus. Two tested positive at FCC Oakdale, Louisiana, and one at MDC New York.

According to the BOP, the inmate arrived at Metropolitan Detention Center, Brooklyn, on March 16. On March 19, he complained of chest pains and was taken to an outside hospital, where personnel performed a test for COVID-19. On March 20, he was discharged back to MDC Brooklyn and immediately placed in isolation. On Monday, the BOP was notified that his test results for COVID-19 were positive.

BOP says the inmate “remains in isolation.” The other inmates he was housed with are being quarantined, as will any staff that need to be as a result of the contact investigation.

Two other staff members – one in Kansas and one in Texas, have tested positive for COVID-19.

Two sources, at different facilities, have told ABC News that inmates came into their facilities, with no explanation given.

At FCI Tallahassee in Tallahassee, Florida, recently 12 inmates, were transferred into the facility – despite the 30-day stoppage on inmate movements.

Inmates from prisons in New York were transferred to three facilities in Pennsylvania, a

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source explained.

A senator's concern

In a letter to the Bureau of Prisons Director, Senator Bob Casey (D-PA) said that he is concerned about the inmate movements.

"These concerns coincide with reports that my office has received indicating that BOP and the U.S. Marshals Service intend to transport incarcerated individuals from out-of-state facilities to multiple facilities in Pennsylvania, including USP Lewisburg, USP Canaan and FCC Allenwood," Casey writes.

Casey also says that the guidance changed "to permit moving and transferring incarcerated individuals between facilities to 'better manage bed space.'"

Prisons officials also told ABC News that they lack the proper Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to protect themselves from these inmate transfers.

On Monday, a judge denied former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen's plea to be released early, citing COVID-19 as a reason why he should be released.

In its response, the Southern District of New York, in its court filing, citied the Bureau of Prisons coronavirus policy, which includes the inmate transfer guidance.

"Cohen has offered no evidence or argument as to why these measures are insufficient, other than his conclusory assertion to the contrary," the filing says.

The BOP is running on empty with hand sanitizer, soap and masks, sources said, adding that the BOP doesn't have the ability to order more due to backorder.

Meals for inmates are also getting a change, additional documents show.

Changes in meals

"Breakfast is a flexible meal, it can be sent to the units. One unit at a time for lunch and dinner or a Grab & Go option. Isolated or quarantined inmates should be satellite fed," noted a document from the South Regional office obtained by ABC News.

The document also stresses the need for prison leadership to find "an area in your institution to isolate or quarantine inmates. Preferably not the Special Housing Unit."

According to the Associated Press, one of the inmates that tested positive at FCC Oakdale, is in the Special Housing Unit. Those units hold inmates considered high-risk, either for their own safety or the safety of others.

Regional counsels have discretion on inmate movements, the Bureau of Prisons said in its memo to the staff; last week sources confirmed that policy to ABC News.

In Washington, D.C., a U.S. Marshal tested positive for COVID-19, and two inmates were put in quarantine for suspected contact with that U.S. Marshal.

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Inmates with ICE

BOP inmates are not the only group in federal government custody, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has a population that is incarcerated.

When asked by ABC News if they are still transporting inmates, ICE referred ABC News to its website which states that it puts detainees with symptoms in a single medical housing room – but the website doesn't address the movement concerns.

U.S. prison union official urges halt to inmate transfers due to coronavirus spread (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 5:25 PM, Sarah N. Lynch, 5304K]
The federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) is still transferring some inmates from coronavirus hotspots such as New York City to prisons in other parts of the country, even as three prisoners tested positive for the COVID-19 respiratory illness over the weekend, a top union official said on Monday.

American Federation of Government Employees Council of Prison Local 33 President Shane Fausey called on Attorney General William Barr to take "unprecedented" action to temporarily stop the movement of all prisoners between facilities until the virus can be contained.

"I am imploring the attorney general of the United States to stop all inmate movement, shelter in place at least for 14 to 21 days, following the guidance of the White House press briefings," he said in a phone interview.

"We need to flatten this curve," he added, referring to the strategy of slowing the virus' spread to prevent hospitals and healthcare systems from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients.

A BOP spokesman said the bureau has "ample" medical and sanitation supplies and has taken protective measures, such as placing all new inmates into 14-day quarantines.

"BOP may need to move inmates to better manage the detention bedspace as well as assure that administrative facilities do not become overcrowded beyond available resources," the spokesman added.

The BOP, which operates 122 facilities, has taken some precautions similar to those in state and local jails and prisons by suspending social visits, though some states have taken more drastic measures. New Jersey, for instance, said on Monday it plans to release "low-risk" inmates serving county jail sentences.

U.S. President Donald Trump confirmed on Sunday he is mulling an executive order to let BOP release some "totally nonviolent prisoners," while criminal justice advocates are pushing Congress to let some elderly inmates free sooner.

The BOP's new policies do call for scaling back inmate movements, but exemptions exist for managing bed space and medical and court trips.

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Fausey flagged as particularly concerning cases where newly processed prisoners are sent from facilities in New York City to prisons in western Pennsylvania.

New York City is the current epicenter of the national epidemic with nearly 17,000 known cases.

Over the weekend, one inmate at a BOP detention facility in the New York borough of Brooklyn tested positive for COVID-19.

Another two inmates at a prison complex in Oakdale, Louisiana are in isolation after becoming infected, and three BOP staffers have the illness, the BOP website says.

[NY] Cuomo directs nurses to 'enlist' as state looks to double bed capacity (Politico)
Politico [3/23/2020 9:55 AM, Shannon Young and Marie J. French, 2003K]
Gov. Andrew Cuomo is asking all registered nurses in New York to "enlist" in the state's effort to expand its surge capacity to combat the coronavirus' spread.

Cuomo announced an emergency executive action on Monday that could ultimately send nurses registered in the state, including those working for insurance companies, to hospitals and new temporary health care facilities to treat the growing number of Covid-19 cases.

The state is looking to double its hospital beds — from 53,000 to 110,000 — through new temporary hospital facilities such as the 1,000-bed field hospital being built at the Javits Center on Manhattan's West Side. It's also suspending capacity regulations at existing medical facilities. The governor said Monday that means New York must secure the staff needed to treat many of those new beds, as well as relieve the nurses and doctors who become infected with the virus.

"We are going to the entire retired community of health care professionals, who are licensed, registered, and we're saying, 'We want you to enlist to help.' It's not a mandatory directive, I can't legally — well I probably could legally — ask them to come into state service. But this is just a request," Cuomo said during an Albany news conference. "We put it out, we've gotten … 30,000 responses to date. I'm doing an emergency executive order for all nurses who are registered to enlist."

Cuomo added that the state's Department of Financial Services is reaching out to insurance companies about the health care professionals they employ.

"This is not about assessing insurance claims at this point, this is about saving lives," he said.

Cuomo's administration sent a letter to health professionals asking them to respond within 36 hours with information about their qualifications and interest in helping to treat patients on March 20.

The governor, who has previously asked hospitals to add more beds on a voluntary basis, said another new executive order will mandate that they increase their capacity by at least 50 percent. He noted, though, that will only increase the number of hospital beds in the state to 75,000.

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“We still have a problem between 75,000 and 110,000 [beds],” he said.

The governor said the state has swiftly ramped up testing capabilities and is outpacing South Korea’s per capita efforts at its peak — about 16,000 tests were performed overnight. There are now 20,875 confirmed positive cases. Of those, 13 percent are currently hospitalized.

There have been 157 deaths related to the coronavirus in New York as of Monday morning.

The governor has been urging New Yorkers to stay home and follow “social distancing” guidelines. He’s awaiting a plan from New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio to reduce density after he said he witnessed crowds of people in parks over the weekend.

Cuomo said he’d want to apply whatever plan the city comes up with to Nassau, Suffolk and Westchester County to ensure people don’t simply get in the car to go find somewhere else to gather.

Cuomo plans to visit the Javits Center, where FEMA is setting up a 1,000 bed hospital with ventilators that will be fully staffed, later Monday. Cuomo commended President Donald Trump for his help so far.

“I thank him for it, it makes a big difference to New York,” he said.

Cuomo has brought in several former aides; Bill Mulrow, Steven Cohen and Larry Schwartz to assist with the response. His daughter Cara Kennedy-Cuomo also attended the briefing and is helping his administration’s efforts (Cuomo joked that while his father Mario Cuomo did not pay him $1, he’d make sure to give her the symbolic pay).

The governor acknowledged the economic strain his shutdown is placing on residents and businesses. On Sunday evening, sweeping restrictions on the types of businesses where workers are allowed to report in-person went into effect. Retail stores are largely closed, but grocery stores, pharmacies, building supply centers, laundromats and liquor stores remain open.

The state’s Department of Labor has reported a tremendous spike in people trying to file for unemployment, overloading phone lines and the website.

“I take total responsibility in terms of shutting off the economy,” Cuomo said. “You turned off the engine quickly. How do you now start or begin to restart or plan the restart of that economic engine — separate task but one we have to consider.”

The governor said Mulrow — currently a Blackstone adviser and former secretary to the governor — and Cohen, another former top aide, would be spearheading efforts to restart the economy.

Cuomo suggested the state might consider a “risk stratification” approach put forth by David Katz, founding director of the Yale-Griffin Prevention Research Center, that could mean younger people return to work sooner and those who have already recovered from the virus also return.

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[NY] N.Y.'s Javits Center to Add 2,000 Beds to System Under Strain (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 3:20 PM, Keshia Clukey and Elise Young, 6400K]
Construction will begin this week to turn the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center in Manhattan into a 1,000-bed hospital, a first step toward eventually doubling that number, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo said.

The main showroom of the center will be broken up into four 250-bed hospitals each about 40,000 square feet in size, Cuomo said at a briefing Monday at the center. There will be 320 Federal Emergency Management Agency workers assigned to the hospitals.

New Jersey, too, expects to increase patient capacity and is asking FEMA to operate four pop-up hospitals, a step that has support from President Donald Trump, Governor Phil Murphy said.

Across the Hudson River on the west side of Manhattan, Javits is one of the nation's biggest event spaces. The New York National Guard, center workers and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are working to prepare the makeshift hospital facility, which is expected to begin operating in a week to 10 days, Cuomo said.

The state is hoping to add an additional 1,000 beds at the center on top of that for less intensive medical care, for a total of 2,000 beds, Cuomo said.

"For us a major thrust is increasing hospital capacity," Cuomo said.

New York is anticipating a surge of coronavirus cases that could require 110,000 beds. The state currently has about 53,000 beds.

Earlier, Cuomo said he was preparing an executive order to compel hospitals to increase their capacity by 50% to handle the surging numbers of coronavirus patients.

The state added more than 5,700 confirmed infections, Cuomo said, for a total of 20,875. Of those cases, about 12,300 are in New York City, 3,260 more than there were on Sunday.

New York accounts for more than a third of all deaths nationwide from Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus, with 157 compared with 114 a day earlier.

In neighboring New Jersey, expanded testing for coronavirus turned up another 930 confirmed cases in the last day, pushing the total to 2,884, Murphy said. Seven more deaths from Covid-19 were reported, for a total of 27.

New Jersey is also trying to add hospital beds. Murphy said he had a one-on-one phone call Monday with Trump in which the president "said he would support" the creation of four pop-up field hospitals, to be run by FEMA.

Murphy on Monday outlined new steps the state was taking to slow the virus's march, including a plan to release as many as 1,000 low-level offenders from county jails. They include people with low-level indictable offenses and municipal-level convictions, and all will be screened to determine whether they pose a danger to themselves or others.

"Jails can be incubators for disease," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said.

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The disclosure follows an order by New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio on Sunday for the release of 23 inmates from the city's jail system. The city's correctional authorities are reviewing 200 other cases as well, de Blasio said.

[NY] Cuomo commands New York hospitals to increase available beds by 50 percent as coronavirus cases increase by more than 4,800 (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 12:00 PM, Dave Lemery, 570K]
New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo on Sunday mandated that all hospitals in the state increase the number of beds in their facilities by at least 50 percent as part of a multipronged effort to ensure that an anticipated surge in COVID-19 cases won't overwhelm the medical system.

Cuomo, during his daily coronavirus briefing, encouraged hospitals across the state to aim for a 100 percent increase. The governor has repeatedly cited statistics showing that the state currently has about 53,000 beds, but projections show there might be a need for as many as 110,000 within a few weeks.

Many state regulations relating to how many hospital beds can be in a room have been waived during the crisis. Nevertheless, Cuomo acknowledged that hitting a 100 percent increase might not be doable for many hospitals.

"However, at a minimum, hospitals must give us a plan to increase capacity by at least 50 percent," he said. "So we would be at about 75,000 minimum against the [110,000] need. We would still have to find additional beds."

To fill the gap, the state is working with the Army Corps of Engineers to establish temporary hospital sites. Cuomo has already notified the corps that four sites have been approved by the state. Another four hospital setups are in the works through the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

"The federal hospital by FEMA is different than the Army Corps of Engineers temporary facility," he said. "The FEMA hospitals come with staff and with supplies. They're in 250-bed configurations. We're asking for four of those 250-bed configurations to be assembled in the Javits Center."

The need for beds continued to take on urgency as the latest coronavirus numbers in New York showed no slowdown. There were 4,812 new cases added to the state's total on Sunday, bringing the latter number to 15,915. There have been 114 deaths in the state, about 30 percent of the 374 in the nation. And the hospitalization rate of the identified cases so far is 13 percent.

The governor also directed New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio and the City Council to bring him a plan within 24 hours to address what he saw as a dangerous amount of defiance toward social distancing directives in the city.

"I was in New York City [on Saturday]," he said. "It was a pretty day. There is a density level in New York City that is wholly inappropriate. You would think there was nothing going on in parts of New York City. You would think it was just a bright, sunny Saturday. … You would not know that anything was going on. This is just a mistake. It's a mistake. It's insensitive, it's arrogant, it's self-destructive, it's disrespectful to other people and it has to stop, and it

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has to stop now. This is not a joke and I am not kidding."

On top of the many orders Cuomo has issued in the past week that have shut down almost every aspect of daily life in the state, he announced Sunday that all elective surgeries would be halted starting Wednesday.

"That alone should get us 25 to 35 percent more beds, and again that is a mandate that is going into effect for the hospitals," he said. "I understand the hospitals are not happy about it. I heard that elective surgery is a big source of revenue for the hospitals. I understand that but this is not about money. This is about public health and we're putting that mandate in place starting today."

He also encouraged the federal government to take over stewardship from the individual states when it comes to acquiring personal protective equipment, noting that New York's efforts to purchase face masks have seen the cost rise from 85 cents to 7 dollars per mask due to competition.

"We are competing against other states," he said. "In some ways we're savaging other states … I'm trying to buy masks. I'm competing with California and Illinois, and Florida and that's not the way it should be, frankly."

[NY] U.S. states, cities desperate for coronavirus help, military prepares (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 11:44 AM, Stephanie Kelly and Doina Chiacu, 5304K]
Several more U.S. governors on Monday joined the procession of states ordering millions of Americans to stay at home to slow the spread of the coronavirus, while President Trump signaled he's considering a move in the opposite direction.

Public health authorities have pushed for the stay-at-home restrictions as essential to curb widespread transmission of a highly contagious respiratory virus that has infected more than 42,000 people in the United States, killing at least 559.

While a wave of statewide social distancing measures expanded, further stifling the U.S. economy amid another day of plunging stock prices and growing fears of a global recession, Trump said, "we cannot let the cure be worse than the problem itself."

"America will again and soon be open for business," Trump told a White House news conference. "We are not going to let it turn into a long-lasting financial problem."

A $2 trillion economic stimulus bill, however, stalled in the U.S. Senate as Democrats pressed for more money for states and hospitals and restrictions on business bailouts.

The president said he would re-evaluate his administration's position on whether to continue restricting business activity at the end of the month, after the lapse of a 15-day guidance the White House issued on March 15 to limit social interactions and curb unnecessary travel.

Trump suggested it was possible to ease up on businesses in states experiencing what he said were relatively low infection rates, like Nebraska, Idaho and Iowa, while continuing to clamp down on hot zones in other states, such as New York.

"If it were up to the doctors, they'd say let's shut down the entire world," Trump said.

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MORE STATES IN LOCKDOWN

Since last week, governors in at least 18 states accounting for nearly half the U.S. population have issued directives requiring residents to stay mostly indoors, except for necessary trips to grocery stores, pharmacies, gas stations and doctors' offices. "Non-essential" businesses have also been ordered closed.

The measures are based on social distancing principles aimed at increasing the amount of space between individuals in order to stem transmission of a potentially lethal illness that threatens to overwhelm the nation's hospitals.

Washington, which accounts for over a quarter of the deaths, became the latest state to issue "stay at home" orders.

"This is a human tragedy on a scale we cannot yet project. So it's time to hunker down to win this fight," Washington Governor Jay Inslee said.

Even before statewide restrictions began to go into effect last week, the coronavirus pandemic had virtually paralyzed sectors of the U.S. economy and shattered U.S. lifestyles as school districts and colleges canceled classes, and many companies shuttered workplaces, either voluntarily or under local government orders.

While Trump's latest remarks showed his concern about the economic fallout, state and local officials continued to raise alarms about a healthcare delivery system in danger of collapse.

California Governor Gavin Newsom said on Monday his state needs 50,000 additional hospital beds to accommodate a surge in coronavirus patients predicted by computer modeling.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio appealed for ventilators, masks and other medical equipment, even asking for help from private citizens.

New York State is now at the epicenter of the U.S. outbreak with 157 deaths, the most of any state.

Karine Raymond, a nurse at Jack D. Weiler Hospital in New York City's Bronx borough, said most nurses were unable to get specialized N95 masks and even simpler surgical masks were in short supply. Nurses are being told to wear them for as long as possible, she said.

"We are the be all and end all and lifeline to these patients, and yet we are being contaminated and cross contaminating," Raymond said.

RESCUES SOUGHT BY FED, CONGRESS

A far-reaching economic stabilization package for the coronavirus crisis failed to advance on Monday in the Senate after Democrats said it contained too little money for hospitals and not enough restrictions on a fund to help big businesses. Democrats predicted a modified version would win passage soon.

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Both Democrats and Republicans say they are aware that failure to agree on the bill could have a devastating effect on states, cities and businesses, and trigger further heavy losses in U.S. stock markets.

Wall Street's slide deepened on Monday as an unprecedented moves by the U.S. Federal Reserve to shore up credit across the economy proved insufficient to sooth investors' fears about the swiftly spreading coronavirus.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average tumbled 3.04% to end at 18,591.93 points, while the S&P 500, a broader-market index, lost 2.93% to 2,237.4. The S&P 500 is now down about 34% from its February record high, its lowest level since fears of the coronavirus swept across Wall Street.

The steps briefly lifted U.S. stock index futures but share prices quickly dropped back into the red, putting the S&P 500 on pace for its worst month since World War Two.

A lack of coordinated federal action was causing chaos for states and municipalities, and even putting them in competition with each other for medical resources, the governors of New York, New Jersey and Illinois said.

The states "are all out looking for the same thing," New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy told CNN on Monday.

[NY] New York City's Javits Center transforming into field hospital for coronavirus patients (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 7:00 PM, Staff, 2394K]
Conversion of the main showroom floor of the Javits Center in Manhattan is expected to begin this week, turning the 1.8 million square feet of convention space into New York City's first field hospital to respond to the coronavirus crisis, CBS New York reports.

Governor Andrew Cuomo announced the plans Saturday and toured the space Monday afternoon. He said setting up four 250-bed field hospitals at the site would take about a week to 10 days.

"This is going to get much worse before it gets better," said Cuomo. "We are still in the relative calm before the storm. You're going to see the number of infections, the number of cases increase dramatically.

"You're going to see an over-capacity of our health system," he said. "Right now we're projecting you'll see more people come into the health care system than we can handle."

In addition to the initial 1,000 beds being made available, Cuomo said an additional 1,000 beds for "lighter medical care" could also be built within the Javits Center, a venue that until known has been known for events like auto shows and comic cons, not medical care.

"This was never an intended use, but you do what you have to do," Cuomo said. "That's the New York way. That's the American way."

In total there will be 320 federal staffers working in the initial combined site within Javits,

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covering 160,000 square feet.

Other locations Cuomo put on his list as field hospital sites included the campuses at SUNY Stony Brook and SUNY Westbury on Long Island, and the Westchester Convention Center, north of New York City. Each of those would have one 250-bed unit under the management of FEMA.

New York is facing the largest number of people infected with coronavirus in the U.S., with more than 12,000 confirmed cases as of Monday, according to Johns Hopkins University.

In Cuomo's earlier press briefing Monday, he urged retired health care professionals to lend their hands in response to the pandemic by enlisting online.

[Editorial note: consult source link for video]

[NY] Virus cases top 20,000 in NY as new restrictions start (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 4:01 PM, Robert Bumsted and Michael Hill, AP, 337K]
New Yorkers started their first full day of severe restrictions Monday that are intended to curb the spread of the virus after the number of cases in the state continues to surge amid an uptick in testing.

All of the state's "nonessential" businesses were ordered closed by 8 p.m. Sunday under an order that also banned nonessential gatherings of individuals. New Yorkers may still go outside their homes to pick up groceries or exercise, but must stay 6 feet away from anyone who isn't a member of their household.

Here are the latest updates about the coronavirus in New York:

EMERGENCY BEDS

Gov. Andrew Cuomo promised 1,000 temporary hospital beds will be swiftly placed inside a vast Manhattan convention center as officials raced to prepare for an overwhelming number of coronavirus patients.

"This is going to get much worse before it gets better. We are still in the relative calm before the storm," Cuomo said during a stop at the Jacob K. Javits Convention Center. "You're going to see the number of infections, the number of cases, increase dramatically. You are going to see an overcapacity of our health system."

The number of positive coronavirus cases in New York state surged to more than 20,000, with more than half the cases in New York City. The city has emerged as a worldwide hotspot for the outbreak, with more than 12,000 known cases.

Cuomo said the swift climb in numbers also is due to aggressive testing, with the state now testing 16,000 people a day.

Construction of the Federal Emergency Management Agency temporary hospitals at the convention center will start this week and hopefully be done within 10 days, Cuomo said. The state is working with the federal government to add another 1,000 beds for a lighter level of care in the cavernous space typically used for auto and trade shows.

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“This was never an anticipated use,” Cuomo said, “but you do what you have to do.”

Cuomo said the 1,000 hospital beds will relieve pressure on hospitals at capacity as the outbreak spreads. He said 320 federal staff will come to take care of 1,000 people initially.

The governor also has ordered existing hospitals to increase their capacity by 50%.

The scramble to add beds is part of a larger effort to line up adequate supplies of ventilators, masks and other medical equipment. Cuomo said the state has enough supplies for today, but cannot make predictions about next week or the week after.

There have been 157 deaths in New York state. And there have been more than 2,500 hospitalizations in the state, with 621 ICU patients.

New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio said Monday that he spoke with President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence about the city’s urgent need for medical supplies to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

"We’re literally in that very tight window now that if we don’t get the ventilators in particular we will actually start to lose lives that could have been saved,” de Blasio said on CNN.

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

EXPERIMENTAL TREATMENT

Cuomo said state health officials will proceed with an experimental treatment for patients seriously ill with the coronavirus. The treatment involves taking plasma from someone who has been infected, processing it and injecting the antibodies into a sick person to stimulate their immune system.

“It’s a trial for people who are in serious condition,” Cuomo said.

The Food and Drug Administration approved the trial, which will begin this week on a "compassionate care basis," the governor said.

Also, the state on Tuesday will begin to conduct trials of an experimental treatment with the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine and the antibiotic Zithromax, a treatment touted by President Donald Trump.

ONLINE SCHOOLING STARTS

School was back in session Monday for New York City’s 1.1 million public school students, though instruction was happening in digital classrooms.

City education officials gave teachers a crash course in online instruction last week and distributed laptops and tablets to some students who lack them, but Mayor Bill de Blasio acknowledged that many students still lack devices to access their classes and do their

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homework with.

“We will reach a lot more kids over time,” de Blasio told WPIX-TV. Officials have said pencil-and-paper packets will be available in the meantime.

[KY] Kentucky gov orders nonessential businesses to close (AP)
AP [3/22/2020 6:41 PM, Staff, 1670K]
Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear on Sunday ordered nonessential retail businesses to close in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

Beshear said the move is effective at 8 p.m. Monday and includes businesses such as entertainment, clothing, bookstores, jewelry stores and car dealerships. He said auto repair and parts shops are exempt.

He said businesses such as grocery stores, pharmacies, drug stores, liquor stores and gas stations will remain open.

“This is the next step that we need to take to reduce the contacts to Kentuckians until we defeat this virus,” the Democratic governor said.

Beshear also said he is mandating that all hospitals cease elective procedures. He said the vast majority already have.

Some other states have ordered residents to shelter in their homes, but Beshear said that has not been discussed.

“Shelter in place evokes emotions in us that (there is) a deadly chemical spill near our house or even an active shooter,” Beshear said. “It says get in your house and board it up until we call you. That’s not the way that we will address this coronavirus.”

The governor said Kentuckians will always be able to go outside to exercise or to go to the grocery store. He also said store supplies are being replenished and there was no need to jam grocery carts full.

“We are our own worst enemy in that,” Beshear said. “Remember that your actions have consequences on your neighbor. Make sure that you buy enough for your family, but there’s enough for the next family coming behind you.”

Like other states, Beshear reiterated that his administration is constantly searching for personal protection equipment such as masks, gloves and goggles.

“We are chasing down every lead,” he said. “We are pressuring every person. We are making every phone call. It is a problem. I’m working like heck that we have as much as humanly possible.”

Three people have died in Kentucky from the virus. Health officials said the total number of confirmed cases in the state increased to about 100.

For most people, the virus causes only mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough. For people with existing health problems and older adults, it can cause more severe

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illness requiring hospitalization.

The vast majority of people recover from the new virus. According to the World Health Organization, people with mild illness recover in about two weeks, while those with more severe illness may take three to six weeks to recover.

[FL] Florida officials say at least 1,000 test positive for virus (AP)
AP [3/22/2020 6:33 PM, Staff, 3020K]
Gov. Ron DeSantis urged Floridians to stay home and not panic about the spread of the novel coronavirus, which had infected at least 1,000 people across the state as of Sunday.

Twelve people have died, including the first fatality in Palm Beach County. Nearly half of the state's positive cases are in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties.

But DeSantis stressed that the results should not cause undue concern.

"The vast, vast majority of people are testing negative for this," DeSantis said.

DeSantis held a news conference at the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami Gardens. Less than two months after hosting the Super Bowl, the stadium is now the home of a drive-thru testing site recently opened by the National Guard. On Sunday, they were only testing first responders and health care workers. On Monday, they planned to expand it to people at least 65 years old who are showing symptoms of the illness. A testing center at Marlins Park will also open in the coming days, officials said.

According to state figures, more than 11,000 people have been tested for the virus. That's more than most states, but less than New York.

Also Sunday, students at multiple Florida colleges were found to have the virus. Ten students and one employee at the University of Florida in Gainesville, six students at University of Tampa, and one student at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg all tested positive, the schools announced. The University of Miami also said a student had the virus.

In addition, a fourth TSA worker at Orlando International Airport has tested positive, officials said. The Transportation Security Administration said the screening officer, last worked March 16 and is quarantining at home.

Around the state, the virus rippled through communities — figuratively, if not literally. Boat ramps were closed, more businesses were shuttered, and officials warned that residents should brace themselves for difficult times ahead.

"I want everybody to get mentally and emotionally prepared," he said.

During a news conference Sunday, Orange County Mayor Val Demings said the county would offer rental assistance for those who have lost jobs.

In Southwest Florida, two Fort Myers restaurants prepared about 2,000 meals Saturday and gave them away to hospitality industry workers who have been laid off. On Friday, DeSantis ordered restaurants statewide to close their dining rooms in an attempt to slow the spread

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of the virus. The order could last through May 8 or longer — a devastating blow to a state whose lifeblood is tourism.

DeSantis has not called for a “shelter in place” order, unlike governors in California, New York and Illinois, who have ordered such restrictive measures.

The virus causes only minor flu-like symptoms in most people, who recover in a matter of weeks. But it is highly contagious and can cause severe illness or death in some patients, particularly the elderly and those with underlying health problems. Severe cases are often only able to breathe with respirators.

[LA] Louisiana virus cases surge; Edwards plans primetime address (San Francisco Chronicle)

San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 3:52 PM, Melinda Deslatte, AP, 337K]

The number of Louisiana residents confirmed to be infected with the coronavirus spiked Monday to nearly 1,200 people, and the virus’s death toll in the state grew dramatically overnight, a troubling trend that had Gov. John Bel Edwards enacting a statewide “stay at home” order and planning a televised plea for people to comply.

At least 34 residents have died from the COVID-19 disease caused by the virus, according to Louisiana’s health department, up from 20 confirmed deaths a day earlier.

Edwards ordered his state’s 4.6 million residents to voluntarily stay at home starting at 5 p.m. Monday unless they need to carry out essential tasks such as getting food or medicine. First responders and workers in grocery stores, pharmacies, doctors’ offices and other critical operations are exempt from the directive, which will remain in effect until at least April 12.

The Democratic governor planned a prime-time, statewide TV broadcast Monday night to talk about Louisiana’s response to the coronavirus. The state has one of the highest per-capita rates of confirmed infection, with the outbreak spreading so rapidly that Edwards has warned that Louisiana is on a trajectory similar to Italy’s, with health care facilities at risk of being overwhelmed within the next week.

The virus has spread to at least 41 of the state’s 64 parishes, according to the health department figures. The epicenter of the state’s outbreak remains in the New Orleans region, which accounts for 25 of the deaths. Residents of the Baton Rouge area and in north and central Louisiana also have died from the virus.

Louisiana joins New York and Georgia in leading the nation in the number of nursing homes with coronavirus cases, a federal report shows. At least seven homes in each of the three states have confirmed or suspected coronavirus cases, according to Sunday’s report from the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Current or suspected cases of COVID-19 have been found in at least four nursing homes in each of three other states: Washington, Illinois and New Jersey.

This coronavirus causes only minor flu-like symptoms in most people, who recover in a matter of weeks. But it is highly contagious and can cause severe illness or death in higher numbers among the elderly and people with underlying health problems.

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Of the Louisiana residents who have died from COVID-19, nine lived at Lambeth House, a New Orleans retirement home and nursing facility, state health officials said. Forty-two people from Lambeth House have tested positive for the coronavirus. A second cluster of cases has been identified at a Donaldsonville retirement and nursing home, with five infections identified Monday, the health department said.

"We continue to be in daily contact with Lambeth House and in daily contact with any other facility that has people with symptoms. We even start at the point of symptoms. We want to be very cautious and watchful here," said Dr. Alexander Billioux, Louisiana assistant secretary of health.

Even as Edwards and public health officials called on people to stay home, one pastor refused to comply with a ban on gatherings of more than 10 people. A Baton Rouge area church held services for more than 1,800 people Sunday, many of them brought in on buses, according to WVLA-TV. Edwards described that as disappointing.

"We need everybody to embrace these mitigation measures and to be part of the solution, not part of the problem," the governor said.

Meanwhile, the leader of the Catholic Church in New Orleans, Archbishop Gregory Aymond, announced Monday that he had tested positive for COVID-19, saying in a statement that he had "very mild symptoms" and had self-quarantined.

Complicating New Orleans' fight of the disease spread, rats and mice are abandoning their hiding places in walls and rafters of shuttered businesses and venturing outside. On Bourbon Street workers in protective clothing placed poisonous bait in storm drains and set out traps.

"Unfortunately, what's happening is, many of these rodents are looking for an alternative food source," Claudia Riegel, the city's pest control director, said Monday.

[IL] Illinois sees three new deaths, nearly 300 new cases, of coronavirus (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 11:00 AM, Cole Lauterbach, 570K]
Illinois officials said Sunday nearly 300 more Illinois residents have tested positive for coronavirus and three more died.

This brings the total number of people who have, or have had, COVID-19 to more than 1,000.

"Unfortunately, I have to report that there are 296 new cases of coronavirus disease in Illinois, including one infant and sadly we're also announcing three additional deaths," Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike said.

She said it has yet to be determined whether a pregnant woman can transmit the virus to her unborn child.

Officials continued to ask people to remain home while they work to track as many sick residents as possible.

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Without being asked, Gov. J.B. Pritzker addressed his and President Donald Trump's comments toward one another.

On CNN, Pritzker criticized the Trump Administration for not requiring private businesses to begin mass producing medical equipment, leaving Illinois taxpayers to compete with other states and countries for equipment and paying a premium for it, referring to it as "the wild west."

Trump responded on Twitter later Sunday morning, saying "@JBPritzker, Governor of Illinois, and a very small group of certain other Governors, together with Fake News @CNN & Concast (MSDNC), shouldn't be blaming the Federal Government for their own shortcomings. We are there to back you up should you fail, and always will be!"

Pritzker said the Trump administration has consistently failed to do what it could to stop the virus.

"I'm a pretty even-keeled guy but even I am finding it hard to contain my anger about Donald Trump's response," he said.

[OR] Oregon Gov. Kate Brown Orders Residents to Stay Home Amid Coronavirus Pandemic (US News & World Report)
US News & World Report [3/23/2020 3:40 PM, Claire Hansen, 3020K]
Oregon Gov. Kate Brown on Monday ordered residents to stay at home and expanded the list of businesses that will be forced close in an effort to stem the spread of the coronavirus.

The order, which goes into effect immediately, mandates that residents stay home when possible and prohibits any nonessential gatherings, regardless of size, if a distance of 6 feet cannot be maintained between people.

The order also closes businesses, including hair salons, gyms and theatres, as well as playgrounds and outdoor parks. Grocery stores, gas stations, pharmacies, restaurants that offer takeout or delivery and other essential businesses will remain open. Those that remain open must enforce social distancing guidelines. Anyone in violation of the order will be considered an immediate danger to public health and subject to a misdemeanor charge.

Governors of several other states on Monday announced similar restrictions as the number of coronavirus cases grows exponentially nationwide.

Health officials have reported 162 cases in Oregon and five deaths, according to researchers.

"Staying home both keeps you safe from infection, and ensures you do not unknowingly infect others," Brown said in a press release. "None of us have ever been through this before, and that means there is no way to know exactly what lies ahead. We don't know yet when this outbreak will end, or what changes this will bring for our state and for our country. But I want to make sure that we've done all we can to end it as quickly as possible."

[OR] Man stole thousands of N95 masks, police say. They were recovered and are now being donated. (USA Today)

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USA Today [3/23/2020 8:05 AM, Ryan W. Miller, 5611K]
Oregon police recovered thousands of N95 respirators after a man allegedly stole at least 20 cases of the masks, worth nearly $2,500.

Portland Police Bureau said The Rebuilding Center, a construction and sustainability nonprofit, reported the theft on March 6 when 20 to 25 cases, each with 400 masks, were stolen.

The next day, staff at the center found the N95 respirators listed on Craigslist and being sold in nearby Beaverton. A meetup was scheduled and police were contacted.

Vladislav V. Drozdek, 22, of Beaverton, was arrested and charged with first degree theft, and six cases of the masks were recovered.

On Saturday, police recovered seven more cases of the masks being stored inside a house. More arrests and charges are possible, police said.

95 mask shortage: How FEMA, businesses and Donald Trump are confronting the country's N95 mask shortage amid coronavirus pandemic

When the masks were returned, they were donated to local hospitals amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Health care workers and public health officials have reported shortages of personal protective equipment, including the N95 respirators, as more people fall ill to COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus.

N95 respirators block "at least 95 percent of very small (0.3 micron) test particles," according to the Food and Drug Administration, and provide more protection than loose-fitting surgical masks.

"This was a good example of interagency teamwork and cooperation, along with some helpful detective work by the victim," said Portland Police Bureau Assistant Chief of Operations Mike Frome. "This is even more significant during a time when these medical supplies are in such short supply."

[CA] L.A. County increases coronavirus testing capacity, securing 20,000 new tests (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 4:14 PM, Patrick McGreevy, Ruben Vives, Colleen Shalby, and Hannah Fry, 1907K]
L.A. County has secured 20,000 new coronavirus tests with a processing capacity of 5,000 tests per day, officials announced Monday. The tests will be free and healthcare workers and first-responders will be prioritized.

Additionally, L.A. City Councilman David Ryu said that officials are working with a South Korean company to have 100,000 coronavirus tests available to the area per week, with the ability to run 30,000 per day.

"With increase testing comes an increased in reported infections. This does not necessarily mean we're having an outbreak of new infections. Rather, testing is helping us identify our

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current problem," Ryu said.

To date, Ryu said that roughly 25,200 test have been conducted in California.

County officials confirmed on Monday 128 new cases and two more deaths, bringing the total number of deaths in the county to seven, and the total case count to 536.

Of those who have tested positive, 80% are people between the ages of 18 and 65 and 42% are people between the ages of 18-40.

Ninety people who have been infected in the county have at some point been hospitalized while sick, L.A. County Public Health Department Dr. Barbara Ferrer said. That's 17% of those who have tested positive.

As the number of confirmed coronavirus infections and deaths in California rises, federal, state and local officials are ramping up unprecedented restrictions on people's movements in an effort to slow the spread of the virus and increasing resources to assist during the crisis.

Parks have been closed throughout the state, following a weekend that saw packed hiking trails and beaches as people flocked to outdoor spaces following statewide instructions to "shelter in place." All the while, the call for help from the federal government has remained a constant need.

To help cities in California beef up their response to the pandemic, President Trump on Sunday approved a request from Gov. Gavin Newsom to declare a major disaster and for the federal government to provide "mass care," emergency aid, unemployment assistance and disaster legal services.

The president said the Federal Emergency Management Agency would ship mobile hospital units to California within the next 48 hours. The state is in line to get eight of these units, for a total of 2,000 beds.

The Navy hospital ship Mercy, based in San Diego, has been deployed to Los Angeles, according to the chief of naval operations. Adm. Michael M. Gilday tweeted on Monday: "#USNSMercy will be getting underway #TODAY in support of the nation's #COVID19 response efforts." Though its facilities will not be used to treat COVID-19 patients, it will accept patients with other medical issues in an attempt to relieve the burden on hospitals, FEMA administrator Peter Gaynor said.

The Pentagon is additionally planning to send a military field hospital to Seattle and New York City later this week to treat non-coronavirus patients and to free up bed space in civilian hospitals, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said at news conference Monday.

The planned move is still awaiting approval by officials at the Department of Health and Human Services.

Los Angeles Unified School District Supt. Austin Beutner announced Monday that schools, which closed along with others across California last week to help quell the outbreak, will remain shuttered through at least May 1.

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The closures are a hardship for children and families in a state where 60% of students qualify for free or reduced-price meals because they are members of low-income households. In Los Angeles public schools, the percentage is even higher, with 80% of students who qualify; in Compton, it's 83%; Pomona, 89%.

"Students are learning in different ways, teachers are teaching in different ways and families are struggling to support their children in their studies while balancing other responsibilities," Beutner said in a prepared statement. "I wish I could tell you it will all be back to normal sometime soon, but it does not look like that will be the case."

Beutner announced that Verizon will provide free internet access for all students who do not currently have access, as not to disrupt their learning.

The district is currently working on a plan to distribute more computers to students and instructions for accessing the Verizon program.

Additionally, L.A. City Council president canceled all upcoming meetings into April.

As of early Monday, more than 1,800 cases of coronavirus infection had been reported in California, and 35 people had died. The number of confirmed cases is expected to grow as more testing occurs statewide. Los Angeles County health officials on Sunday confirmed a fifth death from COVID-19. They also reported 71 new cases in the county, with the total now at least 411.

The Los Angeles Community College District reported on Sunday its first confirmed case of the virus at East Los Angeles College in Monterey Park. A student there was tested Wednesday after reporting symptoms and is in quarantine and recovering, a letter from interim president Raul Rodriguez said.

Rodriguez said the student was believed to have been exposed while at UCLA during the week of March 8 and last came to the East L.A. College campus on March 12.

All faculty and staff who were supposed to come to campus on Monday were directed to work from home unless otherwise notified by their supervisors.

A ground-support employee responsible for handling luggage at Hollywood Burbank Airport has tested positive for COVID-19, according to a statement released Monday by the company that employs the worker.

A fifth Transportation Service Authority employee at San Jose International Airport has tested positive for the virus. The employee last worked at the airport on March 11 at a passenger screening checkpoint

And an inmate in the state's prison system, along with five prison workers, have also tested positive. The prisoner, housed in L.A. County, was in stable condition and was being treated on site as of Sunday night.

Elsewhere, healthcare workers are increasingly feeling the toll of their work.

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In a video message recorded Sunday night, Marin County's Public Health Officer Dr. Matt Willis announced that he tested positive for the virus that afternoon. Willis said he has been self-quarantined from his family since his symptoms first appeared late last week.

"My case is further proof that COVID-19 is with us," said Willis. "While my symptoms are now mild, as most people's will be, we also know that for many, especially our elders, this same illness can be life threatening."

Willis' source of exposure is currently unknown, since he has actively met with healthcare workers around the Bay Area for work.

Meanwhile, as more testing becomes available, the need for increased capacity has not dissipated.

The city of Hayward opened a free, public COVID-19 testing center Monday that officials say should be able to screen up to 350 people a day and provide results within 24 hours.

In a joint-effort between the Alameda County city and Avellino, a Menlo Park-based precision medicine company, the center at city Fire Station #7 will be open daily and staffed by personnel from the Hayward Fire Department.

No doctor's referral is required, but people arriving at the center will be screened for symptoms of the disease — such as fever, cough and shortness of breath — before they're tested.

As of Monday morning, there were "dozens of people who have presented themselves for testing, arriving both by car and on foot," said city spokesman Chuck Finnie.

In Los Angeles, Mayor Eric Garcetti on Sunday admonished Angelenos who hadn't taken orders to practice social distancing seriously, announcing the closure of the city's golf courses and parking lots at Venice Beach and called a halt to organized group sports at city parks, which were continuing to attract throngs of people.

"This weekend we saw too many images of too many people crowding beaches or canyons beyond their capacity. Too many people, too close together, too often," Garcetti said during his daily briefing on the impact of the novel coronavirus.

"The longer we do that, the more people will get sick, and the more people will die," he said. "There's no way to sugarcoat that."

Parking lots near Venice Beach and the boardwalk were closed Monday, he said. In Santa Monica, the city also decided to close its beach parking lots.

L.A. County Sheriff Alex Villaneuva closed beach parking lots throughout Malibu's 26 miles of coast as part of an effort to allow for social distancing. Among the parking lots shut were Topanga, Surfrider, Corral Canyon, Point Dume, Zuma, El Matador, La Piedra, Nicolas Canyon and Leo Carrillo.

On Sunday night, Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia announced the closure of Long Beach's public basketball, tennis and volleyball courts, as well as its dog parks, playgrounds

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and skate parks.

Officials in Orange County also were tightening regulations after groups of people descended on beaches and public trails over the weekend despite warnings about social distancing.

The Laguna Beach City Council voted in a closed session Sunday night to close trail access to county wilderness parks as early as Monday morning. The council also directed staff to close all city beaches by Monday night and request that the county do the same for all stretches of sand in its jurisdiction.

“We were unanimous that these steps must be taken now in our city to slow the spread of COVID-19,” Laguna Beach Mayor Bob Whalen said. “I urge everyone to comply with our actions for the health of everyone in our community and beyond.”

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority announced over the weekend that it was closing all of its parks and trails, including parkland owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. Access roads and parking lots also will be closed. Many were packed over the weekend as people — eager to get out of the house and into the warm weather after days of rain — flocked to the outdoor destinations.

In Marin County, health officials have ordered the immediate closure of all county parks to stem the tide of visitors.

The measures build on Newsom’s sweeping order, issued Thursday, urging Californians to stay home — with a few exceptions — and put distance between themselves and others to slow the spread of COVID-19. Garcetti issued similar orders last week, which have closed most businesses in the city.

Many who flocked to public areas over the weekend insisted they needed time outdoors to maintain their sanity.

Clifford Aquino and Ryan Castro, both 28, couldn’t go to their gyms in Cerritos, as they had closed under government orders. So they decided to go to Long Beach instead, where there are plenty of outdoor gyms and paths for running.

“This is only Day 2,” Castro said. “It sucks.”

“It does suck,” Aquino replied, “but you have to find different ways to stay active.”

Aquino said he felt safe using the outdoor machines because he was able to keep a safe distance from others. If one area is too busy, he finds another, he said. He said he wiped down each machine with a Lysol wipe before using it.

Trump announced that he had signed paperwork to have the federal government pay for National Guard deployments in California, New York and Washington.

Newsom on Friday deployed the California National Guard to assist food banks statewide in serving residents whose needs had not been met due to food shortages.

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The governor said the guard would focus on both humanitarian and public safety needs. Newsom specifically pointed out that the state wanted to ensure that "food delivery is happening appropriately" and expressed concern about grocery stores overwhelmed by customers hoarding food and other essential household goods.

California's National Guard force of roughly 22,000 troops has often been activated in times of disaster and crisis, particularly in response to devastating wildfires and earthquakes.

Meanwhile, Garcetti urged residents with disposable income to donate to the city's emergency crisis response fund, which will help pay for childcare for medical workers, grants for families and individuals who need financial assistance and meals for seniors.

[CA] Coronavirus cases in California pass 2,000. Here is what you need to know (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 11:02 PM, Colleen Shalby, Rong-Gong Lin II, Hannah Fry, 1907K]
California hit another milestone with coronavirus: more than 2,000 cases confirmed.

Officials expect that number to rise significantly amid aggressive new pushes to get more people tested.

The death toll now stands at 43, with two new deaths reported in Los Angeles County. Both state and local numbers show it's not just the old getting sick. Of those who have tested positive in Los Angeles County, for example, 80% are people ages 18 to 65, and 42% are in the 18-40 age group.

"This virus can infect people from across the board," Dr. Barbara Ferrer, director of the L.A. County Public Health Department, said Monday.

Here are the basics:

MORE CLOSURES: Gov. Gavin Newsom said Monday that he is closing parking lots at California's state parks in order to deter people from congregating and unintentionally spreading the novel coronavirus. It comes after many cities and agencies closed down beach parking lots, parks, hiking trails and recreation areas.

NATIONAL GUARD: The California National Guard on Monday provided details about how personnel would be deployed across the state to assist in coronavirus aid. Officials said the Guard is being used purely for humanitarian purposes, such as distributing food and medical supplies as well as helping at food banks and working with officials on the Grand Princess cruise ship, which docked in California after an outbreak of the virus on board.

SAN FRANCISCO WARNING: San Francisco officials warned that a surge in coronavirus is expected to come within a week or two, and voiced dismay over images of the public crowding at beaches and parks across California. "The worst is yet to come," San Francisco Director of Public Health Dr. Grant Colfax said at a news conference Monday.

REAL ID: With the COVID-19 pandemic further stifling the efforts of California and other states to issue Real ID licenses, President Trump on Monday said he will extend the Oct. 1 deadline for people to apply for the identification cards to board domestic flights in the

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United States.

HELP SAILING TO L.A.: The Navy hospital ship Mercy, based in San Diego, has been deployed to Los Angeles and should be here within days. The Federal Emergency Management Agency was set to ship mobile hospital units to California within the next 48 hours. The state is in line to get eight of these units, for a total of 2,000 beds.

SCHOOLS: Los Angeles public schools will remain closed until May 1 in response to the coronavirus outbreak as Supt. Austin Beutner announced Monday that Verizon would provide free internet access for all students who did not currently have it so learning can continue. Beutner said he had authorized $100 million in spending on technology to help students as the district struggled to provide online learning for about half a million students, many without internet access at home. The district is working on a plan to distribute more computers to students and instructions for accessing the Verizon program.

[CA] Trump approves disaster declaration for coronavirus in California (The Hill)
The Hill [3/22/2020 9:20 PM, John Bowden, 1762K]
President Trump on Sunday approved a disaster declaration for California over cases of the coronavirus spreading in the state.

A news release Sunday evening from the White House stated that federal funding would be available for state, local and tribal organizations in California as officials attempt to prevent the further spread of coronavirus. More than 1,600 case have been confirmed in the state.

"The President's action makes Federal funding available for Crisis Counseling for affected individuals in all areas in the State of California," said the release.

"Federal funding is also available to State, tribal, and eligible local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency protective measures, including direct Federal assistance, for all areas in the State of California impacted by COVID-19," the White House continued.

30 people have died in the state as California has reported the third-highest number of cases among all 50 states, behind only Washington state and New York.

In a letter to President Trump this week, California Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) predicted that more than half of the state's 25.5 million people will be infected within weeks.

That number, a spokesman later explained, was calculated without considering actions taken to mitigate the disease's spread.

"Governor Newsom has been honest about the threat of the virus and its impact on the health and welfare of Californians," Jesse Melgar told The Hill. "This projection shows why it's so critical that Californians take action to slow the spread of the disease – and those mitigation efforts aren't taken into account in those numbers. The state is deploying every resource at its disposal to meet this challenge, and we continue to ask for the federal government's assistance in this fight."

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[CA] Newsom says California needs 30,000 more hospital beds than anticipated for coronavirus patients (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 10:57 PM, Taryn Luna, 1907K]
Gov. Gavin Newsom announced new action on Monday to encourage social-distancing measures, including closing parking lots at state parks, and warned that California will need more than twice as many hospital beds for coronavirus patients than previously anticipated.

The governor said he was closing parking lots in an effort to prevent people from congregating at California's outdoor recreational areas and unintentionally spreading the virus.

His announcement came four days after he ordered all residents to remain in their homes, making California the first state in the nation to place such restrictions on the movement of its residents.

As of Monday, 40 people have died and 2065 people have tested positive for COVID-19 in the state.

"We're looking at bending the curve. We're looking at interventions that work," Newsom said. "As a consequence of updating our models, we are looking to significantly increase our procurement of assets, specifically beds, throughout our healthcare delivery system."

Newsom said he believes California will need 50,000 hospital beds for coronavirus patients, a significant increase from the 20,000 beds his administration had forecast last week. The Democratic governor said the state's 416 hospitals were doubling so-called "surge plans" to 40% of their capacity, which includes providing 30,000 new beds across the system.

At the same time, the state is securing an additional 20,000 beds outside the state hospital system. Newsom said his administration had identified 3,000 new beds through mobile hospital units sent from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, an agreement to lease an empty hospital near downtown Los Angeles, and other plans, but still needs another 17,000 beds.

Under Newsom's stay-at-home executive order announced last Thursday, Californians are allowed to venture outside for necessities and for recreational purposes, but are required to stay at least six feet away from one another.

Despite millions of residents heeding the call, reports of noncompliance prompted local officials to admonish people and take additional action over the weekend.

A thick crowd of shoppers at a farmers' market in Sacramento on Saturday made it nearly impossible for people to stay a safe distance from one another. Laguna Beach officials closed beaches and blocked trail access to county wilderness parks in response to growing alarm about people amassing on the city's pristine coastline.

While anyone who defies Newsom's order could be punished with a misdemeanor, the first-term Democrat has repeatedly said that he doesn't believe law enforcement intervention is necessary. Newsom said his administration is conducting a public awareness campaign and he believes that "social pressure" will encourage people to remain at home.

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President Trump granted Newsom's request on Sunday to declare a major disaster in California to help the state respond to the COVID-19 pandemic with emergency medical aid and unemployment assistance.

Newsom declared his own state of emergency in California on March 4 to help the state prepare for the spread of the coronavirus. At the time, the California Department of Public Health reported that 53 people had tested positive and one had died from the virus.

[Editorial note: consult video at source link]

[CA] Navy hospital ship deploying Monday to Los Angeles (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 3:15 PM, Rebecca Kheel, 1762K]
A Navy hospital ship in San Diego is deploying Monday to Los Angeles to help relieve hospitals expected to become overburdened by coronavirus patients, the Navy announced.

In a news release, the U.S. Navy 3rd Fleet said the USNS Mercy will treat non-coronavirus patients referred to the ship by hospitals ashore, providing them with "a full spectrum of medical care."

"This will allow local health professionals to focus on treating COVID-19 patients and for shore-based hospitals to use their Intensive Care Units and ventilators for those patients," the release said.

The Mercy will leave San Diego with more than 800 Navy medical personnel and support staff aboard, as well as more than 70 civil service mariners.

"#USNSMercy will be getting underway #TODAY in support of the nation's #COVID19 response efforts. As announced by @realDonaldTrump, the ship will head to Los Angeles," Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Michael Gilday tweeted Monday.

U.S. officials confirmed Sunday during a White House briefing that the Mercy's destination will be Los Angeles.

While Washington State has the most confirmed cases of coronavirus on the West Coast, officials said Los Angeles was chosen because California is expected to have the greater need.

"Even though there are more cases right now in Washington, the projected needs for beds in California is five times more that of Washington," Pete Gaynor, the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) administrator, said Sunday at the White House.

At a briefing Monday, Navy officials said the Mercy is scheduled to leave San Diego at 2 p.m. local time Monday. The Mercy is expected to arrive at the port of Los Angeles "within the week" and will be able to treat patients the day after arriving, Capt. John Rotruck, commanding officer of the ship, told reporters at the Pentagon via teleconference.

Despite San Diego's proximity to Los Angeles, the Mercy will take a couple extra days to travel to conduct operations, tests and certifications that must be done at sea before arrival, as well as to allow the crew time to train, Navy officials said.

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Once in Los Angeles, the ship will 1,128 active-duty military staffing the medical treatment facility. There will also be 58 reservists who have "self-identified as being members of the clinical community helping their local jurisdiction with COVID-10," said Rear Adm. Tim Weber, commander of Naval Medical Forces Pacific.

The Mercy is prepared to stay in Los Angeles as long as necessary and can go elsewhere after if directed by FEMA, officials said at the briefing.

The U.S. Navy operates two hospital ships, the Mercy and the Comfort, to help with relief efforts during crises, such as Puerto Rico in 2017 after Hurricane Maria. Each ship has a 1,000-bed capacity.

U.S. and New York officials have previously said the Comfort will deploy to New York City. The Comfort is undergoing maintenance in Virginia, meaning it is not expected to deploy until next week.

[CA] Trump approves federal aid for California (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/22/2020 10:04 PM, John King and Tatiana Sanchez, 337K]
A new wave of federal assistance to battle the effects of the coronavirus is headed to California after Gov. Gavin Newsom requested Sunday — and President Trump approved — a “Major Disaster Declaration” for the state.

The declaration clears the way for individual assistance programs to assist those affected by the outbreak, including medical care, emergency aid, unemployment assistance, legal services and supplemental nutrition assistance.

In addition, the Federal Emergency Management Agency will ship eight mobile hospital units with 2,000 beds to California in the next few days, and the federal government will pay for National Guard deployments aimed at helping in the response to what is expected to be a surge in coronavirus cases across the state.

The looming impacts of the coronavirus are “of such severity that effective response is beyond the capabilities of the state and affected local governments,” Newsom wrote Trump on Sunday — saying that without the resources freed up by such a declaration, “impacts will be felt throughout the nation, as well as around the world.”

Over the weekend, other governors castigated the president over what they called a lack of a coordinated federal strategy to respond to a virus that now has spread to all 50 states, with more than 33,000 cases and 400 deaths reported worldwide as of Sunday evening.

But Newsom’s letter was a study in calibrated tact. He began by thanking Trump for the president’s declaration of a national state of emergency on March 13, and how “you and many of the members of your Coronavirus Task Force have been personally available to me and my team.”

After Trump agreed to California’s request for open-ended aid, the governor struck an equally positive tone.

“The declaration will supplement our state’s comprehensive COVID-19 surge planning and make vital resources available,” Newsom said in a statement released by his office Sunday

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evening. “We appreciate the quick response and partnership from the White House.”

The long-term price tag could be vast, given the number of Californians whose lives have been thrown into economic turmoil by the ripple effects of the virus. Particularly disruptive, by intent, is the move by Bay Area counties and then the state to close all nonessential businesses for at least the next two weeks in a bid to slow the spread of COVID-19.

The declaration will unlock federal unemployment benefits for workers who don’t qualify for regular state unemployment benefits. This includes the self-employed, business owners and people who haven’t worked long enough to qualify or who have run out of benefits in California or any other state.

In the past, these benefits have been made available to people who lost work as a direct result of natural disasters, including the 2017 North Bay wildfires.

How much workers can get under the Disaster Unemployment Assistance program depends on their income. In the past, benefits have gone up to $450 a week for 26 weeks in California, the same maximum for regular state unemployment benefits.

The disaster declaration capped a day where recorded coronavirus cases continued to grow in both numbers and extent.

The number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in the region was 772 as of Sunday evening, with Napa County reporting its first two cases and becoming the final Bay Area county to do so. Nearby Yolo County reported its first death, increasing the number of confirmed COVID-19 fatalities to 35 in the state; of these, 13 have been in the Bay Area.

The city of Hayward, meanwhile, announced it will open a free testing facility Monday.

The COVID-19 Testing Center at Hayward Fire Station No. 7, 28270 Huntwood Ave., will open daily from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. and will be managed by Hayward firefighter-paramedics and EMTs. It’s free and open to anyone, regardless of immigration status.

Up to 370 people a day will be tested, said city spokesman Chuck Finnie, and Hayward police will be on hand to control traffic. The desire is to avoid an “unnecessary rush” to get the tests — giving priority to first responders, health care workers and people who are already ill.

“We want sick people to come,” Finnie said. “We want the wondering and the worried to stay home and continue to shelter in place.”

Hayward officials partnered with Avellino Lab USA, Inc., in Menlo Park, which will process the test kits in as little as six hours or by the next day, officials said.

All drivers who pull up to the testing site will be asked a series of questions, such as whether they traveled recently or if they’ve had contact with someone who has the virus, Finnie said. Those who qualify for testing will then get screened for fever, cough, shortness of breath and respiratory issues, among other symptoms.

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[CA] Southern California police to patrol with drones during coronavirus lockdown: report (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 1:44 AM, David Aaro, 8943K]
Some police departments in California plan on using drones to enforce a coronavirus lockdown and to, in part, monitor the homeless population, according to a report on Friday.

The Chula Vista Police Department, located just south of San Diego near the California-Mexico border, recently purchased two $11,000 drones -- doubling its fleet -- that will be outfitted with speakers and night vision cameras.

“We have not traditionally mounted speakers to our drones, but ... if we need to cover a large area to get an announcement out, or if there were a crowd somewhere that we needed to disperse -- we could do it without getting police officers involved,” said Capt. Vern Sallee, according to the Financial Times.

“The outbreak has changed my view of expanding the program as rapidly as I can,” he added.

One of the reasons for the drones will be to monitor the homeless population in the city, who Sallee believes have a lack of reliable information on the severity of the coronavirus outbreak.

“We need to tell them we actually have resources for them -- they are vulnerable right now,” Sallee said, according to the paper. “It might be impractical or unsafe for our officers to be put into those areas.”

The drones were made by the Chinese company DJI -- the largest civilian drone company -- that accounts for roughly 70 percent of the market. Officials had previously warned about Chinese drones being a possible threat to security, the Financial Times reported.

The department currently flies about 10-15 operations a day, but solely for emergency situations. They started using them for emergency situations back in Oct. 2018.

"With strong support from the community, the Chula Vista Police Department began deploying drones from the rooftop of the Police Department Headquarters to 911 calls and other reports of emergency incidents such as crimes in progress, fires, traffic accidents, and reports of dangerous subjects," the department said.

Sallee is working with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to expand drone usage in order to protect those in the community during the outbreak.

“This crisis could be a catalyst to spur the FAA to free up resources faster,” he said, according to the paper.

[CA] Some California beaches closed to deter crowds amid outbreak (AP)
AP [3/22/2020 7:34 PM, Christopher Weber, 337K]
Sunshine lured crowds to California beaches and parks on Sunday despite a statewide stay-at-home order, prompting more closures as officials announced plans to ramp up testing procedures for the coronavirus.

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Santa Monica closed seaside parking lots to discourage people from visiting its famous strand, and Los Angeles was expected to do the same starting Monday in neighboring Venice Beach to curb the virus spread.

Most people on the sand took care to heed guidelines to stay 6 feet (1.8 meters) away from others. But spacing became an issue in popular areas like the Venice boardwalk, causing Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti to chide visitors for being “too close together, too often.”

“The longer we do that, the more people will get sick and more people will die,” Garcetti said at an evening news conference.

Dozens of Los Angeles-area parks, trails and facilities overseen by the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority were closed down Sunday.

In the San Francisco Bay Area, authorities shut Drakes Beach, Agate Beach and other popular coastal spots, including Point Reyes Lighthouse and Chimney Rock Headlands.

President Donald Trump on Sunday approved a Major Disaster Declaration to assist in California’s COVID-19 preparedness and emergency response efforts. The move frees federal funds to help with mass care and emergency assistance, unemployment assistance and disaster legal services.

Trump also announced that he ordered the Federal Emergency Management Agency to ship mobile hospital centers to California, Washington and New York.

When the US Naval Ship Mercy arrives in Los Angeles, it will open 1,000 beds and become the largest hospital in the city, Garcetti said. The timing for the vessel’s arrival was not announced.

The mayor said the city would launch a website this week that will direct people to centers where they can be tested for the virus. The first tests would be reserved for the “most vulnerable,” including patients showing symptoms, people 65 or older and those with underlying health conditions, the mayor said.

In neighboring Riverside County, testing began this weekend at a drive-through facility outside a minor league baseball stadium in Lake Elsinore.

Gov. Gavin Newsom’s order last week that Californians should stay home to curb the pandemic in the nation’s most populous state was by far the most sweeping and was followed by similar announcements in New York and Illinois.

California is one of the hardest-hit states, with more than 1,600 confirmed cases and 30 deaths as of Sunday, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

On Sunday night, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation reported the first case of a prisoner with the coronavirus: an inmate at California State Prison-Los Angeles County.

The department also reported that five more employees have tested positive for the virus. Two of them are at California State Prison, Sacramento, two are at the California Institution

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for Men, and one is at Folsom State Prison.

Newsom has said infection rates of the COVID-19 virus are doubling every four days in some areas. He projected that millions could contract the virus in the next two months if aggressive prevention isn't taken.

Newsom ordered spending $42 million in emergency funding to allow the state to lease two hospitals — Seton Medical Center in Daly City and St. Vincent Medical Center in Los Angeles — for three months to provide care for patients with COVID-19.

The emergency fund will also be used to buy or refurbish ventilators, provide more patient transportation service and expand testing capacity at a state laboratory.

Residents have been told to keep away from others, not gather in groups and wash their hands frequently. They can go out to get food, fill prescriptions, seek medical care, care for vulnerable relatives or neighbors and get exercise, such as walking.

Gas stations, supermarkets and convenience stores were open, along with auto repair shops. Those providing essential services, such as plumbers and electricians, were still on the job. But restaurants were only delivering or providing take-out.

[AK] Alaska Democrats cancel in-person primary voting (San Francisco Chronicle)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 3:04 PM, Associated Press, 337K]
The Alaska Democratic Party will hold its party-run presidential primary exclusively by mail and is moving back the deadlines for returning and tabulating ballots.

The party announced Monday it is canceling in-person voting sites planned for April 4 due to concerns with the coronavirus. But it is extending the deadline to return ballots by mail. Originally, ballots were to be postmarked by Tuesday. The party now says they must be received in Anchorage no later than April 10 to be counted.

Results are expected no later than just before midnight on April 11.

The party sent more than 71,000 registered Democrats ballots, which is seven times the number of people who participated in the 2016 caucuses, the party's executive director, Lindsay Kavanaugh, said in a statement.

"We want to continue to allow for maximum participation in this historic primary while respecting the health and safety of our voters and volunteers," she said.

Ballots also will be made available to download, the party said.

The primary is open only to registered Democrats.

In other coronavirus news in Alaska:

KETCHIKAN CRUISE SHIPS

Ketchikan is considering whether to allow cruise ships to dock there while waiting out the global ocean cruise suspension because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus.

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The Ketchikan City Council discussed allowing cruise operators to pay for space and services at its downtown berths during the nearly industry-wide suspension, The Ketchikan Daily News reported Saturday.

At least one cruise line approached the city about docking multiple ships at the berths, Ketchikan Port and Harbors Director Steve Corporon said.

Cruise Line International Association, accounting for 95% of the market, announced March 13 that its member lines planned to suspend cruises for 30 days.

“It’s kind of like 9/11 with the airplanes,” Corporon said. “The infrastructure wasn’t there to land all the airplanes at once. (It’s) similar here. The infrastructure isn’t in place to have all the cruise ships in port.”

The Canadian government announced port restrictions that could delay the Alaska cruise ship season until July 1.

For most people, the coronavirus causes only mild or moderate symptoms. But for the elderly and people with existing conditions, it can cause more severe illness. The vast majority of those who are infected recover.

The city could take in between $1,700 to $2,800 daily per ship in docking fees. Additional costs depending on the needs of the ships could include drinking water and waste management.

Each ship would likely operate at least one electric generator or engine for power while docked. The largest cost estimate for the city to provide power was $10 million, Corporon said.

Additional port security would be required by under a U.S. Coast Guard plan, costing the city between $1,500 and $2,500 for personnel.

The ships would not be subject to commercial passenger vessel fees or port development fees because there would be no passengers.

[HI] Cruise Ship Passengers Bused to Flights Out of Honolulu (US News & World Report)

US News & World Report [3/23/2020 6:36 PM, Jennifer Sinco Kelleher, AP, 3020K]

Passengers from a cruise ship that was turned away by other ports began disembarking at a Honolulu harbor Monday to catch chartered flights home. The development came after Hawaii officials changed their minds several times about whether the 2,000 passengers on the Norwegian Jewel could set foot in the state.

New measures to seal off borders to reduce the spread of coronavirus have left some cruise ships stranded, with local governments denying permission to disembark as more cases of infected passengers have come to light.

There were no suspected or confirmed cases of coronavirus on the Jewel, according to state and cruise line officials.

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The Centers for Disease Control said in a report Monday that at least 120 Americans who were aboard two sailings of the Grand Princess cruise ship, based in San Francisco, have tested positive for the virus, even though fewer than 500 were tested after being sent to 14 days of quarantine at several U.S. military bases. At least 13 Canadians also have tested positive from the Grand Princess.

The Norwegian Cruise Line ship first set sail on Feb. 28 in Sydney, Australia. It was later turned away by Fiji and New Zealand. It was allowed to refuel in American Samoa but passengers weren't allowed to disembark. The ship then headed toward to Honolulu, where Hawaii officials initially said passengers would be allowed to disembark and catch flights home.

After complaints from Hawaii residents, including threats to block the ship from arriving, state officials changed course and said the ship could only stop to refuel and stock up on supplies.

On Sunday, as the ship headed to Honolulu, Hawaii officials announced that passengers would be allowed to disembark because the ship needed repairs.

The cruise line chartered at least 10 flights to locations including, Sydney, London and Los Angeles, said Tim Sakahara, spokesman for Hawaii's Department of Transportation.

On the ship, passengers would go through U.S. customs and be screened by cruise line doctors. Then, they would enter a terminal at the harbor, where they would undergo thermal screening. Anyone with symptoms, such as a fever, would be evaluated by doctors. Passengers with no symptoms would board buses to the airport for their flights, Sakahara said.

"So far there haven't been any symptomatic passengers at this point," Sakahara said Monday morning after about four large buses transported passengers to the airport. "At no point will the cruise passengers be with the general public at large."

The process will continue Tuesday, until all passengers have departed. About 1,000 crew members will remain on the ship, Sakahara said.

There were 25 Hawaii residents on the ship, who will be directed to self-quarantine for 14 days, even though the governor's quarantine order travelers arriving to the state doesn't take effect until Thursday, Sakahara said.

The 13 passengers who live on the island of Oahu will be shuttled to their homes, while those who live on other Hawaiian islands will take chartered flights, Sakahara said.

Passenger Edmund Pinto, who is a former Associated Press editor, called Hawaii's restrictions "over the top" for people who haven't walked on land since March 11. "The state rules make little sense," he said via text message while going through customs screening on the ship. "Flights into Honolulu are bringing more risk to your population than this ship."

On Monday, passengers lounged in reclining chairs and walked about the deck of the ship.

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The harbor area where the ship was docked was gated-off and officers were standing guard at the entrance.

[Mexico] Trump administration delays court hearings for asylum-seekers in Mexico amid pandemic: report (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 11:19 PM, Justine Coleman, 1762K]
The Trump administration moved Monday to delay the court hearings for asylum-seekers sent to Mexico, citing concerns about the coronavirus pandemic.

The Justice Department said hearings for those affected by the “Remain in Mexico” program that were scheduled for before April 22 will be postponed, CBS News reported. Those who have scheduled court dates before April 22 will need to obtain new government documents and a new hearing date from border officials, on the day of their scheduled hearing.

A spokesperson for the Executive Office for Immigration Review within the department told CBS News the decision would allow the department to protect migrants, officials and U.S. citizens from the coronavirus and allow the migrants to have their “day in court.”

The spokesperson maintained that the “Remain in Mexico” program, officially called the Migrant Protections Protocols, was not being canceled. The program has already sent more than 6,000 Latin American asylum-seekers to northern Mexico as they wait for their cases to process.

The delays come after the administration announced Friday that it would deny entry to migrants, including those seeking asylum, who attempt to cross borders without authorization. Officials said the decision was made in an effort to prevent the spread of coronavirus.

The Justice Department canceled all hearings for immigrants not detained as the outbreak sweeps the country, but it has received criticism for not closing most courts or postponing hearings for those who are detained by the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The novel coronavirus, which has disrupted American society, has infected more than 46,000 people in the U.S., killing at least 610, according to data from Johns Hopkins University.

[Mexico] U.S. postpones court hearings for asylum-seekers in Mexico over coronavirus (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 10:09 PM, Camilo Montoya-Galvez, 2394K]
Citing the global response to the coronavirus pandemic, the Trump administration on Monday moved to postpone all court hearings for the thousands of asylum-seekers it has returned to Mexico.

The Justice Department said hearings for migrants in the so-called "Remain in Mexico" program that were initially slated to take place before April 22 would be postponed. A spokesperson for the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), the Justice Department branch that oversees the nation’s immigration courts, said the decision will ensure asylum-seekers in the program can have their "day in court," while safeguarding the

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health of migrants, officials and U.S. citizens.

Though the spokesperson said the "Remain in Mexico" policy was not being "canceled," Monday's move will partially paralyze the centerpiece of the Trump administration's restrictive asylum policies designed to discourage migration to the U.S. southern border. Under the policy, known officially as the Migrant Protections Protocols, or MPP, U.S. border officials have returned more than 60,000 Latin American migrants to northern Mexico, requiring them to wait there as their asylum cases are adjudicated.

In its statement, the Justice Department spokesperson said asylum-seekers in Mexico who are scheduled to appear before an immigration judge in the U.S. through April 22 should report to U.S. border officials on their previously scheduled court dates to get new government documents and a new hearing date.

Monday's move comes days after the Trump administration invoked sweeping immigration restriction powers in public health law to allow officials to rapidly turn away migrants who cross both the northern and southern borders without authorization. The restrictions, which the administration said were necessary because of the pandemic, bar the entry of migrants without proper documents, even at ports of entry.

Though officials did not clarify whether asylum-seekers in the MPP policy would be allowed inside the U.S. to attend their hearings in light of the new measures, immigration attorneys reported Monday morning that migrants in the program were denied entry. Customs and Border Protection officials did not say whether they will continue to return asylum-seekers to Mexico as part of the MPP program.

Earlier this month, the Justice Department cancelled all hearings for immigrants who were not detained because of the coronavirus outbreak. But the department has come under withering criticism for refusing to close most courts or delay hearings for immigrants detained by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, despite a flurry of calls do so by judges, prosecutors and lawyers.

Richard Newman, an immigration attorney with the non-profit San Antonio Region Justice For Our Neighbors, said Monday's announcement was a good move from a public health perspective. He said he and other lawyers who are representing asylum-seekers in the MPP program had been dreading telling their clients they would not go to court with them or visit them in Mexico, fearing community transmission of the coronavirus.

"If one of us lawyers has COVID-19 and we walk over and talk to our clients, the entire refugee camp will get it," Newman said. "It had put us in this impossible position of trying to protect ourselves, protect our communities and protect the refugee community."

"I'm thankful that EOIR made that decision so it doesn't make the immigration lawyers look like bad guys," he added.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) order that U.S. border officials are using to justify the entry restrictions implemented over the weekend cited assessments by medical experts who said an outbreak of the coronavirus inside the encampments and shelters for asylum-seekers returned to Mexico by the U.S. is "inevitable."

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Though well-aware of the public health considerations, Newman noted that migrants he represents are disheartened that they won't be able to make their case to win U.S. asylum in front of a judge anytime soon. He noted that while waiting months for their hearings, many asylum-seekers have been living in squalid conditions inside camps and shelters located in crime-ridden Mexican borders cities like Matamoros, Tamaulipas, a state the U.S government warns Americans not to visit because of rampant violence.

"These people are broken-hearted," Newman told CBS News. "They are stuck in a horrible situation in Mexico."

[Mexico] Trump administration postpones immigration hearings for migrants waiting in Mexico (CNN)
CNN [3/23/2020 9:40 PM, Priscilla Alvarez, 5551K]
The Trump administration is postponing all hearings related to the administration's controversial policy of returning migrants to Mexico until their court date in the US as a result of the coronavirus, the Justice Department's Executive Office for Immigration Review announced Monday evening.

Hearings set through through April 22 will be rescheduled, according to a statement from EOIR, which oversees the nation's immigration courts. It added, however, that the administration's policy -- officially known as the Migrant Protection Protocols -- will not be canceled, nor will any hearings. .

The administration's so-called Remain in Mexico policy requires migrants, many of whom are from Central America, to wait in Mexico for the duration of their immigration hearings. It has resulted in the creation of makeshift camps where hundreds of migrants have waited for weeks, if not months, in squalid and unsafe conditions. In some cases, migrant families have opted to send children across the US-Mexico border alone.

The growing coronavirus pandemic and new restrictions at the US-Mexico border have raised questions about the program and its enrollees.

EOIR said Monday that any individual with a hearing date through April 22 should still present themselves at their designated port of entry on their previously scheduled date "to receive a tear sheet and hearing notice containing their new hearing dates."

The administration's policy has ping-ponged in the courts since its implementation, ultimately landing before the Supreme Court.

Earlier this month, the Supreme Court said that the policy can stay in effect while legal challenges play out, marking a victory for the administration, which has increasingly relied on the program since its implementation.

Lawyers for the asylum seekers called the government's policy illegal, adding that in the months that it has been in effect "reports of murder, rape, torture kidnapping, and other violent assaults against returned asylum seekers have climbed."

But the administration argued, amid the coronavirus outbreak, that blocking the program would prompt a "rush to the border." In anticipation of the Supreme Court's ruling, the Defense Department deployed its Crisis Response Force in support of US Customs and

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Border Protection, resulting in approximately 160 active duty personnel shifted to the southern border.

EOIR concluded its statement Monday saying that the agency, along with the Department of Homeland Security, is "deeply committed to ensuring that individuals 'have their day in court' while also ensuring the health and safety of aliens, our frontline officers, immigration court professionals, and our citizens."

[Mexico] Hearings for 'Remain in Mexico' migrants delayed, DHS says (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 10:50 PM, Stephen Dinan, 482K]
Officials announced late Monday that immigration hearings for migrants who have been pushed back across the border into Mexico under the administration's so-called "Remain in Mexico" program are being delayed, due to coronavirus fears.

Homeland Security and the Justice Department's Executive Office of Immigration Review issued a joint statement saying that migrants who were supposed to have court dates over the next month will have them rescheduled for later.

Tens of thousands of migrants are waiting in Mexico for a chance to make their case for asylum in the U.S. under the Migrant Protection Protocol, a policy that helped solve last year's border surge.

Under the new terms, the migrants are still supposed to show up at the ports of entry at the designated time, but they'll be given a new court date then.

"DHS and EOIR are deeply committed to ensuring that individuals 'have their day in court' while also ensuring the health and safety of aliens, our frontline officers, immigration court professionals, and our citizens," the departments said.

The move comes just days after the administration announced a broad shutdown of non-essential border traffic, saying there's a danger that COVID-19 would be spread further by entry of unauthorized persons across the U.S.-Mexico border.

Immigrant-rights advocates blasted that move, and have said leaving asylum-seekers in Mexico under the MPP is cruel as well.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement

[TX] Mexican man dies in ICE custody; 10th since October (Breitbart)
San Francisco Chronicle [3/23/2020 2:09 PM, Staff, 337K]
A 42-year-old Mexican man died in a South Texas hospital while being held pending his deportation, immigration authorities said Monday.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement identified the man as Ramiro Hernandez Ibarra and said he died Saturday after being hospitalized Thursday. ICE said Hernandez's preliminary cause of death was complications related to septic shock but did not provide further details.

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Hernandez is the 10th person to die in ICE custody since October, the start of the governmental fiscal year. Eight people died in the previous fiscal year.

Amid the coronavirus pandemic, immigration advocates have criticized the medical care ICE provides to people it detains and called on ICE to release some of its more than 37,000 detainees. About 47% of those people are being held on non-criminal violations of immigration law, according to the agency's most recent statistics.

As of last week, ICE had not confirmed any cases of COVID-19 in its facilities. The agency has placed sick detainees under observation and others in quarantine at several of its jails, including about 60 people confined to a dorm in the Pine Prairie facility in rural Louisiana, according to a lawyer who has spoken to detainees there.

ICE says Hernandez had repeatedly crossed the U.S.-Mexico border and voluntarily returned to Mexico eight times. He was most recently taken into ICE's custody in December after he was arrested and jailed for domestic violence at the Hidalgo County Jail.

Citizenship and Immigration Services

Trump extends Real ID deadline amid coronavirus crisis (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 10:09 AM, Luz Lazo, 12625K]
President Trump said Monday that he is pushing back the deadline for when Americans will be required to have the new Real ID credential to board domestic flights.

At a White House briefing, Trump said he is postponing the Oct. 1 deadline, citing the coronavirus crisis and concerns of crowding at state departments of motor vehicles from people trying to meet the looming deadline.

"At a time when we're asking Americans to maintain social distancing, we do not want to require people to go with their local DMV," Trump said.

Trump did not say when the new deadline was but said it would be announced "very soon."

Governors and lawmakers had asked for the extension in recent days, citing the states' inability to process Real ID applications during the coronavirus crisis. Many states have reduced or completely shut down motor vehicle services as part of their response to the public health emergency.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R), who chairs the National Governors Association, sent a letter to the Trump administration last week saying the coronavirus outbreak was already disrupting states' efforts to issue the credential and calling for a delay of the deadline. Some state and industry leaders say they expect at least a year extension.

"We are pleased that the federal administration has readily agreed to the governors' request to extend the REAL ID deadline. This will help contribute to our efforts to slow the spread of COVID-19, and avoid major confusion for the states," Hogan said in a statement Monday night.

States have been scrambling to comply with the 2005 domestic security program known as

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the Real ID Act, which was designed to help prevent terrorist attacks and reduce the number of licenses granted to undocumented immigrants. By law, states are mandated to issue IDs with counterfeit-resistant security features; applicants must provide several documents proving their identity and legal U.S. residency.

Most states are in the early phases of issuing the new security-enhanced licenses and identification cards. About one-third of Americans have a Real ID credential, according to Department of Homeland Security data.

Because Real ID requires an in-person visit to the DMV, applicants are not able to get the credential during the coronavirus closures.

The federal government had refused to give an extension in recent months, even as it was clear that many states were struggling to issue the credential. It was expected that starting Oct. 1, every U.S. air traveler would be required to present a Real ID-compliant license or another acceptable form of identification, such as a U.S. passport, to board a domestic flight as the last phase of implementation of the law.

Trump's announcement was also welcomed by the travel industry. Roger Dow, president and chief executive of the U.S. Travel Association, said the extension of the deadline "is clearly the wise course of action at this juncture."

The group had asked the Department of Homeland Security to delay the requirement until the economic environment improves and it can ensure that access to air travel will not be negatively affected once enforcement begins.

"The already difficult task of bringing the country closer to REAL ID compliance is now clearly impossible due to the coronavirus crisis," Dow said in a statement. "Clearly the administration understands that the economic damage of coronavirus is already massive, and as we move toward a recovery phase it would be terrible if the REAL ID deadline hits and creates yet another obstacle to people traveling. To get this economy moving again, people need to be able to move again."

Customs and Border Protection

U.S. troops remain at southern border despite waning migration, as coronavirus spreads elsewhere (Los Angeles Times)
Los Angeles Times [3/23/2020 9:05 PM, Molly O'Toole, 1907K]
The United States is in a state of emergency, with thousands of active-duty military and National Guard troops deployed — and not because of the coronavirus.

Under the "national emergency" that President Trump declared in February 2019, roughly 5,200 troops remain at the U.S. southern border to assist in detecting undocumented migrants, though apprehensions are at the lowest levels in years. While other National Guard and military units respond to the rapidly spreading virus, the troops at the border are authorized to stay there through Sept. 30, according to the Defense Department.

The Pentagon "has no plans to pull units off the border for coronavirus response," Lt. Col. Chris Mitchell told The Times in a statement Monday. The mission has cost more than $500

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million, he said.

The troops mainly perform services in support of government border agencies because federal law prohibits the U.S. military from domestic law enforcement activities. Reports of some troops' duties — including, at one point, painting a border barrier "to improve the aesthetic appearance of the wall" — have led to criticism from lawmakers and former officials that the military is being used for the president's political agenda.

David Lapan, formerly an official at the Defense and Homeland Security departments and now a vice president at the Bipartisan Policy Center, said that in a department as large as the Pentagon, the border deployment isn't likely to inhibit its ability to help against the pandemic.

"But," Lapan wrote in an email to The Times, "the larger issue is the absence of a real mission at the [southwest] border because apprehensions have steadily decreased and new coronavirus measures taken by the administration are further restricting movements across the border."

Last week, the administration halted most traffic at the border, restricting all nonessential travel to try to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Though the United States has far more confirmed cases of infection than Mexico or countries farther south, the Homeland Security Department said it will block almost all migrants, including asylum seekers, from entering, whether at an official port of entry or elsewhere, and will return them to Mexico or their country of origin.

Lapan added that the troops and military funding "could be put to better use in responding to coronavirus as well as to true national security threats."

Trump's declaration of a border emergency last year was part of his fight with Congress over funding for his proposed wall, a showdown that led to the longest partial government shutdown in U.S. history. Since then, the administration has diverted about $15 billion from military accounts and other federal funding for border barrier work, according to a March 13 status report by Customs and Border Protection and the Army Corps of Engineers.

The Corps continues to work with the Homeland Security Department, primarily updating and replacing old fencing. The administration has built only two miles of barriers where none existed before, according to the report. John B. Mennell, the assistant chief at U.S. Border Patrol headquarters, said that construction schedules have not been affected by COVID-19, the illness caused by the novel coronavirus.

As part of the military's separate mission to help against the virus, the Pentagon is planning to send military field hospitals to Seattle and New York City later this week to treat non-coronavirus patients, freeing up bed space in civilian hospitals, Defense Secretary Mark Esper said at news conference Monday. The Navy hospital ship Mercy, based in San Diego, has been deployed to Los Angeles to provide extra beds for patients, according to the chief of naval operations.

Trump announced on Sunday that he had authorized the federal government to pay for National Guard deployments in California, New York and Washington. On Friday, California

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Gov. Gavin Newsom had deployed the California National Guard to assist food banks statewide.

Illegal border crossings drop by half amid coronavirus pandemic, DHS says (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 1:10 PM, Alexandra Kelley, 1762K]
Illegal border crossing has dropped by half since the Trump administration temporarily closed the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders, a Trump official said Sunday according to the Associated Press (AP).

Following U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) new order to combat the spread of the coronavirus, AP reports that any individuals caught crossing the border illegally will be immediately deported to Mexico or Canada.

According to Mark Morgan, the acting head of U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the decision applies to all migrants, and the CBP will take anyone crossing the border into custody.

"We don't know anything about you [the immigrant]. You have no documents, we're not going to take you into our facilities and expose you to CBP personnel and the American people as well as immigrants," he said Saturday on Fox News.

Mexican officials, however, said that they would not accept any immigrants who are not Mexican or Central American. Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard said on Friday that "The United States will take care of that."

Last Friday, the CDC issued an order that bars illegal entry into the U.S. for the next 30 days. The decision aims to prevent overcrowding in understaffed detention centers, which could enable the spread of COVID-19. The CDC also took into consideration that migrants suspected of having COVID-19 would be sent to local hospitals, possibly infecting others.

There have been calls from multiple activist groups urging the release of immigrants from detention centers for the sake of immigrants' health. Last week, the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) shut down field officers across the country in response to the virus. Asylum applications will be temporarily suspended in between points of entry.

Speaking on Fox News, Morgan explained that trade cargo would still be permitted to cross both the U.S.'s northern and southern border. He said the Trump administration is taking "bold, aggressive action" at the border to prevent more cases of COVID-19.

"We're absolutely limiting and taking reasonable restrictions to contain and mitigate, but it's still going to be open to essential travel and cargo. commercial trade is going to continue to flow," Morgan explained.

The borders remain open to facilitate trade, as the U.S. has approximately $3 billion per day with Canada and Mexico, according to AP.

Illegal Border Crossings Drop By Half Under Coronavirus Shutdown (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [3/23/2020 11:26 AM, Jason Hopkins, 566K]
Since the Trump administration ordered a shutdown of the U.S.-Mexico border, government

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officials are reporting a roughly 50% drop in illegal alien apprehensions.

Under orders from the Centers for Disease Control, the Trump administration on Friday declared a lockdown of the southern and northern borders, permitting only the flow of "essential" travel. In that short time, border officials have revealed that they are seeing a huge drop in the flow of illegal aliens.

"Since [Customs and Border Protection] began implementing [the CDC] order, we've seen a major decline in traffic at our borders — 54% decrease at ports and 52% decline in USBP encounters — while trade remains level," CBP acting commissioner Mark Morgan tweeted Sunday. "These reductions reflect a historic & aggressive containment strategy by [President Donald Trump] to protect the US."

Morgan was not the only one to report a steep decline in the flow of traffic at the U.S.-Mexico border.

"Without that documentation, we see individuals coming into the country without proper identity documents, without travel documents, without medical history. So it's very hard to make a public health determination on those individuals," Chad Wolf, the acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, said Sunday during an appearance on Fox Business.

Wolf was speaking about DHS actions in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic. Allowing individuals to enter the U.S. with unknown medical histories risks exacerbating the spread of the disease, and so the CDC ordered a shutdown of all non-essential flow between the border.

"The CDC said we need to suspend that, so that's what the Department has been doing over the last 24 hours — and I would say that it's working," Wolf added. "We've seen almost a 50% drop in illegal apprehensions, those illegal individuals coming across our borders."

Under the border shutdown order, only certain travel is permitted — which can include travel for medical reasons, educational purposes, emergency response operations, lawful cross-border trade, and some other "essential" services. Anyone appearing at the southern border without proper documentation will be turned back.

However, there appears to be an exception to this rule regarding unlawful immigration.

The Mexican government announced that it would not accept anyone other than Mexicans and Central Americans. While these people make up a vast bulk of the illegal aliens apprehended by Border Patrol, there are still thousands of "extra-contintenal" migrants that make it to the border. These migrants can include Brazilians, Chinese, Africans and others.

A fact sheet released by DHS on Monday said that all illegal aliens will be be "immediately" returned to the country where they entered from — either Mexico or Canada. DHS added that, concerning migrants who cannot be sent back, CBP would return them to their country of origin.

"Extra-continentals will be sent to ICE for repatriation to their countries as soon as possible," Customs and Border Protection (CBP) spokesman Matthew Dyman clarified on Monday to

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the Daily Caller News Foundation.

As of Monday morning, there have been more than 33,000 individuals in the U.S. who have tested positive for coronavirus, and at least 428 people have died from the virus. Around the globe, more than 341,000 people have tested positive and at least 15,187 have died from coronavirus-related illnesses.

Hung out to dry': Border Patrol agents say agency doing too little to protect them against coronavirus (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/24/2020 12:17 AM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K]
Federal law enforcement agents on the southern border expect Border Patrol personnel to get hit by the coronavirus but say they have not been briefed on how the agency will continue its national security operations and whether that includes their having to report to work sick.

Five Border Patrol agents who work in Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California told the Washington Examiner that for weeks, the agency's Washington and regional headquarters have done little to explain how they should protect themselves on the job beyond basic personal protective equipment.

Agents fear they are at risk for COVID-19 from the tens of thousands of crossers they arrest each month. One agent said he took into custody people from Mexico City who told them coronavirus was rampant there, and that's why they fled.

Last week, the agency's social media pages began sharing pictures and videos of agents and people arrested wearing masks and gloves with reassurances that the job was not significantly affected by the coronavirus, even as the Trump administration made the unprecedented move to restrict all nonessential travel at land borders.

"The management is sort of covering their ass, trying to implement some things that might make them say, 'Look, I tried,'" said an agent. "And then that's about it. I think they're having their [regional] personnel telework, some of them. And then we're still having musters."

Musters are meetings in which a dozen or several dozen agents gather in a small area to talk before a shift starts. Two additional agents complained that the group meetings were still taking place despite these being prime venues for spreading the virus.

When, not if, you get it

"They're sending us all out with gloves and masks saying, 'If you just stay six feet away, you won't get it," one agent said. "What they're trying to do is give Border Patrol agents the same rules they've given the public. They know that they can't come out and say, 'We're telling all our agents and staffers to stay six feet away from each other, but don't worry. We're out there hunting down bad guys. We're just doing it from six feet away now.'"

The agent said he is bracing for the onset of symptoms as are his coworkers: "It's a matter of when, not if."

This source said he was aware of another agent who was out a couple days this month with

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a fever but returned to work the same week as being out. Four agents said they do not know what to do if they have been exposed to someone who is sick.

“There’s been no guidance in terms of whether to use sick or admin leave,” said one agent. “If you’re gonna make me stay home for 14 days, are you gonna give me admin leave or do I have to use my own sick leave?”

Agents in the last few days were given guidance explaining when with respect to COVID-19 — including during the process of determining whether they have it — they could use admin leave, which is also referred to as safety leave, so they do not have to use vacation or annual accrued time and sick leave. In most cases, they are not allowed to use admin leave and in some cases, not even sick leave.

No workman’s comp for the sick

Two agents cited emails they received that said they will only receive workman’s compensation if they are sick enough that it mandates getting tested, the test comes back positive, and they can prove they got the virus while working.

“We have to prove that we got it at work,” said an agent who inspects hundreds and sometimes more than 1,000 vehicles per shift at a Border Patrol highway checkpoint. “I don’t go the gym or restaurants and I’m stuck at home with my girlfriend so I don’t know how else I would get it. The only thing I can think of is you would have to pull the [vehicle license] plate readers and run all those plates to see who has it, which they’re not going to do.”

However, if other agents who work alongside an agent who has tested positive for coronavirus get sick, they would be eligible for workman’s compensation. “But I’m the guy hung out to dry because I’m patient zero. But all the other guys get paid for it,” another agent said.

Agents themselves could become COVID-19 ‘importers’

If agents at each of the 73 stations on the southern border start getting sick but are pressured not to stay home because staffing is already low, it could put healthy agents at risk, one man said.

“The Border Patrol is in this weird conundrum of, ‘We know our agents are gonna get sick, but our agents have to go home every day,” the agent said. “The agents themselves could become the importer of the disease into the country.”

The same agent said he “might as well sleep in a parking lot” rather than going home to his family and risk bringing it home to them.

“It is somewhat of a concern for some of us, especially for me because my kids have asthma,” said another agent.

A national security nightmare

“‘If you’re sick, take care of yourself.’ They’re saying that now, and then coronavirus comes

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in and wipes out all the Border Patrol, and we're mustering no one, then all of a sudden it's a national security concern," an agent said. "They're gonna get to a point — if it's bad as they're making it sound and it's as contagious — then all of the Border Patrol agents are gonna get this. What do you do? It's a civilian service. We're not military. They can't order us to stay in one place … They'll probably end up, 'You have to come to work because it's national security. Just come to work sick, sorry," said the agent, adding they could set up campers or house agents inside stations.

One agent said the United States was in a "unique" position compared to other countries that can deploy military to carry out law enforcement at its borders, but the U.S. was limited in its capacity. Still, not all agents are convinced the coronavirus will be a major issue.

"Our guys deal with it. You just want to have a 20-year career and the goal is to be able to retire — probably not get shot, not get [tuberculosis]," he said. "Coronavirus is just sort of like the flu — it's shortness of breath. OK. Copy that. But really, I just don't want to get TB. I don't want to take lice home tonight."

The CBP did not respond to a request for comment.

[TX] Fake, Unsealed Cleaning Products Seized by CBP at Texas Border Crossing (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 2:15 PM, Bob Price, 1973K]
El Paso Sector Customs and Border Protection officers seized a trailer-load of cleaning products being shipped through a Texas port of entry. Officials said the products exhibited evidence of tampering and were diluted with water.

CBP officers assigned to the El Paso Port of Entry on March 16 encountered a tractor-trailer loaded with household cleaning supplies arriving from Mexico. During initial inspection, CBP officers noticed missing safety seals and other signs of tampering.

The shipping manifest included 168 boxes of Clorox bleach (127 oz.), 75 boxes of Pinol (33.81 oz.), 28 boxes of Fabuloso (169 oz.), 23 boxes of Pinol (27.99 oz.), 9 boxes of Clorox (31.44 oz.), and 20 boxes of Adorable brand toilet paper.

As CBP officers and National Guardsmen conducted a physical inspection, they observed many of the bottles were unsealed. Bottles that allegedly contained bleach did not have the typical chlorine odor.

Field testing showed the bottles primarily contained water, officials stated. Formal CBP lab testing later confirmed suspicions about water dilution or replacement.

"In the current environment, it is reprehensible that someone would attempt a scheme like this to prey upon the concerns and fears of our community, likely for financial gain," CBP El Paso Director of Field Operations Hector Mancha said in a written statement. "Our officers remain focused and attentive to all threats they may encounter."

CBP contacted the Clorox Company in Mexico. The representative advised the investigating officers that Spanish labeled products are never exported to the U.S. The spokesman did not explain how the products ended up being filled with water.

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CBP officers seized the shipment pending further investigation.

Transportation Security Administration

More TSA agents test positive for coronavirus; new cases identified at New York, New Jersey, Orlando airports (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 10:58 AM, Michael Bartiromo, 8943K]
The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is continuing to update passengers of the locations where officers have tested positive for coronavirus, confirming six additional cases among officers employed at New York City, Orlando and Washington D.C.-area airports, among others, over the weekend.

"There are 23 TSA screening officers who have tested positive for COVID-19," reads the TSA's coronavirus webpage as of Monday morning. "In addition, five non-screening employees who have relatively limited interaction with the traveling public, have tested positive for the virus."

On March 21, the TSA confirmed additional cases among officers at Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD), LaGuardia Airport (LGA) and Cyril E. King International Airport in the U.S. Virgin Islands (STT). On March 22, the TSA identified more cases at Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR), Orlando International Airport (MCO) and John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK).

As of Monday, the TSA had listed 23 confirmed cases recorded since late February:

5 at John F. Kennedy International Airport (JFK) in New York

4 at Norman Y. Mineta San Jose International Airport (SJC) in California

4 at the Orlando International Airport (MCO) in Florida

2 at Ft. Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport (FLL) in Florida

2 at Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport (ATL) in Georgia

2 at Newark Liberty International Airport (EWR) in New Jersey

1 at the Cleveland Hopkins International Airport (CLE) in Ohio

1 at Cyril E. King International Airport (STT) in St. Thomas

1 at LaGuardia Airport (LGA) in New York

1 at Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) in Virginia

All but one of the officers (a baggage handler at EWR) are employed as screening officers, according to the TSA. As of March 23, all but five had been present for work within the past 14 days.

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The Transportation Security Administration has also provided a map outlining the locations of where these cases were identified, as part of a relatively new website dedicated to answering people's most frequently asked questions about the coronavirus.

Further information about each employee's shifts and exact checkpoint locations can be found at the TSA's website.

In a statement shared with Fox News last week, the TSA confirmed that it was acting under guidance from the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in order to keep employees safe.

"Frontline personnel" who are required to inspect and come into contact with passengers are allowed to wear surgical masks. Security screeners are also urged to frequently wash hands and practice respiratory hygiene, the TSA said.

Secret Service

Secret Service employee tests positive for the coronavirus (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 6:53 AM, Jeff Mordock, 482K, Neutral, Secondary]
A Secret Service employee has tested positive for the coronavirus, the agency said Monday.

The employee is in quarantine and the agency will continue to monitor their condition, the Secret Service said in a statement.

It is not clear if the employee is an agent, but the Secret Service said the person did not have contact with other employees or anyone the agency is responsible for protecting for nearly three weeks.

The agency will continue to follow all guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and will communicate updates to its workforce, a spokesperson said in a statement.

"The Secret Service is committed to protecting the health and safety of its employees, its protectees and the public," the statement said.

President Trump tested negative for the coronavirus earlier this month, the White House said.

Vice President Pence and his wife Karen also tested negative for the virus. They were tested after a staffer in the vice president's office was diagnosed with the virus.

Secret Service employee who tested positive for coronavirus had no contact with Trump (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 12:00 PM, Anna Giaritelli, 570K, Neutral, Secondary]
A Secret Service employee who tested positive for the coronavirus had no contact with President Trump or White House officials, according to a spokeswoman for the agency.

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"The Secret Service has conducted a comprehensive contact trace assessment and determined that the employee has not had contact with any Secret Service employee or protectee for nearly three weeks," said the Department of Homeland Security in a statement Monday.

The agency said the person is in quarantine and following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention protocols. The employee's name and job title were withheld.

Trump told reporters at the White House on March 14 he had tested negative for the virus. Other DHS employees, including those who work for the Transportation Security Administration at several airports across the country, have tested positive.

As of Monday morning, Johns Hopkins University's coronavirus tracker reported more than 35,000 confirmed cases in the United States.

Court grapples with White House's right to suspend press passes (Politico)
Politico [3/23/2020 7:02 PM, Josh Gerstein, 2003K, Neutral, Secondary]
A Justice Department lawyer urged a federal appeals court Monday to give President Donald Trump's White House broad leeway to pull journalists' press passes for conduct the president or his aides deem unprofessional — even though opinions seem to differ widely about how to define that term in the Trump era.

The case argued before a three-judge panel of the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals stems from an altercation in the Rose Garden last July between Playboy's White House reporter Brian Karem and former Trump aide Sebastian Gorka following a summit for social media influencers.

White House press secretary Stephanie Grisham on Aug. 16, 2019, suspended Karem's so-called hard pass for 30 days, saying he acted unprofessionally and disturbed "decorum" by insulting guests and challenging Gorka to a fight. In September, a federal judge restored Karem's pass in a preliminary ruling that said the journalist did not receive sufficient notice of the rules governing his conduct.

Justice Department attorney James Burnham said the White House wasn't required to have a formal policy in order to take action over behavior that was beyond the pale.

"Every credentialed White House reporter, including Mr. Karem, knows perfectly well that they are not permitted to engage in unprofessional behavior on the White House grounds," Burnham said. "There has always been an enforceable requirement that reporters with hard passes behave in a professional manner."

Burnham, who argued the case in the district court and was recently named as a counselor to Attorney General William Barr, said Karem's position that he's entitled to know all specific rules in advance would mean reporters couldn't be punished for sexually harassing White House staff, shouting racial epithets or even for mooning the president unless the White House made public rules barring such acts.

"That's clearly incorrect," Burnham said during arguments that took place by telephone conference call as a result of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. He complained that Karem was claiming "one free shot at any egregiously unprofessional conduct that the White

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House has not expressly prohibited beforehand."

Karem's lawyer, Ted Boutrous, said Trump encourages a "carnival-like" environment at White House events that leaves considerable ambiguity about what kind of behavior by reporters is fair game.

"This unruly, raucous, circus-like atmosphere … President Trump, for better or worse, creates that sort of atmosphere," Boutrous said.

At times, the differences between the two sides were stark. While Boutrous said letting the White House ban a reporter over his comments posed "a real First Amendment danger," Burnham disagreed.

"This is just not a First Amendment case," the Justice Department lawyer said.

Burnham also hammered away at Karem's defenses of his conduct, particularly his claim that offering to have "a long conversation" with Gorka was a genuine invitation to have a discussion in nearby Lafayette Park.

"That is an utterly preposterous explanation for what Mr. Karem engaged in here," Burnham said,

However, the judges did not seem particularly troubled by Karem's actions, which the district court found not obviously outrageous in the context of the freewheeling event.

Judge Nina Pillard seemed most squarely in Karem's corner, lambasting Burnham for arguing that the reporter wasn't entitled to prior notice of what kinds of behavior could lead to suspension of his credentials.

"Mr. Karem had a press pass. And the notion that the standard for taking it away when the only basis was speech by Mr. Karem and the whole area is obviously you know a First Amendment-protected area, that the authority there would not have to be announced in advance, I just find that astounding," said Pillard, an appointee of President Barack Obama. "I mean: Of course, it has to be announced in advance."

Pillard also said she found it curious that there was no indication other White House reporters had ever had their passes pulled for "unprofessional" behavior.

"Isn't it relevant that nobody who has shouted at the president or jostled another journalist or done things that one might under your reading see as clearly unprofessional, has ever had [a] press pass suspended?" she asked.

Burnham said those sorts of actions were "categorically different" than insulting White House guests. "None of the other reporters who didn't have their questions answered felt like they needed to insult the gathered guests," he said.

Judge Sri Srinivasan was somewhat harder to read, expressing concern that letting Karem escape with no consequence might mean that reporters were free to engage in any behavior that wasn't illegal, no matter how disruptive, offensive or inappropriate. He asked what the White House could do if a reporter was "screaming and yelling ad nauseam, laced

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with profanity and epithets."

Boutrous said the Secret Service could take action against anyone who seemed like a threat and the White House could temporarily remove someone from an event if his or her behavior was bizarre. In addition, the White House could give a reporter a formal warning or call the person's editor to complain.

"That's how it's always been done," he said, but suspension of a reporter's pass went too far in the absence of a clear rule, clearly violated.

During the episode last July, Karem unsuccessfully shouted a question at the president as he left the event. Guests at the event then began taunting him, prompting him to shout: "This is a group of people who are eager for demonic possession."

Gorka then ran out of the crowd toward the press section, declaring: "You're not a journalist. You're a punk!" Karem then suggested taking the conversation "outside," as a Secret Service agent stepped forward with apparent concern the two men might come to blows.

In response to another hypothetical from Srinivasan on Monday, Burnham took a sweeping position that the White House could suspend a reporter over just about any threat to fight a White House guest, even if the threat seemed to be in jest and followed a similar comment from the guest.

"The gray zone is fair game," Burnham insisted.

The telephone arguments — which ran to about 70 minutes, more than double the allotted time — went off largely without incident. However, they were delayed briefly by difficulty getting Burnham on the line. The third judge on the panel, David Tatel, was extremely difficult to hear on the audio feed streamed via the internet.

The case is the first fight over White House credentialing to reach the powerful appeals court in more than 40 years. In 1977, the D.C. Circuit ruled that the First Amendment required that Nation Magazine reporter Robert Sherrill be given a clear basis for denial of a White House pass and an opportunity to challenge the refusal. The court also said the White House needed to articulate "an explicit and meaningful standard" for who was entitled to such passes.

[CT] Connecticut State Police warn against COVID-19 scams (Westerly Sun)
Westerly Sun [3/23/2020 11:25 PM, Jason Vallee, 4K, Neutral, Secondary]
With residents across the nation stuck at home, there is an increased likelihood that you or your family will be spending more time online. Unfortunately, so will scammers.

State and local police said they are anticipating a rise in reported scams in the coming weeks as a result of a change in behaviors related to social distancing efforts. Connecticut State Police are asking residents to remain on alert for possible COVID-19 scams and know the warning signs.

State police said in a press release that when it comes to donating to charities that claim to be assisting with COVID-19 response, be sure to research the organization and cause before giving any money.

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“Do your homework when it comes to donations, whether through charities or crowdfunding sites,” the state police said. “Don’t let anyone rush you into making a donation. If someone wants donations in cash, by gift card or by wiring money, just don’t do it.”

But donations aren’t the only scammers out there. The police said citizens should remain on alert for malicious links, fake information and other online efforts to steal your personal information.

The Federal Trade Commission and Secret Service are asking residents to consider the following precautions are they spend time online in the coming weeks:

Don’t click on links from sources you don’t know. They could download viruses onto your computer or device.

Watch for emails claiming to be from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) or experts saying that have information about the virus. For the most up-to-date information about the Coronavirus, visit the CDC and the World Health Organization (WHO).

Ignore online offers for vaccinations. There currently are no vaccines, pills, potions, lotions, lozenges or other prescription or over-the-counter products available to treat or cure Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) — online or in stores.

Avoid opening any attachment or links in emails from senders that you don’t recognize.

Be wary of emails requesting account information or to verify an account, as most businesses would never call you or email you directly to ask for your security credentials.

Always verify that requests for information comes from a legitimate source. And when in doubt, put a website’s domain into a browser yourself: Since most legitimate businesses use encryption known as Secure Socket Layer, "certificate errors" can be a warning sign that the website isn’t valid.

[PA] Police seize marijuana in East Side raid (New Castle News)
New Castle News [3/23/2020 1:28 PM, Staff, Positive, Secondary]
Gunfire in an East Side neighborhood Sunday led police to find about 40 pounds of marijuana in a Frank Avenue residence, according to a New Castle police report.

The police as a result arrested Michael Jon Ortiz, 35, and Alexis K. Williams, 23, both of 853 Frank Ave., and officers during a search of the house seized a stolen gun, various packages of marijuana, about $5,000 in cash, ammunition, 276 vape pen cartridges, a counterfeit $20 bill and other suspicious items, according to a criminal complaint.

[KY] State police make cold case arrest, probe shooting in I-71 corridor counties (WTVQ)
WTVQ [3/23/2020 2:23 PM, Steve Rogers, 5K, Positive, Secondary]
Three people have been charged with a murder almost 31 years to the day after it happened Gallatin Coiunty, the Kentucky State Police announced.

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And in unrelated cases, state police are investigating a separate shooting and unrelated fatal accident in Trimble County.

Curtis Wade Sharon, Shawn F. Satchwell, and Ricky H. Asher were arrested March 20 as part of an investigation into shooting death of Bernard “Cowboy” Hopkins, who was found killed in his residence in Gallatin County on March 13, 1989.

The investigation has continued since it was first reported, eventually becoming a cold case. Through further investigation in more recent years and following up on new leads, Kentucky State Police detectives were able to develop persons of interest in the case, the KSP said in a statement.

Friday, March 20 the case was presented to the Gallatin County Grand Jury, and indictment warrants were issued. In anticipation of the warrants, the KSP along with Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, United States Secret Service, Gallatin County Sheriff’s Office, and Switzerland County, Ind., Sheriff’s Office were ready to pick up the trio. They were arrested without incident, according to the KSP.

Sharon has been charged with complicity to murder and solicitation of murder, and was lodged at the Switzerland County Detention Center in Vevay, Ind.

Satchwell has been charged with murder and in the Boone County Detention Center. Asher is charged with tampering with physical evidence and criminal facilitation to murder and is in the Leslie County Detention Center.

Meanwhile KSP investigators are working on the fatal shooting of 48-year-old Timothy Luke Webster, of Madison, Ind.

According to the KSP, just before midnight Saturday, March 21, KSP Post 5 received a call from Herman Webster reporting shots had been fired at 32 Callis Lane in Bedford in Trimble County.

When troopers arrived, they found Timothy Webster dead from an apparent gunshot wound, the KSP said in a release.

Upon arrival, Troopers discovered Timothy Webster deceased from an apparent gunshot wound.

Through investigation, it appears that Timothy arrived at the residence late that evening in an intoxicated state and began shooting a firearm inside the residence and making threats toward his father. Herman attempted to flee the residence and was followed by Timothy.

While still on the property Herman fired a separate firearm, striking Timothy in the chest. Timothy was pronounced dead at the scene by the Trimble County Coroner, the KSP said, describing the preliminary results of its investigation.

The SP said the investigation continues but no charges have been filed.

In a separate Trimble County case, troopers are investigating a single-vehicle fatal collision on Barebone Road about a half mile from U.S. Highway 42.

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According to a KSP release, just before 8 a.m. Saturday, troopers discovered that a Ford Focus driven by 28-year-old Zachary M. Taylor, of Bedford, was westbound on Barebone Road when it left the roadway, struck multiple trees, and overturned, according to the KSP.

Taylor was pronounced dead at the scene by the Trimble County Coroner.

Taylor was alone in the car, troopers said.

Trimble and Gallatin counties are along I-71 between Louisville and Cincinnati along the Indiana state line.

[KY] Three arrests made in connection to 31-year-old KSP cold case murder investigation in Gallatin County (Northern KY Tribune)
Northern KY Tribune [3/24/2020 1:44 AM, Mark Hansel, 6K, Positive, Secondary]
Kentucky State Police Post 5 detectives, along with the assistance of Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms, United States Secret Service, Gallatin County Sheriff's Office, and Switzerland County (IN) Sheriff's Office arrested three individuals in connection with a murder investigation dating back to 1989.

Curtis Wade Sharon, Shawn F. Satchwell, and Ricky H. Asher were arrested on Friday, March 20. These arrests stem from the investigation into the murder of Bernard "Cowboy" Hopkins, who was found killed in his residence in Gallatin County on March 13, 1989.

The investigation has continued since it was first reported, eventually becoming a cold case. Through further investigation in more recent years and following up on new leads, Kentucky State Police detectives were able to develop persons of interest in the case.

Friday, March 20, the case was presented to the Gallatin County Grand Jury, and indictment warrants were issued for the arrests of Sharon, Satchwell, and Asher. In anticipation of the indictment warrants, Kentucky State Police and the above-mentioned agencies prepared to act quickly in an effort to place these individuals under arrest.

Upon receiving verification of the warrants, law enforcement were able to locate and arrest all three individuals without incident.

Satchwell has been charged with Murder and was lodged at the Boone County Detention Center.

Sharon has been charged with Complicity to Murder and Solicitation of Murder and was lodged at the Switzerland County Detention Center in Vevay, IN. Asher has been charged with Tampering with Physical Evidence and Criminal Facilitation to Murder and was lodged at the Leslie County Detention Center.

The case remains ongoing at this time.

[GA] Columbus police release surveillance photos of counterfeit money suspect (WTVM)

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WTVM [3/23/2020 3:27 PM, Alex Jones, 6K, Neutral, Secondary]
Columbus police are releasing surveillance photos of a man wanted for questioning.

They say the man seen in the photos is involved in an incident of passing counterfeit money.

Anyone who recognizes the man in the photos is asked to contact CPD at 706-225-4381.

[MN] Man Charged With Using Counterfeit Money To Buy Food, Lotto Tickets (KNSI)
KNSI [3/23/2020 6:10 AM, Jennifer Lewerenz, Positive, Secondary]
A 28-year-old St. Francis man is charged after allegedly using fake money at stores in Anoka and Wright Counties.

Jacob Dean Theis was arrested and charged in Sherburne County Court with felony possession of counterfeit currency.

Police say Theis used four fake $10 bills to buy lottery tickets at a convenience store in Big Lake. Surveillance video shows him throwing the money on the counter before quickly leaving the store.

A similar incident was caught on tape in Blaine, where a woman used fake money to buy lottery tickets, threw the money on the counter, and ran. Theis is accused of driving the getaway car in that incident.

He is also accused of using counterfeit cash at a restaurant in Blaine and a convenience store in Monticello.

Following his arrest in the Blaine incident, a search of his truck turned up $156 in counterfeit money. Police also found paper, a paper slicer, laptops, cell phones, and partially printed fake money.

[WY] Rock Spring PD Warn Of Counterfeit Bills Being Circulated (Oil City News)
Oil City News [3/23/2020 3:00 PM, Brendan LaChance, Neutral, Secondary]
The Rock Springs Police Department said on Monday, March 23 that they have received reports of counterfeit bills being circulated in the community.

“Several businesses have already reported receiving the bills in various denominations,” Rock Springs PD said. “Cashiers are advised to inspect all bills before accepting them.”

They warned people that the bills “look extremely real but are slightly different in color.”

“On the bill, there is the word ‘COPY’ and the bill says ‘FOR MOTION PICTURE USE ONLY’ on the front and back,” Rock Springs PD said.

“If you receive one of the bills please contact Detective Sgt. Brenda Baker at the Rock Springs Police Department at 307-352-1575.”

[Canada] Counterfeit money suspects nabbed after trying to flee from Orillia OPP (OrilliaMatters)

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OrilliaMatters [3/23/2020 12:00 PM, Staff, Positive, Secondary]
The Orillia Detachment of the Ontario Provincial Police have made arrests in relation to use of counterfeit currency in the City of Orillia.

On March 21 and 22, 2020 Orillia OPP members and Rama Police Service members received calls regarding the use of counterfeit American currency in Orillia and Rama First Nation.

On March 22, 2020, the Orillia OPP received a third call from a business on Atherley Road that a suspect, in relation to these incidents, was observed in the area. A description of the vehicle was provided to police and a traffic stop was conducted. Three suspects from the vehicle ran from police. After a short foot pursuit police were able to arrest the suspects.

Police arrested Allan Cliffe, age 38, and Derek Hall, age 36, of Barrie and charged them with the following offences:

Two counts of Uttering Counterfeit Money Contrary to section 452(a) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Counterfeit Money Contrary to Section 450(b) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Property Obtained by Crime Contrary to Section 354(1)(a) of the Criminal Code;

Flight from Police Officer Contrary to Section 320.17 of the Criminal Code;

Possession of a Schedule I Substance Contrary to Section 4(1) of the Controlled Drugs; and, Substances Act.

William Comstive, age 30 of Barrie was also arrested and charged with:

Two counts of Uttering Counterfeit Money Contrary to section 452(a) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Counterfeit Money Contrary to Section 450(b) of the Criminal Code;

Possession of Property Obtained by Crime Contrary to Section 354(1)(a) of the Criminal Code;

Personation with Intent to Avoid Arrest Contrary to Section 403(1)(d) of the Criminal Code;

Obstruct Police Officer Contrary to Section 129(a) of the Criminal Code;

Breach of Recognizance Contrary to Section 811 of the Criminal Code;

Breach of Probation Contrary to Section 733.1(1) of the Criminal Code;

Flight from Police Officer Contrary to Section 320.17 of the Criminal Code; and,

Possession of a Schedule I Substance Contrary to Section 4(1) of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act.

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All three suspects were released on a Form 10 and set to appear at the Ontario Court of Justice in Orillia on June 02, 2020.

Counterfeit currency makes its way through our communities from time-to-time and businesses should take precautions to avoid falling victim.

Consult with your financial institution on how to safeguard your business against the use of counterfeit money which may include use of technology or training. Enact strict policies and ensure your employees are aware of the potential that counterfeit currency can be used.

The Orillia OPP is committed to public safety and crime prevention. If you have any information about crime in our community please contact the OPP at 1-888-310-1122 or call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477 (TIPS).

You can submit your information online at crimestopperssdm.com if you have any information on this crime or any other crime. Crime Stoppers does not subscribe to call display and you will remain anonymous. Being anonymous, you will not testify in court and your information may lead to a cash reward of up to $2,000.00.

CISA/Cybersecurity

As Coronavirus Surveillance Escalates, Personal Privacy Plummets (New York Times)
New York Times [3/23/2020 9:04 AM, Natasha Singer and Choe Sang-Hun, 23673K]
In South Korea, government agencies are harnessing surveillance-camera footage, smartphone location data and credit card purchase records to help trace the recent movements of coronavirus patients and establish virus transmission chains.

In Lombardy, Italy, the authorities are analyzing location data transmitted by citizens' mobile phones to determine how many people are obeying a government lockdown order and the typical distances they move every day. About 40 percent are moving around "too much," an official recently said.

In Israel, the country's internal security agency is poised to start using a cache of mobile phone location data — originally intended for counterterrorism operations — to try to pinpoint citizens who may have been exposed to the virus.

As countries around the world race to contain the pandemic, many are deploying digital surveillance tools as a means to exert social control, even turning security agency technologies on their own civilians. Health and law enforcement authorities are understandably eager to employ every tool at their disposal to try to hinder the virus — even as the surveillance efforts threaten to alter the precarious balance between public safety and personal privacy on a global scale.

Yet ratcheting up surveillance to combat the pandemic now could permanently open the doors to more invasive forms of snooping later. It is a lesson Americans learned after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, civil liberties experts say.

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Nearly two decades later, law enforcement agencies have access to higher-powered surveillance systems, like fine-grained location tracking and facial recognition — technologies that may be repurposed to further political agendas like anti-immigration policies. Civil liberties experts warn that the public has little recourse to challenge these digital exercises of state power.

“We could so easily end up in a situation where we empower local, state or federal government to take measures in response to this pandemic that fundamentally change the scope of American civil rights,” said Albert Fox Cahn, the executive director of the Surveillance Technology Oversight Project, a nonprofit organization in Manhattan.

As an example, he pointed to a law enacted by New York State this month that gives Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo unlimited authority to rule by executive order during state crises like pandemics and hurricanes. The law allows him to issue emergency response directives that could overrule any local regulations.

Increased surveillance and health data disclosures have also drastically eroded people’s ability to keep their health status private.

This month, Australia’s health minister publicly chastised a doctor whom she accused of treating patients while experiencing symptoms of the virus — essentially outing him by naming the small clinic in Victoria where he worked with a handful of other physicians.

The health provider, who tested positive for the coronavirus, responded with a Facebook post saying the minister had incorrectly characterized his actions for political gain and demanded an apology.

“That could extend to anyone, to suddenly have the status of your health blasted out to thousands or potentially millions of people,” said Chris Gilliard, an independent privacy scholar based in the Detroit area. “It’s a very strange thing to do because, in the alleged interest of public health, you are actually endangering people.”

But in emergencies like pandemics, privacy must be weighed against other considerations, like saving lives, said Mila Romanoff, data and governance lead for United Nations Global Pulse, a U.N. program that has studied using data to improve emergency responses to epidemics like Ebola and dengue fever.

“We need to have a framework that would allow companies and public authorities to cooperate, to enable proper response for the public good,” Ms. Romanoff said. To reduce the risk that coronavirus surveillance efforts might violate people’s privacy, she said, governments and companies should limit the collection and use of data to only what is needed. “The challenge is,” she added, “how much data is enough?” The fast pace of the pandemic, however, is prompting governments to put in place a patchwork of digital surveillance measures in the name of their own interests, with little international coordination on how appropriate or effective they are.

In hundreds of cities in China, the government is requiring citizens to use software on their phones that automatically classifies each person with a color code — red, yellow or green — indicating contagion risk. The software determines which people should be quarantined or permitted to enter public places like subways. But officials have not explained how the

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system makes such decisions, and citizens have felt powerless to challenge it.

In Singapore, the Ministry of Health has posted information online about each coronavirus patient, often in stunning detail, including relationships to other patients. The idea is to warn individuals who may have crossed paths with them, as well as alert the public to potentially infected locations. “Case 219 is a 30-year-old male,” says one entry on the Health Ministry’s site, who worked at the “Sengkang Fire Station (50 Buangkok Drive),” is “in an isolation room at Sengkang General Hospital” and “is a family member of Case 236.”

On Friday, Singapore also introduced a smartphone app for citizens to help the authorities locate people who may have been exposed to the virus. The app, called TraceTogether, uses Bluetooth signals to detect mobile phones that are nearby. If an app user later tests positive for the virus, the health authorities may examine the data logs from the app to find people who crossed their paths. A government official said the app preserved privacy by not revealing users’ identities to one another.

In Mexico, after public health officials notified Uber about a passenger infected with the virus, the company suspended the accounts of two drivers who had given him rides, along with more than 200 passengers who had ridden with those drivers.

In the United States, the White House recently spoke with Google, Facebook and other tech companies about potentially using aggregated location data captured from Americans’ mobile phones for public health surveillance of the virus. Several members of Congress subsequently wrote a letter urging President Trump and Vice President Mike Pence to protect any virus-related data that companies collected from Americans.

The digital dictates may enable governments to exert more social control and enforce social distancing during the pandemic. They also raise questions about when surveillance may go too far.

In January, South Korea’s government began posting detailed location histories on each person who tested positive for the coronavirus. The site has included a wealth of information — such as details about when people left for work, whether they wore masks in the subway, the name of the stations where they changed trains, the massage parlors and karaoke bars they frequented and the names of the clinics where they were tested for the virus.

In South Korea’s highly wired society, however, internet mobs exploited patient data disclosed by the government site to identify people by name and hound them.

As other countries increase surveillance, South Korea had an unusual reaction. Concerned that privacy invasions might discourage citizens from getting tested for the virus, health officials announced this month that they would refine their data-sharing guidelines to minimize patient risk.

“We will balance the value of protecting individual human rights and privacy and the value of upholding public interest in preventing mass infections,” said Jung Eun-kyeong, the director of South Korea’s Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

That is a tricky balance that some United States officials may need to consider.

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In New York this month, Mayor Bill de Blasio posted details on Twitter about a lawyer in Westchester County who was the second person in the state to test positive for the virus — including the name of the man's seven-person law firm and the names of the schools attended by two of his children. A few hours later, The New York Post identified the lawyer by name and was soon referring to him as "patient zero" in the coronavirus outbreak in New Rochelle.

In a response posted on Facebook, Adina Lewis Garbuz, a lawyer who is the wife of the man, Lawrence Garbuz, pleaded with the public to focus instead on the personal efforts the family had made to isolate themselves and notify people who came into contact with them.

"We would have preferred this all remain private," Ms. Garbuz wrote in the Facebook post, "but since it is no longer, I wanted to at least share some truths and allay people's fears."

WHO unsuccessfully targeted by hackers earlier this month: report (The Hill)
The Hill [3/23/2020 4:55 PM, Maggie Miller, 1762K]
The World Health Organization (WHO) was unsuccessfully targeted by elite hackers earlier this month in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, Reuters reported Monday.

WHO Chief Information Security Officer Flavio Aggio told Reuters that while the hacking effort was unsuccessful, the WHO has seen a spike in attempted cyberattacks since the coronavirus crisis began.

"There has been a big increase in targeting of the WHO and other cybersecurity incidents," Aggio told Reuters. "There are no hard numbers, but such compromise attempts against us and the use of [WHO] impersonations to target others have more than doubled."

Reuters was tipped off to the attempted hack by Alexander Urbelis, a cybersecurity expert and attorney with Blackstone Law Group, who picked up on a live effort to hack the health agency on March 13.

The identity of the hackers involved is not known, though according to experts contacted by Reuters, a cybercrime group known as "DarkHotel" is suspected of carrying out the attack. This hacking group has previously targeted officials and business in the U.S., China, Japan and North Korea.

The WHO did not immediately respond to The Hill's request for comment on the story.

The attempted cyberattack comes after the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) was targeted in a separate cyberattack earlier this month. HHS Secretary Alex Azar told reporters that the hackers involved were not able to penetrate any networks, and that there was no data breach.

The WHO published an alert last month warning individuals to beware of "criminals disguising themselves as WHO to steal money or sensitive information." The WHO noted that it would never send emails asking for usernames or passwords, or emails including attachments that an individual had not requested.

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These types of emails, known as phishing, have increasingly been used to target individuals due to concerns around the coronavirus.

Elite Hackers Target WHO as Coronavirus Cyberattacks Spike (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 3:08 PM, Raphael Satter, Jack Stubbs, and Christopher Bing, 3020K]
Elite hackers tried to break into the World Health Organization earlier this month, sources told Reuters, part of what a senior agency official said was a more than two-fold increase in cyberattacks.

WHO Chief Information Security Officer Flavio Aggio said the identity of the hackers was unclear and the effort was unsuccessful. But he warned that hacking attempts against the agency and its partners have soared as they battle to contain the coronavirus, which has killed more than 15,000 worldwide.

The attempted break-in at the WHO was first flagged to Reuters by Alexander Urbelis, a cybersecurity expert and attorney with the New York-based Blackstone Law Group, which tracks suspicious internet domain registration activity.

Urbelis said he picked up on the activity around March 13, when a group of hackers he'd been following activated a malicious site mimicking the WHO's internal email system.

"I realized quite quickly that this was a live attack on the World Health Organization in the midst of a pandemic," he said.

Urbelis said he didn't know who was responsible, but two other sources briefed on the matter said they suspected an advanced group of hackers known as DarkHotel, which has been conducting cyber-espionage operations since at least 2007.

Messages sent to email addresses maintained by the hackers went unreturned.

When asked by Reuters about the incident, the WHO's Aggio confirmed that the site spotted by Urbelis had been used in an attempt to steal passwords from multiple agency staffers.

"There has been a big increase in targeting of the WHO and other cybersecurity incidents," Aggio said in a telephone interview. "There are no hard numbers, but such compromise attempts against us and the use of (WHO) impersonations to target others have more than doubled."

The WHO published an alert last month - available here here - warning that hackers are posing as the agency to steal money and sensitive information from the public.

And government officials in the United States, Britain and elsewhere have issued cybersecurity warnings about the dangers of a newly remote workforce as people disperse to their homes to work and study because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The motives in the case identified by Reuters aren't clear. United Nations agencies, the WHO among them, are regularly targeted by digital espionage campaigns and Aggio said he did not know who precisely at the organization the hackers had in their sights.

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Cybersecurity firms including Romania's Bitdefender and Moscow-based Kaspersky said they have traced many of DarkHotel's operations to East Asia - an area that has been particularly affected by the coronavirus. Specific targets have included government employees and business executives in places such as China, North Korea, Japan, and the United States.

Costin Raiu, head of global research and analysis at Kaspersky, could not confirm that DarkHotel was responsible for the WHO attack but said the same malicious web infrastructure had also been used to target other healthcare and humanitarian organizations in recent weeks.

"At times like this, any information about cures or tests or vaccines relating to coronavirus would be priceless and the priority of any intelligence organization of an affected country," he said.

Officials and cybersecurity experts have warned that hackers of all stripes are seeking to capitalize on international concern over the spread of the coronavirus.

Urbelis said he has tracked thousands of coronavirus-themed web sites being set up daily, many of them obviously malicious.

"It's still around 2,000 a day," he said. "I have never seen anything like this."

[MO] Ameren Missouri Equipment Supplier Targeted In Ransomware Attack (St. Louis Public Radio)
St. Louis Public Radio [3/23/2020 8:15 AM, Shahla Farzan, 19K]
Ransomware attackers have stolen data from a third-party vendor that supplies utility equipment to Ameren Missouri power plants.

Dozens of data files from Ohio-based LTI Power Systems appeared on a ransomware server in late February, including equipment diagrams and schematics from two Ameren Missouri facilities. No customer information appears to have been involved in the data breach.

St. Louis Public Radio obtained copies of the data files, which span from 1996 to 2017, and involve the Ameren Sioux Power Plant in West Alton and the Labadie Power Plant.

The files include detailed schematics of uninterruptible power supply equipment, used to provide temporary backup power during outages.

Joe Scherrer, director of the Cybersecurity Strategic Initiative at Washington University, said this type of intellectual property can be a valuable commodity in the cybercriminal marketplace.

"This particular incident is, in my view, all about the theft of intellectual property and making it available for sale to nation states or other companies," Scherrer said.

This type of data breach has become increasingly common across a wide range of sectors.

According to the cybersecurity company Emsisoft, ransomware attackers targeted 966

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government agencies, schools and health care providers in 2019, at an estimated cost of $7.5 billion.

Many companies have strengthened their cybersecurity in recent years and trained employees to recognize phishing scams — one of the most common ways ransomware attacks gain access to internal systems.

Still, ensuring the security of third-party vendors remains a challenge, said Scherrer, particularly as attacks become more sophisticated.

“The attack techniques evolve literally on a day-to-day basis,” he said. “They’re approaching this as a business, as a revenue generator, so they’re going to adapt their techniques and procedures to maximize their returns.”

A spokesperson for Ameren Missouri said they were investigating the data breach, but added they “have no reason to believe that the information obtained is confidential or critical to our operations.”

“In some cases, standard schematics or drawings are shared with equipment suppliers to support the procurement of certain assets,” the spokesperson said in an email. “But these do not contain classified or confidential information.”

Terrorism Investigations

[OK] Man Convicted of Trying to Blow Up Oklahoma City Bank Gets 25 Years in Prison (New York Times)
New York Times [3/23/2020 6:19 PM, Jacey Fortin, 23673K]
A man who was arrested in 2017 after a thwarted attempt to blow up a bank in downtown Oklahoma City — a plot that echoed the deadly bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building there in 1995 — was sentenced Monday to 25 years in prison, the authorities said.

The man, Jerry Drake Varnell, 26, of Sayre, Okla., will be on supervised release for the rest of his life once he completes his prison term, federal and local authorities said in a statement on Monday.

Mr. Varnell was arrested in August 2017 after he tried to detonate a van full of what he believed to be explosives in an alley beside the downtown branch of BancFirst, Oklahoma’s largest state-chartered bank, the authorities said.

The site of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, which was destroyed in the 1995 bombing that killed 168 people, was a few blocks away.

“This case is extremely poignant considering we are approaching the 25th anniversary of the Oklahoma City bombing,” Chief Wade Gourley of the Oklahoma City Police Department said in the statement. “This event not only scarred the community of Oklahoma City, but had a profound effect on the nation.”

Mr. Varnell’s lawyer, Vicki Behenna, said in an interview on Monday that the sentence was “a little bit higher than what we wanted” but that “we’re very grateful it wasn’t life, which is

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what the government was asking for."

Ms. Behenna said that she planned to appeal Mr. Varnell's 2019 conviction on counts of attempting to use an explosive device to damage and destroy BancFirst's corporate offices, and of attempting to use a weapon of mass destruction against property used in interstate commerce.

Mr. Varnell's arrest was the culmination of a domestic terrorism investigation involving an undercover operation, during which Mr. Varnell had been monitored closely for months as the bomb plot developed.

"This case required thorough investigation and careful coordination among agents and prosecutors in a matter that is our highest priority — terrorism," said Timothy J. Downing, the United States attorney for the Western District of Oklahoma.

According to court documents, Mr. Varnell had espoused an anti-government ideology. He had told federal agents working undercover that he wanted to form a small militia group, inspired in part by the movie "Fight Club," the authorities said.

"I'm out for blood," Mr. Varnell wrote in one text message to a confidential informant who cooperated with the authorities, according to an affidavit written by an F.B.I. special agent. "When militias start getting formed I'm going after government officials when I have a team," he wrote.

In another text message, Mr. Varnell wrote: "I think I'm going to go with what the okc bomber used. Diesel and anhydrous ammonia." He was referring to Timothy J. McVeigh, who was executed for his role in the Oklahoma City bombing. Mr. McVeigh and a co-conspirator, Terry L. Nichols, built a giant fertilizer bomb using ammonium nitrate and racing fuel as their primary ingredients.

Around 1 a.m. on Aug. 12, 2017, Mr. Varnell parked a van loaded with what he believed to be a working explosive device next to the bank, and then dialed a number on a cellphone that he thought would set it off, federal officials said. But the device was inert and would not explode, and he was subsequently arrested.

In October 2017, a federal grand jury indicted Mr. Varnell, and an additional charge against him was added in April 2018.

Lawyers representing Mr. Varnell said that he was mentally ill and that he had been coaxed and entrapped by the authorities. His mother and a clinical psychologist testified that he was schizophrenic, Ms. Behenna, his lawyer, said. But the court found him mentally competent to stand trial.

In February 2019, a federal jury convicted him on both counts.

National Security News

Grenell taps new acting director of National Counterterrorism Center (The Hill)

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The Hill [3/23/2020 12:54 PM, Olivia Beavers, 1762K]
Acting Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Richard Grenell on Monday tapped a new counterterrorism chief to temporarily lead the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), a move that comes amid a shakeup in the center's leadership.

Lora Shiao, a career intelligence official who will serve as the NCTC's next deputy director, will also become its first female acting director until the Senate confirms a permanent replacement.

Shiao has a long record of intelligence experience, previously serving in multiple roles at the NCTC as well as the FBI and Pentagon. She also was an intelligence briefer to the attorney general and FBI director during the George W. Bush administration. She now serves as the center's No. 3 official.

Shiao is slated to take over the role April 3. Clare Linkins, meanwhile, will take over for her as the next NCTC executive director.

"Acting DNI Grenell is excited and proud to promote Lora and Clare to these critical positions, where they will lead the nation's efforts to counter terrorism. Lora and Clare are both NCTC veterans, with more than 25 years of combined experience at the Center," Amanda Schoch, assistant director of National Intelligence for Strategic Communications, said in a statement.

"Under their direction, NCTC is well-postured to lead the counterterrorism mission into the future," the statement continues.

The NCTC, which was formed after 9/11, is part of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence that works to unify "counterterrorism intelligence for the homeland and abroad" while "driving whole-of-government action" to protect the nation from attacks, according to its website.

Shiao's appointment comes after Russell Travers, who is the acting director, chose to step down from the interim position. According to reports, Travers had already been considering retiring, but when Grenell sought to shuffle the leadership at the center — offering Travers another senior government role — he ultimately chose to retire.

Last week, President Trump tapped Christopher Miller, who serves as the deputy assistant secretary of Defense for special operations and combating terrorism, to fill the key intelligence role as the next director, if the Senate confirms him.

Travers, who is expected to vacate the position over the next several weeks, explained to colleagues in a letter that Grenell wanted to assemble "a new team to best support" Miller after he is confirmed, The New York Times reported.

Intelligence leadership shuffled again as broader reforms continue (CBS News)
CBS News [3/23/2020 3:13 PM, Olivia Gazis, 2394K]
Career intelligence official Lora Shiao will head the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC) until a Senate-confirmed director is in place, administration officials announced Monday, in a move that at once eased some concerns that the intelligence community might become politicized while raising questions about the reasons underlying recent

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personnel shuffles.

Shiao, who previously held NCTC's third-highest position as executive director and has held numerous government positions focused on counterterrorism, will become the center's first female acting director on April 3, officials from the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) said. Her deputy will be Clare Linkins, another career official who was most recently NCTC's former director for strategic operational planning. Linkins will become executive director once a permanent NCTC director is in place; Shiao will then be deputy director.

Earlier this month President Trump nominated Christopher Miller, a former Army Special Forces officer who worked on counterterrorism issues at the National Security Council before moving to the Pentagon late last year. It is unclear when a confirmation process for Miller will begin.

"Acting DNI Grenell is excited and proud to promote Lora and Clare to these critical positions, where they will lead the nation's efforts to counter terrorism," said ODNI spokesperson Amanda Schoch. "Lora and Clare are both NCTC veterans, with more than 25 years of combined experience at the Center. They are well-respected career intelligence officials, with deep analytic, operational and leadership experience serving in the Intelligence Community and are recognized for their focus and commitment to workforce issues, including recruitment, development, retention and morale."

"Under their direction, NCTC is well-postured to lead the counterterrorism mission into the future," Schoch said.

Created in 2003 amid an extensive restructuring of the intelligence community following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, NCTC is a signature branch of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. It comprises officials detailed from several other agencies – including the CIA and FBI – and is responsible for analyzing, integrating and sharing terrorism-related intelligence across the government. It has in recent years come under scrutiny as the administration's national security focus has shifted away from counterterrorism efforts toward strategic competition with world powers like China and Russia.

But separate from broader organizational reforms to the intelligence community, President Trump has also made moves to staff some major intelligence agencies with officials he perceives as being personally and politically loyal to him. Last month he abruptly announced the replacement of acting director of national intelligence Joseph Maguire with Richard Grenell, an outspoken ally of the president who is now concurrently serving as acting DNI, U.S. Ambassador to Germany, and a special envoy for Serbia and Kosovo peace negotiations.

Mr. Trump subsequently re-nominated Republican congressman John Ratcliffe of Texas to serve as permanent DNI, though it is also unclear when Ratcliffe's confirmation process might be initiated. The first time Ratcliffe – who publicly defended the president during special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into his presidential campaign and during the impeachment inquiry that concluded last month – was nominated to the role, his candidacy was sunk by questions related to his national security experience.

The series of leadership swaps at ODNI was originally set in motion last August, when Mr.

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Trump's first director of national intelligence, Dan Coats, as well as his deputy, career intelligence official Sue Gordon, were effectively removed from their posts. Maguire took the helm at ODNI in an acting capacity after Ratcliffe's nomination foundered and, along with a career CIA official who had been detailed to the office as its No. 2, remained in place until his replacement by Grenell was announced by Mr. Trump in February.

Though Maguire did face a time limit as interim chief, he could have remained acting director until a permanent nominee was confirmed – as Grenell is now doing. Maguire appeared to run afoul of the president, however, after an ODNI official delivered an election security briefing to the House Intelligence Committee that turned contentious.

At NCTC, Shiao will replace outgoing acting director Russell Travers, a former Army intelligence officer with over four decades of experience. He served as NCTC's deputy director since 2017 and as its acting director as of August 2019, when Maguire, then the Senate-confirmed NCTC director, was first tapped to lead ODNI.

ODNI officials have said Travers "wanted to retire" and "did not want another assignment," though his sudden replacement prompted concerns and some criticism from former senior intelligence officials, who questioned whether his replacement was part of a politically charged purge.

On Friday, nine former NCTC directors and other senior ODNI officials – including Maguire – wrote an op-ed in the Washington Post expressing concern about personnel changes at U.S. intelligence agencies. The op-ed was published before the nominations of Shiao and Linkins were announced.

The officials called the "unceremonious removal" of Travers and his deputy, another career official who will now return to the National Security Agency, the latest in a "deeply destructive path" being pursued by the Trump administration to remove apolitical experts.

"To be clear: This is not just about protecting a few senior officers. These unceremonious removals send a damaging message across the intelligence community," the officials wrote. "Every current officer sees that speaking truth to power in this administration is an immediate career-killer."

Officials at ODNI have previously said that Grenell is now overseeing an effort studied but not implemented by previous directors to "refocus or transfer activities at ODNI to eliminate duplication of work with other agencies."

"Since assuming his new role on Feb. 20, Acting DNI Grenell and the ODNI leadership team have embarked on a careful review of these studies completed prior to his arrival, with an eye to implementing key recommendations," spokeswoman Amanda Schoch said earlier this month.

"Acting DNI Grenell has emphasized with ODNI leadership this review is not an effort to purge, as some have erroneously suggested," she said. "The goal is to make sure scarce Intelligence Community resources are used in the best way possible."

"Further details will be provided as more specifics of the review are finalized," Schoch said.

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Acting Director Of National Intelligence Taps First-Ever Woman To Lead National Counterterrorism Center (Daily Caller)
Daily Caller [3/23/2020 7:43 PM, Christian Datoc, 566K]
Acting Director of National Intelligence Richard Grenell officially tapped Lora Shiao Monday to serve as the acting director of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC).

Grenell's office pointed out to Daily Caller that Shiao will be the first ever woman to head the NCTC, and she will take over active duties from the current NCTC director, Russell Travers, in April. Shiao is expected to assume the deputy director position if the Senate confirms Pentagon Special Operations official Christopher Miller, whom President Donald Trump has signaled he will nominate to serve as the next permanent director of NCTC.

NCTC reports directly to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Shiao previously served as the center's executive director, and her previous role will be filled by Clare Linkins, the NCTC's current director of strategic operational planning.

"Acting DNI Grenell is excited and proud to promote Lora and Clare to these critical positions, where they will lead the nation's efforts to counter terrorism," Assistant director of national intelligence Amanda Schoch said in a statement. "Lora and Clare are both NCTC veterans, with more than 25 years of combined experience at the Center."

"They are well-respected career intelligence officials, with deep analytic, operational and leadership experience serving in the Intelligence Community (IC) and are recognized for their focus and commitment to workforce issues, including recruitment, development, retention and morale," she continued. "Under their direction, NCTC is well-postured to lead the counterterrorism mission into the future."

Trump announced Grenell would be pulling double duty as both the U.S. Ambassador to Germany and acting DNI back in February, though the president announced he would nominate Texas Republican Rep. John Ratcliffe to serve as permanent DNI later that month.

Coronavirus confinement challenges intelligence services (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 12:44 PM, Staff, 1973K]
The home confinement of hundreds of millions of people worldwide to halt coronavirus contagion has presented intelligence services with a challenge: monitoring an explosion in internet traffic, above board and not, even as their own capacity is reduced.

The global health crisis has exposed the internet as both a tool and a potential target for malefactors, experts say, with agents — many themselves working from home — having to sift through the deluge looking for credible threats.

Criminals could take advantage of the disarray to launch attacks on government and nuclear systems, alter scientific or electoral data, paralyse servers, or spread fake news.

Developing countries and those with weak monitoring systems are most at risk, with Western nations better geared to pick up external cyber threats.

"If you want to make mischief in… some other part of the world, and try to do so in a low-profile way and try to escape attention, now presents an opportunity to do that," said

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Suzanne Spaulding of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Washington.

In a bid to curb virus contagion among their ranks, intelligence services are alternating teams at the office, like many other essential businesses and services continuing to function amid the unprecedented global lockdown.

And while some officials are equipped to work on encrypted systems from home, these generally do not grant them access to the most sensitive information, a former agent of France's DGSE foreign intelligence agency told AFP on condition of anonymity.

"There is continuity, but strategic intelligence gathering will necessarily be lighter," he said.

Brian Perkins, a researcher at the Jamestown Foundation, a Washington intelligence think-tank, pointed to a breakdown in covert fieldwork capabilities.

"The biggest challenge posed by COVID-19 is… the inability of intelligence field officers to extract human intelligence in areas with active outbreaks, particularly areas with significant restrictions on public interactions or travel," he told AFP.

'Malign actors'

Such restrictions create fertile ground for organised disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks.

"Malign actors are actively exploiting these new challenging circumstances," cross-border policing agency Europol said last week.

And the World Economic Forum has warned that "broad-based cyberattacks could cause widespread infrastructure failures that take entire communities or cities offline, obstructing healthcare providers, public systems and networks."

With the attention of governments around the world focused on a common, invisible enemy, one could have hoped for a drawdown of global hostilities.

But no such luck, experts say.

"Over the past six weeks, we've seen Chinese threat actors continue their operations against their usual external targets," said Ben Reed of the cybersecurity group FireEye.

"It's too early to see if there's been any quantitative decrease in activity, but what we're seeing matches previous patterns… no indication of a 'truce'."

He added that they have continued to see "cyber-espionage" activity from North Korea, Russia and South Asia despite the coronavirus activity.

Russia versus the West

Moscow is indeed also a focus for Western governments, which have accused it of stepping up a campaign of misinformation regarding the coronavirus outbreak.

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“It does not take a lot of people nor resources to carry out these kind of attacks,” Spaulding from CSIS said.

The European Union’s East Stratcom anti-disinformation taskforce has pointed to more than 110 coronavirus-related campaigns between January 22 and March 19.

“Messages targeting domestic Russian audiences describe the virus as a form of foreign aggression”, it said in a statement, while messages targeting international audiences “focus primarily on conspiracy theories”.

“These messages are characteristic of the Kremlin’s well-established strategy of using disinformation to amplify divisions, sow distrust and chaos, and exacerbate crisis situations and issues of public concern,” East Stratcom said.

Moscow regularly denies such accusations, accusing the West of similar tactics in return.

US launches hypersonic glide body test in race to catch up with China and Russia (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 11:57 AM, Abraham Mahshie, 570K]
Amid a backdrop of nonstop coronavirus news coverage, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy wanted to highlight a major step in America’s hypersonic missile arms race with China and Russia.

"I’d likely point out today that the Army, in a joint effort with the Navy, conducted a successful long-range flight of a hypersonic glide body missile," McCarthy said Friday in a briefing dominated by questions about how the Army Corps of Engineers would help address things such as coming hospital shortages.

"This is a significant milestone for our number-one priority, long-range precision fires," McCarthy said.

A C-HGB rocket on Thursday pierced the skies over Kauai, Hawaii. It created explosive smoke flumes similar to those of a space shuttle launch because the joint Navy- and Army-developed hypersonic glide body does reach space.

To reach speeds of Mach 20, or 20 times the speed of sound, the glide body that will carry the nation’s fastest land-based missile passes between the upper atmosphere and space.

"There is no missile defense system from sensor to interceptor in the world, including the United States, that has been developed and is capable of defeating hypersonic glide vehicles (HGVs) like the C-HGB," wrote Riki Ellison, the head of the Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance, the day after the launch.

The test conducted at the Pacific Missile Range facility brings the military a step closer to catching up with adversaries who already have hypersonic missiles in their inventory.

Russia reportedly has tested several hypersonic weapons that can be launched from ships, submarines, ground sites, or midair. China already has an anti-ship hypersonic missile.

“In past decades, we’ve been world leaders in hypersonics technology," Mike White, the

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assistant director for hypersonics, told the Washington Examiner at a March 2 Pentagon briefing. "But we have consistently made the decision to not transition that to weapon applications and build weapons systems out of hypersonic technologies that we were working on in the laboratory."

But as McCarthy hinted at Friday's press conference, the Department of Defense is investing heavily now with hopes to have weapons in inventories across the services by the early to mid-2020s.

The services and DOD's Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency have a combined $3.2 billion devoted to hypersonics development in fiscal year 2021, according to congressional testimony from Defense Secretary Mark Esper earlier this month.

Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett said at a Feb. 21 Johns Hopkins discussion that the effort is coordinated across all the services.

"So much of the advancing technology is very much a joint effort," she said. "If we did it individually, we would be finding duplication and inefficiencies that we wouldn't — that we cannot afford."

McCarthy explained during the same discussion that hypersonics research is not centrally managed but rather draws on each service's work and the strong relationships among the service secretaries.

"If you look at the hypersonics effort, it's joint interest, not a joint program like a big, joint program office with a coin and a seal and all that stuff," he said. "What we do is we share information, and we look at the test regime, and we share the data."

The Missile Defense Agency monitored and tracked data from the flight experiment conducted last Thursday. That data will be used to design a hypersonic weapon to defend against peer adversaries such as China and Russia.

The Pentagon has had false starts in the development of hypersonic missiles, canceling a $900 million program last year before starting a new one earlier this year.

Lately, the department has said it is focused on a glide body, which brings a missile to hypersonic speeds before it breaks away toward its target.

The DOD called the March 19 test a "major milestone" that builds on a test in October 2017.

‘‘In this test, we put additional stresses on the system, and it was able to handle them all," said Vice Adm. Johnny Wolfe, the director of the Navy's Strategic Systems Programs, in a statement about the Navy-led program.

When ready, the C-HGB will carry a conventional warhead, guidance system, and thermal protection shield.

In his congressional testimony, Esper tried to assuage Senate Armed Services Committee concerns that we are far behind China and Russia.

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DHS-(ICE)-19-0135-E-000294

"I'm very confident that in the next few years, we'll be deploying hypersonic weapons as the commanders need them throughout the theater, but in the Indo-Pacific theater in particular," he said in response to a question from Sen. Deb Fischer, a Nebraska Republican. "We are doing very innovative work, and I would tell you, it's more innovative than what you would see coming out of Russia or China — I can assure you that."

New Army technology can track and destroy maneuvering cruise missiles (FOX News)

FOX News [3/23/2020 8:49 PM, Kris Osborn, 8943K]

Maneuvering cruise missiles, fast-moving stealthy fighter jets, armed drones, long-range helicopter-fired air-to-ground weapons and hypersonic rounds traveling at five times the speed of sound are all modern methods of air-attack able to destroy Army ground war units -- potentially even rendering them inoperable or, even worse, making them vulnerable to complete destruction.

The weapons, sensors and platforms now operated by potential adversaries have created an entirely new tactical environment now defining land combat, a scenario that has inspired the U.S. Army to fast-track new, advanced air and missile defense radar technologies sufficient to thwart this changing sphere of enemy attack possibilities.

The service is now surging forward in response to an urgent need with a new 360-degree radar system called Lower Tier Air & Missile Defense Sensor (LTAMDS), slated for initial fielding by 2022. Unlike the more linear directional configuration of the existing Patriot air and missile defense system, the Raytheon-built LTAMDS is engineered with overlapping 120-degree arrays intended to seamlessly track approaching threats using a 360-degree protection envelope.

"The Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor will deliver sensor capability to counter advanced threats and take full advantage of the Patriot Missile Segment Enhancement (Patriot upgrade) capability. It will provide significant improvement over the Patriot radar while enabling incremental growth," Natalia Thaniel, director of communications, Army Futures Command, Air and Missile Defense Cross Functional Team, told Warrior in a statement.

The Patriot, well-known for its Gulf-War ability to track and destroy Saddam's Scud missiles, has been brought into the modern area through a series of extensive upgrades. The kinetic-energy hit-to-kill Patriot Advanced Capability weapon in particular, has received new software, modern sensors and a special upgrade called Missile Segment Enhancement. The Patriot still has a lot of capability, and can defend against the threats of today and tomorrow. However, a new radar is needed to defend against the threats warfighters will face the day after tomorrow.

Nevertheless, while the Patriot continues to remain operational and effective in many respects, the decades-old system will start facing challenges when it comes to confronting increasingly advanced-kinds of attacks.

"The battlefield is not linear. What has happened is threat development. Every time we adapt, potential enemies do something to their threat systems. Cruise missiles, for example, do not have to fly in a straight line," Bob Kelley, Raytheon's director of IAMD (Integrated Air and Missile Defense) Domestic Programs for Business Development & Strategy, told

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Warrior in an interview. “The threats are so advanced, we decided we would need something brand new.”

The rapid engineering of LTAMDS, accelerated by the Army and Congress, could well be described as the technical or material manifestation of the Army’s strategic approach outlined in the Army Air & Missile Defense 2028 Vision document. The essay specifies some of the more challenging specifics associated with newly emerging drone, helicopter, aircraft and ballistic missile threats. For instance, regarding ballistic missile threats, the Army Vision essay explains that advanced weapons are now engineered with “countermeasures, maneuverable re-entry vehicles, multiple independent reentry vehicles, hypersonic/supersonic glide vehicles and electronic attack.”

Increased maneuverability is also, according to the Army document, a specific concern regarding modern cruise missiles.

“Numerous countries are developing ground-, sea-, and air-launched land-attack CMs using an assortment of unconventional and inexpensive launch platforms. In addition, long-range, low-observable, advanced CMs enable our adversaries to present a complex air and missile defense problem with high-volume, high-precision missiles capable of 360-degree avenues of approach,” the Army Vision document states.

Raytheon engineers recently completed the first round of indoor testing of its LTAMDS antenna, assessing the antenna’s ability to track multiple threats simultaneously. The new LTAMDS antenna, Raytheon developers explain, is similar in size to the Patriot yet twice as sensitive. To conduct further testing, the array will be mounted onto a precision-machined enclosure.

As Virus Reaches War Zones, UN Chief Calls for Global Cease-Fire (Bloomberg)
Bloomberg [3/23/2020 4:32 PM, David Wainer, 6400K]
United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said the spread of the coronavirus demands a global cease-fire in war zones so nations can focus on the pandemic as their true enemy.

With infections now reported in Syria and Gaza, Guterres said that weak health-care systems mean civilian populations face the “highest risk of suffering devastating losses.” Refugees and others displaced by violent conflict are “doubly vulnerable,” he said, calling for “an immediate global cease-fire in all corners of the world.”

“It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives,” he told reporters on Monday.

Millions of civilians in crowded refugee camps from Syria to Yemen to Myanmar lack basic requirements deployed in richer countries to fight the spread of the epidemic, from clean water and soap to enough space to keep a safe distance from one another. The UN is seeking $2 billion from wealthier countries as part of a global humanitarian plan to help poor countries combat the virus, he added.

While wealthy countries are trying to develop stimulus plans to buttress their healthcare systems and economies as global equity markets sink, Guterres said coordination is needed so that “not only the developed countries can respond effectively to the disease but

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that there is massive support to the developing world not to let the disease spread like wildfire in the developing world."

He said an aid package will need to keep households and businesses in poorer countries afloat "and this will require a double- digit GDP support in the developed world" and the "creation of new facilities" through the IMF to enable swaps among central banks.

U.N. chief wants $2 billion to help poor countries combat coronavirus (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 2:16 PM, Michelle Nichols, 5304K]
U.N. chief Antonio Guterres said on Monday the world body wants $2 billion to help poor countries combat coronavirus and warned that a massive, coordinated package would also be needed to deal with the pandemic's social and economic impact around the world.

"The package needs to make households be afloat, make businesses be afloat, keep societies being afloat," Guterres told a virtual news conference.

"This will require a double-digit of GDP (gross domestic product) support in the developed world and creating the conditions through the IMF (International Monetary Fund), through the swaps among central banks, through the creation of new facilities," he said.

So far more than 351,00 people have been infected and over 15,330 have died, according to a Reuters tally.

The spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 respiratory illness caused by the coronavirus has drawn comparisons with devastating periods such as World War Two, the 2008 financial crisis and the 1918 Spanish flu.

"We need a much stronger coordination," said Guterres, adding that he had written to the world's 20 largest economies (G20) and would join their virtual meeting later this week.

"Coordination in making sure that not only the developed countries can respond effectively to the disease, but that there is massive support to the developing world not to let the disease spread like wildfire," he said.

Guterres said he would launch a $2 billion humanitarian appeal on Wednesday.

He also called for a global ceasefire so the world can focus on fighting the coronavirus pandemic.

"It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives," Guterres said.

The United Nations has been trying to mediate an end to conflicts in countries including Syria, Yemen and Libya, while also providing humanitarian assistance to millions of civilians.

"End the sickness of war and fight the disease that is ravaging our world," he said. "It starts by stopping the fighting everywhere. Now. That is what our human family needs, now more than ever."

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[Cuba] Cuba Coronavirus Cases Rise as People Lack Soap and Water (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 6:09 PM, Ben Kew, 1973K]
The number of cases of the Chinese coronavirus in communist Cuba is continuing to rise as its population faces the pandemic without widespread access to hygienic essentials such as soap and clean water.

As of Monday afternoon, there were at least 40 confirmed cases of the virus across the island, two of whom are in critical condition, bringing it relatively in line with other Latin American countries. However, the dire state of the country's economy and the lack of access to medical and hygienic essentials means it runs the risk of an aggressive outbreak that health authorities will struggle to contain.

A shortage of sanitary products, even in foreign currency stores where there is a far greater selection of products, has led to large queues of people outside the shops that offer them. Last month, Minister of Internal Trade Betsy Díaz Velázquez told the official Granma newspaper that shortages would last until at least April due to economic constraints. The shortages are unrelated to hoarding or coronavirus-related spending. Cubans still use ration cards for many basic goods.

The first case of the coronavirus in Cuba was reported on March 11, carried by three Italians who had arrived on the island two days earlier. One of those patients, a 61-year-old man who had a history of bronchial asthma, died seven days later after presenting "clinical manifestations of complications of the disease."

According to the Cuban Health Ministry, in addition to the positive cases, 954 individuals are currently being held under epidemiological surveillance, 727 are Cubans and 528 are foreign citizens. A further 30,773 people are under regular surveillance in their homes.

Cuban officials will suspend tourism to the island from Tuesday, while citizens who return from abroad will be required to enter a two-week quarantine. The lockdown is scheduled to last 30 days but could be extended longer, and will undoubtedly inflict major damage on the country's already struggling economy.

"This should enable us to stop (importing) cases and to focus on detecting those there are in the country and stopping transmission," said Cuban second-in-command, President Miguel Diaz-Canel, in a television address on Sunday.

He also called on citizens to practice social distancing, something he said would naturally go against the nature of the Cuban people.

"Something very difficult due to Cubans' nature, but very necessary, is the elimination of effusive greetings," he said. "No kisses or hugs and greetings at a prudent distance until the epidemic passes by."

Despite the brewing crisis in their own country, communist authorities are nevertheless continuing the tradition of sending their slave doctors abroad, with teams already arriving in their crisis-hit ally Venezuela and Italy, the country with the most severe outbreak globally.

Supporters of the Cuban regime have long touted its supposedly high standards of health care, citing the fact that the country has the highest relative number of physicians in the

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entire world as well as the manipulation of health statistics such as infant mortality. However, the poverty inflicted as a result of decades of communist policy has, in reality, led to a decrepit health system with some of the worst health outcomes worldwide.

[South Africa] South Africa Orders Three-Week Lockdown to Curb Virus Spread (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/23/2020 3:50 PM, Michael Cohen and Amogelang Mbatha, 6400K] Video: HERE

South African authorities ordered a three-week lockdown to curb the spread of the coronavirus as infections continue to surge and threaten to spiral out of control.

Grocers, pharmacies, banks and filling stations will be allowed to remain open, while the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and other essential services can continue operating, President Cyril Ramaphosa said Monday in a televised address to the nation. Some mines and furnaces will have to shut and arrangements will have to be made to have them placed under care and maintenance to avoid them being damaged.

The army will help the police enforce the lockdown, which comes into effect at midnight on March 26. The restrictions on movement will be particularly hard to enforce in South Africa's sprawling townships, where tens of thousands of people live in cramped shacks.

"Immediate, swift and extraordinary action is required if we are to prevent a human catastrophe of enormous proportions," Ramaphosa said. "While this measure will have a considerable impact on people's livelihoods, on the life of our society and our economy, the human cost of delaying this action would be far greater."

South Africa has confirmed 402 Covid-19 infections -- the most in Africa. The first one was detected on March 5. Health Minister Zweli Mkhize has warned as much as 70% of the population could contract the illness over time. While Ramaphosa declared a national disaster a week ago and instituted travel bans, shut schools and banned large gatherings, those measures have failed to slow the pandemic's spread.

New Infections

The rand extended a decline, weakening 0.9% to 17.7638 per dollar by 9:14 p.m. in Johannesburg. South Africa's currency has slumped 12% in March.

There were 128 new infections reported on Monday, with cases confirmed in all nine provinces. Gauteng, the economic hub, which has 207 cases, and the Western Cape, which has 100, have been hardest hit. There have been no fatalities so far.

The health system was already strained before the pandemic hit, and the government fears it will buckle under the weight of a flood of new infections. The virus has dealt a body blow to the struggling economy and the new restrictions will exacerbate the fallout, but the government has said it has to prioritize the safety of the country's citizens.

"The next few days are crucial," Ramaphosa said. "Without decisive action the number of people infected will rapidly increase from a few hundred to tens of thousands, and within a few weeks to hundreds of thousands. This is extremely dangerous for a population like ours which has a large number of people with suppressed immunity."

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'Big Hit'
The economy is likely to contract more than 2% this year as result of the restrictions, with services industries set to take "a big, big hit," said Citibank South Africa economist Gina Schoeman.

"Shutdowns like this just mean that some things will never be able to return to how they were," she said. "Base effects will help in the second half of the year, but this assumes we will go back to normal after three weeks."

The president announced several measures to help shore up the economy and mitigate the pandemic's impact. They include a four-month tax subsidy for low-income workers, and the establishment of a solidarity fund that will enable businesses, organizations and individuals to contribute to efforts to combat the spread of the virus, care for the ill and support those whose lives are disrupted.

Two of South Africa's richest families -- the Oppenheimers and the Ruperts -- each pledged 1 billion rand ($56.5 million) to help support small businesses and save jobs, according to Ramaphosa.

South African banks will be exempted from competition rules so that they can meet to discuss a common approach to debt relief for embattled customers, and are expected to announce measures within days.

Other key measures:

Regulations have been put in place to prohibit unjustified price hikes and ensure shops maintain adequate stocks of basic goods.

A safety net is being developed to support those who work in informal jobs.

The government is working on a plan to temporarily subsidize wages for employees of distressed companies to try and minimize job losses.

The Unemployment Insurance Fund's reserves will be utilized to support workers who lose their jobs.

Tax-compliant businesses with a turnover of less than 50 million rand will be allowed to delay paying over a portion of their taxes for six months.

The government is considering temporarily reducing employer and employee contributions to the Unemployment Insurance Fund and the Skills Development Fund.

The Department of Small Business Development has allocated more than 500 million rand to assist distressed small and medium-sized companies.

The Industrial Development Corp. and the Department of Trade and Industry will allocated more than 3 billion rand to assist vulnerable firms and provide funding to companies critical to efforts to fight the virus.

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DHS-(ICE)-19-0135-E-000300
2021-ICLI-00064 1193

The Department of Tourism has allocated 200 million rand to assist small and medium-sized tourism and hospitality businesses sector who are suffering because of travel restrictions.

[Iran] Iran reports 127 new coronavirus deaths, raising toll to 1,812 (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 8:54 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Iran on Monday announced 127 new deaths from the novel coronavirus, raising the official toll to 1,812 in one of the worst hit countries along with Italy, Spain and China.

Health ministry spokesman Kianouche Jahanpour said 1,411 new cases had been recorded in Iran over the past 24 hours, bringing the total of those infected to 23,049.

Jahanpour, who was speaking during his daily news conference devoted to the pandemic, said he would no longer give a breakdown of cases by province.

This was necessary, he said, to avoid sparking undue concern among residents of the most stricken areas and ensure that those in less affected zones remained cautious.

All of Iran's 31 provinces have been hit by the novel coronavirus outbreak.

Tolls provided by the health ministry in recent days indicated that the spread of the virus has worsened especially in northern and central regions of Iran.

Jahanpour renewed a call by authorities for people to stay at home until "the virus is conquered".

That call has come as the Islamic republic is celebrating the Iranian New Year, a time when people usually travel far and wide across the country for holidays and family reunions.

Authorities, however, have not imposed any travel ban or lockdown on Iran where the Nowruz holiday continues until April 3.

On Sunday the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, urged Iranians to follow state instructions "so that Almighty God will put an end to this calamity for the Iranian people, for all Muslim nations and for all mankind".

[Iran] Iranian Officials Stole More Than $1 Billion in Coronavirus Funds, Pompeo Says (Free Beacon)
Free Beacon [3/23/2020 7:44 PM, Adam Kredo, 118K]
Iranian regime officials stole more than $1 billion in humanitarian funds meant to be used to help the country's people fight the spread of coronavirus, according to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

European countries intended for more than $1 billion cash for medical supplies to go to the Iranian people, who have been ravaged by the virus. But American officials say regime leaders instead pocketed the money and are now using it to protect themselves from the virus as it spreads throughout the population. This includes hoarding medical supplies that were meant to aid Iranian citizens.

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Multiple regional reports have showed that before and since the virus began spreading, Iranian leaders stole funds purposed directly to support the ailing Iranian people.

Iran has been among the hardest hit by the virus, and its government's response has drawn international criticism, especially from the Trump administration. Secretary of State Pompeo accused Iran of mass corruption as the regime continues to spread propaganda, including accusations that the United States manufactured the coronavirus and is using its tough global sanctions campaign to prevent Iran from accessing medicine and humanitarian aid.

Pompeo on Monday issued a series of new allegations about Tehran's mishandling of the coronavirus outbreak. "Supreme leader [Ali] Khamenei's fabrications regarding the Wuhan virus are dangerous and they put Iranians and people around the world at greater risk," Pompeo said. "Facts matter."

"Regime officials stole over a billion euros intended for medical supplies," Pompeo said in one of the first public accountings of Iran's alleged misuse of humanitarian funds that were meant to be used in cases such as the coronavirus outbreak. That sum amounts to well over one billion in American currency. Pompeo also said Iranian officials "continue to hoard desperately needed masks, gloves, and other medical equipment for sale on the black market."

The State Department made clear in facts sheets distributed to reporters that the billions in humanitarian funds Iran stole could have been used to fight the coronavirus in Iran. This includes misusing millions of dollars in late 2019 to purchase tobacco instead of medical supplies.

Iranian officials have disseminated falsehoods about the nature of U.S. sanctions, which do not include restrictions on humanitarian assistance. These talking points have been picked up by Tehran's American allies, including members of the Obama administration's so-called echo chamber, as part of an effort to see sanctions on Iran lifted.

Pompeo said part of the reason Iran has become a hotspot for the coronavirus is that the regime refuses to stop flights between Tehran and China. Iran's Mahan Air—which is designated as a terrorist entity by the United States for its routine shipments of weapons and fighters across the Middle East—ran at least 55 flights between Tehran and China after most countries had enacted a travel ban.

International health authorities say at least five countries experienced their first cases of coronavirus as a direct result of contact with Iran.

It has also become clear in recent days that Iran failed to heed warnings from its own health officials about how volatile and deadly the virus could be. In a bid to hide this information from the world, Iran lied about the number of infections and deaths from the virus, the United States alleges.

Iran officially claims there have been 23,049 confirmed cases of coronavirus and 1,812 deaths in the country as of Monday. However, the true numbers are likely far higher, though they are difficult to estimate due to Iran's efforts to hide information from international health groups.

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"The regime continues to lie to the Iranian people and the world about the number of cases and deaths, which are unfortunately far higher than the regime admits," Pompeo said.

The U.S. government has continued to offer assistance to Iran but has been repeatedly turned down. Iran, in turn, has used the global pandemic as an opportunity to spread anti-U.S. sentiment.

"Khamenei rejected this offer because he works tirelessly to concoct conspiracy theories and prioritizes ideology over the Iranian people," Pompeo said.

U.S. sanctions have not and still do not target humanitarian channels meant to allow Iran to access medicine, food, equipment, and other life-saving items. In fact, Iranian health companies "have been able to import testing kits without obstacle from U.S. sanctions since January," according to the secretary of state.

Pompeo's statements appear to be in direct response to Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif, who accused the United States of using sanctions as a weapon to ensure the virus's spread across Iran.

"Iranian people appreciate the growing global campaign of government & civil society leaders calling for lifting of illegal US sanctions," Zarif tweeted on Monday.

"US sanctions has created serious problem for sending medical equipment and supplies to Iran to confront coronavirus," Iran's state-controlled Mehr News Agency claimed on Monday.

Prominent U.S. allies of the Iranian regime, who are now using the coronavirus outbreak to push against the Trump administration's tough economic sanctions campaign, have disseminated these talking points to an American audience.

Iranian leader Ali Khamenei has also spread inflammatory propaganda claiming the United States created the virus and is using it to poison Iranian citizens. The ayatollah said that any U.S. medicine given to Iran could be used to "further spread the disease."

"You cannot be trusted," Khamenei said of the United States in a wide-ranging speech late last week. "If you send some doctor or healer, he might want to come here to check on the effects of the poison you created."

[Afghanistan] Video Chat With the Taliban Keeps Afghan Peace Deal on Life Support (New York Times)

New York Times [3/23/2020 7:54 AM, Mujib Mashal, 23673K]

Balancing coronavirus concerns with fears that a painstakingly negotiated peace deal could fall apart, Afghan government officials met by videoconference on Sunday with Taliban delegates to discuss technical details of a prisoner release that is a part of the deal, officials said.

Though the meeting was not the formal start of direct talks between the government and the Taliban — that step is predicated on reaching agreement on the prisoner exchange — the technical discussion was the first negotiating meeting between them since the United States and the insurgents signed a deal last month.

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Concerns about the global coronavirus pandemic, however, meant that the talks happened by video chat. And that in itself was a notable moment given the Taliban's origins as a national government that largely banned television and music.

The prisoner exchange, involving up to 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan government prisoners, as called for in the deal the Americans signed, has been an extreme point of contention. The prisoners were supposed to be released before the beginning of Afghan negotiations on March 10.

President Ashraf Ghani's government has vehemently disagreed with the terms the United States agreed to with the Taliban, delaying the future steps of the peace deal. After much shuttle diplomacy by the United States' special envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, Mr. Ghani agreed only to a phased release of the prisoners in small batches and conditioned it on Taliban halting their attacks — something the insurgents have said goes against what they have signed with the United States.

"Today, the US and Qatar facilitated the first Afghan government to Taliban technical talks on prisoner releases, via Skype video conferencing," Mr. Khalilzad, who has been in Kabul for several weeks trying to find a solution to the prisoner release and calm a political crisis that has resulted in a split government, said in a series of Twitter posts late on Sunday.

"Everyone clearly understands the coronavirus threat makes prisoner releases that much more urgent."

The country's political crisis — a grinding election dispute between Mr. Ghani and his opponent, Abdullah Abdullah — brought another American diplomat to Kabul on Monday: Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Mr. Ghani was declared the winner of a bitterly disputed election last month. Mr. Abdullah also declared himself winner and held his own inauguration next door. Days of efforts by Mr. Khalilzad, including into the early hours of inauguration day, failed to prevent the announcement of two presidents and keep the country's elite united around the peace process.

Mr. Pompeo was expected to hold meetings with both Afghan leaders, separately and together, to find a way to get them to work together.

In the videoconference with the Taliban over the weekend, the discussions lasted 2.5 hours, and attendants were dialed in from five locations, according to a senior Afghan official and a senior Taliban official.

The American team, led by Mr. Khalilzad, and a team of Qatari diplomats were facilitating the discussions. The Afghan government delegation was led by the deputy national security adviser, Salem Shah Ibrahimi. The Taliban delegation included several senior members of the group, including two negotiators from their political office in Doha and Mullah Nooruddin Turabi, who leads their prisoners' commission.

"The talks solely focused on prisoner release, and there were initial agreements on some issues regarding the release of prisoners," said Suhail Shaheen, a spokesman for the

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Taliban's negotiating team.

Mr. Shaheen said the sides would hold another videoconference on Tuesday to continue the discussions.

Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's national security adviser, suggested that the call had covered other issues in addition to "views on initial technical steps" to make the prisoner release possible.

"All sides emphasized the importance of a reduction in violence, direct negotiations, and a permanent and comprehensive cease-fire," Mr. Mohib said in a statement on Twitter.

In the days before signing the deal with the United States, the Taliban observed a partial cease-fire with the Afghan government. But that deal included no agreement on a lasting violence reduction that was envisioned as part of the ensuing talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

In recent weeks, the Taliban have made clear that they see violence as a major part of their leverage in talks, and have intensified their operations across Afghanistan. The Afghan forces, meanwhile, have largely remained in "active defense" and are beginning to suffer heavy casualties.

In one of the most brutal Taliban attacks since the group signed the deal with the United States, insurgents stormed an outpost in southern Zabul Province and killed at least 24 members of the Afghan security forces on Thursday, torching their outposts and burning the bodies to a point that many were unrecognizable.

The Taliban have also ramped up attacks in the north. In response to an overnight Taliban attack in Kunduz Province that had begun late on Saturday in Imam Saheb district, Afghan forces called for an airstrike on Sunday that resulted in the death of at least nine civilians — including four women and two children — according to Gul Bai, a local police commander.

[Afghanistan] U.S. vows to cut $1 billion in aid to Afghanistan as political crisis threatens peace deal (Washington Post)
Washington Post [3/23/2020 7:39 PM, Pamela Constable and John Hudson, 12625K]
In a sign of mounting frustration with Afghanistan's leaders, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced early Tuesday that the United States would cut $1 billion in aid to the country because of its inability to form a unity government to negotiate with the Taliban.

Pompeo said that Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his main rival, Abdullah Abdullah, had failed to set aside their differences, just hours after meeting with the two men in a quickly arranged visit to Kabul.

"The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests," Pompeo said in a statement. "Their failure has harmed U.S.-Afghan relations and, sadly, dishonors those Afghan, Americans, and Coalition partners who have sacrificed their lives and treasure in the struggle to build a new future for this country."

For weeks, the Trump administration has been pressuring the Afghan government to put

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together a united team to negotiate with the Taliban and form a lasting peace deal in Afghanistan that allows for the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

Pompeo's statement reflects the Trump administration's willingness to condition aid to Afghanistan in order to force the compliance of Ghani and Abdullah.

"We are prepared to reduce by another $1 billion in 2021," Pompeo said, emphasizing that the two leaders' intransigence would not delay America's withdrawal plans.

"We are proceeding with the conditions-based withdrawal of our forces in accordance with the U.S.-Taliban agreement," he added.

After leaving Afghanistan, Pompeo met with the Taliban's chief negotiator in Qatar. Following those discussions, he told reporters that the Trump administration's principal concern right now is the Afghan leadership, not the Taliban.

"They committed to reducing -violence and they've largely done that," Pompeo said, referring to the Taliban.

He added that he hoped the United States wouldn't need to withhold aid from Afghanistan.

"We are hopeful, frankly, that they will get their act together and we won't have to do it. But we're prepared to do that," Pompeo said.

Pompeo arrived in Kabul on Monday in hopes of resolving a clash between Ghani and Abdullah, who is attempting to form a parallel government. Pompeo spent the day meeting privately with both leaders, first separately and then together, before leaving the country less than nine hours after he landed.

The secretary's sudden trip from Washington, even with the novel coronavirus upending life in the United States and consuming its government, was a dramatic indicator of U.S. officials' growing alarm at the lengthening political stalemate here — both for its potential to erupt into a violent civil conflict and to undermine the peace process.

The peace agreement signed Feb. 29 between U.S. and Taliban officials was expected to allow thousands of U.S. troops to begin leaving Afghanistan soon and to pave the way for negotiations between Taliban and Afghan leaders on a shared government in the future. Instead, both plans have bogged down, and no date has been set for the talks.

"Unless this crisis gets resolved and resolved soon, it could affect the peace process, which was an opportunity to end . . . 40 years of war. And our agreement with the Talibs could be put at risk," a senior State Department official told journalists traveling with Pompeo, speaking on the condition of anonymity to be candid.

The official said Pompeo's "authority" as the top U.S. diplomat and a close adviser to President Trump gives him more potential influence than other intermediaries on Ghani and Abdullah, who are bitterly estranged after co-governing for five years. In recent weeks, both Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. diplomat spearheading the peace talks, and senior Afghan political and religious leaders have tried to find a compromise — to no avail.

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Even with "a lot going on," including the coronavirus pandemic, the official said, Pompeo had "come all the way here" to "push" both Afghan leaders to form an inclusive government and to stress the dangers that could result "if they don't do the right thing." The official said there was particular concern that the Afghan defense forces could split between "two presidents and two commanders in chief, or worse."

What the Trump administration wants is for Ghani and Abdullah to agree on an "inclusive government that is acceptable to both," the official said. "We are encouraging them to rise to the occasion" and "put the country first."

After back-to-back meetings, with Pompeo shuttling between Ghani's and Abdullah's palaces — one block apart — and then meeting with them together, no official statements were made.

Pompeo then flew to Qatar, where he met with the Taliban's chief negotiator, Abdul Ghani Baradar. The two men spoke for about an hour at Al Udeid Air Base in Doha, where Pompeo pressed the Taliban "to continue to comply with the agreement signed last month," said State Department spokeswoman Morgan Ortagus.

The political crisis arose after the presidential election in September. Ghani, the incumbent, was declared the winner last month, but Abdullah alleged massive fraud and refused to concede. The two have been locked in a tense stalemate for two weeks, while Abdullah, backed by an array of former ethnic-minority militia leaders, has begun naming his own governors and cabinet members.

Meanwhile, no progress has been made on forming a government delegation to meet with the Taliban, even though those talks were scheduled to begin March 10. In a separate dispute, Ghani has refused to immediately release 5,000 Taliban prisoners as the U.S.-Taliban agreement stipulated, throwing that deal into doubt as well, and leaving unclear if and when American troops can begin pulling out in large numbers.

Pompeo's mission is eerily reminiscent of what transpired after the previous Afghan presidential election, in 2014, when then-Secretary of State John F. Kerry successfully mediated an identical spat between Ghani and Abdullah. Both claimed to have won the presidency in a fraud-marred election, but Kerry persuaded them to accept a power-sharing arrangement. It has proved tense and fractious.

Pompeo, who attended the signing of the peace agreement in Qatar, said at the time that the path forward would be "rocky" and that talks between Taliban and Afghan leaders would be difficult. But he also said that while Taliban leaders have "an enormous amount of blood on their hands, they have now made a break" with their past and promised not to allow anti-U.S. terrorist activities on Afghan soil.

[Afghanistan] US slashes aid to Afghanistan by $1B as power struggle threatens Taliban peace deal (Washington Examiner)
Washington Examiner [3/23/2020 7:37 PM, Joel Gehrke, 570K]
President Trump is slashing aid to Afghanistan in response to a deadlock over the results of the most recent presidential election, which threatens to blow up an historic deal with the Taliban.

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"The United States is disappointed in them and what their conduct means for Afghanistan and our shared interests," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Monday, in reference to Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and his rival, former Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

Ghani was declared the winner of Afghanistan's presidential election in December, but the campaign was postponed repeatedly, and Abdullah refused to concede defeat. Pompeo attempted to negotiate a breakthrough in an abrupt visit to Kabul on Monday, but the two Afghan leaders remained at odds, prompting a $1 billion cut in U.S. aid, with more to come if the problem lingers.

"We are prepared to reduce by another $1 billion in 2021," Pompeo said. "We will also initiate a review of all of our programs and projects to identify additional reductions and reconsider our pledges to future donor conferences for Afghanistan."

The political dispute is a significant impediment to the Taliban peace deal that Pompeo's team signed last month. The agreement calls for the Taliban and Afghan officials to appoint negotiating teams to travel for talks in Norway, but the power struggle has delayed that process.

"We are in a crisis," a senior State Department official told reporters in Kabul. "The fear is that, unless this crisis gets resolved and resolved soon, that could affect the peace process … and our agreement with the Talibs could be put at risk."

The pact already is threatened by a vicious flurry of attacks by the Taliban, as the militant group maintains that the ceasefire agreed to at the signing of the deal only applies to conflict with U.S. forces.

"If the Taliban are not going to lower violence," Army Gen. Scott Miller, the top U.S. and NATO commander in Afghanistan, warned earlier this month, "that causes a risk to the agreement."

The withdrawal of support could even affect counterterrorism operations if Trump's team believes that the Afghan security officials are being used as political pawns by leaders.

"We have made clear to the leadership that we will not back security operations that are politically motivated nor support political leaders who order such operations or those who advocate for or support parallel government," Pompeo said.

[Afghanistan] Coronavirus threatens to undermine Afghan peace plan (The Hill)
The Hill [3/22/2020 6:20 PM, Rebecca Kheel, 1762K]
The coronavirus pandemic is throwing another curveball at President Trump's already shaky efforts to end the war in Afghanistan.

The peace process is expected to take a back seat as Afghanistan's fragile health system will likely struggle to respond to the spread of the virus.

The top U.S. general in Afghanistan has already paused troop rotations in and out of the country in an effort to prevent the disease from spreading among service members, and any effort to kickstart stalled negotiations between the Taliban and the Afghan government is complicated by the inability to meet in person.

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"With having this to deal with, the peace process is sort of put in the shadows," Marvin Weinbaum, director of Afghanistan and Pakistan studies at the Middle East Institute, said of the coronavirus. "The ramifications are so great that it's hard to know what really follows from this. It was difficult enough to get a peace process going because of the prisoner issue and so on. But this is still a further setback, if only because it comes to the point where, do you really want to put together 50 people in a room?"

The Trump administration's peace deal with the Taliban had already had several hiccups since it was signed at the end of February even before the pandemic exploded.

The Taliban resumed attacks against Afghan forces days after the agreement was signed, leading to at least one U.S. airstrike against the terror group in response. U.S. officials have said the Taliban attacks are not consistent with the deal and must stop.

Meanwhile, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani quickly rejected the deal's requirement to release 5,000 Taliban prisoners ahead of intra-Afghan talks. He later agreed to release 1,500 ahead of the negotiations and the remaining 3,500 during them if insurgent violence was reduced, but the Taliban rejected the offer.

As of Friday, Afghanistan had just 24 confirmed cases of coronavirus. But testing there is extremely limited, with just one lab able to analyze tests for the entire country.

The border with Iran, where more than 19,000 people have tested positive as of Friday, is famously porous.

In an effort to prevent troops in the U.S.-led Resolute Support mission from getting COVID-19, Gen. Scott Miller announced this past week that deployments into the country will be paused as officials develop a protocol for screening new arrivals. That means that some troops who were scheduled to leave might have to stay longer, Miller said.

It's unclear whether the pause will have a significant effect on the U.S. military's ability to draw down to 8,600 troops by the 135-day timeline laid out in the deal with the Taliban. International members of the coalition are also required to draw down by a commensurate amount.

U.S. Forces Afghanistan spokesman Col. Sonny Leggett tweeted this past week that officials "continue to execute the ordered drawdown to 8600" even as they work on ways "to reduce the risks of COVID-19 to those deployed."

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg similarly said Thursday that alliance officials "continue to implement the decision to reduce the number of NATO personnel in Afghanistan."

"At the same time, we will make sure that we do that in a way which is responsible and which protects the health and the safety of our personnel, which is always our top priority," Stoltenberg added.

Weinbaum said an inability to relocate troops during the coronavirus crisis "might obviously affect the drawdown," but added the bigger impediment continues to be whether the Taliban

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lives up to its commitments.

Scott Worden, director of Afghanistan and Central Asia programs at the U.S. Institute of Peace, said the Pentagon can mobilize very quickly after it has a plan, so he does not see the pause as “a significant obstacle at this point.”

In addition to his reticence for the prisoner swap, Ghani remains locked in a power struggle with his chief political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, which also poses a challenge to getting talks with the Taliban started.

In February, Ghani was declared the winner of Afghanistan’s September elections, and he was inaugurated earlier this month. But Abdullah continues to dispute the election results and has vowed to form a parallel government, holding his own inauguration the same day as Ghani’s.

In several Twitter threads this past week, U.S. special envoy Zalmay Khalilzad pleaded for Afghan leaders to set aside their differences amid the coronavirus outbreak.

“It is time for Afghans to compromise and put their differences aside to resolve the political crisis resulting from elections and dual inaugurations,” Khalilzad tweeted. “This crisis undermines security. Coronavirus poses a mortal threat and requires Afghans to put their country, and its people, first. It is a matter of life and death.”

In another thread Friday to mark Nowruz, Ghani said the “best gift” Afghanistan’s leaders can give their people is “an agreement on an inclusive government and end the political crisis.”

He also urged them to “take the needed steps to take advantage of historic opportunity for peace” and “work together including the Taliban to contain and take care of the people from the scourge of the coronavirus.”

Khalilzad also reiterated the U.S. call for prisoner releases, tweeting that coronavirus makes the issue “urgent.”

“Technical teams from both sides can work together and focus on technical steps to begin prisoner releases as soon as possible. I will participate in the initial meetings,” he tweeted Wednesday. “While [it is] preferable to meet face-to-face, Coronavirus and the resulting travel restrictions likely requires virtual engagement for now.”

Despite the tragedy of coronavirus and the likelihood of the peace process stalling, there could be one silver lining: Both Weinbaum and Worden expressed hope that Afghanistan could see a reduction in violence as the government and Taliban focus more on fighting the virus.

Worden was somewhat skeptical the Taliban’s calculations will be affected by the spread of the virus given the group “has viewed civilian targets as legitimate and the use of IEDs in crowded places as a means of advancing their agenda.”

Still, he said, “the greater concern that people have for their own health would tend to reduce the motivations for violence.”

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"So humanitarian pause in the conflict is, I think, imperative," Worden said. "I see the coronavirus issue advancing a continuation of the reduction in violence, which started before the U.S.-Taliban agreement was signed, a little bit more than I see it affecting the prisoner release issue."

[Pakistan] Pakistan approves military deployment to curb virus (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 1:05 PM, Staff, 1973K]
Pakistan on Monday authorised the army to deploy across the country and in the capital Islamabad in a bid to slow the spread of the novel coronavirus.

The interior ministry announcement, which came as the death toll from coronavirus rose to six, means troops will be able to assist the civilian government with logistics and in providing supplies, if needed.

It also means troops could, if called on, help enforce any eventual curfews as the crisis worsens — as observers fear it will in a country with large illiterate populations in crowded urban centres where many people are ignoring guidelines on "social distancing".

Since Pakistan's birth in 1947, the military has exercised direct rule for about half of the country's history, most recently under General Pervez Musharraf who seized power in 1999 for a period of nearly a decade.

In a statement, the interior ministry said it was "pleased to authorise" deployment of "sufficient" troops, depending on needs.

The orders came as health authorities confirmed 805 cases of coronavirus so far, including the six fatalities.

Pakistani officials have given conflicting advice on the best course of action against the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Imran Khan has argued the impoverished nation cannot afford the type of wide-scale lockdowns being implemented in the West, saying people living below the poverty line would be unable to support themselves without working.

But Pakistan's two most populous provinces of Punjab and Sindh — home to some 160 million people — have issued their own lockdown decrees for an initial period of two weeks.

Pakistan's constitution allows the civilian government to call for military aid in case of disasters and natural calamities, such as in the aftermath of a 2005 earthquake that killed more than 73,000 people.

[United Arab Emirates] Emirates reverses decision to suspend all passenger flights (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/22/2020 9:14 PM, AFP, 1973K]
Dubai carrier Emirates reversed on Sunday its decision to suspend all passenger flights, shortly after it said it would halt operations from March 25 amid the novel coronavirus outbreak.

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The airline said it “received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travellers” and will continue to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations, down from its usual 159.

Emirates will continue to fly to the United Kingdom, Switzerland, Hong Kong, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Australia, South Africa, the United States and Canada.

The announcement was made just hours after a previous statement said the carrier “will have temporarily suspended all its passenger operations” by March 25.

“We continue to watch the situation closely, and as soon as things allow, we will reinstate our services,” said the airline’s chairman and CEO, Sheikh Ahmed bin Saeed Al-Maktoum.

The United Arab Emirates on Friday announced its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having reported 153 infections so far, of which 38 people have recovered.

Maktoum said that, until January this year, the Emirates Group was “doing well” against current financial year targets, but “COVID-19 has brought all that to a sudden and painful halt over the past six weeks”.

“The world has literally gone into quarantine due to the COVID-19 outbreak,” he said.

Emirates also announced it will slash the basic salaries of a majority of employees by between 25 and 50 percent for three months, but will not cut jobs.

“Rather than ask employees to leave the business, we chose to implement a temporary basic salary cut, as we want to protect our workforce,” Maktoum said. “We want to avoid cutting jobs.”

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the air transport sector.

The UAE has stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but are outside the country from returning.

[United Arab Emirates] Dubai’s vast malls to close under UAE plan to curb virus (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 2:33 AM, AFP, 1973K]
Dubai’s famous malls will shut down for a fortnight under the United Arab Emirates’ plan to curb coronavirus, which will also see its airports closed to passenger and transit flights.

The decision to close commercial centres takes in shopping centres as well as fresh food markets, but pharmacies and food retail outlets will be allowed to stay open. Restaurants are limited to home deliveries.

The health ministry and the disaster management authority said in a statement early Monday that the move would come into force within 48 hours and last “for a renewable period of two weeks”.

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Dubai's vast shopping centres include Mall of the Emirates, which has its own indoor ski slope, and Dubai Mall which is one of the world's largest and features a giant aquarium.

The move came as UAE authorities announced they would suspend all passenger and transit flights for two weeks, as the coronavirus outbreak prompts many countries to shut their borders.

Cargo and emergency evacuation flights are exempt from the measure.

"Additional examination and isolation arrangements will be taken later should flights resume in order to ensure the safety of passengers, air crews, and airport personnel and their protection from infection risks," they said in a statement.

The UAE is home to two major international airports, in Abu Dhabi and Dubai, which are major transit hubs.

Monday's announcement came hours after Dubai carrier Emirates said it would suspend all passenger flights by March 25, only to swiftly reverse its decision.

It later said it "received requests from governments and customers to support the repatriation of travellers" and would continue to operate passenger flights to 13 destinations.

However, after the new UAE suspension the airline confirmed it would suspend all passenger services for two weeks starting from March 25.

"We are very sorry for any inconvenience caused to our customers and travellers. These measures are in place to contain the spread of COVID-19, and we hope to resume services as soon as feasible," it said.

The UAE announced on Friday its first two deaths from the COVID-19 disease, having reported more than 150 cases so far.

Gulf countries have imposed various restrictions to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the air transport sector.

The UAE has already stopped granting visas on arrival and forbidden foreigners who are legal residents but are outside the country from returning.

[India] World's Biggest Lockdown Triggers Record Stocks Crash in India (Bloomberg)

Bloomberg [3/23/2020 9:37 AM, P R Sanjai, Anurag Kotoky, and Nupur Acharya, 6400K]

India will suspend all domestic flights from midnight Tuesday, the final piece of a nationwide lockdown that threatens Prime Minister Narendra Modi's attempts to revive an economy already expanding at the slowest pace in more than a decade.

The open-ended flight ban compliments a nationwide cancellation of all passenger trains, as authorities try to halt the spread of the coronavirus in the world's second-most populous nation, and one which has poorly equipped hospitals and inadequate social security. Stocks fell by a record and the rupee sank to an all-time low, while government bonds also

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declined.

Over the past three days, state after state has declared curfews and India's international borders have been shut for most visitors since March 11. India so far has 433 virus cases, including seven deaths. But experts say the country could be on the same trajectory as Italy, where the outbreak quickly escalated, causing hospitals to overflow.

"This is the biggest lockdown in world history," said Raghu Raman, a former soldier with the Indian army and founder of the National Intelligence Grid, an umbrella database aimed at countering terrorism. "This strategic pause gives decision makers more time to arrest the exponential spread of the virus and evaluate trade offs."

Controlling the outbreak is crucial for Modi, who remains India's most popular political leader currently though his economic management has faced criticism. Foreign investors are selling Indian assets at an unprecedented pace and failure to contain deaths and infections could erode some of the prime minister's personal appeal at home.

Oxford Economics slashed India's January-April growth forecast to 3%, a number not seen even during the worst of the global financial crisis. The main equity gauge slumped by a record 13.2% Monday and the rupee weakened past 76 a dollar for the first time ever. The benchmark 10-year sovereign bond plunged the most in almost four months.

"A part of the cerebral cortex that senses fear and survival seems to have activated in the minds of investors," said Umesh Mehta, Mumbai-based head of research at Samco Securities Ltd. "The only relief in this market can come from either policy makers and regulators, or from some positive news that a cure for the pandemic is near."

Bloomberg Economics estimates Modi's administration needs at least 1% of gross domestic product -- $30 billion -- to meaningfully respond to the virus outbreak. Meanwhile, the nation's billionaires are diverting their factories to manufacture medical equipment and pledging to keep paying their staff even as production grinds to a halt.

Reliance Industries Ltd., controlled by India's richest man Mukesh Ambani, has helped equip a hospital in Mumbai dedicated to patients of Covid-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus. It will also build quarantine centers and produce 100,000 facemasks a day and other personal protective equipment for health workers. The group's telecom unit will offer free broadband to enable work-from-home during the lockdown and will pay its lowest paid workers twice a month to protect household incomes.

Ambani joins Mahindra & Mahindra Ltd. Chairman Anand Mahindra and Vedanta Resources Ltd. Chairman Anil Agarwal -- a combined worth of more than $40 billion between the trio -- who have so far made pledges.

Indian companies are responding to Modi's shutdown call. Maruti Suzuki India Ltd., Tata Motors Ltd., Toyota Kirloskar Motor, Hero MotoCorp., Samsung Electronics Co. and LG Electronics Inc., Mahindra Group, TVS Motor Co., Kia Motors Corp., Renault Nissan Automotive India Private Ltd., and Yamaha Motor India are among companies that have announced factory suspensions.

Policy makers are aware of the risks of such a move. India -- with a record 5.9 trillion rupees

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of corporate debt maturing this year -- faces “waves of default” if cash flows aren’t maintained, the government’s principal economic adviser Sanjeev Sanyal said an interview.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman last week said the government will announce a relief package for coronavirus-affected sectors as soon as possible. The Reserve Bank of India, which is due to review interest rates April 3, announced a 1 trillion rupee cash injection on Monday.

“Let me assure, whatever it takes to keep the cash flow going in the economy will be done,” Sanyal said. “We need to make sure that when we are past the health storm, we still have an economy that has not gotten gridlocked. Because unwinding that would be more difficult.”

[Russia] Russia is underreporting coronavirus cases, Russian doctor says (Public Radio International)
Public Radio International [3/23/2020 3:45 PM, Daniel Ofman] Audio: HERE
Russia has relatively few reported cases of COVID-19 compared with other nations — less than 500 confirmed cases for a population around 144.5 million.

However, many in Russia are starting to doubt the government’s numbers. Some have claimed Russia has been underreporting the instances of the novel coronavirus and has been classifying cases as pneumonia.

“You see that now in our country, we have [a] real increase of pneumonia cases. [The] government changed a lot of hospitals into hospitals where only pneumonia cases are [being treated]. In Moscow, now we have about 15 hospitals that are changed to treat pneumonia. And three hospitals where coronavirus is treated," Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva said. “Really we can associate increase of pneumonia cases with the [pandemic] of coronavirus all over the world. So our test is not really very good. We have not enough tests. We have not good diagnostics to understand which pneumonia cases [are] not coronavirus, which [are] the real coronavirus."

Vasilyeva, the head of Russia’s Alliance of Doctors trade union, says the Russian health care system is woefully underprepared to deal with the coronavirus pandemic. Medical staff lack the necessary equipment, and rural areas lack necessary medical staff. Vasilyeva spoke with The World’s Marco Werman about Russia’s response to COVID-19.

Marco Werman: So, Dr. Vasilyeva, to be clear, you believe that there are many more cases of COVID-19 than the ones reported — that many of those pneumonia cases may actually be COVID-19 cases? Is that what you’re saying?

Dr. Anastasia Vasilyeva: So I can only suppose. I can only suppose, because how can we have increased pneumonia without increase of coronavirus all over the world? So, of course, I think that the quantity of patients with coronavirus is much higher than the government says.

You put out a video about this, as well as the conditions that Russian health workers are working under right now. Are the health professionals in Russia and is a Russian health system prepared to take on this virus?

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Our country's really very big and we have not enough roads. And for coronavirus, it's a very bad way to spread. This can protect, in some way, our people from coronavirus, and the speed of coronavirus spread, I think, will be much less than in Europe.

You're saying basically Russia is geographically predisposed to fighting this virus because everything is so spread out.

So we have no roads. How can a coronavirus travel between towns and cities and villages without roads, without transport? So in Russia, to move from point A to point B — it sometimes is very difficult.

Of course, that doesn't mean that coronavirus will not spread at all. In Russia, there are still flights.

Of course it will spread, but not in such quick way as in China and Europe. And also, you see that this disease is really dangerous for older people. But our older people have no money to travel. They're sitting [at] home. They're sitting there in villages, and they are very poor. This fact can protect our older people from quick spread of this disease. But our health system is also very poor. So we have not enough hospitals, not enough medical staff. We have no fabrics to provide masks, protection costumes, and so on.

So what measures has Russia taken so far in limiting the spread of the coronavirus?

So you see that now the borders are closed. The schools are closed. The universities are closed. But the metro underground transport is open. For me, it's a great surprise. And I think that it's the most dangerous source for spreading this infection.

Dr. Vasilyeva, you're the head of the Alliance of Doctors trade union in Russia. What do you need from the government to help contain this? What do you think Russia should be doing right now?

So, of course, Russia should protect doctors. The government should equip every medical worker with protection, with masks, costumes and so on. It's very important. Every medical worker who goes for a walk and goes to the hospital and back home is really spreading this infection — in the transport, in the metro, in the streets, everywhere. So the medical workers should be well-equipped.

And you're saying today Russia is not prepared for that?

Of course. [In] some towns there is only one medical worker ... only one. He or she is working for four people. So it's very difficult to work, even now without any pandemic.

[China] Trump's China tariffs hampered US coronavirus preparedness, expert says (Public Radio International)
Public Radio International [3/23/2020 5:00 PM, Staff, 105K] Audio: HERE
The fight against the novel coronavirus is also a race for medical supplies: masks, ventilators, lifesaving medical equipment. A lot of that equipment comes from China. In the United States, there's a shortage of supplies and that's partly due to a trade policy of Washington's own making — tariffs imposed on Chinese imports by the Trump White House.

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The Trump administration on Friday said it was soliciting public comments on lifting additional tariffs on Chinese imports that could help the United States battle the coronavirus pandemic, showing some flexibility in its trade war against Beijing.

The US Trade Representative (USTR) has in recent weeks granted "Section 301" tariff exclusions for certain medical products from China, including medical masks, examination gloves and antiseptic wipes.

But as it battles to try to keep the US economy from collapsing amid quarantine orders and halted commerce, the Trump administration so far has been resistant to broader removals of tariffs imposed over the past 20 months on some $370 billion worth of Chinese imports annually, despite calls from the industry that this would be an instant tax cut worth tens of billions of dollars.

US President Donald Trump considers his trade pressure on China among the biggest achievements of his presidency and a top argument for reelection in November.

Chad Bown is senior fellow at the Peterson Institute for International Economics. He spoke with The World's Marco Werman about the impacts of the Trump administration's trade policies on supplies of medical equipment in the US.

Marco Werman: President Trump began his trade war with China in early 2018, and these tariffs hit many medical products and pretty hard. So we can't redo the past two years, Chad. But in theory, would we have less of a shortage of medical equipment if we never had these tariffs in the first place?

Chad Bown: I think the answer to that is clearly yes. There's a number of products that the Trump administration — when they were deciding what to impose tariffs on and what not to impose tariffs on over the last two years — they went out to the public and asked, you know, hey, what do you think of us imposing tariffs on these products? And the American medical community, in a lot of instances, came and said — try to avoid these. And in many instances, the Trump administration didn't. And so you end up with 25% tariffs on things like oxygen concentrators and thermometers and disposable medical headgear. You have 10% tariffs on a lot of protective clothing, or 15% tariffs even, and I think [that] made it difficult for buyers, American hospitals, to prepare for a pandemic like we're seeing today.

We should point out that the Trump administration did announce — quietly announced — earlier this month that some of these tariffs on medical supplies would be temporarily reduced to deal with the coronavirus when it charges onto American shores. Now it is here. So was that too little, too late?

Well, I think it was definitely a step in the right direction. We want to get rid of these tariffs and make it easier for American hospitals to be able to get access to whatever supplies they need from wherever they might need them. But I also think that it is a bit of a mea culpa by the administration, sort of recognizing that they have made it more difficult for the American medical community to be prepared for a pandemic that might arise. And so I think it's a step in the right direction. They, for what it's worth, put out another call at the end of the last week saying, "Hey, if there are other products that we haven't yet taken off of our tariff list, that you do actually need to buy from China, let us know and we'll consider

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removing them." But again, time is ticking by here. And that could take weeks. And hospitals and doctors and nurses — they need this stuff right now. And it seems to be a lot to ask them to go through this bureaucratic process, to ask for some tariffs to be removed when they really should be focusing their time and energy and efforts on other things.

Trump and critics of past trade policies say the US had become too dependent on China, and the crisis we're in now is an example of that dependency. Do you think that's a fair criticism?

Well, I think to deal with an epidemic and a pandemic like what we're facing right now, and the shortages of the supplies, you do need to have a diverse source of supply of these things. You know, you'd want to be producing some of these in the United States — which we are. You want to have supplies coming in from other countries around the world as well, not be entirely reliant on China. I think in this case, the United States was buying a fair amount of this equipment from China, but not only from China. We import a lot of this stuff from Mexico as well. So I don't necessarily think that we were too reliant on China. But I do think you do need to have a diverse source of supplies for these sorts of critical equipment.

Well, you kind of put your finger on it, Chad. Time is of the essence. So what does the US need to do right now? Play nice with China, make more medical supplies here or turn to other countries like Mexico? I mean, they rank second in medical equipment, bought by the US.

Yeah, I think we need to do all of the above. I think no one knows how this is going to play out over the long-term. And I think that we need to be prepared for the worst-case scenario. The Trump administration, it needs to be thinking of creative ways to incentivize American production. We also though, I think, do need to make nice with China and decide that, well, some of the priorities that we were worried about six months ago or a year ago in fighting the trade war — maybe we need to put some of those on the backburner. And this is really actually much, much more important. This is about life and death. We need to get these supplies from wherever we can get them — as quickly as we can get them.

Given the trade war and the antagonism there — not to mention the nasty rhetoric coming out of the White House right now about the coronavirus — I mean, do you think playing nice with China is even an option?

I don't know. You know, I always hope that things can change. I'm an optimist by nature. It has not been the approach of the administration so far. You know, when everything was going fine, the economy was going fine and everybody was healthy, maybe it didn't need to be considered all that much. But now I think times really, really are quite different. And a new approach is needed.

[China] China sees drop in new coronavirus cases; all of them imported (Reuters)
Reuters [3/23/2020 4:57 AM, Ryan Woo, Lusha Zhang, Engen Tham, Jing Wang and Andrew Galbraith, 5304K]
Mainland China on Monday reported a drop in its daily tally of new coronavirus cases, reversing four straight days of increases, as the capital, Beijing, ramped up measures to contain the number of infections arriving from abroad.

China had 39 new confirmed cases on Sunday, the National Health Commission said, down

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from 46 a day earlier. All the new ones involved travellers arriving from abroad, many of them Chinese students returning home.

Beijing stepped up measures to contain imported infections, diverting all arriving international flights from Monday to other cities, including Shanghai and as far west as Xian, where passengers will undergo virus screening.

Foreigners who miss international connections as a result of the measure would have to leave China, an immigration official said at the health commission's daily briefing, adding that foreign visitors should "think carefully" before choosing Beijing as a transit point.

Beijing reported 10 new imported cases, the National Health Commission said, down from 13 a day earlier. Infections from abroad in the city hit an all-time daily high of 21 on March 18.

Shanghai and Guangzhou have also said all arriving international passengers will be tested to screen for the coronavirus, expanding a programme that previously only applied to those coming from heavily affected countries.

The coastal province of Zhejiang, near Shanghai, will also put all arrivals from overseas in centralised quarantine facilities for 14 days, media reported. Zhejiang on Monday lowered its emergency response level from 2 to 3, the lowest level, reflecting easing concern about the spread of the virus.

Shanghai, which reported 10 new cases on Sunday, down from a record 14 a day earlier, lowered its emergency response level to level 2 from level 1.

Guangdong province saw seven new imported infections, Fujian had four and Jiangsu had two. Hebei, Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Shandong and Sichuan each saw just one case, bringing the total number of imported cases in China to 314.

Mainland China saw no new locally transmitted infections.

The health commission did not say from where the cases were believed to have been imported. Beijing authorities reported cases from Spain, Britain, France, the United States and Pakistan.

In Wuhan, capital of central province of Hubei, authorities have eased tough lockdown measures as the epicentre of the outbreak in China saw no new infections for the fifth day.

Downtown Wuhan remains the only high-risk area in the province, with other cities and counties classified as low-risk.

Wuhan went into a virtual lockdown on Jan. 23 to contain the spread of the virus to the rest of China.

According to authorities on Sunday, people can enter the city if they are certified healthy and have no fever.

Hubei residents who are in Wuhan can apply to leave the city, but they have to be tested for

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the virus.

There has been no indication that Wuhan residents can leave the city for non-essential reasons.

As of Sunday, the total number of cases in mainland China stood at 81,093. The death toll rose to 3,270, up by nine from the previous day.

[China] Marine Corps plans to scrap tank battalions, trim infantry to counter China with lighter force (Washington Times)
Washington Times [3/23/2020 7:50 AM, Douglas Ernst, 482K]
The Marine Corps says it needs to cut weight — all three of its tank battalions, in particular — to counter threats to national security by China.

Gen. David Berger, commandant of the Marine Corps, has a 10-year plan to make the service lighter and more nimble, which will require the abandonment of all tank battalions, trimming infantry units to more efficiently support naval expeditionary warfare, and reducing personnel by 12,000.

Marine Corps Times noted Monday that aviation resources, artillery cannon batteries, amphibious vehicle companies, law enforcement battalions and bridging companies are scheduled to shrink or be reorganized before 2030.

"The Marine Corps is not optimized to meet the demands of the National Defense Strategy," Marine Corps Combat Development Command said in the news release. "Our force design initiatives are designed to create and maintain a competitive edge against tireless and continuously changing peer adversaries."

The plan, first covered by The Wall Street Journal on Sunday, will offset some of the changes by investing in long-range precision fires, along with unmanned air and ground systems.

"Moving forward, we will continue to judiciously evaluate, wargame, experiment, and refine our force design, improving service capabilities and lethality for deterrence, competition, and conflict," MCCDC statement added.

[China] China-Owned TikTok Hires American Professors for 'Content Council' (Breitbart)
Breitbart [3/23/2020 10:58 AM, Tom Ciccotta, 1973K]
China-owned social media platform TikTok has recruited American professors to serve on its "content advisory council" to calm concerns that it engages in censorship at the behest of the Chinese government.

According to a report by Campus Reform, China-owned social media platform TikTok has hired American professors to serve on its "content advisory council." Some believe that the company is hiring American professors to calm concerns about its relationship to China's communist government.

In the fall, Senators Tom Cotton and Chuck Schumer encouraged national intelligence

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agencies to investigate whether or not TikTok posed a national security risk. At the time, Schumer argued that TikTok may be compromised by its relationship with China's Communist Party.

In a statement posted to the TikTok website, the company announced that it has formed the council to develop content moderation policies that will help TikTok sustain its growth.

Mindful of our responsibility to our users, last year we shared our intention to form an external council of leading experts to advise TikTok on content moderation policies covering a wide range of topics. We've made great progress as a company since we took the first steps of partnering with global law firm K&L Gates LLP and their team, including former Congressmen Bart Gordon and Jeff Denham. Earlier this year we updated our Community Guidelines to provide clarity to our users, and last week we announced our Transparency Center that will provide content and coding insight to outside experts.

TikTok's "content advisory council" will be chaired by George Washington Univesity Law School Professor Dawn Nunziato. In a statement, Nunziato argued that TikTok's willingness to work with internet law experts suggests that the company is focused on providing healthy and open discourse on its platform.

"A company willing to open its doors to outside experts to help shape upcoming policy shows organizational maturity and humility," Nunziato said. "I am working with TikTok because they've shown that they take content moderation seriously, are open to feedback, and understand the importance of this area both for their community and for the future of healthy public discourse."

Tiktok moderation documents leaked to the Intercept show the company instructed moderations to "suppress posts created by users that were deemed too ugly, poor, or disabled for the platform, internal documents reveal. The same document also allegedly shows moderators being instructed to censor political speech and punish those who harmed 'national honor.'"

[North Korea] North Korea still officially claims zero coronavirus cases (Public Radio International)

Public Radio International [3/23/2020 3:30 PM, Grace Moon, 105K] Audio: HERE

Throngs of consumers around the world are hoarding masks and rolls of toilet paper as world leaders plead with their citizens to stay home. Already more than 160 countries have seen cases of the novel coronavirus that has claimed more than 14,000 lives.

But amid a pandemic, North Korea has yet to report a single case.

Sharing an elongated border with China where the virus first broke out, and being in close proximity with South Korea, which was one of the world's epicenters of COVID-19 just a month ago, the hermit kingdom remains obstinate, continuing to seal itself off from the world. Earlier this month, the regime allegedly quarantined roughly 3,700 soldiers, 180 of whom are said to have died, according to South Korea-based Daily NK news.

Kim Seung-chul, 60, who was born in North Korea's South Hamgyong Province, which is northeast of Pyongyang, talked to The World about the coronavirus situation in the DPRK, or Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He now lives in South Korea.

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COVID-19's spread in North Korea

Kim Seung-chul worked as an engineer at a design center specializing in hydraulic power plants, and like many young North Korean men in the 1990s, vied for a chance to work in the then Soviet Union. He was successful and worked as a logger until 1993 when he realized how brutal conditions were and defected to South Korea.

Today, Kim Seung-chul serves as the president of North Korea Reform Radio, which broadcasts into North Korea from over the border using shortwave radio signals. He regularly communicates with defectors residing in Seoul, South Korea, who have direct contact with those inside of North Korea.

According to Kim Seung-chul, the coronavirus is predicted to have started spreading inside of North Korea sometime near the end of last year — a period that overlaps with a deadline imposed as part of a UN Security Council resolution demanding that China repatriate all North Korean laborers by Dec. 22.

"Some North Korean workers remained in China despite the sanctions while some were repatriated," Kim Seung-chul said. "But it was during this period when North Korean laborers were moving back and forth between China and the DPRK that the coronavirus is said to have been contracted and started to spread inside of North Korea."

It wasn't until early January, however, that North Korean authorities allegedly began to discover people suspected of having contracted the virus. By the end of January, the world's most isolated country plummeted deeper into isolation, enforcing stringent entry bans and even cutting off trade with China, which generates roughly 92% of North Korea's trade, according to the Korea international Trade Association.

"Prices of goods at the market have shot up and so has the cost of gasoline and diesel," Kim Seung-chul said, juxtaposing the gravity of the situation to the Arduous March, a devastating famine that struck in the late 90s and killed millions of North Koreans. "We can predict that by the end of March or early April, the North Korean economy will reach its breaking point. And if authorities fail to control the spread of the coronavirus while remaining on lockdown mode, it will lead to a national crisis and many lives will be at stake."

'Hospitals lack the fundamental supplies'

The COVID-19 outbreak will prove extremely difficult to combat especially given North Korea's crumbling health care situation, which Kim Seung-chul said is the most serious problem at hand for the regime.

"Simply put, without money, people cannot receive any kind of treatment," Kim Seung-chul said. "But even if you had the money, you still may not be able to be treated because the hospitals lack the fundamental supplies to carry out any operations."

As a result, many revert to the jangmadang or black market and buy their own medical appliances and antibiotics. Some will bring the appliances they purchase at the market to the doctor in hopes of at least receiving a consultation. However, during the coronavirus outbreak, those who are ill are not permitted to even visit medical facilities because the

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government is afraid they may further spread the virus. Kim Seung-chul said that people must first report their sickness and then wait to be granted entry to hospitals.

Themes of entry and access are long-standing traits of the regime that often draws a sharp line between life and death during pressing times. Though receiving aid will not likely be easy given the UN's strict sanctions; if any resources are distributed, they will probably be divided up among only the most powerful elite circles that include military officers, the state security department and intellectuals.

Coping with an insufficient health care system

Everyday citizens, Kim Seung-chul said, find ways to circumvent these deeply ingrained systemic barriers. For instance, people working at garment factories are manufacturing masks instead of clothing to protect themselves against the virus. They use fabrics such as gauze, but in reality, these materials end up being flimsy and do not last long.

As everyday North Korean citizens find ways to cope with insufficient medical systems, sharp upticks in the price of food and other necessities as well as uneven access to COVID-19 resources, they may longer have the choice to defect, let alone move from one city to another of their own free will.

Even though the number of defectors entering South Korea has significantly shrunk from 2,803 in 2008 to less than half or 1,137 in 2018, there is still a steady inflow of women defectors in particular. Women comprise roughly 85% of North Korean escapees.

Ramping up missile testing during the pandemic

"Because cross-border tourism and trade has been completely blocked, it is essentially impossible for ordinary North Koreans to defect as a survival tactic," Kim Seung-chul said, adding that only a small handful of elites who are able to obtain permission and pass the entry application are usually granted the freedom to move around.

There are more than 343,000 cases of the coronavirus worldwide. While it is not possible to gauge how many lives in North Korea are in jeopardy, Kim Seung-chul said North Korea's ramping up of projectile missile testing during the pandemic may symbolize growing anxiety permeating the country. In other words, people are beginning to sense the regime's instability and Kim Jong-un's failure to contain the coronavirus.

More and more North Koreans are tuning into programs like North Korea Reform Radio and have covert access to foreign media and documentaries, Kim Seung-chul said.

"There is no doubt that people inside North Korea are cognizant that they are in a dire situation," he said. "Kim Jong-un is demonstrating both a power move and fear tactic in efforts to prove the validity of his leadership in the midst of a fiasco."

[South Korea] South Korea sees lowest coronavirus case increase to date, tightens border over fears of imported infections (FOX News)
FOX News [3/23/2020 11:27 AM, Stephen Sorace, 8943K]
South Korea reported its lowest daily total of new coronavirus cases Monday as the nation ramped up quarantine restrictions for travelers over fears of a new wave of infections from

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hard-hit regions overseas.

The 64 new COVID-19 cases brought South Korea's total to 8,961 infections, the most of any Asian country outside of China, where the virus originated late last year. The death toll stood at 111.

Of the new cases, 13 were from overseas travelers entering the country, Reuters reported, adding to the 74 imported cases South Korea reported last week.

"We don't give much meaning to numbers yet, but as there are some fluctuations despite a declining trend, our top priority is to prevent sporadic group infections and repatriated cases," said Yoon Tae-ho, director-general for public health policy at the health ministry, according to the outlet.

As the number of locally spread cases sees a marked slowdown, South Korean medical officials have urged vigilance and the government tightened border controls to prevent the illness from re-entering from the West.

South Korea began testing all passengers arriving from Europe on Sunday and enforcing 14-day quarantines on South Korean nationals arriving from Europe and foreigners entering the country from Europe on long-term stay visas.

"To prevent imported cases, it will be better to enforce a two-week quarantine on all arrivals," Ki Mo-ran, a doctor leading the nation's coronavirus task force, told South Korea's Yonhap news agency. "The country needs to reinforce its quarantine measures on people coming from other virus-hit countries in addition to Europe."

The pandemic has gripped Europe in the past two weeks, devastating Italy where cases have surged to 59,138 amid a mounting death toll of at least 5,476. The numbers have continued to rise in other European countries, including Spain (29,909 cases), Germany (26,159 cases) and France (16,257 cases).

The U.S. reached 35,000 coronavirus cases Monday, making it the nation with the third-highest number of infections in the world, behind only Italy and China.

China has also reported that the contagion rate has started to slow down, with at least 81,454 confirmed cases amid a death toll of 3,274. However, like South Korea, officials fear a fresh outbreak from abroad after seeing a record rise of 45 imported cases Sunday -- the fourth straight day with an increase, Reuters reported.

Presidential Tweets

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet1 [3/23/2020 7:53 AM] We will be guided by the wishes of Prime Minister Abe of Japan, a great friend of the United States and a man who has done a magnificent job on the Olympic Venue, as to attending the Olympic Games in Japan. He will make the proper decision!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump

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Tweet2 [3/23/2020 7:59 AM] Robert, we will end up stronger than ever before. Thank you! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet3 [3/23/2020 9:07 AM] STRONG & UNITED, WE WILL PREVAIL! GOD BLESS THE USA!! [Editorial note: consult video at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet4 [3/23/2020 10:16 AM] THIS IS WHY WE NEED BORDERS!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet5 [3/23/2020 10:28 AM] The New York Times changed headlines 3 times in order to satisfy the Radical Left. What should have been a good story got “worse & worse”, until the headline alone made it very unfair. Fake & Corrupt News that is very dangerous for our Country!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet6 [3/23/2020 12:05 PM] A great early result from a drug that will start tomorrow in New York and other places! #COVID—19 [Editorial note: consult article at source link]

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet7 [3/23/2020 5:31 PM] It is very important that we totally protect our Asian American community in the United States, and all around the world. They are amazing people, and the spreading of the Virus.....is NOT their fault in any way, shape, or form. They are working closely with us to get rid of it. WE WILL PREVAIL TOGETHER!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet8 [3/23/2020 10:44 PM] This is the way the @nytimes finished a story on me. “You can see the contrast between the steady, assured, informed and strong leadership that VP Biden (Sleepy Joe) has shown, and the bungling, chaotic and dishonest start-stop approach that Mr. (not Pres.) Trump has shown.....us since the beginning of this crisis.” They meant the opposite? Forgot to mention that I closed our Country to China (and Europe) very early, long before it was considered acceptable to do so. Sleepy Joe said I was “xenophobic”, but I saved thousands of lives! Fake News!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet9 [3/23/2020 11:33 PM] Republicans had a deal until Nancy Pelosi rode into town from her extended vacation. The Democrats want the Virus to win? They are asking for things that have nothing to do with our great workers or companies. They want Open Borders & Green New Deal. Republicans shouldn’t agree!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet10 [3/23/2020 11:43 PM] The Hill/HarrisX: 61% to 39% Approval Rating on handling of Coronavirus situation. Thank you!

Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump
Tweet11 [3/24/2020 12:16 AM] This will never be approved by me, or any other Republican! [Editorial note: consult retweet at source link]

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