First Death Reported in U.S.; More Cases Likely: Virus Update

February 28, 2020, 9:54 PM GMT
Updated on February 29, 2020, 9:28 PM GMT

Can We Overcome Pandemics?

The U.S.'s first fatality from the coronavirus was a man in his 50s, Washington State health officials said. The state might be dealing with a potential outbreak of the virus at a health facility that cares for elderly, vulnerable patients after two people at the facility were diagnosed. Another 27 residents have shown respiratory symptoms, as have 25 staff members.

Vice President Mike Pence issued the strongest warnings possible against travel to parts of Italy and South Korea. He also said people didn't need to buy surgical masks for protection.

The FDA took steps to speed laboratory tests for the virus as unexplained infections in three states, including Washington, suggested the disease is spreading on the west coast. Italy became the first non-Asian nation to top 1,000 confirmed cases.

More events were scrapped or delayed around the world, from a Paris race to a Riviera property conference to a Greek economic forum. The NCAA is being pressured to play March Madness without fans.

Key Developments

- First U.S. death confirmed in Washington State as governor declares emergency
- U.S. issues strong warnings on Italy, South Korea travel. French cases spike
- Confirmed cases worldwide pass 85,000; deaths top 2,900
- New York won U.S. approval to conduct its own tests
- Chinese manufacturing fell to record in February
Washington State May Have Outbreak at Health Facility (4:10 p.m. NY)

Two people at the Life Care health facility in Kirkland were diagnosed with the virus, a health-care worker and a resident of the facility in her 70s. Neither has recently traveled outside the U.S., said Jeff Duchin, a public health officer for Seattle and King County. In addition, Duchin said there are reports that 27 residents have shown respiratory symptoms, as have 25 staff members. There are about 108 residents at the center and there are about 180 staff.

Washington State Declares State of Emergency (4:04 p.m.)

Gov. Jay Inslee today declared a state of emergency in response to the nation’s first fatality from COVID-19 and the rising number of cases. He directed state agencies to use all resources necessary to prepare for and respond to the outbreak.

“This will allow us to get the resources we need,” Inslee said. “This is a time to take common-sense, proactive measures to ensure the health and safety of those who live in Washington state.

France Reports Spike in Victims (4 p.m. NY)

Cases in France jumped to 100 on Saturday, almost double from the day before, Director General for Health Jerome Salomon said in a daily briefing.

They included a cluster of 36 cases linked to a victim who has now died in the Oise area, including 10 military and civil personnel at the Creil airforce base. Other clusters include a group of 11 related to an organized trip to Egypt. Of the 86 hospitalized cases, 9 are in a “serious condition,” Salomon said.

Over-The-Counter Medicine Tested (3:40 p.m NY)
The Trump administration is testing “off the shelf” drugs, Energy Secretary Dan Brouillette said at the CPAC meeting. He said the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee made “an important discovery” involving existing drugs that could “help us not only cure the disease but stop the spread” of Covid-19. “It’s still early.”

**NCAA Pressured to Play Without Fans (3:25 p.m. NY)**

The head of the National College Players Association said March Madness may need to go on in empty stadiums to protect college athletes from the virus. The advocacy group’s executive director Ramogi Huma called for a serious discussion with the NCAA “about holding competitions without an audience present.”

The Italian Football Federation is planning for some Serie A games to take place behind closed doors, starting as soon as Sunday.

**Turkey Cuts Flights to High-Risk Countries (2:45 p.m. NY)**

Turkey stopped all passenger flights to and from Italy, South Korea and Iraq as of midnight, Turkey’s Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said, according to state-run Anadolu Agency.

**3M to Provide 35 Million Masks (2:30 p.m. NY)**

Vice President Pence, who has been put in charge of the U.S. effort against the virus, said most Americans don’t need to buy masks for protection.

Because of a shortage of masks for health care professionals, 3M will provide 35 million more masks per month under a new contract with the U.S.

Earlier in the day, the U.S. Surgeon General tweeted, “seriously people -- STOP BUYING MASKS!”

**Details From Trump, Pence Press Conference (1:10 p.m. NY)**

President Trump said additional cases are likely after the person died in Washington. Trump spoke Saturday at a White House press conference. The president for days has talked down the risk of the virus amid the market selloff and rapidly rising global cases.

Pence issued the strongest possible warnings against travel to parts of Italy -- the epicenter of the outbreak in Europe -- and to South Korea. Italy said Saturday its cases raised to over 1,000. South Korea has reported more than 3,000 cases.

In the U.S., 22 cases have been reported. He minimized the risk. If a person contracts the virus, he said, “you will probably go through a process and you will probably be fine.”

Trump said he’d meet with pharmaceutical executives at the White House on Monday about progress toward a vaccine.

First U.S. Virus Death in Washington State (1 p.m. NY)

The first person has died from the coronavirus in the U.S., in Washington state, health officials reported on Saturday.

Health authorities in Seattle planned to brief the media later Saturday on virus cases in King County, including new people identified with the infection, one of whom died, according to an advisory from the agencies. Seattle is in King County.

Washington state health officials had earlier identified two new cases, including a school aged adolescent who had no known travel history or encountered anyone who had visited affected areas.

President Donald Trump and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also planned news conferences about the virus on Saturday.

Italy Tops 1,000 Cases (12:20 p.m. NY)

Italy’s confirmed coronavirus infections surpassed 1,000, skyrocketing from nearly zero in just over a week, the nation’s emergency chief Angelo Borrelli said. The total number of infections is 1,128, with 29 possible virus-linked deaths, the Italian Civil Protection official said Saturday at a Rome news conference. The Lombardy region in Italy's north has biggest pocket of cases, and a cluster of towns near Milan is under quarantine.

N.Y. Approved to Conduct Own Tests: Cuomo (11:50 a.m. NY)

New York state won U.S. approval to conduct its own tests on the coronavirus, speeding up the process of confirming cases, Governor Andrew Cuomo said Saturday.

“This approval will expedite wait time and improve New York's ability to more effectively manage the coronavirus situation as it unfolds,” the governor said.

Surgeon General Says ‘Stop Buying Masks’ (11:40 a.m. NY)

The U.S. Surgeon General urged people to “stop buying masks,” saying on Twitter that they’re not effective in preventing the general public from catching coronavirus.

“The best way to protect yourself and your community is with everyday preventive actions, like staying home when you are sick and washing hands with soap and water, to help slow the spread of respiratory illness,” Jerome M. Adams tweeted. He encouraged people to get flu shots, saying fewer flu patients means more resources for fighting the virus.

FDA Backs Faster Lab Tests (11:15 a.m. NY)

The FDA cleared the way Saturday for some laboratories to conduct diagnostic tests on the coronavirus before an emergency process is fully approved, a step to deal with test-kit shortages that have come under heavy criticism.

The FDA issued guidance to help rapidly expand testing capacity using molecular coronavirus diagnostic examinations. For a period of time while labs submit formal applications, the FDA does not intend to object to the tests for specimen testing, according to a statement. The FDA’s action covers laboratories certified to perform high-complexity testing.

Swiss Cuts Growth Forecast (11:15 a.m. NY)

Switzerland plans to lower its economic growth forecast because of the coronavirus outbreak, Reuters said, citing an official from the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs. The new forecast will be issued March 17, Eric Scheidegger, head of SECO’s
economic policy directorate, said during a government news conference, according to Reuters. SECO predicted GDP growth of 1.7% this year in its most recent forecast in December.

**Xi's Japan Trip Set for Delay (10:30 a.m. NY)**

The governments of Japan and China are set to delay the state visit to Japan by Chinese President Xi Jinping, which was planned for early April, Sankei reports, citing multiple unidentified people. The governments have concluded that the spread of the virus means the environment is not suitable for a visit. The trip is likely to be rescheduled for the autumn or later.

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi and top Chinese diplomat Yang Jiechi agreed at a meeting on Friday that the visit to Tokyo would go ahead as planned.

**Biden Blasts Trump for 'Hoax' Comment (9:50 a.m. NY)**

Joe Biden criticized Donald Trump for describing the coronavirus as a “hoax” by Democrats to derail his presidency.

“The president of the United States said it’s a hoax?” Biden said Saturday in Greenville, South Carolina, as Democrats voted in a primary. “For him to start talking about it being a hoax is absolutely dangerous. It’s just not a decent way to act.”

Trump, at a South Carolina rally Friday, said Democrats were “politicizing the coronavirus” after he overcame the “impeachment hoax” and allegations about his campaign’s ties with Russia. “This is their new hoax,” Trump said.

Biden told reporters: “When you say things like that it just so diminishes the faith that people around the world have in the United States.”

**France Cancels Large Gatherings (8:53 a.m. NY)**

France has banned indoor gatherings of more than 5,000 people and canceled the Paris half-marathon that was expected to attract 40,000 runners on Sunday, Health Minister Olivier Veran said. The country reported 16 new cases of coronavirus, bringing the total to 73.

Schools in two clusters stricken by the coronavirus, in the Alps and north of Paris, won’t reopen Monday. The government asked people to restrict journeys as much as they can, and to work from home when possible.

The new measures aim to prevent or delay a wider spread of the virus “to win as much time as possible” and avoid an overlap with the flu epidemic, which has started to recede, Veran said.

**Greek Economic Forum Delayed (8:30 a.m. NY)**

Greece’s Delphi Economic Forum is being postponed until late May or early June from March 5 to 8, following recent developments with coronavirus. Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Eurogroup President Mario Centeno, ESM’s head Klaus Regling and many other international speakers had been scheduled to speak.

**Property Summit Postponed (8:14 a.m. NY)**

The world’s biggest property event held annually on the French Riviera has been pushed back to June over concerns about the epidemic, the summit organizers said. The four day-event, known as MIPIM, will now take place June 2 to 5 in Cannes instead of its usual March slot. The conference, which usually attracts 10s of thousands of bankers, brokers and developers, to the luxury hotels and super yachts of the French Riviera.
**Chevron Employee in London Negative (7:46 a.m. NY)**

A Chevron Corp. employee in London has tested negative for the coronavirus, the company said in a statement. It asked traders and other staff at its Canary Wharf office to work from home this week as a precaution after an employee had flu-like symptoms.

**Iraq Oil Conference Postponed (7:36 a.m. NY)**

Organizers postponed an oil conference that was scheduled to take place March 2 and 3 in Baghdad, Frontier Exchange Co.’s Baghdad branch manager, Ahmed Al Jadr, said in phone interview. The move is based on a recommendation from Iraq’s health ministry to avoid public gatherings after the country reported eight coronavirus cases. Organizers plan to reschedule the event in early April.

**Azerbaijan Closes Iran Border (7:15 a.m. NY)**

Azerbaijan closed its border with Iran for two weeks and said two more Azeri nationals have coronavirus after visiting the country’s southern neighbor, bringing the nation’s total cases to three. Azeris currently in Iran and Iranians visiting Azerbaijan will be allowed to return home, it said. The restrictions also apply to flights between the Azeri and Iranian capitals, state-owned Azerbaijan Airlines said in a Facebook statement.

**Iran Implements Travel Measures (7 a.m. NY)**

Iran Air says it's restricting flights for Iranians to Germany, Azerbaijan, the Netherlands and U.K. Only Iranian nationals with residency or citizenship of these countries and health certificates will be allowed to fly, the semi-official Iranians Students’ News Agency reported, citing an interview with Masoumeh Asgharzadeh, Iran Air’s director of public affairs. People suspected of coronavirus in Qom, the epicenter of the outbreak there, will be prevented from leaving, according to ILNA.

The semi-official Tasnim news agency reported the death of MP Mohammad Ali Ramezani Dastak by influenza, though denying that he had contracted the coronavirus.

**Inter Milan, Juventus Game Postponed (6:52 a.m. NY)**

In Italy, the soccer game between Juventus and Inter Milan has been postponed until May 13 in compliance with urgent measures to contain Covid-19, the Turin-based team said on Twitter. Five Serie A games in Italy’s top league have been postponed.

Spain’s El Clasico match between Barcelona and Real Madrid is still set to go ahead tomorrow. The country has 46 infections, including two serious cases, Fernando Simon, the head of the the country’s health emergency center, said in a news conference.

**Case Identified Near Rome (6:50 a.m. NY)**

Cases have popped up elsewhere in Italy, including on the fringes of the capital. A woman from Fiumicino, the town that borders Rome’s main airport, tested positive after traveling to the Bergamo area in Lombardy, regional health authorities said in a statement. Her husband and one of her two children were also positive in preliminary tests conducted Saturday.

**Iran Cases Jump More Than 50% (6 p.m. HK)**
The total number of cases in the country rose by more than 50% to 593 with 43 deaths, the highest number of deaths from the disease outside of China. Five members of Iran's parliament have tested positive out of 100 who were tested, spokesman Asadollah Abbasi said. Iran has 290 MPs. Parliament on Friday suspended all sessions indefinitely in response to the outbreak.

**Japan Plans More Measures (5:55 p.m. HK)**

Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said he was planning a second round of measures to tackle the new coronavirus outbreak, using 270 billion yen ($2.5 billion) in remaining reserves from this year's budget.

Subsidies will be introduced for those who lose income due to measures like school closures and the package is to be drawn up within about the next 10 days, Abe said at a press conference in Tokyo.

**Panic Buying in the U.K. (5 p.m. HK)**

U.K. retailers are already reporting panic buying as consumers fear a mass outbreak of coronavirus in the country, the Daily Telegraph reports. Online grocer Ocado said it has seen a spike in “particularly large orders” as customers stockpile food and health products. Boots, the pharmacy, has had to resort to rationing hand sanitizer, the newspaper said. There have been 20 confirmed cases of the virus and no fatalities in the U.K.

**China Could Have Vaccine by April (4:45 p.m. HK)**

China’s vaccine research experts told premier Li Keqiang that a vaccine for coronavirus could be introduced for emergency use as early as April.

Researchers said some coronavirus vaccines could be used under certain conditions, according to a statement posted on government website Saturday, citing a trip Li made to the coronavirus national medical equipment emergency platform on Friday. The statement didn't give details on the vaccine or the conditions.

-- With assistance by Michelle Cortez, David R Baker, Sophie Alexander, John Harney, Kanga Kong, Adam Haigh, Isabel Reynolds, Yasna Haghdooost, Vernon Silver, Charles Penty, Zulfugar Agayev, Khalid Al Ansary, Francois De Beaupuy, and Jennifer Epstein