

Maduro claims Guaidó planned Venezuela 'invasion' while at White House



Nicolas Maduro
Caracas

Venezuela President Nicolas Maduro alleged Wednesday that opposition leader Juan Guaidó met with a former member of the US Army special forces at the White House to plan a failed sea invasion of the Caribbean country.

Maduro claimed the meeting occurred when Guaidó, the legislative leader who is supported by the US and around fifty other countries as the interim president of Venezuela, visited the US president in Washington in February.

"It was at the White House on February 4 of this year, 2020, that Juan Guaidó met with Jordan Goudreau" the leftist leader said, referring to the former special forces member who Venezuela has alleged organized and trained a mercenary force to carry out the invasion.

The meeting, Maduro said, was "at the order of Donald Trump to come up with the plan of attack."

According to Maduro, "it would be very easy to verify" Goudreau's presence at the White House between 2019 and 2020 and "in which room he met with Mr Guaidó."

The White House did not immediately respond to AFP's request for comment.

Major' mental health crisis looming from Corona: UN

Urges countries to include access to psychosocial support and emergency mental care

AFP | Geneva

The coronavirus outbreak risks sparking a major global mental health crisis, the United Nations warned Thursday, calling for urgent action to address the psychological suffering brought on by the pandemic.

While protecting physical health has been the main concern during the first months of the crisis, it is also placing huge mental strains on large swathes of the global population, the UN said in policy brief.

"After decades of neglect and underinvestment in mental health services, the COVID-19 pandemic is now hitting families and communities with additional mental stress," UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres warned in a video message launching the brief.

"Even when the pandemic is brought under control, grief, anxiety and depression will continue to affect people and communities," he said.

The UN brief highlighted the mental strains on people fearing that they or loved ones will be infected or die from the novel coronavirus, which has killed nearly 300,000 people worldwide since it first emerged in China late last year.

It also pointed to the psychological impact on vast numbers of people who have lost or are at risk of losing their livelihoods,



The elderly and people with pre-existing conditions, who are considered particularly at risk from the virus, meanwhile face increased stress over the threat of infection

have been separated from loved ones or have suffered under drastic lockdown orders.

'Tremendous stress'

"We know that the current situations, the fear and uncertainty, the economic turmoil -- they all cause or could cause psychological distress," Devora Kestel, head of the World Health Organization's mental health and substance use department, told a virtual briefing.

Health care workers and first responders -- operating under "tremendous stress" -- are particularly vulnerable, Kestel said, pointing to news reports indicating rises in suicides among medical workers.

A whole host of other groups also face particular psychological challenges brought on by the crisis.

Children being kept out of school, for instance, face uncertainty and anxiety.

Along with women, they also face a heightened risk of domestic abuse as people spend

lengthy amounts of time cooped up at home.

The elderly and people with pre-existing conditions, who are considered particularly at risk from the virus, meanwhile face increased stress over the threat of infection.

And people with pre-existing psychological issues could see them exacerbated, while accessing their usual treatment and face-to-face therapy may no longer be possible.

Yesterday's policy brief pointed to a range of national studies indicating that mental distress is mounting rapidly.

The UN brief stressed the need for countries to include access to psychosocial support and emergency mental care in all aspects of their response to the pandemic.

It called for a significant hike in investments in this area, pointing out that before the crisis, countries on average dedicated only two percent of their public health budgets to mental health support.

News in brief

Fauci's call for cautious reopening 'not acceptable': Trump

US President Donald Trump says he finds top medical advisor Anthony Fauci's latest call for a highly cautious reopening "not acceptable," as he promotes the reopening of schools during a meeting with the governors of Colorado and North Dakota in the Cabinet Room of the White House.

Anti-lockdown protesters in Guinea on Wednesday forced open a handful of mosques that had been shut for weeks, according to witnesses, demonstrators and a local official. It came a day after seven people were killed in clashes with police during protests against roadblocks set up during the pandemic and frequent power cuts in the impoverished West African country. The mosques had been closed since late March as part of measures to control the spread of the deadly disease

New Zealanders mingled with friends and hit the shopping malls for the first time in seven weeks as a national lockdown ended and businesses faced a "new normal" minimising the constant threat of coronavirus. A long-awaited haircut was the top priority for many Kiwis after almost two months in isolation, with queues of tangle-headed customers forming at barbers before dawn.

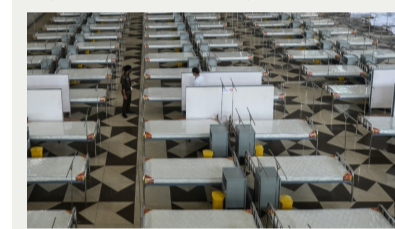
Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe lifted a state of emergency in large parts of the country on Thursday but said it would remain in place in Tokyo until the novel coronavirus is contained. Abe lifted the emergency in 39 of Japan's 47 prefectures but left it in force in the capital and in the second-largest urban area of Osaka, as he tries to cushion the economic blow while stopping the virus.

Japan lifts virus emergency in most areas

Maldives extends lockdown

The Maldives extended its lockdown for another two weeks as the former tourist hotspot reported its fourth coronavirus fatality and the pandemic spread rapidly in the congested capital Male.

Bangladesh has prepared a huge field hospital in three weeks to treat coronavirus



patients in an attempt to fight the intensifying outbreak in the country. The South Asian nation has reported nearly 18,000 infections and 269 deaths from COVID-19 despite a countrywide lockdown, but critics say the numbers are far lower than the true virus figures because of insufficient testing.

Nicaragua released more than 2,800 prisoners to house arrest on Wednesday to contain the spread of the coronavirus pandemic, but advocates said there were no political prisoners among them. Authorities have jailed at least 86 opposition figures and supporters of rights groups under the government of Daniel Ortega -- a former rebel hero who has been in power since 2007 and is now accused of running a repressive dictatorship.



Russia has sent 25,000 tonnes of wheat in humanitarian aid to North Korea after last year's drought hit its rice production, the Russian embassy to North Korea said on social media yesterday.

London's "Square Mile" financial district said it will close some streets to cars to create more space for pedestrians and cyclists so that workers can observe social distancing when the coronavirus lockdown is lifted. Britain began easing restrictions this week but said people who can work from home should continue to do so.

Taliban claim deadly attack on Afghan army base



A woman sits next to newborn babies who lost their mothers following a suicide attack in a maternity hospital, in Kabul

Khost | Afghanistan

The Taliban said it carried out a deadly attack yesterday on an Afghan army base after the government ordered forces to resume strikes against the militants.

Afghan officials said a truck bomb targeted an army base in the eastern city of Gardez, killing five civilians and wounding 19 -- including five army personnel.

It comes after a particularly violent week which saw President Ashraf Ghani rescind the government's recent "defensive" stance aimed at promoting peace talks with the Taliban, and order troops back onto the offensive.

Provincial health director

Welayat Khan Ahmadzai confirmed the death toll, but the Taliban claimed "tens of soldiers were killed and wounded" and denied reports any civilians died.

"After the announcement of the offensive... a martyrdom attack was carried out against an important military headquarters of the Kabul administration," Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said in a WhatsApp message to media on Thursday.

The defence ministry said a suicide bomber detonated the explosive-laden truck before reaching the army base.

On Tuesday, gunmen stormed a hospital in Kabul killing at least 24 people, including infants and nurses.

Corona vaccine possible in about a year, says EU agency

Reuters | Amsterdam/Brussels

A vaccine to counter the new coronavirus could be approved in about a year in an "optimistic" scenario, a agency which approves medicines for the European Union said yesterday.

The European Union, hard hit by COVID-19, fears it may not have sufficient supplies, especially if a vaccine were developed in the United States or China.

The European Medicines Agency, in communication with 33 developers, was doing all it could to speed up the approval process, the EMA's head of vaccines, Marco Cavaleri, said, but he was sceptical of claims any could be ready by September.

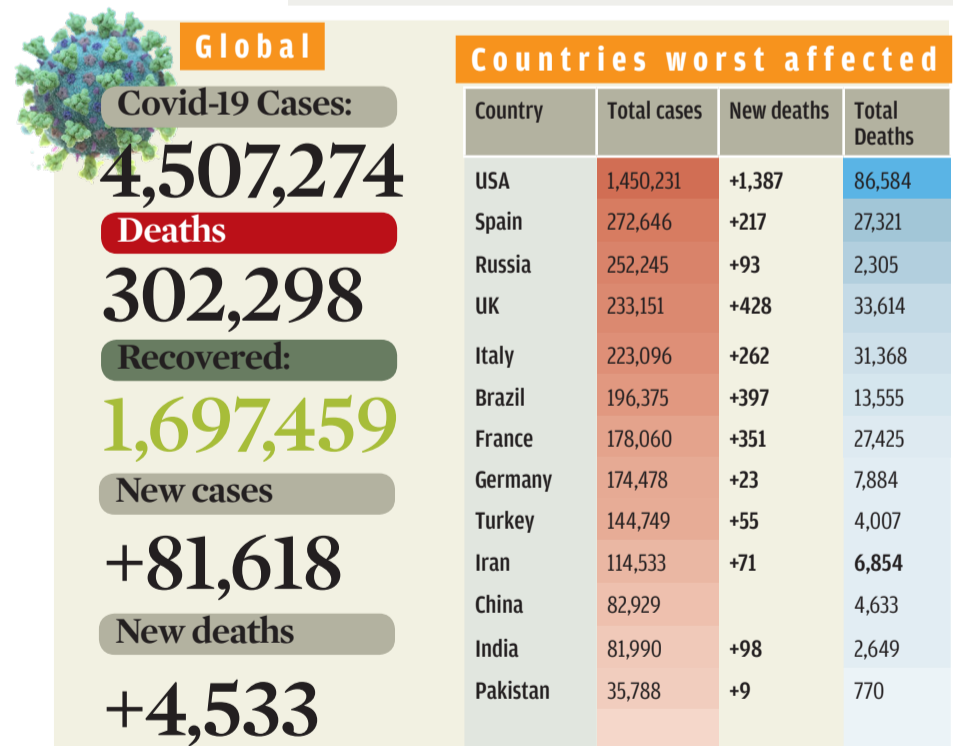
"For vaccines, since the development has to start from scratch ... we might look from an optimistic side in a year from now, so beginning of 2021," he told journalists.

He ruled out the possibility of skipping the third phase of a vaccine trial.

The EMA is also looking at 115 different therapeutics, or treatments, for the coronavirus, which has killed nearly 300,000 deaths globally, according to World Health Organization data.

Cavaleri said some of those therapeutics could be approved in Europe as early as this summer, but he did not specify which.

A leading EU lawmaker said the European Union should circumvent pharmaceutical companies' intellectual property rights if a vaccine were developed outside the bloc, a new sign of EU fears of lagging behind in the global race.



Middle East

Figures as of closing

Country	Total cases	new cases	Total deaths	New Deaths	Total recovered	Active cases	Serious, Critical	Tot cases/1m pop
Bahrain	6,069	+253	10		2,220	3,839	6	3,567
Saudi Arabia	46,869	+2,039	283	+10	19,051	27,535	156	1,346
UAE	21,084	+698	208	+2	6,930	13,946	1	2,132
Kuwait	11,975	+947	88	+6	3,451	8,436	175	2,804
Oman	4,341	+322	17		1,303	3,021	31	850
Egypt	10,829	+398	571	+15	2,626	7,632	41	106