

Mass evacuations for major cyclone in S.Asia

AFP | Kolkata

Millions of people were being moved to safety as one of the fiercest cyclones in years barrelled towards India and Bangladesh yesterday, but with evacuation plans complicated by coronavirus precautions.

"Amphan" is expected to pack winds gusting up to 185 kilometres (115 miles) per hour when it hits eastern India and Bangladesh today afternoon or evening, and with a storm surge of several metres, forecasters said.

Bangladesh authorities fear it will be the most powerful since cyclone Sidr devastated the country in 2007, killing about 3,500 people -- mostly due to a deluge of sea water sweeping in.

Junior disaster management minister Enamur Rahman said Tuesday that they have already evacuated several thousand people from low-lying areas.

"We will evacuate up to 2.2 million and try to keep casualties at zero," Rahman told AFP.

To ensure social distancing in view of the coronavirus pandemic, the number of cyclone shelters has been doubled by using schools, with masks compulsory, Rahman said.

"We are also keeping separate isolation rooms in the shelters for any infected patients," he added.

Fishing boats have been ordered to return to shore and all ports and fish landing stations shut down. The coronavirus lockdown had also cut off many people's income and eaten up their cash reserves, she added.

Diggers and chainsaws

In India, West Bengal state offi-



Bangladesh is aiming to evacuate more than two million people ahead of Cyclone Amphan

cial Manturam Pakhira said more than 200,000 people were being evacuated from coastal districts and the Sundarbans, a vast mangrove forest area.

"Authorities are also supplying masks and sanitisers and making arrangements so that they can maintain safe distance from each other," he said.

Arjun Manna, who works for the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in the Sundarbans, said that loud speakers were urging locals "to wear a mask and maintain social distancing in the shelters".

In Odisha state, relief commissioner Pradeep Kumar Jena told AFP that 20,000 people have been evacuated, with 600 disaster teams "pre-positioned" and contractors standing by with diggers and chainsaws.

"We will evacuate more people depending on the situation. No one will be allowed to stay in huts with thatched roofs in coastal areas," Jena said.

He too said that in order to

ensure social distancing, additional temporary shelters have been identified, with the state ready to house 1.1 million people if needed.

"We have made arrangements for soap, water tanks for hand washing and face masks. We are also educating people about the need to cover their mouths," he said.

Modi prays

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted that he was praying for everyone's safety after chairing a virtual meeting on preparations Monday.

Bangladesh's low-lying coast, home to 30 million people, and India's east are regularly battered by cyclones that have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in recent decades.

In 1999, the eastern Indian state of Odisha was hit by a super-cyclone that left nearly 10,000 dead. In 1991, a typhoon, tornadoes and flooding killed 139,000 in Bangladesh.

Brazil jumps to third in COVID-19 cases worldwide



Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro

Sao Paulo

Brazil has the third-highest number of novel coronavirus cases in the world, according to official figures released Monday, a troubling surge for a country struggling to respond to the pandemic.

With 254,220 confirmed cases, Brazil has now surpassed Britain, Spain and Italy in the past 72 hours on the list of total infections, and is behind only the United States (1.5 million) and Russia (290,000).

Brazil has registered 16,792 COVID-19 deaths, the sixth-highest toll in the world.

But experts say under-testing means the real figures could be 15 times higher or more.

The giant South American country of 210 million people is torn by a political battle over how to respond to the virus.

Far-right President Jair Bolsonaro compares the virus to a "little flu," condemns the "hysteria" surrounding it and is urging the country to get back to work to stop an economic crash.

News in brief

Puppy scammers target lonely Aussies during lockdown



Australia is suffering a wave of puppy scams as fraudsters target the lonely and locked down with fake online offers of cavoodles, French bulldogs and other popular pooches,

authorities said. The consumer watchdog ACCC said the scammers fleeced people looking for a new pet out of some Aus\$300,000 (US\$196,000) in April alone, five times higher than the normal monthly average.

President Donald Trump on Monday made the surprise announcement that he is taking hydroxychloroquine, an anti-malaria drug that his own government experts say is not suitable for fighting the novel coronavirus. Trump,

noting that he has tested negative for the virus and shows no symptoms, said he'd been taking the drug as a preventative measure for about a week and a half. "I take a pill every day," he said, adding that he combines this with zinc. Asked why, he said: "Because I think it's good. I've heard a lot of good stories." **House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said it's "not a good idea" for Trump to be taking the drug as a potential treatment for the coronavirus.** "I would rather he not be taking something that has not been approved by the scientists, especially in his age group and in his, shall we say, weight group, which is morbidly obese, they say," Pelosi said during an appearance on CNN's "Anderson Cooper 360." "So, I think that it's not a good idea," she added.

Brazil re-enlisted more than 150 Cuban doctors Monday to help fight a surge in coronavirus cases, a year and a half after Havana ended a medical assistance program over a row with President Jair Bolsonaro. The doctors, who had opted to stay in Brazil after the Cuban government pulled the plug on the program that sent them, received new medical licenses from the Brazilian health ministry under a program to round up reinforcements for the overstretched health system.

President Vladimir Putin was forced to intervene personally on Monday in the epidemic sweeping Russia's North Caucasus region of Dagestan, as local officials described the coronavirus situation as a "catastrophe." For several days now, there have rumours of mounting fatalities and overwhelmed hospitals in the mountainous majority-Muslim region and local medical staff have taken to social media to make frantic appeals.

Italians hit the hair salon after restrictions lifted



After hairdressers were allowed to reopen, some people in Italy could not wait to rush out and get their grey roots done or just a decent hair cut.

Stopping pandemic 'without vaccine'!

Scientists in China believe new drug can bring Corona to a halt

Beijing

A Chinese laboratory has been developing a drug it believes has the power to bring the coronavirus pandemic to a halt.

A drug being tested by scientists at China's prestigious Peking University could not only shorten the recovery time for those infected, but even offer short-term immunity from the virus, researchers say.

Sunney Xie, director of the university's Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Genomics, said that the drug has been successful at the animal testing stage.

"When we injected neutralising antibodies into infected mice, after five days the viral load was reduced by a factor of 2,500," said Xie.

"That means this poten-



The team had been working "day and night" on the drug



Sunney Xie, director of the Beijing Advanced Innovation Center for Genomics

tial drug has (a) therapeutic effect."

The drug uses neutralising antibodies -- produced by the human immune system to prevent the virus infecting cells -- which Xie's team isolated from the blood of 60 recovered patients.

A study on the team's research, published Sunday in the scientific journal Cell, suggests that using the antibodies provides a potential "cure" for the disease and shortens recovery time.

Xie said his team had been working "day and night" searching for the antibody.

"Our expertise is single-cell genomics rather than immunology or virology. When we realised that the single-cell genomic approach can effectively find the neutralising antibody we were thrilled."

He said he hopes that the drug will be ready for use later this year and in time for any potential winter outbreak of the virus, which has infected 4.8 million people around the world and killed more than 315,000.

"Planning for the clinical trial is underway," said



More than 100 vaccines for COVID-19 are in the works globally

Xie, adding it will be carried out in Australia and other countries since cases have dwindled in China, offering fewer human guinea pigs for testing.

"The hope is these neu-



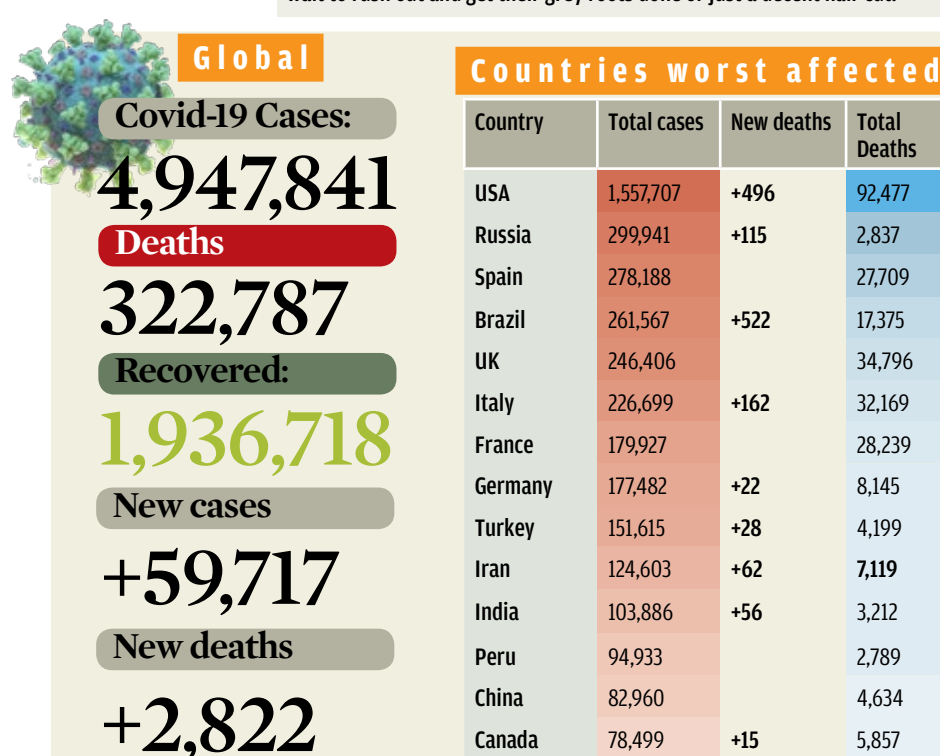
The new drug is being tested by scientists at China's Peking University

tralising antibodies can become a specialised drug that would stop the pandemic," he said.

The study showed that if the neutralising antibody was injected before the mice were infected with the virus, the mice stayed free of infection and no virus was detected.

This may offer temporary protection for medical workers for a few weeks, which Xie said they are hoping to "extend to a few months".

More than 100 vaccines for COVID-19 are in the works globally, but as the process of vaccine development is more demanding, Xie is hoping that the new drug could be a faster and more efficient way to stop the global march of the coronavirus.



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
Saudi Arabia	59,854	+2,509	329	+9	31,634	27,891	237	1,723
UAE	25,063	+873	227	+3	10,791	14,045	1	2,538
Kuwait	16,764	+1,073	121	+3	4,681	11,962	179	3,933
Oman	5,671	+292	27	+2	1,574	4,070	31	1,114
Qatar	35,606	+1,637	15		5,634	29,957	172	12,384
Egypt	12,764		645		3,440	8,679	41	125