VOA NEWS

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This is VOA news. Via remote, I'm Diane Roberts.

Globally, more than 2.6 million people have been infected with the new coronavirus. Almost 594,000 of them have recovered. 181,000 plus have died and nearly two-thirds of them in Europe. The numbers in all cases could be much greater as many countries are only testing the most serious cases.

The World Health Organization said Wednesday COVID-19 will stock the planet for a long time to come, warning most countries were still in the early stages of tackling the pandemic.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said lockdowns and other "physical distancing measures" had curbed the spread of the virus in many countries and that now complacency is now "one of the greatest dangers."

President Trump signed an order Wednesday to temporarily block some foreigners from permanent residence in the United States, arguing the drastic measure would protect jobs for unemployed Americans as the economy begins to reopen from the coronavirus crisis.

The 60-day suspension hits people applying for permanent residency or "green cards." Seasonal workers, such as immigrants vital to U.S. farm labor, are still allowed to enter.

Critics say this is an attempt to take advantage of the pandemic during an election year and implement a long-sought policy that President Trump campaigned on.

Iran's military spokesman said Wednesday U.S. President Donald Trump should concentrate on "saving" his own country from the "major crisis" caused by coronavirus instead of making threats.

President Trump responded by saying he is not changing his "rules of engagement" for the U.S. military with regard to Iran.

Iran's comments are reaction to President Trump tweeting he'd instructed the U.S. Navy to "shoot down and destroy" Iranian gunboats if they harass U.S. ships at sea.

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The British government announced plans Thursday for a major study to track coronavirus in the general population. As many as 300,000 people are expected to take part within a year.

Initial findings could be available in early May, the Health Ministry said, and would likely inform the government's decisions on how to ease a month-long nationwide lockdown imposed to stem the spread of the virus.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the large-scale survey (quote) "will help to track the current extent of transmission and infection in the UK, while also answering crucial questions about immunity."

With the holy Muslim month of Ramadan set to start this weekend, authorities in Niger fear violence after several cities saw riots over anti-coronavirus lockdowns banning collective prayers.

More than 300 people have been arrested in recent days in the runup to Ramadan in the impoverished former French colony, with rioters torching cars and buildings and setting up roadblocks.

The government announced late Wednesday an easing of the curfew in the capital, Niamey, saying it would now be in effect from 9 p.m. until 5 a.m. instead of 7 p.m. until 6 a.m.

Afghan officials said Wednesday clashes between government forces and Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan have left 60 people dead on both sides.

The Taliban raided army and police outposts in two northern Sar-e-Pul districts in a major pre-dawn attack, killing at least 11.

Various officials report Taliban attacks happened at several other security outposts throughout the country. At least 70 Afghan forces have died in intensified insurgent battlefield raids this week.

The violence dealing a blow to a U.S.-initiated peace plan seeking political reconciliation between Afghan parties to the war.

Israeli police says a Palestinian attacker was shot and killed Wednesday after he rammed his vehicle into an Israeli checkpoint and stabbed a police officer. A police spokesman says a sweep of the area found a pipe bomb at the scene.

Wednesday is the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. This year celebration, just like nearly every event this spring, will be different because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The theme of Earth Day 2020 is climate action and the Earth Day Network is urging hundreds of millions to join a huge global social media conversation, including ways to pressure governments to keep their commitments to the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement to fight global warming.

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