News



People line up at Gotham Health East New York, a COVID-19 testing center Thursday, April 23, 2020, in the Brooklyn borough of New York. (AP/Frank Franklin II)

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Unemployment in the U.S. has swelled to levels last seen during the Great Depression of the 1930s, with 1 in 6 American workers thrown out of a job by the coronavirus.

More than 4.4 million laid-off workers applied for unemployment benefits last week, the government said April 23. In all, roughly 26 million people — more than the population of the six biggest U.S. cities combined — have now filed for jobless aid in five weeks, an epic collapse that has raised the stakes in the debate over how and when to lift the state-ordered stay-at-home restrictions that have closed factories and other businesses from coast to coast.

Abroad, there was mixed news about the epidemic. Some countries, including Greece, Bangladesh and Malaysia, announced extensions of their lockdowns. Vietnam, New Zealand and Croatia were among those moving to end or ease such measures.

In Africa, COVID-19 cases rose 43% in the past week, up from 16,000 to 26,000 cases, according to John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The figures underscored a recent warning from the World Health Organization that the virus could kill more than 300,000 people in Africa and push 30 million into desperate poverty.

Huge lines have formed at food banks from El Paso, Texas, to the Paris suburbs, and food shortages are hitting Africa especially hard.

The European Union has pledged 20 billion euros ($22 billion) to help vulnerable communities globally. EU leaders scheduled a virtual summit April 23 to take stock of the damage the crisis has inflicted on the bloc's own citizens and to work out an economic rescue plan.

The coronavirus has killed over 184,000 people worldwide, including about 47,000 in the United States, according to a tally compiled by John Hopkins University from official government figures. The true numbers are almost certainly far higher.

In the U.S., the economic consequences of the shutdowns have sparked angry rallies in state capitals by protesters demanding that businesses reopen, and President Donald Trump has expressed impatience over the restrictions. Some governors have begun easing up despite warnings from health authorities that it may be too soon to do so without sparking new infections. In Georgia, gyms, hair salons and bowling alleys can reopen April 24. Texas has reopened its state parks.

The high unemployment levels of the Great Depression lasted for a decade and peaked at around 25%. U.S. officials hope for a quicker recovery this time, although there may be more layoffs to come from many small businesses that tried in vain to receive loans from a federal aid program.

While the health crisis has eased in places like Italy, Spain and France, experts say it is far from over, and the threat of new outbreaks looms large.

"The question is not whether there will be a second wave," said Dr. Hans Kluge, the head of the WHO's Europe office. "The question is whether we will take into account the biggest lessons so far."

German Chancellor Angela Merkel criticized some German states for moving too briskly in trying to reopen their economies. Germany has been praised for its approach to the pandemic and has a much lower reported death toll than other large European countries.

"We're not living in the final phase of the pandemic, but still at the beginning," Merkel warned. "Let us not squander what we have achieved and risk a setback. It would be a shame if premature hope ultimately punishes us all."

Governments are bearing that risk in mind with the onset of Ramadan, the holy month of daytime fasting, overnight festivities and communal prayer that begins for the world's 1.8 billion Muslims with the new moon this week. Many Muslim leaders have closed mosques or banned collective evening prayer to ward off new infections.

The virus has already disrupted Christianity's Holy Week, Passover, the Muslim hajj pilgrimage and other major religious events.

Authorities in the capital of Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, extended its disease-fighting restrictions to cover all of Ramadan, Turkey banned communal eating during the holiday.

Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan bowed to the country's religious clerics, refusing to close the mosques despite a warning from the nation's doctors that such gatherings are like a petri dish for spreading the virus in a country with a fragile health care system.

(Charlton reported from Paris and Gannon from Islamabad, Pakistan. Associated Press reporters from around the world contributed.)

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