

● Outbreak in Asia ● Aviation gloom doom ● Working from home

THE STRAITS TIMES
Asian Insider

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Pandemic

HOW LONG? HOW BAD?

Countries face major health, economic and financial battles as the viral bug continues to infect. What lies ahead and will we manage to flatten the curve?

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Letter from the Editor-in-Chief

Stay in the know on the latest in Asia with ST Asian Insider

Hello everyone,

I hope you are all keeping well, and striving to stay healthy and positive in these very grim times.

In the span of a few long weeks, the world as we knew it and most of the bold projections about what lies ahead have been upended.

We, at The Straits Times, have been working in a virtual fashion for a couple of months now to keep our readers informed on top stories in Singapore, Asia and the rest of the world, on a 24/7 basis.

The pandemic has made it apparent that we live in an interconnected world and knowing what's happening beyond borders is crucial for everyone's well-being.

The ST Asian Insider is our effort to keep you updated on news that matters in Asia.

Through this title, we bring you independent, insider insights on Asia through our vast network of overseas correspondents and veteran writers, who have been following the region for decades.

We have been building this network of staff over the years – from Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Indochina region in South-east Asia; to China, Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea in East Asia; and India in South Asia.

Together with them, we have a team of correspondents and contributors stationed in the United States, Europe, the Middle East and Australia to give you a complete perspective on happenings in this region.

It is what has earned us a reputation for reporting and interpreting developments in an objective and insightful manner to allow readers to make sense of a fast-changing region and what this means to them.

The ST Asian Insider magazine takes over from the ST Asia Report title published over the past three years. If you've been an avid reader of the latter, we thank you for your support and promise you more in-depth content in coming issues.

The rebranding of the magazine is part of our consolidation efforts to bring to you the best of our Asia content under one title.

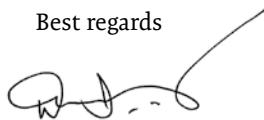
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Write to us at stasianinsider@sph.com.sg to share your feedback, suggestions and views.

We want to hear from you.

Take care, everyone, and stay well. Thank you for following our work.

Best regards



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PHOTO: REUTERS

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Malaysia's stay-home
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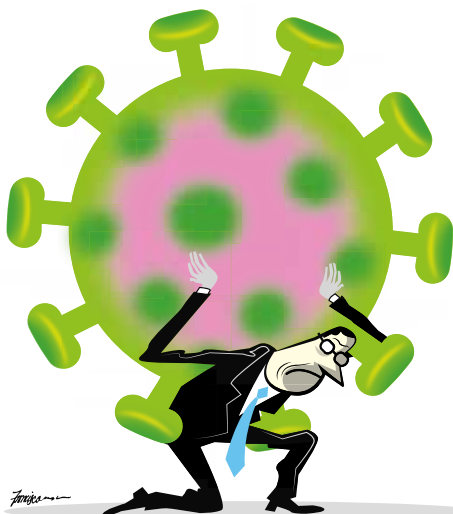
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Lessons already learnt, and more to come

Oh, the irony: Humans are now captive to dislocation and fear from an animal-linked virus. What lies ahead for the world – and especially Asia, which is no stranger to contagion?

RAVI VELLOOR
Associate Editor



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ONE DAY, 2020 WILL PROBABLY COME TO BE known as the year the animals got their revenge and put humans in cages.

How else to describe the plight of the elderly woman in Italy – now the nation that has logged the most coronavirus deaths – who could only watch as her dead husband's body was taken away for a funeral she was not allowed to attend because of the strict quarantine orders placed on her?

Or the family near New York where three of the seven who caught the virus died and the others live on, wondering if the only reason the doors would open for them is for another householder to be released into Death's sly hands?

The world has been turned upside down by a virus that scientists say made a leap from bats to humans. Our dogs, cats, roosters – and if you are in India, cows – roam free while their owners are captives to disease, dislocations and fear.

From Japan to Italy, Britain and the United States, the developed world is a sea of confusion, while some days it looks as though it is the developing world that is doing a better job at keeping a clear head.

New York Governor Andrew Cuomo painted the best description of what is going on. At a press conference televised live by CNN on March 17 night in Asia, he likened the situation to the snow globes you had as a child: Touch one part of it and the whole image fuzzes over.

Not a continent has been unaffected. The disease

has sickened more than 850,000 people and taken more than 40,000 lives, as of March 31. Frighteningly, the numbers have begun rising in Africa, itself just emerging from a long battle with Ebola.

OUT OF ASIA

History's wheels move in circles.

In the past quarter-century, the world was first forced to take notice of a contagion emanating from Asia with the onset of the Asian financial crisis, often called the East Asian flu.

Just as now, its origin lay in China, when it devalued its currency sharply in 1994, cutting the competitiveness of exports from Japan to Thailand.

Like a boxer rocked on his feet, the rest of East Asia staggered around for a couple of years. Speculators began attacking Asian assets. By July 1997, the Thai baht collapsed and in no time, the Asian flu had swept through the region, toppling the Indonesian regime and devastating the Thai, South Korean, Malaysian and Indonesian economies.

Then in 2002, the severe acute respiratory syndrome, or Sars, began to afflict people in Guangdong. Thought to be an animal virus, it was identified in 2003. This time it was not a metaphorical flu and was deadly while it lasted.

Then came another respiratory illness new to humans. This time, it originated in West Asia. Middle East respiratory syndrome was first reported in Saudi Arabia in 2012 and has since spread to several other countries, including the US.





An employee wearing a face mask working on an assembly line at a motor vehicle plant of Dongfeng Honda in Wuhan, Hubei. The coronavirus has crushed the Chinese economy, says the writer, with new bond defaults in China reportedly topping US\$1 billion (\$\$1.4 billion). PHOTO: AFP

In some respects, Covid-19, as we have come to know the coronavirus currently tormenting us, is all of the above and possibly far more durable.

At its source, it has crushed the Chinese economy. The world's No. 2 had already been slowing, weighed down by a debt to gross domestic product ratio that crossed a staggering 300 per cent last year, according to the Institute of International Finance. Today, new bond defaults in China are reportedly topping US\$1 billion (\$\$1.4 billion). Little surprise, too, that the country has not published data on business closures for the past six months.

In the US, the biggest economy, the US\$1.2 trillion market for loans to junk-rated firms, which survived the 2008 housing-led financial crisis, is under severe strain. Wider afield, 12 years of cheap and easy money policies have built a US\$10 trillion debt mountain. A hefty shove, which would be the equivalent of the virus crisis persisting for another six months, could topple the edifice.

Instructively, the US\$1 trillion rescue plan unveiled by the Trump administration on March 18 could not prevent economic panic from accelerating.

VULNERABLE ECONOMIES

Several smaller but significant economies are in worse shape.

India was facing a consumption demand and banking crisis even before the virus hit home. Now, the Indian government, terrified of the enormity of the challenge, has stopped its own nationals abroad

from coming home despite its strident nationalism.

It has good reason to do so; the country has less than one hospital bed for every thousand people, a third of the global average.

In South-east Asia, speculators are eyeing Thailand, the region's No. 2 economy, as the one most vulnerable, now that its last engine – tourism – has stopped firing. Indonesia's currency has suffered some of the steepest falls. Talk about a sense of *deja vu*.

What's worrying is that we still do not know enough about this virus. In January, China's top epidemiologist, who won fame for identifying the Sars virus in 2003, had said that Covid-19 would not be as harmful as Sars and would be controlled sooner. Neither prediction has proved accurate.

Millennials in London and New York, confident they will live forever and cheered by early reports that the very young and the old are most vulnerable, had partied ceaselessly. Now, it appears that the medical evidence does not support the theory that the young are that invincible: In Italy, almost a quarter of the patients are aged between 19 and 50.

Britain, which had set out on a path of building "herd immunity" by not standing in the way of large-scale exposure to the virus, reversed course after seeing calamitous projection from Imperial College London and after the World Health Organisation (WHO) pointed out that while it took three months for the number of coronavirus cases to reach 100,000, it took a mere 12 days for the next 100,000.

Millennials in London and New York, confident they will live forever and cheered by early reports that the very young and the old are most vulnerable, had partied ceaselessly. Now, it appears that the medical evidence does not support the theory that the young are that invincible: In Italy, almost a quarter of the patients are aged between 19 and 50.

”



An Indonesian police officer spraying disinfectant at a local school in Palu, Central Sulawesi. History's wheels move in circles, and this is a case of *deja vu*, says the writer, recalling the Asian financial crisis of the past quarter-century which swept through the region and eventually toppled the Indonesian regime. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

China claims to have licked the disease and that the new cases it is seeing mostly originated abroad, but oddly, many of its workers and students aren't back in factories and colleges. Could a vast nation that has more than 60 cities with populations of more than a million be so certain that it has stopped all domestically originated cases of the disease?

As Dr Bruce Aylward, senior adviser to the director-general of WHO, said in a recent *Time* magazine interview: "Never, never underestimate a new disease, there's just too much unknown."

AND WHEN IT'S OVER?

What happens when the chips are done falling? The world that will emerge is probably going to

China claims to have licked the disease and that the new cases it is seeing mostly originated abroad, but oddly, many of its workers and students aren't back in factories and colleges. Could a vast nation that has more than 60 cities with populations of more than a million be so certain that it has stopped all domestically originated cases of the disease?



look a lot different – industrially, commercially, politically and socially.

Start with global institutions. There will be close scrutiny of the role played by WHO in combating the crisis. Questions will be raised about whether its role as a scientific body got mixed up with its responsibilities as a diplomatic institution under the Charter of the United Nations, causing it to be ultra-careful about not getting on the wrong side of the Chinese government.

For instance, did it really have to wait so long to declare a disease outbreak a pandemic?

What about the International Monetary Fund (IMF)? On Feb 19, it released a surveillance note that maintained its January projection that global

200M

Black Death (Bubonic Plague)

1347-1351



The outbreak wiped out 30-50% of Europe's population. It took more than 200 years for the continent's population to recover.

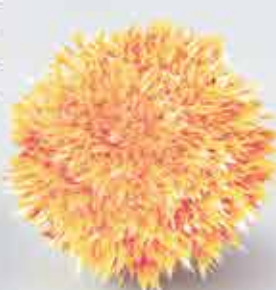
HISTORY OF PANDEMICS

Death toll (highest to lowest)

56M

Smallpox

1520



Smallpox killed an estimated 90% of Native Americans. In Europe during 1800s, an estimated 400,000 people were being killed by smallpox annually. The first ever vaccine was created to ward off smallpox.

40-50M

Spanish Flu

1918-1919



30-50M

Plague of Justinian

541-542



The death toll of this plague is still under debate as new evidence is uncovered, but many think it may have helped hasten the fall of the Roman Empire.



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

growth will accelerate to 3.3 per cent this year from 2.9 per cent last year.

A month later, that assessment looks plain silly.

Supply chains will be upended. Even if China sends its factory workers back to work, many companies are facing massive supply disruptions – from the US and from South-east Asia. Who will they supply finished goods to when global demand has collapsed?

It is rare to see both supply and demand cratering simultaneously, as they are now.

What about China, where the disease originated and whose first instinct was to prevent the news from leaking rather than warn the world of the danger?

Global diplomacy will probably go through a severe reassessment, too. Whatever embers of good feeling that existed between the US and China have disappeared in the wake of the “China virus”, as President Donald Trump insists on calling it, fuelling Chinese fury.

European solidarity has been exposed as a fig leaf as each country rushed to protect its own, starting with Germany, the European Union’s biggest economy. It is China that is coming to the aid of countries such as Italy and Estonia as they fight Covid-19.

At the same time, some analysts are linking the virus outbreak in Italy and in the Iranian city of Qom to both countries being enthusiastic participants in China’s Belt and Road Initiative.

There is major concern in Europe that its industry will not be able to withstand another bout of state-subsidised Chinese exports that will inevitably follow once there is a measure of check on the disease.

Supply chains will be upended. Even if China sends its factory workers back to work, many companies are facing massive supply disruptions – from the US and from South-east Asia. Who will they supply finished goods to when global demand has collapsed?



25-35M
HIV/AIDS
1981 - present



12M
The Third Plague
1855



5M
Antonine Plague
165-180



3M
17th Century Great Plagues
1600



1.1M
Asian Flu
1957-1958



1M
Russian Flu
1889-1890



1M
Hong Kong Flu
1968-1970



1M
Cholera 6 outbreak
1817-1923



1M
Japanese Smallpox Epidemic
735-737



600K
18th Century Great Plagues
1700



200K
Swine Flu
2009-2010



100-150K
Yellow Fever
Late 1800s



37K
(as of March 31)
Covid-19

2019 - present (ongoing)



11.3K
Ebola
2014-2016



850
MERS
2012 - present



770
SARS
2002-2003

A series of **Cholera** outbreaks spread around the world in the 1800s killing millions of people. There is no solid consensus on death tolls.

Source: VISUAL CAPITALIST

Meanwhile, respected China specialists such as Mr Daniel Rosen of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies suggest that Beijing's inclination to massage the numbers hasn't abated despite its mishandling of the virus emanating from Wuhan. Senior officials are compelling juniors to go into offices over the weekend and keep the air-conditioners running in order to show higher power consumption, a key indicator of economic activity.

Without question, just as in an earlier era when the success of the East Asian tiger economies spawned literature on the superiority of "Asian" governance models, there already is plenty of discussion on whether authoritarian models such as the Chinese example are more of a help than a hindrance in crises than "messy" democracies.

The Italians, some will likely point out, have had more than 60 governments since World War II. China, which showed remarkable ability to control the outbreak, has had one.

Economic shibboleths have already been rewritten; after the Asian financial flu, the IMF second-guessed many of the policies it had applied for decades, particularly its advice to tighten interest rates in order to protect free-falling currencies. It is not unreasonable to believe that political systems could be put under a similar lens.

To be sure, there's been stuff to cheer about amid the gloom. Dolphins and swans have reportedly reappeared in Venetian canals.

Big fat Indian weddings are being toned down, even as the air in the nation's capital has never felt cleaner. In countless homes, cupboards unattended

for years are getting a cleaning and teenagers are talking to their parents.

The world has suffered – and survived – so many cataclysmic events just this century. The Indian Ocean undersea earthquake and tsunami in 2004 originated in northern Sumatra and killed more than 200,000 people, including on the faraway African coast. Deadly typhoons with names like Katrina and Haiyan killed thousands in New Orleans and in the Philippines in 2005 and 2013, respectively.

The combined toll from the great earthquakes in Kashmir in 2005 and in Haiti in 2010 topped 300,000.

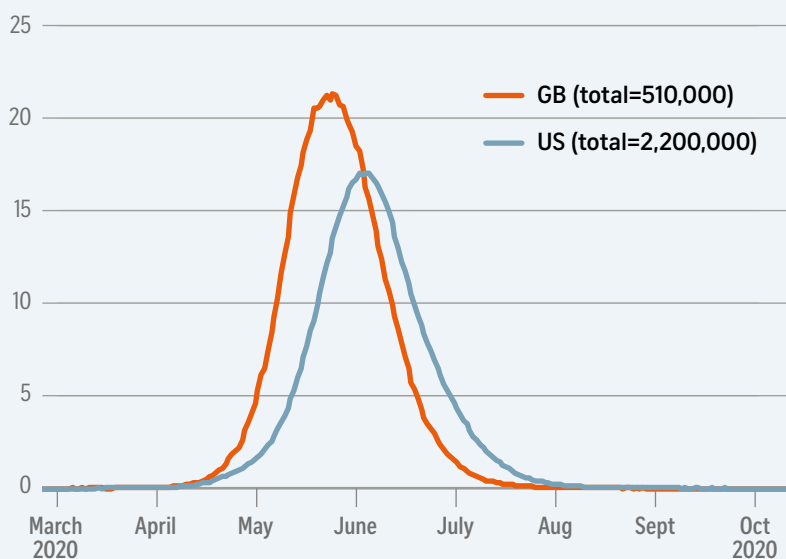
The US should have been a leader in meeting this crisis. Sadly, it has turned out to be a laggard, all too eager to shift the blame elsewhere. The US President who dismisses climate change as fiction and the coronavirus outbreak as a hoax has had to eat crow, to borrow an Americanism. It is time humans realised that they don't own the world so much as share it with other forms of life.

This crisis, too, will pass but more will doubtless follow and we need to prepare. A disproportionately large number of these calamities are occurring around us, in Asia. Even as average lifespans are lengthening owing to advances in science, deaths from unnatural events get more commonplace.

Maybe we will get used to it.

That would make us rather like the animals we capture for pleasure and profit – watching some you know and love leave ahead of you even as you are aware that, fine as you might feel just now, one day the bell will toll for you. [SI](#)

Deaths per day per 100,000 population



Source: Imperial College Covid-19 Response Team

Disturbing projections

ROCKING POLICYMAKERS, A STUDY BY LONDON'S Imperial College on March 16 altered Britain and America's response to the Covid-19 outbreak after predicting a peak of 510,000 deaths in the UK and 2.2 million deaths in the US in the following three months (see infographic), reports CNN.

Based on the infection growth rate in Wuhan, where the virus originated, it also said that 80 per cent of Britain's and US populations would be infected over the course of the outbreak.

While the study rests on assumptions that are not very clear, it also outlined the most effective combination of intervention to be a combination of isolation, home quarantine and social distancing of those most at risk, reducing peak critical care demand by two-thirds and halving the number of deaths.

On the day the study was released, the British government abruptly called on vulnerable and elderly citizens to isolate themselves for 12 weeks, said CNN, while US President Donald Trump unveiled a 15-day plan to slow new infections in the United States on the same day.

Grappling with a triple whammy global crisis

Countries face major health, economic and financial battles, each with knock-on impacts

WARREN FERNANDEZ

Editor-in-Chief



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IN THE SPAN OF A FEW LONG WEEKS, THE WORLD as we knew it and most of the bold projections about what lies ahead have been upended.

When business and political leaders met at the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos in January, there was much talk about addressing climate change, managing the trade and technology tensions between the United States and China, and pondering the threat posed to workers and societies by rapid advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics.

US President Donald Trump was busy trumpeting his plans

to keep America great in his second term, after its “amazing comeback” under his leadership.

China hands were projecting its inexorable rise to global dominance, along straight-line extrapolations into the future. Techno-optimists were excited by the prospects of solving many of the world’s problems using AI and big data.

These forecasts and predictions have come crashing down abruptly, disrupted by a new virus, not of the digital kind, but the old-fashioned organic variety.

The world is now in the grips of a “once-in-a-century pandemic”, as some experts have described it, with outbreaks of Covid-19 just about everywhere.

As the number of people infected mounts, governments are finally being forced to take the pandemic seriously.

That’s the good news – or rather, as good as the news gets.

Here’s the bad news: If you thought the last few weeks were grim, then brace yourself for worse, much worse, to come.

But why so gloomy, you ask?

Well, to put it simply, the world is now facing a triple whammy of a crisis – on the health, economic and financial fronts.

Efforts to tackle one has knock-on effects and could compound problems in the other spheres, forcing painful trade-offs and difficult judgment calls.

No one can be sure how things will play out, or whether the judgments being made will pay off as expected. Yet, leaders, officials and doctors will have to make life-and-death decisions, acting even in the face of uncertainty, but, hopefully, based on science and available evidence, rather than politics, gut instincts or – worse – prejudices and biases.

For now, the consensus seems to be that the best – or least bad – option, given that the virus is spreading, farther and faster by the day, is the much bandied about “flattening of the curve” approach.

In short, this entails taking measures, such as contact tracing, quarantines and “safe distancing” to try to slow down the spread of the virus.

The aim is to prevent a sudden spike in infections which would overwhelm hospitals if more people turn up in need of treatment than the healthcare system can cope with, thereby putting lives at risk.

Flattening the curve buys society time, which hopefully is used well to ramp up medical facilities, as well as to find a vaccine or a cure in a hurry. By doing so, more might receive critical care, medicines might make the effects of the illness less deadly, and



ST ILLUSTRATION: CEL GULAPA

vaccinations could help more people fend off the bug. Yet, this also means that while the peak in numbers might be suppressed somewhat, and delayed, the outbreak would be spread out over a longer period.

In addition, the stronger the measures to press down the curve – think lockdowns, travel restrictions, closed schools, churches and mosques, shutdowns of bars and restaurants – the greater the impact on the economy, as social interaction and the business this generates dries up.

This will put jobs, companies, perhaps even whole industries, at risk. So, apart from people falling ill, we must expect to see companies collapsing as well, and the numbers growing, not only of infections, but also of layoffs and unemployment.

As companies take a hit, and struggle to pay their workers, bills and loans, the impact will be felt not just on the stock markets but also the financial sector.

Fear feeds fear, and downward spirals can quickly follow.

In this sense, the antidote for curbing the coronavirus outbreak is somewhat akin to cancer treatments, administered in the hope of fighting a deadly disease, but not without risks of the patient suffering serious side effects in the process.

A recent front-page report in The New York Times summed up this situation starkly: “Entire sectors of the American economy are shutting down, threatening to crush businesses and put millions of people out of work and forcing lawmakers to consider a vast financial bailout that would dwarf the federal government’s response to the 2008 crisis.”

A further complication is that measures to flatten the curve can’t go on indefinitely. When lockdowns and social distancing measures are rescinded, and people start emerging from their homes and returning to work, fresh waves of infection could strike.

Outbreaks might also flare up in places where they had previously not been seen, with weaker healthcare systems, which are less able or willing to test and detect, let alone deal with them, as the World Health Organisation has warned, pointing to Africa and some parts of our neighbourhood.

Given the very connected world we live in, fresh outbreaks anywhere will put everyone back to square one – the risk of infections being imported back and setting off the whole rigmarole of contact tracing, quarantines and social distancing all over again.

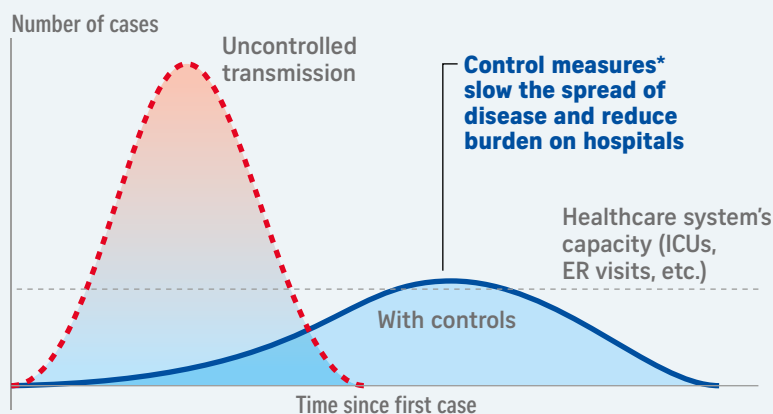
Staying on top of this rapidly evolving triple whammy of a crisis will call for sober, honest and trusted leaders, alive to the challenges, ready to tell it like it is to their people, and prepare them for what might lie ahead.

As the British magazine The Economist put it recently: “To see what is to come, look to Lombardy, the affluent Italian region at the heart of the Covid-19 outbreak in Europe.

“Its hospitals provide world-class healthcare. Until last week, they thought they would cope with the disease – then waves of people began turning up with pneumonia. Having run out of ventilators and oxygen, exhausted staff at some hospitals are being forced to leave untreated

The epidemic curve

The epidemic curve charts the progression of infection. Keeping the curve flat – by ensuring that the number of cases does not rise sharply – will help prevent hospital systems from being overwhelmed, say experts.



NOTE: *Control measures may include handwashing, teleworking, limited large gatherings, minimising travel, etc.

Infographic 1

Source: ESTHER KIM, CARL BERGSTROM STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Flattening the curve

MANY WHO HAVE BEEN FOLLOWING DEVELOPMENTS on the Covid-19 outbreak will have noticed healthcare professionals increasingly refer to a curve that needs flattening. Called an epidemic curve, it is used to visualise when new cases happen and at what speed during a virus outbreak.

This simple n-shaped curve presents the stark reality of how quickly a virus can spread if unchecked. A key goal of public health officials is to avoid a huge peak in Covid-19 cases (a curve with a steep incline spread over a shorter period of time), in favour of a slower growth that becomes a moderate plateau (a curve with a gentler incline, spread out over a longer time period).

But why does it matter if the curve is flattened? Flattening the curve will, in a way, help to buy time and allow people better access to healthcare. (see infographic 1)

National Development Minister Lawrence Wong, who co-chairs Singapore's multi-ministerial task force set up to combat the spread of Covid-19, said at a press conference on March 6: “Slowing down the spread and flattening the

patients to die.”

In contrast, *The Economist*, never a booster for Singapore, added: “The best example of how to respond is Singapore, which has had many fewer cases than expected.

“Thanks to an efficient bureaucracy in a single small territory, world-class universal healthcare and the well-learned lessons of Sars, an epidemic of a related virus in 2003, Singapore reacted early.

“It has been able to make difficult trade-offs with public consent because its message has been consistent, science-based and trusted.”

Such unexpected accolades have been pouring in over the past weeks. But lest these get to our heads, it is worth remembering the magazine’s opening refrain: “To see what is to come, look to Lombardy.” A rich community, with world-class healthcare, imagined it could deal with the crisis, but found itself overwhelmed when the infections surged unexpectedly.

The upshot of this is clear: Singapore has done well in managing the crisis so far, but we must not get smug or complacent. For there is more to come before this crisis runs its course in the months ahead, and we need to be ready for it, mentally, socially and, yes, even politically.

Writing in *The Financial Times*, commentator Martin Wolf put it this way: “No event better demonstrates why a quality administrative state, led by people able to differentiate experts from charlatans, is so vital to the public.”

Indeed. At this crucial time, the sensible and sober statements by Health Minister Gan Kim Yong

and National Development Minister Lawrence Wong, painstakingly explaining the considered steps they are taking and how these will help manage the situation, stand in reassuringly stark contrast to the bloviating we are witnessing from some leaders elsewhere.

Taking up some of the same issues the two ministers have been addressing in their almost-daily media briefings, FT’s Mr Wolf went on to add: “A central question is how deep and long the health emergency will be. One hope is that locking down countries (as in Spain) or parts of countries (as in China) will eliminate the virus. Yet, even if this proved to be true in some places, it will clearly not be true everywhere. An opposite extreme is that up to 80 per cent of the world’s population could be infected.

“At a possible mortality rate of 1 per cent, that could mean 60 million additional deaths, equivalent to the Second World War. This calamity would probably also take time: The Spanish flu of 1918 came in three waves, over a year. Yet it is more likely that this ends up in the middle: The death rate will be lower, but the disease will also not disappear.

“If so, the world might not return to pre-crisis behaviour until well into 2021.”

If, alas, the present crisis proves to be so long-drawn, the impact it will have on society is likely to be deep, long-lasting and profound.

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari summed this up in a thought-provoking essay, published in the FT. He asserted, by no means histrionically: “Humankind is now facing a global crisis. Perhaps the biggest crisis of our generation. The decisions that

Flattening the curve buys society time, which hopefully is used well to ramp up medical facilities, as well as to find a vaccine or a cure in a hurry. By doing so, more might receive critical care, medicines might make the effects of the illness less deadly, and vaccinations could help more people fend off the bug.

”

epidemic curve is very useful, because we avoid overwhelming our hospitals with a surge of cases, and we buy ourselves time – time that will be very useful because over the longer term, we may have better treatment, better anti-viral drugs and, eventually, a vaccine may be in place.”

In Asia, countries such as South Korea and China have been able to successfully flatten the curve – at least till now – through early intervention and stringent measures.

Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan have also managed to keep the number of cases relatively lower, but recent spikes in those places suggest that they are still at risk.

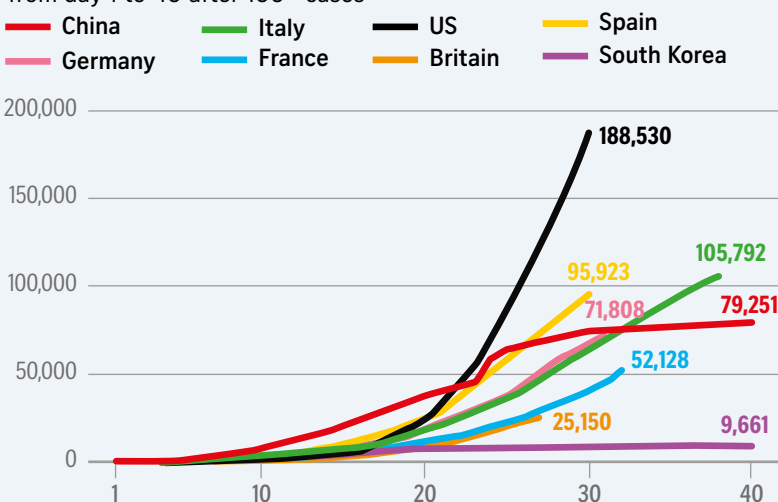
The situation looks grim for South-east Asian countries, however, with experts predicting more than 70,000 Indonesians to be infected by Ramadan in late April.

Globally, several countries are still at the “take-off” stage of the curve, running the risk of overwhelming the capacity of its healthcare systems and reaching extreme numbers of confirmed cases, if they fail to take adequate measures to flatten their epidemic curves (see infographic 2).

– CNBC, Interaksyon, New York Times, The Jakarta Post, The Mercury News, The Washington Post

Coronavirus: Upward trajectory or flattened curve?

Cumulative confirmed Covid-19 cases in selected countries from day 1 to 40 after 100+ cases

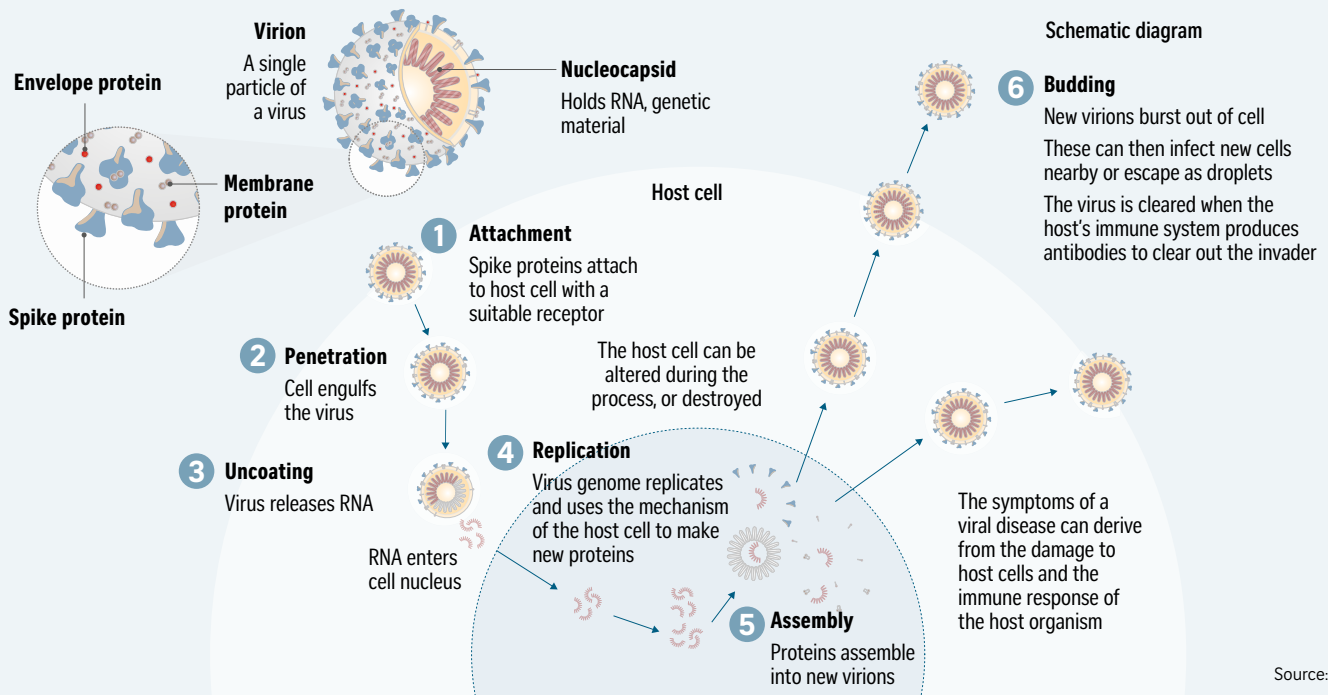


Infographic 2

NOTE: As of March 31 Source: STATISTA STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Virus cell hijack

Step-by-step process of how a retrovirus enters the cell of a living host, replicates and spreads on



people and governments take in the next few weeks will probably shape the world for years to come.

"They will shape not just our healthcare systems but also our economy, politics and culture. We must act quickly and decisively. We should also take into account the long-term consequences of our actions."

Some troubling signs are already emerging. The current US-China tensions look set to intensify. Mr Trump, by his repeated references to the "Chinese virus", is setting up a bogeyman, to whip and stir up his electoral base, by pinning the fallout from the disease on China.

But the notion that China should be blamed, and be expected to apologise for the so-called Wuhan virus, is ludicrous. Equally, so too is the suggestion that it should be thanked for the way which it worked aggressively to bring it under control.

That would be like suggesting that the US should be asked to apologise for setting off the 2008 financial crisis – which it did not wish on itself or anyone else – or thanked for the decisive way it dealt with it.

Both are equally pointless propositions, though each has its share of boosters.

Given the triple-fold crisis at hand, and the urgent need for global cooperation to tackle this, a "with-me-or-against-me" world, split uncomfortably between the US and China, is in no one's interests.

Even so, supply chains, which had already begun to be reshaped because of the trade spat last year, will come under further scrutiny, amid a growing concern over the commercial and strategic risks of being overly dependent on any one source. The changes that follow will bring both challenges as

well as opportunities.

A prolonged economic slump could also force a restructuring of companies and industries in ways we might not yet have imagined.

After months of being cooped up at home, will people want to rush out to eat and be merry, head back to the shops, cinemas and gyms, or seek to roam the world, as before? Or would they have grown enamoured of the joys of online deliveries, streaming, and other new ways to stay happy and healthy?

Having been kept away from their offices, will workers long to return to the social chatter of water-coolers and pantries? Will they prefer those interminable meetings and long business lunches to working at home, with family and kids close at hand? Conversely, would bosses conclude that tele-working can be just as productive, requiring less expensive office space, business travel, and – shudder the thought – a lower headcount?

Who knows? At the moment, it is hard enough to predict what will happen next week or month, let alone next year and beyond.

What is clear is this: It is best not to assume a return to the status quo ante before the dawn of this blighted Year of the Rat in late January, which also marked the arrival of the first cases of the new coronavirus in Singapore.

Straight-line projections from the past into the future have already proven hopelessly wrong. Assuming that things will resume from where they were, after a long, painful period of disruption, as we are now all living through, is likely to be as misguided and fanciful. **ST**

It's not just an economic crisis – it's a war

Experts say drastic steps like having governments act as buyer of last resort to save firms, jobs, will be needed

WE'RE NOT JUST DEALING WITH AN ECONOMIC crisis, say growing numbers of economists, when asked how to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a war, and it has to be fought on a war footing.

With infection rates rising exponentially and lockdowns, travel bans and social distancing measures spreading everywhere, most economic activities – other than the provision of essential goods and services – have all but stopped.

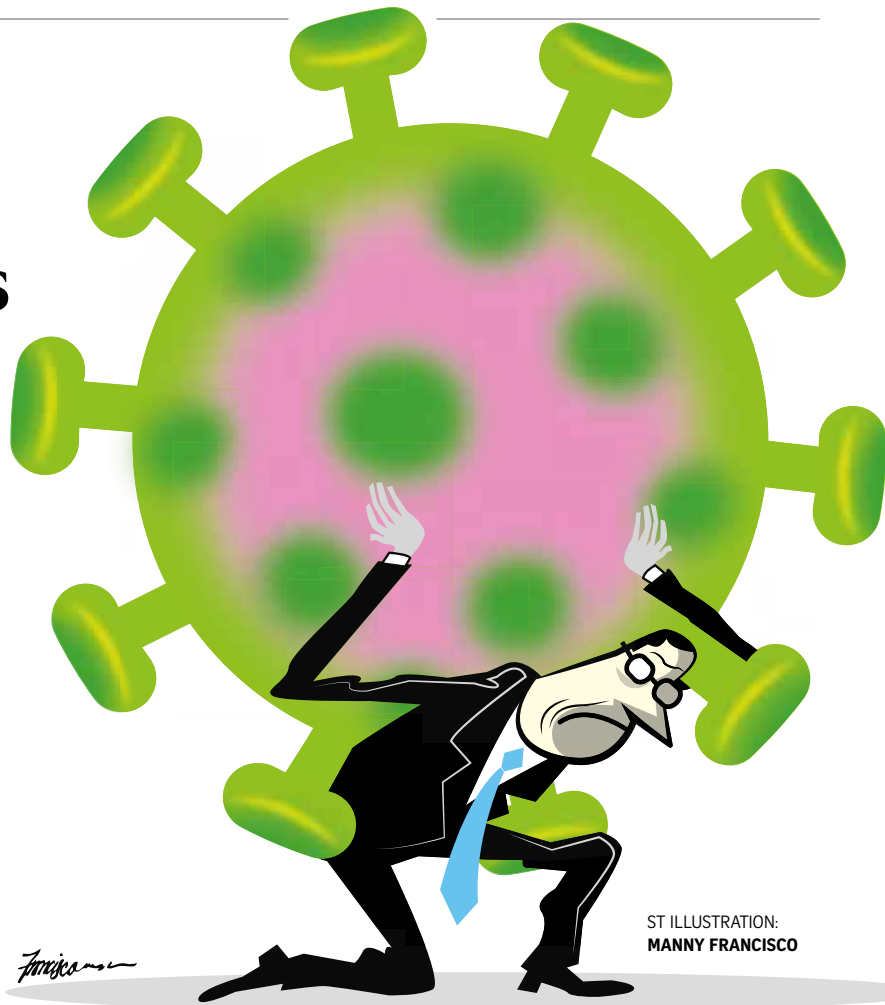
Economic projections of even just two weeks earlier are rapidly becoming obsolete. A global recession is now the baseline forecast. Europe and Japan are almost there already. With unemployment skyrocketing, the United States is on track to follow; the majority of economists polled recently by the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business predict a "major recession".

The GDP growth forecast for China this year has been slashed to below 3 per cent – less than half of last year's. Projections of other countries' growth rates are being downgraded. For Singapore, DBS Bank predicts the economy will shrink by 0.5 per cent, the lower-bound of the Government's forecast of minus 0.5 per cent to 1.5 per cent. This, too, may be optimistic.

Four former International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief economists say the only question is how deep and prolonged the global recession will be. The economic shock will be bigger than the 2008 financial crisis, they say, and an economic depression can't be ruled out.

AN AGGRESSIVE RESPONSE

Encouragingly, the response is now aggressive. The Federal Reserve in the United States has cut its benchmark Fed Fund rates to near zero, flooding the market with liquidity, and expanded its bond-buying programme, as has the European Central Bank. Other central banks have also cut rates.



ST ILLUSTRATION:
MANNY FRANCISCO

But with monetary policy options almost exhausted, countries have started to unleash their fiscal firepower. Across Europe and East Asia, governments have rolled out massive spending programmes and rescue packages, including loan guarantees for companies.

The US, which passed a US\$8 billion (\$11.5 billion) emergency Bill in March focused mainly on health-related spending, is now considering a US\$1 trillion package which could include over US\$200 billion in loans for troubled firms and cash payments of US\$1,200 to every adult and US\$500 for every child. There may also be a separate US\$1 trillion to help small firms.

All these initiatives seem dramatic and are bigger than those rolled out in response to the global financial crisis. But even they might not be enough.

For example, on the monetary side, ultra-low interest rates and quantitative easing measures will give banks easier access to liquidity. But as economist Danny Leipziger of George Washington University has pointed out – and which has also been borne out by the experience of the euro zone and Japan, where rates have long been negative – it doesn't ensure that banks will increase lending.

On the fiscal side, loans will help tide firms over

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A person sitting on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the National Mall in Washington. The Federal Reserve in the United States has cut its benchmark Fed Fund rates to near zero, flooding the market with liquidity, and expanded its bond-buying programme, as has the European Central Bank.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

On the fiscal side, loans will help tide firms over hard times, but will not replace the losses they will suffer from business shutdowns – and those loans will need to be repaid, which will hurt companies down the road.



hard times, but will not replace the losses they will suffer from business shutdowns – and those loans will need to be repaid, which will hurt companies down the road. Loans with partial government guarantees will be more helpful but still inadequate. The experience with such loans is mixed. For example, SMEs in Singapore have pointed out that banks charged them high rates even when the Government guaranteed more than 50 per cent of repayments.

Showering individuals with cash – the “helicopter money” option being considered by the US – will be popular and help them pay urgent bills. But economists like University of California at Berkeley’s Emmanuel Saez say it would be poorly targeted – too little for people who lose their jobs and unnecessary for those who don’t. And it won’t assure the newly unemployed that they will have jobs to go back to when the pandemic passes and the recession lifts, especially if their firms go bust in the meantime.

INCOME SUPPORT

Some economists favour income-support steps that go beyond one-off transfers. For instance, Professor Leipziger proposes government-supported, interest-free credit card purchases for essentials like food and rent, as well as mandatory mortgage grace periods for those affected by the crisis.

The New York Times financial journalist and author Andrew Ross Sorkin goes further, proposing that the government provide all companies, big and small, as well as self-employed workers, interest-free bridging loans guaranteed for the duration of the crisis, to be paid back over five years. But as a condition, companies must retain at least 90 per cent of their workers at the same wage as before the crisis.

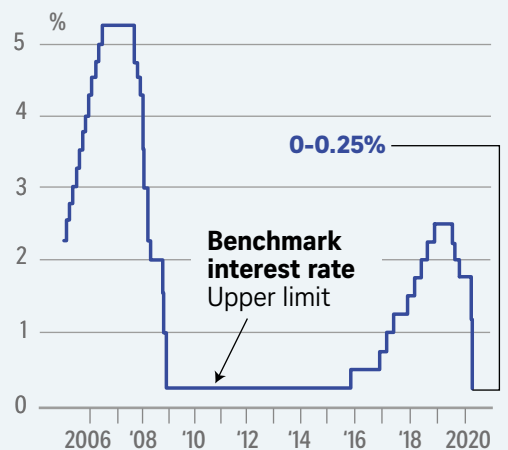
This would keep almost everyone employed and there would be no need for the government to try to pick the losers. This would be difficult anyway – the impact of the crisis will be felt far beyond the

so-called “front-line” sectors such as airlines, hotels and restaurants.

It will also affect, for instance, companies that supply fuel to the airlines, laundry services to the hotels and food items to the restaurants, and to their suppliers in turn.

Professor Saez has an even more radical proposal, suggesting the government act as a “buyer of last resort”, replacing the demand that evaporates because of the crisis. So, for example, if a business loses 80 per cent of its revenue, the government should replace that lost revenue for the duration of the crisis, on condition the firm does not retrench. It should also compensate the self-employed for lost earnings. This way, firms that were viable pre-crisis will still be so after it, and workers will be able to keep their jobs, even if there is currently no work for them. This would

US Federal Reserve



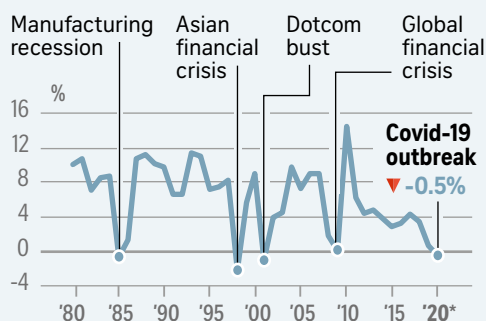
Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

All-out efforts to stimulate economies with cash

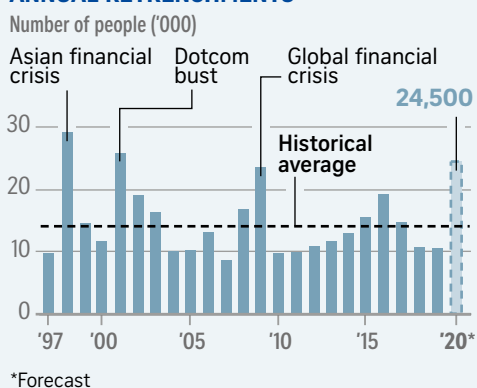
Here's a look at what regional governments are doing to pump up their economies:

Economic downturns in Singapore

HISTORICAL GDP GROWTH



ANNUAL RETRENCHMENTS



Source: DBS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

be the best way to ensure the economy will rebound when the crisis is over. Any halfway measures would not be able to prevent mass liquidations and large-scale job losses.

NEVER MIND THE COST

Such a scheme would be costly. Prof Saez estimates that for the US, if demand falls by 40 per cent over three months, it would lead to a loss of 10 per cent in annual GDP. That's what it would cost the government. That is huge, but would need to be weighed against the future cost arising from mass bankruptcies and layoffs.

At this time of crisis, cost should be a secondary consideration.

As former IMF chief economist Kenneth Rogoff noted: "The whole point of having a sound government balance sheet is to be able to go all-out in situations like this, which is tantamount to a war. Countries that are not able to do this will suffer not just in the short run, but in the long run."

Whatever the policies chosen, the best advice is to think big and err on the side of excess, not caution. This is a dangerous and uncertain time. The costs of overreacting, essentially a temporary blowout of budget deficits, would be small against

SINGAPORE

Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat introduced a supplementary budget amounting to \$48.4 billion on March 26, on top of the \$6.4 billion in measures that was announced in February to cushion the fallout from the Covid-19 outbreak. In all, Singapore will be dedicating nearly \$55 billion to combat the coronavirus – about 11 per cent of its GDP.

MALAYSIA

Malaysian Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin on March 27 announced the country's largest economic stimulus package to date, with RM250 billion (\$83.6 billion) to be channelled towards supporting the people and businesses. The package is on top of earlier announcements to pump in over RM20 billion to the economy.

CHINA

China is set to unleash trillions of yuan of fiscal stimulus to spur infrastructure investment. Spending will be backed by as much as: 2.8 trillion yuan (\$572.5 billion) of local government special bonds and the national budget deficit ratio could rise to record levels.

INDIA

India announced on March 26 a 1.7 trillion rupee (\$32.49 billion) financial package, comprising direct cash transfers and free food, to help the nation's poor weather the global downturn.

INDONESIA

Indonesia announced a stimulus package on Feb 25 amounting to: 10.3 trillion rupiah (\$1 billion).

SOUTH KOREA

South Korea announced a stimulus package on March 5 to be channelled into the health system, childcare and outdoor markets amounting to: 11.7 trillion won (\$13.7 billion).

THAILAND

Thailand's Cabinet approved a stimulus package on March 10 to help alleviate the impact of the coronavirus epidemic on already-faltering domestic activity amounting to an estimated: 400 billion baht (\$17.6 billion).

JAPAN

Japan is considering an emergency economic package of about 30 trillion yen (\$390 billion).

HONG KONG

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam said on Feb 18 said the government would increase handouts to tackle the coronavirus outbreak amounting to HK\$28 billion (\$5 billion).

PAKISTAN

Prime Minister Imran Khan announced a rescue package on March 24, to support sectors across the country amounting to 1.13 trillion rupees (\$10 billion).

Sources: Reuters, Japan Times

the risks of under-reacting – a destruction of the economy's productive capacity and large-scale unemployment.

Singapore's policymakers are pulling out all the stops, with Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat on March 26 announcing a \$48.4 billion (supplementary) "Resilience Budget", with President Halimah Yacob giving in-principle approval to draw up to \$17 billion from the nation's past reserves. What we are facing now is much worse than even a thunderstorm. It's a war. **ST**



An assembly line at a car plant of Dongfeng Honda in Wuhan, Hubei. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva has said that the outlook for global growth is negative and the IMF now expects "a recession at least as bad as during the global financial crisis or worse".

PHOTO: AFP

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Manufacturers, exporters braced for disruptions

EXPORTERS AND MANUFACTURERS IN ASIA MAY suffer a new wave of supply-chain disruption even as the lockdown eases in China.

The latest supply shock is adding to the gloomy outlook for global goods and services demand amid volatile stock, credit and currency markets.

In Singapore, where non-oil domestic exports (Nodx) have been on a declining trend since late 2017, outward-oriented sectors such as manufacturing and wholesale trade are likely to be the worst hit.

"There are emerging signs of a recovery in China's supply chains," said DBS Bank economist Irvin Seah in a phone interview on March 19. "But data in coming months will start to reflect the impact of countrywide lockdowns and border closures (that) governments around the world have enforced and the business continuity plans companies there have put in place."

The result of these measures will be a sharp contraction in global demand, which will put a dent in near-term prospects for exports and manufacturing, he added.

Mr Seah expects the local economy to contract

by 0.5 per cent this year, the first full-year recession since 2001.

To cushion the economic slide, governments are rolling out large fiscal aid packages, and central banks are cutting key interest rates and pulling out all the stops to allow the flow of capital, in order to maintain financial stability.

But the measures they are taking to quarantine the spread of the Covid-19 disease are cancelling out the effectiveness of their policy actions.

The impact of restrictive measures on trade, investment, consumption and travel is depressing consumer spending and overall demand, pushing the global economy towards a sentiment-driven or self-induced recession.

Analysts are worried that if the pandemic does not abate in the coming weeks and months, it may trigger a string of defaults and bankruptcies, not just in Asia, but across the world.

The anxiety over new holes in the supply chain and an overall compression of global demand is being reflected in financial markets worldwide, making possible business failures become a self-fulfilling prophecy. **ST**

IMF sees coronavirus pandemic causing global recession in 2020, recovery in 2021

WASHINGTON – THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC will cause a global recession in 2020 that could be worse than the one triggered by the global financial crisis of 2008-2009, but world economic output should recover in 2021, the International Monetary Fund said on March 23.

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva welcomed extraordinary fiscal actions already taken by many countries to boost health systems and protect affected companies and workers, and steps taken by central banks to ease monetary policy.

“Even more will be needed, especially on the fiscal front,” she said.

Dr Georgieva issued the new outlook after a conference call of finance ministers and central bankers from the Group of 20 of the world’s largest economies, who she said agreed on the need for solidarity across the globe.

“The human costs of the coronavirus pandemic are already immeasurable and all countries need to work together to protect people and limit the economic damage,” she said.

The outlook for global growth was negative and the IMF now expected “a recession at least as bad as during the global financial crisis or worse,” she added.

Earlier, she had said that a recovery was expected in 2021, but to reach it countries would need to prioritise containment and strengthen health systems. “The economic impact is and will be



severe, but the faster the virus stops, the quicker and stronger the recovery will be,” she said.

Dr Georgieva said the IMF would massively step up emergency finance, noting that 80 countries have already requested help and that the IMF stood ready to deploy all of its US\$1 trillion (\$1.4 trillion) in lending capacity. [ST](#)

– Reuters

IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva speaking at a joint press conference on March 4. She has welcomed extraordinary fiscal actions already taken by many countries to boost health systems and protect affected companies and workers. PHOTO: AFP



A pedestrian wearing a protective mask walking past shuttered stores on Hollywood Road in Hong Kong. With infection rates rising exponentially and lockdowns, travel bans and social distancing measures spreading everywhere, most economic activities have all but stopped. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG



A slowdown in passenger traffic due to the coronavirus has forced several US airlines to park their planes in southern California.
PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES.

Aviation gloom doom

Most airlines could become bankrupt before June is here

VEN SREENIVASAN
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Airplanes are grounded, shipments are stalled, hotels and restaurants are empty. The coronavirus has wreaked havoc across the economy. Here's a look at key sectors that have been badly hit

FOR AN INDUSTRY ALREADY STRUGGLING WITH the unpredictable cost of fuel, over-regulation, nationalistic obstacles and criticisms from climate activists, the coronavirus is the cruellest – and possibly fatal – blow.

A dramatic fall in demand resulting from unprecedented border shutdowns across the world to contain the pandemic is threatening to take out almost half the global carriers, according to some estimates.

As Mr Shukor Yusof of aviation-centred Endau Analytics tersely notes, all this seems surreal, given that just three months ago, in December last year, the International Air Transport Association (Iata) was expecting the airline industry to register a net profit of US\$29.3 billion (S\$42.3 billion) this year.

“The industry was to have posted its 11th consecutive year of profitability this year,” Mr Shukor, the managing director of Endau Analytics, points out. “Who could have foreseen the speed with which Covid-19 overturned the sentiment towards air travel in the past fortnight, leading Iata to revise its positive forecast to a staggering loss of US\$113 billion for 2020?”

Indeed.

As late as November last year, the biggest challenge the industry was facing was the loss of environmentally conscious passengers to other modes of transport claiming lower emissions.

Over the past year – just as fuel costs seemed to be supportive of growth – the industry was being

lambasted by climate activists led by Swedish teen environmentalist Greta Thunberg for its carbon emissions. The growth of flygskam, or flight shaming, has seen thousands of European travellers migrating from planes to trains for travel. Airports in the Nordic regions and Germany have seen a marked decline in travellers over the past year, while train stations have been filling up.

Still, the past few years have generally been good for airlines on the back of strong and steady demand for air travel. Yields have also held up, thanks to muted fuel prices and a growing appetite for premium seats. As a result, the financial numbers have been quite robust. Revenue per passenger per kilometre, or RPK (the common measure of top-line income), has risen just over 6 per cent year on year since 2017. Net profit growth for global airlines as a whole rose by between 4 per cent and 5 per cent annually during the past three years. Profit margin has stayed at around 7 per cent of total revenues since 2017, delivering a return on investment of just above 8.5 per cent.

The situation today is starkly different.

BIG NAMES GROUNDED

Top-tier global names like Qantas, United Airlines, British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Korean Airlines, KLM and a dozen others have all but grounded their entire fleets. Staff and crew have been furloughed, and forced to take partial or no-pay leave. Given the disappearance of demand and the cash-flow crunch, many regional discount and low-cost carriers may never see the light of day, even after the pandemic is over.

Jetstar Asia has grounded its entire fleet, while, in Europe, Easyjet and Ryanair are doing the same. Britain's FlyBe is already history.

Even erstwhile stronger players like Singapore Airlines are struggling to maintain positive cash flow. There is a very real danger that the iconic multiple award-winning carrier's gearing will hit its upper limits by this month, forcing it to go cap-in-hand to the Government for funding. The

airline has been forced to cancel scores of flights to China, North-east Asia and Europe, while its senior management is taking huge pay cuts, as many of its crew are furloughed at home.

Just north of the border, Malaysia Airlines was already looking for handouts in the region of RM1 billion (\$330 million) annually to stay afloat. Covid-19 could simply be the straw that breaks its back.

To say this is the worst crisis ever for the industry would be a huge understatement.

This is how the Sydney-based aviation think-tank Centre for Aviation (Capa) put it: "As the impact of the coronavirus and multiple government travel reactions sweep through our world, many airlines have probably already been driven into technical bankruptcy, or are at least substantially in breach of debt covenants. Cash reserves are running down quickly as fleets are grounded and what flights there are operate much less than half full. By the end of May 2020, most airlines in the world will be bankrupt."

Iata has just released an updated report noting that beyond the top 30 players, all other airlines have weak balance sheets, high debt and barely enough cash to cover three months of operations.

In short, most of the world's airlines could be bankrupt by June.

Coordinated government and industry action is needed immediately if a global aviation catastrophe is to be avoided. American carriers are already asking for over US\$50 billion from Washington. Germany and half a dozen other countries have also indicated they will provide financial lifelines to their carriers.

And they should.

Aviation, like it or not, is the lifeblood of global commerce and connectivity. Yes, it has serious issues to address on the carbon emissions front. Serious efforts are being made to address these through alternative fuels, more efficient engines, carbon offset markets, electric power systems, fuel-saving routings and emission taxation.

Also, this is an industry ruled by archaic and nationalistic ownership and air rights laws established some 75 years ago which prevent market

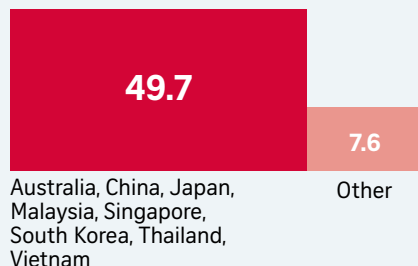
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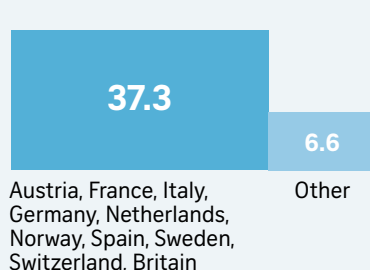
Coronavirus could cost airline industry US\$113 billion

Passenger revenue losses in 2020 in US\$ billion for a worst-case coronavirus scenario*

ASIA-PACIFIC



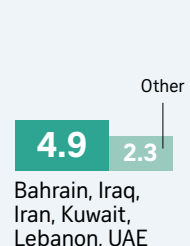
EUROPE



NORTH AMERICA



MIDDLE EAST



NOTE: *Iata revised overall total to avoid double counting, giving a global figure of more than US\$113 billion.

Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Top-tier global names like Qantas, United Airlines, British Airways, Cathay Pacific, Korean Airlines, KLM and a dozen others have all but grounded their entire fleets.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

access, mergers and consolidations like in many other industries.

But all that could change if half the players actually disappear. Indeed, post pandemic, most governments could place higher priorities on saving their economies than saving their airlines.

The fate of the aviation industry can be likened to that of Sisyphus, a legendary king of Corinth condemned eternally to repeatedly roll a heavy rock up a hill in Hades, only to have it roll down again as it nears the top.

Indeed, this is a business that has had its fair share of ups and downs. Good years have quickly been followed by bad ones, often due to factors well beyond the control of industry players. These have ranged from pandemics and terrorism, to sky-high fuel costs and charges, labour dissent and protectionism.

Nobody knows when this pandemic will pass. Given their thin margins, negative cash flow and significant debt, even three months (which is the most optimistic forecast so far) will be too long and too late for many.

And it is not just airlines which are tottering. Plane deliveries to the erstwhile vibrant Asia-Pacific market has collapsed, according to Cirium Fleets data. Planemaker Boeing's stock has lost over 60 per cent of its value since January, and is looking for a US\$60 billion bailout. Meanwhile, its European rival has drastically cut back production.

INFRASTRUCTURE HIT

This crisis will also hit airports and travel infrastructure projects being rolled out across the world.

The knock-on impact on the financiers of these mega projects is yet to be known.

Then there are other players down the supply chain ranging from logistics and ground handlers, to avionics and aero-engineering players who will be impacted.

Sars cost the global economy some US\$40 billion. But Sars was largely confined to the Asia-Pacific



region, with China and Hong Kong at the epicentre. According to Iata estimates, Asia-Pacific carriers lost US\$6 billion during the period. US carriers probably lost US\$1 billion.

A lot has changed since, and not just because Covid-19 is a global pandemic which has spread much farther and faster.

It has simply escalated the crisis to a devastating new level for airlines, the travel industry and the entire related supply chain. Analysts estimate that the lockdown of Europe, US, India, China and other markets could lop off over 50 per cent of global demand for air travel.

This means the forecast of US\$113 billion loss was on the optimistic side – a point that Iata has just acknowledged last month.

Its latest estimate is closer to a US\$130 billion loss. Stressing the gravity of the situation, Iata director-general Alexandre de Juniac has asked governments to act quickly to save the industry: “Time is of the essence. Governments cannot take a wait-and-see approach. We have seen how dramatically the situation has deteriorated globally in a very short time. They must act now and decisively.”

The irony of ironies is that this is coming as fuel prices plunge to their lowest levels since the early 1990s, following Saudi Arabia's decision over the weekend to flood global markets with the black gold in response to the Russia-driven breakdown of Opec+. But cheap fuel in an era of low (or no) demand is not – to put it mildly – useful.

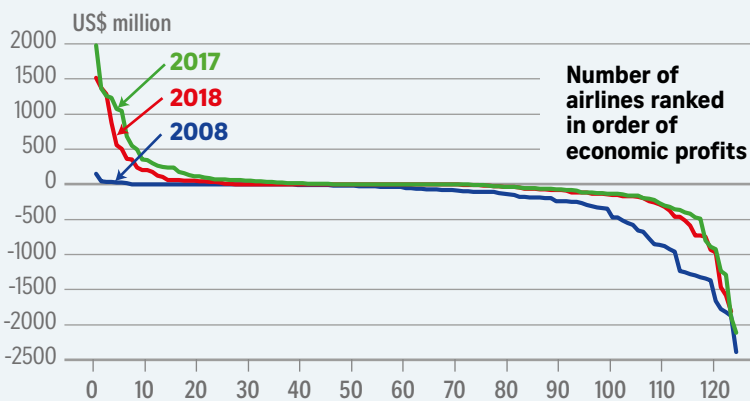
Mr Brendan Sobie of Sobie Aviation notes that the low oil price is, in fact, hurting airlines: “For FY2020/21, SIA is hedged 51 per cent for jet fuel at US\$74 per barrel and 22 per cent for Brent at US\$58 pbl. The group will incur over US\$1 billion in hedge losses for the financial year beginning April if fuel price stays below US\$30 pbl.”

The only segment of aviation that is intact is the private jet business, which has seen more demand as some moneyed folks avoid airports.

If there is any light at the end of the tunnel, it seems rather dim and distant for the distressed aviation industry. But hopefully the survivors – largely those bailed out by governments – will emerge stronger, wiser and more efficient than before. Hopefully, some of the archaic laws governing the industry will also be a thing of the past. **ST**

World's airlines ranked by economic profits

Even before Covid-19 much of the industry was fragile



Source: Iata Economics using data from a McKinsey study for Iata STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

SIA cuts 96% of capacity as virus hammers industry

SINGAPORE AIRLINES (SIA) IS CUTTING 96 PER cent of its scheduled capacity and further cutting salaries of senior employees as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to batter the industry.

SIA announced on March 23 that it was slashing its capacity till the end of this month and grounding 138 out of 147 SIA and SilkAir aircraft.

The group's low-cost unit Scoot will also suspend most of its network, resulting in the grounding of 47 of its fleet of 49 aircraft.

In the note seen by The Straits Times, SIA chief executive Goh Choon Phong said SIA management would be taking a second round of pay cuts. Instead of 15 per cent as previously announced, Mr Goh said he was taking a 30 per cent cut from April 1.

Mr Goh added that the airline has also reached an agreement with its unions on a set of cost-cutting measures that will impact about 10,000 staff.

UOB Kay Hian's K. Ajith said that SIA could potentially lose over \$140 million in March, and could be in a precarious position by end-June without financial help from the Government.

The Centre for Asia Pacific Aviation has also estimated that about half of all global airlines could go bust before the year end as casualties of Covid-19.

SIA said that it is actively taking steps to build up its liquidity, and to reduce capital expenditure and operating costs.

Last month, the SIA Group has drawn on its lines of credit to meet its immediate cash flow requirements, and it is in discussion with several financial institutions for its future funding, the airline said.

Until this crisis hit, SIA was the 15th largest airline group in the world, serving around 140 destinations in more than 35 countries and territories. [ST](#)

— Karamjit Kaur and Clement Yong

Covid-19: Airlines ground flights

From low-cost carriers to international heavyweights, airlines around the world are cutting flights in the face of tighter border controls and a fall in demand.

OUT OF 127 AIRLINES:



48 airlines

have cut their capacity by 100 per cent, including **Jetstar Asia** and **HK Express**.



39 airlines

have cut their capacity by 75 per cent to 99 per cent, including **Emirates, Lufthansa Group and Singapore Airlines (SIA)**, together with its subsidiaries **SilkAir and Scoot**.



22 airlines

have cut their capacity by 50 per cent to 75 per cent, including **Qatar Airways, Virgin Australia and United Airlines**.



18 airlines

have cut their capacity by up to 50 per cent, including **Southwest Airlines, Malaysia Airlines and Japan Airlines**.



SIA and its subsidiary SilkAir have grounded

138 planes

out of a combined fleet of 147, while SIA's low-cost subsidiary Scoot has grounded 47 out of 49 planes in its fleet.

Jetstar Asia has grounded its entire fleet of 18 Airbus 320s.



PHOTO: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Cathay Pacific makes drastic cuts to flights

CATHAY PACIFIC AIRWAYS IS SLASHING PASSENGER capacity by 96 per cent in April and May as the coronavirus shuts down travel across the world.

The virus has floored Cathay, which was already reeling from the impact pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong had on visitor numbers for much of last year. The airline has already asked staff to take unpaid leave and faces a substantial loss in the first half of this year, with a HK\$2 billion (S\$373 million) loss in February alone.

Hong Kong Express, the budget carrier Cathay acquired last year, said on March 20 that it is temporarily shutting down all

flight operations to save cash.

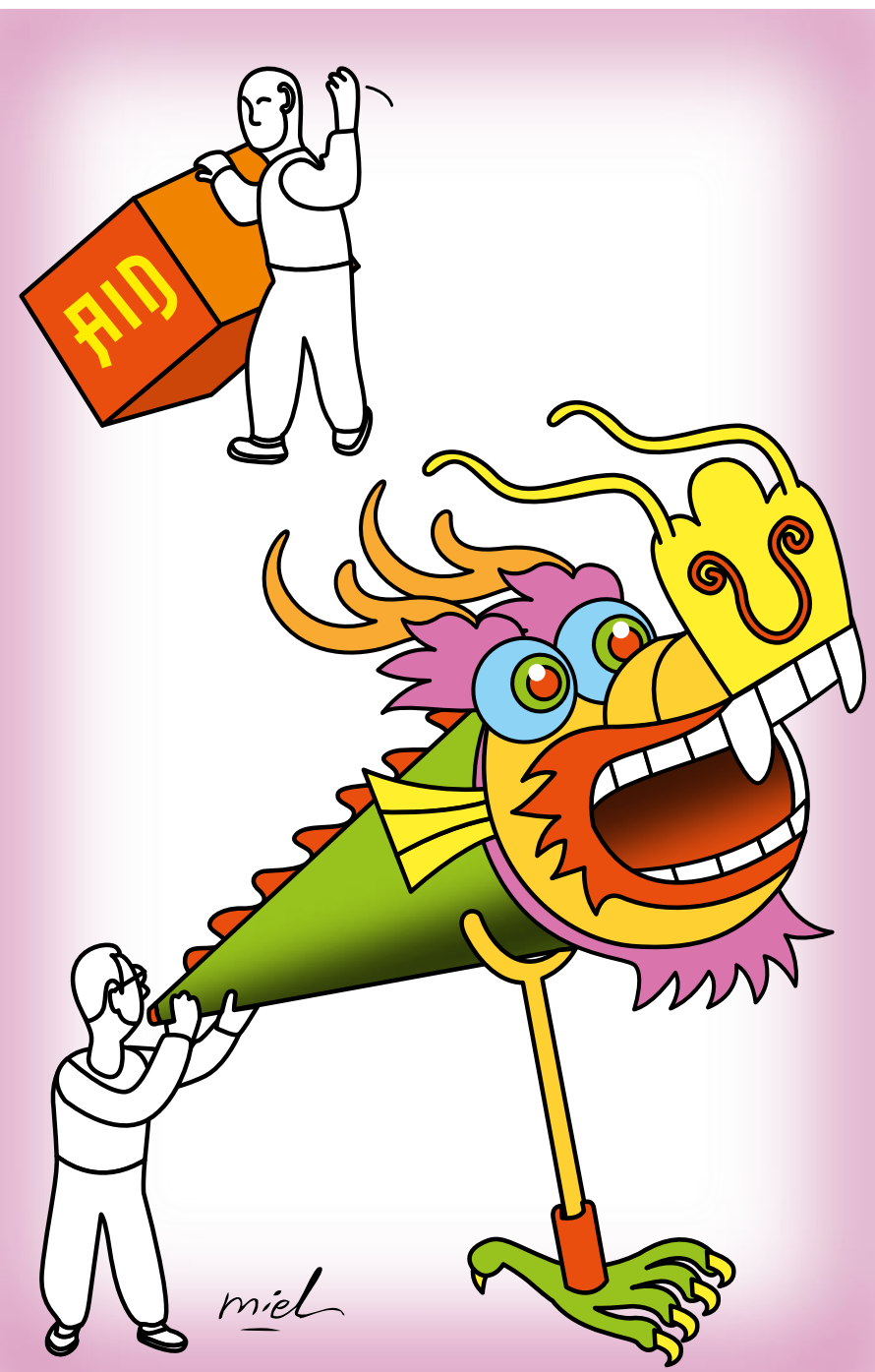
In February, Cathay flight bookings fell to as low as 11,000-12,000 from the standard 90,000, chief customer and commercial officer Ronald Lam said.

Passenger load factor declined to about 50 per cent at the end of February and year-on-year yield fell significantly.

The International Air Transport Association said the industry needs state aid and bailouts of as much as US\$200 billion to survive, while the Association of Asia Pacific Airlines said the region's carriers face revenue shortfalls of more than US\$60 billion this year. [ST](#)

— Bloomberg

China's coronavirus mission – helping others and healing its own image



ST ILLUSTRATION: MIEL

While aid to stricken countries is positive, blowing its own trumpet and engaging in conspiracy theories are not

AMONG THE ITALIAN OPERA ARIAS, FOLK SONGS and modern tunes that rang out from balconies and windows of Italy's cities earlier this month – as its people sought to lift their spirits through music amid the coronavirus lockdown – was the Chinese national anthem.

A recording of the anthem was heard in a Rome residential district, at the end of which the grateful Italian who played it said: "I am not sure if there is a Chinese neighbour here, but I would like to sincerely thank China and the people there."

A day before, a team of experts, along with 31 tonnes of much-needed medical equipment including ventilators and masks, arrived from China, at a time when Italy was struggling with a massive and rising wave of Covid-19 cases. More help has since arrived from Beijing in the form of medical staff and gear.

As China has passed the peak in its coronavirus outbreak, it has begun sending aid and experts overseas to help tame the virus that has now spread to more than 150 countries worldwide.

Apart from Italy, Chinese experts have also gone to Iran – one of the countries outside of China hardest hit by the virus – and Iraq. They have held online conferences with experts from other countries to share their knowledge and experience.

China, which had ramped up production of masks, respirators, ventilators and protective suits to meet the needs of its healthcare workers and patients, has begun sending such supplies to other countries where the need is greatest, as its own demand has dropped.

These have included countries in the West as well as Malaysia and the Philippines. Some of these shipped supplies are donations and some are sold.

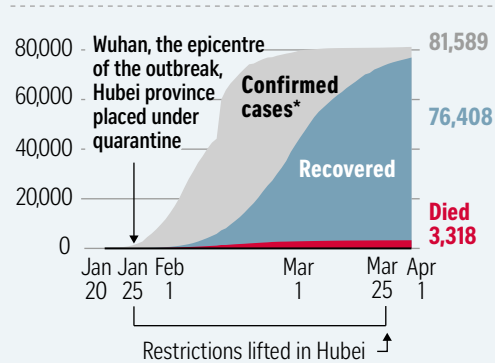
Earlier last month, China's Foreign Minister held a meeting with his Asean counterparts to discuss cooperation on containing the virus.

REPAIRING MARRED IMAGE

China's official media and diplomats have not been shy about publicising these actions.

On March 11, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hua Chunying wrote on Twitter – a social

Covid-19 in China



NOTE: *Official data

Sources: AFP, WORLDOMETER
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

media platform banned in China – that a batch of medical supplies had arrived in Belgium and that these would be delivered to Italy and Spain. Four days later, she tweeted that Foreign Minister Wang Yi had spoken on the phone with his Philippine counterpart Teodoro Locsin and that China would be sending experts and medical supplies to the Philippines soon.

In a display of global statesmanship, Chinese President Xi Jinping called the leaders of France, Spain, Germany and Serbia with offers of help.

This contrasts with reports that United States President Donald Trump had tried to acquire a German company that is working on a vaccine for Covid-19, with a view to keeping its product for the exclusive use of Americans.

As much as China's actions show a desire of the Chinese to help, having gone through a devastating few months battling the virus, they also reveal an eagerness to repair China's image, which has been battered by its initial missteps in dealing with the virus that began to show up in the central city of Wuhan last November, leading to its spread throughout China and to other countries.

And these actions have had an effect, as evidenced in the playing of China's national anthem in Rome and the effusive thanks from Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic to President Xi and China's people for the medical aid that arrived on March 21.

What has been disconcerting, however, is the quickness of China's experts and diplomats alike to question the origin of the virus before evidence has emerged to show it had surfaced elsewhere before China.

Famed pulmonologist Zhong Nanshan, who discovered the severe acute respiratory syndrome virus in 2003, said at a press conference in February that while the coronavirus first appeared in China, it may not have originated in the country.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian went further, promoting a conspiracy theory. He tweeted that it "might be the US Army who brought

the epidemic to Wuhan" and republished a video clip of Dr Robert Redfield, director of the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, telling a US congressional committee on March 11 that some influenza deaths in the US were later identified as cases of Covid-19. Dr Redfield did not say when those people had died or over what time period, but Mr Zhao used the remarks to back his claim.

The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman's comments allude to a conspiracy theory that US military athletes participating in the Military World Games in Wuhan last October may have brought the virus into China. The US had sent nearly 300 athletes and officials to take part in the games. While the Pentagon has confirmed cases of Covid-19 in South Korea and Italy among its servicemen, no American soldier has been linked to the illness from last October, The New York Times reported.

Mr Zhao, said Professor Steve Tsang from the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, was shifting focus to an ungrounded claim from the fact that China's government had acted irresponsibly in the way it dealt with the first reported cases of human-to-human transmission that led to a global pandemic. The Chinese diplomat's comments had come days after US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said China's slow response had cost the world two months in which it could have geared up for the outbreak. China's Ambassador to the US Cui Tiankai has since distanced himself from Mr Zhao's comments, saying such speculation will help nobody and is very harmful.

China has also taken umbrage at US leaders' insistence on calling the coronavirus a "Chinese virus" or "Wuhan virus," even after it was given a non-geographic name – Sars-CoV-2 – by the World Health Organisation. What has ensued is a war of words and a blame game between the world's two most powerful nations, which should really be cooperating to lead the world out of this crisis.

Now, Chinese and Hong Kong media, including CGTN and the South China Morning Post, are floating the idea that the coronavirus could have originated in Italy because an expert there recently told the US' National Public Radio that a "strange pneumonia" was circulating there as early as last November.

When and where the virus could have started, time and science will tell. In the meantime, it is unhelpful if government officials and diplomats were to latch on to these reports and draw as yet unfounded conclusions.

EMULATING CHINA'S DRACONIAN WAYS

Meanwhile, many countries that are facing spikes in Covid-19 cases and deaths are taking a page from China's playbook – the lockdown, albeit to varying degrees of severity.

The lockdown of Wuhan and several cities around it in January had been vilified by some in the West as too draconian and an infringement on individual rights. But these measures, as well as restricted movement in other parts of the country

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Workers in Spain sorting out personal protective equipment (PPE) received from China at a warehouse. The writer says that sending medical equipment overseas and sharing its experience to help the world combat the coronavirus will salvage some of China's credibility that it had before the outbreak. PHOTO: AFP



As much as China's actions show a desire of the Chinese to help, having gone through a devastating few months battling the virus, they also reveal an eagerness to repair China's image, which has been battered by its initial missteps in dealing with the virus.

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affecting about 500 million people in all, proved to have worked in slowing the spread of the virus and buying the world time to gear up for the outbreak.

Some of these measures included shutting schools, offices and factories and requiring everyone to stay home unless they needed to seek medical care. Public transport was also halted and private vehicles banned from the roads.

Italy was the first Western nation to emulate China in imposing a lockdown on the worst-hit areas of the country in February. This has since been expanded to the whole country as the epidemic has worsened. Italy has the highest number of infections in Europe and it now has more deaths than China.

In what is effectively a national quarantine, Italy has shut down all but the most essential businesses, closed schools and universities, prohibited public gatherings and suspended sporting events. The army has been enlisted to help enforce the lockdown.

In France, from March 17, people can leave home only on essential business, such as shopping for food or basic necessities, going to the doctor or going to work. Restaurants, nightclubs, cinemas, museums and sports centres were closed and only food shops, pharmacies, banks, news agents and petrol stations were kept open.

In the US, four states including New York and California have instituted statewide lockdowns affecting 80 million people.

Closer to home, Malaysia has imposed a partial lockdown, or movement control order, as cases began to spike, with nobody allowed to leave or enter the country from March 18 to April 14, schools and non-essential businesses closed and public gatherings disallowed.

LET ACTIONS DO THE TALKING

While some of China's draconian measures are being emulated around the world, it does not mean that these countries are looking to the Chinese authoritarian ways as a model for governance.

People are willing to accept draconian and intrusive measures that they normally would not have because of the pandemic, said Professor Zheng Yongnian from the East Asian Institute at

the National University of Singapore.

However, it is Chinese authoritarian rule that had led to the initial delay in the country's response, and this has caused more people to doubt the Chinese model, he added.

Even the Chinese themselves were questioning the initial delay and whether the situation would have been different if the government had not been so tardy, he said.

While the draconian measures had been necessary to bring the virus under control, it came at a huge social and economic cost as the whole country came to a standstill for two months, said Prof Zheng. People are reflecting on whether China could have instead adopted the less paralysing measures taken by South Korea, Singapore or Japan, as well as Hong Kong and Taiwan, he added.

“They don't have the draconian measures of China but still those societies are quite effective in controlling the disease,” he said.

What China can do, through its actions now – sending needed medical equipment overseas and sharing its experience and scientific knowledge to help the world combat the coronavirus – is to salvage some of the credibility that it had before the outbreak.

The last thing it should do, said Prof Zheng, is to trumpet such actions, as it could lead to a backlash because people usually don't like such behaviour.

Indeed, that pushback has begun with commentators in the US and Europe questioning Chinese motives in sending medical supplies and healthcare personnel to coronavirus-hit countries.

Former diplomat Kurt Campbell and researcher Rush Doshi, in an article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine, wrote that China is positioning itself as the global leader in pandemic response – while the US falters – by working to “tout its own system, provide material assistance to other countries, and even organise other governments”. Others have said China is trying to deflect blame through its propaganda.

If China wants to repair its image and build goodwill, it has to move hearts through its acts of kindness and generosity on the ground, rather than blow its horn. It has to let its actions do the talking. [ST](#)

Coronavirus cases to rise as more overseas Singaporeans return home

Health Minister Gan Kim Yong gives the assurance that Singapore will have sufficient capacity to meet all healthcare needs, including those of coronavirus patients

THE NUMBER OF CORONAVIRUS CASES WILL continue to rise in coming weeks, as some of the 200,000 overseas Singaporeans return home, said Health Minister Gan Kim Yong on March 25.

He noted that the number of cases in Singapore has more than doubled in the past week, from 266 to around 900 on March 31.

“Almost 80 per cent of these new cases were imported, all from countries other than China even though we continued to see around 1,000 residents and long-term pass holders return from China in the past week,” he said.

As of March 31, there were more than 850,000 Covid-19 cases and over 40,000 fatalities from the disease worldwide, with the epicentre shifting from China to Europe.

In his ministerial statement in Parliament, Mr Gan said Singapore has slowed the spread of Covid-19 through a three-pronged approach: reducing importation, detecting and isolating cases early, and emphasising social responsibility and good personal hygiene habits.

First, Singapore has implemented border controls to stem the inflow of travellers – all short-term visitors, including tourists, have been barred from entering or transiting since March 24.

The Government also advised Singaporeans to defer all travel until the global situation is under control.

It has strengthened border checks to detect and isolate cases before they come into contact with the wider community, and taken steps to detect cases early through surveillance at hospitals, polyclinics and the network of Public Health Preparedness Clinics.

Singapore residents have benefited from more than 267,000 subsidised attendances at these clinics thus far, on top of those at polyclinics, Mr Gan said.

He added that Singapore had also carried out around 39,000 tests for Covid-19 up until March 25.

This translates to 6,800 tests per million people in Singapore, compared with around 6,500 in South Korea, and 1,000 in Taiwan.

These tests are key in detecting as many cases as



possible and as early as possible, he said.

“How the outbreak develops globally will depend on the strategies and efforts of countries around the world,” Mr Gan said, noting the World Health Organisation has advised that the course of the pandemic can still be changed if all countries take the necessary containment actions.

“Otherwise, we will continue to see the number of affected countries and cases rise rapidly.”

The top three sources of imported cases to Singapore are the United Kingdom, the United States and Indonesia, Mr Gan said.

The minister gave the assurance that Singapore will have sufficient capacity to meet all healthcare needs, including those of coronavirus patients.

“We had invested significantly in the past to ensure that we have sufficient healthcare capacity to manage infectious outbreaks,” he added, noting that the 330-bed National Centre for Infectious Diseases was purpose-built with spare capacity, and can be further increased to over 500 beds if necessary.

At the beginning of the epidemic, Singapore took the conservative approach of admitting all Covid-19 cases, regardless of severity, until they tested negative twice over 24 hours.

But now, it is clear that about 80 per cent of cases are mild or moderate, with many patients in hospital experiencing mild symptoms similar to the flu.

Nurses at Mount Elizabeth Hospital preparing to receive Covid-19 patients. The Government is tapping private hospitals and setting up community care facilities.

PHOTO: MOUNT ELIZABETH HOSPITAL

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Passengers walking past a temperature screening area at Changi International Airport in Singapore. In preparation for the expected surge in cases, the Government has expanded its "contact tracing capacity", from three teams at the start to 20 teams. PHOTO: AFP

At the beginning of the epidemic, Singapore took the conservative approach of admitting all Covid-19 cases, regardless of severity, until they tested negative twice over 24 hours. But now, it is clear that about 80 per cent of cases are mild or moderate, with many patients in hospital experiencing mild symptoms similar to the flu.



"They only require limited medical care, and what we need really are isolation facilities to prevent them from infecting others, until they are free of the virus," Mr Gan said.

This is why the Government is tapping private hospitals and setting up community care facilities, he said.

Concord International Hospital started accepting well and stable Covid-19 patients on March 20 and Mount Elizabeth Hospital saw its first such patient on March 23. The Government has also converted some government quarantine facilities, starting with D'Resort with a maximum capacity of about 500, for this purpose.

Singapore residents and long-term pass holders transferred to these facilities will continue to receive free-of-charge testing and treatment,

except for those who have travelled overseas despite the travel advisory and contracted the infection while overseas.

Patients in these facilities will continue to be quarantined and closely monitored, Mr Gan said, so there is no risk of the public in the community being exposed to these cases while they are at these facilities.

"Only when they have fully recovered and tested negative for the virus twice over a duration of 24 hours, will they be discharged back into the community. At this point, they no longer have any risk of transmitting the virus to others, as they have fully recovered," he added.

"We will continue to explore the use of such isolation facilities for our well and stable Covid-19 patients. This way, we can focus our critical hospital resources on the seriously ill, to minimise the number of fatalities."

Singapore's strategy, he said, is to slow down the infection rate and keep it as low as possible.

In preparation for the expected surge in cases in the coming weeks, the Government has expanded its "contact tracing capacity", from three teams at the start to 20 teams today, he added. These teams include officers from public service agencies and the Singapore Armed Forces.

Singapore can now trace up to 4,000 contacts each day, and will continue to scale up its contact tracing capacity as needed, Mr Gan said. [S](#)

Singapore's strategy in fighting Covid-19

IN PARLIAMENT ON MARCH 25, HEALTH Minister Gan Kim Yong gave an update on the Republic's strategy in fighting the coronavirus since the outbreak here in January.

The crux of Singapore's strategy is to slow down the infection rate and maintain it at as low a level for as long as possible, Mr Gan said.

This will help the country to better conduct epidemiological investigations, contact tracing and quarantining of close contacts, to prevent further spread and to preserve healthcare capacity to care for the more severe cases.

These were the key points in his ministerial statement.

WAVES OF CASES

Singapore has seen three waves of cases so far. Late-January to February: Imported cases from China. Early patients were mostly tourists from Wuhan to Singapore.

February to March: Some of these imported cases led to local clusters, such as one at a health products store frequented by Chinese tourists, and another cluster comprising two churches. Two Chinese visitors had visited one of the churches, leading to Singaporeans being infected.

Mid-March to present: Second wave of imported cases. This has seen numbers doubling in a week from 266 to 558 as of March 24, and almost 80 per cent of these were imported. The patients are not from China, even though about 1,000 Singapore permanent residents and long-term pass holders have returned from China in the past week.

Instead, the new cases are Singaporeans and residents returning from three key countries: Britain, the United States and Indonesia.

The big worry now: "Over the coming weeks, the number of cases will continue to rise, as some of our around 200,000 overseas Singaporeans return home from all over the world," said Mr Gan.

SINGAPORE'S 3-PRONGED STRATEGY TO FIGHT COVID-19

Reduce importation of cases

Border controls have been imposed since January to stem the inflow of travellers to the country.

All short-term visitors from anywhere in the world are currently barred entry and transit.

Only Singaporeans, PRs and long-term work pass holders can return from abroad.

Residents are also urged not to travel and will face penalties – such as unsubsidised Covid-19 care – should they do.

Detect and isolate cases early

Border checks have been strengthened to detect and isolate cases before they come into contact with the rest of Singapore.

Beyond checkpoints, there is a surveillance system in place at hospitals, polyclinics and the more than 900 clinics under the Public Health Preparedness scheme.

These clinics offer attractive subsidised rates for patients with respiratory illnesses to seek treatment and be spotted early if they have Covid-19.

There have been more than 267,000 subsidised attendances at these clinics so far, on top of patients checked at polyclinics, said Mr Gan.

To date, Singapore has done around 39,000 Covid-19 tests. This translates to 6,800 tests per million people in Singapore. It compares with about 6,500 in South Korea and 1,000 in Taiwan.

Contact tracing is also a crucial weapon.

Singapore has ramped up contact tracing efforts, from three teams when the process started to 20 teams. Officers are from the Health Ministry, Singapore Police Force and, now, also agencies like the Singapore Armed Forces.

The teams can trace up to 4,000 contacts each day, and will continue to scale up as needed. Technology is also being used, such as the TraceTogether app launched by the Health Ministry and GovTech.

Emphasis on social responsibility and good personal hygiene

The Government has stressed how individuals must play their part to reduce the risk of transmission.

It has urged people to abide by quarantine orders and stay-home notices.

"If you violate them, there will be penalties, and the greatest penalty is that you may infect others close to you," the minister said.

The Government has also extended help to employers whose employees have to serve out quarantine and stay-home notices.

The Health Ministry has paid particular attention to seniors, urging them to stay safe and to avoid activities in large groups.

RESEARCH EFFORTS

Scientists in Singapore have been developing research and knowledge on Covid-19 and sharing these with other countries, said Mr Gan.

In the area of treatment, a therapeutic work group comprising members from various hospitals across different disciplines and the Health Sciences Authority has been set up.

It is working on guidelines for repurposed drugs with antiviral activity – such as Lopinavir-ritonavir, Interferon Beta-1B and hydroxychloroquine – to treat infected patients in Singapore.

The National Centre for Infectious Disease and Tan Tock Seng Hospital, together with the Singapore Blood Bank, have started to collect convalescent blood plasma from recovered patients for treatment for other patients.

How the outbreak has evolved in Singapore

Three distinct phases of how the coronavirus has spread in Singapore have emerged, based on a detailed analysis done by The Straits Times. Experts predict a rise in the number of new cases before they start to fall.

WUHAN PHASE

Jan 23 to Feb 3

A new virus is brought into Singapore; all cases are imported from Wuhan, there is no community spread.

0 18

COMMUNITY PHASE

Feb 4 to March 9

Local transmission starts, with the formation of clusters such as the Safra Jurong cluster, which has 47 cases linked to it.

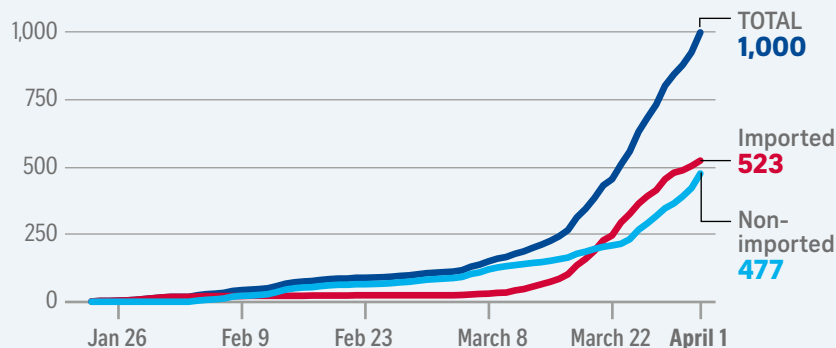
127 15

IMPORTED PHASE

March 10 to April 1

While Singapore seems to be heading towards the next wave of local infection, the number of total imported cases has not yet overtaken total local cases.

350 490



BRINGING COVID-19 BACK HOME

Places where 523 imported cases travelled to before returning to Singapore

	No. of cases		No. of cases		No. of cases
Britain	189	Canada	6	Slovenia	2
United States	87	UAE	6	South Africa	2
Indonesia	32	Portugal	5	Norway	1
France	31	Italy	5	Serbia	1
Malaysia	25	Denmark	5	Bosnia	1
China (Wuhan)	24	Australia	4	Monaco	1
Switzerland	21	Czech Republic	3	Russia	1
Philippines	20	Ireland	3	Iceland	1
Germany	17	Japan	3	Mexico	1
Austria	12	Brazil	3	Sri Lanka	1
Spain	11	Pakistan	3	Taiwan	1
India	11	Hungary	2	Vietnam	1
Turkey	9	Eastern Europe	2	Laos	1
Thailand	9	Croatia	2	Ethiopia	1
Netherlands	6	Sweden	2		

NOTES:

- Data as of April 1
- A traveller can go to more than one country
- 36 travellers have pending travel history

Compiled by: Clara Chong

Source: MINISTRY OF HEALTH
STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Doctors have also been taking part in international clinical trials, with collaborators such as the United States National Institutes of Health.

On vaccines, scientists around the world have successfully isolated and cultured the virus, which will help develop a vaccine, said Mr Gan.

Global work is also being done to identify vaccine candidates and conduct testing, such as how Moderna Inc has started human trials.



Singapore's 330-bed National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) is built to manage infectious outbreaks in Singapore and can be further increased to over 500 beds if needed.
PHOTO: CMG

Singapore's Duke-NUS Medical School is working with Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) and international partners to develop a clinical trial for a vaccine. There are plans to start testing this year.

Mr Gan said that with all these ongoing efforts, WHO estimates that the earliest a vaccine will be ready would likely be sometime next year.

"We do not know how long the pandemic will last, but we have to plan on the basis that Covid-19 will be with us for a long while, maybe till the end of the year or longer, and ensure that we have the resources and capabilities to see us through."

MANAGING HEALTHCARE CAPACITY

The Government has said it will ensure sufficient capacity to meet not just the needs of Covid-19 patients but also that of other patients.

Investments had already been made to manage infectious outbreaks in Singapore, with the 330-bed National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID) built for just this purpose, and with spare capacity, said Mr Gan.

The NCID can be further increased to over 500 beds if needed, he added.

The ministry is also collaborating with private hospitals for some non-Covid-19 patients to be cared for there instead.

Also, because about 80 per cent of Covid-19 cases have been found to be mild to moderate, the MOH is tapping private hospitals and setting up community care facilities for such patients. Patients here will continue to be quarantined and closely monitored so there is no community risk. Only when they have fully recovered and tested negative for the virus twice over 24 hours will they be discharged.

These steps will allow critical hospital resources to be focused on the seriously ill and minimise deaths.

Mr Gan also noted how healthcare workers – "the most important resource" – are taking on a very heavy load, and thanked them, and said measures have been put in place to reduce burnout. "Most importantly, every case we can avoid will help to lighten their load," he said.

'NO SHARP PEAK OR LONG TAIL'

Just as it's important to ensure sufficient healthcare capacity, it is equally important to prevent new local clusters in the first place, he stressed.

This way, Singapore can try to avoid an exponential growth in the number of infections, which could quickly overwhelm the healthcare system, as seen in Hubei and Italy, and increasingly in many other countries.

Singapore's strategy is to slow down the infection rate and maintain it at as low a level for as long as possible, Mr Gan told Parliament.

He noted that if nothing is done, the number of cases will shoot up, as seen in some countries.

In such a scenario, the only hope is that most of the population gets infected and becomes immune, and the rate of infection starts to slow down as more become immune, or a vaccine or a cure is found.

"This scenario may seem attractive – you get over with it very quickly – but there are unfortunately two major risks," Mr Gan said.

First, an uncontrolled spike in the number of cases in a short period of time will overwhelm the healthcare system, easily resulting in high mortality rates, "and there is no turning back once we are on this track."

The second risk is that it is not certain yet that this immunity will be effective or sustained.

One alternative is to introduce stringent safe distancing and other measures to slow down the infection rate.

"The number will still grow, but if we do it right, we will end up with a lower peak," he said.

This is commonly known as flattening the curve.

"But by flattening the curve, we may actually stretch out the pandemic, meaning it will take longer for the pandemic to be over," he said.

"For Singapore, we are still at the start of the curve today, and we have a chance, to do neither," he said.

"We hope that if we do it right, we can significantly slow down the growth as much as we can, until the pandemic is over, without either a sharp peak or long tail," he said. **ST**



Covid-19 nasal swab tests being performed in a laboratory in Pasir Panjang, Singapore. To date, Singapore has done around 39,000 Covid-19 tests. **ST PHOTO: TIMOTHY DAVID**



Country Report

Daily wage workers in India brave long walk home

Sudden lockdown order leaves millions stranded, drawing criticism of poor planning

DELIVERY RIDER MOHAMMED RIYAZ, 19 YEARS old and the eldest of four siblings, was sent away by his family in Bihar even before he was a teenager; they wanted him to earn a living and help feed them.

He has been doing so faithfully for the last several years, ferrying goods in Delhi on his reliable cycle cart. It has not let him down so far, and Mr Riyaz hopes it will not either this time.

It is on his cart that he has set out for his home, forced by a 21-day lockdown imposed by the government from midnight on March 24.

The order came with just four hours' notice, crippling millions of daily wage workers in India's cities who suddenly found they had no way to earn a livelihood or return home with passenger transport already blocked.

Stranded without work for eight days and evicted from his dwelling, Mr Riyaz said he had no alternative but to pedal the roughly 1,000km between Delhi and his home in Bihar's Supaul district.

"We are dying here because of hunger. What are we going to eat if we don't earn?" he told The Straits Times, as he and his friends took a break on an expressway. He and his group are, however, among the lucky ones. They will not have to walk.

Helpless daily wage workers - hundreds of thousands of them - have begun heading out from India's cities on their feet since the lockdown,

Thousands of migrant workers fighting their way onto buses outside the Anand Vihar bus terminal in New Delhi to leave for their villages during the lockdown. PHOTO: AFP

DEBARSHI DASGUPTA

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In New Delhi



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(Right) Mr Mohammed Riyaz, 19, (in singlet) and his friends on their journey home. They were travelling a distance of more than a thousand kilometres between Delhi and their home after the lockdown.

ST PHOTO: DEBARSHI DASGUPTA

prompting criticism of a poorly planned policy that had failed to anticipate the tragic impact it would have on such workers as well as prepare for the fallout.

The sudden decision shattered their fragile daily existence; what they ate at night often depended on their earnings during the day.

The coronavirus is still a distant threat but hunger, on the contrary, has always been a more immediate death risk, more so now than ever before.

"How can we stay back?" asked Mr Vijay Singh, 24, who worked at a construction site earning around 350 rupees (\$6.60) a day.

He had been unable to find work for more than three weeks and with only 250 or so rupees left, Mr Singh decided to lock up his shanty and walk home with his wife, four-year-old son and his brother-in-law in tow.

"The authorities might feed us for a few days but no one is going to look after us beyond that. We will be beaten with lathis and arrested if we head out for work," he added, referring to the long, heavy



bamboo sticks.

The family is headed for Mahoba in Uttar Pradesh, a distance of nearly 500km.

The flight of migrants forced state governments across the country to scramble and arrange for buses to ferry as many people as possible.

Videos widely shared on social media from a bus terminal in Anand Vihar near the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border showed thousands of migrants waiting desperately for buses.

Those who could had even marshalled tractors,

India struggles to put lockdown in place

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First day of restrictions to curb virus spread marked by chaos, supply chain disruptions

FOLLOWING THE START OF A THREE-WEEK lockdown at midnight on Tuesday, March 24, India is facing serious challenges - from ensuring that essential groceries and medicine reach people, to encouraging social distancing and helping the poor through a time of wage disruptions.



Municipal workers distributing bags of food among the residents as they maintain safe distance during the 21-day nationwide lockdown. PHOTO: REUTERS

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the biggest lockdown in the world, which will essentially keep 1.35 billion people restricted to their homes in a bid to break the coronavirus transmission chain.

The first day of the lockdown saw signs of chaos and ample anecdotal evidence of supply chain disruptions, in spite of assurances to the contrary by the government.

Teething problems reported included the police cracking down on vegetable vendors, delivery trucks being blocked at borders and delivery boys getting stopped, even though essential services are exempt from the lockdown.

Panic buying was reported at grocery stores. Online grocery providers, from Big Basket to Flipkart, announced that they were temporarily unable to fulfil deliveries due to logistical issues.

Social distancing has emerged as a key measure in the fight against the virus. But that is proving to be difficult, particularly with the poor living in crowded spaces.

With 27 deaths and infected cases climbing above 100 as of March 30, Mr Modi has urged people to stay indoors, warning that a mass coronavirus outbreak would be disastrous for the South Asian country.

Water, too, remains in limited supply in the slums, making even something as basic as washing hands frequently difficult.

Social activist Nikhil Dey said: "For the poor, (the) lockdown is a massive problem. The urban poor live in such close proximity to (one another)... within one room and outside also; there is no space.

cranes and pushcarts that were hitched to motorcycles.

The government brushed aside criticism that the lockdown had been poorly planned.

A statement said the movement of people should be prevented with orders issued again to seal state and district borders.

It had also asked state governments to ensure adequate food and shelter are made available where the migrant labourers work and ensure wages continue to be paid.

As these migrants continue their journey, more are also likely to die because of exhaustion, hunger and road crashes than from Covid-19.

Mr Ranveer Singh, a delivery agent who had walked for more than 200km, died of a cardiac arrest. He was 80km from his home.

Reports of migrants being run over by speeding vehicles on highways have also come in with frightening frequency. At least 17 have been killed so far in three different crashes.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was contrite in his

monthly radio address, as he apologised, especially to the poor, for the tough decision to impose a lockdown. "I understand your troubles but there was no other way to wage a war against corona for a country like India with a population of 1.3 billion."

But many who have hit the road think Mr Modi could have given them some time before imposing the lockdown.

"We should have at least got a day's notice. This way we could have left on a bus," said Mr Naveen Kanojia, 23, who was more than 300km away from his home in Uttar Pradesh's Etawah district.

The crisis, meanwhile, has moved many locals to come out and help those walking home.

Mr Pankul Jain, a resident near Delhi, has been doing the rounds with some other volunteers feeding the local poor as well as migrants in recent days.

"The good thing is that there are many people who have shown up in their cars distributing food to them," he said, adding that he must have seen thousands walking home but not a single bus. [ST](#)

The sudden decision has shattered their fragile daily existence; what they ate at night often depended on their earnings during the day.



"The rural poor also have big issues because a lockdown isolates them and they don't get information related to food and health. It is a humanitarian crisis."

Mr Dey, along with others, has urged the government to consider giving cash handouts of 7,000 rupees (\$130) a month to each poor household for two months, as well as to provide free food.

"As far as social distancing is concerned, if you don't have food or (if you) are not well, you are going to break the rules," he said.

Daily-wage labourers are particularly at risk, with the lockdown halting economic activity across sectors.

Some have come up with offers to help the poor.

Mr Anand Mahindra, chairman of Mahindra Group, tweeted: "The lockdown's necessary, but will be devastating for the homeless, daily-wage earners and contract workers. If each of us takes care of the daily rations and essentials of at least three less privileged families, it will have an exponential effect, but unlike Covid-19, it'll be a 'good virus'."

On March 29, the government moved to address some of these concerns.

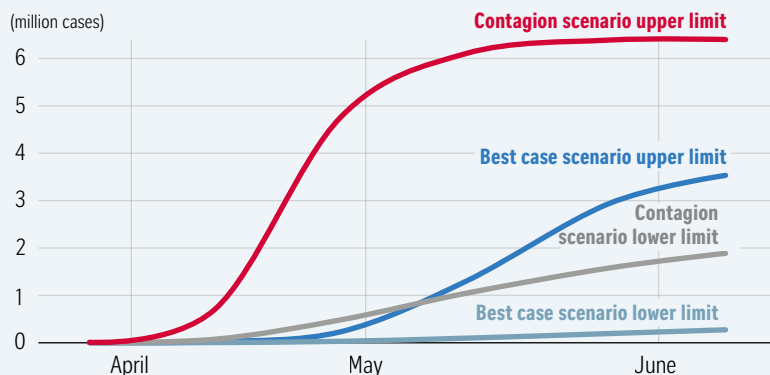
Federal Minister for Information Prakash Javadekar announced that rice would be available to 800 million of India's poor at a subsidised rate of three rupees per kilogram instead of 37 rupees, while wheat would go for two rupees per kilogram instead of 27 rupees.

"The government is studying the financial impact of the coronavirus - let's solve the crisis first," he said.

Still, the country is expected to feel the economic cost of the lockdown. India's economic growth fell to a six-year low of 4.7 per cent in the last quarter of last year. Experts predict the lockdown would significantly dent India's gross domestic product (GDP) growth, making this an even worse year for the economy than the 2008 global financial crisis.

Predicted cases of Covid-19 in India

India could see between 100,000 and 1.3 million cases of coronavirus by mid-May, according to a team of scientists based mainly in the United States.



Source: REUTERS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

Mr Rishi Sahai, managing director of boutique investment bank Cogence Advisors, said: "I expect the lockdown to dramatically reduce GDP in the current and subsequent quarters, while there will be prolonged economic gloom throughout the rest of the year."

The biggest whammy will be to private consumption, which accounts for 57 per cent of India's GDP.

Forecasting service Oxford Economics has slashed India's growth forecast for the first quarter of this year to 3 per cent, a number not seen even during the worst of the global financial crisis, Mr Sahai noted. [ST](#)



A woman taking the Mass Rapid Transit train in Kuala Lumpur, during Malaysia's movement control order. PHOTO: REUTERS

Country Report

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Malaysia's stay-home order leaves many too close for safety

Those living in low-cost housing and foreign workers share tight spaces

MALAYSIA'S MOVEMENT CONTROL ORDER (MCO) has, for most households, meant the annoyance of being cooped up at home, counting the days as the authorities try to limit human contact to curb transmission of the coronavirus.

But for some in the country of 32 million, the stay-home order has resulted in the opposite of the much-vaunted "social distancing" method to "flatten the curve" of infections.

Hundreds of thousands live in low-cost public housing where some units – typically less than 60 sq m in size – have over a dozen people piled into them.

And then there is the unskilled foreign labour – two million legal and anywhere up to double that

undocumented – who often share tight spaces so as to reduce cost.

"I'm renting a small room on top of a shop lot in Petaling Jaya with two other friends for RM500 (\$170); the size of the room is roughly 10 sq m," said Bangladeshi wiring technician Shohel Mollah, 29, referring to the satellite city next to Kuala Lumpur. "Two other rooms are also being rented by six others, so there are nine of us."

Despite taking precautions, such as having one person buy groceries for everyone and immediately showering and washing the worn clothes upon returning, they live in fear of contracting the virus. "We keep on asking ourselves, what if one of us contracts it without knowing because we're living in such a cramped place?" he told The Straits Times.

Meanwhile, many poor citizens are also living in cheap housing, with several generations of a family or even several families sharing the space. According to MP Fahmi Fadzil, whose constituency Lembah

Pantai is in Kuala Lumpur, low-cost government flats “are very densely populated”, with each block having up to 18 floors and 20 units per floor, and two to 12 people per unit.

Even smaller families like Kuala Lumpur City Hall officer Norden Sohed’s – five people living in a home of about 60 sq m – find life “scary” in these low-cost flats. “The density of this area is high, I dread imagining if one catches the virus,” he told ST.

Mr Norden, 58, is allowed to work from home, but his son has to head out daily as an employee of the postal service.

Concerns of being “too close for comfort” are not limited to just the most vulnerable. Thanks to the advent of “co-living” – where premium apartment units in urban centres are subdivided into several rooms – up to 100 professionals and long-term tourists can share common lounges, kitchens and fitness centres.

Sama+ closed its common areas when the MCO began on March 18. Co-Coon, in Kuala Lumpur, did so on March 24.

Co-Coon told ST: “We have increased the frequency of cleaning in all areas. Hand sanitisers are available in common areas for all.”

One resident, who wanted to be known only as Adam, said: “Management has been careful. If anyone entering the building has a temperature above 37 deg C, they will get medical assistance first.”

Meanwhile, the government yesterday imposed an enhanced movement control order (EMCO) in Hulu Langat, to the east of Kuala Lumpur, after 71 students at a tahfiz, an Islamic school, were found to have Covid-19.

Under the 14-day EMCO up to April 13, residents cannot leave their homes, in a move to contain the virus. Food will be distributed by the Social Welfare Department. This is the second EMCO following one enforced for 14 days to April 9 in two areas in Simpang Renggam, Johor, after a large cluster of cases there. **ST**



Malaysia has deployed its army to ensure the public stays at home through the two-week lockdown meant to contain the coronavirus pandemic. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Malaysia's poorest can breathe easier with RM230b coronavirus stimulus package, but jobs still at stake



A worker spraying disinfectant on a street in Kuala Lumpur, while the movement control order is in place due to the coronavirus outbreak. PHOTO: REUTERS

WHILE BUSINESSES WILL GET SOME relief in the form of a six-month moratorium on existing bank loan repayments, the small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) Association warns businesses are still likely to shutter and millions of jobs could be at risk.

“Why would SMEs take loans to pay salaries and rental when they don’t have any income to sustain their businesses?” SME Association president Michael Kang told The Star. He added that up to four million jobs could be lost if these firms decide not to prolong their losses.

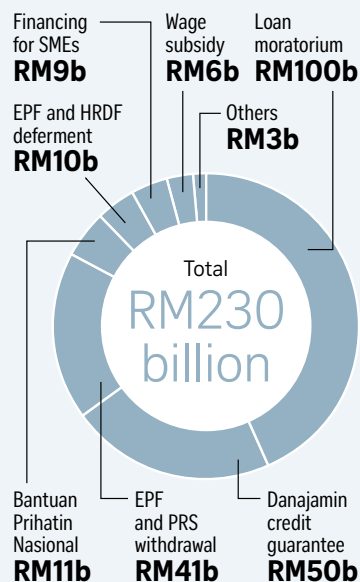
The Malaysian Employers Federation also criticised the wage subsidy scheme because it is available only to SMEs which can show that their normal revenue has at least halved since Jan 1.

This means larger firms which do not qualify for the scheme have little incentive to retain their thousands of workers, and are more likely to retrench them instead.

Hoteliers and food and beverage operators are among those who have also asked the government to cover half their wage bills.

Responding to the stimulus package, the opposition Pakatan Harapan coalition immediately called for the government to double its contribution to private sector wages to RM1,200 (S\$400) monthly.

Malaysia's stimulus package



Source: MALAYSIA PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE
SUNDAY TIMES GRAPHICS

Meanwhile, data shows nearly 15,000 claims for unemployment benefits as of March 30, with February job losses 60 per cent higher than the same month last year. And March is on track to show an 80 per cent increase in job losses year on year. **ST**

– Shannon Teoh



Indonesia's Red Cross personnel wearing protective suits spray disinfectant on the road in Jakarta, Indonesia.
PHOTO: REUTERS

Country Report

Indonesia rolls out new regulations to step up fight against Covid-19 outbreak

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INDONESIAN PRESIDENT JOKO WIDODO ON March 31 approved new regulations that came into immediate effect with the goal of curbing the novel coronavirus outbreak in the country, including a 405.1 trillion rupiah (\$\$35.22 billion) increase in the state budget to cater to exigent expenses such as spending on health equipment.

In a televised address, Mr Joko said he had signed a “Perppu” – a government regulation that becomes effective immediately and is treated as legally binding, thereby circumventing Parliament – on financial policies and stability of the financial system amid the Covid-19 outbreak, which has so far sickened more than 1,500 people and killed more than 130 across Indonesia.

Out of the additional funds to be provided in the state budget, 75 trillion rupiah has been earmarked for the purchase of testing kits, reagents, personal protective equipment, and masks, among other

health-related expenditures.

Besides that, 110 trillion rupiah will be used to provide a social security net, 70.1 trillion rupiah will go towards fiscal incentives and credit for businesses, and 150 trillion rupiah will be used for economic recovery.

The new regulations will allow the government to widen the 2020 budget deficit to 5.07 per cent of GDP.

In addition, Mr Joko announced a Keppres – a presidential decree on a public health emergency that enables the implementation of civil emergency measures – as well as a PP, a government regulation that lays out the guidelines for “large scale social distancing”

The regulations are intended to contain the spread of Covid-19 at the provincial, regency and city levels through coordinated efforts with the virus task force at the centre.

“With the issuance of this PP, regional leaders

should not issue uncoordinated policies. All policies at the regional level must comply with the regulations and refer to PP and Keppres,” said Mr Joko.

The government has been under pressure to impose a lockdown in Indonesia, but Mr Joko has resisted so far due to social and economic concerns.

Details of the exact measures to be taken as part of the regulations have not been revealed as yet.

Indonesia recorded a total of 1,528 infections nationwide on March 31, said Mr Achmad Yurianto, the government’s spokesman on Covid-19 matters.

The world’s fourth-most populous nation also saw overall fatalities reach 136 (as of March 31) – the highest tally across South-east Asia. [ST](#)



Boarding school students are sprayed with disinfectant before they travel back home by bus in Surabaya, Indonesia. PHOTO: REUTERS

Muslim group in close contact with infected patients moved to quarantine ward

ONE OF THE KEY CHALLENGES INDONESIA HAS faced in recent weeks is dealing with a group of more than 200 Muslim worshippers who had been in close contact with three fellow Muslims during Friday prayers at Jami mosque on March 20, who later tested positive for coronavirus.

Indonesian armed forces were progressively moving the group – half of them are foreigners – from a mosque in West Jakarta to the country’s largest quarantine centre, the Wisma Atlet in North Jakarta, in a pre-emptive move to curb the spread of the coronavirus, at the time of going to press.

The authorities began moving the group on March 28. The group has been in isolation at the West Jakarta mosque since March 26.

Comprising 106 Indonesian nationals and 102 foreigners, they were part of a group that had travelled to attend a large Muslim Tabligh gathering, state news agency Antara reported.

Tabligh is formally known as Tablighi Jama’at, a global movement of evangelical Muslims that promotes proselytising, known as dakwah. On March 18, more than 8,000 Tabligh members arrived in Gowa in Indonesian province of South Sulawesi to attend the gathering that had been slated to take place the following day.

More than 400 of them were from the region and countries as far as Saudi Arabia, and among the largest groups of foreign Muslims were those from Thailand, Malaysia and Pakistan.

The gathering was cancelled at the last minute following appeals from the authorities, amid fears of the spread of coronavirus. The pilgrims then made their way home via the airport and seaports in Makassar on March 19, through Jakarta.

The 10-tower Wisma Atlet was built for participating athletes in the 2018 Asian Games, which Jakarta co-hosted with Palembang, South Sumatra.

Some of the towers have been converted into quarantine wards for patients with mild to moderate coronavirus symptoms as well as for people who might have been in close contact with infected patients.

The world’s fourth-most populous country announced its first two cases of coronavirus infections on March 2, and the number has since risen to 1,414 as of March 31.

Meanwhile, Jakarta continued to deploy drones and trucks to spray disinfectants across parts of the capital. [ST](#)

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Indonesian Muslims praying at a mosque on March 20, after an official discouragement of big religious meetings during the coronavirus outbreak, in Tasikmalaya, West Java Province. PHOTO: REUTERS



‘Crazy Zumba aunties’ among growing number of cluster infections in South Korea

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ONCE IT WAS FAMED AS A CALORIE-BURNING Latin dance workout that celebrities swore by to lose as many as 30kg.

But the mention of Zumba now will send chills down many spines in South Korea, after more than 100 cases of community infection of the coronavirus were linked to it.

Netizens lashed out at a group of “crazy Zumba ajummas (Korean for auntie)” for spreading the virus in the western city of Cheonan, while Zumba instructors cried foul over a witch hunt that created the misconception that Zumba is an infectious dance.

This and more small cluster outbreaks of the coronavirus are triggering concern, as the number of cases continued to grow, reaching 9,661 as of March 30.

Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun has urged religious, sports and entertainment facilities to suspend operations, and people to avoid travel and socialising for two weeks, in order to curb the spread of the virus.

Social distancing also helps, as the virus can spread quickly in crowded, enclosed spaces, experts warned.

Infectious diseases professor Kim Woo-joo of Korea University Guro Hospital said people can reduce the risk of infection in crowded spaces by keeping a distance of 1m to 2m from others, and avoiding direct contact.

Cluster infections account for 80 per cent of South Korea’s confirmed cases, the largest cluster being linked to a branch of the secretive Shincheonji Church of Jesus in the south-eastern city of Daegu.

The city has the highest number of cases – more than 6,500.

Capital city Seoul previously reported 314 cases, with another 321 in the surrounding Gyeonggi province.

Major clusters revolve around healthcare facilities, such as Daenam Hospital (119 cases) in Cheongdo, and religious organisations, including River of Grace Church (60) in Seongnam city also

South Korea’s Prime Minister Chung Sye-kyun visiting a mask factory in Seoul. Mr Chung has urged religious, sports and entertainment facilities to suspend operations, and people to avoid travel and socialising over the next 15 days, in order to curb the spread of the virus.

PHOTO: EPA-EFE



previously imposed a new administrative order on around 15,000 entertainment facilities, including Internet cafes, karaoke rooms and dance clubs.

They are required to abide by measures such as regular disinfection and maintaining good ventilation, or risk getting their business licence suspended.

The move came after a bout of small cluster infections emerged around the country.

In Seoul, there are 91 cases among telemarketers working at a call centre and nine linked to an Internet cafe. Other clusters include a coin karaoke room in South Gyeongsang province (seven cases) and a kindergarten in Busan (six cases).

In South Chungcheong province, Zumba dance





A worker spraying disinfectant as a precaution against further spread of the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE

The city's first two cases confirmed on Feb 25 are both linked to Zumba. The first is a 47-year-old woman who attended the class, and the second, a 50-year-old Zumba instructor who taught at three fitness centres and had 60 students.

”

“put Cheonan city in fear”, according to JoongAng Ilbo newspaper.

The city's first two cases confirmed on Feb 25 are both linked to Zumba. The first is a 47-year-old woman who attended the class, and the second, a 50-year-old Zumba instructor who taught at three fitness centres and had 60 students.

By March 2, the cluster had grown to 77 cases, including family members of these Zumba instructors and students, from as young as a two-year-old child. Cheonan city closed 10 fitness centres and community centres offering Zumba lessons.

The final tally in the province, which includes Asan city, is now 103 cases. Most of them are women ranging in age from their 20s to 50s.

Zumba-linked infections have since spread beyond the region to Sejong, Seoul and Gyeonggi.

The health authorities said the virus could have spread so fast because Zumba classes tend to be conducted in small rooms with bad ventilation, with students standing a few centimetres apart.

Amid swirling animosity against the Zumba dance group, one woman has posted her experience on an online forum, calling for an end to hurtful comments.

Happymonju said she attended a Zumba class at a fitness centre on Feb 19 but was told in a call to the coronavirus hotline that she did not need to go for a test as infections linked to the centre were traced to a Feb 21 class.

But her husband developed high fever on March 2 and tested positive for the coronavirus on March 4. She and her two children also tested positive the next

day, even though they had no symptoms, she said.

“I regret not taking the virus test earlier, and I feel remorse for causing harm and being a threat to my neighbourhood,” she wrote, adding that she was careful to stay at home and wore a mask when she went out to the supermarket and bakery.

But she still drew online comments that she was socially irresponsible and “went out a lot.”

“I want to die because I think I caused too much damage... Even without hate comments, my mind is already experiencing hell!” [ST](#)

– Additional reporting by Kim Yeo-joo



An environment and health group campaigning in Seoul for preventative measures against the coronavirus, advising people to avoid crowded places. Experts say the virus can spread quickly in crowded, enclosed spaces and social distancing helps. PHOTO: AFP

Rich and powerful not spared

The coronavirus has hit the rich and famous in its persistent lethal spread around the globe. The entertainment business and sporting circles have not been spared either, with many political leaders and celebrities testing positive for Covid-19. Some famous personalities have also put themselves in self-isolation after possible exposure to the virus. Here are some of the prominent figures affected.

Rodrigo Duterte

Philippine President

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte tested for the coronavirus on March 12 after he had met Cabinet officials who were exposed to infected people, reported AP. However, an official announced on March 13 that Mr Duterte has tested negative, said ABC news.



Joko "Jokowi" Widodo

Indonesian President

Indonesian President Joko Widodo said on March 15 that he and his ministers will be tested for the coronavirus, a day after Transportation Minister Budi Karya Sumadi was confirmed to have been infected. Both President Joko Widodo and his wife, First Lady Iriana, tested negative on March 19.



Mahathir Mohamad

Former Malaysian prime minister

Former Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad had come into close contact with Bandar Kuching MP Kelvin Yii Lee Wuen, who tested positive for the coronavirus, The Star reported. However, the 94-year-old statesman's result has been cleared by health authorities after he tested negative on March 22.



Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson

Hollywood actor and wife

The Academy Award-winning actor and his wife, Ms Wilson, both 63, said in a statement on March 11 that they were in Australia for a film project and had tested positive for the coronavirus. Days later, their son Chet Hanks said in a video that they had been released from a hospital and were in self-isolation.



Tzuyu

South Korean girl group Twice singer

Korean girl group singer Tzuyu was reunited with members from K-pop girl group Twice in Korea after serving a mandatory 14-day quarantine in Taiwan, starting from March 3. Her quarantine comes after the group cancelled their performances in Seoul, which were originally scheduled for March 7 and 8.



Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin and his wife Tuanku Azizah Aminah Maimunah Iskandariah

Malaysia's King and Queen

Malaysia's King and Queen have been under quarantine after seven staff from Istana Negara tested positive for coronavirus, Bernama reported. The comptroller of the Royal Household said Sultan Abdullah Ri'ayatuddin and his wife have tested negative for the virus, but decided to self-isolate for 14 days from March 25.



Peter Dutton

Australia's home affairs minister

Australia's Home Affairs Minister Peter Dutton tested positive for the coronavirus and was quarantined on March 13, days after returning from Washington where he met President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka Trump on March 6. It is not yet known when Mr Dutton contracted the virus.



Boris Johnson

British Prime Minister

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson tested positive for the coronavirus on the midnight of March 26 after developing mild symptoms earlier that day, said Reuters. He is currently self-isolating at his Downing Street residence. Mr Johnson is the first leader of a major power to announce a positive test result for virus.



Prince Charles

Prince of Wales

Prince Charles, the eldest son and heir to Queen Elizabeth II, has tested positive for coronavirus, AFP reported on March 25. Prince Charles is displaying mild symptoms "but otherwise remains in good health", a spokesman said, adding that his wife, Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, has been tested but does not have the virus.



— Compiled by Dominique Nelson

PHOTOS: AP, BLOOMBERG, REUTERS, CHINA PRESS, AFP, EPA-EFE

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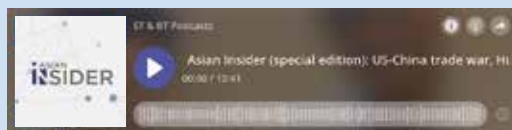
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Marine products from Fukushima prefecture on display at an Aeon supermarket in Tokyo. Despite competitive pricing, it takes some effort to get shoppers to buy fish and seafood from the prefecture.

Special Report

Tapping the Samurai spirit to change Fukushima's image

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Stringent quality control measures notwithstanding, Japan's Fukushima prefecture, which is located some 239km from Tokyo, still struggles to delink radiation exposure concerns from its produce

STANDING IN FRONT OF A LARGE IMAGE OF Aizuwakamatsu castle, located in a city of the same name in Fukushima, Japan's State Minister for Reconstruction Ichiro Kanke holds forth on his promise to restore the prefecture's glory.

The charismatic minister, who hails from the same city and returns frequently for its local fare, is among those leading efforts to change perceptions of the disaster-hit prefecture, which has been preparing to join the country in celebrating Olympics 2020, which will now be held in 2021.

Officials are hoping to use the opportunity to showcase produce from the region and send a signal that it is safe for consumption.

"We have been working very hard to make everything safe," Mr Kanke told a group of international journalists at his office in Tokyo, in November. "We need international understanding," he said.

That, indeed, will be vital for Fukushima and the country.

The Great East Japan earthquake, when a 9.1-magnitude tremor hit the prefecture, followed by a tsunami and the Tepco Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power station accident in March 2011, left over 22,000 people dead or missing.

The triple disaster destroyed more than 120,000 buildings and damaged another million.

Such was the impact of the disaster that more than 163 countries offered assistance for recovery efforts. The prefecture's work to recover from the disaster is being regularly tracked by bodies concerned with ensuring the safety of nuclear power use.

In Fukushima's case, widespread fear about exposure to radiation severely impacted the market for agricultural and marine products from the region. In the months that followed, as many as 53 countries and economies introduced regulations on food imports from Japan.

Today, many countries maintain these restrictions - with only 32 countries and economies lifting import regulations so far.

But there is also the reality that Fukushima's measures to change attitudes have been hampered by occasional setbacks that draw attention to radiation hazards that remain in the area.

As recently as last November, several bags holding waste polluted with radioactive substances were reported missing in the floods caused by Typhoon Hagibis. The bags had been in temporary outdoor storage areas in Fukushima.

The Japanese government in late December delayed the planned removal of fuel from the two reactors at Fukushima, highlighting difficulties faced in cleaning up the site, The New York Times reported.

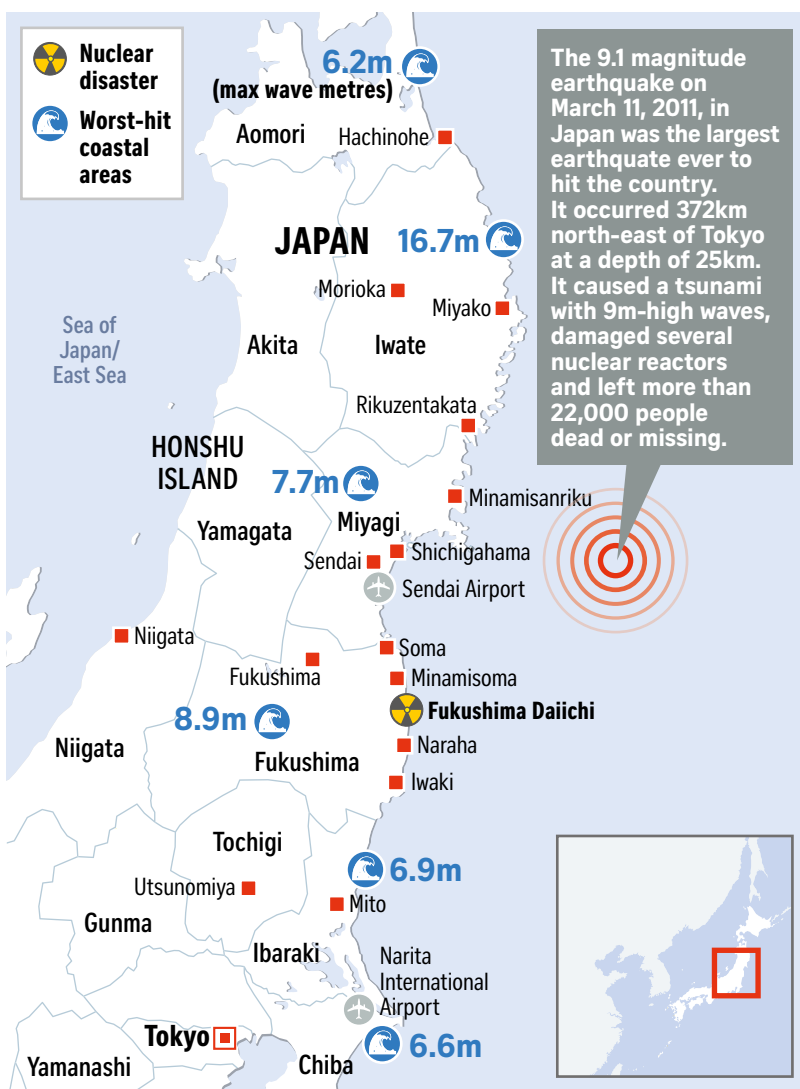
Despite these challenges, the spirit to fight back seems evident.

Apart from the Olympics, one other opportunity Japan is eyeing for Fukushima is the growing world food market. Forecasters say that with the world population set to grow from 7.3 billion in 2015 to 9.7 billion by 2050, the food market in major countries would boom.

And Japan clearly wants to be able to export its food and marine products, including those from Fukushima, to meet this demand. Some of these items could be strawberries, beef, apples, tuna, mackerel, rice - which are already recording high export growth.

Japan's efforts to help Fukushima rebound are

Disaster-hit Fukushima



Source: AFP STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS

led by the Reconstruction Agency established under the Cabinet. A sum of 32 trillion yen (\$420 billion) will have been spent from fiscal 2011 until this year to rebuild homes and reconstruct communities, revive industries and livelihoods, revitalise the area, provide health and living support, and several other initiatives, a government document states. The efforts will include the imposition of very stringent standards for approval of radiation levels in edible products.

Today, fishermen diligently line up to get their catch tested for radiation before letting buyers purchase them at auction markets.

At warehouses in the prefecture, almost every bag of rice produced in the area is tested before being released for sale.

Apart from the Olympics, one other opportunity Japan is eyeing for Fukushima is the growing world food market. Forecasters say that with the world population set to grow from **7.3 billion** in 2015 to **9.7 billion** by 2050, the food market in major countries would boom.

”



Mr Ichiro Kanke is among those leading efforts to change perceptions of the disaster-hit Fukushima prefecture.

In other measures, the top 5cm of soil – where most of the radioactive caesium can be found – was removed in the disaster’s aftermath.

Farmers are now encouraged to use more potassium-rich fertilisers, which can further reduce the absorption of radioactive caesium by the farm

products.

There is more. The standard allowed in food in Fukushima is 100 becquerels of caesium radioactivity per kg (Bq/kg). This is much lower than the European Union’s maximum level of 1,250 Bq/kg and the United States’ at 1,200 Bq/Kg.

Singapore lifts 9-year ban on food products from Fukushima

SUPERMARKET SHELVES IN SINGAPORE ARE once again stocked with food products from Fukushima, Japan, after a nine-year hiatus following the nuclear plant meltdown in the prefecture after the devastating tsunami and earthquake of 2011.

The ban on the import of all food items, from peaches to sake to fish, from the prefecture was lifted in January, marking the end of a series of import controls on produce from across Japan, including Tokyo, Kanagawa and Shizuoka over the past decade.

Consumers interviewed said that they were happy to get their food products from Japan again, but remained wary about those from Fukushima itself.

Madam Soh Ling Hong told The Straits Times in Mandarin that she had been buying Japanese produce regularly. But when it came to food from Fukushima prefecture, she is more prudent.

“If it’s rice and fruit, I don’t mind buying them. But if it’s seafood products, I would think twice, because the ocean was affected by the radioactive

leak,” said Madam Soh, 55.

Singapore Food Agency’s (SFA) lifting of the ban will allow seafood and forest-gathered products – such as wild berries and wild mushrooms – from the city of Fukushima, as well as all food products from areas within the Fukushima prefecture, to be imported into Singapore. Fukushima is highly dependent on agricultural exports.

Among other requirements, these products must be accompanied by a test certificate for radioactive contaminants to show that it meets safety standards, and a certificate of origin to identify the prefecture of origin of the food product, said SFA.

The agency said that the import restrictions were lifted in line with its food safety assessments and that it has been closely monitoring food imports from Japan over the years.

It added that it has not detected any radioactive contaminant in food imports from Japan in the past five years.

– Vanessa Liu

The data and other measures have encouraged some older folk to return from shelters to their homes in the prefecture – although their children tend to work elsewhere.

Despite the gains made in the past eight years, officials candidly admit that changing perceptions in people's minds about safety in the area and about the levels of radiation that can be harmful is still an uphill challenge.

This is most apparent in malls where getting people to buy food and marine goods from Fukushima requires special effort and still meets with limited success, even if they are competitively priced.

This has been the case at an Aeon supermarket in Tokyo where the management trained staff and designated a special place for products from the prefecture to be sold.

It is for this that Mr Kanke acknowledges: "The most challenging part of our job is tackling ungrounded rumours and anxieties about Fukushima products."

Before the disaster, the prefecture was a hub for tourists who would travel to its interiors to take in the beauty of its changing autumn leaves while experiencing the region's peach trees, cuisine, sake breweries, hot springs and historic sites. While tourists have returned, the inflow does not match the surge in visitors elsewhere in Japan.

Mr Kanke believes the government's efforts will bear fruit, saying: "The peaches are to die for. The soba noodles from the region are Japan's best." **ST**
The writer is also Editor, ST Asian Insider.



Bags of rice being inspected for radiation levels in Japan's Fukushima prefecture, which is located some 239km from Tokyo. Almost every bag of rice is tested before it is released for sale. Stringent quality control measures notwithstanding still struggles to delink radiation exposure concerns from its produce. **ST PHOTOS: SHEFALI REKHI**



The Singapore Food Authority lifted a nine-year ban on food products from Fukushima in January. **ST PHOTO: ARIFFIN JAMAR**

Fukushima stakes future on renewables

WALTER SIM

Japan Correspondent
In Tokyo



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Japanese prefecture opens hydrogen power plant, 9 years after triple disaster

FUKUSHIMA IS STAKING ITS FUTURE ON renewable energy, taking the lead in a country that is not just squarely wedded to coal-fired power, but also reluctant to give up nuclear energy.

This despite the anniversary (on March 11) of the devastating triple tragedy nine years ago.

One of the world's biggest renewable-based hydrogen power facilities was opened in Fukushima a short while ago, in the town of Namie that is home to just 1,100 people, or 5 per cent of the pre-disaster population.

Many municipalities in the hardest-hit coastal areas of north-east Japan remain ghost towns, despite exclusion orders being gradually lifted, as former residents do not return.

The full decommissioning of the crippled Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant is expected to continue until 2040 at best, while local fishermen despair over the increasing likelihood that water from the plant will be released into the Pacific Ocean.

Japanese experts say all radioactive particles, except harmless tritium, would have been removed in the treatment process.

Still, there are concerns that the move will

further hurt a region already suffering from “toxic rumours” that have reduced demand for its produce despite stringent testing standards.

As many as 470,000 people fled their homes at the peak of the nuclear disaster, but more than 47,000 still have not returned.

Meanwhile, the Japanese government and Fukushima Daiichi operator Tokyo Electric Power Company (Tepco) continue to face civil lawsuits from Fukushima evacuees.


There are about 30 such civil lawsuits throughout the country.

In the latest decision in favour of the plaintiffs, the Sapporo District Court ordered the government and Tepco to pay 52.9 million yen (\$700,000) in damages to 89 people who were evacuated to Hokkaido.

Also, Greenpeace Japan in a report said that typhoons like Hagibis, which battered the region last year, had created new radiation hot spots in areas previously cleared by the authorities.

Its survey found 40 hot spots with radiation levels more than four times the government's decontamination standard of 0.23 microsievert per hour.

Long-term Fukushima resident Nobuyoshi Ito, 76, who lives in Iitate village, said: “Perhaps, for runners passing through, the exposure is not very high.

“But the situation is still not ideal for those who have returned and are exposed to the radiation 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.” 

A woman offering a silent prayer at an altar for victims of the 2011 earthquake and tsunami disaster at a park in Tokyo.
PHOTO: AFP





Climate Change

PLANET ON THE EDGE

‘Tipping points’ of rapid and irreversible climate change

Scientists say the Earth is on the cusp of crossing ‘tipping points’ of rapid and irreversible change and tell us how close humans are to crossing into a new and more dangerous world

LAST NOVEMBER, A SMALL GROUP OF LEADING climate scientists issued a warning about planetary tipping points and the need to rapidly cut greenhouse gas emissions to limit the risks to humanity.

“Evidence is mounting that these events could be more likely than was thought, have high impacts and are interconnected across different biophysical systems, potentially committing the world to long-term irreversible changes,” they said.

The fear, they wrote in the journal *Nature*, is triggering changes in which exceeding tipping points in one system can increase the risk of crossing them in others, like dominoes falling.

Polar ice sheets are melting faster, raising sea levels and threatening coastlines. Huge areas of forest are going up in smoke in the Amazon, in Australia and across the far northern hemisphere from Russia to Canada. Coral reefs are also badly degraded, while permafrost in the Arctic is melting.

Damage one system and the consequences could be dire for other parts of the planet. Forests are huge stores of carbon, as is the layer of frozen soil in the Arctic. As both degrade, they release more and more carbon, fuelling global warming.

What constitutes a tipping point into a sudden and dangerous shift depends on the system. It could be driven by temperature or affected by droughts and heatwaves. The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says the world needs to limit global average warming to 1.5 deg C

A common squid swimming over mostly dead plate coral on one of the outer reefs off Port Douglas in Queensland, Australia. Globally, reefs are in bad shape. Marine heatwaves can kill wide areas of coral.

ST PHOTO: MARK CHEONG

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Too close for comfort

Scientists say rapid and irreversible ecosystem changes, called tipping points, are a growing threat as the planet heats up and that urgent action on curbing the impact of climate change is needed. The greater the warming, the greater the risks of abrupt changes that could flood coastlines, trigger chaotic weather and disrupt economies.

- 1 Melting permafrost**

! The vast frozen layer of soil in the Arctic is already melting. Faster melting could lead to a huge increase in CO₂ and methane emissions that would accelerate global warming.
- Arctic ice loss**

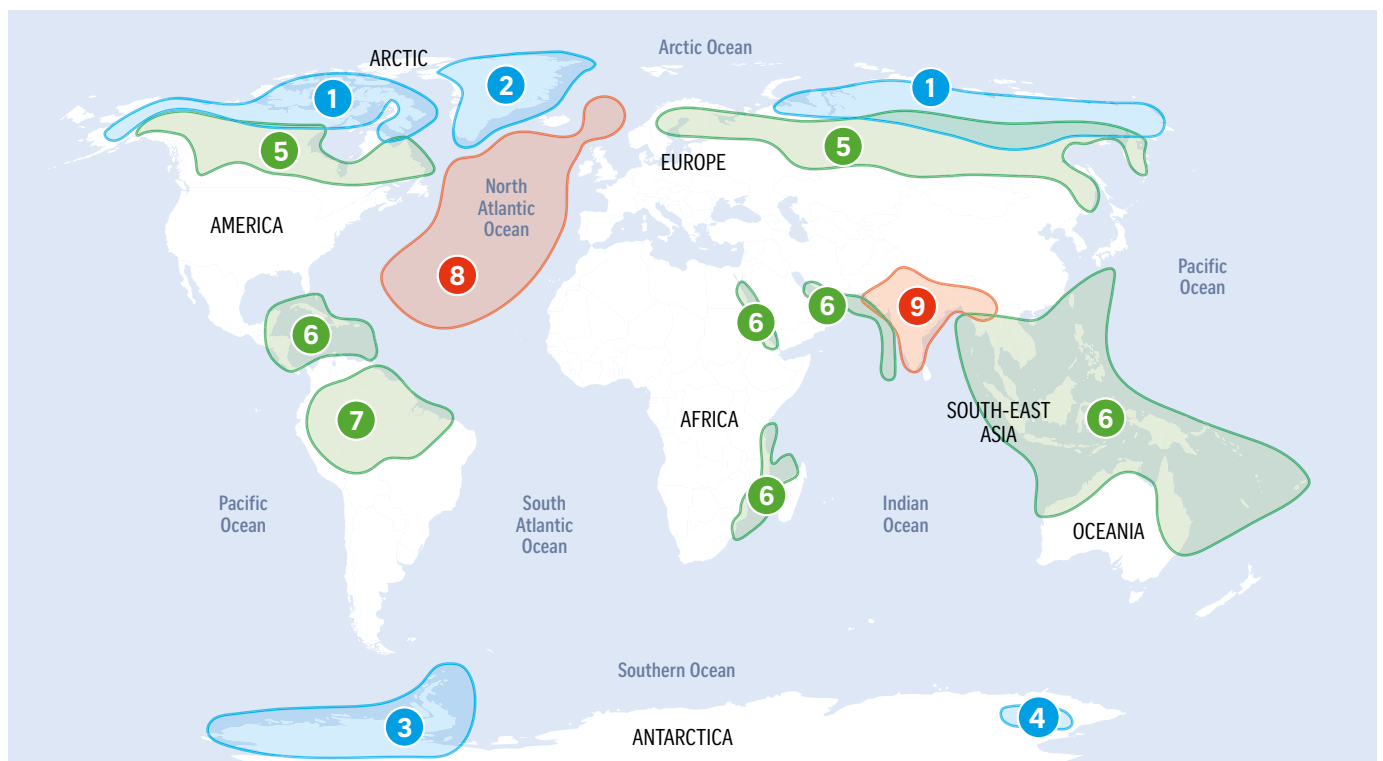
! Arctic sea ice is already shrinking rapidly. Scientists say at 2 deg C of warming, the region has a 10 per cent to 35 per cent chance of becoming largely ice-free in summer. The less ice, the warmer the Arctic becomes, leading to yet more melting of ice and permafrost.
- 2 Greenland ice sheet collapse**

! Higher temperatures could trigger irreversible melting, raising sea levels 7m over centuries. The release of huge amounts of fresh water into the North Atlantic could also disrupt ocean circulation patterns.
- 3 West Antarctic ice sheet disintegration**

! Accelerating ice loss could lead to 3m of sea level rise
- 4 Wilkes Basin ice shelf collapse, East Antarctica**

! Could add 3m to 4m of sea level rise.

■ Melting
 ■ Biome shift
 ■ Circulation change
 ! Impact



- 5 Boreal forest dieback**

! The world's largest ecosystem is also a huge carbon store. Rising temperatures, drought, fires and pests could wipe out a large area of forest in the south, while warmer temperatures could trigger expansion into the Arctic.
- 6 Coral reef die-off**

! Tropical corals are already damaged from warmer ocean temperatures. A mass die-off would represent a profound loss of marine biodiversity and source of income and food for millions of people.
- 7 Amazon rainforest loss**

! Deforestation, drought and fires could dry out the forest, turning it into a vast savannah and huge source of CO₂.
- 8 Atlantic meridional overturning circulation**

! A shutdown, possibly caused by a huge influx of freshwater into the North Atlantic, could disrupt global ocean circulation and trigger cooling in parts of Europe.
- 9 Disruption of Indian monsoon**

! Still being debated. It could strengthen because of higher CO₂ levels or weaken because of severe air pollution causing a local cooling effect. It could lead to greater rainfall extremes and disruption to agriculture.

above pre-industrial levels – a key goal of the Paris climate accord – to reduce the risks to people and the planet. Already, the planet has warmed 1.1 deg C, says the World Meteorological Organisation, and it could reach 1.5 deg C as early as 2030, says IPCC.

Allowing warming to rise to 2 deg C risks further disruption to fisheries and crops, speeds up melting of ice caps and intensifies bush fires.

The more the planet warms, the greater the risks for humanity.

Here are some of the major tipping points:

MELTING ICE SHEETS

For hundreds of millions of people living around coastlines, including in Singapore, melting ice caps are a huge concern.

If all the ice stored in Antarctica and Greenland melted, it would raise sea levels by about 70m. That is not going to happen overnight. It would take centuries to millennia, depending on how much warmer the planet gets.

But already, ice loss has dramatically accelerated. Greenland is losing ice seven times faster than it did in the 1990s, according to an assessment published last year, while ice loss in West Antarctica has sped up sixfold since 1979, another study published last year found.

If Greenland passes a threshold of irreversible melting, it could add a further 7m to sea levels over centuries. “Models suggest that the Greenland ice sheet could be doomed at 1.5 deg C of warming, which could happen as soon as 2030,” said the authors of the Nature commentary.

They pointed to interconnections feeding off one another. Melting Arctic sea ice is intensifying warming in the northern high latitudes, which accelerates the melting of Greenland. This, in turn, slows ocean circulation in the North Atlantic, which brings warmth to Europe, by pouring large amounts of fresh water onto the surface. Slowing ocean circulation reduces rainfall over the Amazon rainforest basin.

West Antarctica is also in trouble. There, several major glaciers rest on the seabed and warming ocean temperatures have been melting and thinning out these vast rivers of ice, speeding up their retreat.

There is debate as to whether the glaciers in question, in the Amundsen Sea Embayment, have reached a tipping point of irreversible loss. It is a similar case for the speeding up of ice loss in Wilkes Land in East Antarctica.

IPCC said there is limited evidence and high agreement that recent Antarctic ice sheet mass losses could be irreversible over decades to millennia. But there is not yet enough data to say whether these changes mark the beginning of irreversible retreat, it added.

“In essence – we may have passed a tipping point, but it is too early to say for certain,” said Dr Michael Meredith of the British Antarctic Survey.

As oceans warm at the poles, the melting intensifies, eating away at the front of glaciers and



Freshly broken bergs from the Pine Island Glacier, Antarctica.
PHOTO: EPA-EFE

from underneath those that extend out far over the surface of the ocean.

“It is ocean heat that is the primary driver for ice sheet retreat, and the extra ocean heat associated with global warming is posing the real danger,” said Dr Meredith.

Dr Eric Rignot, a veteran Antarctic researcher, said his team announced back in 2014 that the Amundsen Sea sector of West Antarctica had passed a tipping point. That is because there was no major obstacle to halt the retreat of the Pine Island, Thwaites and Smith glaciers farther inland, he said.

“The time scale of the retreat is in question. It could be 200 years or much less; we do not know,” said Dr Rignot, a glaciologist at the University of California, Irvine.

The loss of glaciers in this area will raise sea levels by 1m. Once these glaciers go, it could cause the breakup of other West Antarctic glaciers, causing another 2m to 3m of sea level rise.

East Antarctica, which stores the bulk of Antarctica’s ice, is also vulnerable, said Dr Rignot. “Our observations suggest this sector is on course towards slow collapse, but not as advanced as West Antarctica. The retreat rates are 10 times slower.

“We need to control West Antarctica before the end of the century to slow the retreat as much as possible. In East Antarctica, we need to make sure we do not blow the fuse, but right now the fuse is getting warm.”

Scientists cannot yet calculate exactly how much sea levels could rise from melting ice caps by 2100. A recent study estimated up to 58cm from Antarctica, pushing sea level rise to 1.5m by the end of the century when other causes are included.

CORAL GRIEF

Globally, reefs are in bad shape. Warming ocean temperatures, marine heatwaves, increased ocean acidity and pollution have badly degraded many

Scientists cannot yet calculate exactly how much sea levels could rise from melting ice caps by 2100. A study published last month estimated up to 58cm from Antarctica, pushing sea level rise to 1.5m by the end of the century when other causes are included.





Sled dogs wading through standing water on the sea ice during an expedition in North Western Greenland. Ice loss has dramatically accelerated and Greenland is losing ice seven times faster than in the 1990s, PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Super El Nino events, such as the one in 2015-2016, are likely to become more frequent: They are now about once every decade from once every 20 years previously. IPCC also classifies severe El Ninos as "large-scale singular events", meaning these can result in critical tipping points under climate change.



reefs. Climate change is the biggest threat, with the animals that build the reefs struggling to cope with rising temperatures. Marine heatwaves can kill wide areas of coral, leaving them bleached a ghostly white.

Increasingly frequent bleaching episodes have badly damaged sections of Australia's Great Barrier Reef. Back-to-back bleaching events in 2016 and 2017 killed up to half of all shallow water corals in the reef's northern and central sections. Recovery can take a decade. And there are fears that another bleaching event is under way, with temperatures in some areas of the 2,300km-long reef at danger levels, said the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority in Queensland.

Prior to 1982, bleaching episodes were extremely rare and localised. Now, as temperatures rise, the reefs are under greater pressure and do not have time to fully recover from prolonged marine heatwaves.

IPCC says up to 99 per cent of reefs would be wiped out at 2 deg C of global average warming.

"For coral reefs, the tipping point is likely to be crossed in 10 to 15 years. It's virtually impossible to reduce emissions quickly enough to save coral reefs. They are a zombie ecosystem," said Dr Will Steffen, a member of Australia's Climate Council and inaugural director of the Australian National University's Climate Change Institute.

Many reefs around the world are already very different to how they were before the first major global bleaching event in 1998, said Dr David Wachenfeld, chief scientist at the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

"With every further major bleaching event, such as the one between 2014 and 2017, the world's reefs change further," he said.

"Sooner or later, the impacts will outweigh recovery and we will end up with permanently degraded reefs – reefs that have crossed a tipping point."

GOODBYE, AMAZON RAINFOREST

Scientists also hold grave fears for the world's largest rainforest. The Amazon straddles nine

countries and is nearly twice the size of India.

It is a giant store of carbon, soaking up huge amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂), the main greenhouse gas. The trees also soak up and then release huge amounts of water.

But the worry is that escalating deforestation, more severe droughts and fires will dry out the Amazon and turn it into a vast savannah, and a huge net source of CO₂.

"The Amazon has this dual role in the global climate system," said Dr Daniel Nepstad of the Earth Innovation Institute in California. "It's a giant reservoir of CO₂, about 350 billion tonnes equivalent in the trees of the Amazon – a decade of current human CO₂ emissions globally.

Dr Nepstad, who has been studying the Amazon for over three decades, says it's not clear if the Amazon has reached a tipping point.

But last December, two other veteran Amazon researchers, climate scientist Carlos Nobre and conservation biologist Thomas Lovejoy, said the tipping point had been reached.

Dr Nepstad said the trigger for a huge dieback of the forest could be a combination of events. "My feeling is there could be a colossal forest loss event in the Amazon with or without a tipping point mechanism kicking in."

He said large-scale forest dieback could occur through land clearing and then a major drought that triggers severe forest fires, perhaps with a repeat event soon after. "It could happen in any year without the broader tipping point," he said.

That would cause 15 billion to 20 billion tonnes of CO₂ to be pumped into the atmosphere, making it much harder to avoid 2 deg C of warming globally.

The solution? Dramatically cut emissions, slow deforestation and massively ramp up reforestation of millions of hectares of marginal farmlands.

SURPRISES

There are other tipping points, ranging from disruption of the Indian monsoon to more severe El Nino weather patterns, which bring drought to South-east Asia and Australia and floods to parts of South America.

Super El Nino events, such as the one in 2015-2016, are likely to become more frequent: They are now about once every decade from once every 20 years previously. IPCC also classifies severe El Ninos as "large-scale singular events", meaning these can result in critical tipping points under climate change.

What happens from now depends heavily on global climate action.

Dr Steffen said: "I think we enter the tipping cascade danger zone around 2040 to 2045. Unless national policies change radically, we are highly likely to trigger a tipping cascade by mid-century."

But he added: "The climate system often surprises as to how fast it can change." **ST**



Senior compliance consultant Nasuha Marican works out of a room that also doubles as a play area for her 11-month-old daughter, Noura.
ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

Lifestyle

High-fliers say working from home can be productive

Knowing your working style and cutting out distractions are key factors

A SUDDEN WORK-FROM-HOME ARRANGEMENT may seem like an unexpected perk of the coronavirus outbreak.

You roll out of bed five minutes before the first meeting begins, your morning commute is a short walk to the living room and nobody cares if you stay in pyjamas all day.

But as the days drag into weeks, and your work hours bleed into your Netflix and chill nights, the novelty soon gets stale.

The delay in virtual message relay can be draining, especially if you run into network issues. Keeping tabs on employees from afar becomes a challenge for supervisors and many struggle with feelings of isolation after prolonged periods at home.

Typically, only 8.4 per cent of firms in Singapore incorporate regular teleworking, according to the Conditions of Employment 2018 survey by the Ministry of Manpower.

But those who do so full time, long before Covid-19 mandated split-team operations, say it is possible to be just as, or even more, productive than working in the office.

SELFIES AND JUICING CHALLENGES KEEP MORALE UP

Working from home can be isolating and lonely,

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Ms Lyn Lee, the chief diversity and inclusion officer at Royal Dutch Shell, works at least two to three days a week from home, where she also gets to enjoy the company of her dogs.
ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG

so Ms Lyn Lee tries to keep things fun by encouraging her staff to share selfies and join a juicing challenge on Skype.

These “little morale boosters” are important to make working from home work, says the chief diversity and inclusion officer at Royal Dutch Shell. She works with leaders and policymakers to promote gender balance and inclusivity at the multinational corporation.

The 52-year-old typically works from home at least two to three days a week, supervising a team of around

15 human resource professionals in five countries including Singapore.

She started working from home more than 10 years ago, when she began managing teams in different time zones.

While her team is no stranger to flexible working arrangements like staggered shifts, Ms Lee says working from home is not the norm for most.

“It can get lonely,” she says. “Supervisors have to show care and create a sense of togetherness.”

Hence the juicing challenge, which encourages employees to share pictures of the cold-pressed juices they are making to stay healthy.

She also makes it a point to check up on her teammates regularly via e-mail or Skype calls.

“People tend to feel guilty when working from home, as if they have to make up for something,” she says. “But it really doesn’t matter where or when you work if you are meeting the necessary KPIs.”

During meetings, they try to keep the atmosphere relaxed and are understanding of unexpected disruptions.

“Nobody complains if my dogs start barking, for example, or if someone’s kid accidentally appears on screen,” she says. “But we do try to put our microphones on mute when listening to others speak.”

The divorcee lives in a landed home in Kovan with two daughters aged 19 and 23, two dogs, three cats and four turtles.

She works in a small room on the second floor which has glass doors to let in natural light. She also uses an ergonomic chair.

While she says she is lucky to have a conducive home-office environment, she has these tips for those who work from home: sit upright, rest your eyes every 30 minutes and let family members know not to disturb you.

Do's and don'ts to be productive

Do

Carve out a separate space to work

If you and your partner both work from home, maintain a comfortable distance between each other for privacy, like how one would have his or her own office cubicle or work space.

Refrain from bringing up personal issues or domestic affairs, as it can quickly derail any productive momentum. Also, keep each other informed about the tasks you are working on throughout the day, as it is important for morale and direction in such a closed environment.

Make a to-do list

Schedules help you reflect and take stock of your



day better, says Mr Melvin Yuan, 43, founder of technology start-up Hyperspeed.

Every evening, he plans the next day in his notebook, choosing to do only what he believes is “truly important”. After each task, meeting, project or event, he strikes it off and rates his experience from one to five.

Take regular ‘active’ breaks

Without trips to the bathroom or canteen, you will be moving around a lot less.

If you start feeling sluggish or weary, Ms Deana Zafir, 26, a content marketing executive, recommends scheduling a “sweat session” during your lunch break or “celebrating the completion of each task with a short two-minute workout



Her younger daughter, a student at Lasalle College of the Arts, sometimes shares the home-office area with her. But, if she has something urgent to say to her mother, she leaves a Post-it note with a message.

Her dogs enjoy lying at her feet while she works.

BEING PRODUCTIVE IS NOT ABOUT 'SHOWING FACE'

Working from home helps Ms Nasuha Marican juggle her job as a senior compliance consultant, raise her toddler and care for her father, who had a stroke.

In December last year, the 30-year-old quit her job as a corporate lawyer. In January, she took up a new full-time job with Ethikom Consultancy and started working from her HDB flat in Tampines.

The transition from lawyer to consultant at a small four-man firm was smooth, as she was already on extended maternity leave last year after giving birth to her daughter Noura.

"I have to give credit to my boss, who is a family man himself and understood that sometimes my child needed to go for a check-up, for instance," says Ms Marican, whose American data analyst husband is based in the United States. He comes here once every few months and is in the process of obtaining a visa to live here.

Her typical day starts with breakfast with 11-month-old Noura at 9am, before she accompanies her father, who suffered a stroke last year, to his physiotherapy and rehabilitation session. During the five hours in the hospital, she gets some work done on her laptop while waiting for him to finish.

She returns home at around 4pm to play with Noura, feed her dinner and put her to bed, then cranks up her laptop again at around 9pm.

As a senior compliance consultant, she helps fintech companies with licensing applications. Meetings with clients are conducted through the day over e-mail and telephone or video calls. She usually goes to bed at around midnight.

This flexible work arrangement works well for Ms Marican, who feels the "culture of having to be in the office from 9am to 6pm to show your face" is outmoded.

"Sometimes being in an (office) environment may not be the most productive because people are walking around and talking.

"To me, it's about where you can be most productive and being at home doesn't negate that at all," she says. "I can choose when to take time off to tend to my baby without judgment."

Working from home also allows her to customise her environment. She has her iMac and MacBook Pro set up in a room with a sliding door, which doubles as her daughter's play area.

She admits that, sometimes, staying productive is challenging and she often has to work till the wee hours of the morning "because the day was too filled up" with childcare activities.

As with most babies, Noura can be unpredictable – one moment, she is easygoing and the next, she is cranky – says Ms Marican, adding that she works around her child's mood.

"That said, I'm very grateful that help is here – in the form of my mum, my helper and my husband when he is back – in times when I really need to concentrate."

She adds: "At the end of the day, you just need to know your deadline and work backwards from there to get work done.

"That stigma of being at home equating to low productivity is untrue, and it's all about your discipline and mentality." **ST**

Typically, only 8.4 per cent of firms in Singapore incorporate regular teleworking, according to the Conditions of Employment 2018 survey by the Ministry of Manpower.

”



such as jumping jacks or mountain climbers".

Don't

Work on your bed

Sometimes, it is helpful to mimic an office environment instead. Ms Deana adds: "I try to 'hack' my brain into being more productive by doing the exact opposite of what I would do when preparing to sleep. So, no air-conditioning, lots of light and clothes that are not too comfortable are things that work for me."



Buy into the panic

Out of sight does not mean out of mind, says Dr Elizabeth Nair, 70, principal psychologist at Work & Health



Psychologists. Some worry that being unseen means being disadvantaged when supervisors dole out promotions or plum assignments, but if you keep producing good work, that will speak for itself.

Let yourself burn out

Value quality over quantity, says Ms Jade Randall, 34, the senior manager for communications and brand at global experience company Everise, who has been working from home three days a week for a year.

"Don't work yourself to exhaustion just to clock in hours. Listen to yourself. If you are feeling drained, take a break from what you are doing and come back to it later," she says.



– Hannah Bock and Anjali Raguraman

ST ILLUSTRATION: MANNY FRANCISCO



PHOTO: AFP

Big Picture

New badges of honour for S. Korean nurses

BADGES OF HONOUR COME IN MANY DIFFERENT forms. For these nurses in South Korea (above) at the front line of the Covid-19 outbreak, they begin their day by applying tape and bandages across their faces to prevent bruises.

There's hardly a moment to rest during their eight-hour shift at the Keimyung University Daegu Dongsan Hospital in the southern city of Daegu, which has been at the centre of South Korea's coronavirus outbreak.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared Daegu one of South Korea's "special disaster zones" on March 15. The city has more than 6,400 confirmed cases.

The city first gained notoriety after 329 of the country's 604 confirmed cases in February were linked to the Daegu branch of a secretive church, the Shincheonji Church of Jesus. It was back in the

limelight after a new outbreak emerged again in a nursing home in March.

Keimyung University Daegu Dongsan Hospital is one of the biggest hospitals in Daegu with teams of both full-time and volunteer nurses helping out.

Around 200 nurses are working eight-hour shifts at the facility, hospital representative Jung Sang-min told AFP, nearly half of them volunteers. "More nurses wear bandages than doctors because they spend more time tending to patients," he said.

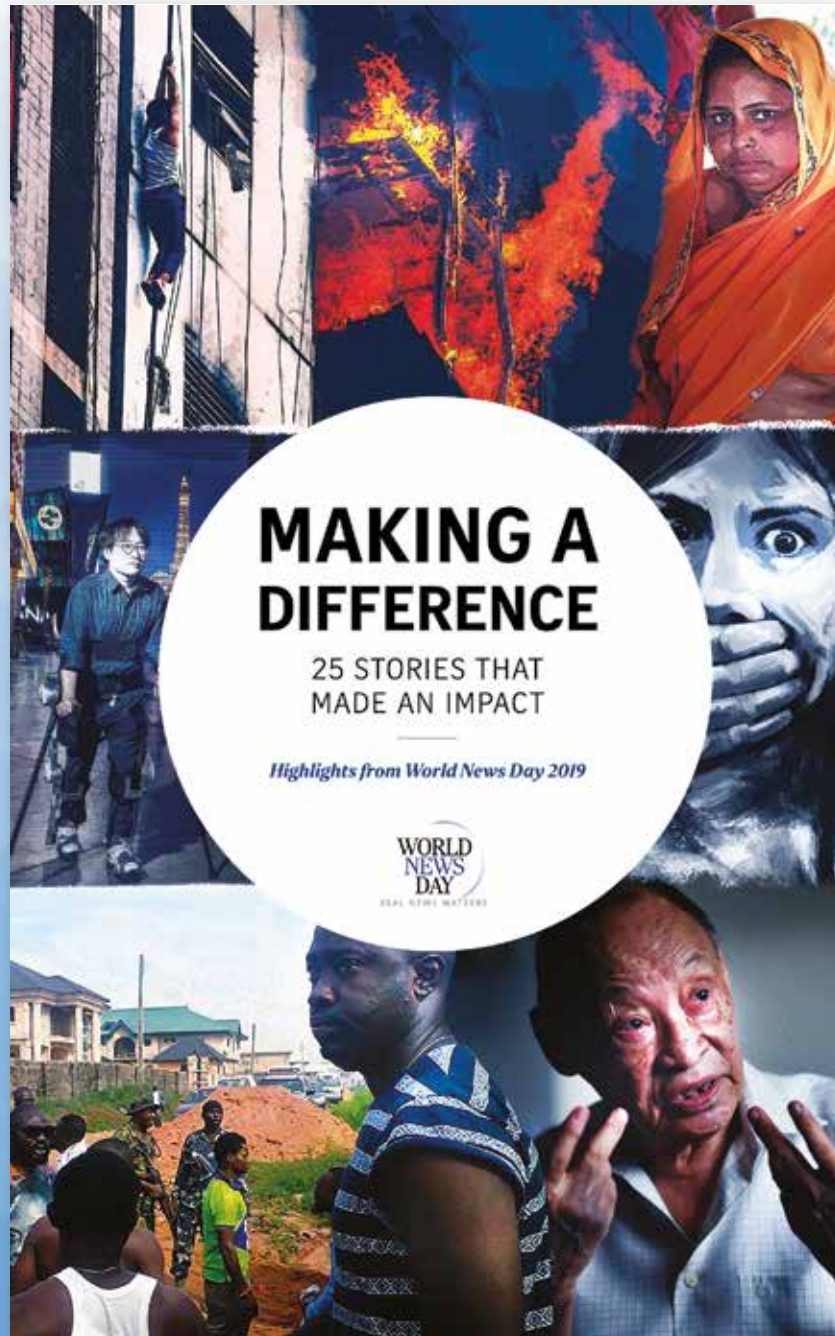
Apart from providing caregiver duties, nurses are also tasked with moving the bodies of infected Covid-19 patients who die, said the Korea Biomedical Review. Mortuary staff are unable to touch a body because of the risk of the virus infection, so a team of five or six nurses must step in to move the body to the morgue instead. [ST](#)

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