

Covid-19: Death toll in the United States climbs past 3,000

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CORONAVIRUS | New York welcomed the arrival of a gleaming 1,000-bed US Navy hospital ship on Monday as a beacon of hope for the city's desperate fight against the coronavirus pandemic, while the national death toll climbed past 3,000 on the country's most deadly day.

People gathered on the New York and New Jersey sides of the Hudson River to cheer the US Navy ship Comfort, a converted oil tanker painted white with giant red crosses, as it sailed past the Statue of Liberty accompanied by support ships and helicopters.

The Comfort will treat non-coronavirus patients, including those who require surgery and critical care, the Navy said.

"It's a wartime atmosphere and we all have to pull together," said New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, who was among the dignitaries to greet the ship's arrival at the Midtown Manhattan pier. Hospitals in the city have been overrun with

patients suffering from Covid-19, the respiratory illness caused by the virus.

The United States had its highest daily death toll on Monday with more than 500 new deaths, bringing the total to 3,001 killed and more than 160,000 reported cases, according to a Reuters tally.

US President Donald Trump told a White House briefing more than one million Americans had been tested for coronavirus - less than three percent of the population. While the United States has ramped up testing after a series of setbacks, it still lags behind countries like Italy and South Korea on a per capita basis.

In California, another hard-hit state, Governor Gavin Newsom said the number of Covid-19 hospitalisations had nearly doubled over the past four days and the number of ICU patients had tripled.

Central Park field hospitals

To ease the pressure in New York, construction of a 68-bed field hospital began on Sunday in Central Park, and the white tents being set up evoked a wartime feel in an island of green typically used by New Yorkers to exercise, picnic and enjoy the first signs of spring.

The makeshift facility, provided by the Mount Sinai Health System and non-profit organisation Samaritan's Purse, is expected to begin accepting patients on Tuesday, de Blasio (above) said.

New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo, one of the most prominent public figures of the coronavirus crisis, told a news conference the state might have to step in to close playgrounds in the country's most populous city.

Cuomo and de Blasio are among a growing chorus of officials who have voiced frustration at Trump's handling of the crisis and a shortage of ventilators and personal protective equipment.

"I am not engaging the president in politics," Cuomo, a Democrat, said of Trump, a Republican. "My only goal is to engage the president in partnership."

Ford Motor Co said on Monday it will produce 50,000 ventilators over the next 100 days at its Michigan plant in cooperation with General Electric's healthcare unit, and can then manufacture 30,000 a month.

Officials in states hard hit by the pandemic have pleaded with the Trump administration and manufacturers to speed up the production of ventilators to cope with a surge in patients struggling to breathe. Last Friday, Trump said he

would invoke powers under the Defense Production Act to direct manufacturers to produce ventilators.

Chilling numbers

US health officials are urging Americans to follow stay-at-home orders and other measures to contain the spread of the virus, which originated in China and has infected about 750,000 people around the world.

"If we do things together well - almost perfectly - we could get in the range of 100,000 to 200,000 fatalities," Dr Deborah Birx, coordinator of the White House's coronavirus task force, told NBC's Today show.

Dr Anthony Fauci, a top US health official, cited those figures on Sunday as a possible outcome, but Birx's assessment appeared to suggest the figures could be a floor, rather than a ceiling.

The virus has spread from its original epicentres in Washington state, New York and California.

Authorities in New Orleans were setting up a field hospital at the Ernest N Morial Convention Center - the same site where thousands of Hurricane Katrina

refugees gathered in 2005 - to handle the expected overflow of patients.

The governors of Maryland, Virginia and Arizona issued "stay-at-home" orders as cases rose in those states, as did Washington DC.

At the Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, Illinois, 12 prisoners were hospitalised and several required ventilators, while 77 more showing symptoms were isolated at the facility, officials said.

Renowned country and folk singer John Prine was among the latest celebrities - including several members of Congress - to come down with the virus. Prine was in stable condition on Monday after being hospitalised with symptoms of the illness, his wife said on Twitter. Prine, a 73-year-old cancer survivor, lives in Nashville, Tennessee.

Trump initially played down the risk to Americans, drawing criticism from health officials and political rivals, including former Vice-President Joe Biden, the front-runner in the Democratic race to challenge Trump in the Nov 3 presidential election.

"We allowed the seeds to be planted. And now there is nothing to do but wait for the bloom. A lot of these deaths are already percolating," said Dana Miller, 61, of

Belmont, Massachusetts, a retired US government health policy official.

Trump on Sunday abandoned a hotly criticised plan to get the economy up and running by mid-April, extending his original 15-day nationwide stay-at-home order for another 30 days, a step that many Americans accepted with resignation.

“I’m sad to be locked inside, but I think it’s for the best,” said Mia Siracusa, 24, a data manager ordered to work out of her apartment in Brooklyn, whose live-in boyfriend is from Italy and whose mother is a New York City hospital nurse.

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