

16.8M Americans out of work; Easter celebrations move online

10/04/2020 21:34 by admin

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The U.S. unemployment rate in April could hit 15% – a number not seen since the end of the Great Depression. (AP Photo/John Minchillo)

New York: A staggering 16.8 million Americans lost their jobs in just three weeks, a measure of how fast the coronavirus has brought world economies to their knees. Meanwhile, religious leaders worldwide Thursday urged people to celebrate Good Friday and Easter from the safety of their homes.

In other developments, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson was moved out of intensive care at the London hospital where he is being treated for the virus. The 55-year-old had taken a turn for the worse early in the week as his country descended into its biggest crisis since World War II.

Governments warned that the hard-won gains against the scourge must not be jeopardized by relaxing social distancing over the weekend. Across Europe, where Easter is one of the busiest travel times, authorities set up roadblocks and otherwise discouraged family gatherings.

A spike in deaths in Britain and New York and surges of reported new infections in Japan and in India's congested cities made it clear the battle is far from over.

New York state reported a record-breaking number of dead for a third straight day, 799. More than 7,000 people have died in the state, accounting for almost half the U.S. death toll of more than 16,000.

"That is so shocking and painful and breathtaking, I don't even have the words for it," New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said.

But he added that there are hopeful signs, including slowdowns in the number of people being hospitalized, admitted to intensive care and placed on ventilators.

He said the onslaught of patients has not been as big as feared and hospitals are standing up to the strain so far. About 18,000 people were hospitalized, well short of the 90,000 hospital beds statewide, many of which were hurriedly lined up at a convention center and a Navy ship docked in the city.

Worldwide, the number of dead topped 95,000 and confirmed infections reached about 1.6 million, according to Johns Hopkins University, though the true numbers are believed much higher, in part because of different rules for counting the dead and cover-ups by some governments.

Numbers released Thursday by the U.S. government showed that 6.6 million workers applied for unemployment benefits last week, on top of more than 10 million in the two weeks before that. That amounts to about 1 in 10 American workers – the biggest, fastest pileup of job losses since the world's largest economy began keeping records in 1948.

And still more job cuts are expected. The U.S. unemployment rate in April could hit 15% – a number not seen since

the end of the Great Depression.

Sharon Bridgeman, 57, of Kansas City, Missouri, was laid off from her job two weeks ago at a nonprofit that helps homeless people and is still waiting to be approved for unemployment benefits.

“I’m worried I may not have a job to go back to,” she said. “I’m also worried about the people I work with.”

Trump brushed off fears the economy won’t quickly rebound after the crisis, as he has predicted, saying he had a “strong feeling” that “the economy is going to do very well.”

“I think that what’s going to happen is we’re going to have a big bounce, rather than a small bounce,” he told reporters. “I think we’re going to open up strong.”

Trump said he’d met with his treasury and transportation secretaries Thursday about helping to support airlines and that he likely would put out a proposal over the weekend.

The U.S. Federal Reserve announced it will provide up to \$2.3 trillion in loans targeted toward both households and businesses.

In many European countries, where social safety nets tend to be stronger than in the U.S., government programs that subsidize workers’ pay are keeping millions of people on payrolls, though typically with fewer hours and at lower wages.

Governments from the 19 countries that use the euro agreed Thursday on a package of measures that could provide more than a half-trillion euros (\$550 billion) for companies, workers and health systems to cushion the economic impact of the outbreak.

The head of the International Monetary Fund warned that the global economy is headed for the worst recession since the Depression. The United Nations’ labor organization said the equivalent of 195 million full-time jobs could be lost in the second quarter, while the aid organization Oxfam International estimated half a billion people worldwide could be pushed into poverty.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious-diseases expert, shot down hopes that warmer spring weather would bring an end to the crisis.

“One should not assume that we are going to be rescued by a change in the weather,” he said. “You must assume that the virus will continue to do its thing.”

Amid widespread restrictions on public gatherings, major religious denominations are holding virtual services where members can watch on TV or online. Others are arranging prayer at drive-in theaters, where people can stay in their cars.

The virus “doesn’t take a day off for Good Friday or Easter Sunday,” said Archbishop John Wester of Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Other churches plan to move ahead with services, especially in states like Texas, where the governor declared religious gatherings “essential services.” A Houston church has installed hand-washing stations and rearranged its 1,000-person sanctuary to hold about 100 people spaced 6 feet (2 meters) or more apart.

Pope Francis will celebrate Easter Mass in a nearly empty St. Peter's Basilica instead of the huge square outside. In England, the Archbishop of Canterbury will deliver his Easter sermon by video.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei suggested mass gatherings may be barred through the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, which runs from late April through most of May.

Meantime, there were encouraging signs in France, where the national health agency saw indications the crisis is stabilizing, though more than 12,000 lives have been lost.

New infections, hospitalizations and deaths have been leveling off in hard-hit Italy and Spain, which together have around 33,000 deaths, but the daily tolls are still shocking. Spain reported 683 more dead, bringing its total to more than 15,200. Britain recorded 881 new deaths, for close to 8,000 in all.

Japan recorded more than 500 new cases for the first time, a worrisome rise since it has the world's oldest population and COVID-19 can be especially serious in the elderly.

For most, the virus causes mild to moderate symptoms like fever and cough. But for some, especially older adults and the infirm, it can cause pneumonia. About 350,000 people have recovered, by Johns Hopkins' count.

- AP