

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

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Highlight: Iran lifts Tehran's lockdown. Hong Kong arrests pro-democracy figures even as it fights the virus.

Body

Iran lifts Tehran's lockdown. Hong Kong arrests pro-democracy figures even as it fights the virus.

This briefing has ended. Follow our latest coverage of the coronavirus pandemic.

Germany, seeking a path out of lockdown, begins broad random testing for antibodies.

While other nations are still struggling to test for infections, Germany is doing that and more. It is aiming to sample the entire population for antibodies in coming months, hoping to gain valuable insight into how deeply the virus has penetrated the society at large, how deadly it really is, and whether immunity might be developing.

In Munich, residents of 3,000 households chosen at random are being asked to allow monthly blood tests for Covid-19 antibodies for a year. It's an ambitious study whose central aim is to understand how many people — even those with no symptoms — have already had the virus, a key variable to make decisions about public life in a pandemic.

The Munich research is the largest of several regional studies being rolled out in various corners of the country, which has become a leader among Western nations figuring out how to control the contagion while returning to something resembling normal life.

The government hopes to use the findings to unravel a riddle that will allow Germany to move securely into the next phase of the pandemic: Which of the far-reaching social and economic restrictions that have slowed the virus are most effective and which can be safely lifted?

The same questions are being asked around the world. Other countries like Iceland and South Korea have tested broadly for infections, or combined testing with digital tracking to undercut the spread of the virus. But even the best laid plans can go awry; Singapore attempted to reopen only to have the virus re-emerge.

The antibody testing has its limits. Scientists caution that there is no proof yet that the detection of antibodies signals effective immunity. And even antibodies were proven to offer immunity, there is no clarity on how long it might last.

And the country is still struggling with its outbreak. Germany recorded a fourth straight day of a spike in new infections on Saturday. Data from the Robert Koch Institute for infectious diseases showed that coronavirus cases rose by 3,609, for a total of 137,439. The death toll rose by 242, to 4,110.

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

Netanyahu says some restrictions in Israel will be relaxed.

With mortality rates relatively low but the unemployment rate at more than 26 percent, Israel is set to begin easing restrictions imposed to fight the coronavirus, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Saturday night.

"From tomorrow, we start opening up both the personal sphere and the economic sphere," he said in a televised appearance.

Outdoor prayer will be permitted in spread-out groups of up to 10 people, he said, and exercise will be allowed for people in pairs up to 500 meters from their homes, up from 100 meters.

An eclectic list of retail establishments will be allowed to reopen, including electrical and office supply stores, laundries, bookstores, housewares dealers and opticians. But malls will remain locked, meaning only permitted businesses with their own storefronts will reopen. And shops will be limited to serving two customers at a time and required to install physical barriers between customers and cashiers.

Restaurants, hairdressers, clothing, shoe and toy stores all remain closed.

Other businesses will be allowed to bring up to 30 percent of their workforces back to their positions, up from 15 percent.

A new "purple seal" certification will allow employers to resume operations contingent on meeting conditions like requiring workers to wear face masks, have regular temperature checks and regularly disinfect surfaces; barring meetings of more than eight people; documenting who works where and when; and forcing the entire workplace to shut down if anyone there gets sick.

Mr. Netanyahu urged Israelis age 67 and older to stay home for the time being, and pleaded with Muslim citizens to avoid feasts and other gatherings during the monthlong celebration of Ramadan, which begins Thursday night.

Iran lifts Tehran's lockdown, despite warnings from health officials.

With the coronavirus outbreak still raging within its borders, Iran on Saturday lifted the lockdown on its capital and called on government and private-sector employees to return to work.

The rest of Iran's provinces had lifted a two-week lockdown and travel restrictions a week earlier. Schools and sporting events remain closed, and restaurants have been restricted to takeout.

President Hassan Rouhani has called his return-to-work policy a "smart distancing" strategy that will fight two enemies: the pandemic and the collapse of an economy that was already strained by international sanctions.

"Our message is the great people of Iran and all private and government entities, labor workers and engineers, despite fighting the coronavirus on one front, are also continuing the economic development of our country," he said on Thursday.

More than 5,000 people with the virus have died in Iran, including some of the country's top officials, and about 80,000 have been infected, according to government figures. But local experts and health officials say that many others who showed symptoms of the virus have died or fallen ill without being tested.

Health officials say that easing the restrictions too soon risks another surge in infections.

Iran's military held annual parades on Friday in Tehran and other cities. The parade typically shows off military hardware, but this year soldiers marched in protective gear, and ambulances and medical equipment replaced missiles and drones.

- In Italy, the number of I.C.U. patients had dropped to 2,812 by Friday, and hospitalizations for Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, had fallen from a high of 29,010 patients on April 4 to 25,786, reflecting a

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steady decline in one of the world's hardest-hit countries, attributed to the national lockdown imposed on March 10.

- In Spain, Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez said he would extend the country's state of emergency to May 9 but would on April 27 ease a stringent lockdown on children that had raised fears of long-term psychological damage.
- Queen Elizabeth II of Britain turns 94 on Tuesday, but the traditional artillery salute to mark her birthday has been canceled. The queen, who has sequestered herself at Windsor Castle since mid-March, said she did not "feel it appropriate in the current circumstances," according to Buckingham Palace.
- In Canada, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said the United States agreed to keep their border closed for another 30 days. Recent suggestions by President Trump that the border with Canada might be reopened soon were not well received there. "Absolutely not," Doug Ford, Ontario's premier, said when asked if he would like Americans to re-enter Canada soon. "I don't want them in Ontario."
- The Trump administration has charged forward with its aggressive immigration enforcement agenda, though the pace appears to have slowed. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement has carried out 2,985 removals of foreign nationals so far in April. In March, I.C.E. completed 17,965 removals.
- Guatemala has counted dozens of cases of coronavirus among people deported by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement since late March, and the U.S. authorities have said they were suspending removals to Guatemala pending an investigation.
- In Nigeria, the president's chief of staff, Mallam Abba Kyari, has died from Covid-19, one of the highest-profile deaths from the pandemic in Africa. Mr. Kyari, whose national power was considered second only to that of President Muhammadu Buhari, died on Friday after battling the virus for nearly a month, a presidential spokesman said Saturday on Twitter.
- In Japan, more than 50,000 people have signed a petition requesting that people made homeless by emergency policies to fight the coronavirus be given shelter at the Olympic Village.

As Hong Kong confronts the virus, major pro-Democracy figures are arrested.

More than a dozen leading pro-democracy activists and former lawmakers in Hong Kong were arrested on Saturday in connection with the protests that raged in the city last year, the biggest roundup of prominent opposition figures in recent memory.

The high-profile arrests were made as Hong Kong battles to contain the coronavirus outbreak, which has helped quiet down the huge street protests but fueled further distrust of the authorities in the semiautonomous Chinese territory. The virus has halted protests around the world, forcing people to stay home and giving the authorities new power to limit public gatherings and detain people with little fear of public blowback.

Those arrested in Hong Kong included the veteran lawyers Martin Lee and Margaret Ng, the media tycoon Jimmy Lai and the former opposition legislators Albert Ho, Lee Cheuk-yan and Leung Kwok-hung, political parties and aides said. They were among 15 activists rounded up on suspicion of organizing, publicizing or taking part in unauthorized assemblies from August to October and will face prosecution, the police said on Saturday.

Lau Siu-kai, vice president of the Chinese Association of Hong Kong and Macau Studies, a powerful Beijing advisory group, said the arrests represented an early step toward a broader crackdown by Beijing on the Hong Kong opposition. They also reflect an assessment by Beijing that protests in Hong Kong over the past year pose such a threat to national security that it is worthwhile to defy American threats of retaliation if a crackdown takes place, he said.

"Now Beijing is calling the U.S.'s bluff and taking the initial steps against the Hong Kong opposition, and there will be more steps to shrink their space," Mr. Lau said.

The virus deals a heavy blow to Canada's nursing homes.

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

The harrowing details about the Résidence Herron nursing home in suburban Montreal continued to mount this week: Medical workers who had abandoned hungry and desperately ill patients. An owner with a long criminal history. Thirty-one dead in less than a month — five from confirmed cases of coronavirus.

Across Canada, nursing homes have been devastated by the virus. This week, Canada's chief public health officer, Dr. Theresa Tam, attributed about half of the country's coronavirus deaths — which had reached over 1,300 as of Saturday morning — to long-term care homes.

The scale of deaths at these facilities has raised a difficult question: Beyond the obvious insidiousness of a highly contagious virus, how has this been possible in Canada, a country with a vaunted universal health care system and a culture of humanism?

Dr. Susan Bartlett, a clinical psychologist and professor of medicine at McGill Medical School, has counseled families about caring for their older parents. In addition to her professional expertise, she has a personal interest in the Résidence Herron catastrophe: Her 94-year-old mother was a resident at the Herron in 2018. The nursing home is now under police investigation amid accusations of gross negligence.

Dr. Bartlett said that while her mother's care had initially been satisfactory, conditions at the residence deteriorated as the owners went on an aggressive cost-cutting spree and struggled to find qualified employees.

She said it was hard to fathom that the body bags leaving the residence amid the pandemic had not raised alarms sooner. "Why didn't anyone scream at the top of their lungs?" she said.

U.S. roundup: Protests against states' stay-at-home orders keep sprouting, even though most Americans agree with caution.

As millions of Americans continued to shelter in their homes to slow the spread of coronavirus, several dozen protesters in Texas converged on the steps of the Capitol building in Austin on Saturday to call for the reopening of the state and the country.

The "You Can't Close America" rally followed a wave of similar protests at statehouses and in city streets this past week. Other people also defied isolation orders by protesting on Saturday in Indianapolis, Carson City, Nev., and Annapolis, Md.

The United States has the world's largest known outbreak, with more than 717,000 confirmed cases and more than 34,000 deaths.

With more than 22 million unemployment claims nationwide in the past four weeks, some conservatives have begun voicing displeasure with the moribund economy. The protests they have fanned have been encouraged by President Trump.

By merely assembling, the protesters were in violation of the stay-at-home orders replicated across the United States in a bid to save lives.

The protests do not appear to represent a broad swath of the country. A Pew Research Center poll released on Thursday showed that two-thirds of Americans expressed more concern that the economy would reopen too quickly and allow the coronavirus to keep spreading, rather than that it would open too slowly, causing undue strain. Even among most Republicans, bringing things back online too fast was the greater source of concern.

[Analysis: Oil collapse and covid-19 create toxic geopolitical stew.]

In Austin, at least 100 people gathered on the statehouse grounds in hats and shirts with President Trump's slogan, "Make America Great Again." Some carried American flags, and few wore masks that are mandated by the city.

The urgency of the rally was dampened somewhat on Friday by Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican, who announced that he would do precisely what protesters are demanding: reopen Texas.

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

The largest of the recent protests, by far, was on Wednesday in Lansing, Mich., where thousands of people protested Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's stay-at-home order in a campaign that organizers called "Operation Gridlock."

Also in the United States:

- Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York, the pandemic's global epicenter, said that the state's daily death toll from the virus had fallen to 540, its lowest in more than two weeks. "If you look at the past three days, you could argue we are past the plateau and starting to descend," Mr. Cuomo said. The state has lost more than 13,000 people to the virus. Read the latest updates from New York.
- Doctors are scrambling to handle an unanticipated crisis as a surge in Covid-19 patients with kidney failure has led to shortages of machines, supplies and staff required for emergency dialysis.
- Democrats sent the Trump administration a compromise offer late Friday evening in an effort to break an impasse over replenishing funds for a new loan program, created as a way to help businesses weather the pandemic.
- The Pentagon announced that it would prolong a national and international travel ban, stopping military units from deploying overseas and returning until June 30. The original ban was set to expire in mid-May.

Lions lounge on the roads as South Africa goes into lockdown.

With much of the world staying at home to contain the coronavirus, animals in the wild are finding new terrains to roam — and sleep.

This week, a pride of lions was spotted lying across traffic-free roads at Kruger National Park in South Africa. The park was closed on March 25 just as the country prepared to go into a lockdown that forced most of its 59 million people to stay at home except when seeking to buy medicine and food or to collect social benefits.

Visitors to the park don't usually see the lions, since they live in a different area of the park. But the park said on Twitter, "This afternoon they were lying on the tar road just outside."

Across the world, animals have ventured into desolate streets and emptied-out cities as people practice social distancing and remain in lockdown. Great Orme Kashmiri goats have been spotted in Wales, along with coyotes in San Francisco and swarms of rats where tourists once thronged in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

While the sightings of the lions delighted many on social media, the images highlight the dangers facing Africa's multibillion-dollar tourism industry. The sector is a major source of revenue, and national lockdowns, visa restrictions and border closures have led to mass unemployment on the continent. With reduced staffing in national parks, poaching has also increased.

How are world leaders handling the crisis? It varies.

In the United States, President Trump's mercurial messages have been widely contrasted with the detailed briefings by Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo of New York. But elsewhere in the world, leaders have also taken approaches that run the gamut — from dismissive to serious to somber to combative — offering insights into governing in a time of crisis.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson

In one of his first news conferences about the virus, Mr. Johnson talked about a "clear plan" for Britain to contain it but detailed few concrete measures.

Early on, Mr. Johnson also talked about the values of "herd immunity," suggesting that allowing many in Britain to be exposed to the virus would help build immunity. Days later, he reversed course, putting the nation on lockdown and ordering Britons to stay at home.

Chancellor Angela Merkel

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

Ms. Merkel shocked some during one of her earliest news briefings on the outbreak when she outlined a stark possibility: In a worst-case situation, she said, up to 70 percent of the German population could become infected.

At a time when other leaders were hoping to lessen the blow in their messaging, she stood out. But her frankness preserved the trust of Germans, and her approval ratings have gone through the roof.

President Rodrigo Duterte

For autocrats and strongmen, the pandemic has become an excuse to consolidate power further and extend their reach. In the Philippines, it is Mr. Duterte's latest reason to greenlight extrajudicial killings. More than 5,000 people have been killed in his war on drugs.

Initially dismissive of the coronavirus, Mr. Duterte reversed course late last month, introducing stringent measures, including a lockdown. Critics have accused him of simply pursuing his often-stated ambition of imposing martial law. He threatened those who considered breaking the lockdown, instructing the police and military to "shoot them dead."

They're self-isolating at sea. But even floating around the Caribbean has its downsides.

Simon Fowler, a British events organizer, is sitting out the pandemic with his wife in a catamaran anchored offshore of a deserted beach in the Bahamas. But it has not been idyllic.

"Being out here in a pandemic is actually a lot harder and more stressful than you might think," Mr. Fowler, 60, said. "It has been quite nasty."

The seas may be the ultimate self-isolating destination, but people aboard everything from solo craft to superyachts say they also bring logistical hurdles and ethical dilemmas. Then there is social media: the comments and tweets calling them entitled, clueless about the struggles of the day.

David Geffen, the Hollywood billionaire, posted a photo of the Caribbean sunset from his \$590 million yacht, Rising Sun, with the message "Isolated in the Grenadines avoiding the virus." The response made other secretive superyacht owners even less disclosing of their whereabouts.

Mr. Fowler suffered his own online kicking after noting on Facebook that he and his wife plan to flee the hurricane season by making the weeklong journey to Bermuda.

"I got an absolute tsunami of abuse saying how selfish I was," he said. "People were vulgar and vile."

Bobby White, a sailing blogger from the United States who is now anchored in the U.S. Virgin Islands, bares all about his current voyage. Traffic to his YouTube videos, his source of income, has soared.

"People are bored stuck at home and have nothing better to do than watch YouTube so that's great for me," Mr. White said. "I understand that some people are going to be negative so I try not to post too much of: 'Hey look at me, I am having fun out on the water.'"

A Republican election strategy increasingly is to shift blame to China.

The strategy could not be clearer: From the Republican lawmakers blanketing Fox News to new ads from President Trump's super PAC to the biting criticism on Donald Trump Jr.'s Twitter feed, the G.O.P. is attempting to divert attention from the administration's heavily criticized response to the coronavirus by pinning the blame on China.

With the death toll from the pandemic already surpassing 34,000 Americans and unemployment soaring to levels not seen since the Great Depression, Republicans increasingly believe that elevating China as an archenemy culpable for the spread of the virus may be the best way to salvage a difficult election.

Mr. Trump's own campaign aides have endorsed the strategy, releasing an attack ad last week depicting Joseph R. Biden Jr., the presumptive Democratic nominee, as soft on China. The ad relied heavily on images of people of

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

Asian descent, including former Gov. Gary Locke of Washington, who is Chinese-American, and it was widely viewed as fanning the flames of xenophobia.

But there is a potential impediment to the G.O.P. plan — the leader of the party himself.

Eager to continue trade talks, uneasy about further rattling the markets and hungry to protect his relationship with President Xi Jinping at a moment when the United States is relying on China's manufacturers for lifesaving medical supplies, Mr. Trump has repeatedly muddled Republican efforts to fault China.

Even as the president tries to rebut criticism of his slow response to the outbreak by highlighting his January travel restrictions on China, he has repeatedly called Mr. Xi a friend and said "we are dealing in good faith" with the repressive government. Yet in private, he has vented about the country.

Mr. Biden, for his part, has criticized Mr. Trump's warm words for China. On Friday, his campaign released a video assailing the president for not pressing Mr. Xi to let the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention into his country and for being "more worried about protecting his trade deal with China than he was about the virus."

Malaysia is asked to stop turning away Rohingya refugees.

Human rights advocates are calling on Malaysia, which turned away at least two boats filled with Rohingya refugees, to reverse itself and start accepting the migrants.

Human Rights Watch said in a statement Saturday that Malaysia can be mindful of the coronavirus pandemic without endangering the lives of refugees as it responds to it.

On Thursday, the Malaysian navy intercepted a boat with 200 Rohingya refugees, and prevented it from entering Malaysian waters, according to The Associated Press. It's unclear what happened to that boat.

The day before, the Bangladesh Coast Guard intercepted another boat with 382 refugees, who had been turned away from Malaysian waters weeks prior, survivors said. Although many of the refugees were removed from that boat, at least 30 people died before the rescue.

Malaysia's National Security Council on Saturday defended its decision to turn away the boat over concerns the refugees would be exposed to the coronavirus. An official for the council said refugees were given food and fresh water before being turned away.

In March, Malaysia started banning the entry of foreign nationals to curb the outbreak in the country. Malaysia, a nation of more than 30 million people, has 5,251 confirmed cases with 86 deaths, according to the World Health Organization.

"Malaysia's claims to support the rights of the Rohingya mean shockingly little when they push desperate refugees back to sea," said Phil Robertson, the deputy Asia director for Human Rights Watch.

The pandemic has "intensified" the misery of the Rohingya, who are confined in Myanmar and in camps in Bangladesh, Mr. Robertson said, adding that the Malaysian government "can both protect against the spread of the virus and ensure that those risking their lives at sea are rescued and given a chance to seek asylum."

Singapore records another daily high.

Singapore on Saturday announced a record rise in new coronavirus infections for the third time this week, with most of the 942 new cases coming from crowded dormitories for migrant laborers.

The sharp rise underscores the risks faced by low-wage migrants who have built the modern city-state. As more than 1,600 cases were linked to their residences from Wednesday to Friday, the government promised changes in how the migrants, many from India and Bangladesh, are treated.

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

Singapore has been praised for its rigorous contact-tracing program, which quickly identified clusters of local transmission. But the coronavirus has spread rapidly through foreign laborers' dormitories, where up to 20 people are crammed in each room, with shared kitchens and bathrooms.

After weeks of slow transmission, Singapore began recording a rapid rise in cases in March, as travelers from Europe and the United States brought the virus with them. But the health ministry said the number of new local cases had continued to drop, with 14 Singaporeans or permanent residents confirmed infected on Saturday.

Africa is desperately short of ventilators, among other essential supplies.

Limited testing means that it is impossible to know the true scale of coronavirus infections in Africa. But several countries on the continent are reporting rising caseloads, and the outbreaks could be catastrophic, in part because many countries lack essential medical supplies.

Case in point: Fewer than 2,000 working ventilators have to serve hundreds of millions of people in public hospitals across 41 of Africa's 55 countries, the World Health Organization says, compared with more than 170,000 in the United States. Ten countries in Africa have none at all.

As for intensive care beds, the W.H.O. says there are just 5,000 across 43 African countries. That's about five beds per million people, compared with about 4,000 beds per million in Europe.

Many experts also worry about chronic shortages of much more basic supplies that are needed to slow the spread of the disease and treat the sick on the continent: masks, oxygen and, even more fundamentally, soap and water.

And even if medical supplies do materialize, many countries will still lack trained medical personnel to run the machines, as well as a reliable electricity supply and piped oxygen.

Artillery salute for Queen Elizabeth II's birthday is canceled because of the pandemic.

When Queen Elizabeth II of Britain turns 94 on Tuesday, it will be the first time in her nearly seven-decade reign that her birthday will not be marked by an artillery salute — another longstanding ritual lost to the coronavirus.

The queen, who has sequestered herself at Windsor Castle since mid-March, asked that "no special measures be put in place" for artillery guns to be fired from sites around London, according to Buckingham Palace, because she did not "feel it appropriate in the current circumstances."

The palace had already scrapped the queen's birthday parade, known as Trooping the Color. That elaborate military procession is traditionally held in June and draws thousands of spectators.

The moves come as Britain faces an outbreak of more than 114,000 reported coronavirus cases, over 15,000 related deaths in hospitals, and shortages of safety equipment for the medical workers treating the country's patients.

Officials previously said that medical workers should wear waterproof surgical gowns during high-risk procedures involving the coronavirus. But Britain's health secretary, Matt Hancock, said he could not guarantee that hospitals would have the protective gear they needed over the weekend. Workers were advised to wear plastic aprons on top of coveralls instead.

After criticism about the shortages, the housing minister, Robert Jenrick, said at a news briefing on Saturday afternoon that a consignment including 400,000 protective gowns and equipment was to arrive from Turkey on Sunday. "We've got to do more to get the P.P.E. that people need to the frontline," Mr. Jenrick said.

Britain also remains far short of its goal of carrying out 100,000 tests a day by the end of April, with 21,000 daily tests being completed as of Friday. Mr. Hancock said the country would return to trying to track down the contacts of people with symptoms of the virus, an effort that the government had halted last month.

An emerging hurdle to a vaccine: Some may be reluctant to take it.

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

As several countries race to create a working vaccine against the coronavirus and several trials are underway, a new survey in Ireland offers a glimpse of the hurdles health officials will face to vaccinate people around the world in an effort to stem the outbreak.

The survey, released on Thursday, suggested that 65 percent of respondents would definitely be willing to take a vaccine for Covid-19, the disease caused by the virus, and 9 percent would definitely not.

“Only 65 percent of people saying yes is staggeringly low, given what we are going through,” said Dr. Philip Hyland, an associate professor of psychology of Maynooth University, which carried out the survey in conjunction with Trinity College Dublin.

But he said there was room for optimism. “If the 26 percent of people who are saying maybe can be shifted to the yes category, then we would have over 90 percent uptake, which should be enough,” he said.

The survey sampled more than 1,000 people 19 days after Ireland imposed sweeping restrictions on movements. The report’s authors said that although the coronavirus’s spread was still poorly understood, a 60 percent vaccination rate might be enough to build “herd immunity” in the general population, although a higher figure would be desirable.

Dr. Frederique Vallieres, the director of Trinity College’s Center for Global Health, said that the 9 percent of people who opposed taking a vaccine included both ideological “anti-vaxxers” and people with underlying health conditions that would either prevent them from taking such vaccines or make them reluctant to do so.

She said that many of the undecided were concerned about the possible risks of any new vaccine and might be reassured by scientific evidence and public information campaigns when a vaccine emerged.

The Nigerian president’s chief of staff has died of Covid-19.

The chief of staff to President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, Mallam Abba Kyari, has died from Covid-19, one of the highest-profile deaths from the pandemic in Africa.

Mr. Kyari, who was in his 70s, died on Friday after battling the virus for nearly a month, a spokesman for the president said Saturday on Twitter. Mr. Kyari, a lawyer, banker and journalist before he went into politics, had served Mr. Buhari since he took office in 2015, and many considered him the most powerful person in Nigeria after the president.

The chief of staff was one of several current and former government officials across Africa to have contracted the virus or died from it in recent weeks. The list includes Jean-Joseph Mukendi, a top aide to the president of the Democratic Republic of Congo, who died of Covid-19 in late March.

In February, Nigeria became the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to record a coronavirus case, after an Italian contractor who had been in Milan tested positive. The country of 200 million people has reported just 493 cases and 17 deaths, according to data compiled by The New York Times.

EasyJet says yes, and Ryanair says no.

Executives at budget airlines have been sparring this week over how to get customers back into their seats — or some of them, at least.

Johan Lundgren, the chief executive of easyJet, a British airline that grounded its fleet at the end of March, said on Thursday that planes were likely to operate with middle seats empty to reduce the threat of coronavirus transmission once people started flying again.

But Ryanair, an Irish carrier that is another icon of Europe’s cut-price flight boom, strongly disagreed. Its chief executive, Michael O’Leary, called the proposal “mad.”

Germany Starts Broad Antibody Testing to Assess Spread of Coronavirus; Israel Relaxes Restrictions

He said that leaving some seats empty would not give passengers the recommended two meters of separation, and that they would still be forced into close quarters during other parts of the trip.

Analysts are predicting a yearslong slowdown in plane travel. That could prove especially difficult for budget carriers, which rely on filling more of their seats than pricier airlines.

But Mr. Lundgren of easyJet said that allowing more space onboard would encourage people to fly. "That is something that we will do, because I think that is something that the customers would like to see," he said.

The Hungarian budget airline Wizz Air and an airline trade body also said they were preparing for planes to return to service at only two-thirds capacity in order to reduce virus transmission.

Mr. O'Leary suggested that carriers instead conduct temperature checks and mandate masks for passengers and crews.

Reporting was contributed by Raphael Minder, Elisabetta Povoledo, Benjamin Mueller, Motoko Rich, Hisako Ueno, Mark Landler, Dan Bilefsky, Peter Wilson, Jonathan Martin, Maggie Haberman, Alexander Burns, Katie Glueck, Ruth Maclean, Simon Marks, Abdi Latif Dahir, Elaine Yu, Andrew Jacobs, Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs, Farnaz Fassihi, Tess Felder, Yonette Joseph, Mariel Padilla, Abby Goodnough, Katie Thomas, Sheila Kaplan, Michael D. Shear, Sarah Mervosh, Steven Lee Myers, Ed O'Loughlin, Evan Easterling, Elian Peltier, Megan Specia, Katrin Bennhold, Caitlin Dickerson, Kirk Semple and Derrick Bryson Taylor.

PHOTO: Dr. Dafni Metaxa take a blood sample in a Munich household as part of random sampling for antibodies to the coronavirus. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Laetitia Vancon for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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