

Trump names Pence to coordinate coronavirus response in United States

By Noah Bierman, Jennifer Haberkorn and Noam N. Levey
Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — Desperate to stanch anxieties on Wall Street and public fears that the White House is unprepared for a major coronavirus outbreak, President Donald Trump on Wednesday named Vice President Mike Pence to coordinate the administration’s response while asserting that “the risk to the American people remains very low.”

Public health officials who flanked Trump at a rare news conference in the White House briefing room were noticeably less upbeat, repeatedly warning of the risk that the deadly COVID-19 virus — which has infected 60 Americans, including a newly confirmed case Wednesday in California — could still spread quickly in the United States.

“The trajectory we’re looking at in coming weeks and months is very uncertain,” said Dr. Anne Schuchat, principal deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

“We can expect to see more cases in the United States,” said Alex Azar, the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Minutes after Trump spoke, the CDC confirmed a new case of the virus in California in a person who reported no travel to an affected country or exposure to another known patient. The CDC did not say where the person lived, but said the case could be the first so-called community transmission of the disease in the United States.

Officials urged Americans to take basic precautions, such as washing hands and staying home if sick. And Trump acknowledged that the administration has plans for “large-scale” quarantines should they be needed.

“Whatever happens, we’re totally prepared,” he said, but later suggested schools, hospitals and other facilities needed to take their own precautions.

“I think schools should be preparing just in case” of a major outbreak, he said.

“Every aspect of our society should be prepared,” he added. “I don’t think it’s going to come to that.”

Trump, who has downplayed the threat of the coronavirus for weeks, sought to reassure Americans and to calm stock markets, which have plunged more than 6.5% in the last three days on fears of the disease.

“I think the stock market will recover,” Trump said, although he later conceded that the disease “will have an impact” on the nation’s gross domestic product.

Trump did not rule out possibly barring visitors from South Korea, Italy and other countries with confirmed outbreaks. The U.S. already has stopped accepting visitors from China, where the epidemic has spread widely.

All told, more than 80,000 people in about three dozen countries are known to be infected. More than 2,700



Howard Lipin/Los Angeles Times-TNS

Cynthia, who did not give her last name, traveled from Texas to San Diego to meet her son Alan, 2. He was one of the coronavirus evacuees from China who completed the 14-day quarantine at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar and was released on Thursday Feb. 20. Cynthia was emotional as she holds the toddler, the first one off a charter bus when it arrived at San Diego International Airport from the Marine Corps base. The group is the second wave of evacuees to be released from quarantine. The first group was released on Feb. 18.

have died.

Trump blamed Democrats and the media for stoking public fear, accusing House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of “trying to create a panic,” even as his administration faces increased bipartisan concern over its disjointed response.

The fast-spreading virus that causes COVID-19 appears on track to test the competency of an administration that has proposed large budget cuts to the CDC, shut down an office assigned to track deadly diseases around the world and is rocked by constant turnover in top positions responsible for handling emergencies and potential emergencies.

Trump, who has claimed credit for the rising stock market of the last three years, has been preoccupied with its abrupt drop, complaining to business leaders during his trip to India this week that the stomach-churning fall-off was beyond his control.

CDC officials warned Tuesday that it’s virtually certain the coronavirus outbreak will spread to pockets in the U.S. and that Americans should brace for major disruptions to everyday life, possibly including restricted travel, closed schools and work slowdowns.

Allies counseled Trump to put his political and economic frustrations aside to focus on the public health threat, arguing that ancillary problems will fix themselves once the public is convinced the administration is prepared for what may prove a significant crisis.

“This is not a garden-variety routine event,” said Ari Fleischer, former press secretary for President George W. Bush, who saw his popularity plummet after a botched response to Hurricane Katrina’s battering of New Orleans in 2005. “This can grow into people being legitimately scared into wondering what to do to protect their health, to protect their family’s health.”

Fleischer was among many experts and former officials jarred by the administration’s sluggish reaction so far and the conflicting messages from the White House, which insists the situation is under control, and federal health officials, who have issued increasingly dire warnings.

“A situation like this is extremely volatile and dynamic,” said Dr. Irwin Redlener, who heads the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University. “And to have all these mixed messages from the administration is mind-boggling. It seems they are so muddled at the White House about the political and economic consequences of this that they’ve resorted to just making stuff up.”

He warned that until the federal government issues clear guidance, state and local health officials are unable to make plans for a potential public health emergency.

Tom Ridge, who served as the nation’s first Homeland Security secretary under Bush and co-chairs a bipartisan commission on biodefense, faulted Trump for his breezy response to the threat and Democrats for what he called their “sky is falling” complaints.

“I just don’t recall when public health issues have ever been politicized like they are now,” Ridge said. “It is a real crisis” worldwide.

Underscoring the political risks for the president, new polling shows substantial public anxiety about the risk of an epidemic.

More than half of Americans expressed concern that there will be a widespread U.S. outbreak of coronavirus, according to a survey by the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation, which was conducted Feb. 13-18, before the recent stock market declines.

More than 4 in 10 said they were concerned that they or someone in their family will get sick from the virus.

“People don’t do well with the unknown,” said Craig Fugate, who led emergency response efforts for President Barack Obama. “Tell them what you know. Tell them what you don’t know,” he advised.

In November, a task force at the nonpartisan Center for Strategic and International Studies, which included five current and former Republican senators and House members, warned of gaping holes in the country’s defenses against a major health crisis.

“The American people are far from safe,” the report concluded. To the contrary, the United States remains woefully ill-prepared to respond to global health security threats.”

It recommended the reinstatement of a National Security Council official to coordinate pandemic response, and renewed funding and attention to global health problems.

Earlier Wednesday, Azar testified on Capitol Hill for the second day and defended the administration’s response so far, saying he was overseeing “the smoothest interagency process I’ve experienced in my 20 years of dealing with public health emergencies.”

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California patient had to wait several days for test

By Nelson Oliveira
New York Daily News

A California resident who contracted the new coronavirus through an “unknown” source had to wait several days to be tested because the case did not fit federal testing criteria.

The patient — who had not recently traveled to China and had no direct contact with anyone who did — may be the first case of community spread in the U.S., meaning the virus could already be traveling within this country.

The person, whose age and gender have not been released, was admitted into UC Davis Medical Center in northern California sometime last week with “a suspected viral infection,” the institution said in a memo to staff Wednesday.

Given the person’s symptoms, the UC Davis team requested a coronavirus test by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but the federal agency refused to immediately conduct one, according to the memo.

UC Davis, which “does not control the testing process,” said the CDC finally ordered a test on Sunday, at which time the patient was placed on “airborne precautions and strict contact precautions.” The test came back positive on Wednesday.

It was not immediately clear how many days the patient waited to be tested, but the person had also been to another California hospital before being transferred to UC Davis.

The CDC has developed the only federally authorized coronavirus test kit in the U.S. and remains the main authority in charge of the procedure. The agency did ship test kits to more than 100 labs across the country earlier this month, but UC Davis was apparently not on the list.

As of Thursday, more than 50 people are being treated for the respiratory illness in the U.S. More than three dozen of them, however, are repatriated U.S. citizens and residents who were flown from China or Japan and were quarantined immediately after entering the U.S.

The pneumonia-like disease, known as COVID-19, was first discovered in central China’s Hubei province in December. Since then, the virus has sickened more than 80,000 people and killed nearly 3,000, most of them in mainland China.

The vast majority of coronavirus patients around the world have links to China or had contact with people who have recently been to that country. However, an increasing number of cases have shown no direct connections to China or any of the other disease hubs.

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