

Trump deploys hospital ships in coronavirus 'war'

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The United States is to deploy military hospital ships to fight the coronavirus, Donald Trump said Wednesday, as he likened himself to a "wartime president" and invoked a Korean War-era law.

As America and Canada announced they were closing their border to non-essential travelers, New York governor Andrew Cuomo said Trump was dispatching the navy's 1,000-room USNS Comfort to the city's harbor.

The moves came as the number of deaths in the United States from COVID-19, the illness caused by the new [coronavirus](#), reached 115, with confirmed cases soaring to 7,323, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally.

US stocks suffered deep losses as Trump tried to downplay fears that the [unemployment rate](#) in the world's number one power could spike to 20 percent because of the fast-spreading epidemic.

Cuomo said Trump had told him that the 894-foot (270-meter) Comfort ship would be sent to New York "immediately," although it was not clear when the military vessel would dock in the US financial capital.

"It's an extraordinary step," Cuomo told reporters, adding that it had around 1,000 rooms, including "operating rooms."

"It's literally a floating hospital, which will add capacity," he added at the press conference.

Cuomo said he and Trump agreed on the approach to containing the pandemic which has killed over 8,000 people worldwide and brought cities grinding to a halt.

'Invisible enemy'

"We're fighting a war, and this is a war, and we're in the same trench," said Cuomo.

Trump echoed the theme at a daily White House briefing on the pandemic.

"I view (myself) as a, in a sense, a wartime president. I mean, that's what we're fighting. I mean, it's a very tough situation here," he told reporters.

He added that the United States would "defeat the invisible enemy," and do it "even faster than we thought."

"It will be a complete victory," he said.

Trump told reporters that, as well as Comfort, the USNS Mercy hospital ship would also be deployed.

Navy Spokesman Samuel Boyle said the boats would not treat COVID-19 patients directly but would assist the treatment of other patients in coastal locations where doctors and nurses are focused on the virus.

A defense department source told AFP that the Comfort's readiness to sail would be "more like weeks than days."

Trump also invoked the Defense Production Act, signed in 1950 during the Korean War, allowing the government to compel businesses to sign contracts and thus expand production.

It is expected to help speed up production of protective masks and other equipment for medical personnel.

Elsewhere, the Food and Drug Administration said it was investigating rolling out self-swab kits, where citizens test themselves, and Vice President Mike Pence called on hospitals to delay elective surgery.

Deborah Birx, the coronavirus taskforce administrator, warned of a dramatic increase in cases as testing ramps up in the coming days, and

forecast that the number of cases will exceed Italy's.

"Our curves will not be stable until sometime next week," she said.

Earlier Wednesday, Trump announced the closure of the US-Canada border to non-essential traffic as the coronavirus epidemic intensified in both countries—but said that trade would not be impacted.

He said he hoped it would open in 30 days, as Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Can\$27 billion (US\$18.6 billion) in direct aid to help workers and businesses cope with the economic impact of the pandemic.

On Wall Street, stocks sank as much as 10 percent after trading was halted for 15 minutes to mitigate volatility.

Trump said warnings by Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin that the jobless rate could reach 20 percent without a massive government stimulus program was "an absolute total worst-case scenario."

In New York, Cuomo announced that he was barring all non-essential businesses from having more than 50 percent of the workforce work outside of their home.

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