

US death toll tops 50,000 as some Georgia businesses reopen

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Gyms, hair salons and tattoo parlors had a green light to reopen in the US state of Georgia on Friday as the death toll from the coronavirus pandemic soared past 50,000 in the United States.

As the southern state lifted restrictions on a list of businesses that also included nail salons and bowling alleys, President Donald Trump warned that Governor Brian Kemp may be moving too fast.

"Spas, beauty salons, tattoo parlors, & barber shops should take a little slower path," Trump tweeted.

At the same time, Trump said he had told Kemp, a Republican ally, "to do what is right for the great people of Georgia (& U.S.)!"

The mixed messaging was the latest from a president whose remarks from the White House podium have frequently raised eyebrows, including most recently a suggestion that disinfectant could be injected to treat patients with COVID-19.

Trump sought to walk back his disinfectant comments on Friday, claiming somewhat unconvincingly that he had been speaking "sarcastically."

Chris Edwards, owner of the Peachtree Battle Barber Shop, said he was "happy" about being allowed to reopen his store in an Atlanta strip mall, where most businesses nevertheless remained closed.

"I'm a small businessman," Edwards told AFP as he gave a trim to a middle-aged man, a physician who declined to be identified.

"If I don't cut hair I don't make money," Edwards said. "We're being safe, we're being clean, it's all you can do."

Edwards was wearing a mask, but the customer was not. Since opening at 7:00 am the barber said he had had five or six customers.

Rob Flat, owner of Tried and True Tattoo a few blocks away, said he

was only taking appointments, not walk-ins, but had not had any customers yet.

"We're definitely looking forward to opening, but we want to be responsible," Flat said.

Kemp's reopening plan—which requires people to wear masks and establishments to check customers for symptoms—has met with criticism from some business owners in the Peach State who voiced fears it is too soon.

"Believe in Science, Not Kemp," said a sign displayed by protestors in cars outside the governor's mansion. "Stay Home, Stay Safe," read another.

'Sarcastically'

At his press conference on Thursday, Trump said he wanted to reopen the country but Georgia's move may be premature.

"I don't want this thing to flare up because you're doing something not in the ([social distancing](#)) guidelines," he said.

The White House pushed back meanwhile at criticism after Trump mused that researchers might investigate ways of injecting disinfectant to treat COVID-19—comments dismissed by experts as reckless.

"Leave it to the media to irresponsibly take President Trump out of context and run with negative headlines," White House spokeswoman Kayleigh McEnany said. "President Trump has repeatedly said that Americans should consult with medical doctors regarding [coronavirus](#) treatment."

Trump claimed to reporters on Friday at a White House signing ceremony for a half-trillion dollar relief package for the reeling US economy that he had been speaking "sarcastically."

"I was asking the question sarcastically to reporters like you, just to see what would happen," he said.

In fact, Trump had turned to government scientists in the briefing room and asked them about the role of disinfectants in killing the virus.

Thursday's White House briefing was focused on research suggesting the novel coronavirus was quickly destroyed by sunlight, and also touched on disinfectants that can kill it.

That prompted Trump to speculate about whether it would be possible to bring "the light inside the body."

"And then I see the disinfectant, where it knocks it out in a minute," Trump said. "Is there a way we can do something like that, by injection inside or almost a cleaning?"

At least two manufacturers of cleaning products sold in the United States issued statements after Trump's remarks, warning people against using them as a treatment.

The United States is the country the hardest-hit by the virus with more than 880,000 confirmed cases and 50,100 deaths as of Friday, according to a toll by Johns Hopkins University.

Nearly 22,000 cases

Georgia's bid to jumpstart thousands of teetering businesses is the most aggressive return-to-normalcy effort in the nation.

Restaurants, theaters and private social clubs can open from Monday, provided social distancing and mask-wearing guidelines are in place.

But there is concern that easing shelter-in-place orders too early could trigger new outbreaks.

Georgia's coronavirus figures are far lower than those in New York, the US epicenter, but they are substantial.

The state has more than 21,880 confirmed cases as of Thursday, with 881 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins.

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