

Tiptoeing back to normality, Germany gears up for 2nd virus wave

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Left empty as the coronavirus pandemic forced events to be cancelled, Berlin's exhibition centre Messe is getting a makeover with the help of German soldiers—to reemerge as a hospital in a few weeks' time.

Wires are still hanging from the ceilings, but when construction is finished, the vast site will be able to host up to 1,000 patients.

Even as Germany begins easing curbs on public life to halt contagion of the virus, authorities are busy ramping up their capacity to deal with a second wave of infections.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has repeatedly warned that Germany must not rest on its laurels even if the infection rate has dropped, saying it is still "on thin ice".

Virologist Christian Drosten of Berlin's Charite [hospital](#) has also warned that the virus could return with a "totally different force".

"The virus will continue to spread in the course of the next weeks and months," Drosten told public broadcaster NDR, adding that a second wave would be dangerous as it could pop up "everywhere at the same time".

"We may be in the process of completely squandering our headstart," he said, warning against complacency.

So Germany, which has won international praise for its widespread testing system as well as huge capacity in treating patients, is still throwing vast resources at increasing the number of intensive care beds equipped with ventilators.

'Prepared'

At the university hospital in Aachen, close to the Dutch border, dozens of beds lie empty in case of a resurgence in cases.

"We are ready to react dynamically," said Gernot Marx, director of

intensive care at the hospital, which treated some of the first serious cases earlier this year.

"We have not yet had to decide (to treat one patient over another)... due to the high bed capacity and good preparation," added fellow doctor Anne Bruecken. "I hope it stays that way."

Almost 13,000 of Germany's 32,000 intensive care beds remained free at the last count.

From the start of the crisis, Germany had much more breathing room than its European neighbours, with 33.9 intensive care beds per 100,000 inhabitants compared to 8.6 in Italy and 16.3 in France.

And it has since drastically expanded intensive care and screening capacities.

"Germany is prepared for a possible second wave," said Gerald Gass, president of the German Hospitals Society (DKG).

"In the coming months, we plan to keep around 20 percent of our beds with respiratory assistance free, and we want to be able to free up a further 20 percent at 72 hours notice... if a second wave comes," Gass told AFP.

Europe's biggest economy currently has a [coronavirus](#) mortality rate of 3.5 percent, with latest figures showing 150,383 confirmed cases with 5,321 fatalities.

While that figure is rising, it remains far below that of other countries such as Spain or Italy, where the death rate hovers at 10 percent.

With Germany's health system yet to become overburdened, Gass has

called on hospitals to slowly return to treating patients whose cases were suspended during the crisis as they are deemed to require less time-pressing operations.

"In general, our hospitals are less busy now than they are usually," he said.

'Step by step'

Berlin's current strategy is to pursue a step-by-step return to normality, accompanied by hundreds of thousands of tests a week.

Merkel has said the aim is to be able to return to a stage where infection numbers are low enough to allow contact chains to be traced and isolated to prevent flare-ups elsewhere.

To that end, a contact tracing app is expected to be rolled out in the coming weeks.

Masks are now also obligatory on public transport across the country and, in some states, in shops as well.

"We have now learned that a dynamic development in infections means an immediate burden for the health system," said Gass.

"That means we need to use tests to very quickly identify what effect the step-by-step lifting of restrictions is having."

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