

Johnson vows new UK virus tracing strategy will be ready by June

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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Wednesday the country will

have 25,000 virus tracing staff recruited by June so the country can "make progress" in its strategy to keep easing the nationwide lockdown.

The government is under pressure to get the recruits in place to operate alongside a smartphone tracing app, that it hopes will allow large-scale testing and tracing tactics to start next month.

"We have growing confidence that we will have a test, track and trace operation that will be world-beating and... it will be in place by June 1," Johnson told parliament.

"Already we have recruited 24,000 tracers. By June 1 we will have 25,000," he added, noting the staff will be able to trace the contacts of 10,000 new virus cases daily.

Britain's official coronavirus death toll has reached at least 41,000, with almost 10,000 dead in care homes in England and Wales alone, according to an update from the Office for National Statistics released on Tuesday.

The government's official rolling count of fatalities, which is less comprehensive as it only includes people who tested positive for COVID-19, stands at 35,704, with 363 more added to Wednesday.

By both measures, the figures are the highest in Europe and second only to the United States in the global rankings.

Leave to remain

Johnson, who himself was hospitalised for coronavirus in April and spent three days in intensive care, has been criticised for largely abandoning a testing and tracing strategy on March 12, as the virus took hold.

A cross-party parliamentary committee on Tuesday said it was clear a lack of capacity determined government strategy, and the testing regime had been "inadequate" in the early stages.

Johnson introduced a nationwide lockdown in late March, which is now being partially eased in England but maintained in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The British leader hopes some children will be able to return to primary schools from June 1.

The government has made the army of contact tracers a key part of the re-adopted approach to slowing the spread of the virus, alongside wider community testing and the smartphone app.

The app, developed by the state-run National Health Service (NHS), has been undergoing trials this month before a wider rollout.

No firm date has yet been given for its full implementation.

Among those who have died in the outbreak are 181 staff in the NHS and 131 in the social care sector.

Many are overseas nationals and the government was criticised for not extending a bereavement scheme giving their families indefinite leave to remain to support staff such as cleaners and porters.

But the interior ministry on Wednesday announced the scheme would be extended "in recognition of their tireless dedication and selflessness".

Home Secretary Priti Patel said it will be "effective immediately and retrospectively".

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