

Germany: 657 virus cases at slaughterhouse in new outbreak

June 17 2020, by Frank Jordans and Geir Moulson



A truck leaves the Toennies meatpacking plant in Rheda-Wiedenbrueck, Germany, Wednesday, June 17, 2020. More than 400 new cases of COVID-19 have been recorded among workers at a large meatpacking plant in western Germany, authorities said Wednesday, in an outbreak that may have been linked to the easing of travel restrictions.(David Inderlied/dpa via AP)

Regional officials in western Germany said Wednesday that the number

of new COVID-19 cases linked to a large meatpacking plant has risen to 657, a higher figure than many recent daily increases for the entire country.

Health officials in Guetersloh said they have received a total of 983 test results have so far been received from workers at the Toennies slaughterhouse in Rheda-Wiedenbrueck. Of those, 326 tests were negative.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel praised regional officials for swiftly closing schools in the region.

"We are far away from an exponential increase," Merkel told reporters, insisting that the country would continue to try to relax restrictions despite the local outbreak at the slaughterhouse.

"But we see from these outbreaks that the virus isn't gone," she added.

Company officials at Toennies said the outbreak at the slaughterhouse may have been linked to workers taking the opportunity to visit their families in eastern European countries as [border controls](#) were relaxed.

Officials ordered the closure of the slaughterhouse, as well as isolation and tests for everyone else who had worked at the Toennies site—putting about 7,000 people under quarantine.

The infections pushed the region above the threshold of 50 new infections per 100,000 residents over a week at which local authorities in Germany have to consider new restrictions. Officials decided to close schools and child care centers across the county from Thursday until the summer vacation starts near the end of the month, but chose to avoid a wider-ranging lockdown.



Trucks leave the Toennies meatpacking plant in Rheda-Wiedenbrueck, Germany, Wednesday, June 17, 2020. More than 400 new cases of COVID-19 have been recorded among workers at a large meatpacking plant in western Germany, authorities said Wednesday, in an outbreak that may have been linked to the easing of travel restrictions.(David Inderlied/dpa via AP)

There have been several outbreaks at German slaughterhouses in recent weeks, prompting the government to impose stricter safety rules for the industry and ban the practice of using sub-contractors.

The outbreak in Rheda-Wiedenbrueck, one of Germany's biggest slaughterhouses, could cut the available supply of meat in Germany. Sven-Georg Adenauer, head of the regional administration, said a fifth

of Germany's meat products could be unavailable while the plant is shut, the dpa news agency reported.

Gereon Schulze Althoff, the Toennies official in charge of the company's pandemic response, said that the company had been "fighting like lions since February ... to keep the virus out of the operation."

Schulze Althoff said he had no conclusive explanation for why the infections had occurred now. But he noted that many foreign workers had wanted to go and see their families as European borders started to reopen, meaning that "we were exposed to new risks."

"We were aware of that, but we ... carried out extra testing of people returning from holidays and so on," he added. "But we didn't succeed in keeping out these sources or this source (of infection)—we don't know which exactly."

He said the company has a lot of workers from eastern European countries, and many went home over recent long weekends. He said cooled rooms may also have facilitated the virus spreading.



Thomas Kuhlbusch, head of the crisis management team and head of the Health, Order and Law Department of the Guetersloh district, takes part in a press conference in Rheda-Wiedenbrueck, Germany, Wednesday, June 17, 2020. More than 400 new cases of COVID-19 have been recorded among workers at a large meatpacking plant in western Germany, authorities said Wednesday, in an outbreak that may have been linked to the easing of travel restrictions.(David Inderlied/dpa via AP)

Germany started loosening its [coronavirus](#) restrictions in late April and has largely kept infection rates low, though local outbreaks linked to slaughterhouses, church services and a restaurant among other things have caused some concern.

News of the Guetersloh [outbreak](#) came as Chancellor Angela Merkel

was meeting with Germany's 16 state governors to discuss the situation.

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Citation: Germany: 657 virus cases at slaughterhouse in new outbreak (2020, June 17) retrieved 16 June 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-06-germany-virus-cases-slaughterhouse-outbreak.html>

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