

Sweden's coronavirus consensus cracks as deaths top 5,000

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Sweden on Wednesday passed the grim mark of 5,000 deaths from the new coronavirus, as cracks began to emerge in the political consensus the government has until now enjoyed over its softer approach.

The Public Health Agency said it had recorded 5,041 COVID-19 deaths, giving it the world's fifth highest death rate at 499.1 per million inhabitants.

Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, a Social Democrat, insisted in a weekend televised interview that hospitalisations were down sharply and Sweden's strategy of not locking down "was not a failure".

The large share of deaths in elderly care homes "has nothing to do with the strategy", he said.

"It has to do with failings in society that we are correcting," including basic hygiene deficiencies in many care homes, he added.

Sweden's political circles broadly supported the decision to not lock down, as did the general population.

But there has been growing criticism in recent weeks over the government's struggles to get mass testing off the ground, which only began in earnest this week.

Parties on the right have also accused the government of hiding behind public health experts and failing to take responsibility in the crisis.

"A leader has to step forward, but Lofven took a step back," Ebba Thor, the head of the Christian Democrats, said during a recent party leader debate.

The Liberals' parliamentary leader, Johan Pehrson, said Sweden's softer approach "may have contributed to the high death toll", while the head of the conservative Moderate Party, Ulf Kristersson, has called for a commission to be appointed immediately to probe the government's handling of the crisis.

Situation improving

Swedish officials have stressed that the situation has vastly improved in recent weeks, despite the dire death toll.

The Public Health Agency said the country of 10.3 million had 54,562 confirmed cases on Wednesday, a high infection rate, but said the large majority of new cases were mild ones recorded after testing began to ramp up several weeks ago.

The number of hospitalisations and intensive care patients had gone down dramatically since hitting a peak in April, officials said.

According to the Swedish Intensive Care Registry, there were on Wednesday a total of 218 COVID-19 patients in intensive care units, compared to a peak of 558 on April 25-26.

Doctors interviewed by AFP confirmed that their COVID-19 units had passed the peak.

"The number of patients has gone down dramatically," Lars Falk, head of the ECMO unit at Karolinska Hospital in Stockholm, told AFP.

"There are much fewer patients needing ICU care than a couple of weeks ago," he said.

Karin Hildebrand, an ICU doctor at the capital's Sodertjukhuset hospital, said the situation was similar at her workplace.

"The figures have dropped. It's a big difference (compared) to over two months ago. We have a lot less patients now than in April," she told AFP.

"Hopefully the decrease will continue."

Antibody tests

Anders Tegnell, chief epidemiologist at the Public Health Agency, who has become the face of Sweden's strategy, has repeatedly insisted that lockdowns do not work.

Once countries lift their restrictions and normal routines resume, the virus will begin to circulate again, he said.

"You can't eliminate the virus entirely in the long-run," he told reporters on Tuesday.

A study published late Tuesday indicated that 14 percent of Stockholmers who had taken a voluntary test at a cost of 750 kronor (\$80, 71 euros) had tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies.

The samples were collected between April 27 and June 14.

Some critics have suggested that the 50,000 people tested do not represent a scientific sample. Given the high cost of the test, those who elected to be tested may have done so because they suspected they had caught the virus, they argue.

Another scientific study published on Wednesday by the Public Health Agency showed that the infection fatality rate in Stockholm for those aged 69 and under was 0.1 percent, and 4.3 percent for those aged 70 and over.

That study examined 1,667 people infected with the virus during March 21-30.

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