Britain eases virus quarantine as US under siege

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Britain on Friday exempted dozens of countries from its quarantine rules as the coronavirus outbreak slowed in Europe, but excluded the United States as the pandemic accelerates across the Americas.

With Europe reopening after an unprecedented lockdown, travellers arriving into England from more than 50 nations will from July 10 no longer be required to undergo 14 days of self-isolation.

The European Union meanwhile authorised the use of the anti-viral drug remdesivir for COVID-19—the first treatment approved to deal with the disease—although the United States has bought most of the global stock.

But across the Atlantic the news was increasingly grim with the US posting a record 53,000 new COVID-19 cases, while the number of infections in Latin America overtaking those in Europe for the first time.

Touching almost every country on Earth since it emerged in China late last year, the coronavirus has hit at least 10.8 million people and killed 521,000 globally, shattering previously buoyant economies and bringing public life to a standstill.

The World Health Organization called on countries hit by serious outbreaks to "wake up" to the realities instead of bickering over them.

"People need to wake up. The data is not lying. The situation on the ground is not lying," WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan told journalists in Geneva. "It is never too late in an epidemic to take control."

'Reopening of the nation'

In Europe, countries are trying to safely revive a struggling tourism sector as the northern hemisphere summer gets underway.

England unveiled a list of countries from which it allow travellers, mostly covering Europe—but not Portugal—and the Caribbean,

Australia and New Zealand.

The United States and mainland China are notably omitted.

"Today marks the next step in carefully reopening our great nation," British Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said of the change, which reverses a two-week quarantine policy imposed in June.

But the exemptions will only apply to arrivals into England, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so far sticking to the blanket ban.

Many of the countries on the English list will now also allow travellers from Britain, which has suffered the deadliest coronavirus outbreak in Europe with at least 44,000 dead, although infection rates are falling and it is gradually easing a three-month lockdown.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged people to behave "responsibly" ahead of so-called Super Saturday when pubs will reopen after more than three-month shutdown.

The rest of Europe is also looking to the future while also seeing what lessons can be learned. French prosecutors said they were launching an inquiry into former prime minister Edouard Philippe's handling of the virus crisis, following his resignation Friday.

'Roaring back'

While much of the planet pursued a return to some semblance of normality, the United States soared past 50,000 new infections Thursday for the second time in two days.

Now the epicentre of the pandemic, the United States has recorded nearly 129,000 deaths out of more than 2.7 million cases and is expected

to record its three millionth infection next week.

So-called "Sun Belt" states in the south and west have been forced to re-shut restaurants, bars and beaches, casting a grim pall over the nation's upcoming Independence Day celebrations on July 4.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis blamed the surge on "social interactions" among young people at parties, beaches, bars, swimming pools as well as a more "robust" testing program.

In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott ordered people in counties with 20 or more cases to wear masks and banned gatherings of more than 10 amid a spike in infections.

California has meanwhile seen a 56 percent increase in hospitalisations over two weeks.

States that reopened their economies the earliest and fastest after the pandemic struck—and against the advice of federal health authorities—are now experiencing the highest caseloads.

But President Donald Trump, under fire for his handling of the crisis, highlighted positive jobs data that showed 4.8 million people were back to work in June.

"Today's announcement proves that our economy is roaring back," said Trump. "The crisis is being handled."

Latin American cases soar

Cases have been skyrocketing across Latin America.

The region now has the second most cases in the world with 2.73

million, head of Europe on 2.71 million but behind North America.

However there are still fewer deaths in Latin America and the Caribbean compared to Europe—nearly 122,000 compared to nearly 200,000.

Brazil, the region's largest economy, has almost 1.5 million confirmed cases alone, second only to the United States.

Nevertheless, popular tourist city Rio de Janeiro authorised bars, restaurants and cafes to reopen at 50 percent capacity.

Colombia, the fourth largest economy in the region, passed 100,000 cases while Peru topped 10,000 dead.

In Asia, however, swift lockdowns have largely made progress against the disease.

The Chinese capital Beijing was lifting most travel restrictions, weeks after a new wave of infections broke out.

The global hunt for a coronavirus vaccine continues but there has been a ray of hope.

The European Commission, the bloc's executive arm, on Friday authorised the use of anti-viral drug remdesivir to treat the new coronavirus. Two US studies have showed it can reduce the length of hospital stays.

However the United States announced earlier this week that it had purchased 92 percent of all remdesivir production by the California-based Gilead laboratory until the end of September.