

Global virus infections hit record highs in swelling pandemic

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Global coronavirus infections have hit record highs as the United States and Brazil battle the world's deadliest outbreaks while new clusters around the planet test fragile gains in containing the disease.

The pandemic is accelerating with more than half of the world's infections over the past half year recorded in June alone, according to the World Health Organization.

And the past week has seen new highs with cases topping "160,000 on every single day," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Wednesday.

Touching almost every country on earth, COVID-19 has infected at least 10.7 million people and claimed some 516,000 lives as it upends ordinary and economic life in unprecedented ways.

In the worst-hit United States new infections soared past 50,000 for the first time on Wednesday in a new grim milestone.

Rising cases have seen US states from California to Florida shutter restaurants, bars and beaches as the nation braces for July 4 Independence Day festivities.

Several states have also mandated 14-day quarantines on visitors in the buildup to the holiday weekend celebrations.

Worldwide travel is similarly patchy as the European Union opened its borders to some 15 nations but not the US, Brazil and Russia and others hosting dangerous outbreaks.

President Donald Trump, under fire for his handling of a crisis that has killed some 128,000 Americans, lept on positive jobs data that showed 4.8 million people were back to work in June.

"I'd like to just announce the spectacular news for American workers and for American families and our country as whole," Trump said.

Yet the new business closures in some states in late June could jeopardize the gains.

Indigenous leader dies

The crisis is also ravaging parts of Latin America, particularly Brazil where more than 60,000 have died.

Colombia, the fourth largest economy on the continent, has surpassed the 100,000 infection mark.

In Peru, an indigenous leader who fought for the land rights of Amazonian communities, Santiago Manuin, succumbed to the respiratory disease Wednesday, according to his family.

"Many people have died, the community is holding vigils and burying them. The government has forgotten about us," said his daughter Luz Angelica Manui.

Indigenous people across Latin America have been hit hard by the disease due to weakened immune systems and centuries of state neglect.

The Pan American Health Organization estimates that at least 20,000 people are infected in the Amazon River basin, where some areas are only accessible by boat.

The health body has also warned that the [death toll](#) in Latin America and the Caribbean could quadruple to more than 400,000 by October without stricter public health measures.

Djokovic negative

In the European Union, where many infection rates have been brought down from their peak, countries are trying to safely revive a struggling tourism sector by opening borders to 14 countries ranging from Algeria to Uruguay.

Travellers from China, where the virus first emerged late last year, will also be allowed to enter the EU if Beijing reciprocates.

In Spain, which has managed to keep the virus in check since emerging from its long and painful lockdown, applause erupted as the last six COVID-19 patients left a Barcelona hotel that had been converted into a medical center.

"It's been emotional," said Hugo Figueroa, 45, a mid-level manager standing at reception.

Outside the EU, poor countries in the Western Balkans which have so far been spared the worst of the virus are now seeing a new uptick in cases.

After holding national elections and sporting events throughout June, Serbia on Thursday announced new restrictions on gatherings of more than five people in its four hardest-hit towns.

The country's tennis champion, world number one Novak Djokovic, meanwhile announced he and his wife had tested negative for COVID-19 after catching an infection at a controversial tournament he organized in the region.

Other parts of the world are also struggling with new clusters of contagion.

In the Middle East, deaths in Iran surpassed 11,000 Thursday as the

country records a rise in fatalities and cases following a low in early May.

Kazakhstan is also preparing to tighten anti-virus restrictions after logging a steep infection surge.

In its advice to governments, the WHO has stressed that the most effective way to fight the virus is a "comprehensive approach".

"Not testing alone. Not physical distancing alone. Not contact tracing alone. Not masks alone. Do it all," said WHO chief Tedros.

Countries that have implemented a wide range of measures, including contact tracing, isolation, physical distancing and mask wearing "have suppressed transmission and saved lives", he added.

And while the economic outlook for much of the world is gloomy, there have been a few winners.

In Germany, a century-old firm plexiglas firm in Wiesbaden has been busier than ever with protective plastic in high demand.

Owner Claus Mueller said he did not need to make use of the German government's massive rescue package for stricken businesses or put workers on shorter hours.

"If you're one of the winners of a crisis, you can't ask the state for help. Other companies have been much, much harder hit," he told AFP.

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