

Europe frets over virus spikes as WHO warns against lockdowns

August 20 2020, by Mari ette Le Roux and Jan Hennop In Rome



Italy registered 845 new cases on Thursday, its highest daily tally since May

Spikes in coronavirus infections in European countries caused alarm on Thursday but the World Health Organization (WHO) said the continent should be able to fight the pandemic without reimposing full lockdowns.

While Italy registered 845 new cases on Thursday, its highest daily tally since May, France reported 4,700 fresh infections—a massive increase on the previous day. While Spain's daily increases topped even those of France, Germany was examining its own resurgence.

Worrying trends also emerged in India as a new study suggested more than a quarter of Delhi's 20 million people may have been infected without showing symptoms—backing up several similar studies.

The figures added urgency to the desperate bid to find a vaccine for the virus, which has infected more than 22 million and killed hundreds of thousands since it first emerged in China late last year.

Russia announced on Thursday it was pushing forward with testing on more than 40,000 people of its candidate drug, known as Sputnik V, which has already been hailed by Russian officials as a success even as experts questioned the rigour of the testing regime.

Qantas losses

Africa provided a brighter perspective on Thursday, registering a significant drop in the number of infections last week.

"We have begun to bend the curve slowly... it's important to recognise those slight tendencies that are positive," said Dr John Nkengasong, head of the African Union's health body, Africa CDC.



The full extent of the virus spread in India was once again under the microscope as a new study suggested more than a quarter of Delhi's 20 million people may have been infected without showing symptoms

The continent has suffered less harm than most other regions from the pandemic, which has hit the Americas harder than anywhere else.

The United States continues to bear the brunt in health terms and is suffering grim economic fallout.

The number of Americans filing claims for joblessness each week topped one million again, US officials said on Thursday, an increase on the previous week's figures.

Globally, the airline industry continues to take a buffeting—Australian flag carrier Qantas posted an annual loss of almost \$2 billion after a "near total collapse" in demand.

Online shopping is one of the few sectors still thriving in the pandemic, and second-quarter results from Alibaba once again bore this out as the Chinese e-commerce giant recorded growth of 34 percent.

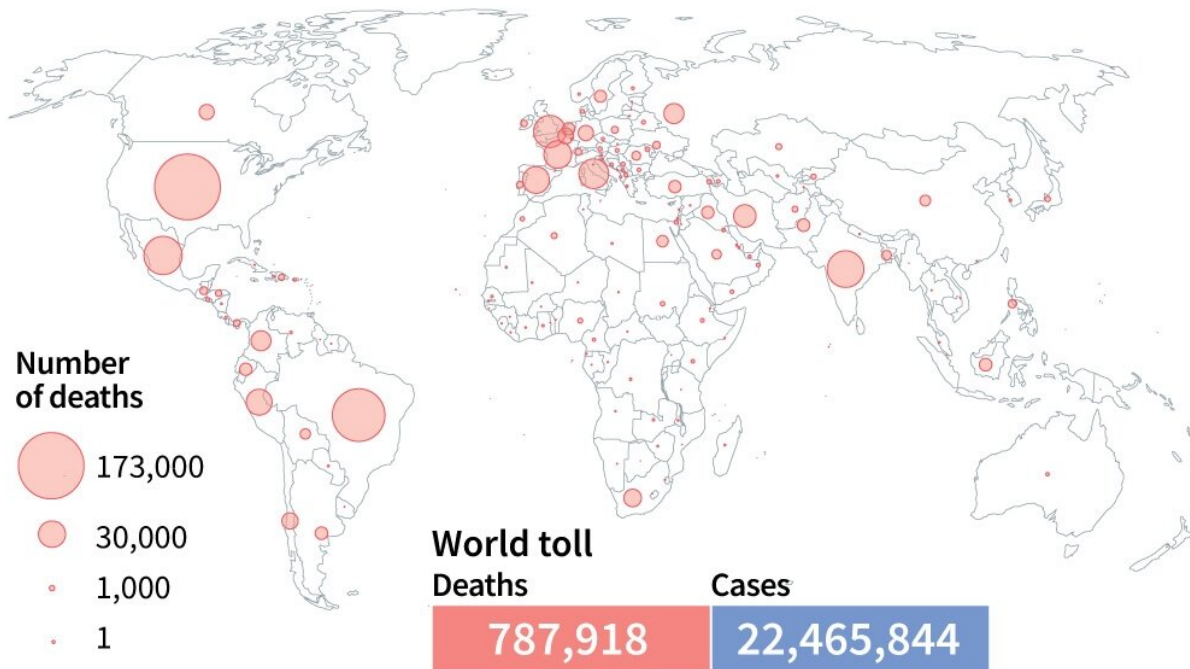
The crushing economic damage has sprung not just from the virus itself but also from the lockdowns that largely halted business activity across the world.

With many nations creeping back towards restrictive measures, the WHO said European health authorities are now better prepared and should not need to resort to the complete closures endured particularly by the Spanish and Italians.

"We can manage the virus and keep the economy running and an education system in operation," said Hans Kluge, head of the WHO's European branch.

Spread of coronavirus

As of Aug 20, 1100 GMT



Source: AFP count based on official tolls



Map showing deaths from coronavirus per country and total global cases and deaths, as of August 20 at 1100 GMT

Anti-social bubble

China reacted swiftly when the virus emerged last year and has kept deaths and infections relatively low compared with most other regions.

However, many web users were incensed by viral images of a pool party attended by thousands in Wuhan—the city where the virus was first reported.

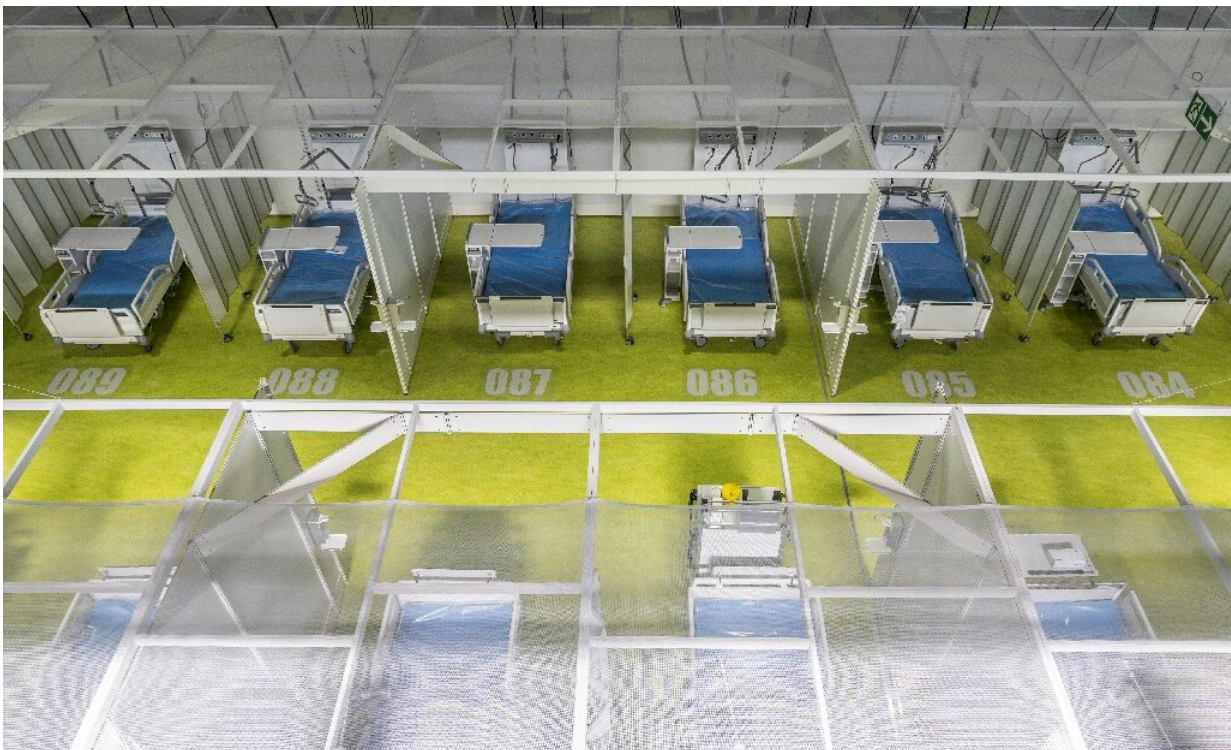
Chinese officials, though, said the party was more proof of their successful handling of the crisis.

"This shows that Wuhan has won a strategic victory in its fight against the epidemic," said foreign ministry spokesman Zhao Lijian.

Political leaders in the Americas and Europe looked on with envy as China's infection figures flatlined, many now pinning their hopes on the speedy development of a vaccine.

Several drugs are approaching the mass-testing phase, and countries around the world have been pre-ordering many millions of doses.

The EU said on Thursday it had concluded talks with a German pharmaceutical firm to secure 225 million doses of a potential vaccine—the fourth such agreement the bloc has reached.



Germany has prepared a temporary hospital for coronavirus patients in Berlin

French President Emmanuel Macron hailed European cooperating on the issue and said he was hopeful that a vaccine would come online with the next few months.

"This will not solve the problems of the next few weeks, but of the next few months," he said.

However, while a vaccine remains elusive, governments are left trying to control the spread through social-distancing measures, quarantines, travel bans and restrictions on businesses.

Following social-distancing rules can be a challenge, even for passengers aboard the Mediterranean's first cruise since the pandemic hit Europe.

The cruise firm had to kick a family off the ship after they left a tour group to go sightseeing on their own.

"By departing from the organised shore excursion, this family broke from the safe 'social bubble'," MSC Cruises said in a statement, adding that the family would not be allowed back on board.

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