

Europe ramps up controls fearing second virus wave

August 5 2020



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Europe on Wednesday tightened virus restrictions as fears of a second wave of infections spurred by the holiday season grew with the worldwide death toll crossing 700,000.

Greece announced a "wake-up week," tightening restrictions after domestic infections saw over 380 new cases in August.

Scotland reimposed restrictions in and around the city of Aberdeen, after a cluster of cases was identified there.

Toulouse in southwest France made the wearing of face masks compulsory in the busiest streets and squares from Wednesday. Paris and other cities are expected to follow suit soon, authorities said.

Germany put Belgium's Antwerp province on its list of coronavirus risk zones, requiring travellers arriving from the region to go into quarantine for 14 days unless they can produce a negative COVID-19 test.

Meanwhile South Africa announced that 24,000 of its health workers had contracted the virus, with more than a hundred of them dying from it.

New York announced it was setting up checkpoints at key entry points to the city to ensure travellers comply with the state's quarantine requirements.

A total of 701,559 deaths have been recorded so far around the world, according to an AFP tally compiled from official sources AT 1600 GMT.

Europe remains the hardest-hit region with 211,603 fatalities, but the number of deaths is rising fast in Latin America, with 206,835 deaths recorded.

Restrictions re-introduced

Announcing the re-introduction of restrictions in Greece, government

spokesman Stelios Petsas told Mega TV: "We are trying to awaken people with messages and daily announcements on additional measures,"

"The virus is here, it feeds on our complacency," he said, adding that three main areas of concern had been identified; regular crossings by ethnic Greeks from Balkans countries; social gatherings—from clubbing youths to baptisms—and public transport.

The restrictions reimposed on the northeast Scottish city of Aberdeen included the closure of all indoor and outdoor hospitality venues from Wednesday evening as First Minister Nicola Sturgeon referred to what could become a "significant outbreak".

The measures will be reviewed in a week, which is when many Scottish schools will reopen.

In Belgium, one of the country's biggest meat processing plants, Westvlees, sent 225 staff home to quarantine after a cluster of coronavirus cases was discovered.

Switzerland added mainland Spain to a quarantine list of 46 countries as well as Singapore and Romania.

In the Netherlands, similar mask-wearing measures came into force Wednesday in Rotterdam and in some busy neighbourhoods of Amsterdam, including its famous red-light district.

New York checkpoints

New York mayor Bill de Blasio, announcing the new checkpoints at access roads into the city, said: "New York City is holding the line against COVID-19, and New Yorkers have shown tremendous discipline.

"We're not going to let our hard work slip away and will continue to do everything we can to keep New Yorkers safe and healthy."

The virus killed more than 32,000 people in the city, which was one of its first epicentres in the United States.

One of Brazil's leading indigenous chiefs, 71-year-old Aritana Yawalapiti, died Wednesday of respiratory complications caused by COVID-19.

Brazil, South America's largest country, is driving a surge in Latin America and the Caribbean. It has recorded more than 2.8 million cases, and nearly 96,000 deaths, nearly half the region's 206,835 fatalities.

In Afghanistan, the health ministry said nearly a third of the population—or 10 million people—has been infected with the coronavirus.

Vaccine trials

In South Africa, the hardest-hit country in Africa, some 24,000 health workers have contracted the coronavirus and 181 have died since March, Health Minister Zweli Mkwize announced.

The number of infected health care workers translates to around five percent of South Africa's overall caseload, which has been rising rapidly in recent weeks.

But he added: "We haven't got to the stage where we don't have hospital space for patients."

The world's hope of ending the current cycle of outbreaks and lockdowns rests on finding a treatment, which has proved elusive so far.

The US government Wednesday announced a new \$1 billion investment in a COVID-19 vaccine being developed by Johnson & Johnson, guaranteeing 100 million doses.

J&J, via its subsidiary Janssen, received \$456 million in March.

Clinical trials on humans began in China for a potential coronavirus vaccine developed by German pharmaceutical group BioNTech with Chinese company Fosun Pharma.

Travel industry hit

The travel sector announced fresh cutbacks due to the pandemic.

British airline Virgin Atlantic, which has not flown since April, has applied for bankruptcy protection in the United States as it seeks to tie up a rescue deal in the UK.

Virgin Australia said it would close its budget subsidiary Tigerair Australia, laying off 3,000 staff as it prepares to relaunch under new owners.

Copenhagen airport, Scandinavia's largest, said Wednesday that it might lay off a quarter of its staff.

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Citation: Europe ramps up controls fearing second virus wave (2020, August 5) retrieved 16 June 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-europe-ramps-virus.html>

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