

WHO warns of 'alarming' virus spread in Europe

September 17 2020, by Afp Bureaus



The WHO's regional director for Europe Hans Kluge said a September surge—Europe set a new record last week, with some 54,000 cases recorded in 24 hours—"should serve as a wake-up call for all of us."

The World Health Organization on Thursday warned of "alarming rates

of transmission" of Covid-19 across Europe and cautioned against shortening quarantine periods as countries in the region scrambled to find ways to reduce infections without resorting to new lockdowns.

The WHO's regional director for Europe Hans Kluge said a September surge—Europe set a new record last week, with some 54,000 cases recorded in 24 hours—"should serve as a wake-up call for all of us".

"Although these numbers reflect more comprehensive testing, it also shows alarming rates of transmission across the region," he told an online news conference from Copenhagen.

Across Europe, governments are battling to contain the fresh spike in cases, while wanting to avoid inflicting fresh damage on their economies and imposing broad new restrictions on their virus-weary populations.

French authorities are preparing tighter restrictions in several cities to curtail a surge in Covid-19 cases that has seen nearly 10,000 new cases per day reported over the past week.

Health Minister Olivier Veran said new measures would be announced for Lyon and Nice by Saturday, after curbs on public gatherings were imposed this week in Bordeaux and Marseille.

'Second hump'

In Britain, new measures will take effect Friday, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson warning that pubs may have to close earlier to help avoid a "second hump" of coronavirus cases.

Residents of northeast England, including the cities of Newcastle and Sunderland, will no longer be allowed to meet people outside their own

homes.



South Korean health officials from Bupyeong-gu Office wear protective gear to spray disinfectant at a shopping district in Incheon

The government, which is facing criticism over a lack of testing capacity, imposed rules across England on Monday limiting socialising to groups of six or fewer, as daily cases reached levels not seen since early May.

Britain has been Europe's worst-hit country with nearly 42,000 deaths.

Worldwide the pandemic has killed over 940,00 people since surfacing

in China late last year, with the United States worst hit.

The city of Madrid meanwhile backtracked on a plan for targeted lockdowns and said it would instead move to "reduce mobility and contacts" in areas with high infection rates.

Austria announced that private indoor gatherings would be limited to 10 people, including all parties, private events and meetings indoors.

Chancellor Sebastian Kurz had warned earlier this week that the Alpine nation was entering a second wave of infections.

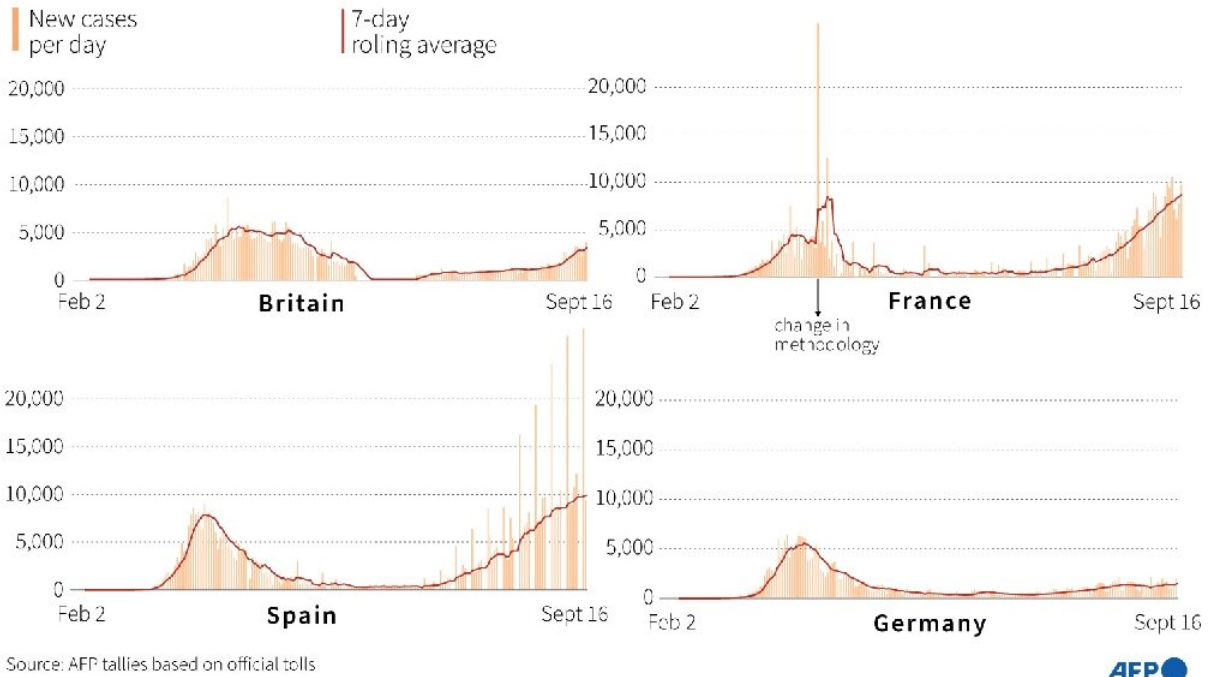
Israel shutdown

Outside Europe, Israel is set to be the first developed country to enforce a second nationwide shutdown, to begin on Friday afternoon.

Its government called for hundreds of its citizens who are blocked on the Ukraine-Belarus border to return home.

Covid-19 pandemic in Europe

Selected countries



New daily cases of Covid-19 and the 7-day rolling average for selected European countries as of September 17.

Around 2,000 Hasidic Jew pilgrims, mainly from the US, Israel and France, are massed at the border which has been closed by Ukraine for most of this month to prevent the spread of the virus.

The pilgrims were hoping to reach the city of Uman for the Jewish New Year this weekend.

Israel has the world's second-highest virus infection rate after Bahrain, according to an AFP tally.

In further comments on Thursday, the WHO Europe said it would not

change its guidance for a 14-day quarantine period for those exposed to the virus.

The recommendation is "based on our understanding of the incubation period and transmission of the disease. We would only revise that on the basis of a change of our understanding of the science," WHO Europe's senior emergency officer Catherine Smallwood said.

France has reduced the recommended time period for self-isolation to seven days, while it is 10 days in the UK and Ireland. Several more European countries, such as Portugal and Croatia, are also considering shorter quarantines.

Vaccine race

Elsewhere, a study released by Oxfam found that rich nations have already bought up over half the promised Covid-19 vaccine stocks.

"Access to a life-saving vaccine shouldn't depend on where you live or how much money you have," said Robert Silverman of Oxfam America.



A handful of vaccine candidates are currently in late-stage trials

Drugs companies are racing to produce an effective jab to counter a virus that has now killed more than 940,000 people around the world and infected almost 30 million.

The five leading vaccine candidates currently in late-stage trials will be able to supply 5.9 billion doses, enough to inoculate about three billion people, Oxfam said.

Some 51 percent of those jabs have been snapped up by wealthy nations and blocs including the United States, Britain, the European Union, Australia, Hong Kong and Macau, Japan, Switzerland and Israel.

The remaining 2.6 billion have been bought by or promised to developing countries including India, Bangladesh, China, Brazil, Indonesia and Mexico.

As tragedies multiply, governments face legal action from citizens for alleged response failures.

A French association of Covid-19 victims plans to file a legal complaint against Prime Minister Jean Castex over France's handling of the pandemic, its lawyer said.

In China, however, bereaved relatives have had their lawsuits abruptly rejected while dozens of others face pressure from authorities not to file, according to people involved in the effort.

The economic effects of the pandemic continue to grow.

On Thursday New Zealand plunged into recession for the first time in a decade, the 12.2 percent contraction in April-June "by far the largest" since records began, national data agency Stats NZ said.

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