

Fastest-ever growth in global virus cases as US tops 8 million

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Coronavirus cases in the United States topped eight million Friday as the world saw the highest-ever number reported in a single day, while European countries tightened measures to control the pandemic's spread.

The running US case tally from Johns Hopkins University is the highest in the world, followed by India at 7.4 million cases and Brazil with 5.1 million.

America has also suffered the most coronavirus deaths of any country, at over 218,000.

Worldwide, more than 400,000 new cases were reported on Friday alone, according to an AFP tally based on official data—a figure only partly explained by increased testing since the first wave of the pandemic in March-April.

Across Europe, the average number of daily infections leapt 44 percent in a single week to over 121,000.

"It's terrible. It feels to me like being back in March," said Hocine Saal, head of the emergency service at the hospital in the Paris suburb of Montreuil, adding that rising numbers of non-coronavirus patients made coping "really difficult".

On Friday, Paris and other French cities marked their final night before an anti-virus curfew comes into effect, and Belgian Deputy Prime Minister Georges Gilkinet said bars and restaurants would be closed for four weeks starting Monday as "our hospitals are clogged."

But in neighbouring Germany a Berlin court overturned nighttime restrictions.

In England, millions of people were just hours away from stricter measures, including a ban on household mixing, while bars and restaurants closed in Spain's northeastern region of Catalonia.

In Greece, the densely populated northern area of Kozani went into a new lockdown.

By imposing restrictions in certain regions only, or only during certain hours of the day, governments are trying to slow the spread of the

pandemic while sparing their battered economies a damaging full-scale lockdown.

In the US, the government said its budget deficit in the year to September surged 281 percent to \$3.1 trillion, after Washington massively increased spending to support activity through the outbreak.

The previous record was \$1.4 trillion in 2009, during the global financial crisis.

On Friday, the number killed by the coronavirus so far topped 1.1 million worldwide, from almost 39 million cases.

Vaccine hopes

Meanwhile, hopes for one of the most promising coronavirus treatments, the antiviral drug remdesivir, were dashed when a study backed by the World Health Organization found it does little to prevent deaths from the disease.

But pharma giant Pfizer said that if safety data expected in the third week of November are positive, it will apply for emergency use authorisation in the US for its coronavirus vaccine.

Massachusetts-based Moderna has already said it aims to apply for authorisation for its candidate on November 25.

Funded by the US government, both companies have been running large-scale Phase 3 clinical trials since July and have already begun producing doses, with tens of millions potentially available by the end of the year.

But experts warn that even when vaccines are approved, it will take many months until they are widely available.

"We are operating at the speed of science. This means we may know whether or not our vaccine is effective by the end of October," Pfizer CEO Albert Bourla wrote in an open letter.

Backlash grows

In France, the curfew affecting some 20 million people in Paris and eight other cities was due to start at midnight, and then come fully into force later Saturday from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am over the coming weeks.

While it has broad public support, officials are worried about the heavy social and economic costs of a measure set to last at least a month.

In many European countries, infection controls have led to a backlash from defiant local authorities and businesses desperate to make ends meet.

Marseille's mayor Michele Rubirola—herself a doctor—said the curfew resulted from the French government's insufficient efforts to bolster hospital systems, costing residents "their daily pleasures (and) their freedom", and also harming hospitality businesses.

Similar unease was felt in England where London and seven other areas were facing new restrictions from Saturday, riling leaders in hard-hit northwest England, especially Manchester.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson acknowledged the restrictions were "far from a pain-free course of action".

"But I must stress the situation in Greater Manchester is grave and it worsens with each passing day," he added.

Over in Berlin, irate restaurant owners successfully challenged in court

an order to close bars and eateries from 11 pm.

Judges said "it was not apparent" such a measure could help fight coronavirus.

The suspension echoed a similar court ruling in Madrid earlier this month that cancelled restrictions on 4.5 million people in and around the capital.

In Barcelona, people working in hospitality took to the streets, banging pots and pans and throwing eggs at the town hall after bars and restaurants were shut.

And in Brussels, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin had to leave an EU summit after coming into contact with an infected person.

The infection risks prompted some leaders to urge the bloc a return to virtual meetings, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel has already cancelled a summit in Berlin on November 16.

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