

Vaccine roll out nears as US closes early for holidays

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US giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech prepared Friday to file an emergency request to roll out their vaunted vaccine while New York shut its schools and California braced for nighttime curfews heading into the US holiday season.

The world is seeking salvation from scientists and pharmaceutical giants

as it returns to the grimly familiar shutdowns and closures that traumatised nations and upturned the [global economy](#) at the start of the year.

India's hospitals are once again struggling to cope and its graveyards are filling as infections crossed nine million in the Asian giant—second only to the United States.

New Delhi quadrupled fines for those without masks in a desperate effort to stave off the dual scourge of the virus and winter pollution enveloping the megacity of nearly 22 million people.

"Initially when the virus broke (out), I thought I'll bury 100-200 people and it'll be done. But the current situation is beyond my wildest thoughts," New Delhi gravedigger Mohammed Shamim told AFP.

And Mexico became the fourth country Thursday to see its death toll breach 100,000.

"We're at a point where we don't see a clear phase of descent," former Mexican health ministry official Malaquias Lopez told AFP. "We don't know where it's going."

Green light

Worldwide deaths are approaching 1.4 million and total infections nearing 57 million—although the true numbers are unknown since countries have different reporting methods and many cases go undetected.

Governments are now pinning their hopes on a vaccine that can save them from business closures that force families to seek dwindling government assistance—and stay at home orders that put people's mental

health under severe strain.

The first tangible signs of relief could come Friday when Pfizer and BioNTech file an emergency use authorisation request with the US Food and Drug Administration.

"The documents will be finalised today and tomorrow and submitted to the FDA," BioNTech co-founder Ugur Sahin told AFP on Thursday.

The scientific head of the US operation to develop a vaccine said the final green light would probably come in December.

The BioNTech/Pfizer shot and another one being developed by the US firm Moderna have taken the lead in the global chase for a vaccine.

EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said the European bloc could also approve both before the end of the year.

'Extraordinary advances'

A separate candidate vaccine being developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca has shown to be safe and effective in a smaller study of order adults.

The UK government is hoping that its production can be ramped up quickly if it passes its final hurdle in a phase 3 trial and is approved.

But the unprecedented speed at which the vaccines are being developed has raised some alarm.

China's Sinopharm revealed Friday that it has already given its experimental [vaccine](#) to nearly a million people—including state employees and students heading to study abroad.

Top US infectious disease official Anthony Fauci sought to dispel concerns about the vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna during a rare briefing by the White House task force.

"It was a reflection of the extraordinary scientific advances in these types of vaccines," Fauci said.

The World Health Organization cautioned Friday that the anti-viral drug remdesivir that was administered to US President Donald Trump when he came down with the virus in October had "no important effect" on survival chances.

'Nonsensical'

US infections numbers have sufficiently alarmed authorities to request that people stay at home for next week's Thanksgiving holiday—normally the time when people travel from coast to coast to be with their families.

But not everyone is happy about the new rules.

More than 13,000 people have signed an online "Keep NYC Schools Open" petition after the city closed schools for its 1.1 million students but left open its bars and gyms.'

"Indoor dining remains open. Gyms remain open. Nail salons and barbershops remain open. Only schools are threatened with closure. This is nonsensical," the petition says.

California will also impose a 10 pm to 5 am curfew from Saturday—a measure that mirrors one that Istanbul will start imposing for its 15 million residents on weekends starting Friday night.

The disease also claimed the life of another revered figure Friday with the passing of Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Irinej.

The 90-year-old succumbed to COVID-19 only three weeks after his informal second-in-command also died of the disease.

But people in South Australia—a giant region with fewer than two million—were given an early reprieve from strict stay-at-home orders after a pizza parlour worker came clean about misleading contact tracers.

Officials said a man who claimed he was a customer of the outlet—leading authorities to believe the strain was virulent enough to be transmitted via a takeaway box—in fact worked there.

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