

US sees new virus records as Italian regions enter lockdown

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Coronavirus cases hit new records in the United States as swathes of Italy returned to lockdown on Friday and Greece prepared for new curbs with the resurgent pandemic continuing its march through Europe.

The US recorded a third day in a row with deaths above 1,000 while more than 120,000 infections were reported between Wednesday and Thursday evening—smashing a daily record set the day before, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University.

More than 9.6 million people have been infected and 234,000 have died in the United States so far during the pandemic, by far the highest tolls globally.

The figures came as US President Donald Trump, who survived a bout with Covid-19 in October and insists the virus will "disappear," was fighting for his political life with vote-counting from Tuesday's presidential election still ongoing.

In Europe, the World Health Organization's regional director Hans Kluge said Covid-19 was surging on the continent as its more than 12 million infections put it above Latin America and the Caribbean's 11.4 million.

Countries across the continent are imposing new lockdowns, with Greeks facing fresh stay-at-home orders from Saturday.

Experts say Italy is already in the grip of a second wave, and regions are again warning that intensive care units are filling rapidly.

Five "red zones" in the north—plus Calabria in the country's "toe"—shut non-essential businesses from midnight Thursday, affecting 16 million people.

In the northern city of Bergamo—the epicentre of Italy's coronavirus crisis earlier this year—several hundred people, including restaurant and shop owners as well as members of the far-right, protested the new curbs.

'More distrust'

The protesters gathered outside the mayor's home after a nighttime demonstration Thursday, waving flags, shouting "Liberty," and hurling smoke bombs.

Bergamo mayor Giorgio Gori said that compared to Italy's more than two-month lockdown from March—when images of army trucks transporting coffins from the city's inundated morgue went around the world—"there is more tiredness and more distrust around".

"At a time like this, with so many people distressed about their future, throwing gasoline on the fire... is in my opinion serious and rather dangerous," Gori wrote on Facebook.

"We haven't learned anything from what we went through in March," said Suzy Porcu, 55, a Milan resident.

Italy's regions follow 56 million people in England who went into a second lockdown on Thursday.

The northwestern city of Liverpool on Friday began England's first city-wide trial of coronavirus testing.

All 500,000 residents will be offered repeat tests, even if asymptomatic, under the pilot trial.

Denmark meanwhile defended the strict measures it imposed on the north of the country after a mutated version of the new coronavirus linked to mink farms was found in humans.

Copenhagen has warned that the mutation could threaten the effectiveness of any future vaccine, and has ordered the slaughter of all

of the country's minks, estimated at up to 17 million.

"These are timely and necessary measures" amid a "worrying" development, said Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod.

Last-minute haircuts

France, which locked down last week, recorded 58,046 new cases on Thursday as it emerged that a plan announced two months ago, but not yet finalised, to support the economy is already at risk of being overtaken by events.

In Greece the country's second nationwide shutdown is due to include secondary schools as well as universities which will remain closed for at least three weeks from Monday to try to halt an aggressive spike in cases.

Traffic in Athens was heavy on Friday with people rushing to run errands before the weekend.

Hairdressers and nail salons were allowed to work for two more days however, with people rushing for a last-minute haircut.

Athens hairdresser Apostolos Gelbas said he was struggling to find the time to serve all his clients.

"It seems that this was one of the main things that the people missed during the first lockdown. They were texting me all the time to find out when we will be back."

The coronavirus has also been mercilessly lashing Switzerland, and in particular its French-speaking region, where hospitals are rapidly becoming overwhelmed.

In one small hospital, patients with severe Covid-19 infections filled all 10 enclosed beds—and more keep coming.

"This morning, I was asked to take one more patient... so I had to transfer the most stable patient I had to another hospital to make room," Herve Zender, the chief physician at the La-Chaux-de-Fonds's ICU, told AFP.

The pandemic has cost the lives of at least 1,235,000 people since it first emerged in China late last year, out of more than 48.7 million confirmed infections.

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