

Austria defends virus tests despite low numbers

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Austria on Monday defended its mass coronavirus testing programme despite opposition complaints that less than half the targeted number had been tested so far.

The programme has been running over the past two weeks. Experts and opposition parties have pointed out that only 22 percent of the

population have taken part—far short of the 60 percent the government initially said it was aiming for.

"It's a successful step to contain the pandemic in Austria," Health Minister Rudolf Anschober told a press conference, adding that two million people across the country had participated in the voluntary tests out of a population of 8.8 million.

Anschober said 4,200 cases had been discovered.

In Vienna, just 13.5 percent of residents got tested.

Christian Deutsch of the main opposition Social Democrats (SPOe) said the campaign was "amateurish", pointing to IT issues that meant some test results had to be recorded with pen and paper, as well as a data breach from the online registration platform.

The liberal Neos party said the real goal should be to enforce measures such as social distancing and mask-wearing.

A new round of mass testing is set to start around January 8, with media reports that the government is considering offering incentives to citizens to get tested to boost participation.

Like several other countries in the region, Austria escaped the worst of the first wave of the pandemic but has struggled to contain the second wave and had to introduce a second coronavirus lockdown which ended last Monday.

The country has recorded 322,588 infections, of which 4,350 have been fatal.

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