

Asian nations toughen virus fight as pandemic rages worldwide

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Countries in Asia were stepping up their fight against the coronavirus again on Thursday in a fresh effort to suppress an illness they had previously tamed, joining Europe in imposing new curbs.

Japan was set to declare a state of emergency in Tokyo ahead of the

release of figures expected to show a record number of infections, while China reported its highest single-day case number since July.

It comes a day after the world clocked up a record number of deaths in a single day and the European Union approved a second vaccine.

There was also no slowing of the spread in North America where Canada was forced to order its first curfew of the pandemic in a push to halt a second wave.

The global outbreak shows no signs of abating, with more than 1.8 million people known to have died worldwide from 86 million confirmed cases.

Japan's outbreak has not been as severe as those in Europe and the US, but on Thursday the government was forced to announce new restrictions in the capital region that it said would last a month, primarily targeting restaurants and bars.

The curbs will be far less strict than the harsh lockdowns seen in other parts of the world. Businesses are being asked to stop serving alcohol by 7 pm and close an hour later, and residents have been requested to avoid non-essential outings after 8 pm.

Local media said Tokyo would report more than 2,400 new cases on Thursday, shattering the previous record of 1,591 logged a day earlier.

The minister in charge of Japan's pandemic response warned that Tokyo's medical system was "stretched thin".

'Can't leave the city'

In neighbouring China, authorities reported 63 new infections

Thursday—the highest daily tally since July—as authorities tried to stamp out an outbreak in a city of 11 million near Beijing.

The government in the city of Shijiazhuang in China's northern Hebei province has imposed school closures, cut travel links and begun mass testing as cases spike.

"I did the nucleic acid test last night, but don't have the results yet. Without it I can't leave the city," one young woman told state broadcaster CCTV.

One district in the city has been sealed off while major highways leading into the area have been closed and inter-city bus travel halted.

Experts see mass vaccinations as the best route back to normality, but the first rollouts have coincided with alarming spikes in deaths and caseloads across many parts of the world.

The latest global numbers make for grim reading. On Wednesday, a record 15,769 COVID-19 deaths were recorded around the world in the space of 24 hours.

In North America, the virus continues to rage, with Mexico on Wednesday reporting more than 1,100 deaths and over 13,000 infections.

In Canada, authorities in Quebec imposed a curfew on the province of eight million from 8 pm to 5 am that will last four weeks, and violators could face fines of up to Can\$6,000 (US\$4,700).

A curfew of this scale has not been ordered in Canada since the Spanish flu a century ago, according to historians.

The province joined Ontario—Canada's economic engine with a population of 14 million—in restricting people's movements and daily routines.

Lockdowns in Europe

The EU on Wednesday cleared the Moderna vaccine for use in the 27-nation bloc, following the approval last month of the Pfizer-BioNTech jab.

Several European governments have been criticised for slow rollouts, with the Netherlands only delivering its first shots on Wednesday.

The EU as a whole has so far shifted more than one million doses—fewer than Britain has managed.

And the vaccines have not yet relieved weary Europeans from the burden of stay-at-home orders, curfews, closed shops and shuttered schools.

A new lockdown came into force in Britain on Wednesday, and Ireland followed suit shortly after.

"We simply have to suppress this surge," Irish Prime Minister Micheal Martin told reporters.

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