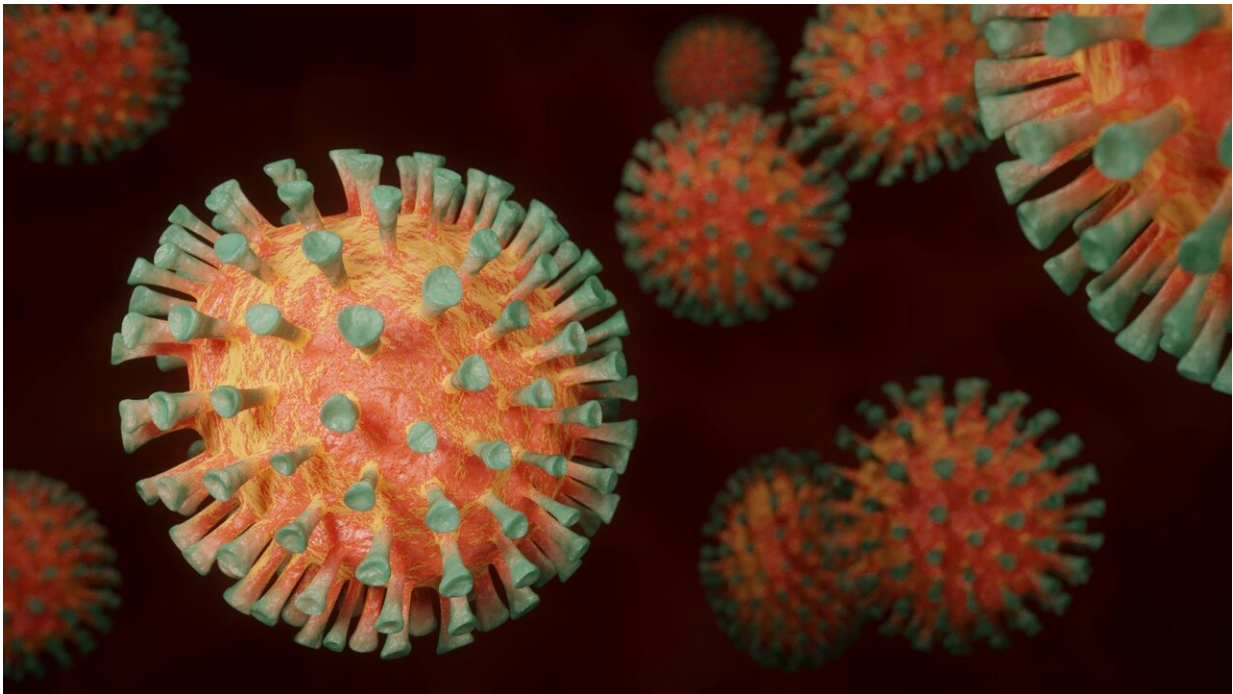


Germany hits 2 million infections as WHO tackles new strains

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Germany on Friday passed two million coronavirus cases as a World Health Organization emergency committee readied to issue advice on stemming the spread of new, more contagious strains of the disease.

The surge in Europe's biggest economy comes as the global death toll from the pandemic approaches two million and many countries double

down on virus restrictions, with vaccination drives still in their infancy.

Portugal entered a fresh lockdown Friday while Britain began requiring negative tests for entry, and fresh curbs on populations were announced from Brazil to Lebanon.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday pushed for a "significant" tightening of curbs to slow the infection rate as the European Union's most populous country added more than 22,000 new cases.

The chancellor said she wanted to bring forward crisis talks with regional leaders to the coming week, participants at a meeting of her centre-right CDU party told AFP.

They quoted her as saying the virus could only be stopped with "significant additional measures" and that people urgently needed to reduce social contact.

At the Meissen crematorium in the state of Saxony, coffins were stacked up to three high, or even stored in hallways, awaiting cremation. The eastern region has been one of Germany's worst-hit areas in recent weeks.

Manager Joerg Schaldach, 57, said anyone still denying the severity of the pandemic should come and take a look at the bodies piling up.

"This is heavy work, so why don't the COVID-19 deniers come and do it," he said.

"We have a disastrous situation here."

'Worrying'

Germany has fared better than many of its European neighbours in the pandemic, with France, Italy, Spain and Britain all recording more infections despite smaller populations.

Britain on Thursday said it would ban all arrivals from South American countries from Friday, over fears of importing a new coronavirus strain.

"I've taken the urgent decision... following evidence of a new variant in Brazil," Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said on Twitter.

The new strain, known as E484K, has raised alarm among researchers over its possible impact on immunity.

Partly over fears of new variants, France said it would impose a daily nationwide curfew at 6 pm starting Saturday and remaining in force for at least two weeks.

Most of France had already been under an 8 pm curfew, with some areas, especially in the hard-hit east, already under the stricter 6 pm limit.

Brazil's northern Amazonas state also announced a curfew from 7 pm to 6 am as the health system is pushed to breaking point in the state capital Manaus.

Global health experts were expected on Friday to issue recommendations to stem the spread of this variant and other new strains, which the WHO called "worrying".

The WHO's emergency committee normally gathers every three months but its meeting was brought forward by two weeks.

"When you first met almost a year ago, just 557 cases of the disease we

now call COVID-19 had been reported to the WHO," director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in his opening remarks to the emergency meeting Thursday.

Stimulus plan

Scientists say large-scale vaccination is the only way out of the crisis but 95 percent of the doses so far administered have been limited to just 10 countries, the WHO's European branch said.

Progress on administering vaccines has often been slow. India's mammoth immunisation programme will only begin on Saturday. In the United States around 10 million people have received a first shot.

American policymakers were on Thursday focused on addressing the economic damage from the pandemic, with President-elect Joe Biden unveiling a proposal for a \$1.9 trillion relief package aimed at revitalising the world's largest economy.

Biden aims to raise the federal minimum wage to \$15 an hour, help struggling state and local governments, safely reopen schools, boost the vaccination campaign and raise the size of stimulus cheques Congress approved last month.

"In this moment of crisis... we cannot afford inaction," Biden said.

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