

German virus cases top 2 million as Merkel urges tougher shutdown

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Germany's total coronavirus cases topped two million on Friday, as Chancellor Angela Merkel pushed for a "significant" tightening of restrictions to slow the infection rate.

The European Union's most populous country added another 22,368 new cases over the past 24 hours, Germany's Robert Koch Institute (RKI) health agency said, bringing the total since the start of the pandemic to 2,000,958.

It also reported another 1,113 COVID-19 fatalities, taking the overall death toll up to 44,994.

The milestone comes hours after Merkel called for harsher curbs on public life to bring the outbreak under control.

At a meeting of senior members of her centre-right CDU party, the German Chancellor said she wanted to bring forward crisis talks with regional leaders to "the coming week", participants told AFP.

They quoted her as saying the virus could only be stopped with "significant additional measures".

She also voiced concern about the coronavirus strain that recently emerged in Britain and is considered more contagious, saying people urgently need to reduce their social contacts.

Second wave

Germany fared better than many of its neighbours in the early days of the pandemic, but has been hit hard by a second wave despite being in some form of shutdown since early November.

It is currently the 10th most affected country in the world, according to an AFP tally, but has still recorded fewer infections to date than EU peers France, Italy or Spain—despite having a larger population.

Britain has recorded more than three million cases and over 80,000

deaths.

Merkel and the leaders of Germany's 16 states were originally scheduled to hold their next meeting on January 25 to take stock of the latest measures.

Among the tougher options considered were border checks, requirements to wear high-quality FFP2 masks in some places and getting more people to work from home, Der Spiegel weekly reported.

Bars, gyms, cultural and leisure centres were closed in early November, followed by non-essential shops and schools in December.

Authorities have also turned the screw on social gatherings, limiting contacts to two households and urging people to stay at home wherever possible.

'Too many exceptions'

The RKI on Thursday echoed calls for stronger measures to bring down coronavirus infections, noting many people were still socialising too much.

"There are still too many exceptions," RKI head Lothar Wieler told a news conference in Berlin.

There is "total consensus" among statisticians that stricter measures would be needed to get "to a stage where the incidence rate is falling substantially and rapidly", the RKI's Dirk Brockmann added.

But mobility has been significantly higher during the second shutdown than the first, according to the health agency.

"People are on the road a lot," Brockmann said.

Germany, with 83 million people, began vaccinating against COVID-19 in late December.

On Thursday one percent of the population had received their first jab, according to the RKI.

Regional poll delayed

The worsening situation has led parties to agree to postpone a regional election in eastern Thuringia state, moving it from April 25 to September 26.

Thuringia is a current hotspot in the pandemic, recording 287 new cases per 100,000 people over the last seven days, compared with the national average of 146, according to RKI data on Friday.

The regional vote will now coincide with Germany's general election, the first in over 15 years that won't feature Merkel, who is bowing out of politics.

The Thuringian election was one of the first state polls scheduled for 2021 and would have been closely watched as a test of the national mood heading into the post-Merkel era.

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