

UK sees record deaths as virus variants deepen global concern

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The world received more frightening reminders of the pandemic's worsening danger Tuesday as Britain's daily death toll reached a record, Germany looked set to tighten its partial lockdown and two Australian

Open players tested positive.

With the global death toll now well past two million and new variants of COVID-19 causing deep concern, countries across the world grappled with how to slow infections until vaccines become widely available.

They also sought ways to speed up vaccine distribution, with the European Union saying it aims to inoculate 70 percent of its adult population before the end of August.

Most EU member states have struggled to get the ball rolling on vaccinations, with other countries from Russia to India also experiencing teething problems.

Recent days have also seen a renewed focus on the initial outbreak a year ago, and China defended its handling of the virus Tuesday after independent experts criticised the speed of its response.

Beijing has faced international criticism over an alleged lack of transparency after the virus emerged in the central city of Wuhan in late 2019, as well for stifling whistleblowers who tried to raise the alarm.

The United States remains home to the world's worst outbreak in overall numbers, and US President-elect Joe Biden made clear he would be taking no chances following his inauguration on Wednesday.

After outgoing President Donald Trump said Monday he would lift a ban on travellers arriving from much of Europe and Brazil, Biden's spokeswoman quickly dismissed the plan, saying the change would not take effect on January 26 as slated.

"With the pandemic worsening, and more contagious variants emerging around the world, this is not the time to be lifting restrictions on

international travel," tweeted Jen Psaki, Biden's press secretary.

Precautions were also being taken in Taiwan, which called off its largest Lunar New Year lantern festival for the first time as authorities rushed to stem a COVID cluster in one of the few places to survive the pandemic largely unscathed.

And in Africa, Rwanda's capital Kigali was back under total lockdown after a surge in cases.

Vaccine queue-jumping?

Britain has been coping with a new strain of the virus thought to be far more infectious, and on Tuesday it registered a record 1,610 deaths over 24 hours.

There was however a sign of hope as the number of new cases over the last week was down around 22 percent, with a stringent lockdown announced this month having an effect.

Britain is in the middle of a massive vaccination drive, and more than four million people have now received a jab.

The government hopes to vaccinate the entire adult population by autumn.

Fears over the new virus variants were growing in Germany, which on Tuesday was expected to extend and tighten a partial lockdown beyond January.

Elsewhere in Europe, Serbia became the first European country to use the Chinese-made Sinopharm jab as it launched a mass vaccination campaign, while Austrian authorities were looking into reports of alleged

queue-jumping for vaccines, including by several mayors.

Holy scam

The pandemic continues to batter the world of sport, forcing postponements and the quarantining of players.

On Tuesday, health officials said two Australian Open tennis players had tested positive—a new blow for the tournament which is facing a backlash from a wary public.

The unnamed players were among three new cases, taking the tournament's cluster to seven.

More than 1,000 players and staff are in quarantine after arriving last week in Australia, which is largely coronavirus-free.

Player complaints about quarantine have raised further hackles, and Australia's Nick Kyrgios led criticism of world number one Novak Djokovic for requesting improved conditions.

"Djokovic is a tool," tweeted Kyrgios, the world number 47.

Meanwhile, another example of the quack cures and false claims that have proliferated in connection with the virus could be seen in Sri Lanka.

A self-styled holy man's supposed miracle potion to prevent COVID-19 turned sour after a minister who publicly drank it was hospitalised with the virus.

Thousands had defied public gathering restrictions to swamp a village in central Sri Lanka last month to get the syrup made by Dhammika

Bandara.

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