

US passes 400,000 virus deaths as Europe faces surge

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More than 400,000 people have now died from coronavirus in the United States, figures showed Tuesday, as some European nations battled record surges in daily fatalities with the fear of new strains taking hold.

Almost a year after the US registered its first death, the pace of the pandemic has picked up with 100,000 deaths coming in the past month, leaving the country with a toll far above any other nation.

The arrival of mass vaccination campaigns in the US and Europe had brought hope that the end was in sight, and the European Union said Tuesday it was aiming to inoculate 70 percent of its [adult population](#) before the end of August.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said meeting the target could be "a turning point" in the fight against the virus.

But many EU countries—and other nations including India and Russia—have struggled to get their inoculation programmes off the ground.

As nations grapple with the current crisis, several inquiries have re-energised questions over the origins of the virus in China in late 2019, and how the authorities handled it.

Beijing has been accused of stifling whistleblowers who tried to raise the alarm, and experts said this week that officials could have reacted quicker to avert catastrophe.

But Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying dismissed the criticism, saying: "As the first country to sound the alarm against the pandemic, we took prompt and decisive measures even though we had incomplete information at the time."

Travel ban row

US President-elect Joe Biden has made tackling the pandemic his top priority, as he prepares to take office on Wednesday.

He is already being forced to take action, with his aides contradicting an order from outgoing President Donald Trump to lift travel bans designed to stop the spread.

"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.

Caution was in evidence too 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 for Britain 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.

As fears of new variants spread across Europe, Portugal also clocked a

record daily number of fatalities and Germany tightened and extended its partial lockdown until mid-February.

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.

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.

"Although some parliamentarians took it, the government does not endorse it," said media minister Keheliya Rambukwella.

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