

Hopes rise in Portugal but COVID-19 still slams hospitals

February 8 2021, by Barry Hatton



Funeral agency workers move the coffin of a COVID-19 victim to be cremated at a cemetery in Alcabideche, outside Lisbon, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021. Portugal is facing a pandemic surge that has made it the world's worst-hit country by size of population. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Hopes are rising in Portugal that the worst of a devastating pandemic

surge might be over, as the number of COVID-19 deaths reported Monday was the lowest in three weeks.

The country's pandemic picture is mixed, however, as hospital admissions rose for the first time in a week. Still, the spread of COVID-19 in the small European Union country has by some metrics been slowing since the end of January.

"I'm a bit more optimistic," said Dr. Joao Gouveia, who heads a government committee monitoring the intensive care response, citing lower infection rates and fewer hospital admissions.

But he added: "I'm still very worried ... We can't get carried away."

Gouveia spoke at a press conference to explain the work of 26 German army medics who last week flew to Lisbon to help out in an intensive care unit.

Col. Jens-Peter Evers, head of the German team, said they had been warmly welcomed by people in the street.

"Sometimes we feel like rock stars," he said, "but we are here to help."

Portugal became the world's worst-hit country last month, with a deluge of new daily virus deaths and cases engulfing the public health system. Data collated by Johns Hopkins University on Monday showed Portugal was still recording the most daily deaths per 100,000 people and had the world's fourth-highest rate of new cases.



A man wearing a face mask walks up a street as a tram drives by in Lisbon's old Alfama neighborhood, Thursday, Feb. 4, 2021. A pandemic surge in January thrust Portugal into the spotlight as world's worst-hit country by size of population, according to Johns Hopkins University data, while its vaccine program has inspired hope amid an extended lockdown. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Blaming the sudden fast spread on the arrival of a COVID-19 variant first identified in England, Portugal went into lockdown on Jan. 15 and closed its schools a week later.

Portugal on Monday recorded just over 2,500 new infections, taking the country's total to almost 768,000. New cases have been trending downward since Jan. 24, when they reached a high of more than 16,400.

Still the number of new cases published on Mondays tends to be lower due to limited testing over the weekend.

The ministry reported 196 more daily COVID-19 deaths, the lowest since Jan. 18. In all, the country has seen 14,158 confirmed deaths.

Still, Portugal's hospitals remain under severe strain and likely will be that way for several weeks, health experts said.

Hospitalizations rose to 6,344 but were still lower than the Feb. 1 peak of 6,869. The number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care was 877, below the Feb. 5 high of 904.



German army personnel walk on the tarmac after disembarking from a German air force airplane that landed at Lisbon airport, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021. The

airplane is bringing 26 German army medics along with medical equipment to help out at Portuguese hospitals under stress from the recent increase in COVID-19 hospitalizations. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)



Portuguese Prime Minister Antonio Costa addresses journalists at the end of a visit to a hospital where healthcare workers were being vaccinated against COVID-19, in Lisbon, Portugal, Friday, Feb. 5, 2021. A pandemic surge in January thrust Portugal into the spotlight as world's worst-hit country by size of population, according to Johns Hopkins University data, while its vaccine program has inspired hope amid an extended lockdown. (Antonio Cotrim/Pool via AP)



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The national lockdown could remain in place through mid-March, officials have said.

On Monday, 1.2 million schoolchildren started remote learning, either online or via television programs shown by the public broadcaster. The government says it is buying around 335,000 laptops for children who don't have one.

Portugal says it has administered almost 400,000 coronavirus vaccines,

with about one-fourth of them representing two doses.

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Citation: Hopes rise in Portugal but COVID-19 still slams hospitals (2021, February 8) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-02-portugal-covid-slams-hospitals.html>

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