

WHO warns against virus complacency, variants provoke new measures

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Medical personnel prepare a syringe with the AstraZeneca vaccine at an inoculation center in Copenhagen

The World Health Organization warned Europe against rash reopenings on Thursday despite a fall in new COVID-19 cases and Germany announced a partial border closure, reminders of the long battle ahead

before vaccines can tame the pandemic.

Mass COVID-19 vaccination programmes are being ramped up in many countries in the race against more contagious variants, and governments are urging populations to continue to cope with closures as the inoculation campaigns move ahead.

But while new cases and deaths have come down in some places, a WHO official said it was by no means time to ease up.

"The decline in cases conceals increasing numbers of outbreaks and community spread involving variants of concern," said WHO Europe director Hans Kluge.

"At this point, the overwhelming majority of European countries remain vulnerable," he added, pointing out the "thin line between the hope of a vaccine and a false sense of security."

More than a million cases are registered every week across the 53 member states in the UN agency's European region, which includes several in central Asia.

But the number of reported cases has been falling over the past four weeks and deaths have also been declining over the past two weeks.

Worldwide deaths have meanwhile climbed to nearly 2.4 million, with the United States the hardest-hit, while the Middle East surpassed 100,000 fatalities on Thursday.

Germany was taking no chances and said Thursday it will ban travel from Czech border regions as well as Austria's Tyrol due to concern over new variants.

Europe's biggest economy had already in late January banned most travellers from countries classed as mutation areas or places hardest hit by more contagious variants.

It has halved its daily infections rate after more than two months of painful curbs.

But fears are growing that the positive trend could be compromised by travellers from border regions reporting sky-high case rates.

Other nations were extending their restrictions, including Ireland, where Prime Minister Micheal Martin said the current lockdown was set to be prolonged until April.

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