

Czechs launch mass testing to battle COVID surge

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The Czech Republic launched mass coronavirus testing at business premises on Wednesday, in a bid to stem the world's highest infection rate.

The government also enabled regions to call up private doctors and other [medical staff](#) to work in public COVID hospitals, many of which have reached capacity.

"The situation in our hospitals is really critical. We have to employ all reserves to save lives," Health Minister Jan Blatny told reporters.

The Czech Republic, which has a population of 10.7 million, has registered 1.27 million COVID-19 cases and almost 21,000 deaths since the pandemic began.

The case rate is at 1,424 per 100,000 inhabitants over the last 14 days and the death rate is the second highest in the world after neighbouring Slovakia.

The government is in talks to receive assistance from other European countries including Germany, Poland and Switzerland, which have all offered hospital beds.

Mass testing kicked off on Wednesday at companies with more than 250 members of staff.

They must test their employees by March 12, with defaulters facing hefty fines or even closures.

Mobile army testing teams have been deployed in the worst-hit regions.

Billionaire populist Prime Minister Andrej Babis said Wednesday that [vaccine supplies](#) for the month ahead looked promising.

A spokesman for President Milos Zeman said the head of state had asked his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping for a supply of the Sinopharm vaccine and that China had agreed.

Zeman had already asked Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier to provide his country with the Sputnik V vaccine.

Last week, Babis's government banned people from leaving their districts and ordered them to wear [face masks](#) in busy workplaces and outdoors in inhabited areas.

A curfew, a limit on gatherings, and restaurant closures have been in place since last year.

But the government decided not to impose the kind of full lockdown which helped it steer through the first COVID wave last spring with relative ease.

Sociologist Daniel Prokop has blamed the uncontrolled spread on the high proportion of people still going into work, along with the government's lukewarm response, and some Czechs' reluctance to play by the rules.

"The countries that have handled the new strains well, such as Britain and Portugal, have reduced the presence of people in workplaces," Prokop told AFP.

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