

WHO blasts Europe's slow vaccine rollout, as France heads for new lockdown

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The new measures were met with a mix of resignation and anger in France

The WHO on Thursday slammed Europe's "unacceptably slow" vaccine rollout and warned of a "worrying" surge in cases, as France became the latest country to impose new restrictions to combat soaring coronavirus

infections.

In a sign of the devastation the virus is still causing while the world races to roll out vaccines, Brazil reported the country's death toll had spiralled last month.

Officials said more than 66,000 people had died of COVID-19 in Brazil in March—more than twice as many fatalities as the country's second-deadliest month of the pandemic, July 2020.

"Never in Brazilian history have we seen a single event kill so many people" in one month, said doctor Miguel Nicolelis, former pandemic response coordinator for Brazil's impoverished northeast.

With the southern hemisphere winter approaching and the virus spreading fast, Brazil is facing "a perfect storm", he told AFP.

The surge in Brazil has overwhelmed hospitals and forced doctors to make agonising decisions over whom to give life-saving care—prioritising those most likely to survive.

The virus has killed more than 2.8 million people worldwide since it emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019.

And though the world is looking to vaccines to end the upheaval the virus has brought, rollouts are off to a sputtering start in many countries, notably in Europe.

"Vaccines present our best way out of this pandemic... however, the rollout of these vaccines is unacceptably slow," the World Health Organization's director for Europe Hans Kluge said in a statement.



The surge in cases in France forced President Emmanuel Macron to relent and reimpose nationwide restrictions he rejected in January

'Precious weeks of liberty'

"We must speed up the process by ramping up manufacturing, reducing barriers to administering vaccines, and using every single vial we have in stock," he added.

The organisation said Europe's virus situation was "more worrying than we have seen in several months" and that slow rollouts were "prolonging the pandemic".

Five weeks ago, the number of weekly new cases in the region had

dipped to under one million. But last week there were 1.6 million new cases in Europe, the WHO said.

In France alone, daily cases have doubled to around 40,000 and hospitals are overflowing in flashpoints such as Paris.

The surge forced President Emmanuel Macron to relent and reimpose nationwide restrictions he rejected in January.

"We gained precious weeks of liberty," he said in a national address late Wednesday, but the current measures "were too limited at a time when the epidemic is accelerating".

The limited lockdown already in place in regions, including Paris, would be extended to the whole country from Saturday night for the next four weeks, he said.



Brazil recorded a staggering 66,573 Covid deaths in March, with hospitals overwhelmed and doctors forced to make agonising decisions over whom to give life-saving care

Schools will close for three or four weeks depending on age level, he added.

The measures were met with a mix of resignation and anger, despite Macron's suggestion that France could begin envisioning a return to normalcy by mid-May.

"Lockdown, the sequel... and the end?" Le Figaro headlined its front page Thursday.

And Le Parisien said Macron was defending his strategy of "slowing without shutting down" even though "the situation has never been so dangerous or complicated".

Travel bubble

As during the first lockdown last spring, parents are scrambling to make arrangements for another round of distance learning.

"It was absolutely necessary to close the schools, even if it will be complicated for parents, and especially young children, to manage this situation," said Laure, a 44-year-old researcher with two young boys in Paris.

In Italy, Prime Minister Mario Draghi extended restrictions until April 30, including restaurant and business closures.

Covid-19

World toll Thursday, April 1, 1000 GMT

Deaths	New	Cases	New
2,816,908	11,978	128,851,201	637,012

New: 24-hour increase on Wednesday, March 31

Hardest-hit countries

	Deaths	New (latest report)	Cases
UNITED STATES	552,073	1,076	30,460,836
BRAZIL	321,515	3,869	12,748,747
MEXICO	203,210	577	2,238,887
INDIA	162,927	459	12,221,665
UNITED KINGDOM	126,713	43	4,345,788
ITALY	109,346	467	3,584,899
RUSSIA	99,233	383	4,554,264
FRANCE	95,667	303	4,644,423
GERMANY	76,543	201	2,833,173
SPAIN	75,459	154	3,284,353
COLOMBIA	63,422	167	2,406,377
IRAN	62,759	94	1,897,314

Increases over 24 hours may not tally exactly with previous day's total due to inavailability or late publication of data or corrections made by authorities

Sources: AFP tallies based on official tolls



Toll of coronavirus infections and deaths worldwide and in worst-affected countries based on AFP tallies, as of April 1 at 1000 GMT

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier received the first dose of AstraZeneca's vaccine on Thursday, just two days after authorities there recommended use of the jab only for people aged 60 and over.

German officials have been at pains to shore up public confidence in AstraZeneca's vaccine, which has been on a rollercoaster ride in Europe.

Several other countries, including France, Spain and Canada, have also imposed age limits on the AstraZeneca shot over the occurrence of rare but severe blood clots in younger people.

The European medicines regulator said that experts probing links between the vaccine and blood clots have found no specific risk factors, though they are investigating further.

In a setback for another vaccine maker, about 15 million doses of Johnson & Johnson's single-shot [vaccine](#) were ruined in a factory error, The New York Times reported—a blow to the US company's efforts to quickly boost production.

Meanwhile, Taiwan and Palau launched a rare holiday travel bubble on Thursday as the two diplomatic allies try to kickstart their battered tourist industries after successfully keeping infections at bay.

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