

US, Britain rush supplies to virus-hit India as Italy opens up

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The United States and Britain rushed ventilators and vaccine materials to virus-stricken India on Monday while Italy lifted many COVID-19 restrictions in a bid to kickstart a near normal summer.

India is battling a catastrophic, record-breaking outbreak that has overwhelmed hospitals and set crematoriums working at full capacity.

A day-after-day surge has seen patients' families take to social media to beg for oxygen supplies and available hospital beds, forcing the capital New Delhi to extend a week-long lockdown.

But in Europe, it was a story of hope as bars, restaurants, cinemas and concert halls were reopening across Italy on Monday.

And in a boost for businesses, the parliament in Rome was to debate the government's 220-billion-euro (\$266-billion) EU-funded recovery plan.

Prime Minister Mario Draghi has admitted to taking a "calculated risk" with the reopenings, with virus statistics improving but COVID-19 deaths still mounting by hundreds every day.

"Finally!" said Daniele Vespa, the 26-year-old head waiter at Baccano, a restaurant near Rome's Trevi Fountain, as he readied for the return of customers.

"Hopefully... we can soon reopen inside as well," he told AFP, adding: "It's the start of a return to normality."

France is also hoping for further improvement with millions of children returning to primary schools and kindergartens on Monday after a three-week shutdown against a severe third wave of infection.

Legal action against AstraZeneca

Secondary schools will reopen in a week's time and restrictions on travel beyond a 10-kilometre (six-mile) radius of homes will also be dropped on May 3 as the number of coronavirus patients in intensive care falls.

Meanwhile, the vaccine fight goes on and the European Union launched legal action on Monday against pharmaceutical giant AstraZeneca over

delivery shortfalls of its coronavirus vaccine.

The drug giant dismissed the litigation as "without merit".

In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson faced a call to resign after claims he dismissed the prospect of thousands dying from COVID-19.

The Daily Mail newspaper reported Johnson had said he would rather see "bodies pile high in their thousands" than impose a third [coronavirus](#) lockdown.

Ultimately, Johnson did order a new round of restrictions in January.

India's 1.3 billion population has become the global hotspot of a pandemic that has killed more than three million people, even as richer countries take steps towards normality with quickening inoculation programmes.

Irfan Salmani told AFP he had been going from hospital to hospital around Delhi for three days, searching for oxygen for his sister.

"I've never seen anything so terrible," he said. "I've been trying non-stop."

"I've just been facing rejection after rejection."

France, Germany and Canada have also pledged support to India, which has driven increases in global case numbers in recent days, recording 352,991 new infections and 2,812 deaths on Monday—its highest tolls since the start of the pandemic.

Vaccine surplus

The first of nine airline container-loads of supplies from the UK, including ventilators and oxygen concentrators, was set to arrive in India early Tuesday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, pledging the UK would do "all it can" to help.

In the US, the White House said it was making vaccine-production material, therapeutics, tests, ventilators and protective equipment immediately available to India.

But it did not mention whether it would send any of the 30 million AstraZeneca vaccine doses it holds in surplus, sparking accusations of hoarding.

India's Hindu-nationalist government faces growing criticism for allowing mass gatherings across the country in recent weeks, with millions attending religious festivals and thronging political rallies.

The glitzy Indian Premier League is also under pressure, with a leading newspaper suspending coverage and slamming the IPL's decision to keep playing cricket as "commercialism gone crass".

The league suffered further blows Monday as Australians Adam Zampa and Kane Richardson became the latest players to leave after star India spinner Ravichandran Ashwin withdrew to support his family during the pandemic.

Fiji funeral

Japan's annual "Golden Week" holiday got under way with new restrictions in Tokyo and Osaka, where shopping malls were asked to close and residents urged to avoid non-essential travel.

Bars and restaurants selling alcohol have also been asked to shut early

during the week—usually Japan's busiest travel period—which comes just under three months before the pandemic-postponed Olympics are due to start.

Thailand enforced new restrictions Monday after a record daily death toll over the weekend.

Fiji's capital Suva entered a 14-day lockdown Monday after detecting the first community transmission cases in 12 months following a funeral.

The tourism-dependent islands have recorded fewer than 100 cases and just two deaths in a population of 930,000.

But Americans dreaming of Paris or Florence were given fresh hope when EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said US tourists vaccinated against COVID-19 would be able to visit the European Union in the coming months.

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