

India posts new COVID record as global cases hit 150 million

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India on Friday broke another global record for daily coronavirus infections, pushing worldwide cases past 150 million, as the first US emergency aid arrived as part of a major international effort to contain the pandemic.

The United States had good news at home with the vaccination campaign boasting a significant milestone of 100 million people now vaccinated.

"That's 100 million Americans with a sense of relief and peace of mind," said White House pandemic response coordinator Jeff Zients.

The country has distributed 237 million doses, and 55 percent of adults have now received at least one dose.

But the pandemic has killed almost 3.2 million worldwide and continues to wreak devastation.

The number of daily cases has more than doubled since mid-February, an AFP tally showed, in an explosion in infections blamed in part on a new COVID-19 variant but also on failure to follow virus restrictions.

The countries with the highest total number of cases are the United States, India and Brazil.

The continent seeing the bulk of new daily cases is Asia, driven largely by a devastating wave in India which now accounts for more than 40 percent of the world's new cases and has overwhelmed hospitals and crematoriums.

India recorded another 385,000 cases in the past 24 hours—a new global record—and almost 3,500 deaths, according to official data that many experts suspect falls short of the true toll.

More than 40 countries have committed to sending medical aid to India, with a US Super Galaxy military transporter carrying more than 400 oxygen cylinders, other hospital equipment and nearly one million rapid coronavirus tests arriving in New Delhi on Friday.

The Indian diaspora has also sprung into action, with a collection of overseas volunteers scrambling to locate desperately-needed supplies for COVID-19 stricken relatives, friends and strangers back home.

Compounding India's woes as cases soared has been its failure to get a much-needed vaccine programme off the ground.

Until now, only "frontline" workers like medical staff, people over 45 and those with underlying illnesses have been given the AstraZeneca shot or Bharat Biotech's homegrown Covaxin.

As of Saturday jabs will be open to all adults, meaning around 600 million more people will be eligible.

But several states have warned they do not have sufficient stocks, and the expanded rollout is threatened by administrative troubles.

Brazil woes

Also struggling to inoculate a vast country facing a surge in cases is Brazil, which has one of the highest mortality rates in the pandemic, at 189 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants.

The country recorded 3,001 COVID deaths in the past 24 hours, bringing its overall toll to 401,186.

Experts blame the latest surge partly on the "Brazil variant" of the virus, a mutation that emerged in or around the Amazon rainforest city of Manaus in December.

But many have also pointed the finger at the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro, which now faces investigation from the country's Senate into whether there was criminal neglect in its handling of the pandemic.

Around 28 million people have received a first COVID-19 vaccine dose, just over 10 percent of the population.

Since the discovery of the virus, more than 50.2 million cases have been recorded in Europe—more than a third of worldwide infections.

But the continent is beginning to open up again as vaccination campaigns pick up.

Italy on Friday announced that for the first time it had inoculated more than 500,000 people in a day, meeting a key target.

Heritage sites are due to reopen across Scotland for the first time this year on Friday and after the longest closure since World War II, as coronavirus restrictions are gradually eased.

In France, cafes, cultural venues and business will reopen in several phases from May, President Emmanuel Macron said.

On Friday he announced that all adults in France would be eligible to be vaccinated from June 15, blowing open the immunisation campaign he hopes will let the badly-hit country get back to normal.

And in neighbouring Belgium, renowned beer brewers hit hard by months of lockdown are rushing to ensure adequate supplies are available when establishments reopen next week.

Among those celebrating will be British pharmaceuticals giant AstraZeneca, which on Friday reported \$275 million (227 million euros) in sales from its COVID vaccine in the first three months of the year.

The company's COVID-19 jab was developed with the University of Oxford and has been key in Britain's rapid vaccination drive. The

company is selling it at cost price.

Meanwhile Pfizer/BioNTech, which co-developed a COVID jab, said they have asked European regulators to authorise their vaccine for 12- to 15-year-olds—a crucial step toward herd immunity.

While children and teenagers are less likely to develop severe COVID, they make up a large part of the population and inoculating them is considered key to ending the pandemic.

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