

India nears 20 mn COVID cases as Europe eyes reopening

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India's total COVID-19 caseload neared 20 million and oxygen shortages exacerbated a devastating second wave on Monday, as the EU proposed new rules that could allow travellers who are fully vaccinated to enter the bloc.

Cases have soared by around eight million since the end of March, with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi under growing pressure to take decisive action to reverse the surge.

Scores died over the weekend in hospitals hit by shortages that have forced clinics in the capital New Delhi to send urgent appeals for help on social media.

"Oxygen is a basic requirement of a hospital and a consistent supply has not been assured. We are constantly firefighting," the head of the Madhukar Rainbow Children's Hospital Dr. Dinesh told the Indian Express daily.

The crisis had already raised questions about whether the Indian Premier League should go ahead, though cricket authorities, who stand to lose hundreds of millions of dollars if it is halted, have insisted it is helping to raise spirits.

But on Monday, the league was forced into its first [coronavirus](#) postponement this season, after two players tested positive despite the tournament's bio-secure "bubble".

The match—between the Kolkata Knight Riders and Royal Challengers Bangalore—was called off just hours before its start.

Amid severe shortages, India's federal and state authorities have been scrambling to get extra oxygen to hospitals, including by sourcing it from the steel industry and sending special "Oxygen Express" trains. International aid has also poured into the country.

'No more oxygen'

Germany and France this weekend sent medical equipment including

oxygen-generating plants.

"Out there the hospitals are full. People are sometimes dying in front of the hospitals. They have no more oxygen," German ambassador Walter J. Lindner said.

Stung by defeat in a key state-level election and a Supreme Court ruling ordering him to rectify the oxygen situation in Delhi by midnight (1830 GMT), embattled Prime Minister Modi held talks with European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen Monday.

The pair discussed "the prevailing COVID-19 situation in India and the EU", according to a statement from Modi's office, with the Indian leader thanking the bloc for "mobilising quick support for India's fight against the second wave".

'I'm alive again'

The grim situation in India stands in stark contrast to gradual reopenings in Europe and other wealthier parts of the world, where rapid vaccination programs buoyed by easy access to jobs have helped keep new cases down.

Von der Leyen's Commission on Monday proposed that travellers who are fully vaccinated with EU-approved jabs be able once again to enter the bloc, if they come from countries keeping COVID-19 at bay.

"The Commission proposes to allow entry to the EU for non-essential reasons not only for all persons coming from countries with a good epidemiological situation but also all people who have received the last recommended dose of an EU-authorized vaccine," the commission said.

Among those preparing for a post-pandemic future is France, which on

Monday relaxed controls on movement and allowed the partial return of students to classrooms as part of a four-stage process of opening up.

Greece reopened outdoor dining after six months of closures as it eyes the beginning of the tourism season.

"Today I feel like I'm alive again, like I've been revived," joked Andreas Rimiinotis, a retiree savouring the ambience at the Da Capo cafe in Athens the day after the country celebrated Orthodox Easter.

And in a jubilant call to action, Britain's Prince Harry joined pop royalty including Jennifer Lopez at a star-studded concert in Los Angeles Sunday to urge faster and more even global vaccinations.

"Vax Live: The Concert To Reunite The World" featured video messages from the pope and US President Joe Biden and in-person appearances from Hollywood stars such as Ben Affleck and Sean Penn.

Oktoberfest cancelled

In northern England, a crowd of 5,000 people danced without face coverings at a music festival in the nation's first post-lockdown gig.

The Covax global vaccine programme, which ensures access to jabs in poorer countries, struck a deal to buy 500 million doses of Moderna's COVID-19 jab, with the doses due to come on stream from October.

Meanwhile Germany on Monday cancelled its iconic Oktoberfest beer festival for a second year due to the pandemic.

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