

Pandemic to be 'far more deadly' this year, WHO warns

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World health experts issued a grim warning Friday that the second year of COVID-19 was set to be "far more deadly", as Japan extended a state of emergency amid growing calls for the Olympics to be scrapped.

"We're on track for the second year of this pandemic to be far more deadly than the first," said the World Health Organization's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus.

The mood also darkened in Japan where the coronavirus [state of emergency](#) took in another three regions just 10 weeks before the Olympics, while campaigners submitted a petition with more than 350,000 signatures calling for the Games to be cancelled.

With Tokyo and other areas already under emergency orders until the end of May, Hiroshima, Okayama and northern Hokkaido, which will host the Olympic marathon, will now join them.

The move to combat a fourth wave putting Japan's medical system under strain comes with public opinion firmly opposed to holding the Games this summer.

Kenji Utsunomiya, once candidate for Tokyo governor, urged Games organisers to "prioritise life" over ceremony as he submitted the petition to capital authorities.

The pandemic has killed at least 3,346,813 people worldwide since the

virus first emerged in late 2019, according to an AFP tally of official data.

There was bad news for Taiwan too with the capital indefinitely closing down entertainment venues, libraries and sports centres in the wake of an outbreak of infections first detected among pilots.

The island has been a global leader in containing the pandemic, with just 1,290 confirmed cases and 12 deaths.

Taipei's decision, effective from Saturday, covers bars, dance clubs, karaoke lounges, nightclubs, saunas and Internet cafés as well as hostess clubs and teahouses.

Sputnik vaccines reach India

India meanwhile started deploying Russia's Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine, the first foreign-made shot to be used in the country that has been reeling from an explosion in cases and deaths.

The first token batch of Sputnik vaccines—reportedly 150,000 doses—arrived on May 1 and a second delivery is expected in the next few days.

A number of leading India-based drugmakers have agreements for local production of Sputnik V with the aim to produce over 850 million doses of the jab per year.

India has been adding roughly as many new COVID cases daily as the rest of the world put together.

More than 260,000 Indians have died, according to official figures.

But in Europe, tourist hotspots are opening up.

Greece kickstarted its tourism season on Friday, hoping to reverse last year's miserable summer.

"I hope to forget this damn COVID," said Jil Wirries, a 28-year old student from Hanover, Germany, collecting luggage on the island of Crete.

"Everything is terrible in Germany... people are depressed... I'm so happy to be here."

France and Spain launched tourism campaigns this week too while Italy said Friday it was scrapping a quarantine requirement for visitors from the EU, Britain and Israel who test negative for the coronavirus.

And in the US, the top health agency on Thursday said it was lifting mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people.

'Milestone'

Biden declared a major victory in the battle against the virus that has seen more than 580,000 Americans die.

"I think it's a great milestone, a great day," he said.

Some, however, said they would continue to wear their masks out of caution.

"I'm still going to wear a mask inside," said Mubarak Dahir, a 57-year-old tourist in the capital Washington, visiting from Florida. "I think it's premature, it's a little dangerous to believe that we are that far already."

Almost 60 percent of US adults have now received one or more doses, while cases are falling fast, down to a seven-day-average of 38,000 or 11 per 100,000.

And the US campaign to vaccinate adolescents aged 12-to-15 began Thursday in earnest following the authorisation of the Pfizer vaccine in this age group.

But Friday, the WHO urged wealthy countries to stop vaccinating children and instead donate doses to poorer nations.

"I understand why some countries want to vaccinate their children and adolescents, but right now I urge them to reconsider and to instead donate vaccines to Covax," said WHO chief Tedros.

Portugal to let fans in

COVID continues to sow turmoil in the world of sport, with the May 29 Champions League Final between Manchester City and Chelsea shifted from Istanbul to Porto.

Portugal announced Friday that British tourists and football fans will be allowed in.

The Turkish Grand Prix, which was only drafted onto the Formula One calendar as a replacement for the cancelled Canada GP two weeks ago, was itself axed on Friday.

Formula One chiefs announced they will instead return to the sport's safe haven of Austria.

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