

Russia drops vaccination target amid record deaths

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The Kremlin on Tuesday conceded that Russia would not reach its 60 percent vaccination target by the end of summer as the country registered its highest daily death toll.

Russia has grappled with a recent spike in infections spurred by the highly contagious Delta variant while struggling to get its citizens

inoculated.

An official government tally reported 652 coronavirus fatalities in the country over the past 24 hours, topping a record that was set in December last year.

A record-high number of daily deaths—119—was also reported in Russia's second city Saint Petersburg, which is due to host a Euro 2020 quarter-final on Friday.

Over the past few weeks, Saint Petersburg and the capital Moscow have faced an influx of new cases, with authorities re-introducing virus restrictions and moving to boost a sluggish vaccination drive.

Speaking at a televised meeting of Russia's coronavirus taskforce, Health Minister Mikhail Murashko said that the "situation is tense, especially in [large cities](#)".

He added: "182,000 hospital beds are allocated, 151,000 patients are receiving treatment."

There has, however, been a "significant increase" in Russia's vaccination rate, he said.

In recent weeks, the government has pulled out all the stops to ramp up Russia's vaccination drive, which has been faltering despite free jabs being available since December.

As of Tuesday, 22.2 million out of a population of about 146 million had received at least one dose, according to the Gogov website, which tallies COVID figures from the regions and the media.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov conceded on Tuesday that it "will

not be possible" for Russia to reach its vaccination target and get 60 percent of the population immunised by autumn.

- Situation 'extremely difficult'

"Only this week the number of those wishing to get vaccinated has more or less started growing," Peskov told reporters.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin had said that the more contagious Delta variant first identified in India accounts for 90 percent of cases in the capital.

To curb the spread of infections, the mayor ordered Moscow businesses to send home 30 percent of unvaccinated employees and restaurants to only allow inside patrons who have been inoculated or infected in the past six months.

"The situation in Moscow remains extremely difficult," Sobyenin said at the government meeting Tuesday, adding that new infections remain at a "very high level".

Moscow also became the first Russian city to introduce mandatory vaccinations, requiring at least 60 percent of service industry workers to be fully inoculated by mid-August.

At least a dozen Russian regions have followed suit, requiring certain groups of citizens to get one of Russia's four jabs—Sputnik V, EpiVacCorona, CoviVac and the one-dose Sputnik Light.

But polls show that the Russian population remains sceptical of homegrown vaccines, and the Kremlin maintains that inoculation in Russia is voluntary.

Nationwide, infections grew by 20,616 on Tuesday, bringing Russia's caseload to nearly 5.5 million—the fifth-highest worldwide, according to an AFP tally.

With 134,545 deaths from the virus, Russia has the highest toll from COVID-19 in Europe—even as authorities have been accused of downplaying the severity of the country's outbreak.

Under a broader definition for deaths linked to coronavirus, statistics agency Rosstat at the end of April said that Russia has seen at least 270,000 fatalities.

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