Dutch hospital welcomes back troops amid Covid surge

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The battle against coronavirus has been a long one, and now the Netherlands is drafting in soldiers to prop up hospitals as cases spike and beds fill up.

Helped by 50 members of the military with medical backgrounds, the

UMC Utrecht hospital has opened a second care unit which can take patients with COVID-19 from across the region.

"What we are try to do here is to increase the amount of nursing beds that we have for COVID patients," Martin van Dijk, a Dutch military aid coordinator, told AFP.

"By that, the military tries to support the Dutch hospitals to make sure that no hospital has to say no to a patient, basically."

This is the second time that the military has been sent in to help at the hospital in the city in the central Netherlands, with the first time being from October 2020 to June this year.

But the fight is now tougher than ever.

Despite high vaccination rates and increasingly tough COVID restrictions including the closure of all shops, bars and restaurants at 5pm, cases have soared to record levels of more than 20,000 a day in this country of 17 million people.

The Dutch government has warned that hospitals are overstretched, with 2,143 COVID patients in hospital, including 611 in intensive care, accounting for 59 percent of all ICU beds, according to the latest figures.

Non-urgent operations are being cancelled across the country and even some more urgent procedures are being postponed as COVID patients fill the wards.

"I'm very proud to be here and to be in command of those people who make the difference with the patients directly," said van Dijk.

The soldiers blend in with the hospital staff at UMC Utrecht, with only

van Dijk wearing his military fatigues in the [hospital](link) corridors.

Nurse Bea Schooleman, who was herself sent to reinforce the unit two weeks ago, said she was "very happy" to have the soldiers there.

"We are grateful that they are back. You must have heard that it is getting harder and harder to get enough healthcare workers, so any help is welcome," she said.

But she is hoping things on the front line of the fight against the virus get better soon.

"There have been vaccinations, you try to stick to the rules and the numbers are still going up. It is difficult," she says.

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