

Third China city in lockdown on anniversary of first COVID death

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Residents in a third Chinese city woke up Tuesday confined to their homes as the country battled several outbreaks two years to the day it reported the first death from the disease that came to be known as

COVID-19.

Since January 11, 2020, known fatalities in the pandemic have soared to nearly 5.5 million and the emergence of the fast-spreading Omicron variant has forced the reimposition of curbs from Japan to Italy.

China largely tamed its initial outbreak with a mix of lockdowns, border closures and mass testing, but flare-ups in some [major cities](#) are testing that Zero COVID strategy just weeks before the Beijing Winter Olympics.

The city of Anyang in Henan province on Monday night told its five million residents to not leave their homes or drive cars on the roads, China's official Xinhua news agency said.

Last week, the one million people in Yuzhou—also a city in Henan—were told to stay at home. Xi'an, home to 13 million people, is in its third week of lockdown.

China reported 110 new local virus cases Tuesday, a tiny figure compared with the hundreds of thousands emerging daily in global hotspots such as the United States.

But they are a cause of alarm for Chinese authorities as they prepare to host the Winter Games in Beijing, with the event already expected to have tight coronavirus safety protocols.

Hong Kong, which already has some of the toughest coronavirus border restrictions in the world, also ramped up its curbs Tuesday to fight an Omicron outbreak, shutting kindergartens and [primary schools](#) until early February.

The same day, Japan extended until the end of next month its strict

COVID border policy that bars almost all new foreign arrivals.

Japanese authorities also announced the reopening of mass vaccination centres as they fight an Omicron-fuelled surge.

'Pretty angry'

Health experts maintain vaccines are among the most potent tools available against the pandemic.

But the deep scepticism and often violent opposition to jabs in many countries dramatically came into focus last week when Australia cancelled the visa of the world's top men's tennis player over COVID shot requirements.

The unjabbed, vaccine-sceptic Novak Djokovic won a legal challenge against the government on Monday, however, and is looking to defend his Australian Open title despite an outpouring of anger in the country over his exemption.

"I can imagine some people will be pretty angry about it," said 22-year-old fan Harrison Denicolo, who felt Djokovic should be allowed to play.

In Italy, however, Prime Minister Mario Draghi urged people to get shots as new restrictions came into force Monday, barring the unvaccinated from a large number of public transport and venues such as restaurants, gyms and cinemas.

"Most of the problems we are facing today depend on the fact that there are unvaccinated people," he said.

The known COVID death toll in Poland, where the government has also urged people to get vaccinated, crossed 100,000, Health Minister Adam

Niedzielski said Tuesday.

Earlier on Monday, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador announced that he has COVID-19 for a second time and was experiencing mild symptoms.

Omicron vaccine

As the virus surges worldwide, governments are once again being forced to make the difficult choice between coronavirus restrictions and keeping their economies and societies open.

France on Monday said COVID rules would be eased for schools as record-high case numbers shut down thousands of classes and sparked concern among parents and teachers.

Under the first change, from Tuesday, parents will no longer be obliged to pick up their child immediately for COVID testing if he or she is a contact case.

There was some good news on Monday as Pfizer announced that it expects a vaccine targeting the Omicron variant to be ready by March.

And the European Union's drug regulator said Monday it could decide within weeks whether to approve the company's COVID pill, after the pharma giant formally applied for authorisation.

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