

Spain deaths top 9,000 but epidemic slows

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Spain's death toll surged over 9,000 Wednesday as infections passed the 100,000 mark, but the rate of new cases continued to slow, suggesting the epidemic may be peaking, health chiefs said.

Spain has the world's second-highest death toll after Italy, with the virus so far claiming 9,053 lives after a record 864 people died over the past 24 hours, while the number of confirmed cases reached 102,136.

But on a day-to-day basis, the rate of new infections continued its week-long downward trend.

And most importantly, the number of people in hospital and those intensive care was falling, suggesting the epidemic had reached its peak, said Fernando Simon, head of the health ministry's emergency coordination unit.

"This is important," said Simon, who himself was diagnosed with the virus this week.

"Right now the central issue is not whether we have reached the peak or not, it seems we're already there, and the numbers are going down."

The main priority now was to ensure that the health system was capable of guaranteeing adequate coverage for all patients, Simon said.

Officials said the figures gave a "very positive" indication that the unprecedented lockdown put in place on March 14, confining Spain's population of nearly 47 million to their homes, was working.

Crunching the numbers, Wednesday's figures showed new cases increasing by just over eight percent, compared with nearly 11 percent on Tuesday and 20 percent a week ago.

They also showed the death rate increasing at a rate of 10.6 percent compared with 27 percent a week ago, with Dr. Maria Jose Sierra from the emergencies coordination unit saying the recent fatalities were those "who were infected two or three weeks ago".

'We're getting there'

Maria, a doctor working at a hospital in Madrid but who did not want to give her family name, said they had seen a drop in numbers in recent days.

"Last week, we were getting between 30 to 40 per day. Today, we've had 20. It's going down, little by little so we're on the right track," she told AFP.

In one of the hospital's centres, they were currently treating 446 people of whom 63 were in intensive care, she said, describing it as "the lowest figure we've seen since the start of the epidemic".

"Unfortunately this epidemic has shown us that we are not at all prepared to deal with this number of people."

Spain's health care system has been stretched to its limit by a massive influx of seriously ill patients, and last weekend, Simon warned that even if the epidemic peaked, the pressure on the intensive care system would be subject to a lag of at least a week.

Spain is also struggling with a worrying rise in cases among healthcare personnel, with some 12,300 infected.

And thousands of others are also struggling with the psychological burden of being on the front line.

Staff at breaking point

Guillen del Barrio, a 30-year-old nurse at Madrid's La Paz hospital, said the situation was "heartbreaking".

"There are so many patients that, before the virus, would have just been put in intensive care, and now we just can't," he told AFP, referring to the lack of beds and equipment.

"When a natural disaster happens, you just deal with it and do what you can. But when there are shortcomings due to human error, and organisational failures resulting from cutbacks and privatisation, it is so frustrating," said del Barrio.

"Emotionally, it takes a toll on you when you see patients dying who in other circumstances would have a much better chance of recovering."

Madrid has been by far the Spain's worst-hit area, with Wednesday's figures raising the death toll to 3,865, with the region suffering close to 30,000 cases, leaving hospitals and mortuaries overwhelmed.

On the upside, the number of people recovering has been steadily growing, rising to 22,647 on Wednesday after another 3,388 were declared virus-free. Nearly half of that number are in the Madrid region.

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