

WHO warns Europe virus surge of 'great concern'

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European countries have unveiled tough new measures to try to curb a surge in coronavirus infections which the World Health Organization warned Thursday is of "great concern".

Underscoring the disruption wrought by Covid-19 even in the corridors of power, US presidential candidate Joe Biden's running mate Kamala Harris suspended travel after a staffer contracted the disease and EU chief Ursula von der Leyen abruptly left a summit in Brussels for a similar reason.

And in France, police searched the home of the health minister as part of a probe into the government's handling of the coronavirus crisis, as new daily cases topped 30,000 for the first time.

A map published Thursday by the EU's ECDC disease control agency handed a red label for high rates of transmission and positive testing to more than half the 31 countries it monitors, which include non-EU members.

As the disease marches on relentlessly, millions in England are facing tighter restrictions, including a ban on household mixing.

Meanwhile Queen Elizabeth II made a first public appearance outside a royal residence since the start of the pandemic, going unmasked during a visit to a top-secret British government research lab.

Across the Channel, a curfew is to be imposed in Paris and eight other French cities and in Germany there are new limits on people gathering at events.

Announcing a partial lockdown in "red" zones including major cities, Poland's government asked people to work from home if possible, while Switzerland's health minister Alain Berset said the situation there "is deteriorating faster than elsewhere".

Both countries are facing record levels of new infections.

'Great concern' at WHO

With nearly 1.1 million coronavirus deaths and close to 40 million cases worldwide, countries in many parts of the world are facing tough choices on how to control the disease without the economic and social devastation wrought by nationwide lockdowns.

In India, where the pandemic has upended a movie-mad culture, some cinemas were allowed to reopen Thursday to try to attract punters back to the cash-strapped silver screen.

Israel, meanwhile, said it was lifting an unpopular ban on citizens flying out of the country in an easing of a second nationwide lockdown.

At a press conference in Copenhagen, the WHO's regional director for Europe Hans Kluge told reporters it was time to "step up the measures" as rising case numbers on the continent were of "great concern."

But he said the situation was not as bad as the peak in March and April, and stressed that full-on lockdowns "where every corner of our society and economy has been halted" should be avoided.

"The collateral damage on the people was too much," he said, encouraging governments not to "hold back with relatively smaller actions".

People's mental health, the risk of domestic violence and children's education should all be taken into consideration, he added.

Britain hopes a local three-tier system will fit the bill, with London heading into level two at the weekend and northwestern city Liverpool the only area in the top level, with strict limits on social mixing including

the closure of pubs.

In France, police searched the home of Health Minister Olivier Veran, one of several current or former ministers being probed following complaints by victims of Covid-19 that they were slow to act to check its spread.

The action came after France announced a virus shutdown between 9 pm and 6 am in Paris and other hotspot cities that will remain for as long as six weeks.

In neighbouring Spain, bars and restaurants will close across the northeastern region of Catalonia for the next 15 days, while Germany said daily infections have reached levels not seen since the start of the pandemic.

Breaking with past practice, China has sought to avoid a major lockdown after an outbreak in the port of Qingdao, testing almost 10 million residents but allowing people to come and go as they please.

Countries across Africa—which accounts for just over four percent of global cases—have also eased lockdowns and travel curbs over the past month, but weekly cases and deaths have ticked up, according to the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We are at a pivotal moment in the pandemic in Africa. While the continent has experienced a downward trend in its epidemic curve during the past three months, this decline has plateaued," the WHO's Africa director Matshidiso Moeti warned.

Silver screen, Olympics

In India, the reopening of cinemas on Thursday was tentative, with some states keeping theatres closed as the country's virus cases surge past seven million, and film studios are offering no new releases.

Punters were few and far between but some, like businessman Chandrashekhar Naidu in Bangalore, still made the trip to the cinema, "excited" to be back after months of coronavirus-imposed hiatus.

"I prefer watching movies on big screens, mobiles don't give you that much pleasure," the 55-year-old told AFP.

Japan, meanwhile, is seeking ways to safely hold mass sports events ahead of the Olympics next year and will allow baseball fans to pack into a near-full stadium in Yokohama to test coronavirus containment measures.

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