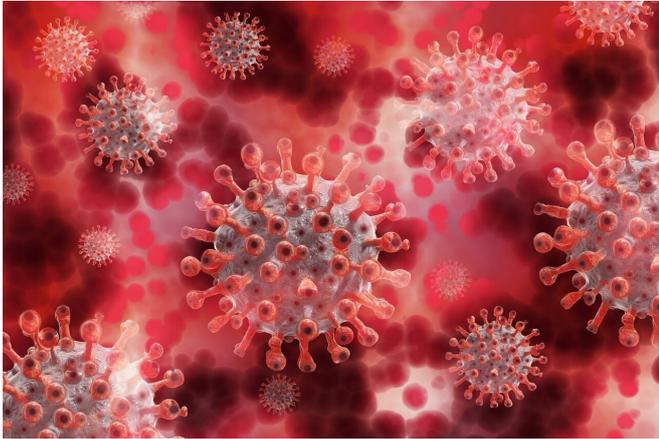


Europe surges past 250,000 virus deaths as Israel lifts lockdown

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Europe passed the milestone of 250,000 deaths from COVID-19 on Sunday as Israel and Australia's second-largest city of Melbourne began to gradually ease their strict lockdowns.

European nations have ratcheted up restrictions on daily life to tackle soaring infections, with a 44 percent increase in cases this week.

Nighttime curfews on millions came into force in France this weekend and Switzerland required all its citizens to wear masks in indoor public places.

But Israel has managed to flatten its outbreak through draconian measures including a ban on travelling more than a kilometre from home.

The government lifted that restriction on Sunday and reopened kindergartens, beaches and national parks.

Israeli mother Talia Zinkin said she was initially unsure whether to send her son back to daycare. "But I felt he would enjoy being with other children," she told AFP. "We have to try to live

normally."

In Australia, Melbourne has managed to control its upsurge in cases and officials were able to allow the city's five million inhabitants to leave their homes for more than two hours a day for the first time in three months.

While people will be allowed to travel up to 25 kilometres (15 miles) from home if they have valid reasons, restaurants and other businesses in Melbourne remain closed.

In Europe however, the increase in cases is reaching alarming levels.

Curfews respected

Europe's death toll makes it the second-hardest hit region after Latin America and the Caribbean, where fatalities have surpassed 350,000.

The United Kingdom remains Europe's worst-affected country in terms of deaths, accounting for almost one-fifth of fatalities on the continent.

It continues to struggle against the virus, with local officials resisting attempts by ministers to impose restrictions by region.

France counted nearly 30,000 new cases Sunday, close to Saturday's record 32,427 cases. Some 1,900 COVID-19 patients are currently occupying intensive care unit beds, out of France's total capacity of 5,800.

The government has introduced a 9 pm-6 am curfew for at least a month in nine cities including Paris, affecting 20 million people.

Those flouting the curfew face a fine of 135 euros (\$158) unless they can prove they have a valid reason to be out.

"I'm coming back from the hospital... where my daughter is being operated on," one man told a group of police officers, showing them a one-page document as evidence.

The measures fall short of the blanket confinements imposed in many countries earlier in the year—but raise fears of new, severe restrictions across the continent.

The Swiss government said Sunday it would enforce mask-wearing in all indoor public spaces from Monday and forbid gatherings of more than 15 people, among other restrictions.

Several hundred people staged a protest against the new measures outside the government's Federal Palace in Bern.

Across the border in Italy, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on Sunday announced a series of new measures to tackle the rising number of virus cases, with restrictions placed on bars and restaurants and a push to increase working from home.

Arrivals at schools will also be staggered to help with social distancing and local festivals and fairs banned.

'Moving cautiously'

Two weeks ago, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had declared her country had beaten the virus again—but a new community case of COVID-19 has now been confirmed, punching a hole in her assertion.

Ardern's Labour Party won a landslide election victory on Saturday, with her government's handling of the pandemic widely credited as a factor.

In South Africa Health Minister Zweli Mkhize announced Sunday that he had tested positive for coronavirus, adding to over 700,000 cases registered in the country.

He is the fifth member of the government to contract COVID-19.

South Africa accounts for around 43 percent of the virus cases on the African continent.

Meanwhile, a new study in Japan has found that the coronavirus remains active on human skin for nine hours.

In comparison, the pathogen that causes the flu survives on human skin for about 1.8 hours, according to the study published this month in the *Clinical Infectious Diseases* journal.

The research team tested skin collected from autopsy specimens, about one day after death.

They concluded that frequent hand washing is the best way to combat the pandemic.

"The longer survival of SARS-CoV-2 on the skin increases contact-transmission risk; however, hand hygiene can reduce this risk," the study said.

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