

Delta spread sparks fears for sports events as Russia fights record cases

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Russia's Saint Petersburg posted record COVID-19 deaths Monday as it prepares to host a Euro 2020 quarter-final despite the spread of the Delta variant, which is fuelling infection surges around the world and causing a headache for major sporting events.

While [wealthy countries](#) have started bringing down infections through rapid vaccination drives, outbreaks are still raging from Bangladesh to South America with the spread of the Delta variant, which was first detected in India.

The strain, now in 85 countries, is the most contagious of any COVID-19 variant so far identified, the World Health Organization says.

The surge has caused alarm for the Euro 2020 football tournament taking place in numerous locations throughout Europe.

A top European Commission official on Monday voiced doubts about COVID-hit Britain hosting the Euro 2020 semi-finals and final at Wembley and urged UEFA to analyse the choice of venue.

The UK is struggling with a sharp upsurge of the Delta variant, fuelling an infection rate four times higher than in the European Union.

But the government has rejected any suggestion of the final matches being played anywhere else.

Margaritis Schinas, a European Commission vice-president, said he could not see the sense of the semi-finals on July 6 and 7 and July 11 final being played in London before large crowds.

Despite the concerns, Britain's new health minister said the government was intent on lifting all of England's virus restrictions on July 19 as planned.

"No date we choose comes with zero risk for COVID," Sajid Javid told parliament. "Because we know we cannot simply eliminate it, we have to learn to live with it... The restrictions on our freedom must come to an end."

Britain has been one of the countries worst hit by the pandemic, registering more than 128,000 deaths.

Olympic worries

In Moscow, the epicentre of Russia's outbreak, businesses have been ordered to send home some of their unvaccinated workers and the mayor has urged residents to get the shot.

Russia has seen an explosion of new cases linked to the Delta variant, with Moscow and Saint Petersburg both posting record deaths Monday.

Saint Petersburg has hosted six matches with case numbers surging, but Russia's tournament organisers said Friday's quarter-final would take place as planned.

Spectator numbers have been capped at half, but are still drawing upwards of 26,000 people.

Finland's health authorities called on fans who returned from a Euro 2020 match in St Petersburg to urgently seek testing after 300 of them proved positive for COVID-19.

Another big event has been disrupted with cricket's Twenty20 World Cup moved from India to the United Arab Emirates due to the COVID situation.

And Japan's Olympic chief warned Monday there was "no way" to ensure zero virus cases among athletes coming to the Tokyo Games, after two members of Uganda's team tested positive last week following their arrival.

"Even if you've had two vaccine doses, it doesn't guarantee every individual will be negative," said Yasuhiro Yamashita.

'How do we pay rent?'

Faced with the surge in a pandemic that has already killed more than 3.9 million people worldwide, officials are racing to vaccinate their populations.

The virus remains on the march across the Asia-Pacific, with thousands left stranded in Bangladesh's capital ahead of a sweeping new lockdown.

A study by the Dhaka-based International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research reported more than two-thirds of new virus cases were linked to the Delta strain.

Bangladesh will shut down in stages by Thursday—a decision that sparked an exodus of tens of thousands of migrant workers from the cities.

"We did not have any choice but to leave (the capital Dhaka)," Fatema Begum, 60, told AFP while waiting for a ferry.

"During lockdown, there is no work. And if we don't work, how do we pay rent?"

Thailand from Monday also reimposed restrictions on restaurants, construction sites and gatherings in the capital Bangkok and its suburbs because of a

spike in infections.

To the south in Australia, Brisbane, Darwin, Perth and Sydney all reported new cases of the Delta variant and authorities imposed restrictions in areas not used to living under strict COVID-19 rules.

S.Africa deaths pass 60,000

The death toll in South Africa meanwhile, the worst-hit country on the continent, passed 60,000 Monday according to official figures—a day after the country reintroduced restrictions.

Patients in this third wave were in worse condition, Elsabe Conradie, chief executive and doctor at eMalahleni Private Hospital east of Johannesburg, told AFP.

"They get much, much sicker and so many of them never leave the hospital," she said.

But Italy became a mask-free, "low-risk" zone on Monday, a dramatic shift from early last year when it was a global symbol of the coronavirus crisis.

Despite the progress, however, Health Minister Roberto Speranza has urged Italians to remain vigilant.

"The battle is not yet won" he warned.

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