More European nations tighten virus curbs as global deaths top 700,000

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More countries across Europe imposed new travel restrictions and containment measures on Thursday with fears growing over a second wave of coronavirus infections as global deaths from the pandemic climbed over 700,000.

Europe remains the hardest-hit region worldwide with more than 200,000 fatalities since the virus first emerged in China late last year, but the number of deaths is rising fast elsewhere especially in Latin America and India.

Even as governments across the globe struggle to salvage economies ravaged by months of lockdown, many have been forced to look at new measures to curb outbreaks of COVID-19 since they lifted initial containment orders.

In Australia, the second-largest city Melbourne entered the country's toughest lockdown yet on Thursday, closing non-essential businesses and requiring hundreds of thousands more people to stay at home in new regulations.

The pandemic has killed at least 708,236 people worldwide with the United States recording the most deaths with more than 158,000, followed by Brazil with nearly 100,000.

Germany is the latest to introduce mandatory tests for travellers returning from designated risk zones, starting on Saturday, as fears grow over rising case numbers blamed on summer holidays and local outbreaks.

Germany's list of "risk zones" currently includes most non-EU countries, as well as certain provinces in Belgium and Spain.

Neighbouring Austria on Thursday announced it would issue a travel warning for mainland Spain, becoming the latest country to do so amid a rise in new coronavirus cases in the fellow EU member.

Finland also introduced new controls on arrivals from some EU countries, including Belgium, the Netherlands and Andorra, putting a stop to tourists arriving from there and imposing a 14-day quarantine on other returnees.

"The situation is extremely delicate," the health ministry's strategic director Liisa-Maria Voipio-Pulkki said, adding that "some sort of second stage has begun."

"Whether we can expect a smaller wave or a larger wave depends on how we respond."

Norway announced Thursday that France would be considered a red zone due to the resurgence of coronavirus cases there, meaning all travellers arriving from France face a mandatory ten-day quarantine.

Switzerland, Monaco and the Czech Republic were also hit with similar restrictions, as well as two Swedish regions, the Norwegian foreign affairs ministry said.

"The infectious situation can change quickly, as can the restrictions," Foreign Minister Ine Eriksen Soreide said in a communique.

Business struggles

While much of Europe appeared to have brought the pandemic mostly under control with strict lockdowns earlier this year, many are seeing new outbreaks, forcing local or citywide lockdowns and other quarantine measures.

Poland will re-impose compulsory face masks in all public spaces in nine districts, the health minister said, as it saw a record new high in the number of infections.

The restrictions will come into force from Saturday and will also affect sports and cultural events in those areas, mainly in the south and east.

Greece's government on Wednesday announced a "wake-up week" on COVID-19, tightening restrictions after the steady rise in mostly domestic infections.

Officials have blamed the increase on overcrowding in clubs and social events.

Scotland this week already reimposed restrictions in and around the city of Aberdeen, after a cluster of cases was identified there.

The new virus outbreaks are forcing officials into an uncomfortable trade-off between health requirements and the need bring economies back to life as businesses and companies struggle with huge losses after initial lockdowns.

German airline giant Lufthansa on Thursday became the latest to reveal the fallout from the pandemic, announcing forced layoffs and a 1.5 billion euro ($1.7 billion) loss in the second quarter as the coronavirus pandemic hit travel.

Announcing its worst quarter in the company's history, Lufthansa said in the three months to June its passenger numbers had collapsed by 96 percent compared to last year as lockdowns curtailed air travel worldwide.

Belgium's biggest airline, Lufthansa subsidiary Brussels Airlines, also said Thursday it had lost 182 million euros in the first six months of 2020 because of the coronavirus crisis.

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