

Slow vaccine rollouts fuel worry as US logs record daily COVID death toll

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England went back into full lockdown as Europe battled Wednesday to stem a rising tide of coronavirus cases, and the United States logged its worst daily death toll of the pandemic.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown no signs of slowing, with known infections nearing 86 million worldwide and more than 1.8 million deaths, even as many nations ramp up their vaccination rollouts.

England began its third national lockdown Tuesday as alarm grew in Britain over the latest surge in cases which is threatening to overwhelm its National Health Service, piling on the misery for people growing tired of social distancing and the economic cost.

"It's just exasperating, because I don't know if people can just go that extra mile, another six weeks with this lockdown. It's just crazy," said Alex, a 65-year-old retiree and one of the few people out on the streets of London on Tuesday.

A senior government minister has warned the lockdown could last into March.

Denmark and Germany also extended and

increased coronavirus measures on Tuesday, as concerns grew about the surge on the continent and the European Union falling behind other advanced nations in its vaccination drive.

There are hopes the bloc's medical regulator will authorise the Moderna vaccine when it reconvenes on Wednesday. It approved the Pfizer-BioNTech shot last month.

Limited supplies are a major hurdle for nations trying to accelerate their rollouts.

Britain and Denmark have said they will wait for longer than the recommended 21-28 days between jabs so they can focus on giving more people their first dose—a move that has divided specialists.

But World Health Organization experts on Tuesday gave cautious backing "in exceptional circumstances" to delaying the second doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine.

In China, schools were shut and travel was restricted in the northern city of Shijiazhuang—home to around 11 million people—as authorities moved to snuff out a cluster after dozens were infected.

Meanwhile, Beijing said delays to a long-planned mission by WHO experts to the country to probe the origins of the pandemic are "not just a visa issue" and that talks were continuing over "the specific date and specific arrangement" of the visit.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said he was "very disappointed" with the last-minute bar on entry, in a rare castigation of Beijing from the UN body.

Vaccine frustrations

Spurred on by new variants that are believed to be more contagious, the virus situation in some countries is as bad as it has ever been.

The United States broke its own record for the number of daily deaths from COVID-19 yet again Tuesday, recording 3,936 fatalities in 24 hours, according to a tally kept by Johns Hopkins University.

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In California, the new US epicentre, Los Angeles ambulance workers have been told to stop transporting some patients with extremely low survival chances to hospitals, and to limit oxygen use, as medical resources are overwhelmed.

The world's worst-hit nation is ultimately counting on its vaccination campaign, which began mid-December, to end the crisis.

But less than two percent of the population has so far been covered, with 4.8 million people having received the first of two doses.

Israel is out front with vaccinations, having covered some 13.5 percent.

But it came under fire from Amnesty International on Wednesday for failing to provide vaccine doses to Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza.

Melbourne stadium scare

The spikes in caseloads around the world have disrupted the few entertainment and sports events that had managed to resume after shutdowns earlier in the pandemic.

The English Premier League, one of the world's most-watched football competitions, said a record 40 players and staff have tested positive in the last two rounds of testing, but insisted the season will continue.

And spectators at Australia's showpiece Boxing Day cricket Test against India in Melbourne were warned they must get tested and isolate after a fan at the stadium tested positive.

The Grammy music awards, slated for January 31 in Los Angeles, were also postponed until March over the COVID-19 situation in California.

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