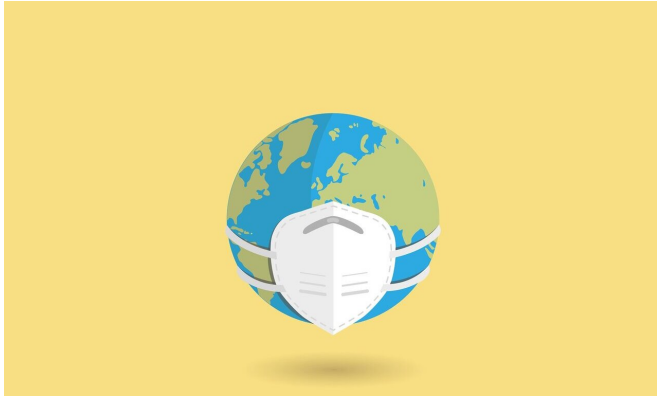


Asian nations toughen virus curbs as Europe fights new strain

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Asian countries stepped up their fight against the coronavirus on Thursday to suppress a contagion they had previously tamed, as warnings grew in Europe over a new fast-spreading variant.

Japan declared a state of emergency in Tokyo as the capital region clocked a 24-hour record of almost 2,500 infections, while China imposed emergency measures to tackle an outbreak in the northern city of Shijiazhuang.

The restrictions come as a slew of new lockdowns and other restrictions came into force around the world, with Canada and Lebanon ordering night-time curfews, and countries from South Africa to Mexico registering record daily deaths in their battle against the virus.

The World Health Organization has warned that European nations need to ramp up efforts to deal with a new variant of the virus that first emerged in England and is spreading more quickly than other strains.

"This is an alarming situation," said WHO Europe chief Hans Kluge, calling on everyone to follow

rules on social distancing, mask wearing and staying at home.

The global outbreak shows no signs of abating, with more than 1.8 million people known to have died worldwide from 86 million confirmed cases.

The pandemic crushed economic growth last year and France's [finance minister](#) warned on Thursday that the worst was still to come.

"There will be more bankruptcies in 2021 than in 2020," said Bruno Le Maire, warning of further job losses "that will be difficult to absorb".

'Can't leave the city'

Japan's outbreak has not been as severe as those in Europe and the US, but the government announced a month-long [state of emergency](#) in the capital region on Thursday with new rules targeting restaurants and bars.

Businesses are being asked to stop serving alcohol by 7 pm and to close an hour later, while residents have been requested to avoid going out after 8 pm.

The minister in charge of Japan's pandemic response warned that Tokyo's medical system was "stretched thin", a major worry for a city gearing up to host the Olympic Games in the summer.

China reported 63 new infections Thursday—the highest daily tally since July—as authorities tried to stamp out an outbreak in a city of 11 million near Beijing.

The government in Shijiazhuang, in China's northern Hebei province, has closed schools, cut travel links and begun mass testing.

"I did the nucleic acid test last night, but don't have the results yet. Without it I can't leave the city," one young woman told state broadcaster CCTV.

UK strain hits France

Experts see mass vaccinations as the best route back to normality, but the first rollouts have coincided with alarming spikes in deaths and caseloads across many parts of the world.

Spain's total number of total infections surged past two million on Thursday as cases jumped following the Christmas holidays, with another 42,360 cases confined over the past 48 hours.

Neighbouring France meanwhile said it had confirmed two clusters of the mutant British [coronavirus](#) strain, in a care home in the western French region of Brittany, and in a southern Paris suburb.

Ten people were confirmed as infected with the variant—a worrying development which means the more infectious strain could already be circulating more widely in the country.

Restrictions at the British border—blocking most people from entering France, including tourists—will nonetheless be kept in force "until further notice" in a bid to stop the new strain taking hold in France, Prime Minister Jean Castex said.

'Catastrophic' impact

Quebec, Canada's hardest-hit province, toughened its restrictions with a nighttime curfew, with historians saying it was the first such order in the country for more than a century.

Britain began its third lockdown on Wednesday despite being praised for a relatively rapid rollout of jabs.

It is facing a more acute crisis than its European neighbours and a leaked document on Thursday suggested London's hospitals could be overwhelmed within two weeks.

"Unless we take the lockdown seriously the impact on healthcare for the whole country could be catastrophic," said Rupert Pearse, a professor of intensive care medicine who works at the Royal London Hospital.

The surge in British cases has not left elite sport untouched, with Aston Villa becoming the fourth Premier League football club to confirm an outbreak.

Those infections add to growing worries about whether English football's top-flight can complete the season on schedule, with 40 players across the league testing positive last week and three matches already postponed.

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