

COVID surges dim hopes for speedy end to pandemic

8 January 2021



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The United States reported a daily record of COVID-19 deaths and Brazil's toll passed the bleak milestone of 200,000 Thursday as new surges of the coronavirus dimmed hopes for respite from the pandemic anytime soon.

Sharp rises in cases around the world have led authorities to impose a slew of new lockdowns and other restrictions, even as dozens of countries roll out the first stages of the vaccination campaigns hailed as the light at the end of the tunnel.

China has imposed emergency measures to tackle an outbreak in the northern city of Shijiazhuang, while Tokyo began a month-long state of emergency Friday, calling on businesses in the Japanese capital to stop serving alcohol by 7:00 pm and residents to stay home after 8:00 pm.

Canada and Lebanon have ordered nighttime curfews, while the World Health Organization warned that European nations need to ramp up efforts to deal with a new, more contagious strain of the virus that first emerged in England.

The plight of countries struggling to control the virus matters beyond their borders, said the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies.

"The fact is that no one is safe until we are all safe," it said.

"The nature of this virus means that the world can only be as strong as the weakest health system."

The global outbreak shows no signs of abating, with nearly 1.9 million people known to have died worldwide and 87 million confirmed cases.

Horror show sequel?

The numbers continued to pile up at an alarming rate in the United States, the country with the world's highest death toll, at more than 360,000.

The US registered a record 3,998 deaths over the past 24 hours, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Brazil, the country with the second-highest toll, meanwhile reported its second-highest number of daily deaths—1,524—on its way to passing the mark of 200,000 people killed by the virus.

The situation stands to get a lot worse in Brazil before it gets better, warned Paulo Lotufo, an epidemiologist at the University of Sao Paulo.

"I don't even know how we're going to get through January," he told AFP.

"A lot of health workers are exhausted. People have had to deal with a huge amount of suffering."

Brazil is now seeing uncomfortable reminders of the pandemic's worst days.

In the Amazon rainforest city of Manaus, the health

system is again being pushed to the brink, echoing haunting scenes last April of mass graves and corpses piled in refrigerator trucks.

As the authorities deployed refrigerator trucks a second time, a court on Saturday ordered the state government to shut non-essential businesses for 15 days.

California has also deployed 166 refrigerated trailers to be used as temporary morgues by overwhelmed hospitals, officials said.

Far-ranging fallout

The pandemic crushed economic growth last year, and France's finance minister warned that the worst was still to come.

"There will be more bankruptcies in 2021 than in 2020," said Bruno Le Maire.

The minister in charge of Japan's pandemic response meanwhile 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.

The Australian city of Brisbane called a snap three-day lockdown after a worker at a quarantine hotel contracted the highly infectious British strain of COVID-19.

In China, authorities have moved swiftly to contain a new cluster of cases in Shijiazhuang, in northern Hebei province, closing schools, cutting travel links and implementing mass testing.

England meanwhile announced it would introduce mandatory coronavirus testing for all international arrivals starting early next week.

UK strain hits France

France said it had confirmed 10 cases of the mutant British [coronavirus](#) strain—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, said Prime Minister Jean Castex.

'Catastrophic' impact

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

"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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APA citation: COVID surges dim hopes for speedy end to pandemic (2021, January 8) retrieved 9 November 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-01-covid-surges-dim-speedy-pandemic.html>

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