

Coronavirus

China to test 9m

Europe unprepared as second virus wave hits

ROME, Oct 12, (AP): Europe's second wave of coronavirus infections has struck well before flu season even started, with intensive care wards filling up again and bars shutting down. Making matters worse, authorities say, is a widespread case of "COVID-fatigue".

Record high daily infections in several eastern European countries and sharp rebounds in the hard-hit west have made clear that Europe never really crushed the COVID-19 curve as hoped, after springtime lockdowns.

Spain this week declared a state of emergency for Madrid amid increasing tensions between local and national authorities over virus containment measures. Germany offered up soldiers to help with contact tracing in newly flaring hotspots. Italy mandated masks outdoors and warned that for the first time since the country became the European epicenter of the pandemic, the health system was facing "significant critical issues" as hospitals fill up.

The Czech Republic's "Farewell COVID" party in June, when thousands of Prague residents dined outdoors at a 500-meter (yard) long table across the Charles Bridge to celebrate their victory over the virus, seems painfully naive now that the country has the highest per-capita infection rate on the continent, at 398 per 100,000 residents.

"I have to say clearly that the situation is not good," the Czech Interior Minister, Jan Hamacek, acknowledged this week.

Epidemiologists and residents alike are pointing the finger at governments for having failed to seize on the summertime lull in cases to prepare adequately for the expected autumn onslaught, with testing and ICU staffing still critically short. In Rome this week, people waited in line for 8-10 hours to get tested, while front-line medics from Kiev to Paris found themselves once again pulling long, short-staffed shifts in overcrowded wards.

"When the state of alarm was abandoned, it was time to invest in prevention, but that hasn't been done," lamented Margarita del Val, viral immunology expert with the Severo Ochoa Molecular Biology Center, part of Spain's top research body, CSIC.

Restrictions

"We are in the fall wave without having resolved the summer wave," she told an online forum this week.

Tensions are rising in cities where new restrictions have been re-imposed, with hundreds of Romanian hospitality workers protesting this week after Bucharest once again shut down the capital's indoor restaurants, theaters and dance venues.

"We were closed for six months, the restaurants didn't work and yet the number of cases still rose," said Moaghin Marius Ciprian, owner of the popular Grivita Pub 'n' Grill who took part in the protest. "I'm not a specialist but I'm not stupid either. But from my point of view it's not us that have the responsibility for this pandemic."

As infections rise in many European countries, some — including Belgium, The Netherlands, The United Kingdom, Spain and France — are diagnosing more new cases every day per capita than the United States, according to the seven-day rolling averages of data kept by Johns Hopkins University. On Friday, France, with a population of about 70 million, reported a record 20,300 new infections.

Experts say Europe's high infection rate is due in large part to expanded testing that is turning up far more asymptomatic positives than during the first wave, when only the sick could get a test.

But the trend is nevertheless alarming, given the flu season hasn't even begun, schools are open for in-person learning and the cold weather hasn't yet driven Europeans indoors, where infection can spread more easily.

"We're seeing 98,000 cases reported in the last 24 hours. That's a new regional record. That's very alarming," said Robb Butler, executive director of the WHO's Europe regional office. While part of that is due to increased testing, "It's also worrisome in terms of virus resurgence."

It's also worrisome given many countries still lack the testing, tracing and treating capacity to deal with a second wave of pandemic when the first wave never really ended, said Dr Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

"They should have been using the time to put in place really robust 'find, test, trace, isolate' support systems. Not everybody did," McKee said. "Had they done that, then they could have identified outbreaks as they were emerging and really gone for the sources."

Even Italy is struggling, after it won international praise for having tamed the virus with a strict 10-week lockdown and instituted a careful, conservative reopening and aggressive screening and contact-tracing effort when summer vacation travelers created new clusters. Anesthesiologists have warned that without new restrictions, ICUs in Lazio around Rome and Campania around Naples could be saturated within a month.

As it is, Campania has only 671 hospital beds destined for COVID-19, and 530 are already occupied, said Campania Gov Vincenzo De Luca. Half of Campania's 100 ICU virus beds are now in use.

For now, the situation is manageable. "But if we get to 1,000 infections a day and only 200 people cured, it's lockdown. Clear?" he warned this week.

The ICU alarm has already sounded in France, where Paris public hospital workers staged a protest this week to demand more government investment in staffing ICUs, which they said haven't significantly increased capacity even after France got slammed during the initial outbreak.

"We did not learn the lessons of the first wave," Dr Gilles Pialoux, head of infectious diseases at the Tenon Hospital in Paris, told BFM television. "We are running after (the epidemic) instead of getting ahead of it."

There is some good news, however. Dr Luis Izquierdo, assistant director of emergencies at the Severo Ochoa Hospital in Madrid said at least now, doctors know what therapies work. During the peak of the epidemic in March and April, doctors in hardest-hit Spain and Italy threw every drug they could think of at patients — hydroxychloroquine, lopinavir, ritonavir — with limited success.

Also:

BEIJING: Chinese health authorities will test all 9 million people in the eastern city of Qingdao for the coronavirus this week after nine cases linked to a hospital were found, the government announced Monday.

The announcement broke a two-month streak with no virus transmissions reported within China, though China has a practice of not reporting asymptomatic cases. The ruling Communist Party has lifted most curbs on travel and business but still monitors travelers and visitors to public buildings for signs of infection.

Authorities were investigating the source of the infections in eight patients at Qingdao's Municipal Chest Hospital and one family member, the National Health Commission said.

"The whole city will be tested within five days," it said on its social media account.

China, where the pandemic emerged in December, has reported 4,634 deaths and 85,578 cases, plus nine suspected cases that have yet to be confirmed.

The last reported virus transmissions within China were four patients found on Aug 15 in the northwest city of Urumqi in the Xinjiang region. All the cases reported since then were in travelers from outside the mainland.



Hamacek



In this July 3, 2019 file photo, Markus Rex, an atmospheric scientist and leader of the MOSAiC expedition, stands on the bridge of the German Arctic research vessel Polarstern in Bremerhaven, Germany. The icebreaker Polarstern, carrying scientists on a year-long international effort to study the high Arctic, has returned to its home port in Germany. The RV Polarstern arrived Monday in the North Sea port of Bremerhaven. (AP)

Climate

Scientists return from Arctic

Experts bring trove of climate data

BERLIN, Oct 12, (AP): An icebreaker carrying scientists on a year-long international effort to study the high Arctic has returned to its home port in Germany carrying a wealth of data that will help researchers better predict climate change in the decades to come.

The RV Polarstern arrived Monday in the North Sea port of Bremerhaven, from where she set off more than a year ago prepared for bitter cold and polar bear encounters — but not for the pandemic lockdowns that almost scuttled the mission half-way through.

"We basically achieved everything we set out to do," the expedition's leader, Markus Rex, told The Associated Press by satellite phone as it left the polar circle last week. "We conducted measurements for a whole year with just a short break."

The ship had to break away from its position in the far north for three weeks in May to pick up supplies and rotate team members after coronavirus restrictions disrupted carefully laid travel plans, but that didn't cause significant problems to the mission, he said.

Samples

"We're bringing back a trove of data, along with countless samples of ice cores, snow and water," said Rex, an atmospheric scientist at Germany's Alfred Wegener Institute for Polar and Ocean Research that organized the expedition.

More than 300 scientists from 20 countries, including the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China took part in the 150-million-euro (\$177-million) expedition to measure conditions in one of the most remote and hostile parts of the planet over the course of a whole year.

Much of the information will be used to improve scientists' models of global warming, particularly in the Arctic, where change has been happening at a faster pace than elsewhere on the planet.

As part of the expedition, known by

Warming makes Delta and other storms power up faster: experts

NEW YORK, Oct 12, (AP): Hurricane Delta, gaining strength as it bears down on the US Gulf Coast, is the latest and nastiest in a recent flurry of rapidly intensifying Atlantic hurricanes that scientists largely blame on global warming.

Earlier, before hitting Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula and temporarily losing strength, Delta set a record for going from a 35 mph (56 kph) unnamed tropical depression to a monstrous 140 mph (225 kph) Category 4 storm in just 36 hours, beating a mark set in 2000, according to University of Colorado weather data scientist Sam Lillo.

"We've certainly been seeing a lot of that in the last few years," said National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration climate and hurricane scientist Jim Kossin. "It's more likely that a storm will rapidly intensify now than it did in the 1980s ... A lot of

that has to do with human-caused climate change."

Over the past couple decades, meteorologists have been increasingly worried about storms that just blow up from nothing to a whopper, just like Delta.

They created an official threshold for this dangerous rapid intensification — a storm gaining 35 mph (56 kph) in wind speed in just 24 hours.

Delta is the sixth storm this year and the second in a week to reach the threshold, Lillo calculated.

Hurricanes Hannah, Laura, Sally and Teddy and tropical storm Gamma all gained at least 35 mph (56 kph) in strength in 24 hours. And a seventh storm, Marco, just missed the mark. Laura, which jumped 65 mph (105 kph) in the day before landfall, tied the record for the biggest rapid intensification in the Gulf of Mexico, said former hurricane hunter meteorologist Jeff Masters.

because it's important to understand what's going on and the more people help out, the better."

Rex, the expedition leader, noted that the ship encountered unusually thin and mushy conditions in the region above northern Greenland this summer that allowed them to make an unplanned detour to the North Pole.

"We are watching the Arctic sea ice die," said Rex, adding that he thinks it's possible there may be no summer sea ice in the Arctic soon. This would cause not just significant disruption to indigenous societies in the region but also interfere with the planet's cooling system.

"We need to do everything to preserve it for future generations," he said.

its acronym MOSAiC, the Polarstern anchored to a large floe last fall and set up a camp on the ice, creating a small scientific village protected from wandering polar bears by alarms and scouts.

"We went above and beyond the data collection we set out to do," said Melinda Webster, a sea ice expert at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, whose work is funded by NASA.

Webster, who led a team of 14 scientists during the fourth leg of the trip, said it will likely take years, or even decades, to sift through the data.

"This is an extremely exciting time to get into Arctic science because of the changes that are happening," she said. "We need to get all the help we



An ultra-rare 14.83-carat diamond that is one of the largest internally flawless, fancy vivid purple-pink gem ever graded by the Gemological Institute of America is displayed by a model at a Sotheby's auction room in Hong Kong on Oct 12. The diamond will be on sale in Geneva on Nov 11. (AP)



Stitt



Cullen

Discovery

Foxes, coyotes removed: Officials removed a half-dozen red foxes, three coyotes and other animals from an unlicensed rehabilitation center in western Michigan where the owner's 2-year-old granddaughter lost an arm after reaching into a pen that housed two wolf-dog hybrids.

State conservation officers searching the Howling Timbers facility in Muskegon also found 47 dogs that are believed to have been crossbred with wolves or other wolf-dog hybrids, according to Michigan's Department of Natural Resources.

The agency said it learned in August that a girl had been bitten in July after putting her arm into a cage.

"No person should be allowed near those dogs," conservation officer Anna Cullen said in a release. "It's not fair to this child who lost an arm. We are doing everything we can to ensure the safety of anyone who may encounter any animal at Howling Timbers, including the health and safety of all the animals at the facility."

The Natural Resources Department, Muskegon County sheriff's office, and the state Department of Agriculture and Rural Development are investigating owner Brenda Pearson for operating the facility without required permits.

The DNR revoked Pearson's wildlife rehabilitation permit in 2010.

Pearson, 59, said that Cullen told her in July that she could start taking in wildlife at Howling Timbers and that she was licensed. But Cullen claimed after a surprise visit in September that she didn't have the authority to say the license was approved, Pearson told The Associated Press via telephone.

Pearson said she has been in business 27 years and continues to care for the wolf-dog hybrids because they can't be released into the wild. Pearson said the animals are not bred at Howling Timbers and that her organization collects them from inside and outside Michigan. It is illegal in Michigan to crossbreed wolves and dogs without a permit.

Her granddaughter may have reached through a chain-link fence for the collar of a penned animal when she was attacked, Pearson said.

"We ran over and picked her up and her arm was missing from the elbow down," she said.

There were no bite wounds on the arm when Pearson picked it up a short time later, she said.

The girl was rushed to a hospital where she underwent surgery on her right arm, Pearson added. (AP)

EPA grants Stitt request: The US Environmental Protection Agency has approved a request from Oklahoma Gov Kevin Stitt's administration to allow the



This March 1, 2010 file photo from the US Fish and Wildlife Service shows a bi-state sage grouse (rear), as he struts for a female at a lek, or mating ground, near Bridgeport, Calif. Citing the government's repeated reversals and refusals to protect a cousin of the greater sage grouse the last two decades, conservationists are suing again to try to force the federal listing of the bi-state sage grouse along the California-Nevada line. The Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians and Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit in US District Court in San Francisco recently against the US Fish and Wildlife Service. It's the latest move in a legal and regulatory battle that dates to the first petition to list the bird in 2001 under the US Endangered Species Act. (AP)

state, not tribal nations, to regulate environmental issues in Indian Country, even those lands that may be inside historical tribal reservation boundaries.

Stitt, a Republican, requested the authority in July, shortly after the US Supreme Court determined that a large swath of eastern Oklahoma remains a Muscogee (Creek) Nation Indian reservation.

In the July 22 letter to EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler, Stitt requested state authority to administer all EPA programs in areas of the state that are in Indian Country, with a few exceptions.

Wheeler approved the state's request in an Oct 1 response. It applies to more than two dozen federal environmental programs overseen by several state agencies, including the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, Department of Agriculture, Food and Forestry, Water Resources Board and the Oklahoma Corporation Commission.

The federal law allowing states to seek environmental oversight in Indian Country was authored in 2005 by Oklahoma's Republican US Sen Jim Inhofe, a staunch ally of the oil and gas industry.

"As Administrator Wheeler's letter correctly points out, the State of Oklahoma did not seek to expand or increase its regulation over new areas of the state, but rather to continue to regulate those areas where the state has consistently implemented these environmental programs under the steady oversight of the US EPA," Stitt said.

The decision drew a swift rebuke from some tribal leaders. Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr said he was disappointed that the EPA ignored his tribe's request to consult individually with the agency about the change. (AP)