

Virus dampens holidays worldwide as vaccinations gather speed

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Thousands of truckers endured Christmas Eve stranded near a major British port, ensnared in the chaos unleashed by a new coronavirus strain, as Western countries speeded up mass vaccinations.

China on Thursday became the latest country to suspend flights to and

from the UK to contain the new strain that British officials believe spreads faster.

Some of the thousands of lorry drivers stuck near the British port of Dover said they feared there was little chance of making it across the Channel in time for the holidays.

"Home for Christmas? Forget it," said Laurent Beghin, a French driver who delivered his cargo of paint on Sunday but was still stranded in England.

Britain on Thursday said rail and sea links with France will remain open over Christmas to clear the backlog.

"As testing in Kent continues... I've spoken to my French counterpart (Jean-Baptiste Djebbari) and we've agreed the UK/French border at Eurotunnel, Dover & Calais WILL remain open throughout Xmas in order to help hauliers & citizens return home as soon as possible," UK transport minister Grant Shapps wrote on Twitter.

Passengers with negative virus tests on Wednesday boarded the first Eurostar trains from London to France since border closures were introduced on Sunday.

The new strain of the virus that surfaced in Britain and has also been detected in small numbers elsewhere, appears to spread more easily but experts say there is no evidence it is more lethal or resistant to vaccines.

Britain on Wednesday introduced restrictions on travel from South Africa, where another new variant of the virus has been discovered.

New restrictions

New restrictions came into force on Thursday in Italy, one of the worst-hit countries with more than 70,000 reported coronavirus deaths—half of them in the past three months.

The whole country has been asked to stay home for the days immediately surrounding Christmas and New Year, although limited trips to family nearby are allowed.

Pharmacies across Italy reported a big spike in people getting tested.

Austria allowed its more than 400 ski stations to open on Thursday, just two days before entering a third nationwide lockdown.

However, hotels, bars and restaurants remain closed, effectively limiting the slopes to locals, while the lockdown will also force the country's shops and much of its service industry to close until mid-January.

Israel said it would announce a third national lockdown from 5:00 pm (1500 GMT) on Sunday for two weeks, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said.

Israelis will be barred from travelling more than one kilometre from their homes and businesses will be closed except for deliveries.

"There is an option to extend the lockdown for an additional two weeks, unless the basic reproduction number (for the virus) falls below 1 and the number of new cases per day falls below 1,000," a statement said.

Fears over the new strain and surging coronavirus infections in general across Europe have severely dampened the mood over the holiday season.

Vatican mass brought forward

Russia on Thursday registered record numbers for daily infections and deaths with 29,935 new infections, bringing the country's caseload to 2,963,688—the fourth-highest in the world.

There were also 635 new deaths, increasing total fatalities to 53,096. Ukraine reported over one million cases with 17,395 deaths in a country of around 40 million.

Germany has been forced to cancel its famous Christmas markets and Pope Francis plans to bring the Vatican's Christmas midnight mass forward by two hours to meet Italy's curfew rules.

The European Union is preparing to kick off vaccinations across the bloc on Sunday, hoping to turn the corner in the fight against the virus, which has infected more than 78 million people worldwide with more than 1.7 million deaths.

The United States—the world's worst-hit country—has already started inoculations, and its Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that more than one million people have been vaccinated.

Switzerland, Qatar and Dubai in the UAE administered their first shots on Wednesday, while Serbia, hard-hit Mexico, and Costa Rica were set to begin on Thursday.

French President Emmanuel Macron's office meanwhile said he was is free of COVID-19 symptoms, a week after testing positive.

'A different Christmas'

Despite a new cluster of cases, Australia's biggest city Sydney still plans to celebrate the start of 2021 with its famous Harbour Bridge fireworks—but people are being encouraged to watch it on TV at home.

And in Bethlehem—which Christians believe is the birthplace of Jesus Christ—Christmas mass will be held without worshippers and broadcast online.

Egypt has called off all New Year's celebrations in order to stem a rise in cases.

In Catholic-majority Philippines, many are choosing to spend Christmas in isolation.

"Spending Christmas alone is odd because we know it as time to be with family," said Kim Patria, 31, who lives alone in Manila and decided not to travel to see his loved ones.

"What's clear I think is that this is a different Christmas, whether you spend it with family or alone."

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