

International

Europe scrambles for COVID control with boosters, jabs for children

Merkel urges her successor government for 'more contact restrictions'

PARIS: Europe scrambled to regain control over a resurgent coronavirus as governments urged adult boosters and jabs for young children in a sign of growing unease over a pandemic that has killed 1.5 million people on the continent. Berlin, Paris and Lisbon were among capitals weighing tighter COVID restrictions and broader vaccination campaigns as surging cases and the encroaching winter threaten to undo hard-won gains against the virus over the summer.

In the Czech Republic, President Milos Zeman returned to hospital just hours after being released to name a new prime minister as he tested positive for COVID-19. With governments already struggling to cope with the more infectious Delta variant, the discovery of a new and troubling strain in South Africa was a stark reminder that the fight against COVID-19 is far from won.

Britain, in response to the new variant, said Thursday it would ban travel from six southern African countries: South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Zimbabwe and Botswana. British Health Secretary Sajid Javid said scientists were "deeply concerned" about the new variant as it "may be more transmissible" than Delta and current vaccines less effective against it.

In Germany, outgoing Chancellor Angela Merkel urged more stringent controls. France stepped up booster shots, and the European Union's medicines

agency gave the green light to a vaccine for five-year-olds. Even countries with relatively high rates of vaccination are now tightening COVID-19 measures that had only recently been relaxed.

Merkel implored the new government succeeding her to take quick, decisive measures as the country reported a record 351 COVID fatalities in the past 24 hours, taking the official death toll since the start of the pandemic past 100,000. Warning that "every day counts", Merkel urged her successor government for "more contact restrictions".

Booster bolster

Germany has had to call on hospitals elsewhere in the EU for help as some clinics face overload. The country last week began requiring people to prove they are vaccinated, have recovered from COVID-19 or recently tested negative before they can travel on public transport or enter workplaces.

Several of the worst-hit areas have cancelled Christmas markets and barred the unvaccinated from bars, gyms and leisure facilities. Germany's Covid-19 crisis has in part been blamed on its relatively low vaccination rate of about 69 percent, compared to other Western European countries such as France, where it is 75 percent — even though new cases hit a seven-month high on Wednesday.

A German campaign for booster shots has been marred by supply and logistics snags. In Paris,



Encroaching winter threatens to undo hard-won gains



LYON: A patient receives a dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech (Comirnaty) COVID-19 vaccine, in the Lyon Gerland vaccination center, yesterday. —AFP

Health Minister Olivier Veran said COVID-19 booster shots would be accessible to all adults starting this weekend. From January 15, people over 18 would need to show proof of a top-up vaccine dose to maintain a valid COVID pass, which is required to enter restaurants, bars, gyms and other public venues. Adding pressure, the EU Commission recommended that the bloc's vaccination certificate should become invalid once the holder's latest dose is more than nine months old.

Elsewhere in Europe, the streets of the Slovak capital Bratislava were deserted as a new partial COVID lockdown came into effect. Even Portugal, which has an 86-percent vaccination rate, said it would impose work from home in the New Year and

close bars and discotheques. Belgium, which reimposed tougher curbs only last week, has seen an uptick far worse than projected, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said.

The Czech government earlier Thursday implemented a 30-day state of emergency, which includes closing Christmas markets as well as nightclubs. Hospitals in the east of the country are reaching capacity, and some have begun moving patients across the country by helicopters and ambulances.

The spiking cases see Europe re-emerge as the pandemic's epicentre, with the continent battling sluggish vaccine uptake in some nations, the highly contagious Delta variant, colder weather sending people indoors and the easing of restrictions. —AFP

Macron slams 'not serious' Johnson after tragedy

PARIS: French President Emmanuel Macron hit out at British Prime Boris Johnson on Friday over a tweeted letter, accusing him of being "not serious" after 27 migrants died crossing the Channel. Johnson sparked fury in France after writing a private letter to Macron on Thursday evening proposing five ways to stop migrants crossing from France to Britain, then publishing it in full on his Twitter account.

"I am surprised by methods when they are not serious. One leader does not communicate with another on these questions on Twitter, by public letter... No, No," Macron told a press conference in Rome. Relations between the two neighbors were already seen as their most tense in decades following a series of disputes over Brexit, but the personal criticism of Johnson represents a further turn for the worse.

French fishermen also began a temporary blockade of cross-Channel ferries and trains on Friday to protest against Britain's new licensing process which they see as obstructing their work. Analysts say the lack of trust and goodwill between Paris and London will make it more difficult to mount a coordinated response to the growing numbers of people seeking to cross the narrow but treacherous waterway separating the countries.

In response to Johnson's letter, French Interior Minister Gerald Darmanin cancelled planned talks with his British counterpart Priti Patel on Sunday, informing her that she was no longer invited to a meeting with other European ministers. In a message seen by AFP, Darmanin told Patel the letter was a "disappointment" and "making it public made it even worse." "We consider the British Prime Minister's public letter to be unacceptable and contrary to the discussions we had with our counterparts," a French source close to Darmanin told AFP, asking not to be named.

'Threadbare'

Johnson wrote that he had "long been profoundly concerned" about a tragedy in the Channel and "such a catastrophe has now happened" following an accident on Wednesday in which 27 people drowned when their inflatable boat sank. As well as reiterating a request to send British security forces to France for joint patrols — a sensitive issue for Macron — he also asked France to immediately start taking back all migrants who land in England. A spokesman for Johnson said he had no regrets about making the letter public, saying the public "would rightly want to know what we are looking at in terms of trying to solve this problem".

Speaking to the BFM TV channel, government spokesman Gabriel Attal called the letter "threadbare in its substance and completely inappropriate in its style". The idea of sending back migrants to France "is obviously not what we need to resolve this problem", he added. "You could ask now whether Boris Johnson regrets leaving Europe because as soon as there's a problem he considers it Europe's job to solve it," he said, targeting Johnson's role as a key architect of Brexit. Macron said Sunday's meeting in the port of Calais with German, Dutch and Belgian interior ministers, as well as the European Commission, would go ahead without the UK. —AFP

Thousands join global outcry over violence against women

MEXICO CITY: Thousands of protesters hit the streets of Europe and Latin America to demand an end to violence against women, with police in Turkey firing teargas to disperse the demonstrators. The rallies took place to mark the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, with thousands marching through Mexico City, Madrid and Barcelona, while others gathered in Paris and London.

There were also rallies in countries including Chile, Venezuela, Bolivia, Uruguay and Guatemala. "They didn't die. They killed them," read one of the banners at the march in Mexico, a country where around 10 women are murdered every day. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, at least 4,091 women were victims of femicide in 2020, according to the regional commis-



MEXICO CITY: A woman walks in front of a graffiti before a demonstration on the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women in Mexico City. —AFP

sion of the United Nations.

Tensions flared in Mexico City when a small number of hammer-wielding protesters tried to grab shields from police officers, who repelled them with smoke bombs. Things also turned ugly in Istanbul as riot police fired tear gas to break up

a demonstration by hundreds of protesters urging the government to rejoin an international treaty designed to protect women.

The Turkish government had abandoned the landmark Istanbul Convention earlier this year on grounds its gender equality princi-

ples undermined traditional family values, in a move that angered women campaigners. So far this year, 345 women have been killed in Turkey, rights groups say.

'A global scourge'

In Spain, where the government has made the fight against domestic violence a national priority, thousands hit the streets of Madrid and Barcelona in a sea of purple flags, while others rallied in Valencia, Seville and other cities around the country. In the Spanish capital, marchers wearing purple masks, hats and scarves walked behind a huge banner reading "Enough of male violence against women. Solutions now!"

"Not all of us are here, the murdered are missing," they chanted as they marched past the Cibeles fountain and other historic buildings that had been illuminated in purple, holding signs reading "Not even one more death". "On a global level, it remains a scourge and a huge problem," Leslie Huguin, a 30-year-old student and actor told AFP. "It's high time that patriarchal violence against our bodies, our lives and our decisions came to an end." —AFP

On Ukraine frontline, soldiers vow 'worthy response' to Russia

TALAKIVKA: Hands on his machinegun, a Ukrainian soldier scans the grey steppe towards the positions of pro-Russian separatists in his country's war-scarred east. The 21-year-old, who goes by the nom de guerre Zhura, says he is ready if Russian President Vladimir Putin decides to send troops across the border. "I cannot rule out the possibility of the start of full-scale onslaught," he says, wearing a green balaclava, helmet and bulletproof vest.

Western governments and independent researchers say Moscow has been moving arms and troops towards the Ukrainian border in recent weeks, with Washington saying it has "real concerns" over the troop build-up. If Russia decides to take action, Zhura says he and his battle-hardened compatriots will fight back. "We will give a worthy response to the enemy." Speculation has been rife of new moves in the longstanding

conflict between Russia and its ex-Soviet neighbor, though Moscow has denounced reports of an invasion plan as Western "hysteria".

President Volodymyr Zelensky said Friday that Ukraine was "entirely prepared for an escalation". "We need to depend on ourselves, on our army. It is powerful," he told a press conference. Zhura says the area of the frontline where he is deployed, near the village of Talakivka in the eastern Donetsk region, has been relatively calm in recent weeks. "But it's only here," he said. "In the direction of another brigade, shelling is heard every day and it is quite strong."

Ukrainian forces are spread along a frontline that stretches along two separatist regions, Donetsk and Lugansk, that broke from Kiev's control after Russia annexed the peninsula of Crimea in 2014. Though full-scale fighting has subsided, there are regular skirmishes along the front,



KIEV: Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky holds a press conference in Kiev. Zelensky said Friday Ukraine was ready to take on Russia if Moscow decides to move troops across the border, amid growing Western concern over a new Russian military buildup. —AFP

with more than 60 Ukrainian soldiers killed this year. The new buildup of forces follows a similar surge in the spring, when Russia gathered around 100,000 troops on Ukraine's borders.

Moscow later announced a draw-down, and some experts at the time said the troop movements may have been posturing ahead of Putin's high-profile

summit with US President Joe Biden in June. Armed with a Kalashnikov rifle, another Ukrainian soldier takes part in a shooting exercise a few kilometres away from Zhura's position. "It's pretty quiet right now, but it may be the calm before the storm," 21-year-old Anatoliy, from the western region of Chernivtsi said. —AFP

Riot police deployed after violent demo in Iran's Isfahan

TEHRAN: Riot police were deployed Saturday after a number of arrests in the Iranian city of Isfahan, witnesses and state media said, a day after violent protests over the drying up of a lifeblood river. Security forces fired tear gas during clashes Friday with stone-throwers at the protest by around 500 people in the bed of the Zayandeh Rood river that crosses the central city, Fars and ISNA news

agencies said.

Security forces made "a limited number of arrests", according to the province's police chief. "The situation is calm in the Zayandeh Rood riverbed and the streets are empty, but I heard riot police were deployed on the Khadjou bridge," said a resident who works in the area.

The demonstration on Friday was the latest in a series in Isfahan, a tourist magnet due to its majestic mosques and heritage sites, including a historic bridge that crosses the dried-up river. But it was the first to turn violent.

The riverbed has been the gathering spot for farmers and other people from across Isfahan province protesting the lack of water since November 9. Drought is a cause, but they also

accuse the authorities of diverting water from the city to supply the neighbouring province of Yazd, which is also desperately short on supplies.

"I used to walk along the riverbed with friends but today the riot police are deployed in large numbers near the Khajou bridge and they are asking people to avoid the area," said a woman in her 50s who was contacted by phone.

During the clashes on Friday, some people set fire to objects in the city, Fars and ISNA reported. "After the farmers left, the opportunists and counter-revolutionaries were left behind, which made it easy for the security apparatus, especially the police, to identify and arrest those who destroyed public and state property," Isfahan police chief Mohammad-Reza Mirheidari said on television. —AFP