

Europe facing 700,000 more Covid-19 deaths: WHO

CAMILLE BAS-WOHLERT
COPENHAGEN

Europe remains “in the firm grip” of Covid-19 and the continent’s death toll could top 2.2 million this northern winter if current trends continue, the World Health Organisation warned on Tuesday.

Europe is battling an upsurge in the pandemic which slammed Austria back into lockdown this week, while Germany and The Netherlands are poised to announce new restrictions.

A further 700,000 people in the 53 countries that comprise the WHO’s European region could die by March 1, the global health agency warned, in addition to the 1.5 million who have already succumbed to the virus.

It expects “high or extreme stress in intensive care units in 49 out of 53 countries between now and March 1, 2022”.

Europe’s return to the pandemic’s epicentre has been blamed on sluggish vaccine uptake in some nations, the highly contagious Delta variant, colder weather moving people indoors again, and the easing of restrictions.



GETTY IMAGES

A young woman gets the jab in Cologne on Tuesday

In the EU, 67.7 per cent of the population is fully vaccinated. But rates vary widely between countries, with low levels in many eastern nations. Only 24.2 per cent of Bulgarians are fully vaccinated, compared with 86.7 per cent in Portugal.

According to WHO data, Covid-related deaths in Europe increased last week to almost 4200 a day, doubling from 2100 a day at the end of September.

It said evidence was growing that vaccine-induced protection against infection and mild disease was declining.

Several countries, including Greece, France and Germany, are moving towards requiring a third booster shot for someone to be considered fully vaccinated.

Chancellor Angela Merkel has warned that Germany is not doing enough to curb its “highly dramatic” fourth wave of the pandemic.

With intensive care beds swiftly filling up and its weekly incidence rate at an all-time high of 399.8 new infections per 100,000 people, Germany’s worst-hit regions have started to order new shutdowns.

The German military is expected to add coronavirus jabs to the list of mandatory vaccines for soldiers “soon”, a defence ministry spokesman said. The move would make troops the first German public servants to be obliged to be jabbed against the virus.

It comes as the army is preparing to deploy soldiers to help local authorities with vaccinations, tests and other efforts to counter soaring infection rates expected in the weeks ahead.

The US State Department has urged Americans not to travel to Germany or neighbouring Denmark because of the surging Covid case numbers.

The rise in cases and hospitalisations have ignited a fierce debate in Germany about whether to follow Austria’s example and make vaccination mandatory for all its citizens.

Austria, meanwhile, closed shops, restaurants and festive

markets on Monday, the most drastic restrictions seen in Western Europe for months.

Israel, which is part of the WHO’s European region, on Tuesday rolled out vaccinations for children aged five to 11, one of only a handful of countries to inoculate minors that young.

About half of its recently confirmed cases were among those below the age of 11, it said.

And France’s fully vaccinated Prime Minister Jean Castex went into isolation late on Monday following a positive test, after his daughter caught the virus.

The regional director for WHO Europe, Hans Kluge, said Europe and Central Asia “face a challenging winter ahead”.

He called for a “vaccine plus” approach, consisting of a combination of vaccinations, social distancing, the use of face masks, and regular hand washing.

The WHO said face masks reduced Covid incidence by 53 per cent according to a recent study, and “over 160,000 deaths could be prevented (by March 1) if universal mask coverage of 95 per cent was achieved”.