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Washington, January 4 (RHC)-- The number of coronavirus-related deaths in the United States has topped 350,000, as health officials brace for another surge in cases related to year-end holiday gatherings. Data compiled by Johns Hopkins University showed the U.S. reached the grim milestone early on Sunday morning.

More than 20 million people in the country have been infected by the virus in the country, making the U.S. the hardest hit in the world in terms of numbers of cases and deaths. Last week, President-elect Joe Biden warned the upcoming weeks may be “the toughest during the entire pandemic.”

In recent days, multiple states, including North Carolina and Arizona, have reported record high daily cases. Meanwhile, mortuary owners in hard-hit Southern California say they are being inundated with bodies.

The newest numbers come as the vaccine roll-out in the country continues to proceed at a slower rate than expected and as a new, apparently more infectious, strain of the virus has increasingly appeared on U.S. soil.

The update also comes as President Donald Trump on Sunday again sought to downplay the effect of the pandemic, tweeting that the number of cases and deaths are “far exaggerated” because of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s “ridiculous” methodology.

Meanwhile, at least three U.S. states have recorded infections by a new variant of the virus that appears to be more contagious. The variant, which is helping to drive the most recent surge in cases in the United Kingdom, where it first appeared, has been recorded in Colorado, Florida and California.

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