

German chancellor warns of 'difficult times' with COVID-19 in 2021

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German Chancellor Angela Merkel records her annual New Year address at the chancellery in Berlin. (Photo: AFP)

Berlin, December 31 (RHC)-- German Chancellor Angela Merkel says her country's "historic" coronavirus crisis will extend into 2021 even if the vaccines bring some hope. As part of her New Year's greetings on Thursday, Merkel denounced the conspiracy theories advanced by virus sceptics as not just "false and dangerous" but "cynical and cruel" towards those who had suffered during the pandemic.

"These days and these weeks ... are difficult times for our country," Merkel warned. "And that is going to last for a good while yet." Speaking in what will be her final New Year's address as chancellor after four terms in office, Merkel's message was characteristically sober.

"Winter remains difficult," she said. "The challenges that the pandemic pose remain immense." Merkel thanked what she said was the vast majority of Germans who had abided by the safety restrictions imposed by the authorities to try to check the spread of the virus.

But she had harsh words for the virus sceptics, many of whom have taken their protests to the streets, some of them ignoring safety measures such as wearing masks. "I can only imagine the bitterness felt by those who are mourning a loved one because of the coronavirus, or those who are still suffering its after-effects, when the existence of the virus is disputed or denied by some," she said.

"The conspiracy theories are not only false and dangerous, they are also cynical and cruel towards these people," she added. There was nevertheless hope for the coming year, she added. "For some days, hope has a new face: That of the first vaccinated people" in retirement homes and among health workers, said Merkel.

In her 15 years in power, she added, "Never have we, despite the worries, been in such a hurry to enter a new year." Germany, praised for its handling of the first wave, has been hit hard by a second wave.

More than 32,000 people have now died from the virus in Germany, and on Wednesday the daily death toll passed 1,000 for the first time - although officials say this was partly due to late reporting of earlier figures. The country is under a partial lockdown until January 10th, with most shops closed along with schools, restaurants, cultural and leisure facilities.

New Year's Eve festivities will be muted, with a ban on the sale of fireworks and tight restrictions on the number of people who can gather in public.

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