

Portugal close to running out of ICU beds for COVID cases

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**Portugal has so far reported a total of 12,179 COVID-19 deaths and 711,018 cases.
(Photo: Duarte Sa / Reuters)**

Lisbon, February 1 (RHC)-- Portugal has said that only had seven vacant beds left in intensive care units (ICUs) set up for COVID-19 cases on its mainland, as a surge in infections prompted the authorities to send some critical patients to Portuguese islands.

Health Ministry data showed that, out of 850 ICU beds allocated to COVID-19 cases on its mainland, a record 843 beds were now occupied. The nation of 10 million people has an additional 420 ICU beds for those with other ailments. The ministry said the number of daily infections was 12,435, dipping from Thursday's record of 16,432, while there were 293 deaths.

Portugal, which has so far reported a total of 12,179 COVID-19 deaths and 711,018 cases, has the world's highest seven-day rolling average of cases and deaths per capita, according to data tracker ourworldindata.org.

The country's rate of new cases has recently reached the highest in the world in proportion to its population. Ambulances have been queueing outside Lisbon hospitals as its health service buckles under the strain.

The Justice Ministry said its institute of forensic medicine, whose role includes handling autopsies for the police and others, had requested a refrigerator truck to preserve bodies as funeral homes were not able to take them fast enough.

An association representing funeral homes said public hospitals were also running out of refrigerated space to preserve bodies. Some hospitals have installed cold containers to ease pressure on their morgues. With mainland beds running low, three patients needing critical care were airlifted from Lisbon to the Portuguese island of Madeira, where the health system is under less pressure.

The government has attributed the surge in infections to a decision to relax restrictions over the Christmas period, blaming the speed at which infections have spread on a new variant first detected in the United Kingdom.

Portugal's health institute, the Ricardo Jorge, told Lusa news agency the variant was likely to account for 65 percent of new COVID-19 cases within three weeks. Portugal has extended a lockdown to mid-February and imposed strict travel restrictions.

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