

Russia's COVID death toll hits record high for fifth day

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The surge in Russia comes as officials in Moscow are pushing vaccine-sceptic Russians to get inoculated [Shamil Zhumatov/Reuters]

Moscow, July 4 (RHC)-- Coronavirus deaths in Russia hit a record on Saturday for the fifth straight day, with the authorities reporting 697 fatalities as the country faces a rapid surge of infections. The previous record on Friday was 679.

Russia's state coronavirus task force on Saturday reported 24,439 new coronavirus cases — the highest daily tally since January and 1,200 more than the day before. Moscow, its outlying region and St. Petersburg accounted for nearly half of Saturday's new cases. Officials blame the surge on the infectious Delta variant and tepid demand for vaccinations.

The Kremlin insisted on Friday that the authorities are not discussing another lockdown. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov admitted that the situation with the coronavirus remains "tense" in a number of regions, but said that "no one wants any lockdowns."

Moscow, the worst-hit region throughout Russia's pandemic, reported 7,446 cases on Saturday, while St Petersburg – which hosted a Euro 2020 quarter-final between Spain and Switzerland on Friday night – reported 1,733 cases and 110 deaths. Pictures from the city's fan zones showed many people without the mandatory covering of mouth and nose.

Russia had hoped its vaccination campaign would tamp down a new wave, but it has met with widespread scepticism and a sluggish rollout, with only 16 percent of the 146 million population jabbed.

Spooked by the new surge in cases, officials have imposed an array of measures to compel or encourage people to get vaccinated. In Moscow, which has not had a strict lockdown since last summer, officials have now banned people from going to cafes, bars and restaurants unless they can show proof of vaccination, immunity or a negative test.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin told residents more than 2.7 million people have now received at least one vaccine dose. He said around 60-70,000 people were being vaccinated on a daily basis and said he hoped that the number of people who have had a first dose would reach 3 million next week.

At one site in the capital, 21-year-old student Svetlana Stepereva told AFP news agency she had been queueing to get the COVID-19 vaccine shot for about two hours. "I want to get a jab and feel safe," she said.

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