

Millions return to lockdown in Philippines as cases soar

AFP News

More than 27 million people in the Philippines -- about a quarter of the population -- will go back into lockdown Tuesday after overwhelmed health workers warned the country was losing the battle against the coronavirus.

Since the beginning of June, when much of the country emerged from one of the world's longest stay-at-home orders, confirmed infections in the archipelago have increased fivefold, surging past 100,000.

The new restrictions announced by President Rodrigo Duterte late Sunday apply to the capital Manila and four surrounding provinces on the main island of Luzon.

For the next two weeks, public transport, including the ubiquitous jeepney minibuses, will be halted and domestic flights grounded to try and slow the



Authorities in the Philippines have ordered people to stay home unless they need to buy essential goods or exercise outdoors

spread of the virus, which has killed more than 2,000 people in the country.

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buy essential goods or exercise outdoors.

Only a limited number of businesses will be allowed to operate and restaurants will be

permitted to do take-aways only.

"We really fell short. Nobody anticipated this," Duterte said, as he rejected calls for the Health Minister Francisco Duque to be sacked.

"Nobody expected that thousands will get sick on a single day."

The move comes after 80 medical associations representing tens of thousands of doctors on Saturday called for Duterte to tighten virus restrictions as hospitals, unable to cope with the influx of patients, turned people away.

On Monday, they welcomed Duterte's decision, saying it will give medical workers breathing room and buy time for the system to handle the surge.

The Philippines announced a record 5,032 new infections on Sunday.

More than 5,000 medical workers have contracted the virus -- including 500 in the past week, health department figures show.

Top coronavirus advisor warns US in 'new phase' of pandemic



People practice social distancing at Washington square park in San Francisco

AFP | Washington

The United States has entered a "new phase" of the pandemic, White House coronavirus advisor Deborah Birx warned Sunday, with rural areas just as threatened as major cities.

Birx, who heads the White House coronavirus task force, told CNN's "State of the Union" that local virus mitigation procedures were starting to work, but added that "what we are seeing today is different from March and April".

"It is extraordinarily widespread. It's into the rural as equal urban areas," she added. "To everybody who lives in a

rural area, you are not immune or protected from this virus."

"We are in a new phase," Birx said. She added that sticking to health and safety guidelines -- such as wearing a mask, maintaining personal hygiene and observing social distancing -- was crucial.

As of Sunday, the US had tallied more than 4,665,000 cases of COVID-19 and 154,834 deaths, according to Johns Hopkins University, making it by far the hardest-hit country in the world.

The US notched 47,508 new cases on Sunday -- a slight dip from the previous five days, which had all recorded more than 60,000 new infections.

Back on track: Europe's fading night trains win reprieve

AFP | Paris

It was one of the quintessential European travel experiences.

With passengers cradled to sleep by the clank of the wheels on the rails, the network of night trains that spanned the continent inspired travelogues, thrillers and films.

But the cost required to keep them running, coupled with the growth of high speed day trains and the popularity of budget airlines, meant that the era of the couchette and wagon lit was quietly fading into the night.

Key routes were cut and the intricate network of overnight routes across Europe was reduced to just a handful of services.

But increasing awareness among passengers and governments of the carbon footprint from air travel -- coupled with shrinkage in the airline sector due to the coronavirus epidemic -- means that night trains may be in line for an unexpected renaissance.

Austria, France and Sweden are among countries pressing for a return to night train travel that may yet see more of us tucking up for the night in a cosy wagon lit.

President Emmanuel Macron of France -- which over the last years stripped down its overnight domestic services to just a pair of routes -- announced in July the government would "re-develop" night trains as part of a campaign to reduce emissions.

Secretary of State for Transport Jean-Baptiste Djebbari said that overnight connections between Paris and the Mediterranean city of Nice, as well as with Tarbes in the Pyrenees, would be restored by 2022.

"I think there is a real demand," said Christophe Fanichet, the chief executive of French rail operator SNCF's passenger arm SNCF Voyageurs.

He said there was in particular a "young population that is paying attention to carbon emis-



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sions" and is prepared to take a little more time to travel.

Austrian 'trailblazer'

Overnight trains were cut one after another in France over the last years, hardly surprising in a country where the high-speed TGV now whisks passengers from Paris to Marseille in just over three hours.

Just two lines survive due to a lack of alternatives for passengers between Paris and Briançon in the Alps and Cerbere in the Pyrenees.

They cost the state 20 million euros (\$24 million) to keep running annually, plus 30 million to renovate the trains.

Signs of a

revival in overnight travel are even more apparent elsewhere in Europe, notably in Austria where state railway operator ÖBB has been blazing a trail for international services.

ÖBB bought up old night train operations of German operator Deutsche Bahn and is now planning to buy 20 new trains for 500 million euros.

It is now possible to hop on a train in Vienna and wake up in Brussels.

"Over the coming years we want to focus on building up the network of night trains," Austrian Environment Minister Leonore Gewessler told the *Kleine Zeitung* newspaper.

"We want to strengthen this role as a trailblazer," she added, referring to the fact that Vienna is served by more night trains than any other city in Europe.

'Reinvent the night train'

with some operators much more wary about bringing them back.

Industry participants acknowledge there has to be a better solution than the standard six-person European sleeping couchette, which contains two sets of three bunk beds separated by a small gap.

This is all the more important in the era of the coronavirus, where few passengers will want to spend the entire night in a confined space with potentially five complete strangers.

"We can't just say that we want night trains. We need to reinvent the night train," said Fanichet of SNCF.

"We can't just have yesterday's night train again," he added.

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