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Kremlin Decries ‘High’ Covid Deaths, Rejects New Measures

By AFP

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Inside the Moscow metro. **Mikhail Tereshchenko / TASS**

The Kremlin on Monday described Russia's Covid fatality toll as "high" and the country's vaccination rate as "unacceptably" low, even as it rejected new restrictions so as to protect the economy.

Officials on Monday registered 957 new deaths from Covid-19 over 24 hours, bringing the country's total fatalities to 217,372 – the highest toll in Europe – even as authorities are accused of downplaying the severity of Russia's outbreak.

Under a broader definition of deaths linked to the virus, the Rosstat statistics agency said Friday that by the end of August more than 400,000 people in Russia had died with the coronavirus.

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The growing toll from the virus comes as Russia's jab drive has stalled. As of Monday, just over 30 percent of Russians had been fully vaccinated, according to the Gogov website, which tallies Covid-19 data from the regions.

"Yes, indeed, the level of vaccinations we have is small, unacceptably small," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters, saying that this is the reason for "such a high mortality rate."

But he dismissed the notion that authorities could do more, saying they had done everything to give the public the chance to "save their lives by getting vaccinated."

The Kremlin's task, he added, is to balance limiting the spread of the virus with ensuring that "the economy continues working."

While several Russian-developed jabs have been available for months, authorities have struggled to inoculate a vaccine-skeptic population.

Independent polls show that more than half of Russians do not plan to get a shot.

The surging infections have come without any real pandemic restrictions to limit the spread, though several regions have re-introduced QR codes for access to public places.

Capital Moscow has so far withheld from bringing back restrictions, but on Monday announced that it would open two dozen sites around the city where residents could get free express tests.

Officials said the additional sites would allow authorities to "completely avoid the introduction of severe restrictions" and "not harm the city's economy."

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