

Spain COVID-19 death toll passes 40,000

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Spain's coronavirus death toll surged to over 40,000 on Wednesday with infections passing the 1.4 million mark, while the rate of new cases continued to grow, health ministry data showed.

With 349 people dying in the past 24 hours, the death toll now stands at 40,105 in Spain, which has the fourth-highest death rate within the European Union after the United Kingdom, France and Italy.

Spain passed the grim landmark a day after logging 411 deaths, the highest daily death toll of the second wave.

Over the past 24 hours, health authorities also registered more than 19,000 new cases, bringing the overall number of people infected to 1,417,709, the second-highest figure within the EU after France.

Pressure on hospitals is increasing with around a third—31.78 percent—of all intensive care unit (ICU) beds taken up by COVID-19 patients.

Despite the figures, top health official Fernando Simon said Tuesday there were signs of a "clear stabilisation" in the 14-day incidence rate although

it would take "several days" for that to be reflected in the death toll and bed-occupancy rates in ICUs.

He said the figures had stabilised "at around 525 cases per 100,000 inhabitants".

By Wednesday, that rate had fallen to 514 cases per 100,000 inhabitants, with Health Minister Salvador Illa cautiously welcoming the numbers.

"The figures are starting to confirm a stabilisation," he told a news conference.

"There is a downward trend but the figures are still worrying," he said. "We must keep our guard up."

In Europe, which has suffered nearly 320,000 deaths from more than 13 million infections, many countries are struggling with a surging second wave.

Despite its high caseload, Spain has been slow to follow the example of other European nations which have imposed new lockdowns to try and curb spiralling cases.

Britain, France and several other countries have recently re-imposed lockdowns as the virus shows no sign of abating, while other European nations like Portugal have entered partial lockdowns.

Until now, Spain has resisted, with the government hoping a national night-time curfew and other restrictions, put in place by regional authorities who are responsible for managing the pandemic, would be enough to slow the rate of infection.

Since it first emerged in China late last year, the virus has now claimed more than 1.2 million lives worldwide and infected more than 51 million people, according to an AFP tally based on official sources.

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