

France hits unwanted milestone: Over 100,000 virus deaths

15 April 2021, by Sylvie Corbet and Angela Charlton



In this Oct. 2, 2020 file photo, a woman walks by empty restaurants in the center of Lyon, central France. France is expected Thursday April 15, 2021, to pass the grim milestone of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths, after a year of hospital tensions, on-and-off lockdowns and personal loss that have left families nationwide grieving the pandemic's unending, devastating toll. (AP Photo/Laurent Cipriani, File)

France on Thursday became the third country in Europe after the U.K. and Italy to reach the unwanted milestone of 100,000 COVID-19-related deaths as new infections and deaths surged due to virus variants.

The country of 67 million is the eighth nation in the world to reach the mark after a year of overwhelmed hospitals, on-and-off coronavirus lockdowns and enormous personal losses that have left families nationwide grieving the pandemic's impact.

The moment prompted a message of solidarity from French President Emmanuel Macron.

"Since the start of the pandemic, 100,000 French women and men have succumbed to the virus. We

all have a thought for their families, their loved ones, for the children who have lost a parent or a grandparent, the bereaved siblings, the broken friendships," Macron said on Twitter. "We will not forget a face, a name," he added.

France added 300 new deaths Thursday to the previous day's tally of 99,777, bringing the total to 100,077 deaths.

Lionel Petitpas, president of the group Victims of COVID-19 told The Associated Press that the number was "an important threshold."

After months of people getting accustomed to the virus, the figure "is piercing a lot of minds. It is a figure we thought would never be reached," he said.

Petitpas, who lost his wife Joelle on March 29 last year from the virus, said families of victims "want the government to make a collective gesture to recognize our collective loss."

Macron told Le Parisien newspaper he thinks about all of the people who died in the pandemic and their families.

The pandemic was "so cruel" to individuals "who sometimes were not able to accompany, during the last moments and in death, a father, a mother, a loved one, a friend," Macron said. Yet the crisis also shows "the ability of the French people to unite."

French government spokesperson Gabriel Attal suggested it is too soon to set a specific date to honor those who died as France is now fighting another rapid rise in confirmed cases.

"There will be an homage for sure, a national mourning for the victims of COVID-19," Attal said Wednesday. "That time will come. ... today, we throw all our forces in the battle against the

epidemic."

Experts say the 100,000 mark is an underestimate by thousands. An analysis of death certificates shows that some COVID-19 cases were not reported or patients were not tested when people died at home, or in psychiatric units or chronic care facilities.

Petitpas started a Facebook group last year for families of victims to share memories of their loved ones. Nearly every day, new testimonies appear.

"My wife, like so many others, was just put in a body bag," he recalled. "It was like a luxury garbage bag. And then she was put in a coffin and sent to cremation." He was not allowed to see her.

Petitpas said despite a decree in January allowing people in France to see their deceased loved ones, many places still aren't allowing it.

"All these people who left us (are) like people with the plague, without human dignity, with nothing at all," he said.

Celia Prioux-Schwab, a social services worker, lost her 82-year-old grandmother in January, four days after she was sent home from the Reims hospital—even though her family had no home-care option and she still had COVID-19.

She is now pushing for a change in French law to guarantee the right of families to visit hospitalized patients even during a pandemic, "to offer support, or even just to say goodbye."

Corine Maysounabe, a journalist in western France, has been involved in a group advising officials on a future protocols for deaths during pandemics. She lost her 88-year-old father last year to the virus. She described the "enormous trauma" of mourning rites being trampled on and bodies "treated at the level of objects."

"When you're told your father was put in a bag and covered in bleach: imagine the image you get in your head," she said.

Maysounabe feels families and victims "are

forgotten" still today. "We have gotten accustomed to 300, 400 deaths a day."

Since Macron declared "war" on the virus while announcing the country's first lockdown on March 17, 2020, the French have faced domestic and international travel restrictions that have weighed heavily on everyday life.

France plunged into a third, partial lockdown at the beginning of April, as new infections were surging and hospitals getting close to saturation. The total number of COVID-19 patients in intensive care in France surged past 5,900 this week. Measures include closing schools, a domestic travel ban and shutting most nonessential shops.

An overnight nationwide curfew has been in place since mid-December, and all France's restaurants, bars, gyms, cinemas and museums have been closed since October.

Schools are set to gradually reopen starting April 26. The government is anticipating that other restrictions will start being lifted around mid-May.

Macron was meeting Thursday with officials to get the nation prepared for the gradual reopening. Authorities expects that 20 million people, about 38% of France's adult population, will have received at least one vaccine shot by that time—up from 11 million now.

France has reported the most confirmed coronavirus infections in Europe, more than 5.2 million.

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