World passes ‘tragic milestone’ of 5m Covid-19 cases, says WHO

It registers daily record of 106,000 infections as new hot spots emerge; 13 new local cases here

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Global coronavirus cases crossed the five million mark yesterday, creeping past 5.1 million last evening, just after the World Health Organisation (WHO) registered a daily record number – more than 106,000 – of new Covid-19 cases on Wednesday.

Dr Mike Ryan, head of WHO’s emergencies programme, called it a “tragic milestone”. The pandemic has now claimed over 331,000 lives.

Meanwhile, a 73-year-old Singaporean man died from complications related to Covid-19 infection, making it the 23rd death linked to the outbreak here.

A total of 13 Singaporeans and permanent residents were among the 446 new cases recorded here yesterday. The rise in local cases, which had stayed low for weeks, came amid active screening of nursing home residents and pre-school staff who accounted for seven of these cases.

Four of the new cases are linked to a cluster at Orange Valley Nursing Home. Another four are part of a family cluster linked to a dormitory, while the other two cases are being investigated.

Singapore has stepped up screening of pre-school staff as it plans to gradually lift restrictions in phases after circuit breaker measures end on June 1.

The rest of the world, meanwhile, has been divided on the issue of whether to have lockdowns and how quickly to lift them – decisions, which experts say, are affecting the spread of the virus.

Latin America has seen a surge of cases in recent days, led by Brazil which now accounts for the third-highest number of cases in the world, after the United States and Russia.

Brazil reported 1,779 deaths on Tuesday alone, but far-right President Jair Bolsonaro remained bitterly opposed to lockdowns, saying that they were unnecessary over “a little flu”.

Italy, one of the worst-hit countries in the world with over 227,000 people infected and more than 32,000 deaths, has also started easing its strict lockdown – although it is limiting the number of people who can enter each shop.

But amid the clamour for economies to open up again, experts like Dr Andrea Ammon, director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, has warned that there is a strong prospect of another surge in cases across Europe.

“We should not even dream of letting the guard down before the battle is won,” he told The Straits Times in an interview with British daily The Guardian.

She added that the battle with Covid-19 will be for the long haul. “I don’t think (the coronavirus) will go away quickly. It seems to be very well adapted to humans.”

Likewise, experts in Singapore have also cautioned that there could be a second wave of infections.

Professor Alex Cook of the National University of Singapore’s Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health told The Straits Times that if restrictions on travel, for instance, were lifted, there could even be multiple waves of infections.

Governments everywhere are, therefore, having to strike a fine balance between easing up on restrictions without doing so too rapidly, or putting lives at risk.

Apart from claiming lives, the pandemic has cost millions of people their jobs by putting the brakes on economies.

Figures released by the Labour Department in the US yesterday showed that 2.43 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week. This means 38.6 million Americans have been put out of work since mid-March, when lockdowns began in full force across the country.

Maybank Kim Eng senior economist Chua Hak Bin said the pandemic has hurt lower-income emerging markets and low-wage workers disproportionately.

“Risks of social unrest are high if lockdowns are maintained for long periods,” he said.

Dr Jeremy Lim, co-director of global health at the NUS Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, told ST the new reality is that life will be punctuated by the occasional outbreak, leading to “mini-lockdowns” and quarantines of smaller numbers of people.

“Every individual and business will be at risk. Hence, stronger social protection from loss of livelihoods and unexpected business stoppages needs to be explored,” he said.

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