Sydney's COVID-19 outbreak throws harsh spotlight on Australia vaccine rollout

FILE PHOTO: The Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine is prepared by a healthcare worker in Melbourne

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SYDNEY (Reuters) – Australia's New South Wales state on Friday reported its biggest daily rise in new COVID-19 cases this year, prompting a tighter lockdown in Sydney and a request for additional vaccine doses which was rebuffed by other state leaders.

State premier Gladys Berejiklian characterized the escalating virus outbreak as a "national emergency" and raised the likelihood that stay-home orders for the country's biggest city would be extended beyond the current end-date of July 30.

"There is no doubt that the numbers are not going in the direction we were hoping they would at this stage," Berejiklian said as she announced 136 new cases in the New South Wales.

The state had urged the federal government to divert additional vaccine doses to Sydney, a request Prime Minister Morrison turned down following a national cabinet meeting with all state heads.

Australia boasted another record day for COVID-19 vaccination with almost 200,000 doses delivered in one day. Morrison, who on Thursday apologized for the slow pace of inoculation, said the latest data signaled the country's vaccination rollout had turned a corner.

"We are not going to disrupt the vaccination programme around the rest of the country," Morrison told reporters in Canberra on Friday.

Total infections in Australia's worst outbreak this year have jumped to just over 1,900 since the first case was detected in a Sydney limousine driver transporting

international flight crews in mid-June.

Crucially, at least 53 of the new cases in Sydney were infectious in the community before being diagnosed. Authorities have said that figure needs to be near zero for the to be lifted.

The outbreak of the fast-moving Delta variant was carried to Victoria and South Australia states, forcing authorities to put more than half the country's population in lockdown. That has shut down large sectors of the economy, even as other parts of the world, including Britain and the United States, open up..

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern on Friday suspended for at least eight weeks the so-called "travel bubble" with Australia that allows movement between the two countries without quarantine.

The Trans-Tasman bubble was a rare quarantine-free arrangement in Asia, where countries have kept their borders mostly closed during the pandemic.

Berejiklian said her health officials have advised that the situation in Sydney was a "national emergency," which would typically unlock federal funding and other assistance and would have to be formally declared by the federal government.

There are 137 COVID-19 cases in hospital in New South Wales, with 32 people in intensive care, 14 of whom require ventilation.

Providing some relief, Victoria state officials reported a fall in new daily cases on Friday to 14, adding that 10 of those were in quarantine during their entire infectious period.

Stay-home orders in both Victoria and South Australia are expected to be lifted on July 27.

VACCINE ROLLOUT

With just over 32,500 COVID-19 cases and 916 deaths, Australia has fared much better than many other developed economies, but stop-and-start lockdowns and a sluggish vaccine rollout have frustrated residents.

About 15% of adult Australians have been fully vaccinated, a rate that is well behind many other developed nations, partly after health advice changed over the

use of the AstraZeneca vaccine due to rare cases of blood clots among some recipients.

The government is targeting full vaccination of the adult population by the end of the year.

The vaccine programme could be further complicated after New South Wales health authorities said they may need to push out the interval between doses of Pfizer from three to six weeks, in order to free up more first doses, a stance Morrison backed on Friday afternoon.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt on Friday said the country's drug regulator has approved the use of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine in children aged 12 to 15.

(Reporting by Renju Jose; additional reporting by Swati Pandey and Colin Packham; editing by Richard Pullin and Jane Wardell)