

France closes schools, urges elderly to stay home over coronavirus

March 12 2020

President Emmanuel Macron on Thursday announced schools in France would close indefinitely to curb the spread of the coronavirus, and urged people over 70 and the infirm to stay home.

In an address to the nation on the fight against COVID-19, which has already killed 61 people and infected almost 2,900 in France, Macron made clear it can no longer be business as usual.

Creches, schools and universities would close from Monday "until further notice", he said, describing the novel coronavirus as France's most serious health crisis in a century.

But the president also announced that nationwide local elections scheduled for Sunday will not be postponed.

"We are just at the beginning of this crisis," Macron said.

"In spite of all our efforts to brake it, this virus is continuing to propagate and to accelerate."

Macron asked people older than 70, those who suffer chronic diseases, respiratory troubles, and the handicapped, "to stay at home" in as far as possible.

This is the group of people most at risk of serious consequences from the virus that has swept the world and caused markets to crash.

"They can, of course, leave home to do the shopping, to take some air, but they should limit their contacts (with other people) as much as possible," said the president.

As for the elections, Macron said he had consulted experts who were of the opinion that "there is nothing to prevent the French, even the most vulnerable, from going to the ballot box" as long as everyone observes basic infection-prevention rules, including observing a safe personal distance from others.

Municipal officials have announced a string of protection measures, including providing hand sanitiser at polling stations.

"It is important at this time... to assure the continuity of our democratic life and that of our institutions," said Macron.

- 'Stay at home'-

The president acknowledged the anxiety of small business owners and the tourism and culture industries that form such a large part of the French economy.

In this regard, he said the state would "take charge of the compensation of employees forced to stay at home."

Furthermore, companies can opt to delay, without penalty, the payment of taxes and other public contributions due in March.

Those employers that can, should allow their staff to work from home, the president added.

Public transport will not be interrupted, said the head of state, "because to stop it would be to block everything, including the possibility to

provide health care" where needed.

But those who can limit their use of trains, metros and buses, should do so.

Non-essential medical procedures will be postponed to free up space and personnel needed to care for those in urgent need.

In a rare comment by a eurozone head of state on monetary policy, Macron indicated the European Central Bank should do more to bolster the European economy at this time.

"The ECB has announced its first decisions. Will they be sufficient? I don't think so," he said.

The ECB had launched a flurry of measures to cushion the impact of the virus but surprised observers by leaving interest rates unchanged.

Macron said Europe will have to react "fast, and strongly" to "relaunch" the economy in the wake of the epidemic.

Any steps to close borders, he added, will have to be jointly decided "at the European level".

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