

Spain moves to extend state of emergency as virus deaths soar

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Spain's prime minister said Sunday he would ask parliament to extend a state of emergency until April 11 to try to curb the spread of coronavirus after the country recorded 394 new deaths from the disease.

A nationwide 15-day [state of emergency](#) was first announced on March 14 barring people from leaving home except for essential outings such as buying food or seeking [medical care](#).

Sanchez said his cabinet would on Tuesday approve the request to extend the state of emergency for another 15 days, adding he was confident that the assembly would approve it.

"I know it is a drastic measure...but experts agree that it is an effective measure in the fight against coronavirus," he told a news conference after holding talks via [video conference](#) with the heads of Spain's regional governments.

The announcement comes after Spain reported 394 new deaths caused by the pandemic, raising to 1,720 the official death toll in Europe's worst-hit country after Italy, a 30 percent increase over the previous day.

The number of confirmed cases of the disease rose by 3,646, or 14.6 percent, to 28,572. Sanchez warned the outbreak would continue to expand in the coming days.

"We have yet to receive the impact of the strongest, most damaging wave, which will test our material and moral capacities to the limit, as well as our spirit as a society," he said during a televised address late on Saturday.

'Significant problem'

The rise in infections is bringing the [health care system](#) in this nation of around 46 million people to the brink of collapse.

The hospitals are particularly stretched in the regions of Madrid and Barcelona, which account of half of all officially recorded infections of

COVID-19.

"There will be stress and a problem in some places. The pressure on the system will be high," the [health ministry](#)'s emergencies coordinator, Fernando Simon, said.

"This collapse which is being talked about could happen in some places but it will not be generalised."

Health care workers have for days complained that they are running short of equipment, such as masks.

The pandemic claimed the first life of a health care worker in Spain last week: a 52-year-old nurse in the Basque Country, northeast Spain.

Doctors, nurses and other [health care workers](#) accounted for over 10 percent of all confirmed cases of coronavirus, Simon said.

"This is a significant problem for our health care system," he told journalists.

To ease pressure on hospitals in the Madrid region, soldiers helped move patients to a makeshift field hospital over the weekend set up at a conference centre in the Spanish capital.

The facility will be fitted with 5,500 hospital beds, which would make it the biggest such coronavirus field hospital in Europe.

About 1,300 hospital beds have so far been set up at the facility and officials plan to move over 300 patients there this weekend, the director of the field [hospital](#), Antonio Zapatero, said in an interview with daily newspaper El Mundo.

A photo taken before the first patients arrived showed rows of empty beds covered in white sheets laid out on the concrete floor of the conference centre.

More masks

The Spanish government said Saturday it would distribute another 500,000 masks to healthcare workers, and 800,000 for patients.

It also said it had also bought more than 640,000 [coronavirus](#) tests.

Authorities have called up 52,000 extra workers to help the country's health service as it struggles to contain the virus, including 14,000 retired doctors and nurses.

Around 2,850 soldiers have been mobilised to disinfect airports and ports, and transport patients to less crowded hospitals.

Police said they were stepping up their reinforcing on the restrictions on movement.

Spain's national police force tweeted a video of two officers on horseback chasing a man riding his bicycle in Madrid along with the warning that it would continue to crack down against the "irresponsible minority" that did not follow the rules.

"We know what the stakes are," said the deputy head of the force, Jose Angel Gonzalez. "This week will be crucial."

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