

# Swiss close schools, offer \$10 bn in business aid over virus

March 13 2020

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Switzerland will close its schools in a bid to halt the spread of the new coronavirus, the government said Friday, adding that it would provide billions in aid to hard-hit businesses.

"The situation is difficult, but we have the means to overcome the challenges on the medical and the financial level," Swiss President Simonetta Sommaruga told reporters.

The government listed a range of measures to halt the spread of the virus after the small Alpine country saw its number of positive tests balloon, soaring from around 850 cases registered on Thursday to 1,125 on Friday.

Seven people have died from the virus in Switzerland to date, health authorities said.

Bern said that all the country's schools would be closed until April 4.

But it urged regional authorities to offer systems for watching children whose parents need to work, to avoid having vulnerable grandparents take on the task.

"We need to do everything possible to avoid mixing the generations," Swiss Health Minister Alain Berset told reporters.

The government also decided Friday to ban all public gatherings of more

than 100 people, and said restaurants, bars and clubs could have no more than 50 people on the premises at one time.

It also called on people to avoid public transportation as much as they could, and said those over the age of 65 or suffering from respiratory illnesses should stay away from such transport means all together.

And it said that it would tighten restrictions on the number of people permitted to cross the border from Italy, which has seen more than 1,000 deaths in the outbreak.

## **Tighten borders**

It said that only Swiss citizens, those holding a residence permit, and those needing to travel to Switzerland for "professional reasons" would be permitted to cross from Italy.

The non-European Union member also said it would tighten controls at all of its borders with surrounding countries in the bloc.

And in a tweet, the foreign ministry urged Swiss residents to avoid all "non-urgent travel abroad".

The government also acknowledged the heavy toll the outbreak was taking on the Swiss economy, and said it was prepared to release up to 10 billion Swiss francs (\$10.5 billion, 9.5 billion euros) to help companies and employees to make it through the crisis.

A full eight billion Swiss francs of that amount would be made available to cover costs related to partial unemployment.

And Bern said it would help sporting organisations cover lost income from cancelled and postponed events, with up to 50 million francs.

Before the announcement, several Swiss cantons had already announced Friday that they planned to close their schools, including Ticino, which borders Italy.

The canton had thus far refrained from closing its border posts with Italy, allowing the tens of thousands of Italians who work in Switzerland to continue crossing each day.

The tiny principality of Liechtenstein, Switzerland's neighbour which has registered four cases to date, also announced Friday it would shutter all its schools from next week until the end of April.

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Citation: Swiss close schools, offer \$10 bn in business aid over virus (2020, March 13) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-03-swiss-schools-bn-business-aid.html>

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