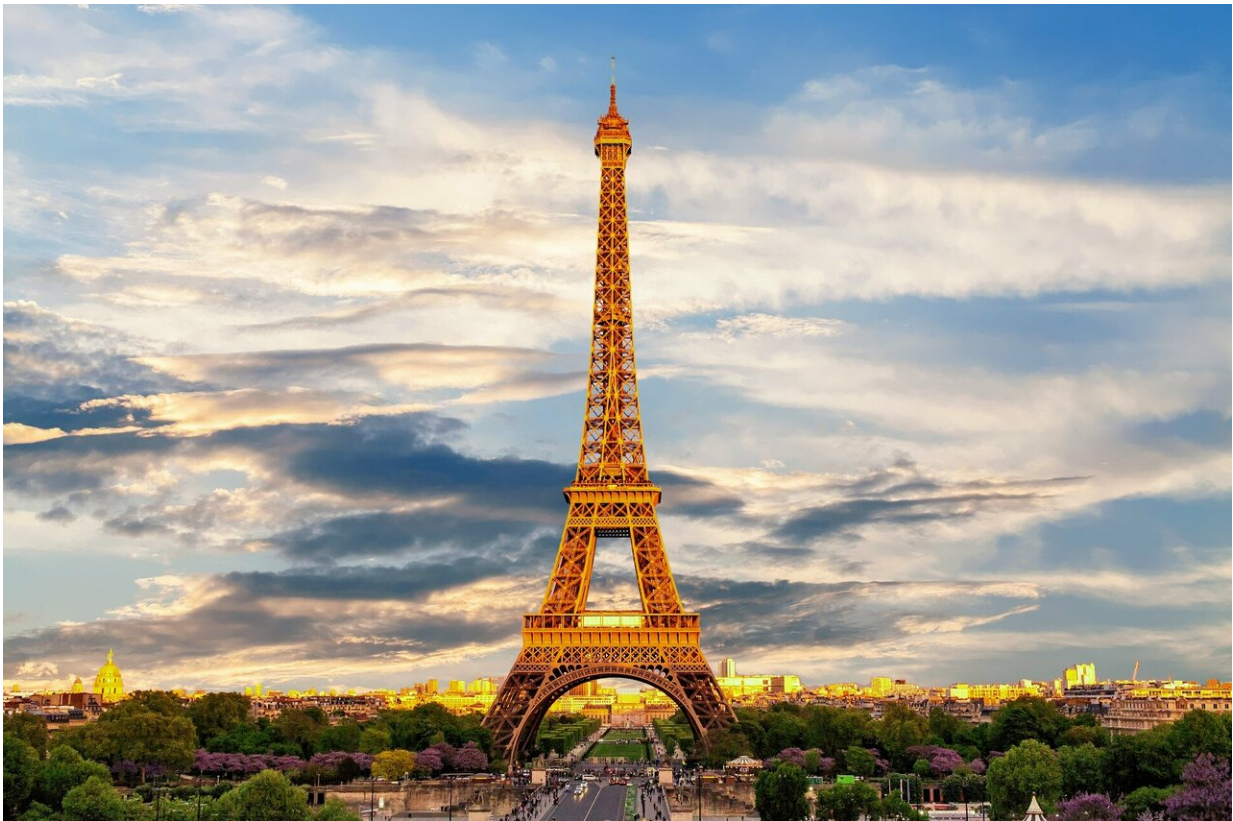


Virus brings France to a standstill, government mulls more measures

March 16 2020



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Many streets in French cities were deserted Monday as schools, cafes and a range of businesses were shuttered on government orders and President Emmanuel Macron weighed additional measures to contain a

fast-escalating coronavirus outbreak.

While many people worked from home to avoid potential germ-spreading encounters or to look after children, others thronged supermarkets to stock up on basic supplies in case of a prolonged lockdown.

France has shuttered non-essential businesses in a bid to curb the spread of the virus that has infected more than 5,000 in the country on the last count and killed 127—a jump of 900 cases and 36 deaths in 24 hours.

More than 400 people are in hospital in a serious condition, raising fears that hospitals might be overrun.

The authorities have also limited long-distance train and plane travel and some domestic public transport. Tour operators announced they had cancelled all trips until the end of March.

But the presidency and the government denied widely circulating rumours of an imminent curfew and home confinement for all residents, a step already taken by neighbours Spain and Italy.

Macron, who maintained a first round of nationwide municipal elections that took place Sunday despite widespread contagion fears, was discussing additional infection-curbing measures Monday with senior government officials.

Polling staff carried out regular disinfection of their stations and policed voters to ensure they stood far enough away from one another? But the election was hit by a record abstention rate.

On Monday, sources close to Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said he had proposed postponing the second round of elections scheduled for

Sunday, which would effectively nullify the first round and require starting from scratch.

The announcement came just hours before Macron was due to give a televised address to the nation at 8:00 pm (1900 GMT) Monday.

The president also held talks Monday with leaders of Europe and the rest of the G7 nations on cross-border anti-virus actions, the presidency said.

An announcement was expected shortly on EU border control measures, it added.

Pizzas placed outside

As Paris closed public parks and gardens Monday, factories came to a halt and restaurants gave away their food stocks, some supermarkets erected face-height screens concocted from sheets of plastic wrap to shield cashiers from coughing or sneezing.

Pharmacies posted signs saying they were out of face masks and sanitising hand gel. Some bus drivers took to protecting themselves from contact with passengers, using tape and plastic wrap to seal off their cabins.

Among the few people out and about on the streets of the capital, several wore disposable gloves and masks or simply wrapped a scarf around their faces.

At one Parisian pizzeria, a sign announced that delivery was still available, but "the pizzas will be placed outside the door" for collection.

Top health official Jerome Salomon on Monday said the situation was "deteriorating very fast", with the number of cases doubling every three

days.

"Every French man and woman must ask themselves this morning: 'What can I do today to divide by three or four the number of people I get in contact with?'" he told France Inter radio. He urged people to "stay at home, it's as simple as that".

Salomon's comments came after TV reports showed large gatherings Sunday at open-air markets and in parks by people enjoying a sunny day out—flouting calls to keep a safe personal distance of at least one metre (3.3 feet) as the best means of braking virus spread.

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