

Treading fine line, France is latest to unveil lockdown exit

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France said on Tuesday that shops, markets and some schools could reopen next month, the latest country to ease coronavirus restrictions as nations tread a fine line between allowing stalled economies to recover while staving off a new contagion.

More than half of humanity is under some sort of lockdown to stem the spread of the deadly pandemic, which has tipped economies toward a bruising global downturn.

Over three million people are now infected worldwide and more than 211,000 have been killed since the virus first emerged in China late last year.

The United States is by far the hardest-hit country, and on Tuesday passed the grim milestone of more than one million recorded infections, with over 57,000 dead.

But some countries are reporting falling infection numbers and, with economies in freefall governments are beginning to chart their way out of the shutdowns.

In France, Prime Minister Edouard Phillipe said would begin to be eased from May 11—some shops and markets could resume business, and primary schools and daycare centres would reopen gradually.

Face masks will be required on [public transport](#), he said, and work-from-home orders will stay in place for several more weeks.

"We must protect the French without immobilising France to the point that it collapses," Philippe said, adding that even a gradual return to normal life was "risky".

Spain also announced a phased plan to emerge from its weeks-long lockdown, saying restrictions would be lifted gradually over the next two months.

France reported a fall in daily deaths on Tuesday and a further decline in intensive care patients, while Spain also said its number of fatalities had

dropped in the past 24 hours.

Meanwhile, Russia will consider a gradual end to quarantine measures from May 12 and Greece will start easing its lockdown from May 4 having "contained the first wave of the virus", Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis said.

And from next week, Italians will be able to exercise outdoors and visit relatives—but only if they wear masks and refrain from hugs and handshakes.

Along with France and Spain, Italy is among the worst affected in Europe, with the three nations each reporting over 23,000 deaths.

But in Germany, which allowed some shops to reopen last week, experts warned against a rush to lift lockdown measures after new data showed a slight uptick in infection rates.

"We all need to take care that we don't end up with more infections," said Lothar Wieler, president of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for [disease control](#).

Experts have warned of a second wave of contagion if restrictions are lifted too hastily, and the World Health Organization has said reinfection may be possible even among recovered patients.

Protests

With the world's economic outlook looking bleak, calls are mounting in some quarters for governments to ease curbs to avoid a disaster in the hardest-hit sectors.

Forecasts warn of the worst global recession in a century, with oil prices

tumbling and travel and tourism hammered.

In Lebanon, anger at a spiralling [economic crisis](#) brought anti-government protesters back to the streets in defiance of a lockdown.

"I came down to raise my voice against hunger, poverty and rising prices," Khaled, 41, told AFP, saying he had lost his job selling motorcycle parts and could no longer support his three children.

The world's poorest were being hardest hit—and the UN's World Food Programme warned that the number of people across East Africa who do not have secure provisions of food could soar from 20 million to up to 43 million.

China faced renewed criticism for its handling of the crisis—US President Donald Trump saying if Beijing had acted properly the virus "wouldn't have spread all over the world".

An editorial in the German press called on China to pay Germany \$165 billion in reparations for economic damage done by the virus, and Trump said the US could take its own action for "a lot more money".

"We haven't determined the final amount yet. It's very substantial," he said.

In response, China's [foreign ministry](#) accused US politicians of "telling barefaced lies".

They have "only one objective: shirk their responsibility for their own poor epidemic prevention and control measures, and divert public attention", said ministry spokesman Geng Shuang.

'Human contact'

Some US states have moved to lift restrictions despite warnings from health experts—but to the delight of some citizens.

"We need human touch, human contact," said 64-year-old Kim Kasetta, as she tucked into breakfast in the US state of Georgia.

But most US states do not yet have sufficient COVID-19 testing to consider relaxing stay-at-home orders, according to experts from Harvard university.

Despite other European countries moving towards reopening schools and shops, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it was too early for the UK to follow suit.

That was in contrast to New Zealand, where people indulged in fast food and coffee shop treats for the first time in five weeks on Tuesday as the country lifted its strict lockdown.

"We see the difference in other countries and I don't envy them, that's for sure," said Wellington resident Cheryl Robertson, who planned to celebrate her newfound freedom with a curry.

In Australia, hundreds of surfers and swimmers rushed back to the waves at Bondi Beach in Sydney, five weeks after police closed the area because of large crowds flouting social distancing rules.

"I've been excited for like a week, I was like: 7:30 right here," Diane Delaurens told AFP, dripping after his early-morning surf.

However, there is not yet a vaccine for the disease and Britain issued a warning of [coronavirus](#)-related syndrome emerging in children—including abdominal pain and inflammation around the heart.

"What I would also stress is that it is rare. Although it is very significant for those children who do get it, the number of cases is small," said Health Secretary Matt Hancock.

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