

Germany relaxes lockdown for playgrounds, churches and zoos

April 30 2020, by Frank Jordans



A woman with a face mask leaves a train at the main station in Muenster, western Germany, Thursday, April 30, 2020. To fight the coronavirus pandemic, Germany ordered social distancing, mandatory face masks when shopping and in public transport. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner)

German authorities agreed Thursday to reopen playgrounds, churches and cultural institutions such as museums and zoos that have been shuttered because of the coronavirus pandemic, but postponed a decision

on whether to relax the rules for restaurants, hotels and kindergartens.

Chancellor Angela Merkel said there would be regional differences because of Germany's federal structure, but the overall goal remained to ensure that the country's health system could cope with the outbreak.

"So far, we have managed to succeed in doing so," she told reporters after a meeting with the governors of Germany's 16 states. "We have all together achieved a lot in recent weeks."

The country of 83 million has recorded almost 162,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 6,467 deaths so far, according to figures compiled by Johns Hopkins University. That is about a quarter the number of deaths reported in Britain and France, even though the three countries have a similar number of confirmed cases.

Over the past week, Germany recorded between 1,000 and 1,500 new cases a day, down from 2,000 the previous week.

The country's success in flattening the curb of infections has sparked calls for an end to the lockdown, particularly from businesses that have been forced to close because of social distancing measures.



People in a shopping gallery wear face masks in Muenster, western Germany, Thursday, April 30, 2020. To fight the coronavirus pandemic, Germany ordered social distancing, mandatory face masks when shopping and in public transport. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner)

Jobless figures released Thursday show unemployment in Germany rose by 308,000 to over 2.6 million over the past month. The jobless rate in April stood at 5.8%, up from 5.1% in March.

Employers avoided far bigger layoffs seen in other countries by taking advantage of Germany's short-work program, which allows companies in distress to receive state funds if they hold onto employees rather than letting them go.

Labor Minister Hubertus Heil said companies registered about 10.1

million employees for short work—more than a fifth of the country's workforce. Restaurants, bars and hotels were particularly hard-hit, with 93% of those employed in the sector now in short work, he said.

Merkel said the federal and state governments wouldn't make a decision on reopening hotels and restaurants at their next meeting on May 6, which will focus on further relaxing the rules for schools, childcare centers and sports facilities.



Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel arrives for a press conference after the video conference with the prime ministers of the German states, in Berlin, Thursday April 30, 2020. (Kay Nietfeld/pool via AP)

"Caution is require, as well as sticking to hygiene measures," she said.

The head of Germany's disease control center earlier Thursday likened the pandemic to a marathon.

"We simply don't know how long it will take for the marathon to end," Lothar Wieler of the Robert Koch Institute said.

Wieler said Germany was currently going through the first wave of the pandemic. "The majority of scientists believe that there will be a second wave and maybe even a third," he added.

Federal and state authorities also agreed Thursday to extend the ban on large sports events, concerts and festivals until at least Aug. 31.

But hospitals will be allowed to resume routine operations that had been ordered put on hold last month, after data showed a sufficient reserve of intensive care unit beds in the country.

Still, like elsewhere, [medical staff](#) in the country are feeling the strain.



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a nurse puts on protective gear at the start of a shift at the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)

"The burden is certainly great as we have to deal with a highly infectious disease every day, and the treatment regime is not clearly defined," said Dr. Daniel Heidenkummer, who oversees the treatment of COVID-19 patients at the InnKlinikum Altoetting, near Germany's border with Austria.

The hospital has treated almost 600 patients with severe illness resulting

from [coronavirus](#) since early March.

Restrictions on visitors mean that staff have to spend more time tending to the emotional welfare of patients, a burden that would normally be borne largely by friends and family, Heidenkummer said.

Merkel acknowledged the sacrifices made by many Germans because of the lockdown. But she warned against venting frustration at health experts who have been providing sometimes contradictory advice to the government, resulting in a zig-zag of decisions in recent months.



An employee wearing a face mask to protect against the spread of the new coronavirus attaches a Mercedes emblem as he works on a Mercedes-Benz S-class car at the Mercedes plant in Sindelfingen, Germany, Thursday, April 30, 2020. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



An employee wearing a face mask to protect against the spread of the new coronavirus works on Mercedes-Benz S-class cars at the Mercedes plant in Sindelfingen, Germany, Thursday, April 30, 2020. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



In this Saturday, April 18, 2020 file photo, a pilot and crew members of South African Airways go through the security check in Frankfurt, Germany. Due to the coronavirus outbreak many flights have been cancelled and some airports have grounded their planes. (AP Photo/Michael Probst, File)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a man walks in front of the European Central Bank in Frankfurt, Germany. The European economy shrank by 3.8% in the first quarter, the most since records began, as business activity was frozen by shutdowns aimed at preventing the spread of the coronavirus. It was the biggest drop since statistics started in 1995 and bigger than the plunge in the midst of the global financial crisis in the first quarter of 2009 after the bankruptcy of U.S. investment bank Lehman Brothers. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)



A sign at a shopping gallery asks visitors to wear face masks in Muenster, western Germany, Thursday, April 30, 2020. To fight the coronavirus pandemic, Germany ordered social distancing, mandatory face masks when shopping and in public transport. Words on the information sign read 'Caution! Access only with a face mask!'. (AP Photo/Martin Meissner)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a nurse assists a COVID-19 patient at one of the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of coronavirus patients. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo medical staff puts on protective gear at the start of a shift at the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



Graffiti depicts US President Trump, right, and China's President Xi Jinping kissing each other with face masks on a wall in the public park Mauerpark in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, April 29, 2020. (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a nurse wears protective gear and masks during a shift at the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a nurse prepares medication for a COVID-19 patient at one of the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a nurse briefs her colleague at a COVID-19 intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo nurses and a doctor talk to a COVID-19 patient at one of the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



The head of the Robert Koch Institute, Lothar H. Wieler, left, and German Health Minister Jens Spahn, right, attend a joint press conference in Berlin, Germany, Friday, April 17, 2020 on the current situation in Germany amid the new coronavirus pandemic. (John MacDougall/Pool Photo via AP)



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2020 photo a nurse puts on protective gear at the start of a shift at the intensive care units of the hospital in Muehldorf am Inn, Germany. The whole hospital was converted for the treatment of corona patients. The new coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms for most people, but for some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness or death. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



Germany Chancellor Angela Merkel speaks during a press conference after the video conference with the prime ministers of the German states, in Berlin, Thursday April 30, 2020. (Kay Nietfeld/pool via AP)

"That's in the nature of the matter," she said, citing her own experience as a scientist before entering politics more than 30 years ago.

"That's why science is so exciting, because you never do the same thing twice," she said, adding that "we politicians are there to draw conclusions."

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