

Swiss announce gradual easing of virus restrictions

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Switzerland announced on Thursday a three-stage easing of the restrictions imposed to suppress the COVID-19 pandemic, with some shops and services allowed to reopen from April 27.

Officials had stopped short of imposing full confinement in emergency measures introduced last month to combat the new coronavirus, which

has killed more than 1,000 people in the Alpine country.

Those restrictions will be gradually eased in three stages: on April 27, May 11 and finally on June 8, the government said.

"We have been able to slow down the infections, the hospitals are not overcrowded, which is good news, and we can now foresee some relaxation," Swiss President Simonetta Sommaruga told a press conference in Bern.

Doctors' surgeries, dentists, creches, hairdressers and massage and beauty salons will be able to reopen on April 27 as long as the safety of employees and their customers can be guaranteed, the government said.

Hospitals will be able to perform all procedures, including non-urgent ones, while DIY stores, garden centres and florists will also be able to open up again.

Mourners outside the immediate family will once more be able to attend funerals, while food shops that also sell other goods will be able to reopen the whole store.

"As a first step, from April 27, the Federal Council decided to relax the restrictions for activities that involve few direct contacts, that do not cause significant flows of people and for which it is easy to set up protection plans," the government said in a statement.

Other shops and schools will be able to return on May 11, if conditions allow.

Finally, vocational schools and universities, museums, zoos and libraries are scheduled to reopen on June 8.

Public health 'top priority'

"The health of the Swiss population remains the top priority, in particular that of the vulnerable," the government statement said.

"This is why flexibility is accompanied by protection plans.

"The Federal Council also wants to minimise economic damage and reduce restrictions on fundamental rights as much as possible."

Around 206,400 tests for the virus have been carried out in Switzerland and Liechtenstein.

Some 26,732 people have tested positive, while 1,017 have died.

The first case was detected in the Ticino region, which borders hard-hit northern Italy, on February 24.

Meanwhile, Geneva's Plainpalais open-air market reopened with just a dozen or so stands on Thursday—but with physical distancing measures in place to keep shoppers and stallholders apart.

"We avoid the market being a place for social gathering," Guillaume Barazzone, from the Geneva city council, told AFP.

"Two metres between each person in line, and then people do not touch the goods since it is the merchant themselves who handle the goods and offer them to the customer."

Market customer Daniel Delfosse said: "People want to go out," but he added: "It's a bit over the top to have 70 metres between each stall."

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