

Madrid region imposes partial lockdown as virus spirals out of control

September 18 2020, by Mathieu Gorse



This handout picture by the Comunidad de Madrid (Madrid regional government) shows Madrid's regional president Isabel Diaz Ayuso giving a press conference to announce partial lockdown measures on nearly one million people to try to slow the spread of the virus

At the epicentre of an explosion of new infections in Spain, the Madrid region on Friday imposed partial lockdown measures on nearly one million people to try to slow the spread of the virus.

Residents of the areas, mainly in densely populated, low-income neighbourhoods in the south of Madrid, will as of Monday only be allowed to leave their zone to go to work, seek medical care or take their children to school.

All bars and restaurants will have to reduce their capacity by 50 percent, the regional government of Madrid said in the statement.

Residents of the areas affected will be allowed to move around freely inside their zone but no one from outside will be allowed in.

The affected areas are home to 858,000 people or 13 percent of the region's population of 6.6 million. The measures will be in force for two weeks.

"We are obliged to take these measures in these specific areas...if we did not do so, we run the risk of it being spread to the whole of Madrid. We have time to avoid it," Madrid regional government chief Isabel Diaz Ayuso, told a news conference.

Gatherings of more than six people will be banned in the entire region, down from ten currently, as part of the news measures, she added.

"Reports indicate that most contagions are occurring in private settings, in personal relationships between families and friends," said Diaz Ayuso, who was infected at the start of the pandemic.

Emergency talks

Spain is currently battling a second wave of COVID-19 and once again, Madrid is the worst-hit region, with a third of all national cases and deaths.

Several low-income districts of southern Madrid have counted more than 1,000 cases per 100,000 inhabitants—around five times the national average, which in itself is the highest in the European Union

Since the central government ended its state of emergency on June 21, lifting all lockdown restrictions, responsibility for public healthcare and managing the pandemic has been left in the hands of Spain's 17 autonomous regions.

Late on Thursday, Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez agreed to meet Diaz Ayuso for emergency talks "to define a common strategy" although the meeting is not due to take place until Monday.

But experts said Madrid's regional government should have learned from the experiences of other regions which reacted quickly following a surge in cases in July.

"Instead of preparing and learning from what happened in places like Aragon and Catalonia, which have coped better with the epidemic, Madrid and other regions didn't put the necessary measures in place," said Salvador Macip, a health sciences expert at Catalonia's Open University.

"We have found ourselves in a situation which is out of control and did not need to be."

'Overwhelmed'

Regional health officials say Madrid's healthcare system is under

growing pressure, with one in five hospital beds occupied by COVID patients.

Santiago Usoz, a medic working at the accident and emergency unit in Madrid's October 12 hospital, said there was a lack of both beds and staff.

"Intensive care units are overwhelmed with COVID patients," he told AFP, adding that his hospital had 35 patients needing intensive care but only 32 beds in the ICU.

"Since the start of September, the admissions curve has been steadily rising... In spring the biggest problem was the lack of material, now it's the lack of human resources."

Regional figures show there are 2,850 people with COVID in hospital of whom 392 are in intensive care.

Figures from the Spanish health ministry indicate that over the past week, 20,987 people have tested positive for the virus in the region and 138 people have died.

Spain has so far suffered more than 30,000 deaths and 625,000 cases of COVID-19, government figures show.

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