

Anger over Italy virus rules as curfews enforced around Europe

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Anger was growing in Italy Monday over harsh new coronavirus restrictions brought in to "save Christmas", while other hard-hit countries enforced curfews in a bid to avoid fresh national lockdowns.

Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's decision to close restaurants and bars from 6:00 pm and shut all theatres, cinemas and gyms for a month

was widely criticised, even as scientists questioned whether it would be enough to stop the virus.

"These restrictions will be the end of us," said Giuseppe Tonon, 70, the owner of a restaurant in Oderzo, a small village in northeastern Italy.

"We're not in a [city centre](#), we're in the provinces. Our customers come in the evening or during the weekend," he told AFP after a photograph of him, slumped in despair at the news, went viral on [social media](#).

Countries across Europe are seeing dramatic spikes in cases, and governments are taking drastic action.

Spain imposed a new national state of emergency and overnight curfews, while France set a daily record of more than 50,000 cases and extended an overnight curfew to cover areas home to around 46 million people.

COVID-19 has now claimed the lives of 1.1 million people and infected more than 43 million globally.

The United States—still the worst-hit country—smashed its own record for new daily cases this weekend, pushing the issue up the agenda in the nation's presidential election campaign.

Challenger Joe Biden accused President Donald Trump's administration of waving "the white flag of defeat" after a senior official conceded the government was not going to control the pandemic.

But the battle was being won elsewhere: Australia's second biggest city Melbourne registered no new cases on Monday, and was set to exit lockdown this week after nearly four months of onerous restrictions.

'The end of us'

Conte told Italy he hoped the unpopular new restrictions, which deal a severe blow to sectors already on their knees after a national lockdown this spring, "will allow us to be more relaxed by Christmas", though he warned "hugging and partying" would still be out of the question.

"Stop! We've brought in a decree to save you!" a cartoon Conte told a suicidal Father Christmas on the Corriere della Sera's front-page.

Restaurant and bar owners were not laughing. The early closing times mean Italy's bustling aperitivo hour is gone, as are dinners out.

Famed Italian conductor Riccardo Muti appealed publicly to the prime minister, saying closing down the arts would also "harm health".

"Defining... theatre and music as 'superfluous', as some elements of the government have, is ignorant, uncultured and insensitive," he said.

Italy, the first European country to be hit hard by the pandemic, on Sunday registered 21,273 new cases.

Regional heads had warned a new decree with strict measures would fuel social tensions, after street clashes in Naples and Rome last week.

The World Health Organization's Italian government adviser Walter Ricciardi said it also may "not be enough" to stop the virus spreading.

'Very difficult year'

Italy was the epicentre of the outbreak earlier in the year, but caseloads are now much higher in Spain and France—both countries crossing the milestone of one million confirmed infections.

Spain's state of emergency will give regions the power to limit movement in and out of their territories and extend curfews.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said he wanted "at any price" to avoid a second national lockdown, adding: "The more we stay home the more protected we and others will be."

Across the other side of the world, Melbourne's five million residents finally got the news they had been waiting for, with lockdown restrictions being lifted this week.

The city's residents have been under far tighter restrictions than anywhere else in the country, but with new cases falling dramatically, the state's politicians had been under pressure to lift the measures.

"This has been a very difficult year. And Victorians have given a lot and I'm proud of every single one of them," said Victoria state Premier Daniel Andrews.

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