

'Difficult winter': Europe divided on lockdowns; cases soar

October 29 2020, by Lorne Cook, Samuel Petrequin and Frank Jordans



A man wearing a face mask walks over a bridge with the buildings of the banking district in background in Frankfurt, Germany, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

The World Health Organization's Europe director expressed deep

concern on Thursday after the region again recorded the highest-ever weekly incidence of cases, and German Chancellor Angela Merkel warned of a "difficult winter" as residents in France braced for life under a new month-long lockdown and Spain's parliament voted to extend a state of emergency.

During a meeting with European health ministers, WHO's European regional director Dr. Hans Kluge said "hospitalizations have risen to levels unseen since the spring" and deaths have sharply risen by more than 30%. He noted that Europe has now reported more than 10 million coronavirus cases and "is at the epicenter of this pandemic once again."

"At the risk of sounding alarmist, I must express our very real concern," Kluge said.

After a virtual EU summit, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the virus surge "is very serious. Numbers of cases are rising. Numbers of hospitalizations are rising. Numbers of death are rising, not as fast fortunately... but the spread will overwhelm our health care systems if we do not act urgently."

She said that Brussels will make 220 million euros (\$257 million) available to help EU countries organize the cross-border transfer of infected patients. During the meeting, the leaders grappled with how best to coordinate their virus testing, tracing and vaccine plans, even as their countries differ over whether to impose full or partial lockdowns.



Ambulance crew work as a patient arrives at the CHR Citadelle hospital in Liege, Belgium, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. Belgium has announced restrictive measures across the country in an effort to curb the fast-rising tide of COVID-19, coronavirus cases. (AP Photo/Valentin Bianchi)

Speaking to Germany's parliament earlier Thursday, Merkel said her country faces "a dramatic situation at the beginning of the cold season."

Germany's disease control agency said local authorities reported 16,774 new positive tests for COVID-19 in the past day, pushing the country's total close to the half million-mark. The death toll stood at 10,272.

"The winter will be difficult, four long, difficult months. But it will end," Merkel told lawmakers.

Under new restrictions going into effect Monday, German restaurants, bars, sports and cultural venues will be shut for four weeks. Gatherings are limited to 10 people from a maximum of two households and all non-essential journeys will be discouraged. Schools, kindergartens, stores and places of worship will remain open—albeit with safety precautions.



Actors and performers protest against coronavirus restrictions as part of a week of protests in Parliament Square in London, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. The British government is under pressure to develop a national strategy to combat the resurgence of the COVID-19 pandemic and "rescue Christmas" as scientists warn that the number of people hospitalized with the disease could almost triple by the end of next month unless something more is done now. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

Merkel said authorities had no choice but to drastically reduce social contacts as three-quarters of infections in Germany now are no longer traceable.

"If we wait until the ICUs are full, then it will be too late," she said.

Opposition leader Alexander Gauland of the far-right Alternative for Germany party accused Merkel's government of "wartime propaganda" and likened the pandemic to traffic, arguing that society accepts a certain number of car deaths each year but doesn't ban driving.

Berlin announced a new 10 billion-euro (\$11.7 billion) fund for businesses affected by the additional measures.

Europe's biggest economy has been able to mobilize massive financial aid to dampen the impact of the pandemic. Still, the measures have sparked anger, particularly from restaurant owners who had set up heated outdoor seating areas and made other preparations to follow health regulations only to be told they aren't allowed to serve customers for a month.



European Council President Charles Michel arrives for an EU Summit video conference at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. EU leaders hold a video conference to address the need to strengthen the collective effort to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. They also discussed quarantine regulations, cross-border contact tracing, and temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU as well as the EU vaccine strategy. (Olivier Hoslet, Pool via AP)

While France announced a second, full nationwide lockdown Wednesday, many countries have hesitated to take such drastic measures for the second time in a year, wary of the economic pain they cause.

Some French doctors expressed relief and business owners despaired as the country prepared to shut down again for a month. The new lockdown is gentler than what France saw in the spring, but still a shock to

restaurants and other non-essential businesses ordered to close their doors.

The British government has resisted calls for a national lockdown, despite having significantly higher 14-day infection rates than Germany and a virus death toll four times larger.

Britain's Communities Secretary, Robert Jenrick, said that the virus is "very concentrated in some places," and that it's best to target restrictions to those areas with the worst outbreaks.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel adjusts her face mask as she arrives for a speech about German government's policies to combat the spread of the coronavirus and COVID-19 disease at the parliament Bundestag, in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. (Photo/Markus Schreiber)

In Spain, authorities have been imposing incremental restrictions on free movement, nightlife and social gatherings, but they have refrained from a strict stay-at-home order like the one that curbed the first wave of infections but scarred the economy.

But with officials predicting that current levels of infection will produce a serious shortage of intensive care beds in November, some experts are already calling for a full lockdown.

Spanish regions like Catalonia and La Rioja have already closed bars and restaurants, while most of the rest have imposed curfews limiting nightlife. But extra subsidies have not accompanied the restrictions, prompting loud protests in Barcelona this week by business owners who banged pots, waved cocktail shakers and chanted "We want to work!"

Spain's parliament, meanwhile, voted by a majority to keep the country's newly declared state of emergency in place until May to try to rein in the resurging pandemic, despite objections by some opposition parties. A vote to lift the measure could be held in March should things improve.



German Chancellor Angela Merkel delivers a speech about German government's policies to combat the spread of the coronavirus and COVID-19 disease at the parliament Bundestag, in Berlin, Germany, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. (Photo/Markus Schreiber)



European Council President Charles Michel, right, and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen put on their protective face mask at the end of a media conference after an EU summit in video conference format at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. EU leaders held a video conference to address the need to strengthen the collective effort to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. (Olivier Hoslet, Pool via AP)



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, left, and European Council President Charles Michel participate in a media conference after an EU summit in video conference format at the European Council building in Brussels, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. EU leaders held a video conference to address the need to strengthen the collective effort to fight the COVID-19 pandemic. They also discussed quarantine regulations, cross-border contact tracing, and temporary restrictions on non-essential travel into the EU as well as the EU vaccine strategy. (Olivier Hoslet, Pool via AP)



People wearing face masks walk down a street in Saint Jean de Luz, southwestern France, Wednesday, Oct.28, 2020. France is bracing for a potential new lockdown as the president prepares a televised address Wednesday aimed at stopping a fast-rising tide of virus patients filling French hospitals and a growing daily death toll. French markets opened lower on expectations that President Emmanuel Macron will announce some kind of lockdown Wednesday.(AP Photo/Bob Edme)



A man wearing a mask walks in the street in the center of Lyon, central France, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. France is bracing for a potential new lockdown as the president prepares a televised address Wednesday aimed at stopping a fast-rising tide of virus patients filling French hospitals and a growing daily death toll. French markets opened lower on expectations that President Emmanuel Macron will announce some kind of lockdown Wednesday. (AP Photo/Laurent Cipriani)



Signs in the window of the hospital Victor Provo read "Covid crisis, all masked" in Roubaix, northern France, Wednesday, Oct. 28, 2020. France is bracing for a potential new lockdown as the president prepares a televised address Wednesday aimed at stopping a fast-rising tide of virus patients filling French hospitals and a growing daily death toll. French markets opened lower on expectations that President Emmanuel Macron will announce some kind of lockdown Wednesday. (AP Photo/Michel Spingler)



Women walk past a dummy wearing a face mask, in central Athens, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. Greece is seeing a record-breaking jump in the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases for the second consecutive day, with 1,547 new cases announced Wednesday, Oct 28, and 10 new deaths. (AP Photo/Petros Giannakouris)



Health workers protest in front of the Palace of the Generalitat, the headquarter of the Government of Catalonia, during a protest against their working conditions in Barcelona, Spain, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. As more of Spain's regions apply border transit restrictions, the government is seeking parliamentary approval to extend the country's newly declared state of emergency to rein in the resurging coronavirus pandemic until May, a proposal that is rejected by some opposition parties. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)



A large sign to thank people for coming to London's West End and to stay safe by observing social distancing to help stop the spread of the coronavirus in London, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. Around 100,000 people are catching the coronavirus every day in England, according to the latest Imperial College London study. (AP Photo/Alastair Grant)



Dancers and theaters workers hold banners reading in Italian "don't kill art" as they stage a protest against the government restriction measures to curb the spread of COVID-19, closing gyms, cinemas and movie theaters, in Rome, Thursday, Oct. 29, 2020. (AP Photo/Andrew Medichini)

Spain has officially recorded more than 1.1 million COVID-19 cases, although authorities say the true figure could be at least three times higher. Its virus death toll is at least 35,000.

Russia, meanwhile, said that it has no plans to impose a nationwide lockdown.

"Despite a difficult epidemiological situation, right now we're much better prepared for working during an epidemic," Russian President

Vladimir Putin said. Russia has recorded more than 1.5 million confirmed coronavirus cases, the highest number in Europe and the fourth largest tally worldwide.

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