

France braces for wider COVID restrictions

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France was preparing Thursday for tighter coronavirus restrictions in several major cities, two days after a maximum alert protocol went into force in Paris that included bar closures.

The number of daily coronavirus infections came in at 18,746 in France on Wednesday, health authorities reported, a record since widespread

testing began.

The rate of positive test results rose to 9.1 percent from around 4.5 percent a month ago.

"The virus has been spreading faster in recent weeks," President Emmanuel Macron said late Wednesday.

"In places where it is spreading too fast, especially where it is spreading among the elderly who are most at risk, and where there are more and more intensive care beds being occupied, we must proceed to more restrictions," he said on French TV.

He said new measures would be similar to protocols put in place in and around the capital, as well as the region around Marseille in the south.

"We are not in a normal situation, and we won't be for several months," Macron said.

Health Minister Olivier Veran is set to hold a news briefing on the virus situation later Thursday.

Last week, Veran singled out five large cities—Lille, Lyon, Grenoble, Saint-Etienne and Toulouse—as possibly requiring more restrictions, saying their health situations were "very worrying".

Intensive care climbing

On Thursday, the ARS regional health authority for the Paris region told hospitals to put themselves on emergency footing, mobilising extra doctors and postponing some surgical operations as coronavirus cases climb.

"It means that we're going to have a huge wave of cases and we need to throw all our forces into the battle," agency chief Aurelien Rousseau told AFP.

"The pressure is rising every day," he warned.

As of Wednesday, 455 intensive care beds in Paris and its suburbs were occupied by COVID patients, more than 40 percent of the total, a rate officials expect to climb rapidly in coming weeks.

Le Canard Enchaîné newspaper, citing a confidential report to Macron's office, said intensive care cases in Paris could surge to 85 percent by mid-November.

That could prompt authorities to impose even tougher restrictions for the capital, which already requires people to wear face masks in all public spaces.

Since Tuesday, bars and cafes have been shuttered and new crowd limits imposed to slow the spread of the virus, just over a week after new restrictions were imposed on Marseille and the overseas department of Guadeloupe.

Nationwide, the number of coronavirus patients in hospital care rose to 7,514 across France on Wednesday from 7,377 a day earlier, with 1,406 in intensive care, out of the some 5,000 intensive care beds nationwide.

The same day, authorities reported 80 new coronavirus deaths in 24 hours, taking the total number in France to 32,445.

The government has said it will do everything possible to avoid another lockdown like last spring, when schools and non-essential businesses were shut for two months as hospitals were overwhelmed with virus

cases.

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