

France extends COVID curfew to cover 46 million people

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France on Thursday extended the anti-COVID curfew in place in nine cities to large parts of the country, leaving 46 million forced to stay indoors at night.

Paris and eight other French cities were placed under curfew from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am last weekend as daily new infections hit record levels and as the national caseload closed in on one million.

At midnight on Friday (2200 GMT) the restrictions will be extended to 38 other departments and French Polynesia for six weeks, taking the numbers affected to around two-thirds of the French population, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced.

"The health situation of our country continues to deteriorate," Castex said. He added that "the coming weeks will be hard and our hospitals will be sorely tested."

After a first wave in the spring which left over 30,000 dead, France, like several European countries, is grappling with a second bout of coronavirus infections.

The number of confirmed cases per 100,000 inhabitants has increased by 40 percent in a week to 251 per 100,000, Castex said.

French health authorities published a new day record of 41,622 fresh cases—up 15,000 on Wednesday—for a national total caseload to date of 999,043.

The past 24 hours have seen 165 virus-related deaths, latest data showed, for a running total of 34,210.

Positive tests are meanwhile on the rise, hitting 14.3 percent from 13.7 on Wednesday. That compares with just 4.5 percent in early September.

The number of patients in intensive care is at its highest level since May.

Tougher measures may follow

Over the past week, 1,627 COVID-19 patients have been admitted for a current total of 2,310—a rise of 71 on Wednesday and more than ten percent of overall hospital admissions nationally over that period.

Castex warned that if France does "not succeed collectively in halting the epidemic, we will be faced with a dramatic situation and will have to envisage much tougher measures."

He refused to be drawn on whether that could mean the whole country being placed under a second lockdown in the run-up to the Christmas holidays.

The government also unveiled a new COVID-tracing app to replace a first app which proved a flop that was downloaded by a mere 2.6 million people.

The nearly-week-old curfew in Paris, Lyon, Marseille and other big cities has forced bars, restaurants, theatres and other venues that had already suffered huge losses during an earlier two-month lockdown to close early, leaving many fighting for survival.

The latest restrictions have been widely respected. Castex said police had issued 4,777 fines.

Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot on Thursday announced an 85-million-euro package of aid for theatres, concert halls and other live entertainment venues, along with a further 30 million euros for cinemas.

"Everyone needs culture, maybe even more so during this crisis which has affected our ability to gather together," she said.

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