

Italy's Lombardy, Campania prepare virus curfews as cases jump

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Italy's northern Lombardy region prepared Tuesday to impose a night-time curfew for three weeks, the most restrictive anti-coronavirus measure the country has seen since it emerged from a national lockdown

in mid-May.

In the southern region of Campania, regional head Vincenzo De Luca said a curfew would begin this weekend, but gave no details immediately on how it would work or how long it would last.

Lombardy, the region at the heart of Europe's first outbreak and hit hardest by a pandemic that has already claimed more than 36,000 lives in Italy, is struggling to contain a new surge in cases.

Lombardy's overnight 11 pm to 5 am curfew is expected to begin on Thursday night and last to November 13.

Health Minister Roberto Speranza gave his consent late Monday to Lombardy's more restrictive measures proposed by the regional government, after an hours-long meeting.

"It's an appropriate and symbolically important initiative that shouldn't have particularly serious economic consequences," Regional President Attilio Fontana said Tuesday's La Repubblica newspaper.

Milan's mayor, Beppe Sala, said on Facebook regional health authorities had warned that the 113 people currently in intensive care in Lombardy would rise to nearly 600 people by the end of the week, overwhelming the system, if new measures were not imposed.

Sharp rise

More than 10,000 new COVID-19 infections were recorded in Italy on Friday for the first time ever, with Lombardy the worst hit, as it was in the beginning of the health crisis in February.

The region, which includes Italy's financial hub of Milan, reported 1,687

new cases on Monday, with Campania coming a close second with 1,593.

"We're getting ready for a curfew," De Luca said. "At 11 pm on Friday everything will close in Campania".

In the past week, from October 12-19, the number of those hospitalised with COVID-19 in Lombardy has jumped 145 percent.

Virologist Fabrizio Pregliasco, a member of a scientific committee advising the region, told Radio Popolare the curfew was "symbolically important" but did not go far enough.

"We had asked for a full closure or at least a substantial reduction (of services) at key moments like dinner".

One newspaper stand owner in Milan said new infections were to be expected, given crowds on public transport.

"There's no more social distancing. If you go into the subway or the tram it's chaos," said Alessandro Sigolo, 57.

Francesco Bini, head of the pulmonology department at Milan's Garbagnate Hospital, said Lombardy's population density and business activity was exacerbating transmission of the virus.

"Lombardy is a very dynamic region, very active, with a large population, concentrated particularly in the cities," Bini told AFP.

"Doing a lot of things, seeing a lot of people, having a lot of work and meeting activities facilitates the spread of the virus."

Some research has suggested the industrial region's more polluted air

also plays a role in the virus' spread.

A study carried out in February and March by the Italian Society of Environmental Medicine (SIMA) found that regions with less fine-particulate pollution reported an average of 0.03 infections per 1,000 inhabitants, compared with 0.26 in the worst polluted regions.

Restricted lockdowns

On Saturday, Lombardy ordered its bars to shut at midnight and banned the consumption of food and drink in public areas outside.

Italy has tightened restrictions recently to try to head off the second wave of infections, banning amateur contact sports, such as football, ending school trips and restricting bars and restaurants to table service after 6 pm.

Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte has said he does not envision another country-wide lockdown, which would further sap Italy's struggling economy—but has said he would not rule out limited ones.

Lombardy's curfew is expected only to allow people to leave their home for reasons of health, work or necessity.

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