

Spain regions seal off perimeter to avoid new lockdown

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One by one, Spain's regions have announced regional border closures in the hope of avoiding a new lockdown like in France, but the move may not be enough.

On Sunday, the government unveiled a state of emergency to give

regional authorities the tools to impose curfews and close their borders to anyone moving without just cause.

Most of the country's 17 regions, including Madrid, Catalonia and Andalusia, have taken advantage of the measure to impose a so-called perimetral or inter-regional lockdown affecting three-quarters of Spain's 47 million citizens.

In some areas, the perimetral closures—banning people from entering and exiting except for essential reasons—have been applied at a municipal level, such as in the Basque Country and in the cities of Seville and Granada.

Although the government can impose an emergency for up to a fortnight, in this case until November 9, it needs parliamentary approval to extend it, with lawmakers on Thursday voting in favour of a six-month extension.

Unlike the rest of the regions, Madrid's combative rightwing administration has refused to impose a two-week perimetral lockdown, saying it would only enforce such a move during the two upcoming long weekends.

"It is the final effort to try to avoid a stay-at-home lockdown. If it doesn't properly stop cases rising, they will need to take stricter measures," said Daniel Lopez Codina, a biophysicist from Catalonia's Polytechnic University.

Fernando Simon, the health ministry's emergencies coordinator, said it would take at least "seven, eight days" before the new measures show any effect.

The lockdown taboo

Despite the many restrictions imposed in Spain since July, cases have spiralled with the health ministry on Thursday reporting 23,580 new confirmed cases—the largest one-day jump of the second wave of the pandemic.

"It's very worrying. Winter is coming... and we're in a situation of high risk," Health Minister Salvador Illa told parliament ahead of the vote on extending the state of emergency, which passed by 194 votes within the 350-seat chamber.

The decree does not envisage a new stay-at-home order like in March.

Spain closed its borders with France and Portugal in mid-March, imposing one of the strictest lockdowns in the world when, for more than six weeks, people weren't even allowed out for a daily walk or to exercise.

The memory has left the general public traumatised.

"The confinement in Spain was particularly harsh... which makes things even more complicated—when we think about lockdown, it raises images of not being able to for a walk," said Fernando Rodríguez Artalejo, an epidemiologist at Madrid's Autonomous University.

A perimetral confinement, he said, would be "very difficult to apply in an effective way and does not reduce the problem within the sealed-off area".

More aggressive steps?

But it was "difficult to predict", he added, saying Catalonia's closure of bars and restaurants for two weeks didn't slow the soaring rate of

infections.

As well as the perimetral closure, the region will also impose extra restrictions at the weekend, when residents won't be able to leave their town or city and all cultural and leisure activities will be suspended.

By contrast, Madrid, which had imposed lighter restrictions, seemed to have stabilised infections following a period of several weeks when residents of the capital and eight nearby towns were banned from leaving the city limits.

Spain, the first EU member state to hit one million virus cases, since joined by France, has seen some 35,000 virus deaths to date.

For Ildefonso Hernandez, an epidemiologist at the Alicante's Miguel Hernandez University, there was also a psychological element at play, with people curbing their own interactions.

In Madrid, the epicentre during the first wave of the pandemic, the population voluntarily "reduced their levels of social interaction" even before the restrictions were put in place.

Now, with more regions announcing stricter measures "it could have the same effect of increasing the perception of risk, meaning people take their own steps", he said.

"But if the incidence continues rising at this rate, we will certainly end up having to take more aggressive steps."

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