

Bulgaria closes restaurants, schools to fight virus

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Bulgaria's government announced Wednesday a return to tougher restrictions, closing restaurants and schools in the face of a surge in infections and deaths as the country endures a second wave of

coronavirus.

"New anti-epidemic measures are coming into force from November 27 until December 21," Health Minister Kostadin Angelov told a news conference after a government meeting early Wednesday.

Cafes and restaurants had remained open even as infection and death rates peaked over the past two weeks, but they will now close along with casinos, fitness studios and shopping centres.

Universities and schools will switch fully to distance learning, and kindergartens will close.

Theatres will be allowed to operate at 30 percent capacity, while restaurants will be allowed to sell takeaway meals only.

Churches and other places of worship will however stay open, and unlike during Bulgaria's tough lockdown in the spring, the government will not shut public parks and gardens or limit travel.

"We are not talking about confinement at home here, the aim is to limit the rate of infections and deaths," coronavirus taskforce chief Ventsislav Mutafchiyski said, adding that the government hoped the new measures would show results after two to three weeks.

"This will allow more people to remain healthy until the vaccines come," he added.

Bulgaria's health system has been overwhelmed in recent weeks by a spiralling caseload while hospitals are severely understaffed.

More than 2,000 doctors and nurses are sick out of a total of fewer than 30,000 doctors and about 30,000 nurses.

The nurses' association has long insisted that the ratio of nurses to doctors should be two to one, and the conservative government of embattled Prime Minister Boyko Borisov has long been criticised for the shortage.

Several cases of patients dying after having to wait for hours outside hospitals for admission have sparked renewed anger against the government.

Earlier this year he faced months of street protests where thousands pressed for his resignation.

Some 300 protesters gathered outside the government headquarters on Wednesday morning to protest against the restrictions, clashing briefly with police.

Business groups meanwhile have demanded financial aid for companies, warning that new closures would lead to bankruptcies.

Over the past seven days, Bulgarian authorities reported 813 coronavirus-related deaths, with the two highest daily totals since the beginning of the pandemic reported on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The country of 6.9 million is therefore currently among the worst-affected EU countries per capita, with 11.7 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants over the past week.

While the number of new cases has fallen slightly, down to 22,750 over the past week from 23,232 in the preceding seven days, the number of deaths has risen by 44.7 percent.

A total of 3,226 people have died after contracting COVID-19 since the start of the pandemic.

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