

France to ease lockdown as world ramps up vaccine preparations

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France on Tuesday was set to become the latest country to ease coronavirus restrictions in the run-up to Christmas, as Russia joined in a flurry of encouraging announcements about possible vaccines.

In an evening television address, French President Emmanuel Macron

was also expected to announce a strategy for procuring vaccines as world governments scramble to put together a complex and lengthy vaccination program.

"We will see a slight relaxing of the lockdown," Prime Minister Jean Castex told leaders of Macron's LREM party hours before the president's primetime appearance, participants told AFP.

Hopes over Covid-19 vaccines have given a boost to virus-weary citizens across the globe in recent days, as well as pushing up stock markets.

The Dow surged past 30,000 points for the first time ever Tuesday as receding US political uncertainty and hopes for virus vaccines offset worries over spiking Covid-19 cases.

Near 1630 GMT, the Dow Jones Industrial Average was up 1.4 percent to 30,000.08.

Care homes first in line

But the disease remains rampant and world leaders are urging people to be patient.

In Brussels, the EU announced it was concluding a sixth contract to reserve doses—this time for up to 160 million from US giant Moderna.

"Every member state will receive it at the same time on a pro rata basis," European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen said.

Austria said it would acquire more than 16 million doses of the vaccine through the EU and could start a vaccination campaign in January.

The government in Spain, one of the worst hit countries in Europe, also

said vaccinations could start in January and care home residents would have priority, followed by medical workers.

Even once a vaccine becomes available, any return to normality for a [global economy](#) ravaged by the pandemic seems a long way off.

The boss of Australia's Qantas airline, Alan Joyce, on Tuesday said proof of vaccination will likely become the only way people will be allowed to fly.

Aviation has been particularly hard-hit, with the global industry body IATA estimating that airline revenue this year will plunge 60 percent.

Easing rules for Christmas

Despite greater vaccine optimism, the world is still engulfed in the unprecedented health crisis which has infected almost 58.9 million people and left nearly 1.4 million dead since the virus emerged in China late last year.

But an easing in infection rates in parts of Europe—still the worst-affected region in the world—has led some countries to start announcing a cautious easing of restrictions.

Germany's 16 states have also agreed to slightly loosen limits on social contact over Christmas, according to a draft deal seen by AFP.

State leaders agreed to cap gatherings to 10 people over the December 23 to January 1 holiday—double the limit for the rest of December.

The measures mark a compromise on the politically charged issue for Europe's largest economy, where some less-affected regions had called for lighter restrictions.

German business confidence fell for the second month in a row after five months of increases, according to a closely-watched survey.

The Ifo institute's monthly barometer slid to 90.7 points from 92.5 points in October.

"The second wave of [coronavirus](#) has interrupted Germany's economic recovery," Ifo president Clemens Fuest said in a statement.

Sputnik V results

Hopes for an end to the pandemic received a further boost on Tuesday when the developers of the Sputnik V coronavirus vaccine said it had proved 95 percent effective in a second interim analysis of clinical trial data.

They said it can be stored at between two and eight degrees Celsius (between 35.6 and 46.4 degrees Fahrenheit), instead of the temperatures below freezing required for some other vaccines.

They did not specify the number of cases used to make the calculation, however.

Western experts have in the past expressed concern over Russia's [vaccine](#), fearing that its development could be rushed.

There are now several possible vaccines internationally that have undergone or are undergoing clinical trials with some already seeking US and EU approval for emergency use—Candidates by Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca/Oxford University are leading the pack.

Thanksgiving warning

But before any of these possible vaccines become widely available, governments are warning of the contagion risk from the upcoming holidays.

The United States—by far the worst-hit nation—celebrates Thanksgiving on Thursday, and many Americans plan to spend the holiday with extended family despite official warnings.

Nearly 258,000 people have died nationwide and the caseload is edging towards 12.4 million, according to Johns Hopkins University.

Stopping short of issuing an outright ban, the US government's health protection agency has for the first time called on Americans not to travel for the annual holiday, which sees families get together over turkey, yams and cranberry sauce.

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