Hungary reintroduces state of emergency as virus surges

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Hungary will introduce a state of emergency and impose a nighttime curfew from midnight Tuesday to combat a coronavirus surge that threatens to test hospital capacity, said Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

"The time has come to take new steps so that we can protect hospitals'

ability to function, and also protect the lives of the elderly," Orban said in a video posted on his Facebook page.

A so-called "special legal order"—a state of emergency that allows for government rule by decree—will come into force by midnight Tuesday, he added.

"We have to put aside political debates, fast action and measures brought in time are needed," Orban said, citing a risk that hospitals could reach capacity by mid-December.

Parliament will be asked to extend the state of emergency by 90 days, while a curfew will also be in place between midnight and 05:00 from Wednesday, said Orban.

Other measures taken Tuesday include a third-seat-only rule and mandatory mask-wearing for patrons at sports, entertainment and event venues, with stiff fines and potential closure of locations for non-compliance.

Hungary's cases in recent weeks have surged well past the levels recorded in the spring, with more Hungarians dying in October than in the previous four months put together.

On Tuesday, Hungary reported a record daily 84 new deaths due to COVID-19, bringing the country's overall death toll to 1,973, while the number of coronavirus patients in hospitals reached 4,767.

Seven-day rolling average data from the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) show that by Tuesday Hungary had the third-highest COVID-19 death rate per million in the bloc—behind the Czech Republic and Belgium.

In March Orban imposed a relatively swift lockdown compared to many European countries, a move that helped Hungary keep the number of deaths and infection cases low.

A state of emergency with no time limit was also introduced then, sparking widespread fears of an authoritarian power grab, but the legislation was revoked by June and restrictions eased.

Opposition parties nevertheless accused Orban of abusing the rule-by-decree period to strip opposition-run municipalities of revenue and powers.

During the second wave of the virus, apart from closing the country's borders, Orban has held out against growing calls for tougher restrictions, with schools remaining open, and crowds allowed into football stadiums.

"People want Hungary to continue to function, the economy as well as lives must be protected," he said in September.

Last week the Hungarian Medical Chamber warned Orban to take more action to prevent a "humanitarian and health catastrophe".

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