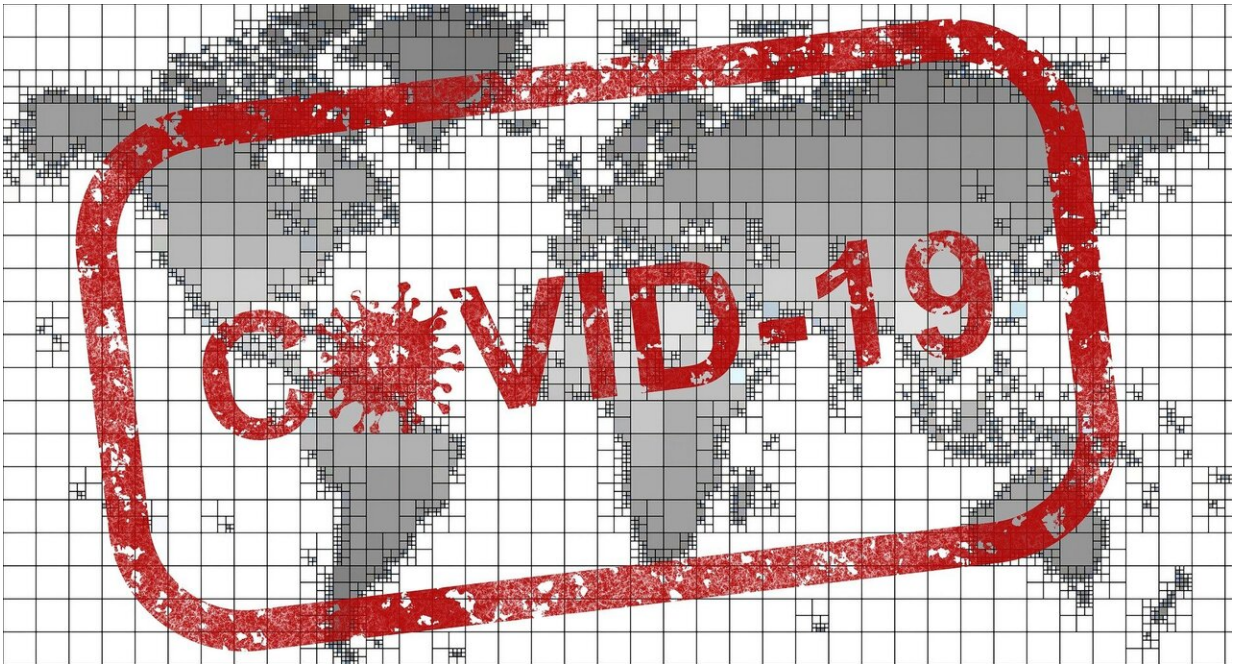


France braces for new Covid curbs but set to avoid lockdown

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The French government is expected Thursday to announce new restrictions to stave off a rise in coronavirus cases but unlike some of its neighbours a full lockdown appears off the agenda for now.

Among the measures floated to try to avert a much-feared third wave of infections include expanding a 6:00 pm curfew in place in parts of the

east to the whole country.

Most of France is still subject to an 8:00 pm curfew imposed in mid-December when a second national lockdown was lifted.

Bringing it forward by two hours would stall the "apero effect", said the leader of President Emmanuel Macron's Republic on the Move party, Stanislas Guerini, referring to the French tradition of meeting up for a pre-dinner aperitif.

France on Wednesday recorded around 23,000 new cases of COVID-19, around half the number detected in Britain on the same day but still far above the 5,000 figure the government had been aiming for by mid-December.

France is warily eyeing the spread across its territory of a new variant of the virus discovered in Britain, which is believed to be highly contagious.

On Thursday, Health Minister Olivier Veran announced plans for mass testing of schoolchildren and teachers following preliminary findings that the new variant spreads more easily among children than previous strains.

"We have established a protocol that aims to test up to a million children and teachers per month," he said, adding that children as young as six could be tested.

Veran said that, unlike Britain, France had no plans to close schools "at this stage" but said the government might reconsider if the share of infections caused by the mutated strain grew.

On Tuesday, he told a Senate commission that the new variant accounted for about 1 percent of infections.

Speculation had been swirling that France was preparing to follow the example of Austria, Britain, Israel and Portugal among other countries in imposing a third nationwide lockdown.

But several government sources told AFP there were no such plans afoot for now.

'People need to be patient'

The president of the scientific council set up to advise the government on the pandemic, Jean-Francois Delfraissy, said France was "in a sort of race" to get the most vulnerable citizens vaccinated before the new variant made further inroads.

After an excruciatingly slow start to the vaccination drive in late December, for which Macron's government drew widespread condemnation, the pace of inoculations has picked up.

So far 247,000 people have received the first jab, a number set to rise sharply in the coming days as the vaccines are rolled out to all people aged over 75 starting on Monday.

Until now, the campaign was focused on people in care homes as well as healthworkers, firefighters and domestic workers aged over 50.

The government had rejected accusations of being a vaccine laggard, saying high levels of resistance to the jabs in France required a cautious approach.

Speaking during a visit to a vaccination centre in the northeastern city of Metz on Thursday, Prime Minister Jean Castex noted with satisfaction that vaccine scepticism was starting to decline.

He predicted a "stampede" for the injections among over-75s.

"Things are falling into place but people will have to be patient," he said.

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