

Spain tightens virus curbs but rules out lockdown

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Spain's regions stepped up virus restrictions this week but the government remained adamant it would not impose a lockdown despite an expected post-Christmas surge in infections, a minister said Thursday.

Outgoing Health Minister Salvador Illa said the situation was causing "a

great deal of concern", warning there were "complicated weeks ahead and people must remain on high alert".

But although countries across Europe are living through a second or even third lockdown, Spain was not even considering such a measure, he said.

"It's not in our sights, nor is it a measure we are contemplating," said Illa, who is stepping down to run for the top post in Catalonia in regional elections next month.

Illá insisted that the scope of restrictions available under a state of emergency which is in place until May was enough.

Memories of the harsh months-long lockdown imposed last March remain fresh in Spain where no one was allowed out for walks or exercise for six weeks until the government began slowly easing the rules, first for children.

But with the number of cases rising, several regions—which are responsible for managing healthcare—have brought forward a nightly curfew or ordered the closure of certain businesses since the start of the year.

Inter-regional travel curbs

Castille and Leon, one of the worst-hit regions, even wants to reimpose its own brief lockdown, but the government has turned down the request.

With Spain counting more than 51,000 deaths and close to two million infections, most regions have banned movement across their borders without a valid reason.

And in Catalonia, new rules took effect on Thursday under which

residents cannot leave their town or city without a valid reason.

The wealthy northeastern region has also closed shopping centres and gyms, bars and restaurants can serve only breakfast or lunch, and only essential shops can open at the weekend.

Schools there will not reopen until January 11 in order to delay for as long as possible the return to classrooms after Christmas.

The Madrid region enforces a six-hour curfew from midnight and closes off areas with a very high infection rate, while on the party island of Ibiza, the curfew now starts at 10 pm and bars and restaurants can serve only on terraces.

Only the southwestern Extremadura region, which has the highest incidence in the country, has shuttered bars, restaurants and all non-essential shops for several weeks.

Vaccination campaign under way

Spain began its vaccination campaign using the Pfizer-BioNTech jab on December 27 and has since immunised nearly 140,000 people, the latest figures show.

It will receive its first doses of the newly approved Moderna vaccine "within seven to 10 days" and is hoping to have received 600,000 doses within the next six weeks.

Authorities aim to have vaccinated around 70 percent of the population of 47 million by summer.

Although the number of confirmed cases is expected to pass the two million mark on Thursday, the actual number is much higher, with a

seroprevalence study released in December showing around 10 percent of the population—or 4.7 million people—have been infected with the virus.

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