

Italy tightens virus curbs as variant fears rise

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Italy on Friday extended a domestic travel ban and tightened restrictions in four regions amid rising concern about the spread of more infectious coronavirus variants.

In one of its final acts in office, outgoing prime minister Giuseppe

Conte's cabinet renewed until February 25 a ban on travelling between regions that had been due to expire on Monday, a spokesman said.

The regions of Abruzzo, Liguria, Tuscany and the autonomous province of Trentino were also moved up to the medium-risk "orange" category from Sunday, meaning that bars, restaurants and museums will be shut.

The rest of Italy remains "yellow", with bars and restaurants open until 6:00 pm except for takeaway service, but with a nationwide night curfew.

Italy was the first European country to face the full force of the COVID-19 pandemic one year ago, and more than 93,000 people have died of the virus there.

Earlier this month, the government eased virus rules following a semi-lockdown over the Christmas and New Year's holidays—but the rise of new variants has sparked concern.

Localised lockdowns have already been enforced in a few provinces in central Italy.

New data from the National Institute for Health showed Friday that almost 18 percent of Italy's recently detected cases are linked to the new British variant of COVID-19.

This compares with 20-25 percent in France and 30 percent in Germany.

The government's weekly infection report found the "R value"—which measures how fast the virus is spreading—had risen slightly to 0.95, from 0.84 last week.

Health experts have warned of the need for leadership after almost a

month of political paralysis caused by the collapse of Italy's centre-left coalition government.

Conte resigned two weeks ago and former European Central Bank chief Mario Draghi was brought in to form a government of national unity. He was expected to be formally appointed prime minister later on Friday.

"We need quick decisions because the course of the virus and its variants are certainly not slowing down for a government crisis," the GIMBE health think tank warned on Thursday.

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