

Germany to reopen schools, hairdressers as virus cases drop

February 10 2021, by Frank Jordans



German Chancellor Angela Merkel, center, Bavarian state governor Markus Soeder, right, and the Mayor of Berlin Michael Mueller, left, attend a news conference after a meeting at the chancellery in Berlin, Germany, Wednesday, Feb. 10, 2021. German chancellor Angela Merkel had meet with German head of federal states to discuss extension of restrictions or other possible measures to battle the coronavirus pandemic in the country (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)

German officials agreed Wednesday to reopen schools and hairdressers in the coming weeks, while extending much of the country's coronavirus lockdown until March 7 amid concern that new virus variants could reverse the decline in confirmed cases.

Chancellor Angela Merkel and the country's 16 governors decided to leave in place many facets of the current lockdown that were due to expire on Sunday, and set a new target of 35 weekly cases per 100,000 inhabitants before letting small stores, museums and other businesses reopen.

The government's previous goal had been to push the number of new cases per 100,000 inhabitants each week below 50, to enable reliable contact-tracing. It peaked at nearly 200 just before Christmas but is now down to 68 nationwide, a trend Merkel credited to people respecting the existing measures.

"We have this great uncertainty with the mutation," Merkel said, explaining the new benchmark. "It will gain the upper hand. The old virus will disappear. We will live with the new virus and we can't yet judge this new virus and its behavior."

"If we can't achieve better tracing then it can quickly happen again there we'll get exponential growth," she told reporters. "That's why we have to be so careful."

Still, officials agreed that states will be able to reopen schools and kindergartens sooner, with some, such as Berlin, announcing that they will gradually resume classes in elementary schools from Feb. 22. Several governors had argued the measure was necessary to relieve parents of the burden of home schooling and make sure that underprivileged children don't fall too far behind.

The country's strained medical personnel had cautioned against such a move.

Ahead of the meeting, the head of the German Interdisciplinary Association for Intensive Care and Emergency Medicine, or DIVI, warned that the reopening of schools and kindergartens would lead to virus infections re-emerging.

"Schools and kindergartens are unfortunately places where the virus is passed on," DIVI President Gernot Marx told the Rheinische Post daily newspaper. "The kids carry it into the families, and most teachers are not vaccinated. As an intensive care doctor I am therefore telling you: this is irresponsible."

The teachers union VBE called for increased testing in schools and welcomed a proposal made by Merkel and the governors to move staff in elementary schools and kindergartens up the priority list for vaccinations.

Hairdressers will also be able to reopen on March 1, though with strict hygiene rules.

Bavaria's governor, Markus Soeder, said the decision "also has something to do with dignity during this difficult time."

Germany's second lockdown began in November and was extended and toughened before Christmas due to concern that the number of COVID-19 patients could overwhelm hospitals.

With the extension, bars, restaurants and most stores will remain closed. Merkel said she would hold another meeting with the governors on March 3 to reassess the lockdown measures again.

On Wednesday, Germany's Robert Koch Institute reported the country had 8,072 new virus cases and 813 deaths in 24 hours. In all, Germany has seen more than 63,000 confirmed virus deaths during the pandemic.

Merkel said Germany would closely watch how coronavirus case numbers develop in neighboring countries, noting that those in Poland have improved significantly and are now comparable with the German figures. She expressed concern, however, about a cluster of cases in Austria's state of Tyrol involving a variant first detected in South Africa that scientists say may be harder to vaccinate against.

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