

Portugal poised to extend lockdown as COVID-19 cases fall

February 9 2021, by Barry Hatton



A woman stands at a viewpoint overlooking Lisbon's old center, a site popular with tourists and now mostly deserted, Monday, Feb. 8, 2021. Hopes are rising in Portugal that the worst of a devastating pandemic surge might be over, as the number of COVID-19 deaths reported Monday was the lowest in three weeks. Still, the national lockdown could remain in place through mid-March, officials have said. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Portugal's COVID-19 infection rate has dropped sharply after a lockdown aimed at addressing a devastating January pandemic surge, but it is still recording the most daily deaths in the world by size of population, health experts said Tuesday.

Portugal hit a peak of cases on Jan. 29, with a 14-day average of almost 1,700 cases per 100,000 habitants.

Amid a lockdown since Jan. 15, that rate has fallen to around 980 per 100,000—a marked improvement but still one of the European Union's highest rates.

But Portugal's seven-day rolling average of daily deaths stands at 2.24 per 100,000—significantly above other countries, according to data compiled by Johns Hopkins University.

"While the measures are producing results, it's clear that the current lockdown will have to be extended at least through February, and then we'll reassess it," Health Minister Marta Temido said.

The current state of emergency decree, a legal measure which allows authorities to enact limits on movements and gatherings, expires on midnight Sunday. Officials must decide before then whether to prolong the lockdown.

Portugal is one of the EU's smaller countries, with a population of about 10.3 million.

Portugal's president, prime minister and other senior officials held a televised meeting with health experts to consider whether the lockdown should be extended.



A restaurant sign advertises take-away service in a street in Lisbon's Bairro Alto, a neighborhood dense with restaurants and bars, Monday, Feb. 8, 2021. Hopes are rising in Portugal that the worst of a devastating pandemic surge might be over, as the number of COVID-19 deaths reported Monday was the lowest in three weeks. Still, the national lockdown could remain in place through mid-March, officials have said. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

Portugal's "R" number, indicating the number of people an infected person passes the virus to, has dropped from 1.24 on Jan. 4 to 0.78 on Feb. 3, data shows.

A study suggested that sticking with the lockdown, and keeping schools closed, through the end of March would bring down the number of COVID-19 intensive care unit patients to around 300. There are

currently almost 900 in ICUs, which are under severe strain.

Experts noted, however, that it could take weeks before a reduction in the number of infections lowers the number of hospitalizations.

Portugal has officially recorded more than 770,500 cases of COVID-19 and attributed more than 14,500 deaths to the coronavirus.

Meanwhile, the coordinator of Portugal's vaccine task force, Rear Admiral Henrique Gouveia e Melo, said a shortage of vaccines is "strangling" rollout efforts.



A woman wearing a face mask walks past closed shops in Lisbon, Monday, Feb. 8, 2021. Hopes are rising in Portugal that the worst of a devastating pandemic surge might be over, as the number of COVID-19 deaths reported Monday was

the lowest in three weeks. Still, the national lockdown could remain in place through mid-March, officials have said. (AP Photo/Armando Franca)

He said the first phase, which was due to be completed by the end of March, will continue into April.

Portugal has so far received just over 500,000 of the almost 2 million vaccine doses it expected in the first quarter of this year, he said. The country is currently administering an average of 22,000 jabs a day.

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