

France steps up travel controls as virus cases soar

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The French government warned Friday of increased police checks to enforce travel restrictions in place in Paris and several other regions as coronavirus cases continue to soar around the country.

Checks at train stations, airports and motorway toll booths will "increase from today", the prime minister's office said, describing the situation as "critical" with the arrival of a third wave of infections.

The move came after France placed three more departments in limited lockdown, with around 20 million people, including those in the Paris region, prohibited from travelling further than 10 kilometres (six miles) from home except for essential reasons.

There is also a nightly curfew in place nationwide starting at 7:00 pm.

Daily cases in France have nearly doubled since the start of the month, reaching over 45,000 on Thursday, with the number of people in intensive care now standing at 4,766, not far from the peak during the second wave in November.

In Paris, the pressure on hospitals is even greater, with the bulk of non-essential surgeries being cancelled to free up beds amid the rapid spread of the more contagious British variant, which now causes the majority of infections nationwide.

Authorities said Friday that 304 people had died of COVID in the past 24 hours, bring the total to 93,709.

French President Emmanuel Macron has come under fire for going against the advice of scientific experts and his health minister at the end of January, when he decided not to impose a national lockdown.

"These coming weeks will be difficult. We'll take effective measures at the right time and to my mind there are no taboos," Macron said late Thursday.

"I have no mea culpa to issue, no regrets and no sense of a failure," he added in defence of his decision to keep the country in a state of semi-openness at the end of January.

Won't slow epidemic?

Schools across the country remain open, though individual classes in high-risk departments will now close if just one student tests positive, instead of three previously.

"That will necessarily mean more class closures in the coming days," Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer said Friday, calling outright school shutdowns to slow the virus a "last resort".

The number of new coronavirus cases in children under 15 has accelerated sharply over the past week, the Sante Publique France health authority said Friday.

"The British variant... is not more contagious for children, but it is as contagious for children as for adults," the agency's respiratory infections chief Daniel Levy-Bruhl said.

France's vaccination campaign has also been sluggish amid a chronic shortage of doses, with only around 10 percent of the population having received at least one dose.

But more than 400,000 doses were administered on Friday alone, Health Minister Olivier Veran tweeted, and the government has vowed to open dozens of mass vaccination "supersites" in April.

Prime Minister Jean Castex has called France's efforts to avoid a painful nationwide lockdown a "third way" in its COVID fight, but many medical experts consider the restrictions not tough enough.

"I understand the strategy of wanting to do gradual measures, but with the situation we are in I'm not sure that they are going to slow down the epidemic," Solen Kerneis, an infectious diseases specialist at the Bichat hospital in northern Paris, told AFP.

The top health watchdog recommended offering the jabs to dentists and vets on Friday in a modest widening of the eligibility criteria, with the focus until now on vaccinating the over-75s, medical personnel and those with existing health problems.

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