

Germany extends virus lockdown till mid-April as cases rise

March 23 2021, by Frank Jordans



German Chancellor Angela Merkel removes her mask at the start of a press conference in the Chancellor's Office following consultations between the federal and state governments in Berlin Tuesday, March 23, 2021. Germany extended its lockdown measures by another month and imposed several new restrictions, including largely shutting down public life over Easter, in an effort to drive down the rate of coronavirus infections. (Michael Kappeler/Pool Photo via AP)

Germany has extended its lockdown measures by another month and imposed several new restrictions, including largely shutting down public life over Easter, in an effort to drive down the rate of coronavirus infections.

Speaking early Tuesday after a lengthy video call with the country's 16 state governors, Chancellor Angela Merkel announced that restrictions previously set to run through March 28 will now remain in place until April 18.

Coronavirus infections have increased steadily in Germany as the more contagious variant first detected in Britain has become dominant, and the country's daily number of cases per capita has passed that of the United States.

"We basically have a new pandemic," Merkel told reporters in Berlin.

"Essentially we have a new virus, obviously of the same type but with completely different characteristics," she added. "Significantly more deadly, significantly more infectious (and) infectious for longer."

Since their last meeting three weeks ago, which saw the two sides agree a multi-step plan to relax restrictions, several states have tried to avoid going back into tougher lockdowns when the weekly number of new infections exceeds 100 per 100,000 residents on three consecutive days.

Merkel made clear that she wouldn't accept that.



The buildings of the banking district are seen in Frankfurt, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. German politics decides about further measures to avoid the outspread of the coronavirus on Monday. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)

"Unfortunately, we will have to make use of this emergency brake," she said.

The weekly infection rate per 100,000 people stood at 107 nationwide on Monday, up from the mid-60s three weeks ago.

Officials agreed to largely shut down public life from April 1-3, adding a public holiday and shutting down most stores for the period. Public gatherings will be banned from April 1-5, to encourage people to stay at

home.

Amid concern over the rise in Germans traveling abroad on holidays, authorities also agreed on a blanket requirement for air travelers to be tested for COVID-19 before boarding a flight to Germany.

Drawing up legally watertight rules has proved a headache at times. A court in Germany's most populous state, North Rhine-Westphalia, said Monday it struck down rules requiring people to get appointments to visit shops. It said they violated a requirement that businesses get equal treatment.



AstraZeneca and Biontech coronavirus vaccine stand in a fridge at the vaccine center in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)

The state government promptly reinstated the rules, tightening them for some businesses—such as bookshops and garden centers—that were previously exempt.

According to Tuesday's agreement, authorities will aim to offer free tests to all students and teachers in German schools, many of which have only recently reopened after months of remote teaching.

Merkel said Germany, which had comparatively low deaths during the first phase of the pandemic last spring, has seen "successes but also of setbacks" and insisted that the situation would improve as more people get vaccinated.

Germany's vaccination campaign has so far lagged behind expectations, with only about 9% of the population receiving at least a first shot and 4% receiving both doses by Sunday.

"It's difficult for longer than we thought," said Merkel. "But there's definitely light visible at the end of the tunnel."



Medical staff wait for people at a local vaccination centre as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



An elderly woman enters a doctors room for her vaccination at a local vaccination centre as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



Medical staff fill in a vaccination pass at the local vaccination centre in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



Medical staff takes the temperature of an elderly man arriving at a local vaccination centre as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



Medical staff wait for people at a local vaccination centre as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



A cargo ship on the river Main in Frankfurt, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. German politics decides about further measures to avoid the outspread of the coronavirus on Monday. (AP Photo/Michael Probst)



People wait after their vaccinations at a local vaccination centre as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)



Medical staff walks through an empty waiting room at a local vaccination centre as the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) continues in Ebersberg near Munich, Germany, Monday, March 22, 2021. (AP Photo/Matthias Schrader)

Asked about the EU's plans to restrict the export of vaccines and components, Merkel said she supported efforts by the bloc's executive Commission to ensure contracts are fulfilled, citing the supply problems the EU has had with the AstraZeneca shot.

Britain, which left the EU last year, has strongly protested against the plans, fearing it could get cut off from deliveries.

Merkel said she and French President Emmanuel Macron had each

spoken to Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson about the issue in recent days and EU leaders would aim to reach a decision "in a responsible way" at a virtual summit Thursday.

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Citation: Germany extends virus lockdown till mid-April as cases rise (2021, March 23) retrieved 6 July 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-03-germany-virus-lockdown-mid-april-cases.html>

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