

France to ban outdoor drinking under new virus restrictions

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Alcoholic drinks will be prohibited in French parks and other outdoor public spaces as part of the new limited nationwide lockdown to stem the COVID-19 crisis, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced Thursday.

Addressing the National Assembly, Castex also said authorities would be quick to disperse groups of more than six people on riverbanks or squares after the new restrictions unveiled by President Emmanuel Macron late Wednesday.

Castex said he "unreservedly" condemned people who had not been respecting the rules, after images emerged of beer-swilling crowds on riverbanks in the spring sunshine in cities including Paris and Lyon.

Meanwhile, prosecutors should "systematically" probe organisers of clandestine parties for putting the lives of others in danger, he added.

By decreeing school closures and systematic work-from-home protocols, Macron hopes to ease pressure on hospitals facing a new surge in coronavirus cases that are overwhelming intensive care units.

But he refrained from demanding that people stay in their homes or avoid socialising completely, and authorised travel between regions over the coming Easter weekend.

The measures were met with a mix of resignation and anger, despite Macron's suggestion that France could begin envisioning a return to normalcy by mid-May.

"Lockdown, the sequel... and the end?" Le Figaro headlined its front page Thursday, while mass-market Le Parisien said Macron was defending his strategy of "slowing without shutting down" even though "the situation has never been so dangerous or complicated".

'Ease the pain'

As during the first lockdown last spring, parents are scrambling to make arrangements for another round of distance learning.

"It was absolutely necessary to close the schools, even if it will be complicated for parents, and especially young children, to manage this situation," Laure, 44, a researcher with two young boys who lives in Paris, said after Macron's TV address.

In a bid to ease the pain, Macron shuffled the timetable for school holidays and younger children will return to school on April 26 after taking their spring break, and older pupils will follow a week later.

The prime minister's office said a decision would be made on Friday on whether child minders will be allowed to receive any children during the three-week period. The office had earlier stated that they would be banned from taking children, but later Thursday evening said deliberations were continuing.

Castex, who provided lawmakers with details of the new measures, said low-income families would receive financial aid for children no longer eating school lunches.

France's public health authority announced 50,659 new cases on Thursday, but that number was inflated due to delayed numbers from several labs.

The authority also said 314 more deaths were recorded on Thursday, bringing the country's total to 95,976.

Health Minister Olivier Veran said the number of new COVID cases could peak in the next seven to 10 days, while intensive care cases in hospitals might do so by the end of April.

"The goal is to suppress this wave of the epidemic... so that it's as small as possible," he told France Inter radio.

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