

Argentina locks back down as coronavirus infections soar

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In this May 1, 2021 file photo, a healthcare worker pushes a woman who is suspected of having COVID-19 into Llavallol Dr. Norberto Raúl Piacentini Hospital in Lomas de Zamora, Argentina. The government of President Alberto Fernández on May 21 announced a strict lockdown for the first time this year after Argentina exceeded its daily record of virus infections and COVID-19 deaths. Credit: AP Photo/Natacha Pisarenko, File

Argentina is imposing its first strict coronavirus lockdown of the year starting Saturday due to surging levels of coronavirus infections and a soaring death toll.

The measures, due to last until the end of the month, will limit circulation and suspend social, business, educational, religious and sporting activities. Workers with essential jobs will be exempted.

"We are living the worst moment since the pandemic began," President Alberto Fernández said in a televised message Thursday. "We are seeing the highest numbers of cases and deaths. We must take this critical situation seriously."

At the start of the pandemic, Argentina imposed one of the world's longest quarantines between March and July. The negative impact that imposed on the economy—and the national mood—left the government with little room to maneuver. But a combination of vaccine scarcity and more contagious variants of the virus has put Argentina's health sector again on the verge of collapse.

On Tuesday, the South American country exceeded its daily record of virus infections and COVID-19 deaths with 35,543 new cases and 745 deaths. The subsequent two days saw similar high infection rates. Overall, Argentina has seen 3.4 million confirmed coronavirus infections and more than 72,000 deaths.

Fernández said that after May 31, pandemic limits will return to their current level: a curfew from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m. and social, recreational and commercial activities prohibited in closed spaces. In addition, strict confinement will be mandatory for the weekend of June 5-6.

"It is vital that the authority of each jurisdiction apply the rules that we are dictating. There is no room for speculation or doubt," said

Fernández, criticizing governors for not ensuring compliances with measures previously ordered.

The president promised economic aid for sectors affected by the new restrictions and confirmed that more than 4 million does of Sputnik V and AstraZeneca vaccines will arrive in the next few days.

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