

Barcelona to reimpose curfew to fight virus surge

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Barcelona and other cities in northeastern Spain will reimpose a night-time curfew starting this weekend to fight a surge in virus cases after the measure won court approval on Friday.

The curfew is aimed at discouraging social gatherings on beaches and in parks to curb a spike in cases of the highly-contagious Delta variant, especially among unvaccinated young people.

Catalonia's regional government asked the courts this week for permission to restore a nightly curfew between 1:00 am and 6:00 am in areas where infection rates surpass 400 cases per 100,000 inhabitants over a seven-day period.

The top court in the northeastern region on Friday approved the move, which will affect 161 municipalities, including popular beach resorts like Sitges, Salou and Lloret de Mar.

"It is a difficult measure, but we must stop the infections, protect lives and the health system. It will take effect tonight," Catalonia's regional head Pere Aragonés tweeted after the court ruling.

The curfew will be in place until July 23 although the Catalan government can ask to extend it.

The curfew will likely have to be extended for several weeks, the court said.

Catalonia, the epicentre of Spain's jump in infections, has already ordered all public gatherings to finish by 12:30 am and restricted gatherings to 10 people.

Images of large groups of youths gathering on Barcelona's beaches or in popular nightlife districts have become common since Spain lifted a nationwide night-time curfew in early May.

With an infection rate of 1,107 cases per 100,000 people—more than double the national average—Catalonia is one of the hardest-hit areas in

Europe.

Among people aged 20 to 29, the figure stands at 3,375 cases per 100,000 people.

Cancelled leave

Unlike in previous infections waves, the death toll has remained low and intensive care units have not so far been overwhelmed with COVID-19 patients.

But the Catalan authorities have cancelled health workers' days off this weekend because the number of intensive care beds filled by COVID-19 patients has been steadily rising.

Spain's regional governments, which are responsible for handling the pandemic in their areas, need court authorisation for tighter restrictions that infringe on rights, such as travel bans and curfews.

With infections rising across Spain, other regions are also tightening measures.

The northern region of Cantabria on Friday also won court approval to restore curfew in 53 towns this week, while Valencia in the east got the green light earlier to do the same in 32 municipalities.

But approval is not guaranteed, with a court in Spain's Canary Islands on Wednesday rejecting a curfew request.

Spain's vaccination programme has worked through age groups, meaning those in their 20s and 30s are only now starting to get jabs, leaving them vulnerable to the new Delta variant.

Over three-quarters of COVID-19 patients in intensive care in Catalonia have not been vaccinated, regional health figures show.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said this week Spain was on track to have 70 percent of the population immunised against COVID-19 before the end of August.

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