

Dutch govt orders partial lockdown amid rising virus cases (Update)

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Caretaker Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte announced a three-week partial lockdown Friday amid surging COVID-19 cases in the Netherlands.

The lockdown that begins Saturday night is the first to start in Western

Europe since a new wave of infections began surging across parts of the continent.

Under the lockdown, bars, restaurants and supermarkets will have to close at 8 p.m. (1900 GMT), professional sports matches will be played in empty stadiums and people are being urged to work from home as much as possible. Stores selling non-essential items will have to close at 6 p.m.

"Tonight we have a very unpleasant message with very unpleasant and far-reaching decisions," Rutte said.

The Netherlands is not alone in taking measures to rein in soaring coronavirus infections.

Earlier Friday, Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said his country will implement a lockdown for unvaccinated people in two hard-hit regions next week and looks poised to move forward with similar measures nationwide.

Starting Monday, unvaccinated people in the regions of Upper Austria and Salzburg will only be allowed to leave home for specific necessary reasons, such as buying groceries or going to the doctor.

Meanwhile, Germany's disease control center is urging people to cancel or avoid large events and to reduce their contacts as the country's coronavirus infection rate hits a string of new highs.

Rutte also said that social distancing is returning and urged people to work from home whenever possible.

Separately, the government announced Friday that it would bring forward the start of a campaign to administer booster shots of

COVID-19 shots to older citizens and healthcare workers. The campaign had been set to start in December, but will now begin at the end of next week.

News of the possible move before the announcement had prompted fury among bar owners and sports administrators earlier Friday.

The Dutch soccer federation and top two professional leagues issued a statement expressing "great dismay" at the expected lockdown and insisting that soccer stadiums—which have strict COVID measures in place—are not a major source of infections.

"This looks like policy poverty," the organizations said, adding that government officials "no longer know what to do."

An organization representing bar and restaurant owners also slammed the government.

"Hospitality businesses are again being presented with the bill for failing government policy," the group said in a statement.

On Thursday the country's public health institute recorded 16,364 new positive tests in 24 hours—the highest number of any time during the pandemic that has killed more than 18,600 people in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands, where nearly 85% of adults are fully vaccinated, largely ended lockdown restrictions at the end of September.

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