

Italy towns under new restrictions amid COVID infection rise

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Twenty small towns in northern Italy's autonomous South Tyrol province went into a partial lockdown Wednesday to try to contain rising coronavirus infections and save the key winter tourism season in one of the least-vaccinated parts of Italy.

The local restrictions went into effect on the same day the government in Rome debated new national proposals to exclude unvaccinated people from certain activities, in its latest effort to encourage vaccinations and limit contagion. Premier Mario Draghi was to brief Italians on the new measures later Wednesday.

In the 20 towns of South Tyrol province where infection rates are rising fast, bars and restaurants were ordered closed after 6 p.m., a nighttime curfew was imposed from 8 p.m. to 5 a.m. and passengers on public transport now must wear an FFP2 face mask, according to the ordinance.

The autonomous German-speaking province in the Dolomite mountains borders newly locked down Austria and has long harbored a certain libertarian sentiment. The province of South Tyrol has ranked among the least vaccinated in Italy during the pandemic, registering between 5 and 10 percentage points behind the national average in younger age groups.

The provincial governor, Arno Kompatscher, said he was imposing the restrictions preemptively, and through Dec. 7 at least, to try to prevent a wholesale lockdown and save the vital ski industry that already lost the last two seasons to COVID-19.

The 20 towns met the new provincial criteria requiring restrictions: More than 800 cases per 100,000 residents in a week, more than five new cases in a day in the town, and a vaccination rate of less than 70% of the population over age 12.

Italy, where Europe's outbreak began in February 2020, has fully vaccinated more than 84% of its over-12 population. Italy is seeing a rise in infections as in other Western European countries, but to a more measured degree, recording around 10,000 new cases and fewer than 100 deaths a day.

But the rise has nevertheless sparked proposals to impose restrictions on non-vaccinated people to prevent a lockdown that would impede an economic reboot after Italy's gross domestic product shrank 8.9% last year.

Proposals include revamping Italy's "Green Pass" by restricting access to museums, indoor dining and cinemas to only people who have been vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19. Unvaccinated people can currently access such venues with a "Green Pass" from a negative test.

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