

Fresh Dutch Covid lockdown as 10 EU states at 'high concern'

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Riot police faced protesters in The Hague as the Dutch premier announced a fresh partial lockdown.

European governments on Friday eyed unpopular Covid curbs, with the Netherlands opting for Western Europe's first partial lockdown of the

winter as EU experts said 10 countries in the bloc were causing "very high concern".

Dutch premier Mark Rutte announced at least three weeks of lockdown measures targeting restaurants, shops and sporting events to curb a record spike in coronavirus infections.

The "annoying and far-reaching" measures came as the EU's diseases agency said 10 countries in the 27-member bloc faced a Covid situation of "very high concern", warning the pandemic was worsening across the continent.

In its weekly risk assessment, the European Centre for Disease Control listed Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, the Netherlands, Poland and Slovenia in its highest category of concern.

Since it emerged in China in December 2019, the coronavirus has killed over five million people and caused economic devastation around the world.

Europe is facing a sharp deterioration in the epidemic situation, especially in Germany and central and eastern Europe. Non-vaccinated people are the most affected.

Announcing his country's partial lockdown, Rutte told the nation the crisis required a "hard blow of a few weeks because the virus is everywhere, throughout the country, in all sectors and all ages".

Cases have soared since the Dutch government lifted most Covid measures less than two months ago on September 25, reaching a record level of more than 16,000 on Thursday and Friday.

"Fortunately, the vast majority have been vaccinated, otherwise the misery in the hospitals would be incalculable at the moment," Rutte said.

Public events scrapped

Bars, restaurants, cafes and supermarkets will have to shut at 8:00 pm for the next three weeks from Saturday, while non-essential shops must shut at 6:00 pm, the Dutch government said.

People will be limited to having four visitors at home and have been advised to work at home unless absolutely necessary.

Public events will also be scrapped while football matches including the Netherlands' home World Cup qualifier with Norway next week must be played behind closed doors. Schools will however remain open.

Several hundred protesters angered by the announcement gathered in The Hague afterwards, with police firing water cannon at them.

Other European nations stopped short of such drastic action but Norway said it would reintroduce nationwide measures to stem surging coronavirus cases, including authorising towns to use health passes.

The Nordic country, which had lifted all Covid-19 restrictions in late September, will also propose a third vaccine dose for people over 18 but will not impose a new lockdown, Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store told a news conference.

"The government wants to introduce new national measures to contain contagions," he said.

"However, we are not talking about confinements or measures as strict as we saw earlier in the pandemic."

Lockdown for unvaccinated

In Austria, the government said it wanted a lockdown for those not vaccinated against or recovered from the coronavirus, while Vienna city authorities said they would start vaccinating children as young as five—a first in the EU.

Salzburg and Upper Austria states, which have seen some of the worst case rates, are already introducing a lockdown for the unvaccinated from Monday.

This means they will not be able to leave the house except for reasons such as buying essential supplies, exercise or seeking medical care.

"The aim is clear: we want on Sunday to give the green light for a nationwide lockdown for the unvaccinated," Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg told a news conference, condemning the country's 65 percent vaccination rate as "shamefully low".

Lockdowns across the country would be enforced with "random" spot checks.

Neighbouring Germany also braced Friday for new restrictions to contain a ferocious fourth Covid wave.

Health Minister Jens Spahn described the Covid-19 situation as "serious" while the country's health agency chief urged Germans to avoid large gatherings.

Amid a record surge in infections, Lothar Wieler, the head of the Robert Koch Institute (RKI), added that he himself would be skipping next month's New Year's parties.

Wieler said large gatherings "must be viewed very critically" and in some situations "clearly should be cancelled".

The federal government and leaders of Germany's 16 regional states are due to meet next Thursday to discuss joint measures to combat the resurgence.

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