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Belgium extends coronavirus lockdown to April 18

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Belgium on Friday extended its general lockdown to slow the spread of the coronavirus by two weeks to April 18.

The decision, confirmed by top officials, extended a confinement that began on March 18 until the end of the country's Easter holiday break, with schools, restaurants and most shops to remain closed.

Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes said the period could be extended by another two weeks to May 3 if the spread of the virus demanded it.

"Our efforts are only beginning and to ease up now would have catastrophic consequences," she told a media briefing.

Outdoor sports activities and walks outside are still allowed, but only in small groups, with a friend or with family members living under the same roof.

In theory, travelling for work can only be done with a certificate from the employer.

Supermarkets in Belgium remain open, but shoppers are only admitted if there is enough space for one person per 10 square metres, and they must not stay for more than 30 minutes.

Belgium, a country of 11.4 million people, has recorded 7,284 cases of the novel coronavirus strain, and 289 deaths.

The extension in Belgium follows a similar decision in neighbouring France where the lockdown rules are stricter.

Europe is grappling with the global outbreak that has killed more than 10,000 people on the continent, mostly in Italy and Spain.

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