

Germany charts lockdown exit with virus 'under control'

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Germany said on Friday a month-long lockdown had brought the coronavirus pandemic under control, announcing plans to manufacture 50 million masks a week ahead of the first steps to loosen restrictions.

Smaller shops will be allowed to reopen from Monday and some children could soon return to school within weeks, even as harder-hit European countries such as France and Britain prolong restrictions.

Europe remains in the "eye of the storm", the World Health Organisation warned Thursday, accounting for over 90,000 of more than 140,000 deaths worldwide according to an AFP tally.

However, infection numbers in Germany "have sunk significantly" and the outbreak is "under control", Health Minister Jens Spahn told reporters on Friday.

Each disease carrier in Germany was infecting less than one other person—the person-to-person rate dropping to 0.7—according to data from the Robert

Koch Institute (RKI) for [disease control](#) on Thursday.

So far almost 134,000 people have been infected and 3,868 have died.

The figures justified a first easing of the lockdown with a review after two or three weeks, Chancellor Angela Merkel said on Wednesday.

But the veteran leader warned there was "little margin for error" and that "caution should be the watchword, not over-confidence".

Federal patchwork

Measures agreed between Merkel and state premiers on Wednesday included reopening shops of up to 800 square metres (8,600 square feet) from next week.

Meanwhile, some pupils will return to classrooms from May 4, with a focus on those soon to sit exams.

Other elements of the wide-ranging restrictions will remain in effect, including a ban on gatherings of more than two people in public and on large public events.

Regional leaders have made their own tweaks to the centrally-agreed rules, with Bavarian leader Markus Soeder arguing to retain tough restrictions while North Rhine-Westphalia premier Armin Laschet pushes to loosen even faster.

Polls show much of the public stands behind strict infection control, but business is pushing hard for a dependable roadmap for exiting lockdown.

Some companies, like car giant Volkswagen, have already announced their own step-by-step plans for reactivating production in Germany in the coming weeks.

Preparations to reopen factories included "a comprehensive catalogue of measures to protect workers' health", Volkswagen brand chief operating officer Ralf Brandstaetter said Wednesday.

Focus on masks

As Germany prepares to allow public life to resume, health minister Spahn said the country would produce up to 50 million masks a week from August.

Some 40 million would be surgical masks and 10 million would be the sought after FFP2 masks, which offer more protection.

But so far Germany has not aped neighbouring Austria by introducing a nationwide requirement for people to wear masks in public.

Merkel on Wednesday issued only a "strong recommendation" to wear so-called "everyday masks" that can be made at home, rather than use up tight supplies of [masks](#) meeting medical specifications.

Defending the decision to hold off a mask requirement, Spahn said people had been "very responsible" so far.

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