

Johnson warns 'maximum caution' needed as UK poised to ease lockdown

7 May 2020

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson told senior ministers on Thursday the government would adopt "maximum caution" as he prepared to outline how lockdown measures imposed to combat the coronavirus outbreak could be eased.

Johnson will address the nation on Sunday evening to set out a "roadmap" for relaxing social distancing rules announced in late March, but is not expected to make any major changes to the measures.

Although officials say the spread of COVID-19 in Britain has fallen markedly, the country has the world's second highest official death toll, with another 539 fatalities announced on Thursday taking its total to 30,615.

However, broader official data released this week put the total number of deaths by late April above 32,000—including 107 health care workers and 29 care staff.

"We have come through the peak but it is a very delicate and... very dangerous moment, so we do need to proceed with caution," Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said at the daily Downing Street news conference.

"The virus is not beaten yet. It remains deadly and infectious," he added.

Raab said Johnson would detail a "roadmap for the next phase" on Sunday, that would include "appropriate measures to be taken at appropriate milestones" and "strict conditions with strict monitoring".

The British premier's spokesman had earlier said that he used the phrase "maximum caution" when talking to colleagues at a cabinet meeting.

Media reports on Thursday said unlimited exercise and picnics will be allowed as part of the early

easing of restrictions.

The announcement comes as the Bank of England warned on Thursday the British economy could slump by 14 percent because of the outbreak, although it would rebound by 15 percent next year.

Johnson's spokesman said the "worst thing we could do" is relax restrictions and allow a second spike in virus rates which would require fresh measures, hitting the economy further.

Four nation approach?

London has indicated it wants a united "four-nation approach" to lifting lockdown measures across all the countries of the United Kingdom.

But Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said she would not be pressured into ending the measures too soon and risk a resurgence of the virus.

She told reporters there were suggestions infection rates in Scotland were higher than elsewhere, and extended the restrictions for another three weeks until May 28.

"We can make changes to the regulations before then if the evidence suggests it is safe to do so," she added.

Sturgeon, who leads the devolved government in Edinburgh which has powers over health policy in Scotland, has clashed with Johnson during the crisis.

Johnson spoke to Sturgeon, and the first ministers of Wales and Northern Ireland by phone on Thursday afternoon, his office said.

"He reiterated his commitment to continuing our UK-wide approach to tackling coronavirus, even if different parts of the UK begin to move at slightly

different speeds," a statement said.

"Those decisions will be made based on the science for each nation."

Proposals

Possible changes to social distancing measures could see pubs and cafes with gardens allowed to open but people would be required to remain two metres (six feet) apart.

The government and its scientific advisers have warned not to expect a return to normality for months.

"The messaging will evolve from 'stay at home' to 'be careful when you're out'," an unnamed minister told the Daily Telegraph.

Offices will have to stagger arrivals and separate staff with screens, while meetings will continue to take place remotely when possible, according to the paper.

Meanwhile, two separate studies indicated that black and minority ethnic groups were more at risk from the virus than the white population.

The Office for National Statistics said black men and women were more than four times more likely to die with coronavirus than white people in England and Wales.

Geographic and socio-economic factors, such as deprivation, as well as health and disability, could explain the differences, the ONS said.

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