

France rules out 'total lockdown' in case of coronavirus surge

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The French government said Wednesday it was girding for a possible surge in coronavirus cases in coming months but ruled out another nationwide lockdown.

"My aim is to prepare France for a possible second wave while preserving our daily life, our economic and social life," new Prime Minister Jean Castex said in an interview on RTL television.

"But we're not going to impose a lockdown like the one we did last March, because we've learned... that the economic and human consequences from a total lockdown are disastrous," he said.

Instead business closures or stay-at-home orders would be "targeted" to specific areas, Castex added.

"The coronavirus is still here," he warned, adding that he would travel Sunday to France's South American territory of French Guiana, which is reeling from a surge in COVID-19 cases.

Officials reported 124 new cases in the territory on Tuesday, bringing the total to nearly 5,200, and the government has dispatched dozens of health workers from the mainland as well as a field hospital.

They also said that 32 people had died from COVID-19 in the latest 24-hour period, bringing the national toll to 29,965 since the first cases were reported in January.

The head of France's national health agency, Jerome Salomon, said authorities anticipated a second wave of cases "this autumn or this winter," depending on a seasonal impact that remains uncertain.

"What we have to understand is that the epidemic's resurgence will basically depend on our behaviour," he said in an interview with the Figaro newspaper.

Even as millions of people prepare to relax over the summer, Salomon urged continued social distancing and the use of face masks, "especially in crowded places and indoors."

Paris authorities said the capital would stage its traditional fireworks show from the Eiffel Tower on July 14, the national holiday, but that the event would be closed to the public.

'Protect people'

Castex was named by President Emmanuel Macron last week to lead a new government tasked with orchestrating the country's recovery from its worst health and economic crisis since World War II.

Billions of euros have been promised for investments as well as measures to limit job losses in an economy expected to shrink by around 10 percent this year.

"We are going to protect people, but above all we are going to invest in the ecological transformation, in our country's recovery," Castex said.

He confirmed he had increased a proposed wage hike and budget boosts for hospital staff by around one billion euros in talks with unions this week, bringing the total envelope to 7.5 billion euros (\$8.5 billion).

But union leaders say that would lift monthly pay for nurses, technicians and others on the frontlines of the coronavirus fight by only 180 euros a month, far short of their demands for a 300-euro raise.

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