

Spanish showdown as court suspends local lockdown order

July 13 2020

Catalan government officials mulled action Monday after a local court blocked a lockdown order confining 160,000 people to homes in a virus-hit area of northeastern Spain.

Faced with a rapidly rising number of infections in Segria, around 150 kilometres (90 miles) west of Barcelona, the Catalan government on Sunday issued a stay-at-home order in and around the city of Lerida.

It was the first such order since Spain's state of emergency ended on June 21.

The area, home to more than 200,000 people, had already been subjected to restrictions on July 4 after cases started to rise, but it didn't help and on Sunday, Catalan officials ordered the confinement of 160,000 residents.

Within hours, the order was overturned by a judge who ruled it "contrary to law", saying such restrictions can only be imposed by the central government.

Although the decision can be appealed, it triggered a showdown with regional authorities as Catalan president Quim Torra said he would "not accept" it.

"We are looking at how we can resolve this matter legally," Catalan health minister Alba Verges told Catalonia Radio.

"These are necessary measures.. we would not have taken them if they weren't absolutely necessary," she said, while urging people to stay at home.

Despite calls to respect the closure, many people were on the streets Monday, with shops and bars still open, an AFP correspondent said.

But many were confused and worried.

"One says this, the other says that, and the city itself doesn't know what it's supposed to be doing," said Eugene Badila, a 41-year-old salesman.

Since the start of the pandemic, the Segria area has counted 3,180 cases and 137 deaths.

Officials have linked the latest outbreaks to movement of seasonal agricultural workers who travel around Spain to harvest fruit and vegetables.

More than 70 coronavirus clusters have now been identified in Spain, with officials most worried by the outbreak in the Lerida area.

Other clusters have been identified in Galicia in the north west, and in the northern Basque country region—both of which on Sunday held their first regional elections since the onset of the pandemic.

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