

France reports first decrease in coronavirus intensive care patients

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France on Thursday reported its first fall in the number of patients in intensive care suffering from COVID-19 since the coronavirus epidemic began, with 82 fewer people in intensive care units compared with the day earlier.

There are now 7,066 patients in intensive care, top French health official Jerome Salomon told reporters, adding that the total combined death toll in hospitals and nursing homes had now risen to 12,210.

Urging people to keep on observing a nationwide lockdown, he said: "Thanks to these measures, we are in the process of putting the brakes on the epidemic."

"Our strategy of defence against the virus, with the nationwide confinement, is starting to bear fruit. It is indispensable to continue this confinement and social distancing of at least one metre and reducing contacts.

"We will only beat this epidemic together. The first signs of a slowing seen this evening are because of your good will.. and I thank you," he said.

But he also cautioned: "If we can hope to have reached a plateau, it is a very high plateau and we need to stay extremely cautious."

The new death toll meant that 412 people had died in hospital over the last 24 hours, also down from 541 the day earlier. There had been no data from nursing homes on Wednesday due to a technical fault.

The country now has a total of 86,334 confirmed cases, although officials warn many cases are not tested. A doctors' union said more than 1.6 million of France's 67 million people may have been infected with the new coronavirus to date.

France has been in lockdown since March 17 in a bid to slow the spread of the epidemic, with only essential trips allowed that must be justified with a signed piece of paper.

French President Emmanuel Macron is due to address the nation for the third time on Monday and is expected to confirm that the lockdown will be again extended beyond its current limit of April 15.

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