

Belgium shuts restaurants, imposes curfew in virus fight

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Belgium on Friday ordered all cafes and restaurants to close for four weeks and imposed a curfew as it seeks to tackle a sharp rise in coronavirus cases.

Prime Minister Alexander De Croo announced the measures, which come into effect on Monday, after a meeting of the Belgian government's crisis unit, warning that COVID-19 cases are rising "exponentially".

With more than 10,300 deaths from a population of 11.5 million, Belgium is one of the worst affected countries in Europe.

"Week after week, the figures are doubling, they're skyrocketing... it's an exponential increase," De Croo told a news conference.

The Brussels city region ordered bars and cafes to close last week, but Friday's announcement extends the restriction nationwide.

The new nationwide limits announced Friday include a midnight to 5:00 am curfew—aimed at

preventing people hosting parties at home—and a ban on the sale of alcohol after 8:00 pm.

Working from home must now "become the norm", De Croo said, while theatres and cinemas are allowed to stay open provided they respect social distancing.

Deputy prime minister Georges Gilkinet said the decision to close cafes and restaurants—deemed high-risk venues for spreading the virus—was taken to try to head off another full lockdown like the one Belgium enforced earlier in the year.

He warned "the situation is serious from a health point of view", and we must "prevent our healthcare system from becoming saturated".

"Our hospitals are clogged," he added. "The figures are as high as they were in March when we decided on a lockdown, that's what we absolutely want to avoid".

The national lockdown helped bring cases down, but new infections—as well as serious cases involving hospital admissions—are rising again.

Belgium has recorded 191,959 COVID cases and 10,327 deaths as of Friday.

Following a surge in infections in September, the rate of hospital admissions has accelerated in recent days, particularly in Brussels and Belgium's French-speaking southern provinces.

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