

Millions more enter virus lockdowns in UK

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Millions more people headed into lockdowns across Britain on Friday, as the country's four home nations adopt differing criteria in their attempts to stem surging coronavirus rates.

Around 3.1 million people in Wales saw the most severe restrictions imposed, after the devolved government there ordered a 17-day "firebreaker" lockdown forcing people to stay at home from 6:00 pm (1700 GMT).

The first national lockdown since an earlier UK-wide shutdown over the summer, it bans all non-food retailers, cafes, restaurants, pubs and hotels from opening.

"Our ambition is we will not need to have this level of restriction again in Wales before Christmas," Welsh First Minister Mark Drakeford said.

Locals in Cardiff appeared split over the draconian move.

"Hospitality has been unfairly punished," said John Sally, owner of The Deep pub in the Welsh capital, arguing that statistics showed the virus was not spreading in such venues.

But 77-year-old Don Strivens was adamant the move was necessary. "It's important that we do something to try to stop it," he said.

'Complicated'

In central Manchester, streets were eerily quiet after the UK government imposed its most stringent measures on the city and its surrounding region, following bitter resistance from local leaders who wanted more financial aid.

"I don't approve of the government's handling of the financial situation," resident Caroline Hall told AFP. "They've just made it really complicated."

The English county of South Yorkshire will also face the same "very high" alert from Saturday, with many pubs and other hospitality venues closing and residents banned from mixing with others indoors.

The latest additions to the areas in the tier-three risk category mean 7.3 million people in England will be living under England's toughest restrictions from the weekend.

The government has warned that other regions could follow as it battles to get a grip on a second wave of COVID-19.

Britain has been the worst-hit in Europe by the virus, registering nearly 45,000 deaths within 28 days of a positive test.

After a summer lull transmission is rising again, especially in northern England, with more than 20,000 new cases announced Friday.

But Prime Minister Boris Johnson has resisted calls for a second national lockdown, arguing his tiered system is better suited to target regions facing the biggest threat.

'Digital Christmas'

On Thursday, the government improved a national jobs-support scheme after businesses hit by regional lockdowns claimed it did not go far enough to replace a furlough package that expires this month.

The Treasury did not divulge the overall cost but Johnson promised "billions more".

Meanwhile Scotland, which like Wales has its own devolved government, announced a new five-tier plan of localised measures.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has already extended the closure of pubs and restaurants in the centre of Scotland for a third week to November 2.

But outlining the five tiers, she insisted that the country was "not back at square one" and that "we do not envisage returning to a situation as severe as the first lockdown".

Scots in the capital Edinburgh seemed unconvinced by the latest changes.

"It's just making it too difficult to be honest so I don't know if they're going to be that useful, student Megan Davis, 20, said.

Scotland's national clinical director, Jason Leitch, warned Thursday that people should "get their digital Christmas ready" and prepare to be deprived of family contact for months to come.

But Johnson's spokesman said the prime minister was hopeful "that people can celebrate Christmas as a family this year".

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