

# France far from exiting partial lockdown, says government

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France is unlikely to lift a partial coronavirus lockdown any time soon, a government spokesman said on Wednesday, even if some restrictions may be relaxed before Christmas.

President Emmanuel Macron and top ministers discussed the crisis, including whether to ease some restrictions from December 1 "if conditions allow it", spokesman Gabriel Attal said.

But Attal insisted: "We're not at all near ending the lockdown, we're still far from it even."

Declines in new infections since a second nationwide lockdown began on October 30 have sparked calls from business groups to let shops open as soon as November 27 for the "Black Friday" sales that kick off the holiday shopping season.

If not, they fear losing out to internet giants such as Amazon, expected to target stuck-at-home shoppers.

The French mayors' association AMF also called

on Wednesday for a gradual reopening of shops "to avoid a rush of clients ahead of Christmas, when allowing them to resume operations will be inevitable".

But Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire on Wednesday called on retailers—including e-commerce firms—to postpone the Black Friday marketing blitz.

Macron himself is again expected to address the nation on the virus crisis next week, in particular on the prospects for travel and family gatherings for the fast-approaching holiday break.

But officials are wary of taking a "stop and go" approach to fighting the outbreak even if the pandemic slows, since hospitals remain packed with COVID-19 patients.

Health authorities reported Tuesday 427 coronavirus deaths in the preceding 24 hours, and a total of 4,759 patients in intensive care, including 361 admitted in the last day.

Total deaths since the pandemic began in France number 46,698.

This meant the vast majority of intensive care beds available before the crisis erupted are now full—though the government has scrambled to make new ones available. But the number in intensive care has dropped from 4,838 patients on Tuesday and 4,919 on Monday.

The number of daily new infections on Tuesday stood at 12,587, far below the 50,000 to 60,000 when Macron announced the new partial lockdown last month.

But Macron said the number of daily cases must fall below 5,000 before the government could start significantly easing the latest restrictions.

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