

France to impose virus curfew after lockdown, including New Year's Eve

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The French government said Thursday it would lift a six-week-long coronavirus lockdown as expected on Tuesday but impose a curfew from 8 p.m., including on New Year's Eve, as the number of infections creeps up again.

Prime Minister Jean Castex ended days of speculation over the year-end holidays by confirming that families would be allowed to travel to celebrate Christmas together.

But in a severe blow for the cultural sector, he said that museums, theatres and cinemas, which had been hoping to try to recoup some of their losses over the holidays, would remain closed for an extra three weeks, as will football stadiums.

Castex said the situation had "considerably improved" since France entered a second lockdown on October 30, noting that the number of new infections had fallen from nearly 50,000 a day in late October to around 10,000.

But the decline "has slowed over the past several days," he said.

"We're on a sort of plateau," Castex said, warning that if the French dropped their guard they could face a third lockdown in the months to come.

The curfew to take effect on Tuesday will last from 8 p.m. to 6 a.m., with the exception of December 24, when families are invited to celebrate Christmas, but with no more than six adults per household.

Health Minister Olivier Veran admitted that France would fall far short of its goal of a maximum 5,000 new cases per day by Tuesday, when the lockdown ends.

On Thursday, the country recorded nearly 14,000 infections over the previous 24 hours, compared with 12,000 a week earlier.

"We have still not exited the second wave" of the epidemic, Veran said.

President Emmanuel Macron had initially conditioned lifting the lockdown on the 5,000-cases level being met but revised his stance to afford the French some relief after weeks of seclusion.

The restrictions were partly eased on November 28, when businesses selling "non-essential" goods and services, such as bookshops and hairdressers, were allowed to reopen.

But bars and restaurants remained closed and people still needed to fill out self-signed permission forms to leave their homes.

The total death toll in France since the beginning of the pandemic stands at over 55,000.

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