France to evacuate around 100 COVID patients from Paris

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France's government said Sunday it plans to evacuate around 100 COVID-19 patients from intensive care units in the Paris region this week as hospitals struggle to keep up with a surge in cases.

With the transfers, officials hope to avoid a new lockdown for the roughly 12 million people in and around the capital as they race to step up a vaccination drive that got off to a slow start.

"By the end of this week, probably around 100 patients will have been evacuated from the Ile-de-France region" encompassing Paris, government spokesman Gabriel Attal said at Orly airport, where two patients—aged 33 and 70—were airlifted to the southwestern city of Bordeaux.

Later this week, two specially equipped trains will transfer "several dozens of patients to regions that today are under less strain" from the pandemic, Attal added.

Asked if Paris would avoid a new lockdown, Attal said "we are doing everything we can to not have to take more difficult, more restrictive measures."

However, "we will always take whatever decisions are necessary."

The government has already ordered weekend shutdowns for the northern Pas-de-Calais region—where transfers of COVID patients to less crowded hospitals began earlier this month—and in the Mediterranean region surrounding Nice.

Of the nearly 4,100 COVID patients currently in intensive care nationwide, around 1,100 are in Paris-area hospitals.

A 6 pm curfew remains in place across France and restaurants, cafes, cinemas, theatres and large shopping centres have been shut, but the average daily number of new COVID cases has continued to climb steadily in recent weeks.

On Saturday, France's public health agency reported nearly 30,000 new cases over the previous 24 hours and 174 fatalities, bringing France's total death toll to 90,315.

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