

Spain imposes state of emergency on Madrid to curb virus spread

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Spain's central government has declared a state of emergency in Madrid. (Photo: Internet)

Madrid, October 9 (RHC)-- Spain's central government has declared a state of emergency in Madrid and its surrounding region to enforce a partial lockdown of the capital amid a surge in coronavirus infections.

"The government has decided to declare a state of emergency ... for the next 15 days," said Health Minister Salvador Illa on Friday following a two-hour cabinet meeting.

The measure, which comes into effect immediately, was rushed through ahead of a long holiday weekend for Spain's National Day on Monday, raising concerns people could take advantage of the legal limbo to head out of town.

Ministers met a day after a bombshell court ruling which effectively cancelled mobility restrictions on 4.5 million people in and around the capital to slow the rapid spread of the virus.

The court ruling had been welcomed by Madrid's right-wing regional authorities which had opposed the partial lockdown over its economic effects.

But in a late-night phone call, Spain's socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez issued an ultimatum to regional leader Isabel Diaz Ayuso: either the region passed the measures itself, or the government would declare a state of emergency to push them through.

"Protecting the health of Madrid's people is absolutely essential," insisted Illa, saying 66 people had died over the past week and some 500 were "fighting for their lives in intensive care".

"Patience has a limit," he said, pointing the finger at Madrid's leaders for failing to act. "Measures must be taken to protect the health of the people of Madrid and to prevent this from spreading to other regions."

The Madrid court had annulled the measures because they were imposed by the central government and not by the regional authorities who manage public healthcare. By imposing a state of emergency, the government now has the legal right to enforce the measures it sought to impose earlier.

Initially imposed on October 2, the restrictions barred residents of the capital and nine nearby towns from leaving the city limits except for work, school or on medical grounds. They also impose an 11pm curfew on bars and restaurants and reduce indoor seating capacity by half.

Ahead of the cabinet meeting, Deputy Prime Minister Carmen Calvo said the government's pleas had fallen on deaf ears. "We have only one objective: to protect Madrid. If the region cannot do it, we will," Calvo said.

Enrique Ruiz Escudero, Madrid's health chief, said it was "very difficult to understand" the central authorities' declaration of a state of emergency, as he said regional restrictions imposed weeks ago were paying off.

Still, a group of scientific and medical organisations representing 170,000 professionals published a letter online pleading for an end to the political infighting.

"You must accept, once and for all, that to deal with the pandemic, key decisions must be based on the best-available scientific evidence and completely disconnected from the ongoing political confrontation," it said.

The infection rate in the region of Madrid currently stands at 564 cases per 100,000 people, compared with just 257 in the rest of Spain, which is the highest in the European Union.

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