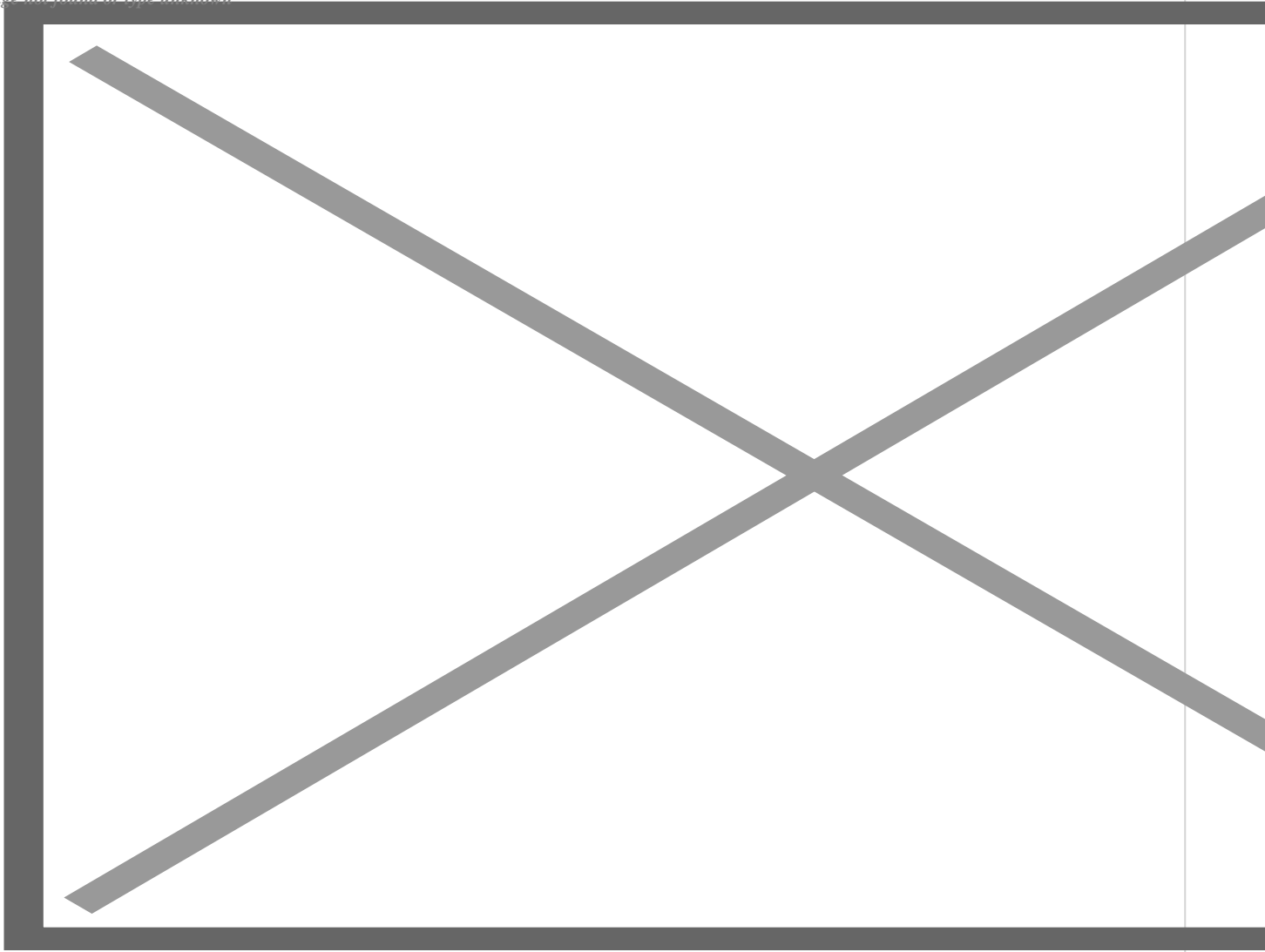


France imposes 6 p.m. nationwide curfew

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French Prime Minister Jean Castex puts on his mask.

Paris, January 15 (RHC)-- The French government will impose a daily nationwide curfew at 6 p.m. starting Saturday to combat a worrying increase in COVID-19 cases, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced. The measure will remain in force for at least two weeks, Castex told a news conference.

Except for emergency services, all services and shops will have to close at that time, he said. "The virus is still spreading actively," Castex said.

Up to now, most of France has been under an 8 p.m. curfew, with some parts of the country, especially in the hard-hit east, already under the stricter 6 p.m. curfew that Castex said had resulted in an infection rate two or three times lower than in the rest of the country.

The nationwide curfew "will allow us to respond gradually and avoid having to taking more difficult measures.... It lets us reduce social interactions at the end of the day, without limiting essential activities during the day," Castex said.

He added that while a much-feared infection surge following the year-end holidays had not happened "thanks to your behavior," a new lockdown could be imposed "without delay" if the health situation were to deteriorate badly.

The situation in France is "under control compared to neighboring countries but still fragile," he warned, with pressure on hospitals still "high but stable." Schools will remain open, but indoor sports activities have again been banned for now.

First-year university students will nonetheless be authorized to return to their courses on-site, but with reduced numbers of participants, from January 25th. Castex also said that travelers arriving in France from non-European Union destinations would have to present a negative PCR COVID test less than 72 hours old, and would have to self-isolate for seven days. They would then have to take a second PCR test.

The new measures were partly motivated by fears that new mutant variants of the virus, first found in Britain and South Africa, would become a dominant spread factor, Castex said. For now, the new strains represent 1 to 1.5 percent of new contaminations.

In a further effort to stop their spread, Castex said that up to one million pupils and teachers at schools would be tested every month for COVID. To speed up a vaccination drive that critics have slammed as too slow compared to France's European neighbors, Castex said people with illnesses making them particularly vulnerable to COVID would have access to vaccinations starting Monday, when "more than 700" vaccination centers would be operational.

He added that over one million people will have been vaccinated by the end of January, in line with targets announced in late December. Castex also defended the decision to prioritize vaccines for the elderly and health workers, instead of trying to vaccinate as much of the general population as soon as possible.

"The sooner we can vaccinate the most vulnerable, the sooner our hospitals will be spared the risk of being overwhelmed," he said. The vaccination program "is the priority of priorities" in fighting the virus crisis, and "the vaccines are going to get us out of this crisis by next summer," Castex said. In the meantime, "we must all be patient and responsible."

The new measures came as a care home for the elderly in western France issued an urgent call Thursday for reinforcements, saying 83 of its 86 residents had tested positive for COVID-19. Only three weeks ago, the home in the town of Secondigny had no cases at all, it said, but since then the virus had spread "with frightening speed." Three people had died of COVID, and several staff members had fallen ill.



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