

Europe goes into lockdown amid COVID-19 surge

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Paris, December 29 (RHC)-- Countries across Europe are imposing restrictions on social life during the holiday season in response to a growing number of COVID-19 cases. The authorities fear hospitals could be overwhelmed by Omicron-variant patients.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex announced a series of new measures aimed at curbing the spread of COVID-19. These will come into force on January 3rd and remain in place for at least three weeks.

The maximum size of mass gatherings will be limited to 2,000 people indoors and 5,000 outdoors, with a complete ban on standing concerts. A mask mandate will be reintroduced in city centers. Consumption

of food and drinks in cinemas, theaters, and sports venues, and during long-distance travel on public transport, will not be allowed.

Companies that can allow employees to work remotely will have to do so for at least three days a week, the government said.

France stopped short of preemptively shutting down schools, which are set to reopen next Monday, but will evaluate whether such a measure might be necessary during a special meeting on Wednesday. In mid-January, parliament is set to vote on a bill to introduce a vaccination pass.

Greece likewise announced on Monday new rules for the January 3-16 period. The restrictions include a midnight curfew for bars and restaurants, a ban on serving standing customers, and a limit of six people per table, Health Minister Thanos Plevris said. People visiting public spaces or using mass transport will be required to wear high-protection masks.

The measures come on top of existing regulations, which banned Christmas and New Year festivities and prohibited unvaccinated people from visiting public venues.

In Germany, the restrictions announced last week came into force on Tuesday. They introduced a cap of 10 people for private gatherings, which are allowed only for the vaccinated and the recovered. If one or more people have no proof of immunity, only two households are allowed to mix.

There is also a ban on large public gatherings, including outdoor New Year celebrations in popular streets and squares. The authorities have banned all firework displays in restricted areas to discourage violators, under the threat of fines.

As he was announcing the regulations, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stressed that his government and the leaders of federal states had agreed to put them in place after Christmas because previous experience had shown that "Christmas and Easter haven't been great drivers of infections."

Spain's northern region of Catalonia last week imposed a nightlife curfew, limited social gatherings to 10 people, and capped the capacity of many public venues to either 50% or 70%. The holiday measures, which are to remain in place until at least January 7, are more restrictive than in other parts of the country and caused mass protests in Barcelona on Christmas Eve.

Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez failed to convince regional leaders to have a unified set of measures beyond a mandate to wear masks outdoors. Contrasting Catalonia, the region of Madrid focused on ramping up testing.

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