

'Idiots' may extend French lockdown

AFP, Paris

France's two-week lockdown to try to stem the coronavirus is likely to be extended, officials said yesterday, as the interior minister blasted "idiots" who are flouting the home confinement rules.

President Emmanuel Macron ordered French residents to stay at home from Tuesday except for essential excursions such as going to the doctor, walking the dog, or going for a solitary run, and banned any gatherings.

People can go to work only if homeworking is not possible.

But news reports have shown groups of people strolling in parks and the one-metre (three feet) safe inter-personal distance has been frequently ignored.

Interior Minister Christophe Castaner accused people of underestimating the risk, telling Europe 1 radio: "There are people who think they are modern-day heroes by breaking the rules while they are in fact idiots."

Some officials have called for even stricter limits and Paris police are mulling closing riverside walkways -- a move already enforced in Bordeaux.

Macron yesterday urged companies and workers to continue their activities "in compliance with the health safety rules".

Genevieve Chene, who heads France's public health agency, said two to four weeks of confinement are needed for the outbreak to be adequately contained.

"It is likely that it is indeed necessary to extend (the containment measures) in order for the braking to be sufficient," Chene said.

The timing will depend largely on how closely people conform with the confinement measures, she said, adding that France's peak was likely to be around the middle or end of May.

Meanwhile, the French government has started requisitioning hotel rooms for homeless people to occupy during the confinement period, Housing Minister Julien Denormandie announced.

More than 170 rooms will be made available in Paris by the end of the week and the government has identified 80 sites elsewhere for an estimated 250,000 homeless.

Some 50 million euros has been set aside for the project.



'Biggest challenge since WWII'

Says Merkel on coronavirus crisis, urges Germans to take warning 'seriously'

AFP, Berlin

Germany is facing its biggest challenge "since the Second World War" in the fight against the coronavirus, Chancellor Angela Merkel has said, in what observers called a "final warning" for citizens to heed sweeping confinement measures.

In a dramatic television appeal, Merkel said everyone played a part in slowing down a pandemic that has raced across the globe and triggered unprecedented peacetime lockdowns.

"The situation is serious. Take it seriously. Not since German reunification, no, not since the Second World War has our country faced a challenge that depends so much on our collective solidarity," she said.

Although her 15 years in office have been marked by blows like the financial crisis, the 2015 refugee crisis and Brexit, the veteran leader has never taken to the airwaves to address citizens directly outside of traditional New Year's greetings.

"I truly believe we can succeed in this task, if all citizens truly understand their own tasks," Merkel said.



German authorities have shut down schools, many businesses and public spaces in recent days in increasingly desperate attempts to stem the spread of the virus.

The country has, however, stopped short of ordering people to stay home, in contrast to tougher restrictions introduced in France, Belgium, Italy and Spain.

Instead, Germans have continued to go outside to enjoy the spring sunshine and socialise, even holding "corona parties".

Although Merkel did not announce any tougher measures in her speech, she said that could change at any time.

Broadcaster NTV joined several

German newspapers in describing the address as Merkel's "final warning" to avoid mandatory lockdowns.

The best-selling Bild tabloid called it a "historic" and stirring speech that marked a change in tone for the "usually so sober chancellor".

Merkel, who hails from Germany's former communist East, said she understood how hard it was to give up "hard-fought rights" like freedom of movement and travel.

Such decisions were never taken lightly in a democracy, she said, and could only be temporary. "But they are necessary right now to save lives."

Europe's top economy on Monday introduced strict checks

on its land frontiers with France, Austria, Luxembourg, Denmark and Switzerland, allowing through only cross-border commuters and delivery trucks.

The German interior ministry expanded those restrictions on Wednesday evening to include European air and sea traffic.

Merkel's speech echoed that of French President Emmanuel Macron, who in a sombre address on Monday likened the outbreak to war.

Germany is among the countries worst hit by the coronavirus pandemic, with latest figures showing 12 deaths and 8,198 confirmed cases on Wednesday, a jump of 1,042 from the previous day.

The Robert Koch Institute (RKI) for public health warned there could be 10 million cases within two to three months if people do not avoid contact.

The government earlier Wednesday said it planned to ramp up intensive care capabilities. Federal and state officials separately announced they could commandeer spaces like hotels and rehabilitation centres to treat people with milder symptoms.

'Second wave' of cases unlikely

Says China amid warnings

REUTERS, Shanghai

Chinese scientists and health experts involved in the country's fight against the coronavirus believe the worst is now over, downplaying warnings that the disease could become seasonal or that a deadlier "second wave" could hit later in the year.

As the pandemic continues to spread overseas, a growing number of countries are bracing themselves for a worst-case scenario in which COVID-19 remains in circulation until next year at the earliest.

But medical advisers in China have expressed confidence that the country's strict containment measures have done enough to ensure that the outbreak can be brought under complete control, domestically at least, within weeks.

Though they remain wary of the risks of "importing" cases from overseas, they say China should be capable of eliminating COVID-19 in the same way it eliminated Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003. SARS was eventually contained after the government imposed stringent screening and quarantine measures.

"For me, a second outbreak (of coronavirus), a domestic outbreak in China, wouldn't be a great concern," said Cao Wei, deputy director of the Department of Infectious Diseases at the Peking Union Medical College Hospital.

She told a briefing on Monday that while China needed another month to make a final judgment, the existing prevention and control measures should be enough to bring the epidemic to an end domestically.



A medical worker embraces a member of a medical assistance team from Jiangsu province at a ceremony marking their departure after helping with the COVID-19 recovery effort, in Wuhan, in China's central Hubei province yesterday. Medical teams from across China began leaving Wuhan this week after the number of new coronavirus infections dropped. PHOTO: AFP

COVID-19 UPDATES

US suspending visa services

The United States is suspending all routine visa services as of Wednesday in most countries worldwide due to the coronavirus outbreak, a spokeswoman for the State Department said, an unprecedented move that will potentially impact hundreds of thousands of people. A spokeswoman said the move would not affect the Visa Waiver Program (VWP), which enables most citizens of participating countries to travel to the United States for tourism or business for stays of 90 days or less without obtaining a visa.

Asean summit postponed

A summit of Southeast Asian and other international leaders scheduled in Vietnam early next month has been postponed until end-June due to worries about the coronavirus pandemic, Vietnam's Ministry of Foreign Affairs said yesterday. The 36th summit of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) had been scheduled to take place on April 6-9 in Vietnam, the group's chair this year.

Japan may open schools

An expert panel guiding Japan's coronavirus response was due to recommend yesterday that some schools can reopen, though mass gatherings that could reignite the outbreak should still be avoided. The infectious disease experts will recommend at a meeting that areas of Japan with low numbers of coronavirus cases can consider resuming classes and sporting events, said Koji Wada, a member of the panel. Japan has had 923 domestically transmitted cases and 32 deaths.

UK, US face ventilator crisis

WHO calls for ramping up production and supplies of medical equipment

AGENCIES

Britain faces a "massive shortage" of ventilators that will be needed to treat critically ill patients suffering from coronavirus, after it failed to invest enough in intensive care equipment, a leading ventilator manufacturer said yesterday.

The call came as United States appealed for donations of respirator masks to combat a shortage of the lifesaving equipment.

"England is very poorly equipped," said Andreas Wieland, chief executive of Hamilton Medical in Switzerland, which says it is the world's largest ventilator maker.

"They're going to have a massive shortage, once the virus really arrives there," he told Reuters in an interview.

UK health minister Matt Hancock has acknowledged the existing stock of 5,000 ventilators is inadequate.

Ventilators, running in the thousands of dollars per unit, are used to help people with respiratory difficulties to breathe. They are high-tech versions of the "iron lungs" that kept people alive into the 1950s during fierce polio epidemics.

Worldwide, the devices have become shorthand for the rapid advance of the disease -- and the desperation of

officials who fear their stocks are inadequate. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo said the 3,000 devices in his state where 20 people have died are a fraction of what he'd like to have.

"The entire world is trying to buy ventilators," Cuomo said, according to a transcript published on Wednesday, adding he is hoping to tap a US federal government stockpile.

Germany's Draegerwerk last week got a government order for 10,000, equal to a typical year's production.

Wieland's company in the Swiss Alps has boosted normal production of some 15,000 ventilators annually by 30-40% and now can produce about 80 ventilators daily.

Last week, Hamilton Medical shipped 400 ventilators to Italy, whose intensive care units have been overwhelmed by more than 35,000 cases of the rapidly spreading virus and almost 3,000 deaths.

About 50% of those with coronavirus in Italy accepted into intensive care units are dying, compared with typical mortality rates of 12% to 16% in such units.

The World Health Organization called on Wednesday for "order and discipline" in the market for health equipment needed to fight the coronavirus pandemic and said it was in discussions with China and others to ramp up supplies.



Thousands of medical staff infected in Italy

AL JAZEERA ONLINE

Rome, Italy - As coronavirus cases jump and deaths surge in Italy, new figures show an "enormous" level of contagion among the country's medical personnel.

At least 2,629 health workers have been infected by coronavirus since the onset of the outbreak in February, representing 8.3 percent of total cases, according to a report published on Wednesday by Gruppo Italiano per la Medicina Basata sulle Evidenze or GIMBE - Italy's Group for Evidence-based Medicine.

The data has sent shock waves through the country's already strained healthcare system.

"We extracted this number from data provided by the National Health Institute," GIMBE Director Nino Cartabellotta, a public health expert, told Al Jazeera.

"Figures regarding the contagion among doctors, nurses and general health professionals have started being disclosed only on March 11. Hundreds of new cases have been daily recorded since then. But medical personnel on the front line should be the first to be protected."

Cartabellotta said the actual number was likely to be higher. Many who tend to coronavirus patients are still only using surgical face masks with no proper protective filters to shield them from contagion. Infected medical staff in China made up 3.8 percent of the total cases, with only five deaths.

On Wednesday, Italy announced that over the preceding 24 hours, the number of deaths had risen by 475 to 2,978, an increase of 19 percent, as cases jumped to a total 35,713. There are no official figures on the number of medical personnel who have died of coronavirus in Italy.



EU's chief Brexit Barnier negotiator tests positive

The EU's chief Brexit negotiator Michel Barnier has the novel coronavirus that is sweeping the globe, he announced yesterday. "I'm fine, morale is good," the former French foreign minister said in a video posted on his Twitter account. Meanwhile, two members of the US House of Representatives, Mario Diaz-Balart of Florida and Ben McAdams of Utah, said on Wednesday they had tested positive for the coronavirus, becoming the first members of Congress known to have contracted the respiratory illness. SOURCE: AFP

MASS MOVE TO WORK FROM HOME

Beware of hackers

REUTERS, Tel Aviv/Washington

As people disperse to their homes to work and study because of the coronavirus pandemic, taking their laptops and company data with them, cyber security experts say hackers will follow, seeking to take advantage and infiltrate corporations.

Government officials in the United States, Britain and elsewhere have issued warnings about the dangers of a newly remote workforce, while tech companies are seeing surges in requests to help secure out-of-office employees.

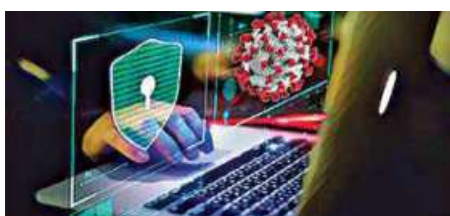
"People who have never worked from home before are trying to do it and they are trying to do it at scale," said Wendy Nather, a senior advisor with Cisco's Duo Security who has spent the past decade working from home for various jobs.

She said the sudden transition would mean more scope for mistakes, more strain

on information technology staff, and more opportunity for cyber criminals hoping to trick employees into forking over their passwords.

Criminals are dressing up password-stealing messages and malicious software as coronavirus-themed alerts, warnings, or apps. Some researchers have found hackers masquerading as the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in a bid to break into emails or swindle users out of bitcoin, while others have spotted hackers using a malicious virus-themed app to hijack Android phones.

The opportunities for hackers are manifold. Many workers are moving their employers' data from professionally managed corporate networks to home WiFi setups protected with basic passwords. Some organizations are loosening restrictions to allow employees to access work-critical information from their bedrooms or home offices.



REUTERS, Dublin/Madrid

On Sunday morning, Irish chef Cuan Greene woke up to the review of his life. Britain's Observer newspaper told readers his cooking would make them "thrillingly giddy and euphoric". Hours later he was out of a job.

Bastible, the Dublin restaurant where he was head chef, was closing as a result of the growing threat from the coronavirus. Greene, 27, and 13 colleagues were all let go.

"When you get a great review, it's a special week every time, and those weeks turn into great months. That's what's upsetting because with what's going on, you feel slightly stunted," said Greene, who worked in the world famous Danish restaurant Noma before returning home to Dublin.

"That's very hard to take, I have to admit and that's what makes me turn at night."

Greene's woes are an example of how the coronavirus pandemic is laying waste to hospitality businesses across the board, irrespective of size or success. Employers across Europe are slashing jobs at a ferocious pace as emergency lockdowns shutter bars, restaurants and hotels, empty offices and ground airlines.



It will be months before official national data reveals the scale of the destruction but the International Labour Organization warned on Wednesday that up to 25 million jobs could be lost globally if governments don't act fast, outpacing the 22 million jobs lost during the 2008-09 financial crisis.

European countries have pledged hundreds of billions of euros to mitigate the economic impact of the virus and have eased the rules to make it easier for people to qualify for unemployment benefit and to help companies keep workers on.

In Italy, the epicentre of the outbreak in Europe, the state has gone one step further, suspending

any firing procedures begun after February 23. In Ireland, where Prime Minister Leo Varadkar estimated 100,000 people or more - almost 5% of the workforce - could lose their jobs within two weeks.

In Germany, Belgium companies have flooded local authorities with requests for state aid to finance short-time work. The abruptness of the layoffs across Europe, coupled with the growing proportion of contract workers who may not qualify so easily for unemployment benefit, mean not everyone will be protected.

Over 100,000 workers across Spain have been let go due to the coronavirus, and the total number could reach 1 million.

In Poland, the job losses are particularly difficult for younger workers used to having options.

Nicoise Kemp, 23, a student in Warsaw, lost her job at one of the city's top hotels after four years working there as a waitress and bartender.

"Right now there isn't even any recruitment going on," she said. "I think for students this was quite a shock, because one moment we had a job, we had university classes we were very busy, and then one day we don't have anything."

From hero to zero

Coronavirus upends livelihoods across Europe