Return to lockdowns and curfews as cases keep rising in Europe

Jon Henley
Europe correspondent

Regions of Spain and Italy have returned to lockdown and Ireland will do so from today as countries across Europe report new Covid infection highs and governments struggle to contain the pandemic’s second wave.

Navarre, in northern Spain, where there are 945 cases per 100,000 people against 312 nationally, announced a two-week lockdown from tomorrow that will be stricter than curbs imposed on Madrid by central government.

People will only be let in or out of Navarre for work, university, to care for relatives or for emergencies, the regional government said. Restaurants, cafes and bars will be closed.

The lockdown in and around the capital, the source of a bitter row between the central and regional governments, is due to expire this Saturday amid media reports that Madrid is considering introducing a curfew.

The central government said yesterday it too was considering curfews to tackle a nationwide rise in daily cases that reached 38,000 on Monday.

A curfew in Madrid and beyond would require invoking a state of emergency, the health minister, Salvador Illa, said, adding that if it lasted more than two weeks it would require the support of some opposition parties.

Ireland is set to become the first EU country to return to lockdown, the Taoiseach, Micheal Martin, confirmed late on Monday, issuing a nationwide “stay at home” order but insisting schools would stay open.

The measures come into effect for six weeks from midnight tonight and will force all non-essential retail businesses to close, limit bars and restaurants to takeaways, and people are required to stay at home with a 5km travel limit for exercise.

Italy’s southern region of Campania is to ask central government to allow a night-time curfew from this weekend, after the northern region of Lombardy got the green light for a similar 11pm to 5am lockdown from tomorrow.

Unlike during the first wave, the prime minister, Giuseppe Conte, wants to give towns and regions more leeway to decide their own curbs. Local officials in both regions said their health systems risked being overwhelmed, with the mayor of Naples saying that will be stricter than curbs imposed during the first wave.

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945
The number of cases per 100,000 people in the Navarre region of Spain; the national average is 312

Police officers in Milan which, with the rest of Lombardy, faces an 11pm to 5am curfew amid soaring hospital admissions

Spain Grand new hotel has everything except guests

Sam Jones Madrid
Stephen Burgen Barcelona

Madrid’s first new grand hotel in almost a century has more than enough to recommend it to even the most discerning and demanding of visitors.

As well as a presidential suite for VIPs and their bodyguards, there is a spa, a handy branch of Hermès, and a restaurant by the three Michelin-starred chef Dani García.

The only thing the Four Seasons project – such as excavating a car park for 400 vehicles and coming up with a way to drive corridors through different buildings on different levels – to marquetry or doing an enormous Rubik’s Cube.

None of these challenges, however, has come anywhere close to the difficulties thrown up by the pandemic. “I think we’re going to go through some very difficult times indeed over the coming months or even years,” he said.

The figures bear out his prognosis. According to the Hotel Business Association of Madrid, the occupancy rate throughout the Madrid region is about 12%. Those hotels that have reopened after the national lockdown are running with only 20-25% of their full staff, with the rest on furlough. A spokeswoman for the association said: “Although the government has extended the furlough scheme until 31 January, there’s no doubt the hotel and tourist sector will continue to bear the brunt of this economic crisis.”

Jorge Marichal, head of the Spanish hotel owners’ association, Celeh, said: “In terms of demand, the sector has practically come to a halt. It needs shock measures to keep up liquidity and a rescue plan.”

While the situation is looking dire for the hotel trade, Madrid’s bars and restaurants are still open despite the pandemic lockdown, and many outside terraces have been doing a brisk trade.

In Catalonia, however, bars and restaurants are limited to takeaway and delivery services until the end of the month, as the regional government seeks to slow the second wave of the virus.

About 15% of Barcelona’s 9,000 bars and restaurants have been closed since lockdown in March, and Roger Pallarols, the president of the city’s restaurant association, estimated half could shut permanently within six to nine months if business did not improve.

Back in Madrid, Lamela remained phlegmatic: “Life will go on, and we’ll keep on adapting just as we have during other disasters and wars,” he said. “It may take a while, but this will all go away.”