

Boris Johnson locks down England as UK COVID-19 cases pass one million



London, October 31 (RHC)-- British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has ordered England back into a national lockdown after the United Kingdom passed the milestone of one million COVID-19 cases and a second wave of infections threatened to overwhelm the health service.

The UK, which has the biggest official death toll in Europe from COVID-19, is grappling with more than 20,000 new coronavirus cases a day and scientists have warned the "worst case" scenario of 80,000 dead could be exceeded.

Johnson, at a hastily convened news conference in Downing Street after news of a lockdown leaked to local media, said that the one-month lockdown across England would last until December 2.

In some of the most onerous restrictions in the UK's peacetime history, people will only be allowed to leave home for specific reasons such as education, work, exercise, shopping for essentials and medicines or caring for the vulnerable.

Essential shops, schools, and universities will remain open, Johnson said, and while elite sports will continue, amateur sports for adults and children will be asked to stop.

Pubs and restaurants will be shut apart from for takeaways. All non-essential retail will close.

"Now is the time to take action because there is no alternative," Johnson said, flanked by his chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, and his chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance. "Unless we act, we could see deaths in this country running at several thousand a day."

A government program that has paid 80 percent of the wages of millions of furloughed employees during the pandemic was due to end Saturday, but will be extended during the new lockdown.

The imposition of stricter curbs came after scientists warned the outbreak was going in the wrong direction and that action was needed to halt the spread of the virus if families were to have any hope of gathering at Christmas in December.

Johnson was criticized by political opponents for moving too slowly into the first national lockdown, which stretched from March 23 to July 4. He fell ill with COVID-19 in late March and was hospitalised in early April.

The measures bring England into alignment with France and Germany by imposing nationwide restrictions almost as severe as the ones that drove the global economy this year into its deepest recession in generations.

Austria and Greece also announced on Saturday a nighttime curfew and the closure of cafes, bars and restaurants to all but takeaway service until the end of November to contain a resurgence in COVID-19 cases.

The UK has the world's fifth-largest official death toll, after the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico, according to a Johns Hopkins University tally. So far, the UK has reported 46,555 COVID-19 deaths – defined as those dying within 28 days of a positive test. A broader death measure of those with COVID-19 on their death certificates gives the toll as 58,925.

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