

French shops to reopen May 11, masks a must on public transport

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Shops and markets across France can reopen from May 11 when the government will begin easing its coronavirus lockdown, Prime Minister Edouard Philippe said Tuesday.

But Philippe said that school classes will resume only gradually and face masks will be compulsory on public transport.

"We must protect the French without immobilising France to the point that it collapses," he told the National Assembly, or parliament.

Philippe said home confinement had helped slow the epidemic's spread and prevented tens of thousands of deaths, but the struggling economy must be reopened as eight weeks of closures put it under major strain.

Only 75 of the 577 lawmakers were present, with several empty seats between each two, in line with virus-busting social-distancing measures.

"It is a fine line that must be followed. A little too much carelessness, and the epidemic restarts. A little too much caution, and the entire country

sinks," Philippe said ahead of a debate and vote on the measures he proposed.

Shops and fresh produce markets should be allowed to reopen from May 11, with strict distancing measures to prevent too many people in once place at the same time.

But restaurants and bars will remain closed for now, as will large museums, cinemas, theatres and concert halls.

Primary schools and daycare centres can reopen progressively from May 11, followed by junior high schools the following week, though only in areas not hard-hit by the epidemic.

A decision will be made by the end of May on when to reopen restaurants, cafes and high schools, Philippe said.

700,000 tests

Public parks and gardens can open only in areas with no active virus circulation, and beaches will remain off-limits until June 1.

People who have the option of working from home should continue to do so after May 11, at least for three weeks, and Philippe issued a "firm request" to companies to respect this directive.

For those who have no choice, limited public transport will be available from the end of the official confinement period, but users will be obliged to wear face masks, said Philippe.

He gave an assurance that there will be enough masks for all from May 11, and a national capacity to conduct some 700,000 viral tests per week.

People who test positive will be isolated, and people they have been in contact with will be traced and also tested.

Churches and mosques will be open, but with no religious ceremonies allowed before June 2. Funerals will remain limited to 20 people, and weddings will continue to be put off for now.

All gatherings, whether in public places or private homes, must be limited to 10 people, Philippe added.

"We will have to learn to live with the virus," he said, since no vaccine or proven treatment is yet available.

He warned that the lockdown could still be extended at the last minute, and urged people to continue observing confinement rules so as not to unleash a new infection wave.

The government's goal was to limit the rate of new, daily infections to 3,000 by May 11, he said. But if this ceiling is breached, "confinement will not be lifted on May 11, or we will do it more strictly."

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