

Johnson rules out tougher Christmas virus curbs for UK

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British Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Wednesday resisted calls to tighten coronavirus restrictions over Christmas, as London faced stricter measures and concern grew about rising case numbers.

The government has been under mounting pressure to toughen proposals allowing up to three households to meet indoors during a five-day festive window from December 23, as European neighbours curb their easing plans amid surging infections.

The *British Medical Journal (BMJ)* and the Health Service Journal (HSJ) on Tuesday warned the UK-wide move could lead to the state-run National Health Service (NHS) being overwhelmed.

But Johnson insisted it would be "inhuman" to "cancel Christmas" now, arguing people should think hard about their plans and "exercise extreme caution" while still being allowed to gather.

"Have yourselves a merry little Christmas," Johnson said at a press conference. "And I'm

afraid this year I do mean little."

After talks with leaders of the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the British leader said the rules should be seen as "a maximum not a target".

"We are keeping the laws the same—but we all want to send the same message: a smaller Christmas is going to be a safer Christmas, and a shorter Christmas is a safer Christmas."

Johnson said there had been "unanimous" agreement between London, Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast not to change the policy, after a tough year of social distancing and lockdowns.

But Wales' First Minister Mark Drakeford announced that only two households in the country should mix indoors during the five-day period.

"The fewer people we mix with in our homes, the less chance we have of catching or spreading the virus," he told a regular briefing.

England's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty said there was widespread acknowledgement that the Christmas easing would lead to more cases, hospitalisations and deaths.

But he added such decisions were a "balance" of risks, while echoing the calls for caution.

"Keep it small, keep it short, keep it local and think of the most vulnerable people," Whitty said, flanking Johnson in Downing Street.

Body blow

Britain has been one of the worst affected countries in the pandemic, registering some 65,000 deaths from about 1.9 million positive cases, according to government figures.

Spiralling infection rates in London and parts of southeast England have triggered concerns about a further rise in January, similar to those after the US Thanksgiving holidays. © 2020 AFP

London moved into the highest level of restrictions early Wednesday, forcing theatres, pubs and restaurants to close again, and banning household mixing indoors.

Takeaway food outlets can still operate, and people can meet in groups of up to six in public places outside. Schools will also remain open.

The move is another body blow for the beleaguered hospitality and entertainment sectors, which have suffered huge losses in revenue and jobs since the start of the pandemic.

Cases were doubling every seven days in some areas, according to officials, a more downbeat assessment after hopes of a breakthrough were raised last week with the start of a vaccination programme.

The roll-out has seen nearly 138,000 people receive their first dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine since last Tuesday, the government said.

Compliance with existing guidelines is an issue, and concerns have been raised about higher rates of infection among secondary school children aged 11-18.

Increased testing in the worst-hit areas in and around London has been introduced.

England only emerged from a four-week lockdown earlier this month, and the government introduced a targeted three-tier regional system of restrictions to try to cut infection rates.

London had been placed in "Tier 2", which means non-essential shops and services can open, but it currently has one of the highest infection rates in the country.

Under Tier 3, shops and hairdressers can also still stay open.

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