

Lockdown-shy Sweden passes pandemic law

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Sweden's parliament on Friday passed a pandemic law giving the government new powers to curb the spread of COVID-19 in a country that has controversially relied on mostly non-coercive measures to fight the virus.

Sweden has made headlines around the world by never imposing the type of lockdown seen elsewhere in Europe but it has started tightening measures in the face of a stronger than expected second wave over recent months.

The new law, which comes into force on Sunday, will enable the government to close businesses, shopping malls or [public transport](#).

"The government today has not made any decision to close down businesses, but is prepared to also make those decisions," Prime Minister Stefan Lofven told reporters at a news conference on Friday.

It will also be able to impose limits on the number of people allowed in specific public places, rather than general restrictions on public gatherings.

Asked why the law was only put forward 10 months after the start of the epidemic, Health Minister Lena Hallengren said "it was not something we saw the need for in the spring".

"Then we had a summer with a low level of infection and then the work started during the autumn," Hallengren told broadcaster SVT.

In most cases, breaches of the new restrictions will lead to a fine.

'Marathon, not a sprint'

Unlike many other countries, Sweden does not have legislation that allows the government to shut down society in peacetime, and even with the new law the government cannot order people to confine themselves to their homes.

Health authorities have also insisted that battling the pandemic is "a

marathon, not a sprint", and measures have to be sustainable for the long haul.

Faced with a strong [second wave](#), the country has already tightened preventative measures since November last year.

As cases multiplied, authorities urged people to limit social interactions to immediate family or a few friends.

On Friday, the government announced that a ban on public gatherings of more than eight people, in force since November, would now extend to private gatherings in public places, such as parties or ceremonies, but they are still not binding for gatherings within the home.

The [government](#) also announced new rules for sports halls, swimming pools, shopping centres and other shops.

These establishments will as of Sunday, need to make sure not to take in more visitors than one per ten square metres.

Similar recommendations from health authorities to limit crowding was already in place, but under these new rules business face the risk of a fine or being closed down.

The special pandemic law, which is in force until September, was first planned to come into effect in March but this was moved forward to January.

The country of 10.3 million people has been bit hit much harder than its Nordic neighbours and on Thursday reported a total of 489,471 cases of COVID-19 and 9,433 associated deaths.

According to a tally by AFP, Friday's figure means the country averaged

101 deaths per day over the last week, surpassing the previous record of 99 set in April.

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