

UK Moves Towards Lockdown As It Braces Itself for Coronavirus Escalation

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'Unprecedented' was the word repeated over and over by UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak on Friday as he delivered a package of economic measures to save the British economy from the repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Boris Johnson has effectively shut down the United Kingdom, as he announced last week the immediate closure of pubs, bars, restaurants gyms, leisure centres, cinemas and other public places in a bid to prevent the spread of the disease. He said stronger measures were now required as 'There is no guarantee that you will get mild symptoms and you can still be a carrier, have no symptoms and pass it on to others'. It had been clear that not everyone had been following the government's advice earlier in the week to maintain social distancing, and Johnson had hinted at his press conference on Thursday that if necessary, stronger measures would be required. He urged people not to go out as nobody was 'invincible'.

The UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak unveiled [plans](#) to assist UK businesses which would effectively mean nationalising huge sectors of the economy - an extraordinary move for a Conservative government. He said that government grants will cover 80% of the salary of retained workers up to a total of £2,500 a month and employers could top up salaries if they wish. Announcing the 'Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme' he said that the cost of wages would be backdated to 1st March, and that the program would be extended if necessary. There is the possibility, according to experts, that the current crisis could last for a year or more.

Friday's spending plan marks an upscale from the Chancellor's original Coronavirus business strategy revealed earlier in the week. The Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme which he said originally would be for six months, has now been extended by another six months. In addition he has now promised to defer the next quarter of VAT payments, the equivalent of £30bn or 1.5% in GDP. He also said that small businesses would benefit from £25,000 in cash grants. The government had faced criticism earlier for not having done enough to help individuals, particularly the self-employed, but now it was announced that even the self-employed would be able to access full Universal Credit at a rate equivalent to Statutory Sick Pay. Rishi Sunak said that the rates of Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit would also be increased. In total the welfare package offered amounts to around £7bn.

So why has the government upped the stakes so dramatically? Well the warnings from both Italian and British medics are coming thick and fast. The death rate to Covid-19 in Italy is now 8.6% - astonishingly high. Medics invited the media into hospitals in Bergamo to stress

the extent to which doctors are being stretched. Staff is working 18 hours shifts and the average age of doctors and nurses is dropping as they also succumb to the virus. Speaking to the [Sky news](#), doctors stressed that Covid-19 should not be compared to the flu: it is a serious respiratory illness with a 50/50 chance of recovery. The statistics coming from Italy are frightening: to date there have been 5476 deaths and only 7024 recoveries. Doctors in the UK are warning that Britain could face an even worse epidemic – one consultant has said that in many ways the Italian healthcare system is better resourced and has many more intensive care beds. On Thursday one hospital in London declared a ‘critical incident’ as it ran out of beds to treat coronavirus patients. Elsewhere in the capital a mortuary was being built to cope with expected future casualties.

Comparisons with ‘war-time’ are being made more and more often. But the situation surpasses any war to date: this enemy is invisible and it’s everywhere – in 191 countries. Never has the Bank of England lowered its interest rates as low as 0.1% – not since its foundation in 1694. Never before has the government offered to effectively pay people’s salaries. Never before have we seen school exams cancelled. And this is just the beginning...

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