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EU proposes ban on travel into bloc to fight virus

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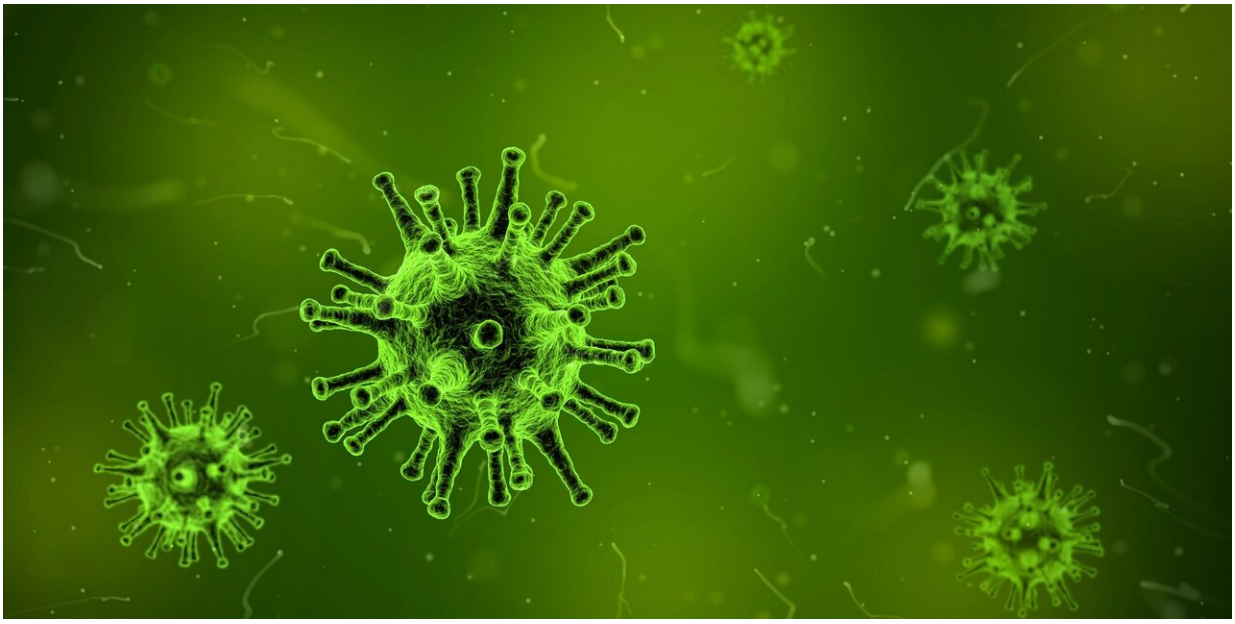

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The head of the European Commission proposed Monday that member states ban non-essential travel into the bloc—even as more EU capitals close their borders to slow the coronavirus epidemic.

Brussels has struggled to keep up with unilateral measures by EU members to restrict travel, and fears tougher border screening will damage efforts to forge a common response to the disease.

So, on Tuesday, commission chief Ursula von der Leyen is to propose to the leaders of the Schengen border-free zone that they restrict travel across the bloc's external borders—as the United States has done.

Non-Schengen EU members will be invited to apply the measures, as will former member Britain, and British travellers will not be banned during the post-Brexit transition until the end of the year.

"The less travel, the more we can contain the virus," von der Leyen said, after talks with the president of the European Council, Charles Michel, who is to host a video-summit with EU leaders on Tuesday.

"I propose to the heads of state and governments to introduce temporary restriction on non-essential travel to the European Union," she added.

The ban would be in effect for an "initial period of thirty days" and would not affect Europeans coming back home, social workers, or those "working on both sides of the borders", von der Leyen said.

But just minutes after she spoke, Spain became the latest country to close its land borders, shutting its land frontiers with fellow members France and Portugal to all but Spanish citizens and residents.

Earlier, Brussels officials had urged members to ensure the free-flow of freight over the union's internal borders.

Michel insisted the intention of the proposed new restrictions on Europe's external borders was to reduce the spread of the disease.

"The philosophy is to reduce movements that are not necessary and guarantee the movement of goods that are necessary," he said.

The idea "is to make sure that our health systems are able to prepare for

what is coming", the former Belgian prime minister said.

'Non-essential'

Michel is to officially propose the measure at the EU summit, which comes a day after the G7 held a similar high-level videoconference.

According to a draft of the proposal published by the European Commission, the member states of the Schengen passport free zone will be asked to approve a ban on all but essential arrivals.

Those exempt include transport workers, healthcare professionals, transit passengers and cross-border workers.

The Schengen group comprises 22 of the 27 EU members plus Switzerland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Iceland which have decided to do away with passport controls for most travellers within the zone.

The European Commission's plan said that Britain and Ireland, as well as prospective future Schengen members, would be "encouraged" to apply the same restrictions.

Europe has now become what the World Heath Organization regards as the epicentre of the global novel coronavirus outbreak, and Brussels is trying to coordinate the response.

Finance ministers from the eurozone single currency bloc were also holding video talks on Monday, as the continent readies a financial package to steady the economy.

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