

UK to introduce 14-day quarantine for international arrivals

May 22 2020



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Travellers arriving in Britain will face 14 days in quarantine from next month to prevent a second coronavirus outbreak, the government announced on Friday, warning that anyone breaking the rules faced a fine or prosecution.

The new rules will apply to all international arrivals except Ireland from June 8 and come after weeks of calls for tougher restrictions to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Healthcare professionals travelling to work in the crisis, seasonal agricultural workers and those working in freight and road haulage, among others, will be exempt.

"We want to reduce the risk of imported cases being introduced into the UK," Home Secretary Priti Patel told the government's daily media briefing.

Patel said the measure would be reviewed every three weeks, adding: "We are not shutting down completely. We are not closing our borders.

"What we are seeking to do is control the spread of the virus because we do not want a second wave of this virus."

The quarantine move is controversial, especially with the aviation sector, where flights have been grounded and passenger numbers slumped during lockdown measures.

France also expressed its disappointment that, despite initial reassurances, it would not be exempt from the plan.

'Catch-up'

Britain has the second-highest death toll in the world in the global pandemic, and the government has been criticised for not imposing border checks and quarantine sooner.

Ryanair boss Michael O'Leary this week branded a proposed quarantine plan "idiotic" and accused ministers of "making it up as they go along".

Virgin Atlantic said quarantine would prevent services from resuming and claimed there "simply won't be sufficient demand to resume passenger services before August at the earliest".

Trade body Airlines UK has said it "would effectively kill" international travel to the UK.

Others have questioned why Britain did not introduce quarantine earlier, like countries such as South Korea, Spain and the United States.

"The UK has been rather too much on the back foot, increasingly playing catch-up, firefighting," geneticist and Nobel Prize winner Paul Nurse told the BBC.

"We are desperate for clear leadership at all levels."

But Home Office chief scientific adviser John Aston said border restrictions would have had a "negligible" effect if imposed earlier, as the virus was so widespread within Britain.

"As the number of infections within the UK drops, we must now manage the risk of transmissions being reintroduced from elsewhere," he added.

The French interior ministry expressed its "regret" that it was not exempt from the quarantine plan, after assurances earlier this month that it would be.

"France is ready to put in place a reciprocal scheme once the system comes into force on the British side," it said in a statement.

Patel said she had been working closely with French officials and there were exemptions for "frontier workers" and to preserve "the critical supply of goods".

Contact tracing

Britain has recorded the highest number of deaths in Europe from coronavirus, with more than 36,000 people who have tested positive having died so far.

Under the new plans, passengers will have to fill in a form providing their contact and travel information to enable them to be traced if infections arise.

They could also be contacted regularly over the 14-day period to ensure they are complying. Rules include not leaving their accommodation or accepting visitors.

Where accommodation at hotels or with friends and family is deemed unsuitable, travellers will have to self-isolate at "facilities arranged by the government", the Home Office said.

Breaches carry a £1,000 (\$1,220, 1,120 euro) fine in England or prosecution with an unlimited fine.

Separate enforcement rules will be set by the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Foreign nationals who are not UK residents could be refused entry and removed as a last resort, the department added.

Britain is currently piloting a contact tracing smartphone app to better identify cases and the spread of the virus nationally.

New arrivals will be encourage to download the app once it is rolled out nationally, the Home Office said.

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Citation: UK to introduce 14-day quarantine for international arrivals (2020, May 22) retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-05-uk-day-quarantine-international.html>

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