

Germany bans most travel from virus variant countries

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Germany will from Saturday ban most travellers from countries hit by new, more contagious coronavirus variants to prevent a surge in infection numbers, the government said Friday.

The move, set to last until February 17, is necessary "to protect the people of Germany and to limit the entry and rapid spread of the new virus variants", according to a government decree seen by AFP.

The affected countries are Britain, Ireland, Portugal, Brazil and South Africa, as well as the southern African kingdoms of Lesotho and Eswatini.

The entry restrictions cover arrivals by air, bus, rail and sea, but several exceptions will be granted.

Germans and other nationals living in Germany are allowed to return, while passenger transits and freight traffic will also be unaffected.

Exemptions also include the entry of medical workers and people in other key jobs.

The emergence of virus mutations in Britain, Brazil and South Africa, deemed more infectious than the original strain, has fuelled concern at a time when many nations are struggling to rein in the pandemic.

Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said earlier this week that he wanted to reduce flights into Germany to "almost zero".

The European Union remains opposed to a blanket travel ban or closures of national borders, despite some members seeking tougher action.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen on Thursday said all non-essential travel "should be strongly discouraged".

Portugal, which has strong air links with Brazil, has seen an explosion in cases and on Thursday decided to limit foreign travel for two weeks.

Belgium has taken a similar step, putting a ban in place until March 1.

Germany coped relatively well with the first [coronavirus](#) wave last spring but has been hit hard by a [second wave](#) in recent months.

Europe's biggest economy renewed restrictions in November, shutting down bars and restaurants as well as culture and leisure facilities.

Measures were tightened further in December, with schools and non-essential shops also ordered to close. The current shutdowns are set to last at least until mid-February.

The curbs appear to be paying off, with the daily infection numbers falling although the number of deaths every 24 hours remains high.

The country has recorded over two million cases and more than 55,000 deaths since the start of the pandemic.

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