

Dutch lockdown extended as virus variants gain strongly

February 2 2021, by Mike Corder



Dutch riot police line up in front of the Rijksmuseum, rear left, as they watch over a demonstration against the curfew and other COVID-19 related restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the coronavirus, in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Sunday, Jan. 31, 2021. (AP Photo/Mike Corder)

Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte extended almost all of his country's tough lockdown measures on Tuesday for at least a month, saying that the rapid spread of the new more transmissible variant made the decision unavoidable.

A curfew imposed 10 days ago, which triggered widespread rioting in its first days, will remain in force, Rutte said. He said the government will weigh up the lockdown options again early next week.

The premier spoke hours after the country's public health institute said new coronavirus infections fell 20% over the last week but more transmissible variants, in particular the one first identified in southern England, now account for two-thirds of Dutch infections.

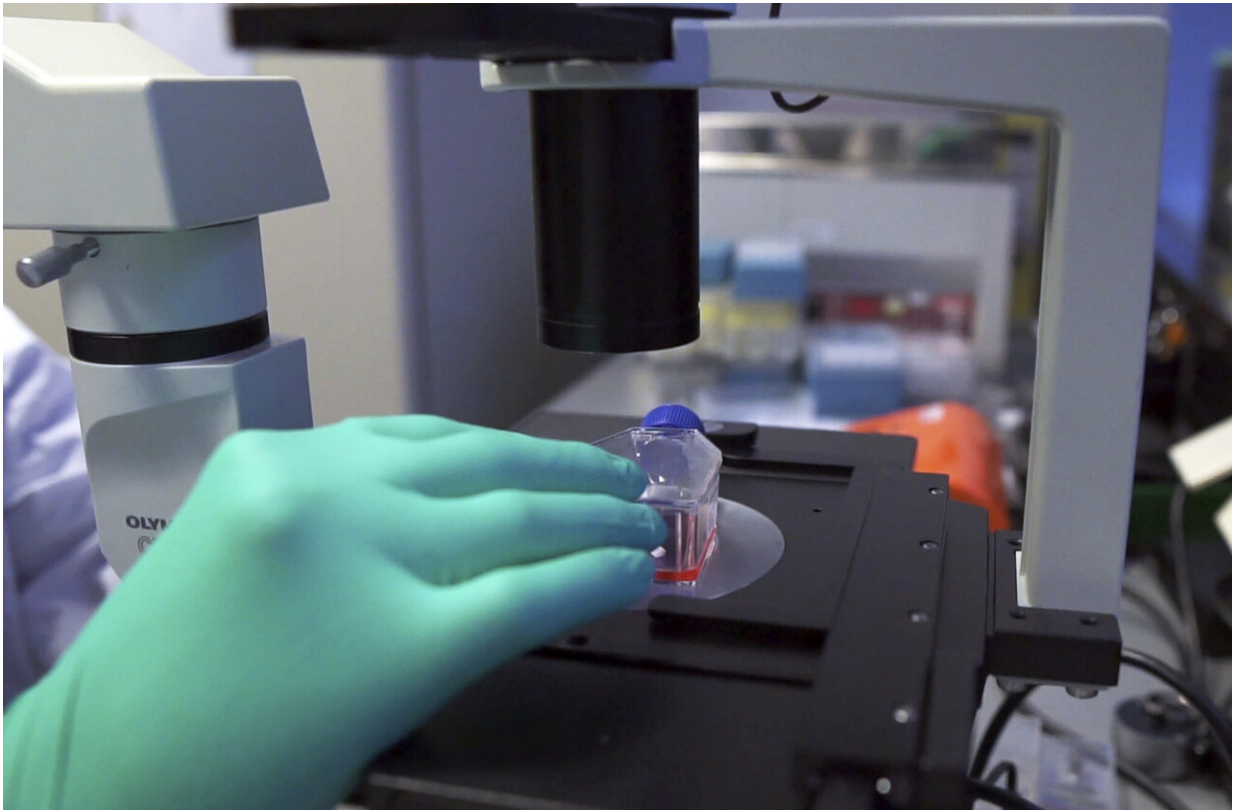
Rutte said that infections are "slowly but surely" declining, but went on to warn that "all calculations point to a third wave that seems inevitably to be bearing down on us, the main cause of which is the British variant of the coronavirus."

The public health institute said new infections fell to 28,628 but urged "the greatest possible caution" in any relaxation of the lockdown.

Rutte heeded that advice.

His ruling coalition "reached the conclusion that extending the current lockdown almost in its entirety until March 2 is unavoidable," he said.

Bars and restaurants in the Netherlands have been closed since mid-October and non-essential shops since mid-December. Public venues such as cinemas, museums and libraries also remain shut and there are strict limits on the size of gatherings both indoors and outside.



This Sept. 2020 photo provided by Johnson & Johnson shows a scientist in Janssen laboratory in Leiden, The Netherlands. Johnson & Johnson's long-awaited COVID-19 vaccine appears to protect against symptomatic illness with just one shot – not as strong as some two-shot rivals but still potentially helpful for a world in dire need of more doses. Johnson & Johnson said Friday, Jan. 29, 2021 that in the U.S. and seven other countries, the first single-shot vaccine appears 66% effective overall at preventing moderate to severe COVID-19. It was more protective against severe symptoms, 85%. (Johnson & Johnson via AP)



Two women inside a cigar smoking lounge watch Dutch riot police disperse demonstrators who protested on Museum Square against coronavirus related restrictions in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Sunday, Jan. 31, 2021. (AP Photo/Mike Corder)



People gather on Museum Square to protest against coronavirus related restrictions in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Sunday, Jan. 31, 2021. (AP Photo/Mike Corder)



People cycle past luxury goods stores that are boarded up, protected by concrete blocks and sea containers at P.C. Hooft street in Amsterdam, Netherlands, Friday, Jan. 29, 2021, following days of rioting and looting after a nation-wide curfew to limit the coronavirus pandemic went into effect last weekend. (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)

The first easing of the lockdown this year came Sunday, when the government announced that elementary schools and daycare centers will reopen next Monday. Rutte said high schools would remain closed until at least March 1.

In another minor easing of the lockdown, Rutte said that from Feb. 10 all stores will be allowed to sell their products and customers can collect them at pickup points outside the shops.

The public health institute said last week's reduction in new infections was a result of the lockdown, but said it was too early to tell what effect the country's [curfew](#) has had since taking effect on Jan. 23. The Netherlands this week recorded the lowest daily increase in infections since the end of September.

The public health institute said "without the more contagious variants, the situation would be going in the right direction" but warned that "relaxing the (lockdown) measures can only be done with the greatest possible caution."

The confirmed Dutch death toll in the pandemic is more than 14,100.

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