

Germany to close borders to Czech regions, Austria's Tyrol over virus variants

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Germany will ban travel from Czech border regions as well as Austria's Tyrol over a troubling surge in infections of more contagious coronavirus variants, Interior Minister Horst Seehofer said Thursday.

"The states of Bavaria and Saxony today asked the government to class Tyrol and the border regions of the Czech Republic as virus mutation areas, and to implement border controls," Seehofer told the Sueddeutsche daily.

"That has been agreed with the (German) chancellor and the vice-chancellor," he said, adding that the new curbs will begin on Sunday.

The interior ministry said on Twitter that checkpoints would be put in place, though certain exceptions were expected, including to maintain commercial links.

Germany in late January banned most travellers from countries classed as so-called mutation areas or places hardest hit by new, more contagious coronavirus variants.

Only a handful of exceptions are allowed to enter Germany from these countries, including returning Germans and essential workers such as doctors.

Europe's biggest economy has halved its daily infections rate after more than two months of painful curbs shuttering most shops, schools and restaurants.

But fears are growing that the positive trend could be compromised by travellers from border regions which are reporting sky-high case rates.

Chancellor Angela Merkel's government is in particular concerned by the South African variant circulating in Tyrol and the British variant in the Czech Republic.

Extending a partial shutdown into March, Merkel warned late Wednesday that "given that the experts say that the mutated virus can get

the upper hand over the current virus, the timespan between now and mid-March is existential".

She had also telephoned Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz to voice her worries over the situation in Tyrol, she revealed on Wednesday.

Fearing superspreader hotspot

Austria has already ordered restrictions to stop people leaving the mountainous Tyrol region, which Kurz says has been hit by the biggest outbreak in Europe of the South African variant.

Anyone leaving the region must now show a negative coronavirus test, with fines of up to 1,450 euros (\$1,750) for anyone who fails to comply.

But Bavarian state premier Markus Soeder, whose region borders Tyrol, said he feared that "a second Ischgl" was in the making—referring to the Austrian ski region which became a coronavirus superspreader hotspot early on in the pandemic.

Tyrol "is not taking the development seriously," he said.

Meanwhile Saxony state, which lies next to the Czech Republic, said it was imposing tougher checks from Saturday with restrictions to also affect cross-border workers.

Only workers in essential sectors—such as doctors or employees in elderly care homes—would be allowed to travel in.

But they would be required to take virus tests daily and commit to travel only between their homes and workplaces.

The Czech government meanwhile said Thursday that it would block off

three hard-hit districts, including two on the German border, stopping people living in these zones from leaving and others from entering.

Czech public health officials want the measure to be in force for three weeks, although there are likely to be exceptions.

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