

Israel begins exit from third virus lockdown

February 8 2021



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Israeli barbershops and some other businesses reopened Sunday as the country began easing its third coronavirus lockdown amid an aggressive vaccination campaign.

The government had announced Friday it was lifting some restrictions imposed since December, when the country saw a rise in COVID-19

infections.

Jerusalem barber Eli Aroas was among those re-opening on Sunday morning, the start of the working week.

"I slowly notified all my customers that we are back at work," he said. "We have a working schedule and orders, and we hope this will be the end of this saga."

While shops were not formally permitted to open, many small stores were making transactions with clients standing outside.

Since December, more than 3.4 million of Israel's nine million people have received a [coronavirus](#) vaccine jab in what is seen as the world's fastest per-capita campaign.

Despite the inoculations, Israel has been registering a daily average of 6,500 new COVID-19 cases, down from around 8,000 in mid-January.

Sarit Reuven was shopping for shoes in downtown Jerusalem, just in time for her son's wedding on Monday.

"There is a feeling of optimism in the air, I think we can already see the end," she said. "I hope this will have been the last [lockdown](#)."

A strict nationwide lockdown in force since December 27 was extended four times to combat the infection rate, but January was the deadliest month yet, with more than 1,000 COVID-19 fatalities.

But as of Sunday, Israelis were no longer restricted to within one kilometre (1,000 yards) of their homes.

'Can't become complacent'

Hair and beauty salons were allowed to have one person providing a service to one client, while [nature reserves](#) and [national parks](#) reopened.

Hotels remained shut and restaurants were allowed to cater only for takeaways, while guesthouses could only host members of the same nuclear family.

A suspension of international flights will remain in place until February 20, along with the closure of Israel's land borders.

Israelis stranded abroad will be able to return on special flights.

The cabinet met later Sunday to plan the further relaxing of limitations, especially in the educational system set to reopen Tuesday morning.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu urged Israelis aged 50 and over to get vaccinated, while warning people to not drop their guard as virus limitations were removed.

"Relaxing the lockdown does not mean that the rise in morbidity is behind us. To the contrary, it isn't, it's still around and in full force," he said in remarks relayed by his office.

"We can't become complacent, we can't be irresponsible, or the numbers will simply rise and exact a huge toll, including lives."

The government also increased fines for businesses or schools operating in violation of the restrictions.

Many ultra-Orthodox institutions had opened during the lockdown in defiance of instructions, and some frustrated entrepreneurs have announced they will reopen their businesses even before the lockdown is entirely lifted.

Israel has registered a total of more than 687,000 cases of COVID-19, including over 5,000 deaths.

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