

UK's virus jabs pass 15 mn, as New Zealand orders city lockdown

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Britain's coronavirus vaccination programme passed the 15 million mark on Sunday, hours after New Zealand, so far largely spared by the pandemic, ordered its largest city into lockdown.

The European Union, facing criticism over the sluggish roll-out of its own programme, meanwhile, confirmed it would fast-track approval of vaccines updated to target variants of the original virus.

Germany partially closed its borders with the Czech Republic and Austria's Tyrol Sunday following a surge in new [coronavirus](#) variant cases, drawing a swift rebuke from Brussels.

And Lebanon got its vaccinations campaigns underway, weeks after richer countries were able to launch theirs.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson hailed hitting the "significant milestone" of 15 million jabs just over two months after the country launched what is its biggest-ever vaccination programme.

"This country has achieved an extraordinary feat," he said in a video message posted on Twitter.

The country met its aim of vaccinating everyone in the top four priority groups: those over 70, [care home residents](#) and staff, health service workers and those who are extremely clinically vulnerable to the virus.

"The vaccine is our route to freedom," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said on Sunday. "We will beat this virus jab by jab."

Fresh lockdown for New Zealand's Auckland

New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern ordered the country's biggest city Auckland into a snap lockdown for the first time in nearly six months.

The measures came after three members of an Auckland family tested positive, with authorities concerned about the "new and active"

infections as there was no obvious source of transmission.

Almost two million residents were told on Sunday to stay at home from midnight, with schools and businesses to close except for essential services.

Arden appealed to all the city's inhabitants to stay at home.

"I know we all feel the same way when this happens—not again," she said.

"But remember, we have been here before, that means we know how to get out of this—together."

The Pacific island nation has been widely praised for its handling of the pandemic, with just 25 deaths in a population of five million.

EU to fast-track vaccine updates

With growing concern over more contagious variants of the original virus, the European Union has agreed to fast-track approval of vaccines updated to target them, health commissioner Stella Kyriakides said Sunday.

"We looked at the process together with the European Medicines Agency (EMA)," Stella Kyriakides told German daily Augsburger Allgemeine.

"And we have now decided that a vaccine, which has been improved by a manufacturer based on its previous vaccine to combat new mutations, no longer has to go through the entire approvals process.

The EU's vaccine rollout has been snagged by delays and controversies,

leaving it lagging behind the United States, Britain and Israel in particular.

European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen last week admitted that mistakes had been made in procuring vaccines on behalf of all 27 member states.

Germany meanwhile mobilised a thousand [police officers](#) for strict checks at its border with the Czech Republic and Austria's Tyrol region.

At the Kiefersfelden crossing in southern Bavaria, masked officers in yellow high-visibility jackets were out in sub-zero temperatures, stopping each vehicle from Austria.

The restrictions are aimed at slowing the spread of more transmissible variants first identified in Britain and South Africa, which have created new virus hotspots along the Czech border and in Austria's Tyrol region.

Kyriakides condemned the German measure, in comments to Germany's Augsburger Allgemeine newspaper saying vaccines and following preventative measures were "the only things that work".

Beginning of the end... hopefully

The novel coronavirus has killed at least 2,395,044 people since the outbreak emerged in China in December 2019, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 1800 GMT on Sunday.

More than 172 million vaccine doses have been given in at least 95 countries or territories, according to an AFP tally drawn from official sources.

But most of those doses have gone to the richer countries.

Lebanon kicked off its vaccination campaign Sunday, with healthcare workers and the elderly first in line.

The country has been under lockdown since mid-January after an unprecedented spike in cases blamed on holiday gatherings that forced overwhelmed hospitals to turn away patients.

The first jab was given to Mahmoud Hassoun, head of the intensive care unit at Rafik Hariri Hospital, which has been at the forefront of battling the outbreak.

"Hopefully this will be the beginning of the end of this plague in the country," he told AFP.

Japan meanwhile approved its first coronavirus vaccine Sunday, clearing the way for mass inoculations as the nation prepares to host the postponed 2020 Olympics.

Japan is now expected to use the Pfizer/BioNTech [vaccine](#) for between 10,000-20,000 medical workers from as early as Wednesday.

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