

New Zealand says COVID vaccinations 'small step in long journey'

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New Zealand launched its COVID-19 vaccination programme Saturday but warned the initial rollout was only a small step in the long battle against the pandemic.

The Pacific nation has been widely praised for its handling of the

coronavirus and has seen just 26 deaths in a population of five million.

The [vaccine](#) drive begins just days after authorities lifted a [coronavirus](#) lockdown in Auckland which confined most of the city's residents to their homes for three days.

"It's the start of what we might call a new chapter but we still have a long way to go," said Ashley Bloomfield, the country's director-general of health.

The rollout marked a "small but important step in a long journey", he added, with the initial focus on high risk citizens and those returning from overseas, along with border and quarantine workers.

Trans-Tasman neighbour Australia is to begin a similar rollout of Pfizer/BioNTech vaccines to frontline workers from Monday.

Both nations have closed borders to almost all international travellers, severely hurting the tourism industry which is a key pillar of the economy.

Despite the vaccine program, the New Zealand government has said it was unlikely overseas tourists would be allowed to return this year.

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