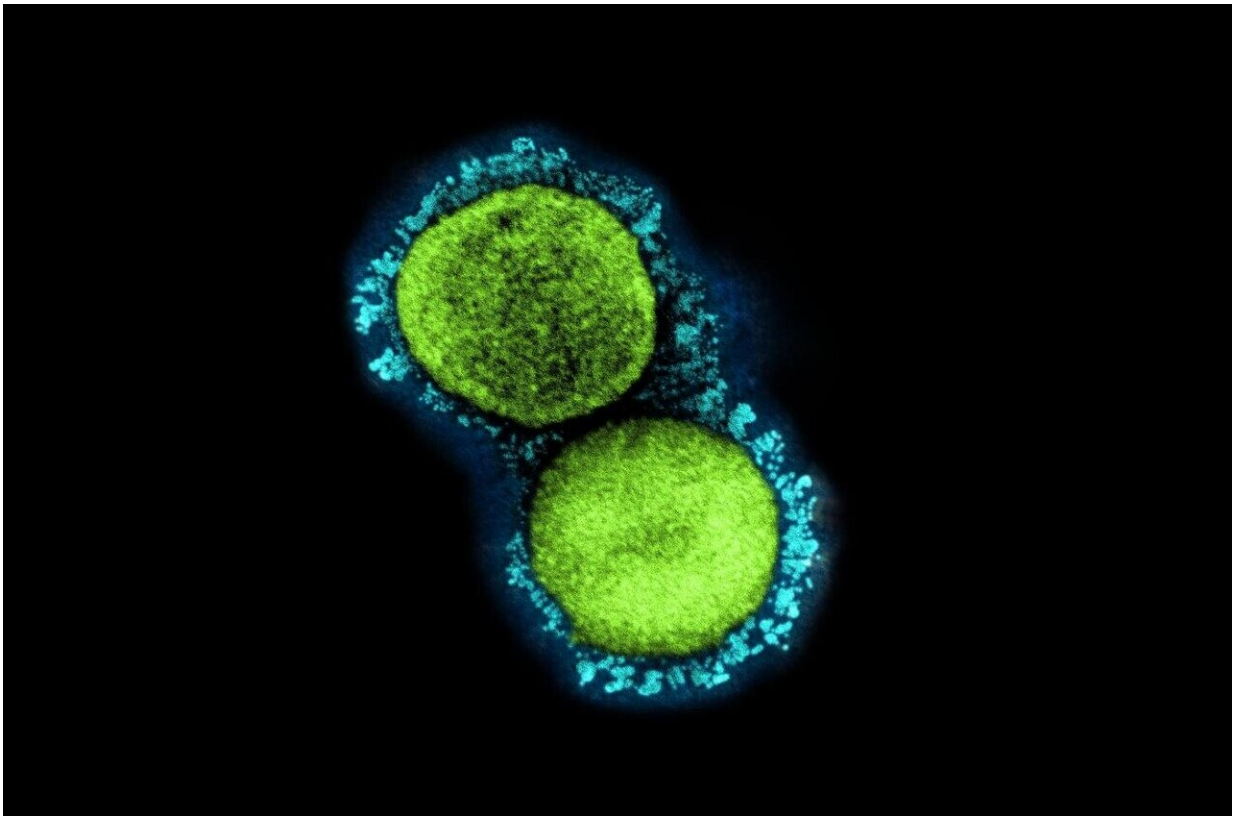


# Australia, Israel impose new curbs as Delta threatens

June 25 2021

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A transmission electron micrograph of SARS-CoV-2 virus particles (UK B.1.1.7 variant), isolated from a patient sample and cultivated in cell culture. Credit: NIAID

Australia and Israel, which had been successful in fending off COVID-19, reimposed restrictions on Friday as cases surged of the

highly contagious Delta variant, which is also threatening Africa, Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

Large parts of Sydney entered lockdown, a shock for a population that had returned to relative normality after months with very few local cases, while vaccination success story Israel reimposed indoor mask-wearing less than two weeks after it lifted the measure.

While vaccination campaigns have helped bring down infections in numerous—mostly wealthy—countries, the rise of the Delta variant which first emerged in India has stoked fears of new waves of a virus that has already killed nearly 3.9 million people.

India's richest state, Maharashtra, on Friday tightened restrictions and warned of a "more severe third wave" after the country recorded a third death caused by a new variant dubbed Delta Plus by the health ministry.

In Australia—among the most successful nations in containing the coronavirus after shutting its borders—around a million people in four eastern and central Sydney neighbourhoods were ordered to stay home for at least a week.

Sixty-five infections have been linked to a driver infected about two weeks ago when he took a flight crew from Sydney airport to a quarantine hotel.

## **Israel masks return**

It was a dramatic development for a city that had been largely enjoying a resumption of normal life.

Bondi local Alana Trepper said "to be honest, I probably think that it should have happened a couple of days ago".

Israel, which has one of the world's most successful vaccination campaigns, has seen infections surge since dropping a requirement to wear masks in enclosed public places 10 days ago.

After four days of more than 100 new cases a day—including 227 on Thursday—the [health ministry](#) reversed the decision.

The head of Israel's pandemic response taskforce, Nachman Ash, said the rise in cases was not yet matched by a parallel rise in hospitalisations or deaths.

Russia, Uzbekistan and Fiji have all recorded rising infections caused by the Delta variant.

Indonesia, meanwhile, is battling a surge in highly infectious cases that have seen more than a dozen fully inoculated doctors die, a medical association in the southeast Asia nation of 270 million people said on Friday.

In a sign of growing uncertainty over the level of threat, residents of the Portuguese capital Lisbon faced tighter restrictions, while in other European cities measures were being eased.

"The measures change all the time! It's hard to keep track," said Lisbon shop worker Isabel Goncalves.

In Spain, an end-of-year student trip to the holiday island of Mallorca has sparked a major cluster of Alpha variant infections—another highly infectious strain which first appeared in the UK.

More than 2,000 people in the Madrid region have been told to self-isolate following the outbreak.

## **'Open our economy'**

But in Reykjavik, Health Minister Svandis Svavarsdottir announced Iceland would become the first nation in Europe to removed all virus restrictions.

"We're reinstating the society we're used to living in," she said.

Iceland was able to take the decision after 88 percent of the nation's 365,000 people were vaccinated.

Elsewhere, faltering or sluggish inoculation programmes and slow regulatory approval of new vaccines are a drag on efforts to reopen economies.

Thousands of South African opposition activists rallied in Pretoria to demand regulators approve more vaccines and speed up the pace of inoculations to get people back to work and kickstart the economy.

"Our agenda is simple, give our people vaccines, we want to open our economy," said Julius Malema, leader of the leftist Economic Freedom Fighters.

## **'Brutal' third wave in Africa**

While Africa has so far been spared the worst of the pandemic, infections are surging at an alarming rate in at least 12 countries.

Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention director John Nkengasong described the third wave hitting the continent as "extremely brutal" and "very devastating".

The Delta variant has been reported in 14 African countries, with unprecedented hospital admissions and fatalities pushing health facilities to the brink, the agency said.

According to the WHO, about one percent of the continent's population is fully vaccinated, the lowest ratio globally.

WHO Africa director Matshidiso Moeti said cases were "outpacing vaccinations".

"Africa urgently needs a million more vaccines. We need a sprint".

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