

Europeans face travel woes as Covid reaches Olympic Village

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Europeans faced last-minute travel frustration on Saturday as the UK and France overhauled COVID-19 border restrictions to combat surging infections that threaten plans to get life back to normal.

The challenge of charting a return to pre-pandemic lifestyles was

highlighted by the first case of COVID-19 at the Tokyo Olympics Games Village, less than a week before the event is due to begin.

The organisers have described the Games as the "most restrictive sports event... in the entire world", but many are concerned about the health risks involved in hosting thousands of athletes and officials.

Britain is also facing a backlash over its decision to exempt France from its new looser entry policies—vaccinated returning UK residents will still have to quarantine for 10 days, unlike in other "amber" countries.

"I'm a doctor so I understand the [health issues](#) very well, but this doesn't make any sense," said Maud Lemoine, a doctor based in London who is visiting France.

And France had an upwelling of anger to deal with after the government announced that unvaccinated visitors from Britain and several other European countries must show a negative COVID test taken within the 24 hours of departure rather than 48 or 72 hours, as was the case previously.

Tens of thousands of demonstrators gathered across France on Saturday to protest against the government's handling of the pandemic and continued restriction on everyday life.

"It's not that we think the Earth is flat, but we don't know the long-term effects of these vaccines cobbled together in a hurry," care assistant Rita, 39, said at a march in the city of Montpellier.

Elsewhere in Europe, Greek officials imposed curfews on the party island of Mykonos and Spanish authorities did likewise in Barcelona and other cities in the northeastern Catalonia region.

Spanish 'milestone'

European governments are facing an uphill battle, with the EU's disease prevention agency warning that infections could rise fivefold across the bloc by August 1.

This comes even as leaders were hailing their vaccine rollouts.

Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez said his country had reached the "milestone" of 50 million doses and promised that half of the population would be fully vaccinated by next week.

In Britain, where most of the [adult population](#) has now had two jabs, the government is preparing to ease most restrictions on its citizens.

Quarantine for vaccinated Britons returning from "amber" list countries is due to end on Monday but at the last minute the government decided to retain the status quo for France because of the "persistent presence" of the Beta variant, first identified in South Africa.

While the rule applies only to England for now, the devolved governments in Scotland and Wales indicated they were likely to follow suit.

The new looser regime in England, with requirements to wear masks among the rules to be dropped, comes as the UK recorded more than 50,000 cases in a day on Friday and the government said that rate could double in the coming weeks.

However, officials said the high vaccination rate should prevent a spike in deaths and serious illness.

Hajj joy

Among those testing positive was Health Secretary Sajid Javid, who announced on Saturday he had contracted the disease and was isolating.

"I'm grateful that I've had two jabs of the vaccine. And so far, my symptoms are very mild," Javid said via Twitter.

More than two-thirds of UK adults are fully vaccinated, but with cases surging, critics say the government is making a reckless gamble.

"This is a threat not just to England but to the whole world—particularly low- and [middle-income countries](#) who have very limited access to vaccines," a group of international scientists said in a joint statement on Friday.

Saudi Arabia is also allowing crowds to gather for the second downsized hajj since the start of the pandemic.

The kingdom is allowing only 60,000 fully vaccinated residents to take part—a fraction of the pre-pandemic number—as it seeks to repeat last year's success that saw no virus outbreak during the five-day ritual.

Among the chosen ones this year was Ameen, a 58-year-old Indian oil contractor who was picked for the ritual along with his wife and three adult children.

"We are overjoyed," said Ameen. "So many of our friends and relatives were rejected."

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