

New Zealand admits it can no longer get rid of coronavirus

October 4 2021, by Nick Perry



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern arrives with director general of health Dr Ashley Bloomfield, right, for the post-Cabinet press conference at Parliament in Wellington, New Zealand, Monday, Oct. 4, 2021. New Zealand's government has acknowledged what most other countries did long ago, It can no longer completely get rid of the coronavirus. Credit: Mark Mitchell/Pool Photo via AP

New Zealand's government acknowledged Monday what most other countries did long ago: It can no longer completely get rid of the coronavirus.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced a cautious plan to ease lockdown restrictions in Auckland, despite an outbreak there that continues to simmer.

Since early in the pandemic, New Zealand had pursued an unusual zero-tolerance approach to the virus through strict lockdowns and aggressive contact tracing.

Until recently, that elimination strategy had worked remarkably well for the country of 5 million, which has reported just 27 virus deaths.

While other nations faced rising death tolls and disrupted lives, New Zealanders went back to workplaces, school yards and sports stadiums safe from any community spread.

But that all changed when the more contagious delta variant somehow escaped from a quarantine facility in August after it was brought into the country from a traveler returning from Australia.

Despite New Zealand going into the strictest form of lockdown after just a single local case was detected, it ultimately wasn't enough to crush the outbreak entirely.

One factor may have been that the disease spread among some groups that are typically more wary of authorities, including gang members and homeless people living in transitional housing.



New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern addresses a post-Cabinet press conference at Parliament in Wellington, New Zealand, Monday, Oct. 4, 2021. New Zealand's government has acknowledged what most other countries did long ago, It can no longer completely get rid of the coronavirus. Credit: Mark Mitchell/Pool Photo via AP

The outbreak has grown to more than 1,300 cases, with 29 more detected on Monday. A few cases have been found outside of Auckland.

Ardern said that seven weeks of lockdown restrictions in Auckland had helped keep the outbreak under control.

"For this outbreak, it's clear that long periods of heavy restrictions has not got us to zero cases," Ardern said. "But that is OK. Elimination was

important because we didn't have vaccines. Now we do, so we can begin to change the way we do things."

New Zealand began its vaccination campaign slowly compared to most other developed nations. Rates rocketed in August after the outbreak began but have dropped off significantly again since then.

About 65% of New Zealanders have had at least one dose and 40% are fully vaccinated. Among people age 12 and older, about 79% have had at least a single jab.

Under Ardern's plan that starts Tuesday, Aucklanders will be able to meet outdoors with loved ones from one other household, early childhood centers will reopen and people will be able to relax at the beach.

The dates for a phased reopening of retail stores and later bars and restaurants have yet to be decided.



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Ardern said the elimination strategy had served the country incredibly well but the government always intended to eventually transition to the protection of vaccines, a change hastened by the delta variant "game changer."

The government's elimination approach had been broadly supported by New Zealanders but was facing increasing criticism. Over the weekend, hundreds of people turned out to rallies protesting the lockdown.

Opposition lawmaker Chris Bishop said the government had no clear strategy to deal with the outbreak other than total surrender.

But Ardern said that most measures would remain in place to keep the outbreak under control, including exhaustive contact tracing and isolating those who got infected.

"There's good cause for us to feel optimistic about the future," Ardern said. "But we cannot rush."

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