

Israel halts controversial tech to track omicron variant

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Israel said Thursday it was halting the use of a controversial phone tracking technology to trace possible cases of the new coronavirus variant, days after it was authorized as an emergency measure.

Earlier this week, the government announced a package of emergency measures to contain the new variant, including travel restrictions and

authorizing the country's internal security agency to use the phone monitoring technology for contact tracing people infected by the omicron variant.

The tracking was authorized under emergency regulations and would have required parliamentary legislation in order to continue the practice.

But late Thursday, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's office said the "cellular monitoring" would expire at midnight and not be extended.

The reversal came following days of public criticism of a practice whose use in the past has been criticized by civil liberties groups and challenged in court. Several Cabinet members voted against using the technology, and a government ombudsman argued that it was ineffective.

Health Minister Nitzan Horowitz said on Twitter that "from the beginning I noted that use of this tool would be limited and brief—for a few days, in order to get urgent information to halt infection with the new, unknown variant."

He said that "alongside protecting health, we must protect privacy and human rights, even in a time of emergency."

Israeli rights groups have decried the use of the technology, which can track where a person has been and whom he has met, as a violation of privacy rights. The Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that its use be limited.

Earlier Thursday, the court rejected a petition by a rights group against the reintroduction of phone tracing, noting the limited scope of its authorization and the uncertainty surrounding the omicron variant.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel welcomed Thursday's decision

and expressed "hope that this is the last time the secret service will be used to monitor the citizens of the State of Israel."

Israel's Health Ministry has confirmed three cases of the new omicron variant of COVID-19, and said Thursday that nearly three dozen other possible cases are being tested.

Israel, a country of 9.3 million people, has reported 8,199 deaths from the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. Most of its population—over 6.3 million people—has received at least one dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and more than 4 million Israelis have received a booster.

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