

Shanghai eases Covid curbs in step towards ending lockdown

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Shanghai slowly whirled back to life Wednesday as a range of COVID-19 restrictions were eased after a two-month lockdown that confined residents to their homes and battered the Chinese economy.

The commercial hub of 25 million people was closed down in sections from late March, when the Omicron virus variant fuelled China's worst outbreak in two years.

After some rules were gradually relaxed over the past few weeks, authorities on Wednesday began allowing residents in areas deemed low-risk to move around the city freely.

"It feels like we've all been through a lot of trauma, a collective trauma," Grace Guan told AFP.

The 35-year-old Shanghai resident said she went out at midnight when the restrictions eased and saw groups gathered in the street drinking beers, some sitting together on blankets laid out on the pavements.

"Now it feels like the Berlin Wall coming down."

On Wednesday morning, commuters trickled into subway stations and [office buildings](#), scanning QR codes that certify they are virus-free.

Residents gathered in [small groups](#) to chat in a park, while masked customers thronged one of the main streets in a Shanghai shopping district.

A day earlier, many of the bright yellow barriers that had hemmed in buildings and city blocks for weeks were taken down.

Deputy Mayor Zong Ming told reporters Tuesday that the easing will impact about 22 million people in the city.

Malls, [convenience stores](#), pharmacies and beauty salons will be allowed to operate at 75 percent capacity, while parks and other scenic spots will gradually reopen, she added.

But cinemas and gyms remain closed, and schools—shut since mid-March—will slowly reopen on a voluntary basis.

Buses, the subway and ferry services will also resume, transport officials said.

Taxi services and private cars will be allowed in low-risk areas, permitting people to visit friends and family outside their district.

"This is a moment that we have been looking forward to for a long time," the Shanghai [municipal government](#) said in a statement on [social media](#).

More than half a million still remained under restrictions as of Wednesday, according to the authorities.

'New normal'

The stringent curbs in Shanghai—home to the busiest container port in the world—had hammered the economy, starving businesses and snarling supply chains in China and abroad.

Signs of resentment and anger among residents emerged throughout the lockdown.

The city government has warned that the situation is still not normal, and businesses said there were many uncertainties.

"It remains to (be seen) how this [new normal](#) will look," said Bettina Schoen-Behanzin, chair of the Shanghai chapter at the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China.

"If there is a positive case in your office or site, in your compound, what

happens? You will be locked down again for two weeks?"

China has persisted with a zero-COVID strategy, which involves rapid lockdowns, mass testing and long quarantines to try and eliminate infections.

But the [economic costs](#) have mounted, and the Shanghai government said "the task of accelerating economic and social recovery is becoming increasingly urgent".

E-commerce professional Chen Ying said ahead of the easing that she still planned to work from home but might treat her two-year-old son to a long-awaited walk outside.

"We should have been free to begin with, so don't expect me to be deeply grateful now they've given it back to us," she told AFP.

While the easing will allow many factories and businesses to resume operations, there are concerns that the recovery will not be immediate.

"I definitely have some worries, things are beyond your control... You can't tell with a pandemic," said cafe owner Chen Ribin.

"No one can tell you if it will come again in July or August... We can only take one step at a time."

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