

Bleak midwinter in UK as mutant virus leads to travel bans

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With Britons already locked down for Christmas due to an "out of control" coronavirus strain, the sense of isolation deepened when countries imposed travel bans, providing a glimpse into the looming chaos of a disorderly Brexit.

France's decision on Sunday to prevent freight travelling through the key port of Dover caused chaos on the surrounding roads and raised fears of food shortages over the Christmas period, in a stark sign of what to expect should Britain leave the EU without a deal in 10 days.

Road signs near the Channel port, through which 10,000 heavy goods vehicles pass each day, on Monday urged people to go home, saying that the French border is closed.

France's snap decision, which is initially set to last for 48 hours, caused Britain to bring forward "Operation Stack", the contingency plan drawn up to deal with anticipated freight tailbacks on roads around Dover in the event of a no deal Brexit.

"Whereas all other countries have allowed hauliers... the French went slightly further and said that hauliers shouldn't cross either," transport minister Grant Shapps told Sky News on Monday.

"The absolute key is to get it resolved as soon as

possible," he added.

"They're mostly European hauliers, the goods are mostly theirs, so they won't want them perishing any more than we would want the border closed."

A disused airfield will be opened later Monday to be used as a lorry park for up to 4,000 stranded drivers.

Shapps reassured Britons that hauliers "anticipate" disruptions and that [food supplies](#) were not immediately threatened.

Chaotic scenes

"On the other hand, any prolonged closure of the French border would be problematic," warned the British Retail Consortium lobby group.

The government also said the travel bans would not affect vaccines.

"Virtually all of the vaccine comes by container and there are good supplies in the meantime, so this won't have an impact on the vaccination programme," said Shapps.

The ban on all but unaccompanied freight crossing to France comes as companies scramble to shift merchandise with days to go until Britain finally quits EU trade structures.

Those hoping for a deal warned the current chaotic scenes could become a familiar sight without a breakthrough before the New Year deadline, leading to the imposition of new tariffs.

But Brexit supporters accused France of exploiting the crisis to try and force trade concessions.

"Restricting tourist travel from the UK seems justifiable at this stage," tweeted the anti-EU Bruges Group think tank.

"Restricting freight movements, however, as the French government is about to do, appears political," it added.

France and Britain are locked in heated debate about fishing rights post-Brexit, the key sticking point in negotiations.

'Out of control'

Germany, Canada, Italy, Chile and Argentina are among other countries to announce flight bans to and from the country.

Britain had looked to have turned the corner in its attempt to quell the virus, with the rollout of a vaccine and falling case rates.

But the emergence of a new strain has thrown the government's plans into disarray, just as it reaches the crunch finale of talks with the EU.

The government had initially announced an easing of restrictions to allow families to meet over Christmas, but changed its plans after it was presented last week with dire analysis of the new strain that is running rampant across southeast England.

Instead of good cheer and reunions, Britons are now waking up to headlines about potential food shortages and rows with their closest neighbours.

"Unfortunately the new strain was out of control. We have got to get it under control," Health Secretary Matt Hancock told Sky News.

Britain has been badly hit by the pandemic, with more than 67,000 deaths of those testing positive for the virus.

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