Finland tightens border ahead of 'harder times'

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Travel into Finland slowed to a near standstill on Wednesday as new entry restrictions designed to protect the country against new coronavirus strains came into force.

The Nordic country closed its entry points to all but essential travel at midnight Tuesday into Wednesday after the health minister warned that more infectious British and South African variants meant "harder times are ahead".

Finland has been spared the worst of the virus registering just 655 deaths—among the lowest rates in Europe.

Most tourists had already been banned from Finland but the new measures will hit the large Estonian workforce, many of whom make regular trips home, and will in addition suspend free movement for the communities living along the northern Swedish and Norwegian borders.

"Based on the government's decision all work-related travel must now be essential for the functioning of society or for security of supply," Deputy Commander Mikko Simola of the Gulf of Finland Coastguard District told AFP.

On Wednesday, just 1,000 ferry passengers were expected at the port of Helsinki, Simola said, suggesting the weekly total will fall well short of last week's 20,000.

Arrivals at Helsinki airport, already 90 percent down from pre-virus levels, "will most probably also decrease further", he said.

"Although Finland has seen a lower prevalence of the coronavirus than elsewhere in Europe, there is a significant risk that the situation will quickly worsen," health minister Krista Kiuru told a press conference on Monday.

The government warned that a rise in cases could mean a return to last March's state of emergency, when businesses and schools were largely shut and travel in and out of the capital region was prohibited.

Finnish society has remained comparatively open since last May, as a testing regime and widespread compliance with quarantine and distancing rules have stopped the health system from being overwhelmed.

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