New variant not stopping New Zealand's reopening plans

November 29 2021, by Nick Perry

Police inspect vehicles at a road block on the outskirts of Auckland, New Zealand on Sept. 30, 2021. The emergence of the omicron variant hasn't changed New Zealand's plans to ease restrictions in Auckland and move the nation into a new, more open phase of its pandemic response, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Credit: Michael Craig/NZ Herald via AP

The emergence of the omicron variant hasn't changed New Zealand's plans to ease restrictions in Auckland and move the nation into a new, more open phase of its pandemic response, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said Monday.

Bars, restaurants and gyms in Auckland can reopen from late Thursday, ending a coronavirus lockdown that began in August.

Around the country, a new "traffic light" system will bring an end to lockdowns but people will need to be fully vaccinated in order to guarantee participation in anything from getting a haircut to watching a concert.

New Zealand on Sunday restricted travel from nine southern African countries in response to the omicron threat. Ardern said she didn't anticipate any further restrictions.

She said as the new variant is studied more, New Zealand will continue doing fundamental things like contact tracing, isolating infectious people and requiring mask use in some settings.

Ardern said Auckland and some other parts of the North Island would enter the new traffic light system under a red light, due to outbreaks or lower vaccination rates. Other parts of the country would enter under an orange light.

She said the past few months had been perhaps the hardest the country had faced since the pandemic began, but the sacrifices of many had helped stabilize an Auckland outbreak while vaccination rates improved.

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Police inspect vehicles at a road block on the outskirts of Auckland, New Zealand on Oct. 27, 2021. The emergence of the omicron variant hasn't changed New Zealand's plans to ease restrictions in Auckland and move the nation into a new, more open phase of its pandemic response, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Credit: Michael Craig/NZ Herald via AP, File

"We've come through the past two years of COVID in better shape than nearly anywhere in the world," Ardern said, pointing to low death rates, a growing economy and high vaccination rates.

The traffic light system is designed to indicate where outbreaks are putting pressure on the health system. A green designation imposes few restrictions, orange requires more mask wearing and distancing, while red limits gathering sizes.

Ardern in October set an ambitious target of getting 90% of all eligible people across each of 20 health districts fully vaccinated before moving to the new system.

But with about 85% of New Zealanders aged 12 and over fully vaccinated, Ardern decided it was time to make the move.

Last week, the government announced the nation will reopen its borders to the world over the coming months, allowing for the return of displaced residents from January and tourists from April.

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