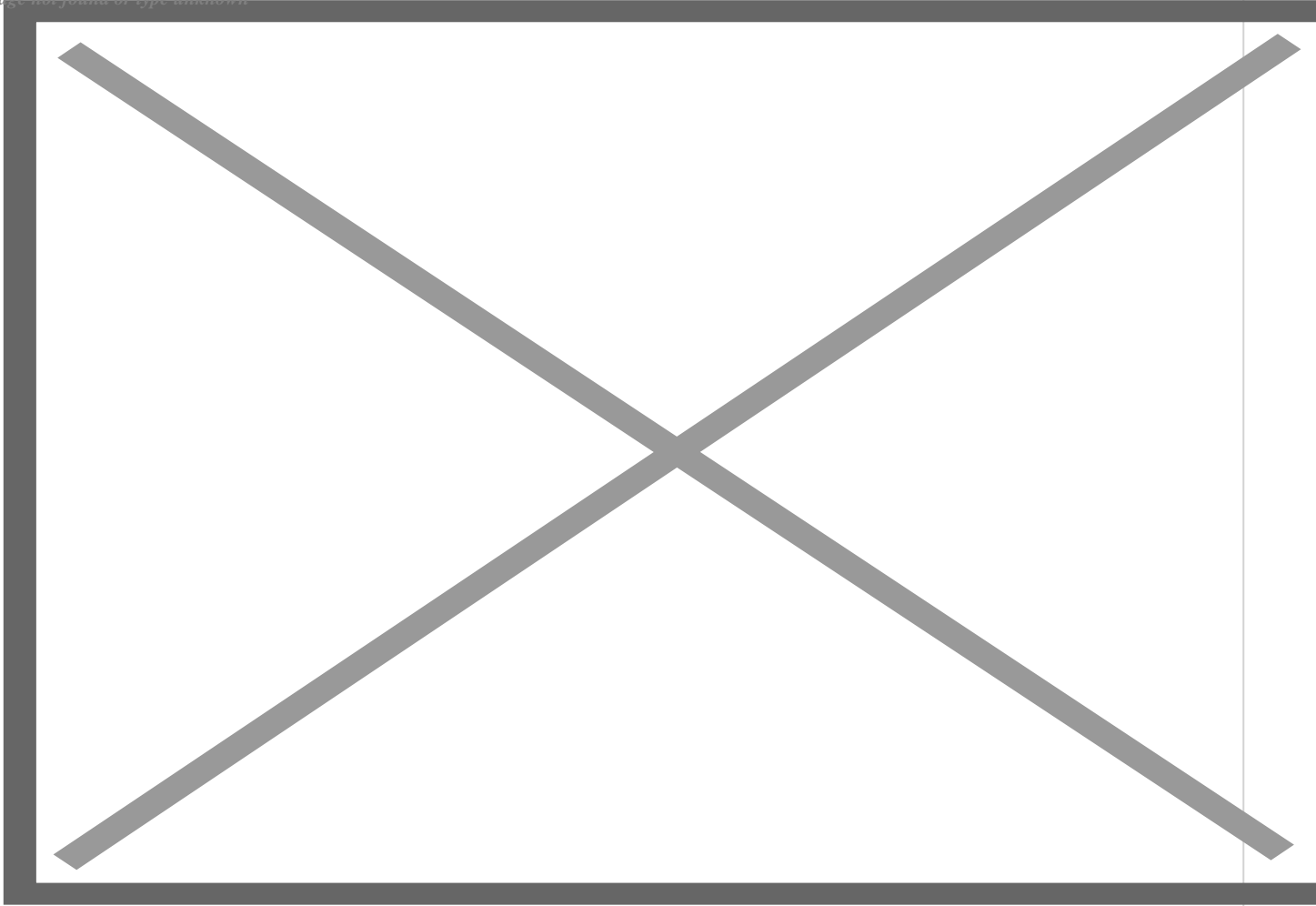


Australian Open bars fans after snap COVID lockdown

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Under the new measures, some five million people will have to remain at home for five days from midnight, except for a limited number of permitted essential activities. (Photo: Asanka Brendon Ratnayake/Reuters)

Melbourne, February 12 (RHC)-- The Australian Open tennis organizers have announced a ban on fans and said players would be cocooned in biosecure "bubbles" as Victoria state authorities ordered six million people into lockdown on Friday to control a new coronavirus outbreak.

The five-day, state-wide lockdown starting at midnight local time (13:00 GMT) to combat an outbreak of the highly infectious UK strain at an airport hotel, is just the latest setback for the troubled tournament.

The year's first Grand Slam, which started three weeks late to allow international players to quarantine, has already welcomed tens of thousands of socially distanced fans in the biggest crowds seen in tennis since the pandemic.

Under the new measures, some five million people in Australia's second-biggest city will have to remain at home for five days from midnight, except for a limited number of permitted essential activities. "These restrictions are all about making sure that we respond appropriately to the fastest-moving, most infectious strain of coronavirus that we have seen," said state Premier Daniel Andrews.

"I am confident that this short, sharp circuit-breaker will be effective. We will be able to smother this. We will be able to prevent it getting away from us."

The latest outbreak, stemming from an airport hotel housing international travellers in mandatory quarantine, has so far infected 13 people, including staff and their families. It has triggered the third lockdown in Melbourne, which came out of a four-month period of isolation in late October and has since remained virtually virus-free.

Tournament director Craig Tiley gave assurances that the Australian Open would continue, with players deemed essential workers and exempt from the lockdown. "Play will continue. The players will compete in a bubble form," Tiley said. "The players have all been very good about it. They understand. They have been through a rigorous program already," he added.

The problems at the Australian Open, the biggest international sporting event so far this year, underline the difficulties of holding the much more complex Tokyo Olympic Games, which are due to start in July after a year's delay.

Play at six warm-up tournaments in Melbourne was also suspended for a day last week when a worker tested positive at one of the official hotels.

American star Serena Williams only learned of the new measures when she came off court after her 7-6 (7/5), 6-2 third-round win over Russia's Anastasia Potapova. "It's rough. It's going to be a rough few days for everyone," said the 23-time Grand Slam singles champion.

"It's not ideal – it's been really fun now with the crowd back. But at the end of the day we have to do what's best. "Hopefully we'll be all right."

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