Thousands protest in New Zealand against compulsory COVID jabs

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Protesters rally against COVID-19 restrictions and vaccine mandates in Wellington, New Zealand [Praveen Menon/Reuters]

Wellington, November 9 (RHC)-- New Zealand beefed up security measures at its parliament as thousands of people gathered to protest against compulsory COVID-19 vaccination and government lockdowns.

All but two entrances to the parliament building, known as the Beehive, were closed off on Tuesday, and unprecedented levels of police and security personnel deployed, as mostly unmasked protesters marched peacefully through central Wellington and congregated outside parliament.

Many people were seen holding signs and placards with messages like "Freedom" and "Kiwis are not lab rats" and shouting slogans as they demanded the government roll back compulsory vaccination and lifts restrictions. "I will not be coerced and I will not be forced into taking something I don't want in my body," a protester said outside parliament. "I'm asking [the government] to give us back 2018. Simple as that. I want my freedoms back."

New Zealand has struggled to fight off a highly infectious outbreak of the Delta variant this year, forcing Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern to move from its strategy of elimination through lockdowns to living with the virus with higher vaccinations.

Ardern last month announced teachers and workers in the health and disability sectors would need to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19. She has promised to end health-related restrictions after 90 percent of the eligible population is inoculated.

That threshold is higher than many other countries and has invited criticism from people calling for more freedoms.

"Treat us like people!" another protester exclaimed when asked about the government's decision to make the vaccine compulsory for certain public sector workers. "I'm here for freedom. The government, what they're doing, is anti-freedom."

New Zealand still has among the lowest COVID-19 cases in the world, with less than 8,000 cases reported so far and 32 deaths. It reported 125 new cases on Tuesday while nearly 80 percent of the eligible population were fully vaccinated.

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