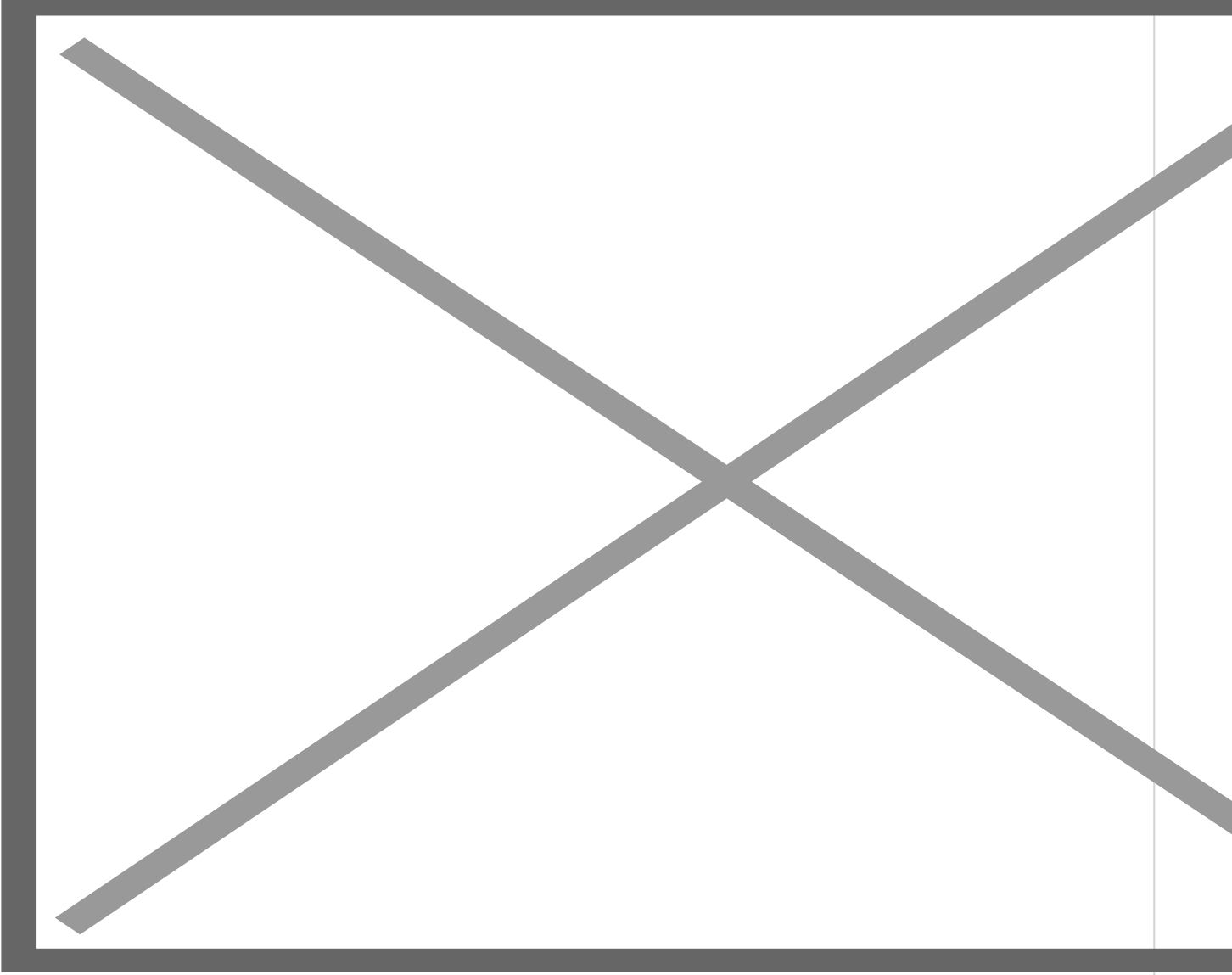


# *Palestinians shut West Bank schools as coronavirus variants surge*

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## **The World Bank reports that the Palestinian territories have one of the lowest testing rates in the Middle East and North Africa**

Ramallah, February 28 (RHC)-- Schools in the occupied West Bank will shut down for 12 days in an effort to stop a sharp rise in coronavirus variant infections, Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said on Saturday.

High schools will be exempt from the closure which begins on Sunday, Shtayyeh said in a televised address, adding the new restrictions were prompted by a rising number of cases of the coronavirus variants first discovered in the United Kingdom and South Africa.

Intensive care units for COVID-19 patients have reached 95 percent occupancy in the West Bank and schools have been identified as the main cause for the fast spread of infections, the health ministry said.

On Thursday, it reported that a randomised sample of coronavirus patients showed that more than three-quarters were infected with the British variant.

The World Bank said in a report this week that the occupied Palestinian territories have one of the lowest testing rates in the Middle East and North Africa and that the positivity rate in the West Bank is more than 21 percent, and in Gaza 29 percent, indicating an uncontrolled spread of the pandemic.

The West Bank, where 3.1 million Palestinians live, has reported a total of 118,519 coronavirus cases and 1,406 deaths. Gaza, where coronavirus restrictions have gradually been lifted since January, has reported 55,091 cases and 549 deaths within its population of two million.

With approximately 32,000 vaccine doses in hand to date, the Palestinians launched limited vaccination programmes in the West Bank and Gaza this month, beginning with health workers.

The Palestinian Authority (PA) expects to receive an initial COVAX shipment within weeks and says it also has supply deals with Russia and drugmaker AstraZeneca, although doses have been slow to come. Shtayyeh said he expected shipments in March.

Israel has so far given 2,000 doses to the PA, with Palestinians accusing Israel of ignoring its duties as an occupying power by not including the Palestinians in its inoculation programme. Human rights groups and UN officials have also said Israel is responsible for the wellbeing of the Palestinians.

Israel claims that under interim peace accords, the PA is responsible for the vaccination drive in the West Bank and Gaza.

Amid the shortage of vaccine in the Palestinian territories, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's controversial plan to ship surplus coronavirus vaccines to a group of allied nations was temporarily frozen on Thursday.

Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al-Maliki called Netanyahu's plan "political blackmail and an immoral act," accusing Israel of "exploitation of the humanitarian needs of these countries."

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<https://www.radiohc.cu/index.php/en/noticias/internacionales/249114-palestinians-shut-west-bank-schools-as-coronavirus-variants-surge>



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