

Austria plans to lift lockdown, curbs to remain for unvaccinated

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A sandwich is seen in a closed cafe as the Austrian government imposed a fourth national lockdown, in Vienna, Austria. (Photo by Reuters)

Vienna, December 9 (RHC)-- Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer has announced that the country's partial coronavirus lockdown will end next week but unvaccinated people will still face restrictions. "The lockdown for the unvaccinated is staying," Nehammer told a news conference in Vienna, while confirming that the wider lockdown would be lifted next Monday as planned following a "positive trend" in recent infections.

He also noted that those who cannot show an antibody certificate following a recent infection will be banned from leaving home for non-essential reasons as well. "For all the unvaccinated who are suffering

from the fact that they are staying in lockdown, there is a clear offer: you can come out of it if you seize the chance to get vaccinated," he added.

Nehammer further acknowledged the "strain" of the pandemic and that "for many, the limit of what is bearable has been overstepped."

The roadmap out of restrictions will be presented at a meeting on Wednesday between the government and the influential governors of Austria's nine provinces. Nehammer, who was sworn in as chancellor on Monday, said his administration would be "as prudent as possible."

The new Omicron coronavirus variant keeps spreading around the world, even as more countries try to seal themselves off by imposing travel restrictions. Austria imposed a lockdown two weeks ago and made vaccinations mandatory from February 2022 following a surge in coronavirus cases, becoming the first EU country to take such stringent measures.

Under the current rules, Austrians are able to leave home to buy essentials, exercise, or receive medical care. Schools remain open but non-essential shops, restaurants, concert halls and cinemas are shut. Hotels are also closed to tourists.

Austria has recorded more than 4,200 new coronavirus cases in the past 24 hours, according to official figures published on Tuesday. Daily case numbers reached 16,000 at the peak of the country's latest wave in mid-November. Demand for vaccinations has increased among Austrians in recent days, and 66 percent of the population is now fully jabbed, slightly below the EU average of more than 67 percent.

Meanwhile, the European Union's health ministers have gathered in Brussels to discuss a more coordinated approach to prevent the further spread of the coronavirus, particularly its newly-detected variant Omicron, across the bloc.

"I will be calling on all health ministers to close the immunization gap, to increase their vaccination rollout programs, and... adhere to non-pharmaceutical measures (like) wearing masks and social distancing," the European Commissioner for Health Stella Kyriakides said as she went into the meeting on Tuesday.

"We still don't know everything about Omicron," German Health Minister Jens Spahn said. "Consequently, travel restrictions (into the EU) are important so as to keep the incidence of the new variant in Europe and in Germany as low as possible."

First discovered in South Africa two weeks ago, the fast-spreading Omicron coronavirus variant is emerging in almost every corner of the world, even as more countries try to seal themselves off by imposing travel restrictions.

The discovery of Omicron, dubbed a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization (WHO), has sparked worries around the world that it could resist vaccinations and prolong the nearly two-year COVID-19 pandemic.

Omicron is potentially more contagious than previous variants, but experts do not know yet if it will cause more or less severe COVID-19 compared to other strains. The United States, Brazil, Canada, European Union nations, Australia, Japan, South Korea and Thailand were the first countries to announce travel bans, but epidemiologists say such curbs may be too late to stop Omicron from circulating.

Much of Europe is already battling a surge in COVID-19 infections and some of them have reintroduced restrictions on social activity to try to stop the spread. That is happening even as many developed countries are giving third-dose boosters, while less than 7% of people in low-income countries have received their first COVID-19 shot.

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