

UK to impose hotel quarantine for returning Britons

January 27 2021



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UK citizens and permanent residents flying back from 22 countries deemed at "high risk" from COVID-19 variants must soon quarantine in hotels under new rules announced on Wednesday.

The announcement came as the government signalled a current national lockdown would stay in force until at least March 8.

Returning travellers must stay in hotels for 10 days while they complete the required self-isolation period, interior minister Priti Patel told lawmakers.

Non-UK arrivals from the targeted destinations—which include South America, Portugal, Cape Verde and South Africa—are already barred following the discovery of two virus variants in Brazil and South Africa.

Patel said the plans were still being "operationalised", with no date mentioned for their introduction, and further details would be announced next week.

The 10-day quarantine will cost returning Britons £1,500 (\$2,060, 1,697 euros), with meals served at the bedroom door and security guards supervising stays, according to media reports.

"These new measures at the border are a necessary step to protect the public and our world class vaccination programme," Patel said.

"Every layer of protection we have put in place will help to reduce the transmission of this virus and any new potential strain from entering the UK."

The Times newspaper reported ministers were divided between those backing the limited quarantine regime and those favouring a blanket policy requiring arrivals from all destinations to self-isolate in hotels.

The main opposition Labour Party's home affairs spokesman, Nick Thomas-Symonds, accused the government of failing to learn from past mistakes over protecting Britain's borders during the pandemic.

Tentative lockdown end

"I'm deeply concerned that the measures outlined today are yet another example of this—too little, too late," Thomas-Symonds said, adding the government was "lurching from one crisis to another devoid of strategy".

"Limiting hotel quarantining to only a limited number of countries from which travel from non-UK residents was already banned means that the home secretary's proposals do not go anywhere near far enough."

Britain has been the hardest hit in Europe from the pandemic, becoming only the fifth country in the world to surpass 100,000 deaths after recording another 1,631 fatalities on Tuesday.

With a more contagious virus variant sweeping the country since December, some health experts have warned it could register as many as 50,000 further deaths in the coming months.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson imposed a third national lockdown in early January, shutting schools and non-essential shops, but critics have said the UK's borders remain a soft spot.

Johnson said Wednesday that schools would be the first establishments allowed to reopen, but not before March 8 at the earliest, once the government has completed vaccinating the most vulnerable people by mid-February.

Speaking to parliament, he anticipated "other economic and social restrictions being removed thereafter as and when the data permits".

The government earlier this month scrapped its "travel corridors" from countries with lower caseloads and now asks all arrivals to show negative COVID-19 tests and then self-isolate.

Ministers have since been mulling whether to require all incoming travellers to isolate in hotels, emulating actions taken by countries such as Australia and New Zealand which have emerged with dramatically lower death tolls.

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Citation: UK to impose hotel quarantine for returning Britons (2021, January 27) retrieved 21 December 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-01-uk-impose-hotel-quarantine-britons.html>

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