

Netanyahu lifts Israel's third lockdown despite warnings of renewed surge in March

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu began reopening Israel's economy at the weekend following a third partial, six-week lockdown. He did so despite dire warnings from health experts that this could lead to a renewed outbreak of the pandemic.

All shops and businesses will reopen without restrictions, while entry to gyms, cultural and sporting venues, hotels, art galleries and swimming pools will be open to those fully vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19. How this will be verified and enforced is unclear. Houses of worship that cannot meet these conditions will be limited to 10 people indoors and 20 outdoors. Schools and kindergartens will reopen on a phased basis, depending on the infection rates in their towns and cities.

The government took this criminal decision on behalf of Israel's financial elite despite nearly 5,000 new cases a day. Some 6.7 percent of over 75,000 tests are proving positive, down from 9.4 percent a week earlier but still higher than the 4.9 percent rate at the beginning of the lockdown, and the 4.5 percent and the 1.7 percent rates at the end of the second and first lockdowns.

With each of the second and third surges seeing a higher death toll than the previous one, 5,463 Israelis have now died. Last Saturday, there were still a massive 992 patients in hospital—after weeks of hovering around 1,200—of whom 388 were in critical condition.

Professor Nachman Ash, the coronavirus czar, warned, "An irresponsible opening of the economy will lead to another lockdown," saying that the more the economy opened, the more the infection rate will climb.

Ash said that if anyone had told him two months ago that the country would be reopening with more than 5,000 new virus cases diagnosed every day and close to 1,000 people still hospitalized in serious condition with COVID, he would have called them crazy.

Professor Ran Balicer, who heads the coronavirus cabinet's advisory board, said the government already tried the "trick" of reopening the economy against the advice of health officials. He told the *Ynet* website, "Both times it did

not end so well, the disease spiralled out of control and never did we try to go out [of a lockdown] with 5,000 new infections a day and hope for the best."

While around 3 million people, one third of the population, will have received both doses of the vaccine by next week, this is still far less than the target of 5.2 million people Netanyahu had originally promised as the condition for allowing businesses, restaurants, sporting and cultural events to reopen.

In December, before the start of the third lockdown, the government had pledged that thanks to the vaccination campaign, this would be the last major coronavirus wave and the last lockdown. Experts are disputing these claims. Professor Doron Gazit of Jerusalem's Hebrew University has estimated that even with a longer lockdown of another two to three weeks and the reopening of the economy only after fewer than 1,000 new cases a day, there is likely to be another outbreak in March due to a combination of the high transmission rate and limited vaccination.

Preliminary results from a study of 1.2 million members by the Clalit health maintenance organisation's research institute show that the Pfizer coronavirus vaccine used in Israel has produced a 94 percent fall in symptomatic coronavirus cases and was equally effective across all age groups, including people aged 70 and older. Nevertheless, the vaccine's effectiveness in reducing the rate of transmission, as important as blocking the disease, is unknown. Imperial College London's model suggests that—other things being equal—a vaccine that blocks 40 percent of infections, preventing 40 percent of the incidence of the disease, would be equally effective in reducing the number of deaths as a vaccine that eliminates 80 percent of disease but leaves the transmission rate the same.

A report by Israel's national information centre said that infection is still widespread. While the number of hospitalisations has declined from the January peak, the number of new infections is still around the level of the September peak, is double the April peak, and overcrowding in hospitals remains high.

The profile of patients in a serious condition has changed, reflecting both the effectiveness of the vaccine programme among the older population and the emergence of new and more virulent strains, including the variants discovered in the UK, South Africa, and Brazil.

Around 75 percent of cases diagnosed last week were among those under 39, with as many as 15 percent of patients in a serious condition in that age group. Some 38 percent of the new cases are 19 or younger and 37 percent are between the ages of 20-39, up eight percent from January. Just 6.2 percent are those aged 60 and older, meaning that hospital beds freed up by older patients are being filled by those under 50 and ever younger patients.

There is general agreement among doctors that the third wave of the virus has been more aggressive than its predecessors, with more patients becoming seriously ill, experiencing worse symptoms and a more rapid deterioration such that they needed ventilators sooner.

Researchers at the Hebrew University have found, as have scientists at the Weizmann Centre, the Technion in Haifa and Tel Aviv University, that COVID-19 patients in serious condition are increasingly likely to die, and to die more quickly, while the infection rate has still to decline, despite the vaccination drive.

Healthcare experts have warned that reopening schools will cause a spike in Covid infection among children under 16 and too young to be vaccinated and called on hospitals to prepare for an increase in cases among children as schools reopen.

The government took the decision to reopen, fully cognisant of this. On Sunday, Dr Segal Liverant Taub, who heads the Ministry of Health's general medicine division, wrote to hospital administrators, urging them to prepare their facilities for children and their medical teams to treat young people by February 25. "In the upcoming two months, we expect an upward trend in infection in children of all ages in Israel. Evidence is accumulating for higher infection rates of the British variant, whose prevalence in Israel is about 80 percent, among children."

The same day, five children were rushed into Meir Hospital in Kfar Sava suffering from the disease, one now in a critical condition. Three of the children—a 13-year-old, a 10-year-old and an 18-month-old—have active infections, while the other two are suffering from long-COVID symptoms, more than a month after falling ill. Dr Dganit Adam, director of Meir Hospital's paediatric intensive care unit, said, "We are witness to the fact that despite everyone being certain that children are not endangered by the coronavirus, there are an increasing number of children being hospitalized for COVID-19 and the complications that follow it."

In another worrying development, a 25-week-old foetus died of COVID-19 after the mother tested positive for the disease over the weekend. So far, a pregnant mother has directly passed on the virus to her baby in 1 to 3 percent of cases. This recent wave, in which the UK variant has predominated, has seen more younger people infected, including pregnant women, with dozens of pregnant women ending up in intensive-care units and delivering their babies prematurely via C-section.

Netanyahu is staking his political survival on the successful rollout of the vaccination drive, aiming for 90 percent of those over 50 years of age to be vaccinated by the end of this month and promising Israelis they would be Covid-free by late March. The pandemic is dominating the March 23 elections, the fourth in less than two years, under conditions where one million people are unemployed, the average standard of living based on income fell by 22.7 percent in 2020 and the economy is looking into the abyss. Facing years in jail if convicted of bribery and corruption, his freedom depends on retaining the premiership with a sufficient majority to pass legislation that will allow him to evade trial.

Netanyahu has called the unvaccinated "the new enemy" and announced the introduction of an app-based "green passport" for those who have been vaccinated, allowing them entry into hotels, museums, restaurants, pools, shopping malls and sports matches and to travel overseas. The government is reportedly considering legislation to make vaccination for teachers compulsory, and to allow municipalities to see which of their residents has not been vaccinated.

Health Minister Yuli Edelstein has called for the forced testing every two days of all unvaccinated "public-facing" employees, including teachers and bus drivers. He accused unvaccinated teachers of "taking unnecessary risks with students' health".



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