

New Zealand government will not immediately lock down if Omicron appears in community

Tom Peters
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On Tuesday, New Zealand's Labour Party-led government announced that it is delaying plans to ease border restrictions, due to the threat posed by the extremely infectious Omicron variant of COVID-19.

New Zealand's border has been closed to most travellers since March 2020. Citizens and residents can still enter the country, but are required to book a space in one of approximately 4,000 rooms in hotels repurposed as managed isolation and quarantine (MIQ) facilities.

The government had planned to remove the requirement to stay in MIQ for double-vaccinated New Zealanders returning from Australia from January 17. They would be told to "self-isolate" at home instead. COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins said the date would be delayed until the end of February. In addition, people will now have to stay in MIQ for 10 days, up from 7.

Hipkins noted that when Omicron cases appear in the community "we expect that it will spread fast." Despite this, he said "it is not our intention to move to lockdowns, unless that is absolutely necessary in the event of a widespread outbreak where our health system comes under considerable strain."

This is a stark warning that the government has no intention of stopping the new variant from spreading.

As of yesterday there were 28 Omicron cases among people staying in MIQ—up from just one case a week earlier. Internationally, including in neighbouring Australia, Omicron is surging as a result of most governments abandoning public health restrictions and embracing the homicidal policy of "herd immunity," i.e. mass infection.

Hipkins said the steps taken were aimed at "keeping

Omicron out as long as we can." However, it is likely to escape from MIQ. New Zealand's ongoing Delta outbreak began in August when an unknown person carried the virus out of MIQ into the community.

The government has exposed the population to increased risk by using hotels located in the centre of cities like Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch as MIQ facilities. It rejected calls for purpose-built facilities in more remote areas.

In October, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced that the government was ditching its previous policy of eliminating COVID-19 from the community, which had kept the country's rate of hospitalisations and deaths among the lowest in the world.

In response to pressure from big business, lockdown measures in Auckland, the centre of the Delta outbreak, were ended in early December, and the government has declared that the virus will spread nationwide.

These criminal decisions are aimed at making COVID-19 endemic, forcing the population to accept ongoing deaths and serious illnesses. New Zealand's COVID-19 death toll has increased from 26 to 49 since August. Last week a Maori boy in South Auckland, aged under 10 years old, became the youngest person to die with the virus.

Daily reported cases of Delta have come down below 100 over the past fortnight, with 1,605 total active cases in the past 21 days. The real numbers could be much higher; the virus is present in at least nine regions. Yesterday a person tested positive in the Hutt Valley, in Wellington and COVID-19 was detected in wastewater in Whitianga and Napier, both popular holiday destinations, prompting calls for more people to get

tested. Test numbers have fallen significantly, from 202,718 in the final week of November to 152,683 over the last week.

The immense dangers of relying solely on vaccines and minimal measures, such as masking, are highlighted by the emergence of Omicron, which has a much greater ability to infect double-vaccinated people.

In New Zealand, 91 percent of people aged over 12 have received two doses of the vaccine, which is 76 percent of the population. Only 5 percent of people have received a third shot. Research from South Africa suggests that two doses of Pfizer are just 33 percent effective at preventing infection from Omicron and provide only 70 percent protection from severe disease.

The government says it aims to accelerate the rollout of the third dose so that 82 percent of those currently vaccinated can receive the “booster” shot by the end of February. It will also make the vaccine available to children between 5 and 11 on January 17.

Even if Omicron is less severe than Delta, which has not been confirmed, hospitals could still be swamped due to the extremely rapid spread.

Scientists have warned that New Zealand’s current “COVID-19 Protection Framework,” known as the “traffic light” system, which has replaced lockdowns, will not stop Omicron. Under the highest setting, “red,” all businesses and schools can remain open. The mitigation measures are limited to the use of vaccine passes for entry into some venues, limits on gathering sizes, and some physical distancing and masking requirements.

Epidemiologist Michael Baker bluntly told *Newsroom*, “We were largely turning our back on public health and social measures and relying on vaccines. I think Omicron is really showing us that we can’t do that at this point in time.”

Public health expert professor Nick Wilson told the Science Media Centre the government should bring back the “alert level” system, which included lockdowns, “so that it can rapidly eliminate any outbreaks of the Omicron variant.”

Dr Matthew Hobbs, a senior public health lecturer at the University of Canterbury, said MIQ systems needed to be strengthened, and “the vaccination requirement for arrivals could be raised to 3 doses of the vaccine to reduce the risk of Omicron coming to New Zealand.”

Representatives of big business, however, are

demanding no retreat from the reopening agenda. Board of Airlines Representatives of New Zealand executive director Justin Tighe-Umbers told the *New Zealand Herald* the delay to reopening the border was “a huge blow to the tourism sector.” He referred favourably to the lifting of travel restrictions in most of Australia, despite “record cases.”

Business NZ chief executive Kirk Hope told Radio NZ the country had to “reintegrate with the world,” complaining: “We’ve got investors who are sitting offshore who are willing to come here and invest significant sums of money in New Zealand.”

The opposition National Party’s COVID-19 spokesman Chris Bishop declared: “The sooner we can return to the plan of allowing fully vaccinated travellers to enter New Zealand without entering MIQ, the better.”

Meanwhile, as Delta continues to spread, the government is encouraging as much complacency as possible. It has not changed the decision to remove limits on public gatherings in Auckland on New Year’s Eve.

Prime Minister Ardern herself is reportedly planning a lavish wedding in coming weeks to her fiancé, TV personality Clarke Gayford, at a farm homestead venue owned by hedge fund billionaire John Griffin, with singer-songwriter Lorde scheduled to perform at the event.



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