Israel tightens travel restrictions over new COVID variant

Israel has approved barring entry to foreign nationals and the use of controversial technology for contact tracing as part of its efforts to clamp down on a new coronavirus variant

JERUSALEM — Israel on Sunday approved barring entry to foreign nationals and the use of controversial technology for contact tracing as part of its efforts to clamp down on a new coronavirus variant.

The Health Ministry said the country's coronavirus Cabinet had authorized a raft of measures, including red-listing travel to 50 African countries, banning entry by foreigners and mandating quarantine for all Israelis arriving from abroad.

It also approved use of the Shin Bet internal security agency's controversial phone monitoring technology to perform contact tracing of individuals confirmed with the new omicron variant of coronavirus in Israel.

Israeli rights groups had decried the use of the technology, which can track where a person has been and whom he has met with, as a violation of privacy rights. The Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that its use be limited.

The Association for Civil Rights in Israel, which has led the opposition to the technology, said Sunday that "resuming the program via emergency regulation is a blatant disregard for the rule of law," and pointed to the court's ruling that "the tracking had not proven effective in preventing the spread of the virus."

But the Cabinet went ahead and gave formal approval to the measure, and Prime Minister Naftali Bennett signed an emergency regulation putting it into effect.

"It should be emphasized that the use is restricted only to verified cases of the new strain. There will be no widespread and sweeping use for all verified cases as was done in previous waves of morbidity," Bennett's office said.

It said the emergency regulation would remain in effect until Thursday, and that if there is a widespread outbreak of the new variant, use of the monitoring technology will be halted.

Earlier Sunday, Bennett said that tightening Israel's borders will help keep the country open internally.

"Restrictions on the country's borders is not an easy step, but it's a temporary and necessary step," he said at the start of the weekly Cabinet meeting.

Dr. Ran Balicer, head of the government's advisory panel on COVID-19, told Israel's Kan public radio that the new measures were necessary for the "fog of war" surrounding the new variant, saying it was "better to act early and strictly" to prevent its spread.

On Saturday, Israel said it detected the new strain in a traveler who had returned from Malawi and was investigating seven other suspected cases. The seven people included three vaccinated individuals and all were placed in isolation.

The new coronavirus variant has been detected in South Africa that scientists say is a concern because of its high number of mutations and rapid spread.

Israel, a country of 9.3. million people, has reported at least 8,184 deaths from coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. Most of its population — over 6.3 million people — has received at least one dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and more than 4 million Israelis have received a booster. It has more than 7,000 active cases, 120 of them hospitalized in serious condition, according to Health Ministry statistics.

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