

New Zealand may stay shut for rest of year amid vaccine rollout doubts



Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern speaks to media during a press conference at Parliament. Photo: Hagen Hopkins/Getty Images

New Zealand's borders will remain closed for most of this year amid uncertainty over the rollout of coronavirus vaccines, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said.

"We can expect our borders to be impacted for much of this year," she said. "We will continue to pursue travel bubbles with Australia and the Pacific, but the rest of the world simply poses too great a risk at this stage."

New Zealand's success in combating the virus has allowed it to lift restrictions and get its economy moving again much sooner than initially expected, but the closed border is decimating its tourism industry.

While the government said it expects to give regulatory approval for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine next week, Ms. Ardern said mass immunization will not begin until mid-year and she was taking a "conservative" approach to letting foreigners in again.

"For travel to restart, we need one of two things," she said.

"We need the confidence that being vaccinated means you don't pass covid-19 on to others or we need enough of our population to be vaccinated and protected that people can safely re-enter New Zealand. Both possibilities will take some time."

Ms. Ardern sounded pessimistic on the possibility of a safe travel zone with Australia any time soon. While talks would continue, "it does look increasingly difficult at a country-by-country level".

Australia began allowing quarantine-free travel for New Zealanders last year but suspended it this week when New Zealand reported one case of covid-19 in the community.

Ms. Ardern expressed disappointment at Australia's decision.

The case involving a woman who tested positive after leaving managed isolation is "well under control", she said.

"If we are to enter into a Trans-Tasman bubble, we will need to be able to give people confidence that we won't see closures at the borders that happen with very short notice over incidents we believe can be well managed domestically," Ms. Ardern added.

New Zealand aims to begin immunizing workers at its managed isolation facilities this quarter, but Ms. Ardern was unable to say when the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine will arrive in the country.

It is expected to get to New Zealand around the same time as it reaches Australia, which is slated for mid-to-late February.

"New Zealand will have its house in order so we will be ready to receive, but ultimately we will be in the hands of pharmaceutical companies' delivery timelines," Ms. Ardern said.

Source:

<https://www.independent.ie/world-news/australasia/new-zealand-may-stay-shut-for-rest-of-year-amid-vaccine-rollout-doubts-40016417.html>

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