

Israel confirms first coronavirus case in cruise ship returnee

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Israel confirmed Friday its first case of new coronavirus in a citizen who flew home from Japan earlier this week after being quarantined on the stricken cruise ship Diamond Princess.

"One of the passengers who returned home from the cruise ship in Japan tested positive in a checkup by the health ministry's central laboratory," a ministry statement said.

A total of 15 Israelis were among the passengers quarantined on board the Diamond Princess, of whom 11 have flown home.

The others all tested negative for the virus.

The returning Israelis had all been placed in quarantine for 14 days at the Sheba Medical Center near Tel Aviv.

"They are in full isolation," said Dr Gili Regev-Yochay, director of the hospitals' infectious diseases unit.

"It's in many ways like a jail. We try to make it as best as we could to have them in a very nice and comfortable place, but very isolated."

The woman who tested positive for the virus "is not sick", Regev-Yochay added.

"She is totally healthy. She feels she is asymptomatic but she is a carrier of the virus."

The other four Israelis who were on board the Diamond Princess are still in Japan.

At the start of the month, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said it was "inevitable" that the COVID-19 outbreak, which first emerged in China, would reach Israel.

He urged health authorities to focus on developing a vaccine.

In late January, the government banned all flights from China from landing in Israel.

This month it also began refusing entry to foreign nationals who had visited Hong Kong, Macau, Singapore or Thailand over the past two weeks.

Since December, the novel coronavirus has killed more than 2,200 people in China, the epicentre of the epidemic.

Elsewhere in the world, the virus has killed 11 people and spread across some 25 countries.

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