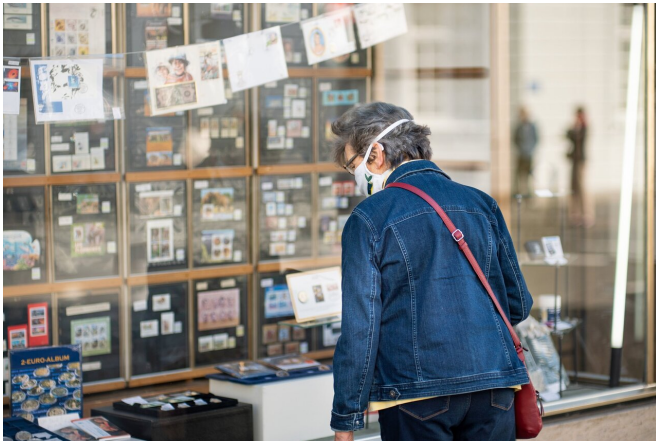# Belgium bans non-essential foreign trips from Wednesday

22 January 2021

Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Belgium will ban non-essential trips in and out of the country from Wednesday in a bid to curb the spread of highly contagious coronavirus variants, Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said.

The prohibition will run to March 1 and apply to land, sea and air travel but will not affect cross-border workers or those with overriding health or family reasons.

"We are not going to build a wall around Belgium. We can go to other countries but only for essential reasons," De Croo told a media conference on Friday.

The announcement comes a day after a European Union summit by videoconference during which leaders decided against barring travel across the EU's internal borders.

They instead "strongly discouraged" nonessential intra-EU trips, and warned they might toughen that line in days ahead if the worrying virus variants took hold.

The EU wants to avoid a repeat of the height of the pandemic's first wave in March last year when several member states panicked and closed off national borders unilaterally, triggering travel and economic chaos.

Travel into the EU is already severely restricted.

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control has warned there is a "very high" probability of the more contagious variants spreading in the bloc.

These mutations—which emerged in Britain, South Africa and Brazil—have already prompted bans or restrictions on travellers from those countries.

Deadly British variant

For most of the EU, the variants are currently a tiny number of overall cases, but the British variant has spread quickly in Ireland and Portugal. The latter country is in the EU's passport-free Schengen area.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Friday that new medical information on the variant dominating in his country showed it may be 30 percent more deadly than the strains on the continent.

The EU has blocked all but freight or voyagers on essential trips from entering the bloc from Britain, a former member outside of the bloc's freedom of movement rules.

Belgium—a country of 11.5 million wedged between Germany, France and the Netherlands—is particularly worried it could be vulnerable to cross-border infections, especially during a February vacation period.

It has registered one of the highest death rates in the world during the pandemic, but restrictions closing bars and restaurants since October along

with a nighttime curfew have brought infection and hospital cases down in the past two months.

"The situation has stabilised these past weeks," De Croo said, but "that doesn't mean the danger has disappeared".

Already, Belgian citizens and residents returning to the country have to have a COVID-19 test on arrival, self-isolate for a week and then take another test.

Others arriving also need to show a negative COVID-19 test before taking a flight to Belgium.

Belgian Health Minister Frank Vandenbroucke said that a person testing positive for COVID-19 would now have to quarantine for 10 days instead of seven as previously "because the new (British) variant is more contagious, for longer".

De Croo said he was aware that "a lot of people are frankly fed-up" with the restrictions, but he urged compliance so that "the light at the end of the tunnel" could be reached.

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