UK rolls out hotel quarantine for 'high risk' country returnees

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The UK government will on Monday introduce mandatory hotel quarantine rules for arrivals from dozens of countries deemed "high risk" for coronavirus variants, as it tries to stop new strains spreading.

The new policy requires all UK citizens and permanent residents entering England from 33 countries on a wider travel ban list to self-isolate at their own expense in approved hotels for 10 days and take several Covid-19 tests.

Other visitors from the countries currently on the so-called "red list", which includes all South American nations, South Africa and Portugal, are currently barred from visiting under lockdown rules.

Arrivals found to have given false information about being in one of the countries 10 days before travel could receive up to 10 years in prison—which has drawn criticism for being excessive.

The government says it has signed contracts with 16 hotels so far, securing nearly 5,000 rooms near English airports, with a further 58,000 rooms on standby.

"The rules coming into force today will bolster the quarantine system and provide another layer of security against new variants at the border," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said in a statement on Sunday.

The minister said Monday the government had resolved well publicised problems with Heathrow Airport, Britain's major aviation hub.

"We've been working with the airport and with the border force to make sure everybody knows the process," he told Times Radio.

"We've worked through all those issues with them. And it does appear to be going smoothly this morning," he added.

The 11-night quarantine, costing £1,750 ($2,420, 2,000 euros), includes transport, food, accommodation and security costs, as well as other essential services and testing.

Passengers must have a negative Covid-19 test result from within three days of travel, and book and pay for the package before setting off for Britain.

They will then take further tests on the second and eighth days of their stays.

The hotel occupants will be able to leave their rooms only in "very limited circumstances", with exercise among them but requiring "special permission" from staff or security.

Anyone refusing to take tests risks a fine of between £1,000 and £2,000, while those who do not self-isolate could have to pay between £5,000 and £10,000.

A limited list of exemptions from the measures include hauliers travelling from Portugal, defence personnel, government contractors and diplomatic

missions.

'Can't be easy'

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said Sunday the new regime would provide "extra safeguarding" as Britain looks to ease strict lockdown measures next month after weeks of falling infection rates.

The UK government unveiled the plans earlier this month following pressure to tighten Britain's borders amid fears that foreign virus variants could derail the country's so far successful mass vaccination programme.

It has vaccinated 15 million of the most vulnerable people with a first jab, and is looking to inoculate all over-50s by May.

Ministers last month scrapped the previous "travel corridors" system that allowed unchecked travel from countries with lower caseloads.

The UK now requires all arrivals from non-"red list" countries to show negative Covid-19 tests and then self-isolate for 10 days at a place of their own choosing.

The government said it had met with stakeholders from various sectors including aviation and hospitality before finalising its plans.

Charlie Islam-Harry, manager of the St Giles Heathrow hotel, said staff would do regular welfare checks on guests during their enforced stays, adding: "It can't be easy for them to be in a bedroom for 10 days."

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