Australian city orders new lockdown after virus escapes quarantine hotel

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Australian authorities ordered a snap, three-day lockdown in the western city of Perth Friday after the coronavirus escaped from a quarantine hotel housing infected international travellers.

Western Australia state Premier Mark McGowan said a man who was allowed to leave the hotel on April 17 after testing negative for the virus at the end of the standard 14-day quarantine period tested positive several days later.

One of his close contacts in Perth tested positive for COVID-19 on Friday in the first case of community transmission of the disease in the state in 12 months, prompting the lockdown order, McGowan said.

Authorities are tracking other people who came into contact with the man during five days he spent in Perth before flying to Melbourne, on Australia's southeast coast, where he tested positive on Wednesday and was put into isolation.

Australia has been among the world's most successful countries in containing the pandemic, with fewer than 30,000 cases and just over 900 deaths for a population of 25 million.

The few instances of community transmission in recent months have been linked to hotel quarantine in major cities, and all the outbreaks have been successfully contained with similar brief lockdowns.

But there has been heightened concern over the hotel quarantine process after several instances of the coronavirus spreading from infected people in one room to those in neighbouring rooms.

There has also been a sharp increase in the number of infected arrivals into Australia, notably from India.

The federal government on Thursday announced restrictions on new arrivals from India, and McGowan said Western Australia would cut the number of returning Australians allowed into the state each week from overseas.

McGowan said that under the lockdown residents of Perth and the adjacent Peel region would need to remain in their homes for three days from midnight Friday except for a small number of activities.

Restaurants and pubs can only serve takeaway food and entertainment venues will be closed, he said.

The lockdown will also force the cancellation of events on Sunday for Anzac Day, the annual day of remembrance for Australian and New Zealand soldiers lost in war.

"I know this is hard to take and I wish we didn't need to do this (but) we can't take any chances with the virus," McGowan said in announcing the measures.

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