Austria, Slovenia impose Italy border restrictions over virus

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Austria and Slovenia announced Tuesday they would severely restrict travel from neighbouring Italy, the country worst hit by the new coronavirus after China.

Austria ordered a halt to flights and trains from Italy, while Slovenia said it would close its 232-kilometre (144-miles)-long border with the country.

"I have given orders to the Foreign Ministry and the Domestic Affairs Ministry to close the border with Italy following Austria's move," Slovenia's outgoing prime minister Marjan Sarec said on Twitter.

He did not immediately give further details. Slovenia has reported 31 coronavirus cases so far among its population of two million.

Exempted from Austria's travel ban are cargo transport, people with a doctor's certificate, and returning Austrians who agree to a two-week quarantine, the Austrian government announced.

"The priority is to stop the spread of the virus," Chancellor Sebastian Kurz told reporters earlier Tuesday.

Some train services between Italy and Austria were still running Tuesday but that was expected to change, a spokeswoman for Austrian rail operator OeBB told AFP.

By extension, train services from Venice in Italy to Munich in Germany via the Brenner pass border crossing with Austria will also be stopped, said a spokesperson for German rail operator Deutsche Bahn.

Amid other measures, Austria is also banning outdoor events with more than 500 people and indoor events with more than 100 people until the beginning of April.

In line with the ban, Vienna's state opera is cancelling all its concerts until March 31 in a "very painful" move, director Dominique Meyer said, adding the opera would need state aid for their lost revenue.

So far the Alpine EU country of more than eight million people has reported 182 confirmed cases of the new coronavirus and no deaths.

Universities and other higher education institutions have been ordered to halt classes from late Monday.

On the travel ban from Italy, border controls will be put in place, Interior Minister Karl Nehammer said.

An exception is cargo transport, which can continue, but health checks are already being put in place. Italy is Austria's second-biggest trade partner.

The coronavirus outbreak has killed 631 people in Italy and forced the government to restrict movement for its 60 million citizens.

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