

New Zealand considers plan to ease virus lockdown

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New Zealand is expected to start easing a nationwide lockdown to combat the coronavirus next week, but Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern warned Thursday it would be far from a return to normal.

The Pacific country of five million people has been one of the most

successful in containing the outbreak, with just over 1,000 known cases and nine deaths.

It had only six confirmed new infections on Thursday.

"There are promising signs our go-hard-and-go-early elimination strategy is working and the lockdown is breaking the chain of community transmission," Ardern said.

The government imposed a maximum Level Four [lockdown](#) three weeks ago that included closing the island nation's borders, countrywide stay-at-home orders and shuttering all but essential businesses and services.

The draconian measures—similar to those imposed in Europe and the United States—paralysed the economy, with companies closing, thousands of job losses and forecasts that unemployment could escalate from around four percent to almost 26 percent.

Leaders around the world are now wrestling with the dilemma of how to return to normal and kick-start their shattered economies without risking a devastating second wave of infections.

Ardern is expected to announce early next week whether the country is in a position to get its economic wheels moving again.

But she insisted that "any move to Level Three cannot put those gains at risk."

"The test for a business opening at Level Three moves to it being safe, rather than being essential," she said.

The government said the easing to Level Three would keep [travel restrictions](#) in place and that bars, restaurants, shopping malls and any

business involving close public contact would remain closed.

Schools up to year 10 could reopen, but attendance would be voluntary while funerals and weddings would be restricted to a maximum of 10 people, with no food or receptions allowed.

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