Melbourne lockdown lifted after zero new virus cases recorded

26 October 2020

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Australia's second-biggest city will this week exit its coronavirus lockdown following nearly four months under onerous restrictions, authorities announced Monday, after no new daily cases or deaths were recorded.

Stay-at-home orders for Melbourne's five million residents will be lifted from midnight Tuesday into Wednesday while restaurants, beauty salons and retail stores will be permitted to throw open their doors.

Melbourne and the surrounding Victoria state recorded the first 24-hour period without any new COVID-19 cases since June 8—before security bungles at quarantine hotels housing returned international travellers sparked a major outbreak in July.

Announcing the much-anticipated relaxing of restrictions, Victoria state Premier Daniel Andrews' voice cracked as he declared it an "emotional day".

"This has been a very difficult year. And Victorians have given a lot and I'm proud of every single one

of them," he told reporters in Melbourne.

Asked if ale-loving Victorians could now "get on the beers", Andrews said he "might go a little higher up the shelf".

Jubilant social media users declared the return to zero cases and deaths "Donut Day", with the hashtag trending as Twitter users posted selfies with the sweet treats in celebration.

Melbourne in the summer became the epicentre of the country's second coronavirus wave, with new daily cases rising above 700 in August when the rest of Australia was already rolling back restrictions.

Some curbs were already lifted last week, allowing haircuts and golf games to return, but further easing planned for Sunday was delayed by 24 hours to assess thousands of test results after a small outbreak in the city's north.

Andrews said all the tests had returned negative.

"It was worth waiting to be absolutely confident to be sure that our team had their arms around those positive cases and fundamental control of the outbreak—and that is exactly what these numbers show us," he said.

Pressure had been mounting for weeks on state authorities to allow the city more freedoms, with a litany of rules remaining in place as they took a cautious approach to reopening despite the falling number of cases.

The rest of Victoria state is already enjoying fewer restrictions, with gyms set to reopen and outdoor live music to resume from Tuesday.

Restrictions on travel between Melbourne and regional Victoria will be lifted from November 8, with a 25-kilometre (15-mile) travel radius for city

residents also set to be removed the same day.

The state remains cut off from the rest of Australia, where regional authorities have largely taken a hyper-vigilant response to COVID-19 such as maintaining internal border restrictions.

Those measures have attracted criticism from some quarters.

On Sunday, conservative Prime Minister Scott Morrison took a partisan swipe at Andrews' centre-left government, claiming Victoria's restrictions had caused "1,000 job losses per day".

Overall, Australia has been relatively successful in containing the spread of the coronavirus, with about 27,500 cases and 905 deaths in a population of 25 million.

The country also maintains strict controls on its international borders to prevent transmission of the virus from overseas, which has left tens of thousands of its own citizens stranded abroad.

Authorities now hope to remove internal travel restrictions, bring more Australians home from overseas, and create "travel bubbles" with other countries that have curbed the virus—all while continuing to maintain low case numbers.

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