

## International

# New Zealand races to track outbreak origin; cases jump

## Outbreak puts pressure on Ardern ahead of election

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealand was scrambling to trace the source of its first coronavirus outbreak in more than three months, reporting 13 new community infections yesterday, after Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern had sought to eradicate the virus with a hard lockdown. The resurgence of COVID-19 comes just weeks before a scheduled general election, increasing pressure on Ardern to get the outbreak under control amid growing criticism.

Ardern swiftly reimposed tight movement restrictions in Auckland and social distancing measures across the rest of the country after the discovery this week of four infected family members in the city. "Once again we are reminded of how tricky this virus is and how easily it can spread," she said during a televised news conference yesterday. "Going hard and early is still the best course of action." Officials reported 13 new cases in the community yesterday, and one overseas arrival who had not left quarantine since arriving in the country, bringing the total number of active cases to 36. Ardern said it was a positive sign that all 13 new community cases

were linked back to one infected family, either via work or broader family connections, and that all were being transferred into quarantine facilities. She said that experience showed "things will get worse before they get better", and more cases were likely to be reported in coming days.

### Searching for patient zero

Director-General of Health Ashley Bloomfield said health officials were getting "closer every hour" to finding the patient zero of the outbreak. Bloomfield raised the possibility on Wednesday that the virus had arrived in New Zealand via freight, given one of the initially infected family members works in a cool store that takes imported frozen goods from overseas.

Ten of the new cases were either cool store staff or their family members. The cool store is operated by the New Zealand unit of US-based Americold Realty Trust. Yesterday, Bloomfield said that importing the virus via freight was considered "a low possibility" as the infection source, but officials wanted to formally rule it out. China has reported the virus on frozen food

packaged in South America. Some prominent local health experts suggested it was more likely the virus had been quietly spreading in Auckland for weeks, despite Ardern's efforts to eradicate it with an initial five week hard lockdown.

This possibility has allowed the major opposition National Party to seize on potential flaws in Ardern's approach ahead of the Sept. 19 election, which she described as a "COVID election" when launching her campaign. Ardern is on track to easily win the election, according to recent polls, but the National Party is pressuring her to delay the vote until at least November, arguing their inability to campaign gives Ardern an unfair advantage. Ardern said she will announce a decision on the election date after she reveals today whether lockdown measures will be extended. The election must be held by Nov 21. Critics are also highlighting the economic impact of an extended shutdown. Reserve Bank of New Zealand Deputy Governor Geoff Bascand told Reuters the resurgence posed "a major risk" to the bank's outlook, given its baseline scenario has an assumption that the virus is contained in the country.

### Auckland lockdown

In Auckland, home to around 1.7 million people, residents were given just hours to prepare for the return to level 3 restrictions on Wednesday, requiring people to stay at home unless for essential trips. Police set up checkpoints at the city's borders as scores of people attempted to leave to avoid a sustained lockdown, as Ardern warned they would be turned back. Long queues of people formed at pop-up clinics, with some waiting hours to be tested for the virus, and there was a rush to supermarkets to stock up on essentials. There was also growing anger at revelations that members of the infected family had visited several tourist sites in the town of Rotorua and an aged care home in the Waikato district, both south of Auckland. "We can see the seriousness of the situation we are in," Ardern said. "It's being dealt with in an urgent but calm and methodical way." With 1,238 confirmed cases and 22 deaths, New Zealand's exposure to the virus remains well below many other developed nations. — Reuters

## Bus stop - the newest front in South Korea's coronavirus battle

**SEOUL:** South Korea has opened a high-tech new front in the battle against coronavirus, fortifying bus shelters with temperature-checking doors and ultraviolet disinfection lamps. Ten advanced facilities have been installed in a north-eastern district of Seoul, offering protection from monsoon rains, summer heat, and the novel coronavirus.

To enter, passengers must stand in front of an automated thermal-imaging camera, and the door will only slide open if their temperature is below 37.5 degrees Celsius (99.5 Fahrenheit). A separate camera is installed lower down to test children. Inside the glass-walled booths - which cost about 100 million won (\$84,000) each - the air-conditioning systems have ultraviolet lamps installed to kill viruses at the same time as cooling the air.

A dispenser provides hand sanitizer, and users are advised to wear face masks at all times, while keeping at least one meter apart from others. "We have installed all the available anti-coronavirus measures we can think of into this booth," Kim Hwang-yun, a district official in charge of the Smart Shelter project, told AFP. Free Wi-Fi is also included. Since they were installed last week each booth has been used by



**SEOUL:** A shelter booth designed to protect passengers from monsoon rains, summer heat and the COVID-19 is seen at a bus stop in Seoul. — AFP

about 300 to 400 people a day, Kim said. To ensure passengers do not miss their bus, a panel displays estimated arrival times while a screen live-streams the traffic outside. South Korea endured one of the worst early coronavirus outbreaks outside China but brought it broadly under control with an extensive "trace, test and treat" program while never imposing a compulsory lockdown. Kim Ju-li, a 49-year-old housewife using the new bus stop for the first time, told AFP: "I feel really safe in here because I know others around me had their temperatures checked as well as me." — AFP

## Pandemic behavior: Why some people obey the rules

**LONDON:** Lockdowns and social distancing measures introduced around the world to try and curb the COVID-19 pandemic are reshaping lives, legislating activities that were once everyday freedoms and creating new social norms. But there are always some people who don't play by the rules. Rule-breaking is not a new phenomenon, but behavioural scientists say it is being exacerbated in the coronavirus pandemic by cultural, demographic and psychological factors that can make the flouters seem more selfish and dangerous. Here are some questions and answers on the science of human behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic:

### Some people flout and others obey

A key factor is individualism versus collectivism. "Some countries...tend to be higher on individualism, which is about expressing your sense of identity and who you are as an individual," said Jay Van Bavel, an associate professor of psychology at New York University. People in individualist cultures tend to reject rules and ignore attempts by public health authorities to "nudge" behavior change with risk

messages or appeals for altruism. "If you say, for example, that wearing a mask will help protect others, people in individualistic cultures just care less," said Michael Sanders, an expert at the Policy Institute at King's College London. In collectivist cultures, people are more likely to do what's best for the group.

### Are trust and fear important?

Yes. These and other instincts are significant influences on human behavior. In societies with more political division, for example, people are less likely to trust advice from one side or the other, and also tend to form pro- and anti-camps. Optimism and fear are also crucial. A little of both can be positive, but too much of either can be damaging. "In a situation like a pandemic, (optimism) can lead you to take risks that are incredibly dangerous," said Van Bavel.

### Why is social distancing difficult?

"We are truly social animals," said Van Bavel. "Our bodies and brains are designed for connection and the pandemic in many ways goes against our instincts to connect." That's partly why local outbreaks can crop up in bars and nightclubs, or religious ceremonies, weddings and parties. "People have a hard time resisting that tendency for social and group connection."

### If rule-breakers are a minority?

"The problem is that, in a massive collective problem like the one we're facing now, if everybody breaks the rules a little bit, then it's not dissimilar to lots of people not following the rules at all," said Sanders. — Reuters