

# Crewcuts and catch-ups as New Zealand lockdown ends

## PM Ardern hoping to catch up with her family face to face

**WELLINGTON:** New Zealanders mingled with friends and hit the shopping malls for the first time in seven weeks yesterday as a national lockdown ended and businesses faced a “new normal” minimizing the constant threat of coronavirus.

A long-awaited haircut was the top priority for many Kiwis after almost two months in isolation, with queues of tangle-headed customers forming at barbers before dawn.

Retailers, restaurants, malls, cinemas, cafes, gyms and playgrounds were all allowed to reopen after the government relaxed COVID-19 restrictions. The lockdown was among the tightest in the world and helped New Zealand become one of the most successful countries in containing the epidemic.

Yesterday’s changes, which put New Zealand at Level Two on its four-tier alert system, also allow Kiwis to break their quarantine “bubble” and meet up with friends and wider family members. “People are looking to get back to normal and being at Level Two will allow everybody to at least function to a degree,” retailer Mike Leigh told AFP.

Downtown streets in Wellington were once again jammed with traffic, although the usual crush on the capital’s commuter trains was non-existent. Instead, red and green stickers were plastered on seats, indicating where passengers could sit while still maintaining social distancing.

The city’s main railway station smelled strongly of disinfectant as cleaners mopped and scrubbed between each influx of office workers. Outside the station, Leigh stood at a makeshift stall selling brightly coloured face masks at NZ\$15 (US\$9) apiece.

A carpenter by trade, he has not worked at his regular job since the lockdown began and spotted a gap in the market for facemasks, which were seldom worn in New Zealand before the pandemic.

“It’s been going pretty good, I’ve sold about eight or 10 of them this morning, my wife makes them,” he said, adding “we’ll probably have to get a website”.

At the suburban Queensgate shopping mall, there was extra security to ensure crowds did not congregate too closely before retailers raised their shutters for the first since late March.

Shops prominently displayed the maximum number of customers allowed inside alongside signs proclaiming “one in, one out”. New Zealand, with a population of five million, has recorded only 21 coronavirus deaths and kept new cases to single figures over the past month.

Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she was hoping to catch up with her family face to face.

“I’m actually really looking forward to giving my sister a hug. I haven’t seen her for a couple of months because I haven’t been home,” she said earlier this week. But authorities have warned there is no place for complacency and businesses of all types must use log-



**WELLINGTON:** Women sit on the waterfront in Wellington on May 14, 2020. New Zealand will phase out its coronavirus lockdown over the next 10 days after successfully containing the virus, although some restrictions will remain, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced. —AFP

books to record customer details in case there is an outbreak.

There are also stringent protocols surrounding the use of personal protective equipment and sanitisers that are likely to remain in force long-term. “It’s not difficult, it’s more a matter of not forgetting that I have to do it after every client,” Wellington barber Dali Toma said, wiping down his chair.

Restaurateur Stephen Morris said the way his Mediterranean eatery Avida operated had fundamentally changed. Capacity has

been reduced by more than a third to 92, with tables removed to allow more space between customers, and staff numbers and opening hours cut. Morris was concerned the upsurge in business as people celebrated the end of lockdown could be followed by a downturn as the economic impact of the pandemic sank in. “We’re very much the CBD crowd, but how many office blocks will be full?” he said.

“If they’re working from home then all of a sudden we’re not getting full... we’re not out of the woods yet.” — AFP

## Buzzfeed closes news operations in Britain, Australia

**SYDNEY:** Groundbreaking website BuzzFeed said yesterday that it would be shuttering part of its loss-making news operations in Britain and Australia, as

it scales back global ambitions to cut costs. “For economic and strategic reasons, we are going to focus on news that hits big in the United States during this difficult period,” a company spokesperson said. Many news outlets have been hard-hit by the coronavirus pandemic, with plummeting advertising revenues and already struggling operations pushed deeper into the red.

Ten staff in Britain and four in Australia will be furloughed, in a move that is expected to become permanent. The company will no longer cover local news in the two countries, but said: “In the UK, we still plan

on retaining some employees who are focused on news with a global audience — social news, celebrity, and investigations.”

The four Australian posts were “no longer essential during this time of sharply limited resources,” the company added. Once maligned as a funnel for little more than celebrity gossip, clickbait lists and cat pictures, BuzzFeed has developed into a news force to rival more established outlets.

“BuzzFeed gave us space to experiment with covering politics for a young audience,” Australian news editor Lane Sainty tweeted. She lauded her staff’s

work to “tackle important and often under-covered beats like abortion, LGBTQ rights, Indigenous affairs, immigration and internet culture.”

“I’ve always been grateful for that & very proud of our work.” More cost-cutting measures are expected, including in the United States, where “work-share programs” are being touted as a way of avoiding furloughs. “Those options need to meet our savings goals, be legally and logistically workable, and allow us to keep producing kinetic, powerful journalism,” BuzzFeed said. This year “news will spend about \$10 million more than it takes in,” it added. — AFP