Australia plans pop-up carparks to prevent rush hour virus crush

SYDNEY (Reuters) - Australian officials planned to open pop-up parking lots and extra bicycle lanes in Sydney and other cities as the country's most populous state began its first full week on Monday of loosened lockdown measures.

Increased traffic is seen in the city centre following the easing of restrictions implemented to curb the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in Sydney, Australia, May 18, 2020. REUTERS/Loren Elliott

New South Wales (NSW) state Premier Gladys Berejiklian is urging people to avoid peak-hour trains and buses as they return to work to ensure that social distancing between commuters is maintained.

Australia's states and territories are beginning to allow more public activity under a three-step government plan after two months of shutdowns that officials have credited with keeping the country's exposure to the pandemic relatively low.

NSW, which accounts for around half of Australia's 7,045 COVID-19 cases, reported just one new infection in the previous 24 hours. The state also reported one additional death, the first nationally in almost a week, taking the nationwide toll to 99.

"We normally encourage people to catch public transport but given the constraints in the peak and the fact we are exercising social distancing, we want people to consider different ways to get to work," Berejiklian told reporters in Sydney.

"Places in and around the CBD, but also in employment hubs, will be investigated and more pop-up parking stations will be made available," she added.

For people still catching trains and buses, the government is ordering "intense and ongoing cleaning" across the public transport network, she said.

Neighbouring Victoria state, which along with NSW accounts for more than half Australia's 25 million population, reported six new cases of coronavirus in the 24 hours to Monday.

Twelve McDonald's Australia restaurants in Victoria were closed after a delivery driver tested positive to the illness, local media reported. McDonald's Australia is a separate corporate entity to McDonald's Corp (MCD.N).

"It is a difficult decision, but it is the right one to make," McDonald's Australia CEO Andrew Gregory was quoted telling Nine Entertainment.

The driver was not symptomatic and no McDonald's diners were at risk of contracting the illness from the driver, Gregory added, according to the network.

The northern state of Queensland reported two new cases over the past 24 hours.

Meanwhile, Australia is joining dozens of countries pushing for an investigation into the origins of the new coronavirus when the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the World Health Organisation, meets in Switzerland on Monday for its first annual meeting since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

Reporting by Byron Kaye and Renju Jose; editing by Jane Wardell

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