FACTS RELATED TO THE COVID VIRUS AT PRINCESS ELISABETH ANTARCTICA STATION

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The International Polar Foundation (IPF) confirms that despite all sanitary measures taken staff members at the Princess Elisabeth Station were infected by the COVID virus in December 2021. The IPF would like to stress that while the COVID outbreak at the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica research station is a situation that it is taking very seriously and monitoring very closely by our medical staff, life and work at the station has not been seriously affected by the outbreak.

Below are the facts the IPF would like to share with the press to clarify the situation:

All residents at the Princess Elisabeth Station have to follow strict sanitary measures before and upon arrival at the station (medical examinations, vaccination, PCR tests, quarantine – see complete list of measures taken at the end of this document).

- December 9, 2021: An inbound flight arrived from Cape Town with crew members and scientists
- December 14, 2021: All crew members and scientists tested after planned COVID test (arrival + 5 days)
- December 15, 2021: A first positive case with mild symptoms was recorded at Princess Elisabeth Antarctica and the person was immediately isolated.
- The individual who had symptoms on the 15th was infected probably around the December 10. And when it was decided that the best thing for this person to do would be to leave on the next flight on December 23 (D07 flight), he did not present (according to the best available information on hand) any substantial risk to others.
- As PEA is a “zero emission” building, people are living in a passive building, which means it has a common ventilation system, similar toa plane. In such an environment the circulation of micro-organisms is inevitable.
- Subsequently, there were 8 positive tests in December. Some had minor symptoms (sore throat generally). All recovered within a short amount of time.
- The management at the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica offered anyone who so wished the opportunity to leave on a scheduled flight on January 12. However, everyone expressed their wish to stay and continue their work.
- In addition, a new team of scientists will arrive at the station on January 12 as planned. They were also informed of the outbreak and given the opportunity to cancel, which they refused.
- Today: there are currently eight external scientists and 22 station crew working from the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica. Four of the eight external scientists currently at PEA are conducting remote field work.
- At this time the IPF and the Belgian Polar Secretariat is collecting data on the infection trajectory (no cases since December 29 2021), and will not lend support to speculation.
- Fortunately, the COVID outbreak consisted of minor symptoms, if any. The expedition members all remained calm and positive. We attribute this to the professionalism of the team, who has many years of experience handling challenging situations in extreme environments.
- For those living and working at the station, life goes on normally and the important work of the BELARE (Belgian Antarctic Research Expedition) with regard to science support continues unhindered.
- We are aware that the figure of 16 people at the station testing positive is circulating in some media outlets and on social media. This number is inaccurate and does not reflect the number of individuals who tested positive at Princess Elisabeth Antarctica.
- It is misleading to say that new arrivals to the station have been suspended until January 12. There was no scheduled flight in or out of the station until January 12; none of the flights scheduled has been cancelled or postponed due to COVID. All flights to and from the station are scheduled at the start of the season. The inbound and outbound flights on January 12 are merely flights that had already been scheduled, and these only vary if the weather is not favourable.

Below you may find a complete list of anti-COVID measures required by the 2021-22 Belgian Antarctic Research Expedition (BELARE) and enforced for all residents of Princess Elisabeth Antarctica:

- Prior to departure from their country of origin (there are not only Belgians, but also British, Irish, American, Canadian, German, French, and Swiss nationals at the station) each person is obliged to be fully vaccinated (with the 2nd dose given at least 14 days prior to travel for a two-dose vaccine). One person at the station this season was able to get a booster shot prior to leaving for Antarctica.
- Prior to departure from their country of origin, each person is obliged to undergo a complete physical exam by a doctor to ensure that they are in good physical condition. No one in poor health is allowed to go on missions to the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica.
- Each person must take a PCR test 72 hours before their departure from their country of origin to Cape Town, where they are required to quarantine before heading on to Antarctica. Anyone with a positive PCR test is not allowed to travel to Cape Town.
- Each person must take a PCR Test five days after their arrival in Cape Town (if a person becomes infected on the flight to Cape Town, symptoms would usually manifest themselves by this time).
- Once the quarantine is over, each person must take a PCR test maximum 48 hours before departure from Cape Town to Antarctica. Wearing masks on these flights is mandatory.
- Each person must take a PCR test again five days after their arrival to PEA (again, most infections would usually manifest themselves by this time).

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