

**OPENING REMARKS BY
MINISTER FOR TRANSPORT S ISWARAN
ON EXPANSION OF VACCINATED TRAVEL LANES
AT THE MTF PRESS CONFERENCE ON 9 OCTOBER 2021**

Preamble

1. PM has set out our understanding of the current situation, our strategy for this phase of the pandemic, and our path forward to a new normal.
2. In particular, as part of ‘Living with COVID-19’, PM has stressed the importance of opening our borders safely. Let me now outline our next steps in this regard.

Updating our Framework for Border Measures

3. MOH has established a risk-based categorisation of countries/regions with attendant border measures. It is based on a public health assessment of a country/region’s COVID-19 situation, including their infection rate and vaccination coverage. It is the baseline setting upon which we assess further reopening moves.
4. We review this framework regularly as the COVID-19 situation, here and abroad, continues to evolve.
 - a. Specifically, countries such as Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands and Spain have been moved to Category II from 7 October.
 - b. With effect from 13 October, more countries, including the US and UK, will also come under Category II.

5. Against this backdrop, I will lay out our next steps to reopen our borders through the expansion of the Vaccinated Travel Lanes (VTLs).

Expansion of Vaccinated Travel Lanes

6. On 8 September this year, we commenced our first Vaccinated Travel Lanes with Germany and Brunei, which allowed fully vaccinated travellers from these two countries to enter Singapore without quarantine requirements.

a. Prior to this, we had reopened our borders only to visitors from very low-risk countries/regions in Category I, such as Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao.

b. The VTLs with Germany and Brunei were our first re-openings to general travellers. They were designed with a specific set of safeguards, including proof of vaccination and repeated testing.

c. This was part of our cautious, calibrated approach to reopening our borders, while upholding our public health objectives.

VTL scheme has worked well

7. Over the past month, the various stakeholders, including airlines, Changi Airport and our government agencies, have gained valuable experience through the implementation of the VTL. This includes putting in place an application process for visitors, checking on vaccination status, managing arrivals at Changi Airport, and tracking compliance with the prescribed testing regime.

8. We have monitored the VTL scheme closely and are encouraged by the outcomes.

a. As of 8 October yesterday, more than 3,100 travellers from Germany and Brunei have entered Singapore via the Vaccinated Travel Lanes.

b. All travellers have complied with the testing regime, including the requirement to be tested post-arrival on Days 3 and 7.

c. There have only been 2 imported cases. Both were detected at the point of arrival by their PCR test, and were isolated before interaction with the general community.

New VTL Countries

9. With the experience and confidence gained from these initial VTLs, we are now ready to expand the scheme to more Category II countries/regions. Let me outline our next set of moves.

10. First, as a natural extension of the VTL with Germany, we will introduce VTLs with six other European countries namely Denmark, France, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom.

11. Second, we will expand VTLs to two Category II countries in North America, namely Canada and the US.

12. All 8 countries are already open to travellers from Singapore. So the VTLs will restore two-way quarantine-free travel between Singapore and them.

a. We will open applications for the VTLs with these countries on 12 October. Approved VTL travellers can enter Singapore from 19 October.

13. Third, we have announced the launch of a VTL arrangement with the Republic of Korea (ROK).

a. The ROK is currently closed to general travellers from most parts of the world, including Singapore, except for specific groups such as those travelling for business, official, or compassionate reasons.

b. Our discussions with the ROK to commence quarantine-free bilateral travel were concluded yesterday, at my meeting with ROK Minister Noh Hyeong Ouk. I am pleased that we have agreed to jointly establish VTLs between our two countries.

c. We will open applications for the VTL with the ROK on 8 November. Approved travellers from the ROK can enter Singapore from 15 November. Similarly, approved VTL travellers from Singapore may enter the ROK from 15 November.

d. This is a significant agreement. Especially as it is the first such travel arrangement between two major aviation hubs in Asia. We hope that it will pave the way for more countries in our part of the world to safely reopen their borders to each other.

Revision to VTL safeguards

14. In tandem with these moves, we have reviewed and will update our current safeguards under the VTLs.

15. First, proof of vaccination.

a. We require VTL travellers to present verifiable and authenticated digital proof of vaccination as a precondition for entry.

i. The European and Asian VTL countries whom I have listed, all issue national digital vaccination certificates.

ii. For Canada and the US, we will start by accepting digital vaccination certificates issued in the Smart Health Card format on the CommonTrust Network. This will enable our border agencies to read and verify their digital vaccination certificates.

iii. We will continue working with our counterparts to progressively include more digital certificate formats.

b. Henceforth, we will also recognise proof of vaccination issued in any VTL country for travel under the VTLs. This means that a traveller could have been vaccinated in France and travel to Singapore under the Germany VTL.

16. Second, travel history.

a. Currently, VTL travellers must have remained in the country of departure and/or Singapore in the 14 days prior to departure for Singapore.

b. With the expansion of VTLs to countries/regions of a similar risk profile, we will accept a 14-day travel history in any of the VTL countries and/or Singapore.

c. This change will give travellers greater flexibility in planning their itineraries.

17. Third, testing regime.

a. Currently, VTL travellers are required to take two PCR tests on the third and seventh day after arrival, in addition to a pre-departure, and an on-arrival PCR test.

b. After further consultation with the Ministry of Health, only two tests will be required of VTL travellers – a negative PCR test result taken 48 hours prior to departure, and an on-arrival PCR test.

18. In addition, VTL travellers will still be required to take designated flights from their country of departure.

a. We will start with a total of up to 2,500 daily arrivals across the nine VTL countries that I have just announced. Together with the two current VTLs, this means up to 3,000 travellers may enter Singapore daily through the Vaccinated Travel Lanes.

b. We will monitor the incidence rate, observe the demand, before deciding on any further increases in capacity.

Conclusion and Road Ahead

19. I have outlined our plans to extend VTLs to nine more Category II countries. When fully implemented, we would have established Vaccinated Travel Lanes with 11 countries – 2 in North America, 7 in Europe, and 2 in Asia.

20. Collectively, these countries accounted for about 10% of our pre-COVID annual passenger arrivals at Changi Airport. They rank among our top 20 trading partners. They have significant investments, a strong business presence, and sizeable communities in Singapore. It is, therefore, important that we reconnect with them early.

21. While still a far cry from where we were pre-COVID, this is a significant step in the reopening of our borders, and crucial to reclaiming and rebuilding our status as an international aviation hub with global connectivity

22. We aim to restore safe two-way quarantine-free travel with more countries/regions from around the world, and are engaged in several discussions to that end.

23. When we announced the VTLs with Germany and Brunei, I emphasised that we would be cautious and calibrated in our approach, carefully assessing the risk and operational implications. That is why we have taken the time to closely monitor the implementation of our initial Vaccinated Travel Lanes, before deciding on these latest moves.

24. The experience over the past month has given us the confidence that we can safely extend the scheme to other Category II countries.

- a. As before, we will ensure that all stakeholders have adequate time to adapt and run in their processes.**
- b. This will allow us to progressively and confidently extend the Vaccinated Travel Lane scheme, while protecting the safety of our people**

25. More broadly, as PM has explained, we are charting a course for the new normal. Reopening our borders is integral to this new normal.

- a. Singapore's survival and success depends on being open and connected to the world.**
 - i. Companies and investors need to be able to transact regional and international business from Singapore.**
 - ii. Executives must be able to travel for their work, if we are going to sustain the good jobs that local and multinational companies provide Singaporeans.**
 - iii. Students must be able to travel for education, industry attachments and internships, and then return home.**
 - iv. And, families must be able to reconnect, after what has been a prolonged period of physical separation.**
- b. We must therefore be resolute, and press on with the reopening of our borders, while staying vigilant with all the essential public health safeguards.**

26. This is how we must and will move forward to protect our lives and livelihoods, to learn to live with the virus, and to become a COVID-resilient nation.

27. Thank you.

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