

More EU nations ban travel from UK, fearing virus variant

December 21 2020, by Kirsten Grieshaber and Sylvia Hui



People at St Pancras station in London, wait to board the last train to Paris today, Sunday Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. (Stefan Rousseau/PA via AP)

A growing list of European Union nations and Canada barred travel from the U.K. on Sunday and others were considering similar action, in a bid to block a new strain of coronavirus sweeping across southern England from spreading to the continent.

France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Ireland and Bulgaria all announced restrictions on U.K. travel, hours after British Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that Christmas shopping and gatherings in southern England must be canceled because of rapidly spreading infections blamed on the new coronavirus variant.

Johnson immediately placed those regions under a strict new Tier 4 restriction level, upending Christmas plans for millions.

France banned all travel from the U.K. for 48 hours from midnight Sunday, including trucks carrying freight through the tunnel under the English Channel or from the port of Dover on England's south coast. French officials said the pause would buy time to find a "common doctrine" on how to deal with the threat, but it threw the busy cross-channel route used by thousands of trucks a day into chaos.

The Port of Dover tweeted Sunday night that its ferry terminal was "closed to all accompanied traffic leaving the UK until further notice due to border restrictions in France."



A woman pulls a suitcase past the Christmas tree on the concourse of Waterloo Station in central London, Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)

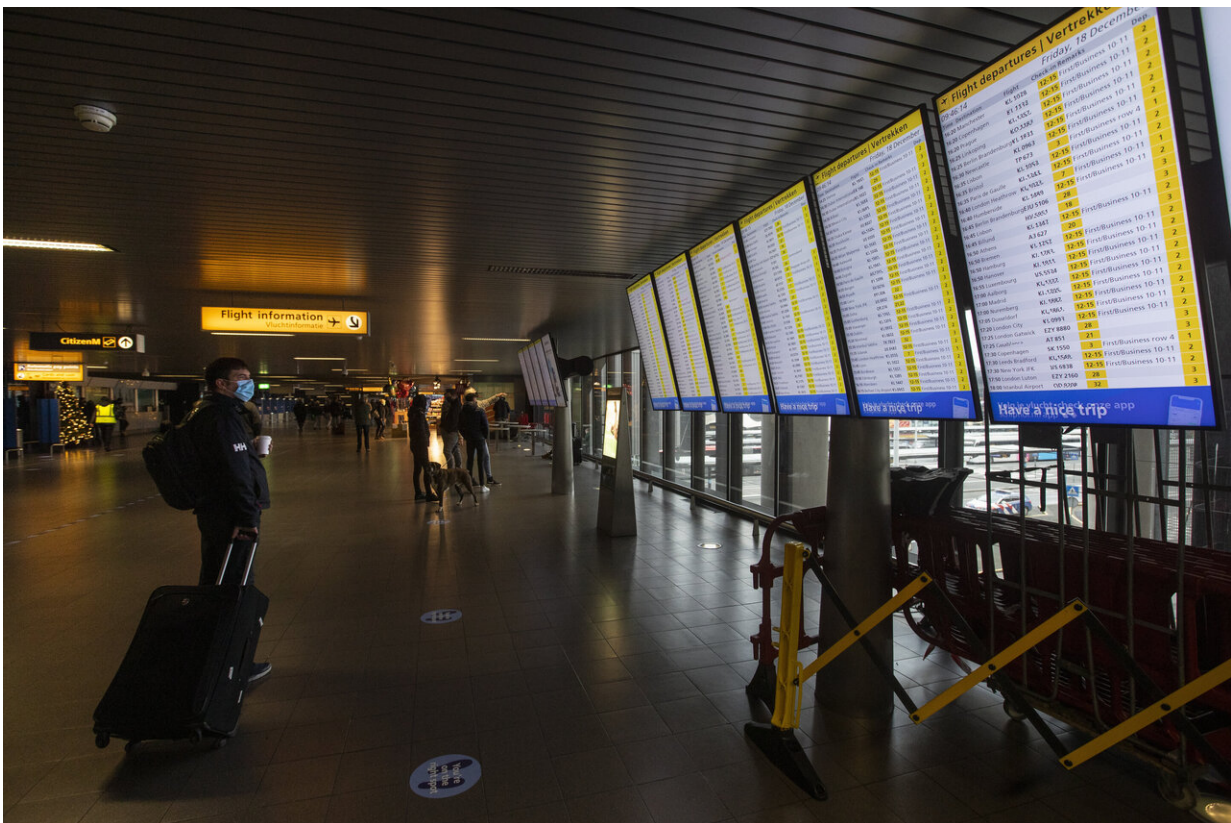
Eurostar passenger trains from London to Paris, Brussels and Amsterdam were also halted.

Germany said all flights coming from Britain, except cargo flights, were no longer allowed to land starting midnight Sunday. It didn't immediately say how long the flight ban would last. Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said he was issuing a flight ban for 24 hours starting

at midnight "out of precaution." "There are a great many questions about this new mutation," he said, adding he hoped to have more clarity by Tuesday.

Canada announced its own ban Sunday night. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said in a statement that for 72 hours starting at midnight Sunday, "all flights from the UK will be prohibited from entering Canada." He added that travelers who arrived Sunday would be subject to secondary screening and other [health measures](#). A follow-up statement from the government said [cargo flights](#) were not included in the ban.

The Central American nation of El Salvador, meanwhile, said it would refuse entry to anyone who has visited Britain in the preceding 30 days.



In this Friday Dec. 18, 2020, file photo, A traveller wearing a face mask checks the flight departures at Schiphol Airport, near Amsterdam, Netherlands. The Netherlands is banning flights from the United Kingdom for the rest of the year in an attempt to make sure that a new strain of the COVID-19 virus in Britain does not reach its shores. The ban came into effect Sunday morning Dec. 20, 2020, and the government said it was reacting to tougher measures imposed in and around London on Saturday. The Netherlands said it will assess "with other EU nations the possibilities to contain the import of the virus from the United Kingdom." (AP Photo/Peter Dejong, FILE)

The British government said Johnson would preside at a meeting of the government's crisis committee, COBRA, on Monday in the wake of the other nations' measures. They come at a time of huge economic uncertainty for the U.K., less than two weeks before it leaves the EU's economic structures Dec. 31, and with talks on a new post-Brexit trade relationship still deadlocked.

Johnson said Saturday that a fast-moving new variant of the virus that is 70% more transmissible than existing strains appeared to be driving the rapid spread of new infections in London and southern England in recent weeks. But he stressed "there's no evidence to suggest it is more lethal or causes more severe illness," or that vaccines will be less effective against it.

On Sunday, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock added to the alarm when he said "the new variant is out of control." The U.K. recorded 35,928 further confirmed cases, around double the number from a week ago.

Germany, which holds the rotating EU presidency, called a special crisis meeting on Monday to coordinate the response to the virus news among the bloc's 27 member states.



Travellers wait for trains on the concourse at King's Cross station in central London, Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)

The Netherlands banned flights from the U.K. for at least the rest of the year. Ireland issued a 48-hour flight ban. Italy said it would block flights from the U.K. until Jan.6, and an order signed Sunday prohibits entry into Italy by anyone who has been in the U.K. in the last 14 days.

The Czech Republic imposed stricter quarantine measures from people

arriving from Britain.

Beyond Europe, Israel also said it was banning flights from Britain, Denmark and South Africa because those were the countries where the mutation is found.

The World Health Organization tweeted late Saturday that it was "in close contact with U.K. officials on the new #COVID19 virus variant" and promised to update governments and the public as more is learned.

The new strain was identified in southeastern England in September and has been spreading in the area ever since, a WHO official told the BBC on Sunday.



Christmas shoppers in Oxford city centre England, Sunday Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. (Steve Parsons/PA via AP)

"What we understand is that it does have increased transmissibility, in terms of its ability to spread," said Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's technical lead on COVID-19.

Studies are under way to better understand how fast it spreads and whether "it's related to the variant itself, or a combination of factors with behavior," she added.

She said the strain had also been identified in Denmark, the Netherlands and Australia, where there was one case that didn't spread further.

"The longer this virus spreads, the more opportunities it has to change," she said. "So we really need to do everything we can right now to prevent spread."

Viruses mutate regularly, and scientists have found thousands of different mutations among samples of the virus causing COVID-19. Many of these changes have no effect on how easily the virus spreads or how severe symptoms are.



People at St Pancras station in London, wait to board the last train to Paris today, Sunday Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. (Stefan Rousseau/PA via AP)

British health authorities said that while the variant has been circulating since September, it wasn't until the last week that officials felt they had enough evidence to declare that it has higher transmissibility than other circulating coronaviruses.

Patrick Vallance, the British government's chief scientific adviser, said officials are concerned about the new variant because it contained 23

different changes, "an unusually large number of variants" affecting how the virus binds to and enters cells in the body.

Officials aren't certain whether it originated in the U.K., Vallance added. But by December, he said it was causing over 60% of infections in London.

U.S. President-elect Joe Biden's nominee for U.S. surgeon general said Sunday that the emergence of the new strain doesn't change the public health guidance on precautions for reducing the spread of the virus, such as wearing masks, social distancing and washing hands.



Passengers wait at Gatwick Airport in West Sussex, England, Sunday Dec. 20, 2020. One by one, several European Union nations have banned flights from the U.K. and others were considering similar action, in a bid to block a new strain of coronavirus sweeping across southern England from establishing a strong

foothold on the continent. (Gareth Fuller/PA via AP)

"While it seems to be more easily transmissible, we do not have evidence yet that this is a more deadly virus to an individual who acquires it," Vivek Murthy said on NBC's "Meet the Press." "There's no reason to believe that the vaccines that have been developed will not be effective against this virus, as well."

Europe has been walloped this fall by soaring new infections and deaths due to a resurgence of the virus, and many nations have reimposed a series of restrictions to reign in their outbreaks.

Britain has seen over 67,000 deaths in the pandemic, the second-highest confirmed toll in Europe after Italy. Europe as a whole has recorded nearly 499,000 virus deaths, according to a tally by Johns Hopkins University that experts believe is an undercount, due to limited testing and missed cases.

The European Medicines Agency, meanwhile, is meeting Monday to approve the first COVID-19 vaccine for the European Union's 27 nations, bringing vaccinations closer for millions of EU citizens. The vaccine made by German pharmaceutical company BioNTech and American drugmaker Pfizer is already in use in the United States, Britain, Canada and other countries.



In this Dec. 16, 2020, photo, A hosts directs visitors of a COVID-19 testing facility of the Municipal Health Authority GGD, in Utrecht, Netherlands. The Netherlands is banning flights from the United Kingdom for the rest of the year in an attempt to make sure that a new strain of the COVID-19 virus in Britain does not reach its shores. The ban came into effect Sunday morning Dec. 20, 2020, and the government said it was reacting to tougher measures imposed in and around London on Saturday. The Netherlands said it will assess "with other EU nations the possibilities to contain the import of the virus from the United Kingdom." (AP Photo/Peter Dejong)



Travellers wait for trains on the concourse at King's Cross station in central London, Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. (Victoria Jones/PA via AP)



A man walks past a closed shop on Regent Street in central in London, Sunday, Dec. 20, 2020. Millions of people in England have learned they must cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday that holiday gatherings can't go ahead and non-essential shops must close in London and much of southern England. Johnson imposed a new, higher level of coronavirus restrictions to curb sharply spreading infections in the capital and other areas. (Stefan Rousseau/PA via AP)



A takeaway delivery cyclist rides down a street in Cardiff city center, Sunday Dec. 20, 2020. In Wales, authorities said they decided to move up a lockdown planned for after Christmas and people must stay at home from 12:01 a.m. Sunday. The move will largely scrap Christmas gatherings in line with the rules for southern England. (Ben Birchall/PA via AP)

The EMA moved up its assessment of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine by a week after heavy pressure from EU governments, especially Germany, which has said that after the EMA approval it could start vaccinating citizens as early as next Sunday.

In an urgent address to the nation on Saturday, Johnson ordered all non-essential shops, hairdressers and gyms in London and large parts of southern England closed and told Britons to reorganize their holiday

plans. No mixing of households is allowed indoors in the region, and only essential travel is permitted. In the rest of England, people will be allowed to meet in Christmas bubbles for just one day instead of the five that were planned.

After he spoke, videos emerged online showing crowds of people at London's train stations, apparently making a dash for places in the U.K. with less stringent [coronavirus](#) restrictions. Health Secretary Matt Hancock called those scenes "totally irresponsible."

While Hancock insisted officials had acted "very quickly and decisively," critics said Britain's Conservative government should have moved against rising infections much earlier.

"The alarms bells have been ringing for weeks, but the prime minister chose to ignore them," said Keir Starmer, leader of the opposition Labour Party. "It is an act of gross negligence by a prime minister who, once again, has been caught behind the curve."

© 2020 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed without permission.

Citation: More EU nations ban travel from UK, fearing virus variant (2020, December 21) retrieved 3 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-12-eu-nations-uk-virus-variant.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
