

EU scrambles to tackle holiday season chaos as new virus strain spreads

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More than two dozen countries from India to Argentina suspended flights from the UK offering a bleak reminder that the pandemic is far from over

Europe scrambled Monday to thrash out a coordinated response to a new strain of the coronavirus which has prompted an international suspension of travel links with the UK, while the United States saw its own caseload

top 18 million.

With travellers in Europe facing a nightmare holiday season, EU ambassadors were to meet Tuesday to try to nail down a unified approach and work out how to eventually lift the border restrictions with Britain—including by imposing a requirement for tests on all arrivals.

More than two dozen countries from India to Argentina suspended flight from the UK, offering a bleak reminder that the pandemic is far from over.

The World Health Organization's emergencies chief Michael Ryan tried to temper the alarm by stressing the situation was not "out of control", shortly after a British minister used those exact words to describe the new spread of the new variant.

While experts say there is no evidence the UK variant of the virus—one of several mutations—is more lethal or will affect the impact of vaccines, it may be up to 70 percent more transmissible, according to early data.

Concern over the mutated strain sent European stocks, oil prices and the British pound plunging and transport changes unleashed chaos for travellers and truckers ahead of Christmas.

"It's inhuman not to give people more notice. My boyfriend is out in Turkey, I want to get back to him," said Beth Gabriel Ware, a 23-year-old Briton who recently came home to visit her parents—but is now among those stuck there longer than intended.

Thousands of people are still dying daily from the virus that has claimed at least 1.69 million lives since it first emerged in China late last year.

Covid-19

World toll Monday December 21, 1100 GMT

Deaths	New deaths	Cases	New cases
1,693,576	8,066	76,728,230	539,656

New: 24-hour increase on December 20

Hardest-hit countries

	Deaths	New (latest report)	Cases
UNITED STATES	317,684	1,591	17,847,630
BRAZIL	186,764	408	7,238,600
INDIA	145,810	333	10,055,560
MEXICO	118,202	326	1,320,545
ITALY	68,799	352	1,953,185
UNITED KINGDOM	67,401	326	2,040,147
FRANCE	60,549	131	2,473,354
IRAN	53,816	191	1,164,535
RUSSIA	51,351	493	2,877,727
SPAIN	48,926	0	1,797,236
ARGENTINA	41,813	50	1,541,268
COLOMBIA	40,475	207	1,507,222

Increases over 24 hours may not tally exactly with previous day's total due to inavailability or late publication of data or corrections made by authorities

Sources: AFP tallies based on official tolls



Toll of coronavirus infections and deaths worldwide and in worst-affected countries, as of Dec 21 at 1100 GMT

UK supply chains 'robust'

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson held a crisis meeting after France announced a 48-hour blockade on both people and freight—just as companies are racing to shift merchandise before Britain finally quits EU trade structures on January 1.

Yet Johnson insisted that supply chains were "strong and robust", with delays hitting only a "small percentage of food entering the UK".

"Everyone can continue to shop," he told a news conference.

The UK has already begun to roll out the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and the EU will soon follow after formally approving the jab on Monday.

A rollout will begin across the bloc on December 27, EU chief Ursula von der Leyen said.

EU regulators earlier noted there was no evidence to suggest the vaccine would not be effective against the new variant.

In the United States, 78-year-old President-elect Joe Biden received a Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine live on television to boost Americans' confidence in the shots.



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Multiple variants

The UK strain has also been detected in small numbers in Australia, Denmark and the Netherlands, according to the WHO.

Another variant with similar genetic mutations has been linked to widespread transmission in South Africa.

There is currently "no evidence to indicate any change in disease severity, but this is also under investigation," WHO said.

In the pandemic's first border closure among Scandinavian neighbours, Sweden barred travellers from neighbouring Denmark, in addition to the UK, because of the variant.

Elsewhere, Luxembourg decided to join European neighbours who are tightening virus lockdowns after Christmas.

Yet Hungary and Slovenia said they would relax some rules around the holiday to allow families to gather.

US relief

While Russia, Spain, India and others joined the list of countries banning flights from the UK on Monday, Australia and the US have held off.



The EU drug regulator is to decide whether to authorise the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine

Americans, still suffering the world's highest death tolls, were bracing for a bit of relief after lawmakers reached a deal Sunday on a nearly \$900 billion COVID-19 financial package.

The measure, which Congress is expected to approve on Monday, would include aid for vaccine distribution and logistics, extra jobless benefits of \$300 per week, and a new round of \$600 stimulus checks.

"People are going to see this money by the beginning of the next week," US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin said.

Wall Street stocks nevertheless opened lower as worries over the UK's virus strain dampened optimism on the stimulus bill.

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