

Europe tries to fend off UK virus strain and calm travel chaos

December 22 2020, by Afp Bureaus



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 was trying to forge a coordinated response Tuesday to the threat of a coronavirus variant that has swept the UK and spurred global panic about an unpredictable turn in the pandemic just as vaccines are being

rolled out worldwide.

The new strain of the virus, which has also been detected in small numbers elsewhere, appears to spread more easily than other types but there is no evidence it is more lethal or resistant to vaccines, according to experts.

Its discovery has nevertheless heightened fears that led more than two dozen countries around the world suspend flights from the UK out of precaution.

With the bans unleashing travel chaos during the 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—possibly by imposing a requirement for tests on all arrivals.

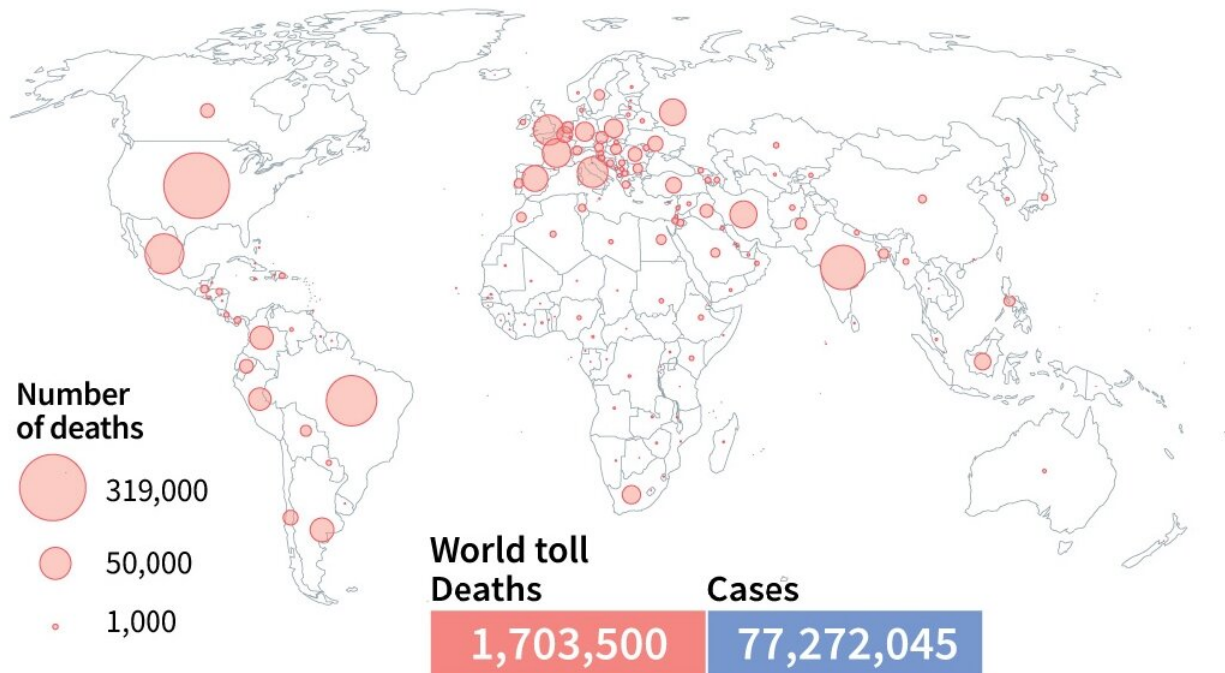
The World Health Organization in Europe said it would also convene its members to discuss how to handle the outbreak and cautioned that "limiting travel to contain spread is prudent until we have better info."

WHO's regional director for Europe Hans Kluge said in a post to Twitter that the organisation would "discuss strategies for testing, reducing transmission & communicating risks."

Around the world, the death toll from the virus surpassed 1.7 million on Tuesday, according to an AFP count, with the highest number of daily fatalities reported in the US, Germany and Russia.

Spread of the coronavirus

As of December 22, 1100 GMT



Source: AFP tallies based on official tolls

AFP

World map showing the number of Covid-19 deaths by country, as of December 22 at 1100 GMT

Vaccine can adapt

Germany on Tuesday extended its ban on arrivals from the UK—as well as South Africa, where a similar variant has been found—until January 6.

Health Minister Jens Spahn said that "as long as it is possible", Germany aimed to prevent "potentially dangerous virus mutations from spreading in continental Europe".

The border closures come as the European Union prepares to start rolling out the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine on Sunday, following similar vaccination campaigns in the UK and the US.

The co-founder of BioNTech assured Tuesday it was "highly likely" that its vaccine against the coronavirus works against the mutated strain detected in Britain.

And if not, the vaccine could be adapted in six weeks, said Ugur Sahin, adding that tests are already being run on the variant.

In the US, the world's worst-affected country, 78-year-old President-elect Joe Biden received a Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine live on television to boost Americans' confidence in the shots.

And after a long delay, US lawmakers finally approved a \$900 billion relief package to help Americans struggling to stay afloat in the pandemic-hit economy.



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

UK shortage fears

In an increasingly isolated Britain, one of the biggest concerns remains France's move to cut freight traffic as part of a 48-hour blockade on the movement of people across the English Channel.

The British government said Tuesday it was considering tests for truckers as part of talks with French authorities to allow the resumption of freight traffic.

While Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted that supply chains were

"strong and robust", experts warn that Britain may face shortages of certain fresh foods over the Christmas period.

Andrew Opie, director of food and sustainability at the British Retail Consortium, said the "borders really need to be running pretty much freely from tomorrow to assure us that there won't be any disruption".

Washington has so far held off on suspending flights with the UK but passengers flying from Britain to New York with British Airways or Delta will have to first test negative for [coronavirus](#), New York Governor Andrew Cuomo announced Monday.



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

A US official advising the country's Operation Warp Speed vaccine program also stressed that more information was needed to establish the risk of the UK variant.

"There is no hard evidence that this virus is actually more transmissible, (but) there is clear evidence that there is more of it in the population," said Moncef Slaoui, a [vaccine](#) scientist and former pharmaceutical executive.

Meanwhile, two cardinals close to Pope Francis have contracted COVID-19, according to sources in the Vatican, where efforts were underway to trace their recent contacts.

The 84-year-old pope, known for his love of getting close to the faithful, has been reluctant to wear a mask despite the pandemic that has hit Italy particularly badly.

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