

# South Africa's virus variant drives holiday surge of cases

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A child kneels at a nativity scene prior to a morning Christmas Mass at the Rosebank Catholic Church in Johannesburg, Friday, Dec. 25, 2020. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

South Africa's normally joyful and lively Christmas celebrations have

been dampened by the spike in new cases and deaths driven by the country's variant of COVID-19.

A record number of 14,305 news cases have been confirmed in the past 24 hours, and with no sign of South Africa reaching a peak, threatening the country's [health systems](#), experts said.

South Africa has a cumulative total of 968,563 confirmed cases, including 25,983 deaths, by far the most cases in all of Africa. Africa's 54 countries, representing 1.3 billion people, have together reported more than 2.59 million cases, including more than 61,000 deaths, according to figures released Friday by the African Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

South Africa's 7-day rolling average of daily new cases has more than doubled in the past two weeks from 8.65 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 10 to 18.25 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 24.

The South African variant, 501.V2, is more infectious than the original COVID-19 virus and is dominant in the country.

To combat the resurgence of the disease, South Africa has imposed measures including closing many large public beaches, requiring masks in public areas, restricting sales of alcohol to four days a week and enforcing a nighttime curfew from 11 p.m. until 4 a.m. However, the quickening pace of the spread of the disease is bringing experts to urge stricter measures.



A worshipper wearing a face mask, holds a lit candle prior to a morning Christmas Mass at the Rosebank Catholic Church in Johannesburg, Friday, Dec. 25, 2020. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

"We do need to think of additional restrictions, so that it's clear to people the seriousness of the current situation," [infectious diseases](#) expert Dr. Richard Lessells told The Associated Press. "Because already many hospitals in many parts of the country are extremely stretched."

Health Minister Zweli Mkhize, in [a Christmas message to](#) the country on Friday urged all South Africans to take preventive measures to slow the spread of the virus. Mkhize also issued a message on [Christmas Eve in which he rejected](#) a suggestion by Britain's health minister that South Africa's variant had contributed to Britain's variant.



Mkhize said that statements by Britain's Secretary for Health, Matt Hancock, had created a perception that the variant in South Africa has been a major factor in the second wave in U.K.



A worshipper wearing a face mask stands in front of lit candles prior to a morning Christmas Mass at the Rosebank Catholic Church in Johannesburg, Friday, Dec. 25, 2020. (AP Photo/Denis Farrell)

"This is not correct. There is evidence that the U.K. variant developed earlier than the South African variant," Mkhize said.

There is no evidence to suggest the South African variant is more

transmissible, causes more severe disease or increased mortality than Britain's variant or any other variant that has been sequenced in the world, said Mkhize.

He also said he was against travel bans.

"It is the widely shared view of the scientific community that, given the current circumstantial evidence, the risks of travel bans may outweigh the benefits, and that it is possible to contain the variants while sustaining international travel," he said.

"Banning travel between the U.K. and South Africa is an unfortunate decision," said Mkhize in his statement. "There is no evidence that the South African variant is more pathogenic than the U.K. variant to necessitate this step."





Parishioners wearing face mask to protect against coronavirus, attend a morning Christmas Mass at Holy Cross Cathedral in Lagos, Nigeria, Friday Dec. 25, 2020. Africa's top public health official says another new variant of the coronavirus appears to have emerged in Nigeria, but further investigation is needed. The discovery could add to new alarm in the pandemic after similar variants were announced in recent days in Britain and South Africa and sparked the swift return of travel restrictions. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)



A parishioner wearing face mask to protect against coronavirus, attends a morning Christmas Mass at Holy Cross Cathedral in Lagos, Nigeria, Friday Dec. 25, 2020. Africa's top public health official says another new variant of the coronavirus appears to have emerged in Nigeria, but further investigation is needed. The discovery could add to new alarm in the pandemic after similar

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Parishioners wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus, exits after a morning Christmas Mass at Holy Cross Cathedral in Lagos, Nigeria, Friday Dec. 25, 2020. Africa's top public health official says another new variant of the coronavirus appears to have emerged in Nigeria, but further investigation is needed. The discovery could add to new alarm in the pandemic after similar variants were announced in recent days in Britain and South Africa and sparked the swift return of travel restrictions. (AP Photo/Sunday Alamba)





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Mkhize noted that South Africa is part of a group of "countries that are leading in the field of genomic surveillance: Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, South Africa and the United Kingdom."

Leading South Africa's genomic research is Professor Tulio de Oliveira who is leading a team of scientists studying the genomic sequencing of

the new variant.

"I'll be spending Christmas in my lab," de Oliveira told AP. "We'll be working throughout the whole holiday season on this research."

Other African countries are also battling a resurgence of the disease.

Nigeria has also reported a new variant of the virus and is battling a resurgence of the [disease](#). The country had reported more than 81,200 cumulative cases on Friday. Nigeria's 7-day rolling average of daily new cases has risen over the past two weeks from 0.21 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 10 to 0.40 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 24.

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