

UK imposes travel ban amid worries of new Brazil variant

January 15 2021, by Danica Kirka



A woman is reflected in a window as she braves wind and rain while walking towards Tower Bridge in London, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2021 during England's third national lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

The British government banned travel from South America and Portugal to ensure a new variant of COVID-19 found in Brazil doesn't derail the U.K.'s vaccination program, although there are no signs the variant has reached the country, Britain's top transportation official said.

U.K. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said the entry ban, which took effect Friday morning, was extended to passengers arriving from Portugal because many people who come to Europe from South America travel through Portugal.

"We don't have cases at the moment, but this is a precautionary approach," Shapps told the BBC. "We want to make sure that we do everything possible so that vaccine rollout can continue and make sure that it's not disturbed by other variants of this virus."

The announcement comes just a few weeks after many countries banned travel from the U.K. following the discovery in England of another, more contagious variant of the virus that has been blamed for a sharp rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths. Scientists have said there is no indication the U.K. variant reacts any differently to coronavirus vaccines.

Portuguese Foreign Minister Augusto Santos Silva called the U.K.'s decision "without logic" and said he would seek clarification from his British counterpart.

"Suspending flights from Portugal with the argument of the connections between Portugal and Brazil is, with all due respect, completely absurd," he said in an interview published online by the newspaper *Diario de Noticias*.



A woman passes a government coronavirus advert in central London, during England's third national lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2021. (Dominic Lipinski/PA via AP)

The U.K. is ramping up its mass vaccination program as the government seeks to protect the country's oldest and most vulnerable residents before easing a third national lockdown. According to government figures on Friday, a little more than 3.2 million people, or around 5% of the British population, have received a first dose of a two-shot vaccine.

Britain plans to give the first dose to more than 15 million people, including those over 70, frontline healthcare workers and others who are particularly vulnerable to the virus, by the middle of February.

"We're so close now that we want to make sure we do absolutely everything possible to give us the best chance of beating this virus, which is why it's important that we do act quickly on these things," Shapps said.

While the first stage of the vaccination program aims to protect around 85% of those deemed most likely to die from COVID-19, the country is expected to continue recording high mortality rates over the coming weeks because of the lag time between infections and deaths.



Joggers exercise in the rain on the banks of the river Thames in London, Thursday, Jan. 14, 2021 during England's third national lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

The government reported 55,761 more confirmed cases on Friday and the deaths of another 1,280 people within 28 days of testing positive for the virus. The daily update brought the U.K.'s death toll in the pandemic to 87,295, the highest number in Europe and the fifth-highest in the world.

Many of the newly diagnosed are likely to have become infected during the holiday period, before the current national lockdown in England came into force on Jan. 5. The hope is that the lockdown will result in falling infection rates falling over the next week or two, particularly in areas that were locked down before the holiday. They include London and the southeast of England, where the new variant of the virus was first identified.

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