

COVID's 'not done with us': Nations rush to contain omicron

November 29 2021, by Raf Casert and Mari Yamaguchi



Residents wait to be inoculated with COVID-19 vaccines outside a school during the first day of a nationwide three-day vaccination drive in Quezon city, Philippines on Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. There has been no reported infection so far caused by the new variant in the Philippines, a Southeast Asian pandemic hotspot where COVID-19 cases have considerably dropped to below 1,000 each day in recent days, but the emergence of the Omicron variant has set off a new alarm. Credit: AP Photo/Aaron Favila

Taking an act-now-ask-questions-later approach, countries around the world slammed their doors shut again to try to keep the new omicron variant at bay Monday as more cases of the mutant coronavirus emerged and scientists raced to figure out just how dangerous it might be.

Japan announced it would bar entry of all foreign visitors, joining Israel in doing so just days after the variant was identified by researchers in South Africa. Morocco banned all incoming flights. Other countries, including the U.S. and European Union members, have moved to prohibit travelers arriving from southern Africa.

Travelers infected with the new version have turned up in a widening circle of countries over the past few days, including now Spain, and cases in Portugal and Scotland have raised fears that the variant may already be spreading locally.

"Many of us might think we are done with COVID-19. It's not done with us," warned Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization.

Days after the variant sent a shudder through the [financial world](#) nearly two years into the pandemic that has killed over 5 million people, markets had mixed reactions Monday, with European stocks and oil prices rebounding and Wall Street opening higher, while Asian markets fell further.

U.S. President Joe Biden called the omicron variant a cause for concern but "not a cause for panic." He said he is not considering any widespread U.S. lockdown and instead urged vaccinations and mask-wearing.



People pass through Waterloo train station, in London, during the morning rush hour, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. The new potentially more contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus popped up in more European countries on Saturday, just days after being identified in South Africa, leaving governments around the world scrambling to stop the spread. In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said mask-wearing in shops and on public transport will be required, starting Tuesday. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

The infections have underscored the difficulty in keeping the virus in check in a globalized world of jet travel and open borders. Yet, many countries are trying to do just that, against the urging of the WHO, which noted that border closings often have limited effect and can wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods.

Some argued that such restrictions could provide valuable time to analyze the new variant. Little is known about it, including whether it is more contagious, more likely to cause serious illness or more able to evade vaccines.

While the initial global response to COVID-19 was criticized as slow and haphazard, the reaction to the new variant came quickly.

"This time the world showed it is learning," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, singling out South African President Cyril Ramaphosa for praise. "South Africa's analytic work and transparency and sharing its results was indispensable in allowing a swift global response. It no doubt saved many lives."



People wearing protective masks walk around the famed Shibuya scramble crossing in a shopping and entertainment district Monday, Nov. 29, 2021, in Tokyo. Credit: AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato

Late last week, von der Leyen successfully pushed the 27-nation EU to agree to ban flights from seven southern African nations, similar to what many other countries are doing.

Cases had already been reported in EU nations Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands before Portuguese authorities identified 13 omicron infections among members of the Belenenses professional soccer team. Authorities reported one member had recently traveled to South Africa. A game over the weekend had be abandoned at halftime for lack of players.

Spain also reported its first confirmed case of the variant. It was detected in a traveler who returned Sunday from South Africa after making a stopover in Amsterdam, one of Madrid's major public hospitals tweeted.

And after Scotland reported its first six cases, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon warned that "there might already be some community transmission of this variant."



Students wearing face masks to protect from COVID-19 are escorted by a teacher as they leave school after classes in Beijing, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Despite the global worry, scientists caution that it's still unclear whether the omicron COVID-19 variant is more dangerous than other versions of the virus that has killed more than 5 million people. Some countries are continuing with previous plans to loosen restrictions, with signs of reopening in Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

Taking no chances, Japan, which has yet to detect any omicron cases, reimposed border controls that it had eased earlier this month.

"We are taking the step as an emergency precaution to prevent a [worst-case scenario](#) in Japan," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said. The new measures begin Tuesday.

Israel likewise decided to bar entry to foreigners, and Morocco said it would suspend all incoming flights for two weeks starting Monday.

And Britain expanded its COVID-19 booster program to everyone 18 and older, making millions more people eligible. Up until now, booster shots were available only to those 40 and over and people particularly vulnerable to the virus. The U.K. has reported about a dozen omicron cases.

Despite the global worry, scientists cautioned that it is still unclear whether omicron is more alarming than other versions.



A passenger makes his way through Johannesburg's OR Tambo's airport Monday Nov. 29, 2021. The World Health Organisation urged countries around the world not to impose flight bans on southern African nations due to concern over the

new omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Jerome Delay

So far, doctors in South Africa are reporting patients are suffering mostly mild symptoms, but they warn that it is still early. Also, most of the new cases are in people in their 20s and 30s, who generally do not get as sick from COVID-19 as [older patients](#).

"We've seen a sharp increase in cases for the past 10 days. So far they have mostly been very mild cases, with patients having flu-like symptoms: dry coughs, fever, night sweats, a lot of body pains," said Dr. Unben Pillay, a general practitioner in Gauteng province, where 81% of the new cases have been reported.

The variant has provided further proof of what experts have long been saying: that no continent will be safe until the whole globe has been sufficiently vaccinated. The more the virus is allowed to spread, the more opportunities it has to mutate.



People wearing protective masks to help curb the spread of the coronavirus take photos as they walk through the row of ginkgo trees along a sidewalk as the trees and sidewalk are covered with the bright yellow leaves Monday, Nov. 29, 2021, in Tokyo. Credit: AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato



People wearing face masks, line up to receive China's Sinovac COVID-19 coronavirus vaccine at a community vaccination center in Hong Kong, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. The new omicron variant was found in Hong Kong, Belgium and Tel Aviv. The European Union, the United States and Britain imposed curbs on travel from Africa. Israel banned entry by foreigners. Credit: AP Photo/Kin Cheung



People queue in line to wait for the coronavirus testing at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man



Students from Norway who were on a field trip to South Africa wait to be tested for COVID-19 before boarding a flight to Amsterdam at Johannesburg's OR Tambo's airport Monday Nov. 29, 2021. The World Health Organisation urged countries around the world not to impose flight bans on southern African nations due to concern over the new omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Jerome Delay



Commuters walk through ticket barriers in Waterloo train station, London, after disembarking from a train, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. The new potentially more contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus popped up in more European countries on Saturday, just days after being identified in South Africa, leaving governments around the world scrambling to stop the spread. In Britain, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said mask-wearing in shops and on public transport will be required, starting Tuesday. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham



Customers have lunch in a restaurant in Hong Kong, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. The new omicron variant was found in Hong Kong, Belgium and Tel Aviv. The European Union, the United States and Britain imposed curbs on travel from Africa. Israel banned entry by foreigners. Credit: AP Photo/Kin Cheung



A medical worker wearing protective gear in a booth, wears plastic gloves at a temporary screening clinic for the coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man



A woman holds onto a cotton pad after being inoculated with AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine during the first day of a nationwide three-day vaccination drive at a school in Quezon city, Philippines on Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. There has been no reported infection so far caused by the new variant in the Philippines, a Southeast Asian pandemic hotspot where COVID-19 cases have considerably dropped to below 1,000 each day in recent days, but the emergence of the Omicron variant has set off a new alarm. Credit: AP Photo/Aaron Favila



Passengers walk from a COVID -19 testing tent at Johannesburg's OR Tambo's airport Monday Nov. 29, 2021. The World Health Organisation urged countries around the world not to impose flight bans on southern African nations due to concern over the new omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Jerome Delay



People line up for vaccination against the coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease at a mobile vaccination bus in Gelsenkirchen, Germany, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Credit: AP Photo/Martin Meissner



A flight crew walk through the terminal at Sydney Airport, Monday, Nov. 29, 2021. Authorities in Australia said Sunday, Nov. 28, 2021, that two travelers who arrived in Sydney from Africa became the first in the country to test positive for the new variant of the coronavirus, omicron. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Baker

"The emergence of the omicron [variant](#) has fulfilled, in a precise way, the predictions of the scientists who warned that the elevated transmission of the virus in areas with limited access to vaccine would speed its evolution," said Dr. Richard Hatchett, head of CEPI, one of the founders of the U.N.-backed global vaccine sharing initiative COVAX.

In some parts of the world, authorities are moving in the opposite direction.

In Malaysia, officials went ahead with the partial reopening of a bridge connecting it to Singapore. And New Zealand announced it will press ahead with plans to reopen internally after months of shutdown, though it is also restricting travel from nine southern African nations.

"We've come through the past two years of COVID in better shape than nearly anywhere in the world," Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said, pointing to low death rates, a growing economy and high vaccination rates.

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