

Will flight restrictions help as new virus variant emerges?

November 26 2021, by Maria Cheng and Haleluya Hadero



People line up to get on the Air France flight to Paris at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, Friday Nov. 26, 2021. A slew of nations moved to stop air travel from southern Africa on Friday in reaction to news of a new, potentially more transmissible COVID-19 variant that has been detected in South Africa. Scientists say it is a concern because of its high number of mutations and rapid spread among young people in Gauteng, the country's most populous province. Credit: AP Photo/Jerome Delay

A new coronavirus variant identified in southern Africa is leading to a new round of travel [restrictions](#) just as many had finally begun to ease.

The risks of the variant, called omicron, are largely [unknown](#). But the World Health Organization has called it a "variant of concern" and governments around the world are not waiting for scientists to better understand the variant to impose flight bans and other travel restrictions.

The U.S. said Friday it will ban travel from South Africa and seven other African nations by non-US citizens beginning Monday. European Union nations agreed earlier in the day to impose a ban on travel from southern Africa to counter the variant's spread. The U.K., Canada and other countries have imposed similar restrictions.

The moves have renewed a debate over whether flight bans and other travel restrictions work to prevent the spread of new variants. Some say at best the restrictions can buy time for new public health measures to be put in place. At worst, they do little to stop the spread and give a false sense of security.

The Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said it strongly discouraged imposing travel bans on people coming from countries where the variant was reported.

DO TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS SLOW THE SPREAD OF THE VIRUS?

They might buy countries more time to speed up vaccination and introduce other measures, like masking and social distancing, but they are highly unlikely to prevent the entry of new variants, said Mark Woolhouse, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Edinburgh.

"Travel restrictions can delay but not prevent the spread of a highly transmissible variant," he said.

Johns Hopkins University infectious disease specialist Dr. Amesh Adalja says the travel restrictions only give the public a false sense of security and should stop being the "knee-jerk" reaction by public officials. Adalja noted imposing restrictions makes politicians "look as if they're doing something" but doesn't make sense when countries now have countermeasures such as rapid tests and vaccines.

Meanwhile, Sweden's chief epidemiologist, Anders Tegnell told a local news agency said he does not believe that a travel ban would have any major effect, other than for countries with direct flights to the affected areas.

"It is basically impossible to keep track of all travel flows," Tegnell told the Expressen newspaper.

COULD IT BE DIFFERENT THIS TIME?

Jeffrey Barrett, director of COVID-19 Genetics at the Wellcome Sanger Institute, thought that the early detection of the new variant could mean restrictions taken now would have a bigger impact than when the delta variant first emerged.

"The surveillance is so good in South Africa and other nearby countries that they found this (new variant), understood it was a problem and told the world very fast about it," he said. "We may be at an earlier point with this new variant so there may still be time to do something about it."

However, Barrett said harsh restrictions would be counter-productive and that the South African officials should not be punished for alerting the world to the new variant. "They've done the world a service and we

must help them, not penalize them for this."

WHAT DOES THE SCIENCE SAY?

Sharon Peacock, who has led the genetic sequencing in Britain at the University of Cambridge, said any decisions to restrict travel were political decisions, not scientific ones. She emphasized that there was still great uncertainty about the new variant, including whether it is actually more infectious or deadly. Although some of the mutations detected appeared worrying, she said there is still no proof that the new variant is any more lethal or transmissible than previous versions.

"It's possible to keep infection out, but you would need very, very severe restrictions and only some countries would be willing to do this," she said.

"Buying time is important and worthwhile, but this is a decision for policymakers," she said. "At the moment, we won't have any definitive scientific answers for a few weeks."

WHAT ABOUT ECONOMIC IMPACTS?

If there's anything the global economy didn't need, it's more uncertainty.

A new highly transmissible coronavirus poses an economic as well as a health risk, threatening to disrupt the global economic recovery and worsen supply chain bottlenecks that are already pushing prices higher. Markets plummeted around the world over worries about the variant—and reaction from political leaders.

"The most worrying thing about the new strain at the moment is how little we know about it," said Craig Erlam, senior market analyst for the currency trading firm OANDA.

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