

World races to contain new COVID variant

November 27 2021, by Joris Fioriti With Danny Kemp In The Hague and Afp Bureaus



The new variant has sparked fears of a major setback to global efforts against the pandemic.

Fears mounted Saturday that a highly-infectious new coronavirus strain was pushing its way into Europe as the world brought the shutters down to contain the new Omicron variant.

Britain confirmed its first two infections and suspected new cases emerged in Germany and the Czech Republic, while Dutch authorities quarantined 61 passengers from South Africa who tested positive for COVID-19.

South Africa complained it was being "punished" with air [travel](#) bans for first detecting the strain, which the World Health Organization (WHO) has termed a "[variant](#) of concern".

South Korea, Australia and Thailand joined the United States, Brazil, Canada and a host of other countries around the world restricting travel from the region, fearing a major setback to global efforts against the pandemic.

Scientists are racing to determine the threat posed by the heavily mutated strain, which is more transmissible than the dominant Delta variant, and whether it can evade existing vaccines.

Anxious travellers thronged Johannesburg international airport, desperate to squeeze onto the last flights to countries that had imposed sudden travel bans. Many had cut holidays and rushed back from South African safaris and vineyards.

"It's ridiculous, we will always be having new variants," British tourist David Good told AFP, passports in hand. "South Africa found it but it's probably all over the world already."



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'Worrisome variant'

The virus has already slipped through the net with cases in Europe and Hong Kong and Israel.

Both cases in Britain were linked to travel from southern Africa, and in response the government expanded travel restrictions on the region.

Belgium said Friday it had detected the first announced infection in an unvaccinated person returning from abroad.

Germany's suspect case, meanwhile, was fully jabbed.

"The Omicron variant has with strong likelihood already arrived in Germany," tweeted Kai Klose, social affairs minister in the western state of Hesse.

The neighbouring Czech Republic was carrying out further tests on a woman who had travelled from Namibia and was suspected to have the new variant, prime minister Andrej Babis said.

The Netherlands meanwhile found around one in 10—61 out of 600—people who had arrived at Schiphol airport on Friday from South Africa were positive for COVID-19.



Thailand and South Korea restricted flights from eight countries, as did the United States, Brazil, Canada and Saudi Arabia.

Those infected, who flew in on two KLM flights that took off before the Dutch government announced a ban on travellers from the region, were being kept quarantined in a hotel.

"The positive test results will be examined as soon as possible to determine whether this concerns the new worrisome variant," the Dutch Health Authority said.

The WHO said it could take several weeks to understand the variant, which was initially known as B.1.1.529, and cautioned against travel curbs while scientific evidence remains scant.

'Draconian' measures

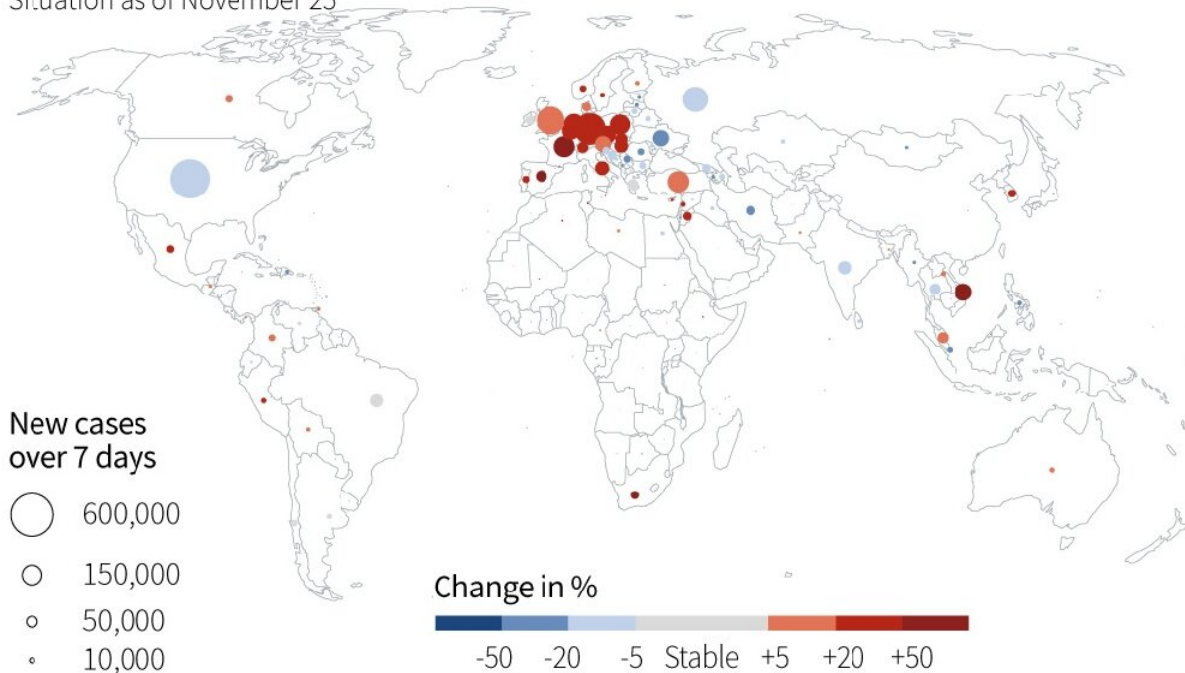
South Africa called the travel curbs "draconian" and on Saturday said the flight bans were "akin to punishing South Africa for its advanced genomic sequencing and the ability to detect new variants quicker."

"Excellent science should be applauded and not punished," the foreign ministry said in a statement.

Covid-19 weekly trends

Number of new cases over 7 days compared to previous week

Situation as of November 25



Source: AFP count based on official tolls



Number of new Covid-19 cases over 7 days and the change in percent from the previous week, as of November 25, 2021.

The main countries targeted by the shutdown include South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini (Swaziland), Lesotho, Namibia, Zambia, Mozambique, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

US President Joe Biden meanwhile said richer countries should donate more COVID-19 vaccines and give up intellectual property protections to manufacture more doses worldwide.

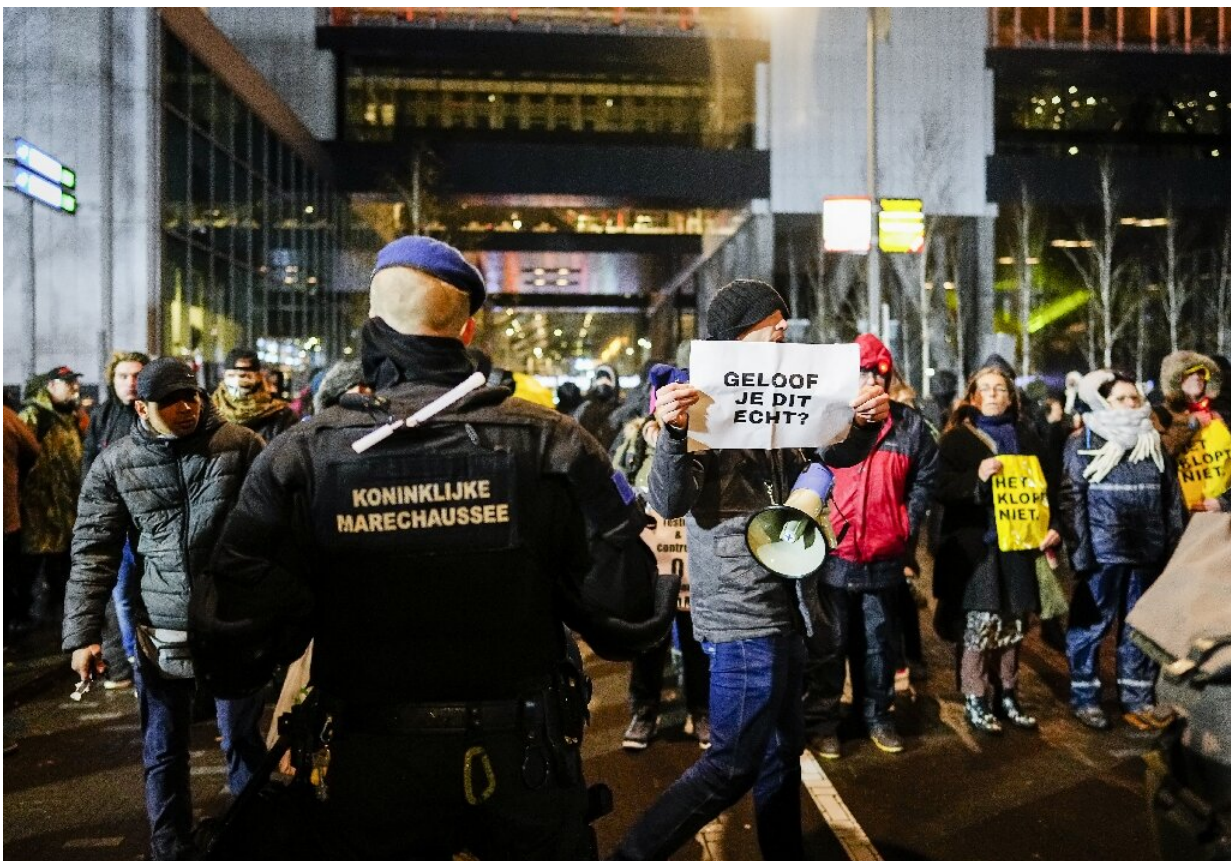
"The news about this new variant should make clearer than ever why this

pandemic will not end until we have global vaccinations," he said.

But with memories still fresh of the way global air travel helped the spread of COVID after it first emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in late 2019, countries clamped down swiftly.

Australia and Belgium became the latest to act, banning all flights from nine southern African countries.

South Korea and Thailand restricted flights from eight countries, as did the United States, Brazil, Canada and Saudi Arabia.



The Netherlands has ramped up anti-Covid restrictions, sparking protests.



The WTO called off a conference, its biggest gathering in four years, at the last minute over the new variant.

EU officials agreed in an emergency meeting to urge all 27 nations in the bloc to restrict travel from southern Africa, with many members having already done so.

The World Trade Organization called off its ministerial conference, its biggest gathering in four years, at the last minute Friday due to the new variant.

Vaccine manufacturers have held out hope that they can modify current vaccines to target the Omicron variant.

Germany's BioNTech and US drugmaker Pfizer said they expect data "in two weeks at the latest" to show if their jab can be adjusted.

Moderna said it will develop a booster specific to the new variant.

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