

Asia keeps omicron at bay, but a surge may be inevitable

December 29 2021, by Huizhong Wu



Medical Technologist Erika Alvarado performs a COVID-19 test on a patient who just delivered a baby outside a hospital in Manila, Philippines on Friday, Dec. 24, 2021. In the Philippines, one of the worst-hit by the pandemic in Southeast Asia, daily COVID-19 infections have considerably dropped from an average 22,000 cases just three months ago during an alarming spike set off by the delta variant to just a few hundred in recent days after a delayed vaccination campaign considerably intensified with more vaccine shipment deliveries. Credit: AP Photo/Aaron Favila

Much of Asia has largely managed to keep omicron at bay even as the variant rages in other parts of the world, but the region that is home to most of the globe's population is bracing for what may be an inevitable surge.

Strict quarantine rules for arrivals and widespread mask wearing have helped slow the spread of the highly contagious variant in Asia. Countries such as Japan, South Korea and [Thailand](#) quickly reinstated entry and quarantine restrictions in recent weeks after relaxing them in the fall.

But cases are mounting, and experts say the next few months will be critical. Those fears have been amplified by doubts about the effectiveness of the Chinese-made vaccines used in China and much of the developing world.

"Once the pace picks up, its upsurge would be extremely fast," said Dr. Shigeru Omi, a top medical adviser to Japan's government.

In India, which has been getting back to normal after a devastating COVID-19 outbreak earlier this year, [omicron](#) is once again [raising fears](#), with more than 700 cases reported in the country of nearly 1.4 billion people.

The capital, New Delhi, banned large gatherings for Christmas and New Year's, and many other states have announced new restrictions, including curfews and vaccination requirements at stores and restaurants.



Medical Technologist Erika Alvarado comes out of a tent after she performs a COVID-19 test on a patient outside a hospital in Manila, Philippines on Friday, Dec. 24, 2021. In the Philippines, one of the worst-hit by the pandemic in Southeast Asia, daily COVID-19 infections have considerably dropped from an average 22,000 cases just three months ago during an alarming spike set off by the delta variant to just a few hundred in recent days after a delayed vaccination campaign considerably intensified with more vaccine shipment deliveries.
Credit: AP Photo/Aaron Favila

At the crowded Chandni Chowk market in New Delhi, many people were shopping without masks this week. Cycle rickshaw driver Mahesh Kumar said he is afraid of passengers who don't wear masks.

"There are many people who don't believe in this disease. They think it

doesn't exist. But I am very scared. I have children and a family," he said. "If something happens to me, who will take care of them?"

Australia is already dealing with multiple COVID-19 surges, with a state leader saying Wednesday that "omicron is moving too quickly."

Elsewhere, Thailand has topped 700 cases, South Korea has more than 500 and Japan, over 300. China, which has some of the strictest virus controls in the world, has reported at least eight.

Only four cases have been reported in the Philippines, where people flocked to shopping malls ahead of Christmas and to Mass in the biggest Roman Catholic nation in Asia. Some hospitals have even begun dismantling COVID-19 wards in a move experts say could prove to be premature.



Residents attend a dimly-lit Christmas eve mass at the damaged San Nicolas de Tolentino Cathedral at typhoon-hit Surigao del Norte province, southern Philippines on Dec. 24, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Erwin Mascarinas, File

Japan managed to delay the spread of the new variant for about a month largely thanks to its reimposition of entry restrictions, mandatory COVID-19 tests for all arrivals and the isolation of all passengers on a flight if anyone tested positive for omicron.

But the barrier was broken last week when the first locally transmitted cases were confirmed in the neighboring cities of Osaka and Kyoto. Experts are urging the government to prepare for an imminent wave of infections by increasing testing, speeding up booster shots and preparing more beds at hospitals.

"We want to believe the omicron cases could be mild, but its fast-paced infections could quickly multiply the number of patients and could still overwhelm hospitals," Omi said.

Taiwan, where wearing a face mask is near universal in major cities, has started to offer booster shots of the Moderna vaccine and is urging people get a third shot before an expected influx of people returning home for Lunar New Year at the end of January.



A paramedic make beds at a makeshift COVID-19 care center at an indoor sports stadium in New Delhi, India on Dec. 22, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

Preliminary research has shown that booster shots of the Pfizer, AstraZeneca and Moderna vaccines offer continued, though diminished, protection against omicron.

However, a Hong Kong University study that has yet to be published found that China's widely used Sinovac vaccine does not generate enough antibodies to protect against omicron, even with a booster shot, according to a university news release. Hong Kong offers both the

Sinovac and Pfizer vaccines.

Sinovac did not respond to a request for comment. Chinese officials have said their vaccines are still effective.

"Our inactivated vaccines are still rather reliable and cover a range of antigens. Therefore, they won't be completely ineffective against omicron," Zhong Nanshan, a top government doctor, said at a public forum.

Some countries that relied on the Chinese vaccines are turning to others for boosters.



A paramedic make checks an oxygen concentrator at a makeshift COVID-19 care center at an indoor sports stadium in New Delhi, India on Dec. 22, 2021. In

India, which has been getting back to normal after a devastating COVID-19 outbreak earlier this year, omicron is once again raising fears, with more than 700 cases reported in the country of nearly 1.4 billion people. Credit: AP Photo/Altaf Qadri

Thailand, which largely used Sinovac and Sinopharm, another Chinese vaccine, is offering booster shots of AstraZeneca or Pfizer. Indonesia, where Sinovac has been the mainstay of a campaign to vaccinate its 270 million residents, is offering a Moderna booster for health care workers. The government is also planning boosters for the general population in January, though it hasn't said which vaccine.

China's attitude toward the virus, omicron or not, is to stop transmission in its tracks, and the country appears to be getting even tougher with the approach of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February.

Officials locked down the city of Xi'an, a city and administrative area of 13 million people last week, amid a delta outbreak that has infected hundreds of people. On Monday, they ordered everyone to stay at home until another citywide round of testing was completed.



A police man, center, directs pedestrians towards a COVID-19 testing booth at a Sunday market in Jammu, India on Dec.5, 2021. In India, which has been getting back to normal after a devastating COVID-19 outbreak earlier this year, omicron is once again raising fears, with more than 700 cases reported in the country of nearly 1.4 billion people. Credit: AP Photo/Channi Anand, File



People wearing a face mask, walk past a Christmas illumination display, at a shopping mall in Yokohama, near Tokyo on Dec. 25, 2021. To contain a deadly delta-driven surge in South Korea, the government this month restored its toughest distancing rules with a four-person limit on private gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew on restaurants. Credit: AP Photo/Shuji Kajiyama, File



A medical worker holds a sign for visitors to prepare for the coronavirus tests at a temporary screening clinic for coronavirus in Seoul, South Korea on Dec. 10, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Lee Jin-man, File



People wearing face masks to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walk under decorations for new year through the alley leading to Asakusa Sensoji Buddhist temple in Tokyo on Dec. 21, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Koji Sasahara, File



Commuters wearing face masks to protect against COVID-19 ride an escalator at a subway station in the central business district in Beijing on Dec. 23, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Schiefelbein



Passengers wearing protective face masks as they sit in social distancing inside a train leaving a train station in Jakarta, Indonesia on Dec. 16, 2021. Indonesia, where Sinovac has been the mainstay of a campaign to vaccinate its 270 million residents, is offering a Moderna booster for health care workers. The government is also planning boosters for the general population in January, though it hasn't said which vaccine. Credit: AP Photo/Tatan Syuflana, File



A customer wearing a mask leaves from a dumplings restaurant in Beijing, China on Dec. 21, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan



People wear face masks to protect against the spread of COVID-19 in Taipei, Taiwan, Tuesday, Oct. 26, 2021. Taiwan, where wearing a face mask is near universal in major cities, has started to offer booster shots of the Moderna vaccine and is urging people get a third shot before an expected influx of people returning home for Lunar New Year at the end of January. Credit: AP Photo/Chiang Ying-ying, File



A woman wearing a face mask and gloves to protect from the coronavirus walks with her masked partner at the Wangfujing shopping district in Beijing on Dec. 12, 2021. China's attitude toward the virus, omicron or not, is to stop transmission in its tracks, and the country appears to be getting even tougher with the approach of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong



Passengers on board a high speed train from Beijing to Shanghai wear masks to curb the spread of coronavirus past near Nanjing in eastern China's Jiangsu Province on Dec. 16, 2021. China's attitude toward the virus, omicron or not, is to stop transmission in its tracks, and the country appears to be getting even tougher with the approach of the Beijing Winter Olympics in February. Credit: AP Photo/Ng Han Guan



A construction worker wearing a protective mask walks by a wall where shadow of tree cast Wednesday, Dec. 29, 2021, in Tokyo. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Eugene Hoshiko



People queue in line to wait for the coronavirus testing at a makeshift testing site in Seoul, South Korea on Dec. 22, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Ahn Young-joon, File



A health worker administers a dose of the AstraZeneca COVID-19 vaccine in Bangkok, Thailand on Nov. 17, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Sakchai Lalit, File



A flight crew walk through the terminal at Sydney Airport on Nov. 29, 2021. Caseloads of omicron have remained relatively low in many countries in Asia. For now, many remain insulated from the worst, although the next few months will remain critical. Credit: AP Photo/Mark Baker, File

Residents complained on social media about the sudden ban. Many were relying on instant noodles and other packaged food. Some worried how they would get enough food in the coming days, especially fresh vegetables.

China quarantines those arriving from abroad for weeks, depending on the province, with three weeks being the most common.

How China's zero-COVID-19 policy will play out at the Olympics is a

major question. Athletes and visitors will not be allowed to leave the Olympic zones, and those attending such as officials, journalists and venue staff will be tested every day.

To contain a deadly [delta-driven surge](#) in South Korea, the government this month restored its toughest [distancing rules](#) with a four-person limit on private gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew on restaurants.

Health experts predict it's only a matter of time before omicron comes.

"Omicron has such a high transmission rate that it's too obvious that it'll become the dominant variant in South Korea at some point," said Jaehun Jung, a professor at Gachon University College of Medicine in South Korea.

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