

Netherlands 'going into lockdown again' to curb omicron

December 18 2021, by Danica Kirka and Mike Corder



Participants gather to demonstrate against COVID-19 measures in downtown Hamburg, Saturday Dec. 18, 2021. Credit: Markus Scholz/dpa via AP

Nations across Europe moved to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant, with the Netherlands leading the way by imposing a nationwide lockdown.

All non-essential stores, bars and restaurants in the Netherlands will be closed until Jan. 14 starting Sunday, caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte said at a hastily arranged press conference Saturday night. Schools and universities will shut until Jan. 9, he said.

In what is surely to prove a major disappointment, the lockdown terms also rein in private holiday celebrations. Residents only will be permitted two visitors except for Christmas and New Year's, when four will be allowed, according to Rutte.

"The Netherlands is going into lockdown again from tomorrow," he said, adding that the move was "unavoidable because of the fifth wave caused by the omicron variant that is bearing down on us."

It wasn't just the Dutch seeking to slow the spread of omicron. Alarmed ministers in France, Cyprus and Austria tightened travel restrictions. Paris canceled its New Year's Eve fireworks. Denmark has closed theaters, concert halls, amusement parks and museums. Ireland imposed an 8 p.m. curfew on pubs and bars and limited attendance at indoor and outdoor events.



A protestor holds a banner during a small anti-COVID restriction demonstration in the Hague, the Netherlands, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Dutch government ministers are meeting Saturday to discuss advice from a panel of experts who are reportedly advising a toughening of the partial lockdown that is already in place to combat COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

London Mayor Sadiq Khan underscored the official concern about the climbing cases and their potential to overwhelm the health care system by declaring a major incident Saturday, a move that allows local councils in Britain's capital to coordinate work more closely with [emergency services](#).

Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin captured the sense of the continent

in an address to the nation, saying the new restrictions were needed to protect lives and livelihoods from the resurgent virus.

"None of this is easy," Martin said Friday night. "We are all exhausted with COVID and the restrictions it requires. The twists and turns, the disappointments and the frustrations take a heavy toll on everyone. But it is the reality that we are dealing with."

The World Health Organization reported Saturday that the omicron variant of the coronavirus has been detected in 89 countries, and COVID-19 cases involving the variant are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission and not just infections acquired abroad.



People walk down a street in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Dutch government ministers are meeting Saturday to discuss advice from a panel of experts who are reportedly advising a toughening of the partial lockdown that is already in place to combat COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Peter Dejong

Major questions about omicron remain unanswered, including how effective existing COVID-19 vaccines are against it and whether the variant produces severe illness in many infected individuals, WHO noted.

Yet omicron's "substantial growth advantage" over the delta variant means it is likely to soon overtake delta as the dominant form of the virus in countries where the new variant is spreading locally, the U.N. health agency said.

In the Netherlands, shoppers fearing the worst swarmed to commercial areas of Dutch cities earlier Saturday, thinking it might be their last chance to buy Christmas gifts.

Rotterdam municipality tweeted that it was "too busy in the center" of the port city and told people: "Don't come to the city." Amsterdam also warned that the city's main shopping street was busy and urged people to stick to coronavirus rules.



Anti -COVID-19 vaccination protesters demonstrate on Parliament Square in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Ian West/PA via AP

"I can hear the whole of the Netherlands sighing," Rutte said in his lockdown announcement. "All this, exactly one week before Christmas. Another Christmas that is completely different from what we want. Very bad news again for all those businesses and cultural institutions that rely on the holidays."

The head of the Dutch public health institute, Jaap van Dissel, described

the shutdown as a preventative move that would "buy time" for more people to get booster vaccines and for the nation's [health care system](#) to prepare for a possible new surge in infections.

In the U.K., where confirmed daily cases soared to record numbers this week, the government has reimposed a requirement for masks to be worn indoors and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a recent negative coronavirus test when going to nightclubs and large events.



People gather to protest against Italy's covid Green Pass in Turin, Italy, Saturday Dec. 18, 2021. Nations across Europe are moving to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant. Credit: Fabio Ferrari/LaPresse via AP

But the moves caused anger.

Critics of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's latest coronavirus restrictions flooded Oxford Street, a popular London shopping area, on Saturday. The maskless protesters blew whistles, yelled "Freedom!" and told passersby to remove their face coverings.

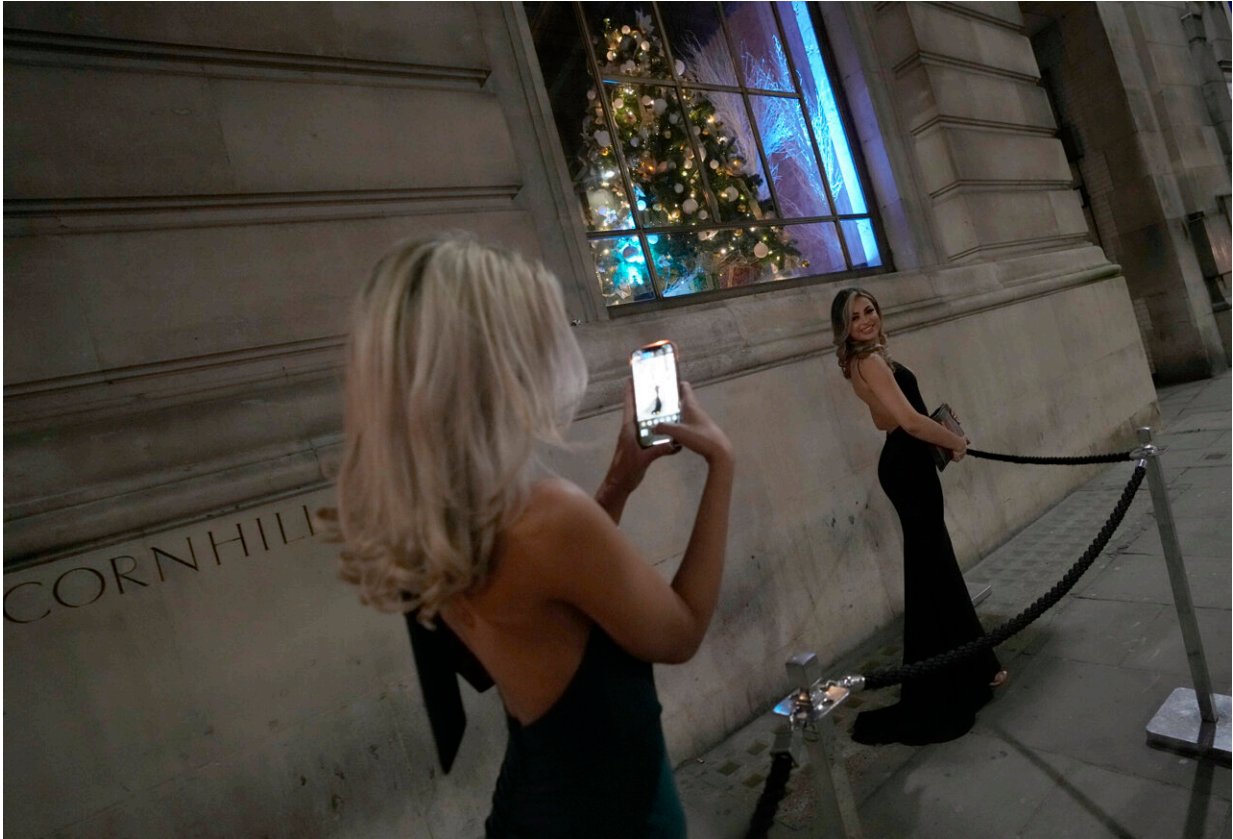
Hundreds of people blocked traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Other signs had the faces of Johnson or U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid and read, "Give them the boot."

Scientists are warning the British government it needs to go further to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed. Leaked minutes from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies suggested a ban on indoor mixing and hospitality, the BBC reported.

Britain and other nations are also accelerating the pace of booster shots after early data showed that two doses of vaccine were less effective against the omicron variant. Shopping centers, cathedrals and soccer stadiums in Britain have been converted into mass vaccination centers.



Travellers stand in front of an information board at BER Airport in Berlin, Germany, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Germany's incoming transport minister is advising people against traveling over Christmas as the country tries to stem a wave of coronavirus infections. Credit: Joerg Carstensen/dpa via AP



Two women dressed for a party take photos of each other outside a venue in London, Friday, Dec. 17, 2021. On what would normally be one of the busiest times for pubs and restaurants just before Christmas, customer numbers are down in central London due to concerns about the new omicron variant. Friday night in Central London was muted with one bar saying they have 30 customers inside when there should have been 170, with large amounts of cancellations in recent days. Credit: AP Photo/Alastair Grant



Police in riot gear during an anti COVID-19 vaccination demonstration on Whitehall, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Dominic Lipinski//PA via AP



People walk past a sign outlining COVID-19 guidelines in the center of Amsterdam, the Netherlands, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Dutch government ministers are meeting Saturday to discuss advice from a panel of experts who are reportedly are advising a toughening of the partial lockdown that is already in place to combat COVID-19. Credit: AP Photo/Peter Dejong



People gather to protest against Italy's COVID-19 Green Pass in Turin, Italy, Saturday Dec. 18, 2021. The Green Pass is the Italy's health pass, which shows proof of vaccination, a recent negative test or having been cured of COVID-19. Credit: Fabio Ferrari/LaPresse via AP



The Berlin police takes away a participant of the forbidden demonstration of opponents of Corona rules in Berlin, Germany, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. The demonstration had been banned by the Berlin police. Credit: Fabian Sommer/dpa via AP



Demonstrators to voice opposition to the new vaccine pass and mandatory vaccine to protect against COVID-19, and ongoing government restrictions attend a protest demonstration march, in Paris, France, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Nations across Europe are moving to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant. Credit: AP Photo/Francois Mori



Anti -COVID-19 vaccination protesters demonstrate on Whitehall near Downing Street, in London, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Hundreds of people protested in London Saturday, blocking traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Credit: Ian West/PA via AP



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A doctor vaccinates a young woman with Moderna's mRNA vaccine at the Dresden State Art Collections in Dresden, Germany, Dec. 18, 2021. The vaccination rate in Saxony is the lowest in Germany. Credit: Daniel Schaefer/dpa via AP



Demonstrators march during a protest to oppose the vaccine pass proposal and ongoing government restrictions in Barcelona, Spain, Saturday, Dec. 18, 2021. Nations across Europe are moving to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant. Banner reads in Spanish "let me breath in the school" Credit: AP Photo/Joan Mateu



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Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in London, and efforts were stepped up to reach people who haven't yet been vaccinated or boosted.

The mayor said during a visit to a mass vaccination pop-up clinic at London soccer team Chelsea's stadium that public services ranging from ambulances to police calls could be impeded by the rapidly spreading

variant.

"The big issue we have is the number of Londoners who have this virus, and that's leading to big issues in relation to staff absences and the ability of our public services to run at the optimum levels," Khan told the BBC.

In France, the government announced that it will start giving the vaccine to children in the 5 to 11 age group beginning Wednesday.

Prime Minister Jean Castex said Friday that with the [omicron variant](#) spreading like "lightning," the government proposed requiring proof of vaccination from individuals entering restaurants, cafes and other public establishments. The action requires parliamentary approval.

Thousands of opponents of vaccine requirements and mask mandates protested Saturday in Hamburg, Berlin, Düsseldorf and other German cities. In Austria, local media reported the crowds swelled to tens of thousands.

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