

WHO says pandemic 'nowhere near over' as France, Germany post record cases

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France reported 464,769 cases within 24 hours on Tuesday, a record number.

The World Health Organization has warned that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, as France, Germany and Brazil posted new records of infections in the past 24 hours.

The highly transmissible Omicron strain has spread unabated around the world, pushing some governments to impose fresh measures while speeding up the rollout of vaccine booster shots.

"This pandemic is nowhere near over," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told reporters Tuesday from the agency's headquarters in Geneva.

Europe is at the epicentre of alarming new outbreaks, with Germany's cases soaring past 100,000 and France reporting nearly half a million cases on Tuesday.

The UN health chief warned against dismissing Omicron as mild, as the dominant COVID strain continues to flare new outbreaks from Latin America to East Asia after it was first detected in southern Africa in November.

"Omicron may be less severe, on average, but the narrative that it is a mild disease is misleading," he said.

European surge

Five millions cases were reported in Europe last week and the WHO has predicted Omicron could infect half of all Europeans by March, filling hospitals across the continent.

Germany on Tuesday recorded 112,323 coronavirus cases and 239 deaths, officials said, with Omicron found in more than 70 percent of the infections.



Germany's cases have soared past 100,000, a new record for the country.

The surge has pushed German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to seek compulsory vaccinations to ramp up the immunity of the population in Europe's biggest economy.

Other European countries are also battling soaring Omicron rates, with neighbouring France recently averaging around 300,000 cases daily.

The latest data issued by Public Health France showed that there were 464,769 new cases in the last 24-hour period, a record number.

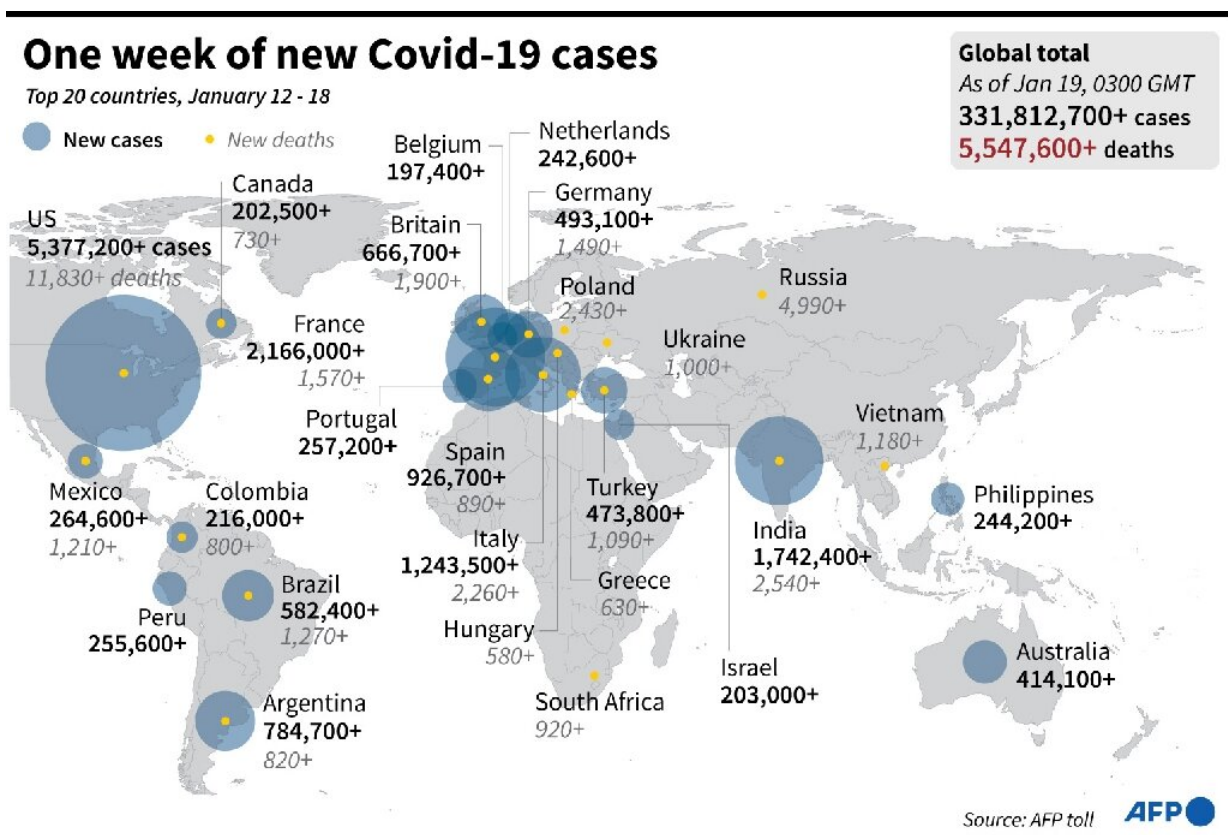
The record cases come days after the two-year anniversary of the announcement of the first person dying of a virus in China only later identified as COVID.

Since January 11, 2020, known fatalities in the pandemic have soared to more than 5.5 million.

Hopes for Europe's tourism recovery remain bleak with the World Tourism Organization saying Tuesday that foreign arrivals will not return to pre-pandemic levels until 2024 at the earliest, despite a rise of 19 percent last year compared to 2020.

'Quasi-emergency'

Elsewhere in the world, Brazil registered a new record number of daily cases of more than 137,000 on Tuesday.



Graphic highlighting twenty countries with the largest number of Covid-19 cases

and deaths in the past week.

The country suffered a devastating second wave last year with deaths topping 4,000 a day, pushing its death toll to the second highest in the world behind the United States.

President Jair Bolsonaro, an avowed vaccine sceptic who has downplayed Omicron, is increasingly under fire for his handling of the pandemic, and he is on course to lose the country's October presidential election, according to polls.

In Asia, Japan was set to tighten restrictions across the country, including Tokyo, as it battles record infections fuelled by Omicron while China partially relaxed transport restrictions in the megacity of Xi'an where millions have been confined to their homes for weeks.

Japanese experts on Wednesday backed placing 13 regions "under quasi-emergency measures from January 21 to February 13" Daishiro Yamagiwa, minister in charge of coronavirus affairs, told reporters.

China's resumption of some inter-city train routes in Xi'an from Tuesday comes just before the Lunar New Year holiday later this month, traditionally a period of mass travel.

It also comes as Beijing battles multiple clusters that are testing its enforcement of a strict "zero-COVID" approach ahead of next month's Winter Olympics.

Hamsters and big cats

Focus is increasingly turning to animals and how the virus interacts with

them, after at least two countries reported COVID-19 cases in creatures big and small potentially passed between them and humans.



Hong Kong's government is facing outrage over its decision to cull 2,000 small animals in pet shops.

A study published Tuesday in South Africa said big cats caged in zoos are at risk from catching COVID from their keepers.

Researchers found clues pointing to the infection of three lions and two pumas by their handlers at a zoo in Johannesburg, some of whom were asymptomatic.

In Hong Kong, hamsters were bearing the brunt of the semi-autonomous Chinese city's similarly strict approach to COVID, with officials appearing to blame them for two human cases.

The financial hub's government faced growing outrage Wednesday over its decision to cull 2,000 [small animals](#) in pet shops after several hamsters in a store allegedly tested positive for COVID-19.

"Internationally, there is no evidence yet to show pets can transmit the coronavirus to humans," Health Secretary Sophia Chan told a press conference.

"But... we will take precautionary measures against any vector of transmission."

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