

EU doesn't follow Italy with COVID checks on China arrivals

December 29 2022, by Raf Casert



A traveller wearing a face mask with his luggage and passport walks by a poster depicting the Beijing airport on display at the international flight check in counter at the Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022. Moves by the U.S., Japan and others to mandate COVID-19 tests for passengers arriving from China reflect global concern that new variants could emerge in its ongoing explosive outbreak — and the government may not inform the rest of the world quickly enough. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

The European Union is assessing Beijing's rollback of its strict anti-infection controls but refrained Thursday from immediately following EU member Italy in requiring coronavirus tests for airline passengers coming from China.

Health officials from the 27-member bloc promised to continue talks on seeking a common approach to travel rules. However, the EU's executive arm said the BF.7 omicron variant prevalent in China was already circulating in Europe and that its threat had not significantly grown.

"However, we remain vigilant and will be ready to use the emergency brake if necessary," the European Commission said in a statement.

Even though virus experts in the EU have played down the immediate danger, Italy made coronavirus tests mandatory for all airline passengers arriving from China. More than 50% of people screened upon arrival at Milan's Malpensa airport in recent days tested positive for the virus.

Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni on Thursday increased pressure on the EU to join Italy's approach. She said requiring COVID tests of all passengers from China "is only effective if it is taken at the European level," noting that many arrive in Italy on connecting flights through other European countries.

Considering the reluctance from several EU nations and experts, the EU's health security committee said in a statement after meeting Thursday that "we need to act jointly and will continue our discussions."

Holding off was certainly something Germany wanted. "There is no indication that a more dangerous variant has developed in this outbreak in China ... which would bring corresponding travel restrictions," Health Ministry spokesman Sebastian Guelde said.



Masked travellers with luggage line up at the international flight check in counter at the Beijing Capital International Airport in Beijing, Thursday, Dec. 29, 2022. Moves by the U.S., Japan and others to mandate COVID-19 tests for passengers arriving from China reflect global concern that new variants could emerge in its ongoing explosive outbreak — and the government may not inform the rest of the world quickly enough. Credit: AP Photo/Andy Wong

A coordinated EU approach is necessary since almost all EU member nations are part of Europe's visa-free Schengen Area. The unrestricted travel means that testing in one nation would not be very effective since travelers from China could enter from another EU nation and spread the virus.

After strict travel restrictions at the height of the pandemic, the EU returned to a pre-pandemic system of free travel this fall, but member nations agreed that an "emergency brake" could be activated at short notice to meet an unexpected challenge.

"At a scientific level, there is no reason at this stage to reimpose specific border controls," Professor Brigitte Autran, a vaccines expert for France's health ministry, told Radio Classique on Thursday.

And even Italy's health minister came with some good news Thursday. Orazio Schillaci told the Senate in Rome that sequencing indicates the variants detected in passengers arriving from China are already in circulation in Europe, somewhat easing fears that a new variant from China could start running amok in Europe.

"This is the most important and reassuring news," Schillaci said.

The United States announced new COVID-19 testing requirements Wednesday for all travelers from China, joining some Asian nations that had imposed restrictions because of a surge of infections.

Japan will require a negative COVID-19 test upon arrival for travelers from China, and Malaysia announced new tracking and surveillance measures. India, South Korea and Taiwan are requiring virus tests for visitors from China.

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