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Inside C2

Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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WHO flags Omicron risk, curbs tighten worldwide, Biden urges vaccination

GENEVA/JOHANNESBURG, Nov 29 (Reuters) - The World Health Organization (WHO) said on Monday the Omicron coronavirus variant carried a very high risk of infection surges as more countries closed borders, casting a shadow over economic recovery from the two-year pandemic. Big airlines acted swiftly to protect their hubs by curbing passenger travel from southern Africa, fearing that a spread of the new variant would trigger restrictions from other destinations beyond the immediately affected regions, industry sources said. read more

But shares in carriers bounced back with the rest of the market on Monday after Friday's rout as hopes grew that the variant might prove to be milder than initially feared. read more

President Joe Biden urged Americans not to panic and said the United States was working with pharmaceutical companies to make contingency plans if new vaccines were needed. read more

Biden said the country would not go back to lockdowns this winter, but urged people to get vaccinated, get their boosters and wear masks. "This variant is a cause for concern, not a cause for panic," Biden said in remarks at the White House following a meeting with his COVID-19 team.

"We're going to fight and beat this new variant."

The WHO advised its 194 member nations that any surge in infections could have severe consequences, but said no deaths had yet been linked to the new variant.

"Omicron has an unprecedented number of spike mutations, some of which are concerning for their potential impact on the trajectory of the pandemic," the WHO said.

"The overall global risk related to the new variant of concern Omicron is assessed as very high."

Further research was needed to understand Omicron's potential to escape protection against immunity induced by vaccines and previous infections, it added.

An infectious disease expert from South Africa, where scientists first identified Omicron, said it was too early to say whether symptoms were more severe than previous variants, but it did appear to be more transmissible.



Professor Salim Abdool Karim also said existing vaccines were probably effective at stopping Omicron from causing severe illness. Scientists have said it could take weeks to understand the severity of Omicron.

South African cases were likely to exceed 10,000 a day this week, rocketing up from barely 300 a day two weeks ago, Karim added.

But South African President Cyril Ramaphosa denounced "unjustified and unscientific" travel bans that damage tourism-reliant economies. His country has said it is being punished for its scientific ability to detect new variants.

Travellers in personal protective equipment load luggage into a taxi outside the international terminal at Sydney Airport, as countries react to the new coronavirus Omicron variant amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, in Sydney, Australia, November 29, 2021. REUTERS/Loren Elliott
A man stands in front of a monitor showing flight schedules at an arrival hall of Haneda airport's international terminal, amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Tokyo, Japan, November 29, 2021. REUTERS/Kim Kyung-Hoon
Health ministers from the Group of Seven bloc of wealthy nations praised South Africa for its "exemplary work" in detecting the variant and alerting others, a sentiment

echoed by Biden.

JITTERY MARKETS

Fears the new variant might be resistant to vaccines helped wipe roughly \$2 trillion off global stock markets on Friday but markets settled down again on Monday, even after Japan said it would close its borders to foreigners.

U.S. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said on Monday it was too soon to tell if Omicron will have any impact on global supply chains. read more

The prospect of a fast-spreading variant has raised fears of a return of the sort of restrictions that shut down a swathe of industries in 2020.

"This is new," Nissan Motor Co's (7201.T) U.S. spokeswoman, Lloryn love-Carter, said. "We're monitoring of course, but we still have a lot of pretty strict COVID protocols in place."

Travellers stranded at Johannesburg international airport said they felt helpless as flights from South Africa were cancelled. "We don't know what to do, we

are just waiting here," said Ntabiseng Kabeli, from Lesotho.

Portugal found 13 cases of the variant at a Lisbon football club. Spain, Sweden, Scotland and Austria also reported their first cases. read more

In Israel, a ban on arrivals by foreigners took effect overnight. read more

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed concern that restrictions would isolate southern African countries.

"The people of Africa cannot be blamed for the immorally low level of vaccinations available in Africa – and they should not be penalized for identifying and sharing crucial science and health information with the world," he said.

Guterres has long warned about the dangers of vaccine inequality around the world and the risk that low immunisation rates are a breeding ground for variants.

More than 261 million people in over 210 countries have been reported to be infected by the coronavirus since the first cases were identified in China in December 2019 and 5,456,515 have died, according to a Reuters tally.

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WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

11/29/2021

We Welcome More People To Become Texans



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The New York Times had an article last week saying that the trauma of the past few years has rearranged all of our lives. Many Americans now have new needs, new desires, new possibilities and new priorities that include looking for bigger homes, second homes or any homes at all.

The New York Times gathered data from thousands of towns

and cities across more than 30 matrices such as school quality, crime rates and affordability. After they looked at the data they found out why many people are moving to Texas.

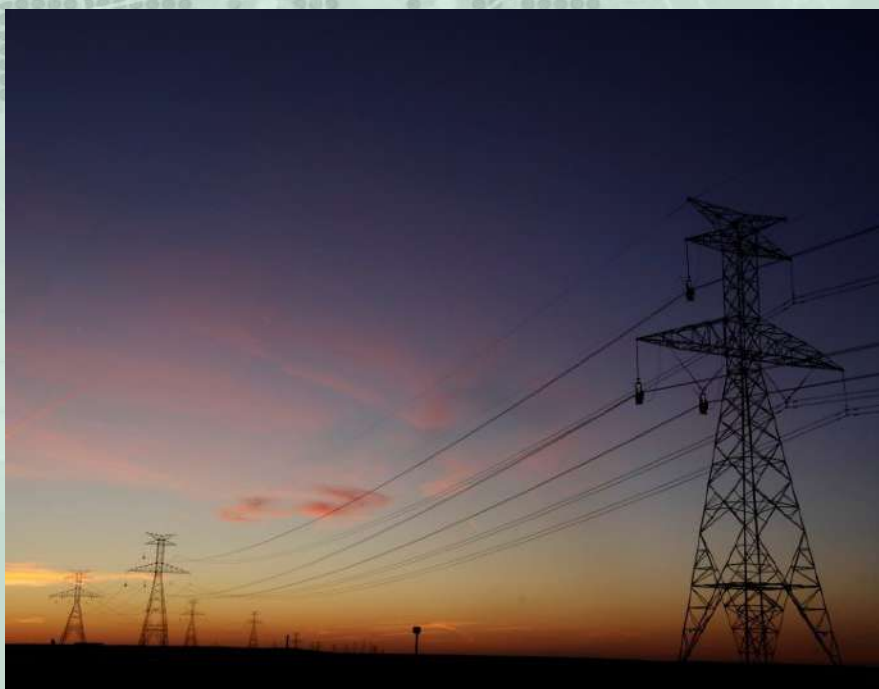
Over the last more than one hundred years, California has become the most prosperous "state-of-the-art" U. S. location, turning the "Golden State" into a global capital.

When people are looking for reasonable housing at a good price, good schools and a lower crime rate they found out that in Texas there are many cities that are suitable for their needs.

We are here to welcome more people to move to our state and become Texans.

When we first moved to Texas many years ago, people were very surprised when we gave up San Francisco in the Golden State to

come all the way to Texas. We spent all our energy and young adult life in Texas. Here is now our home. We are so happy we made the right decision, but for many of you, it is never too late.



Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice



An explosion caused by a police munition is seen while supporters of U.S. President Donald Trump rally to contest the certification of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, at the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, January 6, 2021. REUTERS/Leah Millis



Adrian James, 2, who tested positive for the coronavirus, breathes with the help of a ventilator at SSM Health Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital in St. Louis, Missouri, October 5, 2021. REUTERS/Callaghan O'Hare



A man is doused by a water cannon during clashes as people gather at the Bois de la Cambre/Ter Kamerenbos park for a party called "La Boum 2" in defiance of Belgium's coronavirus social distancing measures and restrictions, in Brussels, Belgium, May 1. REUTERS/Yves Herman



Lava is seen through the window of a kitchen from El Paso following the eruption of a volcano on the Canary Island of La Palma, Spain, September 28, 2021. REUTERS/Jon Nazca



A Naga Sadhu, or Hindu holy man wears a mask before the procession for taking a dip in the Ganges river during Shahi Snan at "Kumbh Mela", or the Pitcher Festival, in Haridwar, India, April 12, 2021. REUTERS/Danish Siddiqui



Haitian fire fighters recover the body of a three-year-old boy from under the rubble of a hotel destroyed in a 7.2 magnitude quake, in Les Cayes, Haiti, August 16, 2021. REUTERS/Ricardo Arduengo

Could Make Vaccines 40% Less Effective

Scientists Worldwide Sound The Alarm Over New ‘Worst-Ever’ Super-Mutant COVID Variant



BOTSWANA

Name: B.1.1.529

Cases? Around 100 detected

Key mutations:

- K417N** can escape antibodies
- E484A** can escape antibodies
- N440K** can escape antibodies
- N501Y** speeds up spread

More spike mutations than any other strain

Key Points

- *The B.1.1.529 variant has a ‘very unusual constellation’ of mutations and may be more resistant to the vaccine*
- *There are currently 77 confirmed cases in South Africa, four in Botswana, one in Hong Kong and one in Israel*
- *However, the real numbers are likely much higher as health authorities establish the full scale of the spread*
- *Britain, Israel, Singapore, Germany and Ital are among increasing countries to block flights from South Africa*
- *There are no direct flights to US from any of the countries except South Africa. Early Friday morning, the CDC still listed South Africa as ‘Level 1: Low Level of COVID-19’ on the country’s travel advice page*

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Scientists are increasingly alarmed over a new COVID-19 variant originating in Southern Africa, which on Thursday and Friday forced countries including the U.K., Israel, Italy and Germany to effectively stop travel from the region, but passengers are continuing to arrive in the U.S. Flight restrictions from South Africa to the US were lifted two weeks ago, along with restrictions on around 30 other countries. As of 5:00 a.m. on Friday, the CDC listed South Africa as ‘Level 1: Low Level of COVID-19’. The variant, B.1.1.529, is believed to have emerged in Botswana - from where there are no direct flights to the U.S. - and is also being found in neighboring South Africa. Hong Kong reported a case after a passenger who had recently traveled from South Africa was found to be infected with the variant, and then infected another person while in the same hotel, quarantining. Israel has also identified a case ‘in a person who returned from Malawi,’ with ‘two more cases of people returning from abroad’ placed in quarantine, the country’s health ministry said Friday. The variant – now named Omicron -- by the World Health Organization has caused an ‘exponential’ rise in infections in South Africa. Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, said initial data from the variant was worrying and border restrictions should be imposed. ‘Looks like vaccine evasion could be real with this variant,’ he tweeted, pointing out that the two patients in Hong Kong who had the variant were both doubled-jabbed with the Pfizer vaccine.

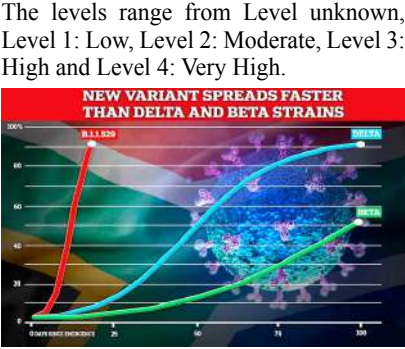
other person while in the same hotel, quarantining. Israel has also identified a case ‘in a person who returned from Malawi,’ with ‘two more cases of people returning from abroad’ placed in quarantine, the country’s health ministry said Friday. The variant – now named Omicron -- by the World Health Organization has caused an ‘exponential’ rise in infections in South Africa. Dr. Eric Feigl-Ding, an epidemiologist and senior fellow at the Federation of American Scientists, said initial data from the variant was worrying and border restrictions should be imposed. ‘Looks like vaccine evasion could be real with this variant,’ he tweeted, pointing out that the two patients in Hong Kong who had the variant were both doubled-jabbed with the Pfizer vaccine.



One of the two had recently been in Southern Africa. That person then passed it on to a second person, quarantining in the same hotel. ‘It’s very airborne,’ Feigl-Ding said. ‘The hotel guests were in different room across the hallway from each other. Environmental samples found the virus in 25 of 87 swabs across both rooms.’ He added: ‘I think border and travel restrictions make sense. Especially since Hong Kong only caught the case because of a mandatory hotel quarantine. Which countries in the west still have that??? Almost none.’

Botswana has four confirmed cases, South Africa 77 - with the real figure likely in the hundreds - and Hong Kong has two, meaning 83 cases of the variant are confirmed so far. But South African scientists tried to backpedal today saying it was ‘likely’ that vaccines still offered ‘high levels of protection’ against hospitalisations and deaths from the variant. Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic and the Netherlands joined Britain, Israel and Singapore in suspending travel from South Africa today and, in a sign of growing alarm, the European Union is also proposing prohibiting travel from the country and its neighbors.

As of 5:00 a.m. EST, the CDC website’s travel advice page for South Africa had the country listed as ‘Level 1: Low Level of COVID-19’, with flights to the US permitted from the African country since November 8. The levels range from Level unknown, Level 1: Low, Level 2: Moderate, Level 3: High and Level 4: Very High.



The CDC page asks anyone travelling to and from South Africa to be fully vaccinated, or for those who are not to be tested for Covid. It also recommends travellers

follow measures in-place in South Africa, including wearing a mask and social distancing.

South Africa’s infection rate spiked 93 per cent in a day yesterday amid fears the strain is driving the surge. Local scientists say it has likely spread to all the country’s nine provinces, but there is yet to be a surge in hospitalisations in epicentre Johannesburg. Travellers from South Africa have been allowed entry into the US since November 8, when restrictions barring entry to people from more than 30 countries - implemented at the start of the pandemic - were partially lifted.

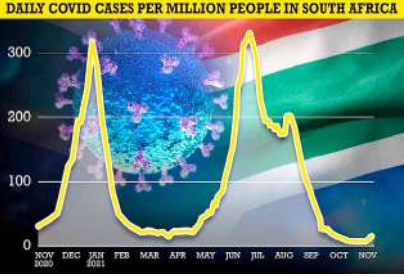
The new rules, which came 19 months after the travel ban was implemented, require international visitors to show both proof of vaccination and a negative Covid test.

‘There’s a lot we don’t understand about this variant,’ said Richard Lessells, an infectious disease physician at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa, at a press briefing organized by South Africa’s health department on Thursday. ‘The mutation profile gives us concern, but now we need to do the work to understand the significance of this variant and what it means for the response to the pandemic.’

U.S. stock futures dropped in overnight trading on Thursday as concerns about the variant spread.

Futures for the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell more than 400 points, while those for the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq 100 were both in negative territory.

On Thursday Britain’s health secretary, Sajid Javid sounded the alarm over what one senior scientific advisor in the UK termed the ‘worst-ever’ super-mutant COVID variant.



He said it could make vaccines at least 40 per cent less effective, and as a result he said they had banned flights from South Africa and five other regional countries. Experts explained earlier how the B.1.1.529 variant has more than 30 mutations – the most ever recorded in a variant and twice as many as Delta – that suggest it could be more jab-resistant and transmissible than any version before it.

In response, Javid announced that flights from South Africa, Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini and Zimbabwe will be suspended from midday Friday and all six countries will be added to the red list. South Africa blasted Britain’s travel ban as rushed.

Foreign minister Naledi Pandor said: ‘Our immediate concern is the damage that this decision will cause to both the tourism industries and businesses of both countries.’ A spokesman for the Government said: ‘Imposing bans on travellers from countries where a new variant is reported has not yielded a meaningful outcome.’

Israel was the first country to follow suit, also red-listing the six nations, with Singapore, Germany, Italy the Czech Republic and the Netherlands also banning flights from South Africa. A statement from European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen said that the EU aims to halt air travel from the region due to concerns over the possible dangers posed by the variant.

Germany’s new travel restrictions, starting Friday night, will affect South Africa and ‘probably neighbouring nations’, Spahn said, with only German nationals allowed entry. They must quarantine for 14 days upon arrival even if vaccinated. In Britain they must quarantine for 11 days in Government hotels for about £2,800.



‘The last thing we need now is an introduced new variant that causes even more problems,’ Spahn said, with Germany in the grip of a ferocious fourth wave of the pandemic.

In Rome, the government on Friday announced it was banning entry to those who have been in South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia or Eswatini in the past fortnight. Health Minister Roberto Speranza said scientists were studying the new B.1.1.529 variant, ‘and in the meantime, we will follow the path of maximum caution’. Asian countries are also preparing to tighten curbs.

(Article continues below)

(Article continues from above)

Scientists Worldwide Sound The Alarm Over New ‘Worst-Ever’ Super-Mutant COVID Variant

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

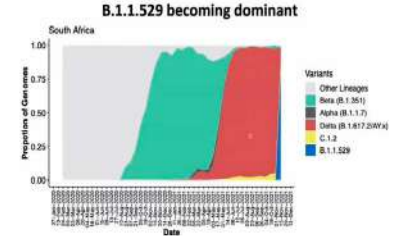
No cases have been detected in the UK so far but everyone who has returned from South Africa in the past 10 days will be contacted and asked to take a test. There are currently 13 direct flights a week from South Africa to the United States - Johannesburg and Cape Town are the only cities in the region from where it is possible to fly direct to the U.S. The 13 flights could hold around 3,900 people, if full. United Airlines currently fly direct from Johannesburg to New York City seven days a week, with the 16-hour flight leaving at 10pm and arriving at 7am in Newark. United also fly direct to New York City from Cape Town three times a week, on Monday, Thursday and Saturday. United flies Boeing 787-9 Dreamliners, which can hold 290 people. Delta fly direct from Johannesburg to Atlanta on Saturday, Monday, and Thursday. They use Airbus A350-900, which can seat between 300 and 350 people.



The UK and Israel on Thursday effectively stopped travel from Southern Africa, and some believe the US may follow suit. Flight ‘bans’ have been implemented before - although they are rarely an outright ban on a commercial flight from a country. Instead, they are stringent restrictions on who can fly, meaning that the airlines themselves cancel the routes because there are so few people who meet the requirements.

Donald Trump placed restrictions on travel from China to the U.S. in February 2020, and then the border between the U.S. and Canada was closed, and the U.S. and Mexico. This month Joe Biden ended 18 months of

restrictions placed on arrivals from the European Union, China, Iran, South Africa, Brazil and India, which had largely stopped travel between the countries. Some epidemiologists have argued that putting a travel ban in place for South Africa is counterproductive, because it punishes a country that has been transparent with its data. ‘Given how transmissible that the nu variant apparently is, I do not think that halting travel will ultimately be effective in preventing the variant from arriving,’ said Jay Bhattacharya, a professor of health policy at Stanford, whose recent research focuses on the epidemiology of COVID-19 as well as an evaluation of policy responses to the epidemic. He told DailyMail.com: ‘COVID is a global pandemic. No country can isolate itself forever, and halting travel imposes harm on the kind of international cooperation we will need to end the pandemic. ‘A better idea would be for the international community to provide sufficient vaccine supplies to the affected places.’ Others, such as Feigl-Ding, insist travel restrictions are necessary.



South African scientists, meanwhile, add that they are ‘concerned by the jump in evolution in this variant’. The variant has over 30 mutations - around twice as many as the Delta variant - which could potentially make it more transmissible and evade the protection given by prior infection or vaccination.

‘I’ve said before - I’m not always as concerned about these variants of concern, but this one, B.1.1.529, does concern me,’ said Marc Siegel, professor of medicine at the NYU Langone Medical Center, in an interview with Fox News.

COMMUNITY

‘It’s got 32 mutations in the spike protein, which is how the virus spreads. ‘And in the province around Johannesburg, there’s about 2,500 new cases over the past day, and they think — not proven yet — that this is the predominant variant.’ Siegel said that there were numerous reasons for concern. ‘It looks like it’s highly contagious,’ he said. ‘And that is what concerns me, because the other variants that have emerged haven’t had a chance against Delta because Delta is so contagious. ‘The other issue is, will the vaccine protect against this variant? Will the treatments protect against this variant? We’re keeping a really close eye on this one.’ The British expert whose modeling helped instigate the first coronavirus lockdown said that the decision to impose travel restrictions was ‘prudent’. Professor Neil Ferguson, a member of the British government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage), said: ‘The B.1.1.529 variant has an unprecedented number of mutations in the spike protein gene, the protein which is the target of most vaccines. ‘There is therefore a concern that this variant may have a greater potential to escape prior immunity than previous variants.



A healthcare worker collects a swab from Bronwen Cook for a PCR test against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) before traveling to London, at O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, November 26, 2021.

‘It is also concerning that this variant appears to be driving a rapid increase in case numbers in South Africa. The Government’s move to restrict travel with South Africa is therefore prudent.

‘However, we do not yet have reliable estimates of the extent to which B.1.1.529 might be either more transmissible or more resistant to vaccines, so it is too early to be able to provide an evidence-based assessment of the risk it

poses.’ Experts from the UKHSA have been advising ministers on the issue, with a number of scientists expressing serious concern over the variant due to the significant number of mutations in the spike protein.

One senior scientist said: ‘One of our major worries is this virus spike protein is so dramatically different to the virus spike that was in the original Wuhan strain, and therefore in our vaccines, that it has a great cause of concern.’

Experts from the World Health Organization (WHO) are meeting with South African officials on Friday at 11:00 GMT to assess the evolving situation in the country.

The variant could eventually be given the moniker ‘Nu’ - with the most concerning variants given named after the Greek alphabet.

The variant is already in three countries, suggesting it is more widespread than the official tally.

Two cases have been detected in Hong Kong – both of whom had links to South Africa – three have been picked up in Botswana and the remainder are in South Africa.

But a lack of surveillance on continental Africa may be underestimating the true numbers there, scientists warned.

Professor Tulio de Oliveira, a director of COVID surveillance in the South African province of KwaZulu-Natal, told a press conference on Thursday that it has been spotted in nearly every corner of South Africa.



A baby cries as her mother receives her Pfizer vaccine against COVID-19, in Diepsloot Township near Johannesburg, South Africa on October 21.

He admitted he was still ‘uncertain’ about the impact of the variant on the country’s epidemic, with other scientists saying that it might be so evolved that it becomes unstable.

But Professor Oliveria explained the new variant is ‘clearly very different’ from previous strains, including the fact that it has five times more mutations on

a specific part of the spike protein than Delta — meaning it might be better at infecting vaccinated people than the world-dominant strain.

He said that officials ‘do expect, unfortunately, to start seeing pressure in the healthcare system in the next few days and weeks.’

Joe Phaahlam, South Africa’s Health Minister, warned at the same press conference: ‘Here is a mutation variant of serious concern.’

He added: ‘We were hopeful that we might have a longer break in between waves - possibly that it would hold off to late December or even next year January.’

Current jabs train the immune system to recognize an older version of the spike, and lots of changes to this protein make it harder for the vaccinated people to fight it off.

What Impact Might B.1.1.529 Have On Vaccines?

Scientists have raised concern that the super Botswana Covid variant may be better able to dodge vaccine-induced immunity than all previous strains — including Delta. UK Health Security Agency scientists say it is the ‘worst ever’. It combines mutations previously seen on the Beta variant, which sparked concern last year as it was thought to be more vaccine resistant, and those on the more transmissible Alpha strain that was behind the second wave.

Scientists warn it is ‘plausible’ that the mutant variant is spreading quickly because it is better able to infect people who have immunity either from vaccines or previous infection.



In South Africa where it is spreading most people already have immunity from previous infection. Some 40 per cent have also received two doses of the Covid jab. But despite the concern lab tests are yet to confirm that the variant is better able to dodge vaccine-triggered immunity than other mutant strains. Very little is known about its virulence and whether someone who catches the mutant strain is more likely to end up in hospital or dying from the disease. (Courtesy <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/>)