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Inside C2

# Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

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## Omicron rapidly dominating in South Africa, U.S. reports first case

JOHANNESBURG/WASHINGTON, Dec 1 (Reuters) - Heavily mutated Omicron is rapidly becoming the dominant variant of the coronavirus in South Africa less than four weeks after it was first detected there, and the United States on Wednesday became the latest country to identify an Omicron case within its borders.

The first known U.S. case was a fully vaccinated person in California who returned to the United States from South Africa on Nov. 22 and tested positive seven days later.

The infected person had mild symptoms and was in self-quarantine, Dr. Anthony Fauci, a top U.S. infectious disease official, told reporters at the White House.

Late on Tuesday, airlines in the United States were told to hand over the names of passengers arriving from parts of southern Africa hit by Omicron, according to a U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention letter seen by Reuters.

Key questions remain about the new variant, which has been found in two dozen countries, including Spain, Canada, Britain, Austria and Portugal. The UAE reported its first case on Wednesday, the second Gulf country after Saudi Arabia.

Early indications suggesting Omicron may be markedly more contagious than previous variants have rattled financial markets, fearful that new restrictions could choke off a tentative recovery from the economic ravages of the pandemic.

South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) said early epidemiological data suggested Omicron was able to evade some immunity, but that existing vaccines should still protect against severe disease and death.

It said 74% of all the virus genomes it had sequenced last month had been of the new variant, which was first found in a sample taken on Nov. 8 in Gauteng, South Africa's most populous province.

The number of new cases reported in South Africa doubled from Tuesday to Wednesday.

World Health Organization epidemiologist Maria van Kerkhove told a briefing that data on how contagious Omicron was should be available "within days."

BioNTech's CEO said the vaccine it makes in a partnership with Pfizer (PFE.N) was likely to offer strong protection against severe dis-



ease from Omicron.

"The World Health Organization classified Omicron as a "variant of concern," due to the number of mutations that might help it spread or evade antibodies from prior infection or vaccination. The president of the European Union's executive Commission said there was a "race against time" to stave off the new variant while scientists establish how dangerous it is. The EU brought forward the start of its vaccine rollout for five-to-11-year-olds by a week to Dec. 13.

"Prepare for the worst, hope for the best," Ursula von der Leyen told a news conference.

A woman gets vaccinated against the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) through a window outside a doctor's practice, in the district of Friedrichshain, Berlin, Germany December 1, 2021. REUTERS/Annegret Hilse. She said that full vaccination and a booster shot provided the strongest possible protection, according to scientists - a view echoed by Fauci.

But WHO emergencies director Mike Ryan criticized developed countries pushing booster shots for large parts of their fully vaccinated populations when vulnerable people in many poorer regions had had no vaccination at all.

"There is no evidence that I'm aware of that will suggest that boosting the entire

population is going to necessarily provide any greater protection for otherwise healthy individuals against hospitalization or death," he said.

Britain and the United States have both expanded their booster programs in response to the new variant.

The WHO has noted many times that the coronavirus will keep producing new variants for as long as it is allowed to circulate freely in large unvaccinated populations.

An upsurge in new coronavirus variants and poor access to vaccines in developing countries threaten a full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

An upsurge in new coronavirus variants and poor access to vaccines in developing countries threaten a full recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

### TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Some 56 countries were reportedly implementing travel measures to guard against Omicron as of Nov. 28, the WHO said.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres slammed what he called "travel apartheid."

"Blanket travel bans will not prevent

the international spread and they place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods," the WHO said, while advising those who were unwell, at risk or 60 years and over and unvaccinated to postpone travel.

The United States has barred nearly all foreigners who have been in one of eight southern African countries.

Hong Kong added Japan, Portugal and Sweden to its travel restrictions. Malaysia temporarily barred travelers from eight African countries and said Britain and the Netherlands could join the list.

Fitch Ratings said it had lowered its global air passenger traffic forecasts for 2021 and 2022.

"It feels a little bit like we are back to where we were a year ago," said Deidre Fulton, a partner at consultancy MIDAS Aviation, at an industry webinar. "And that's not a great prospect for the industry and beyond."

Fauci said it could take two weeks or more to gain insight into how easily the variant spreads from person to person, how severe the disease is that it causes, and whether it can bypass the protections provided by vaccines currently available.



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# WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

12/04/2021



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## Why People Are Moving To Texas



On November 26, 2021, a New York Times article reported that the traumas of the past few years have rearranged all of our lives. Many Americans have new needs, new desires, new possibilities and new priorities. They are looking for bigger homes, better jobs and better schools.

The New York Times gathered data from thousands of towns and cities on more than 30 metrics such as school quality, crime rates and affordability to show that Texas may work for you. The suburbs around Dallas, including places like Plano, McKinney, Allen and Garland came up on top. These are some of the fastest growing areas in the country with less crime, better schools and teeming with jobs, housing, good restaurants, clean air and racial diversity.

Texas has been growing explosively in the last two decades. From 2010 to 2020 the population of Texas grew by nearly four million. Our total population is now 29 million. Now most newcomers have come through migration from other parts of the country and the world.

Today we were driving Interstate Highway 45 from Houston to Dallas. There were beautiful skies and weather

all the way. This is not the first time we have been doing that over the last several decades.

I am so very excited and joyful to welcome more new residents to Texas.

I told our good friend Judge Robert Eckels that we really need the bullet train to connect these two great American cities.



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### Southern DAILY Make Today Different

### Editor's Choice



Hungary's Ioulia Chhtchetinina and Mark Magyar in action during the ice dance, free dance at the ISU Grand Prix of Figure Skating in Sochi, Russia, November 27. REUTERS/Evgenia Novozhenina



A man holds a gun under his chin as he speaks with members of the NYPD outside the United Nations Headquarters in New York City, December 2. REUTERS/Carlo Allegri



An anti-abortion activist attends a protest outside the Supreme Court building, ahead of arguments in the Mississippi abortion rights case Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health, in Washington, December 1. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst



A police officer tries to detain the supporters of the women's wing of India's main opposition Congress Party during a protest against what they say is rising inflation in the country, in New Delhi, India, November 30. REUTERS/Anushree Fadnavis



A worker covers an eye of an African elephant with his palm after the Sindh High Court requested an assessment of health condition of the elephants, after a Pakistan Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) filed a petition for what they say was harsh treatment of them, at a zoo in Karachi, Pakistan, November 29. REUTERS/Akhtar Soomro



A passenger tries to find a flight as several airlines stopped flying out of South Africa, amidst the spread of the new coronavirus variant Omicron, at O.R. Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, South Africa, November 28. REUTERS/Sumaya Hisham

BUSINESS

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 Italy 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'.

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 double-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.



'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)

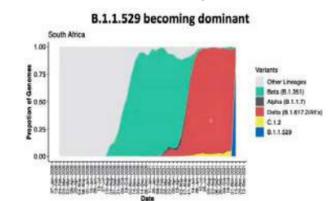
COMMUNITY

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.

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.



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

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.

'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 than

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/)