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Inside C2

# Southern DAILY

Make Today Different

Southern Daily News is published by Southern News Group Daily

Monday, December 25, 2022

## Blinken cites need for all countries including China to share COVID information

WASHINGTON, Dec 22 (Reuters) - U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday emphasized the need for all countries, including China, to share information on their experiences with COVID-19, at a time when some experts have started raising questions about Beijing's official hospitalization and casualty figures.

Speaking at a news conference at the State Department, Blinken said Washington was ready to help all countries on COVID, but said Beijing has not asked for help from the United States.

"It's also very important for all countries, including China to focus on people getting vaccinated, making testing and treatment available, and importantly, sharing information with the world about what they're experiencing," Blinken said.

"Again, because it has implications not just for China, but for the entire world. So we would like to see that happen."

He declined to say what specific help, if any, Washington has recently offered to Beijing, but said the United States was ready to continue to support people around the world. Russia dismissive of Ukraine getting U.S. Patriot missiles. Taliban minister defends closing universities to women as global backlash grows. Exclusive: US says Russia's Wagner Group bought North Korean weapons for Ukraine war. Shanghai hospital warns of 'tragic battle' as COVID spreads. "China has not asked to date for that help," he added.

After widespread protests against strict mitigation measures, China this month began dismantling its "zero-COVID" regime, which had taken a great financial and psychological toll on its 1.4 billion people.

On Wednesday, China reported no new COVID deaths for a second consecutive day, even as funeral parlor workers say demand for their services has increased sharply over the past week. Authorities - who have narrowed the criteria for COVID deaths, prompting criticism from many disease experts - confirmed 389,306 cases with symptoms.

The World Health Organization has received no data from China on new COVID-19 hospitalizations since Beijing lifted its zero-COVID policy, adding to speculation over the transparency of its figures.



U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken listens to Mexican Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard speak in the Treaty Room of the State Department in Washington, DC, U.S. December 16, 2022. Olivier Douliery/Pool via REUTERS

## ByteDance finds employees obtained TikTok user data of two U.S. journalists

WASHINGTON Dec 22 (Reuters) - ByteDance, the Chinese parent company of popular video app TikTok, said on Thursday that some employees this summer improperly accessed TikTok user data of two U.S. journalists and were no longer employed by the company, an email seen by Reuters shows.

ByteDance employees accessed the data as part of an unsuccessful effort to investigate leaks of company information and were aiming to identify potential connections between two journalists and company employees, said the email from ByteDance general counsel Erich Andersen. The disclosure, reported earlier by the New York Times, could add to pressure TikTok is facing in Washington from lawmakers and the Biden administration over security concerns about U.S. user data. A person briefed on the matter said four ByteDance employees who were involved in the incident were fired, including two in China and two in the United States. Company officials said they were taking additional steps to protect user data.

Congress is set to pass legislation this week to ban U.S. government employees from downloading or using TikTok on their government-owned devices.

TikTok Chief Executive Shou Zi Chew said in a separate email to employees seen by Reuters, "This misconduct

is not at all representative of what I know our company's principles to be." He said the company "will continue to enhance these access protocols, which have already been significantly improved and hardened since this initiative took place."

FTX's Bankman-Fried, charged with 'epic' fraud, released on \$250 million bond

Exclusive: TikTok steps up efforts to clinch U.S. security deal

France's privacy watchdog fines Microsoft over cookies

U.S. SEC heightening scrutiny of auditors' crypto work - WSJ

Chew said that over the past 15 months the company had been working to build TikTok U.S. Data Security (USDS) to ensure protected TikTok U.S. user data stays in the U.S.

"The USDS department is limiting access of that data to the USDS department and has already done so across our production systems," he said. "We are completing the migration of protected US user data management to the USDS department and have been systematically cutting off access points."

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# WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

12/23/2022

## Congress Is About To Pass A Huge Budget

Senate leaders unveiled a \$1.7 trillion federal government funding bill including \$772.5 billion for non-defense discretionary programs and \$858 billion in defense funding.

The package also includes \$45 billion in emergency assistance to Ukraine and NATO allies.

Over the weekend, both Democrats and Republicans were sharing their bottom line on various issues and the White House remained optimistic that agreement could be reached to avoid a government shutdown.

Senate Republicans are saying that Democrats must drop their demand for additional spending on domestic programs in order to get the bill passed by this weekend.

The U.S. government's budget

is increasing year-by-year and the deficit gets bigger and bigger. Today, inflation and energy shortages have been caused around the world. Although Russia's invasion of Ukraine is the main reason, the pandemic also caused an interruption of the global supply chain and negatively affected the relationship between China and the United

States, all of which caused chaos all over the entire world.

The year of 2022 is coming to an end. We all hope that there will be new advances towards peace and a new turnaround for the world in the coming new year.

WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES  
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### Southern DAILY Make Today Different

### Editor's Choice



A boy takes photos of tourists behind a toy dinosaur for a fee, at the Uyuni Salt Flat in Bolivia. REUTERS/Claudia Morales



U.S. President Joe Biden welcomes Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on the South Lawn at the White House in Washington. REUTERS/ Kevin Lamarque



"Letzte Generation" (Last Generation) activists cut the top of a Christmas tree at Brandenburg Gate, in Berlin, Germany. REUTERS/Christian Mang



Nottingham Forest's Jesse Lingard celebrates scoring their second goal during Carabao Cup Round of 16, Ewood Park, Blackburn, Britain. Action Images via Reuters/Ed Sykes



Tourists line up for a photo, at the Uyuni Salt Flat in Bolivia. REUTERS/Claudia Morales



A man walks on salt at the Uyuni Salt Flat, Bolivia. Picture taken with a drone. REUTERS/Claudia Morales

# What Does Omicron's Fast Spread Mean For The U.S. – And The World?

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

## Omicron variant detected around world

The World Health Organization announced the "variant of concern" that might herald a spread of more antibodies for prior infection or vaccination. The variant was first identified in South Africa and has also been detected across Europe and Asia.



Omicron spurred a rapid rise in positive coronavirus tests in South Africa. Compared with three previous coronavirus variants, the newly identified omicron variant is sparking a faster surge in the percentage of positive tests in South Africa. Classified as a "variant of concern" by the World Health Organization on Nov. 26, omicron has now been reported in more than 30 countries — and at least 19 states in the U.S.

The first country to really get hit by omicron was South Africa. Before the new variant took off last month, coronavirus cases there were low — only several hundred per day in mid-November. But by early December, the tally of daily infections had shot up to more than 4,500 — and genomic sequencing shows that omicron is to blame. What's more, the variant quickly swept through all regions of South Africa — and has now shown up in about 60 additional countries. Omicron hasn't yet triggered a global wave, but many scientists who are tracking its rapid spread believe it's only a matter of time.

The reason for their concern? Omicron is starting to gain traction in countries where the pandemic looks very different from South Africa — places where the highly transmissible delta variant is currently dominant and where vaccination levels are relatively high.

### Worrisome signs from Europe

The clearest signs of trouble come from how quickly omicron is growing in Europe and the U.K., says Matt Ferrari, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Dynamics and a professor of biology at Penn State University. "Everybody in my industry is hopeful that we're being alarmist, but more than at any other point in the course of the whole pandemic, we know how bad it could be," he says.

A man is vaccinated against COVID-19 at a clinic in Johannesburg, South Africa. The omicron variant appears to be driving a surge in South Africa. New studies suggest that vaccines might not be as effective

against this variant but that a booster shot can be helpful. (Photo/Shiraz Mohamed/AP)

Early data show that one person who catches omicron is currently going on to infect two to four other people — that's at least twice as many as someone who gets the delta variant. The statistics come from countries like the U.K., Denmark and South Africa — all of which have robust surveillance systems in place for tracking coronavirus variants. Some experts believe omicron is spreading even faster than that. The alarming pace of new infections is on par with how quickly the first, wild-type strain of the coronavirus spread at the beginning of the pandemic — back when there were no vaccines and everyone was susceptible. "Now we're in a world where lots of people have immunity, either from previous infection or from vaccination, and we're seeing a pretty rapid growth rate over and above delta," says Ferrari. Indeed, the spread of omicron in the U.K., where about 70% of people are vaccinated compared to about 25% in South Africa, is a key reason scientists are worried. Although omicron infections only make up a small portion of the overall cases in the U.K., the forecasts are sobering. The country's health agency is warning that omicron infections are doubling every few days — and could make up half of all cases there by mid-December.

And the U.S. should take note: What the virus does in Europe, says Barrett, often foreshadows where the pandemic is headed on the other side of the Atlantic. "By next week, we will see clear evidence of an omicron wave in European countries, and I suspect the U.S. is at most a week behind that," he predicts.

Escaping antibodies Exactly why omicron is spreading so quickly comes down to two key questions. Is this strain of the virus intrinsically more contagious — in the way that delta was compared to the variant that dominated before it arrived? And second: is omicron also just better at escaping immune defenses — antibodies resulting either from prior infection or vaccines — which means there are more people who it can infect? It's possible the answer to both questions could be yes, although there's not enough data to say just yet.

"Looking at these early omicron cases, what we've anticipated from immune escape is turning out to be true and the [intrinsic] transmissibility seems to be at least that of delta," says Matt Grubaugh, associate professor of epidemiology at Yale School of Public Health. "I think we're going to see the vaccine's effectiveness against infection drop a lot," he says. This concern is not only based on how the variant is spreading in well-vaccinated places like

Europe and re-infecting people who previously had COVID in South Africa, but also the many mutations on the spike protein. Scientists believe those mutations could make omicron's spike protein more adept at evading the body's antibody defenses that prevent the coronavirus from infecting cells. This week, several preliminary lab studies seemed to confirm this fear. Researchers took blood from people who had received two shots of the Pfizer vaccine to see whether their antibodies could neutralize omicron as effectively as it could other strains of the virus. They found the antibodies had a lot more trouble disarming omicron. It's still too early to know just how much these findings translate into lower overall protection from the vaccine.



Grubaugh is one of many scientists who say it's likely the vaccines will still help ward off severe disease because the immune system relies on other defenses like T-cells. But if omicron can more easily infect those with prior immunity, that will give it a distinct competitive advantage over delta because it will gain a foothold in populations where delta has trouble getting past the protection afforded by the vaccines.

"It will probably end up replacing Delta — it's a little too early to tell how fast, but probably fairly quickly," he says.

### Assessing the risk in the U.S.

Some experts caution against early predictions about what may happen in a place like the U.S. based on the situation in other countries. John Moore, a professor of microbiology and immunology at Weill Cornell Medical School, says it's not at all certain that omicron will take over. "It's not just the transmissibility that matters, it's the ability to outcompete," he says. "Earlier variants like beta and gamma created short term angst, but they just fizzled away."

In some countries, omicron could have more trouble competing because of higher immunity levels and the increasing push to get booster shots — which early data show may help stop omicron infections, says Wafaa El-Sadr, a professor of epidemiology and medicine at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. "This in and of itself may very much influence the trajectory of omicron in a country like the United States versus in a country like South Africa," she says. "But ultimately it's the more transmissible variants that takes over and circulates more widely, so that's what can be anticipated."

So how worried should we be? Early reports from health officials and doctors in South Africa suggest the omicron wave of infec-



Early reports from health officials and doctors in South Africa suggest the omicron wave of infec-

tions — while breathtaking in its speed — isn't yet causing the same level of severe disease as delta did when it hit the country. For example, ICU admissions are much lower. But many experts caution it's far too early to draw any firm conclusions. South Africa has a relatively young population, and many people had already caught the virus prior to omicron's emergence.

"The silver lining right now is we do not have any evidence that omicron is more severe," says Penn State's Matt Ferrari. Then again, he notes: "Everybody wants me to say it's milder, and we really just don't have convincing evidence that it is." Even if omicron does end up being less severe than delta and not as many people get very ill, Barrett of the Wellcome Sanger Institute says there's plenty of reason for concern given just how contagious it appears to be: "A small proportion of a huge number all at once can still overwhelm health care systems." This is especially true in a country like the U.S. where many hospitals are already filled with COVID-19 patients who are sick — not from omicron — but from delta. (Courtesy npr.org)

### Studies Suggest Sharp Drop In Vaccine Protection Against Omicron — Yet Still Cause For Optimism



With the omicron variant continuing to spread in a number of countries, including the U.S., scientists have been anxiously awaiting data to answer this question: How well will the vaccines work against this new variant? On last Tuesday night and Wednesday morning, scientists in South Africa and Germany released preliminary results from two small studies that begin to provide answers. The studies haven't been peer-reviewed. But together, their data strongly suggest the vaccines will be much less effective at stopping infections from the omicron variant, but will still likely offer protection against severe disease. The study in Germany also indicates that a third shot, or a booster, will partially recover the effectiveness of the vaccines, at least for a few months.

In the South African study, researchers at the Africa Health Research Institute took blood from about a dozen people who had been vaccinated with two shots of the Pfizer vaccine and looked to see how well their antibodies kill the virus. In the experiment, everyone's antibodies were able to neutralize an earlier version of the virus quite well. But against omicron, that ability dropped dramatically. On average, the antibodies were 40 times less potent against omicron than against the variant circulating in the summer of 2020. And that's a lot. "It's astonishing ... in terms of

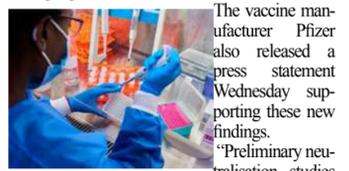
the reduction," says Pei-Yong Shi, a virologist at the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston who has been doing similar experiments to determine the effectiveness of the Pfizer vaccine against the coronavirus.



UTMB researcher Pei-Yong Shi's work puts Galveston lab in front lines of COVID battle. (Photo/The Daily News)

"We seem to see a drastic reduction in neutralizing activity, far more than with previous variants," virologist Florian Krammer, who's at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, wrote on Twitter. "Little activity was left in vaccinated individuals." These findings confirm what scientists have been predicting since omicron was first detected several weeks ago. The virus contains many mutations already known to weaken the power of the antibodies made by the immune system. Based on the results of this preliminary study, scientists say it's likely we'll see a lot more breakthrough infections with the omicron variant. And South Africa is reporting a lot of reinfections. But the news isn't all dire. The vaccine isn't just about protecting against infections. It's also about protecting against severe disease and death. And there's reason to believe the vaccines will still do that, even with the omicron variant. Most of the people in the South African experiment did retain some ability to kill the virus. And scientists say even just a little bit of antibody activity can be enough to prevent someone from ending up in the hospital. Also the immune system has other tools besides antibodies that can ward off severe disease. In particular, the T cells can clear out the virus after an infection. And scientists think those may hold up better against omicron than antibodies will.

On top of all that, the study from Germany shows that a third booster shot, with either the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, increases the neutralizing ability of the antibodies to levels seen with the delta variant, at least for several weeks after the booster. In that study, researchers at the Goethe University in Frankfurt looked at antibody potency against omicron and delta a half-month and three months after a third booster. In the short term, the antibody potency jumped up to the levels seen with delta in about half of the people. But after three months, most people's an



The vaccine manufacturer Pfizer also released a press statement Wednesday supporting these new findings. "Preliminary neutralisation studies indicate that 2 doses of vaccines may not be sufficient to prevent \*infection\* w/ omicron (not severe disease), but regular boosters will help restore this decline to an extent," wrote Dr. Muge Cevik on Twitter. Cevik is an infectious disease researcher at the University of St. Andrews. (Courtesy npr.org)

# Christmas Trees That Light Up The World

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

(Editor's Note) Keeping Faith in Times of Pestilence

The year 2022 will be remembered as the year of global pestilence brought on by the coronavirus pandemic. It has also been a time of immense loss and deep grief, the likes of which we pray to never experience again. It has also been a year of heightened bravery of front line workers and health professionals that the world has not seen in a millennial. While this year has brought us sadness and loss, there also have been miraculous triumphs in medical technology that will now serve mankind for years to come in the battle against illness. Today is the day for family, friends and being together and keeping in touch with friends a world away. Please join us on a brief journey around the world and see how the humble tree of Christmas continues to light up peoples' spirits over the entire globe.



The world's largest Christmas tree display rises up the slopes of Monte Ingino outside of Gubbio, in Italy's Umbria region. Composed of about 500 lights connected by 40,000 feet of wire, the 'tree' is a modern marvel for an ancient city



A Christmas tree befitting Tokyo's nighttime neon display is projected onto the exterior of the Grand Prince Hotel Akasaka.



Illuminating the Gothic facades of Prague's Old Town Square, and casting its glow over the manger display of the famous Christmas market, is a grand tree cut in the Sumava mountains in the southern Czech Republic.



Moscow celebrates Christmas according to the Russian Orthodox calendar on Jan. 7. For weeks beforehand, the city is alive with festivities in anticipation of Father Frost's arrival on his magical troika with the Snow Maiden. He and his helper deliver gifts under the New Year tree, or yolka, which is traditionally a fir.



The largest Christmas tree in Europe (more than 230 feet tall) can be found in the Praça do Comércio in Lisbon, Portugal. Thousands of lights adorn the tree, adding to the special enchantment of the city during the holiday season.



'Oh Christmas tree, oh Christmas tree': Even in its humblest attire, aglow beside a tiny chapel in Germany's Karwendel mountains, a Christmas tree is a wondrous sight.



Ooh la la Galeries Lafayette! In Paris, even the Christmas trees are chic. With its monumental, baroque dome, plus 10 stories of lights and high fashion, it's no surprise this show-stopping department store draws more visitors than the Louvre and the Eiffel Tower.



In addition to the Vatican's heavenly evergreen, St. Peter's Square in Rome hosts a larger-than-life nativity scene in front of the obelisk.



Drink a glass of gluhwein from the holiday market at the Romer Fluhweins city hall since 1405 and enjoy a taste of Christmas past.