

UK urged to keep schools closed as it hits daily COVID record



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London, January 2 (RHC)-- United Kingdom on Saturday recorded more new coronavirus infections in a single day than ever before, registering more than 57,700 cases within 24 hours, many of which are attributed to a possibly more contagious virus strain that is particularly rampant in London. In the same period, 445 virus-related deaths were also recorded.

The British government is facing mounting pressure from teachers' unions to keep schools in England closed for at least another two weeks. So far, the UK has announced a death toll of more than 82,600 since the pandemic began.

The UK has recorded its five highest daily new infection numbers over the past five days – all above 50,000 and double the daily number of what it was only a few weeks ago. Hospitals in London are starting to reach the limits of their capacity, according to media reports. Patients are being put up in

corridors or must wait for hours in an ambulance until a bed is free.

The president of the Royal College of Physicians, Andrew Goddard, advised hospitals nationwide to prepare for similar conditions. "This new variant is definitely more contagious and spreading across the country," he told the BBC.

Simon Clarke, an associate professor of cellular microbiology at the University of Reading, told Al Jazeera the main concern about the new variant was "its ability to spread." He confirmed however that it was unlikely the mutations in the new variant would affect the sensitivity of the vaccines.

The government, which oversees schools in England, has already decided to keep all schools in London closed next week to try to stem new infections. Unions want the policy extended across the whole of England, expressing fears about the health of teachers and students.

After an emergency meeting on Saturday, the National Education Union, which represents nearly 450,000 education workers, called on Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government to move learning online for at least two weeks. It also told members they have a legal right not to have to work in an "unsafe environment" of accelerating coronavirus cases, hospital admissions and deaths.

"We are doing our job as a union by informing our members that they have a legal right to refuse to work in unsafe conditions which are a danger to their health and to the health of their school communities," said Kevin Courtney, the union's joint general secretary.

Another union representing teachers, the NASUWT, also called for an immediate nationwide move to remote education due to virus safety concerns. Its general secretary, Patrick Roach, said there is "genuine concern" that schools and colleges are not able to reopen safely at this time.

"The NASUWT will not hesitate to take appropriate action in order to protect members whose safety is put at risk as a result of the failure of employers or the government to ensure safe working conditions in schools and colleges," he said.

The government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies had warned at a December 22 meeting that schools needed to stay closed to bring down virus transmission rates. The UK is struggling with a spike in new cases as a result of a new virus variant that officials said could be up to 70 percent more infectious.

The variant has been particularly prevalent in London and in surrounding areas, prompting Education Secretary Gavin Williamson to row back on plans to allow some primary schools – those for children 11 and below – in the capital to reopen as scheduled on January 4.

Most other primary schools in England are still scheduled to open on Monday. High school reopenings have already been delayed for millions of students, with exam-year pupils scheduled to return on January 11 and others a week later.

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