

Countries restrict travel from southern Africa over COVID variant



The EU, Britain and India are among those considering stricter border controls [File: Horacio Villalobos /Corbis via Getty Images]

London, November 26 (RHC)-- Several countries, including the UK, Israel and Singapore, have imposed travel restrictions after the discovery of a new coronavirus variant in South Africa.

Scientists have expressed concerns that the new strain could be more resistant to vaccines and could spread more easily. European and Asian countries tightened travel requirements on Friday after a new coronavirus variant, identified as B.1.1.529, was detected in South Africa.

The Israeli health ministry said on Friday it had detected the country's first case of the new coronavirus variant in a traveller who returned from Malawi. The traveller and two other suspected cases have been placed in isolation. It said all three are vaccinated but that it is currently looking into their exact vaccination status.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization (WHO) has cautioned against imposing new travel restrictions. "WHO recommends that countries continued to apply a risk-based and a scientific approach when implementing travel measures ... implementing travel measures is being cautioned against," spokesman Christian Lindmeier told reporters in Geneva on Friday.

The WHO said that it will take a few weeks to determine exactly how transmissible the new variant is. "Researchers are working to understand more about the mutations and what they potentially mean for how transmissible or virulent this variant is," the WHO spokesman said, as WHO experts began a virtual meeting to determine whether B.1.1.529 should be classified as a variant of interest or of concern.

"We expect more data from the laboratory tests in two weeks at the latest. These data will provide more information about whether B.1.1.529 could be an escape variant that may require an adjustment of our vaccine if the variant spreads globally," a BioNTech spokesperson said.

A total of about 50 confirmed cases have also been identified in South Africa, Hong Kong and Botswana. The confirmed cases in Botswana and Hong Kong were detected among travellers from South Africa.

Britain announced that it was banning flights from South Africa and five other southern African countries effective at noon (12:00 GMT) on Friday and that anyone who had recently arrived from those countries would be asked to take a coronavirus test and to quarantine.

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