

WHO designates new COVID strain Omicron as ‘variant of concern’

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People queue for COVID tests at the airport in Johannesburg, after a slew of countries announced travel bans following the discovery of the new variant [Jerome Delay/AP Photo]

Geneva, November 27 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization (WHO) has designated a new coronavirus strain detected in South Africa as a “variant of concern”, prompting countries around the world to impose

travel restrictions amid fears over its potential spread.

A WHO advisory panel on Friday said early evidence shows the new B.1.1529 variant, which it dubbed Omicron after a letter in the Greek alphabet, poses an increased risk of reinfection compared with other highly transmissible strains.

Global authorities reacted with alarm to the emergence of Omicron, which was first found in South Africa and has since been detected in Belgium, Israel, Botswana and Hong Kong. The European Union and the United Kingdom have imposed restrictions on travellers from several countries in southern Africa as researchers seek to find out if the mutation was vaccine-resistant, while the United States announced that similar curbs would begin on Monday.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's COVID-19 Technical Lead, said on Friday that Omicron was designated as a "variant of concern" because it has some "worrying" properties. "It has a large number of mutations and some of these mutations have some worrying characteristics," Van Kerkhove said in a video posted on Twitter. She added that multiple studies are under way in South Africa and other countries to better understand the severity, transmissibility and characteristics of Omicron, however.

The WHO also said it is likely to take weeks to determine how effective current COVID-19 vaccines are against the variant. Helen Rees, chair of the WHO's African Regional Immunization Technical Advisory Group, said scientists still do not know enough about the new variant to begin sounding the alarm – and cautioned against jumping to any conclusions.

"The fact that we are able to identify changes quickly is good news. It's good news for the world. But we must be careful that we don't then jump [to] conclusion[s]. We need to understand much more about this," Rees told Al Jazeera from Johannesburg.

Since Thursday multiple countries have banned travel from several African nations, including South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and Zimbabwe, due to concerns over the new variant. South African Health Minister Joe Phaahla on Friday condemned international reactions to Omicron as "unjustified", telling reporters that global leaders were "finding scapegoats to deal with what is a worldwide problem."

Phaahla said during a media briefing that South Africa was acting with transparency and travel bans were against the norms and standards of the WHO. Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, said travel bans were not an appropriate response. "First of all, we know that travel restrictions do very little to stop the spread of COVID-19," Adalja told Al Jazeera. "Number two, it penalises countries like South Africa for being open and sharing this data."

Meanwhile, UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson – whose government imposed travel restrictions on Thursday – praised South Africa's transparency in sharing scientific data during a phone call with the country's President Cyril Ramaphosa, Downing Street said. "They discussed the challenges posed globally by the new COVID-19 variant, and ways to work together to deal with it and reopen international travel," the UK government said in a statement describing the call.

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