

Europe and U.S. brace for fast-spreading Omicron variant

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Brussels, December 23 (RHC)-- Countries across Europe considered new curbs on movement while U.S. President Joe Biden has appealed to all Americans to get vaccinated to fight the Omicron variant sweeping the world days before the second Christmas of the pandemic.

Omicron infections are multiplying across Europe, the United States and Asia, including in Japan, where a single cluster of COVID-19 cases at a military base has grown to at least 180.

“If you’re not fully vaccinated, you have good reason to be concerned,” Biden said at the White House. In an address to the nation and striking a dire tone about the risks to the one in four American adults still unvaccinated, he said: “Your choice can be the difference between life and death.” Biden also activated some 1,000 military medical personnel to support overwhelmed hospitals.

Hans Kluge, the World Health Organization’s European head, told a news conference in Vienna that within weeks Omicron would dominate in more countries of the region, “pushing already stretched health systems further to the brink.” “We can see another storm coming,” Kluge said.

Germany, Scotland, Ireland, the Netherlands and South Korea are among countries to have reimposed partial or full lockdowns or other social distancing measures in recent days.

Portugal ordered nightclubs and bars to close and told people to work from home for at least two weeks from Saturday.

Nicola Sturgeon, first minister of Scotland – part of the United Kingdom but with devolved responsibilities for health – set out plans for further restrictions on big public events, including sports fixtures, for three weeks after Christmas.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz said Germany will introduce new steps, including limiting private gatherings for vaccinated people to a maximum of 10 before New Year’s Eve. Scholz agreed with the premiers of the 16 federal states that big events, including football matches, would be without spectators.

Sweden will urge all employees to work from home if possible and impose tighter rules for social distancing. “I understand that many are tired of this – so am I – but we now have a new virus variant, which means we are in a new situation,” said Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said he would not introduce new COVID-19 curbs in the UK before Christmas, but the situation remained extremely difficult and the government might need to act afterwards.

Finance minister Rishi Sunak announced 1 billion pounds (\$1.3 billion) of extra support for businesses hit hardest by Omicron, which is hammering the hospitality sector and other businesses.

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