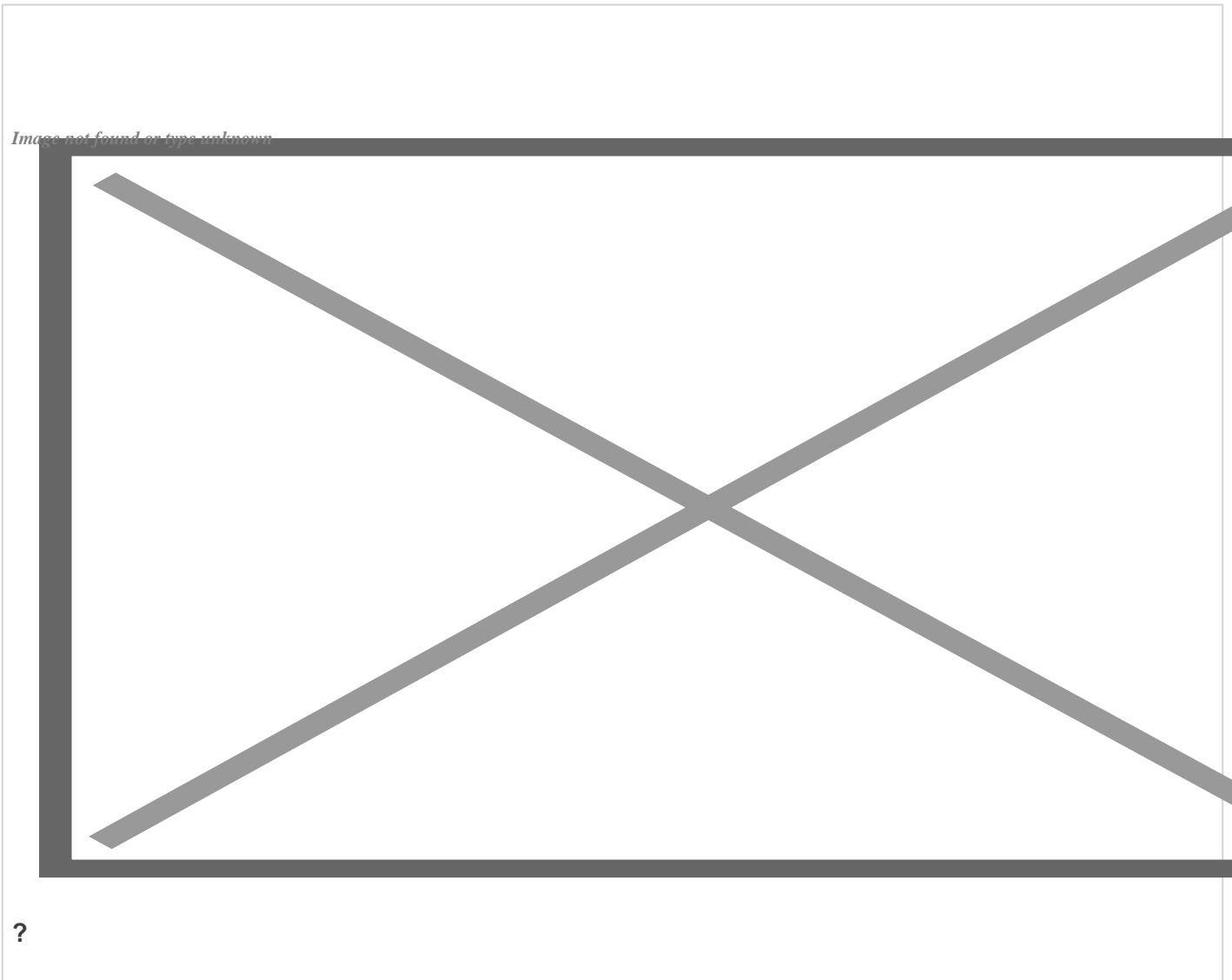


World hits record number of COVID-19 cases in a week



Geneva, December 30 (RHC)-- The world has hit a new record number of COVID-19 cases in a single week, according to one tally, with daily infections also reaching new highs in the United States, Australia and several European countries amid the rapid spread of the Omicron variant.

More than 935,000 cases on average have been detected each day between December 22 and December 28, according to the tally published by the AFP news agency on Wednesday. In total, 6.51 million coronavirus cases have been reported in the past week worldwide.

The latest figures, the highest since cases were first recorded at the end of 2019, are based on tolls provided daily by the health authorities in each country. The coronavirus is wreaking havoc in many parts of the world as it mutates, forcing governments to rethink quarantine and test rules.

Although some studies have suggested the Omicron variant is less deadly than some previous strains, the huge numbers of people testing positive mean that hospitals in some countries might soon be overwhelmed, while businesses might struggle to carry on operating because of workers having to quarantine.

On Tuesday, Britain, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain and Portugal all registered a record number of new cases. In the UK, there has also been a record number of children having to be treated in hospitals. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said on Wednesday that 90 percent of patients ending up in intensive care had not received booster vaccines, which medics say is the best protection against the infectious Omicron. Those who have not been vaccinated are “eight times more likely to get into hospital,” he warned.

Meanwhile, the average number of daily COVID-19 cases in the United States hit a record 258,312 over the past seven days, according to a Reuters news agency tally on Wednesday. The previous peak was a figure of 250,141 registered in early January, this year.

New daily infections in Australia on Wednesday spiked to nearly 18,300, eclipsing the previous pandemic high of approximately 11,300 hit a day earlier. Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said his country needed “a gear change” to manage overburdened laboratories, with long walk-in and drive-in queues reported in a number of states.

Testing bottlenecks have also grown in European nations, including in Spain where demand for free COVID-19 testing kits provided by Madrid’s regional government far outstripped supply on Tuesday, with long queues forming outside pharmacies.

A number of governments were also increasingly worried by the huge numbers of people being forced into self-isolation because they had been in contact with a coronavirus sufferer. “We just can’t have everybody just being taken out of circulation because they just happen to be at a particular place at a particular time,” Australia’s Morrison told reporters.

Italy was expected to relax some of its quarantine rules on Wednesday over fears the country will soon face a severe shortage in workers given how many people are having to self-isolate protectively, with cases doubling on Tuesday from a day earlier to 78,313.

However, China showed no easing in its policy of zero-tolerance to outbreaks, keeping 13 million people in the city of Xi’an under rigid lockdown for a seventh day as new COVID-19 infections persisted, with 151 cases reported on Tuesday.

“I just want to go home,” said a 32-year-old mechanic, who was in Xi’an last week for a business trip when the city was effectively shut off from the outside world. No cases of Omicron have been announced in Xi’an so far.

Many countries are still grappling with the earlier Delta variant, including Poland, which reported 794 COVID-19-related deaths on Wednesday – the highest number in the fourth wave of the pandemic. Deputy Health Minister Waldemar Kraska said more than 75 percent of those who died were unvaccinated.

Meanwhile, in South Africa, infections have reduced over the past few days. But in other parts of Africa, infection rates continue to surge, according to Al Jazeera’s Catherine Soi, reporting from the Kenyan capital of Nairobi. “We’ve seen an increase in infection rates in dozens of African countries,” Soi said.

While government do not differentiate between the different variants, it is difficult to know how many infections are caused by the Omicron variant at this time, she added.

Early data from Britain, South Africa and Denmark suggests there is a reduced risk of being admitted to hospital for the Omicron compared with the Delta variant, the World Health Organization (WHO) said in its latest epidemiological report released overnight. However, the report said further data was needed to understand how the severity of illness may be affected by vaccination and, or, prior infection.

The surge in cases is coinciding with the New Year holidays, normally a period of parties and travel. Some countries, such as Italy, have cancelled public celebrations, while authorities in Japan urged residents to keep end-of-year gatherings small.

“The highest risk is meeting people without taking adequate measures to prevent infection,” said Norio Ohmagari, the director of the Disease Control and Prevention Center and a top health adviser to the Tokyo Metropolitan Government.

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