



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on November 26, 2021

Countries Curtail Travel to/from South Africa Over “Omicron” COVID Variant

A “[heavily mutated](#)” COVID variant has sparked an international ban on non-essential travel to and from South Africa and neighboring countries. European countries on Friday joined Singapore and Israel in imposing such restrictions. The United States followed the suit later in the day as the World Health Organization (WHO) [dubbed](#) the variant “Omicron” and called it a “variant of concern.”

On Thursday, South African health officials [announced](#) that they had identified a new variant of the SARS-CoV-2, which causes COVID-19. That variant had a lineage designation of B.1.1.529. Twenty-two positive cases of the new variant had been recorded in the country following genomic sequencing collaborations between the government and private laboratories, per the official post.

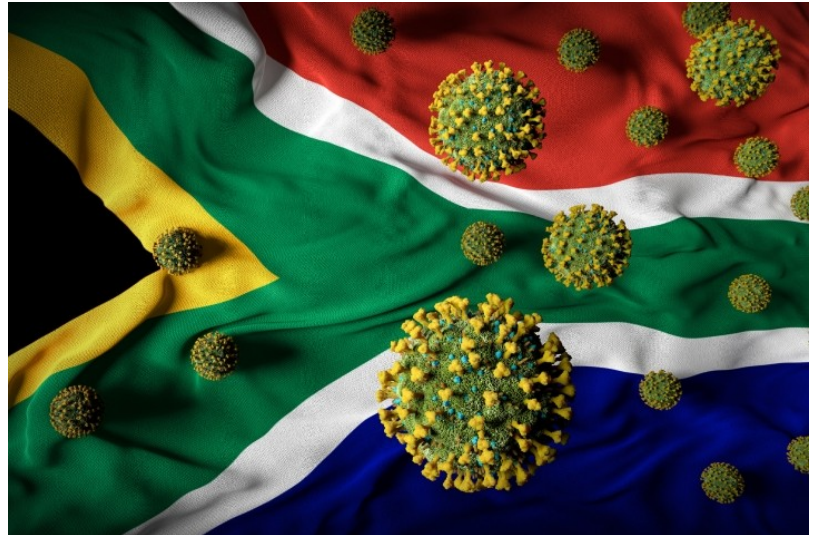
The new variant has a “very unusual constellation of mutations,” said Tulio de Oliveira, director of the KwaZulu-Natal Research and Innovation Sequencing Platform, according to [BBC](#). De Oliveira explained that the new variant has as many as 50 mutations overall and 30 mutations in the protein that helps to create an entry point for the coronavirus to infect human cells, or spike protein. That protein is also the target of most vaccines, which were designed using the original strain, meaning they may not be as effective against the new mutation.

The WHO technical lead on COVID-19, Maria van Kerkhove, [confirmed](#) that numerous mutations of the virus’s viral spike protein may cause the virus to “behave differently” than the previous variants.

While stating that “it may take a few weeks” to determine the variant’s transmissibility and the effectiveness of diagnostics, vaccines, and therapeutics against it, van Kerkhove still called on people to get vaccinated as quickly as possible to “drive transmission down as well as protecting yourself against severe disease and death.”

While most of African countries have successfully [avoided](#) COVID outbreaks, South Africa became the worst affected in terms of total reported COVID cases and deaths.

[Reportedly](#), the country has been experiencing a lull after a severe third wave of infections until last week when the number of new infections started to rise again. On Thursday, the country’s National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) reported 2,465 new cases, almost double the previous day’s number. The NICD did not officially link the resurgence to the B.1.1.529 variant, but the country’s leading scientists believe it may be the cause.



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Penny Moore, a virologist at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, whose lab is studying the variant's potential to dodge immunity from vaccines and previous infections, [said](#) they are “flying at warp speed” to get the answers. He added that while there are anecdotal reports of reinfections and cases in vaccinated individuals, it was still too early to draw any conclusions.

While the scientists are learning how contagious and dangerous the new variant is, some European and Asian countries were quick to close their borders to travelers from the affected region.

According to [Business Insider](#):

- The UK suspended flights to six African countries including South Africa and added them to its “red” list. The UK Health Security Agency has already [called](#) it “the worst variant we have seen so far” since it may be more transmissible than Delta.
- Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Austria introduced travel restrictions to and from southern Africa, [Politico reported](#).
- European Commissioner Ursula von der Leyen said Thursday the EU planned to introduce a bloc-wide ban on air travel from South Africa and neighboring countries, [Reuters reported](#).
- India told individual states to screen and test travelers from South Africa and other “at risk” countries, [Reuters reported](#).
- Israel's health ministry [announced a ban](#) on travel from almost all African countries.
- Japan also tightened border controls.

Belgium [confirmed](#) Friday that the first B.1.1.529 case has been detected in the country.

The World Health Organization (WHO) [met](#) on Friday to flesh out information about the new “Omicron” variant. WHO recognized it as a “variant of concern,” since it showed “some concerning properties” that could make it more transmissible, more virulent, or more adept at eluding vaccines and therapeutics.

Earlier in the day, however, WHO [cautioned](#) countries against hastily imposing travel restrictions, saying they should take a “risk-based and scientific approach.”

Dr. Michael Ryan, the head of emergencies at the WHO, [warned](#) the nations against “knee-jerk responses” and called on the global community to “remain open.”

“We’ve seen in the past, the minute there’s any kind of mention of any kind of variation and everyone is closing borders and restricting travel. It’s really important that we remain open and stay focused,” Ryan said.

President Joe Biden’s top medical advisor, Dr. Anthony Fauci, seemingly echoed WHO’s position.

In his interview to [CNN](#) on Friday morning, Fauci said that while the strain’s numerous mutations “are raising some concern, particularly with regard to possibly transmissibility increase, and possibly evasion of immune response,” he rejected the precautionary approach to closing the borders before getting more information on it.

A couple of hours later, though, President Biden issued a [statement](#) saying that “this morning I was briefed by my chief medical advisor, Dr. Tony Fauci, and the members of our COVID response team, about the Omicron variant” and will impose air travel restrictions from South Africa and seven other countries as a precaution, starting Monday.

The president called on vaccinated Americans to get a COVID booster shot, and all unvaccinated, including children as young as five, to get their shots, even though it appears that the current vaccines



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will not grant much protection against the “super mutant,” as some in the media have called it. Biden also urged world leaders to improve vaccination rates in their countries and waive intellectual-property protections for COVID shots, “so these vaccines can be manufactured globally.”

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