

HIGH ALERT

World scurries to contain new Covid variant

Scientists unlikely to flesh out their findings for a few weeks, countries around the world take a safety-first approach

ASSOCIATED PRESS The Hague, November 27

WITH EACH PASSING hour, new restrictions were being slapped on travel from countries in southern Africa as the world scurried Saturday to contain a new variant of the coronavirus that has the potential to be more resistant to the protection offered by vaccines.

A host of countries, including Australia, Brazil, Canada, Iran, Japan, Thailand and the United States, joined others, including the European Union and the UK to impose restrictions on southern African countries in response to warnings over the transmissibility of the new variant against the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Despite the shutdown of flights, there was increasing evidence that the variant is already spreading. Cases have been reported in travellers in Belgium, Israel and Hong Kong, and Germany also has a probable case.

Dutch authorities are checking for the new variant after 61 passengers on two flights from South Africa tested positive for Covid-19.

The global health body has named the new variant Omicron, labelling it a variant of concern because of its high number of mutations and some early evidence that it carries a higher degree of infection than other variants.

That means people who contracted Covid-19 and recovered could be subject to catching it again. It could take weeks to know if current vaccines are less effective against it.

With so much uncertainty about the variant and scientists unlikely to flesh out their findings for a few weeks, countries around the world have been taking a safety-first approach, in the knowledge that previous outbreaks of the



People line up to get on an overseas flight at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg, South Africa

Cases have been reported in travellers in Belgium, Israel and Hong Kong, and Germany also has a probable case

pandemic have been partly fuelled by lax border policies. "It seems to spread rapidly," US President Joe Biden said of the new variant, only a day after celebrating the resumption of Thanksgiving gatherings for millions of American families and the sense that normal life was coming back at least for the vaccinated.

In announcing new travel restrictions, he told reporters, "I've decided that we're going to be cautious." Nearly two years on since the start of the pandemic that has claimed more than 5 million lives around the world, countries are on high alert.

Dutch authorities have isolated 61 people who tested positive for Covid-19 on arrival in the Netherlands on two flights from South Africa on Friday. They are carrying out further investigations to see if any of the travellers have the omicron variant.

Assam govt to roll out microfinance relief scheme, distribute cheques among borrowers

MITHUN DASGUPTA Kolkata, November 27



Manoj Nambiar, MD of Arohan Financial Services

18, the government signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with microfinance lenders for the implementation of the scheme in August.

"From November 28, the government will start distributing cheques to the Category 1 customers, who were regular in repayments without any dues as of March 31, 2021. Each cus-

The 539 travellers who tested negative were allowed to return home or continue their journeys to other countries. Under government regulations, those who live in the Netherlands and are allowed to return home must self-isolate for at least five days. A German official also said Saturday that there's a 'very high probability' that the omicron variant has already arrived in the country.

Kai Klöse, the health minister for Hesse state, which includes Frankfurt, said in a tweet that "several mutations typical of omicron" were found Friday night in a traveller returning from South Africa, who was isolated at home. Sequencing of the test had yet to be completed.

The variant's swift spread among young people in South Africa has alarmed health professionals even though there was no immediate indication whether the variant causes more severe disease. In just two weeks, omicron has turned a period of low transmission in the country into one of rapid growth. A number of pharmaceutical firms, including AstraZeneca, Moderna, Novavax and Pfizer, said they have plans in place to adapt their vaccines in light of the emergence of omicron.

Professor Andrew Pollard, the director of the Oxford Vaccine Group which developed the

AstraZeneca vaccine, expressed cautious optimism that existing vaccines could be effective at preventing serious disease from the omicron variant. He said most of the mutations appear to be in similar regions as those in other variants. "That tells you that despite those mutations existing in other variants the vaccines have continued to prevent serious disease as we've moved through alpha, beta, gamma and delta," he told BBC radio. "At least from a speculative point of view we have some optimism that the vaccine should still work against a new variant for serious disease but really we need to wait several weeks to have that confirmed."

He added that it is "extremely unlikely that a reboot of a pandemic in a vaccinated population like we saw last year is going to happen." Some experts said the variant's emergence illustrated how rich countries' hoarding of vaccines threatens to prolong the pandemic. Fewer than 6% of people in Africa have been fully immunised against Covid-19, and millions of health workers and vulnerable populations have yet to receive a single dose. Those conditions can speed up spread of the virus, offering more opportunities for it to evolve into a dangerous variant.

India: Active cases down to 1,07,019

INDIA SAW A SINGLE-DAY rise of 8,318 new Coronavirus infections taking the country's total tally of Covid-19 cases to 3,45,63,749, while the active cases have declined to 1,07,019, the lowest in 541 days, according to Union health ministry data updated on Saturday. The death toll has climbed to 4,67,933 with 465 daily fatalities, according to the data updated at 8 am. The daily rise in new Coronavirus infections has been below 20,000 for 50 continuous days and less than 50,000 daily new cases have been reported for 153 consecutive days now.

The active cases have declined to 1,07,019 comprising 0.31% of the total infections, the lowest since March 2020, while the national Covid-19 recovery rate was recorded at 98.34%, the highest since March 2020, the health ministry said.

A decrease of 3,114 cases has been recorded in the active Covid-19 caseload in a span of 24 hours.

The daily positivity rate was recorded at 0.86%. It has been less than 2% for the last 54 days. The weekly positivity rate was also recorded at 0.88%. It has been below 1% for the last 13 days, according to the health ministry. The number of people who have recuperated from the disease surged to 3,39,88,797. The case fatality rate was recorded at 1.35%. The cumulative doses administered in the country so far under the nationwide Covid-19 vaccination drive have exceeded 121.06 crore. India crossed the grim milestone of two crore Coronavirus cases on May 4.

PTI

Kejriwal urges PM Modi to stop flights from countries affected by new strain

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA New Delhi, November 27

DELHI CHIEF MINISTER Arvind Kejriwal on Saturday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to stop flights coming to India from those countries which are affected by a new variant of the Coronavirus infection. In a tweet, he emphasised that the country had "recovered" from the Covid-19 pandemic with "great difficulty".

"I urge Hon'ble PM to stop flights from those countries which are affected by new variant. With great difficulty, our country has recovered from Corona. We should do everything possible to prevent this new variant from entering India," Kejriwal tweeted. Prime Minister Modi will chair an important meeting on the Covid situation and the vaccination drive in the country with top officials on Saturday, official sources said earlier in the day.

The meeting comes amid rising global concerns over a new strain of the Coronavirus which the World Health Organisation has named 'Omicron' and classified as a highly transmissible virus of concern. The cumulative number of Covid-19 vaccine doses administered in the country has crossed 120.96 crore, according to the Union health ministry.



Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal

Order on suspending Ansals' jail terms in evidence tampering case reserved

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA New Delhi, November 27

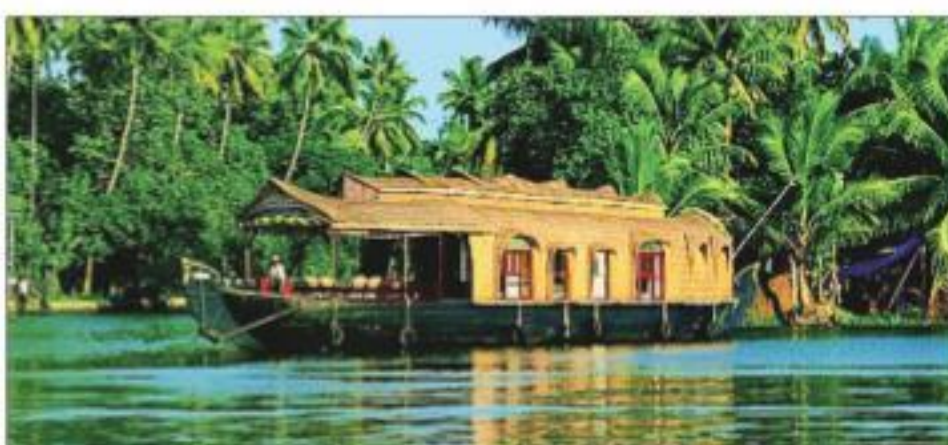
A DELHI COURT reserved for December 3 its order on whether to suspend the seven-year jail terms awarded to real estate barons Sushil and Gopal Ansal for tampering with evidence in the 1997 case of Uphaar cinema fire, which had claimed 59 lives. Additional Sessions Judge Anil Antil reserved the order on appeals filed by the Ansals against their conviction and jail terms by a magisterial court. Besides challenging their conviction and punishment, the Ansals had urged the sessions court to suspend their jail terms till the appeal is decided. The court heard the arguments of the accused, the victim and police, and reserved the order. Senior advocate Vikas Pahwa, appearing for the Association of Victims of Uphaar Tragedy (AVUT), had opposed the appeals and told the court that the offence of tampering with evidence is extremely serious.

DELHI JAL BOARD : GOVT OF N.C.T OF DELHI OFFICE OF THE EXECUTIVE ENGINEER (PROJECT)W-VI. Includes details of tenders for tubewell installations.

Reliance Communications Limited. Website: www.rcm.co.in. Registered Office: H Block, 1st Floor, Dhirubhai Ambani Knowledge City, Navi Mumbai - 400 710. Includes financial results for Quarter and Half Year ended September 30, 2021.

Kerala tourism launches STREET project for experiential tourism

PRESS TRUST OF INDIA Thiruvananthapuram, November 27



Kerala tourism has suffered significant damage in the past few years

Kottayam, Valiyaparamba in Kasaragod, Kanthalloor in Idukki and Chekadi in Wayanad. The project, conceived by the Responsible Tourism Mission, is

inspired by the "Tourism for Inclusive Growth" slogan of The United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), an official statement said. The STREET

is an acronym for Sustainable, Tangible, Responsible, Experiential, Ethnic, Tourism hubs. Green street, cultural street, village life experience street, entrepreneurial tourism street, agritourism street, water street and art street are the themes that have been planned as part of the project, it said. These streets will be in tune with the peculiarities of each of these locations and would focus on experiential tourism. Tourism and public works minister PA Mohammed Riyas said the project offers a huge potential for growth in the tourism sector and would usher in significant changes.