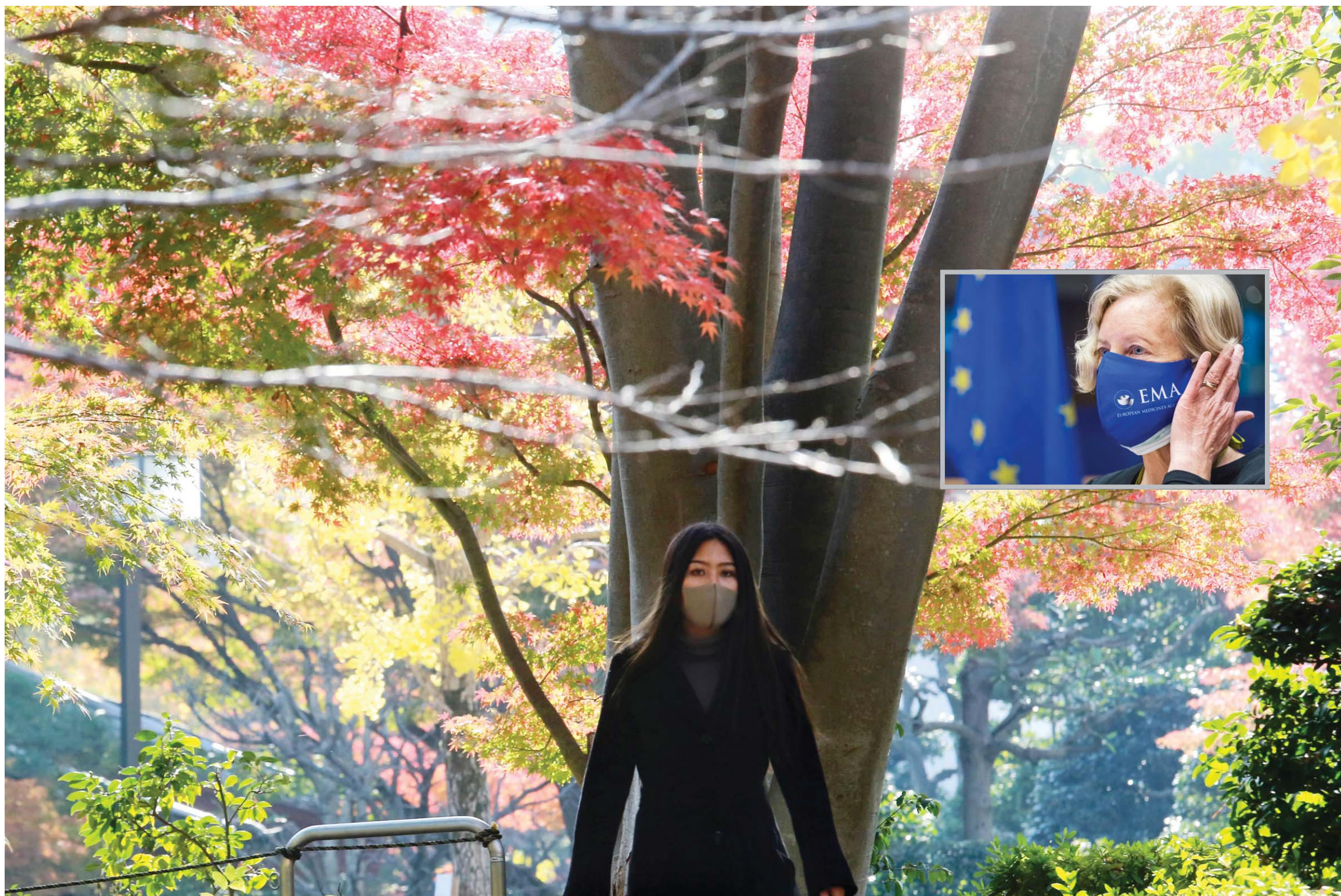




SPECIAL REPORT



A woman wearing a face mask to protect against the spread of the coronavirus walks through autumn leaves at Zojyo-ji temple on Nov 30, 2021, in Tokyo. Inset: Executive Director of the European Medicines Agency (EMA) Emer Cooke speaks during an Environment, Public Health and Food Safety (ENV) Committee at the European

Parliament in Brussels, on Nov 30, 2021. Cooke gave an update on the situation around COVID-19 vaccines, including reviews, authorizations for pediatric use and boosters, as well as recent developments in COVID-19 therapeutics and the general epidemiological situation in the EU. (AP)

COVID's 'not done with us'

Nations rush to contain omicron

Taking an act-now-ask-questions-later approach, countries around the world slammed their doors shut again to try to keep the new omicron variant at bay Monday as more cases of the mutant coronavirus emerged and scientists raced to figure out just how dangerous it might be.

Japan announced it would bar entry of all foreign visitors, joining Israel in doing so just days after the variant was identified by researchers in South Africa. Morocco banned all incoming flights. Other countries, including the U.S. and European Union members, have moved to prohibit travelers arriving from southern Africa.

Travelers infected with the new version have turned up in a widening circle of countries over the past few days, including now Spain, and cases in Portugal and Scotland have raised fears that the variant may already be spreading locally.

"Many of us might think we are done with COVID-19. It's not done with us," warned Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of the World Health Organization.

Days after the variant sent a shudder through the financial world nearly two years into the pandemic that has killed over 5 million people, markets had mixed reactions Monday, with European stocks and oil prices rebounding and Wall Street opening higher, while Asian markets fell further.

U.S. President Joe Biden called the omicron variant a cause for concern but "not a cause for panic." He said he is not considering any widespread U.S. lockdown and instead urged vaccinations and mask-wearing.

The infections have underscored the difficulty in keeping the virus in check in a globalized world of jet travel and open borders. Yet, many countries are trying to do just that, against the urging of the WHO, which noted that border closings often have limited effect and can wreak havoc on lives and livelihoods.

Some argued that such restrictions could provide valuable time to analyze the new variant. Little is known about it, including whether it is more contagious, more likely to cause serious illness or more able to evade vaccines.

While the initial global response to COVID-19 was criticized as slow and haphazard, the reaction to the new variant came quickly.

"This time the world showed it is learning," said EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, singling out South African President Cyril Ramaphosa for praise. "South Africa's analytic work and transparency and sharing its results was indispensable in allowing a swift global response. It no doubt saved many lives."

Late last week, von der Leyen successfully pushed the 27-nation EU to agree to ban flights from seven southern African nations, similar to what many other countries are doing.

Cases had already been reported in EU nations Belgium, Denmark and the Netherlands before Portuguese authorities identified 13 omicron infections among members of the Belenenses professional soccer team. Authorities reported one member had recently traveled to South Africa. A game over the weekend had been abandoned at halftime for lack of players.

Spain also reported its first confirmed case of the variant. It was detected in a traveler who returned Sunday from South Africa after making a stopover in Amsterdam, one of Madrid's major public hospitals tweeted.

And after Scotland reported its first six cases, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon warned that "there might already be some community transmission of this variant."

Taking no chances, Japan, which has yet to detect any omicron cases, reimposed border controls that it had eased earlier this month.

"We are taking the step as an emergency precaution to prevent a worst-case scenario in Japan," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said. The new measures begin Tuesday.

Israel likewise decided to bar entry to foreigners, and Morocco said it would suspend all incoming flights for two weeks starting Monday.

And Britain expanded its COVID-19 booster program to everyone 18 and

older, making millions more people eligible. Up until now, booster shots were available only to those 40 and over and people particularly vulnerable to the virus. The U.K. has reported about a dozen omicron cases.

Despite the global worry, scientists cautioned that it is still unclear whether omicron is more alarming than other versions.

White House pushes booster shots, face masks

Cause for concern, not panic says Biden

President Joe Biden called the new coronavirus variant omicron a cause for concern but "not a cause for panic" Monday and said he was not considering any widespread U.S. lockdown. He urged Americans anew to get fully vaccinated, including booster shots, and return to face masks indoors in public settings to slow any spread.

Speaking Monday at the White House, Biden said it was inevitable that the new variant would reach the U.S., but he also said the country has the tools necessary to protect Americans — particularly the approved vaccines and booster shots.

When omicron arrives, and it will, Biden said, America will "face this new threat just as we've faced those that have come before it."

He appealed to the roughly 80 million unvaccinated Americans aged 5 and up to get their shots, and for the rest of the country to seek out booster shots six months after their second dose. He also encouraged everyone to get back to wearing face masks in all indoor public settings — a pandemic precaution that has fallen out of use across much of the country.

Separately, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention broadened its recommendation for COVID-19 booster shots to include all adults because of the new variant. The agency had previously approved boosters for all adults, but only recommended them for those 50 years and older or living in long-term care settings.

"Everyone ages 18 and older should get a booster shot either when they are six months after their initial Pfizer or Moderna series or two months after their initial J&J vaccine," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said in a statement.

Biden was joined by Dr. Anthony Fauci, the na-

tion's top infectious disease expert and the president's COVID-19 adviser, who said earlier Monday that scientists hope to know in the next week or two how well the existing COVID-19 vaccines protect against the variant, and how dangerous it is compared to earlier strains.

"We really don't know," Fauci told ABC's "Good Morning America," calling speculation premature.

The new variant poses the latest test to Biden's efforts to contain the pandemic, mitigate its impacts on the economy and return a sense of normalcy to the U.S. during the holiday season.

"This variant is a cause for concern, not a cause for panic," Biden said, as U.S. financial markets rebounded Monday after falling sharply on Friday. The White House said there were no plans to curtail Biden's travel as a result of the new variant.

Biden last week moved to restrict travel from South Africa and seven other countries in southern Africa, effective Monday, in a bid to give scientists time to learn more about the new variant, and for more Americans to get vaccinated before it hits the U.S. South African officials have argued they are being punished for speedily identifying and reporting the new variant.

As omicron spreads across the globe, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Monday, "we will continue to assess what steps we need to take to protect the American people."

Some other nations are reinstating severe travel and business lockdowns to prevent the omicron variant from spreading, but Biden indicated the U.S. was not following suit.

"If people are vaccinated and wear their mask, there's no need for lockdowns," he said.

Fauci said earlier on "CBS Mornings" that limiting travel from the countries where omicron was first identified "buys you a couple of weeks because if you can keep things out in force for a couple of weeks you can do a lot of things."

Pharmaceutical companies are already adjusting

their existing COVID-19 vaccines to better attack the omicron variant, but Fauci said Americans should make it a priority to get either their first shots or a booster dose now, rather than waiting for a new formulation.

"I would strongly suggest you get boosted now," he said.

He added that depending on what scientists learn about the omicron variant in the coming weeks "we may not need" targeted boosters to contain that strain of the virus.

Biden said his administration was "sparing no effort at removing all roadblocks to keep the American people safe," including working with drug manufacturers on potential new boosters and testing targeted specifically at the new variant.

Any omicron-specific vaccine probably could not begin to be produced for another two or three months, so getting boosters now is a "very important initial line of defense," Dr. Paul Burton, chief medical officer for the vaccine-maker Moderna, said Monday.

Burton said Moderna and other vaccine companies are testing existing COVID-19 vaccines to determine how effective they are against the omicron variant.

"If we need to manufacture an omicron-specific variant, it's going to take some weeks, two to three months is probably what we're looking at to be able to really begin to manufacture," Burton told ABC.

Noting that the new variant, like earlier ones, sprang up overseas in areas with lower vaccination rates, Biden said it was both a moral imperative and in America's self-interest to speed up global vaccinations. He noted that the U.S. has already donated more than 275 million doses — more than the rest of the world combined — and is on pace to deliver more than 1.1 billion doses globally by September 2022.

"Now we need the rest of the world to step up as well," Biden said. "We can't let up until the world is vaccinated." (AP)

So far, doctors in South Africa are reporting patients are suffering mostly mild symptoms, but they warn that it is still early. Also, most of the new cases are in people in their 20s and 30s, who generally do not get as sick from COVID-19 as older patients.

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editor's choice

