



## SPECIAL REPORT



A woman wearing face a mask, walks down a street in Hong Kong, on Nov 29, 2021. The new omicron variant was found in Hong Kong, Belgium and Tel Aviv. The European Union, the United States and Britain imposed curbs on travel from Africa. Israel banned entry by foreigners.

Inset: A health worker shows an empty syringe after inoculating a woman with AstraZeneca's COVID-19 vaccine

during the first day of a nationwide three-day vaccination drive at a school in Quezon city, Philippines on Nov 29, 2021. There has been no reported infection so far caused by the new variant in the Philippines, a Southeast Asian pandemic hotspot where COVID-19 cases have considerably dropped to below 1,000 each day in recent days. (AP)

## Japan bans entry of foreign visitors

# Borders tighten as omicron fears spread

As cases of a new coronavirus variant are confirmed around the world, Japan announced Monday that it will suspend entry of all foreign visitors, joining an increasing number of countries that are tightening their borders as fear spreads of yet another extension of pandemic suffering.

Japan, which has yet to detect any cases of the recently identified omicron variant, reimposed border controls that it eased earlier this month for short-term business visitors, foreign students and workers.

Despite the global worry, however, scientists cautioned that it's still unclear whether omicron is more dangerous than other versions of a virus that has killed more than 5 million people. Some countries are continuing with previous plans to loosen restrictions, with signs of reopening in Malaysia, Singapore and New Zealand.

"We are taking the step as an emergency precaution to prevent a worst-case scenario in Japan," Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said of the measure that begins Tuesday. Japan has kept its border closed to foreign tourists from all nations.

Kishida urged people to continue wearing masks and pursuing other basic anti-virus measures until further details of the new omicron variant are known.

Kishida, whose predecessor lost his job in part because of disappointment over his handling of the virus, was not alone in choosing an aggressive approach until details of what omicron can do emerge.

Israel decided to bar entry to foreigners, and Morocco said it would suspend all incoming flights for two weeks starting Monday — among the most drastic of the growing raft of travel curbs being imposed by nations around the world as they scrambled to slow the variant's spread. Scientists in several places — from Hong Kong to Europe to North America — confirmed its presence.

On Monday, the Scottish government announced the discovery of six new cases of the omicron variant of coronavirus, taking the U.K. total to nine. It has asked public health authorities to undertake enhanced contact tracing in all cases.

"Questions remain about its severity, transmissibility and response to treatments or vaccines and scientists are working at pace to provide additional information," said Scottish Health Secretary Humza Yousaf.

Over the weekend, health authorities found three cases of the variant, which prompted the British government to tighten rules on mask-wearing and testing of arrivals in the country.

Others to report new cases over the weekend were the Netherlands, which has 13 confirmed cases, while Canada has found two.

In Malaysia, however, officials went ahead with the partial reopening of a bridge connecting it to the island city-state of Singapore. And New Zealand announced it will continue plans to reopen internally after months of shut-down, while also restricting travel from African nations.

The World Health Organization, noting that the variant has already been detected in many countries and that closing borders often has a limited effect, called for frontiers to remain open.

The variant was identified days ago by researchers in South Africa, and much about it is still unclear, including whether it is more contagious, more likely to cause serious illness or more able to evade the protection of vaccines.

Health officials in Australia's Northern Territory announced that the state confirmed its first case of omicron on Monday, a South African man who flew into Darwin last Thursday. Australian Health Minister Greg Hunt said the prime minister is convening the National Security Committee to review actions that could be taken over omicron.

In New South Wales, Premier Dominic Perrottet said Monday there could be a third omicron case in his state. Health authorities there announced Sunday that two travelers returning from South Africa had tested positive. They were asymptomatic and fully vaccinated. Arrivals from nine African countries are now required to quarantine in a hotel upon arrival.

The World Health Organization on Monday is pushing for an international accord to help prevent and fight future pandemics amid the emergence of a worrying new omicron COVID-19 variant.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus also said many uncertainties remain about just how transmissible and severe infection by the highly mutated omicron might be.

Tedros joined leaders like outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Chilean President Sebastian Pinera for a long-planned and largely virtual special session of the U.N. health agency's member states at the World Health Assembly.

The gathering is aimed at devising a global action plan toward preventing, preparing and responding to future pandemics.

"The emergence of the highly mutated omicron variant underlines just how perilous and precarious our situation is," Tedros said, calling for a "legally binding" agreement that wasn't mentioned in a draft text seeking consensus on the way forward. "Indeed, omicron demonstrates just why the world needs a new accord on pandemics."

"Our current system disincentivizes countries from alerting others to threats that will inevitably land on their shores," he said, saying that South Africa and Botswana — where the new variant was

detected in southern Africa — should be praised and not "penalized" for their work. That was an allusion to travel restrictions announced by many countries on air travel to and from the region.

Tedros said WHO scientists and others around the world were working urgently to decipher the threat posed by the new variant, saying: "We don't yet know whether omicron is associated with more transmission, more severe disease, more risk of infections, or more risk of evading vaccines."

The world should now be "wide awake" to the threat of the coronavirus, "but omicron's very emergence is another reminder that although many of us might think we are done with COVID-19. It's not done with us," he added.

A draft resolution set to be adopted by the World Health Assembly stops short of calling for work toward specifically establishing a "pandemic treaty" or "legally binding instrument" sought by some, which could beef up the international response when — not if — a new pandemic erupts.

European Union member countries and others had sought language calling for work toward a treaty, but the United States and a few other countries countered that the substance of any accord should be worked out first before any such document is given a name. A "treaty" would suggest a legally binding agreement that could require ratification — and would likely incur domestic political haggling in some countries.

Outgoing German Chancellor Angela Merkel, whose 16-year tenure is likely to end next week, called for "reliable financing" for WHO and in-

creased contributions to the U.N. agency from its member states — while alluding to the EU position in favor of a binding agreement.

"The catastrophic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of health and the economy ought to be a lesson to us," she said by video message. "Viruses know no national borders. That's precisely why we should lay down measures to be taken to improve prevention, early detection, and response in internationally binding fashion."

Britain's ambassador in Geneva, Simon Manley, tweeted a copy of the draft text that was agreed by consensus — as required under WHO rules on such issues — and praised Chile and Australia for their work as co-chairs.

"The #Omicron variant shows yet again why we need a common understanding of how we prepare for and respond to pandemics, so we're all playing by the same rules," he wrote.

The draft makes no reference to the word "treaty" but, among other things, calls for the creation of an "intergovernmental negotiating body" among WHO member states to work out a possible deal to improve pandemic prevention, preparedness and response.

The three-day meeting that opened Monday amounts to a long-term approach: Any U.N.-backed agreement is likely to take many months, if not years, to be concluded and come into effect.

But it comes as many countries have been scrambling to address the emergence of omicron that has led to travel bans across the world and sent tremors through stock markets on Friday. (AP)



Ghebreyesus

New Zealand has restricted travel from nine southern African countries in response to the omicron threat, but Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said she didn't anticipate any further restrictions.

And omicron hasn't changed New Zealand's plans to ease restrictions in Auckland and move the nation into a new, more open phase of its pandemic response, Ardern said Monday. Bars, restaurants and gyms in Auckland can reopen from late Thursday, ending a coronavirus lockdown that began in August.

"We've come through the past two years of COVID in better shape than nearly anywhere in the world," Ardern said, pointing to low death rates, a growing economy and high vaccination rates.

Malaysians working in Singapore held joyful reunions with loved ones after returning to their homeland following the partial reopening of a land border that was shuttered for nearly two years because of the pandemic.

Buses ferried fully vaccinated passengers across the Causeway Bridge that connects the island of Singapore with the Malaysian peninsula. Strict measures included pre-departure and on-arrival COVID-19 tests.

Malaysia's health minister tweeted that a COVID-19 case was detected during a screening, but didn't elaborate. The causeway was one of the world's busiest land borders before the pandemic struck. Air travel also reopened with fewer restrictions, allowing anyone who is fully vaccinated to travel quarantine-free between the two countries.

Taiwan, which already has strict border entry controls, said it's not planning to further tighten its COVID-19 border policies to protect against the omicron variant.

Taiwan requires a two-week quarantine on arrival. It also has restricted the

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editor's choice

