

Coronavirus

Health workers fall ill

Omicron is slamming S. American hospitals

BRASILIA, Brazil, Jan 18, (AP) — The coronavirus' omicron variant starting to barrel across South America is pressuring hospitals whose employees are taking sick leave, leaving facilities understaffed to cope with COVID-19's third wave.

A major hospital in Bolivia's largest city stopped admitting new patients due to lack of personnel, and one of Brazil's most populous states canceled scheduled surgeries for a month. Argentina's federation of private healthcare providers told the AP it estimates about 15% of its health workers currently have the virus.

The third wave "is affecting the health team a lot, from the cleaning staff to the technicians, with a high percentage of sick people, despite having a complete vaccination schedule," said Jorge Coronel, president of Argentina's medical confederation. "While symptoms are mostly mild to moderate, that group needs to be isolated."

It wasn't supposed to be this way: South America's vaccine uptake was eager once shots were available. About two-thirds of its roughly 435 million residents are fully immunized, the highest percentage for any global region, according to Our World in Data. And health workers in Brazil, Bolivia and Argentina have already been receiving booster shots.

But the omicron variant is defying vaccines, sending case numbers surging. Argentina saw an average 112,000 daily confirmed cases in the week through Jan. 16, up from 3,700 a month earlier. Brazil's health ministry is still recovering from a hack that left coronavirus data incomplete; even so, it shows a jump to an average 69,000 daily cases in the same seven-day period, up 1,900% from the month before.

Omicron spreads even easier than other strains, and is already dominant in many countries — among them, Brazil and some parts of Argentina. It also more easily infects those who have already been vaccinated or infected by earlier versions of the virus. Early studies show omicron is less likely to cause serious diseases than the delta variant, and vaccination and booster shots still offer strong protection against serious illness, hospitalization and death.

Lesser severity leaves South America's residents loath to give up their long-awaited summer that, so they were told, would mark a return to normality after full vaccination. The enduring pandemic often seems an afterthought to people who are out and about, and don't glimpse how omicron has started affecting medical staff. Beaches were packed this weekend in Argentina and Brazil.

Matías Fernández Norte, a surgeon at the Hospital de Clínicas in Buenos Aires, told the AP that the high number of professionals on leave has generated "physical and spiritual fatigue, in addition to the stress of dealing with a patient on the edge."

"You feel like you are living a parallel reality. In the street you meet a world that doesn't seem to feel the pandemic," he said. "Sometimes it feels like people have forgotten. Unfortunately, that's what we feel."

Brazil's council of state health secretariats estimates that between 10% and 20% of all professionals in the health network — including doctors, nurses, nurse technicians, ambulance drivers and others in direct contact with patients — have taken sick leave since the last week of 2021.

"We are having trouble making the schedules," said the council's director, Carlos Lula.

The press office of Rio de Janeiro state's health secretary told the AP that about 5,500 professionals have left their jobs since December. All elective surgeries scheduled in the state health network have been suspended for four weeks. As for urgent care, relocations and overtime are being used as stop-gap measures.

"Forty percent of our staff is on sick leave," **Marcia Fernandes Lucas**, health secretary for the municipality of Sao Joao de Meriti, in Rio's metropolitan region, told the AP in her office. "We are able to work with these 60% by redeploying them (between health centers)."

Public hospitals in Bolivia are operating at 50-70% capacity due to the high number of infections among health care workers, according to the Bolivian doctors' union. In Santa Cruz, the country's most populous city, the Children's Hospital is overwhelmed — but less by its number of patients than the amount of staff falling ill, according to Freddy Rojas, its vice director. Last week, the facility stopped admitting new patients.

"There has been a collapse, because we don't have replacements," said José Luis Guaman, interim president of the doctors' union in Santa Cruz.

Such is the risk of medical services grinding to a halt in Argentina's Buenos Aires province — the country's most populous — that health workers have been allowed to return to work even if coming into contact with someone infected, provided they are asymptomatic and vaccinated. Other provinces in Argentina are expected to adopt the same rules in the coming days, in line with the health ministry's recently-issued guidelines.

Similar measures are being enacted by authorities in France and the US, where omicron has been putting hospital systems to the test for weeks.

Chile has seen a constant increase in its number of cases, prompting the reactivation of public- and private-sector hospital beds, but so far the country hasn't experienced hospital overload. Peru has also seen case numbers rise, but its facilities aren't yet suffering.

The Pan American Health Organization said Wednesday it expects omicron to become the predominant coronavirus variant in the Americas in the coming week. Ten countries in the region — especially in the Caribbean — didn't reach the goal set by the World Health Organization to have 40% of citizens fully vaccinated by end-2021.

While a smaller fraction of people develop serious illness from the highly-transmissible variant, the crush of contagion and resulting strain on hospitals means omicron shouldn't be underestimated, said Lula, of the Brazilian health secretariat council.

"People have to understand that the argument that omicron is 'mild' is false," Lula said.

Also:

MOSCOW: Russian authorities on Monday reported a sharp spike in new coronavirus cases, apparently driven by the rapid spread of the omicron variant health officials warned about last week.

The country's state coronavirus task force registered 30,726 new infections over the last 24 hours, which is twice as many as 15,830 just a week ago and the highest daily tally since early December. The task force has also reported 670 deaths.

The omicron variant spreads much more easily than other coronavirus strains, and has already become dominant in many countries. It also more easily infects those who have been vaccinated or had previously been infected by prior versions of the virus. However, early studies show omicron is less likely to cause severe illness than the previous delta variant.

Infections in **Russia** steadily climbed all of last week, and officials sounded the alarm about a looming surge of cases driven by omicron's rapid spread.

Anna Popova, head of Russia's public health watchdog Rospotrebnadzor, has warned that daily new cases might reach six-figure levels, and President **Vladimir Putin** has said that Russia has "a couple of weeks" to prepare for the unprecedented surge.

Moscow Mayor **Sergei Sobyanin** said Friday that omicron is responsible for nearly half of all new infections in the capital. On Monday, new virus cases in the city surpassed 7,000.



This satellite image provided by Planet Labs PBC, shows Kanokupulu in Tongatapu, Tonga on Jan. 16, after a huge undersea volcanic eruption. (AP)

Volcano

Volcanic ash delays aid

Tonga avoids widespread disaster

WELLINGTON, New Zealand, Jan 18, (AP) — The blast from the volcano can be heard in Alaska, and the waves crossed the ocean to cause an oil spill and two drownings in Peru. The startling satellite images resembled a massive nuclear explosion.

And yet, despite sitting almost on top of the volcano that erupted so violently on Saturday, the Pacific nation of Tonga appears to have avoided the widespread disaster that many initially feared.

Perhaps the biggest problem is the ash that has coated the main island and transformed it into a gray moonscape, contaminating the rainwater that people rely on to drink. New Zealand's military is sending fresh water and other much-needed supplies, but said Tuesday the ash covering Tonga's main runway will delay the flight at least another day.

Tonga has so far reported two deaths, and concerns remain over the fate of people on two smaller islands that were hard hit. Communications have been down everywhere, making assessments more difficult.

But on the main island of Tongatapu, at least, life is slowly returning to normal. The tsunami that swept over coastal areas after the eruption was frightening for many but rose only about 80 centimeters (2.7 feet), allowing most to escape.

"We did hold grave fears, given the magnitude of what we saw in that unprecedented blast," said Katie Greenwood, the head of delegation in the Pacific for the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. "Fortunately, in those major population centers we are not seeing the catastrophic effect we thought might happen, and that's very good news."

Greenwood, who is based in Fiji and has been talking with people in Tonga by satellite phone, said an estimated 50 homes were destroyed on Tongatapu but that nobody needed to use emergency shelters. She said about 90 people on the nearby island of 'Eua were using shelters.

UN humanitarian officials and Tonga's government has reported "significant infrastructural damage" around

Tongatapu.

"There has been no contact from the Ha'apai Group of islands, and we are particularly concerned about two small low-lying islands — Mango and Fonoi — following surveillance flights confirming substantial property damage," UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said.

New Zealand's High Commission in Tonga also reported significant damage along the western coast of Tongatapu, including to resorts and the waterfront area.

Like other island nations in the Pacific, Tonga is regularly exposed to the extremes of nature, whether it be cyclones or earthquakes, making people more resilient to the challenges they bring.

Indeed, Greenwood said Tonga does not want an influx of aid workers following the eruption. Tonga is one of the few remaining places in the world that has managed to avoid any outbreaks of the coronavirus, and officials fear that if outsiders bring in the virus it could create a much bigger disaster than the one they're already facing.

Another worry, said Greenwood, is that the volcano could erupt again. She said there is currently no working equipment around it which could help predict such an event.

Spectacular

Satellite images captured the spectacular eruption of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano on Saturday, with a plume of ash, steam and gas rising like a giant mushroom above the South Pacific. The volcano is located about 64 kilometers (40 miles) north of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa.

Two people drowned in Peru, which also reported the oil spill after waves moved a ship that was transferring oil at a refinery.

In Tonga, British woman Angela Glover, 50, was one of those who died after being swept away by a wave, her family said.

Nick Eleini said his sister's body had been found and that her husband survived. "I understand that this terrible accident came about as they tried to rescue their dogs," Eleini told Sky News. He said it had been his sister's life dream to live in the South Pacific

and "she loved her life there."

New Zealand's military said it hoped the airfield in Tonga would be opened either Wednesday or Thursday. The military said it had considered an airdrop but that was "not the preference of the Tongan authorities."

New Zealand also sent a navy ship to Tonga on Tuesday, with another planned to leave later in the day, and pledged an initial 1 million New Zealand dollars (\$680,000) toward recovery efforts.

Australia sent a navy ship from Sydney to Brisbane to prepare for a support mission if needed.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian on Tuesday said China is preparing to send drinking water, food, personal protective equipment and other supplies to Tonga as soon as flights resume.

The UN World Food Program is exploring how to bring in relief supplies and more staff and has received a request to restore communication lines in Tonga, which is home to about 105,000 people, Dujarric said.

Communications with the island nation are limited because the single underwater fiber-optic cable that connects Tonga to the rest of the world was likely severed in the eruption. The company that owns the cable said the repairs could take weeks.

Samiuela Fonua, who chairs the board at Tonga Cable Ltd., said the cable appeared to have been severed soon after the eruption. He said the cable lies atop and within coral reef, which can be sharp.

Fonua said a ship would need to pull up the cable to assess the damage and then crews would need to fix it. A single break might take a week to repair, he said, while multiple breaks could take up to three weeks. He added that it was unclear when it would be safe for a ship to venture near the undersea volcano to undertake the work.

A second undersea cable that connects the islands within Tonga also appeared to have been severed. Fonua said. However, a local phone network was working, allowing Tongans to call each other. But he said the lingering ash cloud was continuing to make even satellite phone calls abroad difficult.



A healthcare worker prepares a shot of the Moderna COVID-19 vaccine during a door-to-door COVID-19 vaccination campaign, in La Paz, Bolivia, Monday, Jan. 17. (AP)



Vucic

Rajapaksa

Discovery

HK to cull 2,000 animals: Hong Kong authorities said Tuesday that they will cull some 2,000 small animals, including hamsters after several of the rodents tested positive for the virus at a pet store where an infected employee was working.

The city will also stop the sale and import of small mammals including hamsters, according to an official from the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department. The move came after the pet shop employee tested positive for the delta variant on Monday. Several hamsters imported from the Netherlands at the same store tested positive for the coronavirus as well.

Even though authorities acknowledged that there is "no evidence" that pets can transmit the coronavirus to humans, as a precautionary measure, customers who had purchased hamsters from the affected store after Jan. 7 will be traced and be subject to mandatory quarantine.

They must also hand over their hamsters to authorities to be put down.

Authorities said that all pet stores selling hamsters in Hong Kong must cease operations and that around 2,000 small mammals, including hamsters and chinchillas, will be culled in a humane manner.

Customers who bought hamsters in Hong Kong from Dec 22 will also be subject to mandatory testing and are urged not to go into the community until their tests have returned negative. If their hamsters test positive, they will be subject to quarantine.

For now, authorities said they would not rule out transmission between human and animals.

Separately, Hong Kong police have arrested two former flight attendants for allegedly leaving their homes when they should have been in isolation for possible coronavirus infections, which were later confirmed. □ □ □

Plastic waste killing elephants:

Conservationists and veterinarians are warning that plastic waste in an open landfill in eastern Sri Lanka is killing elephants in the region, after two more were found dead over the weekend.

Around 20 elephants have died over the last eight years after consuming plastic trash in the dump in Pallakkadu village in Ampara district, about 210 kilometers (130 miles) east of the capital, Colombo.

Examinations of the dead animals showed they had swallowed large amounts of nondegradable plastic that is

found in the garbage dump, wildlife veterinarian Nihal Pushpakumara said.

"Polythene, food wrappers, plastic, other non-digestibles and water were the only things we could see in the post mortems. The normal food that elephants eat and digest was not evident," he said.

Elephants are revered in Sri Lanka but are also endangered. Their numbers have dwindled from about 14,000 in the 19th century to 6,000 in 2011, according to the country's first elephant census. Sri Lanka's president is **Gotabaya Rajapaksa**.

They are increasingly vulnerable because of the loss and degradation of their natural habitat. (AP)



A staffer for the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department works past a pet shop which was closed after some pet hamsters were, authorities said, tested positive for the coronavirus, in Hong Kong, Tuesday, Jan. 18. Hong Kong authorities said Tuesday that they will cull some 2,000 hamsters after several of the rodents tested positive for delta variant at the pet store where an infected employee was working. (AP)

cause of the loss and degradation of their natural habitat. (AP)

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Lithium mining plans rejected: Environmental protesters demanding the cancellation of plans for lithium mining in western Serbia took to the streets again Saturday, blocking key roads and for the first time a border crossing.

Traffic on the Balkan nation's main north-south highway was halted for more than an hour in Belgrade, the capital, along with several other roads throughout the country, including one by Serbia's border with Bosnia.

Minor incidents have been reported with angry drivers trying to push their way through the crowds. Witnesses told N1 television that a man was injured in one incident in the western town of Sabac.

Environmental groups want Serbia's populist government to halt the possibility of lithium mining in western Serbia. Activists have pledged to press on with blockades until their demand is met and the Rio Tinto mining company is "expelled" from Serbia. **Aleksandar Vucic** is the president of Serbia.

Thousands joined similar demonstrations several weeks ago, forcing the government to withdraw two laws that activists said were designed to speed up the country's mining plans.

"This is an ecological catastrophe, that I think Serbia is already one foot in, and even a worse one (catastrophe) is threatening," said Belgrade resident Mirjana Podolsek. (AP)