

Travel doors slam shut as new Covid variant triggers alarm, stranding hundreds of passengers

(Courtesy of Tamara Hardingham-Gill and Laura Smith-Spark, CNN Travel • Updated 27th November 2021)

(CNN) — Major travel destinations including the European Union, Japan, Australia, the United States and Canada have moved to block flights from African countries following the discovery of the Omicron variant, echoing previous emergency responses that triggered a global freeze on travel.

The speed with which the new restrictions were put in place -- just hours after the South African health authorities announced the discovery of the variant, meant passengers have found themselves stranded without a warning.

Hundreds of passengers from South Africa were being held for hours at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam on Friday, with dozens ending up being sent into a hotel quarantine. This came after the Netherlands imposed new travel restrictions amid concerns over an aggressive [mutation of the novel coronavirus](#).

Two flights carrying between 400 and 600 passengers from South Africa, one from Cape Town and one from Johannesburg, landed Friday late morning local time at Schiphol, an airport spokesman said. Dutch health authorities said later 61 of the passengers tested positive for the virus, although it has not yet been determined whether they had been infected with the Omicron variant.

The new strain has so far been detected in South Africa, Botswana and in two travelers quarantining in Hong Kong. A case has also been reported in Belgium and in Israel. Several other European countries including Germany and the Czech Republic said they were investigating suspected cases.

European Union states have agreed to introduce temporary restrictions on all travel into the EU from southern Africa over the new coronavirus variant, the bloc said Friday. The countries concerned are Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Zimbabwe, EU Commission spokesman Eric Mamer said.

Meanwhile, US President Joe Biden will restrict travel from South Africa, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi starting Monday, administration officials told CNN.

Biden told the press he had "decided we're going to be cautious" about the variant. "We don't know a lot about the variant except that it is a big concern and seems to spread rapidly," he said.

Canada will be "banning the entry of foreign nationals... that have traveled through southern Africa in the last 14 days," due to the Omicron variant, Health Minister Jean-Yves Duclos told a press conference on Friday.

Anyone who has traveled through southern Africa in the last 14 days should get a Covid-19 test and quarantine until they get a negative test result, said Duclos. The countries include South Africa, Mozambique, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and Eswatini, he said.

"Canadians and permanent residents and those with a right of entry into Canada will be tested on arrival, [and] they will quarantine until they get the result of a negative test," according to Duclos.

The United Kingdom, Japan, Brazil, Thailand, Singapore, Turkey, Egypt, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Jordan are also among those imposing restrictions on flights and travelers from southern African nations in light of the new variant.

The World Health Organization announced Friday it had designated the newly identified variant, B.1.1.529, as a variant of concern, named Omicron.

While only dozens of cases have been identified so far, news of the variant, which has around double the amount of mutations as the Delta variant, is already sparking fears around the world.

On Friday, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) warned against travel bans, stressing such restrictions are "not a long-term solution" when it comes to managing coronavirus variants.

"Governments are responding to the risks of the new coronavirus variant in emergency mode causing fear among the traveling public. As quickly as possible we must use the experience of the last two years to move to a coordinated data-driven approach that finds safe alternatives to border closures and quarantine," said IATA Director General Willie Walsh in a statement.

Tourism fears

The cascade of closures began late Thursday as the UK announced it would be temporarily suspending flights from South Africa, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Lesotho and Eswatini, with Health Secretary Sajid Javid describing the variant as the "worst ever" strain of the virus.

The move prompted the South African government to issue a statement describing the UK's decision as "rushed," and expressed concern about the damage it would cause to "both the tourism industries and businesses of both countries."

In the hours since, Japan has tightened border controls for travelers from the same six countries, bringing in a 10-day quarantine beginning 12 a.m. November 27.

Meanwhile, Germany planned to declare South Africa a "virus variant area" from Friday night, which will mean airlines may only enter from the country to repatriate German citizens.

Fellow EU nations Austria, France, Italy, the Netherlands and Malta have all announced imminent entry bans to all travelers who've entered South Africa, Lesotho, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia and Eswatini in the past two weeks.

KLM said passengers will only be allowed on flights from South Africa to the Netherlands if they comply with the entry restrictions imposed by the Dutch government.

The entry ban does not apply to people with Dutch passports, EU citizens, Schengen Area residents, medical emergency staff, airline staff and people traveling under exceptional circumstances, such as family emergencies.

French Health Minister Olivier Véran said the "rapid" circulation of the variant in South Africa "means that it's probably contagious or very contagious," justifying France's precautionary stance.

After Belgium reported one person recently arrived from Egypt had tested positive for B.1.1.529, France said it was "reinforcing" control at its border with Belgium.

Singapore has opted to ban all non-residents from Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe from entering, while nationals and permanent residents returning from any of these countries will be required to serve a [10-day stay home notice](#) (SHN). Malaysia and the Philippines have taken similar steps.

Dubai will restrict travelers originating from or transiting from the same seven African countries starting Monday until further notice, Emirates airline said, citing Dubai's Covid-19 Command and Control Center.

Outbound passenger flights from Dubai to the countries listed are permitted, however, the Emirates statement said.

Saudi Arabia on Friday announced a temporary suspension of flights to and from South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho and Eswatini, and urged both citizens and residents to avoid travel to the region until further notice.

Meanwhile, Jordan has announced any Jordanians arriving from several countries including South Africa will have to go into government quarantine for 14 days, according to a report Friday by Jordanian public broadcaster Al Mamlaka TV.

Non-Jordanians traveling from South Africa, Lesotho, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Namibia, Eswatini and Botswana will only be allowed entry if they spend 14 days outside those countries in a third country, Al Mamlaka TV said, citing the country's Interior Ministry. The new measures will go into effect Sunday.

Turkey has issued a travel ban from five African countries -- Botswana, South Africa, Mozambique, Namibia and Zimbabwe -- as of Friday night, Turkish Health Minister Fahrettin Koca said on Twitter.

Egypt stopped direct flights to and from southern Africa following the World Health Organization announcement that the Omicron variant was designated as a "variant of concern."

Australia has banned the entry of foreign citizens who have traveled to the nine south African countries in the previous 14 days. The government said Australian citizens would be allowed back into their home country, but will have to quarantine for 14 days on arrival.

Russia said that starting midnight on Sunday, it would restrict entry into the country for foreign citizens from South Africa, Botswana, Lesotho, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Madagascar, Eswatini, Tanzania, and Hong Kong, as well as for foreign citizens who have been in these territories within the last 10 days.

The developments have led to speculation that strict curbs on travel brought in at the start of the pandemic could be on their way back.

The trade group representing major US airlines said it has "many unanswered questions" about the Biden administration's travel restrictions.

"We remain in communication with the US government as specifics remain unknown at this time and there are many unanswered questions," Airlines for America spokesman Carter Yang said. "Amid this

rapidly evolving situation, it is critical that US government decisions regarding international travel restrictions and requirements be rooted in science."

Delta Air Lines said it will not stop service to and from South Africa. United Airlines said it will not scale back its service to Johannesburg and will restart its route to Cape Town next week as planned.

Return to restrictions?

Germany has also joined the list of countries banning flights from southern Africa.

"There's definitely a sense at the moment that restrictions are returning," Rory Boland, travel editor at consumer magazine Which? told CNN.

"Not just Southern Africa, Portugal has reintroduced tests for double vaccinated arrivals, and other countries are increasing restrictions. When you're in the country too, lots of countries are requiring tests on top of vaccination. There are increasing restrictions on boosters.

"There's a sense that travel is becoming more difficult again -- and that's against a background of lots of people not feeling confident traveling already."

World Health Organization experts have said while it is still too early to gauge what kind of impact the mutation will have, people should start taking precautions right now to reduce the chances of their exposure to it.

"It is something to watch," Maria Van Kerkhove, WHO's Covid-19 technical lead, said in a [video posted on Twitter](#).

She said it would take researchers a few weeks to understand what it [the new variant] means, but action was needed in the meantime.

"Everybody that's out there needs to understand that the more this virus circulates, the more opportunities the virus has to change, the more mutations we will see," she said.

"Every single one of you watching has a role to play in driving transmission down, as well as protecting yourself against severe disease and death.

"So get vaccinated when you can, make sure you receive the full course of your doses, and make sure you take steps to reduce your exposure and prevent yourself from passing that virus to someone else."

Financial impact

While it may be too early to gauge the impact of the virus, news of its emergence and the flight bans was enough to spook stock markets.

European stocks closed down sharply lower after fears of a new Covid variant sparked a global sell-off. In the UK the FTSE 100 ended the session 3.6% lower, while Germany's Dax was down 4% and the CAC 40 was 4.8% lower in France. Dow futures were also sharply down.

Asian stocks started the sell-off, with Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index dropping 2.7%, while Japan's Nikkei 225 was down 2.5%.

Travel stocks and airline stocks were among the big fallers in Europe.

The fresh anxiety comes as another blow for the travel industry, which has struggled to rebound after being brought to a near standstill during the first waves of the pandemic.

There are now fears some travel companies may not survive if the situation with the new variant worsens.

"I think unfortunately so -- I'm not saying they might go bust in the next couple weeks but the financial situation many are in is very, very challenging," said Boland.

"It's not just that bookings are down, but they're having to continually issue refunds. They're having difficulty getting financing from banks. There are a number of market conditions working against them.

"The UK had very little sector specific support from government, so there's a real risk of further holiday chaos and airlines going bust."

He went on to stress consumers should always check restrictions in any destinations they are planning to travel before booking and make sure they have appropriate coverage just in case.

"It's really important to have cover for your holiday company or airline going bust. Otherwise, you could end up losing hundreds or thousands of pounds."