

No Concrete Evidence that Omicron Variant originated in Africa: Travel Ban Led by Western Countries Draws Condemnation

Republic of South Africa scientists detect a new variant of the COVID-19 virus prompting a reactionary response from the United States, UK, EU and its allies

By [Abayomi Azikiwe](#)

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South Africa has been at the center of the struggle against the COVID-19 pandemic since its beginning during the first quarter of 2020.

At the time of this writing, nearly 90,000 people have died as a result of the infection while 2.9 million infections have been documented.

The country, the most industrialized on the African continent, has confirmed more cases than any other government within the 55 member-states African Union (AU). Some have attributed the high number of cases in South Africa to its testing capacity which has been rigorous since the advent of the pandemic.

With the detection of a new COVID-19 variant labelled Omicron, the western imperialist countries have responded with the imposition of travel bans specifically targeting the Southern Africa region. Political officials and other sectors of society have roundly condemned these measures noting that the restrictions unfairly designated the sub-continent as the source of the variant and its transmissibility.

Although the Southern African region has been the focus of Omicron, the variant has been detected in at least 11 other countries, including Israel, Australia and several European states such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Britain, Switzerland, Italy and Germany. There is no concrete evidence that the variant originated in Botswana or any other country in the sub-continent.

Following the lead of the United States, the UK and EU, other countries even within the AU region, have imposed the same bans related to travel. South Africa has been a leading country in the efforts to vaccinate people domestically and throughout the sub-continent.

Plans are underway for the establishment of manufacturing facilities in South Africa to produce COVID-19 vaccines for continental-wide distribution. The advanced nature of genome sequence monitoring inside the country has been an asset to the overall effort to curtail and eliminate the existing threat.

President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed the nation over television on November 28 to discuss the detection of the Omicron variant of the coronavirus, praising the scientific community for the discovery and encouraging those who had not been vaccinated to do so immediately. At the same the president expressed his profound disagreement with the travel bans noting that it is unjustly punishing those who made the discovery while further damaging the economies of South Africa and the seven other neighboring states.

The ban covers South Africa, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Mozambique, Malawi, Lesotho and Botswana. It was in Botswana where the initial presence of the variant was detected.

South Africa and other members of the Southern African Development Community (SADC) have suffered immensely since the lockdowns and restrictions enacted in the aftermath of the pandemic. Many of these states rely heavily on tourism and such a ban on travel for people from the region or those who have visited Southern Africa, will only serve to hamper any semblance of an economic recovery.

Moreover, the ban stigmatizes the region as a principal source of the pandemic when the initial cases of the coronavirus were detected in Asia and Europe during early 2020. Even today, the U.S. remains the epicenter of the pandemic having reported more cases than any other country internationally. Several states, led by Michigan, are experiencing a fourth wave of infections despite widespread efforts to encourage vaccinations by the U.S. government and its agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease.

Yet within the U.S., the pandemic has been highly politicized by right-wing elements so prevalent in the country. Conservative forces tend to oppose not only vaccinations, they also have utilized the public health protocols to disrupt local, legislative, state administrative and federal structures to claim that the enactment of restrictions to curb the spread of the virus infringes upon their personal freedom.

With specific reference to South Africa, [Eyewitness News reported](#) on November 29 that:

“An outraged President Cyril Ramaphosa on Sunday (Nov. 28) said the curbs were scientifically unjustified and called for them to be ‘immediately and urgently’ reversed. Health Minister Joe Phaahla on Monday said many South Africans had felt the country had hastened to go public with the discovery of the new Omicron variant and that had it ‘kept quiet, travel bans would not have happened. But that would have been detrimental, because our approach is for our citizens to not live in false security and false safety,’ said Phaahla. South African scientists won applause from Namibian President Hage Geingob, who said they had ‘unwittingly drawn fire and condemnation’ for their country.”

Southern Africa and the Global Pandemic

Ramaphosa felt compelled to speak to the South African people over the national media in real time on November 28 emphasizing the work which has been done over the last 20

months. He has maintained the country at a Level 1 public health status which imposes restrictions related to curfews, the number of people who can gather indoors and outdoors, and the need to wear masks along with vaccinations.

The president emphasized:

“The G20 Rome Declaration noted the plight of the tourism sector in developing countries, and made a commitment to support a ‘rapid, resilient, inclusive and sustainable recovery of the tourism sector’. Countries that have imposed travel restrictions on our country and some of our Southern African sister countries include the United Kingdom, United States, European Union members, Canada, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Australia, Japan, Thailand, Seychelles, Brazil and Guatemala, among others. These restrictions are unjustified and unfairly discriminate against our country and our Southern African sister countries. The prohibition of travel is not informed by science, nor will it be effective in preventing the spread of this variant. The only thing the prohibition on travel will do is to further damage the economies of the affected countries and undermine their ability to respond to, and recover from, the pandemic. We call upon all those countries that have imposed travel bans on our country and our Southern African sister countries to urgently reverse their decisions and lift the ban they have imposed before any further damage is done to our economies and to the livelihoods of our people. There is no scientific justification for keeping these restrictions in place.”

Others have pointed out the ongoing vaccination access inequality where on the African continent it is reported that only 6% of the population throughout the AU region have been fully inoculated against the virus. It is inevitable under such circumstances that new variants will continue to emerge globally.

On the European continent there has been a surge in coronavirus infections in several countries over the last few months. According to [statista.com](https://www.statista.com):

“As of November 21, 2021, there were 81,523,935 confirmed cases of coronavirus (COVID-19) across the whole of Europe since the first confirmed case on January 25, 2020. Montenegro has the highest incidence of coronavirus cases among its population in Europe at 24,914 per 100,000 people, followed by a rate of 20,408 in Georgia. Slovenia has recorded the third highest rate of cases in Europe at 19,322 cases per 100,000. With over 9.8 million confirmed cases, the UK has been the worst affected country in Europe, which translates into a rate of 14,773 cases per 100,000 population.”

Nonetheless, during early November, Washington lifted restrictions on travel into the U.S. for a host of countries including EU member-states, Canada, Mexico, Morocco, among others. Those who have proof of being fully immunized with World Health Organization (WHO) approved vaccines were allowed to travel into the country. See [this](#).

However, in regard to Southern Africa, the travel bans have blanketed all citizens and residents of the region. South Africa, which has fully vaccinated approximately 25% of its population of nearly 60 million people, apparently are excluded from these Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines.

United Nations Secretary General Antonio Guterres spoke out against the travel bans on people from Southern Africa. The UN chief said of the situation:

“The people of Africa cannot be blamed for the immorally low level of vaccinations available in Africa – and they should not be penalized for identifying and sharing crucial science and health information with the world. I am now deeply concerned about the isolation of Southern African countries due to new COVID-19 travel restrictions.”

WHO has also rejected the travel bans targeting the people of Southern Africa. The UN-affiliated agency’s regional director for Africa, Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, demanded that the international community utilize science and international health protocols while refraining from travel bans.

[Moeti said in a statement](#) about the bans, noting:

“Travel restrictions may play a role in slightly reducing the spread of COVID-19 but place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods. If restrictions are implemented, they should not be unnecessarily invasive or intrusive, and should be scientifically based, according to the International Health Regulations, which is a legally binding instrument of international law recognized by over 190 nations.”

The existence of new variants of concern further emphasizes the necessity of a global approach to resolving the pandemic. Vaccinations and other medicines to treat COVID-19 must be made available to all the peoples of the world.

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Abayomi Azikiwe is the editor of the Pan-African News Wire. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research.

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