

# Rapid global spread of Omicron unabated, experts deeply worried

Two cases detected in India; number of infections increasing rapidly in the continent of Africa

ONA

JOHANNESBURG

OMICRON shows every sign of being set to become the dominant version of the coronavirus, researchers in Africa and Europe said on Thursday as multiple areas reported surges in the numbers of people infected with the new variant.

For example, researchers in Africa pointed out on Thursday that the number of infections on the continent is increasing rapidly, and signs in some areas show that the majority of these new cases are Omicron-related.

Last week, 52,300 new cases were registered in the whole African continent, an increase of 105 per cent compared to the previous week.

South Africa alone recorded 31,000 new Covid-19 infections. The variant has also spread worldwide.

It has been detected in Botswana, Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, John Nkengasong of the African Centre for Infectious Diseases (Africa CDC) said on Thursday.

According to Nkengasong, however, it is still unknown how many people have been infected with the Omicron variant.

About 80 per cent of DNA-sequenced coronavirus test results are now showing the presence of Omicron, said Anne von Gotteberg, a microbiologist at South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD).

"It looks like there is a predominance of Omicron across the country," she said.

She also noted a high rate of reinfection, which she said indicated that people are more susceptible to Omicron than to Delta, the last variant to break



An illustration picture taken in London on Thursday shows four syringes and a screen displaying the word 'Omicron', the name of the new covid 19 variant, and an illustration of the virus.

out and sweep the world. But there were also signs that people infected with Omicron suffered less severe symptoms in cases of reinfection or when the patient was vaccinated.

Researchers in Europe said they think the Omicron variant might be the dominant form of the coronavirus in a matter of months. Using mathematical models, workers at the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) projected that Omicron could be the cause of half of all Covid-19 cases in the European region within months.

But they also pointed to a variety of uncertainties. It is still not known how quickly Omicron spreads, how sick it makes people and what advantages it has in overcoming

a person's immune system. However, they said earlier signs showed Omicron was a more powerful pathogen when compared to Delta.

ECDC director Andrea Ammon said the dangers posed by Omicron once again made the case that people should get vaccinated or, if already vaccinated and older than 40, a booster shot. She also reminded people to practice mask-wearing, social-distancing and proper ventilation.

Nkengasong said the Africa CDC is concerned about the situation in southern Africa. The supply of vaccines is improving, but they are not being administered fast enough.

In Africa, only 7 per cent of the population has been fully vaccinated against the corona-

virus. The continent has now procured 417.5 million doses, of which only 235.8 million have been administered.

According to the CDC, a total of around 8.6 million infections have been registered in Africa so far, causing more than 223,000 deaths.

Experts say, however, that the number of unreported cases in Africa, home to 1.3 billion people, is probably higher.

Nkengasong expressed concern over the holiday season and fears a sharp increase of Covid-19 numbers due to gatherings over Christmas and New Year.

The Africa CDC wants to increase the number of tests in Africa from the current 82 million to 200 million in the coming months.

Eleven African countries

are fighting against the fourth wave of infection, while Mauritius is entering its fifth wave, according to the Africa CDC.

The Africa CDC is trying to pool the resources of African countries and coordinate measures in the fight against the pandemic.

As Omicron spread further, two were detected in India, health officials said on Thursday.

The two cases are of a 66-year-old and a 46-year-old in southern Karnataka state, health officials said at a briefing. They were being monitored. No further details were given.

"We need not panic, awareness is the need of the moment," said Balram Bhargava, director of the Indian Council Of Medical Research.

The two cases with the Omicron variant were of foreign nationals, both male, who arrived in Bengaluru in November. Their contacts are being traced. No virus was found in the contacts of the one man. In the other case, five contacts have been hospitalized and five more are awaiting the result of tests.

In India, pandemic restrictions have been eased and life has been returning to a semblance of normalcy as daily cases drop and number of vaccinations rise.

The country has the second largest Covid-19 caseload after the US, but has been reporting less than 10,000 cases daily for the past week which is a steep drop from the 400,000 new cases a day during a peak of a deadly second wave in April-May.

Federal health officials said around 84 per cent of the adult population had received a single dose of the vaccine and 49 per cent both doses.

## News in brief

### Libyan court reinstates Gaddafi's son as candidate for president

BENGAZI, Libya A Libyan court on Thursday reinstated Saif al-Islam, the son of late dictator Moamer Gaddafi, as an official candidate for president in an election due later this month, Libya media reported. Last week, an electoral commission disqualified his candidacy, citing a past criminal conviction. On Thursday, an appeals court in Libya's southern city of Sabha accepted Saif al-Islam's appeal against the disqualification and allowed him back into the election race, Libya's state news agency LANA reported, citing his lawyer. The Libyan Observer, a news portal, posted footage showing his supporters celebrating the ruling outside the court. Now 49, Saif al-Islam was an influential figure in his father's inner circle. In 2011 he supported the brutal suppression of protests against his father, who was later killed. (AGENCIES)

### Iraq repatriates 433 more stranded migrants from Belarus

BAGHDAD Iraq said on Thursday it was bringing home 433 more citizens from Belarus after they had been stranded on its border in their attempt to enter the European Union (EU). LAST month, the Iraqi government said it would bring back those who wish to return voluntarily from Belarus. At least 1,500 Iraqis have since been repatriated aboard flights of the national carrier. The latest group were flown on Thursday on an Iraqi Airways flight out of the Belarusian capital Minsk, spokesman for the Iraqi Foreign Ministry Ahmed al-Sahaf said, without giving further details. The ministry has also issued 140 passports for Iraqi migrants who had lost their passports to help their repatriation, the official added, according to Iraq's state news agency INA. (AGENCIES)

### Ten killed in blast targeting oil field workers in war-torn Syria

DAMASCUS At least 10 people were killed on Thursday in an explosion that targeted a bus in the east of war-torn Syria, state media and a monitoring group reported. Syria's state news agency SANA said a "terrorist attack" targeted a bus carrying workers returning from the Kharata oil field in the eastern province of Deir al-Zour. One worker was also injured in the attack, the agency added. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor, confirmed the attack, but said two workers were injured. The Britain-based watchdog said that the bus was hit by an explosive device in a rural area where Islamic State militants are active. The Kharata oil field is located 20 kilometres south west of Deir al-Zour. Syrian government forces retook control of the field in September of 2017 after fighting against Islamic State in the area. (AGENCIES)

### Austrian Chancellor Schallenberg announces surprise resignation

VIENNA Austrian Chancellor Alexander Schallenberg said on Thursday he is stepping down, less than two months after taking office and hours after his scandal-plagued predecessor, Sebastian Kurz, announced his departure from politics. Conservative politician Schallenberg's resignation heralds more turmoil at the top of Austrian politics, and in particular for the conservative Austrian People's Party (OeVP). Kurz, who is suspected of corruption, said earlier on Thursday that he was stepping down as party leader and parliamentary group leader of the OeVP. (AGENCIES)

## 'Personal meeting' with Peng Shuai agreed upon, says IOC

DPA

LONDON

THE International Olympic Committee (IOC) says it has spoken again with tennis player Peng Shuai as it reacted to the WTA's suspension of tournaments in China.

WTA chairman and chief executive Steve Simon has taken a strong stance against the tour's biggest market since former world doubles number one Peng made an allegation of sexual assault against a senior Chinese official on social media last month that was swiftly removed. The WTA has been unable to gain proof that Peng is free of censorship and coercion, while Simon's call for the 35-year-old's claim to be fully

investigated appears to have fallen on deaf ears.

The IOC was criticised for saying after a video call with Peng on November 21 that she was "safe and well" despite offering no evidence that she was talking freely or addressing the sexual assault allegation. The idea of a boycott of the Winter Olympics in Beijing in February has been floated, but the IOC again stated its belief that its approach of "quiet diplomacy" was the best one. The organisation said in a statement: "We share the same concern as many other people and organisations about the well-being and safety of Peng Shuai."

"This is why, just yesterday, an IOC team held an-

other video call with her. We have offered her wide-ranging support, will stay in regular touch with her, and have already agreed on a personal meeting in January. "There are different ways to achieve her well-being and safety. We have taken a very human and person-centred approach to her situation."

Since she is a three-time Olympian, the IOC is addressing these concerns directly with Chinese sports organisations. "We are using 'quiet diplomacy' which, given the circumstances and based on the experience of governments and other organisations, is indicated to be the most promising way to proceed effectively in such humanitarian matters."

## First trial on state torture in Syria may end in January

DPA

KOBLENZ, GERMANY

A trial that German prosecutors say is the world's first criminal proceedings on state torture in Syria may end in January. Senior prosecutor Jasper Klinge said during a break in the hearing at Koblenz Higher Regional Court that, subject to imponderables, the verdict could come on January 13, 2022.

The Federal Prosecutor's Office kicked off the plea proceedings in the ongoing trial at the Koblenz Higher Regional Court on Thursday morning. Klinge said that Germany has a particular historical responsibility not to accept crimes against humanity. "We owe

this to the victims," he said, and described the state torture in question as an attack on the international community.

International criminal law allows the prosecution of possible war crimes committed by foreigners in other states. The 58-year-old Syrian is alleged to have been responsible for the torture of at least 4,000 people in a prison of the General Intelligence Service in the Syrian capital Damascus. At least 58 prisoners had died.

The former colonel denied the accusations at the beginning of the trial. He said then that had secretly sympathised with the Syrian opposition and had supported them after fleeing his home country, even participating in the sec-

ond Syria peace conference in Geneva in 2014. Klinge and Public Prosecutor Claudia Polz drew a different picture of the former high-ranking intelligence officer on Thursday, based also on many statements by victim witnesses. According to Klinge, at the time he was always trying to comply with the wishes of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's rule to "break the opposition out of revenge," Klinge said. The trial, which attracted international attention, began in April 2020 with two defendants facing charges. In February 2021, the younger one, the Syrian Eyad A, was sentenced to four and a half years' imprisonment for aiding and abetting a crime against humanity.

## London angry after French president brands UK PM a 'clown'

DPA

LONDON

REPORTED comments by French President Emmanuel Macron branding British Prime Minister Boris Johnson a "clown" and a "knucklehead" were "unhelpful," a British government minister said on Thursday.

The French president's scathing assessment of the prime minister threatened to fuel an already bitter diplomatic row between London and Paris which has been simmering for weeks.

Business Minister George Freeman suggested the remarks belonged in the "pantomime season" and linked them to the impending French elections.

"Of course, the prime minister isn't a clown, he is the elected prime minister of this country with a very big mandate, leading this country through the pandemic," he told Sky News. The comments attributed to Macron were made privately to a small group of his advisers during a visit last week to Croatia, according to French satirical weekly Le Canard Enchaîné.

The president had already lashed out publicly at Johnson, accusing him of not being "serious" in his response to the capsizing of a migrant boat in the Channel with the loss of 27 lives.

## No end to Delhi's air pollution woes, schools closed again

DPA

NEW DELHI

THE first days of December saw air quality plummeting again to the "severe" level in Delhi after the Indian capital saw the worst pollution in November in six years.

At least three state-run monitoring stations recorded fine particulate matter PM2.5 levels of above 400 on Thursday. This is several times the limit deemed safe by the World Health Organization (WHO).

The Supreme Court rapped the federal and state governments once again for failing to address the issue

and the Delhi government announced that schools, which opened for three days last week as air quality improved, were to be closed again from Friday.

Construction and demolition work has also been stopped.

Central Pollution Control Board data showed that Delhi's average air quality index (AQI), that measures particulate matter, was 377 this November compared to a range of 312 to 374 in the last six years, the Hindustan Times newspaper reported.

There were also 11 "severe" pollution days, which is the most hazardous level, this

November, compared to nine in 2020, seven in 2019 and five in 2018.

Experts ascribe the high pollution levels this year to the late withdrawal of the monsoon leading to more farmers burning stubble within a short period of time as they prepare for the next sowing season, besides weather factors including lack of winds.

The Supreme Court gave the federal and state governments of Delhi and its neighbours 24 hours to take steps to curb pollution levels failing which it said it would take strict action, according to legal reporting website LiveLaw.



Men work at a road construction site amid smoggy conditions in New Delhi on Thursday.