

UK to widen COVID lockdowns as new strain from South Africa found

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London, December 23 (RHC)-- A new, potentially more infectious variant of the novel coronavirus has been found in the United Kingdom in cases linked to South Africa, British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said while also announcing further areas of England would be placed under its strictest COVID-19 restrictions.

South Africa's health department said last week that a new genetic mutation of the virus had been discovered and might be responsible for a recent surge in infections there.

"Thanks to the impressive genomic capability of the South Africans, we've detected two cases of another new variant of coronavirus here in the UK," Hancock told a media briefing on Wednesday. "Both are contacts of cases who have travelled from South Africa over the past few weeks."

The United Kingdom is already trying to curb the spread of a separate mutated strain of the virus discovered in the UK which could be up to 70 percent more transmissible, with further studies being carried out.

“This new variant [from South Africa] is highly concerning, because it is yet more transmissible, and it appears to have mutated further than the new variant has been discovered in the UK,” he said.

Susan Hopkins from Public Health England said the new variant in the UK “is very different to the variant in South Africa, it’s got different mutations.” “Both of them look like they’re more transmissible. We have more evidence on the transmission for the UK variant because we’ve been studying that with great detail with academic partners. We’re still learning about the South African variant.”

She expressed confidence that vaccines that have already been developed should be effective “because the vaccine produces a strong immune response and it’s broad and acts against lots of variation in the virus.”

Hancock announced travel restrictions on flights from South Africa as a result of the detection of the new strain. The health minister said that all individuals in the UK who had contracted the variant originating in South Africa had been placed in quarantine, as well as their close contacts.

Moreover, Hancock said the government was also asking anyone who has been in close contact with someone who had been in South Africa in the last two weeks to quarantine. “They must restrict all contact with any other person whatsoever,” he said.

Haru Mutasa, reporting from Johannesburg, said South Africa is averaging just under 10,000 new infections a day. “South African officials say they alerted the UK about this new variant last week,” she said. “They say it spreads faster and could be responsible for the second wave (South Africa) is currently experiencing. It has been identified in Kwazulu-Natal province in the eastern cape and Garden Route area, that’s the Cape Town area.”

Meanwhile, more than 50 nations have also imposed their own travel restrictions on the UK, including France.

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