

WHO warns against travel bans over ‘Omicron’ variant

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Geneva, November 27 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization (WHO) has stated that countries restricting travel to and from southern Africa to prevent the spread of a “super-mutant” Covid-19 variant are acting too hastily.

“At this point, implementing travel measures is being cautioned against,” WHO spokesman Christian Lindmeier said on Friday at a UN briefing in Geneva. “The WHO recommends that countries continue to

apply a risk-based and a scientific approach when implementing travel measures.”

The statement came as countries around the world, such as the UK, Denmark, Spain, and the Philippines took steps to limit travel to and from South Africa and neighboring states. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen called for all air travel between the EU and countries with reported cases of the B.1.1.529 variant to be suspended while the risk was assessed.

News of the variant set off panic in Europe, where the continent’s first case was confirmed on Friday in Belgium, and caused U.S. stocks to tumble. The variant, which was named after the Greek letter Omicron, has 32 mutations and has been described by the UK Health Security Agency as “the worst one we’ve seen so far.” It was first identified in Botswana earlier this month and has since spread widely across southern Africa.

“It will take a few weeks for us to understand what impact this variant has,” Lindmeier said, adding that researchers were working to understand the mutations and “how they may impact diagnostics, therapeutics, and vaccines.”

But public health officials in various countries are clearly looking to stop the spread of Omicron immediately. Passengers on two KLM flights from South Africa were forbidden from disembarking at Amsterdam’s Schiphol Airport on Friday morning until they had been tested for Covid-19.

Lindmeier cautioned that all travel restrictions should be carefully weighed before being imposed. “Countries can do a lot already in terms of surveillance and sequencing, and work together with affected countries or globally to work scientifically to fight this variant and to understand more about it,” he said.

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