The African Union calls for the urgent rescinding of travel bans placed on Member States following detection of the SARS-COV-2 Omicron variant

Context

On 25 November 2021, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) in South Africa publicly announced the detection of a new variant of the SARS-COV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, following genomic sequencing[1]. This variant, lineage B.1.1.529, was detected as the Gauteng province was experiencing a sudden increase in COVID-19 cases and was accordingly closely monitored by the Health authorities in South Africa. The same variant was concurrently detected in Botswana and in Hong-Kong, China.

The large number of mutations displayed by lineage B.1.1.529 variant suggested potential for increased transmissibility, evasion from immune responses from prior infection and/ or vaccination, and impact on relative disease severity.

On 26th the WHO Technical Advisory Group on SARS-CoV-2 Virus Evolution (TAG-VE) designated SARS-CoV-2 lineage B.1.1.529 a variant of concern, named Omicron.

By 5th November 2021, a total of 635 Omicron cases have been detected and reported to GISAID[2] by 37 countries across all continents, including 228 cases detected in South Africa and 143 cases detected in the United Kingdom.

As genomic sequencing efforts have intensified globally, community transmission of Omicron has been evidenced by reports of cases with no travel history, including in the United Kingdom, the European Union (e.g: Germany, Norway, Danemark) and the United States of America among others. These reports indicate that the Omicron had spread and was already circulating globally by the time the variant was first detected in South Africa.

In response to detection of the Omicron variant, a number of countries have imposed immediate travel bans as a precautionary measure. However, despite the widespread distribution of Omicron cases globally, the majority of border closures solely target flights to and from South Africa and

[1] https://www.nicd.ac.za/new-covid-19-variant-detected-in-south-africa/
[2] https://www.gisaid.org/hcov19-variants/

neighbouring countries in Southern Africa, some of which have no evidence of the Omicron variant and relatively low daily COVID-19 case numbers.

Statement

The African Union strongly commends the effective genomic surveillance systems in South Africa and Botswana that have led to early detection of the Omicron variant on the continent, and applauds scientists and public health authorities in both member states for timely and transparent data sharing to alert the international community in alignment with International Health Regulations (2005).

The African Union acknowledges that more time and investigations are needed to adequately assess the epidemiological and clinical characteristics of the Omicron variant. Although COVID-19 case numbers and test positivity rates have sharply increased in the Gauteng province since Omicron was first reported, early clinical data from infected cases indicate that this has not translated into significant increase in severe COVID-19 cases or in-hospitals deaths until now[3]. This could however be due to the younger age profile of cases and/or the time lag between increase in COVID-19 case numbers and increase in COVID-19 deaths.

The African Union stresses that PHSM interventions to mitigate the risk of infections and control the spread of COVID-19 should be targeted to limit impact on lives and livelihoods, and informed by science and evidence. Current evidence, which underscores global spread and community transmission of the Omicron variant, does not support selective travel bans imposed on Southern African countries.

These travel and entry bans, which limit the free movement of people and goods, have an immediate and significant negative impact in the region as they lead to:

- Adverse impact on the economy which will negatively affect the lives and livelihoods of populations concerned
- Limited capacity to access essential medical supplies needed to respond to the ongoing upsurge of cases in South Africa.
- Limited capacity for Southern African researchers and scientists to access the reagents needed to monitor spread of the Omicron variant and to investigate and characterize its impact on transmissibility, disease severity and possible evasion from vaccines.

The African Union further emphasizes that penalizing Member States for ensuring timely and transparent data dissemination in accordance with international health regulations acts as a disincentive for information sharing in the future, potentially posing a threat to health security on the continent and globally.

[3] https://www.samrc.ac.za/news/tshwane-district-omicron-variant-patient-profile-early-features

Accordingly, the African Union calls for the urgent rescinding of selective travel bans imposed on African Union members states

Equitable access to vaccines is key to immunize populations, control transmission of the virus and prevent the emergence of new variants. International efforts should accordingly focus on increasing vaccination coverage on the continent.