

Countries impose UK travel restrictions as more infectious COVID-19 strain threatens to spread worldwide

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Britain recorded 33,364 new cases of COVID-19, 18,871 hospitalisations and 215 deaths—spurred on by the new more infectious strain first acknowledged by Boris Johnson’s government last week.

More than 40 countries have imposed flight and other travel restrictions on the UK to contain the spread of the new strain which is reported to be 70 percent more infectious than the previously dominant strains. They include at least 18 European countries, as well as Russia, India, Canada, Hong Kong, Israel, Iran, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador and Peru. The US is expected to follow.

But Professor Calum Semple, of the government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has warned that the mutated strain is likely to become the dominant global strain nevertheless. Semple, professor of outbreak medicine at the University of Liverpool, when asked by *Sky News* whether the mutant strain will become globally dominant, answered in the affirmative as it was affecting more people: “Because the virus has the evolutionary advantage in transmitting more quickly, it will out-compete all the other strains, and so it will naturally do that.”

He added, “As immunity comes into the community more widely, then you’ll start to see more pressure on the virus and you’re more likely to see other escapes of other variations,” before warning, “We do not yet have herd immunity despite those people that think herd immunity is going to be the salvation. We won’t have it until a very large number of people have been vaccinated.”

There is no evidence that the new strain is more deadly than its predecessors, or that it is resistant to the various vaccines now being rolled out. But its higher rate of infectivity means more cases, hospitalisations, and deaths

and demands a faster and more widespread vaccination drive and far more effective measures of containment. These are still not being imposed in the UK or in any of the countries now belatedly imposing travel restrictions.

The two earliest samples of the mutated virus were collected on September 20 in Kent and on September 21 in London. But the government only admitted to knowledge of the severity of the new viral spread on December 14. It was only on Saturday that Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson introduced a new more restrictive “Tier 4” level affecting 16.4 million people, including around 9 million people throughout London and much of southeast England. But this still leaves millions going to work in an area where the new mutation accounts for 60 percent of infections and has no impact on the rest of the UK. The government has admitted that 10-15 percent of cases of the new strain, VUI-202012/01, are already occurring outside the southeast.

As a result, the door is being shut on UK travel after the new strain has already escaped to several European countries, and with two cases confirmed as far away as Australia. Infections have been officially recorded in Denmark, the Netherlands, Italy and British-ruled Gibraltar in Spain. South Africa, a centre of the pandemic, has recorded a similar mutation as likely responsible for a surge in cases.

Yesterday Johnson was preoccupied by negotiations with President Emmanuel Macron to reverse a unilateral 48-hour French ban on freight lorries travelling between Dover and Calais, as well as travel through the Channel Tunnel. A fifth of the UK’s entire trade in goods (imports and exports) travel through Dover each day. However, French health minister Olivier Veran told Europe 1 radio, “It is entirely possible that the virus is circulating in France.”

In Germany, Christian Drosten, director of virology at Berlin's Charite Hospital, was widely cited in the UK press for his remarks that politicians and the media could be exaggerating the infectivity of the new strain and that it was unclear whether the surge in cases in Kent and the southeast was caused by the new strain. But Drosten also said he expected the new strain was already in circulation in Germany.

The implications for the spread of the pandemic in Europe and internationally are grave. On Saturday, Johnson said the new virus could boost the *R* reproduction rate in the UK by 0.4—meaning a substantial escalation in infections. This may be an underestimate. The government's New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (Nervtag) estimates the variant could increase the *R* number by between 0.4 and 0.9.

Even if the spread of the mutation is limited, it is already active on the continent and is only one of thousands of mutations worldwide—some of which have similar characteristics. British scientists are reportedly monitoring 4,000 strains of coronavirus. These include the D614G variant that became the dominant strain in Europe and then spread globally. A new strain was identified in October as responsible for 90 percent of new infections in Spain and is likely to have spread throughout Europe due to tourism.

Johnson gave a press conference yesterday, flanked by his chief scientific advisor, Sir Patrick Vallance, and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps. Johnson and Shapps only became animated regarding the negotiations to end the French blockade of haulage trade and treated questions on the pandemic with cursory and evasive replies.

The criminal response of the government was therefore most openly articulated by Vallance. Asked why tougher containment measures were not in place across the UK, he admitted, "The transmission is increased. We can't say exactly by how much, but it is clearly substantially increased, so it is more transmissible." He then predicted there would be spike in cases after an "inevitable period of mixing" over Christmas. But he still proposed no new containment measures.

The government is again ignoring prominent scientists demanding a second national lockdown, with Robert West, professor of health psychology at University College London's Institute of Epidemiology and Health and a member of SAGE, insisting, "We need to reset our strategy and move rapidly to a zero COVID strategy of the kind that many have been proposing ... the alternative

could well be a catastrophic collapse in confidence in the country's ability to control the virus and the economic, human and social disaster that would follow."

The sole concern of the Johnson government and its counterparts in every country is with increasing the share values of the major corporations and filling the bank accounts of the super-rich. His focus on Dover was not prompted by the threat of food and medicine shortages, but the fall of the FTSE 100 by 1.7 percent, provoked by the travel and trade bans, followed by still bigger falls in Europe and the US.

That is why the policy of herd immunity—refusing to implement genuine containment measures that would require closing workplaces and schools and would hinder the accumulation of profit—is pursued throughout the world. The price paid is coined in over 1.7 million human lives, including close to half a million in Europe. Hundreds of thousands face death in the coming weeks.

This must be prevented at all costs. Emergency measures must be taken to bring the virus under control!

The Socialist Equality Party in Britain and our sister parties in the International Committee of the Fourth International throughout the world call on workers everywhere to demand the immediate closure of all nonessential businesses and schools. This must be accompanied by full compensation for lost wages and small business income.

Trillions must be invested in health care infrastructure to treat, contain and eradicate COVID-19, and ensure society is protected from the threat of infectious disease in the future. The massive sums monopolised by the financial elite must be seized and used to meet essential social needs. All workers and young people who want to fight for this programme must contact the SEP today.



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