

New strain of COVID-19 is driving South Africa's resurgence

21 December 2020, by Mogomotsi Magome and Andrew Meldrum



A lone man who was just tested for COVID-19 waits in line to make payment for the test at a private laboratory in Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday Dec. 19, 2020. South Africa is bracing for its second wave, as many people will travel across provinces for vacations and visiting their families. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

South Africa has announced that a new variant of the COVID-19 virus is driving the country's current resurgence of the disease, which is seeing higher numbers of confirmed cases, hospitalizations and deaths.

The new variant, known as 501.V2, is dominant among new confirmed infections in South Africa, according to health officials and scientists leading the country's virus strategy.

"It is still very early but at this stage, the preliminary data suggests the virus that is now dominating in the second wave is spreading faster than the first wave," Professor Salim Abdool Karim, chairman of the government's Ministerial Advisory Committee, said in a briefing to journalists.

South Africa may see "many more cases" in the new wave than it experienced in the first surge of

the disease, said Abdool Karim.

South Africa currently has more than 8,500 people hospitalized with COVID-19, surpassing the previous high of 8,300 recorded in August.

"We are seeing a much earlier and much sharper rise in the second wave or resurgence than we anticipated," Prof. Ian Sanne, a member of the advisory committee, told South Africa's News24.

The new strain, different from the one in Britain, appears to be more infectious than the original virus. South African scientists are studying if the vaccines against COVID-19 will also offer protection against the new strain.



People who were just tested for COVID-19 wait in line to make payment for the test at a private laboratory in Johannesburg, South Africa, Saturday Dec. 19, 2020. South Africa is bracing for its second wave, as many people will travel across provinces for vacations and visiting their families. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

Some of the vaccines, including the one developed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca, are undergoing clinical tests in South Africa.

The scientists studying the new variant emphasized that preventive measures like wearing masks and social distancing are vital.

In response to the resurgence of COVID-19, the South African government has introduced tougher lockdown restrictions which include limited days and hours for the trade of alcohol and the closure of beaches in areas identified as hotspots.

South Africa's 7-day rolling average of daily new cases has more than doubled over the past two weeks, from 6.47 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 6 to 14.68 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 20. The number of deaths has also increased with the 7-day rolling average of daily deaths in South Africa rising from 0.18 deaths per 100,000 people on Dec. 6 to 0.34 deaths per 100,000 people on Dec. 20.

The country has recorded a total of 912, 477 cases, including 24,539 deaths.

Abdool Karim and other experts have expressed concerns that more people may be infected over the holiday season, as many people travel and visit family members.

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