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The World Health Organization names new coronavirus variant Omicron and designates it as a 'variant of concern'.

Global authorities have reacted with alarm to a new coronavirus variant detected in South Africa, with the European Union and the United Kingdom among those tightening border controls as researchers sought to find out if the mutation was vaccine-resistant.

Hours after the UK banned flights from South Africa and neighbouring countries and asked travellers returning from there to quarantine, the World Health Organization (WHO) cautioned against hasty measures, and a South African scientist labelled London's decision a symptom of "vaccine apartheid".

The WHO also classified the B.1.1.529 strain as a "variant of concern," saying it may spread more quickly than other forms. Infections in South Africa had risen steeply in recent weeks, coinciding with detection of the variant now designated as omicron.

The organization said it would take weeks to determine how effective vaccines were against the variant, which was first identified this week.

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