

Global COVID-19 Outbreak



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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread to every region of the world and resulted in more than 132 million cases and 2.8 million deaths. Several vaccines are now available and being administered in numerous countries; however, several virus variants have emerged and may slow the vaccines' progress in containing the global pandemic. COVID-19 hot spots have emerged in Brazil, Europe, India and the U.S., and cases are rising globally. Travel restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19 remain in place in much of the world, though several countries are relaxing travel restrictions for vaccinated travelers or travelers entering from lower-risk areas. Given the global scale of the outbreak and the new phase of the pandemic that began when vaccine rollouts started, it remains essential that travelers acquire accurate data in order to make informed decisions.

Analysis

In 2021, numerous coronavirus variants have emerged and threaten to prolong the global pandemic. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has named several variants of concern, including B.1.1.7, first detected in the UK; B.1.351, first detected in South Africa; and B.1.427, first detected in the U.S. Traits observed in new variants include increased transmissibility, resistance to therapeutics and increased lethality. The variant first detected in the UK has become the dominant strain of the virus in Europe and is a major factor in case increases globally.

Fatigue with COVID-19-related restrictions is also contributing to the spread of the virus. Public disapproval of increased restrictions has reduced compliance from individuals and led several countries, including Brazil and Germany, to postpone or refrain from implementing restrictions despite rising case numbers. Many governments are using vaccines as their main strategy for controlling the spread of the virus.

Seven vaccines have been approved for use among various countries. Independent studies have confirmed that the vaccines are sufficiently effective against current strains of COVID-19 to contain outbreaks, but researchers have observed decreased efficacy against the variant first detected in South Africa, which raises concerns that future variants may be resistant against vaccines to the point of rendering them insufficiently effective for containing outbreaks. Despite the presence of vaccines, there are major discrepancies in vaccine availability among countries. Wealthy countries have purchased the majority of doses, resulting in insufficient vaccine coverage in developing countries. Experts have voiced concerns that delayed vaccinations in developing countries may result in viral mutations that could resist vaccines and prolong the global pandemic. Vaccine rollout programs in many developing countries have been slow, and at least 30 countries have not reported giving any doses as of the beginning of April 2021.

Prevalence and travel restrictions

Cases are rising in much of the world. Major surges in cases per capita are occurring in Brazil, Europe, India and the U.S., where the spread of variants is outpacing the vaccine rollouts.

In Europe, the current wave of the outbreak is centered in the Czech Republic, though cases are rising across the continent. Some European states are enacting more intense restrictions, while others are loosening them. India's disease epicenter is in Maharashtra state, which has been subject to weekend lockdowns and curfews. Most of Brazil's neighbors have enacted travel restrictions to prevent the outbreak from spreading internationally. Cases continue to rise in the U.S., though they are unevenly distributed geographically; cases driven by variants are rising across the east coast and in the state of Michigan.

Due to widespread ongoing transmission of COVID-19, the CDC recommends that travelers avoid all nonessential international travel to most countries, citing the potential for overwhelmed health care systems and limited access to adequate medical care. The CDC also recommends only fully vaccinated individuals conduct air travel due to the ease at which COVID-19 can spread in airports and airplane cabins. Air travel remains subject to restrictions in many countries, and some countries, such as the UK and Finland, are maintaining or increasing travel restrictions for individuals traveling to and from high-risk areas.

Although cases continue to rise and travel restrictions remain in place across much of the world, many countries have reduced restrictions such as self-isolation periods or testing requirements. Additionally, several countries, including Greece and Thailand, are now waiving testing and isolation requirements for travelers who can present proof of vaccination upon entry or are entering from lower-risk areas. Some countries are also developing vaccine passports, which are computerized applications that contain a code verifying whether a person has been vaccinated or has recently tested negative for COVID-19. Vaccine passport initiatives have faced delays and concerns over issues regarding socioeconomic equity and ethics relevant to the concept.

Outlook

Cases will likely continue to rise worldwide — particularly in Brazil, Europe, India and the U.S. — in the near to medium term. Although demand continues to outpace supply in wealthy countries, these countries will likely have vaccine surpluses by mid-2021. Developing countries may face vaccine shortages for longer due to the difficulty of competing with wealthy countries for doses and due to underdeveloped or absent public health infrastructure. Countries currently leading in vaccinations per capita are Bahrain, Bhutan, Chile,

Israel, Seychelles, the UK, the United Arab Emirates and the U.S. However, vaccine hesitancy has emerged as a factor that could prolong the global pandemic. Safety concerns regarding a connection between one vaccine and a rare and dangerous blood-clotting condition have led to restrictions on that vaccine's use in much of the EU. Concerns about vaccine safety may slow vaccinations and prolong the global pandemic, giving the virus time to mutate and generate more variants of concern.

The pandemic has resulted in shocks to global financial markets, prompted the initiation of business continuity plans and led to uncertainties surrounding global travel plans. Should vaccines be widely administered in the coming months, the relaxation of severe domestic and international travel restrictions can be expected. However, countries that lack access to vaccines or a public health service capable of administering them to their population could maintain or intensify travel restrictions and experience a further decline in economic activity. Additionally, the emergence of variants that render vaccines insufficiently effective may prolong travel restrictions and economic stagnation. The success of the vaccine rollout and containment efforts will influence the ultimate outcome.

Recommendations

- For operational support, including secure transportation, meet-and-greet services and close protection, please contact AIG Travel at aigtsoc@aig.com.
- Travelers are advised to monitor developments, as the situation remains fluid.
- Individuals are advised to adhere to all national and international public health directives.
- Travelers are advised to register their presence with their local consulate or embassy.
- Those who have recently visited COVID-19-impacted countries or territories should expect enhanced screening measures upon arrival at airports and other transportation hubs, including potential quarantine.
- Travelers exhibiting symptoms of the virus are advised to seek immediate medical attention.
- Individuals in regions subject to lockdown should obtain all necessary supplies, including medications.
- Travelers should contact their flight provider for itinerary-specific information.

For further information please contact AIG Travel's security team at aigtsoc@aig.com.

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