

Omicron a devastating setback for SA

Ramaphosa expected to address the nation today or tomorrow following consultations on new Covid-19 variant

NATHAN CRAIG and LETHU NXUMALO

OMICRON, the new Covid-19 variant discovered this week, has raised alarm bells as extrapolations suggest it has characteristics of each other variant of concern that exerted global dominance.

However, now the country waits with bated breath after President Cyril Ramaphosa met with the National Coronavirus Command Council yesterday.

The urgent meeting foreshadows a national address on whether the country will spend a second consecutive festive season in a stringent lockdown owing to the emergence of the Covid-19 variant of concern.

Minister in the Presidency, Mondli Gungubele, said developments in the Covid-19 pandemic, including scientific updates, were assessed and the meeting's outcome would determine further consultations with the President's Co-ordinating Council and Cabinet.

Ramaphosa was expected to address the nation today or tomorrow evening.

Health Minister Joe Phaahla said Omicron was rapidly spreading with a major curb being the potential proposal of an interprovincial travel ban.

"Experts indicated that the virus moves as we move. I am not in a position to say, if infections continue to rise and we look at containment measures, that there will never be any restrictions on travelling. It's going to depend on our risk-adjusted approach," said Phaahla.

According to statistics released by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) yesterday, there were 3220 new cases, representing a 9.2% positivity rate. There were a further 8 Covid-19-related deaths, bringing the

total fatalities to 89791. There were a further 12 Covid-19-related deaths, bringing the total fatalities by Friday to 89783.

The B.1.1.529 variant discovered in Botswana this week was classified by the World Health Organization as a variant of concern and named Omicron on Friday, joining Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta. On Thursday the NICD confirmed Omicron had been detected in the country through collaborations with private laboratories and the Network for Genomic Surveillance in SA (NGS-SA).

NICD acting director Adrian Puren said data was limited but experts were working overtime with established surveillance systems to understand the variant. "We don't know what the potential implications could be. Developments are occurring at a rapid pace and the public will be kept up to date."

Infectious diseases epidemiologist Professor Salim Abdool Karim said he could only make extrapolated conclusions: "It has over 30 mutations and many are similar to the other variants of concern which could mean that Omicron could be deadly, spread rapidly and evade immunity, plus there are several mutations we do not know," he said.

Abdool Karim said if the country was not cautious and did not follow all health and safety protocols Omicron would drive the fourth wave.

Wits University vaccinologist Professor Shabir Madhi said while much remained unknown about Omicron, the vaccines, Pfizer-BioNTech and Johnson & Johnson, would likely still be effective.

"The vaccines are intended to prevent severe disease and death. They have done so successfully thus far and should continue to do so. Right now,

work needs to be done to understand the extent of the variant but there is evidence to suggest that it will be resistant to antibodies gained through vaccine and natural immunity but T-cell responses from our bodies should protect us from severe disease and death."

Following the discovery of the new variant, the list of countries that have banned South Africans from flying to their soil is growing. As it stands, the US, Canada, Australia, Philippines, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, Israel, Japan and Malaysia have suspended flights from South Africa to their countries. The ban was also extended to South Africa's neighbours, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, Lesotho, Botswana, Eswatini and the Seychelles.

Otto de Vries, Association of Southern African Travel Agents CEO, said the red listing was a setback of massive proportions. "While we await more clarity, there is no evidence that the new variant is more resistant to the vaccine."

Andrew Stark, managing director at Flight Centre Travel Group, said their number one priority was to assist their customers. "To be in this position again is simply devastating. We envisage there will be a domino effect, with other countries following suit as we have seen before. We cannot emphasise enough how important it is for our country to achieve a 80% plus vaccination rate so that we can proactively put an end to these situations unfolding," he said.

Tourism Minister Lindiwe Sisulu called an urgent meeting with stakeholders from the private sector on Friday to discuss how the private and public sectors could work together to mitigate the inevitable effects.