



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



INTERNAL MEMO

Date:	29 April 2021		
To:	Minister ZL Mkhize, Honorable Minister of Health	From:	Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19

TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS FROM SELECTED COUNTRIES

Problem Statement

Concern has been raised about the apparent increase in arrivals in South Africa of travelers from India, where a high number of COVID-19 cases are being identified at present, with considerable morbidity and mortality. Concern has also been raised that the SARS-CoV-2 variant identified in India (B.1.617+) has contributed to the intensity of the second wave in that country. The question posed is whether South Africa should consider imposing any restrictions on travelers from India.

Evidence review

- A variant of SARS-CoV-2 (referred to as G452R/V3 or B.1.617+ or VUI (Variant Under Investigation)-21APR-01) was identified in India in October 2020, which has 13 mutations, of which 3 are in the spike protein (E484Q, L452R, P681R).
- The B.1.617+ variant has been detected in 21 countries to date, including the UK, USA, Singapore and Australia.¹
- It is unknown whether B.1.617+ is now the dominant strain in India, or whether this variant is associated with increased infectivity or escape from immunity (whether from prior infection or vaccination).
- A local general practitioner grouping (Islamic Medical Association) has reported seeing an increase in the numbers of visitors from India testing positive in recent weeks.
- Some countries (such as the USA and Germany) have closed their borders to travelers from countries in which VOCs have been detected (such as India, Brazil and South Africa).
- In South Africa, a VOC (B.1.351) was implicated in the second wave. This VOC has now been detected in 81 countries.
- The MAC on COVID-19 has previously provided three advisories on travel-related issues (on antigen testing at ports of entry on 30 October 2020 and land border crossings over the festive season, and airline risk reduction, both dated 30 December 2020).
- On 3 June 2020, the Gauteng High Court delivered a judgment (Case 22358/2020) which stated that regulations 6 and 7 of the 29 April 2020 regulations issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act are to be interpreted in such a way that anyone required to quarantine or self-isolate can only

be required to do so at a state facility or a designated facility if that person is unable to self-quarantine or self-isolate, refuses to do so, or violates the self-quarantine or self-isolation rules. The court defined the requirements for successful self-quarantine or self-isolation.

- The World Health Organization has discussed draft recommendations on international travel interventions. The draft recommendation, as applied to the South African situation, are as follows:

Epidemiology in country of departure	Epidemiology in South Africa	Traveller's immunity status (ie. Immune via previous infection or vaccination)*	Considerations
No/sporadic/cluster cases with robust surveillance	Any	N/A	No testing or quarantine required
Community transmission (or unknown)	No/sporadic/cluster cases with robust surveillance	N/A	Pre-departure or post-arrival test (PCR/RDT); and post-arrival 14-days quarantine and test on day 5-7th for release from quarantine
	Community transmission	N/A	Pre-departure or post-arrival test (PCR/RDT); and post-arrival quarantine and test on day 5-7th for release from quarantine
Community transmission of immune-escape VOCs differing from that/those identified in South Africa	Any	N/A	Pre-departure or post-arrival test (PCR/RDT); and post-arrival 14-days quarantine

* Duration of immunity after natural infection or after vaccination is not yet established. Available data show that symptomatic reinfection is uncommon within 6 months after an initial natural infection, although emerging data indicate that symptomatic reinfection may occur in settings where variants with evidence of immune escape are circulating. Furthermore, none of the available COVID-19 vaccines are 100% effective against infection and the impact of vaccines on transmission of SARS-CoV-2 is not yet established.

Recommendations

- A process should be established, relying on the Disaster Management Act, to designate countries based on either the intensity of COVID-19 transmission and/or identification of a VOC (different from any VOC already known to be circulating in South Africa).
- Travelers arriving directly from designated countries, or who have been in any of these countries within the past 14 days, shall be subject to the following **additional** restrictions:
 - Post-arrival antigen RDT testing.
 - Isolation in a designated facility for a period of 14 days if testing positive on the antigen RDT.
 - Quarantine in a designated facility for a period of 14 days if testing negative on antigen RDT. A follow-up PCR test will be offered after 5-7 days. In those testing negative, the quarantine period will be reduced to 7 days. In those testing positive or refusing PCR testing, the quarantine period will remain at 14 days.²
- The additional restrictions shall apply to returning South African citizens or residents as well as to international visitors.
- All international travelers, regardless of mode of transport or port of entry, shall also be required, as currently, to provide evidence of a negative PCR test conducted not more than 72 hours prior to departure, and to download the COVID Alert App.
- At this time, presumed immune status, either as a result of vaccination against COVID-19 or prior infection, will not change the requirement for pre- and post-arrival testing or quarantine.

- Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) at every port of entry, and as part of in-country measures, should be emphasized to complement the recommendations for travel restrictions.
- Any traveler who is diagnosed with COVID-19 after arrival should immediately go into quarantine/isolation in accordance with existing procedures, and inform the relevant authorities, including the airline.
- Noting the current situation in India, we recommend that the above criteria should be applied to travelers entering South Africa from India.
- Should this advisory be adopted, it is recommended that the COVID-19 MAC considers recommendations for travelers from other countries entering South Africa based on the above criteria.

Rationale for recommendations

Notwithstanding the Gauteng High Court decision in June 2020, the situation now facing countries requires urgent action. Self-isolation or self-quarantine at a home or non-designated facility is therefore not recommended. Designating quarantine facilities (such as hotels or other facilities with the necessary systems in place) will allow for better monitoring of travelers from countries where increased incidence of COVID-19 is occurring or where VOCs are circulating. The facilities can also be inspected for compliance with quarantine conditions. By not focusing only on India and one particular VOC, a process can be determined to identify countries of concern in an equitable and evidence-informed manner. Countries can also be removed from the list when conditions permit.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Kind regards,



PROF MARIAN JACOBS

CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

DATE: 29 April 2021



PROF KOLEKA MLISANA

CC:

- » **Dr S Buthelezi (Director-General)**
- » **Dr T Pillay (Deputy Director-General)**
- » **Incident Management Team**

¹ GISAID database. <https://www.gisaid.org/hcov19-variants/>

² The measures for shortening the quarantine period are in accordance with US CDC advice (<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/if-you-are-sick/quarantine.html>)