**The variant this winter**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-12-01

IT was not a piece of news that anyone wanted to hear. Last week, the World Health Organisation designated B.1.1.529 or `Omicron`, the new Covid strain whose existence was announced by South Africa earlier, as a `variant of concern`. No sooner had the very existence of the variant been announced than countries, mostly in the West but also including the United Arab Emirates, declared travel bans against South Africa, Zimbabwe and a host of other African nations.

Such was the scramble that airports such as Amsterdam`s Schiphol Airport did not know what to do with flights arriving from Johannesburg, South Africa, that had taken off before the bans were announced but which arrived in the Netherlands af ter they had been imposed.

The last thing the world needs is yet another winter dominated by disease and restrictions. In the West and Africa itself, people have been looking forward to spending the holidays with relatives whom they have not seen since the start of the pandemic in 2020.

In Pakistan, for instance, a number of people have been waiting for the first real wedding season since vaccines became available in the country.

Those vaccines, even when booster shots have been administered, which they haven`t for the most part, may or may not work against Omicron. Even as scientists work towards answers, according to early reports, this variant has a daunting number of mutations from the original virus and there have been concerns that it might be able to evade existing vaccines or render the latter less effective.

What this means in terms of disease severity is not known at the moment. Going by our experience with the disease thus far, would it be safe to say that young people will fare rather better than the old ones or those with weakened immune systems? Those getting married or participating in weddings are likely to face many complications. The winter wedding season is in full swing and early events show that the very large, very expensive and very crowded Pakistani wedding is back.

Everyone, it appears, had bet on this season being the `back to almost normal` stage that most people,particularly those who were unwilling to settle for limited celebrations, had been eagerly awaiting.

This was an illusion even before Omicron showed up; Covid-19 cases, though significantly reduced, were still there and with people taking their chances and being out and about, the infection rates were entirely likely to go up. As it has been with Covid-19 since the very beginning, young people are vectors who transmit the illness to the immune compromised and the elderly. So, too, is it likely to be the case this winter.

Then there are the problems of equity and the debatable imposition of travel bans. Many expertsquestion whether travel bans are an effective means of dealing with variants. For instance, the latest variant has also been detected in countries such as Israel and Belgium among others, suggesting that it has been there for some time. It did not escape the notice of nationals of southern African countries that such sudden and stringent travel bans had not been imposed on these countries whose nationals were zipping about the globe without restriction.

It is also notable that Western citizens who had been to any of the countries whose people are now banned from travel could still return to their home countries. One illustrative example was that of New York Times reporter Stephanie Nolen who had been reporting on the emergence of Omicron in South Africa and neighbouring countries.

Last week, Nolen boarded a KLM flight from Johannesburg to Amsterdam. From Amsterdam she was to board a flight to Canada where she lives.When the flight landed at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, the Dutch had already banned flights from South Africa. Airport officials did not know what to do with the several hundred people on the planes. Eventually, Nolen and her fellow passengers were unloaded into a warehouse-like room (all together and unmasked) while the Dutch tested them for the virus.

While Nolen herself was found to be negative, there were around 30 people who tested positive for Covid-19 and who had not been detected by preflight testing protocols. The Dutch did not want to let those who were negative stay in their country.

Nolen who had spent several hours with people some of whom tested positive for Covid-19 got onto a flight to Canada. Note that none of the people on this flight would even have known that someone who had just been in South Africa and had likely been exposed to those who had the Omicron variant, was on the plane with them. This is the sort of insane risk that travelling internationally now involves.

The government of Pakistan needs to urgently step up vaccination and booster drives, even as the efficacy of these against Omicron is being tested.

To avoid an outbreak and a lockdown, it is necessary that gatherings of more than 50 people be banned. This should especially be the case for the many protracted functions that usually take place in the winter. Unlike wealthy countries, Pakistan does not have the resources to provide boosters and vaccinations at the rate that is necessary. This means that masking, handwashing, sanitising and stringent curbs on gatherings must all be reinstituted so that the country is not crippled by deaths that could be caused by new variants.

We all know that life in the times of a global pandemic is different from anything that Pakistan or the world has experienced; survival now requires more caution and patience than ever before. A change in our usual ways is not a temporary interlude, it is the way things will be f rom now on.  The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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