

NEW VIRUS STRAIN OUT OF CONTROL: U.K.

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New worries: Protesters gathering for an anti-lockdown demonstration in central London on Saturday. AFPTOLGA AKMEN

British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said on Sunday that the government has imposed a strict Christmas lockdown in London and southeast England because a new strain of the coronavirus was “out of control”.

The World Health Organization is calling on its members in Europe to step up measures against COVID-19.

Outside Britain, nine cases of the new strain have been reported in Denmark, as well as one case in the Netherlands and another in Australia, according to the WHO. “Across Europe, where transmission is intense and widespread, countries need to redouble their control and prevention approaches,” a spokeswoman for WHO Europe said.

Mr. Hancock warned that the strict measures that affect almost a third of England’s population could stay in place until the virus vaccine is fully rolled out.

“Unfortunately the new strain was out of control. We have got to get it under control,” he said.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced on Saturday that millions must cancel Christmas plans and stay home because the new strain was spreading far more quickly.

Around 16.4 million people entered the strictest “tier four” measures from Sunday, or 31% of the population. They are not allowed to hold family gatherings for Christmas, while in the rest of the country households are allowed to mix on Christmas Day alone.

London’s Metropolitan Police said that it would take action against those who “make reckless decisions that risk lives.”

Other U.K. regions have also tightened their anti-virus measures in response.

Wales introduced a strict lockdown from Sunday, while Scotland has banned travel to and from other U.K. regions for Christmas. Both Scotland and Northern Ireland will enter fresh lockdowns on December 26.

Mr. Hancock told Sky News that the situation was “deadly serious.” “It’s going to be very difficult to keep it under control until we have the vaccine rolled out,” he said, adding: “This is what we face over the next couple of months.”

The U.K. hopes to reach a figure of half a million vaccinations over the weekend, he said.

Scientists first discovered the new variant in a patient in September, Susan Hopkins of Public Health England said.

She said that scientists in November found the new strain was behind a cluster of cases in Kent and spreading into London and Essex and informed the government on December 11.

70% more potent

Public Health England then again notified the government on Friday when modelling revealed the full seriousness of the new strain, she said.

She confirmed the figure given by Mr. Johnson that the new virus strain could be 70% more transmissible while saying this was an initial figure. "I think 70% looks like a good number to land on at the moment," she said.

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