

Letter to Prime Minister Trudeau on Canada's Travel Restrictions on African Nations

December 17, 2021

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The Right Honourable Justin Trudeau, P.C., M.P.
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Copies to:

The Honourable Jean-Yves Duclos, P.C., M.P., F.R.S.C., Minister of Health
The Honourable Omar Alghabra, M.P., Minister of Transport
The Honourable Marco Mendicino, P.C., M.P., Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness of Canada
The Honourable Melanie Joly, M.P., Minister of Foreign Affairs
The Honourable Mary Ng, P.C., M.P., Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development
Dr. Theresa Tam, MD, FRCPC, Chief Public Officer of Canada

Dear Prime Minister Trudeau:

As Black Canadian physicians, we have been working frontline throughout this pandemic and caring for patients affected by COVID-19 across the country. We have diligently worked to improve the Black community's vaccine confidence and uptake by organizing vaccine information sessions, advocating for improved public health measures and mobilizing our human resources to vaccinate our community.

On November 24th, when an exceptional team of Botswanan and South African scientists identified the newly emerged variant Omicron, B.1.1.529, and promptly shared their findings with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the global community, we were prepared to continue the fight against COVID-19 armed with this new scientific discovery. However, when Canada responded with swift travel restrictions on 7 Southern African countries immediately after WHO's classification of Omicron as a variant of concern on November 26th, we were quite dismayed at the lack of evidence-based decision making. At the time of these initial restrictions, Omicron has only been identified in 2 out of these 7 Southern African nations, but has already been identified in non-African nations that faced no travel restrictions such as Belgium, Hong Kong and Israel.

Canada continued on these unscientific selective travel restrictions by adding three more African nations to the travel ban list by November 30, when the Omicron variant has already been identified in Canada and over 15 non-African nations. Canada's swift increments on

selectively African travel bans with Nigeria's identification of 3 cases of Omicron, while nations such as United Kingdom with 22 cases and Netherlands with 16 cases faced no travel restrictions, has created a wave of global reaction to the discriminatory nature of Canada's policy.

For Black Canadians, Canada's selective targeting of African nations on these travel restrictions comes as a public demonstration of the pervasive systemic racism we battle in our personal and professional lives. Anti-Blackness has deep historical roots in Canada with precedents of discriminatory bans against Black people as shown in the story of Alberta's Amber Valley, one of the oldest Black communities in the country, whose settling prompted the then prime minister Wilfred Laurier to ban Black people from entering Canada for a year - an executive decision that effectively stopped Black migration to the prairies for years. Moreover, contemporary structural anti-Black racism continues to impact our community and lead to disproportional morbidity and mortality that is further illuminated by the COVID-19 pandemic. As Black physicians who have actively and routinely engaged in community conversations to dispel vaccine misinformation and improve confidence in public health measures, we understand that medical mistrust that is compounded by the historical legacies of colonialism, and current experiences of structural racism is the driver of vaccine hesitancy. When the Canadian government imposes such discriminatory travel bans, it provides further evidence for a significant portion of the community who has long felt targeted and it further erodes their trust in government and public health agencies.

As we have seen with our experiences of previous variants of Alpha and Delta, we understand that an effective solution to prevent transmission of variants will not be selective, irrational travel restrictions. As long as the majority of the world is deprived of access to vaccines, we will continue to face new variants. With over 3 billion people waiting for their first doses, it is imperative on Canada to fulfill its promise to the COVID-19 Vaccines Global Access (COVAX) program and provide more vaccines to developing countries beyond the 4.5% of its pledge that has currently been shipped. We also encourage the Canadian government to join the hundred other countries in supporting the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) waiver, so that pharmaceutical companies share instrumental information on COVID-19 vaccine and therapeutics design to the global community and enable nations such as South Africa and India to manufacture vaccines.

We call on the Canadian government to lift travel bans placed on African countries along with the third country testing requirements immediately. Given that the Omicron variant has currently been identified in over 77 countries including several cases in Canada, most of which are community acquired, placing a travel ban exclusively on African countries is not an evidence-based measure to limit infection transmission. Improved border testing and management of all inbound travellers will be a better approach. This travel ban sets a dangerous

precedent for medical researchers regarding transparency of data and continues to limit scientific advancements as researchers in these countries face restrictions to receive their testing reagents. We are deeply grateful to the dedication to genomic surveillance and transparent communication demonstrated by Southern African scientists. Their phenomenal scholarship and expertise in identifying and sequencing this variant has empowered the global community with critical and timely scientific information. Therefore, rejecting a PCR test from African nations on the grounds of their presumed inability to run such simple tests when they have achieved groundbreaking scientific discovery, further reflects structural racism that routinely questions African brilliance and competence rather than celebrates.

The COVID-19 pandemic has illuminated several ills in our society including structural racism and has made it clear that the marginalized will continue to be disproportionately impacted when we uphold systems of discriminatory and inequitable practices. The only effective way forward is to challenge such practices, build an equitable system rooted in global solidarity. Canada is standing at a critical point with an opportunity to demonstrate its allyship in the global fight against COVID-19 and thus we call on the Canadian government to immediately lift selective travel restrictions on African nations.

List of Canadian health organizations that support this statement:

1. Canadian Medical Association
2. Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
3. The College of Family Physicians of Canada
- 4.. South Asian COVID Taskforce
5. Everton Gooden Medicine Professional Corporation
6. Canadian Association of Nigerian Physicians and Dentists
7. Diversity and Inclusion in Cardiology Education
8. Health and Immigration Policies and Practices Research Program, University of Alberta
9. Black Youth Mentorship and Leadership Program,
10. African Child and Youth Migration Network
11. South Asian Covid Task Force
12. Afro-Canadian Positive Network Of BC
13. Coalition of African, Caribbean and Black Nurses in British Columbia
14. WombCare Inc
15. Women's Health in Women's Hands CHC
16. Canadian Muslim COVID-19 Task Force (CMCTF)
17. Canadian Association of Nigerian Physicians and Dentists
18. Federation of Medical Women of Canada
19. Black Opportunity Fund Health Working Group
20. Black Physicians of Nova Scotia

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