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South Africa Reversed Its Decision To Cancel Most COVID Curbs Under 'political Pressure'

South African Medical Association (SAMA) Chair Coetzee stressed that “political pressure” has prompted reversal of new COVID-19 rules on testing and tracing

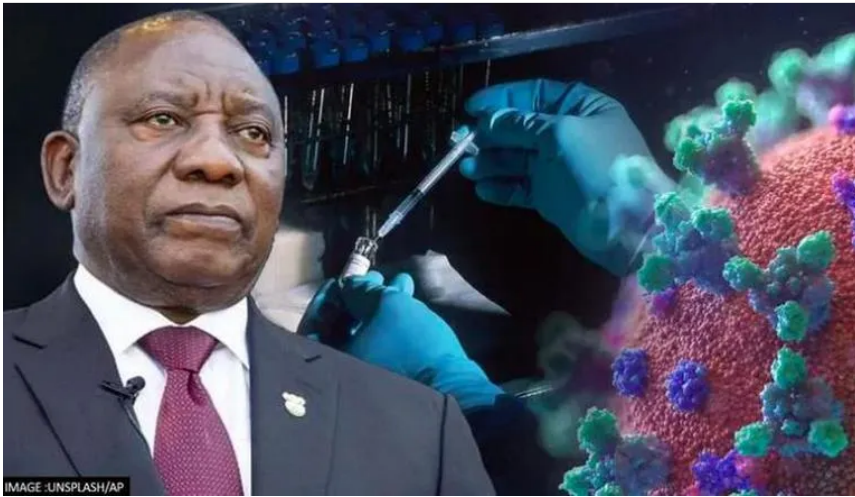
Written By **Zaini Majeed**

IMAGE: AP/Unsplash

Amid the pressure from the state lawmakers and the local media, the South African government has reversed its decision of easing the COVID-19 restrictions. In a media statement, the South Africa Health Department said on Tuesday that the government has been "inundated with media, stakeholders and public inquiries and comments since the release of the revised protocols on Contact Tracing, Quarantine and Isolation on December 23." As South Africa witnesses the falling trajectory of the B.1.1.529 Omicron strain, hoping that it will be eliminated

completely in the upcoming week, reports emerged that the health authorities have stopped the testing and contact tracing.

The country, where the new COVID-19 variant Omicron B.1.1.529 was first detected, announced this week that the containment of the virus is 'no longer viable' as the Omicron spread has faded after just a month of a dramatic peak. While the country registered a caseload of 26,976, for the last few days, the health officials announced that they have hardly recorded any cases of Omicron as the strain was eliminated from the overall data in a promising development. The contact tracing would be halted with immediate effect, announced the South African authorities, outlining exemptions to large public gatherings and areas with containment protocols still active, as per the local media reports.

Revised policy changes 'on hold'

Now, in a statement to the African news outlets, departmental spokesman Foster Mohale and Doctor Tshwale, media liaison to Health Minister Joseph Phaahla said: "In line with the principles of transparency and openness, the department has decided to put the implementation of the revised policy changes on hold, while taking all additional comments and inputs received into consideration." Mohale stressed, "This means the status quo remains, and all prior existing regulations with regards to contact tracing, quarantine and isolation remain applicable."

South African Medical Association (SAMA) Chair Angelique Coetzee, meanwhile, stressed that the "political pressure" from other government departments had prompted the authorities to do a reversal on the announcement. "This is political pressure, most probably from other departments that are putting pressure on the national department. This is our view," Coetzee said, according to Sputnik. Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa (RuDASA) called the earlier decision "scientifically sound."

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"The old guidelines, that had barely changed since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, do not take into account the benefits of the high levels of vaccination amongst healthcare workers, nor the high levels of COVID immunity in the South African population, an estimated at 80 to 90 percent, and have put enormous pressure on small, understaffed hospitals and clinics in rural areas," the Rural Doctors Association of Southern Africa (RuDASA) said in a statement.

The South African authorities had removed the contact tracing and testing protocols saying that highly transmissible Omicron variant cases were almost negligible within the country. South Africa cited a "sero-surveys", alleging that over 60 to 80 percent of the African population has already been infected and gained natural immunity from the disease. Children are no longer showing symptoms of the disease, health authorities said.

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