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STATEMENT FROM THE COMNAP SECRETARIAT

Antarctica remains largely COVID-19 free

Recent media reports heralded the arrival of the Omicron variant to the largely COVID-free Antarctic continent. The reports are mostly accurate, with the virus being confirmed in several symptomatic Belgian expeditioners at the Princess Elisabeth Station in a remote location in Dronning Maud Land, Antarctica. With 25 people at the station at the time infection was confirmed, it is assumed all are infected and are all being treated as such.

An outbreak in Antarctica was not unexpected and Antarctic programs were prepared. Remarkably, almost two years into a global pandemic, the very great majority of the large continent and the thousands of expeditioners there remain COVID-free. This is no small achievement and has only been possible due to the remarkable efforts of the 37 national Antarctic programs-the governmental organisations responsible for their countries activities in the Antarctic region.

Through the Council of Managers of National Antarctic Programs (COMNAP), national Antarctic programs collectively developed and agreed to follow COVID-19 prevention and response guidance based on evidence coming from the WHO and from peer-reviewed publications and sources. The guidance assisted the programs to put in place managed isolation and testing protocols, medical screening, psychological support and to prepare for outbreak management and response in Antarctica should that occur. Therefore, programs have been, and continue to be, engaged actively in implementing pre-deployment protocols, especially at the traditional “gateway” countries to Antarctica (Argentina, Australia, Chile, New Zealand and South Africa). By-and-large the protocols have worked with thousands of Antarctic expeditioners, scientists and science support persons, transiting from all over the world to their final destinations in Antarctica staying virus free. The Belgian expeditioners were using the South African gateway to Antarctica in November and December 2021, precisely at the time the WHO was declaring Omicron a variant of concern, first discovered in South Africa. Contrary to recent public media reports, beyond the Belgian station, the virus is not circulating at any other national Antarctic program stations.

COMNAP Executive Secretary, Michelle Rogan-Finnemore, said “The collective efforts of the national Antarctic programs for the past two Antarctic research seasons has been truly remarkable and has ensured risk related to the global pandemic and the austere Antarctic environment, where there is limited medical sophistication readily available, has been addressed and mitigated, and even eliminated when possible. For example, at each of the traditional Antarctic gateways, strong protocols are in place so that no program expeditioner gets on a plane or ship to Antarctica unless they have undergone strict isolation and testing procedures. There are also intra-continental policies in place, so that when testing reveals a positive case in Antarctica, isolation from any other neighbouring programs and stations mean there is very low possibility for station-to-station spread. Antarctica’s large, open spaces and great distances between Antarctic research stations certainly assists with ‘social distancing’ requirements and for last season, even neighbouring stations had a strict ‘no visitation’ policy. The usual friendly interactions between neighbouring stations went the way of the rest of the world, and neighbouring stations turned to zoom and other virtual methods to communicate and interact.”

The majority of the programs are also from countries that have mandated or strongly advocate for vaccination, so all programs are as prepared as they can be to ensure all is being done to protect Antarctic personnel. Right now, no other positive cases in national Antarctic programs' expeditioners are being reported from Antarctica.

Because of these efforts, the programs have been able to deliver critical data and results from Antarctic scientific experiments from the entire Antarctic region across both summer and winter periods all while keeping people healthy and safe. Antonio Quesada, COMNAP Executive Committee Chairman and Head of Spain's Polar Committee notes, "This has ensured we have a continuum of data from the Antarctic region. Such data is critical to our understanding of how the Antarctic drives and respond to global change. If the past two Antarctic seasons could not take place due to COVID, we certainly would have lost valuable globally important data. That was not acceptable to the Antarctic programs and so they committed to outbreak prevention protocols to maximise safety while delivering science."

The efforts continue. Beyond the Dronning Maud Land region of Antarctica, the vast continent remains COVID-19 free. A remarkable achievement given the extent and evolving nature of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, its variants and the extent to which the world is globally inter-connected. National Antarctic programs have proactively worked to keep the Antarctic COVID-free and efforts will continue to maintain that for as long as needed.

STOPS

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