

South Africa seethes at UK's Beta bogeyman 'discrimination'

South Africa on red list of high-risk countries

JOHANNESBURG: South Africa is seething over Britain's decision to keep the country on its coronavirus "red list," a move that means travelers must pay for pricey hotel quarantine on their return to the UK. Renowned for its wildlife and breathtaking scenery, South Africa is struggling to recover from the crippling blow coronavirus dealt to a tourism industry that directly accounts for three percent of the nation's economy and - prior to the pandemic - was one of the few employment bright spots, providing more than 700,000 jobs.

Shut off from the rest of the world for most of 2020 and then blacklisted by several governments over the discovery of the Beta variant in December, South Africa is slowly starting to see a trickle of high-paying foreign visitors as infection rates fall. Travelers coming from Europe and the US, South Africa's biggest tourism markets along with the UK, can currently holiday and then self-isolate at home upon return - a hassle that some are prepared to take.

But the UK has kept South Africa on its red list of high-risk countries, meaning anyone arriving from South Africa is forced to quarantine in a hotel for 10 days, costing more than \$2,400 (2,000 euros) per person. The stratospheric cost rules the country out for most British tourists. With more than 400,000 visitors a year in pre-pandemic times, the UK was South Africa's biggest source of long-haul travelers, especially during the northern hemisphere winter.

Some British nationals such as Claire Alexander have been stuck in South Africa for over a year because of the costly re-

strictions. "I've just spoken to my 91-year papa in Stirling and it's pretty sore knowing I can't get home," said the mother of two, whose youngest child has yet to meet "his Scottish clan". Marc Mendelson, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Cape Town, is a Briton who earned his PhD at Cambridge's prestigious Addenbrooks Hospital. He said he was "embarrassed" by his home country's government. "Misinformation, misrepresentation, outdated & inaccurate science," he tweeted this week.

Beta blocker

The British embassy in Pretoria acknowledged "positive developments" in South Africa. It noted "cases going down, data on variants of concern improving and vaccinations rising." But it said concerns remained "about the continued presence of Beta given its potential ability to circumvent vaccines". Nonsense, South Africa's leading genomics expert Tulio de Oliveira said, tweeting on Monday that his research showed the Delta variant had now completely replaced Beta in South Africa.

That was confirmed by Adrian Puren of the National Institute for Communicable Diseases, who told AFP that the Beta variant was "undetectable" in cases sequenced in September, and that concerns over its vaccine resistance were "moot". "Really unscientific decision," de Oliveira said, adding that South Africa has a higher vaccination rate than some non-red listed countries - including India, where the Delta variant first appeared. "We have a smaller number of infections than the UK... So why this

discrimination?" de Oliveira said, adding that: "We look forward to engaging the UK scientists and for constructive discussion with (the) UK."

Jabs pickup

Daily new cases in South Africa peaked at the end of June at just over 26,000, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Britain continues to see more than 30,000 new cases a day. Vaccinations, meanwhile, are picking up after a slow start, with around 20 percent of South African adults now fully jabbed.

To date the country has recorded more than 2.8 million cases, the highest in Africa, of which at least 86,376 have been fatal. Britain has recorded 7.5 million cases and at least 135,455 deaths. South Africa's main inbound tourism association has also been lobbying London to remove the red tag. Director of luxury holiday booker Discover Africa Group, Andre Van Kets, argued the measures no longer made sense given infection and vaccination rates were "moving in the right direction".

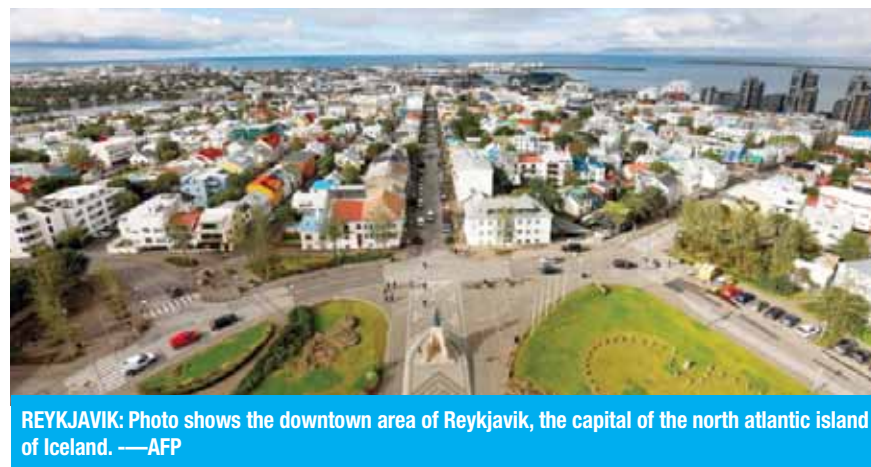
British tourists are still enquiring and making plans for 2022 and 2023, he said, but often pull out when asked to pay a deposit. "There is no reasonable basis for keeping South Africa on the red list," Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said this week in a statement touting the country's "robust vaccination program and excellent science". "It's ridiculous," said Andre Retief of tour operator Safari With Us, which has relied on the UK for 20 to 30 percent of its bookings. "COVID is all over the world now and coming on safari is actually quite safe." —AFP

Icelanders go to polls fearing big 'unstable' coalition

REYKJAVIK: Iceland holds legislative elections tomorrow after four years of an unprecedented left-right coalition that has managed to put a lid on a volatile decade of crises and scandals. But with so many political parties vying for power and no one clear coalition option emerging, analysts say it is hard to predict the shape of the next government. Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir, whose Left-Green Movement had never before been in government, is seeking a second mandate in a political landscape more splintered than ever.

Opinion polls point to a record nine parties expected to win seats in the Althing, Iceland's almost 1,100-year-old parliament. That makes it particularly difficult to predict which parties could end up forming a coalition together after the vote. With 33 of 63 seats, the outgoing coalition is an unholy mix of the conservative Independence Party, the centre-right Progressive Party and the Left-Green Movement. This is only the second time since 2008 that a government has made it to the end of its four-year mandate on the sprawling island of 370,000 people.

Deep public distrust of politicians amid repeated scandals sent Icelanders to the



REYKJAVIK: Photo shows the downtown area of Reykjavik, the capital of the north atlantic island of Iceland. —AFP

polls five times from 2007 to 2017. "This government was not founded on the premise of undertaking societal changes, but much rather for the purpose of co-habitation politics in a country that had been in upheaval for a long time," noted Eirikur Bergmann, a political science professor at Bifrost University.

'No clear alternative'

Opinion polls suggest the current coalition will likely fail to win re-election. Jakobsdottir, 45, is however broadly popular, having won over Icelanders with her integrity, sincerity and consensual management style. She has also been praised for her handling of the COVID-19 crisis, with Iceland recording only 33 deaths. "I

think this government has done a good job, and I think it has really shown what is possible in politics," she told AFP in an interview this week.

But her coalition has at times struggled with internal divisions and the head of the Independence Party, Bjarni Benediktsson, has his eyes on the post of prime minister. The Independence Party is credited with between 20 and 24 percent of votes in surveys, and is expected to remain the largest party. A former prime minister, he comes from a family that has long held power on the right and is the current finance minister. "I'm optimistic, I feel supported," he told a campaign rally this week, insisting his party would continue to be "the backbone of the next government". —AFP

Burundi accuses opposition leader of 'terrorist acts'

NAIROBI: Burundi has issued an international arrest warrant against exiled opposition politician Alexis Sinduhije, accusing him of leading a group responsible for multiple "terrorist acts", the country's attorney general said. The announcement by Sylvestre Nyandwi late Wednesday followed a string of attacks in the troubled East African nation in recent days that have left at least six dead and more than a hundred wounded. But the warrant relates to earlier attacks, including grenade explosions and ambushes that have killed dozens and injured several since the beginning of 2020, the attorney general said.

"The investigations already carried out have revealed that these acts are committed by a band of terrorists led by (...) Alexis Sinduhije", he alleged. "Under national and international law, these acts constitute acts of terrorism, as well as crimes against humanity." The president of the opposition Movement for Solidarity and Development (MSD), Sinduhije lives in exile in Belgium. He has long been suspected by the Burundian government of being at the helm of RED-Tabara, the most active rebel group in the country — a claim he has always denied.

RED-Tabara has a rear base in South Kivu in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo and is estimated to number between 500 and 800 men. The group emerged 10 years ago and is accused of being behind many deadly attacks or ambushes in Burundi since 2015. In 2020, the group said it was behind a series of attacks that killed more than 40 people from the security forces and the youth league of the ruling CNDD-FDD party. —AFP