



REUTERS  
A PERSON attends a demonstration to protest against a bill that would transform France's current coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) health pass into a "vaccine pass," in Paris, France, Jan. 8.

## Vaccine skeptics slammed across Europe amid surge

FROM Boris Johnson to Emmanuel Macron, Europe's leaders are increasingly going after anti-vaxxers as the battle against the fast-spreading Omicron variant deepens the region's pandemic fatigue.

Amid a seemingly unstoppable surge in infections, officials are focusing restrictions on unvaccinated people rather than resorting to widespread clampdowns. The strong overall uptake in inoculations has emboldened leaders to go more aggressively after holdouts, prodding them in various ways to roll up their sleeves.

French President Macron took the rhetoric to a new level this week when he said his government's strategy was to "p-- off" those who have refused shots. In the UK, Johnson accused anti-vaxxers of spreading "nonsense." German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who supports making shots compulsory, has labeled the anti-vax movement "a tiny minority of reckless extremists."

With the pandemic entering its third year and about 70% of Europe fully vaccinated, the leaders are betting they have popular support for this approach.

Across the continent, the policy of coercion is becoming *l'ordre du jour*, with many governments trying to make life difficult for those refusing a vaccine and brushing aside concerns about civic freedoms.

Mr. Macron, who faces a difficult re-election campaign this spring, is banking on support among the millions who are desperate to leave the pandemic behind. Some 77% of the population is fully vaccinated, according to government figures, putting him squarely on the side of the majority.

On Friday, he stood by his remarks, saying it "was my responsibility to ring the alarm."

### VACCINE RATES

On Saturday, several thousand people joined marches across France to protest against restrictions for the non-vaccinated, brandishing placards denouncing Mr. Macron's choice of language and his government's latest efforts to tighten rules. According to local press reports, the protests were mainly peaceful although police fired tear gas amid minor clashes in Paris.

France is toughening restrictions on those without inocula-

tions, looking to put in place a vaccine pass to access bars and restaurants, or even to travel by train.

Neighboring Italy on Wednesday made shots compulsory for people over 50, though the fine of 100 euros (\$113) for non-compliance has been kept deliberately low.

In Austria, the unvaccinated are barred from most areas of life, including non-essential shopping, hotels and restaurants, although enforcement is spotty. The country also wants to make vaccines mandatory for everyone from next month, though implementation may be delayed.

Thousands marched in Vienna on Saturday against the restrictions and upcoming mandate, resuming weekly protests seen before the holidays. Banners included ones that urged "Have the courage to use your own judgement." Meanwhile, a number of businesses in Austria have closed voluntarily due to high COVID cases as the Omicron variant spreads.

Germany, Europe's biggest economy, is already in what some officials have termed a "lockdown of the unvaccinated," with limits on access to theaters and other leisure activities.

On Friday, authorities created an even bigger hurdle, requiring negative tests at restaurants and non-essential stores for fully vaccinated people. Only those who've had boosters get no-hassle access.

"Anyone who hasn't been immunized is endangering themselves," Mr. Scholz said.

The controversy over such measures found a new global flashpoint this week when world tennis No. 1 Novak Djokovic — a vocal vaccine-mandate critic — was denied entry to Australia. That followed anger over a decision to grant the Serbian player an exemption to play in the Australian Open without proof of vaccination.

European governments — unable to halt, or even slow, the spread of infections — are zeroing in on the unvaccinated as part of efforts to protect their health services from being swamped.

While vaccines don't completely stop transmission, research suggests they reduce the chance of severe symptoms from Omicron. That should mean less pressure on hospitals, and especially intensive care units. —

**Bloomberg**

# China reports country's first community spread of Omicron

CHINA saw its first Omicron cases in the community, igniting a mass testing blitz in the northern city of Tianjin as the country strives to maintain its zero-tolerance approach to COVID in the face of more transmissible variants.

The two cases in the port city were confirmed as being Omicron by the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, after its local branch completed the genome sequencing, CCTV reported. The infections were from the same transmission chain but officials have yet to establish if the strain is the same as imported

Omicron cases reported earlier in Tianjin, according to the report.

China's commitment to its COVID Zero policy has seen it restrict movements and implement mass testing and other measures in cities spread across the country. Further outbreaks raise the risk of new lockdown measures that could disrupt production and shipping in an economy already battling weak consumption and a property market slump.

Tianjin first reported the two cases late Saturday and neither of the people, one of whom is a child, have traveled outside of the city in the past 14 days. The govern-

ment announced that it will start mass testing from 7 a.m. Sunday, in order to "effectively prevent the further spread of the omicron variant," state news agency Xinhua reported.

China, which is set to host the Winter Olympics in Beijing next month, has been determined to maintain COVID Zero even as cases spread and other countries adopt policies of living with the virus. The recent flareups, while small compared to international cases, are fueling the most protracted stretch of infections in China since the virus first emerged in Wuhan two years ago.

The southern technology hub of Shenzhen is discouraging people from leaving after reporting two infections, the eastern metropolis of Zhengzhou required all residents to be tested and Xi'an in the northwest has confined most of its population of 13 million to their homes since before Christmas.

China reported 92 new local cases on Saturday, which compares to 90,000 in New York state.

While cases have continued to crop up, until the weekend China hadn't seen local transmission of the Omicron variant. — **Bloomberg**

## Djokovic's stay at detention hotel highlights the plight of asylum seekers in Australia

MELBOURNE, Australia — The people demonstrating outside the Park Hotel in Melbourne on Saturday were a disparate group.

Some were Serb-Australians and anti-vaccine campaigners, there to support Novak Djokovic, the tennis superstar who is in quarantine there as he challenges Australia's decision to deny him entry over questions about a COVID-19 vaccine exemption.

A separate group of protesters held signs proclaiming "refugees welcome" and "nine years too long." They were drawing attention to a very different cause: the well-being of about 30 asylum-seekers who have been held at the Park Hotel much longer than Mr. Djokovic, the Australian Open champion.

Since Dec. 2020, the Australian Border Force has used the hotel to house refugees who had been held for years on remote Pacific islands, under Australia's much-criticized offshore detention policy for asylum-seekers who try to reach the country by boat. Those at the Park Hotel were brought to Australia for medical treatment, but they cannot leave the hotel for any other reason, and they do not know how long they will be kept there.

For activists, Mr. Djokovic's detention at the same hotel has been an opportunity to tell the world about the asylum-seekers' plight.

"The detention of Djokovic is shining a much-needed spotlight on Australia's cruel, inhumane system of mandatory detention," said Elaine Pearson, the Australia director for Human Rights Watch.

Mr. Djokovic's family and the government of his country, Serbia, have denounced the conditions under which they say he is being held at the Park Hotel, a no-frills, four-story facility on the outskirts of Melbourne's central business district. His family says Mr. Djokovic has been subjected to bugs in his room and terrible food. The Serbian government has demanded better accommodations.

Asylum-seekers at the hotel have made similar complaints. Just after Christmas, some posted pictures of moldy and maggot-infested food they said they had received in their rooms. Earlier in December, some said that after a fire broke out at the hotel, they were confined to the lobby and not allowed outside.

Several asylum-seekers said the windows of their rooms had been screwed shut, denying them access to fresh air. In October and November, a coronavirus outbreak swept through their ranks. At one point, 22 of the 46 asylum-seekers who were then being held at the hotel had coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

An Australian Border Force statement said detainees in immigration hotels had "access to dedicated indoor and outdoor exercise and activity areas," appropriate food, "clean, comfortable sleeping quarters" and other amenities.

Alison Battison, a human rights lawyer who represents some of the asylum-seekers in the hotel, said Australia's detention system was deliberately intended to "make the conditions so awful you choose to go back to the place of harm you came from."

"That's what Mr. Djokovic has found himself in — this deterrence policy nightmare," Battison said.

Most of the asylum-seekers at the hotel were taken to Australia in 2019. They had previously been detained in offshore processing centers in the Pacific island nation of Nauru or on Manus Island in Papua New Guinea, and were brought to Australia under a short-lived program for detainees who needed medical attention.

They arrived desperate for a reprieve from the indefinite detention and miserable conditions they had endured, then found themselves confined to a building where they could see normal Australian life outside their windows, just beyond reach.

Ms. Battison said that if Mr. Djokovic had been treated like her clients were, he would have been handcuffed and transported to the hotel in a van with black-tinted windows. His access to vitamins and medication would be decided by the nurse on duty, if one was on duty at all. He would not be allowed access to anything that the authorities decided could be used for self-harm, she said — "for example, not even a skipping rope to help him keep fit."

And while Mr. Djokovic's stay will be temporary, the asylum-seekers locked inside have no idea how long their detention will last.

"We cannot get out of the hotel," said Mehdi Ali, a 24-year-old Iranian refugee. "We're surrounded by walls."

Ali was young when he fled Iran, where he says he was subjected to

persecution as a member of the Ahwazi Arab ethnic minority. At 15, he was among a group of asylum-seekers whose boat was apprehended as they tried to reach Australia.

He spent years in a string of detention centers before arriving at the Park Hotel a few months ago. He says he lost nine years of his youth to Australia's immigration policy — waiting for rain on Nauru so he could take a shower; participating in hunger strikes; trying to treat the rats in his room like pets.

Shankar Kasynathan, a human rights campaigner with Amnesty International, was one of about a dozen refugee advocates who were protesting outside the hotel Saturday morning.

"It's been nine years, and it's too long," he said. "We're calling on Novak to use his influence, support base and platform to call this out and help us and help Australia bring an end to this cruelty."

He added that the protesters he was with were trying to stay separate from those demonstrating on behalf of Mr. Djokovic or against vaccine mandates. Some pro-asylum-seeker and anti-vaccine demonstrators got into a verbal confrontation that was broken up by police.

In the afternoon, an anti-vaccine protest that began in Melbourne's central business district made its way up to the hotel. About 50 police officers surrounded 100 protesters who banged on drums, blew on whistles and chanted "Novak, Novak." Some wore Serbian flags as capes and danced to music. —

© 2022 The New York Times

### Subsidies,

from S1/1

Subsidies are granted to GOCCs to cover operational expenses not supported by their revenue.

Other top recipients include the National Housing Authority at P1.66 billion, the Philippine Health Insurance Corp. (PhilHealth) at P903 million, the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority at P881 million, and the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. at P618 million. — **J.P.Ibañez**

### FULL STORY

Read the full story by scanning the QR code with your smartphone or by typing the link [bit.ly/GOCC11022](http://bit.ly/GOCC11022)

### IPOs,

from S1/1

San Miguel Corp.'s Bank of Commerce, Citicore Energy REIT Corp., and CTS Global Equity Group, Inc. are waiting for regulatory approval for their IPOs.

Meanwhile, Balai ni Frutas, Inc., North Star Meat Merchants, Inc., and Ovioland, Inc. have expressed interest in raising funds through the stock market this year.

The Villar group is also planning to launch its own real estate investment trust through Vista Land & Lifescapes, Inc. and "small IPOs," depending on market conditions, for some of its brands such as Coffee Project.

"Although each public offering may be considered unique, market sentiment may also play an effect to investors looking forward to participate in IPOs and existing issues' growth stories in the local bourse," Mr. Pangan said.

### FIGARO 'CONFIDENT'

Meanwhile, Figaro Chairman and Director Justin T. Liu said he is not con-

cerned with the timing of the offer, expressing confidence in the company's brands and products.

"We're not in the 'market timing business.' We're really more of looking long term so we're looking to use this capital to grow our company, we're not really looking at what will happen to the stock on opening day or on the week after," Mr. Liu said at an online investor's briefing on Jan. 6.

Figaro plans to use net proceeds from its P767.39-million IPO for store launches and renovations, commissary expansion, debt repayment, and investments in the company's digital infrastructure.

Figaro and Camerton, Inc. assigned PNB Securities, Inc. as the stock's stabilizing agent. PNB Securities may purchase up to 93.016 million common shares from the institutional offer for 75 centavos apiece within 30 days upon its listing.

A stabilizing agent is engaged "for the sole purpose of preventing/mini-

mizing reduction in market price of the shares," the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) noted in a document dated Jan. 4. The overallotment is also not allowed to go beyond 15% of the base number of shares sold by the issuer.

The "initial stabilizing action" is directed to start once the stock price falls below its initial offer price. However, if the stock's price falls further, the next trade will be "below the initial stabilizing price."

One of the last IPOs last year, Medilines Distributors, Inc., crashed 30% on its first trading day. The Villar-led firm did not arrange a stabilization fund for the offer.

The SEC has ordered Figaro and PNB Securities to record all details of stabilizing transactions. A weekly disclosure of price stabilization activities within the 30-day period is required.

In addition, the SEC also "directed" the company and the stabilizing agent to submit a report within 15 days from the end of its stabilization period.

## Vista Malls, Make-A-Wish Philippines grant wishes of ten children with critical illnesses



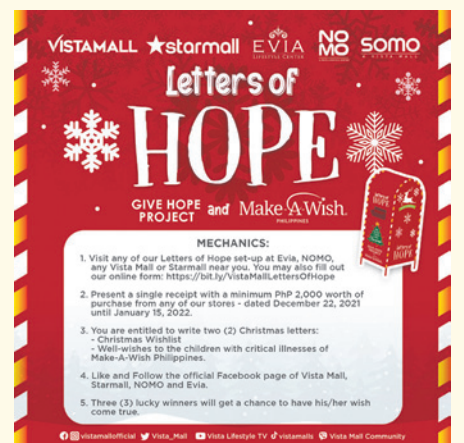
Vista Malls partnered with Make-A-Wish Foundation Philippines to grant ten wishes last Christmas. The beneficiaries were children, age 3 to 17, who are bravely battling critical illnesses such as leukemia, congenital & rheumatic heart diseases.

Through their wish journey process, the foundation received these referrals from their partner medical institutions like Phil. General Hospital, National Children's Hospital, Phil. Heart Center & Batangas Medical Center.

During the wish capture step, the children wished for mobile gadgets to use for their online classes and costumes of their favorite superheroes for the new year.

The partnership between Vista Mall's corporate social arm, Give-A-Hope, and Make-A-Wish Foundation will also grant the wishes of three lucky shoppers who will avail the Letters of Hope activity during the holidays.

Shoppers who spent at least P2,000 from any of the Vista Mall or Starmall stores within December 22, 2021 to



January 15, 2022 may join the promo. Each participant is allowed to write up to two Christmas letters -- a personal wish list and well-wishes for children with critical illnesses.

The Villar-led malls will make the wishes of three lucky shoppers at the end of the promo period.