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Omicron surge prompts concerns over hospitalizations in some provinces

Some provinces released updates regarding COVID-19 hospitalizations on Monday, which highlighted an increase in case numbers driven by the fast-spreading Omicron variant of the novel coronavirus.

Quebec's health minister urged people to reduce contacts after the province saw hospitalizations climb by more than 140 over a four-day period.

Christian Dubé said on Twitter that 520 people were admitted to hospital while 179 were released between Dec. 22 and 26. He noted that admissions are rising, with 93 people entering hospital on Boxing Day alone.

"We must limit contacts," he said on the social media site.

Ontario reported 9,418 new cases of COVID-19, which was down slightly from the record-breaking numbers on Christmas Day.

Health Minister Christine Elliott said 480 people were in hospital because of COVID-19 while ICU numbers rose to 176.

That brings the seven-day rolling average of COVID-19 related patients in intensive care to 168. Elliott added that not all hospitals report numbers on weekends.

Nova Scotia health authorities, meanwhile, reported an outbreak at the Halifax Influenza site of the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre.

They did not give details on how many patients have tested positive



but said fewer than five had been "impacted."

COVID-19 cases have been surging across Canada, driven by the Omicron variant.

Quebec reported 8,231 cases, while Nova Scotia recorded 581.

But as high as they are, health-care analysts have said the real number of cases is likely far higher.

Several provinces have asked people to get tested only if they have symptoms as hospitals and centres have reached their testing limits.

Quebec, meanwhile, has warned that the increasing use of rapid tests is likely to affect the accuracy of the case count.

Manitoba said it would be making take-home, self-administered rapid tests available at provincial testing sites.

As the Omicron variant spreads ever more gloom around the globe ahead of New Year's Eve, governments are moving at different speeds to contain the scourge, with some reimposing restrictions immediately and others hesitating to spoil the party again.

In Britain, where the highly contagious variant of the coronavirus has sent case loads soaring to record highs, Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Monday no further restrictions will be introduced in England before the new year. New daily infections in England are hovering around 100,000, and hospital admissions were up more than 70 per cent on Christmas from a week earlier.

"When we get into the new year, of course, we will see them if we need to take any further measures, but nothing more until then, at least," Javid said.

Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, though, nightclubs have been ordered closed and limits on gatherings imposed in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales, leaving the country divided in its approach to the crisis.

The Netherlands, meanwhile, has already shut down all nonessential stores, restaurants and bars and extended the school holidays in what largely amounts to a new lockdown.

In Belgium, new measures went into effect Monday and over the weekend: Shopping in large groups was banned, and movie theatres and concert halls closed in the middle of the holiday season.

In France, Prime Minister Jean Castex announced a set of restrictions set to begin next week, after New Year's. Among them: Big events will be limited to 2,000 people indoors

Coronavirus: What's happening in Canada and around the world on Monday

and 5,000 outdoors; eating and drinking will be banned in theatres, at sporting venues and on public transportation; and working from home will be mandatory at least three days a week for employees whose jobs make it possible.

Also, a bill will be voted on in France next month to create a vaccine pass that will allow only inoculated people to enter public places, including restaurants, bars and movie theatres.

The measures come after France recorded more than 100,000 COVID-19 infections in a single day for the first time during the pandemic.

In the U.S., the Biden administration has strongly emphasized the importance of vaccinations, boosters and rapid testing, while New York City's sweeping mandate requiring nearly all businesses, big and small, to bar unvaccinated employees from the workplace took effect Monday. It was announced three weeks ago, soon after Omicron gained a foothold in the U.S.

The top U.S. infectious-disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, warned Monday that, with the rise of Omicron, "it's going to get worse before it gets better." He said authorities should seriously consider requiring that domestic airline passengers be vaccinated.

"When you make vaccination a requirement, that's another incentive to get more people vaccinated," he told MSNBC.

Omicron has forced thousands of flight cancellations and delays around the globe because of staffing shortages linked to the virus, scrambling holiday travel plans.

FlightAware, a flight-tracking website, counted more than 2,700 cancellations worldwide by Monday evening in Europe - about 1,100 of them within, into or out of the U.S.

Despite the variant's extraordinary ability to infect people, early indications are that it might cause milder illness than previous versions. That uncertainty is keeping governments guessing and resulting in widely varying strategies for beating back the surge.

In Greece, authorities announced additional restrictions - also effective after New Year's - after recording its highest-ever one-day total of new infections, nearly 9,300.



Health Minister Thanos Plevris said that starting Jan. 3, high-protection or double masks will be mandatory at supermarkets and on public transportation; entertainment venues will close at midnight, and capacity will be cut to 10 per cent at soccer stadiums, among other measures.

Other parts of Europe have hesitated to slap more restrictions on their citizens.

In Poland, a nation of 38 million where the daily death toll now often tops 500, now-closed nightclubs will be allowed to reopen on New Year's Eve, with the government unwilling to go against the will of the many voters opposed to restrictions and mandatory vaccinations.

And despite the highest death toll due to COVID-19 in Europe, Russia will ring in the new year with little if any restrictions. Many precautions will be lifted during the holiday period that runs for 10 days starting New Year's Eve. Russia also will not impose any additional travel curbs.

The official Rosstat statistical agency estimated that between April 2020 and October 2021, Russia had 537,000 virus-related deaths.

In Belgium, the move to close theatres and concert venues came in for especially heavy criticism.

"We need it also for our mental health. It is the only way for people to live experiences, to tell stories. It is of paramount importance for us to be open in these complicated and complex times," said Michael De Kock, artistic director of the Flemish Royal Theatre.

Some movie theatres stayed open in an act of civil disobedience.

As of Monday, more than 280 million cases of COVID-19 had been reported worldwide, according to Johns Hopkins University's coronavirus tracker. The reported global death toll stood at more than 5.4 million.

What's happening across Canada

"Experts fear true number of cases in B.C. could be higher."

"Manitoba reduces capacity limits as Omicron cases skyrocket."

"Ontario reports 9,418 new cases, 5 more deaths."

"Hospitalizations in Quebec rose by 38 per cent since Dec. 22."

"Tougher level 2 restrictions coming into effect in N.B. on Monday night."

"P.E.I. logs 156 new cases over the weekend, lists 30 new exposures since."

"N.S. announces 581 infections, small outbreak at Halifax hospital."

"N.L. adds 357 cases over holiday weekend as testing ramps up."

"Nunavut mine sends employees home after 6 workers test positive."

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Trudeau says China 'playing' democracies against each other, urges 'united front'

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau says the Chinese government is using its economic weight to "very cleverly" play democratic countries off one another.

But Trudeau suggested democratic countries' pursuit of Chinese markets means political ideals can take a back seat to economic imperatives.

"We compete with each other. We're trying to see how could we get better access for Canadian beef than Australian beef to this country or that market," Trudeau told Global News' Ottawa Bureau Chief Mercedes Stephenson.

In a wide-ranging year-end interview, the prime minister said like-minded countries should "show a united front" against Beijing's increasingly "coercive diplomacy."

"We've been competing and China has been from time to time very cleverly playing us off each other in an open market competitive way. We need to do a better job of working together and standing strong so that

China can't, you know, play the cards and divide us one against the other."

Trudeau's comments come as Canada's relationship with China is at a low. Canada's 2018 detention of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou - at the behest of American authorities, who wanted the telecom executive on fraud charges - resulted in a diplomatic chill with Beijing.

It also led to the detention of the two Michaels - Michael Kovrig, a former diplomat, and Michael Spavor, a businessman - by Chinese authorities on national security charges. After nearly three years in prison, the Michaels were released in September shortly after Meng's lawyers cut a deal with U.S. prosecutors.

Reflecting on meeting the two men after their release, Trudeau said it was "a surprisingly emotional" moment.

"As a leader, as a prime minister, you want to do the right thing. You know what the right thing is, but

there's a human cost," Trudeau said.

"These two Canadians were stuck in terrible conditions, totally arbitrarily, and there was at least a theoretical way of me taking shortcuts and backroom deals to get them home. But I knew and I felt that you had to do the right thing and we stayed the course on the right thing."

Trudeau said that one of the Michaels told him he did the right thing, and that it "was satisfying to me on a personal level in ways that surprised even me."

The experience clearly changed Trudeau, who once said he admired the Chinese Communist Party's ability to quickly mobilize their country, and who spent his early years in government attempting to improve relations and trade between the two countries.

Xi Jinping's China today is "no longer the China that we thought about 10 years ago or even five years ago in some ways," Trudeau said.

"We have to be alert to that

possibility, but also to that mind-frame that they have moving forward, which means there are things we're going to continue to challenge China on - human rights, democracy in Hong Kong, supports for journalists, you know, non-interference in the goings-on of, you know, independent countries in Asia."

But Trudeau said Canada must continue to work with Beijing on key multi-lateral issues, including climate change.

"There are ways in which we're going to have to compete with China, whether it's on a commercial level, on trade deals, on goods and services - being thoughtful around that," Trudeau said.

"And then there are ways we're going to want to work with China and think about climate change, for example, where they are going to be a significant player if we're going to be able to decarbonize our global economy ... So all these different nuances are going to continue."

The Liberal government has also encountered friction with the other global superpower - the United States. After the tumultuous Trump years, Trudeau and his government may have been hoping for a smoother relationship with President Joe Biden.

Ontario received royal assent for new "right to disconnect" legislation on Dec. 2. It forces employers with at least 25 staff to develop policies on disconnecting from work in the next six months, but doesn't specify which sectors businesses have to address.

Legislation doesn't enforce.

"It's going to be a piece of legislation that is pretty nice to see on the shelf, but that doesn't have a bunch of teeth," Susan Chauloff, a partner at Workly Law in Toronto, predicted.

She feels the legislation will be difficult to enforce and will trigger waves of complaints to the labour ministry from workers completing tasks long after their shifts have ended.

Though inspired by Ontario, Quebec is aiming to be tougher. The Quebec Solidaire party introduced a bill in December demanding that companies share "the periods during which an employee is entitled to be disconnected from all job-related communications" on a weekly basis. Non-compliant employers will be charged \$100,000.

Until Ontario and Quebec inched toward legislation, Chauloff was never asked to draw up disconnect policies.

Provinces not waiting for Ottawa on laws

Inspired by a 2016 law giving workers in France the right to turn off electronic work devices outside of business hours, Canada's federal government started reviewing labour standards and mulling whether to give workers the right to ignore work-related messages when at home in 2018.

A committee convened in October was expected to analyze the issue and provide then-Labour Minister Filomena Tassi with recommendations in spring.

Michelle Johnston, director of communications for new Labour Minister Seanias O'Regan, wouldn't confirm whether the recommendations were ever received, but said in an email that "work on this file continues."

However, Quebec and Ontario aren't waiting for federal legislation.

A return to CERB-level financial support needed for service sector, Hamilton restaurant worker says

A Hamilton restaurant worker believes a return to the level of funding offered previously by the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) would go a long way to help workers and businesses in the food industry, as the province grapples with record numbers of COVID-19 cases linked to the Ontario variant.

CERB ended in October, 2020, and was replaced by the Canada Recovery Benefit, which ended in October of this year. The government launched the new Canada Worker Lockdown Benefit (CWLB) on Dec. 17.

Like the program before it, the program is designed to provide temporary income support during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it's only available to workers who cannot work due to a local lockdown designation.

There is no official lockdown in Ontario at the moment that requires restaurants to close, however in the wake of the highly transmissible Ontario variant of COVID-19, some restaurants in Hamilton and the Niagara region have closed indoor dining, saying they lack customers and are concerned for the safety of their staff.

Mariello Restaurant on James Street North in Hamilton did so last week, laying off all staff except for its manager, head chef and J.M. Turone, the pizzaiolo.

Turone believes he'll recover if he gets infected with COVID-19, but he worries about losing his income should he get sick.

"If I did get [COVID], the biggest fear would be like losing two weeks' of income, which for me it's not really a tenable option," he said.

"And that's why I think a lot of people in this industry and a lot of people just overall, like minimum wage workers ... you kind of get put into a situation where your financial stability and doing something very reckless, like going into work when you might be sick."

"We've already lost a lot of [servers and cooks] from the sector. Though we're just now returning, they never came back," Berry-Aspöle told CBC Hamilton.

Turone, 33, says he's been working in the sector for 16 years. He believes "some sort of full support system" is what's required, where "the government supports the businesses and the employees financially."

Some workers are "desperately afraid," Berry-Aspöle, an advocate at the Hamilton Hospitality Project, said even with the new CWLB, the uncertain nature of the pandemic has left some workers "desperately afraid."

"We've already lost a lot of [servers and cooks] from the sector. Though we're just now returning, they never came back," Berry-Aspöle told CBC Hamilton.

"You have the ones who kind of like hung on and now they're really scared."

Berry-Aspöle, who is also a chef at Victoria's, said paid sick days should be the foundation to any worker-focused approach to helping workers and businesses through the pandemic.



"I know the government has lowered the requirements for their new program [the CWLB], but ... it's supposed to be more of a supplement for a semi-loss of wages, as opposed to CERB that was supposed to be a complete coverage of those lost wages, or at least to the best of the government's ability."

"The current program is, I believe, \$300 a week, which is roughly \$1,200 a month and, I mean, an average apartment in Hamilton is about \$1,400 a month," Turone added.

With the CWLB only available to workers who cannot work due to a local lockdown, no one in the country met the eligibility criteria at the time of its launch. As of this week, 10 regions were listed as eligible, all in Quebec and the Northwest Territories.

Successful applicants would be eligible to receive \$300 per week, and can apply for the benefit until May 7, 2022.

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The expanded eligibility is expected to cost \$4 billion, the government said in a release.

Ontario becomes the first province to list fluvoxamine as a COVID-19 treatment to consider

Ontario has become the first province to list an inexpensive and well-known antidepressant as a treatment doctors can "consider" for patients with a mild COVID-19 infection in a bid to keep them out of hospital.

In the science table listing on Wednesday, a panel indicated that the drug fluvoxamine can be considered and prescribed to patients with a mild case who are at risk of having more severe symptoms.

Fluvoxamine is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressant that is typically used to treat depression and obsessive-compulsive disorders.

"Right now, we're in a really unprecedented wave of Omicron and we have just a staggering number of patients getting infected," Dr. Menaka Puri, associate professor of medicine at McMaster University and co-chair of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, told CTV News.

"Our goal is to keep them safe, to keep them out of hospital and also to preserve our scarcest resource, which I would say is our hospital beds."

The drug costs a little more than a dollar a day and would be taken for 15 days, starting with a small dose. In comparison, the antiviral medicines from Pfizer and Merck cost nearly \$1,000 dollars per patient.

Pandemic puts 'right to disconnect' in spotlight as provinces inch toward policies

During Danish Yusu's morning routine, his work phone rings and seldom is there an appointment with his Toronto insurance company staff.

The lack of disruptions is no coincidence. Yusu instructed staff not to plan meetings or send electronic communications early in the morning or after 5 p.m. years ago in hopes of helping staff relax and enjoy their personal lives.

"I have a three-and-a-half-year-old daughter and people will not schedule a meeting with me between 8 and 9 a.m. because that's when I'm giving her breakfast, changing her and dropping her off to daycare," said the chief executive of Zensurance.

"My team knows that and people appreciate that."

His policy has taken on new importance and been considered by more companies and governments as the lines between work and personal lives have blurred even further during the pandemic.

Workers spent more time logged in during the pandemic.

Canadians working from home during the crisis have found themselves increasingly balancing their boss's needs with family duties, like caring for children at home because of school outbreaks.

Stepping away from the phone or computer can be tough, when many are no longer commuting and the allure of going out has diminished as COVID-19 cases rise again.

The average time Canadian workers spent logged onto a computer increased from nine to 11 hours a day during the pandemic, cybersecurity company NordLayer found in February.

More recently, a November report from human resources software company Ceridian found 84 per cent of the 1,304 Canadian workers surveyed by Hanover Research felt burned out over the last two years.

Some are anxious for these stats to

change.


Provinces not waiting for Ottawa on laws

Inspired by a 2016 law giving workers in France the right to turn off electronic work devices outside of business hours, Canada's federal government started reviewing labour standards and mulling whether to give workers the right to ignore work-related messages when at home in 2018.

A committee convened in October was expected to analyze the issue and provide then-Labour Minister Filomena Tassi with recommendations in spring.

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'Meri Christmas' shares Vicky Kaushal as he celebrates his special day with Katrina Kaif

Here comes the most awaited picture of newly married couple Vicky Kaushal and Katrina Kaif's Christmas celebrations! Taking to his Instagram handle, Vicky Kaushal treated fans to an adorable picture of himself with Katrina Kaif. The candid snap captures the duo sharing a warm hug as they pose in front of a X-Mas tree for their dreamy Christmas picture.

The video garnered more than eight lakh likes within a few minutes of it being posted on the photo-sharing application. Scores of Vicky fans chimed into the comments section and left a string of emoticons in the awe-of-the-adorable picture.



'Sam Bahadur', a biopic on Field Marshal Sam Manekshaw that also stars 'Danga' girls, Sanya Malhotra and Fatima Sana Shaikh.

Katrina has also returned to the shoot sets for her upcoming film 'Meri Christmas' directed by Vijay Sethupathi.

The film that marks her first project with Vijay is being extensively shot in Mumbai currently.

'Meri Christmas', being produced by Ramesh Taurani and Sanjay Rautray, will hit theatres on December 23, 2022.

The couple who had married in a private ceremony at the luxurious Six Senses Fort Barwa in Sawai Madhopur, Rajasthan, returned to Mumbai last week after enjoying a romantic honeymoon, which reports suggest was in the Maldives.

They recently shifted to their new house and had their housewarming rituals over this week.

On the work front, Vicky has kick-started prep of Megha Gulzar's

Apart from 'Meri Christmas', the actor has two films in her kitty - Salman Khan's 'Tiger 3' and Farhan Akhtar's 'Jee Le Zara', co-starring Priyanka Chopra and Alia Bhatt.

Bollywood actress Jacqueline Fernandez has been in the headlines over the past few months for her involvement in the Rs. 200 crore laundering case. The actress has been reportedly given gifts worth in crores which includes two pairs of diamond earrings, two Hermes bracelets, three Birkin bags, and a pair of Louis Vuitton shoes.

ED to seize all the gifts given by Sukesh Chandra-sekhar to Jacqueline Fernandez

According to the latest reports, the Enforcement Department is going to seize all the gifts received by the actress. The probe agency officials will soon initiate the process of attaching the gifts in possession of the actors in order to recover the proceeds of crime.

It is suspected that gifts worth more than Rs 10 crore were given to Jacqueline Fernandez by Sukesh ChandraSekhar between December 2020 and August 2021. Apart from that, actress Nora Fatehi has also been gifted a BMW car by Sukesh ChandraSekhar's wife Leena Maria Paul. These gifts were allegedly bought using extorted money, making them proceeds of crime.

England (185) endure another bad day in office

England crashed to 185 all-out on Day One of the third Test on Sunday, leaving their Ashes dreams on the brink of ruin in the face of a relentless Australian attack. After heavy defeats in Brisbane and Adelaide, the visitors must win in Melbourne to keep the five-Test series alive, with Australia only needing a draw to retain the urn as holders. But those hopes took a near-fatal blow as Australia ripped through England's flimsy batting, with only captain Joe Root (50) and Jonny Bairstow (35) showing resistance.



"As a bowling group we know we are not going to give up any soft overs. You need to take 20 wickets to win the game and that's our motive," said Australia's Scott Boland, who made his debut and took the wicket of Mark Wood. "It's a great attack to be a part of"

Australian skipper Pat Cummins, back after missing the second Adelaide Test because he was in COVID isolation, and spin king Nathan Lyon both took 3-6. Australia then added to England's pain by negotiating 16 overs to be 61-4 at stumps, trailing by only 124 with Marnus Labroo out 20 despite taking a nasty blow to the finger, and nightwatchman Lyon yet to score.

Ig-wicket of Warner

But on another bad day for England they did bag the big wicket of David Warner, who need to 38 off 42 balls before sending a sick edge off Jimmy Anderson to Zak Crawley at gully.

After batting collapses and poor bowling in the first two Tests, Root read his players the riot act seemingly to little effect. They have failed to score more than 297 in five innings so far. "Obviously the loss didn't go our way, we'd also have loved to bowl in that first session," said Bairstow. "We're still looking for that big score. We've got to get stronger and tougher with our dismissals, we know that. But we've seen that the pitch offered plenty (for the bowlers) today and hopefully we turn up in the morning and put pressure on to get some early inroads."

Opens Haseeb Hammed (0) and Crawley (12) fell cheaply to Cummins after he was won the toss and put England in to bat, with their hopes resting once more on Root in front of 57,100 fans as the MCG less than expected due to COVID concerns. He brought up his 53rd Test half-century in his 12th match, but once more failed to convert it into a maiden ton in Australia after a poor shot on 50 to Mitchell Starc.

Pakistan edge India in thriller to reach U-19 Asia Cup semis

LAHORE: Fast bowler Zeeshan Zameer's five-wicket haul backed by a fine 81-run knock by Mohammad Shehzad steered Pakistan to a nail-biting two-wicket victory over arch-rivals India in their Group 'A' match of the U-19 Asia Cup in Dubai on Saturday.

Chasing 238 for victory, Pakistan achieved their target off the very last ball when Ahmed Khan drove Indian pacer Ravi Karan for a boundary.

Earlier, night-bowler Shehzad played a fighting knock off 105 balls while striking five sixes and four fours.

At 230-7, Pakistan required eight runs for victory in the final over. On the final ball of the over, Pakistan lost Zeeshan, who was the wicket-in-chief of the Indian innings with five wickets, for a duck to Ravi. But Ahmed (29 not out) with Ali Asif (1 not out) survived the tense moments and achieved the target on the last ball.

Besides Shehzad and Ahmed, other notable scorers for Pakistan were Mazhar Sadeq (29, four fours), Irfan Khan (32, three fours) and Rizwan Mohsin (29).

For India, pacer Ravi Karan was the main wicket-taker with four for 56. Earlier after being put into bat, India made a moderate total of 237 all out in 49 overs. Wicket keeper/ batsman Aamir Yaqub top-scored with an 83-ball 50 containing three fours while opener Hamza Singh made 46 off 59.

Hrithik Roshan, Deepika Padukone welcome Anil Kapoor to 'Fighter'



As actor Anil Kapoor joined the cast of 'Fighter', actors Hrithik Roshan and Deepika Padukone give him a warm welcome. The news about Anil joining the film was revealed on his 62nd birthday on Friday. Hrithik posted a picture posing with Anil and the film's director Siddharth Anand.

He captioned the image: "Happyest Birthday to the man who grows younger each year in spirit and health. @anil Kapoor! Best wishes to you Sir. From witnessing your legendary presence on sets as a more assistant, to finally having the opportunity of sharing the screen with you... Super excited for #Fighter!"

Deepika too shared the same picture on her Instagram story and wrote: "Welcome to 'Fighter' birthday boy." Touted as India's first aerial action franchise, 'Fighter' will see Hrithik collaborating with Deepika onscreen for the first time ever.

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Ton-up Iftikhar, Kamran help KP recover from early jolts in QAT final

KARACHI: It was only the second over and defending champions Khyber Pakhtunkhwa were reeling in the Qaid-e-Azam Trophy final.

Northern pacer Waqar Ahmed was getting early afternoon swing at the National Stadium on Saturday and uprooted Fakhr Zaman's off-stump with a delivery that swung back into the left-hander.

The very next ball, Sahibzada Farhan was trapped lbw with a delivery that swung late and Waqas was on a hat-trick with Khyber Pakhtunkhwa 6-2.

Kamran Ghulam prevented him from getting a hat-trick before becoming the pivot for Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's recovery.

His unbeaten 72 in 196 deliveries was key as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa reached 252-5 at stumps on the opening day of the pink-ball day/night final on Saturday.

Iftikhar Ahmed got more runs than



Kamran, and made 102 but it was the latter who frustrated the Northern bowlers with his mean defence and kept one end intact.

After the early blows, Kamran combined with his captain Ashfaq Ahmed (45) in a 79-run partnership which was broken when Muhammad Husrain took a catch at the second attempt at short first leg off Mubair Khan.

Ashfaq hit five fours during his innings and after he departed, Kamran and Iftikhar added 104 runs with the former blocking out the Northern bowlers.

Kamran hit 11 fours, only getting out when he tried to hit Muhammad Nawaz out of the park. He came down the wicket to the Pakistan spin all-rounder and completely missed the ball to be stumped by Mubair Naiz.

Iftikhar, on the other hand, was getting runs more quickly and completed his century off 168 deliveries with his 13th boundary, driving Kasib Ali between three fours and sixes.

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Experts concerned about hospital capacity as Omicron spread continues

OTTAWA — A rise in COVID-19 cases driven by the highly infectious Omicron variant of the virus has renewed concerns among experts about the capacity of Canada's hospitals and health-care workers to handle another wave of the pandemic.

Paul-Emile Cloutier, president of HealthCareCAN, said the latest wave could make the existing health-care worker shortage worse. HealthCareCAN represents research hospitals and regional health authorities.

"If they have to isolate because they have the virus, then that reduces the amount of staff available," Cloutier said in an interview Sunday.

"The health professionals are stepping up one more time, as they do normally, and try to provide the care that patients need. But they do it when they're tired. They're doing it when they're exhausted. They're doing it when they're at the end of their rope."

The highly infectious Omicron variant of the virus has been driving a



surge in COVID-19 cases across much of Canada in recent weeks.

Canada's Olympic mixed doubles curling trials were cancelled Sunday because of a rise in athletes testing positive for the COVID-19 virus.

Curling Canada said the "risks associated with travelling" also contributed to the cancellation.

Cloutier said the number of cases over the next few days will depend on whether people followed public health orders, maintained symptoms and stayed home.

"I think everybody agrees that the numbers will go higher," he said.

Only a few health authorities

released the number of COVID-19 infections Boxing Day. Ontario reported 9,526 new COVID-19 cases, which was a decline after a record-breaking 10,412 infections on Christmas Day — but still a marked increase over the 4,177 reported a week earlier.

Quebec reported about 8,000 cases and three more deaths as new and tighter COVID-19 restrictions took effect Sunday. The province capped private gatherings at six people or two family bubbles.

Health officials in Nova Scotia reported more than 1,100 new COVID-19 cases over the past two

Tourism industry may have to live off domestic travel until the fall, says minister

The tourism and hospitality sector has been among those most severely affected by the pandemic. With uncertainty over the Omicron variant persisting, the federal minister responsible for the industry said the return of international travellers could still be a long way off.

"During the darkest days of the pandemic, Destination Canada, which normally takes its money and markets Canada to the rest of the world, took that money and marketed inside Canada, to travel," Tourism Minister Randy Boissonnault told CBC News.

"I think to at least the third quarter of 2022, we're going to have to see more of that."

In Canada, domestic travellers account for 78 per cent of tourism spending. But international visitors spend an average of \$1,047 per trip, while domestic vacationers spend less than a quarter of that.

"Domestic travel is a crucial step to getting our industry back up and running but [it] will not be able to fill the revenue gap from the halt of international travel," Beth Potter, president and CEO of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada, told CBC News.

The sector has contracted by more than 50 per cent over the course of the pandemic, falling from a \$105 billion-a-year industry before the pandemic to one worth about \$53 billion now. That's a drop of 40 per cent in domestic spending and 67 per cent in spending by international visitors.

Industry stakeholders like Potter say that the sector faces three significant challenges over the next year. The first is simply to survive until visitors return. The second is the impact of ongoing restrictions on travel, while the third is a labour shortage brought on by the pandemic.

In 2020, as the country locked down and the border shut to international travellers, the tourism sector was forced to lay off 43 per cent of its workforce — about 900,000 jobs, according to Destination Canada, the former Canadian Tourism Commission.

Some of those jobs have since returned but over the first six months of the year, the industry's workforce remained 360,000 shy of the number it employed before the pandemic.

"We had to lay off many of the

workers that we did have and many of them will not come back," Susie Grynol, president and CEO of the Canadian Hotel Association, told CBC News.

"They won't come back, not because their heart isn't in hospitality but because we are still, 19 months later, not in a position to hire back every single worker because now we've found ourselves in the off-season."

They have told us they will not come back.

Industry insiders say that the labour shortage is not being driven solely by slack short-term demand that will correct itself once borders reopen — that it represents a permanent move away from the sector by key workers.

"Our industry has suffered some reputational damage because people see us as unstable because we have been subject to so many restrictions," said Beth Potter, president and CEO of the Tourism Industry Association of Canada.

"We have actually lost employees. They've told us they will not come back to the industry because they don't see our industry as a viable place to continue their career."

Potter said the losses include both front-line staff and other positions, such as cleaners, dishwashers, lawyers and accountants.

Grynol and Potter said that phenomenon was experienced by Canadian domestic tourists this summer who reported hotels setting caps on occupancy because of staff shortages, and restaurants cancelling lunch service during the height of the season.

"If we are successful at preserving this sector and keeping it alive — then we do get an open travel climate and what we think will happen after that is revenge travel — a tourism renaissance," said Grynol.

"We will have so much demand for Canada that our single biggest challenge will be labour and making sure we can service all of this demand."

To ensure Canada is ready, the industry wants the federal government to make adjustments to the temporary foreign worker program and immigration streams to fill the demand for key workers in the sector.

Using students, immigration to fill gaps.

They also want to see the revival of

programs targeting recent graduates or international students who take seasonal jobs in the tourism sector to fund global travel.

Boissonnault said he's open to the idea and has already made moves on the immigration front to ensure his sector has the workers it needs.

"Within the first week of being minister, maybe day three, I was already talking with [Immigration Minister Sean Fraser] and [Labour Minister Seamus O'Regan] about this," Boissonnault told CBC.

"It's an active conversation in our government and we're going to be leaning in hard on this issue in 2022 with stakeholders to really address this question for the long term."

Stakeholders say they have to fix the reputational damage done to the industry by the pandemic in order to attract new workers.

"We need to get out there and encourage Canadians that this is a great industry to work in," Potter said. "We're going to need to start influencing not only parents and teachers but students, starting even as young as middle school, that there are some great opportunities in our industry."

Boissonnault said he wants to encourage young people to see jobs in tourism as "great careers that you can have for your whole life."

Rebuilding that workforce requires some predictability — and simplification of travel restrictions would help, industry insiders say.

"We want to make the movement of people across the country, in and out of the country, as seamless as possible [by] really making sure that we have one system across Canada and we don't have 13 or 14 different systems," Potter said.

Boissonnault said that while he'd also like to see more predictability, provinces can be expected to take different and "totally legitimate" approaches to restrictions.

"We need to show that travel, when you do it properly, is safe. That has to be our message. We also have to keep people safe that are travelling and make sure that we're taking the right measures — first safety, then travel," he said.

Police looking to identify suspect who obtained over \$5M in mortgages after posing as private mortgage broker in GTA

Toronto police are asking for the public's help in identifying a suspect who is allegedly posing as a private mortgage broker and has obtained over five million dollars in mortgages.

Starting in August 2020, a man, identified as Lucas, attended several law firms specializing in real estate in the Greater Toronto Area, police said in a news release on Thursday.

It's alleged that he set up fake lenders, borrowers and companies in order to obtain private mortgages.

Police said he then used fake identities of real people in order to place the fraudulent mortgages on the victims' homes without their knowledge.

To date, police said the suspect has obtained more than \$5 million in mortgages from several law firms throughout the GTA.

The suspect is described as Asian, between 25 and 30 years old, with black, short hair, and a thin build.

Canada's public health agency admits it tracked 33 million mobile devices during lockdown

Due to the urgency of the pandemic, PHAC collected and used mobility data, such as cell-tower location data, throughout the COVID-19 response, a spokesperson told National Post. The program's existence was first brought to wider attention by Blackbox's Reporter.

PHAC used the location data to evaluate the effectiveness of public lockdown measures and allow the Agency to "understand possible links between movement of populations within Canada and spread of COVID-19," the spokesperson said.

In March, the Agency awarded a contract to the Telus Data For Good program to provide "de-identified and aggregated data" of movement trends in Canada. The contract expired in October, and PHAC no longer has access to the location data, the spokesperson said.

The Agency is planning to track population movement for roughly the next five years, including to address

other public health issues, such as "other infectious diseases, chronic disease prevention and mental health," the spokesperson added.

Privacy advocates raised concerns to the National Post about the long-term implications of the program.

"I think that the Canadian public will find out about many other such unauthorized surveillance initiatives before the pandemic is over and afterwards," David Lyon, author of Pandemic Surveillance and former director of the Surveillance Studies Centre at Queen's University, said in an email.

Lyon urged a need for greater information "regarding exactly what was done, what was achieved and whether or not it truly served the interests of Canadian citizens."

Deploying surveillance tools for public health purposes also raises the issue of equity, Martin French, an associate professor of Concordia University focusing on surveillance, privacy and social justice, noted in an email.

"There are populations that could experience an intensification of

tracking that could have harmful (rather than beneficial) repercussions."

Increased use of surveillance technology during the COVID-19 pandemic has created a new normal in the name of security, Lyon said.

"The pandemic has created opportunities for a massive surveillance surge on many levels — not just for public health, but also for monitoring those working, shopping and commuting in homes."

"Evidence is coming in from many sources, from countries around the world, that what was seen as a huge surveillance surge post-9/11 is now completely upstaged by pandemic surveillance," he added.

In a notice posted earlier this week, the agency called for contractors with access to "cell-tower/location data in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic and for other public health applications." It asks for "de-identified cell-tower based location data from across Canada" beginning from Jan. 2019 until the end of the contract period on May 31, 2023, with the possibility of three one-year extensions.

The contractor must provide anonymized data to PHAC and ensure its users have the ability to easily opt-out of mobility data sharing programs, the agency says.

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