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BA.2 33% more infectious than 'original' Omicron COVID strain, study finds

The BA.2 subvariant of the Omicron coronavirus variant, which has quickly taken over in Denmark, is more transmissible than the more common BA.1 and more able to infect vaccinated people, a Danish study has found.

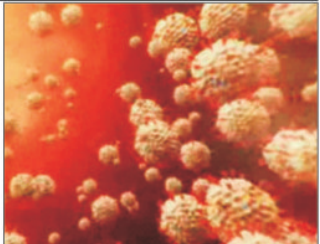
The study, which analyzed coronavirus infections in more than 8,500 Danish households between December and January, found that people infected with the BA.2 subvariant were roughly 33 per cent more likely to infect others, compared to those infected with BA.1.

Worldwide, the "original" BA.1 subvariant accounts for more than 98 per cent of Omicron cases, but its close cousin BA.2 has quickly become the dominant strain in Denmark, dethroning BA.1 in the second week of January.

"We conclude that Omicron BA.2 is inherently substantially more transmissible than BA.1, and that it also possesses immune-evasive properties that further reduce the protective effect of vaccination against infection," the study's researchers said.

The study, which has not yet been peer-reviewed, was conducted by researchers at Statens Serum Institut (SSI), Copenhagen University, Statistics Denmark and Technical University of Denmark.

"If you have been exposed to Omicron BA.2 in your household,



you have 39 per cent probability of being infected within seven days. If you instead had been exposed to BA.1, the probability is 29 per cent," lead study author Frederik Pleisner told Reuters.

That suggests BA.2 is around 33 per cent more infectious than BA.1, he added.

COVID-19: Canada's top doctor says federal, provincial labs have made over 100 identifications of the BA.2 subvariant

BA.2 cases have also been registered in the United States, Britain, Sweden and Norway, but to a much lesser extent than in Denmark, where it accounts for roughly 82 per cent of cases.

The study also showed that BA.2 was relatively better than BA.1 at infecting vaccinated and booster-vaccinated people, indicating greater "immune evasive properties" of the subvariant.

But vaccines still played an important role, the study underlined, since both booster-vaccinated and fully vaccinated individuals were less likely to get infected and transmit other subvariants, compared to those not vaccinated.

Preliminary analysis by SSI has shown that there is no difference in the risk of hospitalization for BA.2 compared to BA.1.

The study also confirms preliminary analysis from England, which showed BA.2 appears to have a substantial growth advantage over the BA.1 type, according to Britain's UK Health Security Agency.

Students in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick headed back to classrooms on Monday - a move that comes amid a broader easing of restrictions in the two Atlantic provinces.

P.E.I. Premier Dennis King said earlier this month that teachers, administrators, parents and children have been "champions" through the period of remote learning, which had "brought its own challenges." But as he announced the plan to shift back to in-person learning, the premier said it was time to get students back to classrooms.

New Brunswick started to ease up its rules late last week. Businesses that had been closed, including salons, dining rooms and gyms, were allowed to reopen with capacity limits as of 11:59 p.m. last Friday. Rules around gatherings, sports and recreation also eased up as part of a broader shift to lower alert level.

New Brunswick on Monday reported a total of 152 COVID-19 hospitalizations - down by 12 from Sunday - with 16 people in the province's ICUs, according to the province's posted update. The provincial COVID-19 dashboard also reported five additional deaths, along with 169 new lab-confirmed cases.

Prince Edward Island's shift in restrictions begins Monday, with businesses that had been closed allowed to open with capacity limits.

Gyms are among the businesses on the island allowed to reopen under new COVID-19 measures that take effect today. The province said fitness facilities can reopen at 50 per cent capacity with physical distancing.

Health officials in P.E.I. reported a decrease in the number of hospitalizations from the COVID-19 Monday to 15 from 19. There are two people being treated in the ICU. There have also been 234 newly confirmed cases.

In Nova Scotia, there were 93

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

people in hospital with COVID-19 Monday, including 15 in the ICU. There were also an additional 256 confirmed cases.

Newfoundland and Labrador on Sunday said COVID-19 hospitalizations had hit a pandemic high of 23, with eight people in ICU. There were no additional deaths reported in the province, which saw 210 additional lab-confirmed cases.

What's happening across Canada

In Central Canada, Canada's two most populous provinces are embarking on a gradual loosening of restrictions put in place to try and stem the spread of the highly transmissible Omicron variant.

Quebec is easing some COVID-19 restrictions on Monday, including allowing restaurants to open with limited capacity and a return of small private indoor gatherings.

The province on Monday reported 2,888 COVID-19 hospitalizations - down by seven from a day earlier - with 223 people in intensive care units. The COVID-19 situation report posted online by the province also showed 33 additional deaths and 2,423 additional lab-confirmed cases.

Ontario is also moving forward with a plan to ease some restrictions. As of Monday, restaurants, gyms and theatres in the province will welcome patrons back today for the first time in nearly a month. Larger venues will also reopen, with capacity limited to 50 per cent or 500 people - whichever is fewer.

It's the first step in the province's plan to gradually ease public health



restrictions meant to curb the spread of COVID-19.

Ontario on Monday reported a total of 2,983 COVID-19 hospitalizations - down by 36 from a day earlier - with 583 people in intensive care units across the province. The provincial COVID-19 dashboard also showed a total of 32 additional deaths, though a spokesperson for Health Minister Christine Elliott noted that the deaths had occurred over the past 17 days. The province also reported an additional 3,043 additional lab-confirmed cases.

In the Prairie provinces, health officials in Saskatchewan on Monday reported a total of 363 COVID-19 hospitalizations - up by 14 from a day earlier - with 42 people in ICU. The province also reported two additional deaths and 748 additional lab-confirmed cases. Premier Scott Moe doubled down Monday on his assertion that the COVID-19 vaccine does not reduce transmission of the Omicron variant, something health officials say is false.

Health officials in Manitoba reported on Monday that there are 735

COVID-19 cases have already peaked in some countries.

Scientists are now tracking a rise in cases caused by a close cousin known as BA.2, which is starting to overtake BA.1 in parts of Europe and Asia. Some early reports indicate that BA.2 may be even more infectious than the already extremely contagious BA.1, but there is no evidence so far that it is more likely to evade vaccine protection.

In the Asia-Pacific region, China has detected 119 COVID-19 cases among athletes and personnel involved in the Beijing Winter Olympics over the past four days, with authorities imposing a "closed loop" bubble to keep participants, staff and media separated from the public.

Tokyo has launched a mass inoculation drive for COVID-19 booster shots at a temporary centre operated by the military as Japan tries to speed up delayed third jabs to contain raging infections.

Japan began administering booster shots to medical workers in December, but has only provided such inoculations to 2.7 per cent of the population after delaying a decision to cut the interval between the first two coronavirus shots and a booster to six months from the initial eight. On a smaller scale, people 65 and older can get booster shots elsewhere.

Australia reported its lowest daily COVID-19 deaths in two weeks on Monday while cases continued to trend lower as authorities braced for staff shortages in schools due to likely outbreaks as thousands of students return after their summer break.

Masks are mandatory indoors for older children and millions of at-home antigen tests, still not readily available in many stores, are being rolled out to families free of cost, with children asked to undergo COVID tests twice a week.

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Canadian troops moved west of Dnieper River amid threat of Russian invasion in Ukraine

Canadian troops deployed to Ukraine have moved west of the Dnieper River amid mounting concerns of a Russian invasion, Defence Minister Anita Anand has confirmed.

Speaking in Kyiv, Ukraine on Monday, Anand said the safety and security of the Canadian Armed Forces remains her top priority, which prompted the move.

"We are continually monitoring the evolving and concerning situation and made a decision to move troops in that regard," she told reporters.

Canada has 200 troops stationed in Ukraine under the banner of Operation UNIFIER, who are there to train Ukrainian armed forces and the national guard.

Heading west of the river and away from the Russian border where more than 100,000 troops have amassed, is ostensibly safer should an invasion occur.

Anand met with her Ukrainian counterpart on Monday to discuss



how Canada can assist with further de-escalation mechanisms to deter Russian advancement.

"We discussed number of forms of aid and it would be prudent, in light of the very intense and sensitive security situation at the current time, for me to discuss that first with my counterparts in cabinet and with the prime minister prior to making formal decisions or announcements about what was discussed," she said.

The United Nations Security

Council is also meeting Monday to discuss Russia's military buildup at the border.

The session kicks off more high-level diplomacy this week. Talks between the U.S. and Russia have so far failed to ease tensions in the crisis.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken are expected to speak by phone Tuesday, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry. Back in Canada, MPs will hold a

debate Monday night about the situation and Canada's response. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will be attending virtually, after contracting COVID-19.

"I'll be talking about the importance of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law in the face of Russian provocation, in this difficult time, more than ever. We must stay true to our values," Trudeau said on Monday.

Canada got an early glimpse at what that debate could look like during question period.

Conservative MP and foreign affairs critic Michael Chong called out the government for not sending lethal weapons to Ukraine as it had asked and as other allies have done.

"Diplomacy not backed by credible threats of the use of military force is nothing more than empty talk and rhetoric. Canada should be joining our other democratic allies in working in a multilateral fashion with our NATO partners to grant Ukraine's request," he said.

"When will this government quit being so naïve about its foreign policy?" In response, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly touted the government's recent expansion and extension of Operation UNIFIER for three years and the \$120-million loan to bolster Ukraine's economy.

Has the Delta variant disappeared in Canada?

Not only is Omicron the predominant COVID-19 variant circulating in Canada, but it also continues to dominate much of the conversation currently surrounding the pandemic. The latest update to draw attention involves the emergence of a new Omicron subvariant in Canada, with more than 100 cases already confirmed.

But with so much of the focus on Omicron, many may be left wondering whether other variants such as Delta continue to circulate in Canada at all.

The latest data from the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) shows that while the Omicron variant now accounts for the majority of positive COVID-19 samples collected by the agency, a small percentage of Delta cases continue to be detected. During the week of Jan. 9, the most recent data on display, 92 per cent of 404 samples collected in Canada tested positive for Omicron. Meanwhile, 7.9 per cent of the samples tested positive for the Delta variant.

"It's really being replaced by Omicron... but Delta is still out there," Dr. Gerald Evans, chair of Queen's University's infectious diseases division in Kingston, Ont., told CTVNews.ca in a phone interview Wednesday.

With Omicron proving to be highly transmissible and quick to replicate, it essentially superseded the variant that dominated before it, Evans said. Delta had done the same to Alpha when it first emerged as well, he said.

"Delta is such a robust variant that it outcompeted Alpha, so we don't really see Alpha at all anymore," he said. "It may just be that we need a little more time to see Omicron push Delta out."

Similar to what's being observed on a national scale, Omicron makes up the vast majority of samples processed through whole genome sequencing in Ontario. The province's latest surveillance report on whole genome sequencing shows that during the week of Jan. 2, 97.8 per cent of cases sequenced were Omicron, while 2.2 per cent were Delta.

"It looks like [Delta] is still holding on in a small percentage of people," Dr. Sany Hota, medical director for infection prevention and control at the Toronto-based University Health Network, said on Thursday in a phone interview with CTVNews.ca. "It hasn't been



completely displaced."

This trend of Delta remaining in circulation is true across most of the country as well, she said, not just in Ontario. In British Columbia, for the week of Jan. 9 to Jan. 15, 97 per cent of positive specimens sequenced by the agency, a small percentage of Delta cases continue to be detected. During the week of Jan. 9, the most recent data on display, 92 per cent of 404 samples collected in Canada tested positive for Omicron. Meanwhile, 7.9 per cent of the samples tested positive for the Delta variant.

An important factor to consider in the reduced number of Delta cases being reported by provinces is the emergence of vaccines, said Hota. Two doses of COVID-19 vaccines have proven to be highly effective against the Delta variant, said Hota. But when it comes to Omicron, while several studies indicate that current vaccines are still effective, they point to the need for a third dose for optimal protection.

"The opportunity still remains for the Omicron BA.1 variant to be transmitted amongst people, whereas Delta is losing that opportunity because vaccines are more effective at preventing infections," said Hota.

Both Evans and Hota said that the Delta variant is likely circulating in greater numbers among those who are unvaccinated, along with other vulnerable populations including those who are immunocompromised or older in age.

Despite the lower number of Delta cases being reported today compared to months ago, both Hota and Evans said it's tough to tell whether the variant will disappear for good in the near future.

"With the continued low-level circulation of Delta in the community, Omicron may not be able to completely wipe Delta if it's got lots of people it can still infect," said Evans.

Hota said she anticipates the Delta

variant may linger in small amounts across Canada for quite some time.

"It all really depends on what happens with future variants coming along, what their characteristics are like and whether they end up displacing [existing variants]," she said.

NEW SUBVARIANT DETECTED IN CANADA

Canada's Chief Public Health Officer Dr. Theresa Tam announced that more than 100 cases of the new Omicron subvariant, BA.2, have been discovered in Canada as of Friday.

This is double the amount of infections from the subvariant that was reported earlier last week.

"We're one of the first countries to actually pick up on this variant, and we have at least over 100 identifications," said Tam during Friday's federal COVID-19 update.

Dr. Jeff Wansa is a senior investigator at Unifield-Tenenbaum Research Institute based in Toronto. He was involved in creating the platform to sequence and name all variants of concern that come through the joint microbiology lab between the University Health Network and Sinai Health Systems. Several BA.2 subvariant cases were first identified by the lab back in December through whole genome sequencing, he said.

"We detected the first BA.2 (cases) before New Year's and since then, there's been kind of sporadic cases," he told CTVNews.ca in a phone interview on Thursday. "But in the last couple of weeks, it's clearly expanding."

According to PHAC, the BA.2 subvariant was first detected in Canada in November. Looking at the subvariant's spread across the country so far, Wansa noted that the pace at which BA.2 cases are increasing is different than what was noted with the original version of Omicron in early December.

"Omicron was basically like an explosion went off - it was just

everywhere almost instantaneously," he said. "This [subvariant] is kind of showing a little bit more of a leisurely expansion."

"But we're just starting to see the expansion now, so we don't really know what the shape of that curve is going to look like."

BA.2 is a descendant of the Omicron variant and has already been detected in nearly 50 countries worldwide, according to global coronavirus data sharing platform GISAID. The United Kingdom recently designated it a "variant under investigation," noting it could have an increased growth rate compared to the original Omicron lineage, BA.1. The Omicron variant has four sub-lineages: BA.1, BA.1.1, BA.2 and BA.3.

The BA.2 subvariant is considered "stabilized" than the original version of Omicron because some of its genetic traits make it harder to detect. According to the World Health Organization, the BA.2 subvariant differs from BA.1 in some of its mutations, including in the spike protein. Still, Evans said there isn't a significant difference in the genomic structure of the BA.2 subvariant compared to that of BA.1.

"This is not a jump from Alpha to Delta, or Delta to Omicron," said Evans. "It's basically Omicron with a few small changes in its genetic structure, nothing that would make it have to have a whole new Greek letter."

As viruses become endemic, they tend to exhibit this kind of behaviour, said Evans, referring to the small degree of mutational differences that are often adopted by viruses over time. While BA.1 is the most common subvariant of Omicron currently circulating around the world, Evans pointed to several countries that are seeing much more rapid growth of BA.2 compared to BA.1 such as India, Denmark, the U.K. and Germany.

According to Wansa, however, it is still too early to tell whether Omicron variants are likely to see another surge in infections as a result of the BA.2 subvariant.

"We don't know yet if it's really going to be explosive or peter out," he said. "There are other variants that came and went that we all got worried about, but they didn't really do anything."

Evans said that very limited data suggests that the efficacy of current vaccines is similar to what it would be against BA.1. Additionally, based on reports so far, the new subvariant does not appear to be more severe than the original version of Omicron, said Hota, pointing to early data from Denmark.

Fifteen per cent of all Toronto public school staff and students were absent on Friday, Jan. 28

More than 15 per cent of all staff and students in Toronto public schools were absent on Friday, according to data provided by school boards to the Ontario government.

According to data compiled by the Ministry of Education, of the 385 Toronto District School Board (TDSB) schools that reported absence data for last Friday, 23 TDSB schools showed absences above 30 per cent, and all but two were high schools where students are preparing for upcoming exams.

The two TDSB elementary schools where absences were above 30 per cent on Friday were Shoreham Public School and Walter Perry Junior Public School.

Across all TDSB schools that submitted data on Friday, the average absenteeism was 17 per cent.

In the Toronto Catholic District School Board (TCDSB) only 105 of 206 schools in the board submitted



absentee data for Friday.

Of those, one high school - Bishop Marrocco/Thomas Merton Catholic Secondary School - reported 30 per cent of its staff and students were absent, with all other schools posting smaller rates of absence.

St. Joseph's College School reported 25 per cent of staff and students were absent while St. Luigi Catholic School said 23 per cent of staff and students were away on

Friday.

Across all TCDSB schools that submitted data for Jan. 28, the average absenteeism was 10 per cent.

Across all 492 Toronto schools that submitted data for that day, the average absence rate was 15.3 per cent.

The numbers appear to be a dip from this time last week when the TDSB reported an average absence rate of 22.88 per cent and the TCDSB

reported an average absence rate of 14.51 per cent.

At the time there were a total of 70 schools in Toronto reporting an absentee rate above 30 per cent, including 17 with an absence rate north of 40 per cent.

The province has said that parents will only be directly notified once a school hits a 30 per cent absentee rate above baseline attendance and that closures can only be considered, and not necessarily implemented, at that time.

While Toronto school boards will still inform impacted classes of any positive cases of COVID-19 that they become aware of, that level of disclosure is no longer required by the province.

Students absent for reasons of travel or short-term remote learning are not included in these tallies.

Elsewhere in the GTA, the school boards of Peel Region reported an average absence rate of 13.6 per cent, Halton's boards reported 6.5 per cent, York Region's boards reported 10.4 per cent of all staff and students absent on Friday and Durham reported an average absenteeism of 13.6 per cent.

Only 68 per cent of the 4,844 schools in the province submitted attendance data for January 28.

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Tejasswi Prakash Is The WINNER Of Big Boss 15, Actress Beams With Joy As She Lifts The Trophy With Salman Khan

Salman Khan-hosted popularity show 'Big Boss 15' which premiered in October last year, closed its curtains tonight with the star-studded grand finale. The finale witnessed many scintillating performances given by eminent Bollywood celebrities, off-Bollywood winners, and contestants. And, the top 3 finalists of the show who competed for the BBI 15 trophy were Tejasswi Prakash, Pratik Sehajpal, and Karan Kundrra. Beating them, Tejasswi Prakash emerged as the winner of the show. Yes, Teja has won Big Boss 15. The actress beamed with joy while lifting the trophy with host Salman Khan.



Besides the dazzling trophy, she has also won Rs. 40 lakh cash prize. Not only this, Tejasswi has also bagged Ekta Kapoor's supernatural fantasy thriller 'Naagin 6.' Needless to say, the actress has indeed got a big reason to celebrate. Pictures of 'Teja' lifting the trophy have taken the internet by storm. Tejasswi Prakash has been trending on social media with fans and relatives congratulating her on the big win. At the stage, she had tears of joy and thanked her boyfriend Karan for supporting her on the show.

Romance is in the air - Hrithik Roshan and Saba Azad are the new love birds in Bollywood

Hrithik Roshan has always kept a low profile about his personal life, but he is too big a star to keep everything a secret. After deciding to part ways with Susanne Khan, the actor has been co-opting to raise their kids. It seems their romance has finally found a new love.



"Duggs prefers to keep his personal life under wraps. He has been silently seeing budding actress Saba Azad for a while now and is finally in the state of making public appearances with her. The two make for a great couple, however, are taking things slow by living in the moment," a close friend of Roshan told Bollywood Hungama on the condition of anonymity.

Farhan Akhtar And Shibani Dandekar To Have A Grand Wedding In April After Their Court Marriage In February

Farhan Akhtar and Shibani Dandekar are one of the most loved couples in the industry. For the past few days, rumours of their wedding has been making headlines. It was earlier reported that they will be registering their wedding in February.

Pinakvika had quoted a source saying, "Wedding was on cards for two of them, as they have been in love for the longest time now. They have been discussing wedding plans for a while now and have finally decided to take things to the next level. On February 21, their relationship will take a new turn, as they will take the formal vows to be partners for life."

West Indies name squad for T20Is against India; retain most players from England series

Cricket West Indies have retained the majority of the players that played in the series against England in the squad for the three-match T20 series against India to be played at Kolkata in February.



Kieron Pollard will lead the squad in the three T20Is that will start from February 16 after the end of the ODI series in Ahmedabad. Nicholas Poonan will be his deputy.

U-19 CWC: India defeat Bangladesh to set up semi final clash against Australia

India took sweet revenge for their loss to Bangladesh in the final of the 2020 edition of the U-19 ICC Cricket World Cup, defeating the Rakibul Hasan-led side by five wickets in the Super League quarterfinal at the Sunshine Cricket Ground here on Sunday (IST), to set up a last-four clash with Australia.



Defending champions Bangladesh were no match for the Indian bowlers, especially left-arm pacer Ravi Kumar Varde (27.5) as they did not allow the opponent's batters score freely, maintaining a miserly economy rate and bundling them out for 111 in 37 overs.

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Ashwin should be integral to 2023 World Cup plans, say former India players

Former India off-spinner Anshu Ashub and Rajesh Chaudhan - are on the same page as far as an experienced offie Ravichandran Ashwin's white-ball cricket future is concerned.

Advertisement for 'MATRIMONIAL' services, including details for Pakistani and Canadian citizens.

Bank of Canada holds interest rates for now, but signals hikes to come

The Bank of Canada kept its trendsetting interest rate at rock-bottom levels on Wednesday, holding off on planned increases aimed at controlling surging inflation but signalling rate hikes are not far off.

The central bank's overnight rate remains at 0.25 per cent, a rate it adopted in a drastic drop in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bank of Canada holds interest rates for now, signalling hikes to come

Bank of Canada holds interest rates for now, signalling hikes to come. Governor Tiff Macklem acknowledged in comments Wednesday morning that inflation, which hit a 30-year high at 4.3 per cent in December, is "unusually high." He said interest rates will need to rise to keep escalating prices under control.

The bank removed its previous commitment to keep interest rates at the floor, with Macklem signalling to Canadians and markets that interest rates are now on a "rising path."

He said the central bank held off on



Bank of Canada Governor Tiff Macklem speaking at a press conference.

increasing rates immediately in January in part because Omicron is a "wild card" that's expected to drive spending lower in the first quarter of the year.

The bank expects the impact of Omicron on the Canadian economy to be milder than previous waves, however, owing to both the country's relatively high vaccination rate and consumers' and businesses' ability to adapt to the new variant nearly two years into the pandemic.

Credit experts warn Albertans to get "financial house in order" before interest rates rise. The central bank estimates the

central bank estimates the

economy grew by 4.6 per cent in 2021, down half a percentage point from its previous forecast in October, and now projects growth in real gross domestic product in 2022 at four per cent, down from 4.3 per cent.

Bank of Canada forecasts annual economic growth in 2022 to be 4% inflation will remain high for first half of 2022, bank forecasts

The Bank of Canada didn't outline the timing or pace of increases in its statement, but the decision to hold off on a first hike will be controversial in financial markets at a time when headline inflation at a 30-year high, Stephen Tapp, chief economist at the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, told the Canadian Press.

The central bank wrote in a monetary policy report released alongside the interest rate decision Wednesday that it expects inflation will remain around five per cent for the first half of 2022, citing supply chain constraints and rising food prices.

Bank of Canada forecasts inflation will fall to 3% by end of year

The central bank expects inflation to fall back down to three per cent by the end of the year and back towards the target rate of two per cent by 2024.

The monetary policy report notes uncertainty in "unusually high" around its latest inflation projections amid factors such as the ongoing pandemic and supply chain issues.

Meanwhile, many parents in the other provinces and territories that have signed onto the federal plan are already realizing savings.

Saskatchewan, which reached a deal with the feds in the summer, has said that it will reduce the cost of licensed childcare to 50 per cent retroactive to this past July and will be issuing parents rebate cheques in the coming months.

Alberta also slashed childcare fees in half this month, saving many parents hundreds of dollars a month. Speaking with reporters on Monday, Lecce said that the government is continuing to have active conversations with the feds and will work to ensure that parents get fee relief "in a timely manner" once there is a deal.

However, he refused to provide a timeline or provide specifics about what the hang up is.

"We're working with the feds making our case for better flexibility that allows us to support all families and we continue to have conversations at the table with one aim - to get a deal to bring down prices and provide as much support to moms and dads as promised," he said.

Alberta premier says massive blockade preventing access to U.S. border 'must end'



Alberta Premier Jason Kenney speaking at a press conference.

Alberta Premier Jason Kenney is calling for a massive vehicle blockade preventing access to the Canada-U.S. border crossing to end, saying it is causing "significant inconvenience for lawful motorists."

"[I]t could dangerously impede the movement of emergency service vehicles," Kenney said in a statement on Sunday afternoon. "This blockade must end immediately."

Truckers and motorists travelling to and from the United States from southern Alberta have been caught up in gridlock as an extremely large blockade of vehicles tied to an ongoing nationwide protest over COVID-19 public health measures continues to jam border traffic.

Vehicle have been blocking the highway from south of Lethbridge, Alta., to the Canada-U.S. border crossing in the village of Coutts since Saturday afternoon.

That means that traffic to and from the border crossing has largely come to a standstill. In a statement on Sunday, RCMP said they are working with truck drivers who are attempting to leave the area, but traffic is immobilized.

It's been frustrating for professional long-haul trucker David May, who's been driving for 15 years and is fully vaccinated.

May picked up a load of meat in Brooks, Alta., to deliver to Portland, Ore., before running up against the blockade on Saturday. He's been stuck in Milk River, Alta., since then.

"The protest makes no sense at all," he said. "Came back here and parked with a lot of other truckers



A large vehicle blockade on a highway, with many trucks and cars stuck in traffic.

who are all vaccinated and ready to head south and do our jobs. It's really frustrating."

Concerns about emergency vehicles. The RCMP previously had concerns about emergency access to the village of Coutts, but earlier Sunday, an ambulance arrived to ensure it was able to access the area. The vehicle is able to get into the community on a dirt road.

"They are able to get into town, but it's certainly not ideal," RCMP Cpl. Curtis Peters said.

What is of concern to the RCMP at this time is the fact that Coutts has a volunteer fire department, which is also supposed to service the community of Sweet Grass, Mont., on the U.S. side. With the highway blocked, firefighters are unable to respond to an emergency or fire were one to occur.

The protest is being held in support of a convoy of trucks from across the country that arrived in Ottawa on Friday, with a stated goal of demonstrating against a COVID-19 vaccine mandate for truckers and other public health measures issued by the federal government.

Jake Zacharias previously told CBC News that he attended the protest at the border on Saturday to support his friends who are truck drivers. He said many plan to stay near the border "until the mandates are lifted."

The Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA) told CBC News shortly after 11:30 a.m. on Sunday that it was monitoring the situation. "The CBSA is ready to respond, with police of local jurisdiction if

necessary, to any events impeding operations at ports of entry," a spokesperson said in a statement.

The spokesperson said that "no traffic is being blocked from coming into Canada," adding it was an offence under the Customs Act to hinder a border services officer from doing their work.

The blockade is taking place on the highway, north of the ports of entry. Critical trade route in North America. The Coutts border crossing is the only 24/7 commercial crossing between Alberta and Montana, and it's a crucial trade route between Canada, the U.S. and Mexico.

Alberta's Critical Infrastructure Defence Act, established in 2020, allows the province to enact punishments for trespassing, interfering with operations and construction or causing damage to essential infrastructure, which includes highways.

Individuals found guilty under the legislation can be fined up to \$10,000 for a first offence and up to \$25,000 for subsequent offences, and sentenced to six months in jail, or both.

In his statement, Kenney said the current blockade violates the Alberta Traffic Safety Act, and he cited the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act as being among the tools available to police and prosecutors.

"I urge those involved in this truck convoy protest to do so as safely as possible, and not to create road hazards which could lead to accidents or unsafe conditions for other drivers," he said.

"Participants in this convoy cross

the line and break the law, I expect police to take appropriate action."

One member of Kenney's United Conservative Party, Taber-Warner M.A. Grant Hunter, posted a photo of himself and his family on Facebook at the protest near the border.

CBC News reached out to Hunter for further comment, but did not receive a response by time of publication.

In response to a request for comment on Hunter's attendance, a spokesperson for the premier referred CBC News to a series of tweets made by Kenney about the protests in Ottawa.

Duane Bratt, a political scientist at Mount Royal University in Calgary, said debate over invoking the Critical Infrastructure Defence Act law is fascinating to watch in the coming days.

"You've passed this law, you've talked about it, and now it's being violated by groups that you like," he said.

Prior to the release of the premier's statement, Alberta NDP Leader Rachel Notley said her party "unequivocally condemns the blockade of the border near Coutts as well as the many examples of hateful symbols and vandalism seen across Canada this weekend."

"We are calling on Premier Jason Kenney to denounce this blockade of Alberta's only international border crossing and work to restore full access to Coutts for emergency vehicles and transportation," Notley said in a statement.

On Saturday, the RCMP said it was engaged in conversations with those involved in blocking the road.

The delays are frustrating for other travellers, such as U.S. citizen Michael Coronado, who was travelling from Fort Saskatchewan, Alta., to Colorado, where he lives.

He said he supports everyone's rights to voice their opinion but finds this form of protest "problematic."

"As a U.S. citizen trying to enter my country and having civilians inhibit my right to do that, is a real issue for me," he said. "Even though I support their right to voice their opinion."

Earlier this month, federal rules for unvaccinated or partially vaccinated Canadian truckers entering Canada from the U.S. took effect.

Truckers who are not fully vaccinated must get a PCR test and quarantine.

Deal to reduce cost of childcare in Ontario is 'within reach,' education minister says

Education Minister Stephen Lecce says that he believes a deal is "within reach" that would allow Ontario to join every other province and territory in signing onto the Liberal government's \$30 billion national child-care plan.

Lecce made the comment during a virtual press conference on Monday when asked for an update about the status of negotiations with the federal government.

His comments come in the wake of Premier Doug Ford telling a radio station in northern Ontario last week that his government is "very, very close" to reaching a deal with the feds on \$10 a day child care.

"I appreciate that everyone wants this deal done. Our government is committed to doing that; we are simply working with the federal government to get the best possible deal for families and taxpayers," Lecce said. "I do believe, as the premier has



A young child playing with colorful toys.

noted, that deal is within reach and we are going to continue working with the feds constructively in good faith to provide a deal that finally makes child care affordable."

The federal government has offered Ontario \$10.2 billion in funding to reduce the average cost of child care by 50 per cent by the end of 2022 en route to lowering it to an average of \$10 a day by 2026.

Lecce, however, has said in the past that Ontario should be reimbursed for the \$3.6 billion that it spends on full-day kindergarten for four and five year olds, which is something that many other provinces don't provide. He has also expressed skepticism over whether the money being offered by the feds is actually enough to reduce child care costs to an average of \$10 a day.

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