

## Omicron travel bans hit South Africa's safari business hard

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Dhaka: Recent travel bans imposed on South Africa and neighbouring countries in response to the discovery of the Omicron variant have hit the country's safari business hard.

It was already suffering due to the pandemic. Hence the emergence of the new variant Omicron and the following travel bans have further added to the woes.

South Africa's tourism industry suffered a more than 70 per cent drop in foreign tourists in 2020, with Covid-19 blamed for the drop from about 15 million visitors in 2019 to less than 5 million in 2020. Tourism employs about 4.7 per cent of South Africa's workforce.

Britain, the largest source of tourists to South Africa, lifted its "red list" travel restrictions on South Africa in October and safari operators were beginning to see an improved outlook for the holiday season and 2022. But then the news of omicron struck, bringing a new round of international restrictions on flights.

South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has criticised the travel bans imposed by Britain and many others, including some African countries as "hypocritical, harsh and not supported by science." He denounced the restrictions as "travel apartheid."

South African safari lodges are experiencing cancellations and few new reservations, said Fred Plachesi, owner of the Tamboti Bush Lodge in the Dinokeng Game Reserve, north of the Tshwane metropolitan area, which includes Pretoria.

With only four guests over the weekend, Plachesi said his business is feeling the damage. He believes the travel bans imposed on South Africa are unfair and will have a negative impact on the people of South Africa.

Among the few overnight guests at the lodge were South Africans Tebogo Masiu and Smagele Twala, who wanted a break from their schedules in Johannesburg. They said they are dismayed by the new travel restrictions on South Africa.

With the outlook bleak for 2022, hoteliers are trying to keep the empty rooms ready in the hopes that at least local visitors will embark on a safari tour.