

WHO director general says all must benefit from COVID-19 vaccine

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Director General of the World Health Organization Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

Geneva, November 15 (RHC)-- The head of the World Health Organization hailed the rapid progress towards a COVID-19 vaccine but insisted that every country had to reap the benefits.

"There is no doubt that a vaccine will be a vital tool for controlling the pandemic, and we're encouraged by the preliminary results of clinical trials released this week," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said, in closing the WHO's annual assembly via videolink.

U.S. pharmaceutical giant Pfizer and its German partner BioNTech announced Monday that their candidate vaccine had proven 90 percent effective in ongoing final phase trials involving more than 40,000 people, less than a year after the novel coronavirus emerged in China.

"Never in history has vaccine research progressed so quickly. We must apply the same urgency and innovation to ensuring that all countries benefit from this scientific achievement," said Tedros.

The coronavirus has killed nearly 1.3 million people while more than 52.7 million cases have been registered, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP. However, the tallies probably reflect only a fraction of the actual number of infections. Many countries are testing only symptomatic or the most serious cases.

Tedros said the pandemic had shown there was an urgent need for "a globally-agreed system for sharing pathogen materials and clinical samples", to facilitate the rapid development of COVID-19 vaccines, diagnostics and therapeutics as "global public goods." He said the system could not wait for bilateral agreements that could take years to negotiate.

"We are proposing a new approach that would include a repository for materials housed by WHO in a secure Swiss facility; an agreement that sharing materials into this repository is voluntary; that WHO can facilitate the transfer and use of the materials; and a set of criteria under which WHO would distribute them," said Tedros.

The UN health agency's director-general thanked Thailand and Italy for offering to provide materials and pioneer the new approach, and Switzerland for offering a laboratory.

The WHO chief said that the world had a long way to go in managing the coronavirus pandemic, as he warned that countries should not rely solely on a vaccine. "The world cannot put all its eggs in one basket and neglect the many other tools at our disposal," he said.

Tedros said that the world needed to invest more and place a higher value on healthcare, adding relying on promising but as-yet unproven vaccines was a risky bet. "Returning to the status quo is not an option. We don't just need more investments in public health, we must also rethink how we value health.

"The time has come for a new narrative that sees health not as a cost, but as an investment, that's the foundation of productive, resilient and stable economies," he said.

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