

WHO says vaccine hoarding threatens global supply via COVAX



Bruce Aylward led the WHO's mission to China in February

Geneva, February 28 (RHC)-- Countries seeking their own COVID-19 vaccine doses are making deals with drug companies that threaten the supply for the global COVAX program for poor and middle-income

countries, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced.

“Now, some countries are still pursuing deals that will compromise the COVAX supply. Without a doubt,” WHO senior adviser Bruce Aylward told a briefing.

The WHO has long called upon rich countries to ensure that vaccines are shared equitably. The global organisation is one of the leaders of COVAX, a programme that aims to supply 1.3 billion vaccine doses to poor and middle-income countries this year. But so far, COVAX has had a slow roll-out.

“We can’t beat COVID without vaccine equity. Our world will not recover fast enough without vaccine equity, this is clear,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said. “We have made great progress. But that progress is fragile. We need to accelerate the supply and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines, and we cannot do that if some countries continue to approach manufacturers who are producing vaccines that COVAX is counting on.”

“These actions undermine COVAX and deprive health workers and vulnerable people around the world of life-saving vaccines.” “If not now, when?” he asked.

The idea of temporarily waiving intellectual property rights for tools to fight COVID-19 is set to come up again next week at a meeting of World Trade Organization (WTO) member states. In the past, it has run into opposition from rich countries with big pharmaceutical industries.

Incoming WTO head Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala of Nigeria has said her top priority would be to ensure the trade body does more to address the COVID-19 pandemic, calling disparities in vaccine rates between rich and poor “unconscionable.”

The 164-member WTO body usually has to agree by consensus unless members agree to proceed to a rare vote. Separately, the WHO said Nigeria is expecting its first four million doses of coronavirus vaccines next week via COVAX.

Walter Kazadi Mulombo, head of WHO’s mission in Nigeria, told a briefing by video link that Nigeria was expecting 14 million doses in total.

Chikwe Ihekweazu, Director General of the Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), said the situation in Nigeria was so far much better than had been widely predicted early in the pandemic.

Nigeria, Africa’s most populous country with some 200 million people, has reported fewer than 1,900 COVID-19 deaths so far. “The whole world expected the continent of Africa, and Nigeria with our social and economic realities, to basically fall apart,” Ihekweazu told the briefing.

He also referred to the findings of seroprevalence studies, published on Monday, which suggested that 23 percent of Lagos state inhabitants – around four million people – may have had COVID-19 in October. He said studies in four Nigerian states had shown that serious illness appeared to be rarer than feared, possibly in part because of the young average age of the population.

“Getting the vaccine into Nigeria will serve the continent well, will serve the world well,” he said.

Nigeria plans to inoculate 40 percent of the population this year and 30 percent more in 2022. Ihekweazu said authorities recognised the need for equity in access to vaccines and was committed to pursuing multilateral deals.

“We will not look for bilateral deals,” Ihekweazu said. “We will work in a multilateral way with WHO, with COVAX with the African Union (AU) to make sure that as we get vaccines into Nigeria, the same happens ... across the continent,” he said.

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