

WHO says real COVID-19 death toll two to three times official figures



Undertakers of Sopema Funerals load the body of a deceased person into a hearse ahead of the funeral service, amid a nationwide coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown, in Soweto, south-west of Johannesburg, South Africa August 4, 2020. (Photo by Reuters)

Geneva, May 23 (RHC)-- The actual number of direct and indirect fatalities due to the coronavirus pandemic may be two to three times higher than officially registered, according to the World Health Organization (WHO).

"We are likely facing a significant undercount of total deaths directly and indirectly attributed to COVID-19," said WHO's assistant director-general in its data and analytics division, Samira Asma, in a virtual press briefing on Friday. "So I think safely about 6 to 8 million deaths could be an estimate on a cautionary note."

Asma added that with the surging death toll in Latin America and in Asia, the death toll "would truly be two to three times higher." Presenting its annual World Health Statistics report, the WHO further estimated that total deaths due to the contagion in 2020 were at least 3 million or 1.2 million more than the 1.8 million official figure.

The UN body cited the lack of reliable systems to log deaths in many countries, noting that in numerous cases people had died from COVID-19 before they had been tested for the virus. The WHO statistics also indicated that nearly 3.4 million people had died globally by May 20 as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak, though the real figure could be substantially higher.

WHO data analyst William Msemburi further explained that the elevated estimates included both unreported COVID-19 fatalities as well as indirect deaths, such as patients not seeking healthcare for other conditions due to the lack of hospital capacity and imposed lockdown restrictions, among other factors.

Even in regions with relatively reliable reporting systems, undercounts were likely, according to the organization, which also estimated 1.1 to 1.2 million excess deaths in the European region during 2020 -- double the 600,000 COVID-19 deaths officially registered so far.

In the Americas, it added, the number of excess deaths was 1.3 to 1.5 million throughout last year, 60 percent higher than the reported 900,000 COVID-19 fatalities in that region. On Friday, the coronavirus death toll in Latin America and the Caribbean surpassed the one-million mark as the outbreak deteriorated in that part of the world with the highest per capita fatality rate.

The top eight countries registering the most COVID-19 deaths per capita over the past week were all in Latin America. On average, 31 percent of the coronavirus deaths across the globe this month have been in Latin America and the Caribbean -- home to only 8.4 percent of the world's population.

"Instead of preparing for the pandemic, we minimized the disease, saying the tropical heat would deactivate the virus," said the head of the COVID-19 program at one of Mexico's main hospitals, Dr. Francisco Moreno Sanchez, who is also a key critic of the government's vaccination plan. "Unfortunately, we are among the most-affected regions, where the handling of the pandemic has been the most mistaken, and now we are suffering the consequences," he said.

In Peru, which is among the hardest-hit nations in the region, COVID-19 patients have died in crowded hospital corridors of the capital Lima. This is while deep in the Amazon jungles of Brazil, many residents of the city of Manaus have died at home with no oxygen to fill damaged lungs, after supplies ran out there this year.

Most of the deaths across South America -- more than 446,000 -- have occurred in Brazil, which became a COVID-19 epicenter this year with the second-deadliest outbreak outside the United States. The country registered 2,215 new deaths from the contagion in 24 hours, its health ministry announced on Friday, pushing Latin America's total above the 1-million mark.

The government of far-right Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a vaccine skeptic and opponent of lockdowns, is being investigated by a parliamentary commission for failing to plan a national drive against COVID-19 and not buying vaccines in time.

Brazil remains the third most-affected country in the world in terms of confirmed COVID-19 cases, behind only India and the US. It has the highest death toll in the region, followed by Mexico and Colombia, which combined represent about 74 percent of all the deaths in Latin America.

A Brazilian senator leading the upper house's inquiry into the government's handling of the crisis said Friday President Jair Bolsonaro never wanted to purchase COVID-19 vaccines and originally bet on herd immunity beating the coronavirus.

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