

WHO says COVID-19 vaccination triples in Africa but still low



A man reacts as he receives a jab of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine from a healthcare worker inside the Transvaco COVID-19 vaccine train stationed at the Springs Train Station outside of Johannesburg, South Africa, on August 25, 2021 [Phill Magakoe/AFP]

Johannesburg, August 27 (RHC)-- COVID-19 vaccinations in Africa have tripled during the past week, although protecting even 10 percent of the continent by the end of September remains “a very daunting task,” the Africa director of the World Health Organization has said.

The continent saw 248,000 new confirmed cases during the past week, with at least 28 countries experiencing a surge in infections driven by the Delta variant. “This is a preventable tragedy if African countries can get fair access to the vaccines,” Matshidiso Moeti told reporters.

The WHO Africa director said 13 million doses were administered in the past week, three times more than the number of shots given in the previous week as donations of doses increased from developed countries. But that remains a drop in an ocean on the continent home to 1.3 billion people, where the Africa CDC said only 2.4 percent are currently vaccinated.

Africa’s brutal resurgence driven by the Delta variant is further stretching already strained health systems across the continent. As African countries struggle, the United States and other high-income countries are talking about booster shots.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom recently said it was “unconscionable” that some countries are now offering booster shots “while so many people remain unprotected.”

“I think it is very difficult for us to talk about booster doses in Africa,” Moeti said Thursday. “We have not covered even 5 percent of the population yet with the initial vaccinations that are needed to slow down the spread of the virus and most importantly, stop what we think might be a fourth wave which is coming.”

Africa will receive 117 million doses in coming months but an additional 34 million will be needed to reach the 10 percent vaccination target, the WHO Africa director added.

Beyond that, though, Moeti urged African countries to ramp up their readiness to utilise vaccines when they arrive. “No precious dose should be wasted,” she said.

In a weekly news briefing on Thursday, the head of Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC) said Africa faces inoculation challenges due to unpredictable access to jabs. John Nkengasong said the continent has so far received 130 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines, out of which 93 million have been administered in 53 member states.

Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt are countries progressing well in their vaccination drives, he said, adding that vaccine hesitancy is not a problem in Africa. “The problem in Africa is vaccine famine, not vaccine hesitancy, as I tweeted earlier,” he said.

Most African countries initially got their vaccines under COVAX, a WHO-backed global vaccine sharing scheme, which were largely sourced from the Serum Institute of India. But earlier this year, India halted vaccine exports in response to its own urgent needs.

Nkengasong said most new infections were being reported in Southern Africa and Northern Africa.

In total, he said, 7.6 million Africans have contracted COVID-19, and about 191,000 have died.

Speaking to Al Jazeera, Nkengasong said that the rollout of the vaccine on the continent has been a “total disappointment.” “It is very unfortunate, if you recognise that we have to immunise at least up to 70 percent of our population,” he said. “That tells you we have an incredibly long journey to go where we have to be.

The CDC director said the implementation of the COVAX scheme did not follow through because “the countries that made pledges and committed to supporting COVAX ended up buying most of the vaccines.”

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