

WHO chief warns blanket COVID boosters risk prolonging pandemic



WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom has called in vain for a moratorium on booster doses to vaccinated, healthy people until at least 40 percent of people in all countries had received a first jab [File: Christopher Black/AFP]

Geneva, December 23 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization chief has warned that the rush in wealthy countries to roll out additional COVID-19 vaccine doses was deepening the inequity in access to jabs that

is prolonging the pandemic.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom insisted on Wednesday that the priority must remain to get vaccines to vulnerable people everywhere rather than giving additional doses to the already vaccinated. “No country can boost its way out of the pandemic,” he told reporters.

The UN health agency has long decried the glaring inequity in access to COVID-19 vaccines. Allowing COVID-19 to spread unabated in some places dramatically increases the chance of new, more dangerous variants emerging, it argues.

“Blanket booster programmes are likely to prolong the pandemic, rather than ending it, by diverting supply to countries that already have high levels of vaccination coverage, giving the virus more opportunity to spread and mutate,” Tedros told reporters.

He said the priority must be to reduce deaths and help all countries meet minimum vaccination targets that many still have not reached. And he noted that “the vast majority of hospitalisations and deaths are in unvaccinated people, not un-boosted people.”

Months ago, Tedros called in vain for a moratorium on booster doses to vaccinated, healthy people until at least 40 percent of people in all countries had received a first jab. He pointed out Wednesday that while enough vaccines had been given to people globally this year to reach that target, distortions in global supply meant that only half the world’s countries had done so.

According to UN figures, about 67 percent of people in high-income countries have had at least one vaccine dose – but not even 10 percent in low-income countries. “It’s frankly difficult to understand how a year since the first vaccines were administered, three in four health workers in Africa remain unvaccinated,” said Tedros.

Tedros renewed a call for manufacturers and other countries to prioritise the COVAX programme to get doses to needier nations and “work together to support those who are furthest behind.” “Unless we vaccinate the whole world ... I don’t think we can end this pandemic,” Tedros said.

But he added that authorities now know the virus better and have effective tools to fight it; “we need to add to that comprehensive implementation and equity, and hope 2022 will end this pandemic.”

His comments came as the Omicron variant’s lightning dash around the globe since it was first detected in South Africa last month dampened hopes the worst of the pandemic was over. The new variant is spreading at unprecedented speed and has already been detected in 106 countries, the WHO said.

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