

WHO declares third wave of COVID-19 pandemic with Delta spreading variant

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Gravediggers wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) bury a coffin at a Muslim burial area provided by the government for coronavirus disease (COVID-19) victims in Bekasi, on the outskirts of Jakarta, Indonesia, July 8, 2021. © REUTERS/Ajeng Dinar Ulfiana

Geneva, July 16 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization is warning that the COVID-19 pandemic has entered the "early stages of a third wave" as the fast-spreading Delta variant of the virus causes cases to spike, wiping out progress made through vaccines.

The global number of infections has risen for four straight weeks with the Delta variant now present in 111 countries, and deaths are rising again after 10 straight weeks of declines, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Wednesday. Speaking to the WHO's Emergency Committee on Covid-19, he said the Delta variant is being fueled by increased social mixing and inconsistent use of public health measures.

The virus has killed more than four million people globally, according to WHO, and Ghebreyesus sees the Delta variant becoming the dominant strain worldwide, if it isn't already. Russia reported a record-high 786 Covid-19 deaths on Wednesday, and new infections in the UK are at a six-month high. In Indonesia, where case rates have jumped nearly sevenfold in the past month, residents are reportedly pitching in to help gravediggers keep up with the nearly 1,000 daily deaths.

"As increasing vaccination rates in Europe and North America started to take effect, we saw sustained declines in cases and deaths," Tedros said. "Unfortunately, those trends have now reversed, and we are in the early stages of a third wave."

Dr. Tedros lamented that lack of access to vaccines has left most of the world's population susceptible to infection and "at the mercy of the virus." While some nations with ample vaccine supplies have lifted social-distancing restrictions and reopened their societies, many countries haven't received any COVID-19 jabs, he added. Most don't have enough.

"We continue to see a shocking disparity in the global distribution of vaccines and unequal access to life-saving tools," Tedros said. "This inequity has created a two-track pandemic."

The scale of the COVAX vaccine-distribution initiative remains far too small, with just over 100 million doses shipped, Ghebreyesus said. To meet WHO's target of vaccinating at least 10% of the population of every country by September, 40% by the end of 2021 and 70% by mid-2022, the world will need 11 billion doses. G7 nations have pledged to donate a combined one billion doses over the next year, but the WHO chief said that "much more is needed, much faster."

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