

WHO chief supports Tokyo Olympics days before opening ceremony

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The Tokyo Games, already delayed by a year because of the pandemic, are taking place as cases surge again [Kiichiro Sato/AP Photo]

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Geneva, July 21 (RHC)-- Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the head of the World Health Organization (WHO), has thrown his weight behind the pandemic-delayed Tokyo Olympics, even as a surge in the Delta variant drives a resurgence of COVID-19 around the world and the event faces continued opposition just hours before the opening ceremony.

Speaking by phone to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in Tokyo, Ghebreyesus, acknowledged the scale of the problem posed by the pandemic but drew parallels between the Olympic spirit and the need for governments and people around the world to work together to beat the virus.

"May these Games be the moment that unites the world, and ignites the solidarity and determination we need to end the pandemic together, by vaccinating 70 percent of the population of every country by the middle of next year," the WHO chief said. "May the Olympic torch be a symbol of hope that traverses the planet. And may the rays of hope from this land of the rising sun illuminate a new dawn for a world that is healthier, safer and fairer."

The Tokyo Olympics were forced into an unprecedented delay after the WHO declared a pandemic in March last year. Organisers have introduced a slew of measures, designed in conjunction with the WHO, to reduce the risk of COVID-19 and ensure the Games remain safe and secure.

But rising cases around the world and in Japan, have undermined public confidence, increasing opposition to the event going ahead. Tokyo recorded 1,387 new cases on Tuesday, bringing its total since the pandemic started to more than 840,000 cases. Some 15,055 people in Japan have died from the disease and more than 4.1 million worldwide.

Dozens of cases have already been linked to the Olympics, including a number of athletes, which has further undermined public trust in coronavirus mitigation efforts. "The pandemic is a test. And the world is failing," Dr. Tedros told the IOC meeting.

"More than four million people have died and more continue to die. Already this year, the number of deaths is more than double last year's total. In the time it takes me to make these remarks, more than 100 people will lose their lives to COVID-19. And by the time the Olympic flame is extinguished on the 8th of August, more than 100,000 more people will perish."

He noted that people around the world were "sick and tired" of the virus and wanted the pandemic to be over but he said this could not happen until more people in more countries were vaccinated. "The threat is not over anywhere until it's over everywhere," he said. "Anyone who thinks the pandemic is over because it's over where they live is living in a fool's paradise."

Rounding on wealthier nations, the WHO chief said that the world had not made the best use of the vaccines that had been developed, with 75 percent of shots administered in just 10 countries. In low-income countries, only 1 percent of people have received at least one dose, compared with more than half the population in high-income countries, he said.

Vaccines had been "concentrated in the hands and arms of the lucky few" he said, adding that the failure to share vaccines, tests and treatments was increasing a two-track pandemic that was not only a "moral outrage" but risked heightening the emergence of new, perhaps more deadly, variants of the coronavirus.

"The tragedy of this pandemic is that it could have been under control by now, if vaccines had been allocated more equitably," he said, adding that pharmaceutical companies should put profits and patents second in order to ensure wider access to vaccines.

The WHO, International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the World Trade Organization are supporting a global push to vaccinate at least 10 percent of the population of every country by September, at least 40 percent by the end of this year, and 70 percent by the middle of 2022.

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