

WHO says COVID pandemic's acute phase could end by midyear

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WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus says the acute phase of the pandemic could be over this year [Nardus Engelbrecht/AP Photo]

Pretoria, February 12 (RHC)-- The head of the World Health Organization has said the acute phase of the pandemic could end this year, if about 70 percent of the world gets vaccinated. "Our expectation is that the acute phase of this pandemic will end this year, of course with one condition, the 70 percent vaccination [target is achieved] by mid this year around June, July," Tedros Adhanom, told reporters in South Africa on Friday. "If that is to be done, the acute phase can really end, and that is what we are

expecting. It's in our hands. It's not a matter of chance. It's a matter of choice."

He was speaking during a visit to Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines, which has produced the first mRNA COVID vaccine made in Africa using Moderna's sequence. "We expect this vaccine to be more suited to the contexts in which it will be used, with fewer storage constraints and at a lower price," said the WHO boss.

The vaccine will be ready for clinical trials in November, with approval expected in 2024. Afrigen is leading the pilot project, backed by the WHO and the COVAX initiative. Tedros also urged African countries to back efforts to set up an African medicines regulator. He said that continental institutions like the planned African Medicines Agency were important because they could cut costs and help fight counterfeit or poor-quality drugs.

Dr. Tedros's comments came a day after Matshidiso Moeti, Africa director for the WHO, said the continent is transitioning out of the pandemic phase of the COVID-19 outbreak. With a more optimistic view, she said Africa is moving towards a situation where it will be managing the virus over the long term.

The pandemic is moving into a different phase ... We think that we're moving now, especially with the vaccination expected to increase, into what might become a kind of endemic living with the virus," Moeti told a media briefing on Thursday.

"Against the odds, including huge inequities in access to vaccinations, we've weathered the COVID-19 storm with resilience and determination," she said.

Only 11 percent of Africans are vaccinated, the lowest rate in the world. Last week, the WHO's Africa office said the continent must boost its vaccination rate "six times" to reach the 70 percent target.

According to the World Bank, the pandemic is estimated to have pushed up to 40 million people into extreme poverty in Africa, and every month of delay in lifting containment measures is estimated to cost Africa \$13.8bn in lost gross domestic product, Moeti said.

Like Tedros, Moeti also noted that the continent needs to maintain political will and support for the local manufacturing of vaccines, therapeutic medicines and diagnostic tools.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Africa has recorded more than 11 million coronavirus cases, and more than 243,000 deaths. More than 10 million have recovered so far, according to data published by the African Centres for Disease Control and Prevention.

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