

New surge in COVID-19 pandemic accelerates internationally

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After seven weeks of steady declines in COVID-19 cases coming off the winter surge, the World Health Organization (WHO) is warning of a steady rise in new cases globally over the past five weeks.

The week beginning March 15 saw 3.28 million new cases, up from 2.49 million the week of February 15, just one month ago. This is equivalent to 100,000 new cases per day globally.

In five of six regions of the world—the Americas, Europe, Southeast Asia, the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Pacific—cases have been rising. The number of new infections across the African continent has plateaued at high daily rates.

In a word, the spring surge is well underway.

Even more concerning is the fact that the weekly decline in deaths due to COVID-19 has ceased, and deaths are now on the upturn. After a low of 59,000 deaths worldwide the week beginning March 8, the death count for the week beginning March 15 has increased to over 60,000 and is still climbing. The WHO has confirmed that since the beginning of the pandemic just over a year ago there have been more than 22.5 million COVID-19 cases globally and over 2.7 million deaths.

The pandemic has led to a massive loss of jobs in low- and middle-income countries, threatening hundreds of millions of people with hunger and homelessness, on top of illness and death. A report published in *Science Advances* in February found startling levels of income loss, with 70 percent of households across nine countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America reporting financial losses, forcing millions of people to eat smaller meals or skip them entirely.

According to Edward Miguel, a University of California, Berkeley economist, “in the early months of the pandemic, the economic downturn in low- and middle-income countries was almost certainly worse than any other recent global economic crisis that we know of, whether the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, the Great Recession that started in 2008 or the more recent Ebola crisis. The economic costs were just severe, absolutely severe.”

Vaccine nationalism has exacerbated the pandemic. As of March 21, close to 440 million doses of COVID-19 vaccine had been administered worldwide, equivalent to 5.7 doses for every 100 persons. However, the distribution of these lifesaving medications has been inequitable and chaotic.

The lion’s share of vaccines has been administered in the United States, with 124.5 million shots-in-the-arm reported, or 28 percent of all vaccines given globally. The United States accounts for only 4.25 percent of the world population.

The US has provided at least one dose of a vaccine to 25 percent of its people so far. The seven-day average stands at around 2.6 million per day.

By comparison, Europe, which has been struggling with issues related to production and distribution, and more recently concerns over AstraZeneca’s COVID-19 vaccine, has managed to inoculate only 13 out of 100 persons with at least one dose.

In the latest tally, most of the world has yet to see a COVID-19 vaccine, and, by all accounts, may not until well into next year. According to the *New York Times*, residents of wealthy and middle-income countries have received about 90 percent of all the vaccines so far delivered.

Low-income countries have asked the WHO to help them procure these lifesaving vaccines and provide scientific and technological support to build vaccine manufacturing capacity in their countries. The US, the UK and the EU have resisted such measures.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen warned that she was ready to introduce emergency controls on COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution to “ensure that Europeans are vaccinated as soon as possible.” She even threatened to invoke Article 122 of the EU’s Lisbon Treaty, allowing it to use emergency measures to secure the necessary vaccine stocks, further exacerbating the overall scarcity of supplies and their highly unequal distribution.

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly stated his intention to vaccinate the American population first. “We’re going to

start off making sure Americans are taken care of first,” he said recently. “But we’re then going to try and help the rest of the world.”

The second part of his statement is nothing more than diplomatic jargon. The US will use its stranglehold on vaccine intellectual properties and production capacity as a lever in pursuing the geo-political and profit interests of the American corporate elite against nominal friends and foes alike. In particular, it will be used to prosecute its aggressive policies against China and Russia and the demand that its European and Asian “allies” line up behind its effort to maintain US global hegemony.

The pandemic has become a weapon in the hands of the ruling elites. Presently, the pandemic’s epicenter is Brazil. Jair Bolsonaro, the country’s fascistic president, is essentially conducting a laboratory experiment in which the dangerous P.1 variant rampages throughout the country, while he tells the population to “stop whining” about COVID-19.

Brazil has recorded 12 million cases of COVID-19 and is rapidly approaching 300,000 deaths, the last 100,000 of these having occurred since the beginning of 2021. Official death tolls of more than 2,700 a day are in reality vast undercounts, as people die at home while health systems collapse, unable to handle the flood of new COVID-19 patients. The Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), a public health research institution, has warned, “Brazil is experiencing a historic collapse of its health services as intensive care units in hospitals run out of capacity.”

India is in the early stage of a second wave. Cases are rapidly accelerating as new, more virulent strains appear. With more than 47,000 new cases of COVID-19 reported Saturday, infections have increased nearly fivefold from just a month ago. This has been accompanied by a rise in the daily death toll. Active cases have risen in 29 of the 36 Indian states. There have been 400 cases of virulent variants detected in India, with 158 reported in just the last two weeks.

With the spring surge, in part attributable to the B.1.1.7 variant, gaining momentum across Europe, several countries have imposed new restrictions.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex placed about one-third of the population—some 21 million people in 16 regions of the country, including Paris—under lockdown, in the face of surging infections. Last week, the number of people in intensive care units reached over 4,200, the highest level since November. Daily cases of COVID-19 stand at more than 35,000.

Germany’s seven-day-average is accelerating, having climbed to over 12,000 cases per day, and the death toll has stopped declining. Chancellor Angela Merkel noted in a

press conference that an “emergency brake” likely needs to be applied and lockdown measures reimposed. The health minister said that Europe lacked the vaccines required to significantly reduce cases.

Poland and Ukraine have reimposed lockdown measures as new cases near their previous peaks from November. Health systems are once more being battered.

The Czech Republic, where cases had been dropping, is reporting numerous cases of multi-system inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C). Without proper treatment, this condition can cause severe organ damage and even failure, leading to death. Additionally, the repeated imposition and lifting of restrictions is heightening social tensions. Demonstrations against coronavirus restrictions are flaring in several European cities, including Amsterdam.

The US remains in a precarious position, where the daily case count has stabilized at around 55,000. The daily death toll continues to decline, but remains at a seven-day moving average of more than 1,000. However, several regions of the country are experiencing new surges in cases, even as the Biden administration touts the “success” of its vaccination campaign.

The seven-day moving average in New York State is over 7,000 per day and has held steady for a month; the positivity rate has not dipped below 6 percent in months.

Cases in New Jersey have been steadily rising since February 25. Rhode Island is slowly trending upwards, while Massachusetts has plateaued at around 1,600 cases a day. Florida is holding steady at 5,000 cases per day. Michigan, however, has seen a dramatic rise in cases.

Many health experts warn that even as the race to vaccinate Americans continues, if proper safety and mitigation measures are not followed, the US could see a resurgence of COVID-19 infections. Scenes of vacationers and spring break revelers in Miami Beach over the weekend raise significant concerns that the situation threatens to become explosive.



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