

# Governments across the globe are pressing to declare the pandemic over

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In an interview with the *Financial Times* (FT) last week, Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden's chief medical advisor on the pandemic, offered the following rosy assessment about the pandemic in the US. "As we get out of the full-blown pandemic phase of COVID-19, which we are certainly heading out of, these decisions will increasingly be made on a local level rather than centrally decided or mandated. There will also be more people making their own decisions on how they want to deal with the virus."

These remarks were made even as the number of new infections remain at pandemic highs and the death toll considerable. States, counties and individual people are on notice that they will be on their own. And despite his assurances, there is no indication that any conceivable measure will ever be carried out by local or federal agencies again if another surge of infections begins to inundate the population and incapacitates health systems.

Choosing not to constrain himself by the term endemic, he then told the FT that the country could soon reach a state of "equilibrium" where tracking infections will become unnecessary. These sentiments are not unique to the United States. The pandemic, regardless of how many people it infects and kills, is to be summarily "ended" by declaring it endemic, a scientific term borrowed illegitimately from epidemiology in order to justify ending all metrics that offer the population an indication of the level of infection and risks to their communities.

According to the World Health Organization's COVID-19 dashboard, there were almost 2.5 million new cases yesterday. Since the WHO declared the Omicron strain a variant of concern at the end of November 2021, more than 140 million cases of COVID-19 have been reported with almost 600,000 deaths.

In the week beginning January 31, 2022, more than 71,000 people lost their lives worldwide. Yet, despite the continued high rates of transmission and deaths, governments throughout the globe are taking every opportunity to end all pandemic restrictions and return to economic normalcy, taking advantage of the pandemic fatigue that has afflicted millions, a phenomenon not dissimilar to weary combatants sludging it out in endless and senseless trench warfare.

In the two years since the WHO declared the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic a public health emergency of international concern, there have been 405 million confirmed cases and nearly 5.8 million deaths. In the more than a year since the COVID-19 vaccines have been publicly available, some 10.1 billion doses have been administered. In that period, more than 4 million have perished from a disease that can only be stopped through an elimination strategy.

Entering the third year, there has been a unanimous consensus on the part of the ruling elites to abandon all such efforts. Fauci, in his usual bland manner, told the FT, "There is no way we are going to eradicate this virus. But I hope we are looking at a time when we have enough people vaccinated and enough people with protection from previous infection that the COVID restrictions will soon be a thing of the past."

His choice of the term eradication instead of elimination is a sleight of hand. He knows full well that many countries have successfully held at bay the coronavirus at their borders through a Zero COVID elimination policy, but eradication requires the adoption of such policies all over the world.

Only China has remained determined to adhere to this strategy. Since Omicron was declared a variant of concern, there have been fewer than 10,000 COVID-19 cases reported there with *zero* deaths, demonstrating once again that even a contagious variant like Omicron can be controlled and suppressed.

Across the globe, China alone has taken the measures to continue protecting the population against the varied long-term risks posed by the infection, which include heart disease, pulmonary dysfunction, diabetes, and mental health disorders such as brain fog and chronic headaches and fatigue. Other systemic complications include kidney disease, vascular clots and dysregulated immune system. Even the vaccinated face the prospect of dying from their infection due to adaptations made by the virus to evade immunity from vaccines, as well as a rapid decline in antibody levels in the months after immunization.

## COVID-19 in Africa

In Africa, Matshidiso Moeti, WHO regional director for the continent, told reporters, "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."

Only 11.3 million on the continent have reportedly been infected and close to 242,000 have died for a case fatality rate of over 2 percent. However, due to lack of broad-based testing and accurate accounting of the cause of deaths, the actual figures may be significantly higher. Only 11 percent of Africa's adult population have been fully vaccinated. The *Economist's* excess deaths tracker places Africa's excess deaths during the pandemic at 2.46 million, a figure 10 times higher than official COVID-19 deaths.

Moeti wrote in the WHO Africa brief of February 10, 2022: "Over the past two years, the African continent has gotten smarter, faster and better at responding to each new surge in cases of COVID-19. Against the odds, including huge inequities in access to vaccination, we've weathered the COVID-19 storm with resilience and determination, informed by Africa's long history and experience with controlling outbreaks. But COVID-19 has cost us dearly, with more than 242,000 lives lost and tremendous damage to our economies."

In reality, the excess deaths underscore that the pandemic has been catastrophic on the continent. As she noted, more than 40 million people

have been pushed into extreme poverty. Moeti added, “And every month of delay in lifting containment measures is estimated to cost Africa \$13.8 billion in lost gross domestic product.”

## COVID-19 in Asia

Across Asia, India saw around 75 million people slip into extreme poverty in 2020. During the early waves of the pandemic, millions of migrant workers returned to their home villages creating a tremendous “drag on growth,” according to the *Wall Street Journal*, “unless India can pull millions of workers into productive nonfarm jobs.”

Inflationary pressures and rise in basic goods are leading to social upheavals as exemplified by the 10 million applicants for roughly 36,000 railway jobs being offered by India’s northern states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which led to violent clashes as groups protesting mass unemployment blocked roads and railway lines, according to Deutsche Welle. The unemployment rate across Asia’s third largest economy has risen to nearly 8 percent, impacting 35 million people.

Despite the recent waves of infections and deaths across the country, the *Times of India* quoted virologist Dr. Gangandeep Kang that COVID-19 is already in an endemic stage in India, where “the virus is and will continue to be.” She proceeded to add that the population, who will have to learn to live with SARS-CoV-2, “should not be forced to face irrational measures such as lockdowns or curfews.” Excess deaths in India have been estimated at 5.6 million.

Vietnam is presently seeing a pandemic high of more than 27,000 new infections per day. Since Delta first derailed its elimination strategy in July 2021, nearly 40,000 people have died. The recent wave of Omicron had pushed the health care system into overcapacity despite 76 percent of the population having received at least two doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

However, the Vietnamese government plans to end COVID-19 curbs on international flights this week allowing foreign tourists to once again travel to the country. Factories are remaining open despite a rise in COVID-19 cases to continue production. Sweeping lockdowns throughout much of the world in 2020 that had protected the population of many countries from infections in part contributed to a crippling of global supply chains.

Adam Sitkoff, the executive director for the American Chamber of Commerce in Hanoi, told the press, “I do not expect to see additional countrywide lockdowns as serious cases in most parts of the country are at manageable levels and the authorities have learned that economy-crippling restrictions are not sustainable.” As Vietnam is the second biggest exporter of clothes and footwear to the US after China, the effects of calculations and profit margins on public health policies are evident. Duc Minh Nguyen, a partner at accounting firm Ernst & Young, noted, “If Vietnam can maintain a strong production capability and factory output, this will really support the global supply chain, in particular for sectors like agriculture, textiles and electronics consumers.”

Meanwhile, Japan which is in the midst of the worst wave of infections and deaths is looking to ease restrictions at the border, citing the impact the measures have had on the economy and its reputation. South Korea is attempting to counter the recent deluge of infections that has impacted its nursing homes by offering the elderly and immunocompromised individuals a fourth jab.

## COVID-19 in Latin America

Countries throughout Latin America are facing similar predicaments where decisions by governments to keep their economies open have led to new waves of infections and deaths. Mexico’s fourth wave had seen cases reach 60,000 per day. Last Thursday, the health minister reported 927 COVID-19 deaths. Though the country has the fifth highest death toll at 311,554, the excess deaths are at a staggering 680,000.

Though Omicron has been declining in several major countries in South America, hospitalizations and deaths in Bolivia and Venezuela continue to rise. Many of the lowest income countries in the region have barely vaccinated half their populations. In many parts of the continent, the impact of the massive disinformation campaigns has significantly contributed to the current rise in hospitalizations and deaths.

## COVID-19 in Europe

Despite 1.4 million COVID-19 cases and 24,447 deaths in Europe last week, every country is proceeding with lifting their restrictions. As Dr. Hans Kluge, WHO’s European regional director, continues to impress on reporters that as winter is ending and Omicron’s mild severity is being countered by the high degree of population immunity, these conditions make it ripe for a “ceasefire that could bring enduring peace.”

However, solitary voices continue to warn that accepting the assumption that variants will become milder with each iteration was a dangerous supposition. Professor Mark Woolhouse, an epidemiologist from Edinburgh University, told the *Guardian*, “The Omicron variant did not come from the Delta variant. It came from a completely different part of the virus’s family tree. And since we don’t know where in the virus’s family tree a new variant is going to come from, we cannot know how pathogenic it might be. It could be less pathogenic, but it could, just as easily, be more pathogenic.”

These warnings were echoed by virologist professor Lawrence Young of Warwick University and David Nabarro, a special envoy on COVID-19 for the WHO: “There will be more variants after Omicron and if they are more transmissible, they will dominate. In addition, they may cause different patterns of illness, in other words they may turn out to be more lethal or have long-term consequences.”

As UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has called to lift all COVID-19 restrictions, including isolating after testing positive, after February 24. The country’s official Health Security Agency has reported tracking a new variant as a serious threat. It harbors mutations that appear to be a combination of Delta and Omicron variants and is deemed a hybrid. Such a mutation was first reported in Cyprus. Little is yet known about the new strain.

And though recombinant variants are quite rare, they have occurred during the pandemic. However, fears of such a recombination in the face of the complete abandon of all restriction measures may prove even more catastrophic than what has already occurred.

As Fauci admitted in a recent interview, “Everything I am saying is based on a big caveat. We must be prepared for the eventuality that we might get a completely different variant that breaks through all of the protection that you get from prior infection.”



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