

COVID pandemic continues mass killing, notably focused on US and Russia

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While temporarily overshadowed by the crisis in Ukraine, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to take a deadly toll in country after country, with the two nuclear-armed countries on the brink of war, the United States and Russia, placing first and third in daily coronavirus deaths.

Like a century ago, when World War I and the influenza pandemic overlapped, working people around the world are once again facing the intersection of war and pandemic.

World War I was the impetus for the emergence of the 1918 influenza virus that killed an estimated 50 million people and infected around 500 million or one-third of the population of the world at that time. By comparison, the war led to the loss of 20 million lives, military and civilian, less than half the death toll of the pandemic.

A hundred years later, all the social and political contradictions that ignited that colossal war remain unresolved. In that regard, the COVID pandemic, which has infected 430 million people and killed 20 million in the last two years, has served as a trigger event for the chain reaction of events now focused on Ukraine.

Even as that conflict escalates, the pandemic continues to infect and kill despite all efforts by major capitalist countries to dispense with tracking the figures, or even feigning concern.

The current tally places the number of people with COVID-19 worldwide at more than 431 million and the number of reported COVID deaths at 5.94 million. The week beginning February 14, 2022, despite the decline in new cases, another 12.8 million infections were added to the list, and another 66,571 people needlessly died.

The 7-day average of 1.7 million new COVID cases

globally remains at pandemic highs, with the rate of decline already demonstrating a slowing. The 7-day average of daily deaths is just below 10,000 per day. Yesterday, 10,731 people died worldwide, led by the US with 2,440, then Brazil with 956 deaths, followed by Russia with 785. Notably, both the US and Russia hold the dubious distinction of having more than 1 million excess deaths during the pandemic.

In Asia, South Korea, Japan, Vietnam and Indonesia are facing the peak of the current surge of infections. South Korea, in particular, which had kept the virus in check for two years, is now facing a massive wave of infections, with a record 171,452 new COVID cases on Tuesday. Around mid-January, cases were only at 3,000 per day. More than 1,500 people have died during the present wave, and approximately 5,400 of the 7,689 total deaths occurred in the last six months.

In Japan, the epidemiologic curve of new cases has finally turned downwards. Recent COVID cases remain, on average, high at around 80,000 a day. The 7-day average in deaths continues to climb, surpassing 200 per day, doubling the highs set in February and June 2021. However, like his counterparts in the west, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said yesterday that the government is considering “easing border restrictions as the country prepares to exit the sixth wave” of the pandemic.

Iceland, an island nation with 366,425 people, which had until recently demonstrated exemplary control over COVID infections, will be lifting all COVID restrictions today. The decision was confirmed through a statement published by Iceland’s Minister of Health, Willum Þór Þórsson. It reads, “Thereby, all rules regarding limitations on social gatherings and school operations as well as the quarantine requirements for those infected by COVID-19 are removed.

Additionally, no disease prevention measures will be in place at the border, regardless of whether individuals are vaccinated or unvaccinated.”

As a caveat, he wrote, “We can truly rejoice at this turning-point, but nonetheless, I encourage people to be careful, practice personal infection prevention measures, and not interact with others if they notice symptoms.”

Since Christmas Eve of 2021, COVID cases jumped from under 23,000 to 115,000. The 7-day average in cases is at 2,600 per day, or approximately 0.7 percent of the population, per day. At the present rate, the entire population of Iceland will be infected in three months. Though the cumulative death toll is only 61, 24 people died during the current surge. The Ministry of Health’s proclamation only puts into words what has been in effect for the last two months.

This only underscores the critical fact that governments worldwide are rapidly changing their approach to the virus, considering it more like an endemic disease whatever the consequences. From the perspective of public health, it raises an important point: without a coordinated international strategy based on science, all future pandemic preparedness faces a similar calamity—the diktats of the markets will decide each time.

Meanwhile, the World Health Organization convened this week to negotiate new rules for dealing with pandemics, “with a target date of May 2024 for a treaty to be adopted by the UN health agency’s 194 member countries,” according to Reuters. At the center of these developments are efforts on Washington’s part to financialize the health agency by setting up a global pandemic prevention fund that the World Bank would host.

With all eyes on the dangers posed by the evolving war front, cases of new COVID infections caused by the BA.2 sub-variant continue to climb slowly across the world. In the US, such cases are doubling each week, which are now above 4 percent. Globally, one in five cases is from BA.2. In 10 countries, the sub-variant is dominant, and more than 74 countries have reported its presence within their borders.

Given the sub-variant’s higher infectivity, possibly higher virulence, and disparate genetic characteristics, there have been calls to give it a new Greek letter name to distinguish it from Omicron. However, the WHO

technical Advisory Group on SARS-CoV-2 Virus Evolution, which concurs that it is a variant of concern, recommends it remain classified as Omicron and “be monitored as a distinct sub-lineage of Omicron by public health authorities.”

Despite the Japanese trial that showed BA.2 more virulent, recent small clinical studies from South Africa and Denmark suggest that the two sub-variants are equivalent to their virulence. Hospitalization numbers appear to be similar, and reinfections with BA.2 after Omicron infection have been confirmed, though uncommon.

Dr. Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada, told CNN, “The situation that we’re seeing on the ground, and I get this from talking to a number of my colleagues who actually do the genomic surveillance, is BA.2 is kind of creeping up in terms of numbers, but it’s not the meteoric rise that we saw with BA.1.”

She further explained, “It’s so soon after the initial BA.1 peak that you have a lot of people who were either vaccinated or boosted ... [or] got Omicron, and so right now all of those people will have relatively high titers of antibodies, neutralizing antibodies that will protect against infection.”

Despite the plateaued case rates in South Africa, the current average COVID death rate there is over 200 per day and continues to climb. In Denmark, cases have finally turned, but the death rate continues to rise 10-fold from mid-November when Omicron debuted. In the US, on average, more than 2,000 daily COVID deaths were reported from January 12, 2022, to February 20, 2022. Only during last winter’s peak did the US see more days with such high death tolls.



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