

Omicron BA.2 subvariant fuels new global surge of the pandemic

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As the deepening war in Ukraine threatens to escalate into a direct confrontation between the US-NATO powers and Russia, there is a parallel but almost entirely unreported escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic. These two interconnected global crises are hurling mankind into a catastrophe.

The most significant hotspot of the pandemic is now Hong Kong, where per capita rates of infections and deaths have dwarfed all previous surges in every country in the world. Soon after infections spiraled out of control in mid-February, hospitals and then morgues exceeded capacity, with the relatively less vaccinated elderly population most severely affected.

On Monday, the 7-day average of daily new *deaths* per 1 million people in Hong Kong reached 29.18. This is over 50 percent higher than the peak of 18.31 reached in the United Kingdom on January 23, 2021, nearly triple the United States' peak of 10.22 on January 13, 2021, and higher than the previous world record of 26.2 set in Peru on April 23, 2021. COVID-19 deaths in Hong Kong continue to rise exponentially and could surpass 50 per 1 million people in the coming days.

Significantly, the BA.2 Omicron subvariant, with an I1221T mutation on the spike protein, accounts for 100 percent of all sequenced infections in Hong Kong. The city is a canary in the coal mine for the next stage of the pandemic, in which the BA.2 subvariant is forecast to become dominant worldwide.

As with the global spread of the BA.1 Omicron subvariant last December, the total reopening of the world economy is causing BA.2 to rapidly spread internationally. Contrary to the narrative spun by the corporate media that COVID-19 is now "endemic" and a stable "new normal" has been reached, reality has come crashing down once again in the third year of this unprecedented crisis.

Only 37 days after official global infections reached a peak of 3.44 million on January 24, 2022, the decline abruptly stopped at 1.48 million on March 2 and is once again rising steadily, marking the start of the latest global surge of the pandemic.

BA.2 accounts for over a third of all sequenced infections globally and is driving the new wave of the pandemic. It is now the dominant variant in 34 of 75 countries being monitored by covariants.org. And it accounts for at least 40 percent of infections in seven of the top 10 countries with the most daily

new cases: Vietnam (42 percent), Germany (63 percent), Russia (41 percent), the Netherlands (53 percent), the UK (57 percent), Austria (40 percent) and Malaysia (73 percent).

After weeks of decline, hospitalizations in England rose sharply by 15.6 percent last week across all age groups, with a staggering 26 percent rise among children ages 6-17. In the United States, BA.2 is rising exponentially, with the Northeast region experiencing the most rapid growth.

Scientist Yaneer Bar-Yam, a co-founder of the World Health Network (WHN), a global coalition of scientists and community groups that advocates a policy of eliminating COVID-19 worldwide, recently spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site*. Summarizing the results of a major study on BA.2 from the University of Tokyo, he noted that "BA.2 transmits 40 percent faster than BA.1" and is "more vaccine-evading than BA.1." He added that BA.2 "is much more severe" than BA.1 and "infection by BA.2 is resistant to previous infection by BA.1."

Dr. Bar-Yam concluded, "BA.2 is different enough from BA.1 that it should be given its own designation—its own Greek letter—according to the current numbering scheme. But that's politically not very comfortable, because people are declaring this to be over and having a new Greek letter would raise questions that require us to reevaluate what's going on."

Indeed, the rapid spread of the more infectious, virulent and immune-evading BA.2 subvariant takes place under conditions in which almost every country except China has scrapped all remaining mitigation measures to slow the spread of COVID-19. The shortsightedness and stupidity of these efforts now stand fully exposed.

In the US, this process has been spearheaded by the Biden administration and White House Coronavirus Response Coordinator Jeff Zients, a multimillionaire who amassed between \$10.4 million and \$28 million in 2020 alone after the CARES Act bailout of Wall Street.

Working closely with the White House is Ezekiel Emanuel, former advisor to Biden and Barack Obama, who co-authored a paper published January 6, 2022, titled "A National Strategy for the 'New Normal' of Life With COVID." On Sunday, a 136-page elaboration of this paper was published under the title "Getting to and Sustaining the Next Normal: A Roadmap for

Living With Covid.”

Emanuel, a longtime advocate of lowering life expectancy and cutting health care spending, has been described as a “eugenicist” by disability rights advocates. His plan, more aptly titled a “Roadmap for Disaster,” accepts unending waves of infections and deaths and long-term debilitation from this preventable virus, which, he argues, should be allowed to become a permanent feature of society.

Providing pseudo-scientific justification for ending all COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, Emanuel’s “Roadmap” is the antithesis of the “dynamic zero” strategy pursued in China, which has stamped out repeated outbreaks and reduced deaths to only two people since May 2020--in a country of 1.4 billion.

The very evolution of Omicron and its BA.1 and BA.2 subvariants is the product of the capitalist response to the pandemic, which has subordinated public health to the profit interests of the ruling elite. By refusing to implement the measures necessary to contain and ultimately eliminate the virus in each country, the ruling class has spawned the Frankenstein’s monsters of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta and now Omicron, each one worse than its predecessor.

The long-term consequences of these socially criminal policies are incalculable. Every study on Long COVID reaffirms the horrific character of this disease and the necessity for its elimination worldwide. The most recent and perhaps most alarming is a UK Biobank imaging study recently published in *Nature*, which found that participants with mild infections sustained brain tissue injury five months after their infections. Damage was consistent with a decade of aging. Researchers speculate that dementia and memory loss may be long-term ramifications of a percentage of COVID-19 infections.

It is now abundantly clear that the current vaccines limit the likelihood of death, but *do not stop* infections, severe disease or death, rendering the “vaccine only” approach unscientific and unviable. So long as the virus is allowed to circulate and infect millions of hosts around the world, new variants will continue to emerge that are potentially more vaccine-resistant, contagious and virulent, due to the relentless character of viral evolution.

The emergence of BA.2 fundamentally refutes all claims that COVID-19 will evolve into a kinder and gentler virus akin to the flu or common cold. Such claims have always been soporifics meant to disarm an increasingly militant working class that has been traumatized by the devastation of the pandemic.

This coming Friday, March 11, will mark two years since the World Health Organization officially declared the COVID-19 outbreak a pandemic. In just two years, approximately 20 million people have died directly or indirectly from COVID-19, according to a tracker of “excess deaths” published by *The Economist*. This includes estimated real death tolls of 1.2

million in the US, 1.2 million in Russia, 220,000 in Ukraine, 150,000 in the UK and 120,000 in Germany.

Having committed sociocide through the “herd immunity” and “vaccine only” strategies implemented over the past two years, the ruling elites in the US and across Europe have steeled themselves for even greater crimes in a potential Third World War with nuclear-armed Russia.

The war itself, which broke out at the peak of the Omicron surge in Ukraine and Russia, will greatly exacerbate the spread of COVID-19. Over 2 million Ukrainian refugees have fled the country, packed into overcrowded trains and subways, creating a massive super-spreader event. Spending on social services will be slashed even further and funneled into the military budgets of each country.

In both the response to the pandemic and conflict with Russia over Ukraine, the ruling class has proceeded with extraordinary recklessness. But it is a recklessness rooted in class interests. Indeed, one of the central aims of the hysterical propaganda for war, above all in the US, is to distract attention from the pandemic.

The capitalist media operates under the delusion that if it does not report on the pandemic, it does not exist. But for the vast majority of the population, the pandemic has had and is continuing to have catastrophic consequences.

The most critical task is to build a unified mass movement of the international working class to stop the drive to World War III and initiate a global war against COVID-19.

In his interview with the WSWS, Dr. Bar-Yam emphasized: “It is easier now to do elimination than previously. Technology is improving. Our understanding has grown exponentially.”

He added, “We must simply decide to do it, and then we will be in a much better shape.”

Only through the combined deployment of every available public health measure on a world scale will COVID-19 be eliminated and the pandemic brought to an end. At its root, this requires a direct struggle against the capitalist system and the establishment of a world socialist society to put an end to war and needless deaths from preventable disease and initiate a development of human culture on the basis of social equality.



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