

World Health Organization warns of war, famine, pestilence and death

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30 June 2022

Leaders of the World Health Organization (WHO) have issued their most dire warning about the confluence of crises facing humanity, including pandemics, the impact of the war in Ukraine on global food supplies, and the danger of widespread malnutrition and starvation.

Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the director-general of the WHO, noted in his opening remarks at the organization's Wednesday press conference that COVID cases have been steadily climbing for the last four weeks, with almost 4.5 million new infections a week beginning June 20, a more than 21 percent jump in new cases from the preceding week. The latest wave is being driven by the highly contagious and immune-evading BA.4/BA.5 Omicron subvariants.

Global COVID deaths also edged up this week, climbing over 9,000, a 7.4 percent weekly rise. The three affected WHO regions where deaths are climbing include the Americas, Europe and Western Pacific, regions where official policy is to accept the SARS-CoV-2 virus as endemic. He cautioned, "Our ability to track the virus is under threat as reporting and genomic sequences are declining meaning it is harder to track omicron and analyze future emerging variants."

The WHO director-general also underscored the persistence in vaccine inequity that plagues efforts even still. As his colleague, Dr. Mike Ryan, WHO's Executive Director for Health Emergencies Program, remarked later in the conference with his usual dry sarcasm, "We get an 'A' for innovation, but an 'F' for fairness."

Notably, mid-year 2022 had been established as the WHO's target date to have every country vaccinate 70 percent of its population. Though globally, 75 percent of health workers and those over 60 have been vaccinated, hundreds of millions of people, including the elderly and health care personnel in lower-income countries, still face the prospect of future waves of infections while they remain unvaccinated. Only 58 countries have hit the WHO target while the average vaccination rate among low-income countries is an appalling 13 percent.

Director-General Ghebreyesus also informed the press he had attended the G7 summit in Germany, briefing the leaders on the array of urgent issues, specifically underscoring his concerns over sustained transmission of monkeypox infections across the globe, the global food crisis that has its worst impact on over 23

million people in the Horn of Africa, and the global implications of the attack on the democratic rights of women signaled by the US Supreme Court repealing *Roe v. Wade*.

The director-general did not elaborate on the outcome of these discussions nor did the press ask any follow-up questions about the summit and any commitments by the G7 (there were none of any substance) to address the pandemic and the convergence of social crises which are causing massive disruptions to the everyday life of the world's population.

Monkeypox is the newest of the global threats, with 5,309 confirmed and suspected cases globally across 67 countries and territories. The seven-day moving average has been climbing steadily, having reached 300 new cases per day. Social media discussions among scientists have warned that based on simple modeling, the world could see 100,000 cases by August and the first million by September if the spread continues unmitigated.

Data scientist J. Weiland wrote on Twitter, "We are definitely in the unmitigated spread phase of this outbreak which should follow consistent exponential spread for some time. It will be interesting to see if Rt [Reproduction factor] slows down once it spreads beyond high-risk demographics."

The epicenters of the current global outbreak remain Europe and North America. England has reported over 1,000 cases, followed by Germany with 969, and then Spain with 800. The case count in the US has reached 351 infections.

Dr. Ghebreyesus offered these explanatory remarks on the recent IHR Emergency Committee meeting on June 23, saying that "On monkeypox, while the Emergency Committee did not advise that the current outbreak presents a PHEIC [Public Health Emergency of International Concern], they acknowledge the emergency nature of the event and that controlling the further spread requires intense response efforts. They also advised that I should reconvene them quickly based on the evolving situation, which I will do."

He continued, "I'm concerned about sustained transmission because it would suggest the virus is establishing itself and it could move into high-risk groups including children, the immunocompromised, and pregnant women. We are starting to see this with several children already infected." The WHO director clarified later that a proposal to declare monkeypox a PHEIC immediately was defeated by a vote of 11-3, with the

majority feeling that more data was required but acknowledging the urgent concerns raised by the spread of the infection.

The Biden administration said this week that the Department of Health and Human Services would make 56,000 doses of vaccines against smallpox available immediately, with another 300,000 in coming weeks. This figure is expected to rise to a total of 1.6 million doses of the vaccine, given as two doses, four weeks apart. The plan is to direct these vaccines to those with confirmed infections or presumed to have been exposed.

The director-general did not state when he would reconvene the Emergency Committee, but some of the following conditions would trigger a reassessment: increased growth rate over the next three weeks, cases identified among sex workers or vulnerable groups (immunocompromised, HIV infected, pregnant women, and children), increase in severity or lethality, evidence of spread back into animals, and evidence of infections of different clades (lineages) with higher virulence detected outside of endemic regions.

One of the major concerns raised at the WHO press conference involved the international crisis caused by the disruption of supply chains, inflationary pressures that are driving food prices and food shortages that are rapidly leading to mass starvation across large regions of the world. These are being exacerbated by the global climate that has brought unprecedented drought to many areas.

Dr. Ghebreyesus warned, “The food crisis across the globe ... [are] leading to millions of people missing meals and going hungry. This is having major physical and mental health repercussions ... Lack of food and nutrition weakens people’s immune system and puts them more at risk of disease. Children that are undernourished are at higher risk of death from pneumonia and diarrheal diseases and measles.”

Max Lawson, Head of Inequality Policy at Oxfam, said of the G7’s failure to address the hunger crisis, “The G7 say themselves that 323 million people are on the brink of starvation, because of the current crisis [the US-NATO-led war with Russia], a new record high. Nearly a billion people, 950 million, are projected to be hungry in 2022. We need at least \$28.5 billion more from the G7 to finance food and agricultural investments to end hunger and fill the huge gap in UN humanitarian appeals. The \$4.5 billion [the G7] announced is a fraction of what is needed.” Additionally, the global humanitarian appeal fund is short \$37 billion.

He added, “The G7 want us to think COVID-19 is over, and the ongoing global health crisis doesn’t exist. Tell that to the many millions yet to have a single vaccine, and the many still dying from this cruel disease.”

There are presently over 23 million people who need immediate assistance and support in Ethiopia, Somalia, Kenya, Sudan and South Sudan, who have faced two years of alarming failed rainy seasons. Estimates place the number of livestock lost in the millions, in a region where agriculture and farming

are the main economic lifeline for the population.

Amina Abdulla, Concern Worldwide’s regional director for the Horn of Africa and a social development specialist, noted that an estimated 5 million children in the region are malnourished, with 1.6 million experiencing severe malnutrition. She said, “Without an urgent response and scaling up of the humanitarian support, we risk 350,000 of these children dying.”

Peter Sands, executive director of the Global Funds to Fight Aids, Tuberculosis and Malaria, told Agence France-Presse (AFP), “I think we’ve probably already begun our next health crisis. It’s not a new pathogen but it means people who are poorly nourished will be more vulnerable to the existing diseases. I think the combined impact of infectious diseases and the food shortages and the energy crisis ... we can be talking about millions of extra deaths because of this.” Indeed, worldwide measles cases have nearly doubled since last year. For the first time in a decade, the WHO has reported a rise in deaths associated with tuberculosis.

The director-general ended his opening remarks on the issue of the US Supreme Court’s reversal of the *Roe v. Wade* decision that gave women the right to an abortion. He said, “I want to reaffirm the WHO’s position. All women should have the right to choose when it comes to their bodies and health, FULL STOP! Safe abortion is healthcare. It saves lives. Restricting it drives women and girls towards unsafe abortions resulting in complications, even death. The evidence is irrefutable.”

Without a doubt, beside the poor working class women in America who will be denied these fundamental rights, clandestine cottage industries will quickly emerge to offer dangerous procedures that can have severe consequences—infection, sterility, death, criminal prosecution—and the right-wing ban will embolden fascistic and bigoted elements throughout the world.



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