

UN launches global push to speed virus vaccine production

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The UN on Friday joined forces with world leaders and the private sector on an initiative to speed up development of COVID-19 vaccines and treatments, and ensure equal access for all.

"This is a landmark collaboration to accelerate the development, production and equitable distribution of vaccines, diagnostics, and therapeutics for COVID-19," World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual briefing.

"United we can fight this virus."

The event was co-hosted by French President Emmanuel Macron, European Commission chief Ursula von der Leyen and Melinda Gates of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

It included UN chief Antonio Guterres as a speaker, as well as global leaders like German Chancellor Angela Merkel and South African President Cyril Ramaphosa.

Conspicuously absent were leaders from China, where the novel coronavirus first surfaced late last year, and from the United States—the country currently hardest-hit by the pandemic, with nearly 50,000 dead and close to 900,000 infected.

US President Donald Trump earlier this month suspended funding to the organisation, accusing it of kowtowing to China over the coronavirus outbreak.

While no US representatives took part, a spokesman from the US mission in Geneva stressed in an email to AFP that "America's world-leading scientists are working hard on a COVID-19 vaccine."

"We welcome serious efforts to assist in that endeavour, and look forward to learning more about the World Health Organization's proposal," the spokesman said, stressing though that "we remain deeply concerned about the WHO's effectiveness, given that its gross failures helped fuel the current pandemic."

Worldwide, more than 190,000 people have died in the pandemic and more than 2.7 million have been infected, according to an AFP tally based on official sources.

'Threat to people everywhere'

"We face a global public enemy like no other," Guterres told the briefing. "A world free of COVID-19 requires the most massive public health effort in history."

He stressed the need to ensure that any diagnostic tests developed to detect the new virus, any drugs produced to treat it, and any vaccine made to prevent it should be provided to all of those in need.

"The world needs the development, production and equitable delivery of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics," Guterres said.

"Not a vaccine or treatments for one country or one region or one-half of the world, but a vaccine and treatment that are affordable, safe, effective, easily-administered and universally available, for everyone, everywhere," he said.

"None of us is safe until all of us are safe... COVID-19 anywhere is a threat to people everywhere."

There were few concrete details divulged during the event on how the wide range of partners would roll out the initiative.

Von der Leyen, however, announced that the EU and its partners were preparing to organise a "worldwide pledging marathon" with an event on May 4 aimed at raising 7.5 billion euros (\$8.1 billion) for initial funding for developing diagnostics, treatments and vaccines against COVID-19.

"We need to develop as soon as possible a vaccine, produce it and deploy it to every single corner of the world," she said, also stressing the need to "ramp up work on prevention, diagnostics and treatment."

"The response to this pandemic can only be global."

'Leave no one behind'

Macron also called for making any vaccine developed "accessible everywhere, including in the most vulnerable countries," insisting "that is what will allow us to return to normal life as quickly as possible."

Ramaphosa, who serves as chair of the African Union, meanwhile stressed the precarious situation of that continent, which is home to many poor nations, with weak health systems.

"Africa is extremely vulnerable to the ravages of this virus and is in need of every possible support and assistance," he said.

Seth Berkley, head of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, acknowledged that it was likely that "without a vaccine we will never defeat this pandemic."

"What this means is that we will need to devise and deliver a vaccine programme to get billions of doses out at a speed and scale never before contemplated, let alone achieved—the most rapid vaccine deployment in history," he said.

Peter Sands, head of the Global Fund, meanwhile stressed that developing new tools against COVID-19 like vaccines "is essential but not enough. We must make sure that the people who need them get them."

"The lessons from AIDS must be learned," he said, pointing to the many millions who had died before anti-retroviral drugs were made widely accessible.

"We must leave no one behind."

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