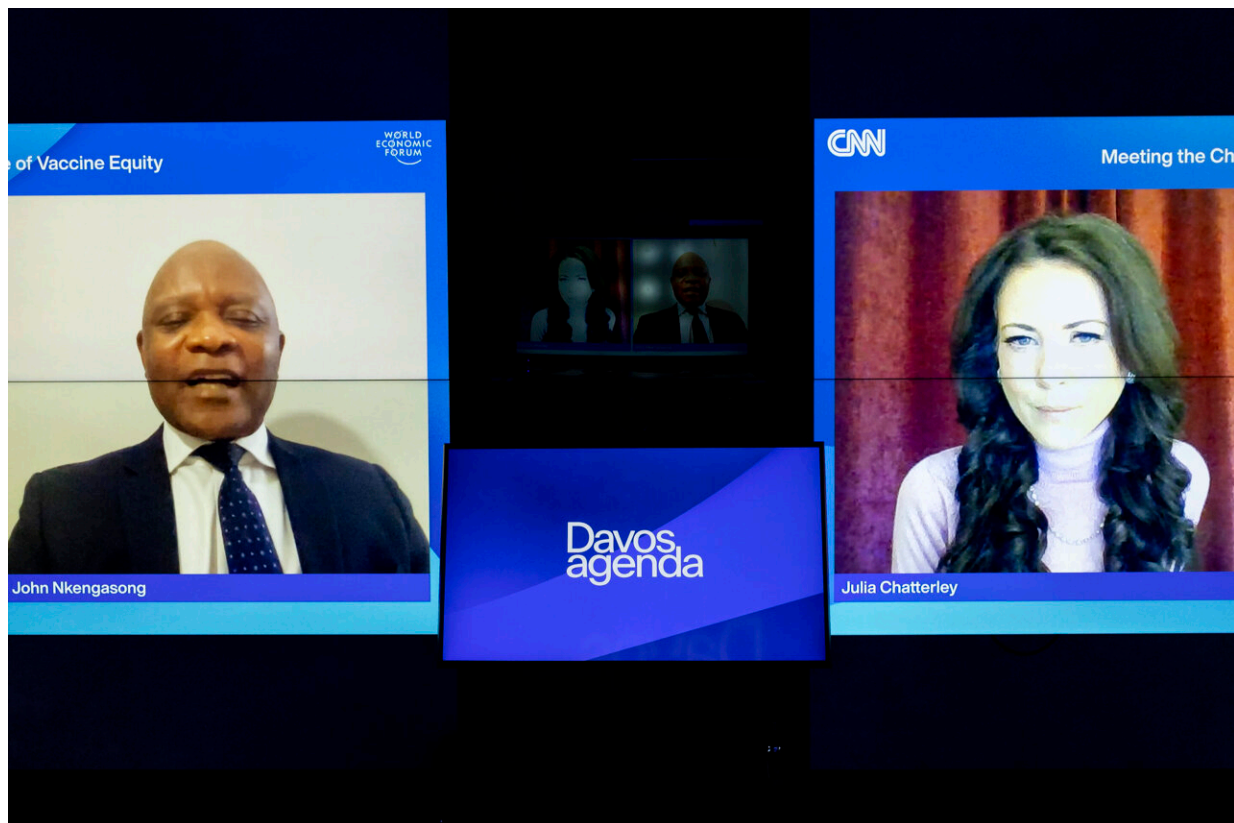


COVID-19 health emergency could be over this year, WHO says

January 18 2022, by Jamey Keaten



Screens show John Nkengasong, left, Director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), and Moderator Julia Chatterley, right, during a remotely panel titled "The Challenge of Vaccine Equity", at the Davos Agenda 2022, in Cologny near Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2022. The Davos Agenda, from 17 to 21 January 2022, is an online edition due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak gather global leaders to shape the principles, policies and partnerships needed in this challenging context. (Salvatore Di Nolfi)/Keystone via AP)

The worst of the coronavirus pandemic—deaths, hospitalizations and lockdowns—could be over this year if huge inequities in vaccinations and medicines are addressed quickly, the head of emergencies at the World Health Organization said Tuesday.

Dr. Michael Ryan, speaking during a panel discussion on vaccine inequity hosted by the World Economic Forum, said "we may never end the virus" because such pandemic viruses "end up becoming part of the ecosystem."

But "we have a chance to end the public health emergency this year if we do the things that we've been talking about," he said.

WHO has slammed the [imbalance in COVID-19 vaccinations between rich and poor countries](#) as a catastrophic moral failure. Fewer than 10% of people in lower-income countries have received even one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine.

Ryan told the virtual gathering of world and business leaders that if vaccines and other tools aren't shared fairly, the tragedy of the virus, which has so far killed more than 5.5 million people worldwide, would continue.

"What we need to do is get to low levels of disease incidence with maximum vaccination of our populations, so nobody has to die," Ryan said. "The issue is: It's the death. It's the hospitalizations. It's the disruption of our social, economic, political systems that's caused the tragedy—not the virus."



Screens show on top from left to right: Julia Chatterley, Moderator, John Nkengasong, Director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), Adar Poonawalla, CEO Serum Institute of India; below from left to right: Gabriela Bucher, Executive Director of Oxfam International, Seth Berkley, CEO of the GAVI (officially GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance), Michael Ryan, Director for Emergencies of World Health Organization (WHO), during a remotely panel titled "The Challenge of Vaccine Equity", at the Davos Agenda 2022, in Cologny near Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2022. The Davos Agenda, from 17 to 21 January 2022, is an online edition due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak gather global leaders to shape the principles, policies and partnerships needed in this challenging context. (Salvatore Di Nolfi)/Keystone via AP)

Ryan also waded into the growing debate about whether COVID-19 should be considered endemic, a label some countries like Spain have

called for to better help live with the virus, or still a pandemic—involving intensified measures that many countries have taken to fight the spread.

"Endemic malaria kills hundreds of thousands of people; endemic HIV; endemic violence in our inner cities. Endemic in itself does not mean good. Endemic just means it's here forever," he said.

Public health officials have warned it is highly unlikely COVID-19 will be eliminated and say it will continue to kill people, though at much lower levels, even after it becomes endemic.

Fellow panelist Gabriela Bucher, executive director of the anti-poverty organization Oxfam International, cited the "enormous urgency" of fairer distribution of vaccines and the need for large-scale production. She said resources to fight the pandemic were being "hoarded by a few companies and a few shareholders."



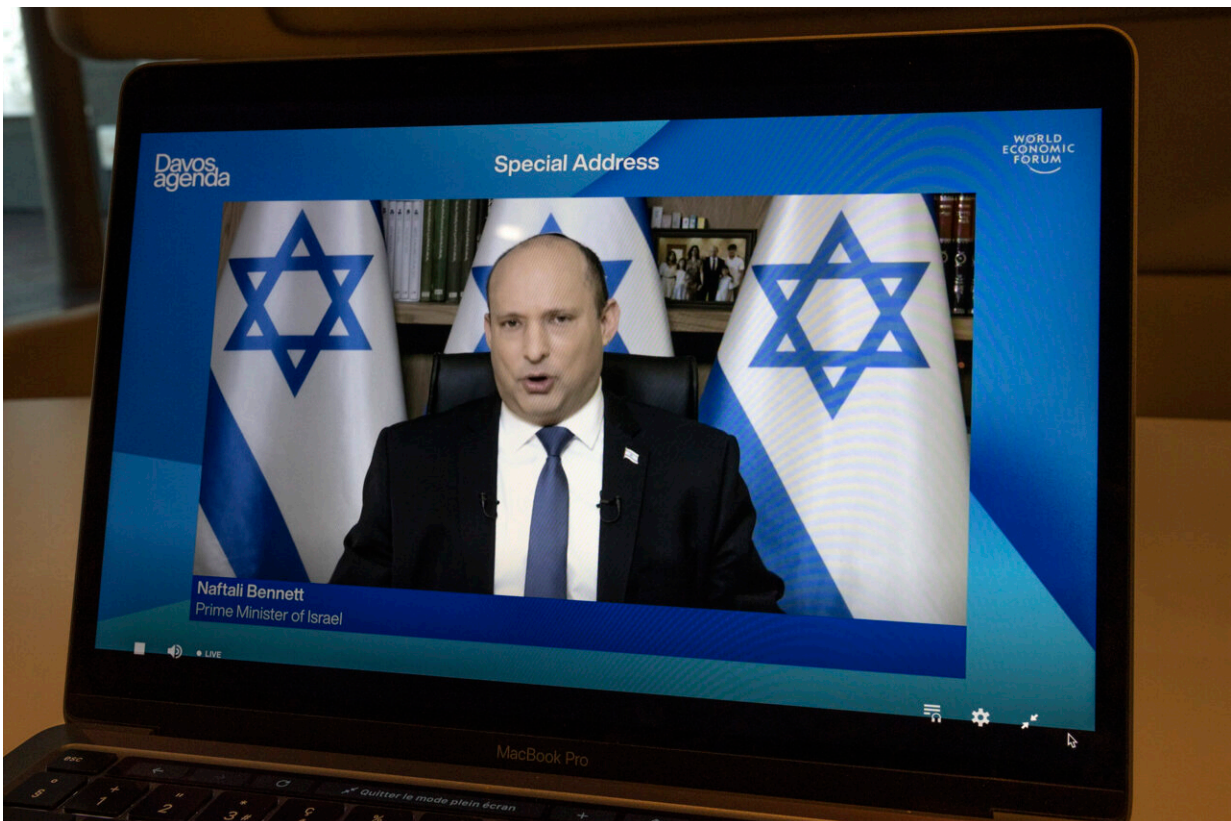
German Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum (WEF), listens Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida displayed in screen during the Davos Agenda 2022, in Cologny near Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2022. The Davos Agenda, from 17 to 21 January 2022, is an online edition due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak gather global leaders to shape the principles, policies and partnerships needed in this challenging context. Credit: Salvatore Di Nolfi/Keystone via AP

John Nkengasong, director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, decried the "total collapse of global cooperation and solidarity" over the last two years, saying it was "totally unacceptable" how few people in Africa have gotten vaccine shots. His agency says only 10% of Africa's 1.2 billion people are fully vaccinated.

He also sought to douse the belief among some that vaccine hesitancy is widespread in Africa, citing studies that say 80% of Africans were ready to get shots if the vaccines were available.

The comments came on the second day of the online alternative to the annual World Economic Forum gathering, which was postponed over pandemic health concerns.

In speeches at the event, world leaders like Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett discussed approaches to the pandemic. He said his country, which quickly rolled out a widespread vaccination campaign, has a strategy of being "at the forefront of the medicines and the vaccines" against COVID-19.



Screen shows Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet (top in screens) addressing his statement during the Davos Agenda 2022, in Cologny near Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2022. The Davos Agenda, from 17 to 21 January 2022, is an online edition due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak gather global leaders to shape the principles, policies and partnerships needed in this challenging context. (Salvatore Di Nolfi)/Keystone via AP)



Norwegian Borge Brende, left, President of the World Economic Forum, WEF, listens Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennet, top in screen, during the Davos Agenda 2022 online meeting, in Cologny near Geneva, Switzerland, Tuesday, Jan. 18, 2022. The Davos Agenda, from Jan. 17 to Jan. 21, 2022, is an online edition of the annual meeting of the WEF due to the coronavirus pandemic. Credit: Salvatore Di Nolfi/Keystone via AP

Israel's Health Ministry says 62% of people there are fully vaccinated, including with booster shots.

Citing advanced research in Israel, Bennett said, "We want to be first in the world to know how vaccines and the new variants respond to one another."

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said his country had high levels of vaccination because society values protecting the elderly and the vulnerable. He plans to keep [stringent border controls](#) in place until the end of February.

He said he was trying to balance restrictions with keeping the economy open but that a "zero COVID policy against the omicron variant is not possible nor appropriate."

In a separate press briefing Tuesday, WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the omicron variant "continues to sweep the world," adding there were 18 million new COVID-19 cases reported last week.

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