

Africa moving toward control of COVID-19 says WHO director

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A nurse prepares to administer an AstraZeneca vaccination against COVID-19, at a district health center giving first, second, and booster doses to eligible people, in the low-income Kibera neighborhood of Nairobi, Kenya, Jan. 20, 2022. The World Health Organization's Africa director Matshidiso Moeti says Africa is moving to the "control phase" of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased vaccination rates will be crucial in helping the continent live with the disease. Credit: AP Photo/Brian Inganga, File

Africa is moving to the "control phase" of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased vaccination rates will be crucial in helping the continent live with the disease, the World Health Organization's Africa director Matshidiso Moeti said Thursday.

"Although COVID-19 will be with us for the long term, there is light at the end of the tunnel," Moeti said. "This year we can end the disruption and destruction the virus has left in its path, and gain back control over our lives."

Africa is heading toward "what might become a kind of endemic, living with the virus ... I believe that we are transitioning from the pandemic phase and we will now need to manage the presence of this virus," she said, addressing reporters at a virtual media briefing.

"Over the past two years, the African continent has gotten smarter, faster and better at responding to each new surge in cases of COVID-19," said Moeti. "Against the odds, including huge inequities in access to vaccinations, we've weathered the COVID-19 storm with resilience and determination ... But COVID-19 has cost us dearly, with more than 242,000 lives lost and tremendous damage to our economies."

Moeti's optimism contrasts sharply with the warnings from WHO Geneva's director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who has said repeatedly the pandemic is not over and that it is premature for countries to think that the end might be imminent.

"Wherever you live, COVID isn't finished with us," Tedros said this week. He has cautioned that new coronavirus variants are likely and could undo the progress made so far, saying populations in Africa are among the most at-risk.



A boy receives a vaccination against COVID-19 at a site near Johannesburg, Dec. 8, 2021. The World Health Organization's Africa director Matshidiso Moeti says Africa is moving to the "control phase" of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased vaccination rates will be crucial in helping the continent live with the disease. Credit: AP Photo/Denis Farrell, File

According to the World Bank, the COVID-19 pandemic is estimated to have pushed up to 40 million people into extreme poverty on the continent, and every month of delay in lifting containment measures is estimated to cost Africa US\$ 13.8 billion in lost gross domestic product, Moeti said.

It is worrying that only 11% of Africa's adult population has been

vaccinated despite the continent receiving more than 670 million vaccine doses, said Moeti. According to WHO's figures, Africa is among the least-affected continents by COVID, although cases and deaths have been undercounted, as they have been elsewhere. Some experts attribute that to the continent's younger demographic and tendency to spend more time outdoors, among other factors.

"While many (rich) countries are considering booster shots, 85% of Africans have yet to receive a single shot," she said. "To reach the levels of immunity achieved in other parts of the world, vaccine uptake needs to be significantly accelerated across the region, urgently. A steady supply of (COVID-19 vaccine) doses is reaching our shores, so the focus needs to be on translating those into actual shots in people's arms."

She said Africa's 54 countries must implement lessons learned during the previous waves of the virus to deal with possible future waves or variants.

"When we move into the next so-called control phase of COVID-19, or living with COVID-19, the capacity of countries to reduce and control incidents of infections will be key," said Moeti.

"The ability to promptly prevent, diagnose and treat cases is what will mitigate the long-term consequences of future infections," said Moeti.

She said the continent needs to maintain political will and support for the local manufacturing of vaccines, therapeutic medicines and diagnostic tools.

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