

Pandemic's 'acute phase' could end by midyear: WHO

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The head of the World Health Organization said Friday the acute phase of the pandemic could end this year, if around 70 percent of the world gets vaccinated.

"Our expectation is that the acute phase of this pandemic will end this year, of course with one condition, the 70 percent vaccination (target is achieved) by mid this year around June, July," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, told reporters in South Africa.

"If that is to be done, the acute phase can really end, and that is what we are expecting. It's in our hands. It's not a matter of chance. It's a matter of choice."

He was speaking during a visit to Afrigen Biologics and Vaccines, which has produced the first mRNA COVID vaccine made in Africa using Moderna's sequence.

"We expect this vaccine to be more suited to the contexts in which it will be used, with fewer storage constraints and at a lower price," said the WHO boss.

The vaccine will be ready for clinical trials in November, with approval expected in 2024.

Afrigen is leading the pilot project, backed by the WHO and the COVAX initiative.

Set up in July, the tech transfer hub will train other countries and hand out production licences to poor nations left out in the race for the life-saving shots.

Tedros said WHO was "committed to supporting the development of local manufacturing in Africa and around the world, to increase regional health security".

Global daily cases dropping

Just over 11 percent of Africans are vaccinated, the lowest rate in the world. Last week the WHO's Africa office said the continent must boost its vaccination rate "six times" to reach the 70 percent target.

The world panicked late last year following the outbreak of the highly contagious Omicron variant which led at its peak to four times more daily infections than previous waves.

But after the surge which lasted for three-and-a-half months, the average number of global daily cases dropped for a second week in a row, receding by 17 percent, according to an AFP tally on Thursday.

Belgium's Minister of Development Cooperation, Meryame Kitir, who was part of the team visiting the Cape Town, bemoaned the slow progress in talks seeking a waiver on vaccine patents.

"Vaccines should be a public good, but after two years in the pandemic ... we are not a step ahead," in patent negotiations, she said.

South Africa and India have since October 2020 led calls for waivers on vaccine patents, or intellectual property rights, on COVID-19 vaccines saying this would help spur local production.

But a number of wealthy countries hosting large pharmaceutical companies have opposed the move, which believe that would discourage innovation.

World Trade Organization, however, announced last month that an accord between rich nations and developing countries on the IP waivers could be just weeks away.

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