

Push for better vaccine access as world cautiously looks ahead

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Some of the world's most powerful countries issued a rare unified call for better vaccine access for poorer nations on Friday, as inoculation campaigns strengthened and governments cautiously envisioned a post-COVID future.

The unanimous support for the resolution at the UN Security Council came as G20 nations sought to align plans to relaunch economies when the pandemic is finally tamed.

But there were also more reminders of the months of difficult work ahead, with new virus cases increasing again globally after a month in which they had fallen by half.

The global death toll is now above 2.5 million out of a total of some 113 million cases, and the United States remains the country with the most fatalities.

Vaccinations are however marching ahead in many countries after a sluggish start.

The United States has hailed progress in turning around its troubled vaccine rollout, while the European Union said it was on track to meet jab targets after months of supply problems.

A US panel met Friday on granting Johnson & Johnson's one-dose vaccine emergency approval, which would add crucial supplies to the

country's inoculation arsenal.

Rollouts in Asia also gathered momentum as Hong Kong and South Korea began their mass vaccination programmes.

In Africa, Ivory Coast received its first jabs—a consignment of 504,000 doses funded by the Covax initiative for poorer countries.

And just over half of the population of Israel has now had at least a first dose, according to the health ministry there.

Russia and Austria have meanwhile agreed to talks over the delivery and joint production of Russia's Sputnik V vaccine.

But many [poorer countries](#) have struggled to secure supplies and launch inoculations, and there have been repeated warnings over the consequences.

Most of the 217 million doses administered globally have gone to wealthier countries.

'The same threat'

With that in mind, the UN Security Council—including permanent members the United States, China, Russia, France and Britain—unanimously adopted a resolution calling for improved access to vaccines in conflict-hit or impoverished countries.

In a rare gesture, it was co-sponsored by all 15 members of the council, diplomats said, and required just a week of negotiations to draft—a change from the days when former US president Donald Trump spoke of the "China virus."

"We are all facing the same threat, the same pandemic, and international cooperation and multilateral action is needed," one diplomat said.

Another diplomatic gathering looked further ahead, with G20 countries discussing post-pandemic economic recovery in a video conference.

US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has signalled openness to new assistance to less developed countries through the International Monetary Fund.

The recovery "from the worst recession since World War II" will be "long and uncertain", IMF chief Kristalina Georgieva warned in an interview with Italy's La Stampa newspaper.

"The prospects for recovery are diverging dangerously across countries."

In the United States, the House of Representatives was expected to vote Friday on President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID relief package.

And in Japan, a state of emergency will be lifted early in some regions as the pace of infection slows and with the country preparing to host the postponed Tokyo Olympics in less than five months.

Paris lockdown?

But restrictions are unlikely to disappear anytime soon, including in France, where a debate erupted over how to respond to infections in Paris.

Scepticism greeted a suggestion by Paris city hall for a three-week lockdown to help restore normality, with critics accusing mayor Anne Hidalgo of a PR stunt.

France has so far avoided a third lockdown but case numbers are starting to rise.

The danger of new variants also remained apparent as Belgian authorities said the more contagious British strain was now the dominant one in the country.

In Britain itself, an advisory group said the next phase of vaccines will be administered based on age rather than occupational risks, sparking anger from police and teachers who said they should be prioritised.

Britain has vaccinated 19 million people, 35 percent of all adults, with at least one dose and says it plans to reach the whole population by the end of July.

Brazil has the world's second-highest death toll after the United States, and it has now surpassed 250,000 fatalities.

The virus has hit especially hard in Brazil's impoverished "favelas," among indigenous communities and in the Amazon rainforest city of Manaus, where there have been haunting scenes of mass graves and patients suffocating to death with no oxygen.

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