

# WHO exploring when and how to end COVID Emergency

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**LAND:** Public health experts at the World Health Organisation have begun discussing how and when to call an end to the global COVID-19 crisis, exploring what would be an important milestone more than two years after the emergence of the virus.

The WHO said it isn't currently considering such a declaration. While cases have fallen in many places, fatalities have spiked in Hong Kong, and this week China reported more than 1,000 new daily cases for the first time in two years.

Instead, the discussions at the Geneva-based agency are focusing on what conditions would eventually signal that the public health emergency declared on January 30, 2020, is over. Such a declaration would be not just a meaningful symbolic step, and would add momentum to the rollback of many pandemic-era public health policies.

"The International Health Regulations Emergency Committee on COVID-19 is looking at the criteria needed to declare the public health emergency of international concern as terminated," the agency said in an email.

"As of now, we are not there yet."

Many nations around the world have already taken steps to return to more normal social behaviors, relaxing masking and quarantine guidelines, and opening borders to travel. Still, many countries in Asia are reporting record levels of transmission, and in Germany cases recently rebounded back near record levels. There have been more than 10 million COVID cases and 52,000 deaths in the past week, the WHO said.

Researchers have also warned that even if COVID-19 cases fall to lower levels, the disease is still likely to cause thousands of deaths annually, not unlike other endemic illnesses such as malaria and tuberculosis. And the potential for new, dangerous variants is unpredictable.

The WHO's discussions could have implications for drugmakers such as Pfizer Inc. and Merck & Co. that have agreed to allow generic competition to their COVID treatments until the pandemic ends.

Vaccine makers including AstraZeneca Plc have said they'll keep prices for their prod-

ucts low until the pandemic ends, without specifying what the benchmark for that would be.

The WHO has been cautious in the past to call an end to global health emergencies and disease outbreaks. Like the declaration of the emergency, the decision would ultimately be made by Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus after consultation with experts.

Many countries no longer rely solely on the WHO's guidance, said David Heymann, a former WHO and U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention epidemiologist who advises the WHO on outbreaks. In the U.S., about 98% of the population lives in counties where masking requirements for indoor public spaces aren't necessary, according to the CDC. However, concerns are rising regarding the BA.2 variant, a version of omicron that has already spread widely in some other countries in Europe. - THE HINDUSTAN TIMES