

IMPACT

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A world without Covid-19

WE CAN AND MUST END THE ACUTE PHASE OF THE PANDEMIC THIS YEAR – WHO REGIONAL DIRECTOR FOR SOUTH-EAST ASIA

BY SAMANGIE WETTIMUNY

In the WHO South-East Asia Region, ten out of its eleven member countries including Sri Lanka have been reporting a decline in new Covid-19 cases while no cases have been reported from DPR Korea.

“Based on what we know the most likely scenario is that the SARS-CoV2 virus continues to evolve, but the severity of the disease it causes will reduce over time as immunity increases due to vaccination and prior infection. Periodic spikes in cases and deaths may occur as immunity wanes which may require periodic boosting for vulnerable populations,” said WHO Regional Director for South-East Asia Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh, in an interview with the *Sunday Observer*.

According to Dr. Singh countries in the WHO South-East Asia Region have made commendable strides in vaccinating their populations. Over 2.8 billion doses have been administered of which 1.4 billion people have received one dose while 1.2 billion have completed the primary series.

Despite the reduction in the number of new cases and deaths, globally there were 5 million new cases and 18 000 deaths reported during the week of 11 to 17 April. A reminder that the pandemic is not over yet, Dr. Singh added.

Excerpts

Q: Do we still need to wear a face mask? Is it safe to stop the practice now?

A: Masks continue to be critical tools to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and a well-fitting mask that properly covers the nose and mouth should be worn in settings where SARS CoV-2 is spreading regardless of vaccination status or history of prior infection when interacting with individuals who are not members of the same household.

Masks should also be worn in areas of poor ventilation when it is not possible to maintain a safe distance in indoor and outdoor settings when or where safe physical distancing cannot be maintained.

Each country will have to tailor its response depending on its own realities as each country is facing a different situation in the pandemic depending on a number of factors such as the intensity of SARS-CoV2 in circulation, the level of vaccination and immunity of the population, and the capacity and agility of the community to respond to the changing situation.

Q: Will the pandemic end with the Omicron variant or will there be

new variants? Could you brief us on WHO's latest projections?

A: While we cannot predict the trajectory of the pandemic, the SARS-CoV2 virus continues to evolve. With such intense transmission worldwide, further variants, including recombinants, are expected to emerge.

WHO's third Strategic Preparedness, Readiness, and Response Plan to end the global Covid-19 pandemic lays out three possible scenarios for how the pandemic could evolve this year.

Based on what we know the most likely scenario is that the virus continues to evolve, but the severity of the disease it causes will reduce over time as immunity increases due to vaccination and prior infection. Periodic spikes in cases and deaths may occur as immunity wanes which may require periodic boosting for vulnerable populations.

In the best-case scenario, we will see fewer variants emerge and boosters and new formulations won't be necessary.

In the worst-case scenario, a more virulent and highly transmissible variant emerges against which existing protection from vaccination or infection wanes rapidly. Addressing this will require significant altering of the current vaccines and ensuring that those who are most at-risk get them.

We can and must end the acute phase of the pandemic this year. We

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must lower the risk of new variants by not allowing the virus a chance to evolve by spreading further. We know that proper wearing of masks, ensuring hand hygiene, keeping safe distance, and getting vaccinated are highly effective in controlling the spread of the virus. We must follow these measures so that we can halt the virus and get back to our lives.

Q: Could you comment on the latest situation in South Asia?

A: In the WHO South-East Asia Region, ten countries have been reporting a decline in new cases. This mirrors the global trend with all six WHO Regions reporting decreasing trends in the number of new cases and deaths since the end of March 2022.

The decline in cases should, however, be interpreted with caution as several countries are progressively changing their Covid-19 testing strategies, resulting in a lower number of tests performed and consequently a lower number of cases.

Despite the reduction in new cases and deaths, globally there were 5 million new cases and 18 000 deaths reported during the week of 11 to 17 April. A reminder that the pandemic is not over yet.

We know that overwhelmingly it is unvaccinated people who are experiencing severe disease as a result of Covid-19. WHO has set a target for all countries to vaccinate at least seventy percent of populations against Covid-19 by the mid of the year.

Countries in the WHO South-East Asia Region have made commend-



WHO Director for South-East Asia Dr. Poonam Khetrapal Singh

able strides in vaccinating their populations. Over 2.8 billion doses have been administered of which 1.4 billion people have received one dose while 1.2 billion have completed the primary series.

More than forty percent of the population in 10 countries have completed their primary series while three countries have achieved the target of 70 percent coverage with the primary series of the Covid-19 vaccines. WHO is urging all countries to scale up vaccination coverage with a focus on the most vulnerable groups to keep everyone safe, everywhere.

Q: What are WHO's latest programs/projects launched in South Asia, especially for the countries in the region worst hit by Covid-19?

A: Scaling up capacity development in emergency risk preparedness and management has been one of my Flagship priorities since 2014. Since then countries have been working to strengthen emergency preparedness response and make primary health care systems (PHC) more resilient. As a result, countries with stronger PHCs were able to recover faster and better from the pandemic.

Through the Covid-19 pandemic WHO supported countries by making available technical know-how, training, experts and field staff, critical supplies such as oxygen, respirators, testing kits, medical masks and gowns, therapeutics, and mobile hospitals as part of the Covid-19 response.

In addition, the South-East Asia Regional Health Emergency Fund (SEAR-HEF) is being used to fund emergency response and strengthen measures.

Covid-19 vaccines were given emergency use listing (EUL) to enable countries to start vaccinating their populations. Vaccines were rolled out to countries through COVAX, the world's largest vaccine sharing program.

WHO, along with partners, has continued to work with member countries in the Region to set up, expand, and enhance testing capacities up to the sub-national levels to ensure testing was accessible to everyone. The number of laboratories testing for SARS-CoV2 has grown from five at the start of the pandemic to now over 4,800.

Eight of the 11 countries in the Region have laboratories conducting genome sequencing, two more countries are in the process of setting up in-country genome sequencing capacities even as all countries have external access to such facilities.

With the Covid-19 pandemic impacting health programs and disrupting health services globally, WHO has continued to coordinate efforts to support the implementation of targeted actions to ensure access to safe and high-quality essential health services.

As countries build back, WHO is working with countries to identify gaps in their health coverage, support the resumption of health services and make health systems more resilient.

