

News | Coronavirus pandemic

Africa transitioning out of pandemic phase of COVID: WHO

The head of WHO Africa says the continent is transitioning to a phase of managing the virus in the long term.



A nurse administers an AstraZeneca vaccination against COVID-19, at a district health centre in Nairobi, Kenya [File: Brian Inganga/AP Photo]

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Africa is transitioning out of the pandemic phase of the COVID-19 outbreak and moving towards a situation where it will be managing the virus over the long term, the head of the World Health Organization on the continent has said.

“I believe that we are transitioning from the pandemic phase and we will now need to manage the presence of this virus in the long term,” Dr Matshidiso Moeti told a media briefing on Thursday.

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“The pandemic is moving into a different phase ... We think that we’re moving now, especially with the vaccination expected to increase, into what might become a kind of endemic living with the virus,” she said.

“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.



Moeti's optimism contrasts sharply with warnings from WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, who has said repeatedly the pandemic is not over [File: Denis Balibouse/Reuters]

“Against the odds, including huge inequities in access to vaccinations, we’ve weathered the COVID-19 storm with resilience and determination.”

Moeti's optimism contrasts sharply with the warnings from WHO 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.

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

It is worrying that only 11 percent of Africa’s adult population has been vaccinated despite the continent receiving more than 670 million vaccine doses, Moeti said.

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.

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“While many [rich] countries are considering booster shots, 85 percent 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.”



Moeti said it was worrying that only 11 percent of Africa's adult population has been vaccinated despite the continent receiving more than 670 million vaccine doses [File: Brian Inganga/AP Photo]

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.

Separately, the director of the Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention said efforts to build up capacity to manufacture vaccines against COVID-19 are not designed to meet this year's needs but are for the longer term.

“The efforts that are going on on the continent now as part of the African Partnership for Vaccine Manufacturing [are] going very well, there are about 10

nership for vaccine manufacturing [are] going very well, there are about 10 countries that are engaged now in the process of vaccine manufacturing or planning to do so,” said John Nkengasong.

He said the leading countries involved were South Africa, Senegal, Rwanda, Algeria and Morocco.

“However, that is not designed to meet the needs for this year, for sure. It’s designed with the understanding that we have to find a long-term solution for ... vaccination in Africa. It’s also designed with the understanding that we may be immunising ourselves almost every six months on the continent with this virus.”

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Between January 30 and February 5, nearly half of the total samples tested in Afghanistan were positive for COVID-19.

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