

International

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Amid virus surge, WHO says Europe vaccine rollout 'unacceptably slow'

Brazil deaths hit new monthly record as France tightens curbs

COPENHAGEN: The World Health Organization yesterday slammed Europe's vaccine rollout as "unacceptably slow" which it said was prolonging the pandemic as the region sees a "worrying" surge in coronavirus infections. "Vaccines present our best way out of this pandemic... However, the rollout of these vaccines is unacceptably slow," WHO director for Europe Hans Kluge said in a statement. "We must speed up the process by ramping up manufacturing, reducing barriers to administering vaccines, and using every single vial we have in stock, now," he said.

To date, only 10 percent of the region's total population have received one vaccine dose, and four percent have completed a full vaccine series, the organization said. The WHO's European region comprises 53 countries and territories and includes Russia and several Central Asian nations.

The organization said the slow rollout was "prolonging the pandemic" and described Europe's virus situation as "more worrying than we have seen in several months." Five weeks ago, the weekly number of new cases in Europe had dipped to under one million, but "last week saw increasing transmission of Covid-19 in the majority of countries in the WHO European region, with 1.6 million new cases," it said. The total number of deaths in Europe "is fast approaching one million and the total number of cases about to surpass 45 million," it said, noting that Europe was the second-most affected region after the Americas.

Worrying new variants

The UN body warned that the rapid spread of the virus could increase the risk of the emergence of worrying new variants. "The likelihood of new variants of concern occurring increases with the rate at which the virus is replicating and spreading, so curbing transmission through basic disease control actions is crucial," Dorit Nitzan, WHO Europe's regional emergency director, said in the statement.

New infections were increasing in every age group except in people aged 80 years and older, as vaccinations of that age group begin to show effect. The WHO said the British variant of the virus was now the predominant one in Europe, and was present in 50 countries. "As this variant is more transmissible and can increase the risk of hospitalization, it has a greater public health impact and additional actions are required to control it," it said. Those actions included expanded testing, isolation, contact tracing, quarantine and genetic sequencing. Meanwhile, the WHO said lockdowns "should be avoided by timely and targeted public health interventions", but should be used when the disease "overstretches the ability of health services to care for patients adequately."

It said 27 countries in its European region were in partial or full nationwide lockdown, with 21 imposing nighttime curfews.

Meanwhile, the COVID-19 death toll spiraled out of control in Brazil in March, more than doubling the country's previous monthly record, officials said Wednesday, as French President Emmanuel



ANKARA: A woman waits to receive the COVID-19 vaccine yesterday. —AFP

Macron announced a limited nationwide lockdown. In a sign of the devastation the virus is still causing while the world races to roll out vaccines, Brazil reported 66,573 people had died of COVID-19 in March—more than twice as many fatalities as the country's second-deadliest month of the pandemic, July 2020. —AFP

Two dead as fresh wave of violence hits India state poll

NANDIGRAM, India: Two people died as the second phase of voting in a violence-marred Indian state election kicked off yesterday, officials said, with crowds of opponents clashing on the streets despite a ban on large gatherings. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Hindu-nationalist party and the firebrand leader of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, are caught up in a fierce battle for the eastern state renowned for its high levels of political violence and murders.

Campaigning in the town of Nandigram has been particularly intense, with 66-year-old Banerjee—one of Modi's fiercest critics—contesting the seat against a former confidante who defected to Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) last year. Hundreds of supporters of Banerjee's Trinamool Congress party and the BJP clashed outside polling stations in Nandigram yesterday, despite an Election Commission banned on gatherings of more than four people. Police told AFP a worker for Banerjee's Trinamool Congress party (TMC) was "hacked to death" early yesterday with three BJP supporters detained for questioning. A BJP worker also allegedly killed himself after he was threatened by TMC supporters, police said, citing a complaint filed by his family. Despite the outbreaks of violence, thousands of people queued at hotly contested Nandigram's polling stations to cast their vote. The West Bengal polls are being held over eight phases amid tight security and conclude on

April 29. The second phase of voting involves 30 constituencies including Nandigram.

In another district, West Midnapore, police said a TMC camp was raided by BJP supporters, with party flags ripped up and vehicles damaged. "BJP supporters came in with force and threw crude bombs and rocks," a police spokesman told AFP. The BJP has been seeking to expand its power at the state level beyond its Hindi-speaking northern heartlands. West Bengal, home to more than 90

million people with some 73 million eligible to vote, has so far eluded the BJP. The results of the West Bengal poll will be announced by the Electoral Commission on May 2, alongside several other state and territory elections in Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. The second out of three phases of polling in the northeastern state of Assam—where the BJP is looking to hold on to power after winning for the first time in 2016 — also commenced yesterday. —AFP



NANDIGRAM, India: Voters stand in a line to cast their vote outside a polling station during Phase 2 of West Bengal's legislative election in Nandigram yesterday. —AFP

US climate envoy Kerry will travel to UAE, India, Bangladesh

WASHINGTON: The United States' climate envoy John Kerry will travel to the United Arab Emirates, India and Bangladesh ahead of a climate summit that Washington will host next month, according to a statement from the department Wednesday.

The leaders of the three countries are among 40 invited to a two-day virtual meeting starting April 22 and meant to mark the US's return to the front lines of the climate crisis fight, after former president Donald Trump disengaged from the process. The US is expected to make ambitious new commitments to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions under the terms of the Paris climate accord soon, and will encourage others to boost their own goals. Kerry will visit Abu Dhabi, New Delhi and Dhaka between April 1 and 9, the State Department statement said.

The Paris Agreement left countries in charge of making their own promises and taking their own measurements of emission reductions, but requires them to regularly revise their Nationally Determined Contributions. The agreement's goal is to limit the increase in global temperatures by the end of the century to around 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels — or risk leaving much of the planet inhospitable to life. The United States, the world's top economy, is the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, which trap heat in the atmosphere.

The trip announcement comes as the administration of President Joe Biden was preparing to seek a multi-trillion dollar package from Congress to modernize ageing infrastructure, while shifting to renewable energy and electric cars. —AFP