

International

World creating 'toxic' recipe for new variants: WHO warns

New variant of concern has rattled countries

GENEVA: The WHO has warned that the world was creating toxic conditions for new COVID-19 variants like Omicron to emerge and then spread around the globe. The World Health Organization said the combination of low vaccination coverage across the planet, mixed with very low testing to track the virus, was a fertile breeding ground.

The UN health agency stressed that measures to stop the globally-dominant Delta variant would also hinder Omicron. The new variant of concern has rattled countries around the world. "We need to use the tools we already have to prevent transmission and save lives from Delta. And if we do that, we will also prevent transmission and save lives from Omicron," WHO director general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference.

"But if countries and individuals don't do what they need to do to stop transmission of Delta, they won't stop Omicron either. Globally, we have a toxic mix of low vaccine coverage, and very low testing—a recipe for breeding and amplifying variants. That's why we continue to urge countries to... ensure equitable access to vaccines, tests and therapeutics all over the world."

Omicron in 23 countries

Omicron was first reported to the WHO from South Africa on November 24, while the first known laboratory-confirmed case was identified from a specimen collected on November 9. The Netherlands said Tuesday it had found the variant in two samples taken on November 19 and 23, one having recently been to southern Africa and the other having no travel history. Maria Van Kerk-

hove, the WHO's COVID-19 technical lead, said timelines around first detections of Omicron may change as there was a backlog of sequencing of cases that occurred in November.

Tedros said the WHO was taking the emergence of Omicron "extremely seriously", but added that the mutation "should not surprise us. This is what viruses do. And it's what this virus will continue to do, as we long as we allow it to continue spreading." Tedros said Omicron was in at least 23 countries—with that number expected to grow. Van Kerkhove said the WHO was not yet aware of any deaths associated with Omicron.

Transmissibility studies

The WHO said it could take several weeks to complete studies of Omicron to see if there are any changes in transmissibility, severity or implications for COVID vaccines, tests and treatments. "We expect to have more information on transmission within days: not necessarily weeks, but in days," said Van Kerkhove. "The more this virus circulates, the more infections there will be.

The more infections there will be, the more people will die, and this is something that can be prevented." Several countries have imposed travel bans on flights from South Africa, which Van Kerkhove said was making it difficult to send samples from the country, even though they were willing to share them.

Van Kerkhove said: "We will get out of this pandemic but every day decisions need to be made on whether or not we're getting closer to the end of this pandemic or we're actually taking steps to prolong it." Michael Ryan, the WHO's emergencies director,



GAZA CITY: A Palestinian medic prepares a dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine during a campaign to encourage people to get vaccinated, in Gaza City yesterday. — AFP

said it was not the time for governments to be passing responsibility for management of the pandemic over to their citizens. "Certainly we are dealing with a crisis now: that crisis is in Europe, and it's being driven by the Delta variant," he said. —AFP

Iranian forces, Taliban exchange fire at border

TEHRAN: An exchange of fire erupted Wednesday between Iranian forces and Afghanistan's Taliban at Iran's eastern border, local media reported. "A clash erupted in the afternoon between Iranian border guards and the Taliban following a misunderstanding at the border near the (Afghan) province of Nimroz," Iran's Tasnim news agency said.

Iran, which shares a 900 kilometer border with Afghanistan, does not recognize the Taliban government formed after the insurgents seized the capital Kabul in August. Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said a "border dispute between residents" of the area had triggered the incident, without referring to the Taliban. "The situation has been resolved. Shooting stopped after contact between border guards of the two countries," he said in a statement.

Tasnim reported that "Iranian farmers passed beyond the protective walls erected within Iran, and the Taliban reacted by deeming that their border had been breached". The Taliban opened fire and Iranian forces responded, it said. In late October, Tehran called on the Taliban to adopt a "friendly" approach towards their neighbors, in a meeting of six of countries that share borders with Afghanistan. Iran has appeared to edge towards a pragmatic rapprochement with the hard-line Sunni Islamist group in recent months. — AFP

Libya on a bumpy road to uncertain elections

TRIPOLI: Libya is less than a month from elections seen as crucial to ending its long-running civil war, but deep political divisions could provoke a delay or even fresh violence. In theory, the North African country is preparing to move beyond a decade of conflict since the 2011 overthrow of longtime dictator Muammar Gaddafi in a NATO-backed uprising.

Western officials have talked up a UN-led peace process and insist on "inclusive" and "credible" elections starting on December 24, despite serious disputes over how they should be held. Libya's electoral commission has said it is ready to organize the process and has published an initial list of candidates and handed out voting cards. The United Nations has said that nine international organizations have sought accreditations to observe the conduct of the vote.

But despite a year of relative calm since an October 2020 ceasefire, Libya's deep political divisions remain. Analysts warn that violence could easily flare again, with camps around eastern military chief Khalifa Haftar and the eastern-based parliament still mired in bitter disputes with a rival camp in the western capital Tripoli.

"The electoral process imposed by the parliament is so fragile, incomplete and dysfunctional and institutions in Tripoli are so eaten away by political factionalism that the dynamics of violence and polarization are bound to come back before December 24," said Libya expert Jalel Harchaoui. "That's almost certain, even assuming that the vote somehow takes place."

'Vague electoral law'

On Monday, gunmen backing eastern military chief Khalifa Haftar blocked roads leading to a court in the southern city of

Sebha that had been set to examine an appeal by Seif Al-Islam Gaddafi after he was barred from running for president. Seif Al-Islam is the second son of the ousted dictator, who was slain in the 2011 revolt. The interim government in Tripoli said it was following the situation in Sebha with "great concern".

But as forces led by Haftar - himself a presidential candidate - dominate eastern Libya and much of the sparsely populated south, the Tripoli-based administration admitted it could do little to intervene. That was the latest in a string of ominous events that have overshadowed preparations for the polls and threaten to spark renewed violence.

With just weeks to go, the list of candidates has yet to be finalized. A Tripoli appeals court on Wednesday rejected two petitions against interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah, allowing him to take part, his lawyer Abdulraouf Qanbij said. On Tuesday, Interior Minister Khaled Mazen warned that the presidential election might have to be delayed if "violations" threatening the electoral process do not stop. "We must not continue on a path that would lead to the deterioration of the security situation until it is out of control," Mazen said.

Claudia Gazzini, a Libya expert at the International Crisis Group, said: "At the base of all these problems there is a vague electoral law and its contradictions." Parliamentary speaker Aguila Saleh sparked controversy in early September when he signed off on the bill without a vote in the assembly, putting into law a piece of legislation critics say was custom-made for his ally, Haftar. In late September, the parliament based in the eastern city of Tobruk, itself well past its mandate, passed a vote of no confidence in the interim government.

This month, notables in several cities called for a boycott and several voting offices were shut down by groups hostile to Gaddafi's candidacy, preventing voters collecting their voting cards. As Libya's main political players wrangle, the security situation on the ground, controlled by an array of militias and foreign forces, has voters asking whether they will be able to cast their ballots in safety. — AFP