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Geneva, January 6 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization said a record 9.5 million cases of COVID-19 were tallied around the world last week, marking a 71 percent weekly surge that amounted to a “tsunami” as the new Omicron coronavirus variant sweeps worldwide.

“Last week, the highest number of COVID-19 cases were reported so far in the pandemic,” WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on Thursday. He said the WHO was certain that was an underestimate because of a backlog in testing around the year-end holidays.

The UN health agency, in its weekly report on the pandemic, said the weekly count amounted to 9,520,488 new cases – with 41,178 deaths recorded last week compared with 44,680 in the week before that. WHO officials have long cited a lag between case counts and deaths, with changes in the death

counts often trailing about two weeks behind the evolution of case counts.

They have also noted that the more infectious Omicron variant appears to produce less severe disease than the globally dominant Delta strain, but should not be categorised as “mild.” “Just like previous variants, Omicron is hospitalising people, and it’s killing people,” Ghebreyesus said.

“In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick that it is overwhelming health systems around the world,” he added. Governments have struggled to tame the virus, which has killed more than 5.8 million people.

The WHO said the rises in case counts during the last week varied, doubling in the Americas region, but rising only 7 percent in Africa. The WHO emergencies chief, Dr Michael Ryan, said speculation that Omicron might be the last variant of the outbreak was “wishful thinking” and cautioned: “There still is a lot of energy in this virus.”

Tedros repeated his call for greater equity globally in the distribution of and access to vaccines. Based on the current rate of vaccine rollout, 109 countries will miss the WHO’s target for 70 percent of the world’s population to be fully vaccinated by July, he said. That aim is seen as helping end the acute phase of the pandemic.

“Booster after booster in a small number of countries will not end a pandemic while billions remain completely unprotected,” Tedros said. WHO adviser Bruce Aylward said 36 nations had not even reached 10 percent vaccination cover. Among severe patients worldwide, 80 percent were unvaccinated, he added.

Another variant B.1.640 – first documented in multiple countries in September 2021 – is among those being monitored by the WHO but is not circulating widely, said the WHO’s technical lead on COVID-19, Maria van Kerkhove.

WHO officials called on the public to step up measures to fight the pandemic like getting vaccinated, ventilating rooms, maintaining proper physical distancing and wearing masks – but properly. “I’m struck by how people actually are wearing masks,” Van Kerkhove said.

“Wearing a mask below your chin is useless. And it gives you a false sense of security that you have something on that is protecting you. It will not ... Basically, we are asking everyone to play a part in this.”

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