

Health experts warn of protracted pandemic amid ‘vaccine apartheid’

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Rich nations are hoarding vaccines, leaving the poor without. (Photo: AFP)

Geneva, March 16 (RHC)-- Global inequality campaigners and health experts have warned of protracted public health crises in several North African and Middle East countries amid the monopoly of COVID-19

vaccine by wealthy countries.

"We are seeing [an] unequal distribution of vaccine rollouts around the world," Amgad el-Kholy, an epidemiologist at the World Health Organization (WHO) regional office for the Eastern Mediterranean region (EMRO), told Middle East Eye, noting that rich nations were racing ahead of poorer ones to immunize their citizens.

Citing WHO data, MEE said only 14 out of 21 countries in the EMRO, which extends from Morocco to Afghanistan, have received inoculations, equivalent to little more than one percent of the population of the entire region.

"This has never been more critical than in our region, where health workers are a rare and valuable resource and vulnerable people should be the first to receive support, rather than be left behind," el-Kholy said.

His remarks came just days after WHO expert Mark Ryan said that 80 percent of all global vaccines had been administered in just 10 countries. "The starkest illustrations of vaccine inequality were evident in the Middle East where countries such as Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates were inoculating nationals and foreign workers at a frenetic pace while countries like Yemen lag behind," the MEE said.

The report also referred to the situation in Israel where about 60 percent of Israelis have received jabs, while Palestinians living under occupation have been told they could have to wait months before being vaccinated.

Activists say it is the systematic dereliction of political leadership at the highest level that is triggering this threat to global public health. "It is vaccine apartheid," Anna Marriott, health policy advisor for Oxfam, told MEE, adding "There is no other way of describing it."

"If you think of the promises that were made at the beginning of the pandemic, that the vaccine would be a global public good - our leaders have failed," Marriott added.

In an attempt to seek a more equitable access to the vaccine, the World Health Organization (WHO) and the GAVI vaccine alliance are leading a facility called COVAX to deliver doses of approved vaccines fairly around the world.

Experts warn that delaying inoculations will allow the virus opportunity to mutate, potentially undermining available vaccines and ultimately global recovery. "The global economy cannot recover if there are disparities in global coverage: Not only will vaccines help save lives and stabilize health systems, but they can help to drive a global economic recovery. That recovery cannot take place if half of the world is hamstrung from the economic fallout of COVID-19," el-Kholy said.

U.S. lawmaker Ilhan Omar told MEE that Washington should be instead "ensuring the broadest possible distribution of the vaccine." Omar said: "Letting people in the global South wait years for the vaccine is a policy choice, and [they] don't have to make it. Until everyone is safe from the virus, no one is."

The United States has also been slammed for undermining the attempt to accelerate the vaccine rollout elsewhere. According to the report, the US and other Western countries are opposing calls for temporarily waiving the World Trade Organization's Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) for those technologies needed to address the pandemic.

The proposal was put forward by South Africa and India and endorsed by 100 other countries. "There are solutions on the table which rich countries are standing in the way of. They need to support the TRIPS (intellectual property) waiver from developing countries and unlocking the supply of the vaccines is the only route to redressing this apartheid situation," Marriot from Oxfam said.

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