

WHO warns against rich nations hoarding jabs to fight Omicron

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Geneva, December 10 (RHC)-- The World Health Organization (WHO) has warned that wealthy countries may start hoarding COVID-19 vaccines again, threatening global supplies as they seek to shore up stocks to fight the new Omicron variant of coronavirus.

The comments on Thursday by the agency's vaccine director, Kate O'Brien, come as supplies to an international dose-sharing program run by the WHO and vaccine charity GAVI have increased in the past few months due to donations from wealthy countries and after India eased limits on exports of vaccines.

New Delhi's move has meant the Serum Institute of India has resumed shipments of the AstraZeneca vaccine it makes, mainly for the programme known as COVAX. "We have to make sure that it [higher shipments] continues," O'Brien said in a briefing.

"As we head into whatever the Omicron situation is going to be, there is risk that the global supply is again going to revert to high-income countries hoarding vaccines" as they seek to protect their ability to

inoculate their citizens, she said later.

O'Brien also said a key problem for COVAX has been wealthy countries donating COVID-19 vaccines with a relatively short shelf life while noting that wastage rates were also high in some wealthy countries.

COVAX has shipped 610 million doses of vaccines to 144 countries or territories since February, according to GAVI.

Meanwhile, John Nkengasong, the director of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said African governments "will not have a choice" but to resort to COVID-19 vaccine mandates if their citizens do not hurry to get the increasingly available doses.

The flow of doses to countries on the continent has grown but vaccine hesitancy and the short shelf life of some donations has created new pressures. "We don't need to get there if we just do the right thing," Nkengasong said of vaccine mandates. He called any lack of interest in vaccine uptake "extremely unfortunate" after African officials have fought for months against dramatic vaccine inequality between their nations and richer ones around the world.

Africa remains the world's least vaccinated continent against COVID-19, with less than 8 percent of its population fully jabbed.

Only six African countries have met the global target of vaccinating 40 percent of their populations against COVID-19 by the end of this year, and "this is simply dangerous and untenable," a WHO immunisation official, Richard Mihigo, told reporters.

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