

Statement to the press

by Dr Hans Henri P. Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe

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The epidemiological picture in the WHO European Region, comprising 53 countries, is mixed.

We now have 64 million confirmed cases and 1.3 million deaths. Thirty-three Member States report a greater than 10% increase in 14-day case incidence. This high transmission is deeply worrying – particularly in the light of low vaccination uptake in priority populations in a number of countries.

Several countries are starting to observe an increased burden on hospitals and more deaths. Last week, there was an 11% increase in the number of deaths in the Region – with one reliable projection expecting 236 000 deaths in Europe by 1 December.

Three factors account for this increase. The first is the more transmissible Delta variant, now reported in 50 countries in the Region. The second factor is the easing of public health measures, and the third is the seasonal surge in travel, driving significant growth in case numbers in most countries. We are seeing a particularly steep increase in cases in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the central Asian republics.

We must be steadfast in maintaining multiple layers of protection, including vaccination and masks. Vaccines are the path towards reopening societies and stabilizing economies. Despite this, we remain challenged by insufficient production, insufficient access and insufficient vaccine acceptance.

In roughly 8 months, nearly 850 million doses have been administered, with nearly half of the people of the Region being fully vaccinated. This is a remarkable achievement!

However, in the past 6 weeks, vaccination uptake in the Region has slowed down, influenced by a lack of access to vaccines in some countries and a lack of vaccine acceptance in others. As of today, only 6% of people in lower- and lower-middle-income countries in our Region have completed a full vaccination series.

Even though nearly 3 in 4 health workers in our Region have completed a full COVID-19 vaccine series, there are countries that have only managed to vaccinate 1 in 10 health professionals.

There is a clear need to increase production, share doses and improve the vaccine access of Member States so that they may offer a full series of vaccination to populations. Everyone, everywhere should have the right to receive the full course.

Vaccination is a right, but it is also a responsibility. The stagnation in vaccine uptake in our Region is of serious concern. Now that public health and social measures are being relaxed in many countries, the public's vaccination acceptance is crucial if we are to avoid greater transmission, more severe disease, an increase in deaths and a bigger risk that new variants of concern will emerge.

Vaccine scepticism and science denial are holding us back from stabilizing this crisis. It serves no purpose, and is good for no one.

Public participation is vital for successful COVID-19 vaccination. Understanding people's perceptions, including their concerns regarding vaccine safety, helps countries to inform communities and health-care providers where and when needed.

It is imperative that health authorities look very closely into what determines vaccination uptake by population group, and then establish tailored interventions at the community level to boost vaccine uptake.

Together with Member States, WHO/Europe has developed pragmatic tools and guidance to identify and resolve bottlenecks in immunization programmes, allowing countries to build on other countries' good practices. These tools are at every government's disposal.

Increasing vaccine production, sharing these doses equitably, and driving vaccine acceptance and demand are the 3 fundamental elements needed to

deliver on the promise that vaccination can move the European Region beyond the pandemic.

My final points concern children.

Their schools must be open.

School closures stall academic performance, increase the likelihood of children dropping out of education and affect children's mental health. Our children have suffered greatly over the past 20 months, especially those who were already vulnerable and or could not benefit from digital ways of teaching.

Unlike a year ago, we are now in a position to keep them safe.

As millions of children return to school, WHO/Europe and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) call for all necessary measures to be taken such that schools are open and remain open.

These include implementing a vaccination strategy targeted at teachers and school personnel, and to children above 12 as well, especially those with underlying conditions; improving the school environment through clean sanitation and hand hygiene, ventilation, smaller class sizes where possible, physical distancing, and masks, depending on the local risk assessment and regular testing of children and staff; and, above all, protecting children's mental and social well-being.

Today we are joined by Zhanerke Assetova, a language teacher in Kazakhstan, who understands these challenges first-hand. As we enter another school year, I am eager to hear how she intends to manage COVID-19 measures in her school and classroom.

In closing, I wish to thank Zhanerke and all the teachers around the world who have had to navigate challenging times, but who have continued to serve their communities and our future generations.

Thank you.