

Beat: News

COVID-19 Vaccine Access In Conflict Areas Remains Critical

Ambassadors Meet To Review Resolutions

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Peace and Security

Although safe and effective COVID-19 vaccinations are available, the pandemic is still far from over, and countries affected by conflict are in danger of being left behind, the UN Security Council heard on Monday.

Ambassadors met to review implementation of two resolutions: one on the Secretary-General's appeal for a global ceasefire during the crisis, and the other on cooperation to facilitate vaccine access.

Ted Chaiban, Global Lead Coordinator for COVID-19 Vaccine Country-Readiness and Delivery, highlighted the need for urgent action this year.

"The window of opportunity is gradually closing. We risk losing the momentum and failing on vaccine equity," he said, speaking from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

"We must therefore use every opportunity to bundle or integrate COVID-19 vaccination with other health and humanitarian interventions and leverage these investments for the longer-term strengthening of health systems."

Respect humanitarian law.

Although widespread vaccination is critical to ending the pandemic, it is not happening in conflict areas, Dr. Esperanza Martinez of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) told the Council.

"The good news is that, as the supply of vaccine doses grows, the potential to get jabs in arms grows too," she said.

The ICRC has called for international humanitarian law to be respected during conflict. Medical facilities and their personnel, as well as humanitarian workers, must be protected from attacks.

COVID-19 vaccination must also be integrated into a broader health strategy that includes greater investment in health systems.

Engage local communities

For Dr. Martinez, this is an opportune moment to see how COVID-19 vaccinations can be routinized and integrated with other health services that are prioritized during times of conflict.

Finally, local communities must also be involved in vaccination activities, something which also enhances the safety of frontline workers, she said.

Dr. Martinez warned how lack of engagement can undermine public trust in vaccinations, as happened in West Africa with Ebola and now in many countries during the pandemic.

"Even if communities can be reached, people will not accept being vaccinated if they don't trust those administering the vaccine, and they do not see other pressing priorities being addressed," she said.

Fighting vaccine hesitancy.

Misinformation around vaccines, including that they cause infertility in men and women, has contributed to vaccine hesitancy in South Sudan, said Dr. Emmanuel Ojwang, Health and Nutrition Coordinator with the international agency CARE in the country.

However, in the face of huge challenges – including food insecurity, flare-ups of intercommunal violence, flooding and a fragile health

system – the Government and partners were able to rollout COVID-19 vaccines.

Strategic investments in community education and mobilization of religious leaders were keys to busting myths and misinformation, he said.

Prioritize gender in rollouts.

Delivering vaccines to “the last mile” in remote and underserved communities, will require a scale-up in healthcare workers, training and infrastructure.

Furthermore, with women less likely to have access to health information and services, gender must be at the “centre” of the rollout if it is to be equitable and effective.

Dr. Ojwang urged the Council to ensure safe and unhindered humanitarian access to all people in need, and for COVID-19 vaccine costing models and budgets to reflect “real-world costs” of rolling them out to last-mile communities.

“Ensure NGOs, women-led organizations and frontline health workers have meaningful roles in COVID vaccine roll-out, not just in delivering services to the last mile - but in decision making about the response,” he recommended.

Safe access ‘elusive’ .

As the United Kingdom holds the rotating Security Council presidency this month, the meeting was chaired by Lord Tariq Ahmad of Wimbledon, the UK Minister of State whose portfolio includes the UN.

He said Resolution 2565, on global cooperation on vaccine access, must remain a top priority.

“What is clear is full, safe and unhindered humanitarian access, and the protection of health workers in line with International Humanitarian Law, remain vitally important, but sadly elusive,” he remarked.

Lord Ahmad said the Security Council can help ensure COVID-19 vaccination is prioritized by Governments in countries in conflict, in addition to supporting efforts to boost international cooperation.

Investment and obligation.

This year also represents perhaps the best opportunity so far to improve vaccination in countries on the Council’s agenda, according to Sarah bint Yousif Al Amiri of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Minister of State for Advanced Technology.

“The fair and equitable distribution of vaccines is both a strategic investment and a moral obligation. It is also achievable,” she said.

Therefore, it is important that the Council continues to underscore what she called “the security benefits” of vaccination.

Echoing previous speakers, Ms. Al Amiri also highlighted how improved humanitarian access enhances vaccination efforts, making conditions safer for health workers and the people they serve.

“The Council’s support for these tools – from ceasefires to days of tranquility to humanitarian notification systems – as appropriate in specific contexts, can make a difference in the rapid delivery and distribution of vaccines,” she said.

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