

The pandemic is getting worse, even when it seems like it's getting better

Ishaan Tharoor – *The Washington Post*, June 1, 2021

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In the United States, life is returning to normal. Restaurants and bars are filling up again, vacations are being booked and flights are selling out. At sporting events, maskless fans are hugging and cheering. Memorial Day weekend, the country's unofficial start to the summer, was celebrated with much more gusto and many more family barbecues than it was a year ago.

That's all for good reason: A majority of Americans have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, and daily new infections and deaths are at their lowest levels in almost a year. The pandemic is slowly receding from the daily lives of many Americans as businesses open up and local authorities ease restrictions. Britain, which on Tuesday [reported no new coronavirus-related deaths](#) for the first time since March 2020, can also see the [sunlit uplands](#) of a post-pandemic future.

"Covid-19 won't end with a bang or a parade," [wrote Devi Sridhar](#), chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh. "Throughout history, pandemics have ended when the disease ceases to dominate daily life and retreats into the background like other health challenges."

But the pandemic is hardly in retreat elsewhere. The emergence of more virulent variants of the virus in countries like Brazil and India and the slowness of vaccination efforts in many places outside the West have contributed to deadly new waves. Coronavirus case counts worldwide are [already higher in 2021](#) than they were in 2020. The death toll almost certainly will be.

Southeast Asia, once a bastion of resistance to the virus as it ravaged Western countries, is in the grip of a harrowing spike in infections. Cases in Thailand and Vietnam rose dramatically over the past month. [Malaysia](#) is now registering more new infections per million people than any medium- or large-size country in Asia, surpassing India, which remains a global hot spot. On Tuesday, the Malaysian government implemented a nationwide lockdown that will last for the next two weeks.

"The economy will certainly suffer. The people will suffer even more, those who live. Many are dying and will die," [wrote columnist Munir Majid](#) in the New Straits Times. "We are staring at the abyss."

In Africa, concerns are growing over the possible arrival of a new wave powered by a more transmissible variant of the virus, with the health systems in many countries at risk of being quickly subsumed by a surge of infections. A [recent study](#) found that the continent has the world's highest death rate of patients critically ill with covid-19, thanks to limited intensive care facilities and reserves of vital medical supplies like oxygen.

In parts of Latin America, the virus rages on, largely unabated. Peru, according to [its own government-adjusted data](#), now has the worst covid-19 mortality rate per capita in the world. The country is slated to stage a closely contested presidential runoff election this weekend.

Even in East Asia, where a handful of nations set the gold standard in preventing community spread, the virus is on the march. Taiwan has seen [an explosion of cases](#) over the past month. In Japan, which still intends to host the Summer Olympics, numerous areas including Tokyo remain under a state of emergency. It's a sign, [argue some public health experts](#), that the strict methods that kept places like Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore safer than their counterparts in the West for all of last year may not be sustainable in the long term.

For [a number of reasons](#), the vaccine rollouts in these countries have been slow, hampered by a lack of supply. In an interview earlier this year with Today's WorldView, Koji Tomita, Japan's ambassador in Washington, described his country and other East Asian states that initially managed to clamp down on community spread — but built up little herd immunity — as “prisoners of their own success.”

Public health advocates and international organizations recognize the main problem: The global gap in vaccinations. In the United States, there's already discussion of booster shots for the general public, while front-line medical workers in some developing countries have yet to even receive a first dose of a vaccine. In [a joint statement](#), the heads of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the World Health Organization laid out a \$50 billion plan for collective action that would accelerate vaccine distribution to poor and middle-income countries and expand and diversify production capacity throughout the world.

“Inequitable vaccine distribution is leaving millions of people vulnerable to the virus while allowing deadly variants to emerge and ricochet back across the world,” they wrote in [an op-ed published in The Washington Post](#). “As [variants](#) spread, even countries with advanced vaccination programs have been forced to reimpose stricter public health measures and travel restrictions. The ongoing pandemic is deepening divergence in economic fortunes, with negative consequences for all.”

“It would be a monumental error for any country to think the danger has passed,” WHO Director General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said Monday at the close of the World Health Assembly. He warned that insufficient global coordination at present means that “we will still face the same vulnerabilities that allowed a small outbreak to become a global pandemic.”

Attention now moves to this month's meeting of the Group of Seven nations, where leaders of these traditional world powers are expected to step up and deliver on the global need for vaccines. The Biden administration also opted to support negotiations at the WTO over a possible waiver of international property protections on [coronavirus](#) vaccines, which could lead to more countries being able to produce them. But the waiver is still [opposed by major European governments](#), while advocates contend that these discussions should have taken place at [a much earlier stage in the pandemic](#).

Now, time is of the essence, as more transmissible variants appear to be burning rapidly through societies without much immunological protection. “It is, of course, understandable that every nation wants to vaccinate its own first, but a country with high levels of vaccination, especially among its more vulnerable populations, can hold things off, especially if they also had big outbreaks before,”

[wrote Zeynep Tufekci](#) in the New York Times, arguing that wealthier nations like the United States should be actively prioritizing providing for other countries over its own population. “In addition, excess [stockpiles](#) can go where they are needed without even slowing down existing vaccination programs.”

Anthony S. Fauci, the leading infectious-disease expert in the United States, appeared to recognize the broader threat. “As long as there is some degree of activity throughout the world, there’s always a danger of variants emerging and diminishing somewhat the effectiveness of our vaccines,” [he told the Guardian](#).