

Iranian weapons shipments prolonging the war in Yemen, US envoy says

Author:

Wed, 2022-01-12 23:37

NEW YORK: The Houthi offensive in Marib is fueled by “the illegal flow of weapons” to the group from Iran, Linda Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador to the UN, said on Wednesday.

She told fellow members of the Security Council that “while we encourage peace, we must not be afraid to call out actions that obstruct it,” and that the escalation of violence by the Houthis “undermines the cause of peace.”

She added: “Just last month, the US Navy seized upwards of 1,400 assault rifles (and) 226,000 rounds of ammunition from a vessel originating from Iran.

“This ship was on a route historically used to illegally smuggle weapons to the Houthis. The smuggling of arms from Iran to the Houthis represents a flagrant violation of the UN’s targeted arms embargo and is yet another example of how Iran’s destabilizing activity is prolonging the war in Yemen.”

Her comments came as council members condemned the continued Houthi aggression, the resultant deaths and displacements, the militia’s attacks on targets in Saudi Arabia, and its ongoing “acts of piracy” that endanger maritime security.

In his briefing to the council on the latest developments in the conflict Hans Grundberg, the UN’s special envoy for Yemen, reiterated that no long-term solution is “to be found on the battlefield,” and that the “warring parties can, should and, indeed, must talk even if they are not ready to put down their arms.”

He described the recent military escalations as being “among the worst we have seen in Yemen for years, and which are taking an increasing toll on civilian lives.”

He said the Houthis remain determined to continue their assault on Marib and that attacks on Saudi Arabia have also increased. He called on all parties involved in the conflict to “respect and uphold their obligations under international humanitarian law, which include protecting civilians and preserving the civilian character of public infrastructure.”

As he lamented what appears to be a new cycle of escalation of violence, “with predictable, devastating implications for civilians and for the immediate prospects of peace,” Grundberg also expressed concern “that battles could intensify along other fronts.”

In particular he highlighted the recent seizure by the Houthis of a UAE-registered cargo ship, and the continued detention of UN staff members in

Sanaa and Marib, and called on the Houthis to grant the UN immediate access to its detained staff.

The increase in the tempo of the war has also tightened already severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods within the country, Grundberg said. The use of Hodeidah port for military purposes is "[worrying](#)," he added, given that it is a lifeline for many Yemenis.

Despite these challenging developments on the ground, the envoy said that peace efforts continue and spoke of plans to enhance his consultations with all parties.

"Yemen's war, like many, is littered with missed opportunities driven in part by combatants oscillating between feeling too weak to accept or too strong to settle for compromise.

"Genuine political will, responsible leadership and adherence to the interests of the entire population is needed to sustainably put Yemen on a different trajectory."

Ramesh Rajasingham, the UN's deputy emergency relief coordinator, told the Security Council that 15,000 people were displaced in the past month during fierce clashes in Al-Jawf, Marib and Shabwah. He said that 358 civilians were killed or injured, "a figure that is tied for the highest in three years."

He reiterated the importance of "safe, predictable passage into and out of Yemen," and pointed to the suspension by the Houthis in December of humanitarian flights through Sanaa airport as the kind of disruption that "risks undermining the aid operation and staff safety." He called on the Houthis to avoid unilateral flight cancellations.

Lana Nusseibeh, the permanent representative of the UAE to the UN, said progress in Yemen will not be possible until the Houthis cease hostilities and end their repeated violations carried out against the Yemeni people.

"The Houthis must understand that the only solution is a political (one), free of any hegemonic aspirations," she said as she condemned the group's drone and ballistic missile attacks against targets in Saudi Arabia as a "flagrant violation of international law."

In addition to condemning Iran for supplying weapons to the Houthis, Thomas-Greenfield, the US ambassador, told her fellow council members: "The Houthis' pattern is punctuated by their continued engagement in violence, rape and other forms of sexual violence, arbitrary detentions (and) targeted killings, including female politicians and professionals. This is unconscionable.

"We unequivocally condemn all human rights abuses and violations, by all parties. We remain strongly committed to promoting accountability for human rights violations and abuses in Yemen."

She added that despite repeated condemnation by the Security Council the Houthis continue to occupy the shuttered US embassy compound, and to detain and harass the Yemeni staff who work there.

“The Houthis must immediately release, unharmed, all of our Yemeni employees, vacate the former US embassy compound, return seized US property and cease their threats against our employees and their families,” Thomas-Greenfield said.

She also condemned the seizure by the Houthis of the civilian Emirati ship Rwabee and called for the immediate release of the ship and its crew.



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UN envoy to Yemen: Militarization of Hodeidah ports worrying KSrelief chief:
Saudi Arabia ranks third globally in providing humanitarian assistance around the world

US asks Israel for clarification over death of citizen in West Bank

Wed, 2022-01-12 23:09

LONDON: The US State Department confirmed on Wednesday that an 80-year-old Palestinian-American man found dead in the West Bank was a US citizen. Omar Abdalmajeed As'ad was found earlier on Wednesday after being detained and handcuffed during an Israeli raid on an occupied West Bank village, Palestinian officials and relatives said.

The State Department said had been in touch with the Israeli government for clarification over the death.

His body was found in Jiljilya in the early morning with a plastic zip-tie still around one wrist.

The Israeli military said it had carried out an overnight operation in the village, and that a Palestinian was "apprehended after resisting a check." It said he was alive when the soldiers released him.

"The Military Police Criminal Investigation Division is reviewing the incident, at the end of which the findings will be transferred to the Military General Advocate Corps," it said in a statement.

As'ad was a former Milwaukee, Wisconsin, resident who lived in the United States for decades and returned to the West Bank 10 years ago, his brother told Reuters.

State Department spokesperson Ned Price told reporters: "We support a thorough investigation into the circumstances." He said the State Department had expressed its condolences to the family and offered to provide consular assistance.



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80-year-old found dead after Israel West Bank raid: PalestiniansIsrael weighs extending detention of sick Palestinian teen

[Will 2022 bring COVID-19 herd immunity or more lockdowns and travel bans?](#)

Tue, 2022-01-11 23:07

DUBAI: For many, New Year's Eve festivities were marred by concerns over the latest COVID-19 variant, omicron, and the resulting stresses of PCR tests, flight cancellations and uncertainty over possible lockdowns.

One popular meme that did the rounds over the holidays captured the pervasive sense of déjà vu with the punchline: "The year 2022 is pronounced 2020 too," hinting at a return to the stringent restrictions of two years ago.

The words quickly proved prophetic. Several countries have implemented partial and even full lockdowns after omicron sent the number of coronavirus infections to record highs, while others have tightened restrictions on indoor gatherings and travel.

As a result, the commercial aviation sector has taken another financial hit, with more than 8,000 flights canceled worldwide. Events, concerts and social gatherings planned to mark the new year were also disrupted.

CORONAVIRUS VARIANT OMICRON

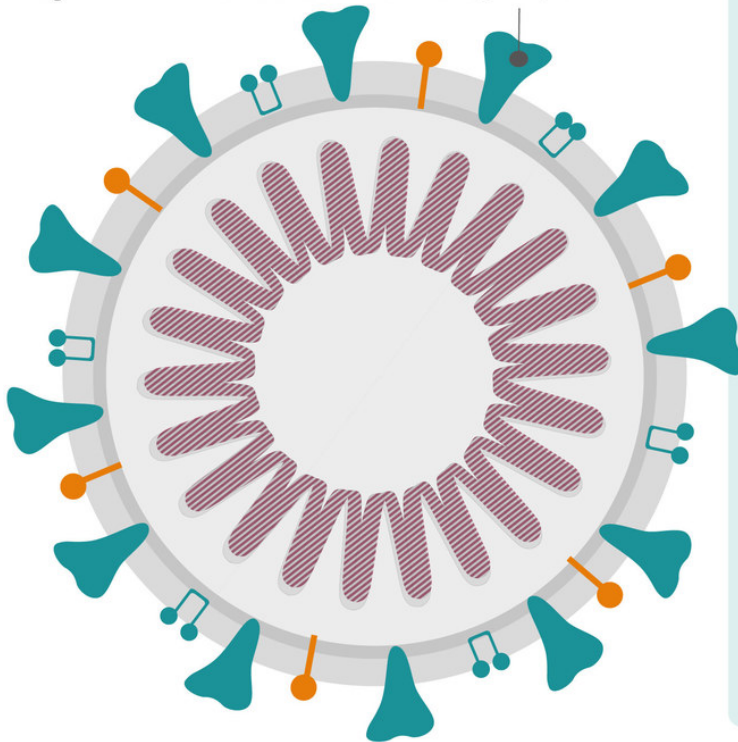
B.1.1.529 is causing havoc across the world

Omicron

First record:
Nov. 2021

Announced in:
South Africa

Key mutations: 32 found on the spike protein



Main concerns

- A preliminary study in South Africa suggested the variant is **3 times more likely to cause reinfections** compared to the delta or beta strains
- WHO scientists have said early data showed omicron **does not cause more severe symptoms** than other variants
- **Significant reduction in vaccine effectiveness:** ECDC
- Even in the case of lower infection/disease severity ... **a steep, exponential increase in cases ... will result in a growing number of cases with severe disease:** ECDC
- Probably **the most significant threat we've had** since the start of the pandemic: Jenny Harries, CEO UK Health Security Agency

High number of mutations in regions of the spike that antibodies recognize, potentially dampening immunity

Source: Nature/WHO/Moderna/ECDC/UKHSA

ARAB NEWS

Chaos created by the newly dominant variant, and news of potentially more transmissible, vaccine-resistant strains appearing in France, Israel and Cyprus, has many people wondering whether it is time to surrender to the idea of herd immunity.

"Herd immunity, if it exists, can be achieved in two ways. One, through widespread infection, or two, through widespread vaccination," Dr. Richard Kennedy, co-director of the Mayo Clinic's Vaccine Research Group, told Arab News.

Wary of imposing further restrictions and undermining economic recovery, several governments are showing tolerance for high rates of infection, perhaps in the hope of achieving herd immunity. But as the well-worn phrase puts it, hope is not a strategy.

"Relying on widespread infection is an incredibly bad idea," Kennedy said. "Infection causes symptomatic disease, hospitalization, death and leads to more variants. In fact, the only time variants can arise is when someone is infected."



Dr. Richard Kennedy. (Supplied)

He added: “The combined cost in terms of human lives, human suffering and societal disruption is simply not worth it. Especially when this route also has a greater chance of prolonging the pandemic or making it worse, depending on the characteristics of the variants that will inevitably arise.”

Indeed, as more of the world develops greater immunity, either through infection or vaccination, Kennedy says, there will be more pressure on the virus to mutate, with no guarantees that future variants will be less severe.

“This virus is a microscopic parasite that needs human cells to survive and reproduce,” he said. “It doesn’t have feelings or emotions. It doesn’t care if you live or die once infected. It simply does what it is genetically programmed to do.”

Nevertheless, there is a selective advantage for milder variants to become dominant. If a viral strain kills a patient quickly, the time window for it to transmit to other hosts may be too brief, thereby threatening its own survival.

By contrast, slow-burners such as omicron “do an excellent job of infecting someone, reproducing and spreading to new victims,” Kennedy said.

Experts say governments should not be complacent about omicron. The World Health Organization has given warning that it is wrong to describe the variant as “mild” as it is still “hospitalizing people and killing them.”

Although the virus is not under any particular pressure to become more or less aggressive right now, there certainly seems to be an incentive for new variants to be more transmissible – as seen with omicron.

Top 10 Countries With the Most Number of COVID-19 Cases

Country	Cases	Deaths	Region
United States	63,141,538	863,484	North America
India	36,060,902	484,359	Asia
Brazil	22,629,460	620,238	South America
United Kingdom	14,732,594	150,609	Europe
France	12,573,263	126,059	Europe
Russia	10,684,204	317,687	Europe
Turkey	10,117,954	83,980	Asia
Italy	7,774,863	139,559	Europe
Germany	7,631,453	115,274	Europe
Spain	7,592,242	90,383	Europe

Source: Worldometer

Caption

The US reported 1.35 million new coronavirus infections on Monday, the highest daily total for any country in the world. The record in new cases came the same day as the country saw the number of hospitalized COVID-19 patients hit an all-time high.

In Saudi Arabia, daily cases more than doubled in just two days in the first week of January, and pushing authorities to again enforce mask wearing in public spaces and reimpose preventive measures at the Great Mosque of Makkah for Umrah pilgrims.

Infections in the UAE have risen steadily since early December, when case numbers were as low as 50 per day. The number of daily positive cases (in a

population of 10 million) is now regularly crossing the 2,500 mark, placing pressure on testing centers and prompting more people to seek booster jobs.

Elsewhere in the Gulf, the number of daily COVID-19 cases has crossed the 1,000 threshold in Qatar, Bahrain and Kuwait. Qatar has reintroduced remote learning at schools and colleges, while a ban on public events has been imposed in Kuwait.

Even as omicron infections explode regionwide, Dr. Abdullah Algaissi, a virologist and assistant professor at Saudi Arabia's Jazan University College of Applied Medical Sciences, is confident that GCC countries have efficient systems in place to resist emerging coronavirus strains.

All GCC countries are close to, or have passed, the 70 percent vaccination mark, thereby lowering the susceptibility rate of their populations to severe illness caused by the virus, he said.



Dr. Abdullah Algaissi. (Supplied)

"GCC governments have controlled three waves of COVID-19 better than other regions, and it will be the same with omicron," Algaissi told Arab News.

"We can expect to see the number of cases increase, and eventually we might see a high number of deaths, but the overall effect of omicron will be lower in the GCC than in other countries."

Algaissi is confident the omicron wave will be short-lived and that the worst of the pandemic is over.

"My theory is that it will be downgraded to an endemic disease, meaning the disease becomes less of a concern because fewer people will be susceptible to it and we will have the tools to deal with it," he said.

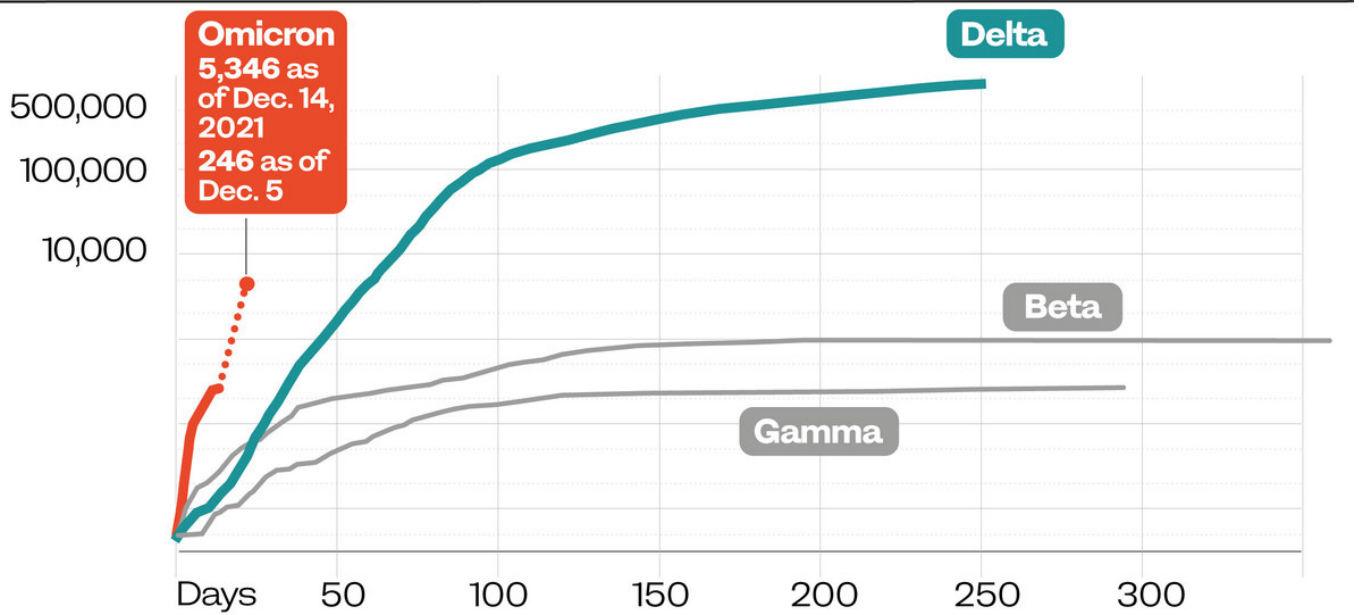
The distribution of a "universal COVID-19 vaccine" – now in the testing phase – will be critical to eliminating all variants, thereby hastening the transition from pandemic to epidemic, Algaissi said.

"We can predict certain mutations in the virus, and in a few years we may

have a vaccine that can protect us from any variant that may emerge in the future, similar to the universal flu vaccine,” he said.

VARIANT TRANSMISSIONS COMPARED

UK cumulative cases, indexed by days since 5th reported cases



Situation as of Dec. 5, 2021

Source : UK Health Security Agency

ARAB NEWS

Algaissi does not rule out a new vaccine-resistant strain emerging from populations with low vaccination rates, resulting in a fifth wave. However, he thinks any subsequent COVID-19 wave will be brief.

Kennedy, of the Mayo Clinic, is less sanguine about the future, cautioning that the world may struggle to fend off the novel coronavirus and its assorted mutations for years to come.

“The human race had a window of opportunity to contain and eradicate this virus. That window is rapidly closing if it is not closed already. We now have to find a way to live with the constant presence of SARS-CoV-2,” he said, using the scientific name for the novel coronavirus.

While the future remains uncertain, Kennedy predicts progress through new vaccines and antivirals, variant-specific vaccines and better treatment options, but also expects major setbacks.

“Because of human nature, most countries have had disjointed, intermittent and rapidly changing responses. This has reduced the effectiveness of these control measures.”



Progress through new vaccines and antivirals offers hope amid uncertainties over the raging pandemic. (AFP)

In practical terms, what this means is that with the resumption of international travel, a country with a high vaccination rate surrounded by neighbors with low vaccination rates is still going to experience problems. Which is why improvements in the distribution of vaccines to the developing world will be paramount.

“This is a global issue that requires a global solution,” said Kennedy. “When we talk about herd immunity, we must interpret that to mean global herd immunity. Nothing short of that will end the pandemic.”

However, he sees a future in which large segments of the population, far from rising to this challenge, continue “to ignore logic, facts and common sense.”

Kennedy said politics would continue to drive each countries’ response, and striking a stark cautionary note, added: “We will see individual countries cobbling together a unique pandemic response that is driven in part by facts and science and in part by emotion and public perception.”



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US reports 1.35 million COVID-19 cases in a day, shattering global record
UAE warns against mocking COVID-19 safety measures on social media

[In Israel, omicron, confusion drive 'real panic' for tests](#)

Author:

Wed, 2022-01-12 00:49

TEL AVIV: Aviran Yael fetched rapid antigen kits from a pharmacy in Tel Aviv's busy center, placed them in the light blue bag strapped to the back of his motorbike and headed off to deliver them.

With that, Yael on Monday joined a growing army of couriers toting Wolt delivery boxes around Israel, a sight that has become ubiquitous in the three years since the Finnish company began operating here.

The payload in the blue boxes changed when the Israeli government last week authorized more at-home testing to take the burden off of testing centers.

Almost immediately, as the omicron coronavirus variant set infection records, rapid antigen tests became the platform's most in-demand product – even more than food, its core delivery business, officials said.

By Monday, as Wolt opened a modern headquarters in a blue building in Tel Aviv, someone was ordering an antigen test every three seconds – a reflection of widespread public anxiety and confusion over the government's constantly changing pandemic policies.

"There's real panic for these tests," said Yael.

Even in relatively wealthy, small Israel, the government and the governed are struggling with the stunning surge of omicron as it rips around the globe, raising anxiety in a place already known for tension. Since the variant emerged in South Africa in November, the government has closed and reopened the airport, changed testing policies, tightened and loosened quarantine requirements and confused people about whether and how to send their kids to school.

In the latest twist, Foreign Minister Yair Lapid announced late Monday that he had tested positive for the coronavirus, making him the most senior

Israeli official to contract COVID-19.

"I am confirmed with corona," he wrote on Twitter. "I feel excellent because I am vaccinated. Get vaccinated, wear a mask and we will be through this together."

With his government facing sagging public support, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett warned this week that between 2 million and 4 million people among Israel's population of 9.4 million are expected to be infected by the variant.

On Monday, Israel reported 21,514 new cases, another all-time high. The number of serious cases crept up to 222, a figure that remains well below the highs experienced during previous waves of the coronavirus. Bennett has said preventing serious illness and hospitalizations is his main concern.

Testing has skyrocketed nationally, another sign of the concern about the variant's spread.

Coronavirus testing reached a peak for the current wave, with more than 342,141 PCR and antigen tests conducted Sunday, according to Health Ministry figures.

That's the second highest single-day figure behind a spike of more than 414,000 in late August, as Israel was rolling out its booster shots.

"It is hard to control a virus that spreads four times as fast as what we've known in the past," Sharon Alroy-Preis, the Health Ministry's top public health official, said on Channel 13.



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Relying on more home COVID-19 tests, Israel looks to lower costsIsrael weighs extending detention of sick Palestinian teen

[Cross-border Syria aid gets 6-month extension sans new UN vote](#)

Wed, 2022-01-12 00:10

NEW YORK: Cross-border humanitarian aid to northwest Syria – not green-lit by Damascus – remains “essential,” the UN said, as the measure was de facto extended for six months without a new Security Council vote.

The council had previously renewed the authorization allowing aid into rebel-held areas in the country’s northwest “for a period of six months ... until 10 January 2022,” through the crossing at Bab Al-Hawa on the Syrian border with Turkey.

The text provided for “an extension of an additional six months, that is, until 10 July 2022,” subject to a report by the UN secretary-general.

For the West, the renewal to July had been interpreted as automatic, while Russia had raised the possibility of requesting a new Security Council vote, though it has not taken that step.

In his December report, UN chief Antonio Guterres had stressed the impossibility of replacing at this stage the cross-border mechanism for one that crossed front lines from Damascus. Moscow favors this method as recognition of the Syrian government’s sovereignty over the whole country.



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Gaps remain in Syrian regime response to chemical weapon concerns, UN
hears Syrians seek word of loved ones missing in regime jails