

WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the Mission briefing on COVID- 19 - 16 April 2020

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Excellencies, colleagues, and friends,

Good morning.

Almost 2 million cases of COVID-19 have now been reported to WHO from around the world, and more than 123,000 deaths.

That's more than 40,000 more deaths since I spoke to you last week.

This is an alarming and tragic increase.

At the same time, we're seeing encouraging signs in some countries that have been the epicenter of the pandemic.

As you know, some countries are now considering lifting social and economic restrictions.

This is something we all want - but it must be done extremely carefully.

If done too quickly, we risk a resurgence that could be even worse than our present situation.

Our new strategy update outlines six factors for countries as they consider lifting restrictions.

First, that transmission is controlled;

Second, that health system capacities are in place to detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact;

Third, that outbreak risks are minimized in special settings like health facilities and nursing homes;

Fourth, that preventive measures are in place in workplaces, schools and other places where it's essential for people to go;

Fifth, that importation risks can be managed;

And sixth, that communities are fully educated, engaged and empowered to adjust to the "new norm".

At the same time, the virus is moving into countries and communities where many people live in overcrowded conditions, and physical distancing is nearly impossible.

COVID-19 magnifies our existing health inequalities. Governments must consider that for some countries and communities, stay-at-home orders may not be practical, and may even cause unintended harm.

Millions of people around the world must work every day to put food on the table. They cannot stay at home for long periods of time without assistance.

We are concerned by some reports in the media about violence erupting as a result of physical distancing restrictions.

We're also concerned by reports of an increasing trend in domestic violence linked to the stay-at-home measures. This must be an area of focus for all countries.

Meanwhile, schools have closed for an estimated 1.4 billion children. This has halted their education, opened some to increased risk of abuse, and deprived many children of their primary source of nutrition and health care.

The pandemic is also disrupting the provision of essential health services and hampering our fight against other priority diseases.

Vaccination campaigns for polio have already been put on hold, and other vaccination programs are at risk because of border closures and disruptions to travel.

Since Friday there have been four new cases of Ebola in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, after 54 days without a new case.

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I would like to use this opportunity, taking you back to COVID, to make a few remarks about wet markets.

Reports in some media on WHO's view on the re-opening of wet markets in China are not correct.

The World Health Organization's position remains that all sectors affected by COVID-19—including food markets—in China and around the world need to ensure strong regulatory systems, high standards of cleanliness, hygiene and safety once they are in a position to gradually resume normal activities.

WHO maintains that governments should rigorously enforce bans on the sale of wildlife. And they must enforce food safety and hygiene regulations to ensure that food that is sold in markets is safe.

WHO has provided guidance and support to countries on safe and healthy markets, including guidance for food businesses on COVID-19 and on food safety and live markets.

WHO has been working closely with the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) since the start of the COVID-19 outbreak, to prevent zoonotic diseases in all concerned sectors.

WHO is committed to working with all countries to find tailored solutions to stop transmission, while ensuring essential health services continue and mitigating the social and economic impacts of the pandemic.

Only by working together will we bring this pandemic under control.

The work has to happen not only at the international and national level, but also at the community level.

I've been seeing some good news stories.

Earlier this week I had the honour of speaking to leaders from the ASEAN-plus-three countries.

As a result of their experience with SARS and avian influenza, these countries have put in

place measures and systems that are now helping them to detect and respond to COVID-19.

In Africa, people are mobilizing.

Long experience with managing diseases like HIV and tuberculosis means that some countries already have the expertise, laboratory infrastructure, and networks of community health workers that will be critical in containing COVID-19.

There are also reports of community groups in poor neighborhoods setting up hand-washing stations and distributing soap, bleach and hand sanitizer, and actively combatting misinformation.

Other countries are working on proactive screening, putting in hand washing stations at transport hubs, and creating call centres and celebrity campaigns to raise awareness.

Last week, we launched the United Nations Supply Chain Task Force, with the World Food Programme and other partners inside and outside the UN.

This emergency supply chain is designed to cover more than 30% of the world's needs in the acute phase of the pandemic.

It will have hubs in eight countries and will deploy sixteen 747s and medium-sized cargo aircraft, plus passenger planes.

Every month we will be shipping millions of supplies, including personal protective gear, respirators, lab equipment and oxygen, as well as medical and technical staff.

The first Solidarity Flight took off on Tuesday, and more will follow.

Today I'm pleased to welcome Amer Daoudi, the Director of Logistics and Food Procurement at the World Food Programme.

We're working with my brother David Beasley very closely. Thank you, Amer, and thank you to the World Food Programme for your support and partnership.

The WFP estimates it will need approximately US\$280 million, simply to cover the costs of storing and moving supplies. The costs of procuring supplies will be much greater.

We urge donors to support this vitally important system and the World Food Programme.

We're all in this together. And we will only succeed together.

I thank you.

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