

WHO chief calls COVID-19 'enemy against humanity'

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The head of the World Health Organization on Wednesday called the new coronavirus an "enemy against humanity", as the number of people infected in the pandemic soared past 200,000.

Worldwide fatalities topped 8,000 and more deaths have now been recorded in Europe, the new virus epicentre, than in Asia since the outbreak first emerged in China in December.

"This coronavirus is presenting us with an unprecedented threat," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told journalists in a virtual news conference.

He stressed the need for countries everywhere to "come together as one against a common enemy: an enemy against humanity."

Sub-Saharan Africa has only recorded 233 cases and four deaths, making it the least affected region.

But Tedros warned the situation could quickly shift.

"In other countries, we have seen how the virus actually accelerates after a certain tipping point, so the best advice for Africa is to prepare for the worst, and prepare today," he said.

"Africa should wake up."

'Solidarity trial'

Tedros said the WHO was speaking daily with decision-makers worldwide "to help them prepare and prioritise."

"Don't assume your community won't be affected. Prepare as if it will be," he said.

The WHO has called for every single suspected case to be tested.

In countries where that was not possible due to soaring numbers of infections, Tedros insisted there were measures to reduce the burden on healthcare systems and make epidemics more "manageable".

He urged states to introduce physical distancing measures, including cancelling sporting events, concerts and other large gatherings, to slow

down transmission.

But Tedros added that the only way to suppress and control epidemics of the virus was for countries to "isolate, test, treat and trace."

If countries fail to do that, he said, "transmission chains can continue at a low level, then resurge once physical distancing measures are lifted."

Tedros hailed that the first vaccine trial had already begun just two months after China shared the genetic sequence of the virus, calling it "an incredible achievement."

He also said WHO was launching a "solidarity trial" of five proposed treatments for the virus across 10 countries to figure out which was most effective.

But an actual roll-out of a vaccine remains far off.

Tedros called on all countries to use a "comprehensive approach, with the aim of slowing down transmission and flattening the curve.

"This approach is saving lives and buying time for the development of vaccines and treatments."

Not just the elderly

Michael Ryan, who heads WHO's emergencies programme, cautioned against downplaying the danger of COVID-19 for younger people.

"This isn't just a disease of the elderly," he said, stressing that "a significant number of otherwise healthy adults can develop a more serious form of the disease."

He called for the close observations of "even the mild cases for any signs of clinical progression towards a more serious disease."

Maria Van Kerkhove, who heads the WHO's emerging diseases unit, stressed that while children appear to be less affected, they too risked becoming seriously ill. One child had died in China, she noted.

"We need to prepare for the possibility that children can also experience severe disease," she said.

Asked about large variations in death rates being recorded in Europe, Ryan said there were several explanations.

Germany, which has so far recorded 8,198 cases but just 12 deaths, has taken a very aggressive approach to testing he said, suggesting "they may be detecting more mild cases as a proportion of all cases."

Italy, which has recorded nearly 3,000 deaths out of more than 35,700 cases, is meanwhile further advanced in the evolution of the outbreak, he said.

At the same time, Italy's health system has been overwhelmed, with more than 1,200 intensive care patients at one point in the north of the country.

"It is an astonishing number, and the fact that they are saving so many is a miracle in itself," Ryan said.

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