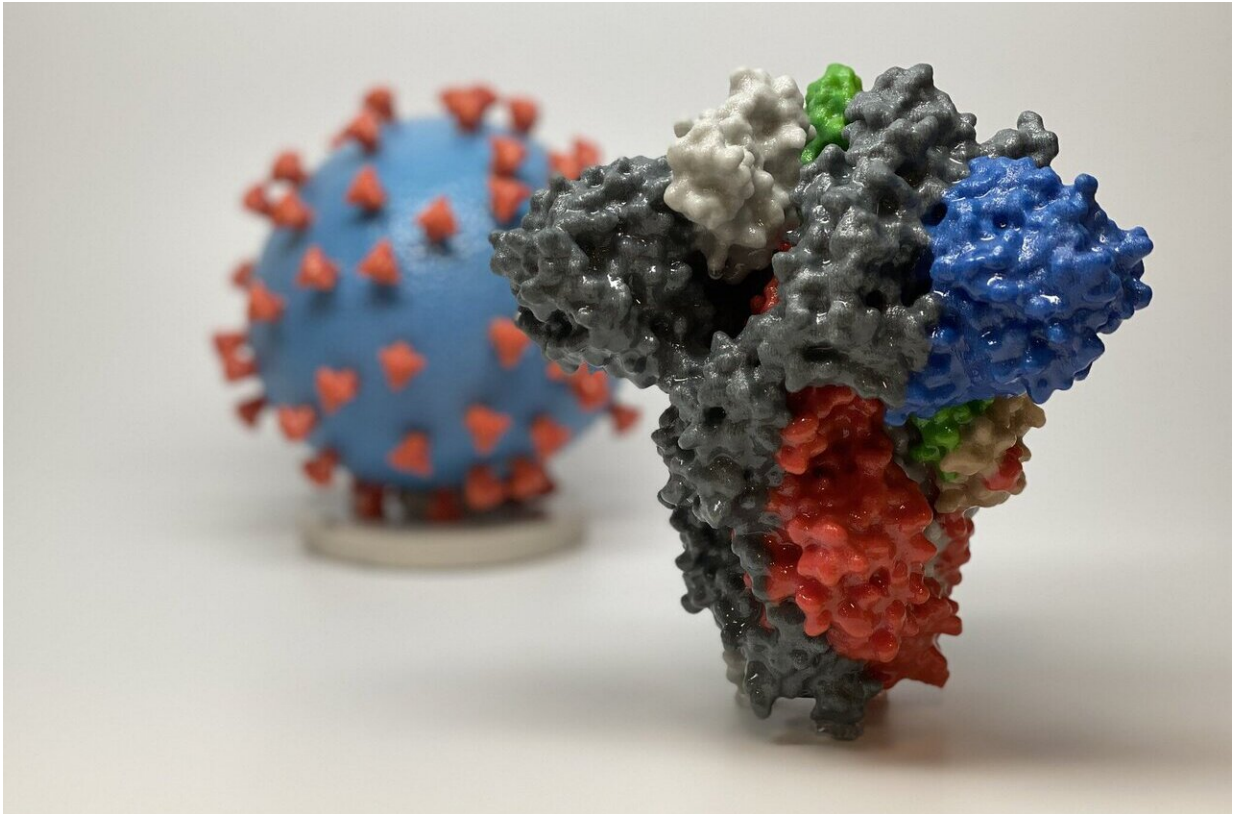


Virus will be with us for a long time: WHO

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3D print of a spike protein of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19—in front of a 3D print of a SARS-CoV-2 virus particle. The spike protein (foreground) enables the virus to enter and infect human cells. On the virus model, the virus surface (blue) is covered with spike proteins (red) that enable the virus to enter and infect human cells. Credit: NIH

COVID-19 will stalk the planet for a long time to come, the World

Health Organization said Wednesday, warning that most countries were still in the early stages of tackling the pandemic.

WHO boss Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said some countries that thought they had the new coronavirus under control were witnessing a resurgence in cases, while there were troubling upward trends in Africa and the Americas.

In the face of criticism, he also insisted that the UN health agency had declared a global emergency in good time for countries to prepare and plan their response.

The WHO has been blasted by the United States for its handling of the pandemic but Tedros brushed off calls for him to resign.

"Most countries are still in the early stages of their epidemics. And some that were affected early in the pandemic are now starting to see a resurgence in cases," he told a virtual press conference in Geneva.

"Make no mistake: we have a long way to go. This virus will be with us for a long time."

He said most of the epidemics in western Europe appeared to be stable or declining.

However, "although numbers are low, we see worrying upward trends in Africa, Central and South America, and eastern Europe," he said.

Question of timing

The global death toll has passed 175,000, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP, while more than 2.5 million declared cases have been registered since the epidemic first emerged in China in

December.

The United States has accused the WHO of sounding the alarm too late, being too soft on Beijing and even having covered up the outbreak.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo went on the attack on Wednesday, saying that countries had a duty to report potential international public health emergencies to the WHO within 24 hours.

"We strongly believe that the Chinese Communist Party did not report the outbreak of a new coronavirus in a timely fashion," he said.

Pompeo added that Tedros had the power to go public if a member state was not following the rules, "and that didn't happen in this case either".

Tedros said that the highest formal alert the WHO could trigger was declaring a global health emergency, which it did on January 30, when, outside China, there were 82 confirmed cases and no deaths.

"Looking back, I think we declared the emergency at the right time and when the world had enough time to respond.

"That was enough to cut it from the bud."

Lockdown protests 'won't help'

The WHO—which has no powers to sanction member states—qualified the outbreak as a pandemic on March 11, which triggered a wave of restrictive measures in several countries around the world.

Asked about calls for his resignation from within the United States, Tedros said: "I will continue to work day and night because this is a blessed work and responsibility: saving lives."

Tedros said the virus remained extremely dangerous.

"Early evidence suggests most of the world's population remains susceptible," he said, adding: "one of the greatest dangers we face now is complacency", as people grow fed up of being confined to their homes.

But with months to go before a viable vaccine can be rolled out, more than half of humanity remains under some form of lockdown.

While anti-confinement protests have popped up in countries including the United States and Brazil, Tedros said such mass gatherings "will not help—it will only fuel the outbreak".

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said that when governments asked citizens, on trust, to shut down their lives and stay at home, it would only work if the public believed their leaders genuinely had a plan.

Ryan said the WHO looked forward to doing a thorough investigation in China to try to pin down the animal origins of the disease.

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