

WHO chief says priority to prevent sexual exploitation

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The WHO chief told member states Wednesday that he was fully committed to reforms needed to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse by staff, acknowledging more needed to be done.

The World Health Organization has been under intense pressure to make far-reaching changes following revelations in 2020 of widespread sexual [abuse](#) by humanitarian workers in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

"Things are changing," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told country representatives gathered for the UN health agency's main annual assembly.

Speaking a day after he was re-elected to a second five-year term, Tedros acknowledged that "it is not enough. We're just starting."

Tedros's first term was marred by horrifying revelations of rape and other [sexual abuse](#) by humanitarian workers as the WHO and other organisations responded to the 2018-2020 Ebola outbreak in the DRC.

An independent commission of enquiry found in a devastating report last year that 21 WHO employees were among humanitarians who committed abuses against dozens of people.

WHO's main donor countries subsequently demanded the UN agency speed up and broaden reforms.

The WHO chief, who described the commission's findings as "horrifying", apologised to the victims and presented an action plan for overhauling the organisation's prevention and response to such cases.

'Zero tolerance'

On Wednesday, he stressed that the organisation was committed to rectifying the situation, and that it was a "daily issue" addressed by management.

Tedros said he himself presided over a weekly meeting of all divisions involved in "monitoring our progress based on the plan of action."

"We're on the same page on zero tolerance," he insisted, stressing that there was a "focus on prevention, focus on [cultural change](#), focus on mindset change, focus on victims."

He also said efforts were underway to speed up investigations into complaints, which in the past have sometimes taken five years or longer.

The message had been made clear, he said, that "justice delayed is justice denied."

Tedros said work was underway to clear the backlog of cases, and that there was now a 120-day-deadline to complete probes.

Some investigations might take longer, he conceded, but in such cases, "there should be a good reason and rationale," pledging both transparency and accountability.

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