

WHO says China's zero-Covid strategy unsustainable

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Image of the ultrastructural morphology exhibited by the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Credit: CDC

China's flagship zero-COVID strategy to defeat the pandemic is unsustainable, the World Health Organization said Tuesday, adding that it had told Beijing so and called for a policy shift.

China has imposed draconian measures, trapping most of Shanghai's 25 million people at home for weeks as the country combats its worst outbreak since the pandemic began.

The Shanghai lockdown has caused outrage and rare protest in the last major economy still glued to a zero-COVID policy, while movement in the capital Beijing has been slowly restricted.

"When we talk about the zero-COVID strategy, we don't think that it's sustainable, considering the behaviour of the virus now and what we anticipate in the future," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a press conference.

"We have discussed about this issue with Chinese experts and we indicated that the approach will not be sustainable.

"Transiting into another strategy will be very important."

There is a pressing political dynamic to China's virus response, with President Xi Jinping pegging the legitimacy of his leadership on protecting Chinese lives from COVID.

Xi has doubled down on the zero-COVID approach, despite mounting public frustration.

Rights, society and economy

Shanghai is China's economic dynamo and its biggest city. The zero-COVID policy has winded an economy which just months ago had been bouncing back from the pandemic.

"We need to balance the control measures against the impact they have on society, the impact they have on the economy, and that's not always an easy calibration," said WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan.

He said any measures to combat the COVID-19 pandemic should show "due respect to individual and human rights".

Calling for "dynamic, adjustable and agile policies", Ryan said early responses to the crisis in many countries showed that a lack of adaptability "resulted in a lot of harm".

He reflected on how the world's most populous nation had had relatively very few deaths officially ascribed to COVID, and therefore had "something to protect".

Given the rapid rise in deaths since February-March, "any government in that situation will take action to try and combat that", he told reporters.

Tedros has been discussing adjusting according to the circumstances to find an exit strategy, "in depth and in detail with Chinese colleagues", Ryan said.

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's technical lead on COVID-19, said that worldwide, it was impossible to stop all transmission of the virus.

"Our goal, at a global level, is not to find all cases and stop all transmissions. It's really not possible at this present time," she said.

"But what we need to do is drive transmission down because the virus is

circulating at such an intense level."

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