

WHO sees hope despite looming 750,000 virus death toll

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The World Health Organization insisted Monday there was still hope of conquering the coronavirus pandemic despite the suffering behind the looming landmarks of 750,000 deaths and 20 million cases.

With both figures expected to be reached within days, the WHO stressed it was never too late to take action to suppress the COVID-19 crisis that has gripped the planet.

"This week we'll reach 20 million registered cases of COVID-19 and 750,000 deaths," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus told a virtual press conference.

"Behind these statistics is a great deal of pain and suffering. Every life lost matters. I know many of you are grieving and that this is a difficult moment for the world.

"But I want to be clear: there are green shoots of hope and... it's never too late to turn the outbreak around."

Tedros gave examples of countries that had successfully clamped down on the spread of COVID-19, citing New Zealand and Rwanda, and praised nations that had suffered major national outbreaks and were now responding quickly to local spikes.

"My message is crystal clear: suppress, suppress, suppress the virus," he said.

"If we suppress the virus effectively, we can safely open up societies."

The novel coronavirus has killed at least 731,500 people and infected nearly 19.9 million worldwide since the outbreak emerged in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP at 1100 GMT on Monday.

Vaccine rush

The race to produce a safe and effective vaccine is well under way at unprecedented speed.

A total of 165 candidate vaccines are being worked on around the world, according to a WHO overview.

Of those, 139 are still in pre-clinical evaluation, while the other 26 are in the various phases of being tested on humans, of which six are the furthest ahead, having reached Phase 3 of clinical evaluation.

However, WHO health emergencies programme director Michael Ryan said that finding a vaccine would not automatically spell the end for COVID-19.

"We have perfectly effective polio and measles vaccines, and we still struggle to eradicate or eliminate those diseases," the Irish epidemiologist said.

"Having an effective vaccine is only part of the

answer. You've got to be able to deliver that vaccine to a population that want and demand to have that vaccine."

Maria Van Kerkhove, the WHO's COVID-19 technical lead, said experts did not yet have an answer as to whether people infected with one of the four globally-circulating common cold coronaviruses had some level of protection against the new coronavirus.

Outsmarting the enemy

Scientists think COVID-19 originated in bats and could have been transmitted to humans via another mammal.

Ryan said that adding billions to the global population, living in densely-packed conditions and exploiting the environment was fostering the conditions needed for diseases to jump species from animals to humans.

"We are actively creating the pressures that are driving the breaches of those barriers. We need to do better at managing the risks associated with that," he said.

Ryan said the virus it was "brutal in its simplicity and its cruelty but it doesn't have a brain".

He said humanity could therefore outsmart it "but we're not doing such a great job right now".

Van Kerkhove said the goal of the new coronavirus was to "make more virus" and find individuals to pass between without killing too many of its hosts and thereby ending its chances of transmission.

The US expert said it could be beaten with the "very unsophisticated" measures available now, such as physical distancing, regular handwashing, wearing facemasks and respiratory etiquette.

"Everybody on the planet needs to understand they have a role to play," she said.

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