



WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19 - 2 March 2020

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Good afternoon to everyone online and in the room.

The number of cases in China continues to decline.

Yesterday, China reported 206 cases of COVID-19 to WHO, the lowest since the 22nd of January. Only 8 cases were reported outside Hubei province yesterday.

Outside China, a total of 8739 cases of COVID-19 have been reported to WHO from 61 countries, with 127 deaths.

In the last 24 hours there were almost 9 times more cases reported outside China than inside China.

The epidemics in the Republic of Korea, Italy, Iran and Japan are our greatest concern.

I would also like to inform you that a WHO team arrived in Iran this afternoon to deliver supplies and support the government in the response.

I would like to use this opportunity to thank Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan of the United Arab Emirates for his support in making this mission possible.

A WHO staff member in our Iran country office has now tested positive for COVID-19. He has mild disease.

The Republic of Korea has now reported more than 4200 cases and 22 deaths, meaning it has more than half of all cases outside China.

However, the cases in the Republic of Korea appear to be coming mostly from suspected cases from the 5 known clusters, rather than the community.

That's important because it indicates that surveillance measures are working and Korea's epidemic can still be contained.

Knowing and understanding your epidemic is the first step to defeating it.

Korea's situation also underlines that this is a unique virus with unique features. This virus is not influenza.

We are in uncharted territory. We have never before seen a respiratory pathogen that is capable of community transmission, but which can also be contained with the right measures.

If this was an influenza epidemic, we would have expected to see widespread community transmission across the globe by now, and efforts to slow it down or contain it would not be feasible.

But containment of COVID-19 is feasible and must remain the top priority for all countries.

With early, aggressive measures, countries can stop transmission and save lives.

We appreciate that people are debating whether this is a pandemic or not. We are monitoring the situation every moment of every day, and analyzing the data.

I have said it before and I'll say it again: WHO will not hesitate to describe this as a pandemic if that's what the evidence suggests.

But we need to see this in perspective. Of the 88,913 cases reported globally so far, 90% are in China, mostly in one province.

Of the 8739 cases reported outside China, 81% are from four countries.

Of the other 57 affected countries, 38 have reported 10 cases or less, 19 have reported only one case, and a good number of countries have already contained the virus and have not reported in the last two weeks.

We know people are afraid. We know they have many concerns and questions.

Is the virus spreading in my community?

Will my kids be okay?

Will my parents be okay?

Is it safe to hold an event?

Should I travel?

The answers to these questions will vary depending on where you live, how old you are, and how healthy you are.

Individuals, families and communities should follow the advice provided by local health authorities and local health professionals.

WHO will continue to provide evidence-based guidance to help countries and individuals to assess and manage their risk, and make decisions.

There is no one-size fits all approach. Different countries are in different scenarios.

More than 130 countries have not detected any cases yet.

Some just received their first cases yesterday.

Some have clusters of cases, with transmission between family members and other close contacts.

Some have rapidly expanding epidemics, with signs of community transmission.

And some have declining epidemics, and have not reported a case for more than two weeks.

Some countries have more than one of these scenarios at the same time. For example, China had community transmission in Wuhan, but relatively small numbers of cases in other provinces.

Other countries have a similar pattern.

WHO is advising countries on actions they can take for each of the “three Cs” scenarios – first case, first cluster, first evidence of community transmission.

The basic actions in each scenario are the same, but the emphasis changes depending on which scenario a country is in.

Our message to all countries is: this is not a one-way street. We can push this virus back.

Your actions now will determine the course of the outbreak in your country.

There's no choice but to act now.

Thank you.

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