

# WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the Mission briefing on COVID-19 - 12 March 2020

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Excellencies, dear colleagues and friends,

First of all, I would like to say good morning.

As you know, yesterday I said that the global COVID-19 outbreak can now be described as a pandemic.

This is not a decision we took lightly.

We have made this assessment for two main reasons: first, because of the speed and scale of transmission.

Almost 125,000 cases have now been reported to WHO, from 118 countries and territories. In the past two weeks, the number of cases reported outside China has increased almost 13-fold, and the number of affected countries has almost tripled.

The second reason is that despite our frequent warnings, we are deeply concerned that some countries are not approaching this threat with the level of political commitment needed to control it.

Let me be clear: describing this as a pandemic does not mean that countries should give up. The idea that countries should shift from containment to mitigation is wrong and dangerous.

On the contrary, we have to double down.

This is a controllable pandemic. Countries that decide to give up on fundamental public health measures may end up with a larger problem, and a heavier burden on the health system that requires more severe measures to control.

All countries must strike a fine balance between protecting health, preventing economic and social disruption, and respecting human rights.

We urge all countries to take a comprehensive approach tailored to their circumstances – with containment as the central pillar.

We are calling on countries to take a four-pronged strategy:

First, prepare and be ready.

There are still 77 countries and territories with no reported cases, and 55 countries and territories that have reported 10 cases or less.

And all countries with cases have unaffected areas. You have an opportunity to keep it that way. Prepare your people and your health facilities.

Second, detect, prevent and treat.

You can't fight a virus if you don't know where it is. That means robust surveillance to find, isolate, test and treat every case, to break the chains of transmission.

Third, reduce and suppress.

To save lives we must reduce transmission. That means finding and isolating as many cases as possible, and quarantining their closest contacts. Even if you cannot stop transmission, you can slow it down and protect health facilities, old age homes and other vital areas – but only if you test all suspected cases.

And fourth, innovate and improve.

This is a new virus and a new situation. We're all learning and we must all find new ways to prevent infections, save lives, and minimize impact. All countries have lessons to share.

WHO is working day and night to support all countries.

We have shipped supplies of personal protective equipment to 57 countries, we're preparing to ship to a further 28, and we've shipped lab supplies to 120 countries.

We've published an R&D roadmap, with a set of core protocols for how studies should be done.

We've published a comprehensive package of technical guidance.

We've had more than 176,000 enrollments in our COVID training courses on OpenWHO.

We're working with the World Economic Forum and the International Chambers of Commerce to engage the private sector. We're also working with FIFA.

We're working with our colleagues across the UN system to support countries to develop their preparedness and response plans, according to the 8 pillars.

And more than 440 million U.S. dollars has now been pledged to WHO's Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan

We thank those countries that have contributed, especially those that have contributed fully flexible funds. Because this is a dynamic situation, we need the greatest flexibility possible to provide the best support possible. In the spirit of solidarity, we ask countries not to earmark funds for this response.

Thank you all once again for your support and commitment.

As I keep saying, we're all in this together.

I thank you.

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