

WHO says countries taking 'wrong direction' on virus

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The World Health Organization warned Monday that too many countries were bungling their response to the coronavirus pandemic, meaning there could be no return to normality any time soon.

After a daily record of 230,000 new COVID-19 cases reported on Sunday, the UN health agency said the pandemic was only going to get worse unless people stuck to the basics of physical distancing, handwashing, wearing masks and staying home if sick.

WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus warned that some countries easing their way out of lockdowns were now witnessing a resurgence of the virus because they were not following proven methods to reduce risks.

"I want to be straight with you: there will be no return to the 'old normal' for the foreseeable future," Tedros told a virtual news briefing.

"Let me blunt: too many countries are headed in the wrong direction.

"The virus remains public enemy number one, but the actions of many governments and people do not reflect this."

He said mixed messages from leaders were undermining trust.

If governments do not roll out a comprehensive strategy to suppress transmission of the virus, and if the public do not follow the basics,

"there is only one way this pandemic is going to go," Tedros said.

"It's going to get worse and worse and worse."

'Explosive transmission'

The novel coronavirus has killed nearly 570,000 people and infected more than 12.9 million since the outbreak emerged in Wuhan in China last December, according to a tally from official sources compiled by AFP.

Tedros said four scenarios were now playing out around the world.

They were: Countries that were alert and avoided large outbreaks, those that got a major outbreak under control, those that eased restrictions but are now backsliding, and those in an intense transmission phase.

Tedros said the heart of the crisis remains the Americas—accounting for more than half of infections—but stressed it was never too late to bring "explosive transmission" under control.

In a study released on Monday—the first of its kind—a team led by researchers from King's College London said patients who recover from coronavirus infections might lose immunity to reinfection within months.

WHO emergencies director Michael Ryan said it was not yet known whether recovered COVID-19 patients could be infected again, but "with other coronaviruses, that is the case".

WHO COVID-19 technical lead Maria Van Kerkhove said more studies were needed.

While those infected did mount some level of immune response through antibodies, "what we don't know is how strong that protection is, and for how long that protection will last", she said.

China mission

The WHO has sent a two-person mission to China to lay the groundwork for a study into the animal origins of the new coronavirus.

The epidemiologist and animal health expert have gone into quarantine after arriving at the weekend, as per Chinese regulations, but are already working.

Ryan said it was assumed the virus came from a bat, but the intermediate animal host that transmitted it between bats and humans was not yet established.

In Beijing, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a press briefing that experts from China and the WHO would "enter into scientific cooperation on tracing the origins of the novel coronavirus".

"The WHO also believes that finding the origin is a constantly developing process that could involve multiple countries and regions," Hua insisted.

Ryan said the probe "should start at where the first clusters of human cases were detected—and that's Wuhan in China.

"You need to go to the epicentre and work from there."

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