

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

Good morning, good afternoon and good evening.

COVID-19 is teaching all of us many lessons.

One of them is that health is not a luxury item for those who can afford it; it's a necessity, and a human right.

Public health is the foundation of social, economic and political stability. That means investing in population-based services for preventing, detecting and responding to disease.

This will not be the last pandemic. History teaches us that outbreaks and pandemics are a fact of life. But when the next pandemic comes, the world must be ready – more ready than it was this time.

In recent years, many countries have made enormous advances in medicine, but too many have neglected their basic public health systems, which are the foundation for responding to infectious disease outbreaks.

Part of every country's commitment to build back better must therefore be to invest in public health, as an investment in a healthier and safer future.

In fact, there are many examples of countries that have done exactly that.

Thailand is reaping the benefits of 40 years of health system strengthening.

A robust and well-resourced medical and public health system, allied with strong leadership informed by the best available scientific advice, a trained and committed community workforce with 1 million village health volunteers, and consistent and accurate communication, have built trust and increased public confidence and compliance.

As you know, Italy was one of the first countries to experience a large outbreak outside China, and in many ways was a pioneer for other countries.

Italy took hard decisions based on the evidence and persisted with them, which reduced transmission and saved many lives. National unity and solidarity, combined with the dedication and sacrifice of health workers, and the engagement of the Italian people, brought the outbreak under control.

Mongolia acted very early, activating its State Emergency Committee in January. As a result, despite neighboring China, Mongolia's first case was not reported until March and it still has no reported deaths.

Mauritius has high population density, with high rates of non-communicable diseases and many international travelers, which meant it was at high-risk. But quick, comprehensive action, initiated in January, and previous experience with contact tracing paid off.

Although the Americas has been the most-affected region, Uruguay has reported the lowest number of cases and deaths in Latin America, both in total and on a per capita basis.

This is not an accident.

Uruguay has one of the most robust and resilient health systems in Latin America, with sustainable investment based on political consensus on the importance of investing in public health.

Pakistan deployed the infrastructure built up over many years for polio to combat COVID-19. Community health workers who have been trained to go door-to-door vaccinating children for polio have been utilized for surveillance, contact tracing and care.

There are many other examples we could give, including Cambodia, Japan, New Zealand, the Republic of Korea, Rwanda, Senegal, Spain, Viet Nam and more.

Many of these countries have done well because they learned lessons from previous outbreaks of SARS, MERS, measles, polio, Ebola, flu and other diseases.

That's why it's vital that we all learn the lessons this pandemic is teaching us.

Although Germany's response was strong, it is also learning lessons.

I welcome the announcement by Chancellor Angela Merkel over the weekend that her government will invest 4 billion euros by 2026 to strengthen Germany's public health system.

I call on all countries to invest in public health, and especially in primary health care, and follow Germany's example.

Tomorrow, the Review Committee of the International Health Regulations will begin its work.

The International Health Regulations is the most important legal instrument in global health security.

As a reminder, the review committee will evaluate the functioning of the IHR during the pandemic so far, and recommend any changes it believes are necessary.

It will review the convening of the Emergency Committee, the declaration of a public health emergency of international concern, the role and functioning of national IHR focal points, and will examine progress made in implementing the recommendations of previous International Health Regulations review committees.

The names of the members of the committee were published on WHO's website yesterday.

Depending on progress made, the committee may present an interim progress report to the resumed World Health Assembly in November, and a final report to the Assembly in May next year.

The committee will also communicate as needed with other review bodies, including the Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response – IPPR – and the Independent Oversight Advisory Committee – IOAC – for the WHO Health Emergencies Programme.

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Finally, today is the first International Day of Clean Air for Blue Skies.

The pandemic – and the measures taken in many countries to contain it – have taken a heavy toll on lives, livelihoods and economies.

But there have also been some unexpected benefits.

In many places, we have seen a significant drop in air pollution. We have been reminded of how starved our lungs have been of clean, unpolluted air.

We have had a glimpse of our world as it could be.

And that is the world we must strive for.

Ultimately, we are not just fighting a virus. We're fighting for a healthier, safer, cleaner and more sustainable future.

I thank you.