

WHO urges member countries to invest in preparedness, not panic, as coronavirus spreads



Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has urged WHO's 196 member countries to "invest in preparedness," not "panic."

At an executive board meeting in Geneva on Monday, Tedros warned that the world may be "dangerously" unprepared for the next pandemic as the flu-like coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan, China, about a month ago spreads rapidly to new countries.

He stressed that funding for outbreak preparedness in surrounding countries "has remained grossly inadequate" in the past.

"For too long, the world has operated on a cycle of panic and neglect," Tedros said, according to a transcript of his remarks.

"We throw money at an outbreak, and when it's over, we forget about it and do nothing to prevent the next one."

“If we fail to prepare, we are preparing to fail,” he added.

Tedros said more than \$1 billion has been spent trying to stop the Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. By comparison, he added, just \$18 million was spent on preparedness in Congo's neighbor Uganda before the virus crossed the border.

“This must be a lesson for the rest of the world,” he said.

The plea from WHO's top official comes as the deadly coronavirus has now killed at least 362 people and sickened more than 17,400 worldwide.

The respiratory illness, which is capable of spreading through human-to-human contact, is not yet considered a pandemic. A pandemic is “an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people,” according to WHO. While the new virus has spread to almost two dozen countries, the majority of the cases remain in mainland China.

Nevertheless, many global health experts expect the virus will become a pandemic. Since emerging about a month ago, the coronavirus has infected more people than the 2003 SARS epidemic, which sickened roughly 8,100 people across the globe over nine months. As of Monday, there are nearly 200 cases in at least 23 countries, outside of China, a handful of which have been transmitted from human contact within those countries.

On Thursday, WHO declared the virus a global health emergency.

Tedros said the “continued increase in cases and the evidence of human-to-human transmission outside of China” were “most deeply disturbing.”

“Over the past few weeks we have witnessed the emergence of a previously unknown pathogen that has escalated into an unprecedented outbreak,” Tedros said during a news conference at the organization's Geneva headquarters last week. “We must act together now to limit the spread.”

Source: CNBC

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