

WHO warns failure to prepare for coronavirus now ‘could be a fatal mistake’



The World Health Organization has warned that member countries need to prepare for their first COVID-19 cases after seven new countries reported cases for the first time over the last 24 hours.

“Every country must be ready for its first case,” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, director-general of WHO, said during a press briefing at the agency’s headquarters in Geneva on Thursday. “No country should assume it won’t get cases. That could be a fatal mistake. This virus does not respect borders.”

“It does not distinguish between races or ethnicities. It has no regard for a country’s GDP or level of development,” he added.

Tedros said that world health officials’ greatest concerns right now are with what’s happening in the rest of the world, not in China, where cases have slowed in recent days. Brazil, Georgia, Greece, North Macedonia, Norway, Pakistan and Romania reported coronavirus cases over the last day, Tedros said.

“We’re at a decisive point,” he said. “The epidemics in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Italy and the Republic of Korea demonstrate what this virus is capable of.”

On Wednesday, WHO officials said the number of new COVID-19 cases outside China exceeded those inside the country for the first time. “The sudden increases of cases in Italy, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Korea are deeply concerning,” Tedros said at the time.

Tedros said Thursday that countries must act “swiftly” and “aggressively” to contain the virus.

“With the right measures, it can be contained,” he said, adding countries should begin thinking about whether they have proper isolation units, medical supplies and other vital equipment.

The preparation will “be the difference between one case and 100 cases in the coming days and weeks,” he said.

Tedros reiterated that the virus has “pandemic potential,” adding, “that this is not a time for fear. This is the time for taking action now to prevent infections and save lives now.”

“Fear and panic doesn’t help,” he said. “People can have concerns and rightly so. People can be worried and rightly so. But the most important thing is to clam down and do the right things to fight this very dangerous virus.”

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