

Coronavirus emergency ‘holds a very grave threat’ for world

By Reuters



WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus says containment remains as objective. (AP pic)

GENEVA: China’s coronavirus outbreak poses a “very grave threat for the rest of the world”, the head of the World Health Organisation (WHO) said on Tuesday (February 11, 2020) in an appeal for sharing virus samples and speeding up research into drugs and vaccines.

WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus was addressing the start of a two-day meeting aimed at accelerating development of drugs, diagnostics and vaccines against the flu-like virus amid growing concerns about its ability to spread.

To date China has reported 42,708 confirmed cases, including 1,017 deaths, Tedros said.

“With 99% of cases in China, this remains very much an emergency for that country, but one that holds a very grave threat for the rest of the world,” he told more than 400 researchers and national authorities, including some taking part by video conference from mainland China and Taiwan.

Tedros, speaking to reporters on Monday (February 10, 2020), referred to “some concerning instances of onward transmission from people with no travel history to China”, citing cases this week in France and Britain.

Five British nationals were diagnosed with the coronavirus in France, after staying in the same ski chalet with a person who had been in Singapore.

“The detection of this small number of cases could be the spark that becomes a bigger fire. But for now it’s only a spark. Our objective remains containment,” he said.

Hong Kong residents evacuated from a residential building where a man and woman confirmed with coronavirus live tested negative for the virus, health authorities said on Tuesday, easing concerns of a cluster of the outbreak in the Chinese-ruled city.

Many questions remain about the origin of the virus, which emerged at a wildlife market in the central Chinese city of Wuhan in December, and is spread by people in droplets from coughing or sneezing.

“We hope that one of the outcomes of this meeting will be an agreed roadmap for research around which researchers and donors will align,” Tedros told the closed-door meeting, according to remarks made available by the UN agency.

“The bottom line is solidarity, solidarity, solidarity. That is especially true in relation to sharing of samples and sequences,” Tedros said. “To defeat this outbreak, we need open and equitable sharing, according to the principles of fairness and equity.”

Dr. Mike Ryan, WHO's top emergencies experts, told reporters on Monday: "This is an amazing initiative to centralise our knowledge."

The aim was to identify gaps and generate scientific information for urgently needed medical interventions, he said.

"This is not just simply scientific discourse, there are big issues to do with how that whole process is governed," Ryan said, citing the need to "ensure equitable access" to any products derived from research and approved by regulators.

"Bringing everybody together I think will give us a leap-frog moment in terms of coherence, priority-setting," he said.

A week ago, only two laboratories in Africa could diagnose the novel coronavirus but as of Sunday, the WHO expected every nation in Africa to be able to diagnose the disease. – **Reuters, Geneva, February 12, 2020**