

Statement for joint press conference on COVID-19

Rome, 26 February 2020

Dr Hans Kluge, WHO Regional Director for Europe

Good morning. Thank you for inviting me to say a few words to you today.

Allow me to provide you with an **update of the situation**. As of today, we count over 80,000 cases of COVID-19 in 34 countries. Four new Member States – Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, and Oman – reported cases of COVID-19 in the past 24 hours. 97% cases are reported from China and our thoughts are with all those families and communities affected by the disease and the health workers and authorities working tirelessly to treat and protect their populations.

Here in **Europe**, communities have also been impacted, in no country more so than Italy – where, as you are fully aware, we have seen a rapid increase in cases in just few days, some of them with no clear epidemiological links, such as travel history to China or contact with a confirmed case.

This presents a significant challenge for the Italian authorities. I am personally assured that your **countryfolk are ALL standing aside each other** in doing the absolute best to contain and prevent transmission of the disease.

Italian authorities are implementing measures to prevent onwards transmission that align with the containment strategy currently being implemented globally. To do that, Italian leadership has had to make tough decisions, placing health ahead of economic prosperity. Tough decisions but correct decisions.

Your burden is Europe's burden and that's why I am here today.

- Thanks to the Ministry of Health of Italy for welcoming our joint WHO-ECDC expert team to Rome. We are doing our **best to support the Italian authorities** and I can assure you we are working around the clock. The meeting that kicked off yesterday defined our collaboration in areas such as clinical management, infection prevention and control, surveillance and risk communication. We will join experts in the Ministry of Health and the Istituto Superiore di Sanita' to analyze information and data, we will work with the affected regions, and we will advise and operate in a common effort to stop COVID-19. Hand in hand, beside each other with a common cause.
- At WHO we are making every effort possible to coordinate COVID-19 global preparedness and response in each and every country. As Regional Director of the WHO Regional Office for Europe I have been in close communication since the weekend with the European Commission and Italian authorities at national and regional level, and with the Minister of Health.

While battling this disease and its spread we must also **learn from the response** here in Italy. Your experience, difficult as it is, is invaluable as we learn how we tackle the disease. The burden of COVID-19 is a **shared one that requires a collective response, from those near and far from its immediate impact today.**

Everyone needs to do their part.

I'd like to leave you with a few short messages:

To the Italian people: Protect yourself and others from getting sick by adhering to the guidance from your public health authorities and stay healthy while travelling. This includes

- hand and respiratory hygiene and keeping distance between yourself and a sick person;
- searching for their information through official channels;
- avoiding stigma and discrimination of other people based on their origin.

To health professionals: They are the heroes of this response. As they face higher risks, they need equipment and training to protect themselves to continue to save others.

To media: Yours is a critical role. This is the time for accurate reporting from official sources. Your role in an outbreak is not simply chasing the news; it is to perform a public service – in all respects your actions are public health actions, in all senses. You have a significant role in protecting the health and wellbeing of your countryfolk.

To governments in Europe: be ready to find and test any cases of COVID-19, treat patients with dignity and compassion, prevent onward transmission, and communicate with the public.

To the Italian government:

I ask Italy to continue its leadership and determination to contain the virus working in full synergy nationally and internationally to learn, respond and share.

You are doing a good job right now, but you have to keep up and sustain these efforts so that no one is left behind. Because ultimately health is a political choice.

WHO/Europe is stepping up efforts for the people of Europe with our headquarters and partners. This is the time for global solidarity and we can overcome the threat only by acting as one.