

Statement for WHO press conference on COVID-19 Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 12 May 2020

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[moderator to introduce the WHO team and the Ministry of Health representatives]

Teams activities

- Good afternoon everybody and thank you for attending this press conference. I would like to start by extending my **thanks to the government of Tajikistan** for inviting the WHO team to support the COVID-19 outbreak response at this critical time. The government and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population in particular, have provided us with essential support to reach the country and access people, places and information.
- The **first confirmed cases** of COVID-19 in Tajikistan were reported on 30 April. Since then, confirmed cases have been rapidly increasing and have surpassed 660 today. As the situation is evolving rapidly, we are at a pivotal moment in the outbreak response: the actions taken over the next days, weeks and months will be critical to saving lives.
- Let me give you an **overview of the team's activities** in Tajikistan during the past ten days. As you know, the mission arrived in Dushanbe on 1 May immediately after the first cases were reported to work with Tajik health authorities to understand how the virus transmits and what is being done to respond, to describe risks and recommend actions.
- During the period we were waiting for our COVID-19 test results, we met remotely with the **Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population and UN agencies** to deepen our understanding of the COVID-19 situation in Tajikistan.
- Upon receipt of negative test results on 4 May, the team had the honour to meet the **Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population officials**. We were also able to discuss with the Committee of Emergency Situation and Civil Defense, other UN agencies, development partners, and civil society groups, which have provided us with an

understanding of how different sectors and partners are working to respond to COVID-19.

- On 5 May 2020, the team was joined by **two experts from the Russian Federation** as part of the WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN).
- Throughout this entire period, **we visited** healthcare facilities, public health centers, laboratories, orphanage, points of entries, elderly care facilities, migrant observation facilities and quarantine areas at the national, regional, and city levels in Dushanbe, and Sughd, Khatlon, and remotely GBAO oblasts.

Observations and Recommendations

- I will now introduce the **observations and recommendations** for Tajikistan, focusing on the essential response areas and intended to provide guidance on measures to minimize risks to and maximize protection of the people of Tajikistan.
- **COVID-19 is challenging all health systems** irrespective of their maturity. Even the strongest and resilient health systems are stretched beyond their limits and no country is spared. Therefore, we need to act now and put in place those measures that we know are effective to curb the spread.
- WHO recommends that all governments ensure their commitment and leadership in implementing a **mixture of measures** – test, trace, treat, isolate, prepare the health system and enforce physical distance, according to the country virus spread scenario. Testing alone does not work, contact tracing alone does not work, physical distance alone does not work. The response to this virus needs to include all these measures, with community engagement at the centre.
- Tajikistan has entered a phase of **community transmission**. Confirmed COVID-19 cases have continued to increase during the WHO mission, with the number of confirmed cases doubling every 2-3 days. Case counts are anticipated to continue to rise as the outbreak evolves. This situation is concerning and requires that measures in place are complemented by additional ones.
- Overall, it is essential having a **nation-wide strongly coordinated strategy** and plans in all technical areas – surveillance, clinical management, infection prevention and control, and risk communication. This will allow structuring and standardizing the ongoing response both at central and local levels.

- On 2 February, the government established a national multi-sectoral COVID-19 task force; and on 19 March, the COVID-19 Preparedness and Response Plan was approved. The creation of a national **Emergency Operation Center (EOC)** should operationalize the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population's action in the Preparedness and Response Plan, coordinating between the Ministry and WHO and international partners support.
- With the assistance of UNICEF and WHO, the government is finalizing the national COVID-19 **risk communication and community engagement plan**. This requires rapid implementation and continuous adaptation to the evolving situation. Measures needed to respond to COVID-19 and health advice need to be accurately and clearly communicated, considering people's perceptions and concerns, and calling to a sense of a societal responsibility to stop the disease spread together.
- On 1 February, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population approved COVID-19 guidelines for **prevention, diagnosis and treatment** and distributed them in the country. Existing surveillance, epidemiology and laboratory systems need to be tailored to COVID-19 response to focus on finding and testing suspect cases and isolating the positive and their contacts. This entails expanding protocols and increasing the number of laboratories testing for COVID-19 nationally and locally. Treatment protocols for severe, moderate and mild cases should be revised and updated on a regular basis to reflect global standards.
- **Reorganization of facilities and staff** at all levels of the health system is a critical step the government is taking: this includes repurposing facilities and training healthcare workers. Patient care and the prevention and control of infections need to be standardized across all health facilities, and protective equipment for health personnel needs to be made increasingly available, for example through national and regional stockpiles. As the response to COVID-19 expands, we need to balance the needs of essential health services for chronic diseases, immunization, and maternal health.
- One point I wish to stress: **health care workers are the heroes of the COVID-19** response in Tajikistan and all over the world. We need to prioritize their protection and support them as a community. Everyone, through their responsible behavior can help the work of doctors and nurses by protecting their health, the health of others and in turn reducing the pressure on hospitals and the health personnel.

- Healthcare workers as well as orphans, older people, people with chronic conditions, prisoners, migrants, and refugees are part of the **high-risk and vulnerable populations** we should devote special attention to, including on socio-economic support.
- These recommendations will require **operational and logistics support** to Tajikistan as there are significant challenges due to the lack of regular international flights. To maintain essential medical services and support to COVID-19 response operations, the movement of people and goods need to be ensured by air and land through humanitarian corridors.
- Finally, we recognize that some physical distancing measures have been implemented, such as closing schools and universities, as well as large business, and restricting international and domestic travels. Our recommendation is to enhance current measures with the introduction of **community-wide measures** such as
 - postponing mass gatherings including sporting and cultural events;
 - quarantining contacts of confirmed patients and people potentially exposed to the virus;
 - introducing options for teleworking, distance learning and suspension of nonessential business; and,
 - reducing non-essential movements, especially for high-risk groups.
- The team appreciates that these recommendations will require additional **internal and external support** to be fully implement. Based on initial discussions with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population, we have already started coordinating the work to operationalize them including human resource and commodities.

Conclusions

- Let me conclude by saying:
 - now is the time to scale-up efforts and **expand** testing of suspect cases, contact tracing of confirmed patients, and isolation of those who are sick and their contacts;
 - now is the time **to engage the community** in the response by providing transparent information, tailoring messages to perceptions, and empowering people to protect their health and contribute to the outbreak control;

- now is the time to prepare for **worst-case scenarios** by activating contingency plans to enable health facilities and healthcare workers to cope with a surge in cases; and to train and protect health personnel;
- now is the time to strengthen not only the healthcare system, but also **all-sector and all-society engagement**. While COVID-19 is a health issues, the response to this virus requires the participation of everyone – the government, the private sector, the civil society and the community all working together to ensure a robust response.
- ***This is a marathon, not a sprint***. We need to be prepared for outbreak response activities continuing and evolving over the next 12 to 18 months. The actions taken in Tajikistan will have impact throughout Central Asia, Europe and the world – this virus has connected us together.
- WHO reiterates its support to the Republic of Tajikistan and is prepared to extend our efforts in the current response and the next phase of this pandemic. We will **enhance our presence on the ground** to support the Country Office and the Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population to be closer to the people and their needs.
- The summary of our observations and recommendations that we shared with you today will be made public through Ministry of Health and Social Protection of Population and WHO channels.