

Stand in Solidarity to Combat COVID-19

Virtual Meeting of Health Ministers in the WHO Western Pacific Region

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic is “an unprecedented global crisis that will require countries to stand together in solidarity to defeat it”, prime ministers, health ministers and other senior officials agreed in a virtual meeting hosted by the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Western Pacific in Manila, Philippines, on 8 April 2020.

Three heads of government made recorded interventions: Mr Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama, Prime Minister of the Republic of Fiji; Mr Lee Hsien Loong, Prime Minister of the Republic of Singapore; and Mr Nguyen Xuan Phuc, Prime Minister of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. Offering words of encouragement to health ministers, the prime ministers recognized that Member States in the Region must work together to fight a common enemy: COVID-19. They were joined by 20 ministers and vice-ministers who were among the representatives from 29 countries and areas to participate in the meeting.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General, and Dr Shin Young-soo, WHO Director-General's Special Envoy for COVID-19 Preparedness and Response and Regional Director Emeritus, also emphasized the need for solidarity.

“We are all in this together. As long as COVID-19 is a threat to some, it is a threat to us all.”

Dr Tedros,
WHO Director-General

The three prime ministers and participating health ministers acknowledged that COVID-19 not only threatens the health of populations but also challenges societies, economies and cultures. Countries are deeply concerned about health-care facilities being overwhelmed and the potentially devastating impact on their economies, livelihoods and food security.

“The economic impacts of this virus have been catastrophic to us and other small island nations.”

Mr Josaia Voreqe Bainimarama,
Prime Minister of Fiji

Many leaders have declared national emergencies due to the threat COVID-19 poses to their country's security. All countries have instituted whole-of-government and multisectoral coordination in response to the outbreak. These efforts are often spearheaded by the highest levels of government. The Prime Minister of Cambodia, for example, personally chairs his country's National Committee for Combating COVID-19.

In the Western Pacific Region, countries are at different stages of the pandemic: China and the Republic of Korea, for instance, were exposed early and have managed to contain the outbreak. Others are focused on containing increasing cases of local transmission. Some countries in the Pacific have not yet reported any cases. Regardless of their transmission stage, all countries and areas acknowledge that “COVID-19 will stay with us for the foreseeable future and we need to prepare for a long-term battle.”

“Each country has different circumstances, social norms and resources, but we are all fighting the same enemy – COVID-19.”

Mr Lee Hsien Loong,
Prime Minister of Singapore

Countries emphasized the great burden that the epidemic and containment measures have already placed on people’s lives and entire economies. Health leaders expressed condolences to all who have lost loved ones and thanked people for their sacrifices. They highlighted the life-saving role of health workers who serve those in need at great personal risk and cost, paying homage to those who had passed away.

Country representatives agreed that communities not only bear a huge burden but also hold the key to a successful response. Restrictions on personal liberties imposed as so-called circuit breakers for transmission come at a high cost to communities. Such measures only work if they are supported by communities and seen as steps taken “by the people, for the people”. Many country representatives applauded the community spirit seen around the Region, particularly the readiness of many people to actively support the COVID-19 response, such as the many volunteers in Brunei Darussalam and the task forces in the outer islands of Tonga.

Health ministers shared their concern for the vulnerable and reaffirmed their commitment to ensure nobody is left behind in the fight against COVID-19. They stressed the priority of reaching out to every corner and all populations in the Region. In some countries, such as the Philippines, this means working through densely populated areas, while in others, such as French Polynesia, it may involve boat travel to remote islands. In all countries and areas, health workers are at high risk and require special consideration.

To date, countries and areas in the Western Pacific Region are not reporting widespread community transmission. As such, health ministries are focused on proven containment strategies: contact tracing, quarantine and physical distancing. At the same time, all countries reported they are anticipating and actively preparing for community outbreaks.

Some countries recognized that in preparing for large-scale community transmission they will need external support – be it financial or technical assistance and/or provision of essential medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE). They acknowledged with gratitude the support already received from fellow Member States and international partners, while highlighting challenges going forward.

Health systems must be equipped and organized to maximize capacity to treat severe cases and to avoid overwhelming the medical system with people presenting with mild conditions. The Philippines, for example, has designated 55 COVID-19 referral

hospitals across the country. Other countries, including Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, Mongolia, Nauru, Palau, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, have requested support for more ventilators and PPE. Several ministers emphasized the need to ensure full continuation of essential non-COVID-19 health services for their populations.

Overall, countries agreed that regional and global solidarity is essential: No country or area will be able to overcome the epidemic in isolation; all Member States in the Region are in it together and will only be able to get out together.

“As the COVID-19 pandemic knows no borders, this fight requires cooperation from and among all countries. A global pandemic requires global solidarity and an all-out global response.”

Mr Nguyen Xuan Phuc,
Prime Minister of Viet Nam

Throughout the meeting, countries echoed the strong call to stand together. Such solidarity must be rooted in the sharing of experiences and information, as well as mutual support. Close coordination at the subregional, regional and global levels is critical to sustain solidarity.

“We have a tradition of supporting and learning from one another across this diverse Region. These values are now more important than ever. Let us continue to stand in solidarity to combat COVID-19.”

Dr Takeshi Kasai,
WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific

Countries are increasingly looking ahead towards incrementally lifting lockdowns and other measures, and returning societies and economies to “a new normal”. In this new paradigm, countries recognize that COVID-19 is one of many challenges to be faced by health systems and societies. Indeed, some of these challenges are already impacting health – such as climate change, population ageing and the surge of noncommunicable diseases.

These challenges are identified as thematic priorities in *For the Future*, the Member State-driven vision for WHO’s work in the Western Pacific Region in the years to come.

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