UNOG Bi-weekly press briefing: COVID-19 Update WHO

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Shotlist

1. Wide shot: exterior, UN Geneva flag alley, a beautiful day.
2. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Dr Margaret Harris, spokesperson, World Health Organization (WHO):
   “The season does not seem to be affecting the transmission of this virus currently; what is affecting the transmission is mass gatherings, it’s people coming together, and people not social distancing, not taking the precautions to ensure they are not in close contact.”
4. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Dr Margaret Harris, spokesperson, World Health Organization (WHO):
   “There seems to be this fixed idea about this virus being seasonal, but there is a huge outbreak, the most intense - the highest numbers - are being experienced in the USA, they are in the middle of summer; also Brazil, they are in the sum.. (breaks off) they are an equatorial country.”
5. Wide shot: UN Geneva main entrance at Pregny Gate.
6. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Dr Margaret Harris, spokesperson, World Health Organization (WHO):
   “The southern hemisphere is currently undergoing its winter and we are watching, we have a full surveillance system and they are looking at the samples coming from every laboratory, and they are also testing them for COVID. Now the interesting thing is we are seeing from those samples high levels of COVID, but we’re not seeing high levels of influenza at the moment. So we’re expecting a later flu season in the southern hemisphere.”
8. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Dr Margaret Harris, spokesperson, World Health Organization (WHO):
“Will there be a melange, will that cause confusion. That would be a concern, because if you
have an increase in respiratory illness when you already have a very high burden of respiratory
illness, that puts even more pressure on the health system.”

9. Wide shot: UN Geneva flag alley seen from outside the UN complex, behind fencing and wall
carrying “United Nations” and “Nations Unies” lettering either side of UN logo.

10. SOUNDBITE (EN) – Dr Margaret Harris, spokesperson, World Health Organization (WHO):
“Now we do everything we can to encourage all countries to test, because testing is absolutely
essential, you don’t know where your outbreak is if you’re not testing people. And we also
encourage all countries to make access to testing wide and available”.

11. Wide shot: exterior, UN Geneva flag alley from the ground, a beautiful day.
Story

COVID-19 is not seasonal, says WHO, urges greater respect for physical distancing

Transmission of COVID-19 is very likely not linked to seasonal conditions, UN health experts said on Tuesday, before urging much greater respect for physical distancing measures to stop the virus spreading.

“The season does not seem to be affecting the transmission of this virus currently,” said Dr Margaret Harris, spokesperson, World Health Organization (WHO). “What is affecting the transmission is mass gatherings, it’s people coming together, and people not social distancing, not taking the precautions to ensure they are not in close contact.”

Globally, WHO said on Tuesday that there have been 16,301,736 confirmed cases of COVID-19, including 650,069 deaths, reported to the agency.

The Americas remains the epicentre by region, with more than 8.7 million cases, followed by Europe (3.2 million), South-East Asia (1.8 million), Eastern Mediterranean (1.5 million), Africa (712,920) and Western Pacific (291,993).

During a scheduled UN Geneva virtual press conference, Dr Harris dismissed the apparently “fixed idea” that the respiratory illness is seasonal and that it might come in several waves – which is not how the WHO is defining virus transmission anyway, she said. “There is a huge outbreak…with the most intense - the highest numbers” in the U.S. where it is the middle of summer.”

Brazil had also seen high infection rates, despite being an equatorial country, the WHO spokesperson continued.

Turning to countries in the global south, Dr Harris noted that winter was under way there, with samples tested indicating “high” COVID infection rates but low influenza traces. “Now the interesting thing is we are seeing from those samples high levels of COVID, but we’re not seeing high levels of influenza at the moment. So, we’re expecting a later flu season in the southern hemisphere.”

The development is in line with WHO’s latest influenza update indicating that globally, influenza activity is currently at lower-than-expected levels.

In temperate areas of the northern hemisphere, influenza activity has “returned to inter-seasonal levels”.

In Caribbean, Central American, South American, tropical African, Southern Asia and South East Asia countries, the WHO bulletin reported that there have been only sporadic or no cases detected.

Assessing the impact on countries finding themselves having to tackle both COVID-19 and influenza at the same time, the WHO spokesperson debated whether a “melange” of respiratory diseases might provoke confusion. “That would be a concern, because if you have an increase in respiratory illness when you already have a very high burden of respiratory illness, that puts even more pressure on the health system,” she said.

Asked about the WHO’s stance on charging for COVID-19 testing, Dr Harris explained that this was a decision governed by countries alone. “Now we do everything we can to encourage all countries to test, because testing is absolutely essential,” she said. “You don’t know where your outbreak is if you’re not testing people. And we also encourage all countries to make access to testing wide and available”.
