

World Health Organization warns premature return to work risks resurgence of pandemic

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World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus reiterated his warnings Monday that a premature return to work without adequate measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic risks a resurgence of the disease.

Tedros emphasized that before governments begin opening businesses, they must ask if the epidemic is under control, if the national health care infrastructure can cope with new resurgences, and if the public health surveillance measures in place are sufficiently robust to trace, isolate, treat and track at a community level across the nation. One should ask first if the nation's testing capacity is of a sufficient magnitude before even considering these criteria.

With only 15 states in some form of a lockdown or stay-at-home restrictions, the US continues to woefully lack sufficient testing capacity regardless of the president's repeated but empty bluster. In actuality, the situation has devolved into absurdity as local communities and states compete against each other as well as with large private vendors and the federal government to procure the necessary material. This only exacerbates the existing shortages that befuddle local government and health officials tasked with opening their towns and small cities while facing sudden new outbreaks in nursing homes or local factories and workplaces. The economic devastation doubly ravages these communities, exacerbating social tensions as workers are forced to pit their safety against financial hardship.

The United States has only recently attained capacity of 300,000 tests per day. The need for higher capacity is due to the criminal delay in not having scaled testing ability in January and February when ample time was available to mobilize the country's vast resources. Because the pandemic has more deeply insinuated itself into the social fabric of the country, more testing is required to identify and map its spread. The assertions about being ahead of South Korea are moot precisely because South Korea brought the outbreak in their country under considerable control very quickly.

According to the Rockefeller Foundation, to safely reopen

the country's economy, the US needs to dramatically expand testing capacity close to 30 million per week, more than 10 times the present capacity. On a per capita basis, the US is at 29,321 tests per million population, on par with the UK, but behind Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain and Russia.

"The US is not yet administering enough coronavirus tests each week to adequately monitor the entire US workforce or rapidly detect recurrent COVID-19 outbreaks," the foundation wrote. "Such outbreaks can be expected for the foreseeable future, given the low level of population immunity as well as the virus's contagiousness and wide geographic dispersion. The location and size of recurrent outbreaks are difficult to predict. Close monitoring of the medically vulnerable, institutionalized, poor and imprisoned is vital."

Dr. Maria Van Kerkhove, the technical lead for the COVID-19 pandemic at the WHO, explained that there had been several seroprevalence (level of a pathogen in a population measured through blood tests) studies in review from varied regions throughout Asia, Europe and the US. To their surprise, she remarked that these antibody tests indicate the prevalence of disease remains low, in the range of 1 to 10 percent in the population. In response to a reporter's query on herd immunity, Dr. Kerkhove responded that though the exact prevalence for COVID-19 required is not known, it would have to be much higher than present levels.

Dr. Michael Ryan, the WHO's emergencies chief, put it quite succinctly, saying, "Promoting herd immunity can lead to very brutal arithmetic which does not put people and life and suffering at the center of that equation. Seroprevalence studies also show that the proportion of people with significant clinical illness is actually a higher proportion of all those who have been infected because the number of people infected in the total population is lower than we expected."

He explained that the virus is still very much rooted deeply in every nation's community as events in South Korea and Wuhan, China, indelibly demonstrated. The present moment is a second chance to rapidly implement the necessary

infrastructure in preparation for local community outbreaks. “Shutting your eyes and trying to drive through this blind is about as silly an equation as I have seen,” he said, “and I’m really concerned that certain countries are setting themselves up for some really blind driving through the next several months.”

Despite the appalling statistics, with over 80,000 fatalities and over 1 million active COVID-19 cases in the US, senior White House officials over the weekend pressed state governors to hurry steps toward restarting commerce. At Monday’s press briefing, the fascistic Trump simply blurted out, “I want the country opened.”

Yesterday, hundreds of thousands of Michigan workers headed to their employment as part of Governor Gretchen Whitmer’s plan to restart Michigan’s economy despite continued new cases of more than 400 per day. The test run will be a model for the rest of the United States’ manufacturing base. The week is being devoted to recalibrating and inspecting equipment proceeding in a measured approach. American Axle brought back one shift at their Macomb County plant. Tents outside the facility were set up to take temperatures and provide masks and protective equipment. This was made into a press event to lull workers back and influence their hearts and minds.

Governor J.B. Pritzker of Illinois has indicated that science and data will guide his decisions. However, he is allowing more businesses to open in a limited sense and moving to create geographic regions across the state that will function independently. Golf courses and state parks have opened. Governor Gavin Newsom in California noted that 70 percent of businesses could reopen with some form of restrictions in place, though a few counties in hard-hit parts of the Bay Area would remain in lockdown.

In concert, several European and Asian countries, devastated by the pandemic, are moving to relax social and commercial activities. France is permitting teachers to return to primary school and some shops and salons to open again. Outside of Madrid and Barcelona, Spain is allowing small gatherings and bars and restaurants to open that have outdoor spaces. In the Netherlands, primary schools and hairdressers will reopen, and noncontact sports will be permitted outdoors. Shanghai Disneyland has opened its gates.

Even Russia, whose case rates are second only to the United States, has boasted about its low fatality rates. This week, Putin ordered the end of a nationwide “nonworking period.” Though he acknowledged the pandemic had not been conquered, he was leaving it to regional governors to decide if and when restrictions would be lifted in their territories. Recent evidence, however, suggests that the number of fatalities due to COVID-19 has been intentionally

undercounted, and the calculated estimates indicate the fatality rate due to COVID-19 is approximately three times higher.

The hypocrisy that all is well has been highlighted best in recent developments at the White House. Last week President Trump’s valet and Vice President Mike Pence’s press secretary, Katie Miller, as well a secret service agent, tested positive for COVID-19. The director of the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, Robert Redfield; the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Dr. Anthony Fauci; and Stephen Hahn, the commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, have taken the precaution of going into quarantine. At Monday’s White House briefing, Trump admitted that the order for all officials to wear face masks (except himself) came from him.

In a poignantly dramatic, but abrupt, end to the White House press briefing, CBS News reporter Weijia Jiang asked the president, “Why does that matter [doing better than any other country in testing]? Why is this a global competition to you if every day Americans are still losing their lives and we’re still seeing more cases every day?”

Trump replied that “she should ask China why so many were losing their lives everywhere in the world.” Ms. Jiang, who was born in Xiamen, China and moved to the US with her family at the age of two, redirected, “Sir, why are you saying that to me, specifically?” Trump then countered by saying he would “say that to anyone who asks a nasty question.” CNN’s Kaitlin Collins came to the reporter’s defense when Trump asked for another question, but waved her off. “You pointed to me,” Collins said. “Can I ask a question?” Furious, Trump called off the news conference and stormed away.



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