

GLOBAL LEADERS ‘WON’T BE FORGIVEN’ FOR NOT WORKING TOGETHER TO BEAT COVID-19, WHO CHIEF TELLS QF/WISH EDUCATION CITY SPEAKER SERIES

International panel of speakers and worldwide audience join online discussion on challenges and hopes in fight against coronavirus.

Doha, Qatar, April 15, 2020: The world must be “one family” in the fight against coronavirus and its leaders “will not be forgiven” if they fail to work together to defeat it, a World Health Organization leader has told a special online edition of Qatar Foundation’s Education City Speaker Series, in collaboration with the World Innovation Summit for Health.

A worldwide audience tuned into the event, titled Flattening the Curve: Global Responses to COVID-19, as an international panel of speakers discussed the challenges COVID-19 has presented to the world, how different countries are battling to overcome them, the risks that lie ahead, and the potential for developing a vaccine to combat the virus.

In the wake of the US announcing it will halt funding for the World Health Organization (WHO), Dr. David Nabarro, the organization’s Special Envoy on COVID-19, told the webinar: “This is a global pandemic and we must not spend time looking backwards – that can be done later when history is written.

“We need to work in solidarity, at a community level, and within and between countries. Without solidarity, we will not win. We plead with everyone to look forward, focus on the epic struggle that is taking place right now, and leave the recriminations until later.

“Every single person in the world is a public health worker right now. Everyone is making sacrifices, taking responsibility, and getting involved. We look global leaders straight in the eye and say: the future of our world is in your hands, you must work together, and you will not be forgiven if you don’t.”

Dr. Nabarro described the current global situation as “the new normal we have to get used to”, saying: “If we argue about it, the virus will find its way between us and catch us out, and we will be asking ourselves why we didn’t move more quickly, develop a unified, strategic approach, and implement it. We owe it not only to the people of our nations, but the people of the world – we are one family.”

Dr. Ahmed Al Mandhari, the WHO’s Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean – an area which includes Gulf Cooperation Council nations – said governments must “rebuild, re-establish, redevelop, and rethink how they are running healthcare systems”, saying that, over the years, many countries have overlooked the need to invest in “basic health measures that have saved many lives”.

“At a community level, COVID-19 will definitely change people’s habits and behaviors,” he said. “It will make people more conscious of their own health and that of others, and I hope it will bring governments, different sectors, partners, and donors together to face a pandemic that we have never experienced in the past.”

The forthcoming Ramadan period will, according to Dr. Al Mandhari, be “a real challenge” in terms of people adhering to social distancing, but he said WHO is working with Islamic groups and scholars to develop recommendations and give clear guidance to Muslims during the Holy Month. “We have to take these public health measures – as proven in many countries, they will help to control the disease and help us to save lives.”

Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO Regional Director for Africa, told the livestreamed discussion that the continent’s COVID-19 challenges range from testing capacity outside capital cities and the “weakness” of its healthcare systems, to a shortage of critical supplies and “the fact that while governments are doing a lot of work in informing people what they need to do to protect themselves, in some settings people do not have access to running water”.

“There has been a lot of suffering in African countries, but I feel we will be able to learn much from the experience of countries around the world and see much stronger global solidarity emerging,” she said.

Providing a Qatar-based context to the discussion, Dr. Salih Ali Al Marri, Assistant Minister for Health Affairs at the Ministry of Public Health – who told the panel that Qatar would be “happy to participate in international vaccine trials” – said: “Working together is the key to success, and what is important is the way our community is adhering to the measures that have been put in place in Qatar.

“The heroes are not only those in the frontline, such as healthcare professionals, but also those within our community – the individuals and the families who abide by handwashing and social distancing guidelines. People have made tremendous efforts and our very clear message to everyone is that we trust them to adhere to these guidelines.

“There is a challenge with Ramadan approaching, and the psychological impact of people having to stay at home and do things they would not usually do. But we have created platforms to support people, and I hope that by encouraging people to approach Ramadan with a different mindset, they can see it as an opportunity to experience it in a different way.”

The event, moderated by journalist and documentary-maker Mishal Husain, also heard from Rossella Miccio, President of EMERGENCY NGO, whose teams are on the frontline of Italy’s efforts to combat COVID-19. “What we need is a centralized decision-making process,” she said. “If information, policies, and messages are not clear, people become confused and gaps between different social groups can become deeper.

“If you take into consideration what has happened in Italy and how regions have been impacted, you can see how we need one very clear message. We have seen people who have really been destroyed by the suffering they have witnessed in the past two months. Nobody wants to go back to that, and so I am sure people will accept longer limitations to their everyday lives.”

The vital role of nurses in the global fight against COVID-19 was emphasized by Dr. Hsiu-Hung Wang, President of the Taiwan Nurses Association, who said: “Their efforts should be recognized broadly and at the highest level of society, and in the long run we need to provide them with mental and social support that is specifically designed for them.”

She also emphasized that Taiwan’s experience of the SARS virus had helped its preparedness for COVID-19, saying: “It raised public awareness and promoted active pandemic response policies, while Taiwanese medical institutions have provided the appropriate personal protective equipment and training, and allocated sufficient staffing to ensure nurse and patient safety.”

And Dr. Jerome Kim, Director-General of the International Vaccine Institute in South Korea, explained that despite the global clamor for a vaccine, issuing an unapproved vaccine would be difficult “because you don’t know if it will actually work”, and said: “It needs to be a vaccine that we know will work around the world, and that is why we everyone needs to participate in clinical trials – it must work for everyone.

“We really need to do research urgently and ethically if we want to develop a vaccine and reduce the suffering and death from COVID-19. The emphasis has to be on a global effort, and not just sharing data. As countries emerge from COVID-19, we have to see how other countries are suffering and what the gaps are in care and treatment.

“As long as we have unchecked epidemics, all of us are at risk of exposure. Unless we get together and control this pandemic together, it will continue to threaten countries around the world.”

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